

The Missional Trinity

by John F. Hoffmeyer

In the course of the twentieth century, missiology increasingly made *missio Dei* its foundational term.¹ According to this development, “mission” is not just something the church does; mission is God’s own activity. The mission of the church is properly understood as participation in God’s mission. Quoting the 1958 International Missionary Council in Achimota, Ghana, Lesslie Newbigin writes: “The mission is not ours, but God’s.” Newbigin then comments: “We are invited to participate in an activity of God which is the central meaning of creation itself.”²

Missio Dei in Trinity and Church

Long before this modern use of the term *missio Dei*—indeed before “mission” came into use as a term describing the life of the church, or even an aspect of that life—the term “mission’s” first theological usage was to denote trinitarian relationships. Thomas Aquinas devotes question 43 of the *Summa Theologiae* to the topic “Of Mission of Divine Persons.” For Aquinas, there are two trinitarian missions, or “sendings”: the mission/sending of the Son and the mission/sending of the Spirit. These missions are how the Son and the Spirit “get into” the created world. For Aquinas, these missions are separable from the identities of the second and third persons of the Trinity. The Son is “begotten” and the Spirit is “breathed” eternally, while the missions involve entry into temporality. The eternal “begetting” and “breathing” correspond to Aquinas’s narrower use of the term “pro-

cessions.”

Protestant dogmaticians of the seventeenth century also put their shoulder to the task of specifying the relation between eternal procession and temporal mission. The Lutheran theologian Johann Quenstedt writes: “The mission of the Holy Spirit in time in and to the apostles and other faithful is the manifestation, or consequence and effect, of the eternal procession. The eternal procession is perennial and necessary, while the mission is a gracious and free happening, and in that way conditioned.”³ Similarly, Johann Gerhard states that the “mission of the Holy Spirit in time” is the “consequence and manifestation” of the Spirit’s “eternal procession.”⁴

Thomas Aquinas and Quenstedt both demonstrate the widely used distinction between the “immanent” Trinity and the “economic” Trinity. The former refers to God’s internal, eternal relations, while the latter refers to God’s trinitarian activity in salvation history.⁵ In the twentieth century, the separation of “immanent” from “economic” Trinity came under major attack. Karl Rahner gave the classic formulation (Rahner’s Rule) to this attack with his claim that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”⁶ A whole host of important players in the “trinitarian renaissance” of the last several decades have agreed with Rahner in his fundamental point, if not in his exact formulation.⁷ I take his fundamental point to be his assertion that “no adequate distinction can be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the economy of salvation.”⁸

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In the Thomistic vocabulary we have briefly examined, Rahner's assertion is that the missions are the processions and vice versa. The second person is constituted as the sent Word. The third person is constituted as the sent Spirit. The first person is constituted as the Sender of Word and Spirit.⁹ Succinctly, God's being is in mission.

At the very least, recent missiology's emphasis upon *missio Dei* provides a terminological invitation to think missiology and trinitarian theology together. Already in 1965, though, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, Vatican II's "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity," began its first chapter with the statement: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit."¹⁰ *Ad Gentes Divinitus* proceeds to give content to the church's mission on the basis of ecclesial participation in the mission of the triune God: "Since this mission [i.e., the church's mission] continues and, in the course of history, unfolds the mission of Christ, who was sent to evangelize the poor, then the Church, urged on by the Spirit of Christ, must walk the road Christ himself walked, a way of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice even to death."¹¹

According to *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, the *missio Dei*, the missions of the second and third persons of the Trinity, originate the church's mission. Moreover, the church's mission "continues" and "unfolds" the mission of Christ. But what does it mean for the church to have its "origin" in the trinitarian missions of God?¹²

Eternity within Time

For Aquinas, the divine "missions" are how an otherwise timeless God gets into time. Thomas Aquinas' conception still operates under the shadow of the great Arian question: How can the gap be bridged between the realm of timeless, impassible divine being and temporal, suffering, mortal becoming?¹³ The Arian solution, of course, was that there had to be a bridge figure, neither exactly God nor exactly human. The answer that won out in the great 4th-century controversy, the orthodox answer, rejected the Arian version of a bridge figure in favor of a fully divine Word that takes on human flesh. But the or-

thodox answer did not question the Arian assumption of two separate realms that needed to be bridged.¹⁴

But why not say instead that the Spirit-enabled revelation of God in Jesus is that God isn't "out there" somewhere needing a bridge to us? Instead of treating Jesus as a special arrangement by which God can be with us, why not say that Jesus is called "Immanuel" because he reveals the truth about God: that God is "God with us"? Why not say that the revelation of the triune God is precisely the revelation of a God that doesn't need any bridge figures? Rowan Williams puts it clearly: "The work of the Spirit, like the Son's work, is bound up precisely with the *loss* of mediatorial concepts designed to explain how the transcendent God (who is *elsewhere*) can be communicated *here*."¹⁵

The aforementioned "trinitarian renaissance" has done a great deal to advance this reconception of God against several longstanding theological assumptions: divine timelessness,¹⁶ divine changelessness,¹⁷ divine impassibility,¹⁸ and divine immortality.¹⁹ Here I want to reflect upon the implications of this reconception of God for the mission of the church.

The divine missions of Word and Spirit are not the bridging of a gap between a divine realm and a creaturely realm, between invulnerable being and vulnerable becoming, between timelessness and time. They are not the divine strategies to "get God into the world." If the church's mission is participation in the mission of the triune God, then the church's mission is also not to get God into the world. Unfortunately, the church's thinking about its mission has often been shaped by gap-bridging models. We have too often conceived mission as taking the Word of God "out" into the world, as if the Word were not already present in the world. We have too often thought of the world as "out there" and the church as "in here," resorting to a two-realms thinking that inevitably tempts us to regard the church as the home address of God's Spirit. As Rowan Williams writes, "We have frequently lost a sense of the Church as sign of the Spirit rather than its domicile."²⁰

The question might well arise: Doesn't the church's liturgy encourage us to think of the church as "inside" and the world as "outside"? We gather for wor-

ship, are renewed by the Word in scripture, sermon, and sacrament, and then are sent in mission. Isn't our gathering a "coming out" of the world, even as the name *ek-klesia* denotes those who have been "called out"? Isn't the sending at the close of our liturgy precisely a sending "back into" the world, so that we can there carry out our mission as church?

Gathering In and Sending Out

The rhythmic movement of gathering in and being sent out is certainly embedded in our liturgy. But that rhythm has a complex structure that it must retain in order to be true to its source in the gospel. First, our gathering has a specific center. We gather around the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Christ, though, is a very odd center. Christ is a center who is on the outside. One of the facts about Jesus that most consistently infuriated his seriously religious neighbors was that he insisted on hanging around with people on the "outside": tax collectors, various categories of women of low reputation, "sinners." As a victim of crucifixion, the most politically-charged form of the death penalty in his time and place, Jesus was most decidedly on the outside: outside the city, outside the law, outside the bounds of public honor and respect. In the famous parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Jesus explicitly promises that he is to be found in those "on the outside" of society: the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned. Jesus' presence in the outsider is invisible, so the "sheep" in the story don't even know that it is Jesus whom they are feeding, visiting, etc.

Likewise, our liturgy's "sending" is simultaneously a gathering. When we gather at the communion table we hear that we are participating in a "foretaste of the feast to come." We are anticipating the eschatological banquet in which all will have a place. This means, though, that in gathering apart as the church to eat the eucharistic meal, we threaten to contradict the very content of the meal as anticipation of the eschatological banquet. We threaten to become the church gathering to eat a meal separate from the rest of the world that "God so loved."²¹ We avert that threatened betrayal of the sense of the meal as long as our churchly eucharist functions as a symbol of

the eschatological banquet. But our gathering at the Lord's table functions as such a symbol²² only as long as the gathering is open toward all the world. We enact that openness precisely as we go from our worship gatherings to share communion with the sick and homebound, to invite others to the next celebration of the eucharist, to fill grocery bags in food pantries, to advocate for legislation that will reduce the number of hungry people, to refuse to cross picket lines where workers are striking to be able to feed their families, etc. These actions, too, anticipate the day when all of us in God's world will sit down around God's table. These actions—the actions that we are "sent" to do as mission—are part of the Spirit's eschatological "in-gathering" for God's great banquet.

In these specific ways—and not by virtue of a vague affection for paradox—our gathering as church is a sending and our sending is a gathering.²³ To neglect our missional sending as church is not just to be weak on mission while possibly still being strong on word and sacrament. To neglect our missional sending is to betray the inherent dynamic of word and sacrament.

Conclusion

I have argued that trinitarian theology can helpfully guide our missiology by steering us away from a "two-realms" model that makes mission a matter of bridging the gap between the two realms. I have tried to show that, far from supporting such a two-realms model, our liturgy decisively undermines it. In conclusion, I want to venture a hypothesis, without arguing for it in detail.

One commonly hears the diagnosis that the Western theological tradition is long on Christology and short on pneumatology. My hypothesis is that this pneumatological deficiency is a major reason for our susceptibility to what I have called "two-realms thinking." When we short-change the Spirit in our thinking about Christ, we invariably diminish our appreciation of the *diversity* of the presence of the Word in the world. To again cite Rowan Williams: "The Son is manifest in a single, paradigmatic figure, the Spirit is manifest in the 'translatibility' of that into the contingent diversity of history."²⁴ We fix on a centering location of the Word (in Galilee 2000 years ago, in

the church's sacraments), without corresponding clarity about the Spirit's role in extending the "resonance" of the incarnate Word.²⁵

It seems to me that one of the most important next steps in conceiving a missional church on the basis of the missional triune God is to focus more on the differentiation between the mission of the Word and the mission of the Spirit. As in all matters trinitarian, this is a differentiation not at the expense of unity, but in the service of unity. More specifically, I think that we need to focus on the particular function of the mission of the Spirit. With a more genuinely trinitarian understanding of the missions of the triune God, we can then better address the question: What is the mission of the church as participation in the mission(s) of God?

Endnotes

¹ For a summary of the development of the term *missio Dei* in 20th-century missiology, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 389-93.

² Leslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964), 78.

³ Heinrich Schmid, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Heyder und Zimmer, 1876), 107.

⁴ Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Cotta, 1762), 329.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas does show signs of struggling against the limitations of his eternal/temporal dualism. He states in question 43, article 2 that "mission" is only predicated temporally in reference to God, while the "processions" of "begetting" and "breathing" are only predicated eternally. But later in the same article, he gives the interesting reformulation: "Or mission includes eternal procession and adds something: namely, temporal effect."

⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 22.

⁷ For a brief assessment of several key figures in the "trinitarian renaissance" in terms of their relation to "Rahner's Rule," see Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 143-44.

⁸ Rahner, *Trinity*, 24.

⁹ In Western church tradition, of course, the Son is also sender of the Spirit.

¹⁰ Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1975), 814.

¹¹ Flannery, *Vatican II Documents*, 818. For a further contribution to trinitarian missiology, based in part on *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, see Anna Marie Aagaard, "Missio Dei in katholischer Sicht: Missionstheologische Tendenzen," *Evangelische Theologie* 34 (1974): 420-33. Aagaard's piece is particularly noteworthy for the strength of its reflections on the Holy Spirit.

¹² In his "No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity," *Word and World* 18 (1998): 264-71, Gary Simpson argues for the inseparability of the Trinity and the church's mission. But his point is that the church's mission degenerates as the church's proclamation and teaching loses its trinitarian content. My concern in the present article is to examine the grounding of the church's mission in the trinitarian process of God's mission.

¹³ To my knowledge, no one has examined the massive ramifications of this question for subsequent Christian theology with more insight and tenacity than Robert Jenson. See e.g. his *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 132-147.

¹⁴ Cf. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 34-35, 42-43.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, "Word and Spirit," in *On Christian Theology, Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 123. For an insightful avoidance of such "mediatorial concepts" by sketching a trinitarian approach to epistemology, see Catherine Keller, "Burning Tongues: A Feminist Trinitarian Epistemology," in Roger A. Badham, ed., *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 225-36.

¹⁶ See among others Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 162-71.

¹⁷ See esp. Heribert Mühlen, *Die Veränderlichkeit Gottes als Horizont einer zukünftigen Christologie: Auf dem Wege zu einer Kreuzestheologie in Auseinandersetzung mit der altkirchlichen Christologie* (Münster: 1969).

¹⁸ See e.g. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 267-74.

¹⁹ Eberhard Jüngel has made central to his theology the conception of God as the "unity of death and life in favor of life" (*Einheit von Tod und Leben zugunsten des Lebens*), my translation. Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1982), 409. English: *God as Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 299.

²⁰ Williams, "Word and Spirit," 124.

²¹ Jn 3:16.

²² My own attentiveness to the importance of symbolic "functioning" has been sharpened by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

²³ Without entering into the controversy concerning the origin of the liturgical term "Mass," one can at least note that the entire liturgical gathering is in fact called *Missa*, a "sending." I am grateful to Gordon Lathrop for calling my attention to this.

²⁴ Williams, "Word and Spirit," 125-26.

²⁵ For the concept of the Spirit as Christ's "domain of resonance," see Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 312-15. Welker notes that he is appropriating the concept of "resonance" from Niklas Luhmann.