

BRIDGING MINISTRY BARRIERS

The POWER of Hospitality is God's divinely designed plan, enabling you to span many of ministry's troubled waters that otherwise seem impassable.

SILHOUETTED AGAINST THE SUNSET, a beautiful bridge is an architectural glory to behold. Yet a bridge is intensely practical. It is carefully designed to enable us to travel between two points that otherwise would be very difficult to reach. Bridges span over great chasms and troubled waters.

Bridging the Gap

So it is with *The POWER of Hospitality*. It is a divinely-designed bridge enabling one person to reach to another under seemingly impossible circumstances. It enables a pastor who has learned to practice it to reach people... even other pastors... over great relational chasms, cultural and denominational barriers, and troubled ministry waters that otherwise frustrate progress in the Kingdom of God. And interestingly, hospitality is at the heart of the gospel.

As I was discussing this fascinating connection between hospitality and the gospel with Erwin Lutzer, pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, he exclaimed, "How could we have missed something so essential to the life of the church for seventeen centuries?" So let me ask you. How have we missed it? Have you missed it? You may have missed more than you realized.

Pastors and Parishioners at Risk

George Barna, in his book, *Virtual America*, revealed astounding statistics:

- Fifty-five percent of all non-Christian Americans believe it is getting harder to make lasting friendships.
- Sixty-two percent of "born-again" Christians claim it is getting hard to make lasting friendships.
- Seventy-three percent of all "evangelical" Christians are finding it difficult to make real friends.

Do we dare put it in print? It seems that the stronger the apparent commitment to scriptural authority, the more severe the problem of our relationships. Conclusion: the more RELIGION, the less RELATIONSHIP. Something is desperately wrong! Do you agree? Divided we stand. Individualism reigns supreme.

On my daily broadcast, *VIEWPOINT*, I interviewed H.B. London, head of pastoral ministries for Focus on the Family. Our focus was "Pastors at Risk." He disclosed that at least 70 percent of pastors in America claim they have NO friends. And pastors' wives feel even more alienated. Whatever happened to Christian community? Are we destined to be strangers in the "Commonwealth of Faith?"

All Strangers Here

The truth is that we are all strangers here on planet Earth. From birth, we are estranged from God (Rom. 3:23; 6:23), “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12). “But now in Christ Jesus,” we “are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Eph. 2:13, 19).

God, through His great heart of hospitality, stretched forth His hand, sending forth His Son to extend an invitation into His eternal home. Hospitality is at the very heart of the gospel. It bridges the eternal gap that frustrates relationship with God. But it also enables us to bridge intractable barriers to human relationships. And these barriers... virtual strangerhood... continually frustrate us as pastors, preventing God’s Kingdom from advancing.

Baffling barriers abound. Yet God has divinely designed the perfect “bridge” to span them - the key that unlocks the door to racial barriers, status barriers, family barriers, marital barriers, misunderstanding barriers, and barriers of tradition, revelation and yes, even denominational barriers. It is *The POWER of Hospitality!* It is for reaching to strangers.

It is little wonder that the Apostle Paul tells us that all who aspire to or function in any oversight of the Body of Christ be first “given to” hospitality and be a “lover” of hospitality (I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:8) Hospitality is essential to all truly effective ministry. So how do you stand in the hospitality department? Are you effective in reaching to virtual “strangers”?

Bridging Denominational Barriers

One of the most daunting dilemmas in any city is how to bridge the chasms that divide us denominationally. And here we must be truly honest.

Regardless of whether we care to admit it, denominations are birthed in and perpetuated by division. The division occurs over keeping either our practices or doctrines pure. There are more than twenty thousand denominations worldwide, more than two thousand in the United States.

Added to denominations are independents, associations and movements, all founded around either doctrine, practice or geography. It should be humbling to realize that if there is only one TRUTH, we cannot **all** be right. This is truly a challenging dilemma if we truly believe we are on the near edge of the Second Coming. Jesus’ prayer will echo to the culmination of history, “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou has sent me” (John 17:21).

We cannot sanctify our differences as God-ordained. That is impossible, since there is only one Truth. That is the problem with the current unity movement even among evangelicals; it borders on idolatry. Neither can we pretend our differences do not matter and drift to embrace many truths. That is the historical nemesis of the ecumenical movement.

What, then, should we do? We must break bread together. Consciously! Intentionally! Personally! We must then trust God to reveal His Truth.

Breaking Bread, Breaking Barriers

Breaking bread is nutritional therapy for the cancer of carnality that creates barriers frustrating genuine relationship. The more frequently persons separated by such barriers intentionalize coming together over a meal, the less the barrier looms as a wall or chasm. Invite a pastor and his wife from another race or denomination to your home for dinner. Do it regularly. Breaking bread will break barriers.

The efficacy of a common meal is multiplied many fold by a holy heart of hospitality. There is no substitute for breaking status barriers, racial barriers or any other barrier, including denominational and ministry barriers. This is not the stuff of organizational meetings, political maneuvering, or ecclesiastical assemblies. This calls for pure and undefiled relationship with another pastor or parishioner who is not of my historical stripe. It calls for reaching to virtual strangers whom I claim to be “my brother in Christ.” If we will purpose to break bread together, we will break many seemingly impassable barriers together.

*“Blessed is he that shall eat bread
in the Kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15).*

City-Church Unity

Across America and around the world there is a clear move of God to see the city-wide church reborn. There is a growing call and increasing desire for unity among pastors. This movement in the twenty-first century is essentially a revival of the practice of the early church.

The Church of the first century was identified not primarily by congregation but by city. Only when pastors and people throughout a city are at one with God in Christ, revealed in their oneness both in faith and fellowship with one another, can Jesus’ *High Priestly Prayer* of John 17 that “they be one” become a reality. Our unity is rooted in truth.

There is no more important or prophetic application of our call to holy hospitality than the cooperative fulfillment of Christ’s Bride to truly become His Body. That will require relationships at a level not yet practiced or experienced among individualistic Americans and their pastors. It will require nothing less than an outpouring of heavenly hospitality on earth, opening our hearts, hands and homes to one another across congregational, racial and denominational lines.

Pastors, given to and loving hospitality, must take the lead. The “Pastor-to-Pastor” plan for building relationships is a proven method that my wife and I have used to help pastors and their wives begin to develop these Kingdom relationships.

Pastor-to-Pastor

This works! Invite 4-6 pastoring couples for dinner to your home. Learn of each other about your life and family. Pray for each other. Don’t puff about your ministry. Dress nice but casual. Rotate homes each month for a year.

After a year, consider pairing couples to invite 2-4 new couples to join you. Begin the process again. It is utterly amazing what can happen. After our very first such evening, one burly pastor leaned over the table and said, “If we had all preached our very best sermon, it wouldn’t have begun to compare to what happened here tonight.” One year later, that pastor’s wife tearfully confessed she had never prayed in public for fear. The spirit of fear was broken in the womb of loving hospitality.

Barriers too numerous to mention will be broken naturally as we purpose to give ourselves to

hospitality. Be the first! Love always requires someone to sacrifice... whether it is time, talent... or treasure.

Reaching Our Inner Cities

The cities of the world are drawing the peoples of the world like a giant magnet. America is no exception. The teeming masses of “faceless” people are exploding, creating relational time bombs of multitudes in a sea of crowded loneliness. Into the vortex of this human maelstrom, Christ calls His Church for such a time as this, the final harvest.

Since our inner cities have baffled church growth and evangelistic experts, perhaps God would honor our simple following of Jesus’ and the apostles’ simple example. It may not be grandiose, it may not report well to nonprofit or denominational constituencies for America’s organizational fund-raising, but the relational connection may be just the heart condition of holy hospitality that would bring hope and healing to our inner cities. And what works in the inner cities will also affect suburbia, for *hospitality reaches people everywhere*.

Just as this article was being written, I received several contacts from a pastor in India whom I had never met. He reported how he read our book, *The POWER of Hospitality*, and was so moved that he translated much of it into the Tamil language so that he could train pastors of 200 house churches that meet monthly for encouragement. We must not despise the day of seemingly small things, nor the Power of Hospitality.

An Investment in Eternity

Relationship is a Kingdom investment. We must pursue the Truth together in building relationships. If we give ourselves to hospitality, opening our hearts and homes to one another, eternity will pay dividends in proportion to the time invested. Are you beginning to catch the vision?

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