

## **PRACTICING HOSPITALITY: THE JOY OF SERVING OTHERS**

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By

Pat Ennis and Lisa Tatlock

Reviewed by Adrienne Lawrence

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As a young bride, I accompanied my husband to the airport late one night to pick up a friend. While waiting for the luggage we noticed a distraught woman speaking in broken English to an airport security guard. She was an international student, her contact could not be located, and the airport was getting ready to shut down for the evening. My husband and I quickly offered her our spare bedroom for the night. This unplanned invitation launched my husband and I into a ministry of hospitality that has spanned 18 years and been exercised in several states and a foreign country.

We have practiced hospitality in small apartments and in a large home, at times when our furniture was boxes and at times when steaks were on the grill. We've done it when the event was anticipated and when we were weary and needing the Lord's strength. As a hostess I have had moments when the food was delicious and the kids said just the right thing and times when the meat was overcooked and the children were ill behaved. We've also had all sorts of people into our home: families, singles, internationals, non-Christians, missionaries, and those in need. Through all these experiences we have known the Lord's provision and blessing, as he has used us to be a blessing to others. Sometimes the blessing has been palpable, and at other times we have trusted that the Lord has used our service for good.

Over the years I have sometimes wondered if hospitality is just something my husband and I enjoy or if it is a biblical mandate for all Christians. It is clear that in biblical times hospitality was at the very least a cultural necessity. There were no hotels or restaurants in the ancient Near East, so the traveler was dependent upon the hospitality of strangers. If the traveler was not received into someone's home, he would have gone hungry and temporarily homeless. But we live in an age where hotels and restaurants are ubiquitous. We also live in a time when more women are working and working hours are longer for everyone. Single women come home at the end of the day tired and families are struggling to all sit down at the dinner table at the same time. We all understand the encouragement of providing an occasional baby meal or food for a grieving family. But should we be calling Christians to a deeper commitment to hospitality? Should we be encouraging Christians to intentionally invite over those they don't know, those who are different from them, those who are in need? Or, in doing so, are we placing an unnecessary burden on our church members?

### **THE THEOLOGY OF HOSPITALITY**

As I have studied Scripture I have noticed that hospitality is not just cultural but theological as well. When God gave the Israelites his law, he told them that they were not only to welcome but to love the alien (Lev. 19:34, Deut. 10:19). This was not merely for the purpose of taking care of

practical needs. The purpose was to display God's character. As the Israelites welcomed the alien into their homes they had the opportunity to show the surrounding nations what a great God they served. They had the chance to tell others and remind themselves about a God who had welcomed them when they were once aliens in a foreign land. In this way they were supposed to be a blessing to the surrounding nations as God had promised Abraham they would be (Gen. 12:3).

As Christians we have that same opportunity. As we exercise hospitality we are reminding ourselves that we were once in our sin and strangers to God, but through Christ's work on the cross we have been welcomed into his family.

### **THE MINISTRY OF HOSPITALITY**

Furthermore, God often used hospitality as the context for specific ministry. After Abraham offered the three visitors hospitality he found out that Sarah would give birth to a son. The spies came to Rahab's Inn but were offered shelter in her home after she discovered their identity and their peril. God used this act of kindness to bring Rahab into his family. It was through the hospitality of Priscilla and Aquilla that Apollos was instructed (Acts 18:24-26). The list could go on.

### **THE COMMANDS OF HOSPITALITY**

If this were not enough evidence for us to continue the practice of hospitality, we have the direct commands in the New Testament. In Romans 12, at the end of a long list of exhortations, Paul commands the believers to practice hospitality (Rom. 12:13). Hospitality is one of the marks of a church leader, whether he is a paid staff member or a layman (1 Tim. 3:2). Paul tells Timothy that a widow may only be put on the list if she is "well known for her good deeds such as . . . showing hospitality" (1 Tim. 5:10). We are exhorted to show hospitality to missionaries and encouraged that if we do so we are working "together for the truth" (3 John 8). What does Peter tell the Christians to focus on after he tells them that the end is near? He encourages them to "offer hospitality to one another" (1 Peter 4:9).

So the next time you see your wife or sister in Christ inviting someone into her home, let her know that she is not just nourishing the stomach but God is using her to nourish souls.

### **HOSPITALITY AND THE LOCAL CHURCH**

Offering hospitality as an individual Christian is a great blessing, but an even greater blessing is to offer hospitality in the context of a local church. During the last six years we have had the privilege to minister in a church in which hospitality is cultivated. This is a unique pleasure because we are ministering to and alongside those who are co-laborers in the field of hospitality.

The most recent evidence of this fact: a group of international students will be coming to Washington, D.C. at the time of this writing and will be scattered amongst the homes of our congregation. This event was not organized by the staff but by a member of the church, and it

will be a success because the members of our church are eager to practice hospitality. My husband and I would have liked to participate but can't—our home is already full.

### **OVERVIEW OF *PRACTICING HOSPITALITY***

Having practiced hospitality for years, but not having read many books on the subject, I was very interested in reading *Practicing Hospitality: The Joy of Serving Others* co-authored by Drs. Pat Ennis and Lisa Tatlock, professors of home economics at the Master's College. I was a bit hesitant when I realized that each woman wrote distinct and interspersed chapters, but it is clear they have worked together before as the book reads seamlessly.

The real strength of the book is its practicality. From the recipes at the end of each chapter to the many ideas on how to practice hospitality, this book exudes the fruit of years of experience. Several chapters stand out in this regard. In "Hospitality and Management" (ch. 4), Lisa gives tips even a busy woman can use to prepare her home for hospitality. In "Hospitality and Others" (ch. 6), Pat provides examples of how we can reach out to others regardless of our season in life. She also gives practical wisdom for reaching others who are hurting or are in different seasons of life from us. In her chapter on "Hospitality and Culture" (ch. 7), Lisa has many practical ideas on how we can make Internationals feel comfortable in our homes.

Although it may seem odd to include a chapter on the family in a book on hospitality, I found this section relevant and helpful. Lisa has several principles on how to practice hospitality as a family. She also encourages her readers to love their families well and not to overextend hospitality to their detriment. I wish she had discussed more fully how those we bring into our homes can be a blessing to our children. We have certainly seen how missionaries have expanded our children's vision of God's work in the world and how young Christian men have provided a model of discipleship. Even difficult guests have been an opportunity for our children to grow in love and have provided a living, negative example of some of the Proverbs.

### **MARTHA STEWART vs. BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY**

Another strength of the book is that it is not captured by "Martha Stewart" notions of hospitality. At the beginning of the book, the authors tell us that *entertaining* focuses on food and décor while *biblical hospitality* is a demonstration of love. Throughout the book the authors remind us that the point of our hospitality is to bless those to whom we are ministering.

Indeed, I find it most challenging—and I expect this is true for many women—to love others in my home when a sick child prevents me from cleaning the house or when my husband arrives home at dinner time with unexpected company. Therefore, I would have appreciated more testimonies of what they did in those situations and how God used them to minister to others.

### **BUT GOD'S POWER TO CHANGE?**

My main criticism of the book is this: I came away with a lot of ideas and a "to do" list a mile long; but I didn't find a sufficient focus on God and his ability to change me into a faithful woman who naturally pursues hospitality out of my strengths and present life circumstances. As

a result, the biblical references were almost entirely devoted to the imperatives in Scripture with almost no mention of the indicatives of grace. The unfortunate irony of this book is that its promotion of hospitality, which is supposed to be a picture of the gospel, is not grounded in an explicit theology of the gospel, but rather in sheer command. Yet isn't it the power of the gospel applied to the heart that will induce the heart to want to give hospitality? Even something as simple as taking a moment to explain what it means to be a Christian and how to become one would have helped to add the "aroma of the gospel" to an otherwise helpful book.

Finally, I hope the authors will make a few changes if they ever have the opportunity to produce a revised edition of the book. In her chapter on character Dr. Ennis discusses character attributes based on the acronym H-O-S-P-I-T-A-L-I-T-Y. Personally, I found this distracting rather than helpful. Also, I would have benefited if the authors had edited the results of their survey more fully. For example, I did not need to read almost 20 definitions of hospitality which were essentially the same.

### A USEFUL INTRODUCTION

Criticisms aside, I think many people will benefit from this book. It will help those who are unfamiliar with the biblical idea of hospitality. It provides a useful introduction to the concept. It will also help the eager but clueless—those women (and men! see 1 Tim. 3:2) who want to practice hospitality but have no idea of how to get started. It would also be suitable for a Bible study since, along with the recipes at the end of each chapter, there are discussion questions and activities.

All in all it is a useful book which leaves the field open for another book on this topic. I long to see a book which addresses the criticism I mentioned above and provides a fuller biblical-theological treatment of the topic while at the same time offering practical ideas and testimonies of real life experiences.

*Adrienne Lawrence (MDiv, Gordon Conwell) has been married for eighteen years to Michael Lawrence, Capitol Hill Baptist Church associate pastor. They have four children with a fifth on the way.*

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