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

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Abstract
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. Therefore, in pursuit of an interpretation of and a metaphor for the Church that emphasizes and embodies the theological tenet of divine inclusivity, this paper defends the argument that “a guiding ecclesiological image embodies an ecclesiological vision and gives rise to particular streams of congregational praxis.” The author develops and supports this thesis by examining the ecclesial imagery and related ecclesiological interpretations utilized by two twentieth-century theologians in their systematic treatments of the doctrine of the Church. Letty M. Russell’s work, Church in the Round, and the ecclesial imagery used therein, and Jurgen Moltmann’s work, The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit, and the ecclesial imagery used therein, are described and evaluated to this end. Russell’s interpretation of the Church as a “round table” and Moltmann’s interpretation of the Church as “the messianic fellowship in the messianic feast” are explored, along with each image’s attendant ecclesiological understandings and practical implications for ecclesial life. The author also proposes her own ecclesial image, that of the Church as “place setters” at God’s feasting table, and describes the inclusive ecclesiology and the related congregational expressions connected with this interpretation of the Church.

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have largely omitted ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church is a crucial component of Christian truth. It is the most visible part of Christian theology, and it is vitally connected with every other part. A distorted church often coincides with a distorted gospel. Taken together, the images used in the New Testament present a rich theology of the church. The church is the people of God, the new creation, the fellowship and, of course, the body of Christ. In this fellowship are those people who have accepted and entered into the reign of God.