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# Rosaria Butterfield: Christian Hospitality Is Radically Different from 'Southern Hospitality'

It has nothing to do with entertainment—and everything to do with addressing the crisis of unbelief.

INTERVIEW BY LINDSEY CARLSON | APRIL 24, 2018



Image: Jimmy Williams

**B**efore Rosaria Butterfield became a popular Christian author, she was a tenured professor at Syracuse University, a lesbian feminist fighting to advance the cause of LGBTQ equality, and an *unlikely convert*. In 1999, her life intersected with the gospel of Jesus Christ through a friend's radically ordinary hospitality. From hating Christians to becoming one, the transformation took place slowly and outside a church pew when the church came to her. In Butterfield's newest book *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World*, she articulates a gospel-minded hospitality that's focused not on teacups and doilies, but on missional evangelism. Writer Lindsey Carlson spoke with Butterfield about opening hearts and front doors to our neighbors.

**You advocate a kind of hospitality that steers clear of teacups and doilies. How does radically ordinary hospitality differ from what most people think of as "Southern hospitality?"**

**The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World**

is about meeting the stranger and welcoming that stranger to become a neighbor—and then knowing that neighbor well enough that, if by God’s power he allows for this, that neighbor becomes part of the family of God through repentance and belief. It has absolutely nothing to do with entertainment.

Entertainment is about impressing people and keeping them at arm’s length. Hospitality is about opening up your heart and your home, just as you are, and being willing to invite Jesus into the conversation, not to stop the conversation but to deepen it.

Hospitality is fundamentally an act of missional evangelism. And I wouldn’t know what to do with a doily if you gave it to me. I would probably wipe up cat mess with a doily.

**There are many hospitable people who don’t have a saving faith in Jesus. How do we ensure our hospitality explicitly reflects the gospel?**

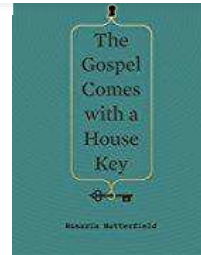
I look at a person as an image bearer of a holy God and I am not in any way spooked by whatever worldly identity that happens to be attached to that image bearer.

We struggle with understanding two things. First, a sin nature: what it means to be fundamentally distorted by original sin, distracted by actual sin, and manipulated by indwelling sin. And second, we struggle with what it means to carry with us the imprint of the God who made us. That means that by God’s command, we are called to reflect God’s image through knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. And all three things require a radical conversion and redemptive life in Christ.

In order to be the image bearers we are called to be, we must be born again. But the thing to realize is that people need more than a meal—they need a meal and the gospel of salvation. They need to know how their sin patterns and the sins of others land on them. They need to know who the real enemy is. People are not our enemy. Sin is our enemy.

**How essential was radically ordinary hospitality to your own conversion?**

When I lived as a lesbian activist, I had been in a lesbian relationship for some years, and I very much thought, “This is who I am, and this is how I want to live.” When I started writing my post-tenure book, it was on the Religious Right and the people they supposedly hated, like me. I got to know a neighbor, Ken Smith, who was also a conservative Presbyterian pastor. And what was striking was that his home looked a lot like my home.



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open every night of the week. There was a lot going on. The community had to gather together, and not by invitation only because this was a crisis. This was an emergency. And we called ourselves family. I thought that was unique to the gay community. But it wasn't. Because Ken Smith's community was like this too.

Ken's Christian community gathered at his house at all hours. I learned this because he invited me in. For two years, I was loved and welcomed by a Christian community that I mocked, despised, and rejected. I accepted them when it worked for me and rejected them all the other times. There is simply no way I would have walked into a church if I hadn't had a genuine friendship with the man behind the pulpit.

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Rosaria Butterfield: Christian Hospitality Is ...  
 For two years, I was part of Ken and Floy Smith's ministry. I met with them once a week. At their home, the door was wide open. People were always in and out of the house—

people from church and people not from church. Heated, genuine conversation would happen. People would speak honestly, and tears would flow. But it was different because Ken would open the Bible and sing from the Psalter, and then he would pray. It was so disarming; I couldn't help but go back. It was in this context of hospitality that Ken brought the church to me, because it was impossible for me to get to the church without the bridge of somebody's home.

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### **Before you came to faith, did you ever try to escape your friend's hospitality?**

Oh, yes. The Bible is an amazing book, and I had never read it. I was more than happy to criticize a book I'd never read. I'm a bookish kind of gal, and the Bible really gets inside of you. And it made me confront some really haunting things. It made me face a whole category of sin—both mine and other people's. It made me think about my own past, my childhood, my parents, and my previous Catholic faith. After a while, I would think, "You know, I'm busy. I don't want this." And then I'd just stop showing up. I'd stop answering email. And Ken would gently pursue me. He'd pop over with a loaf of bread Floy had made. Or a book we were talking about. We did book exchanges. When I would try to slip away, he'd just gently come back and check on me and tell me he missed me.

### **How do you offer hospitality without being pushy or obnoxious?**

That's where being very consistent really helps. I would not have fallen for this if I had felt stalked—if Ken had said, "Let's get together Tuesday the 27th at five o'clock." Instead, I just knew I was welcome for dinner at 5:30. Daily hospitality doesn't make people feel like they're being stalked. If they have the fortitude, the courage, the sobriety, and the mental health to actually get out of that bed and walk through that door to yours, it gives people room. We live in a world where we are told biblical conversations are hate speech. That's ridiculous. What you can't do is make sneaky little raids into people's lives like a moral prig and then expect people to thank you for that. If you want to have strong conversations, you have to build relationships. If you have good manners, you'll make sure you have strong relationships before you have strong conversations. That's true with your children, your neighbors, and everyone else.

For many people, invitations feel formal and one-time-only. But an offer of "we would love to see you as it suits you" gives people the opportunity to sneak in. Sometimes too much focused attention on the guest can be overwhelming, but being one among many isn't as threatening. And having loose boundaries helps that—"we'll eat at 6:30, feel free to come over." It takes the spotlight off people.

### **How does radically ordinary hospitality look when you live in a community where people go to and from work, pull their cars into the garage, shut the door, and never**

~~uninterested and never accept your invitation.~~

Give open invitations, especially invitations for events that are outdoors. We will put an invitation on an app called NextDoor saying, “We’re going to have a cookout. Bring a folding chair and a friend.” And we’ve realized there’s a 10 percent rule. If you invite everyone out, about 10 percent will come. And I’d say be consistent about hosting. Be warm in responding to people. Cast wide nets. In some cases, if we’re responding to a crisis, we have our church there helping. That way, when neighbors show up, 30 people are already there. They’re grilling, talking, filling water balloons, handing out watermelon. It takes away the awkwardness of being the first to walk up.

We forget hospitality isn’t a nice add-on you do when you happen to have a spare Saturday afternoon. It’s the bridge that God is going to use to solve the biggest problems in people’s lives.

Realize your neighbors are struggling with things. I don’t care how meticulous the garage looks when the door closes. Nobody is doing great. I’m not doing great; you’re not doing great. We’re tired, we’re cranky, and we need help. And if that’s true of those of us who have the power of the Holy Spirit in us, how much more for those of us who don’t?

**You emphasize that believers should use their homes in a daily way that seeks to “make strangers neighbors and neighbors family of God.” Does this mean our doors should always be open?**

Daily is an *almost*. If you have the flu, don’t share it. But the idea is that in the church, *someone’s* home is always open. People have a place to gather with God’s people. And as God’s people are gathering, they have the foresight to open the doors. But if nobody is doing that, we need to ask ourselves, “Why?”

I feel like Christians have this attitude like we’re great at hospitality. But we live on a starvation diet. People need to gather. There are plenty of problems that come up in a day—especially for our single church members. They are part of the family. How did we get here? God sought us, brought us to the table, and put us in his robes of righteousness; he cared for us, nurtured us, and gave us a name. These are gestures that should be replicated in the body. It’s not okay to leave people in painful loneliness.

**Do families at different stages of life have different capacities for practicing hospitality?**

We are at a time with our family where, with the age of our children, they can participate in this hospitality ministry. They wonder what’s wrong when no one shows up for dinner.

For 10 years we were licensed foster parents, and we had new babies placed with us every year. My ministry then was to broken children and social workers attached to those children. At one time, it was older children in the foster system that had to come with a security guard and a social worker, and they needed hospitality. I had to just be willing to say, “This is where I am—who’s out there?”

In those days, people would ask how I decorate, and I’d say, “with Matchbox toys, plastic dinosaurs, and Legos.” Those are your people. Let us not forget how important children are.

**How did your own difficult childhood affect how you reach out to children?**

19.14, 19.15], it's not because they're cute and smelly good. It's because you must look out for them. I look at these children in my neighborhood, and even though things are hard for them, I think, "That might be my future pastor someday." And children take things very tenderly, even the tough ones. When something happens in the neighborhood, they notice the details. And so we've trained our children to invite their friends over for dinner, to look out for kids who aren't doing okay, and to stand up for the ones being bullied. And as adults, we have to be willing to ask their parents if something is going on that we could help with. And then to be ready to say "absolutely" and help.

### **If the gospel comes with a house key, why are Christians so hesitant to unlock their doors? What are the biggest obstacles standing in the way of our hospitality?**

There are a number of obstacles. One is that we've made idols out of our white carpet and our boundaries. I can't tell you how many times I've heard about Christians and their boundaries. I am not genuflecting to people's boundaries. And part of this is cultural. I wasn't raised with boundaries, because who would have boundaries when you're in a state of crisis?

If you believe we live in a post-Christian world, and you believe this is a crisis, then let's act like it. The way we deal with crisis is to understand that hospitality is a form of spiritual warfare. We call down from heaven the power of the gospel to save, and we embrace our unsaved neighbors.

### **Does fear play a role in believers avoiding hospitality?**

It's the fear that makes us feel like we're not useful anymore—that the vocabulary has changed, and we don't know how to talk to people. Or the fear that we'll say the wrong thing. Or the fear of dining with sinners. I think the fear really is that we have nothing to offer, and so we might as well hunker down with our church community and draw up that moat and lock the door. But in that case, you will never see the power of the gospel to change the hearts, minds, and lives of the people who appear to be most outside the kingdom of God.

### **How would you encourage people who are terrified by the concept of practicing radically ordinary hospitality? Where should they start?**

I would say go look at somebody who is already doing it and offer to help. And I love when people do that. You know, people will say, "I don't know how to do this and that." I spend two to three hours a day chopping vegetables. Come help.

Everyone isn't called to every ministry. Some people are better with certain problems than others. That's great. Just do what you do, and open your arms a little wider.



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