

Single: Gospel Hospitality

Today, the word 'hospitality' means little more than being a good dinner host – having your friends for dinner, having family to stay the weekend, hosting the Christmas party for all the relatives.

But in the New Testament ... the word routinely translated 'hospitality' refers to something much more.

I don't want to get nerdy but the Greek term is philoxenia—love (philo) of the (xenos) foreigner/outsider

It's a more daring concept than the relaxed 'philadelphia'—love of your kin or kind.

It's easy to welcome those with whom we have an affinity / agreement.

'Hospitality' welcomes those who aren't our kin, our kind, our tribe - those with whom we might have profound disagreement.

There's a line in one of Paul's letters (Rom 12) that captures it pretty well: "Practice hospitality (philoxenia]. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

If this were my class at Wheaton I'd talk about a little Greek word play Paul uses to connect these two sentences to show that one way to show hospitality—love of the outsider—is to bless those who persecute you.

Those with a little Greek should look at the original text – it's very cool.

Anyway, this is a podcast. My point is: hospitality is fruit / mirror of the Xian gospel: God loves the outsider; we are to do the same.

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This all comes from Jesus. In that passage in Romans about blessing those who persecute you, Paul is clearly reflecting on the words life and words of Jesus.

Jesus epitomized 'hospitality' in the deeper sense of love of the 'xenos'—the outsider.

On the one hand, Jesus wasn't shy about preaching judgment on wrongdoers -not just on religious hypocrites (as is sometimes claimed) ... but also rank-and-file thieves, greedy, violent, & sexually immoral.

In this sense, Jesus was just like John the Baptist or some other ancient Jewish prophet.

The curiosity for many 'Jesus scholars' today (whether believers or sceptics) is that Jesus also had a habit of sitting at the dinner table with those who were first in line for judgment:

Religious leaders like Simon the Pharisee, classic sinners like Zacchaeus the tax-collector.

Jesus showed gospel-hospitality.

He is the very definition of hospitality.

I first learnt this theme the easy way - through a Christian who emulated Jesus.

Glenda Weldon was a once-a-week volunteer teacher at my high school.

She was a very open Christian.

She was smart and funny—had answers to all my smart Alec questions in class.

And she constantly hosted feasts in her home.

My mates and I would turn up at her Sydney mansion Friday afternoons, gorge ourselves on her hamburgers, milkshakes, and scones ... and then she read us episodes from Gospels, and fielded our questions.

Glenda put up with so much from us.

Turned up at her home with 20 mates (when she was expecting 5-6), and other times didn't turn up at all (when she'd prepared all the food).

We even stole from her.

In those days, I had no idea there were bigoted Christians who looked down, judged/shunned you.

That's something I only learned later, when I started going to church and mixing with Christians.

Glenda epitomised for me one of the most striking / historically secure aspects of Jesus.

He was (in-)famous for being (in words of Luke 7): 'friend of sinners'.

There has been a lot of discussion among scholars about who 'sinners' are in Gospels.

Joachim Jeremias (Leipzig) 1970s: 'Sinners' were simply the common folk, 'people of land', whose vulgar trades and lack of education left them ignorant of the noble ways of Judaism.

This probably gave us the popular notion that Jesus directed his ministry mainly to the 'down-and-outs', the 'misfits', the 'underdogs'.

Ed Sanders (Duke) replied in 1990s: ‘sinners’ = deeply wicked.

Consorting with common people wouldn’t’ve been scandalous in Galilee and Judaea ...

No! ‘Sinners’, he said, were “Jews who systematically or flagrantly transgressed, and who were, therefore, like Gentiles, except that they were even more culpable.”¹

Sanders added his own controversial argument (it, too, has influenced a modern outlook):

He said Jesus never called sinners to repent.

Jesus just wanted to show sinners that God loves them, just as they are.

This aspect of Sanders’ insight didn’t convince many scholars—for the reasons I’ll mention in a moment but most scholars have accepted his definition of the sinner as one who transgresses the Good and deserves judgment.

It was James Dunn (Durham) who reviewed all the evidence and showed that ‘sinners’ was roughly correct.

Whoever used the word ‘sinner’ intended it as a description not that the person was just an underdog or outsider but someone who was (from the speaker’s point of view) a wrongdoer under divine judgment.

Many in Jesus’ culture had a purity approach to the sinners.

¹ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. Penguin Books, 1993, 227 (see pages 226-237). See the detailed restatement in W. D. Davies and E. P. Sanders, “Jesus: from the Jewish point of view” (618-677) in *The Cambridge History of Judaism (vol.3): the Early Roman Period* (edited by William Horbury, et. al). Cambridge University Press, 2001. 636-646.

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Contact with sinners was heavily regulated.

We have actual laws from the Pharisees declaring that if a thief enters your house, everywhere the thief stepped is ritually unclean and must be ritually purified.

The same ruling says if it's a tax collector the entire house is unclean.

That's the background to the many statements in the Gospels ... indicating a controversy over Jesus' 'hospitality' .

Jesus regularly ate and drank with sinners.

Matthew 9:10-11. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Luke 7:34. 'He is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'

LUKE 19:1-7 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

Jericho was a wealthy resort town; being chief tax collector meant he one of wealthiest citizens!

Zacchaeus wasn't a poor stigmatized outcast (despite short!).

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He was an opulent controller.

We might have ‘muttered’ (v.7) at way Jesus invited himself to Zac’s home.

Worth pondering: God doesn’t just love dejected sinners; he loves extravagant, arrogant sinners, too.

And Jesus embodied that love and became the friend of sinners with all the risk to his reputation that brought.

But, for Jesus, this hospitality wasn’t an endorsement of the sinner’s status and actions; it was meant to be transformative, as we see in the numerous examples in the Gospels of people giving up their life course and following Jesus.

I said earlier that Ed Sanders promoted the thought (incredibly popular today) that Jesus’ meals with sinners contained only one message: “God loves you, just as you are - no moral judgment or transformation implied”.

You often hear this idea throw at us: “Didn’t Jesus welcome everyone—why is the Church so bigoted!”

But Sanders’ claim was more popular outside history circles than inside.

It just doesn’t account for all the evidence.

Jesus regularly demanded renewal.

Consider how he how responded to the religious authorities when they complained about his meals with sinners: Luke 5:30-32. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

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Inherent in the ‘doctor’ metaphor is the notion of restoration, not leaving someone sick!

Jesus welcomed people to his table, but he called them to the transformation of grace.

His message wasn’t that we’re all fine just as we are.

It’s that we can all be rescued from judgment and transformed by grace.

Of course, this was nowhere clearer than in his death on a cross, which achieved what the meals embodied: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Matthew 26:28

This is why I say ‘Hospitality’—love of the outsider—is a fruit and mirror of Christian gospel.

Hospitality doesn’t just do the easy thing of loving our kin and kind.

It does the difficult thing of loving the outsider, those we might disagree with.

Our fractured world has lost the moral imagination that enables us to disagree and love at the same time.

A culture of grace can easily disagree & love.

After all, God loves us despite our sins; we love ourselves despite our sins; and so we can love others despite their sins.

But a grace-less culture has lost this ethical imagination.

Now it’s common to equate disagreement with bigotry.

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If you don't agree with me, you don't respect me or care for me—that's the equation.

It's a culture staring in the mirror of its own tragic loss of genuine hospitality ... loss of grace.