

The Man in the Brown Hat

"A Tale of Two Cities" is a wonderful and inspiring book that was written by the well-known 19th Century, English novelist, Charles Dickens.

But today I would like to tell you "a tale of two churches"!

So that you'll know where I'm leading, I'll tell you right away that the purpose of this article is to encourage all of our readers to start getting in practice right now to effectively welcome the new people that will be coming to Sabbath services in the weeks and months ahead.

I'd like to begin by recounting a short anecdote entitled "A parable for our times":

The story goes that just as the first hymn started, a man wearing a brown hat was ushered into a front seat. One of the ushers suggested kindly that he take the hat off. 'No', the man said, 'I prefer to keep it on.'

There was some consternation at the back of the church. The head usher asked the man to take off his hat, but he, too, was rebuffed. A deacon was enlisted to make an appeal, only to have the man under the hat reply, 'I have every right to keep my hat on, and I intend to do so.' The deacon asked a deaconess to help. Alas, she, too, failed.

After the service, the minister approached the man and, in a kindly way, said, 'It has been a great pleasure to have you with us this morning. You will be welcome to join our congregation and worship here regularly. However, it is the custom in our church for men to remove their hats, and to keep them off during the service. I hope that you might conform to this practice in the future.'

The man under the hat replied: 'Thank-you very much. It is good of you to invite me to join the congregation. In fact, I have been coming regularly for three years, but today is the first time that anyone paid any attention to me. By simply keeping my hat on, I have had the pleasure of talking with the ushers, a deacon and a deaconess, who have always appeared too busy to speak to me before, and now I am having a conversation with you! I feel good about it, and wish to express my appreciation.'

We could stop right there, and you would have my main point. But let us continue with church tale number two...

Can you remember the first time you attended a service of the church of God? I can remember our first day – very well. What stood out in my mind back then was not the fact that the format of the service was so very different than any church I'd been to before – although it certainly was. Nor was it the fact that the doctrines taught were so very different to those in the churches I had previously attended – although they certainly were. What was remarkable to my wife and I was the cheerfulness and the friendliness of the people. Upon our arrival, as we drove into the parking lot, the first face we saw was that of one of the men who was serving on the parking crew. Despite the miserable Vancouver rain and the fact that we were complete strangers to him, he was beaming and smiling and waving a welcome to us.

When we walked into the meeting hall, people were not sitting in their chairs with blank looks on their faces with an organ playing quietly in the background – as had been our previous church experience. A real "buzz" was in the air. Everyone was talking, smiling and laughing.

But they didn't restrict their friendliness to one another. As soon as we were noticed as newcomers, there was someone there right away, smiling warmly, shaking our hands firmly, introducing themselves, and showing sincere interest in us. All this despite the fact that we must have looked so different – my wife in her shocking pink slacks and high platform-soled shoes – me in my knee-length, pigskin coat, long hair... and high platform-soled shoes. Ah, the styles of the seventies!

Those first introductions were not just shallow or short-lived expressions of affected politeness. We made friends with some wonderful people on that rainy Sabbath Day. One lovely couple took this pair of new immigrants under their wing and, over the next few months, showed us some of the breathtaking countryside in mainland British Columbia. Some of those friendships have lasted thirty years.

And there were more surprises in store for us. This was no gloom and doom sect! Yes, the ministers preached about the end of the age and about the coming of the World Tomorrow. But how wonderfully optimistic, cheerful and positive they were!

What about *you*? What was your first experience like on the first day you attended God's church? Were you ignored, like the man in the brown hat? Or were you warmly greeted and welcomed, as my wife and I were in Vancouver? I sincerely hope that the latter is true.

With these things in mind, and despite the relatively low growth rates in the church of God today, we all need to be thinking now about the new people who may come walking through our doors in the coming weeks and months at Sabbath services. We need to be preparing and practicing now for the welcome, the greeting and the hospitality that we will give to them.

Why hospitality?

This might seem like a strange question but *why* should we do this? Why should we practice hospitality? The primary reason is that God, through the words of His apostles, commands it:

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:1-2 Revised Standard Version throughout)

Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. (Romans 12:13)

Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. (I Peter 4:9)

But *why* does He command it?

God commands His children to be hospitable for the purpose of making sure that all new people and visitors who come to His church feel welcome – so that they desire to come back and keep on coming back week after week. He also commands it because He knows that it is an effective method for His children to be practicing true, Christian love – the love of God.

How?

But *how* do we do it? How can we practice true Christian hospitality? It's quite simple really. First, just introduce yourself! Smile, stick out your hand and say, "Hi! I'm Horatio Fizkin" or whatever your name is, and shake the newcomer's hand firmly and warmly. My first Spokesman Club director frequently warned our group against "the evils of limp, wet-fish-style handshakes." As part of our preparations for welcoming new people to God's church it might be a good idea to practice firm, warm and sincere handshaking on each other whenever we meet.

Another way, if it applies, might be by getting out of and disbanding any weekly cliques that we may have formed or become part of without realizing it.

He [*Jesus*] said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbours [*i.e. your regular circle of friends*], lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." (Luke 14:12-14)

We can effectively practice hospitality by getting to know others who we don't normally mix with – some of the newer brethren perhaps, or some of those who have been attending for a long time, but who we have never made the time to get together with. Also by being alert for new attendees or members visiting from other Church areas, making an extra effort to greet them.

Invite them for a meal! The last quoted scripture in the fourteenth chapter of Luke equates hospitality with sitting down and enjoying a meal together with the brethren. Unfortunately for some, and for various valid reasons, inviting new people for lunch or dinner is not an option and for most of us, it is not possible every single Sabbath. But many families have found that having lunch or dinner together with new people is one of the most effective ways of getting to know them.

You don't have to be wealthy to do this. Many church families are on a single-income and most are on tight budgets. But it is not necessary to provide a huge, lavish, impressive banquet for our guests. The food itself is of secondary importance. The company and fellowship is primary! On the first Sabbath we spent on moving to Victoria, BC, we enjoyed a wonderful and unforgettable, post-service lunch of borscht (an east-European cabbage soup) and grilled cheese sandwiches with a lovely, friendly, lower-income church family.

Neither does the host have to provide all of the meal. Many church families have had great success with pot-luck lunches and dinners, where each guest family and individual brings along what they would have otherwise eaten at home, and everyone shares it together. It doesn't matter if someone brings along sandwiches or last night's left-over tuna casserole. Nobody should be trying to outdo anyone else, and all will benefit from the variety of food and, of course, from the fellowship.

How NOT to!

This section should not really be necessary. But, over the years, we have all heard the horror stories about the well-meaning, but somewhat over-zealous, long-time church member, who perhaps really should know better, latching on to new people who are attending services for the first time, and pouring forth a torrent of subject matter that a first-time attendee might perceive to be negative information about God's church and its teachings: tithes, offerings, "strict" Sabbaths and Holy Days, morality, dress code, divorce and remarriage, fasting, no smoking, no Christmas, Easter, Halloween, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, April Fools Day.... (deep breath!) and all of their pagan origins in the most elaborate detail!

These topics of conversation may be considered "strong meat", and are unnecessary and even damaging for a person attending for the very first time. Let's stay with the "milk of the Word" when conversing with newer brethren.

Who?

Who should be involved in this? Who should be hospitable? Hospitality is a church activity that *all* age groups can and should have a part in: adults, seniors, teens, younger children - everyone!

Who should we greet? Simple answer: *All* new faces of *all* age groups – adults, seniors, teens and younger children.

As mentioned previously, in our preparation and practice for welcoming new attendees, we might seek out some of those who are already attending our local congregation that we do not know so well, and we make the effort to get to know them better. Most congregations have had at least some small growth. Look around. How many in your congregation do you *not* know very well?

We generally tend to get along best with people of our own age and with those who have similar circumstances and interests as ourselves. Birds of a feather flock together! For example, singles will usually gravitate towards other singles. Teens will usually gravitate towards other teens. Families will normally gravitate towards other families with children of similar ages to their own. This is a natural thing to do. However, we should not allow our hospitality to be completely restricted by age groupings. It is good for us to endeavour to cross age boundaries from time to time in order to make sure that no one is ignored or left out.

And it is not only age boundaries that we should be willing to bridge. When we are looking for new people to greet we must have no respect of persons due to their apparent income levels. God's Word is very clear on this point:

My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while you say to the poor man, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honourable name which was invoked over you? (James 2:1-7)

Likewise it would be wrong for us to fail to greet those with physical deformities or other disabilities. Again, God makes it clear:

No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. (I Corinthians 12:22-26)

When?

Finally, WHEN Should we do it? We cannot leave it all until the day that a new person arrives at services, hoping that all will go well. We need to be beginning right now by rehearsing our hospitality skills. We must continue in our hospitable ways, continually giving warm welcomes to all the new faces we see in our local congregations at every Sabbath service. Christian hospitality should be never ending!

So, in future, if you see a man in Sabbath services wearing a brown hat, please make him very welcome!

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