Room At The Table:
The Role of Hospitality in Inter-Religious Life
From a Open-Minded Baptist Perspective

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Building Bridges Towards Peace and Reconciliation in South-East Europe
The Place for Others in Our Faith and Life: Foundations for Inter-Religious Peace Education

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I. Preface

It is incredibly difficult to speak on behalf of a Protestant perspective because there is such a wide diversity of thought, theology, and doctrine. Narrowing it down and speaking from a Baptist perspective does not allay this problem. Within the Baptist community, there is no unifying church body set in place that assures like-mindedness on any issue, let alone the issue of others and their place in our faith and life. Furthermore, Baptists are almost phobic to creeds and any sort of blanket statements or doctrines that would take away from the authority and autonomy of the local church. Therefore, it is almost impossible to write something such as this and say, “Baptists think this” for there are always exceptions and intra-community debate. In fact, exceptions seem almost to be the rule.

With recognition to these exceptions, I qualify that this paper is from an “open-minded Baptist perspective” recognizing that there are many within my own Baptist community who would disagree with me on what I am about to put forth. In addition, the “open-minded” designation is not an implication that others are closed-minded, but simply an indication that I realize my position is perhaps a bit more open concerning the place for others in our faith and life than more conservative Baptists would be comfortable. With that said, this paper does not claim to be the Baptist perspective on hospitality (for there is none), but rather an exploration of a theology of hospitality, which is written by a Baptist. When possible, traditional Baptist doctrines and values will be included, as well as looking to the Scriptures for authority which is typical Baptist behavior.

One thing is for certain, however, even with the absence of an overarching doctrine that all Protestants can agree on without debate. Within the our tradition, there is an increase in the recognition, at least among scholars, that we as a community seem to have forgotten what practices of faith are; or at the very least, we have placed them on the back burner to other activities such as evangelism and church programs. Because of this separation, the role of the other has become one to minister to, not live in community with. There are many within the tradition, including Baptists, who are aware of this fact and working towards education and exhortation to return to these practices that build a more holistic way of life and regain some of the characteristics that place us within the entire Christian tradition.¹

Yet, these practices are not unique to the Christian tradition. They are taught by all the Abrahamic faiths and in addition to our shared history, it is what binds us together as

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¹ There will be a fuller discussion of these practices later, but for the sake of mentioning them now, they are defined by a particular group of scholars as: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God. For more information on these practices in general, see www.practicingourfaith.org; Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002) and/or Dorothy C. Bass, ed. Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People (Indianapolis: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
people of faith. Many times we as Baptists have been so bent on getting rid of duties and separating ourselves from the established religion of our context that we have done away with the very actions that give witness to faith. In our efforts to separate ourselves from the “law,” relying instead upon the “grace” of God, we have separated ourselves from the practices that are expected of us as people of God and bind us in commonality with our brothers and sisters of other traditions.

We say, “We don’t need to go to a priest to confess our sins. We are priests for ourselves, speaking to Jesus directly.” But because of this, our reliance upon confession and accountability to others is sometimes lacking and the community is weaker for it. In our desire to be autonomous and free, we lose sight of our connectedness to the community of saints through all traditions, including our own.

We say, “We don’t have to stop our activities to pray five times a day. Such rules lead to legalism.” But because of this, our prayers are sometimes hurried, if we are disciplined enough to set aside time for prayer at all. In our haste, we give no room for the interruption of God in our daily lives. In addition, if we do set aside time to pray, oftentimes it is focused upon our needs and wants, rather than on simple but intentional meditation upon the character of God.

We say, “We don’t need incense and icons for worship. We can worship God through our own hearts with the help of nothing.” But because of this, our worship is sometimes vulgar in our familiarity of God and our insistence that God be at our beck and call. Our appreciation for beauty, mystery, and sensual elements for meditation has grown weak.

We say, “We don’t need to adhere to the Levitical laws. Jesus has released us from the law that binds us, giving us freedom.” But because of this, our appreciation for actions that characterize our faith and life are sometimes lacking, misinterpreting Jesus’ statements about the law as exemption rather than intensification.  

For us to regain the practices of our faith, including the particular practice of hospitality that will be discussed here, we must be willing to look to our place among the community and our actions within it. This community is comprised not only of those who are like us – other Baptists and fellow Protestants - but also the world at large, and all the various religions and faith traditions (including those who claim no faith at all such as atheism) within it. Without them, our identity is lacking.

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2 See Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1-7:29 for examples of this intensification, particularly related to issues of worship, relationship with neighbor, inner thought life, economy, and righteousness (both in the public and private sphere).
II. Introduction to Thinking Theologically About Hospitality

A few years ago, I remember seeing an increasingly popular bumper sticker on cars which read: “Practice Random Acts of Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty.” What a great idea! Encourage people to be nice to one another! Who would have thought? Soon afterwards, there began to be “Random Acts of Kindness Day” in the U.S. where those who might not be normally inclined to be nice to strangers saw themselves as saints for at least a day for doing good deeds to people they did not know.

However, after a bit of time, I began to think about this more. Why use the words “random” and “senseless”? Are we not supposed to be kind to one another and to appreciate beauty? Are not these acts of kindness part of what defines us as people of God? Granted, not everyone who participated in this were people of faith; yet, many of them were. Is not the very quality of kindness one of the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22) for those of us who call ourselves Christians? Why then random and senseless instead of frequent and intentional acts of kindness? Furthermore, why are we surprised when people are kind to those different from them? Why is it that we have come not to expect kindness from strangers?

There are many qualities that are needed in order to embody the practice of hospitality; kindness is just one. Yet this kindness within the practice of hospitality is not a “pushover” type of kindness. Nor is it a niceness from old ladies or Martha Stewart wannabes who bring their guests coffee or sweet iced tea and call them “sugarpie” or “honey,” as it seems to be often defined in my own Southern culture in the U.S. No, sometimes hospitality can be frustrating and not-so-nice. Sometimes it requires more emotional resources than one has on one’s own. Those who are committed to the genuine practice of hospitality have realized that it is a way of life, not just an activity one in which one participates on Sunday afternoons after church when friends are invited over for dinner. Inviting friends over is no sacrifice; hospitality implies welcoming strangers and others who are not within our inner circle. Furthermore, the practice of hospitality is never “a random act.”

Hospitality is only one of the ancient practices of faith that seem to have gotten lost in our hustle and bustle of everyday life. Despite the recent developments in theological discussions regarding the revival of these practices, renewing the practice of hospitality seems to be outside of the scope of focus for most, especially within my Baptist community. This is unfortunate. As we, along with many other denominations within the Christian

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tradition, seek to define further our identity, it would be quite helpful to think intentionally about the role of others – the strangers in our midst – and our life among them as we draw our borders for inclusion and exclusion. While we as Christians define ourselves as “aliens and exiles” in this world, we cannot deny that we are, in a literal sense, a part of this world (whether we like it or not) and therefore should act and believe accordingly.6

These practices are ways in which those of us in the Christian community can begin thinking about how to live intentionally concerning our faith while dwelling in the midst of this world. Each of these practices - honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God – is not just a behavior. Each is full of meaning, giving shape to our beliefs, and each “addresses a fundamental human need in ways that reflect and respond to God’s grace to us.”7 These practices span the course of the centuries and are not specific to one particular culture or expression of Christian faith. In addition, within all Abrahamic traditions, it is safe to say that these practices are what each tradition has in common with the others, with only small debate on how to live each one out and the intrinsic values in each tradition that give meaning to the practice. Nevertheless, participation in these practices, including hospitality as will be described here, is recognition that we as the people of God are “attuned to God’s presence and to the well-being of all creation.”8 The goal in these practices is not to attain mastery over them - to conquer the use of time, heal all those who are sick, or become the best host but rather “to cultivate openness and responsiveness to others, to the created world, and to God.”9

Hospitality is a practice that is inextricably wound up in the scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments and in the traditions of Christianity itself. It reminds the faithful of the needs of others - particularly the stranger, widow, and orphan - and teaches us the dangers inherent in being exclusive in both community and thought. For the Christian, the very practice of hospitality is a participation in the acts of God’s self within the context of the

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9 Dorothy C. Bass, “What is a Christian Practice?” www.practicingourfaith.org/cfm/library/view.cfm?id=396&page=3, December 22, 2003. In addition, the practice of hospitality is not done in isolation but also plays a role in the other practices. Forgiveness will be needed because we will inevitably make mistakes in the practicing of hospitality. Sabbath keeping will be needed because we all are in need of rest, even when practicing hospitality to those in need. Singing our lives is also needed because practicing hospitality is not a “grim set of duties,” but something that should “erupt into glad song if we are doing it in the spirit of Christ.” If one practices hospitality or any other practice without the others, it will bring harm instead of blessing. Bass, “The Practice of Hospitality,” www.practicingourfaith.org/cfm/library/view.cfm?id=396&page=3, December 22, 2003.
Trinity and a reminder that no entity is to live in isolation from the other. Each person is given the abilities seen in the very characteristics of God to be both guest and host.\textsuperscript{10}

There are at least two biblical traditions that illustrate this point very clearly. The first is found in Genesis 18:2-19 where Abraham is visited by three strangers who seem to appear from nowhere. Before he has even attempted to find out who they are or what their business is, Abraham provides a feast for them comprised of the choicest flour and the best calf of his herd. In the end, we are told by scripture and tradition that Abraham was showing hospitality to God’s very self that day.\textsuperscript{11} Later, we understand Abraham’s reasoning for such hospitality when God admonishes the Israelites to treat the stranger with hospitality for they too had been strangers at one time, just as Abraham had been in his time.\textsuperscript{12} In the end, while Abraham was a host, providing a meal and company for his guests, he became a guest when presented with the gift of a promise of a son.

The second illustration is from the New Testament found in Luke 24:13-31. The risen Jesus walks along the road to Emmaus and meets up with fellow travelers and believers. Yet, they do no recognize who he is; the Christ is a stranger among them.\textsuperscript{13} In accordance to their tradition, they invite him as a stranger to lodge with them for the evening and to share a meal. Jesus has become a guest. Nevertheless, when he takes the bread of the meal and breaks it, he becomes the host and his guests realize who he is. Later the next day, the travelers will continue their journey, now as strangers and exiles as those of faith seem to be in this world, but “looking for other strangers who need to be welcomed as guests.”\textsuperscript{14} In fact, since the early church, Christians have identified themselves as “aliens and exiles” and from that designation, the tradition of


\textsuperscript{13} See also John 1:11. From the very beginning, Jesus was identified as a stranger to a world “that did not know him.” Miroslav Volf writes: “He was a stranger to the world because the world into which he came was estranged from God.” Therefore, our recognition of God’s revelation of God’s self in Christ (for Christians) and our ability or inability to show hospitality to others is indicative of our very relationship to God. Miroslav Volf, “Exclusion and Embrace”, A Spacious Heart, 42.

hospitality sprung forth.\textsuperscript{15} In a world where faith is not valued and is most times frowned upon, there is the realization that the faithful will always be strangers in need of welcome, community and hospitality. Because of this, as we are admonished in Leviticus 19:33-34, since we are strangers, we must also welcome others.

In focusing upon the needs of others, the practice of hospitality will inevitably bring us into contact with social injustices and challenge us to look for ways to work towards the good of all creation, including the good of our guest.\textsuperscript{16} Contemporary examples of this can be seen in the extraordinary stories of the rescuers during the Holocaust of World War II. In these true stories, people took in complete strangers, those who were different either religiously, politically, or ethnically, risking their lives for the sake of the other’s wellbeing. Out of their understanding of the place for the other in their faith and life, communities such as Le Chambon in France, the nation of Denmark, or other individuals saw intervention on behalf of the other as the only option and saved thousands of lives from the extermination system of the 1930s and 1940s.\textsuperscript{17}

Welcoming the “least of these” is not about the benefit it brings to the host, as these rescuers illustrate.\textsuperscript{18} For people of God, it is, instead, a recognition that God welcomes us, those who are hungry and in need of grace and mercy, with the same self-giving hospitality.\textsuperscript{19} This is not to say, however, that the host does not benefit from the practice of giving hospitality. In such activity, those who show hospitality “come to know themselves, others, and God in a different way,” and therefore come to “develop virtues and dispositions that are consistent with [the] practice.”\textsuperscript{20} Yet, if one is interested in immediate gratification, the practice of hospitality may not be appreciated. Benefits and blessings from practicing hospitality are not immediately discernable every time and one must be committed to the practice over the course of a lifetime.\textsuperscript{21}

In light of this, one must understand that hospitality is not a means to an end. It arises from a heart that is grateful for the love, mercy, and welcome that has been shown to us by God. Looking after the stranger and those in need is a moral imperative set forth in Scriptures and for many has been that which determines the authenticity of Christian faith

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} I Peter 2:11. Miroslav Volf, “Exclusion and Embrace,” A Spacious Heart, 41.
\item \textsuperscript{17} For more information on such instances, see books such as these: David P. Gushee, The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Philip P. Hallie, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There, second edition (New York: Perennial, 1994); or Eva Fogelman, Conscience & Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust (New York: Anchor, 1994). Philip Hallie is quoted to have said these words: “I learned that the opposite of cruelty is not simply freedom from the cruel relationship; it is hospitality...When I asked them [the villagers] why they helped these dangers guests, they invariably answered, ‘What do you mean, ‘Why?’ Where else could they go? How could you turn them away?’”, Schulman and Barkouki-Winter, “The Extra Mile.”
\item \textsuperscript{18} Matthew 25:35-45.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Christine D. Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” Vision, Spring 2002, 35-36.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 37.
\end{itemize}
throughout the centuries. For it to be significant, it must be intentional. There are certain Christian communities who, over the course of the years, have made hospitality one of their defining characteristics – groups such as Benedictine orders who welcome the guest as if he/she were Christ himself; the Catholic Worker communities who practice hospitality as a communal discipline; and even Anabaptists, who have more of a structured theology for hospitality that other Protestants which, in turn, informs their participation in social justice issues. All of these groups, within the Abrahamic tradition, see the relationship between host, guest, and God as being intertwined. The Baptist tradition should be no different.

It is interesting that at least within the New Testament context of hospitality, the Greek word *xenos* means “stranger”, but also “guest” and “host.” The New Testament word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, could then be interpreted to mean one of two things: either 1) a love of the guest/stranger or 2) enjoyment of hosting guests. Concurrently, *xenophobia* would be implied to mean 1) fear of the stranger/guest or 2) fear of being host.

This fear of others, many times, leads us to avoid others who are different from us, those with whom we do not desire to share life or gifts, those under whose influence we do not want to be. Sometimes this fear is exhibited in small gestures such as the selection of friends and at times is, admittedly, warranted. However, this fear can also be exhibited in larger ways such as racism, ethnic cleansing, or genocide. Interestingly enough, we strive so hard, sometimes, to be separate from those who are different from us, yet, as Walter Brueggemann, a Reformed Christian Old Testament scholar, puts it, “we have no human neighbors who are as unlike us as this other God is unlike us” and therefore, if we live in community with this God, living with a neighbor who is other should not be quite as difficult.

### III. Traditional Baptist Doctrine and Values

*With Potential for the Practice of Hospitality*

Baptists have four main identifying characteristics: 1) authority of the Scriptures, 2) priesthood of all believers (sometimes referred to as soul competency), 3) autonomy of the local church, and 4) a commitment to religious liberty. How these characteristics are lived out usually depends upon the local church and its leaders, which in turn, lends itself to a

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22 Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 36-37.
wide variety of expressions of faith and particular theologies along the spectrum of Baptist life around the world.

As mentioned in the preface, there are no Baptist principles, doctrines or otherwise, that speak about hospitality specifically. Yet, within the Baptist tradition, there are certain doctrines and values that have the potential to be informed and shaped by the practice of hospitality. These are the doctrines of priesthood of all believers and religious liberty and the traditional value of mission.

**Priesthood of All Believers**

Among Baptist historians, the interpretation of “priesthood of all believers” in the course of the tradition seems to indicate the belief that salvation and personal faith arises from the “sacredness of individual choice;” or as one Baptist historian puts it, “Baptists never crouch in a defensive position when the charge of individualism is hurled at them...[because despite] all of its inherent weakness, individualism is to a great degree a Baptist badge of honor.”

Taking cues from Scripture, Baptists affirm the teaching that all persons are created in the image of God and because of this, each person has individual worth and is competent to make his/her own personal decisions regarding morality, spirituality and religiosity.

Yet by focusing upon the personal so heavily, Baptists are often accused of losing sight of the communal. Contemporary references to “priesthood of the believer” are often relegated to modernist ideals of individual freedoms and rights rather than focusing upon the role of a priest in a communal context. Elizabeth Newman, a Baptist theologian and hospitality scholar, states that this understanding of the priesthood of the believer is “essentially Unitarian,” rather than Trinitarian, in that “the person as an individual in the privacy of his or her heart enters directly into relation with God such that no mediation is necessary.” In opposition, Newman looks to Martin Luther’s concept of a “common priesthood” whereby our baptism initiates us “into the priesthood of Christ.” Thus, the meaning of priesthood, then, is a designation of our “communal participation in the one mediation/priesthood of Christ” rather than “a description of our individual status before God.”

This priesthood is not an entitlement or right for an individual to set off on one’s own with no accountability within the community of other believers. Instead, it is a gift we are

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26 Shurden, 24.
27 Newman, 2.
28 Newman, 3.
29 Newman, 3.
given that cannot be separated from the community; it is something shared with fellow believers and is not in isolation.

**Religious Freedom**

The Baptist contribution that is most beneficial to inter-religious life as discussed here is the tradition of religious freedom. If hospitality is dedicated to the acceptance and invitation of others, there must be a value of equality and freedom undergirding the entire process. While the Baptist perception of religious freedom in the U.S. is heavily influenced by ideas of separation of church and state – freedom of, freedom for, and freedom from religion - this tradition does have value in other areas of the world where such an idea is not as widely accepted or maintained.  

The theological basis for religious freedom is based upon the idea that all persons are created in the image of God and therefore, the human personality is sacred and of the utmost worth. Choice of religion is an act of conscience for the individual, according to Baptists. Therefore, as Walter Shurden, a Baptist historian, puts it, “To deny freedom of conscience to any person is to debase God’s creation.” John Leland, an 18th century Baptist leader, put it another way: “Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing.” Seeing religious freedom as “not only an inalienable human right, but indispensable to human welfare,” it is imperative that Baptists maintain this tradition in creating space for others in their religious choices.

When religious freedom is practiced correctly, it affirms the same freedom for all by providing a safe place for discussion and disagreement as well as unity in purpose and mutual learning. Those who are humble in their faith realize that no one has a complete hold on every aspect of being faithful nor can they claim absolute truth, and we must, therefore, look to our neighbors as example and as support even if their tradition is different from ours.

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30 Shurden, 45, italics added. Some Baptists claim that their tradition was the origination of the concept of religious liberty in practical form beginning in the 17th century with Leonard Bushner in England who went before James I for “freedom of conscience” and Roger Williams, “the apostle of religious liberty in colonial America.” A Pronouncement on Religious Liberty, Appendix, Shurden, 80.

31 Shurden, 49


33 A Pronouncement on Religious Liberty, Appendix, Shurden, 83.

34 1 Corinthians 13:9-12; Charles Kimball writes of those who make absolute truth claims in his When Religion Becomes Evil (San Francisco: Harper, 2002) saying: “religious convictions that become locked into absolute truth can easily lead people to see themselves as God’s agents. People so emboldened are capable of violent and destructive behavior in the name of religion.”, 70.
Mission

In light of the discussion on religious freedom, the issue of mission is an important one. The non-Baptist world perceives Baptist mission to be mostly centered upon evangelism, and for many cases this is true. Yet, this particular issue of mission is the criteria by which many Baptist church bodies throughout the world define themselves. Not all Baptists see their mission as being solely evangelism; others have a wider view of what evangelism consists and recognize that this allows for a broader range of ministry. Within Baptist life, there is a full spectrum of thought on this issue.

Those on the conservative end of the Baptist spectrum declared in 1964 that since Baptists “believe in the freedom and competence of each person to make individual decisions in matters of religion, it is our responsibility under God to see that each individual has the knowledge and opportunity to make the right decision.” Because of this, they further noted that they “are under the compulsion of the divine commission to proclaim the gospel to every person of every person, of ever race and nation,” and for this they do not apologize. Yet, in light of religious liberty, it seems hypocritical to claim freedom of, freedom for, and freedom from religion as a traditional value and yet make it one’s job to make sure that each individual makes the “right decision.” One may certainly ask: the right decision for whom? Granted, this statement does not imply force or coercion; but the implication that any choice outside of Christianity (sometimes Baptist Christianity at that) is wrong seems quite inhospitable and antithetical to principles of religious freedom.

In contrast, the liberal end of the spectrum of Baptist life made a statement in 1992 defining mission as “the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the calling of God to all peoples to repentance and faith, reconciliation and hope, social and economic justice.” They define the proclamation of the Good News synonymously with the qualities of reconciliation and hope, as well as social and economic justice. Those who adhere to the liberal side understand that the good news of Christ is both holistic and inclusive, maintaining their identity as Christians who are committed to the example of Jesus Christ, but not withholding their love, welcome, and support for those who are other.

In the middle are the moderates of Baptist life who issued a statement in 1991 who sought to differentiate themselves from the conservatives. They defined themselves as being those who sought to minister as Jesus did, “preaching, teaching, healing and other

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35 It is here where my true “open-mindedness” will show and within my Baptist community, I know I will need to ask for indulgence and grace for my opinions from some more conservative colleagues.
36 “Baptist Ideals” (a statement by SBC in 1964), Shurden, 113.
37 “Baptist Ideals” (a statement by SBC in 1964), Shurden, 113. While this statement was declared in 1964, within the Southern Baptist Convention, these ideals remain basically unchanged.
38 Kimball reacts to such mission activities by saying, “missionary activities informed by absolute truth claims that define sharply who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ continue to shape the landscape.” When Religion Becomes Evil, 64.
ministries of mercy and justice,” seeing that focusing solely upon evangelism as being narrower than Jesus’ example.40

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**IV. Theological Foundations for Hospitality**

So, what do these Baptist doctrines and values have to do with hospitality? How can these traditional tenets of Baptist life be informed by the practice of hospitality? Here is where the theological foundations for hospitality must be brought into the conversation.

**Trinity**

For the Christian community, one of the main theological foundations undergirding the practice of hospitality toward others is the doctrine of the Trinity. When one affirms the doctrine of the Trinity, one is affirming the oneness of God manifested in three parts - Source, Wellspring, and Living Water.41 Yet, in the recognition that there are different aspects of God as evidenced by the Trinity, one must also affirm that there are differences within God. David Cunningham, in his book *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, makes an excellent argument regarding these differences by stating that we as Christians need to “re-think our understanding of oneness and difference…[that] multiplicity is [not] necessarily a scattering to the winds, leading to naïve forms of relativism and isolationism; the trinitarian value of particularity does not exclude the possibility of harmonious consensus and mutual participation.”42

The need for homogeneity is a main cause of violence, seen in attempts to do away with one’s enemies, to destroy what makes others different, to utilize one’s power to make the difference of the other subordinate. Peace is found when the diversity of the other is given the freedom to exist – nay, to flourish – and in this allowance, one realizes that the threat is no longer valid.43 Where these principles are found to be the most meaningful is in the nature of God’s very self.

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40 “An Address to the Public,” (CBF 1991), Shurden, 99
41 Traditionally known as God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ) and God the Holy Spirit, the Trinity creates a difficulty for those who wish to be gender inclusive in their names for God, recognizing that God is neither male nor female, but exhibits traits of both genders. David Cunningham uses the designations Source, Wellspring and Living Water and for the purposes of this paper, they will be used. All are water, the foundation of all life, and while each part exists from the beginning, is of the same essence and stems from the same location, all three have different aspects, roles, and characteristics while still maintaining a “oneness.” David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 240.
42 Cunningham, 234.
43 Cunningham, 234-235.
The concept of peace only has meaning in circumstances where there is a potential for strife, conflict, or rivalry. Therefore, when the possibilities for peace are discussed, it is with the understanding that there is a multiplicity involved, that there is a potential for two or more wills to be in disagreement. Furthermore, unity of purpose or coexistence without violent conflict is also implied when one speaks of peace, that there is a desire to make compromises or live harmoniously with the other at the expense of one’s will. Peace implies negotiation rather than violence, but it admits that the potential for conflict does, in fact, exist yet is not allowed to actualize.44

As part of the priesthood of believers, the Christian who holds to this tradition understands that his/her place within the priesthood is in the context of community, which is exposed to the diversity of wills throughout the Christian tradition. In this diversity of wills, it is important to acknowledge that the priesthood is not a right for an individual, but is something shared with others. Therefore, the potential for conflict within this priesthood exists.

Perhaps one meaning behind being “created in the image of God” for humanity is the existence of the will. Because of this existence of will, there is the potential for conflict when wills may disagree. Yet, how is this visible in the character of God? If God is called a God of peace, what does that mean?45 Does that imply that there is a potential for divided will within God’s self as well?46

With recognition to the differences in doctrine towards monotheism between Christians, Jews and Muslims, one must admit that the three traditions interpret monotheism differently. All believe in one God; this is true. However, Christians, unlike Jews and Muslims, adhere to a doctrine that recognizes “otherness” in God; that God has different expressions of character and action as seen in the three aspects of the Trinity. Therefore, these three suggest that “there is space for otherness” in God and in turn, creates the potential for divided will.47

The good news is that God – unlike humanity – does not allow for this difference of will to escalate into strife. Because of this, the designation that God is a God of peace is full of meaning. Testaments to this are found in the writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament as well as in the Gospels which recorded the life of Jesus. In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul attributes the emptying of Christ’s will for the sake of the Others within the Trinity, seeking not to exploit his position but humbling himself. In God, Cunningham points out, “each of the Three acts for the sake of the Others.”48

44 Cunningham, 238-239.
46 Cunningham, 239.
47 Cunningham, 240.
48 Cunningham, 241.
In John 14:16, Jesus Christ models this relationship of peace within God’s self by telling the disciples about the coming of the Living Water who will be given by the Source to work in his stead. Even though their roles in this instance are different, they interact without strife in order to reach a common goal. There is no rivalry, jealousy, or conflict in this exchange. Instead, the Trinity is a perfect model of mutual cooperation for the benefit of all.

Two other instances in the life of Christ on earth further illustrate this point of the potential for a divided will. The first instance is found in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 where the story of the Temptation of Jesus is told. The implications in this account are that there must have been “at least a potential for conflict within God; otherwise the entire scene becomes meaningless, or a ruse at best.” Second is the scene in Gethsemane where Jesus prays that “this cup pass” from him, but ultimately surrenders to the will of God (Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36 and Luke 22:42). In his prayerful request for another alternative, there is the recognition that there is at least a potential for difference – two wills desiring for opposite outcomes. In this, Jesus recognizes that his will is “shaped by the will of the Other.”

By allowing will to be shaped and determined by the Other within the Trinity, this helps one understand and find more meaningful the designations given to God as a God of peace. Therefore, being created in the image of God characterized by peaceful co-existence, our embodiment of the Trinity should also be in God’s likeness by modeling the same peaceful submission of will to the other. As we, as members of this sacred priesthood of the faithful, live in community with others, we should also be characterized by this peaceful co-existence. Indeed, when we are able to understand the trinitarian values of difference and oneness, and allow those values to influence our Christian practices such as hospitality, Christians will become much more effective in being peacemakers in this world.

**Humanity’s Propensity Towards Violence Against the Other**

The questions regarding the origin of sin, whether it is innate or a learned behavior, is not a topic to be discussed here at this time. Nevertheless, the questions regarding the character of that sin as it applies to relationships with the other is. In the larger scope of things, a series of events detailed in Genesis show a steady decline in humanity and its willingness to accept the differences of others, giving the indication that our propensity

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49 Cunningham, 241.
50 Cunningham, 241.
51 Cunningham, 242.
52 Another consideration in light of this potential for internal conflict is God’s ability to change God’s mind, regret God’s actions, or limit God’s self for future action as seen in passages such as Genesis 8:21-22 and I Samuel 15:10. This brings into question traditional Christian doctrines such as God’s immutability and omnipotence, but exploration of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper.
53 Cunningham, 243.
54 Cunningham, 235.
towards violence takes us on a destructive cycle away from the peaceableness of God that is supposed to be inherent in our created nature. Rather than thinking of a one-time event that language such as “the fall” seems to imply, let us consider several “falls” that have initiated a cycle of violence and a desire to elevate one’s self in relation to the other. Cunningham lists them as the following:

The man and woman eat the fruit because they believe it will elevate them in relation to God [Genesis 3:5-7]; Cain kills to obliterate his rival [Genesis 4:3-9]; Ham enjoys some kind of sexual license at another’s expense [Genesis 9:21-25]; the builders of Babel seek their own fame, demanding that others recognize their superiority [Genesis 11:1-4]. At the center of the five stories is that of the flood, in which the general and thoroughgoing obliteration of the other – described in the general terms of wickedness, evil, and violence – is sufficient to bring about the deluge [Genesis 6:11-13].

These stories give indication, while some were more serious than others, that violence is rooted in the violation of the other. Furthermore, violation of others is a violation of self in the sense that one turns against another who is also created in the image of God just as the perpetrator, holding that characteristic in common. In violation of other, we are failing, as the Trinity does, “to know and to love the Self in the Other.”

The cycle of violence begins and is perpetuated when one particular action, defined as any feat designed to eliminate or subordinate the other, is returned by the victim in order to reclaim his/her own otherness. From this initial interaction, the cycle begins, with the number of participants or level of violence escalating on most occasions, and sometimes even forgetting who the original perpetrator of violence was in the first place. The hope is that this cycle of violence can be broken, but only through the open activity of God’s own peaceful self-giving incarnated in each of us, for if we still retain the image of God then we also retain God’s ability to live at peace with the Other within God’s self.

It is only when this peaceableness of God toward the other is embodied in our own actions that we are able to live out the true expression of hospitality.

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55 Cunningham, 244. See also Miroslav Volf, “Exclusion and Embrace,” A Spacious Heart, 55 and his reference to Hannah Arendt’s The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 240ff, in which she states that vengeance “acts in the form of reacting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course...[vengeance] encloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end.”

56 Cunningham, 244.

57 It is interesting to note Cunningham’s interpretation of these actions. He states that this violence can be defined as “ranging from murder to the violation of a piece of fruit...the fruit is protected by divine sanction, and its violation is thus a violation of God’s trust. Interestingly, most of the stories seem to imply the penetration or piercing of an ‘other’: the fruit, the body, the bedchamber, the heavens.” Cunningham, 245.

58 Cunningham, 245.

59 Cunningham, 246, 248.
The Abundance of God

Somewhere in the course of history, humanity began to think that there was not enough of whatever was needed to go around; not enough food, not enough money, not enough jobs, not enough….the list goes on and on. In many cases, this is true. The Great Depression in the 1930s in the U.S. taught a generation to save their money for hard times, realizing that what little income or stature they had could be taken away in an instant; yet elsewhere, others grew rich at their expense. The famines in Ethiopia in the 1980s showed us that there was not enough food; yet it is known that while hundreds of thousands lie dying of starvation, others were throwing food away or allowing it to sit in warehouses, uneaten.

There seems to be some sort of mythical idea that there will never be enough, that there is a dire need for people to store up, hoard, and exclude to ensure their own survival, most oftentimes to the detriment of others. Walter Brueggemann calls this the “myth of scarcity.” This myth is what drives national economies, but it also seems to be what drives many religious communities as well.

It all comes down to simple economics, really. Wars and conflicts start because one group does not have what it needs or thinks it deserves, while another group profits (either in perception or in reality) at their expense. Behind every act of violence lies, sometimes lurking in the deepest and darkest corners unseen, fear and greed. These are antithetical to the very nature of hospitality and peaceableness; but in addition, they are, on most occasions, rooted in the idea that there is not enough to go around.

There is a biblical witness, however, to the economics of God. The economics of the Trinity has been discussed; the knowledge within the Self that there is room for the Other enables God to share among God’s self without competition or strife. Additionally, the biblical witness also testifies to God’s economics toward all of creation. It says repeatedly to the people of God that there is enough, that God is bountiful and generous, and that we are called to be the same. The alleged scarcity, according to God’s perspective, is a human invention that truly does not exist, for God’s creation is one of abundance and provision.

Concurrently, as Brueggemann puts it, when there is no myth of scarcity, “there is no warrant for hoarding. No member of the community need be threatened by what the neighbor has, no need for greed, no need for brutality, no need for violence…because [the LORD] is the giver who keeps on giving, every day, sufficient for the day.”

This giving is not that which will make one rich, however. In the wilderness, as shown in Exodus 16:16-18, quail and manna were delivered to the Israelites, providing as much as each had need with

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60 Brueggemann, 87.
61 Brueggemann, 87.
62 Brueggemann, 113.
63 Brueggemann, 115.
no more and no less, each day by God’s very self. No doubt God chose to provide in this way in order to limit possession, equalize the personal economies, curtail greed, and teach those in the wilderness lessons about God’s provision.

Psalm 36:7-9 gives another dimension to God’s abundance:

How precious is your hesed, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

“All people”? This is supposed to mean only those who are Jewish since these are the Hebrew Scriptures, right? No, that is not what the text says. It says all people. Furthermore, what do all these people do? They “feast on the abundance of [God’s] house, and [God] gives them drink from the river of [God’s] delights.” What are the conditions in partaking of this feast? The text does not say which in this case makes it seem as if there are none. This is a universal invitation. “Come, everyone, and feast on the abundance of God’s house! There’s plenty of food and drink to go around! God’s table has many chairs and there’s room for everyone!”

If this is the case – it is right there in the Bible, by the way – then why do we live out our faith so many times as if there is not enough of God’s love to go around? Why do we restrict others from sharing in the bounty as if we ourselves will run out? Why do we treat sharing in the love of God as if it is a scarce commodity? Participation in the feast does not depend on one’s orthodoxy, doctrine, power, or (heaven forbid!) one’s morality. Our invitation to the feast is based solely upon the love, generosity, abundance, and mercy of God Almighty, who has prepared a place for all people in the shadow of God’s wings.

Similar statements are made elsewhere in Scriptures. Psalm 68:7-10 reads: “Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad...in your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy.” In Matthew 6-7, Jesus makes similar statements by saying, if God provides for the sparrows and the lilies of the field, “how much more will [God] in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” Elsewhere, in John 10:10, Jesus makes the promise that he has come so that humanity may have abundant life. Hebrews 7:27 indicates, within the context of the priesthood, that the one Christ has established is one of inexhaustible abundance. Why then do we treat God and others with whom we come in contact as if there are limitations to God’s abundance?

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64 See related Psalms which give identical imagery to God’s provision in the wilderness: Psalm 104:27-28; 145:15-16.
65 Hesed (חֶסֶד) is sometimes translated as “steadfast love,” “lovingkindness,” or “mercy.” Hebrew scholars are uncomfortable with these translations for they fail to take in the full meaning of the word, which implies love, commitment, loyalty, grace, reliability, sacrifice and mercy. For this reason, many simply keep the Hebrew word as I have done here.
66 Hebrews 7:27; Newman, 3.
Interestingly enough, there are indications of our expected behavior regarding others as we sit at God’s table. The most familiar Psalm 23 tells us in verse 4:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

The original Hebrew of this verse implies not only God’s provision in the presence of those who might wish you harm, but also table fellowship with them. As Baptist peacemaker, Ken Sehested, once said, “Table fellowship with antagonists is always where God’s rod and staff lead us.” Under the direction of God, we are able to share a table with others – and not just any others, but enemies too! – prepared by God’s very self without fear, and with comfort, anointing, and a full cup.

In this extension of generosity lies the Baptist principle of religious liberty for a spirit of liberty is one which believes that there is plenty of space at the table for all, one that “seeks to understand the merits of other men and women,” providing freedom for all the children of God in the spirit of God’s very self. To restrict religious liberty is to become exclusive. Therefore, if hospitality is about welcoming the other, exclusivism is not supportive of dialogue and cooperation and is, therefore, antithetical to the practice of hospitality. If true dialogue is to take place, one must feel as if their decisions and beliefs are treated with dignity and respect, not looked down-upon by those with whom they are in community.

Within the context of mission, this principle needs to be considered seriously before programs are initiated which may be interpreted as inhospitable. The diversity of faith, according to the practice of hospitality, is based upon the abundance of God and “requires a pluralistic approach to doctrine and ethics” which allows for a variety of voices to be heard. This pluralistic approach to hospitality in inter-religious life does not allow for anything and everything, as will be discussed later, but acknowledges that God’s table is big enough to deal with those issues.

Because of God’s generosity, we are also asked as people of God to extend that same generosity to others. This is the very essence of hospitality. Living according to God’s economics teaches us that it is in giving that we receive (Luke 6:38) and in generosity, the myth of scarcity is exposed.

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67 Ken Sehested, sermon delivered at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Richmond, Virginia. April 2, 2003.
69 Cunningham, 235
70 Brueggemann, 87-88.
Jubilee

In the book of Deuteronomy, we see a picture of the intentions God has for living with the other. First and foremost, Deuteronomy is “Israel’s ‘neighbor-book’,” putting forth a radical vision that has yet to be accomplished in the world. In addition to being the God of gods, commanding legions of angels and accomplishing all sorts of miracles, God as depicted in Deuteronomy is “preoccupied with orphans, widows, and strangers.”

The revolutionary core of Deuteronomy regarding otherness is found in Deuteronomy 15:1-18 – the teaching of the year of release, or Jubilee. This concept is the most detailed and distinct of all the biblical teachings regarding loving one’s neighbor. Every seven years, all debts are cancelled, no matter how large or small. Every seven years, all slaves and indentured servants are to be set free, liberally provided with means to support themselves. In essence, every seven years requires a massive social equalization.

Related to God’s abundance as discussed previously, Deuteronomy 15:4 reads that if God’s people trusts in this abundance, they will not be in need because God will provide. Furthermore, if, for some reason, one does find one’s self in need, one’s neighbors are to give generously, giving enough to meet the need, without thought of repayment (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). This principle of release “sets the community of ancient Israel apart from all other communities in insisting that power must be limited and handled differently if there is to be a neighborhood.”

Just as the principle of God’s abundance teaches us about the economics of commodity, the principle of Jubilee teaches us about the economics of power. When neighbors are on equal footing before God and others, one cannot strive for power with a clean conscience. In addition, if debts are ultimately to be forgiven, they cannot be used as a means of oppression. Instead, the cycle of release every seven years would equalize the balance of power, creating a much more sustainable environment for cooperation. Imagine how different this world would be if these principles were actually put into practice!

Of course, such an idea is threatening to those who have power and it is for this reason that, unfortunately, one can be sure this principle was probably never put into long-term and widespread effect. This would require the powerful to cede both political and moral capital, both which give tremendous claims to power. Ceding political capital, or the power to control and dominate processes of decision-making, would give power to a minority or

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71 Brueggemann, 77.
73 There is, of course, a significance to the choice of seven years (as opposed to eight or ten). The year of release, or Jubilee, is inextricably wound up in the sabbath principles found elsewhere in the Pentateuch, which in a general sense, require rest for all of creation (land, animals, humanity) in order that it thrive in peace, health and wholeness. The origination of this principle is found in God’s day of rest on the seventh day after the six days of creation.
74 Brueggemann, 80.
those who are considered lesser, indebted, or undeserving. \(^{75}\) Moral capital, on the other hand, is held by those who have the ability and power to stand on the moral high ground (at least in their own minds) because of rhetoric, loyalty to their brand of morality, and study. When one’s adversaries are perceived to be on the lower level morally, it is easy to consider them as being stupid, unfaithful, or hard-hearted.\(^{76}\)

Deuteronomy 15 makes it clear that the inclusion of and providing for the needs of the other is more important than one’s political or moral capital.\(^{77}\) Verses 13-14 point to a generosity towards others that implies emptying of one’s self for the sake of the needs of others, “providing liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, your wine press, thus giving to [the other] some of the bounty with which the LORD your God has blessed you.”

This principle is applied elsewhere in Scriptures, most poignantly in Philippians 2:7-8 when the Apostle Paul cites the Christ hymn writing:

> ...do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in your that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition,” and “in humility, regard others as better than yourselves.” These are radical words as well. While Paul is writing to the church of Philippi, there are no exclusive terms which imply that these “others” are only those within the church. One has every right to assume that Paul is making a universal imperative. Brueggemann puts it this way:

> Regard others as better than yourselves – better in faith, better in discernment, better in stewardship, better in leadership, better in morality, better in orthodoxy, better in social analysis...The problem of course is that our interests feel so much like the interests of God. So in Psalm 139, as we have seen, the psalmist assumes his hates are God’s hates. But Paul is clear [in Philippians]. The seduction is our own interests, because nobody is disinterested. The Christian community is a community that holds to the odd conviction that the neighbor – the one so odd, so stupid, so recalcitrant, so misguided, so careless, so rigid – is superior.\(^{78}\)

Visible both in the Deuteronomy 15 and Philippians 2 passages is a yielding of power for the sake of the other, the emptying of one’s self in order to give hospitality to those

\(^{75}\) Brueggemann, 82.  
\(^{76}\) Brueggemann, 82.  
\(^{77}\) Brueggemann, 83.  
\(^{78}\) Brueggemann, 85.
outside of the familiar circle. It all seems to boil down to economics. If all sides are yielding and transferring power, then the possibility of mutual cooperation has a much better chance. Releasing those in bondage because of debt, providing for the needs of others, equalizing the division between poverty and wealth and the powerful and the powerless – all made possible by the fact that we are to trust in God’s own generosity and God’s ability to provide for and work within us in more ways than we can ever imagine. These are the imperatives given to the people of God as characteristics of their relationship to God and others. These are the very foundation to the two greatest commandments given to the people of God: 1) to love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and 2) to love your neighbor (the other) as yourself.

V. Hospitality: A Life Lived With Others

Hospitality as Antithesis to Individualism

With all this focus upon the other in the practice of hospitality, such a statement as “hospitality is the antithesis to individualism” should come as no surprise. The issue is, however, how we go about practicing hospitality towards the other in such an individualistic age. There are some cultures, such as in the U.S., where this question is particularly relevant. There are others, such as in this context of the Former Yugoslavia, where it is becoming more and more of an issue as the years go by.

Throughout the globe, societies are becoming much more mobile (sometimes out of desire, sometimes out of necessity) and because of this mobility, families, religious communities, and neighborhoods are becoming increasingly fractured. In addition, Western culture places high value on power, control, efficiency, and organization.

The problem with hospitality is that it cannot give quantifiable results, it is not defined by completed tasks, and it is often inefficient and highly unpredictable. In fact, it is not something we should even attempt to do alone. Showing hospitality to others is risky business, and we will be tempted to close ourselves off from others or become lazy. It is ironic that in order to practice hospitality, we need the help of others. Furthermore, if one is

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79 Brueggemann, 84. II Corinthians 8 also gives similar imperatives for looking after the needs of others and equalizing of commodity and power.
80 Ephesians 3:20, Brueggemann, 88.
83 Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 37.
looking for power and control, hospitality is not the place to find it, for hospitality seeks to establish equality and eradicate fear of the other. Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche community, defines hospitality as this:

Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren’t afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share…A community which refuses to welcome – whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because it is fed up with visitors – is dying spiritually. 85

No doubt this is true for all religious traditions, including the Baptist one. When a community becomes exclusive is when the beginning of the end is at hand; and the harder a community fights to close in its borders, the more desperate the situation becomes. The only means of revival or resurrection is to fling the doors wide open to others and recognize the gifts that one has been given as a result of God’s abundance.

An example of this is found in the telling of the story of ancient Israel in the Old Testament. Within part of its history, “the community chose death…[finding] the condition of neighborliness too demanding and too inconvenient” and were led off into exile as God had promised would happen if they violated God’s commandments. 86 The silver lining to this story, however, is that there were members of the community who understood the mistake that had been made, and worked to bring change and life back into it. These visionaries – bold prophets and brave poets – loudly and vehemently declared that God had given them a better way to live and that the survival of the community rested upon Israel’s ability to live in hospitality with the other. 87 In this is where their salvation lies.

Unfortunately, in contemporary context, individualism keeps us from considering our place within society and the religious community at large. Like the Israelites, our need to be distinct from others many times keeps us from being hospitable to them. Protestants are notorious for having an individualistic idea of salvation and life in God – that the community plays no role in one’s spirituality and therefore, the living out of our faith does not require community outside of the church services we attend twice a week. As we are priests for ourselves, we neglect the role of the entire priesthood within the community of faith. We may have friends within the church, but when it comes to the sharing of each other’s lives with truth and integrity as people of God, we somehow find excuses to avoid such action. Sharing in each other’s lives just gets a little too messy for many people’s tastes.

Yet when we share in a common meal, the Lord’s Supper, we must recognize that we do, indeed, live in community with one another or else we partake of the meal with ignorance or falseness in our hearts. Participation in acts of hospitality such as the

86 Brueggemann, 106. Deut. 30:15-20 and I Kings 9:4-7
87 Brueggemann, 107.
communion is an admission that this life in all of its glories and limitations is a shared one, not lived in isolation, but bound to God, others around us and in the world, as well as those who have come before us.\textsuperscript{88}

Many within the Christian tradition, including a few Baptist congregations, open or close the time of communion with a “sign of peace,” most often relegated in modern times to a hug or handshake with other fellow communion participants.\textsuperscript{89} Nevertheless, this sign of peace is “an outward sign of the uniting of our bodies into one body – the Body of Christ – in the act of communion itself.”\textsuperscript{90} This unification of our bodies into the one Body of Christ is the incarnation of the priesthood of believers at its symbolic best.

The problem arises when this outward sign ceases to put us into contact with the entire community rather than comfortable friends by whom we are seated. As David Cunningham puts it, “this is unfortunate, for often these are not the people with whom we most need to be reconciled.”\textsuperscript{91} Despite our difficulties in understanding or participating, the fullness of meaning in the sign of peace and the common meal is an indication that our lives are inextricably wound together, to be shared with one another, and that we move along in this journey of life and spirituality in community. This participation in each other’s lives is not restricted to only those who share the pew with us. It extends to the other side of the sanctuary, to the foyer where visitors enter, and past the entrance doors by which the whole world passes.

**Hospitality as Table Fellowship**

If one were to ask the average person what the word “hospitality” means, it no doubt will include some reference to food or drink, with perhaps even inclusion of “hospitality industry” entities such as hotels and restaurants. There is no argument that even the theological understanding of hospitality includes the giving of sustenance to others. Yet, this sharing of food is not a simple meeting of physical needs. Just as God shares in the Other of God’s self, so we share with others in the presence of God’s own hospitality to God’s self by participating with one another at a common table.\textsuperscript{92} The very actions of eating and drinking in order to survive are to be caught up in our lives with

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\textsuperscript{89} Historically, this sign of peace was a kiss.

\textsuperscript{90} Cunningham, 254.

\textsuperscript{91} Cunningham, 254.

\textsuperscript{92} Cunningham, 255.
Christine D. Pohl, a Christian ethicist who has focused upon the practice of hospitality, has pointed out that over the course of human history (up until just recently in Western culture, at least), hospitality has been valued “as a pillar on which the moral structure of the world rested.”

Sharing hospitality to others was, at that time and now, a demonstration of kindness, neighborliness, assistance, cooperation, and a natural outcome of a life lived in relationship to God. In fact, in the ancient Near East from where Abrahamic faiths originate, it was a reality that if one was refused refreshment in such a harsh climate, it was as if a death sentence was being placed upon the guest. It attends to the needs of the other by providing food, refuge, and security all the while assuming that the other has equal value and a right to be treated with dignity. In almost all cases, it also includes a shared meal with one’s host.

However, the sharing of these meals is not to be restricted to only those who are friendly. As stated earlier, Psalm 23 makes it clear that sharing the table with one’s enemies is expected. This does not imply that the issues between adversaries will be, somehow, miraculously eradicated by the action of sitting down together for a meal. Yet, it is interesting to note that table fellowship is, as Cunningham puts it, “a peacemaking activity because – let’s face it - it’s difficult to enjoy a good meal in the midst of a fight.”

Additionally, in response to the abundance of God revealed in the first fruits of one’s harvest, the people of God in Deuteronomy 26 were required to consecrate their yield to the LORD and then, in an act of hospitality to others, share the fruits of the bounty with the priests and strangers among them (verse 11). How interesting that as an act of thanksgiving for receiving one’s abundance, they are required to give a portion of it away in a celebration feast – with the other, no less.

The principle of table fellowship as an expression of abundance is also seen in Jesus’ ministry. The “feeding of the thousands” stories of Jesus and his teachings afterwards indicate that there is more than enough for everyone, with even baskets left over.

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93 Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 35.
95 Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 35.
96 Cunningham, 256.
that there is no shortage to the generosity of God.\textsuperscript{97} Furthermore, there are no conditions placed upon the thousands to partake of the bread. It was freely given. No confession of faith was necessary. No adherence to certain creeds or doctrines are required. The gift was there to be shared among those who had need, offered freely.\textsuperscript{98} Elsewhere in the ministry of Jesus, meals were a central part of communicating love, grace, welcome, and challenge. Ever notice how the roles between being guest and host become a bit ambiguous when Jesus is a part of table fellowship with others? Roles reversals run rampant whenever Jesus enters the scene. At the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus is a guest but becomes a host as he provides the wedding party with drink in a time of need.\textsuperscript{99} When invited to the home of Zaccheus for a meal, Jesus becomes the giver of life and love.\textsuperscript{100} When hosted for dinner in the home of Martha, her sister Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and receives sustenance from Jesus’ very presence.\textsuperscript{101} Yes, this living out of hospitality is about both giving and receiving, despite who does the cooking and serving. In fact, these shared meals as modeled by Jesus became, for Christians, the crux of worship as seen in the participation of the Lord’s Supper.\textsuperscript{102}

Isaiah 58:6-7 defines the act of worship as being the very essence of hospitality:

\begin{quote}
…to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke…to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;…[to] see the naked, [and] to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin…
\end{quote}

The prophet makes it clear in this chapter that God does not desire empty worship that serves one’s own interests and contributes to the oppression of and conflict with others.\textsuperscript{103} It is ironic to note that while Solomon’s table was full each day – his daily provision was enormous! – the fact that it was lavish at the expense of others and not shared with those in need contributed to his kingly demise.\textsuperscript{104} Consistent with the economics of commodity and power, it is correct to say that “unshared food, unshared long enough, leads to social displacement.”\textsuperscript{105} True practice of faith and gratitude for one’s abundance is focused on releasing the chains of injustice that are, on most occasions, entrenched and systemic. The opposite of oppression is sharing of hospitality on both personal and communal levels.\textsuperscript{106}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{97} Mark 6:30-44; Mark 8:1-21; John 6:1-14
\textsuperscript{98} Brueggemann, 121.
\textsuperscript{99} John 2:1-11.
\textsuperscript{100} Luke 19:1-10.
\textsuperscript{102} Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 35. Furthermore, sharing of this common meal in the context of worship within Christian tradition is be restricted to those who are have made efforts to be at peace with their neighbor. See Matthew 5:21-24.
\textsuperscript{103} Isaiah 58:3-4.
\textsuperscript{104} 1 Kings 4:22-23 - “Solomon’s provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl.” Brueggemann, 118.
\textsuperscript{105} Brueggemann, 119.
\textsuperscript{106} Brueggemann, 119.
\end{footnotesize}
Hospitality as Truth

In addition to individualism, the other antitheses to hospitality are false piety, self-righteousness, inauthenticity, and self-deception. As made apparent in films such as Chocolat, one cannot welcome and live in the community with the other if one is absorbed with one’s own self-righteousness and expressions of piousness. In focusing upon ourselves and excluding others (for whatever reasons), we lose sight of the reality of ourselves in the process. We become blind to our faults, our need for grace, and our communion with others. It is with this aspect of hospitality that the practice becomes the most risky and perhaps even painful. Furthermore, is because of this aspect that hospitality in a theological sense is not defined as simply “being nice.”

Truth and hospitality go hand in hand; one should not be exclusive of the other. It may seem, upon first inspection, that they are complete opposites. In contemporary definitions of hospitality, one who is hospitable is nice, blind to reality, and/or soft. On the other hand, if one is described as being truthful, he/she is most likely considered unkind or inhospitable. In reality, the complete opposite is true. For the truth to be told, a hospitable environment must be fostered and maintained. Yet, a community or individual who is loath to hearing the truth is not truly hospitable, for hospitality is innately truthful.

Just as God shares in God’s own Self, one aspect of hospitality is our ability to “bear and actually enjoy one’s own company [presupposing] the ability to face and thus honor the truth of one’s own life...[and] acknowledging, and therefore receiving, the truth of who and whose one is [liberating] one for genuine hospitality.” Out of that liberation comes the ability to truly live with others, sharing in personal relationships actively characterized by the honoring of truth. Nevertheless, when one honors this truth about one’s self, one is faced with the “sum of our deeds and sufferings, the innumerable ways we have failed others and others have failed us.” Therefore, the practice of hospitality as truth is intrinsically united with the practice of forgiveness of both one’s self and others. As one shows hospitality, one is open to the scrutiny of others regarding our strengths and weaknesses. Pohl makes the excellent statement that showing hospitality to others "has a way of laying bare our lives and surfacing our inadequacies." We are broken and wounded people; and it is through this brokenness and woundedness that we are able to allow hospitality to spring forth out of

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107 Chocolat, directed by Lasse Hallström, produced by David Brown, distributed by Miramax, 2002.
108 Reinhard Hütter, “Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine,” Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. (Grand Rapids, Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 207, 211. Hütter uses the example of C.S. Lewis’ The Great Divorce to illustrate his point that to be guests and hosts, one must face the truth, including whatever pain it may cause or falsehoods it might shatter.
109 Hütter, 209.
110 Hütter, 211-212.
111 Hütter, 211.
112 Hütter, 211.
113 Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 41.
gratitude for God’s grace and mercy, for it is in God where we find our sufficiency. Until we are able to admit this brokenness, we will be unable to practice hospitality truthfully.

The hurdle we, as practitioners of hospitality, must face is the obstacle of becoming hospitable to the truth about ourselves and others, and allowing that truth to transform us into the persons we were created to be by God. Self-deception, however, keeps this from happening in many cases. It is incredibly difficult for us to open ourselves up to sharing our life with others “if we are not willing to risk loss and damage to the things we value,” including our self-perceptions, preconceived notions, and valued ideals and opinions. Moreover, if one is unable to face truth about one’s self, there is no possibility of being able to share one’s self with others authentically. There are many who are afraid to live in true community with others out of fear of what that community will reveal about one’s self. Instead, one lives in isolation, believing falsely that this isolation keeps them safe and secure, as described in the deceptively happy song, “Alone Everybody” by independent folk/rock singer Lori Chaffer:

I am happiest when by myself / nobody’s hurts nobody’s helps / like a gun or bullet on a shelf / alone everybody’s fine.

I’ve been playing little tricks on me / it’s fascinating what I’ll believe / then in circled stitches my mind weaves / alone everybody lies…

If you want to try to shift the blame / think of how hard you try and all your pain / oh there’s one amendment to the game / alone everybody cries.

I’ve been thinking I could get along / I think I’m happy, I think I’m strong / but like my cactus when it’s dry too long / alone even cacti die / alone everybody’s fine / alone everybody lies / alone everybody cries.

On a systemic level, welcoming others also implies that we must honor the truth of our society and the world in which we live. If we are to live out the principles of hospitality as truth, then we are not exempt from the responsibility of responding to those truths if the need requires. One is not entitled to run from the truth or pretend it does not exist once it has been exposed; if we pretend to look the other way and do nothing about it, we betray that which we have seen. Truth and hospitality cannot exist as long as there is blindness and inaction toward injustice.

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114 Pohl, “Hospitality, a Practice and a Way of Life,” 41.
115 Hütter, 212.
117 Hütter, 214
119 Hütter, 216-217. In a footnote, Hütter makes the point that there is a difference between telling the truth and honoring a friendship or duty. Hütter makes the distinction that telling the “truth” to a Gestapo officer about where “dissident friends” are hidden would be a betrayal of friendship instead of honoring the truth. He differentiates between Immanuel Kant’s “absolute prohibition of lying” detailed in The Metaphysics of Morals, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 182-184 and Augustine’s statements on what it means to receive the “gift of God’s truth” as detailed in Paul J. Griffiths, “The Gift and the Lie: Augustine on Lying,” Communio: International Catholic Review 26 (Spring 1999): 3-30. Dietrich Bonhoeffer also gives a different perspective on lying in Ethics, translated by Neville Horton Smith, (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 358-367, particularly 363 when Bonhoeffer responds to Kant’s prohibitions. Stanley Hauerwas adds, commenting on
The prophets of the Old Testament are excellent at making this point, but the ones responsible for betraying the truth are not those one would naturally assume. Both Ezekiel 13:10 and Hosea 4:4-6 indict the priests and religious leadership for turning blind eyes to the state of their world, economy, communities and religious life. Rather than speaking out against injustices as they were told to do in the Pentateuch, they have become rich and corrupted, covering up that which has tainted them and leading adherents to the faith astray. They have abandoned their mission, given to them by God. Their society is disintegrating and their failure to protest has legitimized the very conditions they are supposed to be against.  

Likewise, in contemporary life, our job as priests and religious leaders is not to stand aside and be complacent, but to prophetically speak the truth and respond to things as they are in our world, our neighborhoods and in ourselves. Furthermore, as Baptists, to ignore issues of injustice in favor of evangelism is no better than the sins of the prophets as mentioned in Hosea and Ezekiel. As people of God, we have been given a mandate, as discussed previously, to care for those in need and to seek justice for all of humanity, regardless of creed, race or gender. For Baptists such as myself, speaking with truth on behalf of those in need and working for peace and justice is evangelism in the sense that it makes known God’s purposes for the world and humanity and invites others to join us on the journey. This invitation is the living out of hospitality for all who accept it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s position on truth, that Bonhoeffer “rightly saw that the Christian acceptance that truth does not matter in...small matters prepared the ground for the terrible lie that was Hitler. In order to expose the small as well as the big lies a community must exist that has learned to speak truthfully to one another.” Stanley Hauerwas, “Bonhoeffer on Truth and Politics,” The Project on Lived Theology, available at http://livedtheology.org/pdfs/hauerwas.pdf, December 16, 2003, 17. Furthermore, the Catholic Catechism states clearly that “no one is bound to reveal the truth to someone who does not have the right to know it,” which would be the case of such a situation. U.S. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition, (New York: Doubleday, 2003), Part Three, Article 8, Section 4, Paragraph 2489, page 657.

Miroslav Volf, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environment,” The Project on Lived Theology, available at http://livedtheology.org/pdfs/Volf.pdf, December 16, 2003, 11. Volf gives the example of the drafters of the Kairos Document in South Africa (ending apartheid) and their coining of the phrase “cheap reconciliation” implying that reconciliation is not true reconciliation until injustices have been confronted and removed. Volf asserts that the removal is not necessary before reconciliation can begin, but that the reconciliation process is part of the removal of injustice.  

Kimball adds: “Christians and Muslims need not and should not abandon their core commitment to sharing their respective versions of God’s good news with humankind...[yet] they should remember that converting others is not their responsibility,” but God’s. *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 65.
Hospitality as Appreciation for Abundance

Hospitality, as has already been established, springs from a gratitude for the abundance of God. We are able to welcome others into our lives not because we simply want to treasure diversity, but because we know that God’s ability to provide is limitless and to exclude others from that bounty is not up to us to decide. Hospitality implies an openness and inclusion towards others, but it does not support a “thorough going relativism.”¹²³ Our commitment to truth is a deterrent from accepting everything as we seek to share in hospitality with others. Embracing a generic diversity creates a pluralism that is not hospitable to the truth, for such a stance inevitably takes away that which is unique to each tradition. The goal of hospitality is not the assimilation of all persons and faiths into one universal tradition, but to recognize the uniqueness of persons and their traditions while remaining true to ourselves as well. Our very identity depends upon it.¹²⁴

Instead, hospitality requires that there be an ability to think critically about faith, values, morality and ethics in light of what is best for all of creation – and not to simply roll over and say that everything is acceptable in the spirit of diversity.¹²⁵ To practice hospitality, particularity need not be discarded, nor are we required to put away our faults and sins and become perfect in order to share in God’s abundance. If we waited for such circumstances, hospitality would never happen. Instead, hospitality “is to be practiced in all the messiness of our ordinary lives, even as it also has the potential to transform us in the process, whether we are guests or hosts.”¹²⁶

Rather than focusing upon diversity or relativism as a reason for hospitality, we should, instead, focus upon God’s abundance and goodness for those aspects of God are not limited to “one individual, one subject matter,…one facet of God’s good creation,” or (might I add) one particular system of belief that is limited by humanity’s finitude. Instead, in order to practice hospitality well, it must spring from “a desire to discover with the heart and mind the rich mystery of God’s abundance, an abundance that pertains albeit in different ways, to all subjects.”¹²⁷

¹²³ Newman, 4-5.
¹²⁴ Judith M. Gundry-Volf and Miroslav Volf, *A Spacious Heart: Essays on Identity and Belonging*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 6, 10-11, 59. David Cunningham also writes, “For the triune God, the Self is always Other and the Other is always Self; living in the image of the triune God thus means learning to recognize ourselves in others and others in ourselves.” Cunningham, 271.
¹²⁵ For example, we would not accept the practice of child sacrifice (to speak hyperbolically) in an effort to treasure diversity and be welcoming to all. Instead, hospitality would require us to be truthful and protest such actions for the benefit of all creation, especially that of children, who are innocent and defenseless, in addition to being created in the image of God as is all humanity. Yet, it is hoped that we would be hospitable to the practitioners with all that entails. This does not make truth relative, but instead, provides space for dialogue, challenge, and mutual learning. Similarly, in inter-religious dialogue, parties are not required to agree on everything and the end result is not to convert everyone to one particular all-encompassing faith, but simply to be able to communicate with one another each other’s values and differences, learning how to work towards the goal of mutual cooperation.
¹²⁶ Newman, 6.
¹²⁷ Newman, 5
Hospitality as Identity Formation

Undoubtedly, when one speaks so inclusively regarding the practice of hospitality, the questions of exclusion and identity will surface. How far are we to extend hospitality? How much difference do we allow before we close our shutters and bar the doors to others? Is our identity as a community contingent upon to whom we extend hospitality? Are there some who should be unwelcome? Is exclusion ever appropriate? Is it possible to live together hospitably with others who think, believe, and act differently?\(^{128}\)

As has already been established, allowing for diversity does not necessarily lead to relativism. It is quite acceptable and even necessary to maintain a community’s particularity while at the same time striving for oneness with others. In fact, it is only in relationship with others who are different that we can truly know ourselves. Moreover, there is a substantial difference between excluding others because they are outsiders and being hospitable of others without necessarily asking them to become insiders. Sharing hospitality with someone of a different faith does not negate one’s own. Inviting a Jew speaking from the pulpit of a Baptist church does not make the church less Baptist. Welcoming a Muslim into one’s home does not make one less Christian. Going to Mass with a friend does not make one Catholic. And meditating upon icons does not make one Orthodox. Instead, actions such as these simply make one more welcoming and hospitable of the other.

Contrary to somewhat popular (and perhaps inflated) Baptist opinion of ourselves, most people do not want to become Baptist; nor will our faith be put into danger if we rub shoulders with those who are not. Being hospitable simply makes us better citizens in this world in which we find ourselves. The issue of inclusion only comes into effect when one truly wants to become Baptist, which occurs only when one wants to join a Baptist church.\(^{129}\)

Nonetheless, there will be differences of opinion, fragmentation and perhaps even disunity as such mixed company builds its own community together. How then does one deal with this inevitability? In light of hospitality, it returns to the issue of relying upon the abundance of God and the willingness to cede power to the other. Genuinely sacrificing on behalf of another does not lead to self-destruction but to a fuller understanding of relying upon God’s abundance. We must, with wisdom as guests and hosts and without losing our identity, be willing to forfeit our interest in the outcome of our hospitality to the sovereignty of

\(^{128}\) Gary Harder, “Competing Visions: Can we keep Isaiah and Ezra in the same Bible, and you and me in the same church?”, Vision, Spring 2002, 25

\(^{129}\) Shurden, 1. When this is the case, then there are set of traditional Baptist doctrines and values that are commonly adopted by those who desire to be a part of the community, but only then does that make one Baptist. Moreover, those traditions are subject to the acceptance of the autonomous local church one joins.
others. Ideally, we would hope that our partners in hospitality would understand this equation and do the same; but realistically, we know that that will not always be the case and we must be ready for the pain that will inevitably come. All the same, when we endeavor “to manipulate or coercively control the outcome [we] inevitably distort our roles as guests and hosts.”

We are not without a Biblical example with the same questions and issues that arise just as in our contemporary context. There are two perspectives found within the Old Testament that seem to be in tension with one another over the issue of identity and the welcoming of the other. In both circumstances, the Israelites are engaged in a homecoming from their exile in Babylon. Once arriving back to their homeland, they are faced with the reality of their situation and undoubtedly hurt. Their homes were destroyed. Refugees and those who had stayed had taken over their property. They are confronted with poverty, a need to rebuild their lives, and the pain of loss. Sounds familiar to contemporary post-war circumstances, does it not?

The post-exilic community of Israel was faced with a choice. Do they live among those who have filtered into their homeland, those who have taken over their homes and land, and find a way to make it work? Or do they exclude and resist the threat of assimilation with foreigners and strangers?

Ezra 9-10 and Isaiah 56 are at odds with one another over this issue. Ezra was distraught at the circumstances surrounding Israel’s return from exile. Foreigners had infiltrated the community; those who claimed to abide by the Torah had married strangers those who did not. In these chapters, Ezra admonished the Israelites to separate themselves from the foreigners, including divorcing their wives who were not Israelite, to the point of what seems like xenophobia. Ezra wanted to “cleanse” the Israelites of foreign influence and draw in the borders of the community in order to restore their heritage and Torah obedience. Understandably, he sought to put things right and return the people of Israel to an earlier time where their identity was based upon their difference from others.

Conversely, Isaiah 56, which in its final form may have been written around the same time as Ezra, gives a radically different view. While the first two verses of this chapter seem to imply and support strict Torah obedience that Ezra is advocating, the direction the following verses take is quite astonishing. Instead of being exclusive, defining who will not be allowed to fraternize with the Israelites, Isaiah depicts a shocking inclusivity to those who,

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130 Newman 6-7
131 Harder, 28.
132 It is thought by many that the final redaction of Isaiah 56-66 (also known as Third or Trito-Isaiah) inserted these inclusive sections found in 56:1-8 and later in 66:18-24 at a later date than the rest of Third Isaiah was written, which would have placed it, perhaps, at the same time as Ezra as an intra-communal polemic. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 305.
In the past, had been excluded. Including the eunuch and the foreigner to be a part of the community expands even the standards of Moses and the Sinai covenant. This, perhaps, is the clearest example of the Mosaic tradition being altered “for the sake of the future community.” Yet, there is criteria to be included in the community, albeit lacking in the Ezra-like ethnic restrictions. The requirements spoken by God in order to be included in this community are: 1) “keep my sabbaths” and 2) “hold fast my covenant”. It is as straightforward as that. If one is to be included, one must to set aside time for rest and worship and one must pledge to be in a relationship of dependence upon God. After that, God takes care of the rest by welcoming them into the community, bringing them to a place of holiness, making them joyful, accepting their sacrifices, and gathering all those who have been scattered. They are welcome because God is welcoming, gracious, and giving God who extends hospitality to all who are in need.

In the context of hospitality and basking in the abundance of God, were Ezra’s actions justified? The text does not give the answer to this question. Which side is right? The text does not answer this question either. Undoubtedly, those who compiled the canon wrestled with the same questions and chose to leave both perspectives in for a reason. It is interesting to note that the books of Jonah and Ruth are also thought to be finalized at the same time as Ezra and this particular section of Isaiah. Strong in their anti-exclusivist perspectives, Jonah and Ruth seem to give support to Isaiah’s vision of community and could be indicative of an intra-community debate on just how exclusive Israel should be. Perhaps Ezra was kept in the canon to give example to its readers of what not to do, as Isaiah, Jonah, and Ruth would imply.

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134 Harder, 31. Likewise, although during the period of exile instead of post-exilic, Jeremiah 29:4-14 gives similar directions to the Israelites to invest themselves in the foreign land, to get married, plant gardens, seek the welfare of the foreign city, and yet still live as Israelites. Both options must have been, therefore, possible.

135 Isaiah 56:3-7; Deut. 23:1-2, 23:3-6
136 Harder, 31.
137 Harder, 32.
139 Harder, 32.
140 Isaiah 56:7-8
141 Isaiah 56-66 seems to reflect the theological issues of the time. Brueggemann states that it indicates the “theological crisis of the formative years of Judaism, just after the return to and restoration of the community in Jerusalem after the Exile...Specifically, 56:3-8 seeks to enact the imperative for justice in 56:1-2 by an insistence on a large inclusiveness in the community, presumably an attempt to counter and resist any narrow exclusivism.” Walter Brueggemann, Isaiah 40-66: Westminster Bible Companion Series, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 164 and 165.
VI. Conclusion

In this world in which we live, we have two choices. Either we can choose to exclude others, seeking to keep our own selves pure and untainted by the influence of those who are not like us; or we can choose to include others, seeking to invite others to be a part of our lives and work together for a common good despite our differences. The invitation to others into our homes, at our tables, and among our communities does not make us less than who we are, but teaches us that there is still a great deal to be learned.

Yet, our job, as guests and hosts, is not to practice hospitality as a means to an end. We are simply called to “open our eyes and our hearts to the person who is at our gate.” Welcoming that person is not contingent upon them confessing the correct creed or worshipping a similar way, but upon our ability to recognize that just as God shares God’s abundance with the Other, we are to do the same, looking for ways in which we too might empty ourselves for the sake of another.

Hospitality is a practice of grace. It is difficult work, held up by faith, dedication, prayer and thanksgiving; yet it is sustained by the grace given to us by God and those whom we welcome. Grace, in and of itself, is inclusive, embracing the one who seems as if one is beyond favor, yet somehow finds one's self in the arms of another. Beautifully, Miroslav Volf writes:

In an embrace I also close my arms around the others – not tightly, so as to crush and assimilate them forcefully into myself, for that would not be an embrace, but a concealed power-act of exclusion; but gently, so as to tell them that I do not want to be without them in their otherness. I want them to remain independent and true to their genuine selves, to maintain their identity and as such become a part of me so that they can enrich me with what they have and I do not.

Hospitality recognizes that our lives, as God has intended for us, are to be wrapped up in each other and not lived in isolation. Hospitality to others reiterates that as people of God, we are to be focused upon and inclusive toward others as we live out the principles of our faith. Furthermore, in order to live authentically with others, an environment of hospitality is required. This is not an easy task, but essential all the same. As we all sit at the table of God’s abundant feast, may we embody the realization that there is plenty of room and sustenance at the table for everyone as we open our arms to welcome the world, for it is in that welcome that we give witness to the work of God in our lives.

Bibliography


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