

MISSIO DEI, THE TRINITY, AND THE CHURCH

Jessica Chu

Missiology has undergone a paradigm shift over the past century as it has increasingly reflected on the Trinitarian mission of God. This article explores this movement and how it shapes contemporary approaches to mission.

Introduction

Our understanding of the foundational basis and essential framework of mission has shifted considerably in recent years. David Bosch sums it up well: “During the past half a century or so, there has been a subtle, but nevertheless decisive, shift toward understanding mission as God’s mission.”¹ Not only that, but it is now impossible to speak of God’s mission (*missio Dei*) without speaking of the Trinity. This paper will attempt to analyse recent scholarship of the Trinitarian basis of *missio Dei* by outlining its historical development. The paper will explore the connection between the economic and immanent Trinity² and urge the necessity of a relational perspective in order to understand this connection. This will lead to a brief survey of scholarly discussions regarding the role of the economic Trinity in *missio Dei*, specifically looking at the role of each of the Persons individually. Lastly, the paper will discuss how the economic Trinity informs the participation of the church in the *missio Dei*.

Missio Dei and Its Historical Development: A Brief Overview

What is the *missio Dei*? Bosch gives a well-nuanced definition: the *missio Dei* is “God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate. *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 389.

² In this paper, the economic Trinity refers to the way in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to one another and the world. The immanent Trinity refers to the way in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate in themselves, within the interior life of the Trinity.

a God-for-people.”³ The understanding of mission as intrinsically focused on and rooted in the Triune God instead of the church, human race, world, or context gradually emerged in twentieth-century missiological thinking. Before then, both Catholics and Protestants saw mission as an activity of the church moving into the world rather than as an activity of the Triune God moving into creation.⁴ At the Brandenburg Missionary Conference of 1932, Karl Barth became the first theologian to re-focus the concept of mission as an activity from God in which the church participates in and through him.⁵ Karl Hartenstein, influenced by Barth, introduced the concept to the International Mission Conference at Willingen in 1952 and originated the phrase *missio Dei*. However, he did not link the phrase to the Trinity.⁶ Flett argues that the initial grounding of mission to the Trinity came from a document developed by Paul Lehmann and H. Richard Niebuhr in preparation for the Willingen Conference, which addressed the overemphasised christology in the church and pointed to the Trinity as the source of mission. But even in that document the Trinitarian grounding was not fully established.⁷

It is important to keep in mind that the resulting Trinitarian shift from post-Willingen debates is a refocusing, not a new establishment.⁸ It is the theological recovery of a foundational truth that was already in the consciousness of the church fathers, as evidenced in Augustine’s book on the Trinity.⁹ Although the paradigm shift towards a Trinitarian *missio Dei* is not as clear cut as many people think,¹⁰ it is nevertheless a decisive shift

³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

⁴ Jannie Swart, Scott Hangle, John Ogren, and Mark Love, “Toward a Missional Theology of Participation: Ecumenical Reflections on Contributions to Trinity, Mission, and Church,” *Missiology: An International Review* 37, no. 1 (2009): 76–77.

⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 19.

⁶ John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 123.

⁷ Flett argues that the connection between *missio Dei* and the doctrine of the Trinity came after Willingen. The Willingen conference adhered to a Christocentric focus with an ambiguous theology attached to the concept of *missio Dei*. The Trinitarian focus only emerged in hindsight after much theological discussion and debate, in response to the conference’s failure to provide an adequate theological framework for mission. See Flett, *The Witness of God*, 123–149.

⁸ Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 136.

⁹ Flett, *The Witness of God*, 20.

¹⁰ For a brief summary of debates that emerged after Willingen and the subsequent influence they had on the development of the *missio Dei*, see Craig Ott and Stephen

that has shaped and will continue to shape the conception and practice of mission. The framework for the *missio Dei* is now firmly rooted in the Trinity and we cannot go back to earlier frameworks again.

Relationship Between the Immanent Trinity and Economic Trinity

How has the doctrine of the Trinity transformed our understanding of mission? Scholars have used the terms *economic* Trinity and *immanent* Trinity to differentiate between God in his relationship with the world outside himself (*ad extra*) and God in his relationship within himself (*ad intra*).¹¹ God is a Trinity of three divine Persons in perfect, eternal fellowship and unity with each other. This truth came to the world as revelation through God's action towards the world - through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as Scripture testifies: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). Thus, there is an inherent and inseparable connection between God's economy and God's immanence. However, what is the nature of this connection? There seem to be two different aspects of it: one emphasises that God's immanence informs his economy, while the other emphasises that God's economy illustrates his immanence. The former emphasis has been profoundly shaped by Greek metaphysical categories in which God's immanence is characterised by perfection, impassibility, and immutability—the Trinity is a closed circle of perfect fellowship in which loving the world is secondary to his being.¹² The latter emphasis was proposed by Barth, and subsequently more fully explicated through different angles by theologians such as Eberhard Jüngel, Jürgen Moltmann, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna.¹³ For Moltmann, "God is not indifferent towards the world as his counterpart in total otherness.

J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 62–65.

¹¹ Kevin Daugherty, "Missio Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31, no. 2 (2007): 152.

¹² Daugherty, "Missio Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions," 154.

¹³ See Daugherty's article for a fuller explication of his understanding on Barth, Jüngel, Moltmann, LaCugna's theologies regarding the relationship between God's economy and immanence. Daugherty holds a different view of Barth compared to Flett. Daugherty critiques Barth's conception of revelation, which does not go far enough to describe the "intrinsic importance of God's relationship with the world." On the other hand, Flett argues that Barth saw mission as central to the being of God, since there is no separation between his being and his acting: "God,

The world affects God in his very being. This reciprocal relationship is not conceivable as taking place in the *same* way, but given the difference between God and the world, it takes place in its *own* way.”¹⁴ This is the foundational basis for Moltmann’s social Trinity model. LaCugna carries Moltmann’s understanding of the God-world relationship further and argues that God’s perfection and aseity is *precisely* due to his ability to relate to a distinct “other” while still being fully himself. LaCugna sees the Trinity as inherently and eternally an open circle of perfect fellowship in which loving the world is essential to his being: God’s relationship to the world illustrates his perfection.¹⁵

Although in recent scholarship many scholars have adopted relational language along the lines of Moltmann’s social Trinity to describe God’s Triune life, one can understand it as mutual, communal, participatory and still conceive the Trinity as a closed circle that only became open through Christ.¹⁶ When one describes the Trinity as a community of love that opened to the world only through the Son, the language used implies change within the Godhead. How can God be closed and then become open? For Moltmann, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son precisely illustrates the eternally open nature of God - it is not that in Christ God opens up his life to the world, but that God’s life has always been open to the world and Christ realises and illustrates that openness. By being open to the world relationally, God is not ontologically dependent on the world: God can be completely free and infinitely different from the world while still being open to relationship with the world, as LaCugna argues by exploring the definition of personhood.¹⁷ God is totally different from the world and yet in full communion with the world through his Son

in Jesus Christ, chooses humanity.” Daugherty, “*Missio Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions*,” 155; Flett, *The Witness of God*, 213.

¹⁴ Swart, “Toward a Missional Theology of Participation,” 84.

¹⁵ Daugherty, “*Missio Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions*,” 161.

¹⁶ See Justin White, “A Biblical and Theological Foundation for International Missions Strategy in the Local Church: A Trinitarian Model,” *Contextualization* 1, no. 13 (2015): 1–5. White tries to uphold God’s ontological independence and aseity by using Greek metaphysical categories, which can be detected in his usage of Sander’s quote on page 3. Yet, he also uses the relational language of the Cappadocian fathers and Moltmann such as “participation” and “perichoresis” to describe God’s inner relationship and relationship with the world. He summarises the section on the immanent Trinity with the following on page 5: “So, in Christ, God opens up His life, the Trinitarian community of love and order, and invites us to join with Him as he accomplishes His will, or mission, in all of creation.”

¹⁷ See Daugherty, “*Missio Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions*,” 162, on his summary of LaCugna’s conception of di-polarity.

and his Spirit: it seems to be more appropriate to conceive the immanent Trinity by grappling with the implications of his economy, rather than basing the understanding of God's immanence on philosophical categories and then allowing those categories to interpret his economy.

The doctrine of the Trinity, which includes God's economy and immanence, is paramount for understanding the *missio Dei*. So summarises the point well, "the Trinity is the ground, the means, and the goal of mission."¹⁸ Not only that, the Trinitarian doctrine was revealed to us *for* the purpose of mission.

It [the doctrine of Trinity] "is not intended to be information about the internal life of God, but about how God relates to human beings." This means that the Trinity could be called the theological statement of the gospel; it is the gospel explained with reference to the being of God. It states that God has a missional essence. The economic focus does not limit God's being to saving humans, but it does say that God is salvific to the core.¹⁹

In other words, the economic Trinity is not a complete picture of who God is in his immanence, although it is a complete picture of who God is towards the world. The debate regarding the connection between God's economy and immanence is ongoing, but this paper will take the perspective that God's economy illustrates the radical extent of his openness and love towards the world in his immanence. Thus, the Triune God is, in his essence, a loving, holy, missionary God. The following section will be explored from this perspective.

Role of the Economic Trinity and the Church in *Missio Dei*

From the previous sections we see that the Triune God is a missionary God who is carrying out his mission in the world. Though the Triune God is wholly active in the *missio Dei*, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have specific functions and roles. By coming to a deeper understanding of the Persons' roles in the *missio Dei*, the church, as God's people, also comes to understand her part in it. Tan utilises four models to outline each

¹⁸ Damon W. K. So, "Christology and Trinity in Mission," in *Foundations for Mission*, ed. Emma Wild-Wood and Peniel Rajkumar, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, vol. 13 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 137.

¹⁹ Daugherty, "*Missio Dei*: The Trinity and Christian Missions," 162.

Person's role in *missio Dei*.²⁰ This paper will make use of the processional, linguistic, and dispositional models as a helpful organisational guide in its brief survey of literature.

First, the processional model, foundational in the church fathers' understanding of the Trinity, emphasises the role of God the Father as the source of divinity in the Godhead, the transcendent Creator, the Begetter who sends the Son and the Spirit from all eternity, and the King of his kingdom.²¹ Thus, God the Father is the Source, Initiator, and Goal of the *missio Dei* while the world is the stage on which he acts to bring about his kingdom.²² The sending nature of God the Father is seen in various Old Testament passages, in which we read about and learn of God's initiatives and purposes behind his sending activities.²³

In this model, both the Son and the Spirit can be envisioned as the hands of God the Father reaching out to establish and sustain God's kingdom on earth.²⁴ Regarding the Son, Tennent makes an accurate observation among the evangelical circle:

It is quite common for the church, and even missions textbooks, to associate Jesus Christ with "sending" since He is the one who commissions and sends the church out in those dramatic, post-resurrection appearances to his disciples.... However, from the perspective of the Triune God, Jesus is the one who himself was sent into the world by the Father. It is only as a "sent one" that Jesus is granted the authority to send.²⁵

²⁰ Seng-Kong Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 369 (2004): 280–291. Each model emphasises a specific Person and his role in relation to *missio Dei*, and describes the other two Persons in light of the emphasis. Though Tan does not discuss the church's role, this paper will attempt to fit the church into his models. It is important to note that these models are not meant to be strict delineations of the Divine Persons and their roles: we worship the only living and almighty God who is three in one. Each Person fully participates in the Others, so in a sense, it is improper to speak about the Trinity in separate models, for he is all of these models at once. Yet models and analogies do help us grasp a little of the Mystery, whom we worship.

²¹ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 280.

²² Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 75–82.

²³ Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 66–67.

²⁴ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 283.

²⁵ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 76.

Thus, God the Son's role as one hand of God the Father is to be sent to do the will and work of the Father, anointed in the power of the Spirit.²⁶ He is the embodiment of the *missio Dei*, "the presence of the Kingdom of God in his own person."²⁷ In Jesus we see what the Kingdom of God is like, we see what the *missio Dei* is in concrete reality, and we see the Father's plan, his grand narrative that began with creation and will end with the complete manifestation of the New Creation.²⁸ As the other hand of God the Father, God the Spirit is sent to bear witness to the Son as the empowering presence of the *missio Dei*.²⁹ Tan, Tennent, and Wood point to a pneumatological deficiency in which the Spirit's work often fails to be recognised, because it is constantly subsumed under Christology or soteriology, to the detriment of the church.³⁰ As the One who links together the Triune God and the church, the Spirit plays a paramount role in the church's participation of the *missio Dei*.³¹

In this model, the church participates as a key player in God's grand narrative, the ushering in of his kingdom to all nations and peoples on earth.³² With the ascension of the Son and the giving of the Spirit, God has made it clear that his church is the main instrument through which his Spirit will work to welcome all peoples into his kingdom. The church is, by nature, a missionary church, because her God is a missionary God. In the same way that the Father sent his Son and his Spirit to carry forth his *missio Dei*, the church is also sent as "those who bear Christ and his message to the world",³³ bringing the good news to everyone everywhere. Zscheile emphasises the need to return to the local church as the main implementation of twenty-first-century mission.³⁴ Indeed, it is the local

²⁶ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 284; Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 68–71.

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 40.

²⁸ Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 77.

²⁹ Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 92–101; Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 72.

³⁰ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 283–284; Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 93; Laurence W. Wood, "From Barth's Trinitarian Christology to Moltmann's Trinitarian Pneumatology," *ATJ* 55, no. 1 (2000): 54.

³¹ The Spirit's role will be more fully explicated later in the paper.

³² Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 192–193, 196.

³³ Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 220.

³⁴ Dwight Zscheile, "Forming and restoring community in a nomadic world: A next generation perspective on the future of the discipline of missiology," *Missiology: An International Review* 42, no. 1 (2013): 31. He further comments on the same page that "even global mission is being transformed from an enterprise organized

church, not individuals, mission societies, para-church organisations, or non-profit organisations that must be the primary agency of missions.³⁵ Furthermore, missions must no longer be dichotomised between home or abroad, but must be conceived as both because *missio Dei* encompasses the whole world. They are not “ministries” the church can choose whether or not to participate in.

Secondly, the linguistic model championed by Barth envisions God the Father as a Speaker who is communicative by nature. The Father communicates himself to the world in order for the world to be in a relational dialogue with him.³⁶ The Father continuously speaks today through his already-spoken Word (John 1:1–18). This model emphasises the role of God the Son as the eternal and uncreated Word who became flesh to complete the work of revelation and reconciliation. As the Spoken Word of the Father, the Son has made the Father known in history—his nature, his will, his plan, and the way to relate to him. Not only has the Son made the Father known, the Son has made the triune nature of the Godhead known in history. But this is not a history confined to the past; it is a history that continues to transform the present and future. Flett quotes Barth and explicates the significance of Jesus’s history in the following:

The life of Jesus “unquestionably belongs to a definite time. It has happened. But, in so far as it has happened as *this* history, the act of *God*, it has not ceased to be history and there to *happen*.” As the *history* of the living Lord Jesus Christ, it is active as past, present, and future. As a history of the *living* Lord Jesus Christ, it receives its character from his resurrection and ascension: it is a declarative history proclaiming who Jesus Christ is from all eternity.... The incarnation is [a] declarative history, so the act of declaration and witness is not limited to a particular segment of linear time.³⁷

Though Jesus is the objective history mediating between the Father and humanity, the Spirit is the One who makes the Word efficacious in the

and implemented primarily at the denominational or mission-society level to a collaboration between local communities.”

³⁵ White, “A Biblical and Theological Foundation,” 11. This is not to argue against the existence of those organisations, but those organisations must act as supporting roles helping the local church in her participation of *missio Dei* instead of taking on the central role.

³⁶ Tan, “A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions,” 289.

³⁷ Flett, *The Witness of God*, 224.

recipient's heart.³⁸ He is the One who guarantees human participation in the *missio Dei* by transforming the objective history into subjective history. Because of the Spirit, the Spoken Word is powerful and effective across time, culture, ethnic groups, and people's experiences.

In this model, the church participates in *missio Dei* by pointing the world to the Word and embodying the Word in the world. Castro's reminder is significant: "it is impossible to follow a Trinitarian theology or missiology that separated itself from the Christological entry point. It is through the revelation of God in Christ that we discover the Trinitarian doctrine, even more the Trinitarian spirituality and the Trinitarian sending."³⁹ It is through the objective Word, made real to believers by the Spirit, that believers come to understand the Triune God. Thus, the missional church must be pointing the world to the Word and through the Word to the Triune God.⁴⁰ This pointing and witnessing is both vocal and behavioural, through the church's proclamation of the good news and action of humble, self-giving love. Furthermore, the church is a community of disciples, whom Jesus has called to carry their crosses and follow him. Therefore, discipleship is paramount in mission, along with doing life together as a community of faith. Discipleship necessarily entails suffering and persecution.⁴¹ It means sharing in the life of and listening to the community in which they live and serve, seeking to participate in "local life, seeking the peace and flourishing of the city" by being a "faithful presence."⁴² Discipleship also means going out to the community, both local and global, and making more communities of disciples in the form of church-planting, teaching and modelling Jesus's message for these new communities.⁴³

Lastly, the dispositional model is based on Augustine's Trinitarian conception: God the Father is the Lover whose Beloved is God the Son, and the Spirit is the Eternal Bond of that love.⁴⁴ The Father also loves

³⁸ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 289.

³⁹ Emilio Castro, "A Christocentric Trinitarian Understanding of Mission," *International Review of Mission* 89, No. 355 (2000): 587.

⁴⁰ Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 215–217.

⁴¹ Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 212–214.

⁴² See Zscheile, "Forming and restoring community," 31–35.

⁴³ White offers an insightful suggestion in regards to church planting. If the Word is most powerfully embodied and clearly manifested through community, then instead of sending out church-planting individuals, the church needs to begin sending church-planting communities. See White, "A Biblical and Theological Foundation", 11–17.

⁴⁴ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 289.

the world similarly and communicates his love to his beloved world through the Son, who identified himself completely with humanity and emptied himself as an ultimate demonstration of the Father's love.⁴⁵ This model emphasises the role of the Spirit as the One who, "in effecting an interpersonal communion of love between humanity and God [personally dwells] in the believer."⁴⁶ In this regard, humanity relates to the triune God as Spirit Son-Father. The Spirit always points towards the Son and the Father, bringing humanity into a vertical communion with God and horizontal unity between disciples. Moltmann's controversial view of *perichoresis* takes this model further and emphasises the "relational, perichoretic indwelling of the three Persons [as] what constitutes their fellowship and perfects them in a unity of love."⁴⁷ This reminds the church that the Spirit is not only a sub-personal bond, power, or abstract spirit, but a distinctive Person in the divine fellowship.

In this model, the church participates in the *missio Dei* by co-labouring with the Holy Spirit, recognising that "the Holy Spirit is at work in the elect to bear witness to the salvific and liberating work of Jesus Christ for all nations.... Mission is a work of the Spirit of the living God, and we are invited, even elected or chosen, to participate in this cosmic work."⁴⁸ Instead of relying on human efforts, strategic planning, and business models to carry out mission, the church participates in the *missio Dei* by relying on the Spirit to be Christ's disciples in this present world in the context of God's New Creation.⁴⁹ This requires the church to be maturing in her spirituality, cultivated by its spiritual discipline, since she must be constantly listening and being sensitive to the Spirit's direction. By the Spirit the church proclaims Christ, forms disciples, contextualises theology, engages in inculturation, cares for the poor and oppressed, participates in interfaith dialogue, seeks ecumenical unity,

⁴⁵ A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "The Trinity: Paradigm for Mission in the Spirit," *Missiology: An International Review* 17, no. 1 (1989): 72.

⁴⁶ Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 289.

⁴⁷ Wood, "From Barth's Trinitarian Christology," 55. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the theology of perichoresis. See a fuller commentary on Moltmann's understanding of perichoresis from Wood, "From Barth's Trinitarian Christology," 54–59. Tan offers important insight on the implication of perichoresis to *missio Dei* in Tan, "A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions," 291–295.

⁴⁸ Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 232. He grounds this statement by outlining the Spirit's work in the early church from pages 235–240.

⁴⁹ Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 99–100.

empowers other people, and gathers together to worship.⁵⁰ The chief mark of a Spirit-empowered church is joy and hope: joy in her relationship with the triune God, and hope in the context of the incoming New Creation.⁵¹

Conclusion

The church has come a long way in developing her theology of mission. With the *missio Dei* rooted in and sustained by the Triune God, the church has a clearer theological framework to envision and articulate mission as a process that “is concerned with nothing less than the completion of all that God has begun to do in the creation of the world and of man. Its concern is not sectional but total and universal.”⁵² As a result, the church has come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of her role in mission too: “Missions summons [sic] people not merely to ‘make a decision’ to follow Christ but also to enter the community of the faithful, the church, and to live out the realities of the future in the present before the eyes of the world in real space and time history.”⁵³ May the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit continue to lead the church in his *missio Dei* until his kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven, for the praise of his glory.

JESSICA CHU is a postgraduate student at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Canada.

⁵⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 368–510; Zahniser, “The Trinity: Paradigm for Mission in the Spirit,” 79.

⁵¹ Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 98; Flett, *The Witness of God*, 297.

⁵² Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 62.

⁵³ Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 492.