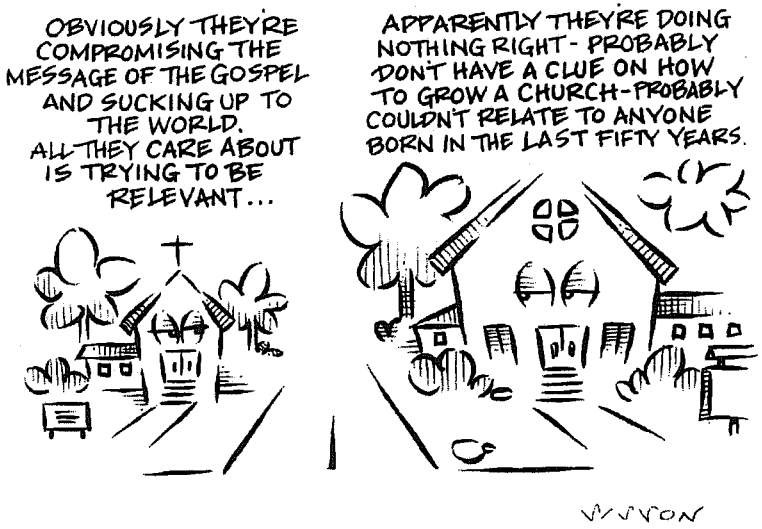
Reformation & REVIVAL JOURNAL

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A Quarterly for Church Renewal

VOLUME 13 · NUMBER 3 · SUMMER 2004



Classical Worship for Today

Hospitality: The Invitation to Come, See and Stay

Wilbur Ellsworth

The ancient church had a communion prayer that drops hard on us today. As the American evangelical church struggles with sincere desire to be relevant to the people who are passing by our friendly signs and non-threatening services, our fathers and mothers in the faith were praying just before receiving the Bread and the Cup, "I will not speak of thy Mystery to thine enemies, neither will I give thee a kiss as did Judas." Instead of opening wide the doors for all to come, the pastor would instruct the deacon to shut the door after having sent out all the unbaptized attenders. So much for being "seeker sensitive!" In spite of such poor marketing strategy, the church grew tremendously during this period that lacked ecclesiastical graces.

The first Christian witnesses did not try to make the church's culture like the world's culture. They knew that only highly intentional initiatives could bridge the relational gap between the church of the Savior and the culture of the world. Those initiatives are called "hospitality." And the understanding of the role and character of hospitality is a crucial link in calling our generation to the worship of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

From the ministry of the Lord himself, to the work of the early apostolic church, the building of a radically different

Christian culture and the opening of a daring initiative of love to the world formed the mission of salvation. It seems that we no longer have this dual sense of mission: difference in culture and initiative in love. Today we have tamed the difference between church and culture. As a result we have tamed the need for, and the nature of, Christian hospitality. How often today Christians will say, "I really don't care what it takes, I just want to win people to Christ." While the love for lost people is commendable, "just winning people to Christ" may result in introducing people to a diminished view of the Holy Trinity because we haven't sufficiently thought through what "just winning people to Christ" involves.

An event in the first chapter of John's Gospel, verses 35-42, portrays Christ's wisdom in hospitality. It is love's path that invites the stranger into God's home. Three words in this event are markers on the path—*Come, See, Stay*:

> The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus.

"Come" is the loving invitation. Notice that "come" is a word of response. These men had been captivated by the radical difference of Jesus. They clearly desired to know more about him, to understand what made him who he was. The Lord's hospitality didn't start in a vacuum. It started with the integrity of his life making an impression on their souls. John the Baptist had created the possibility with his call, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Clear and public attention to Jesus created

the possibility for Jesus to ask them the first question, "What are you seeking?" That initial question is a powerful base for creating a path of conversation. The community effort of John and Jesus raised interest and permitted the question and it was then the conversation began to move. These men wanted to know where Jesus was staying. John's Gospel makes it quite clear that this was not a casual question. It went to the heart of the matter of establishing an enduring relationship, for the word "staying" (Greek: *meno*) returns later in the Lord's discourse in the fifteenth chapter when he urges his disciples to "abide in" him. Again, the word is *meno*. In our present way of speaking we would say, "Where are you coming from?" In other words, these men did not merely want a passing introduction to Jesus of Nazareth; they wanted to follow him back to the roots of his life and being. Gradually it dawned on them that this man lived in a world and spoke of a kingdom that stirred up deep desire in them. It was that desire that led to their question, "Where are you staying?" Jesus rewarded that risk by inviting them to "come." We need to ask ourselves what it is about us that people will want to come and see.

Inviting people to Christian worship without laying the foundation of desire and need will usually fail. In the determination to succeed the church sometimes uses unworthy and even contrary appeals that attempt to draw people without helping them face the deepest needs and desires of their hearts. "Teacher, where are you staying? Where Jesus lived on earth (and where we make our true "heart home") is the vision that makes our "come" more than a variation of the telemarketer's irritating pitch at dinner time. "Come" becomes a call to learn where to find the Father's love and to share that love with Jesus Christ and his followers. Getting close enough to people so they can see the difference that creates desire is the first act of spiritual hospitality. The Lord, however, kept drawing his new friends further.

"See" is the loving call to investigation. What do you imagine it would have been like to visit the place where Jesus stayed? On the one hand, there probably wasn't much to see. Jesus had no earthly house to call his own. He had few possessions,

so going home with Jesus wouldn't have been a Parade of Homes Tour. But going home with Jesus involved something far more important. It involves the ability to "see." It is the vision of Psalm 27, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that I may gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his temple." Some years ago our family visited the home of the New England poet, Robert Frost. We toured the plain house and went upstairs to a starkly furnished room where Frost had written some of his greatest poetry. A plain rough plank table stood before an open window. Clearly the window had been left open in all kinds of weather because the boards were badly warped and worn. That's where Robert Frost had "stayed." How easy it would have been to look around and quickly move on. But through that window there was a view of the mountains, there was the smell of the hay and the singing of birds and out back in the old barn there was a shop where we could buy books of his poetry and recordings of Frost reading them. If you wanted to know Frost, there was a wealth of opportunity in that place. *But first you had to want to know Frost!* The desire to see the glory of God must be awakened in the questions that lead to "come" before there can be any hope of "see." "Come and see" is the preparation to help our friends hope for a glimpse of the glory. Jesus did not say, "Come and enjoy, I think you'll like it. We have a service designed just for your cultural interests." Rather, he put their coming and seeing on the foundation of wanting to know where he himself made his home. Jesus knew that he had lived eternally with his Father and that was what he wanted them to see. Christians who have learned to live in the worship of God's glory and live in the beauty and strength of that goodness can extend the invitation to "come" in the spirit of love and patience. But if we never say, "come," they won't. And if they don't come they won't see. And if they don't see they won't stay.

Stay is the loving call to identification. As important as it is for people to come and see, the ultimate test of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is staying. While this sounds obvious, we need to think carefully through the implications

of the reasons we give to people to come and see in the first place. Someone has wisely said that the reasons people have for coming usually are the reasons for which they stay. Evangelism is an invitation to stay in the life of Jesus Christ. John's story implies this when he records that "they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour" (4 o'clock in the afternoon). They took significant steps to establish fellowship with the Lord where he lived, and where Jesus lives is with the Father. They stayed with him for the day to learn about his home. They came in, they saw and they stayed and it changed their lives forever. Andrew, one of these two men, found his brother and gave witness, "We have found the Messiah." The hospitality of Jesus had won them. Later on, Jesus said his disturbing words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood as conditions of staying with him. Many left because they were troubled by such a thought. The Lord turned to Peter who had come to Jesus on the basis of Christ's early hospitality. He asked him, "Do you want to go away as well?" This was the test! How lasting would the influence of those early days of "come, see and stay" hospitality really be? How deep had the desire been planted through Jesus' question, "What are you seeking?" Peter's answer is filled with the wonder of truth and grace: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

This seemingly insignificant story in the early ministry of the Lord teaches us how the love of the stranger draws people into the life of "staying with Jesus," of abiding in the place where he lives in the fellowship and joy of the All Holy and Eternal Trinity. These days sincere attempts to evangelize the stranger seem to diminish the nature of biblical triune worship of the church out of a desire to get people to come. We often show them appealing pleasures that are only seductions to draw them to something different. Instead we need to follow our Lord in his "come, see and stay" love for the stranger.

There are strangers to Christ all around us and he calls us to care about their eternal homelessness. Welcoming the stranger into Christ's home begins with: (1) Asking them

what they are seeking; (2) Sharing with them the home you have in the worship of God in the church; and (3) Staying with them for as long as it takes for them to stay in Christ's love.

As we walk through our world may we love the strangers the Lord places in our path and seek to bring them to the life of worship that prays, "O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells" (Psalm 26:8).

Hospitality is the path that loves the stranger into God's home. And that path runs right through our lives.

Author

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We must notice a tradition of "affectionate" spirituality represented in the heirs of Richard Baxter, the seventeenth-century Puritan, who combined theological eclecticism with deep seriousness, and was of that catholic spirit which Law and Wesley expounded.

GORDON S. WAKEFIELD

Discipline, while the word is unfallen, exists for the sake of what seems its very opposite—for freedom, almost for extravagance.

C. S. LEWIS