

“Without Hospitality, Our Souls Would Wither”¹

“Love them as yourselves,
for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” Leviticus 19:34
“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers:
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Hebrews 13:2

I begin with an assertion, or perhaps better said, the admission, that the global body of Christ is fragmented, not only into long-term identifiable streams of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant, but within those streams, and especially so in Protestantism, where further fragmentation has become seemingly endemic, with smaller and smaller fragments emerging out of endless varieties conflicts of varieties, so much so that it’s hard to imagine just what might staunch the proliferation of fragmentation. This disunity and fragmentation of the church is sociologically describable, but more importantly, it’s a theological problem of the first order.

One Anabaptist approach to this fragmentation, namely, insisting that a divided church has the merit of giving and receiving ‘gifts’ with other ecclesiological traditions, does not recognize adequately the problematic nature of embracing what is frequently called ‘diversity,’ a notion that often goes unexamined, as the practice of such diversity carries on as though its meaning is self-evident, and beyond scrutiny. Instead of celebrating fragmentation, even in the form of denominationalism, I want to assert the essential importance of the unity of the church, understood *not* as a state that results from human effort, but seen and embraced as a gift from God. Central to the embrace of unity and resistance to fragmentation is the ecclesial practice of

¹ Christine D. Pohl, “A Community’s Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities,” in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 125. Pohl is quoting an unnamed host in a Christian community.

hospitality, offered not only by Christians to other Christians, but also to those outside of the Church.

We can see in some instantiations of early Anabaptism the ecclesiological dynamic of separation and subsequent unity of a separated body confirmed and extended, for example, in the work of Menno Simons, who provided influential leadership and significant stability to a movement that experienced persecution and ambiguous development in the late 1520s and 1530s. Simons emphasized separation of the true church not only from the world but also from any part of the church that was not pure. Simons's consistent emphasis in deploying images of the church is on those that highlight separation, as seen in his choice of descriptors such as "chosen of God," "the true believing Christian church, the body and bride of Christ, the ark of the Lord."² Further, Simons rejects any interpretations of parables which might suggest that the church is a 'mixed body.' Says Simons,

...many intermingle with the Christians in a Christian semblance, and place themselves under the Word and its sacraments who in fact are no Christians, but are hypocrites and dissemblers before their God; and these are likened unto the refuse fish which will be cast out by the angels at the day of Christ; unto the foolish virgins who had no oil in their lamps; unto the guest without a wedding garment and unto the chaff, For they pretend that they fear God and seek Christ; they receive baptism and the Lord's Supper and outwardly

² "The true messengers of the Gospel who are one with Christ in spirit, love and life, teach that which is entrusted to them by Christ, namely repentance and the peaceable Gospel of grace which He Himself has received of the Father and taught the world. All who hear, believe, accept and rightly fulfill the same are the church of Christ, the true believing Christian church, the body and bride of Christ, the ark of the Lord, etc... Christ's church consists of the chosen of God, His saints and beloved who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, who are born of God and led by Christ's Spirit, who are in Christ and Christ in them, who hear and believe His word, live in their weakness according to His commandments and in patience and meekness follow in His footsteps, who hate evil and love the good, earnestly desiring to apprehend Christ as they are apprehended of Him. For all who are in Christ are new creatures, flesh of His flesh, bone of His bone and members of His body." See Menno Simons, in *Menno Simons' Life and Writings: A Quadricentennial Tribute 1536-1936*, Harold S. Bender, ed. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1936), 72, 73.

have a good appearance, but do not have faith, repentance, true fear and love of God, Spirit, power, fruit, works and deeds.³

Simons's emphasis on separation from the world and other churches in the name and pursuit of purity of Christ's body as the pure bride of Christ, while deeply influential, has not survived intact in current Anabaptist circles. That is, the hoped-for unity within Anabaptism has given way to multiple divisions in whatever geographical region Anabaptists inhabit, even when migration to this region or that was ostensibly pursued to remain separate from the world.⁴

Resisting Division

God's work in and gift to the church, which gives her unity as an ontological reality, calls for Christians to face the problem (sinful state) of the proliferation of fragmentation. Rather than finding ways to provide warrants or positive rationale for ongoing division, the church at a minimum is called to deliberately reduce acceptable reasons for splitting, and resist further fragmentation over more and more issues which Christians deem as worthy of schism.⁵ The propensity for division stands in need being replaced by a commitment to live in light of God's gracious gift, and thus be committed to the difficult work of sticking together in the face of significant disagreement, along with pursuing the healing of ruptures that have already occurred. Perhaps the most urgent of those commitments is to stay put despite our current fragmented

³ Ibid., 73, 74.

⁴ It's beyond the scope of this essay to trace the migrations of Anabaptists from their origins to many destinations around the globe, and to show the multiple divisions that developed and continue to proliferate through to the present day. See <https://www.astudyofdenominations.com/denominations/anabaptism/> for one of any number of descriptions of the diversity of Anabaptism; see also <https://ecumenism.net/denom/anabaptist.php>. And, take for example, the admittedly partial and oversimplified chart showing only North American Anabaptist group that appears in the back of the *Anabaptist Community Bible*.

⁵ The question of identifying theological warrants for any kind of legitimate church division is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one thinks here of the Confessing Church splitting from the German Church during the Nazi regime as one extreme example. Ephraim Radner has suggested in passing that perhaps the church might need to split over the question of supporting Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) in Canada. See [“Death is part of life, but euthanasia should not be,” Ep. 217 – SoundCloud:”](#)

condition, remaining where we find ourselves as a way of giving witness to hope for realized unity, even while we endure the broken state of the church.⁶ That state of the church, its current condition, is not permanent, as God will reconstitute the church in his time. Therefore,

this means that our task in the meantime is not to separate from one another and try to escape the church's inevitable death and hoped-for resurrection...Just as Israel's faithful remnant was not a replacement for the people as a whole, so neither should today's divided churches congratulate themselves on their theological rightness and use that as a justification for not living in light of God's promised restoration and reunification of the church at the last day. Rather, we should be prepared to suffer the judgement of division together, recognizing that by virtue of our common baptism and shared confession, our fates are inextricable from one another's. The only hope we have of salvation is journeying with Christ into the darkness of exile, judgement and death, and being caught up together with him in the triumph of the resurrection.⁷

The Hospitality of the Unified Church

Here I want to propose (modestly) a central ecclesial practice for a broken church that is nonetheless ontologically unified, namely, the practice of hospitality. A word of caution is in order here; we need to recognize carefully that before we speak of the church as constituted by

⁶ Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 54, 199-214. Radner generates a list of benefits for staying put – I'm less interested in living in light of benefits than his emphasis on living by a logic of faithfulness, a dimension of the discussion that is clearly important to Radner's much larger project.

⁷ Wesley Hill, "When Christians Disagree," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 45, no. 1 (February 2021): 10. Hill is narrating Radner's work in this passage. Regarding remaining in the ruins of the church, see R. R. Reno, *In The Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2002). Reno's impassioned plea for Christians to remaining in the church in which they find themselves lost some of its persuasive power when Reno left his church not long after publishing the book. See my discussion of that book in Paul G. Doerksen, *Take and Read: Reflecting Theologically on Books* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 1–6. I have developed the topic of church unity more fully in Doerksen, "Resisting the Proliferation of Fragmentation: The Unified and Hospitable Body of Christ," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 41:1(Winter 2023): 56-71.

practices, we ought to remember that the church is fundamentally a creature of the Word; this recognition reminds us and keeps intact the asymmetry between divine and human action.⁸ Further, church practices as I'm referring to them here cannot be relegated to churches of one denomination or another, or to churches described as 'high' or 'low.' That is, the unified church is 'higher' than many (high) churches realize; images such as the people of God and new creation "point to a reality which is pre-existent and postexistent, which transcends the boundaries of time and space, of present and future, of life and death. This reality is as high as the Most High God who lives within it and moves through it to accomplish his divine purpose."⁹ The New Testament concept of the church is also 'lower' than any (low) church might believe. "The height of the people of God is accomplished by the depth of his condescension in love for those who are not his people."¹⁰

With these cautions in mind, I make the case for the importance of hospitality as a *human* ecclesial practice that is generated by and grounded in the *divine* gifts of unity and divine hospitality. I am not arguing for some all-encompassing notion of 'inclusivity,' especially of the kind that might be based on some lowest common denominator of either belief or behaviour.¹¹ After all, inclusion is not a value in itself;¹² and inclusion mandated by law or policy cannot guarantee human connection.¹³ Neither is diversity a purpose in itself, especially if the term is

⁸ John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 228.

⁹ Paul Sevier Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Pub. Corp., 2004): 259.

¹⁰ Minear, *Images of the Church*, 259.

¹¹ Ephraim Radner, "The Cost of Communion: A Meditation on Israel and the Divided Church," in *Inhabiting Unity: Theological Perspectives on the Proposed Lutheran- Episcopalian Concordat*, ed. Ephraim Radner and R.R. Reno (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 147, 148.

¹² Rowan Williams, "The Church is not Inclusive," in https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2006/09/welcome_versus_.html

¹³ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 78.

taken to describe a vast array of choices seen as “essentially aesthetic and noncommittal.”¹⁴ Rather, it is important to think *theologically* about inclusion, the meaning of which is not transparently self-evident. Much of what I’ve learned theologically about inclusion comes from the world of disability theology, especially the work of John Swinton and Brian Brock.¹⁵ In *Wondrously Wounded*, Brock includes a section titled “Theologizing Inclusion,” where he makes what appears at first to be a surprising claim, namely, that inclusion language is not traditionally Christian or even biblical. Instead, he argues, “Christian theology offers a politics of *redeemed communion* that displaces the politics of both exclusion *and* inclusion.”¹⁶ The language of inclusion suffers from a deficit, much like models of charity which go no further than giving things to those ‘less fortunate.’ The problem is the conceptualization of a ‘needy them’ whom ‘we’ need to help to become more like ‘us;’ a patronizing stance which can’t get beyond the notion that there is a group of people, ‘us’, who hold the keys to which ‘them’ we’ll include. Even if the circle of inclusion on this model expands, it’s still the group that is ‘us’ which determines who is included. These are different politics than those offered to us by a deep understanding of the nature of the church, the body of Christ. Says Brock, “The politics of the body of Christ arise from an economy of service to one another for mutual upbuilding.”¹⁷

John Swinton urges his readers to think about the importance of the practice of hospitality for the Christian church. He counsels us to push beyond the notion that we should be hospitable to strangers to the point where we recognize that as Christians, there’s a very real sense in which

¹⁴ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 31. Newman also asserts that inclusivity undermines any meaningful distinction between the church and the world, 43.

¹⁵ John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, 1st edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2012). Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 201.

¹⁷ Brock, 203.

we are all strangers in a strange land as we make our way as pilgrims, as aliens in this world (cf. I Peter 1). But recognizing that we are all strangers doesn't remove the importance of hospitality. Rather, it changes things to where we recognize the call to be hospitable as strangers to other strangers. As Swinton puts it, we are "strangers among strangers...the object of extending hospitality to strangers is to stop them from being perceived as strangers, not just offer them welcome."¹⁸

But what does it mean for this hospitality to which I'm referring to be 'radical'? I teach at Canadian Mennonite University, and a commitment to generous hospitality directly connected to radical dialogue is written right into our mission statement:

CMU's self-understanding as a church-related university is grounded in relationships of trust and in commitments to ongoing, open dialogue, and inquiry.

Commitments

From the flow of this mission, four commitments colour the university's work across all of its programs and activities:

1. **Educate for Peace – Justice**
2. **Learn through Thinking and Doing**
3. **Welcome Generous Hospitality... Radical Dialogue**
4. **Model Invitational Community**

Fair enough – the mission statement and the concomitant commitments are after all, grounded in “the story of God's creating and transforming work through Jesus Christ as the heartbeat of the service, leadership, and reconciliation through which CMU students, faculty, graduates, and surrounding community participate in church and society.”¹⁹ It is here, in “the

¹⁸ Swinton, *Dementia*, 277.

¹⁹ See <https://www.cmu.ca/about/cmu/mission-statement>.

story of God’s creating and transforming work through Jesus Christ” that the radical nature of hospitality can be found, not primarily in the human practice, or even the connection to ‘radical dialogue’ as articulated in CMU’s commitments. Rather, God’s hospitality toward all of creation creates the reality within which humans can practice hospitality to each other. “Our hospitality only makes sense in light of God’s prior hospitality toward us: God has come to us in Christ to invite us into his presence so that we might share eternal fellowship with him...it is in the cross, perhaps more than anywhere else that we see the face of the divine host: the true love of God.”²⁰ Put another way, Christian hospitality names our graced participation in the very triune life of God, having been called to a place where our own practices are determined, given shape by God’s abundant giving across time.²¹ That life of God as communion of Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit is the life into which we are called to share, thus making our practice of hospitality a reflection of, or extension of God’s sharing of the love of that triune life with those who are and remain dust. We might say that Christians do not receive God’s hospitality, nor do we practice it in a generic way; rather, we embrace a Gospel-specific notion of hospitality to guide our lives.²²

This ‘Gospel-specific’ understanding is shaped by the biblical text, drawing on foundational accounts in both testaments. For example, Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality toward three strangers at the oaks of Mamre is deeply influential (Gen. 18:1-15); Jesus’s account of the judgment of the nations, divided between the sheep and the goats based on treatment of the

²⁰ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 15, 16.

²¹ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 14, 15.

²² Reinhard Hütter, “Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine,” in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 207, 219, 224. The burden of Hütter’s essay is to show that hospitality and truth are both crucial for the Christian life; the practice of one (hospitality) does not relativize the importance of the other (truth, or doctrine, to use Hütter’s language).

stranger might be seen as perhaps the most important passage for the Christian tradition on this topic. These (and other) narratives are accompanied by many exhortations, “Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home (Romans 12:13); “Welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God’s glory” (Romans 15:7); “Be hospitable to one another without complaining (1 Peter 4:9). Indeed, “love for the stranger echoes throughout the Old and New Testaments.”²³

It's important to notice that the practice of hospitality as exemplified, described, and embedded on biblical accounts is not a straightforward account of clearly demarcated roles of the host as server and guest as stranger/receiver. Rather, we are confronted with an array of roles taken by people who have been first embraced by God’s hospitality. In what can be described as a radical de-centering of the self, instead of clearly articulated roles of host and guest, the tradition of Christian hospitality brings to view the deliberate relativizing of roles, an intermingling of guest and host, acting here as one and there as another.²⁴ This intermingling is seen in the paradigmatic example of Jesus, who is often portrayed as a guest, described as someone who has no place to lay his head (Luke 9:58), as receiving welcome at Simon’s house (Luke 4:38-39), attending a banquet in his honour at Levi the tax collector’s house (Luke 5:27-32), and of course he is a welcome guest at the home of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:8-42). Further, in the encounter between Jesus and his disciples on the Emmaus Road, at their invitation he agrees to stay with them, and when they sit down to eat, he assumes the role of host, taking the bread, blessing and breaking it, and then serving them, at which point they finally recognize

²³ Michelle Hershberger, *A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1999), 35.

²⁴ See Amy Oden, ed. *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 15 and Pohl, “A Community’s Practice of Hospitality,” 123.

him (Luke 24: 29-32).²⁵ So, while Jesus can certainly be understood as a welcoming host, drawing in children, tax collectors, prostitutes, and others, he also “experienced the vulnerability of the homeless infant, the child refugee, the adult with no place to lay his head, the despised convict.”²⁶

Designations of host and guest are further complicated as Christians are called to embrace the role of stranger, a role that remains with us in perpetuity; “as strangers we depend upon hospitality; among strangers, we are called to host...we live hospitably toward every stranger...”²⁷ The role of stranger is also connected to that of pilgrim: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were **strangers** and **pilgrims** on the earth.” (Hebrews 11:13) This nomenclature is also seen in 1 Peter 2:10-12: “...which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy. Dearly beloved, I beseech you as **strangers** and **pilgrims**, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.”

This embrace of the status of stranger as one who also acts as host to other strangers is also celebrated, for example, in the writing of John Chrysostom, who draws on the examples of Paul and Abraham as examples of the stranger who understands that “the whole of virtue is to be a stranger to this world, and a sojourner...(showing) hospitality, brotherly love, mercifulness,

²⁵ Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 101-102.

²⁶ Pohl, *Making Room*, 16, 17.

²⁷ Hershberger, 195. Hershberger is quoting Patrick Kiefert here.

forbearance, contempt for wealth and for present glory, and for all else.”²⁸ A similar framing of the status of a Christian in this world is articulated by Augustine when he encourages us to “acknowledge the duty of hospitality, for by this some have attained unto God. You take in some stranger, whose companion in the way you yourself also are, for we are all strangers.”²⁹

Key to Christian hospitality, then, is to embrace the porousness that exists between the roles of stranger, guest, host, pilgrim, and exile. To see ourselves only in one of those roles in perpetuity is to miss opportunities to participate in hospitality. For example, to see ourselves *only* as strangers is to miss the responsibility of hosting and squander the opportunity to create hospitable environments as an expression of faith.³⁰ However, taking the role of host does not carry with it the right of domination or condescension; indeed, hospitality flourishes when the hosts themselves know what it is to be marginalized.³¹

Central to this practice of embracing a variety of roles as constitutive of Christian hospitality, to knowing when and how to do what, is the church, the body of Christ. God’s hospitality is faithfully received in Christ’s own body, which is larger than us and is marked by God’s triune giving and receiving. “Our place is with the body of Christ, yet this body is on pilgrimage.”³² St. Paul writes about these matters at length in 1 Corinthians 12 in his discussion of the body of Christ, the differing roles of the variant parts, and the gracious gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church. What Paul is saying, clearly, is that all parts of the body need each other. Gifts are characterized by being given graciously; they’re used to serve the whole body and are only gifts when they are being used. They are not something that can be held in storage for the

²⁸ John Chrysostom, “Homily 24 on Hebrews,” in Oden, ed. *And You Welcomed Me*, 42, 43.

²⁹ Augustine, “Sermon 61,” in Oden, ed. *And You Welcomed Me*, 45.

³⁰ Pohl, *Making Room*, 90.

³¹ Pohl, *Making room*, 106. Pohl’s influential book could be described as an attempt to recover the church (and the household), not primarily institutions, as key settings for the practice of Christian hospitality. Pohl, 42, 58.

³² Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 39, 17.

future.³³ The Holy Spirit energizes each part to serve the other parts. And the body of Christ needs the different perspectives and gifts brought by very different people. Brock says that the church Paul is describing “is aware that God is so big and so active that no one of us can grasp what God is doing.”³⁴

So, when we talk about hospitality in the body of Christ, we need to remember that we are not the ones extending a welcome, but it is God’s gracious spaciousness that is the welcome to all of us. Jesus *is in* our midst, and he brings with him, all his friends, with whatever language, social status, bodily health, mental state – with everyone as they are. The church exists not, as Rowan Williams says, because we decided it should; the church exists because God wants it to exist.³⁵ The church, every part of the body of Christ, exists to pray, praise, worship, and witness to God’s announcement of gracious welcome – and where each of us are called to grow in faithfulness. The terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity,’ it seems to me, can’t bear the freight that they are being called to carry. The church, God’s unified body, redeemed by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Spirit, calls us all to be part of that one body even though we are strangers. As strangers and pilgrims, we practice hospitality among strangers, asking ourselves and each other again and again: what message from God is being announced by my fellow stranger? What is God doing in each constitutive member of the body of Christ? Having been welcomed as a stranger by strangers, what kind of transformation, redemption awaits me, awaits all of us as we practice being vulnerable, adjusting our gaze to see the proclamation of others as God see them, and to live patiently in God’s time?

³³ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 125ff.

³⁴ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 128.

³⁵ Williams makes some version of this claim in various places. See, for example, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/12670/rowan-williams-condemns-richard-dawkins-as-bad-philosopher->

If the church is indeed to be the locus for the practice of Christian hospitality, it is crucial that the church strive to embrace oneness; a divided house where we don't share God's hospitality as unified body means that our hospitality in and for the world is in danger of being compromised.³⁶ This lack of oneness is a great danger to the faithful practice of hospitality. A hospitable body of Christ can and should be welcoming even while maintaining appropriate boundaries which can be described as inviting people to display their loyalty to Christ, to be "responsible to God," to say to people that they can come in, but also that such a decision will change all of us; all things in the body of Christ are brought under the scrutiny of Christ.³⁷ That is, the church is distinct from the world, yet truly welcoming.³⁸

To practice Christian hospitality is to participate in the gift granted to us by the triune God. It is also to participate in the practices of the body of Christ, seeking to extend that which has been first given to us. To participate in radical Christian hospitality is therefore, in addition to extending grace to others, an opportunity to mature as Christian disciples; without hospitality, our souls truly would wither, because "...in God's remarkable economy, as we make room for hospitality, more room becomes available to us for life, hope, and grace."³⁹

³⁶ Newman, *Untamed Hospitality*, 147, 148.

³⁷ Williams, "The Church is not Inclusive."

³⁸ Pohl, *Making Room*, 137.

³⁹ Pohl, *Making Room*, xiii.