

Good architecture communicates a clear message. For example, our courtyard is designed as a very Queensland, informal, all weather place of welcome and hospitality. The coffee shop under construction will be completed by a new playground that will sit right in front of it. This new playground will be the first thing most people see when they drive into our property. It's deliberate; the playground says without words that children are welcome here.

Good architecture communicates a clear message.

I grew up in a country town that had no movie theatre – cinema. When I was 16 and moved to Adelaide I loved going to the pictures – the 'flicks'. My favorite cinema was the Regent on Rundle mall. It was old and big and majestic – with high ceilings, a large and elaborate foyer and staircase. This was a building from an era when movies weren't shown in bland, functional suburban cinemas, but in movie palaces. Palace – the word says it all.

These old movie palaces were mostly designed and built during the 1920's – the depression era, when life was really, really tough. The typical movie palace was a visual feast because it was designed to offer a contrast and transition from the grind of daily life – when life was really tough.

The pictures behind me are from the Fox theatre – a 6000-seat masterpiece in St Louis, Ohio – magnificent.

Theater architects wanted moviegoers to feel a sense of anticipation for what was coming next. Vaulted ceilings, ornate decorations, vibrant colors communicated a clear message to patrons – they had entered a different realm.

Movie palaces were designed to give people a taste – a foretaste - of the visual feast that was to come, when the curtains were drawn back and the screen filled with life.

Good architecture communicates a clear message.

The church is a lot like one of those classic movie palaces. The church has been designed and established by God – the master architect- to offer people a preliminary picture – a foretaste - of another world—not an imaginary film world, but a real world filled with God's glory. One day the curtains will be drawn on this world, and the curtains will open wide to the world to come and we will drop to our knees in awe and worship.

Church is an expression of the kingdom of God that points to the world beyond this world that is our eternal home. With all of our many flaws and imperfections, the church is designed and empowered by God to model a way of living radically different to the world around us.

The bible calls this radically different way of living 'koinonia'. Koinonia is an ancient Greek word that has multifaceted meanings. But at its essence, this different way of living the church is called and empowered to live, is Deep Community – where we are invited to live deeply with God and with each other.

Two thousand years ago, Luke described the first few months of the church this way:

All the believers were together and had everything in common.  
(Acts 2:44)

Koinonia community is Deep Community. It's 'everything in common' community. And when it truly exists, people are attracted to in their droves. That is what happened in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. In a fractured, violent and brutal world, the early church's demonstration of Deep Community was so attractive people were drawn in their thousands, in turn encountering the God who was behind it all.

The Deep Community enjoyed by the early church, and its impact on the world around them was a fulfillment of Jesus' words when he said:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.  
(John 13:34-35)

At its heart, Deep Community is an engagement in love – first receiving the free gift of love of God that’s ours in Jesus, and choosing to overflow with that love in our interactions with friend and stranger alike.

The bible speaks very practically about what this Deep Community looks like, tastes like, feels like. At one point, Paul writes to the church in Rome with what is in effect is his ‘recipe for Deep Community’. We are going to spend the next few weeks in this one passage, exploring what it says to us about how we can engage in ‘all things in common’ community. Let’s read it now:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

(Romans 12:9-18)

Paul starts with the words, ‘Love must be sincere’. Right from the get go he is defining that at the heart of Deep Community is love, and not just any love, but love translated from the Greek word, Agape.

Agape love is self-sacrificial love. Agape love is love offered even when it’s not deserved, or may not even be reciprocated. Agape love is costly love. Agape love risks rejection.

Agape love is expressed through hospitality, and that is what we will focus on for the rest of our time today as we focus on this one little, two-word phrase in the text:

Practice hospitality.

Hospitality will almost always involve food. Certainly that was the case for the early church. Luke tells us they daily broke bread – ate together – in each other’s homes.

With that in mind, I have a question for you; ‘What is your favourite dish – your favourite meal?’ Tell someone next to you...

(DISCUSSION)

Let me tell you my favourite meal. It’s smorgasbord. I was seventeen when I discovered smorgasbord. I had moved to Adelaide and was working as a bank teller. That Christmas we had our staff Christmas party, and for the grand price of \$13 – I still remember – I had my first, magical experience of smorgasbord. I never knew such a thing existed – that there was all this food and I could eat as much as I liked. Even though there were dozens and dozens of dishes, I had dish after dish of crumbed prawns and plate after plate of sugar doughnuts, topped with chocolate dairy whip. Does it get any better than that?

Here’s my point – and, yes, there is one! Smorgasbord is a banquet of multiple dishes. It is ‘everything on the table’ dining. That’s the sort of hospitality we’re called to offer in Deep Community – everything on the table, all in, hospitality.

‘All in’ hospitality, biblical hospitality expressed in deep community actively seeks, sacrificially gives and humbly serves.

### **Hospitality Actively Seeks**

The Oxford dictionary defines hospitality as:

The friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.

The really interesting thing about our Bible reading is that Paul uses a Greek word – philoxenia - that says the hospitality we offer should have laser sharp focus. Philoxenia is literally translated as ‘love to strangers.’

Let me be really clear. The essence of biblical hospitality is the willing and active love of strangers. It has ancient biblical roots. Long before Paul, God said to Israel again and again to practice love of stranger hospitality. In Leviticus we read:

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.  
(Leviticus 19:34)

This form of hospitality offers the promise strangers can, through love given and received, become friends.

Philoxenia is translated as 'practice hospitality', but more accurately is 'pursue hospitality' – pursue opportunities to love strangers. One of the early church Fathers, Origen, said this about biblical hospitality:

We are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to inquire after, and look carefully for strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere.  
(Origen)

In Jesus' day there were all sorts of spoken and unspoken rules about hospitality – rules about who was invited to your table, who sat where, how the meal was prepared, how you prepared yourself for the meal, what was appropriate to eat and so on. Much of Jesus' ministry was around meals and food. He began his public ministry by turning water into a wine at a wedding. He was dishonoured when Simon the Pharisee failed to wash his feet before a meal. Jesus was the ultimate host when he fed the 5000 with a few loaves and fish.

Jesus was dismissed by his opponents as a 'friend of sinners', someone who shared his table with prostitutes and tax collectors and the poor. Jesus broke all the rules of hospitality in his day. And so should we. Jesus actually gave some pretty clear instructions as to how we should pursue love of stranger hospitality:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; 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.  
(Luke 14:12-14)

Have you ever had this conversation in your house? 'We must invite the Smiths over for dinner. They've had us over three times now and we haven't returned the favour.'

Or, it can go the other way – 'we've invited the Smiths three times, and still they haven't invited us. That's it – no more invitations!'

These are just two of the unwritten rules of modern hospitality. Another is to never invite people over when the house is a mess.

The goal of biblical hospitality is not to entertain people, but to love them. The goal is not to impress, but to serve. The goal is not to seek a favour in return, but to give without expectation of reward.

Jesus calls us to break all the unwritten rules of hospitality, most especially that we offer hospitality to those who are friends already, or those that we hope can return the favour.

Let me tell you – you don't need to look far to find the stranger. In fact, you might be sitting alongside one.

I have asked this question twice before, but I think we are due to do it again. If you were born on the Gold Coast, please stand...

Have a look around, without hospitality; this is a room full of strangers who happen to be in the same room.

I love this city passionately. I love its youthfulness and vitality. But there is a dark side to our city – a dark side of loneliness and social isolation and disconnectedness. Tragically, it's possible to be surrounded by people like we are today and yet feel totally and completely alone.

Philoxenia – biblical hospitality – love of stranger hospitality offers the promise that strangers can become friends.

Max Lucado puts it this way:

Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But who can't be hospitable? Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality.

Something holy happens around a dinner table that will never happen in a church building. In a church auditorium you see the backs of heads. Around the table you see the expressions on faces. In the auditorium one person speaks; around the table everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. Around the table there is time to talk.

Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: "You matter to me and to God." You may think you are saying, "Come over for a visit." But what your guest hears is, "I'm worth the effort."

Biblical hospitality actively seeks the stranger. It also joyfully gives.

### **Hospitality Joyfully Gives**

The Apostle Peter offered this advice to the church:

Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.  
(1 Peter 4:9)

Hospitality isn't something we have to do; it's something we get to do. It's fascinating that as our homes gotten bigger and bigger and bigger, all the data says that we are inviting people into them less and less and less. Many homes have formal dining rooms that are never used, barbeques that are never switched on and dinner sets never taken out of the cupboard.

See if you can complete this saying for me. A man's home is his....?

Castles have thick walls and moats and battlements. A castle is designed to keep people – strangers - out. Our modern castles – our houses - lie behind gates, and security cameras and roller doors that allow us to enter our homes without even leaving our car.

Too often, our homes become the places we retreat from others rather than open up to others. Carl Sandberg put it this way:

Love your neighbour as yourself; but don't take down the fence.  
(Carl Sandburg)

But here is the thing. Our homes are not our castles. They are our welcome lounges.

That's what the homes of 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians were – welcome lounges. The 1<sup>st</sup> century world of the Roman Empire was fractured by racism, classism, xenophobia and fear. Cities, where the church grew rapidly, were effectively in large part, disease-ridden, violent slums. The common life of the multi-cultural, diverse church family was very uncommon. And it was deeply attractive. One of the early church fathers, Tertullian, said this:

It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving-kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Only look,' they say, 'look how they love one another.'  
(Tertullian)

It is no exaggeration to say that, historically, the uncommon, 'all things in common', Deep Community of the early church over time transformed Roman cities. Christian households dismantled all the old dividing walls, they took down the fences that separated neighbors and risked believing Jesus when he said to find life we must lose it. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they did so joyfully.

Hospitality comes from the same Latin root word as hospital. God empowered and glorifying hospitality is healing and restoring. Biblical hospitality transforms strangers into friends.

Biblical hospitality actively seeks, joyfully gives and in the end, humbly serves.

### **Hospitality Humbly Serves**

The writer of Hebrews says this:

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.  
(Hebrews 13:2)

When we extend hospitality, especially to a stranger, we aren't simply modeling the hospitality Jesus offered. In a way beyond our human comprehension, we are actually serving Jesus through that stranger.

Jesus told a parable about the separation of people on the Day of Judgment. On his right will be the sheep, those who will enjoy heaven. To them he says:

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... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.  
(Matthew 25: 35 and 40)

Love of God and love of neighbour cannot be separated. They are strands of the same cord. When we extend hospitality to a stranger, we are expressing our love of God. With humility, we are setting aside our agenda, our needs, our wants to serve that person, and through them God. This will cost us our time, our money, our energy - our convenience. This is the love that must be sincere – the agape love – that is at the heart of all in, Holy Spirit fuelled Deep Community.

In summary, Philoxenia – biblical hospitality – actively seeks, joyfully gives and humbly serves, in so doing, in the power of the Holy Spirit, transforms strangers into friends.

That's nice, but where does it leave us?

I am going to get really, really practical. I am going to invite you into a challenge. As an expression of sincere agape love, I challenge you to practice and pursue hospitality by inviting someone you don't know to share a meal with you and your family. There are two rules, and they are simple.

One, it has to be someone you don't know. Heaven forbid, it could even be someone much younger or older than you!

Two, it has to be in your home. I have nothing against eating out, but for this exercise, no outsourcing of hospitality to a café. Remember our homes are not our castles; they are our welcome lounges. We are not entertaining guests; we are serving friends.

I can anticipate some of the excuses you might be mentally contemplating right now.

You might be thinking you could risk inviting an axe murderer into your home. To that I would say that here at Newlife we have a 'no axe murderer' policy. Not really – but biblical hospitality is risky – it risks awkward moments and even rejection. Get over it.

You might be thinking you don't have the time – that's your diary is just too crowded. If that's genuinely the case – repent and start clearing your diary of too much stuff.

You might be thinking you don't have the gift of hospitality – that you can't cook and you're a terrible host.

I read a story this week of a speaker who visited a church where a shared lunch was enjoyed after the service. This speaker was taken to table laden with food by a ten-year-old boy, who then proceeded to tell him which food he should put on the plate. The boy pointed at various dishes saying, 'Eat that casserole – it's fantastic', and 'Trust me, skip that one.' The got to the end of the

table and the boy pointed out yet another casserole, and said, 'My mum cooked that.' The speaker asked him of it was any good, and the boy replied:

The recipe has been in the family for years. Passed down from one bad cook to another.

Yes, hospitality is a spiritual gift that some of us have here.

Some of exercise a gift. All of us obey a command – practice hospitality.

When we do, we express love that is sincere. When we do, strangers are transformed into friends. When we do, we not only serve and honor people - we serve and honor Jesus.