

A Call for Hospitality Evangelism
addressed to the
Maple Glen Bible Fellowship Church

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We are God's children, we have been welcomed into His family. In Jesus Christ we have been made the objects of God's abundant mercy. "For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace." (John 1.16) We were really in bad shape. It's not just that we didn't know God - we were actively suppressing all knowledge of God. It's not just that we could not keep God's Law - in our rebellion we loved to break it. We, who because of our sin were such stench in the very nostrils of God, are now Beloved children of our Heavenly Father. We are clothed in Christ's righteous garments. Since His robes are royal we are made to be a Kingdom, and Priests unto His God. Our Father receives us with the love with which He loves His Son. God is hospitable. Once we were not a people, but now we have been made the people of God.

As God's Beloved children He calls to imitate His example of hospitality. He has thus spoken through Moses, "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt." (Deut. 10.19) And fully and finally in the Apostles of Jesus Christ; Paul - "Practice hospitality" (Rom. 12 .13), and Peter - "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Pet. 4.9). The Apostles were only amplifying the example of their Lord, "a friend of sinners", who taught that "it is more blessed to give than receive." (Acts 20.35)

Contextually, the focus of both Paul's and Peter's words are directed to doing good to the household of Faith. But the people of God are called to do good to all men also (Gal. 6.10), reflective of God's global concern (Matt. 28.19). Too often we

waste time wondering "who is my neighbor?", blindly passing those who lie bruised and bloodied by sin's ravages. When was the last time we held a banquet and invited the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind?(Luke 14.13). God's example is a very difficult one for us to follow. Peter's discerning statement is quite true, we are very prone to grumble about showing hospitality. Often, we are no better than the Gentiles who only love those who love them.

How can we demonstrate hospitality? I want to focus my thoughts on this particular topic. The "we" makes broad reference to all of God's people. Our good works of hospitality are to give witness to the hospitality of Him who is the light of the world, that men may turn from their darkness and enter into His light. For the purposes of this paper I want to address my thoughts particularly to the local congregation where I am currently a member, the Maple Glen Bible Fellowship Church.

As we watch the value of our dollars sink while the prices of nearly everything seems to soar, we ought to consider what it will cost to perform this ministry. We don't want to start our work and have to quit before we've finished because we have failed to count the cost. Very simply, it will cost us everything and it will cost us nothing.

Everything, because the Lord Jesus demands that we give ourselves to Him without reservation. We cannot stand with one foot in the dominion of darkness and the other in the Kingdom of God's Beloved Son. Our Lord Jesus gives us the model for

"Incarnational Evangelism". He said, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you". How did He come? "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (John 20.21; 1.14) His ministry was not regulated by a 40 hour week. After an 8 hour day He did not clock-out and catch the 5:15 space shuttle back to Heaven. He was here to stay - working, teaching, healing, feeding, laughing, weeping, and even dying. His life was characterized by vulnerability and availability. Yet, His priorities were carefully outlined. His Father, not those whom He served, dictated His plan of action. Thus, it was essential that He be a man of prayer - to receive His marching orders. Therefore, when it was necessary, He would pray even while others slept. It is important to see that Jesus not only gave everything, but also how He was a wise steward over what He gave away. He followed a plan of action. His first major battle, fought in the wilderness against Satan, shows that the Lord Jesus had determined His battle plans prior to the attack. He set His face like flint to the wind. The power of His offense, the sword He wielded, was the Word of God. He was submissive to His Father - "the Servant of the Lord". There were no idols erected in His heart, all He did was for His Father's glory. It is really hard to understand isn't it? He who was so very rich becoming completely impoverished that we might become rich, what a glorious transaction. May the wonder of it grip our hearts and fill us with joy. For as it does, we'll gladly give up all our "rights" and follow Him.

It is in this way that we will realize that it costs us nothing to follow Jesus. In the first place, all we have is a gift from God. We are completely dependent upon the provision of our Creator. From the moment of conception until the day of our death, we are held in the hands of our God. As Christians, God has staked an even greater claim upon our lives. We have been bought with the very life blood of His Son. We are not our own - we have been redeemed. So it is only what we were given in the first place that we are now asked to give away. This ought to impress upon us a sense of responsibility. We are to be careful about our giving, "be wise as serpents". For as God's stewards we will give an account to Him. Yet, this ought to make us very generous; freely we have received, now we freely give. Remember this as our ministry of hospitality means pressure on our already busy schedules, wear and tear on our homes, depletion of our food allowances, and the draining of our strength. Perhaps we will give and never hear one word of thanks from those to whom we have given. How ungrateful! Yes. But such were we. Yet, now we are the recipients of every spiritual blessing in heavenly places. As our service is for His glory, our Father who sees in secret will reward us.

The thoughts that I have shared thus far serve as foundational concepts for a proposal for a ministry of hospitality. The "Jerusalem" that God has called us to serve in as His witnesses from Maple Glen is largely a suburban environment. We must realize, of course, that because God is concerned for the whole world it is also our responsibility to be His witnesses unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

Perhaps it would be most helpful if we began with a bit of self examination. The Bible calls for us to love fervently and from the heart. In Scripture the "heart" represents the center of our being, the deep recesses of our selves, the real man. It is our heart that God searches to discern our condition before Him. The very issues of life flow from the heart. One of the great blessings of God's New Covenant is that He gives His people a new heart, upon which He has written the Law of God. We are being changed from the inside out.

Like our love for our God, our love for our neighbor is to flow from the heart. For our love to wane in either direction, Godward or manward, is very serious and must be fought with zeal. I begin my thoughts on hospitality with a call to examine our own hearts. We must not show hospitality if it does not flow from a loving, concerned heart. This would only be an act of hypocrisy. Neither our God, nor our neighbor, would believe us. Our neighbor will be able to smell a rat; the uneasiness in our manner, our forced, hollow words, and the strain on our countenance. We must remember that we are no less than Ambassadors for Christ. When we neglect to rejoice and marvel in God's mercy in giving Himself to us, we will neglect to give ourselves away. We won't learn a thing until we soften our hearts.

The next important consideration is to think about our immediate family. God's standards for His servants are always concerned with their family lives (1 Tim. 3.4,5). Of

course, a ministry of hospitality is not the same as the duties of an elder. But I cite this passage as a principle for our thinking. The rationale behind the examination of our family life is that it is often a very good thermometer of our spiritual condition. Often people show a great zeal for an "outside" ministry as a form of escape from their shipwrecked home. Another reason is that our home and family life is the site of this ministry. We can begin to break up the hard ground now by increasing, or at least beginning, family devotions and prayer. If these elements are not a regular part of our family lives now, it is a good bet that we will not be interested in this ministry of hospitality. That is too bad. Perhaps the concept of ministry and servanthood is the very thing that could bring a spiritual cohesiveness to our families. To effectively minister in our neighborhoods we must have a ministry of the entire family. A husband and father who is irresponsible, a wife and mother who is prone to gossip and dominance, or children who are disrespectful and rebellious can blow the whole thing. Indeed, especially in the suburban neighborhood, our actions will speak louder than our words. Even the social graces and table manners of our families ought to be considered as we try to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in every respect".

Notice my emphasis here has been on the welfare of the occupants of the house, rather than the household itself. Naturally, our homes ought to be clean and inviting. Perhaps the ladies in the Church could exchange ideas on how to

creatively and simply beautify our homes. But we must not let the excuse of a dirty house be a scapegoat for our lack of compassion. We must love people more than we love our "things" and our pride. Realistically, this will be time consuming and costly. Francis Schaeffer speaks of the adjustments he has been forced to make in opening up his home. He speaks of having a drunk vomit on his living room floor and a prostitute staying in their guest room. But he insists, as I do too, that what we need is not a big splash, a fancy program, but to begin by opening up our homes to people. He wonders if we really believe people are going to hell? ("The Church at the End of the 20th Century", p. 107ff)

I would imagine that many of us do not even know our neighbors. This is where we must start then, in getting to know them. Take some home-grown vegetables, fruit, flowers, or some fresh-baked cookies and go to their door. Say to them, "I am -- ---, I am sorry that I have lived next to you for so long and not even gotten to know you". If you do know their name, then do the same thing and say you wanted to get to know them better. Don't worry about tracts, Church attendance, or even the Gospel at this point (unless that is what they want to talk about). Show them you can love them without having a catch. Pray for them based upon your conversation. Plan to invite them over for dinner soon. Don't wait too long after this contact and allow that icy, inter-personal tension to develop. How can we help our neighbors in tangible ways? Perhaps our families could serve Christ by mowing lawns or shovelling snow for those

who are not able to do so themselves. This is one area where the entire family could be involved. Pray for discerning wisdom in how to show Jesus' love. Pray for an open door to tell them Christ's Gospel. The uniqueness of our gifts and talents, our houses and neighborhoods call for much creative and prayerful thinking in this area. We ought to be characterized by flexibility and the spirit of self-sacrifice; having a willingness to often re-examine and evaluate what we do to make sure we are really hitting the mark.

As the Spirit moves God's people to soften their hearts and open up their homes, the ministry of the Church ought to be providing evangelism training. God's people ought to know how to simply, clearly, and directly announce and apply the Gospel message.. There might very well be unanswerable questions if our conversations with our neighbors become intense. It is not necessary that we know "all" the answers. We can take our questions and struggles to one another for help and encouragement. But we can confidently speak of what we do know, once we were blind and now we see. We can speak from our hearts about the Lord Jesus - His life, death, and resurrection - for sinners like us! We must humbly warn our neighbors of the necessity of repentance from sin and faith in Christ to be delivered from the wrath to come. We must be more afraid for them, the condemnation that is already upon them; than afraid of them, the social disdain of "fanaticism". We must never forget that our neighbor - who may be respectable, physically attractive, and socially enjoyable, yet without Christ, is utterly lost.

Hell is a very real place. There is a danger of being satisfied with winning their friendship alone, to believe the devil's lie about "silent witnessing", because we really do not believe God's warnings to sinners. Yet at the risk of losing their friendship, we must speak of Jesus - our best friend. We must not be satisfied with anything less than their partnership in the ministry of the Gospel.

As God allows us to make some progress in sharing the Word of the Gospel, it will be very beneficial to bring our neighbors under the more direct ministry of the Local Church. Though commitment to the Church is an important part of obedience to the Gospel, we must be careful in our approach here. We ought to be characterized as a people who reach out to our neighbors in Jesus name; showing our neighbors why we go to Church, that it really means something to us; our lives have been changed. Our household ought to be a manifestation of His Kingly rule, showing that we are a last days people and that He changes all we do. This caution is because, for some people, their lifestyle does not show any connection with their Church participation beyond the fact that they are ⁱⁿ attendance on Sundays. These people might convey the Christian message as an isolated weekly activity instead of a life-transforming relationship with the living God. By all means we ought to be eager to bring our neighbors to Church, but we must not forget to first take the Church to them.

We who are at Church on Sundays ought to be prepared to reflect the hospitality of our Heavenly Father. Many times

people that I have brought to Church have been greatly impressed by the lovingkindness of God's people. Our trust in God's saving power is that they will be as significantly affected by the proclamation of the Word. May God make it true that the unbeliever in our midst will be "convicted by all" and fall on His face worshipping God, declaring that the Lord Himself is in our midst. We must not minimize the power of the assembled Church. But we must be alarmed at the sterility of the silent Church, the heartless Church, the Church which allows its' neighbors to die under condemnation - unmoved. May God burden our hearts that we might die to ourselves and open up our homes. May we act like "the kingdom of this world has become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever."