

The other 'H' word: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

by [Mark Ralls](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

Church bells chime. Two muscle-bound men stand arms-crossed in front of a Gothic cathedral. A gay couple approaches holding hands. “Step aside, please,” say the muscle-bound guards. They speak similar words to an African-American girl, a Hispanic man, a young man in a wheelchair. Then, just as we realize that the two large men are “church bouncers,” the scene fades to black and the tag line reads: “Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.”

This 30-second commercial from the United Church of Christ ignited weeks of national debate after CBS and NBC refused to air the spot, claiming it was too controversial. Pundits weighed in, filling airwaves and editorial pages with opposing views.

I am not sure what to think. On one hand, I worry that the decision reached by CBS and NBC marks a new era in public life: the political correctness of the 1990s has been replaced by values correctness. Networks are so concerned that they might offend the sensibilities of religious conservatives that they refuse to air commercials that break no FCC guidelines. Yet I also feel a small bit of gratitude toward those nervous television executives whose actions sparked controversy over an issue that Christians have forgotten ought to be controversial—not homosexuality, but that other “H-word”—hospitality.

In the Hellenistic world, the peculiar way that early Christians practiced hospitality set them apart from the surrounding culture. Non-Christians prized hospitality, but understood it to be discriminate. It was directed toward family, friends and influential social contacts—those who could easily reciprocate the host’s goodwill. Christian hospitality, on the other hand, was notoriously indiscriminate. Not only were all welcome, but it was those least likely to reciprocate—the widowed, the orphaned, the outcasts and the estranged—who were its primary recipients. In a modest way, Christian hospitality cut against the grain of social propriety and courted controversy in the ancient world.

Hospitality has lost its edge in the contemporary church. We no longer see it as a weighty moral issue; it is now more about manners than morals. I recall meeting with a group of church members about changing the name of our evangelism committee. We were divided into two camps. One side recalled Billy Graham and felt we were unworthy of the title “evangelists”; others remembered Jim Bakker and thought we could do better. Thinking I had the perfect solution, I recommended that we call ourselves the hospitality committee. Neither side was impressed. One man finally broke the silence. “We’re about more than just hospitality. That makes it sound like we’re the tea and crumpets committee.”

But the hospitality of Jesus was controversial. He chafed against the limits of social propriety by welcoming prostitutes and adulterers, crooks and outcasts into his gracious presence. His hospitality knew no limit. It was not just indiscriminate: it was promiscuous.

It was also central to the incarnation. Through his promiscuous hospitality, Jesus reenacts the gracious being of the Triune God. The Trinity calls into question everything we assumed about the structure of reality. We live not in a world of divisions ruled over by a supreme being, but in a universe tightly bound and called into being by the God who desires intimacy with us. Divine hospitality lies at the heart of creation. It is also the source of our redemption. When Paul greets the church in Corinth, he does so in the name of the God “who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The pattern can be seen in a story from the Gospel of John. Two men approach Jesus and ask, “Where are you staying?” Jesus replies, “Come and see,” and Andrew rushes to find his brother Simon. It is such a simple story, but John seems to want us to see something significant. He concludes with the words that signal the beginning of the Christian church. “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas.” John wants us to see that simple words of invitation are more crucial to the life of redemption than even proclamations of faith. This is how the church begins.

“Come and see.” Christ invites us to enter into a shared life with this Gracious Host. From this point on, the way to truth will be constituted by personal encounters. Our evangelism is simply a reflection of this truth. Andrew invites Simon to come and see. We welcome because we were welcomed ourselves. We invite because we received an invitation.

I was leaving church one evening as the Alcoholic Anonymous meeting was about to adjourn. I noticed a man crouched over the hood of a rusty Ford and introduced myself as one of the pastors. He sighed and told me how long he had intended to “get back to church.” I invited him to worship. His face flushed and he launched into the story of his life. It was the familiar string of regrets and loss that accompany addiction. We shared a prayer and said, “Good night.” As I was walking to my car, he called after me with urgency. “Did you mean what you said?” “About what?” I asked. “Did you mean that *I* could come to *this* church?” Driving home, it occurred to me that he had told me his life’s story as a response to my invitation. It was his polite way of explaining why he couldn’t take me up on my offer. He felt he wasn’t “clean enough” to be included in our congregation.

I never saw him again. I wish my response to his questions had been more direct. I wish I had simply repeated the words of Christ. I wish I had said, “Come and see.”