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ESSAYS IN HONOR OF KWABENA DONKOR ON HIS RETIREMENT

DANIEL K. BEDIAKO AND MARTHA O. D. DUAH
EDITORS



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SOCIETY MARGINALS AS GUESTS: HOSPITALITY IN LUKE 14:12-14

Sampson M. Nwaomah

Introduction

Hospitality is largely perceived as the courtesy of welcome extended to strangers or visitors in one's home. It includes the generosity and goodwill of reception and entertainment. However, biblical hospitality seems to extend beyond this narrow understanding. According to Amy Oden, hospitality "within the Christian biblical and historical traditions has focused on receiving the alien and extending one's resources to them. Hospitality responds to the physical, social and spiritual needs of the stranger."¹ Similarly, Christine Pohl argues that Christian hospitality differs from the Greco-Roman practice because it "offers a generous welcome to the 'least' without concern for advantage or benefit to the host."² She further contends that biblical hospitality could be seen as "a recognition of their [persons] worth and common humanity."³ This kind of hospitality is based on "listening and acceptance of the other."⁴ And it is perhaps this hospitality that Jesus commands in Luke 14:12-14.

¹ Amy G. Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 14.

² Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Dale Jacobs, "The Audacity of Hospitality," *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 28/3-4, (2008): 566.

The Gospel of Luke perhaps has the most extensive record of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In the teachings of Jesus in this Gospel, there are significant narratives that provide indications on the theology of hospitality, its manner, and the extent to which Christians may engage in this practice. Writing on the message and value of this Gospel, James Edwards asserts, "The Gospel is determined by both historical and theological purposes..."⁵ Further, it has been noted that "a strong theological emphasis that continually appears in Luke-Acts involves God's concern for the downtrodden and outcast."⁶ Therefore, significant attention is given to the matters of "poverty and riches, possessions and the renunciation of possessions, communal sharing and social obligation."⁷ Consequently, Luke provides considerable accounts of hospitality and Jesus' fundamental attitude towards the prevailing practices.

The Gospel of Luke seems to have devoted considerable attention to Jesus' presence at hospitality scenes or His counsel on it. In fact, Luke can be said to report the sharpest denunciation of the attitude of the Pharisees on this practice. In most of these passages, where Jesus was a recipient of hospitality, He used the occasion to teach about His identity and mission (see Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-44; 14:7-24; 19:1-10; 24:13-35). In two instances (Luke 9:1-5; 10:1-16) Jesus instructs His travelling missionaries to rely on the hospitality and kindness of receptive hosts in their missionary itineraries. However, of these passages, Luke 14:7-14 is one that seems to elucidate Jesus' theology of hospitality in relation to social status and ranking. What is the significance of the theology of hospitality in Luke 14:12-14? How does this hospitality differ from contemporary hospitality? Can hospitality today be unconditional? In this study, I will focus on this passage and its relevance for Christians. I proceed by giving a synopsis of hospitality in the New Testament, then examine the concept of

⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 1.

⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1992), 49.

⁷ Anselm Grun, *Jesus: The Image of Humanity*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 2003), 120.

hospitality in Luke 14:12–14, followed by some implications and conclusions.

A Synopsis of Hospitality in the New Testament

The biblical foundation of hospitality may be traceable to Abraham's welcoming of three strangers (messengers) who appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre.⁸ However, in the New Testament, several passages provide indications on the manner and purposes of hospitality. The theology of hospitality, its method, and the extent to which Christians may practice it are evident in the Gospels. Some passages in the Synoptic Gospels hint at the importance of hospitality. For instance, Christ instructs His disciples, as bearers of the good news, to travel light in their missionary journey and rely on the hospitality of believers, although this may not always be granted (Matt. 10:5–14; Mark 6:8–11; Luke 10:5–7). His instructions also indicate that the provision of hospitality or its denial to the itinerant disciples constitutes actions for or against Christ (Matt. 10:41–42; Mark 9:41). Another important passage on hospitality and its eschatological implication is Matthew 25:34–46 which presents Christ's response to the saved and the lost at the *parousia*.

The Pauline corpus and the General Epistles stress the importance of this practice for early Christian mission and relationships. Paul considered the practice of hospitality as a virtue indispensable to the church in Rome. In a parenetical passage in his epistle to the Romans, Paul urged believers to practice hospitality (Rom. 12:13). He later urged them to extend hospitality to Phoebe, whom he described as a servant of the Lord (Rom. 16:1–2). Later in the development and organization of the church, love for hospitality was one of the prerequisites to ecclesiastical leadership (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). Further, Paul commanded that only widows who had practiced hospitality were eligible to be enrolled to benefit from the welfare ministry of the church

⁸ For an insightful discussion of hospitality in the Old Testament, see Lee R. Martin, "Old Testament Foundations for Christian Hospitality," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 53/1 (2014), Art. #752, 1–9, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i1.752> (accessed January 24, 2021).

in Ephesus, where he had assigned Timothy as an overseer (1 Tim. 5:10).

The Old Testament example of hospitality was presented to the recipients of the epistle to the Hebrews. The writer's intent was to encourage believers to practice of hospitality (Heb 13:2). Peter also encouraged believers to happily engage in and sustain the practice of hospitality, even though some believers might have been weary of the practice possibly because of false teachers and the burden and/or abuses of this practice (1 Pet 4:9). Nevertheless, it seems that hospitality could be withheld from those who denied the Christian faith (2 John 1:9–11) and resisted by some who did not hold on to the faith (3 John 1:8–10).

Hospitality in Luke 14:12–14

Luke 14:7–14 seems to elucidate Jesus' theology of hospitality in relation to social status and ranking. This unit appears in the third section of the Gospel. This section contains the travel narratives and the final events in Jesus' earthly ministry (Luke 9:51–24:53). According to Darrell Bock, Luke in this segment of the Gospel presents a contrast between Jesus' ministry as compared to that of the Jewish leadership in two significant ways — “humility and openness to all.”⁹ But my focus in this study is Luke 14:12–14. In this brief but remarkable passage Jesus instructs on what could be considered a radical hospitality.

In Luke 14:12–14, Jesus rebukes the attitude of the host and the guest, admonishes them on the right guest list, and exhorts on the paradigm of true hospitality and its implications on discipleship and eschatology. As already noted, the immediate context of this passage is the unit of the dinner or table fellowship episode in the home of a prominent Pharisee (Luke 14:1–11). The theme of calling/invitation (Grk. *kaleō*) is dominant in this section. This theme brackets Jesus' teaching on attitudes at banquet and the parable of the eschatological banquet (vv. 7, 24). It is significant that this dinner episode prepares the stage for the parable on the eschatological banquet (Luke 14:15–24).

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1267.

Commenting on that era's sociology of presence and sitting positions at banquets, issues that were of relevance to the guests at the banquet in our passage of focus, Dennis Smith writes,

At any formal meal in a Greek or Roman setting, the diners reclined around a central axis, the most common arrangement being that of the "triclinium," whereby the couches were arranged in a u-shaped formation around a central table. All such traditional arrangements (and there were others) also had traditional rankings assigned, so that one's position at the table indicated one's rank relative to that of the other guests. This was a regular factor that always had to be addressed at a formal meal: who is to be assigned the position of honor, the second position, and so on around the room.¹⁰

Accordingly, invitations to, presence, and sitting positions/locations at formal meals were very significant to the hosts and invitees in that era. My argument in this study is that along with Jesus' rebuke on pride and arrogance of social status in this episode in the house of a prominent Pharisee (Luke 14:1), the hortatory function of this passage rests on Christ's teaching on the imperative of a radical hospitality which could evidence the attitude of a disciple (vv. 12–13), and that radical hospitality has implications for mission and eschatology. In other words, Luke 14:12–14 teaches what constitutes true hospitality, its inclusiveness, how it exemplifies the solidarity of humanity, and its eschatological implications.

Following His denunciation of the attitude of the guests' quest for honor and recognition at the banquet by the choice of sitting positions (Luke 14:7–11), Jesus turns to the host and the guests and counsels on inclusive guest list (vv. 12–13). Smith observes that

a timeworn symbol of the table is its function to designate a special relationship between the participants at the meal. In the Greco-Roman world, whenever groups organized themselves as funerary clubs, trade associations, religious parties, or philosophical schools, more often than not the

¹⁰ Dennis Smith, "Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 617.

central social activity that served to exemplify group identity and solidarity was the communal meal. The same was true in the case of several Jewish groups which had an identifiable and separate social identity.¹¹

Therefore, the culture of purity and impurity, social classifications and reciprocity guided inclusion and exclusion in the practice of hospitality. Guest lists were given careful attention to include only those in the same social levels identified here as “friends, brothers, relatives, rich neighbor” (v. 12).¹² It has been observed that a host “by inviting persons to his banquet, . . . honors a patron, repays clients, reinforces their loyalty by putting them further in his debt, or seeks out new alliances.”¹³ Judging from this viewpoint, hospitality was no more than “a utilitarian investment,”¹⁴ intended “to return a net gain in status, honor, and influence.”¹⁵ Hence, presence was considered a privilege and even an obligation at such banquets. Similarly, sitting locations were coveted to establish the status and/or ranking of guests before the host and other invitees.

However, Jesus’ admonition constitutes a reversal of the practice of hospitality in His day (Luke 14:13). It does not seem that Jesus was excluding the invitation of the first group—friends, family relatives, and rich neighbors—from hospitality as may be implied in verse 12. Rather, it appears the customary nature of limiting the practice of hospitality to social status is what is prohibited by the expression *mē phōnei*, “do not call/invite”¹⁶—a present prohibition. Therefore, the categories of people who should benefit from hospitality, Christ admonishes, should also include the “poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (v. 13). Thus, the Pharisees are commanded to begin to invite (*kelei*) the marginal

¹¹ Ibid., 633–634.

¹² All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.

¹³ David Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 577.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Mē phōnei* could be translated as “do not continue to invite,” signalling a call for a change of attitude.

categories of people—the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. These persons, to whom hospitality was to be extended, in addition to the sick, prisoners, strangers/travelers (Matt. 25:34–36), orphans, and widows (Jas 1:27), were part of the vulnerable categories in Israel who needed economic, social, and even spiritual support.¹⁷ It is significant to note that in the Gospel of Luke these vulnerable categories of persons are included in the recipients of the good news of salvation: Jesus' mission includes giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk and the deaf hear, cleansing the lepers, and raising the dead (Luke 7:22; cf. 4:18). Similarly, the Old Testament abounds with instructions on hospitality towards the vulnerable in society (see Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 26:1–13; Prov. 19:17; 22:9). These were categories of persons at the lower level of the social hierarchy. So, in Luke 14, Christ commands radical and unconditional hospitality that is opposed to prevailing societal relational standards and that upturns the purity and impurity values of the Israelite society. The significance is that radical hospitality is not exclusive but inclusive of the marginals in society.

The second consideration in this passage concerns Luke 14:14 where Jesus states, “And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” Jesus promises that radical and selfless hospitality will not go unnoticed. If in the preceding verses He challenges the sociology of the prevalent table fellowship and hospitality, the emphasis in verse 14 is that a heavenly, rather than an earthly, reward should encourage believers to practice hospitality. This is expressed by the divine passive *antapodothēsetai* “you shall be repaid.” By this pronouncement, Christ offers a different motivation to disciples for practicing hospitality. This radical incentive contrasts with the reciprocal or transactional nature of hospitality prevailing at the time. In verse 14 Jesus presents the paradox of ‘losing to gain’ to the disciples. The host, who cannot be repaid or reciprocated, by ignoring the social status and purity or impurity of the least in the society and extending hospitality to them, will be blessed and “repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

¹⁷ The Old Testament also calls people to extend hospitality towards the vulnerable in society (e.g., Lev. 25:35; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 15:11; 16:11, 14; 26:1–13; Prov. 19:17; 22:9; Isa. 58:6–10; Ezek. 16:49; 18:7).

By stating that true hospitality would be rewarded at the resurrection, Jesus introduces an eschatological dimension to this practice. This eschatological dimension to hospitality appears also in Christ's responses to those who shall be saved and the lost at the *parousia* (Matt. 25:31–45). The eschatological ideas of blessings and reward at the resurrection of the righteous in Luke 14:14 cannot be dismissed. This resonates with the eschatology of the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection of the dead and which, unarguably for them, would be a time of reward. This seems evident in the controversy between Paul, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, the latter group objecting to the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6–8; cf. Mark 12:18).

However, the eschatological blessing of *antapodothēsetai*¹⁸ certainly does not convey heavenly material return to the generous. It rather indicates the eternal joy that the generous disciple will experience as a result of his/her hospitality and the possible effect of such in the lives of the beneficiaries. It is the experience that results from the extension and expression of the grace of God in radical hospitality to the marginals and the ultimate divine approval of such gesture of hospitality. The significance of the text is that believers who give without expecting a return should not count as loss what they give to the needy. This is because their existence or their value is not diminished by their radical hospitality, nor does it depend on social rankings and affiliations. The disciple then must give and share his/her resources with the marginal in society. This radical Christian hospitality should not be considered as an arbitrary loss, but rather a heavenly investment. But it depends on how one relates to the paradox in the teaching of Jesus concerning hospitality towards the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (Luke 14:14; 1 Pet 4:9).

The question that may be addressed is whether the idea that those who practice this kind of radical hospitality will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous supposes salvation by works. Could Jesus be implying this in His teaching on this subject in Luke 14 or even in Matthew 25? In addressing this concern, it is necessary to clarify that

¹⁸ *Antapodothēsetai* conveys an idea of judgment in Romans 12:19, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, and Hebrews 10:30. Thus, one may also understand the repayment in Luke 14:14 as a favorable judgment for disciples. This includes resurrection and eternal life.

the hospitality teaching should be understood in the context of discipleship. Jesus instructs and challenges His disciples that they do not need to be obsessed with earthly honor and status in living out their calling. Their faith and relationship with God should guide their relationship and treatment of others, especially, those whose earthly conditions do not match theirs.

Implications and Conclusions

What is the significance of the theology of hospitality in Luke 14:12–14? How does this hospitality differ from contemporary hospitality? Can hospitality today be unconditional? These questions become more challenging considering the shift and social dynamics in contemporary society such as emphasis on rights and independence, economic challenges, and security issues. Further, in contemporary Africa, with a heavy burden of poverty and weak social infrastructure heightened by societal and cultural plurality, conflicts, and ethnic differences and loyalties, how may disciples who are blessed with resources relate to radical hospitality practices and societal inclusion largely in Christian mission? It is in this context of challenges to hospitality in modern times that Pohl observes that “the actual story of Christian hospitality as an expression of care, respect, recognition, and equality is not without serious problems, failures, and ambiguities.”¹⁹ She further asserts that “the emphasis on rights is partly an attempt to move away from a charity model that reinforces ‘the donor’s distance and the recipients’ dependency.’”²⁰ This seems to be the prevalent culture in most contemporary societies.

However, in addressing the subject of hospitality in Africa, Moeahabo Moila posits that “each member of the same family group is bound to offer food and shelter to any member of his or her group who needs it. Further, it is also an African custom to offer hospitality even to strangers. Hospitality is perceived and practiced by Africans as open-handed, instinctive and the most natural thing in the world.”²¹ Similarly,

¹⁹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 78.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Moeahabo P. Moila, *Challenging Issues in African Christianity* (Pretoria, South Africa: CB Powell Bible Centre, 2002), 2.

Elochukwu Uzukwu argues that “despite the destabilization of traditional life by colonialism, foreign world views, technology and modern living... African hospitality has held rather well to the extent that it could be described as a way of being an African.”²² In Africa, therefore, it seems that the obligation to radical hospitality may not be dismissed or excused by Christians despite prevailing circumstances. Disciples are still commanded to deal with the issue of the radical hospitality as an extension of the gift of God to humanity and evidence of His grace.

Following the study of Luke 14:12–14, I note, first, that Jesus challenges His disciples that Christian hospitality is founded on the gifting of the grace of God to humanity. In this gifting, some are more privileged with resources and endowments. And some people, due to circumstances of birth, societal inequality, and tragedies, live marginal lives which at times makes them largely or wholly dependent on the benevolence of others. However, it is important to emphasize that human economic inequality and social imbalance do not translate to our value nor categorize humanity before God. Economic and social inequalities do not indicate that some are valued by God more than others. Jesus subsequently illustrates this axiom in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in the reversal that occurred after their death (Luke 16:19–31). In this parable, the rich man was rebuked thus: “son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented” (v. 25). Therefore, riches and wealth are entrusted to disciples for God’s mission. And disciples could exemplify this in their interactions and relationships with the marginals in society.

Secondly, biblical hospitality, as Luke 14:13 indicates, challenges disciples to broaden their social circle beyond their class and status to include those who are less advantaged, the poor and needy. In this kind of non-transactional relationship, true hospitality can occur, one that is not a reciprocal gesture or a circle of exchange. Jesus’ admonition to the host and guests to be aware of, identify with, and care for those in

²² Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, “Missiology Today: The African Situation,” in *Religion and African Culture: Inculturation—A Nigerian Perspective*, ed. Elochukwu E. Uzukwu (Enugu, Nigeria: Snaap, 1988), 158.

marginal positions—social statuses largely constructed through societal identifications, and sometimes personal tragedies and other challenges—provides an opportunity to affirm such persons' worth and our common humanity. It is also possible that the wretched conditions of the marginals in society may negatively affect their perceptions of God, including their concept of the love of God. Therefore, the awareness and hospitality towards the marginals in society offer prospects to demonstrate the grace and the blessings of God in kindness to persons considered as societal ordinary, outcasts and dispensable. This kind of attitude of the materially-endowed — “identification with the poor and the social outcast—becomes an indispensable condition for offering true hospitality.”²³

From this perspective, I argue that the paradigm of hospitality in Luke 14:12–14 is integral to mission. True hospitality is unconditional, missional, and an extension of the mercy of God from the host to the recipients. This act demonstrates Christian love and is an expression of faith rather than social obligations and mutuality. As Andrew Arterbury observes, “the custom of welcoming travelers or strangers into one's home and establishing relationships with them—becomes the prism through which Jesus' disciples can view one another and others as valuable children of God.”²⁴ It is also important to state that possessing the right attitude towards hospitality helps the believer to become more aware of his/her marginal status without Christ—wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked—to use the language of Revelation 3:17. Thus, Christian hospitality illustrates the grace of God to us and, through us, to others. As Luke Bretherton notes,

True hospitality requires [that] we *remember* the truth that we owe our existence not to ourselves or our own work, but rather to the Giver of Life. We are the recipients of God's abundant and costly hospitality of us through the death and resurrection

²³ Iisup Ahn, “Economy of ‘Invisible Debt’ and Ethics of ‘Radical Hospitality’: Toward a Paradigm Change of Hospitality from ‘Gift’ to ‘Forgiveness,’” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38/2 (2010): 243–267.

²⁴ Andrew Arterbury, “Entertaining Angels: Hospitality in Luke and Acts,” available at <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53378.pdf> (accessed February 4, 2021).

of Jesus Christ. Openness to the stranger [marginals in society] requires constant remembrance of our strangeness to God and God's hospitality of us.²⁵

Further, as may be implied in Luke 14:12–14, true hospitality is a Christ-like attitude. This kind of hospitality is not an ostentatious act. Nor is it an occasional act by which the well-to-do in society extend an invitation to the needy. Christian hospitality is an opportunity to demonstrate the evidence of the grace of God in the life of the host that is extended to others, whether they are strangers who enter our homes, the less-privileged whom we meet on the street, or people to whom we bring the good news of salvation. Thus, hospitality still plays a significant role in the propagation of the gospel. It can become the vehicle to facilitate the evangelization and integration of the marginals in society into the Christian community. Through this practice, the followers of Christ are able to see others outside of the church in a new way—no longer as impure or unclean but as fellow children of God with whom we share a common community and to whom God's love should be extended.

Finally, while social and economic equality may not be possible to all, disciples who have been endowed with material blessings are challenged not to ignore the plights of the needy in society. Hospitality does not need to take place only at the home of those who can afford. In other words, one does not always need or wait to invite guests to the home to practice a radical hospitality. It can still be extended to the categories of people mentioned in Luke 14:14 even at their own places of abode and as we encounter them in society.

I conclude by reiterating that hospitality is never given if it is practiced with an expectation of reciprocity or if the recipient is obligated or indebted to a benefactor. Genuine biblical hospitality is that which is given to those who cannot reciprocate; it is not the type invested in those who are able to reciprocate. The guest list of this kind of hospitality includes those lacking the capacity to return the favor of hospitality to the host. These persons are the vulnerable populations

²⁵ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 138.

with physical, financial, and social conditions that may be alleviated by showing hospitality toward them. The Christian host is commanded not to live in expectancy and the guest is not required to look for ways to acquit himself/herself of a debt of hospitality. Otherwise, it becomes an economic cycle and loses its divine purpose—an extension of the grace of God and His benefits toward humanity, especially through Christians. Thus, we can no less agree with Iisup Ahn that “radical hospitality should transcend law, duty, and debt.”²⁶ Indeed, like the grace that God extends to believers through Christ, hospitality becomes a ‘debt’ that cannot be repaid.

²⁶ Ahn, “Economy of ‘Invisible Debt’ and Ethics of ‘Radical Hospitality,’” 258.