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**UNDERSTANDING AND EQUIPPING THE CHURCH IN
ITS PRACTICE OF LOVE THROUGH HOSPITALITY AND
REDEMPTIVE CONVERSATION**

By

Timothy A. Meendering

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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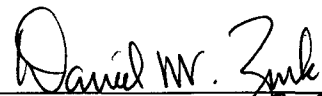
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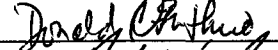
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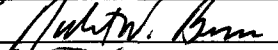
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ABSTRACT

This project has focused on understanding and equipping the church for its practice of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation. Scripture makes it clear that love for the stranger through the practice of Christian hospitality is a mandate for the Church. Hospitality is a significant means by which we reflect the welcoming character of God and the abundance of His kingdom. Scripture also provides instruction for our conversations which are a critical element for communicating the humility, acceptance and love of the gospel. This study has demonstrated while the faithful practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation is a vital part of the Church's mission, it is becoming increasingly difficult to be faithful in these practices.

A review of literature and qualitative research through a series of interviews has exposed the primary internal beliefs or worldview and the external factors that work to either promote faithfulness or serve as barriers to faithfulness. The data revealed that when the interviewees embraced the gospel, were taught by example, and encouraged toward and by engagement (in hospitality and redemptive conversation); the daily resistance and barriers toward faithful practice were often overcome. Most significant for the equipping work of the church was the affirmation of the indispensability of our theology with a kingdom vision, a grasp and embrace of the gospel, or the compelling power of Christ's love for propelling us into the counter-cultural work of hospitality and redemptive conversation.

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Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Study

It is impossible for anyone's imagination to capture the joy, love, and fellowship that Adam and Eve must have known in their relationships with God and each other. In light of this special bond, the fallout from their disobedience must have been staggering. Two of the most destructive consequences of sin have been alienation from God and alienation from each other. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., President of Calvin Seminary, in his well-regarded work on the nature of sin and evil, writes that "at its core, human sin is a violation of our human end, which is to build shalom and thus to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."¹ The separation resulting from sin causes us to groan and yearn for the joy, fellowship and shalom of Paradise.²

But God is working out a plan of redemption where alienation can be healed, shalom restored, and His glory revealed. Gospel transformation empowers us to love and delight in Him. We display His glory through our love for one another and for the stranger. And when we are faithful to Christ's mission for us, we serve as instruments of His redemption,³ leading others to the joy of this same transformation. Two of the most significant tasks that we can carry out in this mission consist of extending hospitality and nurturing redemptive relationships that serve as the context for God's grace of healing, restoration, new life, and maturity.

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 17.

² Rom. 8:22-25; Ps. 73:25; 1 John 3:2.

³ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R 2002), 18-19.

God is a welcoming God, and He commands His people to be a welcoming people.⁴ The Holy Spirit through Paul instructs the believers in Rome: “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”⁵ Jesus is revealed through us when we open our arms, hearts, and homes just as He opens His. But we are also called to something more than putting a good spread of food on the table or picking up the dinner tab. Each of us is called to a ministry that involves displaying the character of Jesus and speaking to one another with the truths of Scripture. Colossians 3:12-17 holds one of Scripture’s clearest calls for us to incarnate the love of Christ:

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.⁶

Our faithfulness depends on our understanding and absorption of the gospel into our hearts and minds.⁷ Do I know and receive the welcoming, patient, and merciful love of God? Am I convicted by the depth of my sin and my need for the admonishment of His Word? If so, Christ’s love will compel me to love and welcome others and to gently lead them into the truth of their condition before God.

Today, the need is as great as it ever has been for the church to be equipped and encouraged toward the practice of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation.

⁴ Matt. 11:28-30; Luke 14:12-14.

⁵ Rom. 15:7 ESV.

⁶ Col. 3:12-17.

⁷ Rom. 1:16-17, 12:1-2

Cultural factors such as isolationism⁸ and individualism⁹ work against biblical community and relationships—primary venues for God’s redemptive work. Families are unstable; often no one is home. Lifestyles involve a frenetic pace that prevents many of us from sitting down to a meal with our own family. In the midst of this, we hardly think in terms of serving as a host to friends or strangers. Even when we do gather with others, we struggle to love through conversation that is redemptive.

The congregation I serve provides an example of some of the challenges and obstacles to practicing love through hospitality and redemptive conversation. A Natural Church Development survey revealed that out of eight measured quality characteristics, the congregation rated lowest in having “loving relationships.”¹⁰ The survey particularly illustrated our need to extend hospitality and engage in conversation with depth. Difficult times leading up to the beginning of my pastorate left my congregation with a high concentration of members with deep roots and internal family relationships. The result was a high percentage of members who enjoyed a developed web of relationships and were not necessarily looking for new ones. We tended to overestimate our hospitality because while strangers to us would affirm that we were indeed friendly, we struggled to overcome the hurdle of building new and meaningful relationships. These hurdles are pushed higher because of our commitment to be a community church in a racially and socio-economically diverse neighborhood.

As a pastor living in the heart of this same neighborhood, I struggle with these same challenges. How can I lead by example with hospitality and redemptive

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁹ Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

¹⁰ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 36-37.

conversation? How can I better preach, teach, and equip the flock to be faithful with these practices of love? What are the beliefs and factors that promote or discourage hospitality and redemptive conversation? How can these beliefs and factors best be addressed in order to promote our faithfulness to the One who has been so faithful to us? These are the primary concerns of this project.

Hospitality is modeled and taught throughout Scripture. In a journey to Israel, I learned firsthand how hospitality is a significant part of the Middle Eastern culture. I joined a group of pastors who hiked long distances over the same land that was traveled by Abraham and his descendants. Along the way, we entered into the camp of a Bedouin family who quickly welcomed us into their tents and served us tea and flatbread which was freshly prepared over an open fire. This experience helped me to better understand the roots of the ancient practice of hospitality. I was also better able to enter into and identify with stories of Abraham and Rebecca who are presented as models for this ancient practice.

Christine Pohl is a professor of Christian social ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary who has authored a noteworthy book on the centrality of hospitality for the Christian faith. She writes that “hospitality is central to the meaning of the gospel.”¹¹ Hospitality particularly manifests the heart of God to those who are spiritually lost. The parable of the prodigal son is one example where we gain this glorious vision of a welcoming God. In addition to looking at hospitality in Scripture, Pohl offers a historical review of the practice of hospitality and concludes by saying that “even a superficial

¹¹ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 8.

review of the first seventeen centuries of church history reveals the importance of hospitality to the spread and credibility of the gospel.”¹²

Jack Miller, the founder of World Harvest Mission, through his emphasis on the hospitality of God and His church, has influenced my leaders and me over the last several years. He writes that:

God presents Himself to our faith as a hospitable God, a welcoming God through Christ’s permanent, heavenly intercession. What we do, then, in our own hospitality is simply to mirror in our relationships the openness and access that we have already experienced with our Father. Our evangelism takes off from this focal point. By faith we open our homes and hearts to others just as God has opened His welcoming salvation to us.¹³

Miller illustrates how faithfulness with hospitality leads each person then to “go” with the gospel. It becomes a significant way for each church member to be sent out rather than merely looking to the church leadership or to missionaries to be “the sent” part of a congregation. Hospitality becomes a primary means by which we are faithful to the “go” of the Great Commission.

The church I serve has experienced how adopting this view of God and ministry has initiated changes in our relationships with our neighbors. We are intentionally and increasingly initiating and developing relationships with individuals, families, and institutions rather than waiting for them to come to us. Seeing hospitality as an effective and significant element of disciple-making challenges a commonly accepted attraction model for ministry, where worship services and programs are developed to attract others to come to us. In the context of hospitality and redemptive conversation, relationships are initiated and developed, and the gospel is modeled and communicated. Jesus in us, particularly His love in us, becomes the attraction.

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 86.

So, again, this study is concerned with the beliefs and values that compose our world and life view and thus guide the choices we make each day. Toward this end, this study will work to discover the impact of an individual's understanding and experience of the gospel. The gospel absorbed into our hearts empowers and propels gospel expression. Paul explained to the Corinthian church why he was such a maniac for the gospel by writing that "Christ's love compels us."¹⁴ John Piper, in his exceptional work entitled *Desiring God*, defines love as "the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets the needs of others."¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards explains it this way:

If persons have the true light of heaven let into their souls, it is not a light without heat. Divine knowledge and divine love go together. A spiritual view of divine things always excites love in the soul, and draws forth the heart in love to every proper object. True discoveries of the divine character dispose us to love God as the supreme good; they unite the heart in love to Christ; they incline the soul to flow out in love to God's people, and to all mankind. When persons have a true discovery of the excellency and sufficiency of Christ, this is the effect. When they experience a right belief of the truth of the gospel, such a belief is accompanied by love.¹⁶

The present tense in this last sentence is significant. There must be a continual experience and absorption of the wonder of the gospel that perpetually nourishes the heart for bold love. When we step out to act with courage and love for others, we are led to the cross for strength and encouragement and propelled further into ministry because of the evidence that Christ works through us. On the other hand, a withdrawal in fear perpetuates discouragement and additional withdrawal. It will be helpful then, in understanding the beliefs and faith that influence our love practices, that this project also seeks to understand how we become nourished in the gospel and how we step out in ministry.

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 5:14.

¹⁵ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1986), 96.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 21.

As noted earlier, our practice of hospitality has purpose. It is the incarnation of the welcoming heart of God—particularly for those who are prodigals. We are called to be instruments in the hands of our Redeemer. In a similar way, our conversation should have purpose. We should listen and speak with love and a concern for the communication of the gospel. Tripp outlines how we should view our relationships with others:

As we understand the way God works in our lives, we realize that relationship to him is not a luxury, but a necessity. It is the only context in which the lifelong process of change can take place. In the same way, we are called to build strong relationships with others. God’s purpose is that these relationships would be workrooms in which his work of change can thrive.¹⁷

Tripp uses the term “redemptive relationship,” to describe these kinds of relationships. He provides instruction for listening and conversation skills within the context of these relationships. This is why I have begun to use the term, “redemptive conversation” to describe conversation that seeks redemptive change or gospel transformation in the hearts and lives of those involved. This conversation will often involve the use of God’s Word and it may benefit from training in areas such as listening and gospel application.

The Apostle Paul instructs us toward redemptive conversation with commands such as “teach and admonish one another”¹⁸ and “do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”¹⁹ I know from personal experience that it is common for us to extend hospitality and then never get beyond the Lions, Tigers, and weather. God calls us to so much more. We are tasked to be instruments in the Redeemer’s hand through the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation.

¹⁷ Tripp, 110.

¹⁸ Col. 3:16.

¹⁹ Eph. 4:29.

In summary, the practice of hospitality is a dying, yet essential practice of love to which the church has been called. Beliefs, faith, cultural influences, and other factors yet to be uncovered will all emerge during the discovery process. The love practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation are essential toward becoming like Jesus and our faithfulness in making disciples. This study will work to discover the most significant factors and beliefs that influence our engagement in these practices and yield findings that will better equip churches for the promotion of these love practices.

Statement of Problem and Purpose

How can the church love in the way that is modeled through Christ and taught in Scripture? How can the church better practice love through hospitality and redemptive conversation? What factors and beliefs promote or hinder the practice of love in these ways? How can the church teach the truths and encourage the factors that lead to faithfulness in these areas? How can the church assist people in overcoming the factors and beliefs that hinder the church in these practices? How can pastors and leaders work to better equip the church for these vital practices of love?

My own efforts toward loving well will benefit from understanding the answers to these questions. My church family is particularly focused on understanding how we can better love, welcome, and meaningfully connect with a diverse community. The greater church is called to the same mission and faces similar challenges. The purpose of this study will be to understand how Reformed Western Michigan Christians (RWMC) practice love through hospitality and redemptive conversation.

Primary Research Questions

The primary research questions were:

1. What are the beliefs that instruct or hinder RWMC in the practice of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation?
2. What are the factors that support or encumber RWMC in the practice of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation?
3. How do RWMC perceive that churches could better equip or assist people in the practice of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation?

Significance of the Study

Studies reveal that hospitality and relationships of depth are significant factors for the effectiveness and growth of churches. Christian Schwarz, head of the Institute for Church Development, through the widely regarded Natural Church Development studies, reveals the significance of the practice of love in this way:

Our research indicates that there is a highly significant relationship between the ability of a church to demonstrate love and its long-term growth potential. Growing churches possess on the average a measurably higher “love quotient” than stagnant or declining ones. Unfeigned, practical love has a divinely generated magnetic power far more effective than evangelistic programs which depend almost entirely on verbal communication. People do not want to hear us talk about love, they want to experience how Christian love really works.²⁰

Hospitality and redemptive conversation are essential to the experience of how Christian love works in practice. Thom Rainer, Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth, reported that “the formerly unchurched told us that one of the key reasons for their returning to a particular church was the

²⁰ Schwarz, 36.

friendliness of the members.”²¹ Sometimes, friendliness at a more superficial level is not a part of genuine, biblical hospitality. But, where there is hospitality, there must be friendliness.

As noted earlier, biblical hospitality and redemptive relationships are God’s intended context for the work of gospel transformation that God looks for in us and through us. Michael Green, senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, boldly states:

It is abundantly plain that the vast majority of people who come to faith are more influenced by friends or family members than by any other single factor. Church, the Bible, preaching, and visitation are low on the list of attractors: by far the highest is the friendship of a committed, warm, unembarrassed Christian. That seems to be the magnet for some 77 percent of new Christians in the West. So it stands to reason that, if we want the gospel to spread, we need to pay enormous attention to the building of relationships and the natural conversation about Jesus that can emerge from the trust those relationships engender.²²

Our church family has been encouraged by similar observations. We celebrate stories where one-time strangers come to faith over time and in the context of hospitality and loving relationships. They tell how we patiently loved and repeatedly welcomed them while they “kicked the tires” and “counted the cost” of this precious yet free journey of eternal life. This study will work to benefit the church as it records the stories of others and discovers some of the factors and beliefs attendant to these stories.

Pohl, referring to hospitality, writes that “we become proficient in a skill by performing it regularly, and by learning from persons who are masters of it.”²³ Understanding the beliefs that instruct and hinder Christians in these practices of love will inform pastors and leaders as they work to teach, preach, and equip their members. The discovery of the primary factors that support or encumber Christians in these

²¹ Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 95.

²² Michael Green, *Sharing Your Faith with Friends and Family* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 11.

²³ Pohl, 9.

practices of love will prepare pastors and leaders to assist and equip members for this ministry. The suggestions for equipping and assisting will also serve the church as it seeks to build up its members for these vital practices. Finally, the results of this study will inform our prayers as we seek the coming of His kingdom. These practices of love and their opposing forces and challenges are a part of a cosmic spiritual war for hearts and souls.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the primary terms that must be defined are:

1. **Hospitality** – Contrary to common beliefs, hospitality is not social entertainment or even a defined set of skills or actions. It involves responding to the physical, social, and spiritual needs of the stranger. It may indeed involve simple acts such as eating together, praying together or simply being together in fellowship. It is a way of life that involves “others orientation” and serving as the channel of God’s grace. We will welcome, recognize, serve, listen, learn, value, and honor others in countless ways and places.

2. **Redemptive conversation** – Redemptive conversation is conversation, out of love, which is guided by the intention of seeking the betterment of the other person. These conversations will often use Scripture and be guided by skills in listening, learning, asking good questions, speaking the truth, exercising patience, and more.²⁴

3. **Stranger** – I will use the term “stranger” in a way that is similar to its use in Scripture. It is someone who is outside of the community of faith or a “not-yet believer.” Stranger may also refer to those, believers or unbelievers, who participate in the community at some level but are not yet truly integrated or assimilated into the life and

²⁴ See Tripp.

mission of the community, and thus need to be welcomed and nurtured (in part through redemptive conversation) toward faith and discipleship.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The first section of this chapter will provide a biblical survey and perspective that will assist in understanding the significance and place of Christian hospitality and redemptive conversation for the church. The second section reports on the success, challenges, and teaching related to these practices throughout church history. Since this dissertation is concerned with equipping the church, a third section, in light of what is revealed in the biblical perspective and church history, will provide a review of some of the most effective literature or resources that are available. Focus will then turn to why the equipping of the church for hospitality and redemptive conversation is a significant concern for today's culture. This final section will document the deterioration of these practices and some of the greatest issues and challenges to these practices.

Biblical-Theological Framework

The way we think governs the way we act. The Apostle Paul taught that the renewing of our minds precedes life transformation.²⁵ Perhaps most simply, theology deeply influences our practices. Miroslav Volf, Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale University Divinity School and a highly acclaimed scholar, contends that "at the heart of every good theology lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life, and that theology is therefore best done from within

²⁵ Rom. 12:1-2.

the pursuit of this way of life.”²⁶ Richard Lintz, Associate Professor of Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, similarly wrote that “it is God who grants to his people a theological vision, and the church is the fundamental context he has chosen to carry forth that vision.”²⁷

This work is concerned with God’s vision for a way of life that includes the practice of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation. The church’s faithfulness to this way of life depends on the teachings and beliefs that make up its theological vision. The biblical-theological framework that provides the moorings for the vision presented here is covenantal and reformed.

God presents Himself in the Bible as the Sovereign Ruler of the universe who reveals His will regarding how His church is to act for the display of His glory and the coming of His Kingdom. At the heart of God’s will for our actions is love for others.²⁸ Mark Dever, the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, wrote that one of the nine marks of a healthy church is the use of biblical theology that focuses on “the main lines of the great story of the Bible,” and he notes further that one of these main lines is the love of God.²⁹ This love is especially revealed in God’s plan of redemption that is initiated with a covenant promise to Adam and Eve³⁰ and culminates in the covenant fulfillment of Christ, who is both the woman’s Seed and God’s Son. Christ is ultimately

²⁶ Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 247.

²⁷ Richard Lintz, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 318.

²⁸ Matt. 22:37-40.

²⁹ Mark E. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 1998), 60.

³⁰ Gen. 3:15.

revealed to us as the gracious Host who will come again and present a grand banquet feast for His people.³¹

The concern for this biblical-theological study is to demonstrate how our love, through the faithful practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation, is foundational to the redemptive work and glory of God. This discovery requires careful attention to three subject areas: 1) God's character and our identity as his image-bearers, 2) God's heart and work revealed in redemptive history, 3) the biblical basis, including examples, commands, and teaching, for hospitality and redemptive conversation. Scripture serves as the primary text here for understanding the progressive unfolding of God's character, heart, commands, and teaching. It reveals Him as a welcoming God who is worthy to be loved, worshiped, imitated and obeyed.

God's Character and Our Identity as His Image-Bearers

A biblical study could perhaps focus on God's commands to love others with a specific focus on hospitality and conversation. However, these commands take on significant weight and urgency when we understand how they are grounded in the character, work and glory of God and in our identity as image-bearers of God. The character and glory of God are revealed throughout Scripture. One of God's interactions with Moses reveals that God's "goodness" is used as a synonym for His glory.³² But the apex of His goodness and character is His love. At the same time that God passed by Moses with His glory, God proclaimed His love, compassion and faithfulness.³³ The ultimate display of God's glory is revealed through Jesus, who is the revelation of God's

³¹ Luke 14:15-24.

³² Exod. 33:18-19.

³³ Exod. 34:6-7.

glory.³⁴ This glory is especially displayed through Jesus' suffering and death.³⁵ The Apostle John's first epistle states that the cross is the ultimate display of love.³⁶

The glory of God's love is also revealed in the relationship and roles of the three Persons of the Trinity. Scripture shows that the glory of this community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is exposed in the love that they share. John described God most succinctly when He wrote that "God is love,"³⁷ and as C.S. Lewis has argued, this statement has no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons who have an object for their love.³⁸ John's gospel records various affirmations of the Father's love for His Son and the Son's perfect love for and allegiance to His Father.³⁹ Daniel Fuller, Emeritus Professor of Hermeneutics at Fuller Theological Seminary, expounds on this amazing relationship with a reference to Jonathan Edwards, who wrote that "God's love is primarily to Himself and His infinite delight is in Himself, in the Father and the Son loving and delighting in each other...The happiness of the Deity, as all other true happiness, consists in love and society."⁴⁰

The Holy Spirit also plays an important role in the revelation of God's love. J.I. Packer, the highly regarded Professor of Theology at Regent College and author of multiple works, writes that "the distinctive, constant, basic ministry of the Holy Spirit under the new covenant is so to mediate Christ's presence to believers...."⁴¹ The Apostle

³⁴ John 1:14; 2 Cor. 4:6; Heb. 1:3.

³⁵ John 17:1.

³⁶ 1 John 3:16.

³⁷ 1 John 4:8.

³⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Beyond Personality: The Christian Idea of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 21.

³⁹ John 3:35; 8:29; 14:31; 17:5.

⁴⁰ Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 122.

⁴¹ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

Paul specifically defines this mediatory work of God's Spirit as that of pouring out His love into the hearts of His people.⁴²

The character and glory of God and the relationships and roles of the Trinity are most momentous when we understand our identity as image-bearers of God. Bruce Ware, Professor of Christian Theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes that we should look to the character of God and “to the triune roles and relationships among the Triune Persons of God to see what it means to live our lives as his images. We are created to reflect what God is like, and this includes a reflection of the personal relationships within the Trinity.”⁴³ Anthony Hoekema, former Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, wrote a definitive theological work regarding what it means to be created in the image of God. He stated that, “man's fellowship with his fellowmen is a reflection of the inter-Trinitarian fellowship within the Godhead.”⁴⁴

Miroslav Volf has authored a significant study where he urges the greater Church, especially in its development of community, to act out of its identity that is grounded in the Trinity. Pointing particularly to the work of the Holy Spirit and drawing from the work of Jürgen Moltmann, he wrote:

The Spirit present in all Christians “opens” each of them to all others. It starts them on the way to creative mutual giving and receiving, in which each grows in his or her own unique way and all have joy in one another... The Spirit dwelling through faith in the hearts of human beings “himself issues from his fellowship with the Father and the Son, and the fellowship into which he enters with believers corresponds to his fellowship with the Father and the Son and is therefore a trinitarian fellowship.”⁴⁵

⁴² Rom. 5:5.

⁴³ Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 133.

⁴⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids; Exeter, UK: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1986), 81.

⁴⁵ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 189.

Our identity as image-bearers becomes evident in the creation account where God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.”⁴⁶ Paul affirms that man is “the image and glory of God.”⁴⁷ Since we bear and are to reflect the image of God, God’s heart and actions should be our heart and actions. There are multiple ways that our identity as God’s image bearers can and should guide our hearts and lives today. But it is particularly important for our hearts and lives to take their cues from God and his character in the area of love and relationships. G.C. Berkouwer, the Dutch theologian, wrote that “the calling to the imitation of God constantly concentrates on communion with others, a communion which finds its basis in the imperative reminder ‘...even as God’ and ‘...even as Christ.’”⁴⁸

God is indeed love, and the deep delight of His heart and soul is to do good to His people.⁴⁹ He is the ultimate example of One who enjoys the blessing of giving.⁵⁰ Daniel Fuller wrote that “God’s ultimate purpose is to increase his joy by sharing the blessing of the Trinity in creation.”⁵¹ Fuller further describes this ultimate purpose in this way:

Now the basic thrust of God’s whole purpose in creation and redemption has become clear. It is that the earth might be filled with the glory of his desire to service people and, calling upon all his omniscience and omnipotence, to do them good with his whole heart and soul. But men and women do not become the beneficiaries of this glorious purpose unless they are willing to undergo that radical change in their lives whereby they align themselves with this great purpose.⁵²

The concern of this study is to assist believers who seek to align themselves with God’s great purpose to love and serve others, particularly with the expressions of

⁴⁶ Gen. 1:27.

⁴⁷ 1 Cor. 11:7.

⁴⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 115.

⁴⁹ Jer. 32:41; Zeph. 3:17.

⁵⁰ Acts 20:35.

⁵¹ Fuller, 136.

⁵² Ibid.

hospitality and redemptive conversation. This biblical study will demonstrate how hospitality is God's ordained means for expressing His heart and saving work in this broken and alienated world. The next section of this study will thus begin with a history of God's heart and saving work to bring His people home.

God's Heart and Work Revealed in Redemptive History

Since the beginning, God put the glory of His fellowship, love, and service to people on display. As the psalmist describes God's heart and actions in the following text, he could just as well have been describing the Garden of Eden before Satan slithered onto the stage for the first act of redemptive history: "How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."⁵³

Fuller explains that "the serpent's strategy was to foster a "sinful, unbelieving heart"⁵⁴ in Eve, so that she and her husband would doubt that God had really made himself a means to the end of doing only the greatest good for them."⁵⁵ As Adam and Eve trusted the word of the serpent, they disbelieved God and scorned God's glory. Adam and Eve turned their backs on God's love, benevolence, and mercy. They chose independence for themselves, thinking that they were wiser and better able to provide for their needs than the all-loving, omniscient, and omnipotent God.

This rebellion shattered the sweet fellowship that Adam and Eve had known with God and each other in the Garden of Eden.⁵⁶ To this day, sin persists with its devastating

⁵³ Ps. 36:7-9.

⁵⁴ Heb. 3:12.

⁵⁵ Fuller, 179.

⁵⁶ Gen. 3:6-12.

consequences. The worst of these consequences are seen in the relationships between God and people and people with each other. This rending was immediately apparent as Adam and Eve sought to hide from God because of their shame and as they then turned on each other during God's questioning.⁵⁷

The Bible further documents the destructive work of sin and evil, particularly in the context of relationships. Cain killed his brother Abel, and to this day, even in the closest of relationships, separation and hatred are evidenced by violence, gossip, grudges, and apathy. Key characteristics of broken relationships that must now be overcome include pride, exclusion, withdrawal and a self-centered and inward focus.

The Bible also reveals God's antidote for the poison of sin that pounds through the veins of creation. On one hand, out of His righteousness, God responded to this sin with judgment and curse. The man and woman would each suffer consequences for their rebellion.⁵⁸ On the other hand, out of His love, God responded with amazing mercy and grace. There would be healing for this tragic enmity or hostility between God and man through a plan that would involve enmity between the posterity of Satan and the posterity of Eve. There will be violence that leads to death. But while Satan will wound and "strike [the] heel" of this unnamed male descendant of Eve, one day, in a final battle, this descendant will deal a mortal blow to the skull of the Evil One.⁵⁹ Fallen humanity, from here on, would only ever deserve rejection, separation from God's benevolent presence, and death. But God provided a way for people to find acceptance, the joy of His presence, and life.

⁵⁷ Gen. 3:10-12.

⁵⁸ Gen. 3:14-19.

⁵⁹ Gen. 3:15.

The curse of sin which led to separation and alienation from God was poignantly illustrated in God's eviction of Adam and Eve from their home in the Garden of Eden. This is just the beginning of displacement for the entire human race that is highlighted by Cain's banishment from society to live as a wanderer.⁶⁰ The Tower of Babel documents a universalizing of the alienation from God and from one another as the division into separate languages initiates the process of differentiating nations and ethnic groups.⁶¹

Babel's fallout makes it appear that sin's curse and alienation are spinning out of control. But Genesis records God's plan for blessing and restoration in the next chapter. God made a commitment to renew humankind through Abraham and his descendants, and they were to become His own special people, a holy nation with a land and special blessing from God. God's promise of restoration would extend far beyond Abraham's descendants, as they were also to *be* a blessing, and "all peoples on earth" were to be blessed through them.⁶² God's redemptive plan involves people from "every tribe and language and people and nation" who will return home and "be a kingdom and priests to serve [their] God."⁶³

Walter Brueggemann, a highly regarded Old Testament scholar and author of more than fifty-eight books, has written an extensive work on the significance of land for Israel. He notes how leading up to the day when all will be gathered to be a kingdom and priests, God's people Israel are revealed as sojourners, strangers, wanderers, or exiled aliens.⁶⁴ From the moment that Abraham obeyed God's command to "leave your country,

⁶⁰ Gen. 3:23; 4:12.

⁶¹ Gen. 11:1-9.

⁶² Gen. 12:1-3; 26:4; 28:3.

⁶³ Rev. 5:9-10.

⁶⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, [1] (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 6-9.

your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you,"⁶⁵ the father of the faithful became a sojourner. Here, one's place as a sojourner is not a curse but a condition of the covenant, an act of obedience to a God who promises a home and fellowship for those who follow Him. Abraham's descendants, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, follow the same path where they leave their homes and trust God enough to follow Him to a place not yet revealed.

Jacob's numerous descendants settled down into the lush land of Goshen, but their prosperity soon led to becoming oppressed strangers in the land of Egypt.⁶⁶ After God orchestrated the escape from their slavery, the Israelites took on their identity as wanderers, and God made them drift through the wilderness for forty years before entering the Promised Land. This time, their homelessness was a curse for their disobedience but at the same time, it was an opportunity for demonstration of faith and restoration to a land with God.⁶⁷

. After their time in the wilderness, God provided for Israel's settlement into the Promised Land. But, rather than enjoying the security, freedom, and prosperity of the land with God, and even though God had clearly warned them,⁶⁸ Israel chose a monarchy and followed rebellious kings who exploited their positions of power. Israel was driven from the land that they had fought to keep.⁶⁹ Jeremiah recorded these mourning cries: "How ruined we are! How great is our shame! We must leave our land because our houses are in ruins."⁷⁰ Life and joy in the presence of a loving God would not be found in

⁶⁵ Gen. 12:1.

⁶⁶ Exod. 1:7-11.

⁶⁷ Num. 32:13-22.

⁶⁸ 1 Sam. 8.

⁶⁹ Brueggemann, 10-13.

⁷⁰ Jer. 9:19.

this Promised Land but in a place that was yet to be revealed. Israel suffered the judgment of the exile, where they were cut off from the land and lived as aliens who longed to go home. Brueggemann, in his study of Israel's relationship with land throughout Scripture, summarizes his findings in this way: "The central learning about the land motif...is that grasping for home leads to homelessness and risking homelessness yields the gift of home. We yearn deeply for home, but we live in ways which surely will result in homelessness."⁷¹ Brueggemann bases his conclusions on observations from Scripture about three land histories. These observations about the land, homelessness, and returning home provide application for us today:

We can thus understand the land histories of Israel. The first is a history of risking homelessness which yields the gift of home. The second is the deep yearning for home, but in ways which result in homelessness. And in the third history, from exile to Jesus, we learn that Jesus' embrace of homelessness (crucifixion) is finally the awesome, amazing gift of home (resurrection).⁷²

As we seek to better understand God's heart and saving work for our comprehension of Christian hospitality, we will now turn to the gospel accounts of Jesus. As we turn the pages of Scripture into the New Testament, we can see that foreigner, stranger, sojourner, and alien are recurring images that enable us to more clearly see the Christian's place and calling in this life. In the Old Testament, the patriarchs and the nation of Israel are literally homeless. In the New Testament, these early images help us to understand our identity as pilgrims and strangers in this world because our citizenship is in heaven rather than on earth.⁷³

⁷¹ Brueggemann, 189.

⁷² Ibid., 189.

⁷³ Leland Ryken and others, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 300.

The apostle Peter referred to believers as “aliens and strangers in the world” and instructed them to live like strangers.⁷⁴ The book of Hebrews clarifies how the foreigner serves as a spiritual symbol of the Christian life. Here we read that Abraham “made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country...for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”⁷⁵ Abraham and others “were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”⁷⁶ Paradise, where sweet fellowship with God is restored, will not be a garden but rather a city that comes down out of heaven.⁷⁷

Finally, we see that Jesus is the final solution for the stranger who longs for home. Jesus left home to become the wanderer on this earth so that we who are wanderers can go home. He made this observation about his earthly ministry: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”⁷⁸ Jesus became the unrecognized stranger whose kingdom is not of this world⁷⁹ so that we who are of this world could become a recognized friend and enter His kingdom.⁸⁰

L. Gregory Jones, Dean and Professor of Theology at Duke University Divinity School, wrote an article that challenges the church toward effective, meaningful hospitality. He asserted that Christ, while experiencing the ultimate estrangement of the cross, overcame “our estrangement from God, from ourselves, and from one another.”⁸¹ This conquering of the cross is a staggering revelation of God’s welcoming heart. Hans

⁷⁴ 1 Pet. 2:11; 1:17.

⁷⁵ Heb. 11:9-10.

⁷⁶ Heb. 11:16.

⁷⁷ Rev. 21:1-4.

⁷⁸ Matt. 8:20.

⁷⁹ John 1:10; 18:36, 8:23; 17:13-16.

⁸⁰ Matt. 7:21; John 15:14-15.

⁸¹ L. Gregory Jones, "Eucharistic Hospitality," *The Reformed Journal* 39 (March 1989): 15.

Boersma, Professor of Theology at Regent College and author of an extensive work on the relationship of the cross, suffering, and hospitality, wrote that “the God who encounters us in the cross of Jesus is a hospitable God...the essence of God is unbounded love, pure hospitality. God intends to embody this hospitality wherever possible and works toward its full eschatological realization.”⁸²

The cross is the basis for the transformation from a stranger to a friend—from alienation to a welcome home. The Apostle Paul, imitating the life and sacrifice of Christ,⁸³ served as another example of the foreigner. He was cast out from his prestigious position with the Pharisees and wandered from city to city as an itinerant tent maker and preacher. He described his life in this way: “To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.”⁸⁴

The story of God’s people throughout Scripture shows how homelessness exacts a toll. There is a rootlessness and a longing for rest that leads to weariness.⁸⁵ A constant sense of insecurity, danger, and narrow escapes hounded the patriarchs and the Israelites. A foreigner’s meager status in society became evident when Ruth responded in this way to Boaz’s compassion for her: “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?”⁸⁶

Again, Jesus paved the road that leads home. He gave up his supreme status as King to suffer the humiliation of birth into the filth of a manger. Jesus entered a world that had no room for Him so that He could make room for all.⁸⁷ He narrowly escaped

⁸² Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 54.

⁸³ 1 Cor. 10:33.

⁸⁴ 1 Cor. 4:11.

⁸⁵ Exod. 2:22.

⁸⁶ Ruth 2:10.

⁸⁷ Luke 2:6-7; John 3:16; 14:1-3.

death as a refugee in Egypt so that His people could have refuge away from the slavery of sin represented by Israel's experience in Egypt.⁸⁸ Jesus' life was characterized by oppression, sorrow, restlessness, and agitation—even to the point of death.⁸⁹ He was led outside the city where the unclean and outcasts wandered so that the spiritually unclean and displaced could make the holy city their home.⁹⁰ Jesus suffered the toll of homelessness so that we could enter into the joy of the home that is to come.⁹¹ He suffered restlessness and rejection by His Father so that the weary could be invited into that Father's eternal rest and loving arms.⁹²

Just as God's call to Abraham stated that he would be blessed to bless others,⁹³ we are welcomed into the arms of the Father to become those who love and welcome others. This blessing and commission became evident on Pentecost when Jesus poured out His Spirit. The curse, confusion, and scattering of the nations at Babel was reversed at Pentecost, and the language barrier was supernaturally overcome.⁹⁴ David Smith and Barbara Carvill have joined forces on a book that seeks to inspire foreign language students and teachers by understanding their study in the context of our mandate to extend hospitality. In their book *The Gift of the Stranger*, they begin with an excellent biblical study of hospitality and outline the parallels and differences between Babel and Pentecost.⁹⁵ Two significant differences noted at Pentecost are that the people are gathering in obedience rather than disobedience and are now miraculously hearing and

⁸⁸ Hosea 11:1; Matt. 2:13-16.

⁸⁹ Isa. 53; Matt. 26:36-38.

⁹⁰ Heb. 13:12; Rev. 21:2.

⁹¹ Matt. 25:21-23.

⁹² Matt. 26:36-38; Mark 15:34; Matt. 11:28-30; Luke 15:20.

⁹³ Gen. 12:1-3.

⁹⁴ Acts 2:5-12.

⁹⁵ David I. Smith and Barbara Maria Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 14-15.

understanding one another rather than scattering away in confusion. This is God's redemptive plan unfolding. "A fresh wind blows to make all things new, including Babel."⁹⁶

Jesus declared that "many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."⁹⁷ Pentecost was a sign that the floodgates are opening so that God's people will be gathered "from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."⁹⁸ The Apostle Peter explained the events and signs of this day and through the power of the Spirit, and the Jerusalem congregation grew from 120 Galilean Jews to over three thousand multicultural, multilingual Jews.⁹⁹ Several thousand more believers were added in the days that followed.¹⁰⁰ The working out of this faith involved hospitality through the sharing of possessions, fellowship, and meals.¹⁰¹

Acts and the New Testament epistles also document the development of the church. Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Associate Professor of Reconciliation Studies at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota summarizes this development:

The disciples of Jesus sought to embrace his inclusive vision in the congregations that emerged under their leadership. Congregations of the church of God from Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome embraced people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and cultural perspectives, becoming houses of prayer for all the nations. They were implementing Jesus' instruction to make disciples from all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). The diverse and inclusive nature of early congregations did not occur by accident. This outcome was the result of embracing the vision and strategy of Jesus.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁷ Matt. 8:11.

⁹⁸ Rev. 7:9.

⁹⁹ Acts 2:40-41.

¹⁰⁰ Acts 4:4; 5:14; 6:7.

¹⁰¹ Acts 2:44-47; 9:42-10:48; 16:14-15; 18:1-11.

¹⁰² Curtiss Paul DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22.

The ways that Jesus received and extended hospitality and the teachings and practices of the apostles and the early church indicate the significant role of hospitality for the vision and strategy of Jesus.

In summary, God's character, heart, and actions reveal His passion to redeem and overcome the alienating effects of sin. He welcomes and adopts strangers so that all can enjoy sweet fellowship with Him—today in part, and someday, in fullness, for eternity. He calls believers to bear His image, display the glory of His welcoming heart and actively engage in acts of hospitality.¹⁰³ Jesus shows us the way and empowers us through His Spirit¹⁰⁴ and the gospel¹⁰⁵ to radically love and welcome the stranger.

The significant part that hospitality and redemptive conversation plays becomes more evident in the examples and teaching that are recorded throughout biblical history. The following section will examine biblical examples and instructions for hospitality and redemptive conversation.

Biblical Basis for Hospitality and Redemptive Conversation

The land of Canaan was significant for the mission of God's people to "fill the earth and subdue it"¹⁰⁶ and to "be a blessing."¹⁰⁷ King David's conquest of Transjordan strategically placed God's people at the crossroads of civilization so that they could be "a light for the Gentiles."¹⁰⁸ The holy city of Jerusalem served as a military, political, and economic home base for a densely populated and prosperous land.¹⁰⁹ It is also significant

¹⁰³ Rom. 15:7.

¹⁰⁴ John 7:38-39.

¹⁰⁵ Rom. 1:16.

¹⁰⁶ Gen. 1:28.

¹⁰⁷ Gen. 12:2.

¹⁰⁸ Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Luke 2:32.

¹⁰⁹ F. F. Bruce and David F. Payne, *Israel & the Nations: The History of Israel from the Exodus to the Fall of the Second Temple* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 18.

that through the history of the Old and New Testaments, God settled and raised up His people in cultures where hospitality was both duty and practice.

Amy G. Oden, Professor of History of Christianity at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., compiled a collection of early Christian texts (especially the first five centuries of Christianity) that documents the history and challenges relating to hospitality and its practices.¹¹⁰ Oden notes that Egyptian culture and law placed a high value on hospitality.¹¹¹ The Greeks embraced hospitality as a sign that distinguished them from primitive cultures who suffered from a fear of strangers. Roman culture held up hospitality as a virtue of their civilization.

Cicero and Ovid also referred to the sacred duty of hospitality in early documents. Oden explains that “the *jus hospitii*, or law of hospitality, regulated seven different categories of relationship and the hospitality properly accorded in each case.”¹¹² In early Christian writings, Shepherd of Hermas listed various works that are good and included “being hospitable (for doing good is found in hospitality).”¹¹³

A high value was placed on hospitality in part because of the need for it in the ancient Mediterranean world. Travel was dangerous and filled with tension. Very few inns or rest houses existed, so travelers depended on locals for the basics of water, food, shelter, and safety from attack.¹¹⁴ A system of inns developed to meet the needs of travelers in the first century A.D., but their reputation was so poor that the hospitality of strangers was preferred.¹¹⁵ Tremper Longman III, Professor of Biblical Studies at

¹¹⁰ Amy G. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹³ Jack N. Sparks, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Nashville: Nelson, 1978), 194.

¹¹⁴ Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), 49.

¹¹⁵ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 95.

Westmont College, notes how hospitality played such a major role in the Ancient Near East that a code developed to address the complications that would naturally emerge:

Since Palestine was inhabited by a variety of groups whose political boundaries and alliances were in flux and whose values and beliefs often clashed, people sensed the social tension and threat to the cohesion of their communities that the arrival of strangers posed. These needs and tensions were addressed in a fairly standardized code of hospitality practices.¹¹⁶

Longman further explains that this code included four phases: initial invitation, screening, provision and protection, and departure.¹¹⁷ The details of these phases are not the focus of this study. But it is important to note that there were specific, accepted customs whereby strangers could be welcomed and depart as friends.

The ancient cultural code or customs surrounding the practice of hospitality are exhibited throughout Scripture. Scripture also makes it clear that extraordinary hospitality is a mandate or duty for God's people.¹¹⁸ The story of Abraham, Sarah, and their three guests in Genesis 18 demonstrates how this patriarch of Israel exercises faithful, Near Eastern hospitality. He honors the unexpected guests with water for washing their feet, a lavish meal, and an opportunity to rest. The guests provide Abraham and Sarah with a warning about the imminent doom of Sodom and Gomorrah and the news of a son who will be born to them. While the reader is told in Genesis 18:1 that the Lord appeared to Abraham in this encounter, Abraham only gradually came to see that this was a special, divine encounter. Blessing is extended, and, in the announcement of the miraculous gift of a son, amazing blessing is received through this interaction. But this event is also recorded to provide instruction and motivation for God's people. The author of Hebrews holds this story up as significant by referring to it in chapter thirteen: "Do not forget to

¹¹⁶ Ryken and others, 402.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Gen. 18:4; 19:7; Judg. 19:20; Matt. 10:40-41; Rom. 12:13.

entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”¹¹⁹

Additional Old Testament narratives express how the practice of hospitality is a significant part of God’s redemptive plan. The longest narrative in Genesis involves the selection of Rebekah as the wife of Isaac after she extended lavish hospitality to Abraham’s servant.¹²⁰ Rebekah’s generous service to the stranger, which included drawing water for camels and the provision of food and lodging, led to her blessing as the mother of “thousands upon thousands.”¹²¹ The narrative reveals for His people that God is working out His plan of redemption through those who are committed to strangers.

Two other stories that illustrate the blessing of extending hospitality involve the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elijah received hospitality from a poor foreign widow shortly after meeting her, including the last of her flour and oil. As a result, God miraculously provided a daily supply of flour and oil for the widow during a time of drought. The widow then took Elijah in as a guest of her home for a lengthy time. God provided another miracle for the generous woman when Elijah restored life to her dead son. A prophet in need turns to a widow in need, and together they delight in God’s provision.¹²²

Elisha was also blessed through the extension of hospitality. A wealthy Shunammite woman provided a special, furnished, guest room for Elisha whenever he passed through her area. Elisha sought a way to show his gratitude. Like the story of Abraham and Sarah, the woman and her husband receive the gift of the promise of a son.

¹¹⁹ Heb. 13:2.

¹²⁰ Gen. 24:19, 25.

¹²¹ Gen. 24:60.

¹²² 1 Kings 17.

And, as in the story of Elijah and the widow, the son later died, and the prophet/guest revives him.¹²³

God's grand story in the Old Testament holds up these and other stories as examples for His people to follow. The Old Testament record also includes repeated commands to extend hospitality.¹²⁴ The Torah mentions at least twenty-four references to the duty of hospitality. As noted earlier, these commands for love and action toward the stranger and the needy are grounded in the very character of God and the identity of His people as aliens. Deuteronomy exemplifies this: "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt."¹²⁵

Love and care for the stranger was a response of gratitude and justice for the care and justice that God extended to them:

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.¹²⁶

Isaiah provided a stern warning of judgment for neglect and, at the same time, a stunningly beautiful promise of blessing for those who honor God by extending themselves to the stranger and those in need:

¹²³ 2 Kings 4:8-37.

¹²⁴ Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:10, 33-34; 24:22; Deut. 10:18-19; 26:12-13; 27:19.

¹²⁵ Deut. 10:18-19.

¹²⁶ Deut. 24:17-22.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”¹²⁷

New Testament writers also recall the mandate of hospitality and often note the blessing that accompanies faith and faithfulness. Rahab escaped punishment and lived because she, by faith, welcomed and cared for the spies.¹²⁸ Abraham, while simply expecting to extend hospitality to strangers, entertained angels without knowing it.¹²⁹ Widows were to receive the blessing of care on the list of widows if their good deeds included showing hospitality.¹³⁰

This biblical-theological study began by indicating that the extension of hospitality is a significant expression of both God’s love for us and our love for others. The significance of hospitality as God’s and our expression of love become particularly evident in the New Testament. In *Testaments of Love*, a scholarly study on the biblical doctrine of love, Dr. Leon Morris, former principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, writes that “hospitality was evidently rated highly, as seems obvious by the number of exhortations to engage in it.”¹³¹

¹²⁷ Isa. 58:6-10.

¹²⁸ Heb. 11:31.

¹²⁹ Heb. 13:2.

¹³⁰ 1 Tim. 5:9-10.

¹³¹ Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 267.

The Apostle Paul urged the Christians in Rome to “practice hospitality”¹³² in the context of his overall mandate to present themselves to God as living sacrifices.¹³³ He then provided specific directions regarding what this would look like. These exhortations include a section that begins with these words: “Love must be sincere... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”¹³⁴ Biblical commentator Charles E. B. Cranfield suggests that the caption for this section might be “love in action” or “the marks of love.”¹³⁵ James D. G. Dunn, Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, provides comment on this text and notes that there would have been a considerable need for hospitality from the various ethnic sub-groups in Rome at the time.¹³⁶ He suggests that this is why Paul used διώκω as the original Greek word, translated as “practice” in the *New International Version*, as it can be understood as “pursue” or “strive for.” Morris explains that διώκω “points to vigorous effort.”¹³⁷

The strain related to the demand for and abuses of hospitality is also evident in Peter’s exhortation to the struggling and persecuted believers as he wrote, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”¹³⁸ And again, the context, in verse ten, includes the mandate to, “above all, love each other deeply.”¹³⁹

Alexander Strauch, long-time teacher, church elder, and author, has summarized the message and application of these two commands by Paul and Peter in his book entitled, *The Hospitality Commands*:

¹³² Rom. 12:13.

¹³³ Rom. 12:1-2.

¹³⁴ Rom. 12:9-10.

¹³⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 308.

¹³⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary. Romans 9-16*, vol. 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 744.

¹³⁷ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 448.

¹³⁸ 1 Pet. 4:9.

¹³⁹ 1 Pet. 4:10.

Hospitality demands old-fashioned hard work. It may be costly and is often inconvenient. It is time consuming. It places a strain on the family. Sometimes guests abuse their Christian brothers' and sisters' hospitality. And during times of persecution, hospitality can even be dangerous. Hospitality, therefore, is a concrete, down-to-earth test of our fervent love for God and His people. Love can be an abstract, indistinct idea; hospitality is specific and tangible. We seldom complain about loving others too much, but we do complain about the inconveniences of hospitality. Hospitality is love in action.¹⁴⁰

Hospitality as a call to love in action for the stranger can also be understood etymologically. The most common Greek word for hospitality is *xenia*, which is cognate with *xenos*, the Greek word for stranger.¹⁴¹ A second Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia*, which combines the general word for love or affection for others who are connected by family or faith (*phileo*) and the word for stranger (*xenos*).¹⁴² The concept here is that the host treats the stranger as a friend.

This survey of various biblical examples and commands has included hospitality that is extended to both the total stranger in need and brothers and sisters in Christ within a church community.¹⁴³ The greater early church, reflecting the mobility of Roman society, greatly depended on hospitality as the church spread throughout the Empire. Acts and the Apostle Paul's letters record how he and his co-laborers, as they established churches along the main trade routes, lived as transients who needed Christian hospitality to fulfill their basic needs.¹⁴⁴

The Johannine epistles also underscore the importance of hospitality for the early church in its spread of the gospel. The apostle John recommended that the believers, through their hospitality, were to serve as gatekeepers for orthodox teaching: "If anyone

¹⁴⁰ Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands: Building Loving Christian Community: Building Bridges and Neighbors* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1993), 38.

¹⁴¹ Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 522.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Deut. 10:18-19; 1 Pet. 4:9.

¹⁴⁴ Acts 21:4, 7, 16-17; Rom. 15:28; 16:1; 1 Cor. 16:10-12; Phil. 2:29; Philem. 22.

comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.”¹⁴⁵ John again highlights the significance of hospitality as he commends Gaius for his faithfulness to itinerant believers like Demetrius.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, the elder wrote a stinging complaint against Diotrephes, who rejected his letter of recommendation and refused to welcome Christian brothers.¹⁴⁷

The gospels, as they record the life and teachings of Jesus, provide significant pieces for the unfolding revelation of God’s heart and mission through love and hospitality. Johannes Nissen, Professor of Theology at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, has outlined distinguishing features of the New Testament love command in comparison to Hellenistic Judaism.¹⁴⁸ Nissen concluded that a distinctive development involved a criticism of the traditional interpretation of the command to love and a resounding emphasis on the need to love outsiders.¹⁴⁹

Jesus’ radical welcome of “tax collectors and sinners” to table fellowship with himself exemplifies the redefinition and expansion of how God’s people are to love.¹⁵⁰ N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and a leading British New Testament scholar, has written about the invitation and welcome that the table fellowship of Jesus highlighted. He notes that the Pharisees and others raised questions and accusations surrounding Jesus’ fellowship with sinners because this kind of welcome implied a scandalous redefinition of the kingdom: “Jesus was replacing adherence or

¹⁴⁵ 2 John 10-11.

¹⁴⁶ 3 John 5-10.

¹⁴⁷ Malherbe, 92-112.

¹⁴⁸ Peder Borgen and Soren Giversen, *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 123-150.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 149.

¹⁵⁰ Mark 2:15; Matt. 9:10; 11:19; 21:31f; Luke 5:29; 7:29; 7:34.

allegiance to Temple and Torah with allegiance to himself. Restoration and purity were to be had, not through the usual channels, but through Jesus.”¹⁵¹ In another work, Wright further explains that Jesus’ clash with the Pharisees was “because his kingdom-agenda for Israel demanded that Israel leave off her frantic and paranoid self-defense, reinforced as it now was by the ancestral codes, and embrace instead the vocation to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth.”¹⁵²

While the Pharisees, rabbis and other sects used table fellowship as a social boundary to indicate who were the insiders and outsiders, Jesus used table fellowship to remove boundaries and open wide the doors of the kingdom. Dunn explains that “to eat with another was a mark of acceptance of that other. To eat regularly with another was to forge and express a special bond of fellowship.”¹⁵³ Jesus accepted and bonded with those who had otherwise been the sinners, the outcasts, and the marginalized members of Jewish society. He explained that His mission was to welcome and gather sinners, or “the sick,” and the lost sheep of Israel.¹⁵⁴ Jesus’ practice of eating in the company of tax collectors and sinners illustrated the way for his followers to be light and salt. Dunn observes that table fellowship “was clearly a regular and important feature of his mission.”¹⁵⁵ Luke especially recalls the many times that Jesus accepted invitations to meals.¹⁵⁶ As noted earlier, the practice of shared meals became a prominent aspect of early church communal life. But the table fellowship of Jesus was especially noteworthy.

¹⁵¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 274.

¹⁵² N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 58.

¹⁵³ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 602.

¹⁵⁴ Mark 2:17; Matt. 15:24.

¹⁵⁵ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 599.

¹⁵⁶ Luke 5:29; 7:36; 10:38; 11:37; 13:26; 14:1, 12; 19:5-7.

Philip A. Cunningham, author of several scriptural education books, suggests that Jesus' practice of sharing meals with yet unrepentant sinners is a living parable. He explains:

Jesus not only announces that the reign of God is like a feast to which all are invited, he actually lives out this conception by his own behavior... There is in his habit of engaging in social intimacies with the outcasts a remarkable consistency between Jesus' words and actions. Just as the shepherd takes the initiative in hunting for the lost sheep, just as the king invites the uninvited to a great supper, just as the father has already forgiven his prodigal son, so, too, Jesus expresses his solidarity and communion with those who are estranged from Israel *before* they have repented. By his actions Jesus is calling for all God's Jews to act similarly because that is the way God himself acts. Likewise, he defends his actions by insisting that he is only acting the way God does.¹⁵⁷

As we have seen, it is a matter of love in action. The point of Jesus welcoming table fellowship is *hesed*; i.e., God's permanent, irrevocable, unconditional, covenantal love.¹⁵⁸ It is a love that is not limited ethnically or racially to Israel but is God's design for all people.

Scot McKnight, Professor of Religious Studies at North Park University, has written about the teachings of Jesus as they relate to the nation of Israel. He observed that the table fellowship of Jesus is a revelation of God's desire for table fellowship with His people: "[God] yearns for Israel to call him 'abba' (thereby obeying and loving him), and he showers his power and love on them by acts of the kingdom that restore Israelites to society and health by fulfilling expectations about the final kingdom of God."¹⁵⁹ McKnight further explains that Jesus' parable of the prodigal son illustrates this truth.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Philip A. Cunningham, *Jesus and the Evangelists: The Ministry of Jesus and Its Portrayal in the Synoptic Gospels* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 160-161.

¹⁵⁸ Jer. 31:3.

¹⁵⁹ Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 67.

¹⁶⁰ Luke 15:11-32.

Kenneth Bailey, a lecturer and author of many books regarding Middle Eastern New Testament studies, has written an extensive work that highlights how Jesus, in this parable of the prodigal son, was illustrating the story of Israel's rebellion, exile, and opportunity to return home to the Father.¹⁶¹ Again, in Luke 15, as Jesus welcomes the tax collectors and sinners, His actions and parables work together to reveal the nature of the Father and His kingdom. Bailey explains that the parable reveals how the lost or exiled find salvation "in the freely offered, costly, self-emptying love of his compassionate father, who takes upon himself the role of a servant as he empties himself on the road before the village. The prodigal accepts the offered love, and the father orders a banquet to celebrate the success of his costly efforts."¹⁶² God's welcoming heart for the wandering and lost here paints a stunning picture of how we are to reveal the Father's love and welcome others.¹⁶³

Miroslav Volf suffered persecution and the temptation to reject and hate while serving as teacher during the war in former Yugoslavia. Out of his experiences, he wrote an award-winning book entitled *Exclusion and Embrace*.¹⁶⁴ He wrote this book to illustrate the significance and implications of the cross where God's love, sacrifice, suffering, and self-surrender for sinners, even enemies, is displayed. Volf explains, "I want to spell out the social significance of the theme of divine self-giving: as God does not abandon the godless to their evil but gives the divine self for them in order to receive them into divine communion through atonement, so also should we—whoever our

¹⁶¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob & the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁶³ Rom. 15:7.

¹⁶⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

enemies and whoever we may be.”¹⁶⁵ Volf’s explanation of the inner logic that He uses reflects and affirms some of primary arguments that have been outlined so far in this biblical-theological study.

Volf writes that the best summary of this reasoning and its application can be found in Paul’s command to the Romans: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.”¹⁶⁶ Volf then explains the basis for the logic of his argument:

To describe the process of ‘welcoming,’ I employed the metaphor of ‘embrace.’ The metaphor seems well suited to bring together the three interrelated themes that are central to my proposal: (1) the mutuality of self-giving love in the Trinity (the doctrine of God), (2) the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross for the ‘godless’ (the doctrine of Christ), (3) the open arms of the ‘father’ receiving the ‘prodigal’ (the doctrine of salvation)...the most basic thought that [the book] seeks to express is important: *the will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.*¹⁶⁷

The parable of the prodigal son and other parables are significant for our understanding of kingdom hospitality. Two parables are especially explicit in their teaching. The first, in Luke 14:12-14, affirms much of what Jesus illustrated throughout His table fellowship and earthly ministry:

Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”¹⁶⁸

Ordinary hosts invited their old clique of friends and family to their banquets. As they did so, they further developed their relationships, declared their social boundaries, and looked for the reward of reciprocation. Kingdom of God hosts, on the other hand,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶⁶ Rom. 15:7.

¹⁶⁷ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 29.

¹⁶⁸ Luke 14:12-14.

welcomed dependent people who lived on the margins of the community and looked forward with faith to the day of resurrection for the reward. Pohl, while examining ancient and biblical sources, summarizes the implications of Jesus' teaching in this Luke passage:

Jesus challenges narrow definitions and dimensions of hospitality and presses them outward to include those with whom one least desires to have connections. The poor and infirm come with their inconvenient needs and condition, with their incapacity to reciprocate. But in welcoming them one anticipates and reflects the welcome of God.¹⁶⁹

The second parable that adds significant weight to the call to kingdom hospitality is found in the story of the great judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. Here, as nations gather before the Son of Man, He will separate them like a shepherd separates sheep and goats:

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in...." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in?..." The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."¹⁷⁰

The implications here are serious: hosts who welcome those in need will welcome Jesus himself and are themselves invited into the kingdom. We see here how Jesus identifies with "the least of these." Put most simply, hospitality to others is intimately and powerfully connected to our care and love for Jesus. Pohl summarizes the weight of this text for Christian hospitality:

This has been the most important passage for the entire tradition on Christian hospitality. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" resounds throughout the ancient texts, and contemporary practitioners of hospitality refer to this text more often than to any other passage. Acts of welcoming the stranger, or leaving someone outside cold and hungry, take on intensely heightened significance when

¹⁶⁹ Pohl, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Matt. 25:34-40.

it is Jesus himself who experiences the consequences of our ministry or lack of it.¹⁷¹

We have seen how in Jesus' life, ministry and teaching worked in concert to redefine and open the doors of the kingdom—especially to those in the margins of society. The ministry and teaching of Jesus that revealed God's abundance for a renewed community helps us to further apprehend God's heart and mission through love and hospitality.

John Koenig, author of an often-quoted work on hospitality in the New Testament, explains how Jesus' feasting and fellowship with a strange mixture of individuals caused many of the good, upstanding people of His society to regard His ministry as something immoral. Jesus was accused by His critics of being a glutton and a drunkard—a “party animal” in contemporary terms.¹⁷² Koenig explains, “For Jesus himself, however, the gatherings of his diverse friends called for joy and feasting, like that of a family reunion. In short, what his critics called excess, he experienced and proclaimed as God's good news.”¹⁷³

This joy of feasting and fellowship, particularly through the metaphor of a banquet feast, is offered to those who enter into relationship with Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The Pharisees and John's disciples were fasting in Jesus' day, and the early church Christians continued to fast.¹⁷⁴ However, Jesus explained that while He, the bridegroom, was around, it was a time of joy and feasting.¹⁷⁵ Jesus' feasting and teaching worked together to invite people into the kingdom, which yields an abundance of peace

¹⁷¹ Pohl, 22.

¹⁷² Mark 11:19; Luke 7:34.

¹⁷³ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, 17 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 26.

¹⁷⁴ Acts 13:2-3; 14:23.

¹⁷⁵ Mark 2:19.

and joy now and into eternity. Jesus said, “But seek his kingdom, and these things [food, drink, clothing, etc.] will be given to you as well.”¹⁷⁶

Jesus’ teachings often refer to the joy, celebration, or banquet feast that awaits those in the kingdom. God is presenting a banquet invitation.¹⁷⁷ Jesus’ stories and miracles persistently involved food and drink or referred to hospitality withheld or extended.¹⁷⁸ The feeding of the five thousand, where Jesus hosts a plentiful feast for many, serves as one of the clearest expressions of the kingdom.¹⁷⁹ Koenig concludes that “Jesus considered himself and his followers to be a kind of parable of how people live together from God’s abundance. As the vanguard of a restored Israel, symbolized by Jesus’ core group of twelve disciples, they extend a constant invitation to God’s home and plenty.”¹⁸⁰

Jesus’ summons to the joy and abundance of God is an extension, fulfillment, and confirmation of the promises and invitations that had been issued centuries earlier by God’s prophets. Alec Motyer, a highly regarded Old Testament scholar and former Principal of Trinity College in Bristol, England, explains how one of the central themes of Scripture is the King and his Kingdom. Isaiah is one of the prophets who recorded some of the beautiful calls to become a part of what Motyer refers to as the “foreseen emergence of a world-wide ‘Israel.’”¹⁸¹ He explains further that in this vision, “the people of God (Is. 54) and a freely invited world (Is. 55) join alike in the salvation and

¹⁷⁶ Luke 12:31.

¹⁷⁷ Luke 14:16-24; 15:17-24.

¹⁷⁸ Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 9:11-17; 10:30-37; 12:16-21; 16:19-31.

¹⁷⁹ Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:11-17; John 6:5-13.

¹⁸⁰ Koenig, 29.

¹⁸¹ J. A. Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to Our Understanding of Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 37.

banquet of the Messiah (cf. Is. 25:6-10a).”¹⁸² Isaiah 55:1-2 is a beautiful invitation and promise that is wonderfully fulfilled through the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.¹⁸³

Pohl encapsulates how the heart and mission of God is extended and related to God’s people as they are engaged to reflect God’s image and pursue His mission through the love of hospitality:

Hospitality is important symbolically in its reflection and reenactment of God’s hospitality and important practically in meeting human needs and in forging human relations. Though part of everyday life, hospitality is never far removed from its divine connections. Especially in the context of shared meals, the presence of God’s Kingdom is prefigured, revealed, and reflected. Jesus as gracious host feeds over five thousand people on a hillside, and later explains to the crowd that he is the bread of life, living bread for them from heaven. He offers living water to any who are thirsty (John 6-7). He is himself both host and meal—the very source of life.¹⁸⁴

A discussion of Jesus’ revelation of the kingdom through banqueting and joy in Jesus’ presence must also include the significance of the Last Supper and the observance of the Lord’s Supper as a sacrament for the church today. Luke recorded in his account of the Passover or Last Supper that Jesus ate with His disciples and said, “For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”¹⁸⁵ This fulfillment refers to the so-called messianic banquet that pious Jews expected at the end of the age

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Isa. 55:1-2.

¹⁸⁴ Pohl, 30.

¹⁸⁵ Luke 22:16.

just as Jesus had indicated: “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”¹⁸⁶

The Didsbury lectures, by I. Howard Marshall, a widely-published scholar and Emeritus Professor of New Testament Exegesis at the University of Aberdeen, explain the relationship between the Last Supper, the Lord’s Supper, and the final banquet feast.¹⁸⁷ Marshall explains that this messianic banquet for the Jews “has also been understood as the new meal which was to be celebrated in the church once the kingdom of God had come.”¹⁸⁸ The Apostle John was asked to record these words in Revelation: “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”¹⁸⁹ So this future feast in the presence of Jesus has also been long understood to be the church’s gathering when the kingdom of God had come. This same idea is communicated in Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”¹⁹⁰ As Jesus instituted the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, Marshall explains that “Jesus looked forward to a new Passover in the heavenly kingdom of God, but that at the same time he commanded his disciples to celebrate a meal which would be an anticipation of that heavenly feast.”¹⁹¹

L. Gregory Jones describes the significance of the Lord’s Supper or the eucharist for revealing the hospitality of God and His people in this way:

The eucharist not only recalls Jesus’ table-fellowship, it not only is the occasion for encountering the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread—it also is an eschataological meal that looks forward to the communion of the saints. In the eucharist we receive a foretaste of the great messianic banquet in the Kingdom of

¹⁸⁶ Luke 14:15.

¹⁸⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980).

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁸⁹ Rev. 19:9.

¹⁹⁰ Rev. 20:3.

¹⁹¹ Marshall, 80.

God. In so doing, we are put into fellowship with those who have gone before us as well as with those living around the world who share that anticipation.¹⁹²

Pohl agrees with Marshall and Jones when he explains the significance of the sacrament for hospitality and the church today:

Eating together, ritualized in the Lord's Supper, continually reenacts the center of the gospel. As we remember the cost of our welcome, Christ's broken body and shed blood, we also celebrate the reconciliation and relationship available to us because of his sacrifice and through his hospitality. The Eucharist most fundamentally connects hospitality with God because it anticipates and reveals the "heavenly table of the Lord." In that sacrament, we are nourished on our journey towards God's banquet table, even as we experience the present joy and welcome associated with sharing in that table. A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God's Kingdom, just as it is the most basic expression of hospitality.¹⁹³

Koenig affirms what Pohl suggests here about how the Lord's Supper serves to refresh God's people with the wonder of the gospel and further explains the dynamics of eating together, with reference to Jesus' last meal with His disciples:

As his chosen associates, they receive his body and his "blood of the covenant," first of all to seal their extraordinary friendship with him, to take into their very bodies the peace and trust and hope that they have begun to taste in their table companionship with him. But beyond this, in ways that they do not yet understand, they are also being drawn into the work of Jesus' mission on behalf of Israel. After the resurrection it will become clearer to them that they must take up their master's table ministry and become hosts of the kingdom themselves.¹⁹⁴

The abundance of the kingdom is revealed and offered when followers of Christ "take up their master's table ministry" and "become hosts of the kingdom." A survey of Scripture and biblical literature reveals that there is a two-fold dynamic at work when we extend hospitality—particularly in the context of shared meals. There is a receiving and giving where believers are nourished on their journey toward God's banquet table, and

¹⁹² Jones: 15-16.

¹⁹³ Pohl, 30.

¹⁹⁴ Koenig, 41.

there is an offering of hospitality “in grateful response to God’s generosity and as an expression of welcome to Christ ‘who for your sake was a stranger.’”¹⁹⁵

God’s purposes and the dynamics involved in the practice of hospitality have often surfaced throughout this review of literature. Hospitality is essential for nourishing our hearts in the gospel and for reflecting the welcoming heart of God. When God’s people receive and care for those on the margins of society, “justice roll[s] on like a river.”¹⁹⁶ God acts to accomplish His mission of drawing the nations to Himself through the faithful extension of Christian hospitality. Koenig’s study, pointing to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, underlines how hospitality serves as a catalyst for initiating and supporting partnerships in the gospel.¹⁹⁷ The next segment of this study will outline some of the dynamics involved when God’s people are faithful in the practice of hospitality.

God at Work—the Dynamics of Christian Hospitality

How does God work His purposes through the love practice of hospitality? Hospitality is God’s design for holding up Christ, the gospel, and His kingdom to the world. Scot McKnight, in a recent and well-regarded study of how Jesus refined and expanded the understanding of how we are to love, wrote that we are “to become channels of God’s love to others in need.”¹⁹⁸ Love is a significant means for us to be salt and light, and our expression of love through hospitality distinguishes us from the world. While some comfortably care for friends and expect a return, believers, with risk and sacrifice, extend themselves to the stranger, the needy, or enemies and expect nothing in

¹⁹⁵ Pohl, 33.

¹⁹⁶ Amos 5:11-24.

¹⁹⁷ Koenig, 10.

¹⁹⁸ Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004), 58.

return.¹⁹⁹ We display that we are children of a Father who “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good.”²⁰⁰ Hospitality is one way to exercise love so that, as Jesus said, “all men will know that you are my disciples.”²⁰¹

Francis Schaeffer’s *The Mark of the Christian* was highly influential among evangelicals in the late 1960s and early 1970s. His comment on Jesus’ teaching regarding love’s significance for His kingdom mission is profound:

What then shall we conclude but that as the Samaritan loved the wounded man, we as Christians are called upon to love all men as neighbors, loving them as ourselves. Second, that we are to love all true Christian brothers in a way that the world may observe. This means showing love to our brothers in the midst of our differences—great or small—loving our brothers when it costs us something, loving them even under times of tremendous emotional tension, loving them in a way the world can see. In short, we are to practice and exhibit the holiness of God and the love of God, for without this we grieve the Holy Spirit. Love—and the unity it attests to—is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father.²⁰²

Another dynamic that God works through the extension of hospitality occurs in the relationship of the host and stranger. Michele Hershberger, Chair of the Bible Department at Hesston College in Hesston, Kansas, works to develop a Christian view of hospitality and provides this definition: “In its simplest form, hospitality is seeing the stranger through the eyes of Jesus. It is choosing to look for Jesus in the eyes of each stranger. It is loving the stranger.”²⁰³ Hershberger’s elaboration of hospitality reveals how it is much more than an action for host and stranger. She points out, “It is a choice. We choose to reject suspicion as the first reaction to the stranger. We choose to minister

¹⁹⁹ Luke 10:29-37.

²⁰⁰ Matt. 5:45.

²⁰¹ John 13:35.

²⁰² Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 59.

²⁰³ Michele Hershberger, *A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises.*, The Giving Project Series (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 31.

alongside others rather than ministering to them. We choose to let go of some of our own control when we meet strangers and when we interact with those we've known for years."²⁰⁴

When we choose hospitality, God goes to work in both the host and stranger. Henri Nouwen, a scholar and author of forty books on spirituality, wrote from his own experience of humble service to the developmentally disabled. Nouwen, in *Reaching Out*, focuses on the dynamics of hospitality for the host and stranger and wrote that the term hospitality refers to "a fundamental attitude toward our fellow human being, which can be expressed in a great variety of ways."²⁰⁵ In the context of love practiced through hospitality, there is a transformation of heart and mind that God works in us and deeply values.²⁰⁶

Jean Vanier, the founder of the world-famous l'Arche community for the mentally handicapped and their helpers, has written a classic about community dynamics entitled *Community and Growth*. He notes the vital importance of hospitality for opening the doors to God's work in our hearts and lives.

One of the risks that God will always ask of a community is that it welcomes visitors, especially the poorest people, the ones who disturb us. Very often God brings a particular message to the community through an unexpected guest, letter or telephone call. The day the community starts to turn away visitors and the unexpected, the day it calls a halt, is the day it is in danger of shutting itself off from the action of God.²⁰⁷

Various authors have outlined many of the positive effects for both host and stranger as they engage in hospitality. Ana Maria Pineda, Associate Professor of

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 48.

²⁰⁶ 1 Cor. 13:1-3.

²⁰⁷ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 161-162.

Theology at Santa Clara University, points to the gifts received and extended by the apostle Paul:

This circle of mutual hospitality can embrace and transform the people who enter it. The early church, which met in houses, grew up turning hosts into guests and guests into hosts. The apostle Paul, whose ministry involved traveling from one house church to another, looked forward to the nourishing hospitality that awaited him in each place, just as the young churches looked forward to the gifts he would bring them. We need to think about how similar transformations can happen in our own lives, as those we thought were our guests end up hosting us instead, giving us the gifts of their presence. Work for the homeless, for example, frequently begins with the thought that a privileged person can help someone in need. Often, however, the ostensible hosts discover that they have received from the homeless at least as much as they have given.²⁰⁸

One benefit that occurs in the context of hospitality relates to the often-necessary widening of our perspective. Thomas Ogletree, Professor of Theological Ethics and former Dean at the Yale University Divinity School, has written a book that focuses on the dynamics of hospitality. He says that “to offer hospitality to a stranger is to welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our life-world...hospitality designates occasions of potential discovery which can open up our narrow, provincial worlds.”²⁰⁹

Through the practice of hospitality, God works another significant action: exposure of our hearts and lives that can lead to a healthy, ongoing recognition of our deep need for Christ. Thomas R. Hawkins, Professor of Career and Organizational Studies Program at Lumpkin College of Business and Applied Sciences at Eastern Illinois University has written a book on the theology of hospitality. He observes that hospitality helps us “truly discover who we are rather than simply seek confirmation of the self-

²⁰⁸ Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 34.

²⁰⁹ Thomas W. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 2.

made identities we have forged for ourselves...Our relationships with strangers draw us out of private worlds that can so often deceive and misdirect us.”²¹⁰

Hershberger addresses this dynamic as well: “Strangers bring about new perspectives and situations, and that throws us off balance. The sin sneaks out...Strangers help to uncover the evil in us that is so familiar that it ceases to seem evil.”²¹¹ Parker J. Palmer, a former Professor at Georgetown University, has authored a well-regarded work on the stranger’s impact on the community. He writes that “the stranger offers us a chance to come out of ourselves and thus find ourselves.”²¹²

When we welcome a stranger, our own poverty and weaknesses are uncovered. Vanier describes how “while we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone.”²¹³ But when we are faced with the difficult or needy, we begin to see that we are the difficult and needy as we struggle to truly love and deny ourselves. This uncovered evil and need can work to bring us to Jesus as our host who welcomes, loves, and restores us for the work of becoming hosts who welcome, love, and restore others.

Hospitality and Redemptive Conversation

The vital importance and distinctiveness of biblical hospitality becomes increasingly evident through the study of Scripture. Biblical hospitality is guided by the lofty purposes of reflecting the image of God, love and obedience in the name of Christ, and welcoming others into the abundance of the Kingdom of God. At first glance, hospitality and redemptive conversation may not seem to be related. Reviews of related

²¹⁰ Thomas R. Hawkins, *Sharing the Search: A Theology of Christian Hospitality* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1987), 86.

²¹¹ Hershberger, 57-58.

²¹² Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 75.

²¹³ Vanier, 26.

literature seldom connect the two. However, it becomes evident that conversation in the context of extending hospitality is important within our faithfulness to God's intent and calling for biblical hospitality. The idea of redemptive conversation will be developed throughout this section. Most essentially, it is conversation that is aligned with God's purposes to genuinely love and care for the other person. This section will demonstrate that redemptive conversation is an indispensable part of biblical hospitality. Thus, for the purposes of this review, references to hospitality will often assume that the element of redemptive conversation is included.

Nouwen writes that "at first the word 'hospitality' might evoke the image of soft sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversations and a general atmosphere of coziness."²¹⁴ Karen Burton Mains, the co-director of Mainstay Ministries, authored an excellent book to better equip the church for hospitality.²¹⁵ Mains' work exposes the church malady that she calls "secular entertaining," where the motivation is human pride, and thus the urge is to impress with a beautiful home, clever decorating, and gourmet cooking.²¹⁶ In secular entertaining, things have a higher priority than people, and there is a false display of self comparable to what Jesus identified in the Pharisees.²¹⁷ Jesus also condemned the pseudo-hospitality or entertainment that looks for personal reward, self-advancement, and a return invitation.²¹⁸ Elizabeth Newman, Professor of Theology and Ethics at Baptist Theological Seminary, dedicates a chapter of her recent work to outlining some common distortions of hospitality. Newman also refers to a form of "entertaining" hospitality

²¹⁴ Nouwen, 46.

²¹⁵ Karen Burton Mains, *Open Heart, Open Home* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, 1976).

²¹⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

²¹⁷ Matt. 6:1, 5, 16.

²¹⁸ Luke 14:12-14.

which is focused on appearance, involves superficial niceness, and “becomes a way of holding others at a distance.”²¹⁹

Faithfulness to love through the practice of hospitality requires our presence, just as God expressed his hospitality through Jesus’ presence with humanity. It is easy to help someone by dropping off a meal or some groceries, but our presence with the other person must also involve our being open and genuine. “Love must be sincere.”²²⁰ This genuine love and hospitality will focus on and pay attention to the guest. This can be seen in Jesus’ encouragement to Mary as she sat listening intently at Jesus’ feet while Martha was busy with the entertainment-like activities. Nouwen notes that the highest form of hospitality involves the “full and real presence of people to each other” where we listen with real attention.²²¹ In a similar way, Lucien Richard, Professor of Theology at Boston University, notes that “to welcome the other means the willingness to enter the world of the other, to let the other tell his or her story. So listening becomes a basic attitude of hospitality.”

Redemptive conversation will involve our love through listening and truly hearing the stories of our guests. At the same time, our conversations with guests can be redemptive when we are prepared to tell our own stories. Dan Allender, President of Mars Hill Graduate School, has authored a book about the redemptive impact of understanding and sharing our stories:

We don’t just have stories; we *are* a story. It is our responsibility to know our story so we can live it out more intentionally and boldly for the Great Story, the

²¹⁹ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*, The Christian Practice of Everyday Life (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 26.

²²⁰ Rom. 12:9.

²²¹ Nouwen, 67.

gospel. God writes our story not just for our own enlightenment and insight, but to enlighten others and to reveal his own story through our story.²²²

Richard Peace, Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation at Fuller

Theological Seminary, has written a twelve-week study which is intended to train people to engage in what he calls holy or meaningful conversation.²²³ He writes that holy conversation includes issues of consequence, deepens friendship, and changes people. If our love through hospitality is to be characterized by sincerity and depth, so should our conversation.

Paul David Tripp, director of Changing Lives Ministries and faculty member at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation, has published articles and books that define and describe the need for redemptive speech. He writes:

Speaking redemptively means choosing our words carefully...we are committed to serve one another in love with our words. We want to speak in step with what the Spirit is seeking to produce in us and in others. We want to speak in a way that is consistent with His fruit and that encourages the growth of that fruit in others. Finally, we want to speak as gentle, humble agents of restoration, as burden-bearers who are committed to live by Christ's rule of love.²²⁴

David Powlison, who serves as a faculty member of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation's School of Biblical Counseling and teaches Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, has authored a book that encourages Christians toward and equips them in choosing their words carefully for the wise counsel of others. In this context, he writes that our wise counsel is "essentially a way of loving another

²²² Dan B. Allender, *To Be Told: Know Your Story, Shape Your Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2005), 52.

²²³ Richard Peace, *Holy Conversation: Talking About God in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2006), 18.

²²⁴ Paul David Tripp, "Speaking Redemptively," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 16, no. 3 (1998): 18.

person well. It is a way of speaking what is true and constructive into this person's life right now."²²⁵

Scripture repeatedly refers to the power of our tongues or words and the importance of choosing our words wisely so that they are pleasant, constructive, and in accord with God's purposes.²²⁶ We will be held accountable for every careless word we have spoken.²²⁷ Our carefully chosen words and topics should align with Christ's agenda to make disciples and communicate His message of reconciliation.²²⁸ In the context of encouraging the Ephesian believers toward love and the imitation of Jesus, the Apostle Paul taught that their conversation should be "only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."²²⁹ Paul's letter to the Colossian believers also guides us as we welcome strangers and engage in conversation: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."²³⁰

This biblical-theological study has demonstrated the mandate for Christ-imitators to love and serve others through the practice of Christian hospitality. Hospitality is a significant means by which God publicizes the love and beauty of His heart and the abundance of His Kingdom. God has ordained that our hospitality serves to welcome every kind of people into the joy of His redemptive work. The case for the

²²⁵ David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (Winston-Salem, NC: Punch Press, 2005), 5.

²²⁶ Prov. 18:21, 12:25, 15:4, 16:24, 25:11; Phil. 4:8; James 3:1-12.

²²⁷ Matt. 12:36-37.

²²⁸ 2 Cor. 5:19-20.

²²⁹ Eph. 5:29.

²³⁰ Col. 4:5-6.

indispensability of Christian hospitality is also bolstered through a review of church history.

Hospitality in Church History

A scan through church history often reveals a desire to perpetuate and incarnate the mandate for Christian hospitality. While this mandate for Christian hospitality has been understood and embraced with varying degrees, it becomes clear that the church has both enjoyed the fruit of faithfulness in displaying hospitality and mourned over its demise. The fruit of faithfulness has been documented by Rodney Stark, the University Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University, and author of twenty-six books on the history and sociology of religion. Stark has authored two books that specifically summarize his extensive research on the growth of Christianity through history.²³¹ He compares the beliefs and life practices of Christians with the beliefs and life practices of pagans and other religious movements—especially in the face of the vast challenges relating to plagues, epidemics, natural disasters, and the often squalid and cramped conditions of early urban life. Stark concludes that the ultimate factor in the rise of Christianity is that “central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations.”²³² Stark further explains:

The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a *structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments*. Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semiclosed networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out

²³¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

²³² Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, 211.

and into new adjacent networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time.²³³

According to Stark, Christians effectively maintained “open networks,” meaning that when cities were filled with the homeless and poor, the Christians would offer shelter and food in the context of love and hope. Stark concludes from his study on the urban Greco-Roman world that, “To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family...And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.”²³⁴

The church today can learn a great deal from Stark’s research. Theology deeply influences practice. The way we think impacts the way we act. Teaching and preaching that includes both the gospel indicative of being loved and welcomed by God and the mission imperative to love and welcome others is significant for the glory and redemptive work of God.

Stark affirms how central both doctrine and practice were for the rise of Christianity: “The truly revolutionary aspect of Christianity lay in moral imperatives such as *‘Love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive,’* and *‘When you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it unto me.’*”²³⁵ The real difference, Stark explains, is that these imperatives were much more than slogans. Christianity thrived because its members genuinely and actively loved and welcomed others, especially those in need. In contrast, when pagan leaders challenged their people to imitate the love practices of the Christians,

²³³ Ibid., 20.

²³⁴ Ibid., 161.

²³⁵ Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome*, 30.

Stark writes that “paganism was utterly incapable of generating the commitment needed to motivate such behavior. Not only were many of its gods and goddesses of dubious character, but they offered nothing that could motivate humans to go beyond self-interested acts of propitiation.”²³⁶

While there are many reasons to celebrate the faithful response of Christians to the mandate for hospitality, church history also reveals some of the great challenges. Francis W. Nichols, Professor of Theology at Saint Louis University, compiled a series of essays by a number of historical theology faculty members at the University. These essays provide an account of the church’s theology, successes, and failures as it relates to welcoming the stranger. Nichols states that welcoming the stranger has been a “dreadful challenge” where “in spite of all its noble examples of care and succor of the stranger, the outcast, the other, there have also been all too many occasions when not just individual Christians but even the institutional Church itself failed to welcome the stranger: the heretic, the other Christian, the Muslim, the Jew, the sinner.”²³⁷

Amy G. Oden’s collection of early Christian texts includes portions of letters, diaries, teachings, sermons, and community records that document how the church’s leaders, preachers, and theologians frequently and urgently expounded many of the same texts and points that have been highlighted in the preceding biblical perspective.²³⁸ John Calvin, commenting on the command to not forget to entertain strangers,²³⁹ wrote, “This office of humanity has...nearly ceased to be properly observed among men; for the

²³⁶ Ibid., 31.

²³⁷ Francis W. Nichols, *Christianity and the Stranger: Historical Essays*, South Florida-Rochester-Saint Louis Studies on Religion and the Social Order, vol. 12 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 1.

²³⁸ Oden.

²³⁹ Heb. 13:2.

ancient hospitality celebrated in histories, is unknown to us, and inns now supply the place of accommodations for strangers.”²⁴⁰

Very often the centuries-old exhortations of the preachers are just as appropriate for our own time and culture. John Owen, the Puritan theologian and pastor, commenting on this same Hebrews passage, wrote that in earlier days, hospitality to the stranger in need was faithfully extended, “but with us it is applied unto a bountiful, and, it may be, profuse entertainment of friends, relations, neighbours, acquaintances, and the like.”²⁴¹ Oden’s compilation of sermons and documents from church history includes several references to the preaching of John Chrysostom, who also lamented the loss of Christian hospitality. In one sermon, Chrysostom observed that the clergy have to bear the entire burden of care for others while the people are distracted and drained of energy because of their endless daily administrative tasks, like haggling over business matters and caring for home and property.²⁴²

The challenges relating to the church’s efforts, or lack of efforts, toward faithfulness in hospitality and redemptive conversation are persistent and perhaps much more intense today. As Jesus noted with Martha,²⁴³ and prophetic church leaders and teachers have noted through the centuries, the church continues to struggle with distractions and neglects the essential tasks of biblical hospitality and redemptive conversation.

²⁴⁰ Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.*, ed. John Owen, The Calvin Translation Society (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 340.

²⁴¹ John Owen and William H. Goold, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: With Preliminary Exercitations* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 387.

²⁴² Oden, 248-249.

²⁴³ Luke 10:38-42.

Equipping the Church for Hospitality Today

A review of Christian literature on the topics of hospitality and redemptive conversation reveals that there have been few recently published works that focus specifically on these topics. As authors seek to effectively equip the church for the faithful practice of hospitality, the observations noted earlier by Stark must be taken into account. Stark noticed that doctrine and teaching were indispensable for guiding, informing, and rightly motivating people to do the arduous work of love through Christian hospitality.²⁴⁴ When these observations, along with the evidences in the earlier-outlined biblical perspective, are considered, the criteria for works of literature effective for equipping the church become clear: inclusion of exhortation to faithful practice, motivation and empowerment based on the redeeming and welcoming God of the gospel, and practical equipping for daily practice. Few works of current literature provide these elements.

There is a seemingly endless stream of popular works that illustrate the keys to evangelism and church growth. Occasionally these writings will give some brief attention to the need for Christian hospitality or redemptive conversation and will provide some ideas for implementation. These contemporary texts will often mention the need to build relationships or initiate conversations that lead to the sharing of stories or finding a way to serve those in need, very often in the context of some organized ministry or program. Many authors, assuming the corporate worship event to be the primary entry point for strangers and unbelievers, will seek to encourage and equip the church to institutionalize the extension of hospitality so that it revolves around the corporate event of worship.

²⁴⁴ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, 211.

Gary L. McIntosh, Professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot School of Theology, has recently published a book that promotes and equips the church for this institutionalization of hospitality.²⁴⁵ Over slightly more than two pages, McIntosh provides an eye-blink glance of the biblical basis for extending hospitality and then outlines his suggested systems or programs ideas for church leaders to implement so that a church can provide excellent service to the “guests” who may be attracted into their facility for worship. McIntosh writes that, “Systematic approaches to serving others are eighty percent of the battle. Some of these approaches include changing the name of the church, making a good impression through your facilities, advertising and gusterizing your church.”²⁴⁶ According to McIntosh, “gusterize” means that you “make a church more responsive to its guests and better able to attract new ones.”²⁴⁷ This includes training all the people of the congregation to be friendly greeters who will invite guests to a Pastor’s dessert and then extend an invitation to a Get Acquainted Class.

These kinds of programs or systems often allow members to remain safely distant from “guests” and provide no opportunity for the earlier-noted dynamics of hospitality, such as when the stranger presses into our protected, private world and uncovers sins like impatience or selfishness. In addition, the primary responsibility for this institutional hospitality lies in the hands of the clergy or leaders, and there is little provision for members to express sincere love through significant listening and the sharing of stories. The earlier review of the biblical perspective revealed that Scripture prescribes hospitality but also describes various means, such as generous table fellowship, sacrificial

²⁴⁵ Gary McIntosh, *Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 107.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

self-giving, and the extension of invitations to those who often believe they are unworthy or unwelcome for a worship gathering.

Newman also critiques this kind of institutional hospitality, noting that the church's tendency is to adopt the McDonald's food chain values of efficiency, predictability, and control for the practice of hospitality.²⁴⁸ Newman argues that true Christian hospitality is not compatible with these values and notes, for example, that in contrast to being efficient, Christian hospitality "allows time to be patient and vulnerable with others." He also observes that since we understand our act of love for others as an act of love for Christ (Matthew 25:45), we must give up predictability and control and allow Christ to "come among us in surprising and strange ways that we can never fully predict or domesticate."²⁴⁹

Michael Frost, the Founding Director of the Centre for Evangelism and Global Mission at Morling Baptist Seminary in Sydney, Australia, and Alan Hirsch, the National Director for Forge Mission Training Network, have co-authored a book that turns this idea of attracting guests and institutionalizing the work of hospitality on its head.²⁵⁰ They describe the approach of McIntosh and many others in this way: "The relationship between the traditional Christendom mode of church and the world around it can best be described as being fundamentally *attractional*. The church bids people to *come and hear* the gospel in the holy confines of the church and its community."²⁵¹ Frost and Hirsch observe that many westerners have tried church, rejected it, and won't go back, and so they explain how the church must take a new approach:

²⁴⁸ Newman, 88-92.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 91-92.

²⁵⁰ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

²⁵¹ Ibid., 41.

If they won't come to us, we have to go to them. This approach, being incarnational, is the opposite of being attractional. It implies something of a *Go-To-Them* approach to mission and evangelism. Instead of asking non-Christians to *Come-to-Us*, to our services, our gatherings, and our programs on our terms, the incarnational church seeks to infiltrate society to represent Christ in the world. That is why we propose that a radical shift needs to take place in this time—a shift from the attractional mode to an incarnational one. This is no mean request, because the vast majority of churches in the West (ninety-five percent?) operate in a nonincarnational mode of mission. An incarnational mode creates a church that is a dynamic set of relationships, friendships, and acquaintances. It enhances and “flavors” the host community’s living social fabric rather than disaffirming it. It thus creates a medium of living relationships through which the gospel can travel. It emphasizes the importance of a group of Christians infiltrating a community, like salt and light, to make those creative connections with people where God-talk and shared experience allow for real cross-cultural Christian mission to take place.²⁵²

The authors go on to provide a biblical basis for this shift toward incarnational ministry and supply multiple examples and suggestions for what it may look like. Frost and Hirsch suggest that a vital means for making this incarnational shift is the practice of hospitality, particularly through the shared table that serves as “a powerful symbol of intimacy, generosity, and acceptance.”²⁵³ The authors further emphasize the need to “develop a spirituality of engagement with not-yet-Christians. That will involve true listening and genuine presence.”²⁵⁴

There are three published works that equip the church for an incarnational ministry of hospitality or redemptive conversation. These include the elements of exhortation to faithful practice, a motivation and empowerment based on the redeeming and welcoming God of the gospel, and an equipping for daily practice. Pohl’s *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as Christian Tradition* is the most recent work that is

²⁵² Ibid., 42.

²⁵³ Ibid., 57.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 98.

indeed true to its title.²⁵⁵ Pohl provides an excellent outline of the biblical and historical basis for what she perceives to be a significant mandate for Christians. Pohl also supplies some practical ways that believers can practice hospitality, engage in meaningful sharing of stories and conversation, and overcome some of the obstacles. While Pohl's work provides the biblical basis for the imperative to practice love through hospitality, she only briefly touches on the gospel indicative as the motivation or power to truly push out and be faithful. The book is written with a depth that would make it perhaps best suited for equipping pastors and leaders. Otherwise, most readers would need a pre-ignited interest and motivation in order to wade through the specific historical details. Pohl has wisely developed a companion study guide that can assist laypeople, especially in the context of small groups, to work through and benefit from her fine work.²⁵⁶

A second book, though now more than thirty years old, which has served well in equipping for hospitality is *Open Heart, Open Home: How to Find Joy Through Sharing Your Home with Others* by Karen Burton Mains.²⁵⁷ This book, compared to Pohl's work, is more accessible to the general population, with a focus on hospitality in the home and the inclusion of personal stories. Mains' work is very practical, but at the same time consistently provides a solid biblical basis for both the practice and motivation of hospitality. A companion and yet contemporary Bible study guide for small groups has been developed to augment and sustain the ministry of Mains' original work.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ Pohl.

²⁵⁶ Christine D. Pohl and Pamela J. Buck, *Study Guide for Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

²⁵⁷ Mains.

²⁵⁸ Karen Burton Mains and Adele Calhoun, *Opening Our Hearts & Homes: A Group Exploration of Scriptural Hospitality* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 1999).

A third published work that equips the church, particularly for the work of redemptive conversation, is *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* by Paul David Tripp.²⁵⁹ Tripp does not make a specific connection between hospitality and redemptive conversation. He teaches that all of our relationships should be characterized by a genuine love and desire for good change in the heart and life of others. Tripp's call for believers to become active instruments for God's redemptive work is solidly grounded in the gospel and the amazing love that God extends to us. Tripp's work especially equips believers to engage in what he calls redemptive relationships. This equipping includes entering into the other person's world, incarnating the love of Christ, getting to know the person by gathering data, and speaking the truth of Scripture.

Randy Frazee, Senior Pastor of Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas and author of several works that focus on biblical community, has published two books that equip believers for hospitality and redemptive conversation.²⁶⁰ *The Connecting Church* provides the biblical basis for and practical suggestions toward substantive biblical community, while *Making Room for Life* focuses on how to remove the common obstacles and restructure your life so that you can embrace the biblical community and openness to others that is vitally important for our spiritual well-being and the mission to which God calls us. In the seemingly endless stream of works that speak to our need for biblical community, what makes Frazee's work stand out is his emphasis on making room for hospitality through opening our homes to neighbors, sharing meals together, and engaging in meaningful conversation.

²⁵⁹ Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*.

²⁶⁰ Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Randy Frazee, *Making Room for Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

When you consider the biblical mandate for and the significance of hospitality and redemptive conversation for God's redemptive work, the Christian literature that equips the church both in theology and practice is scant. Oden's conclusions, after her extensive review of historical documents for an understanding of how hospitality was understood and practiced, are helpful here. The historical evidence shows that "hospitality as a practice and virtue held a central place in early Christian life...One encounters it at every turn. Paradoxically, however, hospitality is rarely addressed directly as a topic, but more commonly is touched upon in the context of discussing something else."²⁶¹ Oden concludes that "the pervasive character of hospitality in early Christian writing demonstrates a lack of self-consciousness, a matter-of-factness, that suggests it is simply a given part of life, not the stuff of esoteric treatise."²⁶² These historical findings are congruent with a review of contemporary works in that the topic of hospitality is rarely addressed directly. However, it would seem that for the church today, the challenge is greater because hospitality, along with redemptive conversation, is no longer "simply a given part of life," at least to the degree that is used to be.

This review will therefore close with a focus on works that illustrate how the faithful practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation are increasingly becoming a matter of concern. The section that follows will illustrate some of the greatest issues and challenges for the church in these areas.

Lament over the Deterioration and Loss

The Christian community is lamenting over the absence of Christian hospitality. Pohl ponders its demise in the introduction to her study: "Granting that the practice was

²⁶¹ Oden, 27.

²⁶² Ibid.

rarely as good as the rhetoric, still, we pause to wonder, if hospitality to strangers was such an important part of Christian faith and life, how did it virtually disappear?”²⁶³ This disappearance is documented in Christianity Today’s “Matters of Opinion” department, where Stephen Winzenburg, Professor of Communication at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa, recalls his experiences visiting dozens of churches after living in eleven different cities. Winzenburg observed that “hospitality is an unglamorous subject that doesn’t get much attention from the pulpit”²⁶⁴ and summarized his experiences in this way:

Today Americans are much more reluctant to approach strangers. Fear of violence, the influence of the media, and the use of electronic communication devices have isolated people from those outside their circle of comfort. For Christians, a lack of hospitality toward strangers has crept into churches, where many believers feel safer ignoring those they don’t know.²⁶⁵

Hampton Morgan, Jr., who serves as the Executive Director of the Board of World Mission of the Moravian Church in America, has written an excellent article that illustrates how fundamental hospitality is for the expression of God and His mission. At the same time, he expresses dismay over the loss of hospitality in Western culture and particularly the church. He sounds an alarm and affirms much of what has been demonstrated through this review:

God’s kingdom has a special manifestation in the practice of hospitality and authentic koinonia among Christians. It is a ‘pearl of great price’ for which much of far less value could be readily abandoned. Crucially important in the spread of evangelical faith in New Testament Christianity, hospitality became a mandatory sign of true faith in the post-apostolic age. Its practice today is superbly illustrated in traditional cultures, among peoples of all faiths, though it continues to have an essential role in the expansion of Christianity in those cultures. But what is naturally expressed in pre-modern peoples is at risk of disappearing in the modern and post-modern cultures, where a different ethic of individualism and isolation

²⁶³ Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 7.

²⁶⁴ Stephen Winzenburg, “Whatever Happened to Hospitality?,” *Christianity Today*, May 22, 2000, 78.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

has seized the day. Surely this is a factor in the loss of faith, community and identity in such cultures, and is also probably implicated in the staggering numerical exodus from the churches of the west. But more is at stake than numbers. God is present in the gathering of God's people, a visible sign of a destiny where relationship and community have no end.²⁶⁶

Morgan illustrates how the practice of hospitality is disappearing in western and post-modern culture by referring to how he and a group of nineteen Europeans and North Americans were overwhelmingly welcomed in Tanzania. And then, months later, when he had the opportunity to extend hospitality to two visitors from Tanzania in his own home, he struggled greatly to do so. He writes:

Recalling the extraordinary experiences of hospitality that blessed me earlier, I am anxiously pondering whether I know anything at all about receiving weary travelers from afar...Suddenly my home, so well furnished and equipped with every labour-saving device in the kitchen, seems inadequate to the task and insignificant in the face of the awesome responsibility which is mine. My culture, which has so ably prepared me for many things, has utterly failed me when it comes to discharging this sacred obligation.²⁶⁷

Andi Ashworth has recorded a portion of her life story where she and her musician husband, Charlie Peacock, suffered through the first years of an ugly, self-centered marriage that ultimately led into alcohol abuse, drug addiction, financial ruin, and marital breakdown.²⁶⁸ But, a gospel introduction and spiritual awakening yielded profound change, particularly with her new desire for and actions toward caring for family and strangers. The study of Scripture and various Christian works, reinforced by the mentoring of Christian women, have worked together to yield a gospel-driven passion for the practice of hospitality and meaningful conversation.

²⁶⁶ Hampton Morgan Jr., "Remember to Show Hospitality: A Sign of Grace in Graceless Times," *International Review of Mission* 87, no. (1998): 535.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 538.

²⁶⁸ Andi Ashworth, *Real Love for Real Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Shaw Books, 2002).

Ashworth writes with a valuable combination of biblical wisdom and “been there” practical experience to illustrate some of the heart and value of what she calls “true hospitality.” Her understanding of biblical hospitality reveals meaningful depth with a view to what God is doing in the promotion of his kingdom. For example, she writes that “as people of faith we have a heritage of hospitality, and it is not an option only for the particularly gifted. Christ has welcomed us into his presence and his kingdom, and we are to imitate him as we welcome others.”²⁶⁹ Ashworth is zealous about what she perceives to be the mandate to transform home and shared meals into places and opportunities for the nourishment of souls—particularly those of family and friends. She writes, “Home is the school where we learn that love shows itself in the details.”²⁷⁰ Ashworth’s sensitivity to and passion for God’s work through hospitality leads her to mourn the loss of home as a place of welcome and nurture, especially with a concern for the future generations.

A review of non-Christian literature will not yield any references to Christian hospitality and redemptive conversation because these practices are uniquely Christian. Non-Christian literature does, however, uncover an American culture that is struggling under its loss of social connectedness. Robert Putnam, the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard, has written a book documenting a landmark study, in which he argues for the need of Americans to reconnect with each other.²⁷¹ Putnam documents a thirty-year decline of American social activities and structures and reveals how factors such as time and money pressures, suburbanization, TV viewing, fast-food restaurants, family meals at home, and multiple other factors are significantly changing so that Americans are increasingly alienated from each other. Putnam suggested in this

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 55-56.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 66.

²⁷¹ Putnam.

work that there is hope for a renewing of the social fabric of America and the revival of communities if people will actively work to develop new forms of social connection.

Putnam, along with Lewis M. Feldstein, President of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and a longtime civic activist, have since authored *Better Together* which records the stories of people throughout America who have successfully worked to build community in new ways.²⁷² In one of these success stories, a coalition of church and school groups worked to organize parents and other area residents to improve a struggling school. The coalition engaged in what they called relational organizing, where it built up membership through house meetings and one-on-one conversations. These house meetings served as a form of hospitality where participants were then encouraged to tell their stories. Putnam and Feldstein note that “Stories build relationships; they knit communities together.”²⁷³ Another chapter of *Better Together* focuses on how the biblical values relating to community and relationships have guided Saddleback Church toward building a community that bears fruit for those who are both inside and outside the community.

American individualism has been documented as one of the most significant values or factors that have contributed to our social disconnectedness. Robert N. Bellah, Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, wrote an award-winning work called *Habits of the Heart*, in which he addresses the conflict between American individualism and our indispensable need for community and commitment to one another.²⁷⁴ This individualism is also a significant factor in the waning practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation. David F. Wells, the Senior Research at

²⁷² Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁷⁴ Bellah and others.

Professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has written about the shift from biblical to such cultural values:

The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one's self. The world shrinks to the range of personal circumstances; the community of faith shrinks to a circle of personal friends. The past recedes. The Church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is the self.²⁷⁵

Frazer addresses the problem of individualism and adds that the problem is compounded by rejection of sharing beliefs in common with others.²⁷⁶ Thus, Wells, Frazer, and others point out the vital importance of a theology or shared belief system that will provide a vision for hospitality that is worthy of our passion and sacrifice and that will both instruct and empower us for faithful engagement. A church's work of equipping the saints for hospitality and redemptive conversation must be consistent and have a depth and breadth that will enable believers to identify and overcome cultural values such as individualism.

While the corrosion of both hospitality and community is documented and lamented, and individualism is often noted as one of the most determinative factors, there are multiple factors that contribute to the decay and may be considered when seeking to understand and equip the church for speaking the truth and extending hospitality in the context of love.²⁷⁷ This review will close by noting some of the factors that often surface as the greatest challenges or barriers for the faithful practice of Christian hospitality and the development of community.

²⁷⁵ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 183.

²⁷⁶ Frazer, *The Connecting Church*, 53.

²⁷⁷ Eph. 4:15-16.

Contemporary Issues and Challenges

Various works document how individualism and other factors have played a role in the abandonment of the city and suburban sprawl and thus the deterioration of hospitality and community.²⁷⁸ Eric O. Jacobsen, associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Missoula, Montana, and member of The Congress for New Urbanism, in his book, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, illustrates how Christians have retreated from their mandate to be a redemptive presence in the city and suggests ways to recapture an effective incarnational ministry presence.²⁷⁹ Jacobsen notes, for example, that Christians, guided by non-Christian values such as freedom, independence, power and privacy, will choose to live in the suburbs and travel everywhere by car, thus remaining largely isolated from the city and their neighbors. In response, he writes that “it’s time that we call into question the assumption that the needs of the automobile should be met above all else. We need to build cities and neighborhoods that allow us to get out of our cars and get to know one another by paying attention to the age-old conception of public space.”²⁸⁰ Jacobsen further suggests that we should choose “to live or work in cities, where strangers actually are to be found...and...put ourselves in situations where we encounter strangers so that we can practice the delicate social practice of welcoming strangers in appropriate and relatively safe ways.”²⁸¹

Albert Y. Hsu, an Associate Editor at InterVarsity Press, documents the isolationism and other negative consequences of suburbanization and makes practical

²⁷⁸ Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000).

²⁷⁹ Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith*, *The Christian Practice of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 141-142.

suggestions for how to thrive as a suburban Christian and develop an incarnational ministry presence in his book, *The Suburban Christian*.²⁸² While Hsu makes several good suggestions, he holds up the practice of hospitality as the most significant: “The chief antidote to suburban anonymity and isolationism may well be the Christian practice of hospitality. Hospitality can be a profoundly prophetic, countercultural activity that helps us escape our cocoons, connect with neighbors and minister to our communities.”²⁸³

Perhaps the most important challenge that contemporary Christians face involves their pace of life. Busyness is one of the most common reasons for not practicing hospitality. Richard A. Swenson, who received an M.D. from the University of Illinois and is now a full-time futurist, physician-researcher, author, and educator, has written a significant work that documents how we suffer the pain of overload under the supposed progress that “has given us unprecedented affluence, education, technology, and entertainment.”²⁸⁴ Swenson states further that “progress’s biggest failure has been its inability to nurture and protect right relationships.”²⁸⁵ Swenson and Frazee²⁸⁶ both focus on ways to restructure our time, work habits, recreation, and much more so that we have “room for a life” and are thus freed to develop meaningful relationships.

John L. Locke a Chair in the Human Communication Sciences at the University of Sheffield and Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Cambridge, England, has authored a book called, *The De-Voicing of*

²⁸² Albert Y. Hsu, *The Suburban Christian: Finding Spiritual Vitality in the Land of Plenty* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

²⁸³ Ibid., 132.

²⁸⁴ Richard A. Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992), 15.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 35.

²⁸⁶ Frazee, *Making Room for Life*.

*Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Anymore.*²⁸⁷ Locke, like Putnam, addresses the vital importance of social relationships but particularly focuses on the indispensability of intimate or face-to-face conversation for these relationships. He gives the greatest attention to documenting the factors that are working toward social de-voicing, or the loss of opportunities for intimate talking. Since face-to-face conversation is an important element for effective redemptive conversation, the barriers that Locke uncovers in his work will likely also serve as barriers for effective redemptive conversation. Locke's work outlines the impact of many different barriers to intimate talking but highlights technological factors such as e-mail, voice mail, the Internet, cell phones, televisions, and shopping at home. One specific example is in the way that the convenient use of Amazon.com to purchase books has led to the near-extinction of regular and significant discussions with local bookstore employees. Locke made these observations ten years ago, and since this time, additional technology such as text messaging and the iPod have increasingly worked as a barrier to intimate talking.

As we engage in and equip for the practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation, we must also acknowledge personality and individual spiritual giftedness. We are all uniquely "wired," and for some, the extension of hospitality is much more difficult than it is for others. Hershberger briefly acknowledges the role of personality by telling the story of one couple who experienced conflict regarding their extension of hospitality together because he was an extrovert and she was an introvert.²⁸⁸ The husband generously invited a number of strangers or guests into their home and, upon noting his wife's resistance to these unexpected visits, he assumed that it was a lack of spiritual

²⁸⁷ John L. Locke, *The De-Voicing of Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Anymore* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

²⁸⁸ Hershberger, 59-60.

maturity on her part. After struggling through this conflict for some time, the husband finally recognized that the two of them were wired differently. As an introvert, his wife needed more personal space. The solution for this couple involved better communication regarding when to welcome guests so that the wife could better manage the balance between caring for self and ministry to others.

Scripture also helps us to understand that some believers will be particularly equipped and inclined through the spiritual gift relating to hospitality.²⁸⁹ Mains devotes a chapter to understanding the relationship of spiritual giftedness and hospitality and notes that while some can indeed act out of their supernatural ability for hospitality, we are all called to develop the spiritual gifts and be sensitive to the Spirit's leading in ministry to others.²⁹⁰ Kise, Stark, and Hirsh have developed an excellent resource that can assist believers in understanding elements such as spiritual gifts, values, passions, and introversion vs. extraversion as part of one's unique personality and how these things equip them for ministry.²⁹¹

The contemporary challenges noted above serve to highlight the need for believers to actively resist conformity to the world and instead be transformed into disciples who extend the welcoming arms of Jesus and speak the truth in love. God's redemptive plan certainly includes putting His character and kingdom up for display through the faithful practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. The biblical survey and perspective demonstrated that the mandate and the empowering gospel indicative that propels us into this vital work are clear. In addition, the most competent

²⁸⁹ 1 Pet. 4:9-10.

²⁹⁰ Mains, *Open Heart, Open Home*, 43-54.

²⁹¹ Jane A. G. Kise, David Stark, and Sandra Krebs Hirsh, *Lifekeys: Discovering Who You Are, Why You're Here, What You Do Best* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996).

resources for the Church's equipping work have been highlighted. The greatest concern is for literature and teaching that has the breadth and depth to equip and empower God's people to give up cheap substitutes, resist conformity, and embrace a way of life that involves sacrificial love, hard work, joy, and immeasurable rewards.

CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The literature review demonstrated that Christian love through hospitality and redemptive conversation plays a crucial role for the church's vitality and mission. The challenges are significant as these practices are waning and counter-cultural, even within the church community. Biblical and historical surveys revealed how doctrine and teaching are indispensable for equipping and rightly motivating or empowering believers to engage in the sacrificial work of these love practices. But this review also revealed a dearth of available resources that contain the essential elements for effective equipping and empowering.

Since the purpose of this study is to understand and equip the church for hospitality and redemptive conversation, a methodological plan using qualitative research and interviews was selected so that the successes, challenges, beliefs and experiences of believers could be understood and evaluated. This chapter will outline how this qualitative research was executed, including a review of the study's design, an introduction to the study participants, a description of the interview process, and a discussion of some of the study's limitations.

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam, in her *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, states that "the key philosophical assumption...upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals

interacting with their social worlds.”²⁹² Merriam further explains that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”²⁹³ This study is indeed concerned to understand the constructed reality of individuals and how it influences their practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. As was stated early in the literature review, our worldview, particularly our theology, propels our vision and way of life. An individual’s reality, meaning, worldview, or theology can be understood by soliciting his descriptions of activities, actions, beliefs, experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. The most appropriate means to collect this data is through interviews.²⁹⁴

Sampling Criteria

A mix of the various types of purposeful sampling was used to select the study participants.²⁹⁵ The sampling was typical in that some of the participants exhibited outstanding or atypical attributes relating to hospitality or redemptive conversation. A measure of convenience sampling was used in that all participants reside in the West Michigan area. At the same time, some degree of variation was utilized so that commonly shared beliefs, challenges, and practices could be identified over a greater diversity.

A network of friends and pastors was used to identify potential participants. The criteria for choosing the participants was simply that they should be believers who participated in the life of the church. The criterion of being a believer is important because the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation are distinguished from secular entertaining or stimulating conversation. The motivation of Christ’s love for us

²⁹² Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 6.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 69.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

and in us is an essential part of this study, and it can only be truly practiced by believers. Active participation in the life of the church was designated as an essential criterion because exposure to doctrine and teaching are essential for the understanding and equipping of believers.

Beyond these common characteristics, the participants displayed a range of diversity in age, denomination, Christian maturity, vocation, socio-economic level, and setting. Several generations were represented, with people ranging in age from their twenties into their seventies. Some were retired, and others were involved with careers.

The sampling size of fifteen participants (seven couples and one single) was sufficient to yield both common and unique beliefs, patterns, challenges, and practices. The settings included medium to large suburban homes, an apartment, a duplex, a rural acreage, and a small urban home. The denominations represented include: Presbyterian Church in America, Reformed Church of America, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Christian Reformed Church, Lutheran (ELCA), Charismatic/Pentecostal, and non-denominational. Two-thirds of the participants were from a Reformed denominational background. In part because of the network through which I located participants, only one participant was African American, and the others were Caucasian.

Interview Design and Data Collection Methods

Each of the interviews was conducted in person and in the participants' own living space. So while the interviews served as the primary source of data, the research also utilized some field study and observation.²⁹⁶ This observation included the physical setting, such as an interviewee's home and community setting and some related activities,

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 94-95.

interactions, and conversation.²⁹⁷ The conversation and the related activities and interactions included the social interaction before and after the interview. Some of the interviewees, depending on the time chosen for the interview, insisted on having me join them for dinner, lunch, or coffee and homemade cookies sometime during, before, or after the interview. These interactions affirmed that hospitality and redemptive conversation were a significant part of life and ministry for some interviewees.

Each session, lasting forty-five to sixty minutes, was digitally recorded and transcribed by myself or a professional transcriber. A list of twenty-eight questions (Appendix A) was used as a guide in a semi-structured format. The interviews were initiated by providing a brief definition of Christian hospitality and redemptive conversation, congruent to the definitions provided in Chapter One of this study. Then, depending on the development of the conversation and the need to do some steering, the data sought by the question list was elicited through clarifications, encouragement, and various versions of several selected questions as needed.

The interviewees were informed beforehand regarding the topic, purpose, and time expectations. Interview questions and guidance worked to solicit data regarding beliefs and external factors relating to their practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. Or, as noted above, the concern was to understand the meaning that people have constructed based on their beliefs, and the related experiences or social interactions based on factors such as mentors, busyness, and church equipping.

Questions that focused on constructed meaning or beliefs revolved around how long each participant has been a Christian and what was instrumental in their conversion. Further questions were used to ascertain their beliefs regarding what is the gospel, who is

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 97-98.

God, what is His mission and how He has offered them hospitality. Directed inquiry was also used to gain more personal information, allowing the researcher to understand what they perceive to be God's primary mission for their life and what elicits their love and compassion. The questions and guidance that focused on the related experiences, social interactions, and other factors included the following: 1) Who were your best mentors for loving the stranger? 2) How did your childhood home function for welcome and nurturing conversation? 3) What factors hinder you from or encourage you toward practicing hospitality or redemptive conversation? 4) How does your church's teaching, preaching and equipping work prepare you for hospitality and redemptive conversation?

The constant comparative method of data analysis was used in the examination of the eight interview transcripts.²⁹⁸ The review of the transcripts involved a search for similarities, dissimilarities and insights that would yield insight for how the church can best address the most significant beliefs and factors for its equipping work.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to a sampling of fifteen Western Michigan Christians (WMC), of which two-thirds were from Reformed denominational backgrounds. These WMC will have characteristics, beliefs, and factors relating to their practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation that are unique to this geographic area. For example, many WMC have a Dutch ethnic heritage, and my long-term experience with Dutch ethnic Christians reveals that many believe that their faith is a private matter and thus act accordingly. Western Michigan has a more stable population than many parts of the country, and thus people may not be as inclined to look for new relationships here as people would be in more transient areas. Western Michigan's climate provides for a

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 18, 159, 179, 191-192.

limited window of time each year when people are able to connect in their neighborhoods by taking a walk or sitting on the front porch. These and other factors may make WMC a unique population of Christians where the data gathered and conclusions drawn will have limited applicability for the church at large.

Another limitation of this study will be that the interviews only yield insights from the perspective of those engaging in hospitality and redemptive conversation. The study could be broadened by additional input from those who were recipients of hospitality or redemptive conversations. Input could also be gathered from pastors or fellow church members who make observations about others.

An additional potential limitation of this study relates to my role as a pastor. Those being interviewed may be inclined to tell me what they think I want to hear, and they might be reticent to share their related struggles. On the other hand, some may perceive an interview with a pastor as a longed-for opportunity to unload frustrations or concerns onto someone with a sympathetic ear.

The findings here will also reflect the subjective views of the interviewees, some of whom may communicate regarding their beliefs and practices in a way that is perhaps more positive than the reality. Actual observation of the interviewees over time could yield different impressions.

Finally, a limiting factor of this study will be related to the practical suggestions that arise from the research. The suggestions for equipping and teaching others can be proven valuable only after they have been tested in the actual experiences of families and churches. Nevertheless, this study should provide insights for theology and practice that

will assist church leaders in their work of equipping and teaching God's people for faithfulness in His Kingdom.

Summary

This chapter has outlined how a methodological plan using qualitative research was utilized to gain insight into the beliefs, factors, and church equipping work that influence the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. The study design, the selection criteria for the study participants, and the interview process were reviewed. Finally, some limitations of the study were noted. The next chapter will present a collation of the data collected through the interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study has focused on understanding and equipping the church in its practice of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation. Fifteen individuals, including seven couples and one single person, were interviewed to record data regarding their beliefs and experiences relating to these practices. Each of the participants was from Western Michigan and actively participating in church life. Within the Christian community, the sampling is somewhat diverse in age, denomination, faith maturity, experiences, and beliefs, but at the same time, common experiences and beliefs were discovered and yielded valuable insight.

The physical setting of the interviewees' homes and communities yielded insights into their beliefs, practices, and values. For example, one couple's immaculate home reinforced a confession of perfectionism and a resistance to welcome strangers into home and life. On the other hand, other couples' invitations to join them for a meal around a well-worn table reinforced their descriptions of a life that was active with hospitality and redemptive conversation. Another couple's decision to live and develop a ministry out of their home in a struggling urban community spoke loudly about their commitment to the stranger.

The focus of the questions directed to the interviewees was intended to yield data regarding their practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation. The following were the primary concerns for understanding their faithful or not-so-faithful practice.

1. What are some of the beliefs that might instruct or hinder the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation?

2. What are the external factors that might support or encumber these practices?
3. What are some ways that churches might better equip or assist in these practices?

All those interviewed could speak of some experience with hospitality and redemptive conversation. Some were passionate both in belief and practice about hospitality and redemptive conversation, but for a few, these practices had little or no significant place in their life. Each of the participants noted the value of the interviews because they worked to initiate some thinking about the value of these practices and how they might make changes to be faithful with them.

Introduction to Study Participants and Their Settings

Ned and Mary are both about sixty years old and have been Christians since their youth. They have participated in their PCA church for forty years, especially since Ned served on the staff as Minister of Congregational Life for fourteen years. Their large, well-adorned and yet comfortable suburban home serves as a primary base for their ministry of hospitality and redemptive conversation.

Ken and Katie are both thirty years old and have also been Christians since their youth. They had joined an RCA church about a year earlier, after having participated in a non-denominational church in San Diego, California and PCA churches earlier in life. They actively work to extend hospitality and practice redemptive conversation in their duplex home and in other ways.

Don and Sarah are forty-nine and fifty-one years old. After professing their faith as children and participating in the CRC and RCA during their earlier years, they have both provided leadership through various ministry positions in their OPC church for the past eighteen years. Their comfortable, suburban home has been well worn with a variety of guests through the years.

Dan and Melissa are both forty-one years old and maintain a smaller, urban home with their family that includes five sons ages seven through eighteen. They both describe being saved when they were about twenty-two years old and have been developing in faith, maturity, and hospitality ever since. Their non-denominational, charismatic church has provided them with significant training for ministry. Even though they both work full-time out of their home, they have specially furnished their basement and work together as a family to welcome and care for struggling, troubled, and even delinquent kids.

Rich and Betsy are seventy-five and sixty-six years old. After participating in Baptist and RCA churches through many years, at the time of the interview they provide leadership for a *nine month-old non-denominational church plant*. They live in a modest home on a remote, small acreage. The closest community is a single-grocery-store town that is several miles away. While they both became Christians as children, they have matured through some recent hard times. They have a vision to welcome strangers into their new church.

Arlene is a fifty year-old, single African American who became a Christian at the age of twenty-eight. While she participates in a non-denominational and largely African American church, she has struggled to make progress in her faith. Her struggle with faith maturity, the challenges of being single, and a limited-space apartment have made it *difficult for her to think about reaching out to strangers*.

Pete and Laura are both seventy years old and have been professing members in the CRC since their youth. They are both very active in leadership and in a welcoming

ministry in their middle-upper class suburban church. They provide some hospitality in their well-cared-for outer-urban home.

Bob and Macy are thirty-one and twenty-eight years old and are both intensely focused on career. Both say that they have been Christians for their whole life and currently participate in their Lutheran Church (ELCA). They confessed that their spacious, clean, and well-ordered suburban home was seldom a place to welcome strangers.

The data gathered through these interviews, both through the transcripts and observation, is collected into three subject areas: beliefs, external factors, and church equipping.

Data Relating to Beliefs

The literature review noted how hospitality and redemptive conversation both involve an active engagement with others in the context of relationships. The review also pointed out that God often uses these practices to reveal His heart and draw people to Himself. This study has documented how faith maturity, or belief development, influences how we will be faithful with these practices. So one line of questioning directed to the interviewees revolved around how they became Christians, how long they have been Christians, and how they have matured since becoming Christians. Another line of questioning focused on what the interviewees understood to be the heart of the gospel. Interviewees were asked, alternatively, to explain who God is for them or to describe their favorite pictures of who God is for them. Two couples and the one single interviewee were generally not engaged in hospitality or redemptive conversation, and the various reasons will be presented.

Nearly all of the interviewees were led into faith or attributed early faith development to growing up in a Christian or “religious” home, or through significant relationships with other believers. Follow-up inquiries focused on these important relationships, in part to learn whether this means of influence became a high value for them as they sought to lead others into faith and maturity. Regardless of how they had been led into faith and maturity, the most indicative factor leading interviewees to actively engage others for the sake of the gospel was revealed to be a compelling view of God and the gospel.

Ned and Mary demonstrate the importance of both relationships and a compelling view of God and the gospel. Mary was drawn to Christ through a relationship with a college friend who underwent what Mary called a “contagious” heart and life transformation. Mary’s husband Ned described being reared in a Christian family, but he noted that he had not been “sold out” nor surrendered his life until he studied Scripture and the gospel through his adult years. Both Mary and Ned understood the gospel in terms of God’s persistent grace, mercy, care, and forgiveness. Ned compared the gospel to having found the cure for cancer and being highly motivated to share it with everyone. Ned further explained that in their experience, this sharing “comes from friendships, from reaching out to people and really asking, how are you?”

Ned and Mary often spoke about how the gospel equipped and motivated them for ministry. For example, Ned said, “you have to rely on your identity in Christ” in order to pursue others in what will sometimes be one-sided relationships where “you feel like you are not being ministered to.” Mary explained that the gospel gave her a freedom to

engage in relationships without being “bound up with the old life and the perspective that the world gives us.”

Ken and Katie both described coming to faith through the influence of a Christian home or family. Though Ken had professed his faith at eleven years of age, it was not until the age of twenty-six that “I felt like Christ really called me into an intimate relationship of obedience with Him and did that primarily through magnifying the experience of love of meeting and falling in love with my now wife and taking and building upon that to open my mind and heart to the infinite love that He has made available to me.” While Ken and Katie had each relocated to various parts of the country at least a few times, they sought out a steady diet of Christ-centered or gospel-centered preaching and teaching. This teaching became evident as they both described being recipients of grace, love, and redemption. At the same time, they expressed their need to manifest grace and love to others for the sake of God’s redemptive work. Ken noted that “to see in the Bible God’s intimate love for us and His human but divine reaction to our relationship to Him and yet the grace that He has offered motivates me in the way that I respond to and treat others.”

Don and Sarah, after coming to faith as children through Christian parents, have since experienced steady growth. Don often reads and studies Scripture and said that “just within the last twenty years, especially through the ministry of [his OPC pastor],” he has gained a broader and deeper understanding of the church. Don’s studies became evident when he was asked to describe what he understands to be the heart of the gospel:

The heart of the gospel is, first of all, my knowledge of who I am in the light of a perfect, eternal, righteous and holy God—that I am not worthy to be in his presence because of my sin in Adam, and because of my own sin. But, in the context of being alienated from God, God in his mercy has come to me in Christ,

and everything that kept me from God's presence has been solved in Christ—both my sinfulness that God does not tolerate, and also just maybe nothing in me that would cause him to love me. All of that has been given to me by Jesus' perfect righteousness, his perfect obedience, and his perfect sacrificial death on the cross that he took upon himself all of my sin and he gave me his righteousness. He has given me the privilege of being adopted into the covenant community of God, being a part of the family of God, and has given me the privilege of being able to come into the very presence of God, being clothed in Jesus' righteousness, and having God's favor rest upon me because of what Jesus has done.

Don then referred to the parable of the unmerciful servant as one example of what drives him to be faithful in “manifesting God's grace to others.” When they were asked to describe how best to put Jesus on display, Sarah quickly responded with, “By loving him and doing what he commands” and then laughed, explaining, “my childhood catechism coming out.” These kinds of responses, along with references to recently read books such as *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*,²⁹⁹ made it clear that their passion for and practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation had a steady source of fuel.

Rich and Betsy made commitments to Christ as children, but God used a variety of relationships and experiences to draw them into a vital relationship with Him. Betsy married Rich twelve years ago, after a divorce eight years earlier, and said that in the context of their marriage, “my life in Christ has grown more in that twelve years than the first forty years that I was a Christian. And I attribute a lot of that to Rich—because of his encouragement, because of his help in helping me study.” Rich referred to the gospel in terms of the liberating effects of the love and sacrificial death of Christ. Rich and Betsy provide leadership for an outreach-oriented church plant which had just welcomed and baptized a new family. Betsy explained that “because God loves us, we need to love them, no matter what they have done in the past.”

²⁹⁹ Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*.

Dan and Melissa had both “been saved” since they were about twenty-two years old, and their involvement in a vibrant, charismatic non-denominational church was significant for their growth and ministry. They had both completed nearly three years of a four-year internship to become pastors for their own church when God led them to focus on reaching their immediate neighborhood. Dan explained that “one time I was sleeping on my front porch, and God said, ‘You know, I have asked you to reach your neighborhood,’ and He started giving me questions, like, do you know your neighbors? And I didn’t know my neighbors because I was so busy in church.” So, even though they encountered significant resistance from their church, they backed away from the formal pastoral positions and have developed a formidable ministry out of their home.

Dan and Melissa, along with their five sons ranging in age from seven through eighteen, invite neighborhood kids into their home a few times a week and neighborhood adults about two times per month. They especially target young and old who are rough, on the fringe, and would never otherwise find themselves in a church setting, such as the intoxicated, drug users, drug dealers, or the lesbians who live across the street. Donations have been solicited from area businesses to equip their modest basement with furniture and games, and their gatherings often involve meals. Dan passionately explained that their family’s “vision statement is to be a loving, caring environment in which [the neighbors] see the word of God.” It became clear that Dan provides strong leadership for his wife and sons:

We were equipped, we were trained, and we have a passion, and we are just trying to do what we are trained to do. What we are doing is building relationships with them, loving them, and getting them to ultimately see Jesus in us. I don’t want them to see Dan, or Dan’s family; I want them to see God so that ultimately they can get saved. We keep telling our kids we need to love people, right where they are at. Don’t love them where you think they should be at, or don’t love them

based on their performance or how they look, but love them because they were created unique and created special. That's really all we do here, is we firmly believe in just loving people...we need to be a representation of who God is, and not what we say or how we act, but how we live, and how we respond to things. It has very little to do with what we say and that is about being a Christian, it has everything to do with how we present ourselves.

Melissa explained that their study of the Word confirmed much of what had been taught to them regarding the need to love people regardless of their appearance or performance. She understood the heart of the gospel to be defined in terms of God's mercy and grace. Dan especially understood the gospel in terms of the servanthood of Jesus: "I always picture Jesus washing the disciples' feet." It became clear that Dan's understanding that God is relational and that Jesus "died on the cross so that we can have a personal relationship with him" fueled his passion and practices. Dan shared some of what he had learned recently in a study of Hebrews:

In Hebrews, the Bible says that Jesus is the second Adam, and He came to erase and undo everything the first Adam did. Well, the main thing he did, what Satan did when he had Adam bite the apple, was it broke that relationship. And that is really why God created us, so that he could just fellowship with us. So we could walk in the garden, He could talk to us. I believe that ultimately, God hungers and desires to just fellowship with us.

Arlene grew up in the government housing projects of Indianapolis and she struggled through horrible pain related to giving up her baby at the age of fourteen. She began dating and living with a guy at the age of fifteen, and this developed into a thirteen-year, destructive relationship. But at age twenty-eight, God wonderfully intervened and worked in her life through some key relationships. Arlene said, "I ended up going to this church in Indiana with very few African Americans but that's where the Lord led me and the people there took me in and they poured their life out into me and that's where I saw Jesus." Arlene sees God as a God of relationships "because he has a relationship with me." Because of the emotional wounds that Arlene suffered early in life

and the healing that she has found through Christ, she has been propelled to become trained as a nurse.

I hate to see people hurting, that's kind of automatic for me. I get into that mode. Even when people are talking I can see where they're at. That's why I feel I could be more effective if I was a nurse. Cause if people are at their end, this is where I get emotional, I want to make sure they know Jesus—at least presented to them. But I help anybody even though I don't have a nursing degree. But that would put me in places where I could be more effective.

Bible Study Fellowship, in both the Bible study and the fellowship, has been a significant influence toward Arlene's growth in the gospel. She described how she still struggles with the old ways of thinking and living, but she insists that it is vital to just keep "putting God's Word into you—keep putting it in. The more I put it in me the more that I can't help to become what he wants be to become."

Pete and Laura both described coming to faith and maturity over time in the context of a Christian home and the Christian Reformed Church culture with its Christian schools, catechizing and more. Neither of them could point to any specific time, event, or influence that led them into faith. Pete's most significant times of growth have been when he served as an elder, and Laura's most significant factor for growth has been Bible Study Fellowship.

Pete and Laura each struggled with describing what they understood to be the heart of the gospel, but they did say that "God is faithful...forgiving...patient." Pete told a story that illustrated how God is very fond of us. It should be noted that Pete and Laura both labored to describe their faith or the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation apart from the activities and location of the church. For example, they did not think so much in terms of inviting others to God as they did inviting others to their

church. They defined their ministry in terms of inviting or nudging people toward church event attendance.

When asked how long they had been Christians and how they came to be Christians, Bob and Macy both affirmed that they had “been a Christian my whole life.” Neither of them made reference to Jesus. Instead, they both described their Christianity more in terms of a relationship with a church and involvement with its activities. When asked about how they would describe the heart of the gospel or what they think about relating to how God reveals Himself to them, Macy said, “For me, I guess that would be being compassionate towards others. I guess my job is a teacher, so I kind of see myself as the teacher, or Christ as the teacher, helping others in that way, and compassion and understanding.” Bob explained: “I would probably say caring or forgiving would be what I, I don’t know, seems important to me, or I think about a lot.”

It became apparent that hospitality and redemptive conversation are not on their radar screen, and they are not nurtured in their faith beyond their worship service participation. Thus, inquiry was made regarding what their church does to nurture them in reaching out to others. Again, they talked in terms of activities such as Habitat for Humanity, help with gardening at the Luther home and small groups that, from their perspective, were for other people.

The fifteen interviewees described a diverse abundance of experiences, relationships, and teachings that were significant for the development of a similar diversity in faith, beliefs, or constructed meaning. But some notable patterns or themes emerged from this abundance and will be highlighted at the end of this chapter.

Data Relating to External Factors

A second line of questioning revolved around understanding the factors that support or encumber the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. These factors might include significant mentors or modeling in their childhood years. Some are consumed with career or work. Others are retired and could more easily devote the necessary time and energy. Other factors that influence our practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation include extroversion and introversion, fear of rejection, perfectionism, and busyness. The following section recognizes some of the most significant factors identified by the interviewees.

Ned and Mary say that they are on a mission, working together to disciple people, and hospitality and redemptive conversation are considerable elements of their mission. Their comfortable and spacious home extends welcome and facilitates conversation. Ned noted that inviting people onto their sailboat has helped them to develop relationships and opened up significant conversations with those who are searching or in need. Ned explained that “it’s important to get people away from their home environment and unhealthy things going on, and sailing is then a great way to do it.” Ned and Mary have also learned the value of gathering around food. Ned suggested that “when someone sits down or you just invite someone to sit down for coffee or meet someone in a coffee shop, for some reason, food has a leveling effect and a comfortable setting.”

While Ned and Mary benefit from a number of factors that propel them toward an active ministry, they also made observations about the challenges that they and others face in today’s culture. Ned made this observation about how busyness is a significant factor:

I think hospitality is a lost art today. People will get together and have parties and they will play games and do things together but they're not really aware of where the other person is in their walk or in their lives because no one asks them. So they have kids going to three different sports and they are following them all over the place and they don't have the time or energy like they could have back when they did forty to fifty years ago when they indulged in just having people over for dinner.

Ned and Mary admitted that they suffer from this busyness as well. Mary said that there are times when she just doesn't have the energy to clean the house and prepare a big meal. They both noted how it was essential for their input to be sufficient for their output—particularly in a spiritual way. Mary explained that “Jesus always seemed to take some time to get away and so we need a day or two where we don't reach out. We are both people persons and so we can get over-involved.” Ned added that they also gain input through “special people in our lives where their doors are always open to us and that's special to us.”

Mary's parents were not Christians, but they did provide a model for opening their home up to others. After marriage, Mary began to see “that there was a greater purpose to have someone in your home.” It is interesting to note that Ned's mother was very intimidated by the process of being hospitable, so it became valuable for him because he sorely missed it.

Friends and mentors were the most significant external factors propelling Ken and Katie toward the faithful practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation. Just out of college, Katie moved into a Boston apartment with two friends who were excited about hospitality. “These girls were really the first ones that I can remember having redemptive conversations with—talking about the hard things and working to make the other person better. That was definitely a time when I began to think about loving people in this way and not just being nice to them.” Ken said that,

It has more been a number of people who have demonstrated how to care for me in ways that I was not expecting. My mother was tremendous as a role model for caring for people and I was surprised at my father's ability to care for people. And then random people who really cared for and reached out to me at critical times—times of need. I have been impressed by these times. And these were not necessarily Christian care.

Katie then reminded Ken about a significant turning point in his life. Ken was deeply impressed by a college friend who consistently called Ken with genuine care while Ken endured a battle with cancer.

Regarding the challenges and factors that hinder their efforts toward hospitality and redemptive conversation, Ken is a diabetic, and Katie was pregnant with their second child, thus they both referred to physical limitations or limited energy. Katie noted that “we prioritize our own family over anything else, and so when there is a choice, ninety-nine percent of the time, we will choose to keep our own family unit healthy.”

Ken also noted that he is an introvert: “For me, it is taxing—pushing me over the threshold of ability—both physically—energy-wise and pushing out of my introversion. I am limited by this body but I know that God calls me and His promises in Scripture are a motivator.”

I followed up on Ken's response in this way:

Tim: What about spiritually, if you are not soaking it in, if you are not, today, delighting in the grace of God, you will not be that inclined. Do you have these times where you don't feel like it—maybe for a week or two or more? Do you have these times where you are just out of it spiritually?

Ken: Yes it is definitely an ebb and flow and part of the challenge is to reconcile that. Because it is easier when I feel that God is present and feel in-synch with what God is calling me to do and the temptations are minimal and I am walking on the narrow path and there are times when I am not. But I know that God told me that this would happen. But I can continue to be motivated by grace and activated by faith. But yeah, there are definite times and periods when you feel like you are wading through spiritual muck and it cuts off my willingness to extend outside my core levels of responsibility.

Don and Sarah note that they intentionally purchased their larger suburban home so that they would have room to have people over. They wanted to develop a ministry of hospitality more than they had in the past. As well, with three children, now ages twenty-two through twenty-five, they needed a place to welcome their friends. The details of their hospitality to others, their welcoming home, and the interview experience itself revealed that they have embraced a ministry of hospitality and redemptive conversation. As we arranged the interview time, they insisted on having my wife and I join them for dinner, and it was clear that this was an often-repeated event.

When asked about the influences or mentors who significantly encouraged them toward hospitality and redemptive conversation, several of the interviewees recalled the importance of parents who modeled the practices for them. The exchange below reveals how Don and Sarah were especially influenced by their parents:

Tim: When you, throughout your years of growing up, and even now, your married years together—what were some of maybe the most significant influences, or mentors - maybe I read this, or whatever, that lead you to open your home, or open your life in a sense? Because it's not just in your home, it can be anywhere, but open your life up to those that are on the outside. What has been most significant in your doing that?

Sarah: I would easily say my parents. And I remember at five years old, of somebody new moving into our neighborhood and my parents wanting to go and visit this new family that were coming in—Mom bringing food. Anytime there was somebody new at our church, they were invited to our house for Sunday dinner afterwards. We had not met these people before. And you just didn't go to restaurants, you had people in. So, we had people, and we lived in a relatively small house, one bathroom, there were six kids and three bedrooms, so there wasn't a lot of extra room, but we always squeezed people together. Mom would put up a board on sawhorses to make a bigger table. So, just sharing what we had. And she still, she has been widowed now for twenty-five years, and she still does that in her home.

Don: For me, probably my parents as well. We had people over to our house. When I was in, I think I was still in high school, for sure later grade school, Rock Valley has an institution called Hope Haven. There are teenagers and young

adults that are part of—they have a factory there that their clients can work in. They look for homes in the community for the folks that are a part of that program. So we had four gals from Hope Haven that lived with us for many years. They weren't the same four, they would cycle through or whatever. So there have always been, from an early age, just experiences with different people and neither of us have a fear of people in that sense. So that helps.

The most significant factor that hindered Don and Sarah from engaging in the practices as much as they would like is exhaustion. By Saturday, when they would especially begin to think about preparing for an event on Sunday, they are often too tired to think about preparation and engagement with others. Part of their exhaustion was related to “over-participating” in activities, especially those related to their church. Don noted that he struggles with having not “pre-planned” with Sarah for extending an invitation, so when the opportunity presents itself, it doesn't happen. Don also said that he hesitates to initiate conversation with people that he doesn't know.

Sarah confessed that pride was a factor that prevented her from engagement with others. She said, “I think, oh, my house is a disaster area—thinking about having anybody over.” Don added, “I think sometimes it's too easy to say, well, I don't have everything in order, and so therefore I can't do anything until I get everything in order. It's just never going to happen.” And then, again, Sarah emphasized the importance of her mother's influence:

Sarah: And that is probably where I learned, from my Mom, because she has people over and her house really is never clean.

Tim: And it's fine.

Sarah: Yeah. And she puts another cup of water in the soup. Yeah. We are confessing our sin here.

Rich and Betsy have been married for twelve years after a divorce and the death of a spouse. They were settled into a modest and remotely located acreage tucked into the

woods. Nevertheless, God had worked through a number of life experiences to lead them to work together as a team that is focused on drawing others into the kingdom of God. They provide leadership for a new church plant that will be focused on drawing not-yet-believers into their fellowship. When they were asked about the factors that may be most significant for their ministry today, Betsy pointed to her parents:

I think my parents had a very big impact on my life and how, we have a large family, and we do a lot of family things. But I remember my parents being really open to other people—helping other people. We had an older gentleman that lived just a little ways up the road from us whose wife died, a couple of years later he was out with his horse, his horse kicked him, he lost his leg from just below his knee, and he lived alone. One of the things that my mother did was always do his laundry. And we would go, as children, we would walk down there, pick up his laundry, take it home, it would be done, and we would bring it back. It was like, this was us showing love to that man. I think I carried that through my life.

Rich attributed his engagement with others to his sensitivity to the suffering and needs of others. Before retirement, he had served as a policeman, and he worked for a time as the commander of the juvenile division. His multiple exposures to the cases of abuse and suffering deeply hurt him.

Rich and Betsy's teamwork in mission is noteworthy in part because in Betsy's first husband discouraged her from initiating relationships with others. Now, she says, "Rich is my biggest encourager that I have—if you feel led to do something, and you feel that God is leading you, then you step forward and do it."

The most significant factor that hinders Betsy from reaching out to strangers is a fear of rejection. Rich similarly struggled with not wanting to be pushy. It became evident that one reason for this fear is that they viewed their ministry more in terms of cold-calling and personal evangelism as opposed to extending hospitality, building a relationship, and engaging in redemptive conversation over time. Personal evangelism courses had been a significant part of their church's training. In the discussion here, Rich

confessed that he had pushed out to engage in cold-calling largely out of guilt. At the same time, he confessed his discouragement with the results from his meager efforts. He shared this great insight: “When you are motivated by guilt, people can sense it, when the palms of your hands are sweaty and you’re shaking, that you’re really not telling it out of the right motivation.”

What would Dan and Melissa, who demonstrate that they are “all in” with a ministry of hospitality and redemptive conversation in their neighborhood, say are the most substantial factors that equip or encourage them for this ministry?

Melissa: I don’t know, I think a lot of it kind of comes naturally to us.

Tim: Because of the heart for it, maybe?

Melissa: The heart for it. We owned a catering business for ten years, we always catered to people, per se.

Tim: You could throw food together.

Dan: A lot.

Melissa: Yeah, and we enjoy entertaining, we enjoy having people over, and fellowshiping.

Tim: And so, it is a gift of hospitality perhaps in your case.

Dan affirmed that indeed hospitality is a gift for them and explained further that they had carefully sought God’s particular mission for them:

I think that in the body, what we do is, we spent time fasting and praying about—God, what do you want us to do? And now that we look back eighteen years later, and we see how God has trained us, and how He has placed us with certain people, it had everything to do with what we are doing today. You know, just be sensitive to what God is trying to draw out of us as far as the gifts and talents that He put in us. Because a lot of times, you see people in the body of Christ, and they are trying to do something because they think it is a glorious position, but it is not what God has called them to do, and they are all frustrated.

Later, when I asked about the factors that influence their engagement in redemptive conversation, Melissa affirmed this concern with being sensitive to God's leading: "I think a lot of the times, we just go by the leading of the Holy Spirit, you know, is this the right time to bring this certain subject up?"

Dan and Melissa are bound together in their ministry as a team, and since Dan is a "ready to rock" go-getter, "she is always reeling me back in." When Melissa pulls the reins back on Dan, it is usually out of concern to maintain a balance with the proper care and nurture of their sons. In spite of Melissa's care for Dan and family, Dan admitted:

I get burned out. There was a day a couple of weeks ago where I just wept for two or three days on my way to work because I was just like, you just get hurt. I mean, you see kids making bad decisions that you have to endure. I've had a neighbor tell me, why are you having those people over? I can't put up with this anymore. And the thing is, I got kind of angry towards him. But then I look at the Word, and he's not saved, so he's a part of what I'm trying to do. So I had to really humble myself and talk to him and just love him, and try to minister to him on his level, and just apologize because he's not saved, he's an unbeliever.

While Arlene's work as a community nurse enables her to make some connections, she finds that her church is the most difficult place to practice hospitality and redemptive conversation. She has made multiple attempts to converse with and entertain various members of her non-denominational, mostly African American congregation, but it appears that "The people in church seem to not want anybody to know them and when you try to say something, not just a negative, they will set you straight. I don't know if they feel educated or what but I had to go on my way." Arlene is quite open and willing to confess and ask for help with her struggles with sin, but her church family does not want to go that deep. She admits that being single in a congregation where most are married has also served as a barrier.

While Arlene expressed frequent frustration with her efforts toward hospitality and redemptive conversation, she has been on the receiving end of these practices and longs to become like those who have mentored her. She described an especially significant experience for her:

Tim: What about through the years, the friends you've had, maybe from your mother, did you see any examples of hospitality that you could point to and say yes, I learned something there?

Arlene: I've had a lot of people like that. A couple in Chicago—she writes the “Unshackled” program and he is a Bishop and they moved to Indianapolis shortly after I accepted Christ and he was going to school at the Bible college there and the guy I was dating worked with that guy and the guy was telling him things about me because I was changing and so they wanted to meet me but I wasn't trying to meet them. So one day they decided to come to my house and knocked on my door and introduced themselves and they believed from what they heard from him that I was a child of God and God wasn't pleased with my life and I started crying and we became friends.

Tim: And so then you started getting together more often.

Arlene: Well, yeah, they took me in and became like my Ma and Dad and poured their life out on me. Even now they come here and I go there.

Tim: Isn't that great! So that experience with them, does that guide you for wanting to do that for others?

Arlene: Yes—I knew that it wasn't because of who I was that made them do the things they did because I was downright ghetto.

Tim: Arlene uncut.

Arlene: Yeah. They really just took me in and showed me what I needed or even said, this is what you need to do. They just allowed me to become a part of their family—just swept me up. Where they went, I went—even now when I go there, that's the way it is, that relationship continues on. I was like a diamond in the rough and they picked it up and wiped it off and saw that there could be some value and kept polishing it up and here I am.

Tim: Do you see yourself as someone looking for diamonds?

Arlene: Yeah, I wish I was more like them. Even when I go to visit they will have girls from the mission and if they are getting married, with the time they have, she will tell them everything they need to know for how to be a wife and what I see in her I very seldom see in other women. Because she is very unique.

In spite of the fact that I had provided definitions of hospitality and redemptive conversation in terms of one's personal ministry and sought to steer the conversation in those directions, Pete and Laura kept thinking in terms of institutionalized hospitality through programs at their church facility. So, for example, I asked them, "What place does your extending hospitality play in God's mission?" Pete immediately responded:

Well, we refer to our church, which is sitting up on the hillside, as the light in [their suburban community], the light of the world. And we do things at our church to make that light shine for the glory of the Lord. And we have neat programs going on, we have a parents' night out tonight. We just invite the neighborhood people, bring your kids to us, we'll take care of them, you go shopping, go to the movies, take off for dinner, we'll take your kids for three and a half hours, and we'll bring the Word to your kids. Don't forget about that, we are going to do that while you're gone. But, you get a night off. We will take care of them for a night. And, you know, is it a mission effort? Actually, it might be.

When I really pressed them to talk about extending the grace of God through personal hospitality—particularly through their home, they struggled:

Pete: We used to do more. When our kids grew to college age, we used to have a lot of visitors. We just don't get together as much as we used to. But, a few weeks ago, Laura invited a couple over, and they came, and Mom and Dad came, too. Anyway, we got to talking a little bit, and he shared with us the fact that they had been in our church, new in the area, they had been in our church since January and it was August, I guess it was, and we were the first ones that had invited them into our home. It's important to people who haven't got any family.

Laura: I think that's where we are really lacking.

Pete: We realize...

Laura: Not only in our church, in society today. We just don't...

Tim: Yeah, yeah. That's why I'm sitting here.

Laura: Yeah, right. It's like, we don't want to go through the work, and, our house isn't clean enough. That's bad. Real bad.

Tim: Yeah. And what do you think, 'cause I'm going to get to that anyway, so since we're there, let's talk about it. What do you think are often, both in your own lives, but also maybe as you observe in your own church community, are the biggest barriers towards actually doing what just happened a few weeks ago?

Laura: Busy.

Tim: That's a big one.

Laura: Mm-hmm. A huge one.

Pete: I don't have anything to add to that.

Tim: So there are other things that are taking priority in your life.

Pete then again went on to explain that they do participate in a get-to-know-you-around-a-meal type of church program. And in the context of explaining this program, they again noted how everyone was just too busy to get together. It just wasn't a priority for people. As this topic developed, Laura surprised her husband with another reason that they seldom extend hospitality:

Laura: I have a hard time inviting people. I will do the work, but I would like someone to just tell me, so and so is coming to your house.

Pete: What???

Laura: Yeah. Such-and-such a time. Then I'm fine. I'm not a phone person. I do not like to invite people. But, we've done it. We used to do it a lot.

Tim: Yeah. So, the hump for you is just inviting someone.

Laura: Yup.

Tim: Once you're there, you're having a good time.

Laura: Oh, yeah. I think we do a really good job of having fun when we have people over. And I would just like to have somebody call me up and say, you know, I've got so and so coming to your house at such and such a time—that's great.

Tim: And why do you think that hump is there? Because they are going to say no?

Laura: Well, I think it's rejection.

Pete: Or, trying to get a date. It's frustrating.

Laura: Well I'm not worried about that. It's rejection for me. Because I could never sell you anything, because I would say, you really don't want it. So that kind of goes way back to my childhood.

Tim: Okay, that's interesting.

Laura: I don't like it when people say no to me.

Tim: Okay. And so, when your son started taking folks home and they kind of forced you into it, you just started to go with it.

Laura: Yes. And loved it.

Pete and Laura revealed a number of barriers toward their practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation. It appears that they had embraced these practices earlier in life but they were no longer a priority. Pete and Laura were not sufficiently motivated to push through barriers such as fear of rejection, and they were gladly relegating such work to programs performed by their church.

Bob and Macy's interview revealed that they are both moving at a crazy pace in an unknown direction. They both struggled to express what God's mission might be for them, and hospitality and redemptive conversation are not a part of their life. When it comes to conversation that might lead to "religion" or sharing the Word, Bob explained, "I kind of tend to leave people alone on that kind of area." Macy said she likes to help and so her mission could be helping people.

The discussion revealed that a number of factors prevent them from engaging in hospitality and redemptive conversation. Bob and Macy are both self-professed introverts. But, much more significantly, they simply did not have a compelling grasp of the gospel or God, nor had they been taught about being engaged in God's redemptive mission that would include these love practices. They indicated that their church had held meetings to discuss the need to reach out more and develop more relationships among the

members. Macy suggested that they should participate: “I really should be doing that, but I don’t have the time. I know this would be great. But again, it comes down to that time thing, I feel crunched.” She explained that she works “a good eighty hours per week.” Their home’s order and cleanliness served to affirm Bob’s confession that he is a perfectionist and struggles to have anyone over unless all looks good.

Data Relating to Church Equipping

The third line of questioning revolved around understanding how the interviewees’ churches had equipped them for hospitality and redemptive conversation through teaching, preaching, and training. The questions and guidance of the interviews focused on their past or current experiences for equipping in these areas and how their pastors or church leadership could perhaps better equip or provide resources. The discussion around this topic of the church’s equipping work was consistently much briefer than the discussion around the other topics because hospitality and redemptive conversation are not a significant part of the teaching or training of most churches. There was often not much to talk about here.

Ned had served as the Minister of Congregational Life of the PCA church to which he and Mary had belonged for forty years, so equipping in the areas of hospitality and redemptive conversation was a passion for him. Ned and Mary participated in church-hosted seminars and retreats that focused on listening and building bridges with people. But Ned expressed his frustration with leading people to embrace the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation:

Tim: Would you say your church focuses on hospitality as a significant means of ministry? Is it communicated consistently that hospitality is important?

Ned: I think that sadly, it is not communicated enough. It seems to be just assumed. There are salt shaker dinners and other programs or events but it is not modeled from the top down. But a lot of people are just takers and not givers. And you have to realize that that is where it is going to be.

Both Ned and Mary observed that modeling seemed to be the most effective means of equipping. But, while their church made it a significant part of a leader's or elder's job description and provided formal training, only some of those leaders were ultimately effective. Ned explained:

Our congregation is divided up into many different folds and each fold has ten to twelve families and the leaders and [their wives] of each fold are trained and encouraged to be hospitable leaders who engage in redemptive conversation. And some people really gravitate to that and find it meaningful and others find it threatening. I would love to see everybody really catch on to that but it doesn't happen. And so some folds are cared for and other folds just don't have these kinds of things happen.

Mary and Ned both gave examples of how modeling, either by them or through other families, has especially borne some fruit:

Tim: How has [your] church been a part of equipping you for what you do—the underlying beliefs and practice? And with your position for fourteen years as Minister of Congregational Life, you were a part of that equipping, right?

Mary: I see that in our children because one of them is in social work and the other one is in the pastoral ministry and as time has gone on, they were raised in [our] church, they saw a lot of people come through our home here. They saw some really hurting people that we were able to reach out to as a family and they saw some really fun people that cared about them. And so now, in the Church they both feel comfortable with, a lot of the families, because they have been cared for all these years, and in our family, and they were a part of discussing afterwards what some of the dynamics in the relationship were or what the struggle was. We talked about how we can be helpful or what God was doing in their lives. And so I think it was what helped Lori to be prepared for social work.

Ned: It's also, as I look back, when we were first married, the people that modeled this to us had us over for dinner. I think of the Smiths for example—these are families that had children of their own but they fixed extra food and said come on over let's have dinner together and so we became trained in a way to see how meaningful and welcoming that felt to how caring it was—so that modeling is one thing. You learn also when you're going through a marriage encounter, you learn some thought-provoking questions that you can ask someone. We are not

people who like to talk about surface things. We want to talk about where people are in their lives. We ask things like, how can we pray for you or, we enjoy praying, give us something that we can pray for you. And everyone has a burden to share that we can pray for. And then we try to follow up with a note or ask them a question about a week later to follow up.

Ned and Mary have worked to encourage and train others. But there are often barriers that are not crossed. Ned revealed some of these substantial barriers:

In our church we need more of the leaders to be involved in redemptive conversation and hospitality and it appears in our church as though many of our leaders are caught up in this fast-paced life—they have children—sometimes young children—and they are not able to have the discretionary time to do some of these things because it does become time-consuming. I have taught it, I have modeled it, Mary and I have gone to many different steps and some people see it and some don't, but they don't have that gift of hospitality.

Ken and Katie joined their church in Grand Rapids about a year after relocating from San Diego, California, and they were warmly received through the hospitality and redemptive conversation of various church members. Their interview reveals the successes that they observe and the challenges that need to be addressed:

Tim: I want to get at how does your current church—leaders, pastor, etc., equip you for hospitality and redemptive conversation and how can they do it better—both theologically or spiritually and practically? How does it happen now and how can they do it better?

Ken: As it relates to preparedness, I think that our pastor preaches on it regularly which is important and helpful. I think practically, the church is set up for good interactions and opportunities within the congregation for people to spend time in fellowship and also I am aware of other programs such as Secret Sister, retreats, and small groups aimed at hospitality and redemptive conversation. Where I see a disconnect is sort of external to the congregation recognizing the existence of [the church's non-profit organization focused on the neighboring urban community] addressing that. Their efforts are aimed externally but there is no bridge for moving from inside the church to outside the church. And I don't know what that would look like. It seems that the people participating in [the non-profit] are generally doing hospitality well. In light of that, I would see that as an area of need to develop that further.

Tim: What about the practical side? How can you be helped with the practical side of hospitality or redemptive conversation? How can you be helped with the practical?

Ken: I would be helped by some kind of a mentor program. For example, on Sunday, when Jack, the alcoholic, disrupted the service, it really helped me to see [the pastor] respond to that. It would be helpful for me to observe and debrief with someone who knows what they are doing. Demonstration would be helpful. And I think that potentially, small groups are a good medium for that if they are focused on hospitality and redemptive conversation. But I don't get the sense that everyone uses the small groups in a missional way.

Tim: In order to act out in hospitality and redemptive conversation, your theology and understanding of God and Scripture is pretty significant. What's important for you to get in terms of preaching and teaching?

Katie: I think that the emphasis on hospitality is really important. Because I feel like that's where a lot of direction comes from. In our last church, there was such a push on planting that there was hardly anything given to what hospitality was. And so I appreciate hearing about hospitality—I don't feel that it is talked about enough. I feel that one of the traditional Christian traits of loving people is being nice and giving them what they want. I don't think that there's a lot of discussion and examples of loving people by giving them what they really need and learning what they really need through a deep relationship. I think that hospitality needs to be normalized in our theology. Because that definitely has been a revelation for me.

The life experiences of Ken and Katie, which include being on the receiving end of hospitality and redemptive conversation, their passion for and delight in the gospel, and their understanding of the need to connect the theology and the practice, have led them to be actively involved in these love practices. They work in their church to model and provide leadership for others. Their church's unusual focus on both the theology and practice relating to hospitality and redemptive conversation has been significant for their ministry, yet both Ken and Katie suggest that it is important to develop more focus, teaching, and equipping.

Don and Sarah's OPC church has developed and strongly encourages participation in Christian Education classes for all ages. The classes have included the Contagious Christian seminar, and the church recently hosted a family camp weekend that focused on fellowship. Their leadership recently shifted some focus to developing

relationships within the body through small groups. and they have a ministry team that directs its efforts toward following up with visitors. But there is not much emphasis on extending self to the stranger or to those in need who are outside of the church family or worship service. The church's primary time for doing the "work" of fellowship is after their morning worship service. But even then, Don observes that it is often inward-focused:

I know there are a lot of conversations where people are sharing their struggles. And there is a lot of sort of interpersonal counseling that goes on and things like that in a good Christian sense. But it seems like without any real impetus to do something else, sort of the default or drift, is that people are just sort of forming their own cliques or things like that.

Their pastor's preaching will occasionally refer to the need to extend hospitality, but Don and Sarah could not recall sermons or teaching that specifically addressed hospitality or redemptive conversation. As noted earlier, Don and Sarah have a wonderful grasp of the gospel and God. But their church leadership does not teach, equip, or encourage its members toward extending love and grace through the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation.

As Rich and Betsy are part of the leadership of a new church plant, their highest priority for making progress toward the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation is the location of a pastor. Their greatest concern in finding a pastor is to get the spiritual leadership and training that they need. They also noted that a significant factor for the effectiveness of the pastor in providing leadership and training will be his own example, especially in the context of the congregation.

Since their church is in its infancy and they lack a pastoral leader, they lack any organization for effective equipping at this time. When asked about their experience with training specifically related to redemptive conversation, they found Contagious

Christianity to be a very helpful tool. Betsy's observation about this course was that she learned that "you need to talk to people in a loving way, and bring God into that."

Dan and Melissa attend a large charismatic/nondenominational church where many people participate in home care groups that revolve around special interests such as fishing, bowling and other themes or interests. They meet in homes and enjoy meals together in order to build relationships within the body. Otherwise, the teaching or equipping that seems to be most effective for Dan and Melissa is the focus on the gospel and the life of Jesus. These teachings are significant for empowering and motivating Dan and Melissa to go "all in" with their neighborhood ministry of hospitality. Dan more than once talked about how the Scriptures work to keep him focused on humbly serving difficult and needy sinners.

Dan also noted that there were two significant factors for the effectiveness of their pastors in leading and equipping him:

Dan: Number one, if all you are saying is, do as I say, not as I do, you know, for example our pastor knew his neighbors, and he was very hospitable. So for me, when he would tell us, we need to reach people outside these four walls, he was doing it. It's like when you are a little kid and the parents say don't drink, but he's sipping on a beer all the time. Hey, it don't work. You know, but if the little kid sees dad saying no, I don't drink, and he is setting the example. Knowing that the pastor can't do everything, you know what I mean, and there are so many different ministries and so many things to do in the church. But with hospitality, if the pastor is telling people look, we have this available, but he's not hospitable, more than likely they are not going to be hospitable, because people put pastors on a pedestal...

The second thing is, when I was going up, the pastors that I had...when I looked at them, and I would just spill my guts out. I would say look, what do I need to do here. I respected that they told me what I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear. And half the time to sixty percent of the time, what they had to say to me made me mad. I had a pastor look at me and say to me—you need to learn how to love people. You are off. You are religious. You are like the people that Jesus used to rebuke. That's not what I wanted to hear, because...

Tim: I would guess not.

Dan: But the thing is, he took a chance on losing me, because he loved me enough. He did come back and say now, Dan, these are your strong points. He didn't just call me. But the thing is, he loved me enough to tell me what I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear. And especially now, I'm 41 years old, I have been saved for eighteen years, I have been through an internship, and I crave men in my life that will tell me what I need to hear, not what I want to hear. Because I don't want to be stroked anymore. I'm not twenty-something years old, I don't have all the time I used to have. So I think the two things, number one, the pastor's going to walk it; number two, the pastor's got to love me enough to tell me what I need to hear, not what I want to hear.

Gospel teaching, modeling and accountability by the pastoral leadership were most important for Dan as he provides leadership for his family and their ministry.

Arlene struggled to describe how her non-denominational church or its leadership provides equipping for the congregation.

Tim: What do you think that your church or the leaders in your church can do to better equip you for hospitality and redemptive conversation?

Arlene: I don't know. I do believe that the Word is being preached, but I think, it might be me. It doesn't have the power to help people. The Word is there, but it's lost its sting.

Arlene is committed to her church even while she is certain that the teaching and equipping is not working to motivate or empower the people for pushing out toward strangers or those in need. She described a church culture where people are unwilling to open themselves up to change or accountability and was at a loss to make suggestions for change.

Pete and Laura are long-time members of a larger Christian Reformed Church in an upper-class suburb. The church is prospering by many of the common measurements, but Pete explained that their pastor, who has been with them just over a year, anticipates providing leadership that will significantly equip and push them out into their communities. Pete is serving as an elder, and as a leadership team, they have discussed how they anticipate that the transition toward becoming welcoming and outward-focused

will not come without some pain and sacrifice. Pete and Laura discussed how people will have to learn how to open themselves up to each other and share their stories, but they did not provide any other specifics for how they would look for their pastor and leadership to better equip them for hospitality and redemptive conversation.

When Bob and Macy were asked about what their pastor or leadership could do to better equip them for hospitality and redemptive conversation, Macy responded because she had recently participated in an evaluation of her pastor. Her greatest concern at that time was the need for the pastor to empower leadership. Equipping the congregation is a need that has been recently identified. She also explained that the pastor does not talk much about reaching out to non-Christians, but they have recently begun to push toward some institutional efforts to meet needs in their community. Bob and Macy do not understand the requirement for Christ-centered or grace-empowering preaching and teaching, and based on their discussion, these things are not considerations of this Lutheran congregation.

Three Themes That Emerge From the Data

In light of all the data that has been collated here relating to beliefs, external factors, and church equipping, there are three themes that emerge and can be summarized with some alliteration: embrace (of the gospel), example, and engagement. The data revealed that when the interviewees embraced the gospel, were taught by example, and encouraged toward and by engagement (in hospitality and redemptive conversation); the daily resistance and barriers toward faithful practice were often overcome. Many of the external factors or barriers noted in the review of literature reappeared in the interview data. Busyness, introversion, self-concern, lack of energy, pride, and many other

concerns were raised. But, the combination of embrace, example, and engagement often worked to overcome the excuses relating to external and internal resistance.

The data revealed that there was just no substitute for an active embrace of the gospel. Ned and Mary, Ken and Katie, Don and Sarah, and Dan and Melissa all gave voice to a significant embrace of the wonder of the gospel. Dan and Melissa, who had essentially given over their life and family to a mission of hospitality in their neighborhood, repeatedly described how they were responding to what they knew, every day, of the love, welcome, and sacrifice of Christ. Ken and Katie both confessed their struggle to maintain a consistent focus on and energy for hospitality and redemptive conversation, and they noted that it coincided with their lack of delight in or embrace of the gospel. Ned and Mary committed themselves to a life-long mission of hospitality, and Ned explained that “we have been blessed beyond what we deserve through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It’s kind of like if you found the cure for cancer...you’re going to share it...that is what motivates me.”

On the other hand, Bob and Macy, who could not describe their life’s purpose or mission, particularly relating to God, also could not provide a definition of the gospel. Bob confessed his perfectionism and commitment to “leave people alone” when it comes to religion or God. Years ago, Pete and Laura extended hospitality, but it had now virtually disappeared from their ministry life. They both confessed that their priorities had changed, and Laura admitted that she struggled with both pride and a fear of rejection. At the same time, Pete and Laura struggled to demonstrate or explain how the gospel was impacting them. In contrast, Dan and Melissa told several recent stories that demonstrated little or no self-concern or fear of rejection.

One of the most significant factors that kept believers from hospitality and redemptive conversation might be summarized as self concern. Several of the interviewees confessed that they were hindered from inviting and engaging the stranger because of pride (and thus a concern that others would see their unkempt home), a fear of rejection, or perfectionism. A grasp of the gospel, when it is rightly taught, preached, applied, and counseled into hearts and lives, can often address these self concerns. A solid sense of one's identity in Christ can overcome the pride, fear of rejection, and perfectionism.

The interviews revealed a wide range of beliefs relating to God and the gospel that formed each person's unique worldview and theology. But when sorting through the stated beliefs, opinions, feelings, and knowledge, it became evident that a full, relentless refreshing in the gospel was hugely significant for a full, sacrificial engagement in hospitality and redemptive conversation.

A second theme that emerged from the data was the importance of modeling, mentoring, or learning through example. The significance of example or modeling was revealed in two ways. When the interviewees were asked about the factors that were most significant for leading them to engage in hospitality and redemptive conversation, they consistently noted examples such as parents or friends, even going back to childhood. When asked about what their church could do to better equip them for these practices, interviewees suggested the importance of mentors.

When one or both parents demonstrated the methods and joy of serving and caring for others through hospitality, the data revealed that there was a much greater inclination to engage in similar ways. For some interviewees, friends or roommates had

modeled and awakened them to the ministry and joy of hospitality. Betsy recalled some beautiful stories of how her mother extended hospitality to neighbors in need. But it was not until her second marriage that she really began to extend herself because, in contrast to her first husband, her current husband now encourages her to reach out to others. The interviews revealed that each of the couples that were actively engaging in hospitality worked together as a team.

When asked about how their church could better equip them, interviewees expressed in both negative and positive ways the importance of having examples or mentors. Arlene noted that she struggled to engage because neither her church family members nor the church leaders were providing any significant example for hospitality. Ned and Mary, in spite of their own significant efforts to provide their church with leadership in the areas of hospitality and redemptive conversation, expressed some frustration with leaders who did not give these practices a place or priority in their lives.

In a positive way, Ned, who had worked as their church's Minister of Congregational Life for fourteen years, expressed his conviction that leaders need to lead the way with these love practices. His church worked to implement mentoring through their leaders by having their church family divided "into many different folds, and each fold has ten to twelve families and the leaders [and their wife] of each fold are trained and encouraged to be hospitable leaders who engage in redemptive conversation." Ken and Katie, because of the way that they were genuinely welcomed into their church family through multiple invitations and meaningful conversations over meals, were committed to be a part of extending the same kind of ministry to others. Ken suggested that a mentor program would be important for the equipping work of the church and

noted how the pastor's demonstration of love and his interactions with those on the fringe was especially helpful for him.

The third theme that emerges from the data is the need for engagement in the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. Some interviewees expressed their joy, and even a surprise in that joy, when someone, somehow, had convinced them to engage, invite, share a meal, and converse. Pete and Laura admitted that their kids, who were now grown and out of the house, were mostly responsible for leading them to open their home to others, and when they did, they loved it. But, now, without the prodding of their children, their ministry of hospitality had faded away. In spite of their commitment to open their home to those in need, Sarah often needed to prod Don, the self-confessed introvert, to step out. However, Don reported that he was always glad to be engaged once their ministry was underway.

The interview findings revealed that unique personality characteristics clearly play a role, both positive and negative, in our choosing to engage in these practices of love. Some subjects were introverts and needed more effort, energy, and an intentional pushing out in order to be faithful in these love practices. The extroverts, actually getting some energy from being with people, would be more inclined to engage in hospitality and redemptive conversation. At the same time, the extroverts could race up the hill to the point of exhaustion and have to back away for a time. Again, however, both the introverts and tired extroverts often expressed a joy after just taking a step out toward others.

The spiritual gift of hospitality also surfaced as a factor in the findings. A few of the interviewees were clearly inclined toward engaging, serving, and meeting the needs

of others because they had the spiritual gift of hospitality. Doors, homes, and hearts were often wide open when both spouses were extroverts and exhibited the gift of hospitality.

More significantly, the interviewees who were engaging in hospitality and redemptive conversation shared encouraging stories about what God had done through their efforts. Dan told stories of disappointment and dead-ends, but these struggles were overwhelmed by the stories of joy where God worked through their efforts to bring about transformation, both in those whom they had loved and in their own hearts. Dan understood how God works through hospitality to reveal our own hearts and our own needs. Dan and Melissa realized and delighted in how their ministry efforts could represent and serve as a much-needed picture of God's patient efforts with them. In a similar way, in the context of redemptive conversation, Ned conveyed how the conversations of some will often be one-sided and irritatingly turn toward self. During these times, Ned said that he had learned to rely on his identity in Christ.

Faithful engagement in the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation yields rewards that work to perpetuate faithful engagement. Mary rejoiced in how their two children, after engaging in these practices as a family through their years of growing up, had now begun their own homes and careers that often revolve around hospitality and care for those in need. Ken and Katie, after being generously welcomed and loved in their new church, are on a mission to communicate the gospel through their hospitality and redemptive conversation.

Summary

This chapter has provided a report of the data collected from the fifteen interviewees regarding beliefs, external factors and church equipping. Through this

report, some common patterns and themes have emerged. The next chapter will provide a discussion and summary of the findings and make recommendations for further research and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The review of literature in chapter two presented a solid foundation of biblical and historical evidence for the vital importance of the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. The Father gathers people to himself when his children display his welcoming heart through the faithful exercise of hospitality and redemptive conversation. But, the review of literature also demonstrated that these practices are waning. There are multiple beliefs and factors that make these practices of love increasingly rare. Various works of literature were also referenced to illustrate some of the most significant issues and challenges for the church today. Literature and resources for equipping the church for hospitality and redemptive conversation were also reviewed and found to be in short supply.

Chapter three described the methodology for interviewing seven couples and one single person who were believers that actively participated in the life of their church. Chapter four reported the findings and collated the most significant data that was gathered from the interviews. This chapter will discuss the study and findings in light of the literature review and interview data and make recommendations for further research related to the purpose of this study.

Summary of the Study

This study was intended to provide insight for the church and its leaders as they seek to equip believers for the practice of love as it was modeled by Christ and taught in

Scripture. How can the church best address the beliefs and other factors that influence how we practice hospitality and redemptive conversation?

In the course of studying the relevant literature and analyzing the interview data, a focus on three subject areas proved to be most helpful. First, with the understanding that theology significantly influences practice (because we are transformed by the renewing of our minds), it was evident that some inquiry into beliefs and how they influence our practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation would be essential. Second, while our renewed minds may be inclined one way, there are always various factors that influence our behavior in another way. The literature review and the interviews worked together to examine both positive and formidable factors. Third, in light of what is learned about essential beliefs and the factors that encourage or hinder our practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation, how can the church best address the challenge of equipping believers for obedience, faithfulness and glory to our Lord?

Analysis Relating to Beliefs

The literature review documented some of the biblical and historical evidence for the indispensability of the gospel indicative for engaging in the rightly-motivated and sacrificial work of hospitality and redemptive conversation. The Apostle Paul explained his counter-cultural, sometimes seemingly bizarre behavior by writing, “Christ’s love compels us.”³⁰⁰ The interview data has affirmed the indispensability of our theology, grasp, and embrace of the gospel, or the compelling power of Christ’s love for propelling us into the counter-cultural work of hospitality and redemptive conversation.

Everyone has an assortment of beliefs, experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge that make up their worldview, and these things in turn guide their actions and

³⁰⁰ 2 Cor. 5:14.

activities. But a compelling grasp of the gospel is a non-negotiable element that serves both as a model and a motivating force for our faithful incarnation or re-enactment of the gospel through hospitality and redemptive conversation. A compelling vision of the kingdom and a grasp of the gospel have the power to trump or overwhelm barriers that are both real and imagined. Couples or families who could be tempted to distraction with their abundant resources, or those who could be tempted to merely focus on survival because they have extremely limited resources and space, are instead pouring themselves out for the sake of those who are strangers or in need. On the other hand, it became apparent that without a kingdom vision and gospel grasp, believers, regardless of their resources and time constraints, will wander aimlessly and consume themselves with activities that revolve around self, family, and the same old friends.

This study also revealed that there are a number of beliefs or opinions that motivate people to support or participate in various kinds of formal church programs/ministries that do not require personal involvement. For example, Pete and Laura did not think in terms of personally incarnating the love and welcome of Christ and believed their church facility to be the place where they make their light shine for the glory of God. The result was that the personal hospitality ministry that they had enjoyed earlier in life had withered, and they were now content to trumpet the parents' night out ministry held in the church's gym.

This study has shown how rightly-motivated hospitality and redemptive conversation can yield amazing rewards for the giver as well as the receiver. But it also requires tough, sacrificial work that demands a relentless refueling of a gospel grasp. Some people had never received their first dose of kingdom vision and gospel grasp.

Some soaked it in for a season of perhaps years before the tank ran dry. Others, like Ken, who was wonderfully driven by a kingdom vision and gospel grasp, confessed an ebb and flow where, as God's grace for him slips out of view, so does his energy and vision for pursuing and extending grace to others.

The implications of this non-negotiable right thinking and right motivation are enormous for the church today. Very often, church leaders serve like cheerleaders and managers who, as some of my peers have noted, work to bring freshness and energy, especially into worship, in order to build up a momentum of programs and activities. These programs have their own reward because you are comfortable with your friends, accomplishing something, and few hearts need to ever be exposed or changed. On the other hand, there is this Christian hospitality and redemptive conversation. These are love practices that are personal, inconvenient, involve people who are not friends or are potentially distasteful, make us uncomfortable, expose our impatience and lack of love, burn energy, time, and resources, involve self-sacrifice, may put a strain on the family, and are perhaps even dangerous. Scripture is clear that this is God's prescribed means for putting the self-sacrificing and wide-open arms of Christ on display to the world. History reveals that God changes families, communities, and nations through these kinds of efforts.

So how should the church respond? A number of suggestions that can be made: First, the church must be a relentless refueler for the kingdom vision and a grasp of the gospel. Gospel-centered preaching and teaching are essential for believers to move from paralysis or guilt-driven efforts and into active love and grace-driven efforts. When interviewees were passionate and active in a ministry of hospitality and redemptive

conversation, they were also consistently motivated by a knowledge and experience of the gospel. When interviewees expressed a sense of regret or guilt for not engaging in hospitality and redemptive conversation, they often struggled to give voice to a gospel grasp. And, as Rich confessed, he sensed on occasion that people that he contacted knew that his motivation was guilt and not love. It is sacrificial love that distinguishes us from the world and puts Jesus on display, not the fun activities and not-so-fun compulsory efforts.

Church leaders and pastors need to preach and teach the truth about what God rightly demands from his people and be willing to bless some as they move to another fellowship because it is too difficult. Our call to follow and imitate Jesus in his eating with sinners and tax collectors is not accomplished by signing up to work a soup ladle at the rescue mission. Jesus is a tough act to follow. But, we can follow Him, and the rewards are without measure. Our teaching and preaching, while they will contain the gospel imperative and call us to transformation, must always also include the gospel indicative. We will patiently bend down and serve the stranger in need when we are nurtured with the truth that Jesus relentlessly and patiently bends down to serve us. He left his home to become a rejected stranger so that we, who were aliens deserving rejection, could be welcomed home. There are seminaries, churches, and pastors who practice and equip for this Christ or grace-centered preaching and teaching. However, the interviews affirmed my observations through fourteen years of ministry that even in Reformed circles, this kind of preaching and teaching is exercised by a dismal minority.

Analysis Relating to External Factors

This study has identified a number of factors that work against the faithful practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation. As you might expect, as significant as they may be, individualism and the isolationism of suburbanization were not factors that were identified by the interviewees. Perhaps the most significant negative factor that was most consistently identified by the interviewees was busyness or being overwhelmed with life activities that exceed their limited time and energy. The literature review also referred to the documented loss of opportunities for intimate talking, in large part because of media like e-mail, voice mail, Facebook, and cell phones. This loss surely contributes to a loss of redemptive conversation as well.

Other negative factors or barriers identified by interviewees included introversion, “not my gift,” self-concern, fear of rejection, or a lack of confidence when engaging with strangers. One of the most significant observations that I made from this study is that a kingdom vision and gospel grasp can work to overwhelm and overcome the negative factors that work against our faithful practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation. I observed believers who appeared to have the time, resources, support, and even a good measure of teaching and equipping through many years who floundered without a vision for incarnating the risen, welcoming Christ or a genuine love for the stranger or needy. At the same time, I observed introverted believers with limited time, energy, and resources who, with their family, spent themselves because of their embrace of Christ’s love and mission.

Church leaders can benefit from the multiple resources and studies that address time management, facing the fear of rejection, and a better understanding of our unique

personalities. However, the power that propels us through all of the barriers and excuses can be reduced to Jesus' three times repeated question for Peter: "Do you love me?"³⁰¹ Prior to this moment, Peter had shown himself to be fickle, self-concerned and unreliable. But at that point, Peter had truly affirmed his supreme love for Jesus and thus a reorientation of his priorities and concerns. This meant that Jesus could send him out with confidence on a mission that was certain to be littered with resistance and grief.

Consistent teaching, preaching, and equipping regarding the vital importance of hospitality and redemptive conversation can effectively demonstrate what following or imitating Jesus in his kingdom mission really means. Consistent teaching, preaching, and equipping regarding the hospitality that has been and is being extended to us through the cross can effectively enflame our love for Jesus and lead to a reorientation of our priorities and concerns. The study revealed that regardless of the circumstances, our obedience and faithfulness depend on what we love the most. And what we love the most determines our priorities. The interviewees who received the most significant gospel-based preaching and teaching and were most engaged in hospitality and redemptive conversation consistently stated that they saw a need for their church to step up and increasingly teach and preach regarding these practices.

Analysis Relating to Church Equipping

In light of the conclusions that have been drawn, how can leaders and pastors most effectively equip the church so that it embraces the specific gospel imperative of hospitality and redemptive conversation and so that it embraces the gospel indicative of a Savior who has embodied the ultimate hospitality? As it has been noted here repeatedly, preaching, and teaching are indispensable. This study has also revealed that modeling is

³⁰¹ John 21:15-19.

an indispensable means of equipping believers for their ministry of hospitality and redemptive conversation. The examples held up by parents, pastors, and friends have played a significant role for the believers who participated in this study. It was interesting to note that some had imitated the acts of hospitality and even meaningful conversation that were demonstrated by parents over time. But then, sometime later, after they began to be captured by the wonder of the gospel, these simple acts were transformed and become redemptive acts out of love for Christ. The early modeling of parents, regardless of motivation at the time, had nonetheless provided a pattern that influenced how some opened their home to strangers today.

In light of the biblical basis for modeling³⁰² and the effectiveness of examples observed in this study, there are two implications for the church's equipping work. First, if pastors or leaders are committed to this kingdom vision for hospitality and redemptive conversation, they should not expect commitment and life transformation unless they are leading by example. Pastors and leaders will need to be involved with extending themselves to the stranger and the needy.

Second, it would be wise to identify the individuals and families within a church family who are particularly gifted and already inclined toward hospitality and redemptive conversation. These people need to be turned loose to intentionally model these practices for those who struggle because this will expand the base of those who take up this ministry. This study revealed that sometimes, because there were so many church activities, little time or energy was left for people to engage in what should be a ministry of the highest priority. A pruning of the church calendar could be considered so that focus, time, and energy can be diverted to hospitality and redemptive conversation. When

³⁰² John 13:15.

developing a church calendar, pastors and leaders should see that its members are freed up, equipped for, supported, and encouraged toward these practices of love. This would mean that members are consistently participating in two ways. They will be nurtured well in Christ or grace-centered teaching, preaching, and perhaps small group studies. They will also be focused on acting out the gospel through the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation.

This study has also shown how helpful one spouse can be for another who is less inclined to be either enflamed or engaged. Men's and women's ministries can be effective for training people to be encouragers and nurturers for their spouses. In addition, encouragement among believers in a church family can be extremely effective toward making progress in faith and practice.

Third, this study has shown the vital importance of engaging in the practices or just doing it. The more that people are engaged, the more they see evidences of God's grace and power working through their obedience and sacrifice. Examples, mentoring, and modeling are essential to lead others toward taking a step out. At the same time, the preaching and teaching should include a regular dose of the gospel imperatives for hospitality and redemptive conversation. We have seen how the sacrament of the Lord's Supper can be a wonderful opportunity to put the wide-open, welcoming arms of Jesus or the Banquet Master on display.

Believers should be encouraged toward obedience to the hospitality commands. But, effective preaching and teaching will involve a biblical-theological perspective where people will see that this is about much more than giving some attention to the few repeated commands (among hundreds of other commands) to extend hospitality. Pastors

and teachers will need to show that we engage and welcome others because it reflects the heart of God revealed from the beginnings of Genesis through the eternity of Revelation.

The literature review demonstrated that there is no single resource that encompasses the essential elements that have been outlined above, and few pastors and leaders will put the pieces together from multiple resources to learn and implement God's redemptive plan through these love practices. One of the most effective and practical ways to equip the church may be to develop a book with study materials, or perhaps something like a "Forty Days of Hospitality" program, that incorporates the findings of this study. These resources could include sermons/outlines, study guides, implementation suggestions for modeling/mentoring, and they could orient a leadership and community around the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. Some of the most significant barriers such as self-concern, busyness, and priorities could be addressed in the context of preaching and be reinforced with corresponding small group studies.

Finally, this study has repeatedly affirmed what was stated early in the literature review – that good theology and a compelling vision go hand in hand. All of us are prone to wander and attach ourselves to the new and attractive endeavor of the month. Church leaders and pastors must work to relentlessly refuel and reorient the body with the good theology of a welcoming, sacrificing, serving Savior and a compelling vision of the kingdom. The crucial work of effective equipping can produce a harvest of joy, reward, and blessing that puts our Savior wonderfully on display to a world of strangers who long for the home and fellowship that only God can provide.

Recommendations for Further Research and Practice

This study has focused on understanding and equipping the church in its practices of love through hospitality and redemptive conversation. Because this study was limited in scope, I will now suggest some potential areas of study may be considered for further research.

This study has demonstrated a crucial need for the church to be trained and equipped for embracing the mandate of hospitality and redemptive conversation, and at the same time, embracing the gospel indicative that propels us into this vital work. A review of the literature demonstrated that there are few competent resources that outline the biblical mandate in conjunction with gospel teaching that has breadth and depth. In light of this unmet need, a resource could be developed, taught, and studied to observe the effectiveness for heart and life transformation.

This study has also revealed the vital importance of modeling for these practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation. How effective are leaders or pastors when they teach and preach but do not necessarily manifest or model the imperatives or life transformation that they are trumpeting? In addition to developing competent resources for equipping the church, a further study could consider the influence or effectiveness of modeling when leading a church toward change in hospitality or other areas.

A third possibility for further study could be a study of our conversation or listening skills. How can we move from conversation that is shallow and self-oriented to conversation that is redemptive and has depth? How can we more effectively speak what is true and constructive into a person's life? What place should story-telling play in our redemptive conversations?

A fourth possibility for further study could include a survey or study of churches that have made a transition from an attractional ministry to an incarnational ministry, where the people are focused on being the presence of Christ within their community. Many churches have traditionally worked to attract guests to their worship services or programs. What has been the experience of churches that have moved toward infiltrating the community by eating and working with neighbors and building relationships through which the gospel can travel?

A fifth possibility for further study could include a study of the vision and motivation of pastors, or perhaps the vision and motivation of church members. We have seen that good theology and a compelling vision of the kingdom is essential for biblical hospitality and redemptive conversation. If the gospel imperative, gospel indicative, and kingdom vision are not effectively taught and embraced by believers, what are the common alternatives or adulterations?

Finally, the church could benefit from a study that develops a means to evaluate and nurture leaders and congregations in their efforts to preach and teach with a compelling vision of the kingdom and the gospel that has both breadth and depth. When effective preaching and teaching is identified, the study could work to identify effective sources such as seminaries, mentors, resources, or particular experiences that can be better supported or multiplied.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following interview guide was used when conducting the interviews of believers who were actively participating in their church. I used these questions in a mostly semi-structured way to solicit data regarding their beliefs, the external factors and church equipping relative to hospitality and redemptive conversation. From interview to interview, select questions from each section were used and additional questions were added if discerned to be beneficial for the study.

Beliefs

- How long have you been a Christian?
- What was most instrumental in your conversion?
- How would you describe the heart of the gospel?
- When you think about the way God reveals Himself throughout Scripture what are one or more of your favorite pictures of Him?
- How do you think God feels about you?
- How has God offered you hospitality?
- Can you think of how the gospel or your view of God might affect your relationships with others—particularly those who are strangers?
- Why do you think God commands us to extend hospitality to others?
- How do you stay refreshed or nourished in the gospel?
- What do you think is God's primary mission for your life?
- Who/what makes your heart break with love and compassion?
- What part do you think hospitality should play in your mission to make disciples?

Factors that Encourage/Hinder

- Who were some of your best mentors for loving the stranger and why?
- Was your childhood home a place of welcome and nurturing conversation? If so, what made it that way? What did it look like?
- Describe a time in your life when you experienced hospitality.
- Where did you learn the practices of hospitality and redemptive conversation?
- When your practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation went well, why do you think it went well? What factors were in place for that special time?
- What are the primary factors that prevent you from practicing hospitality and engaging in redemptive conversation?
- Tell me about a time when you extended hospitality and invested yourself into another person. What were some of the results and why?
- How do you think you can better make a place for hospitality in your home and life?
- If you could change several things in your life that would open the door to your practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation, what would those things be?

Ways That Churches Could Better Equip/Assist

- How do your pastor(s), leaders or church equip you for practicing hospitality and redemptive conversation?
- How could your pastor(s), leaders or church better equip you for practicing hospitality and redemptive conversation?
- What kind of resources might be most helpful as you seek to be faithful in practicing hospitality and redemptive conversation?
- What kind of teaching or preaching would encourage you for the practice of hospitality and redemptive conversation?
- What kind of teaching would best give you the skills and information you need to practice hospitality and redemptive conversation?
- How do you think the members in your church can improve their practice of hospitality to those who are not members?
- Does your church have someone who focuses on promoting and equipping members for the practice of hospitality? Would that be helpful for you?

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