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'Unexpected' Guests at God's Banquet Table Gospel in Mission and Culture

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I Introduction

Split cod and ale. That is all they have eaten for years on end. But today the sisters' table is sumptuously spread with exquisite fare that awakens all senses. With lavish love the servant Babette has spent even her last cent on this banquet. And no one who partakes of it is left unchanged: an estranged couple kisses in forgiveness, two sisters discover the bounty of creation, and a stray general is struck. 'Grace makes no conditions, it takes all to its bosom and proclaims amnesty. That which we have rejected is poured out on us'. *Babette's Feast*, Gabriel Axel's 1987 film, marvellously ushers us into the theme of gospel in mission and culture.

The theme of this paper is broad and demands an interdisciplinary approach. Not discrete strands that can be tidily woven into a braid, gospel, culture and mission mix and mingle rather like food and guests, smells and tastes, tinkling glasses and laughter at a shared and well-laden table. This paper proposes that Christian communities can and do live out God's mission in the world when they are willing to live, in ever-present tension, as 'third-culture' followers of Jesus. As they together indwell the story of God's saving action recorded partly in Scripture, submit to Christ's sovereignty and are filled by the Holy Spirit, Christians from around the world can become an alternative culture, which draws on the particularities of their unique backgrounds but also transcends them. These welcoming communities are historical out-workings of God's mission and localized expressions of the bountiful banquet of God's kingdom.

Background for that claim is laid out in several sections: readers are first invited to witness the telling of a story around a table, and the confrontation of two socio-cultural and religious paradigms: that of some

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Pharisees and that of Jesus, who, in his prophetic role, draws on the long story of God's action in human history.[1] Then, with broad strokes, a narrative portrait is depicted of God's banquet table through the ages, one to which all people are called so that they may live out their creational purpose as relational and cultural beings, and the world may come to know God's love. The spotlight next rests on the early followers of Jesus, revealing their struggles and successes in becoming a community whose lifestyle affirmed their relational bond to each other and to God as well as their creational, culture creating, calling. Finally, a call is issued for followers of Jesus today to live as inculturated expressions of God's mission in today's world.

II Good News at the Banquet Table

1 Jesus' Banquet Story

The Gospel of Luke records a parable of Jesus about a great dinner (Lk. 14:15-24). The table is abundantly laden; however, when sought out, the initial invitees 'begin to make excuses', alleging more important occupations. Of course, they are wealthy, powerful people, capable of buying land, purchasing five yoke of oxen for a proportionately big plot of land, and probably particularly respected and esteemed in their city. But even they customarily would have previously confirmed their attendance; and their refusal to attend is not taken lightly by the host.[2] So, countering all cultural expectations and rules of table etiquette, the host sends not for friends, brothers, relatives or other rich neighbours (v. 12), but for the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame from the roads and lanes, the relegated people from 'outside' town.

2 The 'Expected' Guests at the Table

Important as is the content of the parable, the textual and historical context illumines our matter yet further. It is the Jewish Sabbath and Jesus is seated at the table of a leader of the Pharisees. The gospel account paints an air pregnant with tension. Jesus has daringly healed a man with a severe illness that caused fluid retention, under the scrutinizing eye of those who are 'watching him closely' (Lk. 14:1). He has just challenged religiously and culturally acceptable and highly discriminatory seating arrangements (v. 8-11); and he now tells the story in response to the piously self-assured exclamation of a well-fed dinner guest: 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' (v. 15).

Of course, 'anyone' in the vocabulary of most of the privileged Judean scribal groups and Pharisees applies to a rather circumscribed circle of influential men which probably does not include uneducated Galilean peasants, even less despised Samaritans, and

1 For further discussion on the assertion that Jesus was, in effect, a Pharisee, see Hyam Maccoby, *Jesus the Pharisee* (London: SCM Press, 2003).

2 Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary—New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 230.

never, heaven forbid, unclean Gentiles, like occupying Roman forces or foreign traders. 'Blessed' in this man's mind is a qualification limited to people like him: sons and perhaps some daughters of Abraham, who abide within the same socio-cultural and religious framework as he does.

Particularly blessed within that framework are men like him who, at least publicly, seek to interpret Mosaic law carefully, according to the traditions of previous generations of the pious, and to apply them rigorously.[3] The ancient words of the prophet regarding the feast of the Lord — 'a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filed with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear' (Isa. 25:6)—pertain to *them*. They are to be counted among the chosen of God, and, in the resurrection, theirs is the prerogative of being fed abundantly in the intimacy of God's kingdom.

People from outside that enlightened circle can gain limited access to the table only if they submit to the socio-religious and cultural traditions and standards of the insiders: this is the case of the Jewish proselytes who can draw close by means of circumcision, baptism and adherence to Jewish law and practice. Theirs is a rather exclusive banquet.

3 A Prophetic Vision

As the story goes, Jesus does not overtly counter the pious affirmation of the dinner guest. Instead, he turns the entire picture upside down, and ends his parable with a provocative editorial comment: 'For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner!' (v. 22). The shocking turn of the story is that those who feel most secure in their 'right' to belong, and consequently take upon themselves the role of judges and excluders of others, are precisely the ones who run the risk of excluding themselves from the celebration. Their self-assuredness blinds them to the recognition that there, sitting at their very table, eating and drinking with them, is the very Lord of the banquet, the only true host, and prevents them from accepting his invitation.[4]

At the Pharisees' table, a man with dropsy had been brought in, not as a welcome guest but as bait to trap Jesus. At the table of God's kingdom, Jesus dares suggest, it is precisely the people excluded from the socio-cultural and religious establishment who are the celebrated guests. With such a brazen statement, Jesus radicalizes the prophetic role he has publicly assumed upon his arrival in Jerusalem (Lk. 13:33). He has made explicit his adoption of a certain 'script' existent in their shared cultural tradition: in identifying himself as God's prophet, he attributes to himself characteristic traits, roles and messages recognizable to his contemporaries.[5] He stands

3 Keener, IVP *Bible Background Commentary*, 828.

4 Moessner points to the fact that in this passage the Greek *kyrios*, Lord, is applied to Jesus, and not to the naturally expected owner of home. David Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: the Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 275.

5 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: the Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 58.

in the line of their father, Abraham (Gen. 20:7), of the prophetic prototype Moses (Deut. 34:10).

Jesus speaks and acts as God's prophet, as 'a human being called by God for a specific mission: to proclaim the divine vision of the world and society and to invite conversion to that vision.'[6] As God's prophet, Jesus dares hearken back to a vision of God's kingdom often forgotten or distorted in his day and all too frequently throughout the history of God's people. The good news he incarnates and announces is not really new, though it needs to be witnessed and proclaimed afresh: 'unexpected guests', particularly people devoid of power within the ruling cultural framework, are welcome guests at God's table.

III God's Multicultural Kingdom Table

The good news experienced and recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures begins with the story of creation, which is necessarily cast within a particular language and cultural ethos. Its implications, nonetheless, are universal: *all* humans are created in God's image,[7] as relational, creative beings, and are called to shape family and community, culture and science in relationally responsible ways, multiplying and filling the earth as expressions and agents of God's good purposes for all of creation.[8]

The epic continues: in spite of the marring of that image through rebellion and its deadly consequences, men and women do shape families and develop diverse cultures. Some live in tents and raise livestock. Others play the lyre and the pipe. Yet others make bronze and iron tools. No one culture is upheld as best. All communities, in their particular ways and within their own cultural paradigms, 'invoke the name of the Lord' (Gen. 4:17-26). All are welcome to the table. Problems, however, arise when people disregard either of the two interrelated expressions of their divine image: first, their relational character in reverence to God and respect for other people, and second, their cultural character, their call to organize their lives in order to creatively care for all forms of life (Gen. 4:8-16; 6:1-8).

Even in the midst of these contradictions, there still is good news: God is experienced and portrayed as one who does not abandon his mission when under pressure. Beginning with Noah, God establishes and re-establishes a 'covenant' with humanity, resembling the ancient Hittite Suzerain's 'treaty' with his vassals, always offering anew the possibility for people to live out their relational and

6 Alejandro Botta, *Los Doce Profetas Menores* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 1 (author's translation).

7 Croatto affirms that the 'image' of God in the Genesis didactical narrative is not accidental but essential: 'humans, and *all* humans, *are* "image" of God. They are "theomorphus".' Severino Croatto, *El Hombre En El Mundo: Creación y Designio. Estudio De Génesis 1.1-2.3* (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Aurora, 1974), 175 (translation and gender inclusive language added by author).

8 Regarding the ontological aspects of the creational and relational responsibility of humankind as God's image, see Croatto, *El Hombre En El Mundo*, 181.

culture-creating nature (Gen. 9:1-7).[9] When humanity is tempted to concentrate numbers, power and wealth in one place, running the risk of establishing hegemonic and life-denying uniformity at Babel, God disperses them, safeguarding diverse cultural expressions and languages.

When God calls Abraham out of his land to begin a new people, a particular blessing is promised in relation to a universal intent: 'I will make you a great nation… so that you will be a blessing…. in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen. 12:2-3). Centuries later, the apostle Paul would frame this expansive promise as 'gospel' in that it evidences God's favour, not restricted to one ethnic, cultural or language group, but available to all peoples (Gal. 3:8).

When the Egyptian empire, feeling its power threatened by the growth of Abraham's descendents inside its domain, tightens its grip and institutes carefully tailored ethnic cleansing, God intervenes (Ex. 3:16ff). God not only liberates the Israelites through Moses, assuring their survival as a people, but also establishes ethical, social and economic conditions aimed again at guaranteeing their capacity to live out fully their relational and culturally creative calling among the nations. Imbedded in this law is good news for every day life.[10] As Wright puts it: 'All nations belong to God, but Israel will belong to God in a unique way that will, on the one hand, demand covenantal obedience, and, on the other hand, be exercised through a priestly and holy identity and role in the world'.[11]

Within the covenant community, religious commitment is inseparable from economic and political relations: debts are to be cancelled, land is to be returned to the original family (Lev. 25), even the foreigner in the land is to be protected (Ex. 22:21) and received in love (Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:19). Particularly the poor, the defenceless and people whose circumstances have uprooted them from family and native culture are welcome to the table. Trouble ensues, however, whenever allegiance to foreigners is accompanied by the adoption of their gods and the concurrent turning away from God and his ethical and relational standards. Although the table of the Lord of hosts is spread 'for all peoples' (Isa. 25), there is room at it for only one head host, and this is the incisive and recurring message of the Old Testament prophets.

Even when disobedience leads to exile and the Jews become strangers in unknown lands, surrounded by differ-

9 'The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture' in Robert T. Coote and John R. W. Stott eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture: The Papers of the Lausanne Consultation on Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). Regarding the 'Noahic Covenant', see Arthur Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom: the Story of God's Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 49-51.

10 Horsley affirms: 'Interpreters of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) have long…recognized that, in theological terms, the Mosaic covenant includes gospel along with law'. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 113.

11 Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006), 257.

ent cultural traditions and expressions, the relational and culture-creational call still holds fast. As Glasser points out, the prophet Jeremiah's words parallel those of Genesis 1: he urges the people to build houses, plant gardens, eat what they produce, marry and have children, multiply and not decrease (Jer. 29:5-6). But the call is not merely to survive. 'Seek the welfare (peace, *shalom*) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf', continue the words of the prophet (v. 7). Theirs is a culture-creating role, which engages them in all dimensions of the life of their 'host' culture in search of the wellbeing of its inhabitants. In keeping with this vision, Scripture records Daniel and his friends training for the Babylonian civil service and Mordecai serving Xerxes, the king of Persia, as 'second in rank' (Esth. 10:3).[12]

The biblical story briefly records the return from exile as a time during which effort had to be made to rebuild not just a place but a people. In seeking to create a 'distinctive Jewish identity', Ezra and Nehemiah insist on obedience to Mosaic law, surround the city with a wall and purge the community from all things foreign. The book we know as Malachi, written about those days, also attacks cultic impurity and marriage with foreigners, both concerns that could, and eventually did, lead to attitudes of superiority and exclusivity. Yet the offerings accepted by the promised 'messenger of the covenant' are those presented by people who care for and respect the foreigner (Mal. 3:1, 5). Even the alien, whose presence may threaten the identity and challenge the cultural patterns of God's people, is welcome at the table of God's kingdom.

Along with the biblical record we fast-forward four centuries. The Jewish people have undergone much change since the days of Malachi: Persians and Greeks were followed by precarious independence and they are now under the iron rule of Rome.[13] Horsley paints the picture:

> This new world order established by Rome… meant disruption and disorder for subjected peoples of the Middle East such as the Judeans and Galileans. In conquering and reconquering them the Roman military forces repeatedly slaughtered and enslaved the inhabitants and destroyed their houses and villages, particularly in the areas of Jesus' activity around villages such as Nazareth and Capernaum.[14]

Roman power is exerted locally through Judean kings who in turn build up a temple structure that religiously ratifies their authority. Suffering, for the majority of the population of the region, is compounded by the imposition of heavy taxation in addition to traditional temple tithes. The very culture of the people is threatened when a Roman-style temple is built, Palestinian cities are renamed and dedicated to the emperor, and high priests are appointed by the Roman governor. Repression and taxation run families into debt and hunger, ripping at the

12 Glaser, *Announcing the Kingdom*, 130.

13 Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom*, 163.

14 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 34.

very social texture of their communities.[15] Galilean and Judean peasants respond with political unrest and agitation in defence of their traditional way of life: theirs is a resistance to foreign domination, but also to Herodian and high priestly connivance with this rule at the expense of their own people and with total disregard for their law and tradition.[16]

It is in the thick of such tension that we encounter Jesus at the table of the Pharisee, and witness the clash between two incompatible interpretations regarding who is welcome at the table of God's kingdom. Jesus' story confronts the 'official' story line of the comfortable and relatively powerful religious man who lives within the cultural expectations of his context. Jesus' story, however, is far from exotic, extra-cultural or foreign to Jewish identity and tradition. It springs from and extends the long story of God's good purposes for all people that Jews, even not highly educated ones, would recognize as part of their tradition.

In his prophetic role, Jesus is spearheading a mission of renewal among his people that builds on God's mission of reestablishing the relational, creational image of God in all people, which is being threatened by human sin, by imperial power, and by legalistic and ritualistic religious power. Again in Horsley's words:

> Jesus launched a mission not only to heal the debilitating effects of Roman military violence and economic exploitation, but also to revitalize and rebuild the people's cultural spirit and communal vitality.[17]

As the New Testament reflects, the first followers of Jesus perceived and recorded his life and message as good news *within* their socio-economic, historical, cultural and religious contexts.

In the 'official story' of Roman and temple power, peasants and fishermen, women and children are insignificant cogs in the imperial system, worth no more than their meagre taxes. It actually favours the powers-that-be for internal rivalries and regional competitions to keep people away from one another. In these days of uncertainty and massive threat to their identity and survival as a people, Jesus reminds his fellow Jews of who they are: a community of mutual concern held together by God's sustaining hand, in order to illustrate to others what God's good purposes look like in the here and now.

In the imperial story they are a relegated, insignificant colony, nobodies close to extinction. In God's story they are welcome guests at the table of God's kingdom. It is to them that Jesus announces and demonstrates the good news of salvation, reconciliation, healing, restoration and freedom during the years of his public ministry.

Accordingly, on the climatic night before Jesus' death, he gathers around the Passover table, not the renowned figures of his day, not the press, the military, nor the diplomatic core, but a handful of simple folk, twelve of his followers, including even the one who

15 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 33.

16 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 54.

17 Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 126.

would betray him. With them he shares bread and wine, to them he reiterates his law of love which will be supremely illustrated in his own death, and to them he delegates the remembrance of this inclusive table at which the host gives himself away for the sake of his guests.

IV Followers of Jesus at the Table

Although Jesus' life and ministry were circumscribed to a rather small geographical area, that is not the case with his followers. It was the Jews of the Diaspora who provided the initial basis for the growth of the early church. These were mostly Hellenized Jews, primarily urban, more influenced by Greek culture than their Palestinian counterparts. Many of them had taken Greek names, employed Greek as their mother tongue and read the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah.[18] These were people who stood between cultures: they were immersed in Jewish tradition but were inevitably marked by their broader participation in the Greek world.

This double identity underlies the Gospel of Luke and its sequel, Acts. On the one hand, it is obvious that Luke intends to prove the historical, theological connection of Christianity with its Jewish roots. At the same time, both in form and in content, his writing reflects its Hellenist setting and is meant to address people immersed in that broad and diverse cultural milieu.[19] Luke and Acts conform more to Greco-Roman standards for historical writing than those of traditional Jewish biography present in the other gospels.[20]

Most significant for our theme is how this bi-cultural writer highlights the barrier-crossing nature of the good news as the plot moves from Galilee to Jerusalem (in Luke) and from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (in Acts).[21] But borders crossed are not merely geographical: women, along with the outcasts, the poor, the 'outsiders' are prominent in Luke's writing.[22] This we have observed in his account of Jesus at the Pharisee's table. And we witness it again in Acts.

Table issues—who is fed, when, what and how—surface in the narrations of Acts and threaten the unity of the fledgling church. Luke's recollection is honest: the church has to grapple with the social and cultural differences that spring up in every-day matters. Diaspora Jews often returned to Palestine in order to die and be buried

18 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became The Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 49, 57.

19 'The word "Hellenist" is derived from the verb *hellenizo* meaning "to Graecize" in speech or custom.' Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: a Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 30.

20 Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 322.

21 Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 186.

22 His Hellenistic sensitivities could explain, for example, Luke's more emancipated attitude toward women. Thurston attributes to this cultural sensitivity the fact that some have called Luke's the 'Gospel of womanhood'. Thurston, *The Widows*, 23.

in the land of Israel. The widows would then receive support from the temple or synagogue. However, those that joined the sect of Jesus followers would have been cut off, and stood in need of charity.[23] As the story recorded in Acts 6:1-7 goes, the followers of Jesus from among the Hellenist Jews complained. In their perspective, 'their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food' while the widows among the Palestinian Jews were being favoured.

It is not difficult to imagine the inner workings of this conflict: possibly among the Hebrew widows were some Galilean women who had followed and served Jesus and hence were given preference in the daily distribution.[24] There might have been cultural clashes between these and the Hellenized women, deemed too liberated by more traditional insiders. In any event, the response was prompt and effective: leaders were chosen from among the Hellenist followers of Jesus to care not merely for their own people but for all those whose needs brought them to the table. It is not surprising, coming from Luke, that in the next stories recorded we encounter two of these 'minor' leaders taking on roles central to the witness of the new church: Stephen becomes the first martyr among Jesus' followers; and Philip preaches in Samaria and to an African official, the first non-Jew (or Jewish proselyte) whose conversion is recorded in the Bible.

Another 'table story' is central to the self-understanding and mission of the early church. Peter, the prominent leader of the first believers, very much an insider both of Palestinian Jewish tradition and of the Jesus movement, is commanded in a vision to eat unclean (non-kosher) food that had been off limits for Jews since time immemorial. He is still puzzling in horror over the vision when messengers of a Roman centurion call out to him, extending an invitation to Cornelius' home.

Against all Jewish ritual law—according to which eating, drinking, providing and receiving hospitality from non-Jews is strictly prohibited—and probably overcoming much personal prejudice—Romans like Cornelius were oppressing his people and had very recently crucified his teacher!—Peter responds. He welcomes the messengers into the house where he is staying, travels a long distance with them, and enters Cornelius' house, where he shares, and actually discovers, the good news. In amazement he declares: 'I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10).

Much to the consternation of the 'central' church in Jerusalem, Peter actually enters into the intimacy of the Roman centurion's world: he stays for days, partaking of the same food under the same roof with this man who represents everything the Jewish people hate, fear and reject. Cornelius was Roman, a soldier of the imperial army that was crushing Israel. Although he feared God, he had never taken the steps required to become a Jewish proselyte. He and his household adhered to traditions, habits, diets and

23 Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 338.

24 Thurston, *The Widows*, 30.

values abhorrent to them. Surely he should become *like* them in order to become one *of* them! Then he would be welcome at the table of fellowship.

In striking contrast to that attitude ring the words of yet another bi-cultural follower of Jesus, a man born as a Roman citizen into an established family of Tarsus, a prominent city of the empire, but raised (possibly in Jerusalem) as a Jewish boy in the Pharisee tradition. Paul affirms that he is willing to become like others, 'all things to all men', be they weak, Jews, or people not bound to the law, in order that they may share in the blessings of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:2-23). Accordingly, he dedicated his life to making the good news of God's kingdom known to women and men, Jews and Gentiles, in cities spread wide across the Roman Empire.

The early church stumbled, debated and suffered as it made its way out of its first, culturally determined 'table manners' and sought to understand and convey the universal reach of the good news in daily interaction with the people of many cultures, languages, and gods, that had been 'dumped together helter-skelter' by the Roman Empire.[25] Their primary affiliation as members of a new community allowed Christians to create a new and coherent culture and identity within the culturally diverse chaos of their day. Stark summarises his analysis of this 'revitalization movement':

> Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent problems. To cities filled with homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn apart by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity.[26]

Such an alternative way of living was not some new and passing fad but rather a current and contextually relevant indwelling of the good news story of God's good purposes for God's creation. Against the backdrop of prevailing up-rootedness, injustice, oppression and relativity, the new people of God sought together to establish communities whose lifestyle affirmed their relational bond to each other and to God, as well as their broad creational calling. Drawing on elements of their diverse cultural background, early followers of Jesus actually created 'a new culture capable of making life in Greco-Roman cities more tolerable'.[27]

V A Call to Christian Mission

In recent years, a shift has occurred within the social sciences regarding the concept of culture. Many sociologists today favour an understanding of culture as a 'repertoire of techniques',

25 The entire book of Acts depicts this struggle. See particularly Acts 11 and 15. See also Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 213.

26 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 161.

27 Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 162.

'a toolkit of strategies', as 'complex, rule like structures that can be put to strategic use' rather than as a tight network of a few abstract central themes or values instantiated in a range of symbols, rituals and practices in collective life. Culture is deemed as more dynamic, as both constraining and enabling. Personal agency is accounted for rather than overridden by social conditioning, and more allowance is given to choice and variation. Within this understanding, people can, and do, participate in multiple cultural traditions at the same time; they also can and do question and override cultural constraints. The job of cultural sociologists, within this understanding, is to study how these information-processing mechanisms or techniques (schema or scripts) are acquired, diffused and modified.[28]

In light of this shift, our exploration of gospel in mission and culture must move beyond the classical Niebuhrian route regarding the position of Christ and church in relation to a supposedly homogeneous and non-porous culture. Instead, we must consider what specific aspects within any particular cultural construct are compatible with a biblical worldview. Rodney Clapp affirms in this regard:

> The church as a culture will approach any particular host nation (or cultural practice) with discrimination. It need not indiscriminately reject, and it cannot indiscriminately accept, any and all aspects of a particular culture… Christians are not haters or lovers of culture, any more than fish could be said to hate or love water…. The question is not choosing for or against it; the question is *what kind of culture is at hand?*[29]

There are elements in all cultures that reflect God's creative, life-enhancing goodness, and elements born out of human rebellion that breed death in their wake. The issue is, how are Christians to discern the ones from the others or even to disengage from the very water they swim in?

I propose that the church worldwide has within herself the resources required for such discernment: Christian communities can and do live out God's mission in the world when they are willing to live in the ever-present tension of being 'third-culture' followers of Jesus. In this section we will explore what that might look like. What, in other words, are the missiological implications of the gospel in culture?

1 The Concept of a 'Third Culture Kid'

David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken define a 'Third Culture Kid', (or TCK), as follows:

> A Third Culture Kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the

28 Paul DiMaggio, 'Culture and Cognition' in *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 23 (1997), 265-268.

29 Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 177.

cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.[30]

What is striking is that people who have grown up between worlds, treading both the home culture of their parents and the culture of their host country, have been found to create, together, and identify most strongly with a third culture that transcends all original ones, without denying their value. The culture of a TCK is a 'culture between cultures' in which he or she engages meaningfully, and with a sense of belonging, with people from very diverse cultural blends.

2 Missiological implications

The parallels are obvious: Christians are called, in Jesus' words, to be *in* the world, but not *of* it. Though imbedded in particular national, ethnic, and cultural stories, Christians also claim to belong to another reality as real as the first: they inhabit the story of God's action and mission in relation to the world—their second culture.

Through this 'double belonging', as TCKs do, they together create a new 'third' culture in which they share with people from very diverse cultural backgrounds. Allegiance to that group grants its members the capacity to look at their first national, ethnic or cultural group as if from the outside, from a more discriminating vantage point than would ever have been possible from within. They are free to question and imagine alternatives rather than simply receiving their cultural environment as a given and all-determining reality.

a) Third-culture communities at the crossroads

As third-culture people, followers of Jesus are called to recognize as relative many dimensions of their culture that those encased within it experience as inevitable and imperative. Third-culture Christians stand in what Orlando Costas has termed the 'crossroads', those often unsettled and unsettling, uncomfortable, but generative places 'where the forces of history (ideologies, political and economic systems, social and religious movements) confront each other'.[31]

Most communities grant space only to like-minded, like-looking, like-speaking people. But followers of Jesus are called to acknowledge they have been sent as he was into the world, as agents of reconciliation. So, unafraid of mixing with the 'wrong' people, or of not fully belonging, they must stand in the interstices of society; between belief and unbelief, between purposeful and aimless living, between community and disintegration, between the global and the local, between people and nature, between haves and have-nots, between power and vulnerability,

30 'The TCK Profile' seminar material (Interaction, Inc., 1989), 1, in David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: the Experience of Growing up Among World*s (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2001), 19.

31 Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982). 325.

between north and south, east and west. Once they capture a vision of the table of God's kingdom, submit to Christ's sovereignty and are filled by the Holy Spirit, followers of Jesus are called to celebrate their unmerited inclusion at the table of God's kingdom, and both welcome people who look, think, speak and eat differently than they do, and also take the risk of confronting any power that excludes or deprives people of their rightful presence at the table.

The good news is that, contrary to most expectations, true gospel witness in the world does not rest on power, or the structures of Christendom, but on sharing in the passion of Jesus. In Newbigin's words, 'the very heart of the biblical vision for the unity of humankind is that its center is not an imperial power but the slain Lamb'.[32] Consequently, the 'central reality' in witness is 'neither word not act, but the total life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ, sharing his passion and the power of his resurrection'.[33]

In so doing, or rather in so *being*, the church—the multi-faceted community of Jesus disciples, gifted in 'many tongues' by the Spirit—indwells God's story, she takes on God's mission in the midst of clashing and blending human cultures and is used by God to weave those strands into meaning and life-granting wholes. It is there, at the 'crossroads', where missiology—'the critical reflection about Christian faith as cultural, ideological, religions, social, economic and political borders are crossed'—is most fecund, as Costas says.[34]

It is precisely its 'third-culture-ness', its ecumenicity and catholicity that offers the world church the necessary correctives to the inevitable cultural blind-spots. 'It is only by being faithful participants in a supranational, multicultural family of churches', affirms Newbigin, 'that we can find the resources to be at the same time faithful sustainers and cherishers of our own respective cultures and also faithful critics of them'.[35] As 'third-culture' people, Christians are called to celebrate their unmerited inclusion at God's kingdom table and stand in the often painful place of the prophet, denouncing national, class, ethnic and tribal values and practices that counter God's good purposes for *all* people, even at the risk of exclusion, ridicule, persecution or death.

b) Socio-cultural particularities

Of course, this 'third-culture-ness' does not deny particularity. In Brett's words, 'Christian faith does not mean the erasure of cultural identity altogether'.[36] A Chinese Christian will continue being Chinese and an Argentine, Argentine. What occurs, instead, is that 'the specificities of social identity

32 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 159.

33 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 137.

34 Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate*, 28.

35 Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 197.

36 Mark Brett, 'The Loss and Retrieval of Ancient Religion in Ancient Israel and in Australia' in Michael Parsons, *Text and Task: Scripture and Mission* (Bletchley: Paternoster Press, 2005), 12.

are given dignity within the larger body of Christ' and add to its rich multiplicity.[37] In becoming a first-century, Aramaic-speaking Jewish man, and binding his divine identity into the specificities of that time and place in history, God says 'yes' to socio-cultural particularity, even to a powerless particularity. And as the account of Pentecost so vividly portrays, and the impact of vernacular translations through the centuries attests, God's Spirit gifts people of diverse settings to hear the good news in their own language, even when it is not the language of the empire of the day.

The good news is that even in a world in which a given civilization is esteemed as privileged, more enlightened or progressive than others by the powers-that-be (Rome in Jesus' time, the British Empire in its height, or transnational capitalist elites today), no *one* culture is granted hegemony over others in God's story. No one culture owns the keys of the Kingdom. No one has generated *the* illumined reading of the Bible and reality, *the* definitive theological articulation or *the* anointed outworking of faith in society. God's mission enlists Christians to celebrate the unique character and contribution of diverse people groups, to strive to make it possible for every person to encounter God's story in her own language, and to stand against all homogenizing cultural impositions that nullify particular expressions of God's creative image in diverse people.

A tempered appreciation of the virtues and vices of particular cultures does not imply, however, that third-culture people must leave their initial culture at the door in order to sit at God's banquet table. God's kingdom is not some amorphous, supra-cultural, other-worldly milieu. Rather, it is a space of vibrant, life-giving, God honouring encounter of spice and colour, smell and sound here and now, in the complex entanglement of human relations. As 'third-culture' people, followers of Jesus are called to live today in light of the completion of God's story, with daily expectation of Christ's imminent return. They are called to express in their daily interactions, the confident belief that one day the triumphal choir before God's throne will be composed of a great multitude from *every* nation, tribe and people, proclaiming, on bended knee, God's sovereignty in their own very distinct languages.

VI Conclusion

The characters in Axel's film discover, or rather are discovered by, the good news of healing, abundant, and undeserved grace when they share in Babette's lavish feast. In contrast, today's economic globalization, accompanied by the individualistic and materialistic culture of its mostly western proponents, is threatening the relational and creational capacity of people, undermining community life, effacing rich cultural distinctives, and plundering the environment the globe over.[38] No longer able to support their families locally, ravaged by violence

37 Brett, 'Loss and Retrieval' in *Text and Task*, 13.

38 Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Making Globalization Work* 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 9.

and exclusion, millions of people emigrate or wander the world as refugees. Thousands of women are left alone with their children in crowded cities. Families are torn apart. And so is the entire eco-system: land is gouged by mining, rivers and air are polluted by waste, with no respect for its integrity or sustainability.

Followers of Jesus, as creative and responsible stewards of both this world and of God's story, cannot remain indifferent. With humble yet bold confidence we can and must affirm in prophetic word and deed that even within this ruling world order, or disorder, there is good news for humanity. N. T. Wright puts it well:

> What the Christian gospel offers, and what Christian ministry must urgently offer in its formation of communities of faith, hope, prayer and witness, is a love which cannot be deconstructed, a love which manifestly is seeking its neighbor's good rather than its own, a love which goes out into the public square not in order to gain power, prestige or money but in order to incarnate that love of God which is expressed precisely in God's putting of all things to rights, God's righteousness, God's justice.[39]

Is the community we belong to and create one such as this? Is our table one at which immigrants, people of diverse cultural backgrounds and different languages are welcome, not as oddities or welfare cases, but as full-fledged members? In as far as Christian communities the world over live together in light of God's grace-full story, they become historically visible and culturally alternative out-workings of God's mission and localized expressions of the bountiful banquet of God's kingdom.

39 N.T. Wright, *The Gospel and Our Culture* (Nashotah: Nashotah House Studies, No. 1, 2007), 32.