

THE TABLE FELLOWSHIP OF JESUS WITH THE MARGINALIZED:
A RADICAL INCLUSIVENESS

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Introduction

Table fellowship in the first century Jewish society is primarily a movement towards exclusiveness and otherness. In contrast, the table fellowship of Jesus is a breakaway from its traditional mold of prejudice and discrimination.¹ The Gospels often depict Jesus in a meal setting. He is shown to be freely dining with and offering table fellowship to all classes of people. His table fellowship with the marginalized, in particular, has caused great consternation among the Jewish hierarchy. They irately labeled him as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19).²

In his research on the historical Jesus, Perrin posits that the tradition of Jesus offering table fellowship to the outcasts (e.g., Matt 11:16-19) must be authentic.³ As he observes the intense hostility of the Jewish authorities

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¹ The scholarly interest in table fellowship originates with a different objective in view. It is in the attempt of reconstructing the historical Jesus that attention is laid on this prominent motif. Amidst the varied scholarly evaluations and conclusions deriving from diverse persuasions, there is ample unanimity in the assumption that the table fellowship motif constitutes an integral part of the proclamation of Jesus.

² Scripture quotations are taken from New International Version.

³ The spark of interest on table fellowship is first ignited by E. Lohmeyer in 1942. In discussing the ministry of Jesus, Lohmeyer contends that the central role

against Jesus, he deduces that there must be an impetus behind their desperate measure of plotting for the death of Jesus. Using his “criterion of dissimilarity,” Perrin argues that the texts dealing with Jesus’ table fellowship represents the perspective appropriate to the *Sitz im Leben* of the first century Palestinian Jewish society (1967:103). He then surmises that a regular table fellowship in the symbolism of the messianic banquet which Jesus holds with his followers (a group that includes those “Jews who had made themselves as gentiles”) must be the main reason that infuriates the Jewish Sanhedrin. He postulates that,

Jesus welcomed these outcasts into table fellowship with himself in the name of the Kingdom of God, in the name of the Jews’ ultimate hope, and so both prostituted that hope and also shattered the closed ranks of the community against their enemy. It is hard to imagine anything more offensive to Jewish sensibilities. To have become such an outcast himself would have been much less of an outrage than to welcome these people back into the community in the name of the ultimate hope of that community (103).

Perrin reckons this reconstitution as authentic because it adequately explains how Jesus comes to be crucified.⁴ Jesus has violated the sacred social boundaries of the Jewish community thus prompting the Jewish leaders to insist on his destruction. It is the intent of this paper to take a closer look at the indiscriminate table fellowship of Jesus with the marginalized and to examine its significance, filtered primary through the lens of a biblical-missiological spectacles. In order to accomplish the purpose of this study, and to avoid redundancy as we consider the overlapping texts, the data of the Gospels will be classified into two main categories: Jesus’ table fellowship with the multitude, and with the outcasts.

1. Jesus’ Table Fellowship with the Multitudes

of table fellowship and its development towards the Last Supper is undoubtedly historical (1961:79). His proposition is later elaborated by N. Perrin. To this day, Perrin’s work remains the authoritative resource on this subject.

⁴ Subsequent scholars who pursue Perrin’s line of thought in a varying degree are: James Breech (1983:22-64), E. P. Sanders (1985:174-273), Richard Horsley (1987:178-80), and Marcus Borg (1987:101-33). They uphold the opinion that the table fellowship of Jesus with the outcasts remains as the primary and essential data to any valid reconstruction of the “historical Jesus.”

The *'am-ha-aretz* (literally "people of the soil") are the peasant farmers, craftsmen, day laborers, and all others who belong to the lower strata of the Jewish society. They are often referred to as the *'ochloi* ("multitude" or "crowd") whose personal identities are lost in the massive number of humanity. Because they do not have any political and economic clout, they are often despised. They are considered in some rabbinic traditions as "the rabbles who do not know the Law" and consequently, there is a rule among the rabbis that warns, "The disciples of the learned shall not recline at table in the company of the *'am-ha-'aretz*" (Hendriksen 1978:95).

By sharp contrast, Jesus indiscriminately extends his table fellowship to the multitude. The Gospel writers all attest to his concern for the crowd who comes to listen to him. Through such gestures, he clearly illustrates that God's redemptive fellowship is to be offered to all who would respond, regardless of their social status and rank. There are two specific instances in the Gospels that vividly portray Jesus breaking the social norms of the Jewish society as he extends table fellowship in the name of the kingdom of God to those on the periphery.

1.1 The Feeding of the Five Thousand

The feeding of the five thousand is a prominent narrative mentioned in all of the four Gospels (Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). Based on the Synoptic tradition, this account immediately follows the flashback about the death of John the Baptist which occurs within the context of a banquet (Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-32; Luke 9:7-9). Harrington observes that,

The juxtaposition of Herod's banquet and Jesus' banquet is powerful. At Herod's banquet, there is pride and arrogance, scheming, and even murder. At Jesus' banquet, there is healing, trust, and sharing (1991:221).

Through this story, the Synoptic Gospels intend to stress the fact that Jesus is ushered into the limelight after the demise of John the Baptist. Consequently, it is the key to Jesus' identity in a very special way (Nolland 1989:434). The Gospel of John depicts the incident as a *semeion* (6:14), a "sign" which proves the divine authority and majesty of Jesus (Hendriksen 1953:117). At the same time, it presents Jesus as a person of great compassion for human needs and a supplier of such needs when ordinary resources are shown to be insufficient (Brooks 1992:107). His kindness for the multitude grows out of his deep concern for them "as sheep without a

shepherd” (Matt 14:14; Mark 6:34; Luke 9:11), an Old Testament imagery that is used of Israel and linked with the wilderness (cf. Num 27:17; 1 King 22:17; Ezek 34:5). He is thus viewed as the embodiment of the eschatological shepherd (cf. Ezek 34:23) who will provide food and table fellowship for the multitude (Guellich 1989:340). The miracle thus exhibits both his authority in the natural world and his identity as the promised Messiah who will lovingly take care of God’s flock. It later paves the way for the disciples to acknowledge and confess that he is the Christ, the son of God (Matt 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20).

The story of the feeding, moreover, is shown to be a repetition or reactualization of God’s promise and provision of food in the wilderness (Nolland 1989:442). It takes place in a deserted area similar to the situation where ancient Israel was fed with manna (cf. Exod 16). The Lukan account particularly brings out this parallelism by using the word *’episitismos* (a *hapax legomena*) which is the same equivalent for “provisions” in Exodus 16 of the Septuagint (Luke 9:12). The story likewise corresponds to Elisha’s feeding of the hundred men (2 King 4:42-44), thereby firmly setting itself within the prophetic tradition of miracles. It is thus, not just another act of power, but prophetic in its character and implications (Ravens 1990:122). Yahweh is feeding his people once again in the wilderness (Myers 1987:32). The multitudes who share in the loaves as one integrated community is enjoying in advance the anticipated blessings of the kingdom of God. They are having a little foretaste of the eschatological banquet. Their eating and drinking reflects the figure of prosperity (cf. Deut 8:9; 11:5; Neh 9:36; Eccl 8:15) that God’s people enjoyed in the promised land (Morris 1977:304).

The Synoptic Gospels have also linked the narrative to the commission of the twelve and their return from their mission (Mark 6:7-12,30; Luke 9:1-10; cf. Matt 10). It delineates the continuing ministry of Jesus in preaching God’s reign and healing which he has also delegated to his disciples. The twelve is apparently given a prominent role in the story. They are the ones who prepare the crowd, distribute the food, and feed the multitude through his power. In the last sentence of the episode, their number is placed in an emphatic position corresponding to the number of baskets of excess food. Such analogy suggests that they are being abundantly supplied for their future ministry in which they will continue to nourish and care for the people being attracted to the kingdom of God (Tannehill 1986:216).

1.2 The Feeding of the Four Thousand

The story of the feeding of the four thousand is found only in Matthew (15:32-39) and in Mark (8:1-10). It shares many striking similarities with the narrative on the feeding of the five thousand, prompting many scholars to surmise that it is a doublet intended to affirm the inclusion of the gentiles in the messianic banquet (Carson 1984:358). Its repetition is thus postulated to be theological in intent, rather than historical. A closer examination, however, would reveal some important distinctions that will confirm the two incidents as separate events.⁵ Furthermore, in the ensuing narrative, Jesus himself clearly refers to the two feedings (Matt 16:9-10; Mark 8:18-20). There are more reasons to accept its historical reliability than to speculate against it.

At any rate, the inclusion of the gentiles remains the major focus of the story. This is strongly hinted by the setting of the story which takes place in the gentile Decapolis. It is very probable that those who share in the meal are chiefly inhabitants of the district (Edersheim 1950:63). Furthermore, the leftovers are placed in seven large gentile baskets (*spuridas*), not the wicker basket (*kophinon*) used by the Jews for carrying their kosher food. All these suggest that the gentiles, the people group who are deemed as godless, idolatrous, unclean, and rejected by God, are now included in the kingdom of God. Like Israel, they are also being invited to the eschatological banquet. As Jesus has prophesied,

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:29).

2. Jesus' Table Fellowship with the Outcasts

The social structure of the Jewish society in the time of Jesus is basically group-oriented. In such context, the people's main source of identity is derived from belonging to a strongly bonded group. Consequently, the group exerts an immense pressure upon the individual to

⁵ E.g., there is a difference in numbers (5,000 vs. 4,000; 12 baskets vs. 7 baskets); in locales (northeast vs. southeast shore of Galilee); in season (there is no mention of grass in the feeding of the four thousand); cf. also Guellich (1989:405-406).

conform to its patterns and definitions of acceptable social behavior. To publicly accord a person with honor is the primary means of reward, while putting the person to shame is the chief means of restraint. Shame, in this instance, is not simply “embarrassment”; it is an emotional response related to the anxiety aroused by a sense of “inadequacy or failure to live up to the internalized, societal and parental goals and ideals” (Bechtel 1991:49-50). It stimulates “a fear of contempt by others within the group leading to a physical or psychological rejection, abandonment, expulsion, or demotion/loss of social position” (49-50).

The outcasts in the Jewish society live in a state of constant shame. Because they have violated the general cultural expectations of what it means to be whole, perfect, and “in place,” they are classified as “unclean.” For this reason, to have fellowship with the outcasts is considered morally contaminating (Neusner 1973:83-90). Jesus, hence, breaks all the rules of Jewish society when he extends his table fellowship to the social outcasts. He is completely out of place according to Jewish cultural perceptions. It must be noted that the table fellowship of Jesus with the “unclean” are not isolated incidents or ideas in the Gospels. They constitute “the one basic and inexhaustible concept which determines and permeates all others” (Lohmeyer 1961:28). By sharing a meal with the “sinners,” God’s love is vividly painted as condescending. It reaches down even to the lowest level of human society.

2.1 Jesus’ Table Fellowship with the Tax Collectors

The tax collectors are very unpopular in the Graeco-Roman world (Downing 1992:82). They are treated as men of despicable character because they prove to be unscrupulous in their duties, using their power to acquire sordid gain. In Judea, they are particularly labeled as collaborationists and traitors due to their active support for levies in behalf of the pagan and oppressive Roman government (Freyne 1980:192). Their regular transaction with the Gentiles, moreover, classifies them as persistent law-breakers. Consequently, the appellation “tax collectors” has become a by-word of contempt and an idiomatic expression of Pharisaic hostility (Blomberg 1992:156).

In the Gospels, Jesus has shared a table fellowship with these “rejects” of society on many occasions. Hence he is labeled as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Two of the more outstanding instances in the Synoptic Gospels are the banquet in Levi’s house (Matt 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32) and the meal in Zacchaeus’ house (Luke 19:1-10).

2.2 The Banquet in Levi's House

The table fellowship in Levi's house takes place in the urbanized Capernaum where tax collectors normally take their seat (Freyne 1988:147). The banquet is most likely a *despedida* party that Levi has prepared to signify the renunciation of his former lucrative operation and an occasion for his associates to meet Jesus. At the same time, it may be the public expression of Levi's unqualified acceptance of Jesus' call to discipleship. Without any qualms or reservations, Jesus graces the party and dines with the "sinners." By doing so, he is essentially extending peace, trust, brotherhood, forgiveness, and acceptance (Riches & Millar 1985:55). All who sit at the table with him evidently receive a share of the divine blessings that is communicated through the process of eating and drinking (Lohse 1983:71). Hence, "sharing a table" means "sharing life" (Jeremias 1971:115). Jeremias would explain that,

In Judaism, table fellowship meant fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shared in the meal brought out the fact that they have all a share in the blessings which the master of the house had spoken over the unbroken bread. Thus, Jesus' meals with the publicans and sinners were not only events on a social level, not only an expression of his unusual humanity and social generosity and his sympathy with those who are despised, but [it] had an even deeper significance. they were an expression of the mission and message of Jesus (Mark 2:17), eschatological meals, anticipating celebrations of the feast in the end time (Matt 8:11) in which the community of the saints was already being represented (Mark 2:19). The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, achieved in table fellowship, was the most meaningful expression of the message of the redeeming love of God (115).

The table fellowship of Jesus with the social outcasts would, furthermore, indicate a praxis of equal discipleship where the marginals and the oppressed are welcome without any qualification (Perdue 1990:9). Such egalitarianism would include both the oppressors and the oppressed -- the publicans and fishermen who have had many unfriendly dealings in the past, along with a revolutionary Zealot who entertains his own political agenda. All are called to share the blessings from the same table as his followers (Freyne 1988:54). The meal thus becomes a "provocative theater" that discloses God's embrace of all peoples (Senior & StuhlmueLLer 1983:264).

No wonder the Pharisees and scribes vehemently object to such outrageous behavior (Matt 9:11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30). Jesus has canceled

the all-too-rigid ritual rules and has transgressed the social boundary set up to demarcate the “us” (the “elect”) from the “them” (the “reprobate”). His action is a “deliberate offense against the binding cultic commandments” (Lohmeyer 1961:28). Jesus, by associating with the “unclean,” has made himself one of them. From the Jewish standpoint, Jesus has excluded himself from the fellowship of the faithful. To Jesus, however, his eating with “sinners” represents the sharing of the eschatological meal with his own people. He knows, in the words of Lohmeyer, that,

[T]here and then, in the fleeting hour of a friendly meal shared with the despised men and renegades was represented the eternal and fulfilled community of the “holy”; therefore he set himself against the cultic institution which outlawed these same “tax collectors and sinners” (1961:28).

2.3 The Meal in Zacchaeus’ House

The story of Jesus eating in Zacchaeus’ house (Luke 19:1-10) epitomizes the mission of Jesus by demonstrating how he willingly reaches down to the foulest of dregs of Jewish society to rescue an outcast who responded in faith and repentance. Zacchaeus, in this story, is an *architelones* (a *hapax legomena*), that is, “a chief tax collector.” He is a very prominent individual who controls the entire tax district of Jericho and its vicinity (Hendriksen 1978:854). Through extortion, he has accumulated much wealth, but he remains an “outsider” within his community due to his “acquired deviant status” (Malina & Neyrey 1991:101). His name and character carry an indissoluble stigma causing people to loathe and shun him.

Moreover, he is depicted as “diminutive in stature” (v. 3). Based on Jewish social appraisal, Zacchaeus must be accursed, or his parents must have incurred God’s severe displeasure (cf. John 9:1). Consequently, his social standing must have been doubly jeopardized due to his physical imperfection.

But in spite of Zacchaeus’ social and moral dislocations, Jesus specifically singles him out from the crowd and asks for his hospitality and lodging (vs. 5-6). Jesus is favorably disposed to have table fellowship with him even at the consternation of the Pharisees and scribes and the complaint of the crowd (v. 7). He offers an outcast God’s salvation. Jesus is the Messiah who has come “to seek and to save which was lost” (v. 10). Luke’s great theme of reversals is once again aptly illustrated (Stein 1992:469).

2.4 Jesus' Table Fellowship with Simon the Leper

Simon the leper is a native of Bethany (Matt 26:2-16; Mark 14:3-11; John 12:1-8).⁶ His former malady carries along with it a perpetual stigma within the Jewish society. Based on the Mosaic legislation, lepers are unclean and must be quarantined "outside the camp" for fear of contaminating the healthy (Lev 13:1-46; 14:1-31; Num 12:10-16). They are required to wear torn clothes, cover the lower part of their faces, have unkempt hair, and to constantly cry out informing people that they are "unclean." During the time of Jesus, the Jewish leadership bans the leper from worship in the temple or synagogues, and from participation in community activities (Heil 1990:310). They constantly live in a state of disenfranchisement, to be abhorred and avoided.

Most likely, Simon has been previously healed by Jesus and is hosting the meal as a gesture of his gratitude (Carson 1984:526). Nevertheless, the stigma attached to his former ailment is not easily erased. People still identify him as "the leper." Transactions with him is kept at a minimum and with great reluctance. Yet Jesus is not selective of his associations at meals and is careless about the Jewish dining customs and company (Bailey 1988:95). He freely shares a meal with a person whom other people still designate as "unclean."

It is also in the duration of this meal that Mary demonstrates her loyalty to Jesus by anointing his head with an alabaster jar of costly perfume. There is, however, a twist of irony in the narrative. The disciples seem to have joined the ranks of his critics in their indignation over the alleged "waste" of the perfume (Matt 26:8; Mark 14:4-5; John 12:4-5). The meal scene quickly leads to the betrayal of Judas the Iscariot (Matt 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11) and the events leading to the crucifixion.

3. Summary Observations

⁶ The exact identity of Simon the Leper is difficult to ascertain. Sanders proposes that he is the father of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (1955:41). Carson, on the other hand, argues that he is not related to them because John's Gospel does not specify that the event takes place in their home (1984:526). Apparently, the name "Simon" is a common name in Jewish circles. What differentiates him from other "Simons" is the appositive that comes after his appellation. He is, or used to be, a leper.

Despite its noble traditions regarding good works and hospitality, the Jewish society in the time of Jesus was plagued by some mitigating “socio-economic, political, and religious” forces which work “to prevent mutual welcomings among the various classes and parties of the land” (Koenig 1985:19-20). For instance, the Pharisaic *haburot* that met in homes to meticulously practice the laws on tithes and purity, had effectively erected social barriers between themselves and the *'am-ha-'aretz* for fear of ritual pollution (Neusner 1972:13-xx). The Sadducean aristocrats, on the other hand, had isolated themselves from the common people since they mainly mingled only with their upper class relatives and the Roman officials who have the clout (Harvey 1982:41). The esoteric Qumran community generally viewed the populace as “sons of darkness,” while the Zealots, who seek to recruit a morally and ritually clean guerrilla force, would similarly recoil from association with people they classified as “unclean” (Hengel 1971:10-xx).

Jesus, however, has always been identified with the marginalized segment of the Jewish society. In his earthly ministry, he is shown to have indiscriminately shared table fellowship with friends and foes alike. Recklessly and willfully, he oversteps the cultural and social boundaries by reaching out to those who are considered ignominious and “unclean.” He deliberately appoints twelve disciples, mostly of Galilean origin - a symbol of the periphery (Costas 1982:188-94), to be with him and to follow him. He freely dines and associates with the socially and morally marginal people to the trepidation of his Jewish contemporaries. Consequently, his Jewish detractors contemptuously caricature him as a “glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”

Evidently, by way of the inclusive nature of his table fellowship, Jesus intended to prefigure how a renewed people of God could indeed live together from God’s abundance (Koenig 1985:28). Through the images of food and drink, he vividly illustrated reconciliation and acceptance, the sense of belonging and of being “at home,” and the sharing of material and spiritual abundance (Bartchy 1992:800). His table fellowship, hence, pointed to radical table community of open commensality, egalitarianism and brotherhood. As Tidball has delineated it, the table community of Jesus is,

... to be a revolutionary community where “the first will be the last and the last first” (Mark 10:31). It is to be the “kingdom of God,” that is, the society in which God actively reigns. In it, God’s goodness, forgiveness, mercy and creative power rules, and the limitations of this life, hatred, exclusiveness, exploitation, pain and suffering are absent. Furthermore in

preaching the possibility of this new order Jesus was not talking of a merely social dimension. His preaching looked forward to the radical recreation of man himself (1984:33).

Jesus, hence, had come to create a new community that fore-shadows the new Eden that is to come. And as Koenig aptly concludes,

But even now, as his disciples pass through the banquet doors that God opens to them each day, the feast of the Kingdom comes. The primary medium for these advents is an actual sharing at table with Jesus and his improbable companions. But thus is by no means the only possible "setting in life." All words and acts of welcome that conform to Jesus' ministry both partake of God's abundance and disclose it to others. When this welcoming happens, the boundaries of space and time that obscure God's kingdom melt away. Briefly, imperfectly, but also with great power, heaven and earth intersect and true humanity occurs (1985:45).

4. General Implications of the Praxis of Table Fellowship for "Doing "Missiology" in Asia

Asia is a vast continent and a home for more than half of the world's population. From this plethora of ethnic groupings and diverse cultural contexts, two pervasive features can be deduced concerning the Asian reality: its religiousness and widespread poverty (Mackie 1989:240). Within this peculiar context, the praxis of Jesus' table fellowship would particularly highlight the following distinct Asian emphases in "doing missiology" in Asia.

4.1 A Focus on Concrete Issues

Western theology, through the employment of Greek philosophical categories, is primarily an abstraction of theological truths from the statements of the scripture (Dyrness 1992:11). Its language is often couched in metaphysical symbols "predicated upon the separation of the sensible from the non-sensible, the practical from the transcendental" (Cheng 1989:203). While abstraction may be "a valuable tool which allows human beings to transcend the limitations of personal context and experience and to apply knowledge from one area of life to another" (Hargrave 1993:5), it nevertheless can retard the theologizing process when it confines itself mainly within the realm of the abstract. When theology is reduced to a mere "intellectual process" detached from the social and

cultural issues, it settles within the domain of the “unreal.” Exegesis and the concomitant biblical theology can be easily convoluted with some abstract symbols and meanings to denote “out of this world” concepts and ideas. Missiology, in this fashion, would often be a mere disjointed discussion and debate about irrelevant issues and theories.

On the other hand, a missiology shaped by the praxis of Jesus’ table fellowship, and in conjunction with the Asian mindset, will have a strong aversion towards the process of abstraction. Instead, it will lay emphasis on what is “concrete and relational” (Stults 1989:60). A prominent interrogative maxim circulating among the Filipino-Chinese would partly accentuate the pragmatism of Asians. Designed as a “guiding principle” in one’s everyday living, the leading question put forth in every situation is, “Is it edible?” (or, “Can it be eaten?”). From the perspective of the Filipino-Chinese, what is edible (concrete) is that which is concerned with life-experiences. It is reckoned as a worthy and profitable pursuit. What is inedible (abstract) is that which exists only in the conceptual level. It is summarily dismissed as not worthy of our best efforts at all. The praxis of table fellowship, hence, necessitates “doing missiology” in concrete cultural and historical contexts. In contrast to its western counterpart, it does not dichotomize between “mission theory” from “mission practice,” nor human needs into “spiritual” versus “material.” They must constitute a unity on the concrete level. Rather than analysis, it favors the methodology of synthesis, that is, of seeing things in their unity and totality. And in place of precision and definition, it is inclined towards integration and intuition (Dyrness 1990:149) as it can accommodate seemingly contradictory elements (Elesterio 1989:15). From this perspective, missiology is essentially a unified multi-disciplinary approach. It primarily addresses issues pertaining to the message and the implications of the gospel of Christ for humans (body, soul and spirit as a unity), as it crosses and confronts a world of religious pluralism, rampant poverty and oppression in concrete human history.

4.2 A Preference for Parables and Community

With its predilection for logical thinking, the scientific method, and systematizations, western theology has manifested itself primarily as “propositional theology” (Dyrness 1992:20). Missiology, in such mode of thinking, often times has appeared in propositional form. The Asian mindset, on the other hand, is highly visual and prefers to participate in the world around it. Its intuitive character favors “the frequent use of stories

rather than straight propositions, parables rather than discourse" (Maggay 1987:16).

Due to the Asian propensity towards life experiences, stories, and parable, a missiology shaped by the praxis of table fellowship would greatly magnify the importance of narrative theology in "doing missiology" in Asia. The praxis of table fellowship, by itself, is the life experience of Christ's table community. The Gospels, in particular, have vividly illustrated the missiological significance and implications of table fellowship through the form of narrative theology. Mission theology in Asia, from the standpoint of table fellowship, denotes a greater utilization of narrative theology.

Western culture is dominated by a spirit of rugged individualism that gives relativism a strong appeal (Dobson 1994:133). At the same time, it endorses an unbridled autonomy that lauds a person's total independence from other persons or entity. The aftermath of relativism and unchecked autonomy is quite destructive in the western world. In the area of social relationships, it fosters isolation and alienation. In the realm of ethics, it engenders greed and selfishness. In the field of theology, it brings about a spirit of exclusive elitism that prides itself of high-sounding jargon (to the confusion of the wider Christian community) and delights itself in disputes over words and opposing ideas (cf. 1 Tim 1:4; 6:20-21). In the area of missiology, it patronizes the perspective that views people more as objects and statistics, detached from their relationships to their community.

Asians, however, extol communalism and tend to look at everything from the perspective of the community (Timmer 1988:21). It is rather difficult for an Asian to perceive of himself/herself in separation from his/her community. For without community, life becomes "rootless, homeless, anchorless" (Song 1986:123).

The praxis of table fellowship is essentially based on a group-oriented worldview perspective. As such, "doing missiology" is primarily done "within" and "in relation to" one's community and "for" his/her community. It is focused on an "everyday life orientation" that is "brought to bear on issues of immediate concern to the people" of one's community (Dyrness 1990:189). It would point out the significance and implications of the oneness of the church as Christ's table community. As "family" (*chi'a* in Chinese) is defined as "people who eat together," the praxis of table fellowship similarly demands an acceptance in which believers everywhere can come together as one family while dismantling every racial, cultural, and denominational barrier. At the same time, it also mandates a communalism that pool and share resources across the races, cultures, and denominations. Missions, hence, must be reckoned as the task of the church

as God's sole community, not of a fragmented and competing racial or denominational enclaves.

Moreover, missiology, shaped by the praxis of the table fellowship of Jesus, would necessitate a communal predisposition in favor of the marginalized and a disposition towards a deliberately constructed literal or theological liminality. As Jesus in his *kenosis* has voluntarily chosen to be marginalized in order to reach out to the marginalized (cf. Phil 2:5-8), so must his table community seek liminality in order to win the majority of people living on the periphery (cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23). In this instance, mission theology should explore the significance and implications of powerlessness, weakness, and marginality as missiological categories instead of pursuing power, might, and affluence.

God has designed that the intermittent and fleeting moments of every Christian table fellowship be a "sacred moment" where heaven and earth intersect, and where God's people can be gathered as a community, with all human-erected barriers dismantled, in joint celebration of his goodness as well as to enter into an intimate communion with one another. In this moments of intimate fellowship and sharing, the processes of marginalization are effectively suspended, and men and women can constantly demonstrate God's missionary intention for humanity. As Wainwright adroitly concludes,

God desires to enter into the table fellowship with the whole humanity. This is what God desires for all peoples...to be called into table fellowship with God is to participate in his vision for humanity, a vision still waiting to be accomplished (1988:187).

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