

## Evangelism and the Practice of Hospitality<sup>1</sup>

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In this essay, I view evangelism in relation to the biblical practice of hospitality. Hospitality is neither equal to evangelism nor simply a means to evangelism; it is a primary context for evangelism, within which an authentic evangelism takes place. Evangelism in the context of hospitality is particularly crucial in the post-Christendom society in which North American and Western European churches find themselves today. In this post-Christian era, the church is no longer in a central position of power and influence, but is rapidly becoming marginal. In his article, “Can the West Be Converted?” Lesslie Newbigin writes that our society is a pagan society. Yet “it is far tougher and more resistant to the Gospel than the pre-Christian paganisms,” since it is “a paganism born out of the rejection of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> As Douglas Hall aptly describes, “It is a society that has some awareness of the enormous gap between Christian theories and Christian practice and that mistrusts easy declarations of salvation.”<sup>3</sup>

Verbal proclamation of the gospel is an essential dimension of evangelism; evangelism is definitely a word event. It is not, however, solely verbal, as demonstrated in Jesus’ incarnation, the paradigmatic event of evangelism, in which the Word became flesh. As Niles claims, “The Christian Gospel is the Word become flesh. This is more than and other than the Word become speech.”<sup>4</sup> As people hunger for evidence of the life of the gospel, the practice of biblical hospitality compellingly embodies the gospel and makes its witness “credible and inviting.”<sup>5</sup> An evangelist is not simply a detached and mechanical communicator. In evangelism, our whole being is to be involved and shared. In the context of hospitality, the gospel becomes vital and visible.

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<sup>2</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?” *The Princeton Seminary Review*, 6 (1985), 36. Newbigin also stresses that “the most aggressive paganism” with which the church has “to engage is the ideology that now controls the ‘developed’ world.” *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), p. 368.

<sup>4</sup> D.T. Niles, *They May Have Life*, (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), xi.

## Hospitality as Context for Evangelism

When we practice hospitality, we intend to enter into fellowship with those whom we welcome. Evangelism practiced in the context of hospitality is not simply the sharing of our knowledge of the gospel, but of our lives redeemed, transformed, and sustained by the grace of God. When the Good News is shared, the lives of the witness and the one invited to Christian faith are also to be shared. In this way, hospitality is more than simply a context for evangelism; it is integral to the gospel. In fact, the whole life of Jesus was that of hospitality, as Pohl suggests: “Jesus gave his life so that persons could be welcomed into the Kingdom.”<sup>6</sup> Koenig puts it this way: “When Paul urges the Romans to ‘welcome one another . . . [just] as Christ has welcomed you’ (15:7), he is revealing something close to the heart of his gospel.”<sup>7</sup>

The driving force for evangelism is felicitously described in 1 John 1:1-4, particularly in verse 3: “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, our motivation for evangelism is based, first, upon our own experience of God’s invitation to eternal life in Christ, out of our gratitude for God’s welcoming of us in Christ to fellowship. Second, our motivation is based upon our desire to invite others into the same welcome of God, into this fellowship, which is not only with God but also with one another. The practice of evangelism in hospitality “both reflects and participates in God’s invitation of welcome to all.”<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, one of the most important questions in evangelism is whether we are willing to share our lives with others and to share in the lives of others.

In Christian hospitality, the ultimate host is Christ. We, as Christians, do not invite unbelievers to the table of our own resources, but to the table of Christ. And to that table “we come as equals.”<sup>10</sup> Niles emphasizes that a Christian is merely a guest at Christ’s table. In the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), p. 11. Koenig also states in his recent study on the missionary dimensions of the church’s eucharistic rituals: “Answering the command to join Christ’s mission becomes possible only when we can savor the eager and compassionate welcome that he extends to each of us personally (Matthew 11:28f.; Romans 15:7ff.)” *The Feast of the World’s Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), p. 220.

<sup>8</sup> Scripture quoted in the essay comes from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>9</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

Christian's role as evangelist, he or she calls others to come to that table."<sup>11</sup> Again and again, we are pointed to the way mission is described in Luke and Acts as – what Koenig names – “spiritual-material welcoming.” Luke carefully seeks to prove “the essential unity between ministries of the word and ministries of the table.”<sup>12</sup> A vivid example is found in Luke 15 where Jesus presents three parables which “are a classic description of what evangelism is.”<sup>13</sup> These are the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Jesus aptly tells these parables of the lost precisely when he is accused of receiving and associating with tax collectors and sinners and having meals with them: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). Here is a significant connection between evangelism and the hospitality of shared meals. Evangelism is to be practiced in the context of the welcome table, which is a sign of acceptance, inclusion, and equality.

Seeking to understand evangelism in relation to biblical hospitality, there are three elements that I deem crucial for evangelism to be authentically practiced: evangelism in hospitality as a boundary-crossing practice; the church as the witnessing and hospitable community; and evangelism in hospitality sustained by spirituality.

### **Evangelism in Hospitality as a Boundary-Crossing Practice**

For evangelism done in the context of hospitality, an intentional and genuine effort to cross significant racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries is an essential and integral part. As Koenig states, “The kingdom breaks in on meals and other occasions of welcoming; or it somehow advances through alliances with strangers.”<sup>14</sup> Hospitality to the stranger, particularly to the marginalized, is then both intrinsic to the gospel and crucial to its proclamation.

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<sup>11</sup> Niles, *They May Have Life*, p. 96. In biblical hospitality, the roles of host and guest are far from being predictable, as well illustrated in the story of Zacchaeus in which Jesus invited him to be his host; host and guest roles are often exchanged or reversed. See Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 121. Stephen Bevans rightly stresses the missionary's role as guest: “It seems to me that if there is one basic attitude that missionaries must cultivate as part of their missionary activity and spirituality, it is this attitude of being a guest.” In “Seeing Mission Through Images,” *Missiology: An International Review*, 19 (1991), 51.

<sup>12</sup> Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Niles, *They May Have Life*, p. 57. According to Robert C. Tannehill, “these parables help to define the character of God and the mission of Jesus.” *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 1: *The Gospel according to Luke* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986), p. 239.

<sup>14</sup> Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, p. 125.

For the early church, hospitality to needy strangers “became one of the distinguishing marks of the authenticity of the Christian gospel,” and “a fundamental expression of the gospel.”<sup>15</sup> The very credibility of our witness to the gospel is at risk when our ministry of evangelism fails to cross boundaries, when it is limited to those who are culturally or racially similar to ourselves. The true nature of the gospel is contradicted when our witness becomes selective and does not reach past racial, ethnic, and other boundaries established by society. But evangelism in the context of hospitality recognizes the equal worth of every person and does not accommodate the gospel to discriminations based upon cultural and socioeconomic differences. Thus, the evangelistic practice of hospitality defies prevailing practices of society and can offer a prophetic witness to the prevailing culture.

At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Most New Testament scholars agree that, in the brief phrase “to bring good news to the poor,” we find Jesus’ own statement of his primary mission. The question then is, “Who are the poor?”

The phrase “the poor” should not be deprived of metaphorical meaning, and thus it should not be limited either to the spiritually poor or to the economically poor. However, as Tannehill points out, it first of all refers to those economically oppressed and poor.<sup>16</sup> Green extends the meaning of “the poor” as to embrace not simply economically oppressed but also “the excluded, and disadvantaged,” all who are on the margins of society and devalued by society.<sup>17</sup> One of the contributions of liberation theology is the rediscovery of “the poor” as a hermeneutical focus, which leads to a new understanding of the Christian gospel and to a legitimate attention to the priority of “the poor” in mission and evangelism. The emphasis of liberation theology upon “the preferential option for the poor” does not imply that God is only interested in the salvation of the poor, but that “the poor are the first, though not the only ones, on which God’s attention focuses and that, therefore, the church has no choice but to demonstrate solidarity with the poor.”<sup>18</sup> It

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<sup>15</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, pp. 33, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, vol. 1, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 1995), p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), p. 436. Gustavo Gutierrez also writes: “The very word ‘preference’ denies all exclusiveness and seeks rather to call

cannot be denied that Jesus particularly demonstrated his solidarity with the poor and made them the principal recipients of the good news. The rediscovery of the poor in theology has had significant implications for mission and evangelism. Considering solidarity with the poor “a central and crucial priority in Christian mission,” Bosch argues that “once we recognize the identification of Jesus with the poor, we cannot any longer consider our own relation to the poor as a social ethics question; it is a gospel question.”<sup>19</sup>

Korean Protestantism has experienced remarkable church growth for the last thirty years. Recently, however, it has been losing the credibility of the gospel it preaches because it has not been on the side of the poor and marginalized and has been rather silent in the face of injustices. It has become too rich to hear the cry of the needy and powerless. In the Korean church, there likely is a strong connection between its experiences of becoming culturally captive and becoming gradually stagnant. If the gospel is to be announced credibly, believers should follow the evangelistic practice of Jesus, paying careful attention to the kind of people with whom he associated throughout his ministry. Then, as Costas stresses, evangelism is “to be undertaken from below . . . from the depth of human suffering, where we find both sinners and victims of sin.”<sup>20</sup>

In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit keeps urging the church to move beyond its boundaries. In fact, in Acts almost every evangelistic endeavor involves the crossing of boundaries. One of the most significant events in Acts is the conversion of Cornelius. It was the first full-blown encounter between a Christian Jew and a Gentile, with significant implications for the future mission and evangelism of the early church. Here the issue is not the legitimacy of a Gentile mission, but how that mission should be carried out in the face of Gentile uncleanness, which prevents Jews’ free association with Gentiles.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the whole incident, hospitality becomes and remains both a pervasive and thorny issue. Thus, in the subsequent episode, when Peter goes up to Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians criticize him for having gone to uncircumcised

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attention to those who are the first—though not the only ones—with whom we should be in solidarity,” *A Theology of Liberation*, 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), xxv-xxvi.

<sup>19</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 437.

<sup>20</sup> Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2: *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), p. 135.

people and having eaten with them (Acts 11:2-3). Here “the inclusion of Gentiles and table-fellowship with Gentiles are inseparably related.”<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that the Cornelius story is about the social barrier to the Gentile mission. For the Jerusalem church to overcome such a barrier, Peter first has to experience a conversion, learning firsthand that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). Peter’s conversion then leads to the conversion of the church from ethnocentrism to multiculturalism. According to Gaventa, “Indeed, in Luke’s account, Peter and company undergo a change that is more wrenching by far than the change experienced by Cornelius.”<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, the church in the twenty-first century is still faced with the same kind of challenge – to overcome its ethnocentrism and homogeneity and to reach people of different races, cultures, and economic classes. No Christian could possibly deny that God’s love is for all, and that God shows no partiality. Yet many Christians and churches still need to have a conversion experience, as Peter and the early church did, so that they can fellowship willingly and joyfully with persons of different cultures, and practice mutual hospitality. For the witness of the gospel, we need intentionally to cross many boundaries established by society and to create relationships with those who are different from us. Any church, which is neither multicultural nor seeks to become so, should carefully examine itself and ask why it has become stuck in a monocultural mode. There is always a danger that the church will pursue “culturally exclusive forms of Christian witness and church formation” that could result in “the pollution of Christian witness with racism, classism, and ethnocentrism.”<sup>24</sup> However, evangelism in the context of hospitality invites believers to go beyond their comfort zone to meet and form a community with people who are different from them, challenging the prevailing patterns of homogeneous human relationships in society.

### **The Church as the Witnessing and Hospitable Community**

Second, for evangelism to be carried out in the context of hospitality, what is critically needed is a Christian community that is evangelistic and, at the same time, demonstrates a life of hospitality within itself. Evangelism should not simply be understood as a program of the church,

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<sup>22</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986), p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church’s Witness* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International), p. 48.

but as integral to its identity and calling. Faithful and effective witnessing to the gospel is based upon the congregation's sense of identity. Only when members of a Christian community understand evangelism or mission in relation to its basic identity, can the biblical sense of evangelism be recovered. In other words, what is required is a radical transformation in its ecclesiology.

Bosch in *Transforming Mission* states, "There is church because there is mission, not vice versa."<sup>25</sup> The church is a missionary community by its very nature and vocation. Hence, mission and evangelism are intrinsic to the very life and calling of the church. The church is called to participate in mission and evangelism not for institutional survival, but for the kind of community it has been created to be. What has to be recovered is "the biblical sense of mission as belonging to the whole disciple community."<sup>26</sup> The evangelistic work should not be considered an individualistic labor only of some who are gifted. It is a ministry committed to the whole people of God; the church as the body has been called to be and live as an evangelizing community.

When the church understands itself as a witnessing community, evangelism cannot be disconnected from the corporate life of the church. This is so because the concrete life of a believing community is an essential expression of the credibility of the gospel to which it bears witness. The life of the church should not invalidate its witness. Evangelism is practicable and feasible only when there is a community whose life reflects authentic differences from the rest of the world. Thus, John H. Yoder says, "There can be no evangelistic call addressed to a person inviting him or her to enter a new kind of fellowship and learning if there is not such a body of persons . . . ."<sup>27</sup> In fact, the very being of the church is a witness. The church as a witnessing community is to live its life as a community of hospitality, a community for which "hospitality is an organizing practice."<sup>28</sup> The authenticity of evangelism is heavily dependent upon the way the believing community lives and practices hospitality.

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<sup>25</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, *Confessing the Faith*, p. 367.

<sup>27</sup> John H. Yoder, "A People in the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 75. Yoder continues: "But this congruence between the free visible existence of the believers' church and the possibility of valid missionary proclamation is not a merely pragmatic or instrumental one. It is found deeply in the nature of the gospel itself. If it is not the case that there are in a given place people of various characters and origins who have been brought together in Jesus Christ, then there is not in that place the new humanity and in that place the gospel is not true."

<sup>28</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 9.

The community of hospitality, above all, should be inclusive. The question is whether our community of faith has a place for strangers within itself, and whether it is willing to be a home for all. Churches willingly provide various social programs and yet remain unwilling to extend community to people of differences – what Charles Van Engen calls “a separation between ‘church’ and ‘mission.’”<sup>29</sup>

There are, however, some churches across the nation that seek to build relationships across racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences, with their biblical visions of a community. In *We Are the Church Together*, Foster and Brelsford carefully examine the life and ministry of the three multicultural congregations in the Atlanta area. Among the distinctive characteristics of these multicultural congregations, two are particularly important. First, there is an emerging ecclesiology different from the one prevailing among homogeneous congregations. The three congregations have endeavored to embrace racial and cultural diversity as integral to their identity as a community of faith, and to draw upon it as a resource for their life and mission. In other words, the “differences have come to be viewed not so much as problems to be overcome but as gifts to be accepted, explored, and affirmed.”<sup>30</sup> Second, they bear a sign of the cross. In living against the persistent and dominant practice of cultural and racial homogeneity, both in congregational life and in society, they cannot avoid facing difficulties. They constantly live in ambiguity and uncertainty. The sense of loss is inevitable, since not every one understands their vision and some long-time members have thus left in search of a more comfortable and familiar congregational setting.

What these churches possess is “a particular sort of faith, . . . a faith without the certainty of uniformity and sameness. It is a faith that does not rely on what is, but lives instead with multiple possibilities and imagines what might be. This is not an easy faith.”<sup>31</sup> These three congregations demonstrate a life of vibrancy in the midst of fragility. One of the pastors often refers to a particular vision from Revelation 7:9-10: “There was a great multitude that no one could count,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 159. Saunders also criticizes the social and spatial arrangements of most congregations in North America: “[They] direct their expressions of solidarity or hospitality primarily at their own membership, or at potential members (usually ‘people like us’). Engagement with poor or homeless people is usually understood as a form of benevolence, that is, as an act of charity rather than an opportunity to build a relationship. Thus, even congregations that provide services and financial support for poor and homeless people tend to resist actually including such persons in their fellowship” (Stanley P. Saunders, and Charles L. Campbell, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000], pp. 161-162).

<sup>30</sup> Charles R. Foster, and Theodore Brelsford, *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 109.



from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" The vision is a constant reminder to the congregation that the church is to bear faithfully the multicultural nature of the kingdom of God.

The call to mission and evangelism is given both to the individual Christian and to the whole community of faith; as such, we should respond to the call both as an individual and as a community. For the church to be a faithful witnessing community, it has to be a community of hospitality itself. As Kirk aptly puts it, evangelism "must proceed from a community that believes in evangelism and it must result in people becoming part of a community that knows how to welcome 'strangers' and make them part of its family."<sup>32</sup>

### **Evangelism in Hospitality Sustained by Spirituality**

The practice of evangelism when carried out in the context of hospitality is, in itself, a spiritual experience and, at the same time, needs to be sustained by spiritual disciplines.<sup>33</sup> Evangelism is not about methods or techniques. It is not simply a task of memorizing and reciting salvation prescriptions. The Christian witness is to be born out of the depths of our being; it is to be an encounter at the deepest level. It thus involves our spirituality more than any other ministries of the church. As Escamilla maintains, "The answer to the crisis in evangelism does not lie in innovative programs, or in just trying harder. The nature of crisis is much deeper – it is spiritual!"<sup>34</sup>

In Acts, the Holy Spirit initiates and guides every evangelistic and mission activity. In fact, the main evangelizing actor is the Holy Spirit, "the great mover and driving power" of the evangelistic witness of the church;<sup>35</sup> we participate in evangelism as co-agents with the Spirit. But what has not been given due attention is the fact that spirituality is missional by its very

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> Saunders writes that "the practices of hospitality . . . blur the boundaries between two disciplines we usually separate, spirituality and mission . . ." *Word on the Street*, p. 166.

<sup>34</sup> Roberto Escamilla, *Come to the Feast: Invitational Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998), p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964), p. 33. According to Newbigin, "The active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free,

nature: “Spirit and speaking therefore belong together.”<sup>36</sup> The Holy Spirit is not simply concerned about our inner spiritual life, but encourages and enables us to speak in witnessing. As Guder rightly states, “witness is an essential form of spirituality: in and through witness to the gospel, the Holy Spirit is experienced as the enabler and encourager.”<sup>37</sup>

It is unfortunate that the practice of evangelism has not been considered as one of the essential spiritual disciplines in the Christian church. I believe that evangelism both deepens our spirituality and is sustained by it. Particularly when the ministry of evangelism is done in the context of hospitality, it touches us at our deepest being: it compels us to examine our own spirituality, our own relationship with God. Our spiritual growth is thus directly linked to our participation in the ministry of evangelistic hospitality. Without faithful involvement in evangelism, “we deny ourselves a unique and compelling form of spiritual growth, a unique and compelling sort of communication with God.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, evangelism is an intrinsic part of our spiritual journey.

If evangelism is an essential form of spirituality, it needs to be nurtured and cultivated. John Wesley’s understanding of God’s prevenient grace, as preceding any conscious human responses to God, encourages us to anticipate the active presence and operation of God in every person. God not only seeks all, but takes the initial step in the human experience of divine grace. If God is already present and active in the life of a person whom we invite to the Christian faith, we definitely need spiritual sensitivity to discern such divine presence and activity and to respond accordingly. As a witness, we are to have a deepened awareness of and sensitivity to the Spirit’s presence and work in our own spiritual journey, so we can help others relate to the Spirit’s presence and work in their lives. We first need the discipline and practice of speaking with God before we speak of God. For us to help others begin their relationship with God, we ourselves have to be in communion with God. Our journey inward through disciplines of prayer, word, and silence nurtures our ability to invite others to the same journey. We need to cultivate and nurture a spirituality that freely and joyfully witnesses.

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sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God”; and “The church’s witness is secondary and derivative. The church is witness insofar as it follows obediently where the Spirit leads,” *Open Secret*, pp. 56, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Berkhof, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas R. Hawkins, *Sharing the Search: A Theology of Christian Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1987), p. 84.

Welcoming strangers and sustaining our commitment to engage in fellowship with them at the deepest level is long, hard work. Doing evangelism in the context of hospitality is quite demanding and exacting. Such witness requires sustaining strength and perseverance, which can flow only from our daily communion with Christ. Pohl writes, “the demands of hospitality can only be met by persons sustained by a strong life of prayer and times of solitude.”<sup>39</sup> Without constant access to spiritual nourishment, human resources will quickly drain. What we need is a spirituality that can sustain our willingness and commitment to carry out the ministry of evangelism in the context of hospitality.

The church should help its members cultivate spiritual resources that enable them to endure and to find sustenance in their work of witnessing. We can draw on powerful resources when “we learn to read scriptures missionally,” that is, “to read scriptures from the basic assumption that they are intended to equip the community for mission.”<sup>40</sup> The church should be a place where such a missional reading of the Bible takes place, helping the members discover and live the call to be a witness. Our commitment to integral evangelism is to be nourished and deepened by our constant encounter with God. Everyday we have to renew our commitment to follow Christ and to be his witnesses in the world. The spirituality of our churches and individual Christians should be missional; at the same time, the ministry of evangelistic hospitality should be nurtured and sustained by our spirituality.

## Conclusion

The multicultural congregation I pastored in Cincinnati has been involved in urban ministry in a racially diverse community since the spring of 1998 through a coffee house and basketball ministries. Since the summer of 1999, it has extended the ministry to Over-the-Rhine, the most drug-ridden and crime-ridden area in Cincinnati (where the riot erupted in April 2001, following the police shooting of an unarmed African-American teen).<sup>41</sup> Every Saturday afternoon, we met and talked with people on the streets of Over-the-Rhine, seeking to communicate the gospel to them. I never drove to Over-the-Rhine without anxiety or apprehension of meeting and talking

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<sup>39</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, p.13.

<sup>40</sup> Guder, *Incarnation and Witness*, p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> I want to express my profound appreciation to the lay members who started the Over-the-Rhine ministry with me and n continue to be involved in it with their faithfulness and commitment to the gospel.

with strangers. Often, I went out of obedience rather than out of willingness; yet, I always returned full of joy and thankfulness, realizing that I was where Jesus had already been at work.

Walking around the sections of Over-the-Rhine, with trash-riddled lots and boarded-up buildings, we often felt overwhelmed by the depth of brokenness and hopelessness among the people, and by the vicious cycle of poverty and despair. In the face of extreme human suffering, the practices of evangelism and social concern, though distinctive, were so closely interrelated that they could hardly be separated. Talking with strangers on the street corners, and trying to build friendships with them, we discovered that a great number of them had already heard the gospel and many once belonged to the church. The good news was not new to them; rather, it had to be proven good and true. Without genuinely caring about them and seeking to serve them as whole persons, that is, without practicing biblical hospitality, we could not communicate God's redeeming love in Christ with credibility. We needed to share our lives with them and to share in their lives. It was extremely challenging, but there was no other way. We came to realize the essential need of hospitality in the ministry of evangelism.

Practicing hospitality is quite difficult and arduous. It involves our whole being, not just a part, and demands all we have, not just a portion. It requires "the kind of courage that lives close to our limits, continually pressing against the possible, yet always aware of the incompleteness and the inadequacy of our own responses," and thus deepening "our dependence on, and our awareness of, God's interventions and provision."<sup>42</sup> Since evangelism in hospitality is so demanding, we can carry it out only with the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We also need a witnessing and hospitable community, in which every Christian can be equipped, nurtured, and supported for the self-conscious and intentional witnessing.

Being a witness is at the core of our identity and calling as Christians and as the community of faith; it is not optional. We have to understand it "as defining the entire Christian life, both individually and corporately."<sup>43</sup> In D. T. Niles's words, evangelism is "being a Christian," and "a way of the church's life."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, our motivation for evangelism should be based upon our own experience of God's love for us, and on our realization of the truth that every person is the object of God's love. Without an undeniable personal encounter with Christ and an experience of his grace, one cannot become a witness. Furthermore, without love and the willingness to practice

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<sup>42</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>43</sup> Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, p. 55.

hospitality, our witnessing becomes empty words and vain rituals. It is because evangelism is “a labor of love”<sup>45</sup> and a form of participation in the cross of Jesus that biblical hospitality can thus be seen as an authentic context for evangelism. In a similar context some two thousand years ago, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

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<sup>44</sup> D. T. Niles, *They May Have Life*, pp. 33, 82.

<sup>45</sup> Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 18.