

The Significance of Serving by Charles Crismier, founder and president of Save America Ministries and host of Viewpoint, a daily radio program that can be accessed via the Web at www.saveus.org. Accessed at ministrytodaymag.com

According to one study, people are running out the back doors of churches in the United States at a rate of 52,000 per week. This alarming trend could be reversed if the body of Christ discovered the true meaning of hospitality.

There are few subjects of a more practical or potent nature for the end-time church or for the healing of America than that of hospitality. Here are the seeds that will revolutionize your life as a servant to God's people. Here lies one of the greatest secrets of church growth and a divine prescription for racial healing. Here is preparation for the end-time church, practically translating agape love.

Pastors and parishioners at risk.

On my daily broadcast, Viewpoint, I interviewed H.B. London, head of pastoral ministries for Focus on the Family, on the topic Pastors at Risk. London disclosed that at least 70 percent of pastors in the United States claim they have no friends.

Whatever happened to Christian community? To covenant community? Are we destined to be strangers in the commonwealth of faith? Are you a virtual stranger to your family, to your flock or to other pastors?

Don't answer too quickly. Secular and religious observers agree that **the overarching social problem in the United States is the total fracture of community. It appears our increasing commitment is to self and self alone.**

The fracture of community is revealed in the breakdown of our families. Divorce among born-again Christians exceeds the nation at large by 4 percent, according to the report by Barna Research Group, while divorce among pastors equals that of their parishioners, per a Hartford Seminary study. The State of Our Unions report from Rutgers University reveals divorce in the Bible Belt to exceed the nation as a whole by 50 percent. Christ may be our Savior, but self is apparently king. [ed.: I have seen research that contradicts these comparisons.]

William Hendricks, author of Exit Interviews, revealed on Viewpoint that 52,000 people per week are leaving through the back door of America's churches. After interviewing two dozen frustrated parishioners from coast to coast, Hendricks confirmed three basic reasons why many Christians are fed up.

First, they do not believe they are being told the "gospel truth" by their pastors; second, they do not believe the church provides true Christian fellowship and community; and third, they do not believe their individual giftedness and spiritual purpose on earth, as part of a body, are recognized. In short, American Christians increasingly feel like strangers within the church that is supposed to be the body of Christ.

Is there hope for a revival of true covenant community? I believe there is--our hope lies in true Christian relationship born in a heart of hospitality.



In the congregation...but not of it.

It's tough to be a stranger. Strangers joined Israel's march out of Egypt, believing the God of Jacob but alien to the sons of promise (see Ex. 12:38). God specifically included them in His covenants (see Ex. 12:48-49; Deut. 29:9-12).

Exactly 70 times the "I Am" spoke to the stranger through Moses during Israel's sojourn from Egypt to the promised land. Moses' final instructions

to Israel before they crossed over the Jordan speak of God's heart for the stranger 24 times--twice for each of the 12 tribes.

Israel knew it was tough to be a stranger. And God would not let Israel forget it. He commanded Israel to open her heart, her hand and her home in hospitality. Hospitality reaches to strangers.

A crisis of loneliness.

"He died of a broken heart," we hear. If a man can die of a broken heart, how about a family, the church or even a nation? J. Kerby Anderson, discussing on Viewpoint the topic Signs of Warning/Signs of Hope, warned that the baby boomer generation is headed for a crisis of loneliness. Since the boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, comprise the largest generation in American history, we are in for a revelation of the consequences of fractured community beyond anything yet experienced.

The children of boomers provide an early taste. They bear the label Generation X. They have been "crossed out" by their parents and "crossed off" by society, rooted neither in family, culture nor community. They are the alone generation--strangers.

Loneliness can truly break the heart. "Who cares for me?" is the nagging question.

In The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness, James Lynch states: "The price we are paying for our failure to understand our biological needs for love and human companionship may be ultimately exacted in our own hearts and blood vessels."

According to various studies, adults who do not belong to nurturing groups or relationships have a death rate twice that of those with frequent caring contact.

As congregations increasingly shift toward megachurches, the most nurturing relationships outside the family can tend to fade into "crowded loneliness."

Small groups, relationally based rather than organizationally driven, are wonderful; but when organizationally driven, they create the illusion of satisfying relational needs yet lack underlying covenant commitment, serving more the needs of organization management than the needs of relational ministry. Organizational programs will never resolve relational needs. The church in America faces a crisis of loneliness. Where can we find hope?

The hope of hospitality.

America's hope includes a restored covenant community and sacrificial relationships with one another as a demonstration of our covenant with God. Hope begins in your home and in the church. It begins with holy hospitality, formed in an open heart, an open hand and an open home.

With broken homes, come broken hearts. With a divided church, comes divided community. And a nation divided against itself cannot stand.

A people committed only to themselves will starve physically, emotionally and spiritually. Congregations committed only to their own programs, without active commitment to the body of Christ at large in their own cities, are incubators of isolationism. But God is calling us to a renewed understanding of Christian covenant and restored commitment to Christian community. And those are born in a heart of hospitality.

Hospitality means to "reach to strangers." A stranger is anyone who is unknown, unfamiliar, unacquainted or unconsidered. And our congregations are packed with them. As I mentioned earlier, at least 70 percent of pastors admit to feeling like strangers in the midst of the crowd. A holy disillusionment is brewing from pulpit to pew.

The hope of our healing is rooted deeply in the Father's heart of hospitality. The gospel is good news precisely because it tangibly translates God's heart. We were all estranged sinners, strangers from God. But the Father's heart opened His divine hand, sending His only Son "across the tracks" to a sinful place called earth, to extend an invitation to join Him for an eternal marriage supper in His home. Christ declared, "I go to prepare a place for you...that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3, NKJV).

God loves strangers.

Jesus was hospitality incarnate. Watch Him reach to the outcast, to the poor, to the tax collector, to the sinner. Peter, apostle to the Jews, warned, "The end of all things is at hand" (1 Pet. 4:7). In that end-time plea, he exhorted, "Be hospitable to one another without grumbling" (1 Pet. 4:9).

Given to hospitality.

The apostle Paul drives home the same message: "Let love be without hypocrisy...Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love...given to hospitality" (Rom. 12:9-10,13).

Notice, Paul does not say "gifted in" hospitality. We are told to give ourselves to hospitality. So elementary is this kingdom principle that Paul required anyone in leadership to be "a lover of hospitality" (Titus 1:8, KJV).

Hospitality is the tangible translation of agape love, the key that unlocks the door to genuine body life. It is God's natural and supernatural outreach tool. Over 70 percent of all people come to Christ, not through crusades or programs, but through relationships.

Hospitality is the grease that lubricates and activates legitimate ministry. It is a nondelegable manifestation of true Christian love. Purported ministry without it, regardless of appearances, is a cheap organizational counterfeit. Hospitality makes our creeds credible.

Truth without relationship born of hospitality is void of reality. God could have sent a flying scroll, but instead He sent a suffering servant to "flesh out" the truth.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" in divine hospitality, so that "we beheld His glory...full of grace and truth" (see John 1:14). That is what will bring integrity to our message. Preaching without hospitable relationship is a perversion of God's plan and purpose.

Preaching, teaching and living biblical hospitality will revolutionize the church as we know it. It gives the necessary "handle" to activate the love of God we profess to offer. It is the window through which we can reach an alienated world of strangers.

Hospitality will also conquer racism. The roots of racism are deeply entwined in both white and black America. Racism is a two-way street, if not a multi-hubbed intersection, defying solution. It is a matter of the heart. And as Tony Evans, pastor of Oakcliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, has so poignantly said: "God has not come to take sides. He has come to take over!" Reconciliation will require holy hospitality.

Relationship is the only biblical path to reconciliation. Both black and white believers must be intentional about the opening of their homes and hearts in genuine hospitality.

Hospitality means to "reach to strangers." If it were natural, we would not have to reach. It is time for us to take kingdom risks. We must love God enough to love our brothers.

We cannot love corporately until we love individually. Do not wait for the other guy. Invite someone across the color barrier to your home today. Do it again next week and the week following. Just do it. Perfect love will cast out your fear. And the healing of America will begin in your home.

If we break bread together, we will break barriers together. Pick up the phone now. Write the note now. Discuss your plans with your spouse now. Talk is cheap. The walk will cost you your time. Forget programs. Build relationships. Holy hospitality is the solution--and it can even conquer racism.

A final call to the church.

Israel suffered strangerhood in Egypt for 400 years. But God heard their cry. He sent Moses to deliver them, but they were a tough bunch, perpetually tempted to enforce strangerhood on those journeying with them.

Out of Egypt and in the flesh, but grovelling in spirit, Israel received a stiff exhortation from Moses: "'For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords...He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt'" (Deut. 10:17-19).

Our God is unchanging. He still loves the stranger. His message to His children has never changed; neither have His children. We are still stiff-necked.

Seventeen centuries have brought traditions and practices institutionalizing strangerhood in the church. The very way we "do church" has, in effect, become institutionalized strangerhood.

Satan is clever. By the third century he devised a way, in religious disguise, to paralyze the effectiveness of the church for 17 centuries. Constantine converted an empire to Christianity, but brought a curse. Cathedrals relegated the church to boxes with four walls. An open heart's door was replaced by a massive church door. The haven of the home took a backseat to the haven of the sanctuary.

Stained glass replaced clear windows. The church could not

see the world, nor the world the church. Beautiful buildings stole the beauty of the body of Christ.

"Come see our building," became the kingdom cry, silencing hearts in homes where body life once thrived. Men bowed in shrines of wood and stone, while the life of living stones comprising the church was smothered in ecclesiasticism and all but snuffed out.

Those who had worshiped from house to house in the first century were now relegated to "God's house." The cold pallor of strangerhood hovered over the spirit of hospitality. Worshipers gathered in rows rather than in relationship. The collective effect was devastating.

Back-slapping churchgoers replaced warmhearted families. "Come to my church" obscured "Go into all the world." The building obscured the body. Programs obscured the people. The body became a corporation. Big became better. Love was largely lost.

Institutionalization paralyzed the people. The heart was left at home. Men became strangers to their brothers in Christ, isolated even from their own flesh, as families became divided by age and sex for the "efficient propagation of the gospel."

It was a clever sleight of hand—all so religious. The back of men's heads in pews structured out the glory of God to be seen on faces. Strangerhood was now part of church structure. And the Spirit of God was grieved.

In many respects, the entire body of Christ has become a stranger. We feel strange with one another and treat one another other strangely. From congregation to congregation, and even within our own congregations, we do not know one another. Most neither care nor know how to care for one another.

Love has become organizational rather than organismal. Programmed caring often renders faceless the objects of our care. The Master yearns for us to bring the poor to our own house and to feed the hungry with our own food (see Is. 58:7). He wants to eradicate strangerhood at the table of His truth in these final moments of history.

The "I am" is stirring by His Spirit to create a holy disillusionment with institutionalized "churchianity." He is calling His church home, for "home is where the heart is." Through small group and cell ministry, touching one another's lives "from house to house," He is breaking us out of the bondage of institutionalized worship. His purpose is to restore the relational gospel of a Savior who was the Word made flesh—the very incarnation of the divine heart of hospitality.

Let there be no more strangers among the household of faith. Open your heart, then your hand and then your home. It will change the way you think and live. It will revolutionize the way we "do" church. And it will profoundly impact our nation and the world.

After all, if we do not love those we can see, how can we say we love God, whom we cannot see? (See 1 John 4:20-21.) The Father asks you today, "Do you love me?" His response echoes through the centuries: "Then love the stranger."

Alone in the Crowd

You may be surprised to find out how many people feel isolated, even in the one place where they should feel the most

welcome—the church. George Barna, in *Virtual America* (1994), revealed the following astounding statistics about friendship in America:

**55 percent of all non-Christian Americans believe it is getting harder and harder to make lasting friendships.

**62 percent of born-again Christians claim it is getting harder to make lasting friendships.

**73 percent of all evangelical Christians are finding it difficult to make real friends.

The conclusion?

It appears that the stronger the apparent commitment to Scriptural authority, the more severe the problem of developing good relationships. Something is desperately wrong with this picture.

What about you? ■

Serving or showing hospitality is based upon selflessness—thinking more of others than of self (Philippians 2:3). In the congregational context, as measured by your active involvement, how devoted are you to others?

Jesus came to serve and not to be served (Matthew 20:28). What attitudes and actions would you allow the Holy Spirit to change so you would become more like Jesus?

Inasmuch as it is impossible to serve the Head by neglecting the body, what practical measures are you prepared to take to serve Christ by better serving His body?