



ROD AND STAFF: TOOLS FOR A SHEPHERD

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Hospitality: Strangers to friends.

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It's an old cliché seen in movies, TV, the stage; a person walks into a saloon, bar, pool hall, someplace where they've never been. The people already present are all going about their relationships, either ignoring or glaring at the stranger. Tension created by the outsider's presence builds and these scenes rarely end well. Perhaps great scenario for fictional drama, but, in the church, such response to an outsider should never occur. Sadly, and generally without malice on our part, people can feel no less the stranger when first visiting our church or small group. Most of us would be horrified to discover being perceived this way. We think of ourselves generally friendly and ready to welcome in new members. Prayers for a harvest flow regularly from our lips. So let's take a moment to analyze how our good intentions and desire to be friendly so often get lost to those coming in looking for a new home in the family of God.

We have significant obstacles to overcome in our individualistic culture. When everyone is looking out for number one, it leaves no one to look out for number two. Our time is ours, and an unexpected visit can throw the whole choreographed day into a tailspin. I am exaggerating in most cases; however, my point is that other cultures, including those in which our scriptures originate, are oriented towards event/people instead of time. One key, then, to hospitality is being willing to move at least a bit away from the tyranny of the second-hand. Having ever stepped on an escalator or entered an auto-revolving door, you may have a sense of what it feels like to be forced into someone else's rhythm if you want to engage them. It's okay once in a while but few would enjoy all of life that way. Giving others our time in today's society is giving sacrificially.

Another thing we see in biblical stories, such as Abraham's, is that you never know when guests might show up, but, when they do, we are ready. They might just be angels. Are we expecting to entertain? When we gather together as believers, do we anticipate the potential of a visitor coming? We pray for the Lord to send revival, so when they come should we appear surprised and unprepared? Or will they find us excited, prepared and expecting guests?

How to in the assembly: Sunday morning is a wonderful time to see precious friends, but also a time to welcome those God has drawn to join us that morning. Sometimes there are many visitors, sometimes only a handful. Sacrificing the conversation with a friend to entertain a new person is part of laying down our lives, but, if we are all on the same mission, our relationship will generally survive. Consider a hybrid approach that serves a greater purpose—take a new person to meet one of your friends, or go together with friends to meet the guests. When you see an unfamiliar face, do not assume someone else will eventually greet them, take responsibility to do so yourself. If you have a difficult time starting conversations, develop a list questions to ask when meeting new people.

How to in the small group: Introductions are important, not peripheral. Take the time to introduce guests and regular members to each other. Discuss with your group members about how, as a group, you will work together in welcoming new comers. Food is rarely harmful to this endeavor.

Initiate introducing your guests to others. Here's a couple tips:

Don't: "Joe, this is Ralph, you know the guy from my work who we have been praying for, because he has an anger problem and obscene graphics on his computer every time I walk past his cubicle."

Do: "I would like to introduce you to Ralph Smith; we (work together or other relational info.). He's a (mechanic or other identity or interest info.) Ralph, this is Joe Yoder, he is (relational or identity info.)"

Note that the inclusion of some basic information gives each something to launch a conversation from. If you know the two have a common interest, choose that information to include.

Work hard at inclusion, as it is so easy to start with a conversation between two friends, well intending to include a new comer and end up alienating through unexplained inside jokes, vague references to shared experiences and other people that they don't know.

It is often beneficial for meetings to be held in a home other than the leader's, so they can focus on hosting, and you can focus on overseeing hospitality and other aspects of the time together.

Keep a few Icebreakers at hand to use. There are many available examples on-line. Icebreakers can be a powerful tool for drawing everyone into more familiarity with each other. Personal testimonies can also create an inviting environment for others to self disclose. It often goes better if you have asked someone in advance to share to avoid a long uncomfortable silence, as everyone is preferring others above themselves.

Can we be over-friendly? It is possible that our authentic, Christ-inspired friendliness can be mistaken for worldly manipulation. However, erring on this side is rarely the case. Staying aware of nonverbal cues can help you decide whether they are comfortable or if they desire you to back off a bit.

Suggested Activities:

1. Choose a Sunday and purpose that you will not meet with any of your regular friends until you have talked with two new people or couples.
2. Find a new person, initiate introducing them to one of your friends and then become acquainted together.
3. Prepare two plans for your next small group meeting. One if only regular participants are present and one if new people come.
4. Interview one or two of the most hospitable people you have met and learn all you can from them.