

# Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology of God as Missionary<sup>1</sup>

STEPHEN R. HOLMES\*

---

**Abstract:** This article explores the possibilities of using ‘missionary’ as an attribute of God, as has been done recently in some ecclesial discourse. To this end, it offers an exegesis of John 20:21–23 via expositions of Augustine’s discussion of the divine missions in *De Trinitate*, Barth’s account of election, and the Lateran condemnation of Joachim of Fiore, and a discussion of the relationship between trinitarian theology and the divine attributes.

---

Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them . . .’.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

‘A missionary church worships a missionary God.’ Such language is relatively common throughout the denomination within which I have the privilege to minister, the Baptist Union of Great Britain. From the perspective of the wider church it is much more unusual, however;<sup>3</sup> ecumenical theology will happily talk of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, but seems reluctant to accept ‘missionary’ as a possible attribute of God. God *has a mission*, but God *is not missionary*, or so the rhetoric of ecumenical theology would seem to imply. Is anything at stake in these differing rhetorical styles, and if so, what? These are the questions I intend to explore in this article: it is a part of the work of confessional theology, after all, to run behind the rhetorical advances of church leaders, sometimes clearing up the mess, sometimes securing the insights, sometimes firming the foundations, sometimes perhaps merely

---

\* St Mary’s College, St Andrews KY16 9JU, UK.

1 This article was originally written as a paper for the Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

2 Jn 20:21–23a (NRSV).

3 I owe this point to the Revd Myra Blyth.

sorrowfully surveying the carnage. The strategy of the article is to offer a straightforward exposition of the text above, in the belief that this will illuminate the questions.

I need to start, however, with one minor piece of ground-clearing. It is sometimes claimed that language of ‘mission’ and ‘missionaries’ is foreign to scripture; I presume that what lies behind such claims is a general sense of post-colonial guilt, but it occurs to me that post-colonial guilt would be more convincing if it did not quite so straightforwardly employ the assumption that there is something logically basic about the English language. ‘Mission’, as readers of this journal will know, is derived from Latin *mittere*, ‘to send’; if the point being made is that the Christian scriptures are not written in Latin (or indeed English) it is unexceptionable, but hardly interesting; if the suggestion is that the concept is absent, it is surely straightforwardly false. In the Vulgate *mittere* usually renders ἀποστελλω, a word that does receive some employment in the New Testament, and which also means ‘to send’. Consider the verse I have taken for my starting-point: in Greek, καθως ἀπεσταλκεν με ὁ πατηρ, καγω; πεμπω ὑφας; in the Vulgate, *sicut misit me Pater, et ego mitto uos (sic, vos)*. The first use of *mittere*, referring to the Father’s sending of Jesus, translates ἀποστελλω; the second use, referring to Jesus’ sending of the disciples, translates πεμπω; the two words are broadly synonymous within the Fourth Gospel,<sup>4</sup> however, and the standard commentators make nothing of the difference – particularly as most detect a deliberate echo of John 17:18 here, which uses ἀποστελλω of both sendings.<sup>5</sup>

It is true, of course, that ‘missionary’ and ‘apostolic’ have acquired significantly different nuances of meaning in English, but to claim that one is a biblical word while the other is not is either a linguistic point of almost fatuous obviousness, or a simple misunderstanding of the case. We may cheerfully deploy either, making sure that we specify the precise shade of meaning we intend to give to whichever one we choose. In either case, the root idea is of sending, particularly sending in order to achieve something: ‘as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you . . .’.

Central to this text and its precursor in 17:18 is the relationship between the Father’s sending of Jesus and Jesus’ sending of the disciples. The sending of Christ

---

4 C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1965) offers a survey of the gospel’s usage of the two words, concluding ‘it does not seem possible to distinguish between two types of sending’ (p. 473).

5 ‘[20:21] is formulated in close dependence on the wording of the prayer in 17:18’. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) p. 692. Beasley-Murray in his own commentary speaks of ‘its echo of 17:18’. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987) p. 379. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible, 2 vols (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), vol. 2, p. 1036 and Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 611.

by the Father has been a major motif of the Gospel;<sup>6</sup> the sending of the disciples has been less prominent, but has been mentioned in 4:38 and 13:20; in 17:18 and 20:21, however, the two sendings are closely linked.<sup>7</sup> At the very least, we must assert that the work the disciples are sent about – the apostolic mission – is not merely a task given to the church that stands alone; rather it is a task that has some sort of continuity with the work the Father gave to the Son. This, admittedly inchoate, exegetical point will be the basis for any talk of God as ‘missionary’.

## The sending of the Son

‘As the Father has sent me . . .’. The ontological status of this ‘sending’ will be a major point of concern for later in the article, but the immediate issue is identifying the nature of the mission of the Son. There is some suggestion amongst the commentators that John 20:19–23 is intended to provide a summary of the message of Jesus as presented by the Fourth Gospel;<sup>8</sup> even if this is not true, the brief set of sayings here recorded provides a lapidary statement of some central themes of Jesus’ teaching about the purpose of his work.<sup>9</sup>

“Peace be with you” . . . Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you . . .”. Whilst this is no doubt a conventional, if slightly formal, greeting, the repetition here cannot go unnoticed. Nor can we simply dismiss it as an indication of pastoral concern, although Jesus is certainly pastorally concerned for his followers. The character here is more of a blessing, pronounced perhaps by the one true High Priest after he returns from making the sacrifice in the Holy of Holies.<sup>10</sup> When he has finished his atoning work, however we are to understand that, he announces the end of that work by pronouncing peace over his people. The end of Jesus’ mission is the gift of peace. ‘Peace’ here, however, must be understood as nothing less than the eschatological *shalom* promised by the prophets.<sup>11</sup> Healing, wholeness,

6 It appears directly in Jn 3:17, 34; 4:34; 5:23f., 30, 36–38; 6:29, 38f., 44, 57; 7:16–18, 29, 33; 8:16–18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44–49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; and repeatedly throughout ch. 17. A glance at the differing uses of Greek words in these passages will serve as further evidence for the claim that they are synonymous in this gospel.

7 There is a hint of this in Jn 13:20 as well.

8 So Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 370.

9 It so happens that one of my fellow leaders at Ashford (Middlesex) Baptist Church, Dr John Belstead, preached on this text as I was preparing this article. Whilst responsibility for exegetical errors remains my own, of course, I should record that I was helped in my interpretation by John’s sermon.

10 This theme might be more explicit in Hebrews than John, but it is certainly present in the Fourth Gospel’s presentation of the death of Jesus: the link between the temple sacrifices of the Passover and the death of Jesus begin as early as 2:13–22, and are only strengthened by John’s apparent decision to move the date of the crucifixion. Immediately prior to our passage, Jesus is recorded as speaking of his need, following his resurrection, to ascend to his Father.

11 So, e.g., Beasley-Murray, *John*, pp. 378–9; Brown, *John*, p. 1021; Bultmann, *John*, pp. 692–3.

reconciliation, the renewal of creation – all are announced by the solemnly repeated greeting.

“Peace be with you.” After he had said this he showed them his hands and side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you . . .” Again, I think there must be more here than a reductionist reading of the narrative logic might demand. We could assert that the display of wounds is simply an act of self-identification – Jesus proving to the disciples who he is. In a parallel text in Luke 24:36ff., however,<sup>12</sup> it is clear that the disciples recognize Jesus from his appearance alone, but need to be assured that they are seeing a resurrection body, not a ghost. Again, whilst the following story about the doubts of Thomas might supply a sufficient narrative reason for the focus on the wounds, it seems to me that the form of the text, with the repeated blessing framing the brief narrative of the scars of crucifixion eliciting the joy of the disciples, invites us to understand that joy and peace flow in some fairly direct way from Jesus’ death. If the end of Jesus’ mission is the gift of peace, then the central act of Jesus’ mission is his self-offering on Calvary.

“ . . . As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” The apostolic mission, the mission of those who are sent by Jesus, stands in continuity with Jesus’ own mission. I have attempted elsewhere to specify with some exactness the nature of the church’s participation in the ministry of Jesus; here I will just repeat the conclusion of that discussion: by the Spirit, the church participates in the continuing working out of the (already eschatologically complete) mission given to Christ by the Father.<sup>13</sup> Hence I believe that the reference to the Spirit in this text is not incidental: for the apostolic mission to have a relationship to the mission of Jesus, there must be a parallel mission (sending) of the Holy Spirit, given to the church to create that relationship.

What of forgiving and retaining sins? The easy part of the exegesis first: if this is to be the central content of the apostolic mission, which stands in necessary continuity with the divine mission of the Son, then this allows us to specify with more exactness the content of the Son’s own mission: peace comes to the world through the forgiveness of sins. Given this, I think it is difficult to read the harder part of the text as anything other than a warning of the consequences of failure in the apostolic mission: there is a danger that, if the apostolic mission to bring forgiveness of sins to the world is not faithfully carried forward, there will be sins unforgiven. This would, necessarily, indicate also a failure of the divine mission of the Son. Put thus, as a conditional statement, this is undoubtedly true and serious;

---

12 Where, incidentally, there seems to be a transposition of this Johannine blessing into some of the mss.

13 See my ‘Towards a Baptist Theology of Ordination’, in A.R. Cross and P.E. Thompson, eds, *Baptist Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought V (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003) pp. 247–62; pp. 253–4, and preceding discussion.

but there is nothing in this text to suggest to us that the condition will be fulfilled, and before assuming that it has or will be in some particular cases, we should reflect on the seriousness of asserting the failure of a divine mission.

### Augustine and the *missio Dei*

As I have already noted, ecumenical theology will accept, indeed insist on, talk of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. At its least interesting, such talk demands those sent about the apostolic mission are sent by God; this, whilst true, is already inadequate to the meaning of my text from John 20,<sup>14</sup> which requires us to confess that there is sending within the life of God, as the Father sends the Son, and – well, either the Father alone, or the Father and the Son together, send(s) the Spirit.<sup>15</sup> The *locus classicus* for discussions of divine missions of this sort is, of course, books II–IV of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* and, whilst I will need to make my disagreements with Augustine clear before the end of this article, his reflections will be helpful in attempting to offer an adequate exegesis of John 20:21–23.

Augustine’s great aim in his treatise on the Trinity<sup>16</sup> is to expound and defend the received ecumenical doctrine, defined by the Council of Constantinople a few years before he began writing the work.<sup>17</sup> Augustine does not attempt to defend the philosophical innovations that were developed by the Greek Fathers to make it possible to give an adequate and comprehensible doctrine of the Trinity; indeed, he indicates (perhaps with more regard for humility than veracity) that his grasp of Greek was such that he did not really understand the philosophical decisions behind the ecumenically-accepted vocabulary of *ousia* and *hypostasis*.<sup>18</sup> Augustine’s

---

14 Unless, borrowing the language of Hebrews (3:1), we understand the Incarnate Son as one of those sent about the apostolic mission. The substantive theological point that Jesus is sent by the Father, and so can properly be called an apostle (or missionary) is central to my argument here; by contrast, I am merely indifferent to the question of whether it is better to define the ‘apostolic mission’ as including or excluding the sending of Jesus.

15 To anticipate the next few steps of argument slightly, it is perhaps worth noting that, if the sending in God is merely economic, then the double sending of the Spirit is ecumenically uncontroversial; the Johannine texts demand that, at the level of the economy, the Son is involved in giving the Pentecostal gift – see 16:7.

16 English quotations are from *The Trinity, The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991); for Latin I have relied on the text in the *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, L* (Turnhout: Typographi Brepols, 1968).

17 Hill, in his ‘Introduction’ to the translation cited, suggests the work was begun c.400 and finished ‘soon after 420’ (p. 20); this seems generally accepted.

18 ‘[M]ost of us are hardly well enough acquainted with that language to be able to read Greek books on the subject with any real understanding’ III.1 (p. 127); ‘They make a distinction that is rather obscure to me between *ousia* and *hypostasis*’ V.10 (p. 196). For a convincing, if brief, discussion of the progress in Augustine’s knowledge of Greek see Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986), pp. 394–5.

theological interests are (almost) always driven by his pastoral concerns, and here the great issue would seem to be the pre-Nicene Latin tradition of trinitarian discussion, which, in its eagerness to respond to Sabellian tendencies by demonstrating a genuine distinction between Father and Son, had tended to a mild form of subordinationism.<sup>19</sup>

The exegetical points need not concern us here. Augustine's responses are not dissimilar to those of Athanasius and the other Eastern defenders of orthodoxy and (with one exception, to which I shall come) those different exegetical choices he does make are not of decisive significance to my argument, as far as I can see. The theological issue is much more interesting: to oversimplify grossly, whereas Eastern Arianism argued on the basis of relationships of origin ('There was when he was not!'), Augustine's predecessors had been more concerned with relationships of authority. If the Father sends the Son, then the Son is shown to be lesser than the Father. On such an account, all talk of a 'missionary God' would be merely oxymoronic: one who is a missionary, and so sent by another, is necessarily not Lord of all, and so not God; conversely, it is a necessary perfection of God's being that he is not sent. Hence Augustine's great theological slogan at the end of book IV: *Filius et Spiritus Sanctus non minoris quia missi* (IV.21). This is the point to which he has been arguing, because this is the denial of the essence of his opponents' positions. Only if Augustine is right can talk of the 'missionary God' even be countenanced: otherwise it would be straightforwardly Arian.

In the early sections of Book II, Augustine argues, effectively, that since all divine works are the undifferentiated work of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit must together be the sending agent of any divine mission, and so the Son must be involved in his own sending.<sup>20</sup> This is defended at some length, with the standard exegetical argument (based on Lk. 1:35) proving the Spirit's role, and a theological argument to the effect that sending must be done through a word, and the Father has no other Word but his Son, so the Son must be involved in his own sending: 'So when the Father sent him by a word, what happened was that he was sent by the Father and his Word. Hence it is by the Father and the Son that the Son was sent, because the Son is the Father's Word.'<sup>21</sup> However, argues Augustine, it is 'appropriate' (*congruenter*) that we speak of the Father sending and the Son being sent, because the Son appears, whereas the Father remains invisible.<sup>22</sup> Because the Son also

---

19 So Hill, *The Trinity*, pp. 37–43, 47–8. Eugene TeSelle's careful reconstruction of the stages of Augustine's writing suggests the same conclusion, in that he finds the first stages of *De Trinitate* to be a head-on engagement with the exegetical bases of Tertullian's *Ad Prax. Augustine the Theologian* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), p. 227.

20 *De Trinitate* II.8–10, where Augustine will insist that the Son is involved in his own sending, just as he is in his own glorification.

21 For the role of the Spirit, see *De Trinitate* II.8; for the role of the Son, see II.9, whence the quotation.

22 'Cum itaque hoc a patre et filio factum esset ut in carne filius appareret, congruenter dictus est missus ille qui in ea carne apparuit; missus autem ille qui in ea non apparuit.' *De Trinitate* II.9.

remains invisible (Augustine held to the inaptly named *extra Calvinisticum*, of course),<sup>23</sup> the Son is involved in his own sending.

Behind all this lies a subtle account of the divine economy, The sending of the Son does not change the Son's eternal being, and so the Son is not reduced to being merely the one who is sent by the Father, but is also the God who sends. Incarnation, visibility, implies a becoming in response to a command; the divine Son does not become or change, and so is not simply responding to a command. Nonetheless, Augustine insists that the sending of the Son and the Spirit is merely economic, and in no way illustrative or definitive of the inner-triune relations. Even at the end of the discussion of the divine missions in Book IV, where Augustine is honing his rhetoric to make the most extreme claims he feels able to offer, the position is unambiguous. Here, Augustine is prepared to claim that it is the case that the Father sends the Son, and simply to assert that this does not damage the equality the two share.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, sending is still an economic activity: 'the Son of God is not said to be sent in the very fact that he is born of the Father, but either in the fact that the Word made flesh showed himself . . . [o]r else he is sent in the fact that he is perceived in time by someone's mind'.<sup>25</sup>

It would be a misreading of Augustine to claim that only the incarnate one is sent: 'it was not just the man who the Word became that was sent, but . . . the Word was sent to become man'.<sup>26</sup> There is a divine economy, an act of the Trinity that precedes and causes the temporal events of the gospel history. This is, I think what allows Augustine his shift of language from insisting in Book II that any divine act be an undifferentiated act of the whole Trinity to speaking of the Father (alone) sending the Son. We are in the realm of what later Reformed dogmatics was to call 'the internal works of God'. Still, however, there is no sending or being sent within the eternal life of God. On this account God has a mission, but God is not properly described as missionary.

Augustine's account of the Old Testament theophanies is also contained in these sections. In contrast to the weight of earlier exegetical tradition, Augustine will not see the burning bush, the pillar of cloud and fire, the commander of the armies of the LORD, the 'one like a Son of Man' who appeared to Daniel, and so on, as, well,

---

23 'Quapropter pater inuisibilis una cum filio secum inuisibili eundem filium uisibilem faciendo misisse eum dictus est; qui si eo modo uisibilis fieret ut cum patre inuisibilis esse desisteret, id est si substantia inuisibilis uerbi in creaturam uisibilem mutata et transiens uerteretur, ita missus a patre intellegeretur filius ut tantum missus non etiam cum patre mittens inueniretur.' *De Trinitate* II.9.

24 'Si autem secundum hoc missus a patre filius dicitur quia ille pater est, ille filius, nullo modo impedit ut credamus aequalem patri esse filium et consubstantialem et coaeternum, et tamen a patre missum filium.' *De Trinitate* IV.27.

25 'Non ergo eo ipso quo de patre natus est missus dicitur filius, sed uel eo quod apparuit huic mundo uerbum caro . . . uel eo quod ex tempore cuiusquam mente percipitur . . .'

*De Trinitate* IV.28.

26 'id est ut non tantum homo missus intellegatur quod uerbum factum est, sed et uerbum missum ut homo fieret.' *De Trinitate* IV.27.

theophanies. Instead, they are angels sent by God on missions. Augustine defends this conclusion exegetically, but his essential reason for believing it is an intuition that follows from the arguments I have just outlined: sending is really quite an odd thing for God to do. God has a mission, and the events of incarnation and Pentecost – the sendings of Son and Spirit – are central to that *missio Dei*, but God is not missionary. These are anomalous events, not expressions of who God most fundamentally is in his eternal life.

Augustine's account demonstrates, then, that there is something at stake in choosing whether to speak of God's mission, or God as missionary. When Jesus says 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you,' is he speaking of a merely economic event, essentially foreign to the life of God, or is he linking the life of those who participate in the apostolic mission with the very life of God from all eternity?

### A missionary God?

Augustine's arguments suggest that the latter position is impossible. This is based on two things: a particular account of the indivisibility of the divine works *ad extra*; and a belief that being sent implies ontological subordination, and so can only be predicated of the Son economically. In the next section of this article I intend to argue that both these positions are false. This will establish the possibility, but not the necessity, of listing 'being missionary' amongst the perfections of God, and of interpreting John 20:21 as speaking of the eternal life of God. I will then go on to consider arguments as to whether this is a desirable theological move or not.

Augustine's version of the indivisibility criterion cannot be dismissed quite as rapidly as many modern writers would like; there are good reasons, or so it seems to me, to regard the ancient theologumenon *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* as a necessary derivation from trinitarian dogma, and so something that cannot be ignored or discarded. The ecumenical trinitarian settlement depends on the assertion that the only properties peculiar to the particular hypostases of the Godhead are the relations of origin; all other properties must be predicated in common.<sup>27</sup> On this basis, no property can be ascribed to any particular person of the Trinity that is not a necessary implication of the relationships of origin in which that person stands.

---

27 So both Gregory of Nazianzus (*Orations* 28:16; 30:8–9) and Augustine (*De Trinitate* V.6). This became a central contention in the medieval summaries of patristic doctrine: John of Damascus (quoting Ps.-Cyril) asserts that the three persons share 'one essence, one divinity, one power, one will, one energy, one beginning, one authority, one dominion, one sovereignty, made known in three perfect subsistences and adored with one adoration' (*De Fid. Orth.* 1.8); Thomas Aquinas affirms more briefly that 'Distinctio autem in divinis non fit nisi per relations originis' (*ST* 1a. 29, 4 resp.). There is not room here to defend the assertion that orthodox trinitarianism 'depends' on this point, rather than merely including it, but it is, I think, standard.

Although the point perhaps needs more philosophical defence than I can give it here, it seems to me reasonable to assume that the doing of an (external) act is either a property or sufficiently closely related to a property to mean that the same condition obtains: God's acts must be predicated of the Godhead unless they can be shown to depend on a relationship of origin. The church Fathers, of course, knew this well, and offered two possible accounts of divine action which obeyed this rule.

On the one hand is what we might call a 'hard' account, which we have already seen Augustine employing: all external divine acts are undifferentiated acts of the entire Trinity. God, who is Father, Son and Spirit, acts, but his actions bear no mark of the triunity of his nature, because the relationships that determine that triunity do not shape divine action in any way.<sup>28</sup> The other position is classically stated by Basil of Caesarea.<sup>29</sup> On this account, the relationships of origin do shape divine action: because the Father is the source/cause (*aitia*) of the Son and Spirit, each divine work has its origin in the Father, and so on. Thus, it is appropriate that the work of redemption is initiated by the Father, carried out through the incarnation of the Son, and brought to completion by the Spirit's work in the church, because this pattern mirrors who Father, Son and Spirit are, in their eternal relations.

Unlike many recent writers on trinitarian theology, I can see nothing in the contours of trinitarian dogma that demonstrates Basil's version to be necessarily superior to Augustine's. Nonetheless, it is – but the point is derived from christological, rather than trinitarian, dogma. As soon as the errors associated with Nestorius are articulated and condemned, we must take Basil's side of the debate: all the evasions that refused to say 'was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man' (and mean it!) leave room to believe that economic acts cannot be ascribed to particular divine persons (because the acts of Christ need not be the acts of the Son), but the doctrine of incarnation in its ecumenically accepted form requires us to believe that they can.<sup>30</sup> (All of which suggests a useful theologoumenon to sum up the argument of this article: we may speak of God as missionary only if we are prepared to honour the Blessed Virgin as the Mother of God. A proposition that I did offer to the Doctrine & Worship committee of the Baptist Union . . .)

What of the assertion that being sent implies ontological subordination? This, I think, needs to be met head on with a robust counter-assertion: just as being begotten does not imply ontological subordination, nor does being sent. And, just as a failure to accept the former is finally a failure to believe the gospel, so the latter

---

28 Karl Rahner claimed (without, I believe, attributing the point to Augustine) that this theological move had become endemic in the theology and piety of the Roman Catholic Church in which he learnt his faith. He claims that 'despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere "monotheists"' (*The Trinity*, p. 10) and goes on to offer examples and argument from dogmatic theology, spirituality, ethics, and various other areas of church life.

29 Basil of Caesarea, *De Spir. Sanc.* 16:37.

30 I am no expert on Augustine's Christology, and so make no comment on the resources available within his thought to meet this criticism, other than to note that he lived and died before Ephesus and Chalcedon, and the controversies they sought to settle.

is also dogmatically vital. I make such a strong claim because I believe the arguments are directly comparable. I indicated earlier that at the heart of Augustine's trinitarian meditations was a desire to combat the suggestion that the Son was less than the Father because sent; although his theological instinct was (as almost always) profoundly insightful and right, I suspect that he perhaps conceded slightly too much to his opponents in working them out exegetically and philosophically.

At the heart of many of the patristic debates over trinitarian (and christological) doctrine was an intellectual engagement with a thought-world shaped by Greek philosophy. Acknowledging this is not to return to the simplistic nineteenth-century liberal accounts of a simple, ethical Hebraic gospel infected by Hellenistic metaphysical speculations, based as they were on a simple failure to understand history,<sup>31</sup> and a now-discredited set of dates for the New Testament writings. Rather, it is to recognize that the profound philosophical speculations of Ancient Greece were not religiously neutral, but enshrined certain theological assumptions which, whilst of course not all wrong, needed exposing and evaluating before the gospel could be articulated adequately using language and concepts that had been shaped decisively by the Greek heritage.<sup>32</sup> Central to these assumptions were a series of propositions about the nature of divinity which were assumed to entail each other; part of the patristic theological task was unravelling these, demonstrating that some could, in fact, be held independently of others, and determining which were adequate to the gospel and which were merely pagan.

So, for instance, the easy set of assumptions that to be truly divine was to be eternal and unoriginate threatened the gospel because, within this thought world, it was not possible to believe that the only-begotten was truly divine. Athanasius' celebrated contrast between *agenetos* and *agennetos* was not mere word-play, as it might appear today, but the creation of a new conceptual distinction which allowed him to assert the existence of relations of origin within the eternal Godhead, as the gospel story demands we do.

Now, whether the gospel demands we postulate relations of sending and being sent within the eternal Godhead is precisely the issue at point in this article, and one I do not want to address just yet. I do think, however, that we may assert that relations of authority and obedience to authority obtain between Father and Son, and between Father (and Son?) and Spirit, and that this is the root point which caused nervousness amongst Western theologians about divine sendings and missions. The exegetical evidence for the first part of this proposition is obvious, although Augustine's attempts to read all these texts as relating only to the economy are sufficiently convincing that we must allow the possibility of this reading. A theological argument

---

31 To believe this requires us to think that the Macedonian conquest of Israel, and the various Hellenistic kingdoms that followed it over the next three centuries or so before the arrival of the Romans, affected the culture not at all. And that the Hellenization of the Jewish diaspora (witness Philo) was somehow prevented from ever entering Israel.

32 For a perceptive account of this history, see Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 9–11.

is available and more telling, however: if we admit Basil's account of the indivisibility of the divine acts, then we are forced to confess of every divine work that the Father (alone) initiates, causes, or originates it; if this is true, then it seems inescapable that there is some sense in which Son and Spirit defer to the authority of the Father, and that this is a necessary consequence of the particular relationships of origin within the Trinity.

On this basis, I suggest that nervousness about structures of authority within the Godhead, and in particular nervousness about speaking of an eternal sending of Son and/or Spirit, derives from pagan intuitions, which the gospel story would teach us to unlearn.<sup>33</sup> Notice, however, that the argument thus far, whilst it does prove the need for some account of authority within the eternal life of God, does not yet prove that 'sending' and so 'mission' is a proper, or indeed possible, way to talk about this authority, and so does not yet prove that John 20:21 may be read as speaking of the eternal life of God. That is the next stage of the argument.

### **The sending of the Son and the mission of the church**

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' Thus far in the argument, it remains possible that the Father's sending of the Son is a merely economic reality, but I hope that I have established that it is also theologically possible to believe that Jesus here, as in the earlier farewell discourses in John which this text seems to be deliberately echoing, is reflecting on the eternal inner-triune relationships of love which Father, Son and Spirit share, and in which the church is called to participate. If the latter is the case, then we may indeed call God 'missionary', and the theological consequences are enormously significant: the apostolic mission is a reflection of God's own nature and character, reflecting who God is from all eternity.

There is, so far as I can see, no decisive exegetical reading for choosing between these positions. There seems little doubt in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus' disclosures of the relationship he shares with the Father are intended to be read back into the immanent Trinity, the eternal life of God,<sup>34</sup> but Augustine's example demonstrates that we might read certain passages as referring solely to the economy if it seems theologically necessary without doing serious violence to the text. With these two points in mind, I suggest that the proper exegetical procedure here is to assume that the text does refer to the immanent Trinity if it can, and the weaker reading should only be accepted if there are pressing theological reasons rendering the stronger reading impossible.

---

33 This point is of course of great significance for attempts to derive a doctrine of the church from a doctrine of the Trinity. I have sketched some of the consequences in my 'Towards a Baptist Theology of Ordained Ministry' (n. 13 above).

34 This was classically argued by C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 250–62.

As I have indicated, the theological implication of the stronger reading would be a reading back of the apostolic mission into the eternal life of God. The sending of the Son and Spirit, the gospel story, on this reading, is neither something foreign to God, nor is it an afterthought, a second and unpremeditated act of God intended to repair the unforeseen damage to his primary and intended act of creation.<sup>35</sup> Rather, God's own life is gospel shaped. As in Rubliev's famous icon of the Trinity, at the heart of the relationships of love that are the eternal life of God is the eucharistic chalice, the sacrificed blood of the Incarnate Son.

Such comments are commonplace in twentieth-century theology (*The Crucified God!*), but I want to draw a distinction that I think is usually missed: for God to be described as missionary, the events of the gospel story must be *revelatory* of God's eternal life, but they need not be *definitive* of it. That is to say, we need not speak with Moltmann of the historical event of the crucifixion being at the heart of God's own eternal life, although this would certainly secure the point; the point could equally be secured by insisting that what happens on Calvary is a repetition of the pattern of God's eternal life.<sup>36</sup>

Consider, for example, the work of Paul Fiddes, the leading British Baptist theologian of recent decades. Fiddes offers an account of God as missionary, based on a reading of John 20:21, in a brief introduction to a recently-published paper.<sup>37</sup> He feels able to assert that 'The reason why mission is of the very being of the church is that mission is not just *imitating* the sending forth of Jesus. It is a *participation* in the Father's own sending forth of the Son . . . mission is rooted

- 
- 35 Thus put, it will be clear that I am following some of the arguments that were deployed in favour of the supralapsarian version of Calvinist doctrine, which, to my mind, connects closely to the arguments I am developing here. On the history, and some reasons why supralapsarian doctrine coheres better with the sort of theology I am developing here, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957–75), II/2, pp. 127–45; for some of my own comments on the history see Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), pp. 126–34 and *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 68–85, 122–36. Baptists, more than others, may have historical reasons to doubt that a hard Calvinism can promote mission, but this is to misunderstand the particular failings of John Gill and his followers: as the famous (fabled?) retort to William Carey's first suggestion of the foundation of a missionary society indicates, the problem lay not in believing that God had a mission, but that he had called the church to share it ('Young man, sit down: when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!').
- 36 One of the exegetical cruxes of the *flioque* debate might illustrate this point helpfully. The Johannine statements about the Son's role in giving the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit have generally been taken by the West to repeat the pattern of God's eternal life, leading to an insistence that in all eternity the Spirit has his origin in the Father and the Son.
- 37 Paul Fiddes, 'Mission and Liberty: A Baptist Connection', in *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), pp. 249–73; pp. 249–52 for the point.

in the very being of the triune God.’<sup>38</sup> Fiddes is able to make this claim so straightforwardly because of the doctrine of God he has developed over the course of his work: he has been one of many to follow Moltmann’s denial of divine impassibility by removing the ‘Chalcedonian firewalls’ that held apart the eternal life of God and the contingent life of the world. On Fiddes’s account, God lives with the world and suffers with the world, and the death of Christ is an event within the eternal life of God, not merely an event within the history of the world.<sup>39</sup>

Fiddes develops these ideas with care and subtlety – he acknowledges immediately, for example, the problem that besets so much talk of God’s suffering, that in suffering God must overcome suffering to be of any help at all.<sup>40</sup> His account unquestionably works, and offers powerful pastoral consequences, including the ability to read John 20:21 as locating mission within the eternal life of God. It is perhaps worth asking, however, whether we need to follow this broadly Moltmannian line in order to talk of God as missionary, or whether the same gain can be made within a more traditional doctrine of God. Hence my distinction above.

Barth’s account in the *Church Dogmatics* offers a helpful way forward here. His decision to place the doctrine of election as a part of the doctrine of God, rather than as the first of the works of God is consciously innovative.<sup>41</sup> Coupled with the radical christocentrism of his account of election, with its insistence (based on Eph. 1:4) that the basic act of election is the election and reprobation of the Incarnate Son, this move places the gospel history right at the centre of the doctrine of God. In the ‘way of the Son of God into the far country’, God’s decree of rejection, the divine judgement, is spoken – against God himself in Christ. God surrenders his impassibility, embraces the nothingness, the shadow existence of all that he actively did not will, and all its consequences.<sup>42</sup> ‘He declared Himself guilty of the contradiction against Himself in which man was involved . . . He made Himself the object of the wrath and judgement to which man had brought himself . . . He

---

38 Fiddes, ‘Mission and Liberty’, p. 251.

39 See, variously, Paul Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God, Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of the Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989) and, most recently, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), where all the above points can be found: on God living with the world, pp. 131–48; on divine suffering, pp. 152–87; and on the death of Christ, pp. 224–47.

40 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 154.

41 Barth, *CD II/2*, pp. 76–93; see also Colin Gunton, ‘Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Election as Part of His Doctrine of God’ *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 25 (1974), pp. 381–92 for a discussion of the implications of this move. More generally on Barth on election, see John E. Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1989).

42 For more on Barth’s interesting and provocative idea of nothingness, see John McDowell, ‘Much Ado about Nothing: Karl Barth’s being Unable to do Nothing about Nothingness’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4 (2002), pp. 319–35.

took upon Himself the rejection which man had deserved.<sup>43</sup> In the Son of Man's resurrection and 'homecoming' to his Father's house, God's decree of election, the divine acquittal, is spoken over all humanity, in Christ.

I have argued elsewhere that Reformed theology at its (supralapsarian) best has been insistent that God's first and best thought was the gospel history of Jesus, and that all else that God does flows from his first decision that this should happen. As Jonathan Edwards put it, 'the sin of crucifying Christ is that on which all other decreed events depend on (*sic*) as their main foundation'.<sup>44</sup> The basic reality of God's action is the gospel; creation happens so that Christ may be crucified for the sins of the world and rise again from the dead – and in so doing, reveal the depths of mercy and forgiveness in the triune heart of God. ('As the Father has sent me, so I send you . . . if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven . . .'. If God is missionary, it is a mission of mercy.) This is not yet enough, of course, but the final premise necessary should be theologically uncontroversial:<sup>45</sup> the basic shape of God's acting *ad extra* mirrors and reveals the patterns of God's eternal life. Thus far the account supports the second of my two options: the gospel story is *revelatory*, not *definitive*.

In Barth's account there are two significant (for my argument at least) changes to this traditional account: one is to bring the decree of reprobation, as well as the decree of election, within the overarching gospel-shaped decree, which is a clear and necessary theological advance, to my mind at least;<sup>46</sup> the second is, as already mentioned, to move the decree to be the last word of the doctrine of God, rather than the first word under the works of God. Thus, not only is the gospel history of Jesus God's first and best thought, it is decreed and intended as part of God's self-determination of his own life – it is a part of who God is, not just what God has done.

Now, this point should not be overplayed with regard to Barth. He is still discussing a doctrine of election, and so deliberately separating out that which God simply is, in all eternity (the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the divine perfections, discussed in *CD II/1*) from that which God chooses to be and to do (the doctrine of election). Nonetheless, there is an important move here from an account of the gospel as merely revelatory to actually definitive of God's life. In the second half of the twentieth century, various interpreters, in conscious dependence on Barth, have taken this forward and unambiguously taught that the gospel history is straightforwardly determinative of God's life. Notable amongst these are Robert

43 *CD II/2*, p. 164.

44 Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies* 762 corol. 2. See Holmes, *God of Grace* and the sections of *Listening to the Past* already referenced for the wider point.

45 Although this was the point at which infralapsarian Calvinism suffered its basic failure of nerve. Whilst on such internecine Reformed disputes, it is perhaps worth noticing that Arminian and other Remonstrant positions, in so far as they insist the Fall was not intended by God, and so suggest that crucifixion and the consequent redemption were not part of God's original plan, can only describe God as missionary if they suggest that the atonement is incidental to the mission of God.

46 See Holmes, *God of Grace*, pp. 199–272; *Listening to the Past*, pp. 122–36.

Jenson and Jürgen Moltmann – and Paul Fiddes.<sup>47</sup> I find Jenson and Fiddes more convincing than Moltmann here; Jenson because I think he recognizes the theological problems of pantheism or panentheism, and so devises a new metaphysics designed to avoid a series of pitfalls into which Moltmann has a habit of falling.<sup>48</sup> Whether we follow this radicalization of Barth, Barth's own middle way, or the (less fashionable) conservative Reformed hesitations about Barth which would be my own preferred position, current and traditional trends in theology offer ways of defending the stronger reading of John 20:21, and so I suggest this reading is to be preferred, for the reasons indicated earlier.

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' Just as the church is called to love in ways that mirror the eternal relationships of love that Father, Son and Spirit have shared from all eternity, so the missionary nature of the church derives ultimately from the missionary nature of God's own life. Two further steps will complete the argument: a theological account of what it means to include 'missionary' amongst the perfections of God; and an ethical and ecclesiological account of the consequences of this theological account for the life of the church and its mission.

### The eternal missions

'As the Father has sent me . . .'. I have suggested exegetical reasons for believing that this sending is not merely economic, but a reflection of the eternal life of God. If being missionary means a movement of sending and being sent, then for God to be missionary in all eternity, there must be an eternal movement of sending and being sent. To work this out in a theologically adequate way, it needs to be constructed in terms of the triune relations of origin; any other account risks making God's life and perfections dependent on the existence of that which is not God (because the sending must be of and to some external thing), and so surrendering a central point of the gospel.<sup>49</sup>

To speak of God as missionary, then, is to assert that in the eternal begetting of the Son, and the eternal procession of the Spirit, there is not just a movement of origination, but also a movement of purposeful sending. The relations are

---

47 See Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, and Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*.

48 Take, for example, the issue of the passibility of God. Both Jenson and Moltmann reject the traditional doctrine of impassibility, but Jenson manages to do so in a way that does not, for all the rhetorical impressiveness of 'crucified God' language, leave God just as helpless a victim of sin and death as we are.

49 One day I will get around to writing a paper demonstrating that the development of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was necessary to defend God's aseity, impassibility, goodness, and so on; and that the articulation of this doctrine in the second century AD was the first of the great patristic moves to differentiate the God of the gospel from any pretended gods of Greek metaphysics. In the meantime, the argument is at least implicit in pp. 31–62 of *God of Grace*.

teleological, not just protological. I see no theological problem with making such an assertion, in that it does not contradict any trinitarian dogma; what it might mean is not, however, immediately obvious. This need not be a problem – famously, the ecumenically agreed solution to the question of how procession differs from begetting is that we cannot know how it does, only that it does – it would be good, however, if we could give it some content.

Before turning to that, I need to answer the obvious question – what about Joachim of Fiore? Not only does this question demonstrate a proper concern for the dogmatic decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council, where (of course) Joachim's trinitarian theology was condemned, it also allows me to offer a brief defence of a figure for whom I have a certain admiration. It is true that Joachim insisted on putting language of mission alongside language of relation in discussing the eternal Trinity; it is not, however, clear to me that this move either has any relationship to those aspects of his theology which were condemned in 1215, or is a problem in itself. Let me explain.

Joachim was condemned as a result of a controversy in which he was involved with Peter Lombard. He accused Peter of teaching a quaternity, on the basis of statements from the *Sentences*<sup>50</sup> which sounded like Peter was giving independent existence to the simple nature of God, apart from the hypostatic existence of Father, Son and Spirit, and so teaching that there were four real entities within God. Joachim, by contrast, sought to insist that the Father was the source of deity and existence within the Godhead.<sup>51</sup> His precise criticisms are lost; they were apparently contained in a short book, mentioned at the Council but no longer extant. It is difficult, therefore, to know what to make of the council's decision that the teaching of this book was tritheistic; my best reading of the Decree is that Joachim is justified in his complaint against Lombard, but the Council was right to condemn his alternative position.<sup>52</sup> None of this, however, has anything to do with Joachim's teachings about the eternal missions.

These teachings come in the course of his writings on the Psalms, and are part of an elaborate numerological construction around the number of the psalms, 150.

---

50 According to the text of Lateran IV, Peter had claimed, *inter alia*, 'Quoniam quaedam summa res est Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus, et illa non est generans neque genita nec procedens' (from Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: vol. I: Nicaea I to Lateran V* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), p. 231; Tanner references the Lombard quotation to *Lib. IV Sent. I dist. 5*).

51 All this is clear in his famous 'Anti-Lombard figures'. The 'Perfidia Petri' figure when compared to the 'Fides Catholica' figure introduces a clear fourth term, which stands in a fundamental relationship of origin to Father, Son and Spirit. In the 'Fides Catholica' figure, the Father is the origin of all divine persons (including being self-originate).

52 The sentence from Lombard quoted above is surely objectionable for precisely the reason Joachim asserts; according to the Council, Joachim taught instead that 'Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus sunt una essentia una substantia, unique natura,' which is far more adequate; however, immediately following is the claim: 'verum unitatem huiusmodi non veram et propriam, sed quasi collectivam et similitudinariam esse fatetur', which is rather less happy. Tanner, *Decrees*, p. 231.

At one point in this he suggests that there are five relations in God: Father to Son; Son to Father; Father and Son to Spirit, ‘because two send (*mittunt*) one’; Son and Spirit to Father, ‘because two are sent (*mittuntur*) by one’; and all three Persons to creatures.<sup>53</sup> Two things should be said about this, from the point of view of classical trinitarianism: first, the use of the language of mission is eccentric, but unexceptionable; second, the fifth relation, where God’s relationship with the creatures is put on a par with relations in God, is more difficult, for all the reasons I have discussed in connection with Moltmann above. None of this, however, relates to the dispute with Lombard and the condemnation by Lateran IV. That condemnation does not prevent us from talking of eternal missions in the life of God.

Back, then, to the attempt to give this language of divine missions some content. According to John 20:19ff. the temporal sendings of Son and Spirit are gracious acts to undeserving people, God’s embracing of the suffering and sin of the world in mercy and love in order to set the world free from these evils. There is, of course, no suffering and sin to be overcome in God’s eternal life, but the teleological movement of gracious generosity might be taken as indicative of the eternal missions in the life of God. In and through begetting the Son, the Father intends generosity towards his Spirit; in and through the procession of the Spirit, the Father intends generosity towards his Son. Such theologumena might begin to suggest what speaking of God as missionary might mean.

It might also mean an outward orientation of God’s own life, but this needs careful construction. As I have already indicated, and *pace* Fiddes, in my estimation the theological obstacles to suggesting God needs something outside of his own triune life to be who he is are insurmountable. We may, however, assert that God’s perfection is such that, having created, he will act in certain ways towards that creation, and that in claiming certain concepts are partial, but adequate, specifications of aspects of his perfection, we might note that some of those attributions do tend to indicate that his ways of acting towards his creation will be characterized by concern and involvement, rather than detachment and indifference, and so claim that they demonstrate an ‘outward’ orientation of his life.<sup>54</sup> Love is one such perfection. If, as I have argued, it is appropriate to number ‘being missionary’ amongst the perfections of God, then it is clearly another. It specifies that God does not just regard his world with benevolent interest and concern (as the perfection of love demands), but that he exerts himself in a pattern of cruciform self-sending to bring about his loving purposes. Purposeful, self-sacrificial acts of loving concern flowing from the Father through the Son and Spirit to the world God has created are fundamental images of who God is, from all eternity.

---

53 So Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 168.

54 For some account of the concerns about the nature of attributing things to God that underlie this paragraph, see Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, pp. 50–67.

## Theological missiology

The particular (temporal) mission of Christ is atonement and reconciliation, bringing a sinful world back to the loving arms of the Father, giving peace and joy through the forgiveness of sins. The particular character of the Son's mission is sacrificial self-giving centred in the cross. The idea that the church's practice of mission should be an imitation of Christ is hardly new, and has been explored in much more detail than I can do here, but under this head I should note that an account of God as missionary will support and insist on these positions. I think it will also have further implications for ecclesiology, however.

As I have indicated more than once in the foregoing argument, the fundamental difference between asserting that God has a mission and asserting that God is missionary is that in the former case the mission may be incidental, disconnected from who God is; in the latter case, mission is one of the perfections as God, as adequate a description of who he is as love, omnipotence or eternity. To return to the slogans this article was written to explore, a missionary church might worship a God who has a mission, but it is conceivable that such a God could be worshipped by a non-missionary church; if God is properly described as 'missionary', however, he can only be worshipped by a missionary church. A church that refuses the call to mission is failing to be the church God calls it to be just as fundamentally as a church that refuses the call to be loving. Just as purposeful, cruciform, self-sacrificial sending is intrinsic to God's own life, being sent in a cruciform, purposeful and self-sacrificial way must be intrinsic to the church being the church.

This might be expressed in credal language. Baptist accounts of what it means for the church to be 'apostolic' have sometimes suggested that continuity in the apostolic mission is a part of this, alongside (or instead of) more Catholic accounts of continuity in the apostolic institution and more Reformed accounts of continuity in the apostolic doctrine.<sup>55</sup> Exegeting what the Fathers of Nicea and Constantinople meant in their declarations of faith is a specialist art in which I am not schooled, but credal interpretation tends, in any case, to proceed through theological argument of what should be meant, rather than historical argument as to what was meant. An argument that mission was a mark of the church, without which it is not being what by grace the triune God has made it, could easily be made, therefore.

There is one more consequence of suggesting that God is missionary *in se*: the divine mission cannot ever come to an end. There must, therefore, be an eschatological continuation of God's mission. For all eternity, the Father will continue to send his Son and Spirit to bring peace and joy to creation. For all eternity this mission will be centred on the event of the cross. This is a large claim, but an easy one, it requires formal but not material alteration to be made to standard

---

55 Pleasingly, this is not limited to Baptist accounts. See, for instance, the demand of the Orthodox Archbishop of Tirana and All Albania that apostolicity necessarily involves missionary activity: Anastasios Yannoulatos, 'Rediscovering our Apostolic Identity in the 21st Century', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 48 (2004), pp. 3–20.

accounts of eschatology. We might nonetheless ask if there is any biblical evidence in support of it. I suggest the answer is yes: in that the lamb who sits in the centre of the throne bears the marks of the abattoir (Rev. 5:6); and that God's eschatological purposes are unfolded through the Lamb ('You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals – for you were slaughtered' Rev. 5:9); and that in the New Jerusalem God's purposes to do good to his people for all eternity are repeatedly described as being mediated by the Lamb (Rev. 21); we must insist that the crucifixion of Jesus is at the heart of the continuing action of the Father to do good to his people through his Son. Because the grace of God is infinite, God's gracious gifts to his church in Christ can never be exhausted, and so the gracious mission of our missionary God will never come to an end.

Copyright of International Journal of Systematic Theology is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.