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Setting God's 'Welcome Table': Images of the Church for an Inclusive Ecclesiology

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SETTING GOD'S "WELCOME TABLE":
IMAGES OF THE CHURCH FOR AN INCLUSIVE ECCLESIOLOGY

"Setting God's 'Welcome Table'"

BY: KATHERINE V. STATS

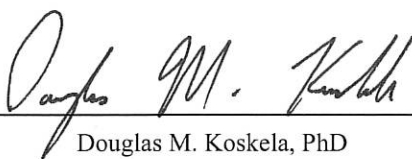
SEATTLE PACIFIC SEMINARY

SETTING GOD'S "WELCOME TABLE":
IMAGES OF THE CHURCH FOR AN INCLUSIVE ECCLESIOLOGY


BY: KATHERINE V. STATS

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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PROGRAM AUTHORIZED TO OFFER DEGREE: SEATTLE PACIFIC SEMINARY

X  Date 11/10/2016
Dean of the School of Theology
Or
 Associate Dean of Seattle Pacific Seminary

In Search of a Roundtable

Concerning the why
and how
and what
and who of ministry,
one image keeps surfacing:
A table that is round.

It will take some sawing to be roundtabled,
some redefining and redesigning
Such redoing and rebirthing of narrowlong Churching
can painful be for people and tables

But so was the cross,
a painful too table of giving and yes
And from such death comes life,
from such dying comes rising,
in search of roundtabling
And what would roundtable Churching mean?

It would mean no diasing & throning,
for but one King is there,
He was a footwasher, at table no less...
For at narrowlong tables,
servant and mirror
became picture framed and centers of attention

And crosses became but gilded ornaments
on bare stone walls
in buildings used but once a week only
But the times and the tables are changing and rearranging

And what of narrowlong table ministers,
when they confront a roundtable people,
after years of working up the table
(as in 'up the ladder')
to finally sit at its head,
only to discover
that the table has turned around???
Continued rarified air will only isolate
for there are no people there,
only roles

They must be loved into roundness,
 where apart is spelled a part
 and the call is to the gathering
 For God has called a People,
 not 'them and us'
 'Them and us' are unable to gather around,
 for at a roundtable, there are no sides
 And ALL are invited to wholeness and to food.

At one time
 Our narrowlong churches
 Were built to resemble the Cross
 But it does no good
 For building to do so,
 If lives do not.
 Roundtabling means
 No preferred seating,
 No first and last,
 No better, and no corners
 For the 'least of these.'

Roundtabling means being with,
 a part of,
 together,
 and one
 It means room for the Spirit and gifts
 and disturbing profound peace for all.

And it is we in the present
 who are mixing and kneading the dough for the future.
 We can no longer prepare for the past.
 To be Church,
 And if He calls for other than a round table
 We are bound to follow.
 Leaving the sawdust
 And chips, designs and redesigns
 Behind, in search of and in presence of
 The Kingdom
 That is His and not ours.¹

¹ Chuck Lathrop, "In Search of a Roundtable," in *A Gentle Presence* (Washington, D.C.: Appalachian Documentation (ADOC), 1977), 5-7. Excerpts from this poem appear in Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

Introduction: Inclusive Ecclesiology and Guiding Imagery

Roundtabling means
no preferred seating,
no first and last,
no better, and no corners
for 'the least of these.'

Roundtabling means being with,
a part of,
together,
and one

It means room for the Spirit and gifts
and disturbing profound peace for all.²

Why Inclusive Ecclesiology?

The way in which ecclesial bodies interpret and envision the nature and function of the Church shapes every aspect of their own self-understanding, organization, and praxis. The questions of who may be included in—or alternatively, who is precluded from—specific roles and leadership positions within a church body are influenced by this self-understanding. Often, the ecclesiology of a congregation or denominational group may never be described in any formal, doctrinal terms, and yet the organization's theological understanding of the Church—and just who is deemed most important within that understanding of the Church—may be seen clearly in the patterns of leadership, participation, and inclusion that characterize its common life.

For many churches, the articulation of an egalitarian theology that affirms the equal worth and value of all people—including people of all genders—is considered a vital cornerstone within their official doctrinal confession statements. However, subtle—

² Lathrop, "In Search of a Roundtable," 7.

and sometimes not-so-subtle—decisions and practices carried out within the congregation's day-to-day life may undermine these official declarations.³ Essentially, these deviations in praxis from a theoretical affirmation of egalitarianism expose an unspoken ecclesiology that prioritizes one group of people over all the others, particularly when it comes to the question of who may occupy positions of authority within the church.

Often, the hierarchies and titles found within a congregation's structural organization reveal insights into the ways in which their unspoken ecclesiology plays out on the ground. For example, churches that ordain their own leaders without the oversight of denominational or other governing bodies may confer the title of "Pastor" on any male leader they choose to hire, but equally-qualified women serving in similar leadership capacities at the church may be dubbed "Director" or "Ministry Leader," rather than "Pastor."⁴ The reasoning behind such decisions may never be openly discussed, but a reluctance to affirm the equivalency of women's and men's leadership and authority within the church belies an egalitarian theology—no matter how frequently or eloquently articulated—and points to an ecclesiology that relies upon boundaries of exclusion and hierarchy as necessary to the Church's nature and function.

In short, inclusive ecclesiology matters because the ways in which the Church perceives what and who and how the Church is called to be will ultimately influence its

³ For further reading regarding these claims and the examples cited in the following paragraph, see the narratives documented in the blog post by Sarah M. Keough, "Sexism and the Church, Part 2: Don't look like Marilyn Monroe (or: Microaggressions)," *Shark Feet* (blog), 15 July 2015, <https://smkeough.wordpress.com/2015/07/15/sexism-the-church-pt-2-dont-look-like-marilyn-monroe-or-microaggression>. See also Norma Cook Everist, "Gender, Power, and Leadership," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1 (2002): 45–67.

⁴ This is a personal example; I observed this particular situation take place among the leadership at one of the congregations where I was a member.

behaviors. It is the behaviors and practices of an organization that people notice—over and above whatever a group may say or publish—and it is these outward expressions of belief that ultimately convey the message of the gospel. If the actions of ecclesial bodies communicate an ecclesiology of exclusion, privilege, and inequality, the theology they are proclaiming will be lopsided as well. How can the Church preach a gospel of grace, love, forgiveness, redemption, salvation, and sanctification for all—regardless of gender, race, sexuality, class, socio-economic position, or ability—when its practices and behaviors indicate a preference for and an acceptance of only a *certain kind* of leader? In Christ there may be no male or female, no Jew or Greek, but in the Church it often seems that this kind of broad inclusivity exists in rhetoric only, not in the concrete expressions of leadership and practice that demonstrate who really matters.

Who is the gospel for? If the Church wants to affirm that the good news of God in Jesus Christ is truly for everyone, regardless of who they are apart from their identity in Christ, then the actions of the Church—as the lived expression of the people of God—must proclaim this truth even more loudly than its voices do. It is because the gospel is good news *for all* that it is good news for any. The ways in which believers understand the Church and live out that understanding matter because these are the proclamations of the gospel that the world hears the loudest. Only when the message of Christians' lives matches the message of their mouths will they truly be the Church, the people called to embody and proclaim God's good news.

Selected Theologians and Interpretive Images of the Church

Letty M. Russell addresses these issues of inclusion and their ecclesiological roots in *Church in the Round*, a theological exposition which she terms a “feminist interpretation of the Church.”⁵ But Russell does not stop with gender boundaries; she recognizes that the Church can only be an expression of God’s inclusion and grace when it is a place of inclusion for all. Addressing gender inequality and interpreting the Church through a feminist perspective offers Russell an entry point into the discussion of ecclesial inclusion, but she reiterates throughout *Church in the Round* that the pursuit of inclusivity cannot stop with issues of gender alone. She notes that the approach of feminist theology represents for her “a search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization” and a manner of advocating for the “full human personhood” of all people.⁶

Yet feminist theology functions as a helpful lens for the conversation of inclusivity in the Church, Russell asserts, because “Those who have been ‘left out’ become the very ones who understand most clearly why God’s welcome is such good news and where that welcome is needed.”⁷ Drawing upon the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24–30, Russell points out “the hermeneutical privilege” of those who have been excluded from full participation in the household of God.⁸

⁵ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸ *Ibid.*

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone (Mark 7:24–30, NRSV).⁹

If, Russell argues, the Church will listen to the voices of those who have been excluded—as Jesus listened to the logic of the Syrophenician woman's reply—and if the Church is willing to allow their experiences of exclusion to shift its paradigms—as the woman's argument affected Jesus' understanding of election¹⁰—then the Church can move towards a more inclusive and a more faithful expression of God's good news of welcome. A feminist interpretation of the Church offers a fruitful exploration of such voices and their hermeneutical privilege to which believers must attend, but by no means should the Church's pursuit of ecclesial inclusivity end there. Addressing issues of gender inclusivity in the Church is just the beginning of the work, Russell reminds her readers. God's good news of welcome invites *all people* to abundant life in the church in the round.

Working with a set of metaphors centered around this common theme of God's welcome and hospitality for all, Russell envisions an ecclesiology that moves the Church

⁹ *The HarperCollins Study Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). This version will be used throughout this paper unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ According to Russell's interpretation of this passage, Jesus' concept of election was altered and expanded by his encounter with the Syrophenician woman. See Russell's section "Contradictions of Divine Election," *Church in the Round*, 162–8.

towards a posture of greater inclusivity. Russell focuses on the image of the Church as a table—a round table, a kitchen table, and a welcome table. She nuances each of these differently, but her primary metaphor is that of a round table, one where there are no seats of honor or status—or, conversely, where *every* seat is a seat of honor and status. This kind of community is “church in the round,” an experience of the inclusive, welcoming, empowering life that develops around and flows outward from the round table.

Russell explains that “To speak of ‘church in the round’ is to provide a metaphorical description of a church struggling to become a household of freedom, a community where walls have been broken down so that God’s welcome to those who hunger and thirst for justice is made clear.”¹¹ *Church in the Round* envisions ecclesiology as progressing towards the metaphor of a round table, and while Russell is not the only theologian to employ the scriptural precedent of table imagery in her articulation of the nature and function of the Church,¹² her ecclesial imagery and interpretation push the Church towards a uniquely-nuanced vision of Christian community that proceeds from a feminist perspective of inclusive ecclesiology. Yet the image of the Church as table inspires other promising ecclesiological visions of inclusivity as well.

Related to and yet distinct from Russell’s round table imagery, theologian Jürgen Moltmann’s ecclesial metaphor of a “messianic fellowship in the messianic feast” features as one important image within his ecclesiological work.¹³ In this understanding,

¹¹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 12.

¹² See, for example, the essays of Christine Grumm and others in *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology, and Church Leadership*, ed. Musimbi Kanyoro (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997).

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977), 262.

the Church participates in the "eschatological feast of peace and joy shared by the nations in the kingdom of God" and prophesied by Isaiah:¹⁴

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
 a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
 of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
 And he will destroy on this mountain
 the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
 the sheet that is spread over all nations;
 he will swallow up death forever.
 Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
 and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
 for the Lord has spoken.
 It will be said on that day,
 Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
 This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
 let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation (Isa 25:6–9).

As the messianic fellowship, the Church participates in the messianic feast ushered in by Christ and presided over by the Spirit. Empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church is able to celebrate the current, messianic reality achieved by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as the coming consummation of God's kingdom on earth. In this feast of both the celebration of the redemptive and liberating work of Christ and the anticipation of the approaching eschatological fulfillment, the Church discovers its identity as the "messianic community" that has been led by the Spirit into this feasting lifestyle of exuberance and expectation.¹⁵ From this place of salvation and renewal, then, the Church is enabled to extend God's gracious love and redemption to all people through a posture of liberating openness and grace.

Moltmann describes "the messianic fellowship" whose identity is encapsulated

¹⁴ Ibid., 248.

¹⁵ Ibid., 225.

within the "messianic feast" in this way:

The fellowship which corresponds to the gospel in its original interpretation is the messianic community. It is the fellowship which narrates the story of Christ, and its own story with that story, because its own existence, fellowship, and activity springs from that story of liberation... The messianic community belongs to the Messiah and the messianic word: and this community, with the powers that it has, already realizes the possibilities of the messianic era, which brings the gospel of the kingdom to the poor, which proclaims the lifting up of the downtrodden to the lowly, and begins the glorification of the coming God through actions of hope in the fellowship of the poor, the sad and those condemned to silence, so that it may lay hold on all [humans].¹⁶

Both elements of fellowship and feast are integral to Moltmann's image of the Church, because both the community and the communal celebration are key to his ecclesiological understanding. Yet the connections between Russell's image of "table" and Moltmann's metaphor of "feast" are important. As more detailed examinations of their respective ecclesiological works are made, this correlation will be explored further. For now, however, it is sufficient to note the similarities of imagery that link the two authors, as well as their mutual identification of the reality that ecclesial models and expressions of the Church have the potential to change the surrounding world.¹⁷

While both Moltmann's and Russell's respective uses of imagery are firmly based in precedents and language found in Christian scripture and tradition, the ways in which each theologian uses their selected image of the Church dictate the content and conclusions of the ecclesiologies at which they arrive, as well as the ecclesial behaviors that subsequently emerge from such an understanding of the Church. Round table and feast are inherently related visions for the Church, but the ecclesiologies and ecclesial

¹⁶ Ibid., 225–6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 316.

expressions that each image inspires are distinctly nuanced. However, Moltmann and Russell agree that the metaphors Christians use to imagine the Church shape the visible sign of the gospel that they share with the world.

How do such images exist within the life of the Church? For many congregations, ecclesial metaphors occur within both the established, familiar language of the community and within intentionally-crafted designs created for both in-house and advertising use. Most Christians are acquainted with ecclesial descriptions derived directly from the words of the New Testament, such as "the body of Christ," "the people of God," or "the fellowship in faith."¹⁸ Often these are the same metaphorical phrases that occur within congregational publications such as service bulletins, newsletters, websites, and logos. However, churches also choose to develop additional imagery for themselves, particularly when a congregation is embarking upon a new season of vision-casting and mission-defining.

Whichever images are most prominent in the life and rhetoric of a congregation will typically have the most influence over the self-understanding and behavior of the group.¹⁹ It is because images live and exert power within the life of the Church—and therefore capture believers' theological imaginations and impact their patterns of thought and behavior—that ecclesiological visions are so important. Russell and Moltmann both identify this reality as crucial to the ecclesiological task of reflecting upon the nature and function of the Church and subsequently envisioning metaphors that faithfully express

¹⁸ See Paul S. Minear's discussion of major images of the Church in *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

¹⁹ For a discussion of the power of images, including the theological influence of those existing within the life of the Church, see Sara R. Danger, "Critical Vision: Word and Image in the Postmodern Age," *Word & World* 32 (2012): 227–36.

the truths of such theological reflection. A dynamic image for the Church not only describes an ecclesial understanding, but it casts a vision for what a life lived out of that understanding should resemble.²⁰

Therefore, whether one talks about a round table or a messianic feast—or another ecclesial image—any description of the Church “proclaims the kingdom of God through its way of life, which provides an alternative to the life of the world surrounding it.”²¹ The ways in which the Church perceives and envisions its ecclesiology inevitably form its ecclesial expressions, which in turn convey its interpretation of the gospel to a watching world. Images and metaphors matter.

Imagery, Understanding, and Practice

Precisely because images and metaphors carry such weight in the Church's ecclesiological development and behavior, the correlation between imagery, ecclesiology, and practical expression cannot be understated. The ecclesial imagery utilized by the Church is always reciprocally connected to its self-understanding and to its practices. Therefore, this paper will argue that a guiding ecclesiological image embodies an ecclesiological vision and gives rise to particular streams of congregational praxis.

In developing this thesis, I will utilize Russell's and Moltmann's respective ecclesiological images to explore the ways in which their selected metaphors interact within the essential relationship of guiding image, theological understanding, and actual ecclesial practices. The validity of Russell's and Moltmann's ecclesiologies is not in

²⁰ According to Russell, “A metaphor is an imaginative way of describing what is still unknown by using an example from present concrete reality.” (Russell, *Church in the Round*, 12.)

²¹ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 316.

dispute—both are scripturally and theologically appropriate interpretations of the nature and function of the Church. Yet even the closely-related images chosen by these authors—round table and messianic feast—yield slightly different conclusions about what the Church is and how the Church should behave.

Every image employed in ecclesiological discussion will embody a unique theological understanding of the Church and elicit a particular course of congregational praxis. Although Russell's and Moltmann's chosen images overlap thematically in many ways, the nuances between Church as round table and Church as messianic feast must be drawn out in order to examine their ecclesiological and practical implications. Therefore, the two questions I am asking of these theologians and their respective images of the Church are first, what ecclesiology does the selected ecclesial metaphor embody, and second, how does this understanding of the Church, as guided by the ecclesiological image, affect ecclesial practice?

Sections one and two of this paper will ask these questions of Russell's and Moltmann's work, exploring their selected imagery and the implications for their respective ecclesiological understandings and practices. Section three will propose a third guiding image for consideration within the pursuit of inclusive ecclesiology and praxis. By presenting a constructive theology that builds upon the discussions of sections one and two, this final section will center around my own envisioning of how my suggested ecclesial image embodies a particular ecclesiological understanding and affects congregational practice. It is my hope that these reflections—along with future work in the same vein—will open the door even wider for creative guiding images, faithful

expressions, further theological growth, and greater hospitality as the twenty-first century Church continues to seek to understand its nature and function as the round table of God's generous inclusion—the "welcome table" of God.²²

²² Russell, *Church in the Round*, 12.

Section One: Church as Round Table and Russell's Ecclesiology

We're gonna sit at the welcome table!
 We're gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days; Hallelujah!...
 All kinds of people around that table
 one of these days! Hallelujah!
 All kinds of people round that table!
 Gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days.²³

Inverted Expectations at the Table of God's Kingdom

In its most basic sense, to have "a seat at the table" means to be included. An invitation to the metaphorical table connotes respect, worth, and value to the recipient, and representation at the table confers prestige, privilege, and power upon the included one. To be seated at the table is to be a part of what is taking place, to have a say in what happens, and to be recognized as an indispensable participant in the conversation. Conversely, to be denied a seat at the table is to be told that you, your concerns, and your voice do not matter. If you have no place at the table, you have no place at all.

In the great reversal of Luke 13:22–30, Jesus announces that God intends to include at the table all those who have been cast to the margins of society, while those who have enjoyed power and anticipated a reserved seat will be excluded.

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you

²³ "Welcome Table," Afro-American spiritual, in *An Advent Sourcebook*, ed. Thomas O'Gorman (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 50.

see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (Luke 13:22–30).

Although Letty Russell does not refer directly to the passage of Luke 13:22–30 in *Church in the Round*, the ecclesiology she describes throughout her book reflects a deep understanding of and reliance upon the themes of God's inclusivity and expectation-inversion found in Luke's Gospel. In fact, in building her argument for ecclesial round table imagery, Russell refers to more sections of Luke than she does to passages from any other biblical book.²⁴ Indeed, as Russell notes in her introductory section of *Church in the Round*, "Round Table Talk," "Although communal meals are important to many of the writers [of the New Testament], according to [New Testament scholar] Paul Minear, the writer of Luke/Acts thought of 'table fellowship as interpreted by table talk' as constituting the gospel."²⁵ Therefore, understanding the context and orienting concerns of Luke's Gospel is an important prerequisite for understanding Russell's approach to inclusive ecclesiology and her associated image of the Church as round table.

Exclusion or Inclusion at God's Table?

Jesus' words in Luke 13:22–30 describe a vision of who will be seated at the table in the kingdom of God and who will be denied such a seat. Christ declares that "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God,"

²⁴ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 245–7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

seated in places of honor at the table (v. 29).²⁶ However, these persons included on the divine seating chart will not be those who presume they have a reserved seat in the kingdom. "Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last" (v. 30).

This table parable demonstrates God's intention to gather into the kingdom people from the far corners of the world. Topographically, this means drawing in those from the east, west, north, and south—not just Jews living in the diaspora, but also those whom Israel has long considered outcasts: namely, the Gentiles. Even more specifically, Luke 13:22–30 declares that God plans to include all those who have been shunted to society's margins and pushed away from the center to the very ends of the earth.

Jesus warns of this great reversal: those who have been marginalized by the oppression of people wielding power and privilege will be prioritized in the kingdom of God. Moreover, those currently occupying positions of power and favor (i.e., the Israelites, and particularly their religious leaders) are in for an unpleasant shock and a complete inversion of their expectations of whom God intends to invite and seat at the

²⁶ Several other translations, including the New American Bible and The Message paraphrase, are even more explicit about this table fellowship. Instead of referring simply to the action of eating, the NAB remarks that the included ones will "recline at the table in the kingdom of God," while the Message renders verse 29 in this way: "You'll watch outsiders stream in from east, west, north, and south and sit down at the table of God's kingdom." The Greek text does not include the noun "table," but refers to the act of feasting—which was intimately linked to table fellowship and the significance of the table within ancient Greco-Roman society. (See "Banquets: Eschatological Banquet," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 143–144., and Mitzi Minor, "Luke 13:22–30: The Wrong Question, the Right Door," *Review and Expositor* 91 (1994): 553.)

kingdom's table of inclusion.²⁷ Those who are now first will be last, and those who are last will be first. This is God's economy of inclusion at the "welcome table" of the kingdom.

Such an announcement of radical inclusion within the historical and cultural context of first-century Israel would have been unexpected, to say the least. Scripturally and theologically speaking, this theme of God inverting expectations and declaring a preference for the marginalized and the outcast stretches as far back as the Genesis narratives.²⁸ Yet the identities of the author and the audience of Luke's Gospel makes all the difference in understanding the impact of this scriptural theme incorporated in this place within Luke's narrative. If the tradition that identifies the author of Luke's Gospel as a Gentile is correct—and there is much evidence to support it—that means that Luke's is the only canonical gospel to have been written by a Gentile.²⁹ This Gentile identity may account for one of the author's central concerns in the Gospel: answering the question "Who are the true people of God?"³⁰

Biblical scholar Mitzi Minor believes that Luke's church community wrestled with this question because of their mixed demographics.³¹ Both Jews and Gentiles

²⁷ Mitzi Minor observes that "Table fellowship was the litmus test of social unity in the world of the early church. It was symbolic of appropriate relationships between those at the table. Persons ate with their families, clans, social class—those who fit within their social boundaries. Thus, the claim of the outsiders to have sat at the table with Christ is an effort to prove their social solidarity with him." (Mitzi Minor, "Luke 13:22–30: The Wrong Question, the Right Door," *Review and Expositor* 91 (1994): 553.) This cultural standard is an important element of this passage's socio-cultural context. Many in the ancient Greco-Roman world might have assumed that such expressions of solidarity guaranteed future reward. However, Jesus' parable rejects salvation on the basis of social status and inverts this expectation completely—much as Jesus' other teachings turned cultural norms and religious anticipations entirely on their heads.

²⁸ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 29.

²⁹ Minor, "The Wrong Question, the Right Door," 551.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

comprised the church towards the end of the first century (when Luke most likely was writing his Gospel), and in fact, it is possible that Gentile Christians may have constituted a majority in some regions and congregations.³² The influx of non-Jewish people into the church raised theological questions, particularly that of Christian identity.³³

The Jews had always understood themselves to be the people of God, and Jesus was a Jewish messiah. Yet now the church of Jesus was rapidly becoming a Gentile church.³⁴ So just who were the true people of God? Minor posits that "One of Luke's major considerations in writing this gospel was to address this question."³⁵ Viewed in this light, then, Luke 13:22–30 can be understood to constitute part of Luke's response.³⁶ Within the Kingdom of God, the Gospel of Luke proclaims, "A great reversal is pictured as a result of which those who were outsiders will be let in, and those who thought they were in will be left out."³⁷

Indeed, it is this theme of "a great reversal" to which Luke continually returns. The parable of Luke 13:22–30, both individually and when considered part of the larger whole of Luke's Gospel, reiterates this moral: In the kingdom of God, all norms and expectations are inverted. Those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last. Letty Russell draws upon this Lukan orienting concern as she takes up the

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ R. Alan Culpepper notes that "it is clear that Luke is vitally interested in Israel's rejection of the gospel and the subsequent inclusion of Gentiles. The two foundational reversals of the kingdom are first, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and second, the rejection of Jesus by Israel and the subsequent inclusion of the Gentiles." (R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, volume IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 278.)

³⁷ Robert J. Shirock, "The Growth of the Kingdom in Light of Israel's Rejection of Jesus: Structure and Theology in Luke 13:1–35," *Novum Testamentum* 35, no. 1 (1993) : 24.

expectation-inverting anthem in her interpretation of inclusive ecclesiology in *Church in the Round*.

The Great Reversal and Russell's Ecclesiology

The concept of the great reversal at the table of the kingdom, as described in Luke 13:22–30, figures prominently in Russell's discussion of the Church as a unifying round table of God's welcome and inclusion.³⁸ As Russell summarizes her ecclesiological and eschatological perspective, "The ultimate goal of God's household is to do away with the margin and the center by joining the one who is at the center of life in the church but dwells on the margin where he lived and died."³⁹ There is no greater example of God's gracious work of inversion than the cross.

Just as Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection demonstrate the shocking inversions that characterize God's redemptive work, God's reversal of our expectations is a constant and unmistakable theme throughout the biblical metanarrative. Russell draws upon the scriptural witness to remind us that God often works in ways that appear contrary to our limited understanding of how things should be in the kingdom. Of particular interest to her ecclesiology are the stories from the gospels—such as the

³⁸ Strictly speaking, a table that is round has no priority seating. By its very definition, a round table's seats are all equal to one another. In contrast, the theme of God's grand inversion from Luke 13 declares that the last will be first and the first will be last. Russell's image of a round table and the Lukan theme of inversion complement each other in many ways, but because of the two metaphors' inherent differences, there is an evident tension between these interpretations of divine inclusion. My understanding is that *all* the seats of the round table constitute "seats of honor" for those whom God invites to take their place around the table; the fact of inclusion is that which confers the honor and a "priority seating" status to all of the table's seats. As both Russell and Moltmann emphasize, God's intention is to welcome all people to such positions of unexpected honor by including them at the table. While the Lukan parable's take on the existence and implementation of priority at God's table differs from Russell's and Moltmann's understandings, the broader theme of inverted expectations at the table still offers helpful theological insight into the scriptural basis upon which Russell constructs her round table ecclesiology.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

parable of Luke 13:22–30—that allow people who had previously been marginalized, ignored, and silenced to have a voice. In surprising and unexpected exchanges, Russell points out, Jesus attends to the words and needs of lepers, beggars, outcasts, children, women, Gentiles, the demon-possessed, and the poor, offering them a seat of honor and welcome at the table of God's inclusive kingdom.

Returning to the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24–30, Russell notes that both the reader's and Jesus' expectations are inverted in this dialogue. Jesus, his disciples, the Jewish audience—all anticipate a certain outcome based on their experiences and assumptions, and yet the Syrophenician woman courageously offers an alternative way of seeing the situation, one that clearly resonates with God's concern for the outcast. The figures of teacher and student are reversed in the episode, and it turns out that the person on the margin—a poor, socially-disadvantaged, non-Jewish woman—boldly speaks out to suggest a new perspective of divine grace to the Rabbi—that is, the Son of God.

Whether or not one agrees with the Christology implied by Russell's interpretation of this text, her response highlights the fact that the inclusion preached by the Syrophenician woman is in fact representative of the kind of hospitality God offers to all in God's kingdom. It is the same ecclesiological reality that makes room at the eschatological table for people from all corners of the globe. It is an inversion of expectations and an outpouring of love and grace with which God chooses to identify and through which God is pleased to work. It is a reversal that makes sense only from a kingdom perspective. Russell remarks:

Here a woman does her own naming and calls Jesus to use God's power to help her daughter. In this reversal of role models we have the one who is the nobody do the educating and the one who is the teacher do the learning! It might be upsetting to think that a woman helps Jesus to discover (or redefine) his own calling more fully, except that is exactly what happens for us. We don't own the call we receive in baptism or ordination. We all share in the one call of Christ. In baptism our call is confirmed, but it is not complete, and neither, it seems, was Jesus' call. When the Syrophenician woman caught him with his compassion down, she witnessed to Jesus about the need to broaden his ministry of hospitality to those outside the house of Israel.⁴⁰

The unexpected grace Jesus extends to the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:30 is the same expectation-inverting grace Luke describes as being paradigmatic of the kingdom. It is the same unreasonable inclusivity that Jesus preaches in the Sermon on the Mount. It is the scandal of the gospel and the inconceivable divine hospitality that built the Church in its first centuries, as slaves and women and Gentiles found a welcome place within the household of God. Russell reminds us, "...the ministry of the Syrophenician woman models for us the importance of understanding what the gospel is about from the perspective of outsiders, those marginal persons who are hungering and thirsting for good news."⁴¹ Indeed, paying attention to such persons' viewpoints and experiences demonstrates again precisely *why* God's expectation-inverting, role-reversing, paradigm-shattering grace is such good news.

Methodology and Imagery for Mission and Praxis

This emphasis on God's sovereign agency to invert our expectations, God's gracious choice to include those who have been excluded, and humanity's finite and fragmented grasp of God's larger redemptive vision is central not only to Russell's

⁴⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁴¹ Ibid., 164.

ecclesiology, but also to her doctrine of God and her theological anthropology. The rest of her systematics, including her hamartiology and her soteriology, flow from this apprehension of God's great and invitational reversal as well.⁴² As Luke makes clear in his account of the parable of the kingdom banquet, salvation is both an expression of and a recruitment into the grace-filled, invitational ethos of divine hospitality.⁴³ And for Russell, this boundless hospitality is best conveyed through the symbol of the table.

In articulating her theological and ecclesiological understanding, Russell employs several metaphors for the Church, but she always returns to the central image of a table. Whether she calls it a round table, a kitchen table, or a welcome table, the picture of this universal and vital piece of furniture remains constant in her discussions of the Church. The nuances vary, but the basic idea stays the same. "Indeed," Russell asserts, "there is no limit to the number of tables that are part of church in the round, just as there is no limit to the signs of Christ's presence."⁴⁴ The ways in which Christians envision and talk about the Church will forever be multiplying, as long as they pay attention to the ever-increasing ways in which Christ is making himself known among them.

Russell's ecclesiological methodology, in fact, hinges upon this concept of ongoing reflection, analysis, and constructive response. Although not unique to Russell's work, this "spiral connection" of examination and revision emphasizes the importance of listening to the experiences of those whose voices have historically been ignored or drowned out by the Church's leaders.⁴⁵ Feminist theologians in particular value this

⁴² See Russell's discussions of salvation and election, *Church in the Round*, 114–27; 162–68.

⁴³ Russell avers, "...to be saved is to receive the gift of God's welcome into a covenant relationship of justice and shalom with ourselves, with God, and with our neighbor." (Russell, *Church in the Round*, 122.)

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29–31.

theological spiral because it offers opportunities not only to engage in critical analysis of the social, historical, and structural contexts that contribute to our experiences, but also to ask questions about biblical and church traditions that “help us gain new insight into the meaning of the gospel as good news for the oppressed and marginalized.”⁴⁶

Like Russell's array of table imagery, a spiral methodology offers new and continually evolving perspectives of context and tradition that lead to “action, celebration, and further reflection.”⁴⁷ The spiral is not a closed circle, but rather an ongoing ring of movement with no end. “Each time a new angle is examined,” Russell writes, “it is necessary to ask ourselves how the feminist perspective shapes our understanding of scripture and tradition.”⁴⁸ In terms of her ecclesiology, Russell concludes that her feminist perspective results in theological commitments that emphasize God's unexpected hospitality and God's desire to care for and incorporate those on the margins into an ever-widening circle of embrace and redemption.

What does this mean for the mission and praxis of the Church? Simply put, the Church must be about the same kind of inclusive, redemptive, and welcoming work as God, or it will not be a true reflection of God's kingdom community here on earth. The spiral connection is key here for the development of ecclesial practice. “The community of faith and struggle, then, is the community that makes use of its critically reflected experience of struggle in the process of traditioning by which it selects from the still living and evolving past of scriptural and church tradition as a means of shaping an

⁴⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 34.

alternative future.”⁴⁹ Such an alternative future, of course, represents God’s expectation-inverting work turning the assumptions of this world upside-down; the round table of God’s invitation and inclusion is no longer a shocking alternative if it is viewed from a kingdom perspective.

In her introduction to *Church in the Round*, Russell narrates a vignette that illustrates the kind of practical expressions of ecclesial life that can stem from embracing God’s commitments to inclusion and invitation as the mission of the Church. She describes an event in the life of her congregation in East Harlem that offered the church an opportunity “to create a sanctuary that in itself symbolized our connection to one another as a family that gathered across racial lines.”⁵⁰ By repositioning the long wooden pews of the sanctuary into a circular arrangement—“with a large space in the center around the table where we could crowd together for the breaking of bread”—the congregation discovered a manner of worshiping “in the round” that physically embodied their commitment to an ecclesiology rooted in the image of the Church as round table.⁵¹

Russell remarks upon her delight in how transformational this simple and practical adjustment within the worship space was for the congregation’s ecclesial life: “By the time the second fall had arrived, the new tradition stuck and was considerably reinforced when no one wanted to help move the pews back! Thus was born a round table that symbolized our table talk and table sharing as we gathered in community.”⁵² By embracing and expressing the ecclesiological mission encapsulated by the imagery of

⁴⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Church as round table, this church body discovered and epitomized the three-fold connection of ecclesial guiding image, ecclesiological understanding, and practical embodiment. Metaphor, theology, and praxis intertwined and flourished together beautifully.

Unfortunately, the Church has not always approached its mission with the kind of receptive and expressive attitude demonstrated by Russell's Harlem congregation. Although texts like Luke 13:22–30 urge the Church to expand its understanding of whom God welcomes at the table, all too often believers lapse into theological torpors that emphasize the maintenance of the status quo, rather than the pursuit of the spiral connection. Inevitably, this leads to ecclesial postures of exclusion rather than embrace.⁵³ Instead of the inviting, open space of the altar surrounded by equal seating in the round, hierarchical structures and gatekeeping practices take precedence. "Preoccupied by deciding who has access to Christ and to God's table," Russell admits, "the church has often fenced out many of those whom Jesus welcomed."⁵⁴

Yet the work of Russell and others reminds us that our methods of ecclesiology offer us the opportunity to "talk back" to such traditions and to break out of our limiting and exclusionary patterns.⁵⁵ A theological methodology that utilizes ongoing reflection of experience, context, tradition, and response allows the Church to explore the web of connections that exist between all of these areas. Eventually, such an ecclesiological practice leads to greater freedom, truer expressions, and rounder corners of the table that

⁵³ See Miroslav Volf's discussion of exclusion as humanity's primary sin in *Exclusion and Embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 197.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

is God's Church.

What makes these connections startling and unexpected, of course, is their source. Russell insists that the spiral methodology is only useful in revitalizing our ecclesiology and bringing it into closer alignment with God's commitment to inclusivity when it incorporates the experiences and voices of those who have previously been silenced and ignored by the Church:

...ecclesiology is by its very nature not only talking back to tradition but also talking back and forth between tradition and its historical context. Feminist ecclesiology is not different in this respect from any other expression of the church's self-understanding, but it is different in that the self-understanding includes action/reflection on the way faith shapes life in the struggle for justice on behalf of marginalized people. What makes its back talk so startling is that the voices doing the talking have not been those of the church officials and scholars who are the usual interpreters of meaning in the church.⁵⁶

Talking back to tradition can only move the Church forward into an alternative future of inclusivity if the imagery it develops and the voices it allows to speak into its ecclesiological reflections and praxis help it to establish connections from its own position to the margins and back again. Such work requires attentive listening, yes, but also a dedication to practicing reciprocity and a commitment to solidarity with those who have been marginalized by the Church's own structures of exclusion. Ultimately, Russell concludes, "Jesus' message is that he is found with the outsiders, not because they are any more righteous than the others but because, as a group, they are the ones who help us know when justice is done and all are included."⁵⁷ Only when congregations' images,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 197.

ecclesiologies, and actions coalesce to capture this grand reversal of God's inclusion will the Church embody the round table paradigm of the kingdom.

Section Two: Church as Fellowship in Feast and Moltmann's Ecclesiology

They must be loved into roundness,
 where apart is spelled a part
 and the call is to the gathering
 For God has called a People,
 not 'them and us'
 'Them and us' are unable to gather around,
 for at a roundtable, there are no sides
 And ALL are invited to wholeness and to food.⁵⁸

Divine Inclusion at the Kingdom Feast

A feast is not a feast without food. Yet food alone constitutes merely a meal. Without elements of celebration, grandeur, and extravagance, true feasting does not occur. It is the festal atmosphere, rather than the menu, that makes a feast.

When Jesus refers to the divine feast in the kingdom of God, he omits any description of the array of delicacies available at the feasting table; instead, he emphasizes the characteristics of honor, celebration, anticipation, and fulfillment that make the banquet so special. To take part in the feast is to engage and embody this festal culture; therefore, to be a feasting community means to manifest the qualities of the feast in all lived expressions of fellowship. According to Jesus, those who enter into such a festal lifestyle bring the coming feast of the kingdom a little nearer.

Another Lukan parable describes both the nature of the kingdom feast and the character of the one who hosts it.⁵⁹ While a guest at a Pharisee's banquet, Jesus instructs his fellow diners to take a cue from God when it comes to issuing invitations to festal celebrations.

⁵⁸ Lathrop, "In Search of a Roundtable," 6.

⁵⁹ Roger W. Sullivan, "The Parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24)," *The Theological Educator* 56 (1997): 61.

Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses... So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner'" (Luke 14:16–18a, 21–24).

Although Jesus' parable expresses a clear bias against those who understand themselves to be worthy of an invitation to the meal and yet make excuses for their absence from it, the story's emphasis is on the host's prerogative to include any and all of those who appear to be undeserving of welcome at the banquet. The kingdom feast is a feast open to all precisely because of the gracious nature of its divine host. It is from this reality that the Church derives its identity as "the messianic fellowship in the messianic feast,"⁶⁰ for, as Jürgen Moltmann explains, "the fellowship at table of the men and women who follow Jesus and enter into his messianic mission must be open for the meal which accepts and justifies 'tax-collectors and sinners,' and must be seen in the perspective of the universal banquet of the nations in the coming kingdom."⁶¹

Moltmann understands Jesus' messianic mission to be centered around this eschatological vision of the open feast in the kingdom of God. The God who chooses not to be God without us⁶² incorporates us into the divine life as welcome participants in the eschatological feast. The grand and open invitation of the incarnation is that of gracious

⁶⁰ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 262.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶² "[W]hat unites God and us is that God does not will to be God without us, that [God] creates us rather to share with us..." (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1 (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 7.)

inclusion and full participation within the feasting community of the kingdom of God. For the messianic fellowship—that is, the Church—this means that “The ‘evangelist’ of the poor is also the messianic ‘host’ who invites the hungry to eat and drink in the kingdom of God and brings them into divine fellowship.”⁶³

Open Invitation to the Open Feast

Jesus’ parable in Luke 14 parallels in many ways his dinner table story in the previous chapter of Luke.⁶⁴ Again the narrative of the preparations for a great banquet leads to an unexpected outcome and an unanticipated guest list. Despite the differences in reaction from the elite crowd, the message of God’s inclusive hospitality is clear: “In both cases Jesus challenges the confidence of those who take it for granted that they will be present at the great eschatological banquet. In both cases there is a reversal of expectations about those who will be in and those who will miss out.”⁶⁵

In Luke 14:16–24, these reversed expectations have to do with who is worthy of receiving an invitation to the feast. According to New Testament scholar Roger W. Sullivan, the parable draws upon first century near-Eastern social customs dictating invitation protocol.⁶⁶ As plans were made for an upcoming banquet, the host would send out preliminary requests to the intended guests—who, on the basis of their social status and their connections with the host, knew to expect an invitation—at which time the invitees would make an initial commitment to attend. The guests would anticipate that a second announcement would be made when all the preparations were complete and the

⁶³ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 249.

⁶⁴ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary 35B (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 753.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Sullivan, “The Parable of the Great Supper,” 63.

feast was about to begin.⁶⁷ To refuse the host's invitation at this point, as all of the previously-notified guests in Jesus' parable do, was considered within the operant cultural norms to be "a serious insult, far worse than refusing the first invitation."⁶⁸ This is the first reversal of the parable—the unprecedented rejection of the host's offer.

The second and even more shocking reversal of the story comes with the host's response to the guests' refusals. Instead of canceling the party, the host decides that his table will be filled and the feast will commence at all costs. Therefore, he sends his servant out into the streets of the town—and then into the lanes of the countryside—with an invitation for "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" to join in his celebration. Despite the initial rebuff from his peers, the host is determined to feast in the company of other diners—without their presence, in fact, the feast could not take place. Sullivan notes that "the unfaithfulness of persons does not negate the faithfulness of God."⁶⁹ The feast must—and does—go on.

Because of the host's commitment to the banquet, invitations are issued to anyone and everyone. There is no discrimination when it comes to seeing that the feasting table is thoroughly attended. Indeed, without a full house the feast cannot occur, since the presence of food alone does not entail a true feast. The convivial atmosphere of celebration and camaraderie is necessary for the banquet to take place. Therefore, the party becomes an "open feast" to which an open invitation is issued,⁷⁰ just as in the kingdom of God "the very standards and practices of discrimination will be overthrown"

⁶⁷ According to R. Alan Culpepper, there is additional scriptural evidence of this two-tiered invitation practice, with examples found in Esther 5:8 and 6:14. (Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 289.)

⁶⁸ Sullivan, "The Parable of the Great Supper," 63.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷⁰ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 258.

and "the outcasts will be accepted as equals."⁷¹ For the sake of the open feast, the open invitation must be issued.

Central to Moltmann's interpretation of the messianic feast of the kingdom of God is the fact that it is an open feast to which all people are invited by Christ. The all-encompassing invitation of the host in Luke 14:16–24⁷² epitomizes this soteriological understanding, one summed up by New Testament scholar T. W. Manson in his declaration that "The two essential points in His teaching are that no [human] can enter the Kingdom without the invitation of God, and that no [human] can remain outside it but by [their] own deliberate choice."⁷³

In light of the the context, orienting concerns, and theological commitments of Luke's Gospel, as explored in the previous section, this emphasis on Christ's open invitation to the kingdom feast comes as no surprise.⁷⁴ R. Alan Culpepper notes that the Book of Luke emphasizes this priority of divine inclusion and kingdom hospitality throughout its chapters.

[Luke's Gospel] continually calls the Christian community to model more fully Jesus' concern for the oppressed, the overlooked, and the outcast. The kingdom community is one in which the social barriers that divide and exclude are torn down and God's grace can begin to flow to and

⁷¹ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 288.

⁷² It is important to note that while the parable's original invitees declined to attend the feast, they did in fact receive an invitation from the host. Roger W. Sullivan remarks in his commentary on this passage that "God chooses all so that all have the opportunity to choose [God]. There is no select group whom God chooses while closing the door to the 'non-elect' ... Those not present at the banquet are absent because of their choice to stay away, not because they did not receive an invitation." (Sullivan, "The Parable of the Great Supper," 66.)

⁷³ T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1957), 130.

⁷⁴ "The parable reflects Luke's primary concern with practical charity and inclusion of the outcasts, with a related warning against worldly concerns that lead one to miss that which is most important. Jesus' healing ministry and table fellowship with the sick, maimed, and poor were clear and graphic ways of expressing the celebrated presence of the kingdom, anticipating the final eschatological banquet." J. Lyle Story, "All is Now Ready: An exegesis of 'The Great Banquet' (Luke 14:15–24) and 'The Marriage Feast' (Matthew 22:1–14)," *American Theological Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (2009): 77.

among the wealthy and the poor, the sick and the self-righteous, the powerful and the excluded.⁷⁵

Called to embody the attributes of God's kingdom, then, the Church is commissioned to participate in and welcome others to the open feast that has been inaugurated by Christ. For Moltmann, the open invitation to the kingdom feast shapes the ways in which the Church understands itself, its salvation, and its mission. Openness to the other does not stop with tolerance of denominational differences or theological divergences. God's open invitation to all people to join in the feast means that the Church's hospitality must extend to "all whom [Christ] is sent to invite."⁷⁶ The invitation's inclusivity must have no boundaries precisely because Christ's sacrifice and redemption have none.

The openness of the crucified Lord's invitation to his supper and his fellowship reaches beyond the frontiers of different denominations. It even reaches beyond the frontiers of Christianity; for it is addressed to "all nations" and to "tax-collectors and sinners" first of all. Consequently we understand Christ's invitation as being open, not merely to the churches but to the whole world."⁷⁷

This is what it means to understand the banquet of the kingdom as an open feast. And the Church, as the feasting fellowship, has been entrusted with extending God's open invitation to partake in this inclusive celebration to the whole world. Its identity, function, and mission are caught up in the vision offered by the guiding image of the open feast.

⁷⁵ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 30–31.

⁷⁶ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 244.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

The Open Feast and Moltmann's Ecclesiology

This understanding of the kingdom banquet as an open feast, as described by Jesus in the parable of Luke 14:16–24, guides Moltmann's reflections on both ecclesiology and ecclesial practice. Drawing upon Isaiah's prophetic vision of the eschatological feast in which God will both rule over and invite in all nations to God's great celebration (Isa 25:6–9), Moltmann notes that this feast is both imminent and already present through the ministry and presence of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' fellowship of the common meal is therefore inseparable from his gospel of the nearness of the kingdom and his acceptance of sinners. His message about the kingdom and his forgiveness of sins are incomprehensible without this fellowship of the table. The feast of the messianic era and the community of the saved was anticipated by Jesus, and anticipated with tax-collectors and sinners. That is why his feasts are joyful 'wedding' feasts in the dawn of the divine rule as demonstrations of God's undeserved, prevenient, and astounding grace (cf. Luke 15:22ff; 19:1–10).⁷⁸

According to Moltmann's eschatological understanding, the scene described by Isaiah—in which “a feast of rich food” is hosted by the Lord “for all peoples” as God comforts “all nations” by wiping away their tears and swallowing up death and disgrace forever (Isa 25:6, 7, 8)—is already taking place within Jesus' feasting fellowship. His “fellowship of the common meal” demonstrates the gospel he preaches and offers an entry point for the in-breaking of God's eschatological redemption.⁷⁹ Moreover, the table ministry Jesus entrusted to his disciples and his Church also proclaims the good news of God's open invitation to the feast and embodies the now-and-not-yet reality of God's

⁷⁸ Ibid., 248.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

festal kingdom.⁸⁰ The Church finds its identity and its mission in the image of the open feast that Jesus describes in his parables and initiates through his actions.

Moltmann's ecclesiology, therefore, emphasizes God's gracious and astounding decision to work through the Church in order to invite all people to redemption in Christ. In this understanding, the Church continues Jesus' ministry of drawing in and including the outcast fringe of "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame" (Luke 14:21)—along with all others—in the celebratory banquet of God's kingdom. As the fellowship that participates in the messianic mission of extending to the world the divine invitation to the kingdom feast that is already being ushered into the present through the active work and Spirit of Christ, the Church therefore must take care to embody this reality through its ecclesial expressions and behaviors—particularly, according to Moltmann, its eucharistic and worship practices.

Methodology and Imagery for Mission and Praxis

Much as Russell encourages a theological method of "talking back to tradition" in a way that incorporates both action and reflection,⁸¹ Moltmann approaches the practical concerns of church life from a critical-reflective perspective that envisions the embodiment of the guiding image of the open feast within the ecclesial practices of the Church. Moltmann's methodology hinges upon not only a commitment to orthodoxy and scriptural tradition but also to the engagement of theological imagination as he interprets

⁸⁰ "The special thing about Jesus' eating together with his disciples is that not only does it give effect to Jesus' messianic mission in the disciples themselves (as in the case of the tax-collectors and sinners), but they are also drawn actively into his messianic mission and participate in it... The meal with the disciples is not an exclusive meal enjoyed by the righteous; it is the meal of Jesus' friends, who participate in his mission 'to seek that which was lost.'" (Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 249.)

⁸¹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 44.

the sacramental and worshiping practices of the Church via his ecclesiological understanding of "the messianic fellowship in the messianic feast."⁸² For Moltmann, the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the liturgical expressions of the worshiping life of the Church are two areas that must provide clear examples of this ecclesiological interpretation coming into focus. As Moltmann declares, "It is precisely in its character as a fellowship in word and sacrament, and as a charismatic fellowship, that the church will understand itself as a messianic fellowship of service for the kingdom of God."⁸³

In describing the messianic open feast through the sacramental lens of the Lord's Supper, Moltmann remarks that its defining characteristic of openness reveals several realities of the Church's nature and mission within multiple realms.

As a feast open to the churches, Christ's supper demonstrates the community's catholicity. As a feast open to the world it demonstrates the community's mission to the world. As a feast open to the future it demonstrates the community's universal hope. It acquires this character from the prevenient, liberating and unifying invitation of Christ.⁸⁴

The covenant and the fellowship created and celebrated by the open feast of the Lord's Supper are "universal, all-embracing and exclusive of no one; they are open to the world because they point to the banquet of the nations."⁸⁵ Therefore, the ecclesiology that emerges from this guiding image of the open feast—embodied by the practice of welcoming all people and refusing to bar anyone access to the eucharistic table—reflects this commitment to boundless inclusivity as well. It is this sense of unreserved invitation and communion that should inform the Church's sacramental practices.

⁸² Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 262

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

Likewise, the ecclesiology that understands the Church to be the fellowship of God's open feast prompts a vision of corporate worship that is imbued with the divine invitational mission. The nature of the open feast of the Lord's Supper must spill out into the worshiping and invitational lifestyle of the feasting fellowship. Moltmann concludes that "A community without the common table loses its messianic spirit and its eschatological meaning,"⁸⁶ and therefore the worshiping and evangelistic life of the Church is also impoverished without the guiding image of the open feast. If the communion table is the place within the life of the fellowship that most clearly embodies the image of the open feast, then the worship practices of the fellowship are the evidences which reveal the most visible attributes of the festal lifestyle.

As the intersection between eschatological vision and ecclesiological practice, the worshiping life of the Church serves to inspire real hope and yet confront difficult realities.⁸⁷ True worship only occurs when the whole truth is told—both that of the imminent kingdom and that of the present brokenness. Moltmann reflects that "The service of worship reveals the heights of life, but also the poverty of the depths of our own lives. These dissonances are part of its harmony. They make it at once realistic and hopeful."⁸⁸

In this way, the worship of the Church participates in what the psalmist refers to as "the Lord's song in a foreign land" (Ps 137:4).⁸⁹ In fact, it takes part in the coming

⁸⁶ Ibid., 249.

⁸⁷ "The feast of the resurrection makes room for the cry of the crucified Jesus to God, and for the outcry of the dumb, imprisoned, suffering people... A celebration cannot endure the unanswered cry out of the depths or unsoled pain; but the feast with the crucified Christ in the presence of the Christ who is risen can be open for these things." (Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 274.)

⁸⁸ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

feast of the kingdom while yet remaining present in the midst of a broken world. It is this faithful practice of witness that makes the Church's worship "the fragmentary anticipation of God's free and festal world."⁹⁰

Worshiping as the fellowship of the feast, the Church does not turn away from the pain and suffering of the current moment, but it sees and engages with the places of brokenness out of its Spirit-empowered hope that the kingdom feast can and is transforming the darkness into light.⁹¹ The worshiping practices of the Church serve as its witness to the reality of the open feast—a reality visible only when the Church is fulfilling its call to live as both the banquet's honored guests and welcoming hosts. As it relies upon the Holy Spirit for the courage and faith to testify to the near and coming redemption of God epitomized in Isaiah's vision of the eschatological feast, the Church comes "to know itself as the messianic fellowship in the messianic feast."⁹²

Through the sharing of the sacraments and the extending of God's invitation to the nations, through the proclamation of the gospel and the acknowledgment of the present darkness, through the celebration of the current reality of the open feast and the anticipation of its glorious culmination, the Church comes to know itself as the festal fellowship. Its imagery, ecclesiology, soteriology, eschatology, mission, and practices are all caught up in the banquet parables. The inclusive, gracious, invitational nature of the feast's host casts a vision and issues a calling for precisely what and how the Church is to

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ "Anyone who celebrates the Lord's supper in a world of hunger and oppression does so in complete solidarity with the sufferings and hopes of all men, because he believes that the Messiah invites all men to his table and because he hopes that they will all sit at table with him. In the mysteries, the feast separates the initiated from the rest of the world. But Christ's messianic feast makes its participants one with the physically and spiritually hungry all over the world." (Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 258.)

⁹² Ibid., 262.

be in the world.⁹³ Yet it is not enough for the fellowship to capture this vision within its worship services. For it is the lived expression of the messianic fellowship that truly embodies the essence of the messianic feast.

The important point is that the assembled community should not merely give its worship the character of a messianic feast, but should also give its everyday individual and social functions the impress of messianic impulses... The whole of life becomes a feast.⁹⁴

The practices of the Lord's Supper and congregational worship provide a starting point for the Church to begin to discover what it may mean for the whole of its communal life to become a feast. The guiding image of the open feast—through which the Church's participation as the messianic fellowship leads to its perception of its identity and commission as the festal community—offers a new and viable way of developing an inclusive ecclesiology that leads to invitational behaviors and practices. Yet the primary actor in this faithful and transformational movement remains God's Spirit.

Moltmann reminds believers that "It is when the church, out of faith in Christ and in hope for the kingdom, sees itself as the messianic fellowship that it will logically understand its presence and its path in the presence and the process of the Holy Spirit."⁹⁵ The Church cannot be the Church without the Spirit's source of power and vision. Only when the Church engages its imagery, reflects upon its ecclesiology, and engages its practices within the guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit will it really know and

⁹³ "To preach the gospel of the kingdom to the poor, to heal the sick, to receive the despised, free prisoners, and eat and drink with the hungry is the feast of Christ in the history of God's dealings with the world." (Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 271.)

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 262, 270.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

embody its divinely-ordained purpose. Then it will fully exemplify the festal lifestyle of God's kingdom, wherein "the whole of life becomes a feast."⁹⁶ Then it will truly be the Church in the power of the Spirit.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 270.

Section Three: Setting God's "Welcome Table"

And it is we in the present
 who are mixing and kneading the dough for the future.
 We can no longer prepare for the past.
 To be Church,
 And if He calls for other than a round table
 We are bound to follow.
 Leaving the sawdust
 And chips, designs and redesigns
 Behind, in search of and in presence of
 The Kingdom
 That is His and not ours.⁹⁷

Dough for the Future

Much as good dough requires periods of kneading and resting, shaping and rising, in order to yield a future loaf worth all the steps of labor and waiting, so too does theological reflection require similar elements of patience and progression. The best bread recipes emphasize that the ingredients incorporated into the present mix must include not only new flour and fresh water, but also the heirloom of the dough starter, time-tested through thousands of loaves and passed down as both a legacy and a promise. Likewise, thoughtful and faithful theological reflection must incorporate not only contemporary ideas and a vision for the future, but a clear understanding of and a deep appreciation for the traditions and history which have formed and continue to shape the Church today. In both the reflecting and the envisioning, the kneading and the rising, growth in continuity is achieved. Jesus may well caution over-eager vintners against pouring new wine into old wineskins, but as any baker will tell you, the best dough emerges from a long heritage that integrates both past and present while anticipating a

⁹⁷ Lathrop, "In Search of a Roundtable," 7.

delicious future.

The theologians examined in this paper exhibit their appreciation for this multi-faceted reflective cycle, demonstrating their willingness to incorporate the flavors of tradition into the ecclesiological dough they are currently kneading and shaping for the future. Letty Russell and Jürgen Moltmann have engaged in this integrative work critically and faithfully, offering potent images for the Church that envision a hopeful, inclusive future while remaining true to the traditions and texts that have shaped Christian faith throughout its long history. In many ways, this treatment of Russell's and Moltmann's respective work has also represented a participation in the task of reflective kneading, listening, and watching that the best theological recipes require.

Place-setting at the Feasting Table

Russell and Moltmann inspire the Church to consider what it means to conceive of itself as round table and as open feast. Their images prompt reflection on the three-fold relationship that exists between guiding image, ecclesiological understanding, and practical expression. Just as the dough kneaded in the present becomes bread for the future, so the contemporary images offered by and for the Church develop into ecclesiologies and behaviors that are lived out by congregations and communities years from now. Yet the imagery set forth by these two theologians also inspires new interpretations and new metaphors for the kind of life the Church is called to lead.

Russell imagines the Church as a round table of God's welcome, addressing the problems of preferential seating and exclusionary boundaries. Moltmann visualizes the Church as a fellowship whose identity is rooted in its participation in the open feast of

redemption to which God invites all people. Somewhere in the amalgam of the symbols of table and feast perhaps there is a third image that can serve as a guiding metaphor for ecclesial contexts that are striving towards an inclusive ecclesiology. What if, in addition to and flowing out of Russell's and Moltmann's table and feast interpretations of the Church, the people of God also affirmed their identity as those who have been commissioned to set the table of God's welcome for all whom God invites to the banquet of the kingdom?

Both place-setting and dough-kneading are behind-the-scenes responsibilities that ensure all will be ready when the hour of the feast arrives and the guests are seated around the table. Without these preparations, the table would remain bare and there would be no banquet. For those who undertake the tasks of mixing the dough and laying the table, both the present moment and the moment of culmination intersect. Neither is more important than the other, for the first builds up into and makes possible the second. Without dough-kneaders and place-setters, the moment of celebration cannot occur, and it therefore cannot transform the empty table into the feasting table.

In his poem "In Search of a Round Table," Chuck Lathrop eloquently reminds the Church that "it is we in the present/ who are mixing and kneading the dough for the future."⁹⁸ There will be no bread in the future without the present work of preparing the dough. But bread alone does not make a banquet. The table, the feast, and the preparations all hang together. As both dough-kneaders and as place-setters, Christians thereby understand themselves to be called into the work of preparing the feasting table

⁹⁸ Ibid.

described by Russell and Moltmann.

Yet Lathrop's image of dough-kneading only goes so far. As a guiding ecclesial image, setting God's "welcome table"⁹⁹ better serves the Church's ecclesiological purposes. The vision of place-setting at the feasting table describes well the preparatory and invitational part that the Church plays within the inclusive banquet of the kingdom. It is an active role that connects with both Russell's work on the Church as round table and Moltmann's vision of the Church as open feast. When it comes to laying God's welcome table for the festal celebration, the metaphor of the Church as place-setters guides the task of envisioning the Church's nature and function and the practical implications of such understandings. Not only is the Church called to the work of preparing the dough for the coming meal, it is also commissioned with the task of setting the table for the future banquet in order that it may become the feasting table of the kingdom.

The Church as a Fellowship of Place-Setters

What kind of ecclesiology does an image of place-setting at the feasting table entail? Does it assume a subservient role for the Church in all things? What practices might flow out of this ecclesial understanding?

First of all, describing the Church as place-setters for the kingdom feast emphasizes the characteristics of humility, attentiveness, and service. The Church understands itself to be called primarily to make room for and to prepare for the arrival of others. The emphasis in congregational life shifts from ensuring the comfortability of those who are already present to emphasizing the invitation of and hospitality for those

⁹⁹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 12.

who are yet to join the fellowship. This might be expressed in practices as simple as making important signs, liturgical scripts, musical scores and lyrics, and congregational information prominent and accessible for visitors. Even if these things seem superfluous to church members who have been part of the fellowship for a long time, the ecclesiology of the place-setting Church understands its expressions of welcome and hospitality to take precedence over established preferences that would diminish its invitational posture. The Church is setting the table.

In many senses, this does mean that the Church views itself as a collection of servants first and a community of feasters second. Yet it is precisely *because* believers have been seated at the table and invited to taste the feast that they are entrusted by God with the great commission of bringing in even more guests from far and wide to take part in the celebration. Those who have been welcomed to the table and seated in unexpected places of honor by the graciousness of God in Christ know first-hand why their position as the place-setters and the invitation issuers and the generous hosts is so important.

Indeed, throughout the gospels Jesus calls his disciples to view themselves as servants and not entitled elite. In the kingdom of God, he reminds his followers, the last shall be first and the first shall be last. With banquet parables like those of Luke 13 and 14, as well as with appeals to appropriate place-setting and feasting etiquette (see Luke 17:7–10), Jesus makes clear that the Church is called to partner with God in preparing and hosting the feast so that all may partake in the celebration and the table may be filled. By tending to the festal preparations and setting the welcome table, the Church should understand that it is simply following through with what it "ought" to do as servants of

the kingdom.¹⁰⁰

However, the Church's identity as place-setters and servants does not negate its equal calling to be seated with honor at the table and to share in the gracious hosting of the banquet along with God.¹⁰¹ This paradoxical vocation is best expressed by these words of wisdom from the book of Sirach:

If they make you master of the feast, do not exalt yourself;
 be among them as one of their number.
 Take care of them first and then sit down;
 when you have fulfilled all your duties, take your place,
 so that you may be merry along with them
 and receive a wreath for your excellent leadership (Sir 32:1–2).¹⁰²

In fact, it is precisely excellent leadership that the Church is expressing by embracing its call to serve and to lay the place settings for others. Just as God demonstrates God's divine sovereignty as host of the inclusive feast—valuing and inviting and gathering in all people, including those from the margins—so the Church

¹⁰⁰ “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’” (Luke 17:7–10).

¹⁰¹ Jesus' banquet parables in Luke 13 and 14 make clear that the ultimate host of the feast is God alone. However, epistolary passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:9 and 2 Corinthians 6:1 elaborate upon the Church's role as co-workers in God's mission, emphasizing the manner in which God draws God's people into participation in the divine work. As host of the banquet, God chooses to deputize God's people into the holy task of hosting, rendering them co-hosts who prepare for and welcome God's guests to God's table. (This commission might also be viewed as an expression of God's people's “stewarding” the hosting responsibility that ultimately belongs to God.) By using the language of hosting and co-hosting, I am in no way suggesting that the sovereign host of the eschatological banquet is anyone but God; rather, I choose to emphasize the gracious and honored ways in which the Church is called to share in the task of hosting by God's own invitation and design. For a detailed discussion of this theological concept of the Church's partnership in God's mission—often referred to as the *missio dei*—see *Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

¹⁰² My interaction with this passage from the Wisdom of Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) neither presumes nor demands any particular position with regards to the book's canonical status. I choose to engage it as an ancient text which is canonical for some Christian traditions and which has been influential for Christian reflection throughout the history of the Church.

emulates this model by making room for others at the table. This kind of self-emptying, *kenotic* leadership—exhibited first and fully by Christ in his incarnation and crucifixion—denotes the kingdom of God wherever it is found.¹⁰³ Whether that means listening to and learning from the voices of the marginalized and the outcast or prioritizing the accessibility of the Church's ministries and worshiping life, the Christian community best exemplifies the kingdom by following the example of the King. He who came not to be served but to serve calls his disciples into this lifestyle of ministry to the other. Christ commissions his Church to be about the work of setting the table.

Evaluating Imagery's Potential

While the images of round table, open feast, and place-setting all contribute to ecclesiological understandings and practical expressions that promote greater inclusivity within the life of the Church, there are of course limitations and fallibilities associated with each metaphor. Even collectively, the combined vision of the Church setting places at the round table for the sake of the open feast cannot account for the ways in which God might call the Church to embody a new or different image in order to align with the Spirit's continuing work in the world.

Lathrop wisely observes that the Church "can no longer prepare for the past" as it envisions its future, and yet he also warns that God's people must be ready and "bound to follow" if and when God calls for an ecclesial future different from the one believers are currently imagining and constructing.¹⁰⁴ The Church must always be prepared to respond

¹⁰³ The theological concept of *kenosis* is most closely connected with the "Carmen Christi" found in Philippians 2:6–11, although several other New Testament passages also develop this idea.

¹⁰⁴ Lathrop, "In Search of a Roundtable," 7.

to God's constant movement in its midst, even if that means revising or releasing the guiding imagery that was previously helpful and constructive. As part of that task of remaining ready and "bound to follow" the Spirit wherever it blows, the Church must be continuously analyzing and assessing the strengths and weaknesses—along with the potential benefits and drawbacks—of the ecclesial imagery it chooses to adopt.

The guiding images proposed by Russell and Moltmann represent positive strides in the advancement of inclusive ecclesiology.¹⁰⁵ Drawing upon the scriptural witness to God's gracious gospel of inclusion as well as examples of practical expressions of this theological commitment in action, Russell, Moltmann, and myself have endeavored to connect our ecclesiological interpretations with useful ecclesial metaphors that both describe and inspire. The reflections we have offered have worked to demonstrate and reinforce the three-fold relationship that exists between guiding image, ecclesiological understanding, and embodied praxis. In our articulations of the reasons for, the visions of, and the way forward for inclusive ecclesiology, we have aspired to engage the Church's theological imagination around the meaning and necessity of this ecclesiological interpretation and to offer inroads of imagery for the Church's continued progress in this area. Yet the images we have proposed are by no means perfect.

Russell invites the Church to imagine itself as a round table at which people from the margins find a home and a voice, and around which dignity and equality for all are prioritized. But what happens when those who have been invited to a place at the table and encouraged to contribute to the ecclesial conversation voice prejudices or attitudes

¹⁰⁵ To a much lesser degree, I hope that the additional guiding image I have proposed in this paper may also be viewed as a positive contribution to the growth and progress of this field.

that fly in the face of the gospel message? Similarly, Moltmann's understanding of the Church as the fellowship in the open feast emphasizes the necessity of extending God's inclusive invitation to all people and welcoming the world to the banquet,¹⁰⁶ regardless of the religious convictions they bring with them as they enter the feasting hall.¹⁰⁷ Yet how does this approach to hospitality—encouraging the onslaught of diverse ideas, including those that may be at odds with orthodox Christian teachings—ensure that the Church's identity, rooted in the tenets of the gospel, remains regulated and not relativized?

Unfortunately, neither Russell nor Moltmann spends time adequately addressing these possible scenarios—and the critiques they carry—within their respective ecclesiological works. Whereas Moltmann hints at the expected transformation that inclusion within the fellowship of the Church will entail,¹⁰⁸ thereby anticipating to some degree criticism regarding ecclesial identity regulation within an open feast ecclesiology, Russell writes little about the potential conflicts that could arise from a round table

¹⁰⁶ "The openness of the crucified Lord's invitation to his supper and his fellowship reaches beyond the frontiers of different denominations. It even reaches beyond the frontiers of Christianity; for it is addressed to 'all nations' and to 'tax-collectors and sinners' first of all. Consequently we understand Christ's invitation as being open, not merely to the churches but to the whole world." (Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 246.)

¹⁰⁷ Although Moltmann advocates for a completely open invitation to the messianic feast and its fellowship, he is clear that the aim of such hospitality is to incorporate outsiders into the covenant of faith in Christ. Non-Christians are to be welcomed into the embrace of the fellowship, but it is through their participation in the festal celebration that the power of the Holy Spirit works to redeem and sanctify them. They do not remain outsiders—either to the feast or to the faith—once the Church draws them into the fellowship of the feast. "[The Lord's supper] mediates the power of Christ's passion, and redemption from sin and the powers through his death. It mediates the Spirit and the power of the resurrection. It confers the new covenant. Finally, it confers fellowship in the body of Christ, a fellowship which overcomes separation and enmity through the self-giving of Christ for all men, and which creates solidarity among people who are in themselves different. This new covenant and this new fellowship are in tendency universal, all-embracing and exclusive of no one; they are open to the world because they point to the banquet of the nations." (Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 252.)

¹⁰⁸ Moltmann contends that the world's incorporation into the messianic fellowship will result in the world's liberation from the damaging elements of secular society and its simultaneous transformation into people of "messianic character"—which presumably means the acceptance and expression of Christian theological ideas, practices, and morality. "[I]t is a fellowship which, by virtue of its remembrance of the story of Christ and its hope for the kingdom of man, liberates men and women from the compulsive actions of existing society and from the inner attitudes that correspond to them, freeing them for a life which takes on a messianic character." (Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 225.)

ecclesiology that grants an equal voice to everyone—including those who may reject the radical inclusivity that afforded them a seat at the table to begin with.

Strangely enough, in all her discussion of the ways in which a feminist approach promotes an egalitarian understanding of church leadership and participation, Russell fails to reckon with the possibility that a sexist person could take their seat at the round table and then claim that open, equal platform in order to voice and promote their patriarchal views. Considering just this single example of potential problems with Russell's image—there are certainly others that could be raised—it becomes clear that a round table does not ensure either homogeneity of opinion or absence of conflict.¹⁰⁹ And these are things that can quickly result in a round table no longer being a safe table at which the expression of differences contributes to an embrace of inclusivity in all its forms.

In response to the concern of ecclesial identity regulation raised by the images of round table and open feast, my own metaphor of the Church as place-setters offers several opportunities to address this critique in ways that Russell's and Moltmann's descriptions do not. While it is fair to say that the place-setting image has the potential to emphasize ecclesial subservience—or to reject the legacy of church traditions in favor of improved accessibility, or to prioritize unreserved hospitality over fellowship expectations—it also has the capacity to normalize and regulate the Church's identity

¹⁰⁹ It is important to note that neither unified opinions nor the absence of conflict constitute true Christian unity—something that is imparted only through the active work, presence, and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. A round table community populated by people of diverse opinions—who consequently experience disagreements and conflict—is still united in Christ when all of its members share in the same Spirit (1 Cor 12:4–13; Eph 4:4–5). The issue raised by the concern of regulating ecclesial identity amidst inclusivity is not one of ensuring spiritual unity, but of achieving an egalitarianism that accommodates and values every voice and yet does violence against no one.

within an inclusive posture. Despite its shortcomings—for, like Russell's and Moltmann's images, it is not without fault—the guiding image of the Church as place-setters at the feasting table provides the best interpretive lens through which the problem of ecclesial identity regulation amidst inclusive ecclesiology may be addressed. In order to understand why this is so, one must consider the role that place-setting plays within the broader scope of table etiquette.

Laid out upon the table at any meal are distinct markers that signal certain expectations and identities. The table setting typically signifies the manners and behaviors that are appropriate to the dining experience.¹¹⁰ If salad forks as well as dinner forks grace the table, it can safely be assumed that both a salad and an entree will be served. And if seafood crackers sit alongside the other silverware, high expectations would be dashed and great disappointment would ensue should lobster or crab be omitted from the menu. Likewise, the abundance or lack of cutlery, dishes, glasses, and other serving items usually indicates the formality of the coming meal—and the degree of dining formality informs guests of the expectations for the formality of their manners. Etiquette follows from setting. Those who prepare the table for the feast—along with those who host the banquet—are commissioned with the great responsibility of communicating the concomitant expectations of behavior for the meal's participants.

This metaphor can only be stretched so far, of course. There are no liturgical saucers or doctrinal teaspoons that can be laid out as literal identity markers for the expectations of Christian community. Yet the analogy provides a helpful vision for what

¹¹⁰ Peggy Post, Anna Post, Lizzie Post, and Daniel Post Senning, *Emily Post's Etiquette, 18th edition: Manners for a new world* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 46.

the Church's role, as carried out through the tasks of place-setting and hosting, should be when it comes to guiding outsiders into the culture of the community, communicating expectations, establishing boundaries, and regulating ecclesial identity. As those entrusted with inviting and welcoming others to the banquet, preparing and presiding over the table, and serving the needs of all who take their seat at the feast, the Church is uniquely positioned to both include and instruct.

Even as the concern of ecclesial identity regulation is mitigated by this understanding of the Church's nature and function, other difficulties with and insufficiencies of the place-setting description are certain to arise. No image for the Church is perfect. There will always be metaphors that fall short, analogies that unravel when pressed. Yet the Church will never escape its need for such imagery, as flawed as it may be. As Russell reminds her readers, it is the ongoing cycle of reflection, critique, revision, and reinvention that embodies a faithful response and a faith-filled expectation for the future.¹¹¹

The Church needs images and metaphors, and the Church's work of evaluating and amending those images and metaphors is never finished. The best imagery is that which provides a starting place from which to embark on this faithful cycle, as well as a touchstone to which the Church can return as it struggles and listens and revises and reimagines. It is my hope that the ecclesial metaphors and treatments presented in this paper will serve as just such valuable points of access and reference for the essential

¹¹¹ "The community of faith and struggle, then, is the community that makes use of its critically reflected experience of struggle in the process of traditioning by which it selects from the still living and evolving past of scriptural and church tradition as a means of shaping an alternative future." (Russell, *Church in the Round*, 40.)

work of imagery development for an inclusive ecclesiology.

Conclusion

Images and metaphors matter, for they shape the message that the Church conveys and the vision it pursues, as well as the identity and praxis it adopts. Just as in architecture, form follows function—but the reverse is also true. The three-fold relationship between guiding image, ecclesiological understanding, and embodied praxis extends from one element to the others and back again in a mutual flow. Therefore, once implemented in the collective imagination of the Church, the metaphors that Christian communities select to represent themselves come to serve as architectural blueprints for the future they are developing.

Furthermore, the Church's descriptions of itself and how it understands its calling as the Church must always be rooted in the ways in which it believes God has been, will be, and is currently working in its midst. "All ways of describing the church are indications of ways that God in Christ has shaped the lives of Christians through the power of the Spirit."¹¹² For Russell, Moltmann, and myself, the images of round table, open feast, and place-setting capture the ways in which we have witnessed God at work—both in scripture and within the Church. We offer these descriptions to the Christian community in the hopes that they will serve it well as guiding images which interact symbiotically with both ecclesiology and ecclesial practice.

Or perhaps, as the Church listens to the particularities of the spaces that believers inhabit, an entirely different image will emerge to do its work in the community's midst.

¹¹² Ibid., 18.

The picture is not the most important thing; it is how Christians arrive at their ecclesial vision and how they understand the implications for their life as the Church that matter most. The ecclesiological imagery, understandings, and practices of the contemporary Church will have profound consequences for believers, congregations, and the world, both now and in the future. For that reason, it is vital that Christian communities embrace and participate in the dynamic and ongoing task of ecclesiological reflection and interpretation as they select their imagery and evaluate its potential implications for ecclesial life.

In this work, as in everything else, Christ goes before the Church and provides a model for its emulation. By taking on the challenge of engaging questions of identity and contextual reinterpretation—challenges presented to him by a bold woman from the margin—Jesus reminds his followers that great opportunities exist within the paradigm shift.¹¹³ Russell notes, "...the way in which Jesus is portrayed as changing his mind and learning new perspectives on his own ministry is a model for us as we seek to gain new perspectives on issues of chosenness and exclusion in the life of the church."¹¹⁴

My hope for the Church is that it will continue to engage the difficult questions that changing contextual landscapes perpetually bring. Especially as regards the advancement of an inclusive ecclesiology, I have confidence that as the Church takes up the challenging work of ecclesiological reflection, imagery development, and embodied praxis, many more metaphors of God's unlimited embrace will guide the Church into greater and varied expressions of inclusion. Although the Church's theological task will

¹¹³ See Russell's interpretation of Mark 7:24–30, *Church in the Round*, 162–4.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

never be finished, I believe that its efforts can and will bring about redemptive change, both in the life of the Church and in the wider world. For, in Russell's words, "It may be that the gift of faith and struggle in the life of the church today is a way in which God's Spirit is at work to renew the church as well as the whole earth."¹¹⁵

It will take work to be roundtabled—or to be refashioned into the shapes of new metaphors for the Church's identity and mission. It may be painful, and it will be costly.¹¹⁶ Yet God calls God's people into just such a work, reminding them that when it comes to the unexpected and unearned gift of divine grace and welcome, it is always blessed both to give and to receive. May the Church continue to pursue the fullness of its identity, the redemption of its struggle, and the limitless grace of the gospel as it remains rooted in this truth. And may we never stop seeking God's shaping work among us—nor cease reflecting and acting upon what it may mean for our ecclesial visions, metaphors, and lived expressions of God's gracious, unexpected, and welcoming gospel of inclusion and embrace.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 110, 111.

¹¹⁶ "It will take some sawing to be roundtabled, some redefining and redesigning/ Such redoing and rebirthing of narrowlong Churching/ can painful be for people and tables/ But so was the cross, a painful too table of giving and yes/ And from such death comes life, from such dying comes rising..." (Lathrop, "In Search of a Roundtable," 5.)

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