

Welcome One Another

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by David Schrock

Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. -- Romans 15:7 --

In the Bible hospitality is no small matter. From Abraham to the Apostles, God called his people to greet one another with love and concern. For instance, in the Old Testament it was more than a cultural faux pas to deny hospitality; it was an indictment against the whole village. Likewise, in the New Testament we find John commending the believers to welcome into their homes those who have gone out for the sake of the name (3 John 8). And Paul makes hospitality (i.e., love for strangers) a necessary part of an elder's qualification (Titus 1:8; 1 Timothy 3:2).

In churches today, the command to welcome one another in the Lord is no less emphatic. While Western Christians live in an upwardly mobile culture, where grocery stores overflow with food, and people typically present themselves as self-sufficient, we know from Scripture (and experience) that weakness and worry---not strength and sufficiency---is our natural condition. Accordingly, to fulfill God's calling to love others, we must make hospitality a priority in the church. After all, Scripture says this glorifies God (Romans 15:7)

If we are going to glorify God in our church, we cannot simply put effort into good music, good preaching, and good Sunday schools; we must also give attention to good hospitality. And such an emphasis goes beyond a team of people with name tags greeting people at the door. For all of us committed to making disciples and sharing the love of Christ, we should feel a happy burden on Sundays to look for others to meet, greet, and take out to eat.

What follows, therefore, are 5 practices to help us as a church love those who gather with us know and experience the love of God.

1. Pray.

No good thing happens apart from prayer. And we should not expect our church to be a warm, welcoming, and winsome church unless we are praying for it. So as you come to Sunday, please pray not only for the message, the music, and the ministries of teaching. Pray for all that goes on in the hallways, at the front door, and behind the welcome desk.

God, grant us a spirit of joy and interest in all who come through our doors. May the weary and heavy-laden find rest in our church, may the lost find their Savior, and may the displaced find a home.

2. Prepare to give yourself away.

We come to church to feed on the Lord's faithfulness, but growing Christians also come to church to serve one another. In truth, this might be as simple as father and mother corralling a quiver-full of squirrely children, but it should also include finding ways to care for others.

Indeed, disciples of Christ must not come to church as ravenous consumers. Fed on Christ's love, we must come to feed others. Therefore, as you come to church this Sunday, prepare to give yourself away. As Jesus said, it is more blessed to give than receive (Acts 20:35). Therefore, let us multiply our joy by seeing others rejoice in the Lord. But to do that, we must prepare our hearts and open our eyes to serve.

3. Keep your eyes open.

The only way we can give ourselves away is if we see others who need a word or a touch. It is too easy to come to church and overlook others. Running late, we can race to our seats and miss the opportunity to meet others in the foyer. Then, when the final "amen" sounds, our empty stomachs can propel our feet to hit the concrete again. Yet, consider how many blessings you miss if you fly in and out of church on auto-pilot?

This Sunday, instead of following well-grooved habits, what if you opened your eyes to all the people you don't (yet) know. Unlike the people on a plane who you may never see again, those who gather Sunday-by-Sunday at church are potential prayer partners, spiritual comforters, and disciples in need of coaching.

Jesus said the fields are white unto the harvest (John 4:35). Nowhere does this apply more than in a Sunday gathering. Indeed, the heavenly food which satisfied Jesus in John 4:32 is found by 'fasting' a bit every Sunday and probing the fields. Who might you be able to encourage? Who do you need to befriend? Who has God given you to be a counselor, consoler, exhorter? We need one another, and that begins by keeping our eyes out for one another.

4. Introduce yourself to others.

Putting words into action, we must not only pray, prepare, and ponder how we might welcome others. We must also do it.

Do you step into conversations, introduce yourself, and welcome others? If not, why not? What would keep you from saying, "Hi, I'm _____. I don't believe we've met yet."

Befriended by God, we are now called to be friends (John 15:14; 3 John 14) and to befriend. To be sure, some may be more comfortable with this than others, but that's not the point. The One Another's are not written for extroverts but disciples. Disciples don't welcome one another in the Lord because they are more comfortable with it. Disciples pursue hospitality because of Christ and for the glory of Christ. Because Christ welcomed us, we have been given the resources and the reason to welcome others.

In fact, greeting is not a calling reserved for the extroverts. Many introverts need other introverts to welcome them at church. The overly-gregarious may feel like a hurricane to the incoming introvert. But the softer-spoken disciple may be the perfect greeter for a more reclusive seeker. In this way, we need extroverted and introverted people to welcome others.

Again, think of the impact. If everyone of us came to church looking to welcome others, we would quickly increase the synapses firing in the body of Christ. What would happen if every church member made it a priority to meet every other member? How might we encourage one

another if we sought to introduce strangers, making them friends. One of my favorite 'hobbies' on Sunday morning is connecting people who share a similar vocations, subdivisions, or seasons of life. Few things are more delightful for me than seeing connections being made between parts of the body. As a pastor, I am burdened to help connect the body. But I pray that we all might enjoy that same experience.

5. Walk someone to their classroom or to their seat, and help collect contact information.

Last (for now), let us go beyond just saying 'Hi!' and shaking hands, let us endeavor to make visitors feel visible and valued.

When I worked at Harris Teeter, they gave us---part-time, summer help---twenty hours of customer service training. Twenty hours to workers who they knew they would soon lose. One of the most important lessons they taught involved was always walking the person to the product and never just pointing and telling. We can learn a lesson here too. When we meet a new visitor, let us walk them to the nursery, the Sunday School class, or a seat in the sanctuary. As late visitors come in, we can do more than just open the door; we can assist them in finding a seat in a crowded sanctuary. Or, we can slide over to make space for them. Imagine how valued a person would feel if we did that?

At the same time, if we find that someone is visiting for the first time, it would help them and the whole church if you took them to the visitors desk to get their contact information. It is not a mercenary act of salesmanship to get someone's contact information. If you are convinced that our church will help someone in their walk with Christ, help us get to know them and serve them. At the same time, if you get their information, you can also send a text or an email to encourage them.

Let Us Welcome One Another Unto the Glory of God

Again, these steps require us to have eyes open for others. But with open eyes we become the very hands and feet of Jesus. We are able to console, encourage, and strengthen others through our actions and words. And even more the body of Christ is built up.

Friends, God loves to use people who make themselves available to meet the needs of others. In this way, through intentional hospitality, God is glorified, the church is edified, the needy are cared for, and we are both humbled and encouraged.

To this end may we pray and labor, and participating in God's welcoming committee.

For His Glory and your joy,

Pastor David