

Come On In . . . But Not You: The South's Lack of Hospitality to Immigrants

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Author Note

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**Abstract:**

In this research paper, I will explore the disparity between the ideal of southern hospitality and the antagonism exhibited toward immigrants in the South. Although the South is frequently associated with hospitality, immigrants to the South often experience hostility instead. I will discuss the modern conception of southern hospitality and its historical development. I will look at the effects of racism in molding a fearful southern view of immigrants. I will also examine the role that religion has played in shaping the southern worldview, both in the past and today. I will discuss ways in which southern churches can and are advocating for immigrants. I hope to propose some potential solutions which might bridge the gap between southern hospitality and hostility.

Come On In . . . But Not You: The South's Lack of Hospitality to Immigrants

The phrase “southern hospitality” calls to mind images of sprawling gardens, family-style feasts, and welcoming homes. Indeed, the South is inextricably linked with hospitality, and the concept of southern hospitality permeates the American consciousness. According to a survey conducted by John Shelton Reed and the Howard W. Odum Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, nearly 90% of Americans include the concept of southern hospitality in their ideas of the South (Szczesniul, 2017, p. 2). Yet, as practiced by white southerners, southern hospitality is far from universal and is not extended equally to everyone. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans are not welcomed to the same extent as are white Americans. Those who are not American at all are welcomed perhaps even less, as evidenced by the percentages of foreign-born residents throughout the country. Whereas 13.5% of America's residents are foreign-born, within twelve southern states only 7.9% of the population is foreign-born (Migration Policy Institute, 2018). Not only are they far fewer in the South than in the whole nation, but immigrants to the South also frequently face fear, distrust, or outright hostility instead of experiencing the famed “southern hospitality.” This fearful antagonism toward immigrants often stems from a deeply-seated racism. For many southerners, their prejudiced beliefs trump their commitment to southern hospitality when immigrants are considered. Racist fear and hospitality remain at odds with one another. Accepting and welcoming immigrants can best happen if efforts toward reconciliation are led by an influential institution. In the South, the church can be that institution. Southern churches have been central to southern life, shaping southern culture for centuries. The church in the South has been a guiding force in determining cultural norms, often based on biblical principles. Considering the Bible's call to “love your neighbor as yourself” and “not

oppress a foreigner,” the church can guide people toward extending southern hospitality to immigrants (Leviticus 19:18, Exodus 23:9 New International Version). Southern churches should lead the South in fostering safe discussions about immigration and advocating for acceptance of immigrants.

As noted above, the vast majority of Americans, Southerners and non-Southerners alike, associate hospitality with the South. This concept, although encompassing a broad idea, presents a distinctive image. According to Diane Roberts, southern hospitality “signifies both graciousness and excess” (2006, p. 234). Hospitality involves smiling hosts greeting you at the door and lavish dinners in plantation-style homes. Many southerners understand hospitality as a mandate for life. For these people, southern hospitality is more than sweet tea on the front porch, although few would deny that sitting with friends and sipping iced tea is one aspect of southern hospitality. For people like Michelle Darrisaw, hospitality includes good manners, kindness, neighborliness, charm, generosity, and meals prepared with love. As Darrisaw writes, “southern hospitality isn’t just a catchphrase, it’s a way of life below the Mason Dixon”.<sup>1</sup> For many southerners, southern hospitality is seen as enduringly timeless. Those characteristics of southern hospitality “are as consistent as our famously hot summers” (Darrisaw). Hospitality is associated with southern heritage, causing many southerners to believe that hospitality and the South are inextricably linked (Roberts, 2006, p. 236). Southerners take pride in this hospitable lifestyle which, they feel, sets them apart from the rest of the nation.

Southern hospitality and the feelings of exceptionalism which accompany it are not recent developments. Anthony Szczesiul explains that Americans associated hospitality with the

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<sup>1</sup> The article “These are the 6 Qualities That Really Define Southern Hospitality” comes from the well-known *Southern Living Magazine*, a prime example of the southern hospitality-mindset in modern America. Although the article does not include a date, it exemplifies the modern conception of southern hospitality.

South as early as the 1700s, and certainly by the 1830s (2017, p. 12). This emphasis on hospitality set the South apart from the rest of the United States. Ironically, the concept of southern hospitality, which now sets the South apart, became popular as a way of uniting the South with the rest of the country. Prior to the Civil War, differences between northern and southern states abounded. The North accepted industrialization and urbanization while the South remained agrarian and rural. Most importantly, the North largely rejected slavery, which the South upheld and defended. The concept of southern hospitality reduced these differences, at least among white Americans. To Northerners, southern hospitality meant they would be welcomed in spite of their differences, and to southerners, southern hospitality forged a connection between them and their northern counterparts (Szczesiuł, 2017, p. 13). The hospitality emphasis initially served as a unifying force, although it would later create a sense of southern exceptionalism.

The emergence of southern hospitality as a cultural notion cannot be fully understood without addressing the connection between southern hospitality and slavery. Szczesiuł writes, “Racism cannot be separated from the antebellum social practices of southern hospitality; indeed, it was the labor of the slave that provided the master the leisure to be so hospitable” (2017, p. 10). The extravagant hospitality of wealthy plantation owners depended upon the unpaid labor of slaves. Without the horrific abuses of slavery, the lavish southern hospitality concept that solidified during the 1830s would not have been possible. Furthermore, the southern hospitality concept attempted to mask the problems of the South. Prior to the Civil War, southern hospitality shifted the focus from the evils of slavery to the generosity of the southern aristocracy. After the end of slavery, white southerners attempted to use southern hospitality to ameliorate the violent injustices done to African Americans (Roberts, 2006, p. 235). Southern

hospitality increased the acceptance of white southerners in the rest of the nation by attempting to disguise the racial injustice of many of these same white southerners. Roberts explains, “The South of benign myth is a sort of Eden, where people are as warm as the weather and good manners paper over poverty, ignorance, and racism” (2006, p. 235). Southern hospitality, then, has had racial division since its beginning.

The rich southern elite were discriminatory in determining who could receive southern hospitality. This meant, of course, that only those deemed worthy, those who fit within the social norms, received hospitality. As Howard Zinn wrote,

It is one of the curious paradoxes of Southern life that suspicion of strangers, outsiders, goes along with what is called ‘Southern hospitality’. The answer to the paradox is that there is a line of demarcation which separates the accepted person from the unaccepted. Within that line, the warmth is almost overwhelming. But outside it, the coolness can become hostility to the point of violence. The foreign-born is almost always outside that line in the South, as is, of course, the Negro. (as cited in Szczesiul, 2017, p. 104).

In addition to slaves being denied hospitality, free African Americans from northern states were excluded from the South’s hospitality, even imprisoned for no reason other than their race (Szczesiul, 2017, p. 107). Anyone considered to be “other”— whether that be a slave, a person from the lower class, or a foreigner—could and often would be precluded from receiving southern hospitality.

In many ways, this same dynamic exists today. Outsiders, especially immigrants, continue to be excluded from southern hospitality. Caroline Nagel explains that as people fled

from unrest and life-threatening dangers, southern states overwhelmingly excluded Syrian refugees (2016, p. 285). In spite of the sensitive nature of the refugees' situation, many southern states denied them safe haven. Largely because the refugees came from a predominantly Muslim country, they were rejected. Certainly, some parts of southern states welcomed refugees. Communities like Clarkston, Georgia, where nearly half of all residents are refugees from across the world, do extend southern hospitality to refugees (Jonsson, 2018). Unfortunately, though, much of the South did not welcome Syrian refugees because they were too different to be accepted. The lack of hospitality includes immigrants already living in the South, in addition to those seeking entry. Anti-immigration legislation has increased in southern states. Especially in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, these laws make life hazardous for undocumented immigrants. According to Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel, these laws require proper documentation, increase police searches for documentation, and forbid protection of undocumented immigrants (2014, p. 320). Alabama is especially notorious for its anti-immigrant legislation. Jamie Winders writes that an Alabama law compels public schools to record the expenses of educating undocumented children and requires all immigrants to carry documentation of their residential status at all times (2011, p. 607). These laws illustrate just how hostile the South can be to immigrants.

The South's rejection of immigrants can be directly linked to racist prejudices. As Ehrkamp and Nagel write, "Anti-immigrant legislation, accordingly, goes hand-in-hand with the reconfiguration of race in the U.S. South and the racialization of the 'other'" (2014, p. 320). As immigration is tied more and more closely with race, anti-immigration legislation increases. Hana Brown, Jennifer Jones, and Andrea Becker write about this "racialization of the other." They explain that in southern news media, immigrants are discussed in mostly negative terms,

with a disproportionate emphasis upon the criminal tendencies of immigrants (Brown, Jones, & Becker, 2018, pp. 123-125).<sup>2</sup> In the media, this supposed criminality of immigrants was closely linked with a Latino or Hispanic nationality (Brown, Jones, & Becker, 2018, p. 126). The assumption of southern media outlets, based solely on ethnic identity, tended to be that Latino heritage predisposed immigrants toward criminal activities. This racist language regarding Latinos is similar to that directed at African Americans. The media frequently depicts both African Americans and Latinos as criminals, assumes their criminality based on their race, and disproportionately includes stories of crimes committed by members of both groups (Brown, Jones, & Becker, 2018, pp. 128-129). These similarities indicate a common factor: both African Americans and Latino immigrants suffer because of racist attitudes toward minority ethnic groups and races.

This criminalization of immigrants decreases their acceptance. According to Gallya Lahav and Marie Courtemanche, when citizens perceive that immigration threatens security and safety, both liberal and conservative Americans are more concerned than when immigration affects American culture or the economy (2012, p. 490). Safety is, for most Americans, the most important factor affecting their immigration attitudes. When southern news media present immigrants as dangerous criminals, then, southern Americans are highly likely to oppose immigration. Because Americans tend to view immigration less favorably when security is threatened, politicians who oppose immigration only have to present immigration as a threat to decrease support for immigration. Republican politicians opposed to immigration are thus able to promote immigration as a kind of loosely-unifying issue when immigration is seen as a threat to

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<sup>2</sup> In their research, Brown, Jones, and Becker surveyed more than 4,000 news stories from a sample of newspapers in southern states. They believe their findings apply to other news sources, such as television, as well.



safety (Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012, p. 499). Security-inspired opposition to immigration can then pave the way for more anti-immigration legislation which is inhospitable for immigrants. This security mindset is reflected in the South's immigration policies, perhaps unsurprisingly, since the South is largely a Republican bastion. Fear can be the determining factor in how immigrants are received—or not received. Southern anti-immigrant legislation responds to fears of overcrowding, financial instability, and, importantly, public safety (Winders, 2011, p. 607-608). Southern hostility to immigrants often stems from a fearful desire for safety and security.

Southern Christians, along with the larger South, often react to immigration out of fear. Indeed, the politics of white evangelical Christians, concentrated in the South, have been marked by fear in recent decades. Nagel writes that evangelical politics react to perceived threats against American culture (2016, p. 285). She continues by saying that evangelical Christians bring together fearful concepts like terrorism “with a host of other anxieties relating to undocumented immigrants, crime, government spending, and national decline” (Nagel, 2016, p. 286). Christians are tempted to group all their fears together in a way that degrades immigrants. John Fea writes that an evangelical Christian political view “too often gravitates toward nativism, xenophobia, racism, intolerance, and an unbiblical view of American exceptionalism. It is a playbook that divides rather than unites” (2018). Southern Christians can often react, especially to immigrants, from a place of fearful protectionism which may preclude tendencies toward extending hospitality to outsiders.

This fear should be of special concern to Christians in the South, for southern churches help guide the public consciousness of the South. According to Paul Harvey, in the South, evangelical Protestant churches greatly influence a large number of southerners, more people than in any other region in the country (2004, p. 408). Southern churches direct public opinion

concerning a wide range of issues. These churches have the potential for great harm or for great improvement. In the past, southern churches have contributed to both discriminatory practices and social progress. After the Civil War, white southern churches promoted segregation as part of God's plan, sanctifying the act of discrimination (Harvey, 2004, p. 416). However, African American churches in the South led the way in de-sanctifying segregation and achieving the human rights which always belonged to African Americans (Harvey, 2004, p. 418). Given their influential position, southern churches today have the potential to shape the conversation about immigration. If they choose to reject the fear surrounding immigrants, southern churches can create a more welcoming environment for immigrants.

Presented with their position of influence, southern churches must decide how they will respond to immigrants and immigration. The choice is not easy, nor is the choice simple. Rhetoric, prejudices, and fears from both sides of the debate abound. Christians must determine what their faith requires. Both Christians and churches of the South must look to how the Bible speaks about all people, strangers, outsiders, and immigrants. Genesis says, "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them" (1:27 New International Version). All people, then, are created to be like God. As Daniel Carroll R. says, "Immigration is the movement of *people* across borders. [. . .] The creation of all persons in the image of God must be the most basic conviction for Christians as they approach the challenges of immigration today. [. . .] Immigrants are humans, and as such they are made in God's image" (2008, pp. 65-67). In considering immigration, Christians must understand that immigrants are human beings. Although this statement seems obvious, the tendency in a polarizing debate is to be swept away by facts, figures, and statistics. Immigrants, though, are more than numbers or documents; immigrants are people made in "the image of God."

Particularly relevant to the South because of its reputation for hospitality, the Bible mandates hospitality for strangers, outsiders, and foreigners. Abram welcomes and feeds three strangers, Boaz takes care of Ruth, the Good Samaritan protects the injured Jewish man, and Jesus offers His living water to the Samaritan woman. Clearly, hospitality should be important for Christians. Specifically, hospitality for outsiders, even immigrants, must be important for Christians. Sarah Quezada describes hospitality as a physical manifestation of a Christian's love for God (2018, p. 80). Considering that the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God," Quezada's definition creates an important role for hospitality, indeed (Matthew 22:37 New International Version). Daniel Carroll R. takes hospitality's importance even further. He says that the God of the Bible is a hospitable God, so to be hospitable is to be like God (Carroll R., 2008, p. 94). Hospitality becomes a way of imitating God. Southern churches must see immigration in terms of the Bible. All people, immigrants included, are made in the image of God and are therefore worthy of respect and love. Hospitality, southern hospitality, can serve as a means by which Christians can love God and be like God.

This biblical understanding of immigration means that southern churches need to extend a gospel-based hospitality to immigrants in such a way that recognizes the full humanity of immigrants. One way that southern churches can do this is by fostering safe discussions with immigrants and about immigration. In a climate where the racially-charged issue of immigration inspires fear, safe and open environments will be difficult to create. But Christians must create a space for discussion, conversation, and relation. Immigrants and native-born Americans often live separate lives. Many native-born Americans don't know any immigrants at all. This separation breeds a cycle of isolation and fear, "which yields even more insecurity and uncertainty" (Quezada, 2018, p. 21). Fear and isolation prevent productive discussions with

immigrants. However, forming relationships with immigrants can reduce feelings of isolation and fear. Quezada writes, “To avoid the isolation that cultivates fear of the other, we have a pressing need for community. Relationships across cultural barriers are an antidote to fear. [. . .] Community building in an age of fear: what a beautiful and countercultural opportunity for the church” (2018, pp. 22-23). Relationships between immigrants and non-immigrants can humanize the issue of immigration. When immigrants are seen as human beings, conversations about immigration can be more compassionate, less polarized, and more open. Open discussions can then reduce fear and create acceptance of immigrants. Southern churches must first open a space for relationships, and then for discussion.

Southern churches must also advocate for acceptance of immigrants. This advocacy can, and for some churches already does, take many forms. One way for churches to promote acceptance is through actual advocacy. As previously mentioned, Alabama’s immigration laws are especially stringent. The law forbids aiding or protecting undocumented immigrants in any way, whether that be renting an apartment to someone without proper documentation or simply providing transportation to an appointment (Szczesniul, 2017, p. 214). Many church leaders, and even lay people, ardently opposed Alabama’s law. These leaders filed law suits, wrote responses, and spoke publicly about their opposition to the law. The church leaders claimed that they, as Christians, would offer hospitality to anyone in need, regardless of whether that person possessed proper documentation or not (Szczesniul, 2017, p. 216). The opposition to Alabama’s law demonstrates a desire for accepting immigrants as human beings, not as pieces of paper. Other churches may advocate for immigrants more quietly, though certainly no less diligently, than those opposed to Alabama’s anti-immigration law. Many southern churches focus on caring for their congregants’ various needs, regardless of immigration status (Ehrkamp & Nagel, 2014,

p. 323). If those needs do involve immigrant status concerns, some church leaders work to connect immigrants with sympathetic lawyers and health care providers who will offer aid regardless of documentation (Ehrkamp & Nagel, 2014, p. 324). These churches work toward increasing acceptance of immigrants by providing immigrants safe avenues toward legitimizing their status.

Churches can also advocate for acceptance of immigrants through ministries for immigrants. Many southern churches minister to immigrants by providing church services in the languages and cultural styles of different immigrant groups (Ehrkamp & Nagel, 2014, p. 322). If done well, these services can increase solidarity between American and immigrant Christians, encouraging acceptance of immigrants. Other churches can serve as sanctuaries, places of refuge and safety for immigrants. Immigrants often face deportation, even though returning to their country of origin might mean economic destitution, lack of necessary health care, or danger from violence (Quezada, 2018, pp. 143-144). Such sanctuary churches offer immigrants a place to stay while working toward the goal of legal acceptance into the United States.

In 1845 Frederick Douglass wrote about the existence of slavery. He wrote, “They love the heathen on the other side of the globe. They can pray for him, pay money to have the Bible put into his hand, and missionaries to instruct him; while they despise and totally neglect the heathen at their own doors” (Douglass, 1995, p. 73). He railed against slave owners who claimed to follow Christ. The Christ he knew brought peace instead of pain, trust instead of fear, and love instead of hate. Although more than a century and a half has passed, his words still ring true, reflecting the situation of many immigrants in the South today. Many southerners, many Christians, both despise and neglect the immigrants “at their own doors.” The South denies entry to refugees and passes intensely hostile immigration legislation. This poor treatment of

immigrants can be traced to the racist views many southerners hold concerning immigrants. These racist fears stand in sharp contrast to the famous southern hospitality. Southern hospitality is supposed to be a way of life reflecting southerners' welcoming warmth, yet immigrants are considered too much of a threat to be the recipients of southern hospitality. This type of racist division should be rooted out of southern hospitality, which has always been closely linked with the oppression of African Americans. Like the rest of the South, southern churches have a complicated past. At times, churches have paved the way for equality and reconciliation. At other times, southern churches have contributed to repression and discrimination. Whatever they did, though, southern churches were influential. Churches then and now guide the attitudes and actions of many southerners. Because of this continued influence, southern churches today are poised to shape the discourse surrounding immigrants and immigration. Churches must view immigrants as human beings made in the image of God, worthy of love and respect. The Bible mandates hospitality to strangers, outsiders, and foreigners as a way of imitating God and expressing love for God. When hospitality is viewed like this, southern churches must create safe and open discussions with immigrants and about immigration. Churches must form relationships with immigrants that transcend fear and allow for communication. Southern churches must, and some do, work toward acceptance of immigrants. A deep divide currently exists between the ideal of southern hospitality and the reality of immigrants in the South. Southern churches must guide the South in bridging this gap between reality and ideal. As Daniel Carroll R. says, "Let the journey to reconciliation begin. May the church lead the way" (2008, p. 140). Reconciliation will not be easy or simple or neat; it will be difficult and complex and messy. But the church is called to love. Southern churches must not continue in the same way as the Christians described by Frederick Douglass. They must not "despise and neglect" the immigrants "at their own door."

Rather, southern churches should open their doors, inviting immigrants inside their lives in a way that honors God and shares southern hospitality.

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