

Becoming a Guest Christology and Ecclesiological Identity

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Article abstract

The question of ecclesiological identity is a pressing one in the contemporary context, particularly in the light of the church's increasing marginalization or relative insignificance within Western society. This question of ecclesiological identity is explored by way of engagement with the guest Christology of the Nigerian Presbyterian theologian Enyi Ben Udoh, and by way of John Koenig's New Testament Hospitality. The result is a suggestive and constructive vision of the church that prioritizes its status as guest, in relation to the Christ who comes to the human family as guest, then kin, then Lord. The implications of this guest Christology for the church are sketched in conclusion.

Becoming a Guest

Christology and Ecclesiological Identity

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Questions of context have become insistent ones within Western theological discourses today. This prominence of contextual theology is rooted in a deepening awareness of the significance of context for the articulation of faith, and an awareness of the multiplicity of contexts that exist both locally and globally. Within this theological terrain, broadly conceived, the question that animates us here is whether a conversation between contexts might illuminate a challenge faced by the church in the West today—specifically, the ecclesiological and missiological challenge of the church’s marginalization within the wider culture. To address this contemporary and Canadian challenge, we will draw three unique contexts into conversation with each other. We will turn first to the writings of the Nigerian, Presbyterian theologian Enyi Ben Udoh, and to the Christological framework he develops within his *Guest Christology. An interpretative view of the Christological problem in Africa*. From there we will turn to consider John Koenig’s explorations of hospitality in his *New Testament Hospitality*, with particular attention paid to his analysis of the guest-host exchanges portrayed in Luke-Acts. Having traced a path through the writings of Udoh and Koenig, we will turn finally and briefly to the contem-

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porary Western context, asking a series of questions concerning the guest nature of the church¹.

1. Developments in African theology

In surveying theological developments on the continent of Africa during the twentieth century, Diane Stinton (2004, 3-14) points out that African theology as an intellectual discipline arose in the 1950's, in parallel with the struggle for independence that was taking place across the continent. Thus, alongside the establishment of independent nation-states (Ghana in 1957, Nigeria in 1960, and Tanzania in 1961, to name just a few) we also see the voices and texts of independent African theologians themselves coming to the fore. Stinton observes, also, that while Christological explorations were not absent from early theological writings across Africa, these were also not prioritized in that period. Rather, Africans in general (and theologians with them) were making «intensive efforts to reaffirm their identity and integrity in many spheres of life, including names, dress, music, dance forms, architecture, and other indigenous expressions affecting church life and practice» (Stinton 2004, 7). That is, in the light of the historical marginalization of African culture and identity within the colonial church and in relation to colonial theologies, the period of the 1950's through 70's saw great attention placed on the retrieval and affirmation of what had been lost or was being lost. Following Kwame Bediako, Stinton points out that early theologians were preoccupied with the relationship of traditional African religions to Christian identity—again, in the wake of the missionary tradition and its general impatience or dismissiveness with respect to traditional religions across Africa (2004, 9).

Moving beyond these early theological developments, however, Stinton points out that from the 1980's to the present, theology within the African context has engaged with the whole range of traditional loci and has approached them through specifically African categories and conceptions. Christological development has dominated in this period, «now formulated in categories derived directly from the worldviews of African primal religions, such as Christ as healer, as ancestor, as master of initiation» (Stinton 2004, 10). Among the theologians Stinton associates with

1. My focus is in fact more narrow than the Canadian context since, again, there are multiple contexts (ecclesiologically and missiologically speaking) in Canada. More narrowly I speak from the context of Protestantism within the Anglophone community in Quebec.

this period of emergent Christology are Kwame Bediako (Ghana), Charles Nyamiti (Tanzania), Takatso Mofoken (South Africa), and Enyi Ben Udoh (Nigeria). Udoh himself acknowledges the emergent nature of his Christological reflections when he writes: «Doing Christology, we must admit, is a new business for us» (1988, 12). Udoh writes as a Nigerian Presbyterian minister who completed his doctoral dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminar in 1983, with that dissertation published in 1988 under the title: *Guest Christology. An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*. It is to an analysis of Udoh's guest Christology that we now turn.

2. Udoh and the re-introduction of Christ to Africa

The development of a Christology that is faithful to African culture, identity, and experience lies at the heart of the Udoh's *Guest Christology*, and this work is set against the backdrop of what he describes as the failure of missionary Christology. Speaking programmatically, Udoh points out: «Christ entered the African scene as a forceful, impatient and unfriendly tyrant. He was presented as invalidating the history and institutions of a people in order to impose his rule upon them» (1988, 74-75)². Over-against this missionary Christology, Udoh further defines his intention as follows:

In all, this project is an attempt to lay a foundation for a solid and creative Christology for Africa. It is an effort to interject a different form of understanding of Jesus Christ in our lives in a way which might stimulate a better understanding of ourselves and of what God is doing in the world through the witness of Jesus Christ. If this work could generate such interest toward God and his Word, such desire to welcome Jesus in as our guest, our kin and our Lord, then it would have succeeded in its purpose. (Udoh 1988, 14-15)

Here it becomes apparent that Udoh is sketching a relational trajectory that sees Jesus proceed from the status of guest, to kin, to Lord, in the African context. Which is to say, in part, that Jesus cannot first be Lord. Rather, Jesus must first become a guest to those who meet him in their particular context, and it is only from this starting point that a person or a community might progress in their relationship, if at all, to the point of

2. In the same vein, Udoh (1988, 212) later points out that the average Nigerian holds a view of Christ that is closer to the missionary version than to that of the Bible.

affirming Christ as Lord. This trajectory (from guest to kin to Lord) also has implication's for the conceptualization of Lordship itself, since any Lord who has traced this path, who has first been a guest, will be other than the Lord introduced by the Scottish, Presbyterian missionaries in Nigeria.

We have already alluded to a tension within African Christianity, between traditional culture and religion on the one hand and Christian identity on the other hand—a tension much explored in the early years of theological writing and discourse across the continent. While this tension is not a primary focus for us, it is important to mark its significance in Udoh's own thought. He argues that many Christians live between these two worlds, never being able to reconcile them fully, and lays this disjunction between worlds at the feet of the missionaries themselves. He therefore suggests that this dualism might be overcome if Christ is introduced to the African context within some framework other than that of « Lordship ». In either case, he concludes:

[I]mported or received theological categories in their present form, cannot contain the intense religious aspirations of the African, nor can they any longer come to terms with their fundamental religious questions [...] Addressing the thorny question of Christ is, in our opinion, an important inroad toward doing a theology with an African soul without alienating Christ. (Udoh 1988, 162)

More pointedly: « What we are saying is by beginning Christology with Jesus as a foreigner—and that is how he is generally depicted—Christians in Africa might, then, be able to deal with their own predicament which the two worlds have brought them » (Udoh 1988, 226)³.

As is already apparent, Udoh's argument is not theological in an abstract way. In laying the groundwork for his guest Christology he takes a further practical turn in discussing the failure of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria in his time to acknowledge its increasingly marginal status within society. This marginal status was expressed in the fact, among others, that the church no longer ran schools within the country. This was a source of frustration to the church, which expressed its frustration by pointing to « moral decadence » and poor academic performance to assert its claim that the church should become implicated, again, in the operation

3. Udoh continues here: « Emphasis here is on the guest identifying with the needs and problems for which the host culture is famous without having to be biologically African. »

of schools—thereby reclaiming, also, its prominence in the social and political landscape. For Udoh, however, this response of the church represented its failure to recognize that the culture had moved on, and for the good—recent improvements in educational and governmental administration had been to the benefit of the country. Thus Udoh writes:

It is good to remind us that [...] Nigeria is making progress, especially, since after its civil war (1967-1970). For example, most Nigerians perceive the creation of multiple states and the Administration's emphasis on education [...] as necessary steps toward the nation's overall objective. They view these as being the most significant events designed to deal realistically with its various domestic problems since Independence. (Udoh 1988, 217-218)

For Udoh, the church had preferred the status quo, as opposed to dynamic engagement, and had thereby raised doubts about its very survival in a new context. Expressed differently, the Christian Church in Nigeria had always played the host—had become comfortable with, and self-satisfied within, the role of host—and in a new circumstance that resisted its host-identity, the church was compromising its own life, vitality, and existence. Certainly the church may have, historically, contributed to the well-being of Nigerians (educationally or medically), but this is beside the point for Udoh since the fundamental question is that of the alien nature of Christ and of the church in relation to traditional Nigerian culture and identity. Apart from any contributions the colonial church might have made, the alienation between Christ and culture, and the bifurcation of identity within Africans themselves, remained deeply problematic—this, for Udoh, is not merely a pragmatic problem, but a decidedly theological one.

In turning to those theological questions, Udoh clarifies the precise nature of the «guest» he is writing about, as follows:

Guest in our usage presupposes a situation where one has to abandon his historical roots for a new environment. Whether in search of a better future or as a result of crisis, a guest finds himself at the threshold of a new life, be it by force or volition. When we refer to Jesus as a guest we are indicating three important characteristics. We are suggesting that he is human; that his cradle-history belongs elsewhere; and that he is looking for understanding, love and acceptance he could not find elsewhere. (Udoh 1988, 221-222)

The full humanity of Jesus is particularly important for Udoh, since welcoming Jesus as a guest within traditional guest ceremonies requires that he be human—this ceremony is only possible within the human con-

text (Udoh 1988, 224)⁴. If Christ is not fully human, then he cannot participate with us in community⁵. But alongside his humanity, Jesus is and must be perceived also as an alien or as one whose cradle-history, as Udoh puts it, belongs elsewhere. This means that «Jesus is different and perceived as such. It means he is liable to be rejected, doubted and excluded from the mainstream» (Udoh 1988, 225)⁶. It is fundamental to his nature as a guest that he is a stranger and one who is not inevitably or invariably at home with the communities and families within which he arrives, whether on his travels through Judea or as he becomes present and contemporaneous to communities across time through the telling of his story. Expressed somewhat differently, «because other forces are closer, more enduring and often more trustworthy [to the African]», it also «makes no sense for them to rely upon [Jesus] for answers to their deep religious questions» (Udoh 1988, 230). Thus, if Jesus is truly a guest, or if we wish to attend to his guest nature meaningfully, then we must recognize the fundamental vulnerability that accompanies such a status—he is not in a position of power, is not a host, and is not at home within the world. He is at risk from rejection and indeed of loss.

The reception of guests within the Nigerian context is often embedded within a ritual of welcome and exchange that centres, very concretely, on

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4. Udoh gives a deeper sense of the significance of the human dimension of Jesus in contrasting the quest for the historical Jesus with a theological framework that accents his humanity. «A distinction should be made at this point between the quest for historical Jesus and the historicity of Jesus as the take-off point of Christological reflection. The former pertains to the liberal European theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which saw Jesus as the great model and teacher, particularly concerned with the question of what we might *know* or *not know* about the historical Jesus. The latter seeks to see Jesus in a concrete human mold which can affect and be affected by the African experience» (Udoh 1988, 223). That is, the historicity of Jesus suggests a Christ who can be touched by African culture, and enter into genuine exchange with African persons and communities. This must also be the basis of any guest Christology.
 5. This, of course, give expression to classical Christological formulations which have insisted that both our knowledge of Christ (epistemological dimension) and our relationship with Christ (soteriological dimension) require his full humanity.
 6. Here, importantly, Udoh moves to the missional and ecclesiological dimensions of his thought that will also preoccupy us, when he adds: «It means the paternalistic attitude of the church must change to that of a guest; change from lord to servant, from bourgeois image to a participating audience.» He also adds: «The stranger factor in Jesus allows the Nigerian to play host by assuming the responsibility that goes with it; to experience the joys and frustrations of living and working with Christ» (Udoh 1988, 225).

the kolanut—here, evidently, we are turning again to concrete practices and considerations. Kola trees are common across West Africa and produce large pods that contain kolanuts, which themselves fulfill a variety of personal (they have stimulant properties and are also used medicinally) and communal functions. As Udoh points out, however (1988, 196), «the prevailing notion ties the nut to a stranger-event. A guest is welcomed or rejected depending on whether or not the offer of a nut is made⁷». There are different protocols across different contexts that define how the nut is served to a guest or entourage, and different meanings implied in the different ways that the nut may fall into pieces when it is broken, but the significance or meaning of the ceremony itself is similar across contexts. Udoh fills out that meaning:

A search for new and better form of relationships begins officially with the presentation of the nut. The acts of acceptance and chewing the broken seed are exercises of self-volition. Coercion is antithetical to the principle of the relationship formation. Indeed, the use of force automatically undermines the very constitution and meaning of the ritual process. It is imperative to bear this social fact in mind—namely, expression of free will as a necessary component of the Guest Paradigm. (Udoh 1988, 199)⁸

The Kolanut ceremony is not the end of a journey toward relationship and encounter between guest and host, but marks the beginning only. Through the ceremony and a subsequent extending of rights to the guest, he or she might be received not only into the home of the one who serves the nut, but also into the wider community as «more and more homes join together in welcoming a guest as one of their own» (Udoh 1988, 198). In fact, Udoh goes on to argue that the main significance of the Kolanut ritual «lies in dramatizing a procedure by which social cleavages can be managed as a means of incorporating aliens into the mainstream of the host cultural environment» (Udoh 1988, 198). The ritual forms and conserves relationships, even if he knows it is not a panacea for every social ill. «The ceremony makes the beginning of an ongoing encounter. It may be views as a public declaration of intention by the parties concerned, to set in motion

7. For his description of the Kolanut Rite, see Udoh (1988, 196-206).

8. I have explored this dimension of freedom in hospitality and encounter elsewhere (De Vries 2012).

what amount to a very difficult but significantly worthy search for belonging together » (Udoh 1988, 200)⁹.

The trajectory here, however, both in terms of the Kolanut ritual and the Christological framework Udoh develops, is from guest toward something more than guest—from guest to *kin*. Udoh acknowledges this trajectory when he writes of the guest who is becoming more than a guest:

Once a guest and host have voluntarily initiated themselves into this new role, the distance between them begins to shorten, the number of laws governing them gets fewer and the choices before them increase. There exists in effect a new sense of solidarity, one ethical principle and a shared destiny. (Udoh 1988, 245)¹⁰

That is, on the way to becoming kin, a guest is granted rights with respect to property, rituals, and such practical realities as selling in the market—the guest becomes implicated in the variety of dimensions that make up family life and community life (Udoh 1988, 233)¹¹. Turning again to the Christological dimension of the guest-to-kin trajectory, Udoh argues that the guest-kin framework allows Jesus to progressively become one of the family and community, rather than remaining an alien figure defined by those unfamiliar with that family, community, and culture¹². Otherwise put, by insisting immediately on the titles of Saviour, Christ, and Lord, « we alienate Jesus from the normal human experience. We make it difficult to get acquainted with and understand him directly. Kinship can be an asset for building the kind of infrastructure by which Jesus and people

9. More concretely, and generally, through the guest ritual and subsequent integration into the family and community, the guest obtains rights to participate in and contribute to decision making, to make use of land and sell at markets.

10. Later Udoh will add, in direct comment on the transition of guest to kin: « It is the duty of society to create a climate which enables its people to enhance its well-being, and preserve its dignity. Any talk about human development must take on concrete and particular expression by working to build the sort of society which can serve that end. Being a member of society means the ability and freedom to participate in that social responsibility. »

11. Here it should perhaps be clarified that Udoh is not referring simply to situations of displaced persons or refugees seeking a new space of safety or belonging, but is referring generally to a context in which two parties « voluntarily step out of their current historical situation to initiate a new beginning » (1988, 233).

12. Udoh is critical of what he describes as the church's superficial education efforts through catechesis, which were not aimed at serious engagement with Nigerian culture but with the inculcation of truths not fully understood or grasped culturally speaking.

live together as a family, working together as a team for one common goal » (Udoh 1988, 244). This relationship, on the way from guest to kin, is neither one in which Jesus insists on his own way within the culture, nor one in which he is required to immediately conform to the host culture¹³. Rather there is openness and reciprocity within the relationship. Udoh describes the openness of the African family and kin structure as follows:

It brings together the living and the dead, the unborn and the stranger, human community and the natural environment. To this end, African system is far from being closed. On the contrary, its inclusive and open characteristic accounts for the ease with which the continent was able to contain various colonial bodies in the last century and the Arabs before. There is always room for extra people, for more improvement and for additional symbols. (Udoh 1988, 184).

Which is to say that there is a dynamic of exchange by which the host environment also becomes receptive to transformation or change as this may be invited or initiated through the presence of a guest—in this case, through the presence of Jesus.

There is finally one step beyond the process of conversation and exchange that has been outlined above since Udoh imagines the possibility that Jesus might become not only a guest, and not only kin, but also Lord. He writes:

[I]n Jesus we have seen an important member in our midst, a kin whose presence we can celebrate, whose voice we can heed and in whom we can affirm our kinship with one another. For Jesus, it's an opportunity to unfold his power and mission in a different culture. It is indeed a chance for him to declares his candidacy publicly in indigenous languages and dialects, and perhaps announce his Lordship over all. (Udoh 1988, 246)

According to Udoh, it is generally unlikely that a person will be able to provide significant leadership in a community in which that person was not born. But he also insists that such leadership is not finally impossible. « A great deal of work, dedication and determination are required in order to receive people's mandate » (Udoh 1988, 250). Thus there should be no assumptions (and should have been no assumptions) about the willingness

13. As Udoh puts it (1988, 244): « It is inconsistent with the principle of guesing, and a limitation put on the full potentiality of a guest, to predetermine what image Jesus would seek to project for different homes and peoples in the larger family. It is improper to forecast his title because we are dealing here not with a rigid category but with a dynamic process of living and belonging together ».

of Nigerians to confess the Lordship of Jesus, particularly where the prelude to such confession was limited catechesis and no deep sense of freedom to do so (Udoh 1988, 250). Also, it must always be acknowledged (it is basic to the guest-kin-Lord framework) that while some may accept that trajectory, it is possible that many will not. Jesus may excel in moral excellence, understanding, dedication, and love, and thereby earn the trust of some, but « others may still contest his qualification » (Udoh 1988, 252).

From the point of view of Udoh, those who have accepted Jesus as a guest, then as kin, and then as Lord, will do so because they have found in him someone who makes him or her aware of their frailties and who lends them energy to work for the transformation of the world in his kingdom. And those who related to him through this guest-kin-Lord trajectory will themselves take up the task of living in, and inviting others into, that trajectory—always under the reality of the cross. « Ultimately offering up his life on the Cross, he introduces into human consciousness the irony of true Lordship. By such a paradigm other leaders can examine their policy and program » (Udoh 1988, 255). Those policies and programs, including the task of mission or evangelism, must defer to the ironic account of Lordship Udoh describes, and must aim also toward the kingdom Jesus introduces: « [By] sharing in his mission to the world in the cause of the oppressed, in struggle against injustices, inequality, poverty, diseases and ignorance, we celebrate a new communalism, the communalism of the kingdom » (Udoh 1988, 255). The only path of such participation in mission and in the communalism of Jesus' kingdom is by way of encounter with Jesus as a guest, opening to him and his way in deepening kinship, and then finally acknowledging his Lordship in complete freedom.

3. Koenig, and the guest-host reversal

The guest Christology of Udoh is rooted in his broad understanding of the colonial history of Nigeria, in his celebration of the guest-host rituals fundamental to African identity and culture, and in his broad interpretation of the gospel narratives and Christian tradition. In his constructive theological work, Udoh also mentions, in passing, the portrayal of Jesus as a guest in the New Testament, referencing this portrayal as found in both the Gospel of John and the Synoptic tradition (Udoh 1988, 199). Udoh's guest Christology can be helpfully filled out by giving closer attention to the narrative of Luke-Acts, and specifically to the ways that Jesus himself is a guest, but also a host—that is, Jesus as one who traces the trajectory

of guest-host-Lord in his encounters with others. Filling out Udoh's guest Christology is an important theological exercise in its own right, inasmuch as it will provide scriptural warrant for the Christological framework he develops and inasmuch as it will fill out details in a way that may illuminate other ecclesiological and missiological questions. To this end, then, we turn to Koenig's *New Testament Hospitality*¹⁴.

In tracing out Koenig's argument, it will be helpful to do so through the lens of a specific scriptural text, to bring as much concreteness as possible to this analysis. To that end we will take the narrative of Luke 7: 36-50 as a starting point¹⁵. In that text and narrative, Jesus has been invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon and is reclining at table with others who have similarly been invited. During the meal and conversation, a woman comes near to Jesus, weeping, and wets his feet with her tears, then wiping them with her hair and anointing them with oil. In response to her actions, the host Simon objects—not to the woman or to Jesus, but to himself—muttering to himself that Jesus would have nothing to do with this woman if he knew who she was. Namely, a sinner. Jesus, seeming to know what Simon is thinking, offers a teaching about debt, about the forgiveness of debt, and about love—in fact, about the love she has shown by anointing Jesus' feet; the love that Simon, as host, failed to show. In the narrative Jesus also goes on to explain that this woman is an example of love and of the significance of forgiveness for human life and relationships. Speaking directly to the unnamed woman, he says: «Your sins are forgiveness». And: «Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.»

In the first place we observe that this narrative includes an instance of the table fellowship that is a distinctive feature of Luke-Acts. Indeed, Koenig is willing to accept (with only limited qualification) Minear's argument that table-fellowship *constitutes* the gospel in Luke-Acts (Koenig 1985, 86). In the privileging of table fellowship in Luke-Acts there is a similar privileging of hospitality, and Koenig points out that within Acts, specifically, there are innumerable figures who appear to be mentioned for no other reason than that they have offered significant hospitality to one of the Apostles (Koenig 1985, 87). A capacity for hospitality, given and received, is evidence of the kingdom inaugurated through the presence of

14. Amos Yong (2008, 99-125) offers a parallel engagement with Koenig on the question of guest-host exchange.

15. The choice of this text is somewhat arbitrary yet is such that it allows us to fill out most elements of Koenig's framework.

Jesus. But beyond this prizing and privileging of hospitality, it is impossible to read the narrative of Luke-Acts without appreciating Jesus' specific identity as a guest (as Udoh himself has recognized). This identity is in evidence from the outset of Gospel narrative («there was no room for them in the inn») and through the «travel narrative» of Luke 9-19, where Jesus is portrayed «as one constantly on the road, sometimes finding hospitality with others, sometimes experiencing rejection» (Koenig 1985, 86-87)¹⁶. Koenig (1985, 87) also notes that Jesus often spends nights out in the open in Luke's gospel, and that he seems always «to enter upon the scene as a guest in need of hospitality». Returning to Luke 7, it is impossible to imagine this encounter of forgiveness and love—and Jesus' teaching about love—without his participation in table fellowship in the home of Simon and, more specifically, of his entering that home as a guest.

The meaning of table-fellowship within Luke-Acts is not exhausted, however, by this insistence on the importance of hospitality itself, or by the observation that Jesus is first a guest to others. Koenig (1985, 86) observes: «The very structure of Luke's work witnesses to a conviction on his part that some deep link exists between the verbal content of God's good news and its historical embodiment in boundary situations involving guests and hosts». This is not to simply reaffirm Luke's interest in table fellowship. Rather, it is in the boundary situations created by table fellowship—where roles overlap, becoming uncertain and fluid—that the good news of Christ comes most decisively to expression and fruitful. With this in mind, Koenig wants readers of the narrative to pay particular attention to «the frequent and sometimes subtle reversals that occur in the guest and host roles played by our author's chief characters» (1985, 90). Returning to Luke 7, it is evident that Jesus is first a guest in the home of Simon the Pharisee—he is welcomed to the home of another, and another presides as host. But during the meal, Jesus' posture shifts from that of guest to that of host. In the midst of the story he is suddenly in the mode of teacher, offering Simon an explanation of the relationship between indebtedness and love. Similarly, Jesus speaks to the woman who has anointed his feet with authority, affirming that her sins are forgiven, and that her faith has healed her—adopting the posture of a host and of a Lord who has the capacity, even, to announce the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, as he affirms

16. Already here we have a significant resonance with Udoh, who sees Jesus' reception within the Nigerian context as a question of freedom—to receive, to reject, or to continue holding Jesus at a distance.

faith, forgives sins, and embodies love, there is a sense that in this moment Jesus defines what it means to be a host, which is inclusive of and defined by his prior willingness to become and be a guest (Koenig 1985, 90).

This reversal—this shift from guest to host—happens on numerous occasions in Luke-Acts, and we find another prominent example in the story of two disciples traveling to Emmaus. Within that narrative a stranger (Jesus) is invited into a home as a fellow-traveller and guest, and yet suddenly he is breaking the bread and blessing the bread, a host who reveals himself to those who had thought him dead. In these two instances of a guest-host reversal, there is no intimation that Jesus effects this transformation by way of aggressiveness or presumptuousness—rather there is something natural or organic about the transition. His capacity and right to serve as a host is honored and acknowledged, even if there is sometimes a mumbling annoyance at the form his host-posture takes in relation to some gathered around the table (in the Luke 7 narrative, at least). While Udoh has rightly identified the Christological significance of Jesus' identity as a guest, we both affirm and extend his guest Christology with this observation that Jesus himself traces a guest-host trajectory within the narrative of Luke-Acts.

To extend this analysis, we go a step further with Koenig as he considers the social and historical framework within which Luke seems to compose his narrative, work in which Koenig is indebted to the earlier work of Dillon and Theissen. For his part, Theissen argues that the earliest church was inhabited by (or embodied within) wandering charismatics, on the one hand, and settled sympathizers on the other hand—and that this earliest embodiment of Christianity shaped the synoptic tradition, including within the Gospel of Luke. According to Theissen (1978, 7-30), the four defining features of the wandering charismatics (or itinerant preachers) was their homelessness, their lack of family, their lack of possessions, and their lack of protection. These wandering preachers are to be understood in a dialectical relationship with settled groups of sympathizers, which formed the nucleus of later local communities. Thiessen summarizes the relationship between these two embodiments of the Christian way as follows: «There was a complementary relationship between the wandering charismatics and the local communities; wandering charismatics were the decisive spiritual authorities in the local communities, and local communities were the indispensable social and material basis for the wandering charismatics» (Theissen 1978, 7, 17). While Luke is not living in the earliest moments of Christianity—and these moments are in some sense lost

to us, historically speaking—he nevertheless writes out of a memory of this dialectical relationship between itinerants and local communities, possibly having had some personal experience of this milieu (Koenig 1985, 94). Luke's gospel, as Koenig puts it (1985, 94), is clothed in «the memories and self-understandings of the itinerants».

Through engagement with Thiessen, then, and in developing his own analysis, Koenig offers the following qualified interpretation of Luke-Acts: «It seems [...] that Luke's composition is aimed at building up local leadership so it can strengthen the whole church for partnership with the wandering prophets» (1985, 94)¹⁷. He offers the following summary of the relationship between itinerant and settled ministry, paying particular attention to the guest-host exchanges we have already observed:

[T]he goal for Luke on this issue is a cooperative missionary effort characterized by a fluidity in guest and host roles on the part of travelers and residents alike. From these role reversals, which take place most often in house churches and typically at meals, divers spiritual-material welcomings are generated. As a consequence, local churches must function as (a) banquet communities which attract their nonbelieving neighbours and (b) home bases for missionaries who travel but tend to settle down in younger churches for extended residencies as teacher-colleagues and leaders-by-example. (Koenig 1985 119)

Luke has weaved together a narrative of Jesus and of the apostles that demonstrates the significance of these narratives for a community that is now at some historical disjunction from the original «wandering charismatics», yet in which there is a continuing presence of travelling missionaries. In this context, Luke portrays Jesus as the wandering prophet-messiah, and many of Jesus' encounters become expressions of the life to which his followers in the early church are called, particularly in guest-host exchange. To offer a few examples: In the house of Levi, Jesus is welcomed as a guest, then presides with authority, announcing that the kingdom of God cannot be accommodated by old modes of religious life (Luke 5: 29-39).

17. It is worth noting that Thiessen's arguments have been subject to substantial critique, both in terms of methodology and in terms of assumptions made about the first-century context. Our argument here, however, does not finally depend on whether Thiessen or Koenig have accurately reconstructed the original context that gave rise to, or informs, Luke's portrayals of guests and hosts. Rather, each draws attention to realities on the surface of the text and narratives that contribute to our theological understanding of Christ and the guest-host relationship. For critique of Thiessen see, for example, the work of W.E. Arnal (2001, 23-66).

Similarly, there is Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-27) and Peter's encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10: 1-48). In each case there is a fluidity of roles, and a willingness to become a guest or host (exchanging roles) and to do so in relation to persons with whom one might not naturally or inevitably find oneself in relationship (Koenig 1985, 90-91)¹⁸.

Koenig also finds all of this operative in the ministry of Paul, who becomes an example of one who is both a travelling preacher and a settled teacher:

Paul is both itinerant and resident, guest and host, minister of the word and minister of the table. As such, he becomes a prime example for all believers, but particularly for the residents Luke wishes to address. This does not mean that every believer will play all roles, but it does mean that each one must anticipate the Spirit's call to shift roles for the sake of the gospel. Indeed, there is considerable evidence in Luke-Acts that our author expects some of his residential readers to adopt an itinerant missionary life, at least for a while. (Koenig 1985, 109)

On the latter point it seems that Luke expects believers in a residential context (often providing a safe place of welcome and hospitality for neighbours and itinerant preachers) to go themselves to become guests. And, as guests, to share the way of Christ where they are welcomed—or where they are not welcomed. These guests may not be able to anticipate the types of homes into which they will be invited, or the form that the welcome will take, or what may be asked of them in terms of adopting a host-posture. The fluidity of roles in evidence, and the possible fecundity in adopting those roles, owes to the guidance of the Spirit, and a prior willingness to let the Spirit lead.

Returning to the narrative of Luke 7, we observe Jesus, again, as guest to a Pharisee who welcomes him while also doubting him, and as guest to a woman who anoints his feet in the most intimate of ways. Indeed, the unnamed woman becomes a host to Jesus (by welcoming and anointing him) in a way that the Pharisee-host failed to. Those who become itinerant preachers of Jesus' way are likely to find themselves similarly welcomed in unexpected places and by unexpected people—not at the centres of power or relative wealth as they might have wished or anticipated. And if they are so received they are to remain and teach and serve as guests (Luke 9: 4-5). In the case of Jesus, an allowance is made by those who have wel-

18. I have approached these questions from a slightly different trajectory, elsewhere, via the thought of Luce Irigaray (De Vries, 2012).

comed him, so that he becomes a person of authority in that context, offering a complicated teaching, a difficult word, and the grace of forgiveness. The Spirit that blesses Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3: 21-22), and which urges him on and equips him for service to the one he calls Father (Luke 11: 2; 23: 46), now prompts him to become a guest/host on the way to embodying the kingdom of God in and through table-fellowship.

Conclusions: Ecclesial identity and becoming a guest

We have set the stage, now, for reflection on the late modern context of the church—though the limits of space prevent us from doing more than offer brief comment on this question. It is worth noting, at the outset, certain commonalities between the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (at the time of Udoh's writing) and mainline Protestant churches in late modern Canada. Even if the parallels are not exact, they are instructive inasmuch as the church in each instance has lost its privileged place in the culture—has lost that place of privilege from which it once deployed power in social and political debates and from which it presumed to contribute to cultural and social developments at national, regional, and local levels—which is to say that the question raised by Udoh is no less relevant in the contemporary Canadian context than it presumably was in Nigeria in the 1970's and 80's. It is the question of whether the church is capable of becoming a guest in its particular context—of abandoning the presumption that it might serve as a host, as it often did historically speaking. At one level the adoption of a guest identity will be driven by necessity, since the marginalization and decline of the Protestant church means that it simply cannot command a place of prominence at the table. This marginalization of the church goes hand in hand, of course, with its general, numerical decline—congregations are being closed at a significant rate, membership and attendance rates continue to decline. But is it also possible that the embrace of a guest identity or guest posture might be driven as much by the theological self-understanding as by necessity. That is, it is possible that a Christologically-defined self-understanding will allow the church to inhabit the identity of the Christ who was and is, first and foremost, a guest¹⁹.

19. An important theological question concerns the Church's relation to Christ in his guest nature. Is it a merely imitative relationships, or is it a relationship in union, for example? The answer to this question will shape not only the spiritual practices that give expression to the church's guest-nature, but will determine the shape of it, also.

The possible, concrete modes of expression of such a self-understanding are perhaps less important than the features of the framework itself—that is, it is possible that this Christologically-defined self-understanding could be expressed in a house-church, emergent community, or traditional expression of church²⁰. It is more important, then, to identify several broad principles that give expression to this guest-Christology, and given the limits of time and space we will touch on three such principles. In the first instance, we signal the importance of acknowledging the foreignness of Jesus and his narrative to the broader culture in which communities of Christians are located—of assuming that neither Jesus nor the community that lives in relation to him will be comprehensible to those encountering him, and them, for the first time. It is important, that is, to recognize that the language, cultural assumptions, and ethical frameworks, of those encountering Christ do not admit of a straightforward comprehension of his way and kingdom as this is embodied in the narratives, poetry, and letters of Scripture. This acknowledgment of Jesus' foreignness also translates into a posture of patience—patient story-telling and patient instruction—under the assumption that the presence of Jesus represents a kind of collision of worlds. This must equally be recognized in relation to those who already are within the church, since it is invariably the case that women and men of faith too easily relinquish the foreignness or guest-nature of Christ. Otherwise put, there must be a continuous dialectical relationship with Jesus, in which he is always both guest and Lord—and in which we come to the narrative and person of Jesus always prepared for the disruption of a guest who cannot be easily assimilated to our mode of life or perceptions.

An embrace of Christ as guest means, also, that the church should be prepared for engagement with the wider community in contexts where the church has relinquished the position of host. That is, a context in which the church relinquishes its intention to direct the conversation, to decide on appropriate participants, or to determine the outcomes of conversations or programs. This is a result not simply of the church's awareness that there are multiple points of view that should be recognized within a pluralistic and multicultural society, but because a form of life and spirituality that corresponds to the guest-nature of the Christ implies a willingness to

20. It is also possible that there will be some forms of church that will be antithetical to the Guest-Christology we have been formulating—though such questions are very well beyond the scope of what we can explore here.

be one partner among many within the conversation. If others, in the contexts Christians share with them, come to acknowledge the kingdom that Christ brings, or the wisdom of his way, this must always come as a surprise, and through no manner of manipulation. This is not to say, of course, that the church does not have, or cannot have, its convictions about who Christ is or about the nature of the kingdom that he has inaugurated—it is not to say that faith convictions or modes of life rooted in Christ are rendered secondary for the church. It is to say, rather, that these convictions, and that mode of life, must be held and lived lightly enough that the church is capable of allowing others (in partnerships or collaboration or conversation) to speak freely from their own point of view and even to freely adopt the point of view of one who acknowledges Christ, according to their own intention.

As we have implied above, the life of a guest, in Christ, cannot be expressed without attentiveness to the voice of the Spirit. When Udoh's account of the church as guest is seen through the lens of Luke-Acts, we discern the spiritual dimension of the task of becoming a guest. To use Koenig's language (1985, 109), it is a matter of prayerfully attending to «the Spirit's call to shift roles for the sake of the gospel». This is to say, in part, that this adoption of a guest-posture is neither artificial nor unreflective, but indicates attentiveness to the relational and cultural circumstances in which a person finds him or herself. It is possible to imagine a person's unreflective adoption of a guest-posture, in which he or she refuses to offer a word of grace or hope or confident faith, in the fear that this will somehow betray the other's freedom or one's own guest-nature, in Christ. Similarly, an unreflective adoption of the guest-nature can lead to a refusal to accept the role of host when one is invited into such a position by those with whom one is engaged collaboratively in work or conversation. Attending to the Spirit means exercising discernment about when and how to give voice, in an explicit or direct way, to the hope embedded in the gospel.

This guest Christology, and the church's concomitant guest-nature, is oriented toward the renewal of human persons in community—that is, the church is invited to work toward the restoration of lives and communities from the posture a guest, but not (again) of passivity. In a fluidity of roles—as guest to Simon and as a guest to the woman who adopted a host posture in the place of Simon—Jesus is both received as a guest and becomes a host who announces forgiveness, healing, and love. This fluidity of roles, and this participation in working toward the renewal of the world

corresponds with what Udoh characterizes as the ironic Lordship of Christ. Here it is worth quoting Udoh again: « Ultimately offering up his life on the Cross, he introduces into human consciousness the irony of true Lordship ». Lordship, that is, that works for the wellbeing of women and men and children and communities from a fundamental posture of service, as guest to those who might receive him. And in this, Christ embodies a new life-in-community in which Christians remain attentive to the Lordship of Christ without ever presuming that they themselves perfectly reflect this kingdom or that they may establish it within the world. It belongs to the followers of Christ not to embody his Lordship but only to confess it and point toward it by their mode of life and by their acknowledgment of their guest identity with him. Thus the kind of community partnership we have alluded to, above, becomes decisive here, for it is evident that there are innumerable individuals and organizations that are working toward the renewal of the world (mirroring the kingdom of Christ) and the church's task is to become a guest in their midst, or alongside.

A final word about the risk that is inherent in the guest-identity of the church. To become a guest, as the gospel narratives reveal, is to become vulnerable. Yet this is not the vulnerability of those who are mere victims. Rather, it is the vulnerability of those who know their identity in the way of Christ, who are assured of his Lordship, and who out of that assurance find courage to become a guest—to take the risk of not defining the conversation, of not determining the end, of being changed through encounter, and of initiating a change in relation to the community in which they are (becoming) responsible. It is a risk, however, rooted in love. Love for the one who has become their guest and kin and Lord, and whose love is strong enough to sustain them in their own becoming a guest. Becoming a guest with Christ is a risk rooted in love.

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Résumé

L'identité ecclésiologique est une question urgente dans le contexte contemporain, en particulier avec la croissance de marginalisation de l'Église et de son insignifiance relative au sein de la société occidentale. Cette question d'identité ecclésiologique est examinée à travers la « guest Christology » du théologien nigérian presbytérien Enyi Ben Udoh et à travers le livre *New Testament Hospitality* de John Koenig. Le résultat est une vision suggestive et constructive de l'Église qui priorise son statut d'invité, en relation avec le Christ qui vient à la famille humaine en tant qu'invité, puis parent, puis Seigneur. Les implications de ce concept du « Guest Christology » pour l'Église sont esquissées en conclusion.

Abstract

The question of ecclesiological identity is a pressing one in the contemporary context, particularly in the light of the church's increasing marginalization or relative insignificance within Western society. This question of ecclesiological identity is explored by way of engagement with the guest Christology of the Nigerian Presbyterian theologian Enyi Ben Udoh, and by way of John Koenig's New Testament Hospitality. The result is a suggestive and constructive vision of the church that prioritizes its status as guest, in relation to the Christ who comes to the human family as guest, then kin, then Lord. The implications of this guest Christology for the church are sketched in conclusion.