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Chapter Eleven

Examining the Believers Church within a Trinitarian-Missional Framework

Arnold Neufeldt-Fast

The introduction of a trinitarian framework or grammar may seem an odd contribution for the study of Believers Church ecclesiology. Not a few contemporary Believers Church theologians regard trinitarian theology as structurally bound to a “Constantinian” or Christendom worldview. The historical reticence amongst the Believers Churches to employ or examine the doctrine of the Trinity is well documented. In her doctoral dissertation on the Believers Church tradition, Nadine Pence Frantz writes: “Suspicious of creeds and doctrines which were used as tests of faith against them, the emphasis in the [Believers Church] tradition has been on an active, living faith, one that is demonstrated by the lifestyle of the believers rather than by their doctrine.”¹ For many reasons, both good and bad, presence and action in the world have been more important than abstract understandings of ontology and the speculative tasks of the human mind.

Believers Church ecclesiologies have most often been developed

¹ Nadine Pence Frantz, “Theological Hermeneutics: Christian Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Believers Church Tradition” (PhD diss., Divinity School, University of Chicago, 1992), 144.

christologically. Yet a growing number of Believers Church theologians—ecumenical and evangelical—are proposing trinitarian models not for speculative inquiry, but as the implicitly present grammar or crucially required framework for the ecclesiological distinctives of the Believers Church tradition.² Moreover, a growing number of missiologists of this same tradition now argue for the missionary grounding of the Christian community in the being and act of the trinitarian God, suggesting that only the trinitarian mission and sending of God can properly focus and rekindle the church's missionary engagement of modern Western culture and its Christendom assumptions.³

This essay examines the theological arguments for a shift from a traditionally christocentric to a more robust, trinitarian-missional paradigm for Believers Church ecclesiology. I begin with a presentation of the growing missiological consensus with respect to a trinitarian theology of the mission or sending of God (*missio Dei*) and its consequences for the witness of the Believers Church in post-Christendom societies (North America and Europe). I will trace the historical development of the trinitarian-missional paradigm to the theology of Karl Barth and its introduction specifically to North American Mennonites—most predominantly via the eschatologically oriented social-trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann. In the final part of the essay I will examine critically the larger contribution to a trinitarian Believers Church ecclesiology by Miroslav Volf⁴ and the most recent argument proposed by

² Cf. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); A. James Reimer, *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. V (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), s.v. "God (Trinity), Doctrine of;" Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence*, trans. Helmut Harder (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007); Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006); Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

³ Wilbert R. Shenk, "New Wineskins for New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29, no. 2 (2005): 73-79; Neal Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgram Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (2004): 29-52.

⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

German Mennonite theologian Fernando Enns.⁵ In conclusion I will make recommendations for further steps for developing the theological contribution of the Believers Church to an ecumenical understanding of the church.

Trinity as Framework and Grammar

Is a trinitarian framework necessary for a full theological account of Believers Church distinctives? The Believers Church conferences originated, in large part, to study the common heritage and promote awareness of the theological contribution to ecumenical dialogue of those Christian groups which have insisted upon the baptism of believers, on confession of faith, into visible congregations. At the centre of this heritage is a christological focus; an early Believers Church consensus acknowledges “the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Word, church membership regenerated by the Spirit, the covenant of believers, a need for a perpetual restitution of the church, the necessity for separation from the world and proclamation and service to the world, and a special conception of Christian unity.”⁶ Christian unity is explicated here as the “fellowship of restored congregations” under Christ as “head” and realized by the “Spirit of God.” From this perspective unity should not be shaped by a formal and forced uniformity of structure or creedal (e.g., trinitarian) orthodoxy, but by “a personal relationship and mutual commitment between God and His people.”⁷

The Believers Church is but one ecclesial family which has seen little practical significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the orthodoxy or orthopraxis of the church. In his instructive book, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes*, Colin Gunton⁸ traces how the theological tradition separated God’s being from God’s action, thereby distorting any account of God that is normed by the biblical witness and focused on the

⁵ Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence*.

⁶ James Leo Garrett, ed., *The Concept of the Believers Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 324.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 322f.

⁸ Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Doctrine of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

person and work of Christ. A breach developed between divine attributes in philosophical theology (i.e., the negative, metaphysical, and impersonal attributes) and divine action in Christian faith (i.e., attributes derived from God's historical action). The doctrine of the Trinity became one doctrine alongside others rather than a frame of reference or grammar for all others. It took on a speculative life of its own and had little practical significance for the life of faith. Gunton summarizes that "[w]e are in the presence of an entrenched tradition which owes more to Greece than scripture and, despite modification, dominates the treatment of attributes until this day."⁹ Trinity understood here as the "grammar" which explicates the biblical story of God's being in action, and thus also as the "frame of reference" for all other affirmations and embodiments of faith, is a proposal which would not deny any Believers Church affirmations, but possibly a doctrine which would allow those affirmations to be explicated more fully and with greater ecumenical effectiveness.

The Church Precedes the Individual as Mission Precedes the Church

Even with its voluntarist understanding of church, the Believers Church affirms with Cyprian that the church precedes the individual believer: "Jesus Christ is head of the church; it does not belong to its members."¹⁰ Since the gathering of Believers Church theologians in Louisville in 1968, a growing number of Believers Church mission theologians have encouraged the churches to think of the primacy of the church once again within the larger mission or sending of the triune God. Wilbert R. Shenk, director of missions for one of the largest Mennonite conferences for many years and later missiologist at Fuller Seminary, has argued in recent years that mission must precede the church. For "sixteen centuries Christians have been taught to think of church as the prior category and mission as one among several functions of the church," Shenk writes.¹¹ But this view "is based on a deformed understanding of the nature and purpose of the church. Jesus the

⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰ Garrett, ed., *The Concept of the Believers Church*, 322; cf. also C. Norman Kraus, *The Community of the Spirit: How the Church Is in the World*, rev. ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

¹¹ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 7.

Messiah formed his disciple community for the express purpose of continuing his mission.”¹² Shenk argues that to be authentic, “mission must be thoroughly theocentric. It begins in God’s redemptive purpose and will be completed when that purpose is fulfilled. The God-given identity of the church thus arises from its *mission*. This order of priority is foundational.”¹³ God the Father sends the Son into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation in all its dimensions, that is, God’s reign in its fullness. The mission of God (*missio Dei*) so understood is essentially trinitarian. Shenk links the recovery of a trinitarian-missional theology with the recovery of the missionary nature of the church in post-Christendom.¹⁴

In the 1960s Shenk and other missionaries—ecumenical and evangelical—began to engage seriously the work of Church of Scotland missionary, Lesslie Newbigin. At this time Newbigin began to argue that the mission of the church “can only be rightly understood in terms of the trinitarian model.”¹⁵ Mission is the overflow of the infinite love of God upon all creation, expressed in the incarnation and in the outpouring of the Spirit. God sent the Son into the world to accomplish redemption; the Father and the Son send the Spirit to create the people of God as a missionary people. God’s mission is to bring comprehensive reconciliation (*shalom*) to all peoples and to the whole of creation. Especially in his later writing, Newbigin states, “It is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power.”¹⁶

This trinitarian paradigm has provided a rich and fresh context for imagining the church in the flow of the mission and sending of God, and within God’s intentions for the church to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the redemptive reign of God’s kingdom in the world. The mission of the church to all nations “is itself the mighty work of God, the sign of the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Shenk, “New Wineskins for New Wine.”

¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 118; also, Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today’s Mission* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964), 31.

¹⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119.

inbreaking of the kingdom.”¹⁷ The self-understanding of the church is grounded in the work of the God’s Spirit who brings the church into existence as a gathered community, equips and prepares it, and then sends it into the world to participate fully in God’s mission (*missio Dei*). There is a growing convergence in missiological circles around this understanding of the *missio Dei* and its implications for ecclesiology. It has also been central to the birth of the “missional church” conversation in North America in the last fifteen years. An early and widely accepted definition of the Believers Church by Durnbaugh¹⁸ as a covenanted and disciplined people of God gathered and willingly scattered in the work of the Lord is, for example, not threatened or superseded by this form of trinitarianism. Rather, this trinitarian theology of mission offers a new context for re-imagining and extending a Believers Church ecclesiology of “gathering and scattering” within God’s mission and God’s intentions for the world.

Neal Blough, long-time Mennonite missionary in France and historian of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, has argued convincingly that this *missio Dei* structure is deeply embedded in South German Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck’s (d. 1556) understanding of discipleship and church. Regarding Marpeck’s thinking Blough writes, “[w]ithout the sending of the Spirit and its presence in the life of the Church, there can be no sacramental extension of the Incarnation. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that material and outward reality participates in God’s action in the world.”¹⁹ For Marpeck, discipleship and church are participation in the very life of the Trinity and the visible manifestation of God’s love for the world. On the basis of his extensive writings on Marpeck (mostly in French), Blough affirms that for Marpeck “[t]his socio-political living out of the narrative in the midst of history is seen as an extension of the reality of the Trinity.”²⁰

Blough is, of course, keenly aware that with the establishment of the Constantinian church there was a shift from ethics to dogmatics, from a concern with teaching baptismal candidates how to live the teachings of Jesus

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁸ Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1968), 33.

¹⁹ Blough, “The Church as Sign or Sacrament,” 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

in evangelical attractiveness to the avoidance of errors of heresy.²¹ But Blough with others²² contends that this problem is not *inherent* in trinitarian theology; the problem is the failure to develop a robust trinitarian theology grounded in a concrete, embodied christology. In exemplary fashion, Pilgram Marpeck used the christological and trinitarian categories to critique the Constantinian practices of the church, giving it great *practical* significance for the life of faith. Blough extends this argument and recommends John Milbank's claim that both the Constantinian church and secular modernity are established on an "ontology of violence" (priority of violence and necessity of conflict) which the doctrine of the Trinity as grammar or framework actually challenges. The self-differentiation of the triune God provides the "theological ontology" from which the non-violent narrative and communal praxis of the church flows and can be lived out.²³ Similarly Thomas Finger writes:

We can now perceive Christ's extraordinary, kenotic self-giving originating from the Trinity's mutual self-giving, and new creation communities formed and sustained by this divine community. Historic Anabaptists, of course, did not express all these notions directly. I propose, however, that these explicate many implicit convictions that energized their communal and missional emphases.²⁴

The missionary reflections of Blough and Shenk are deeply rooted in the struggle of the church in North America and Europe to rediscover its theological identity and vocation at the end of Christendom. Not only are they convinced of the Believers Church's very important contribution to ecumenical discussions on ecclesiology in this new context, but they also

²¹ Cf. Alan Kreider, "Beyond Bosch: The Early Church and the Christendom Shift," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29, no. 2 (2005): 59-68.

²² Cf. Duane K. Friesen, "Ten Theses on Connections between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis in Mennonite Theology," *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 3 (2005); Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 94-108; Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 421-446.

²³ Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament," 43; cf. also Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998): 403-423.

²⁴ Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 446.

encourage the rediscovery and explication of the deeper trinitarian grammar which has informed this heritage.

Recovery of Trinitarian Theology

The recovery of trinitarian theology in twentieth- and twenty-first century theology is due in large part to the work and witness of Karl Barth. With Barth, and later Karl Rahner, the speculative theistic tradition and its atheistic critics (Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche) were vigorously engaged by—all things—a robust trinitarian and anti-theistic approach. After the First World War, missiologists began to take special interest in these explosive new developments in biblical and systematic theology. It was Karl Barth who, in 1932, first articulated for them an understanding of mission as an activity of God at the Brandenburg Mission Conference in Berlin. Reflecting upon the impulses Barth gave at that gathering for an intensification of the linkage between theology and mission, missiologist David Bosch summarizes: “The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another ‘movement:’ Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation.”²⁵ The rethinking of western ecclesiology that was already being considered in global mission discussion was given significant theological focus by Barth insofar as he linked the missionary vocation of the church with the sending of God.

The congregation, the so-called home church, the community of pagan Christians, should recognize itself and actively engage itself for what it essentially is: a missionary community! It is not a mission association or society, nor a group that formed itself with the firm *intention* to do mission, but a human community *called* to the act of mission.²⁶

Especially in his later theology, Barth took mission out of ecclesiology and

²⁵ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1957), 118.

soteriology and placed it squarely into the context of the doctrine of Trinity.²⁷ In contrast to the longer trinitarian tradition which believed it could discover the shape of God's being by negating the supposed characteristics of the material or visible world, Barth's *Dogmatics* are constructed with a trinitarian framework that unfolds the implications of the Son's involvement in the material world, beginning with his humanity and the story of Israel. There is no general doctrine of materiality which must then be transcended.²⁸ Moreover within this structure Barth identifies the main task of the church to be that of a witnessing community in the "solidarity of the pagans inside with the pagans outside"²⁹—rather than as the patronizing "owner and proper disposer" of the goods of salvation.³⁰ What emerges in Barth's Doctrine of Reconciliation is an understanding of church for which its "sending is not secondary to its being; rather it is insofar as it is *sent* and is *active* on the strength of its sending. It builds itself up for the sake of its sending and in view of it."³¹

This new christological focus and reorientation of the doctrine of the Trinity in view of God's being and activity should be welcomed by representatives of a Believers Church ecclesiology insofar as it seeks to trace the biblical witness and to place theology in the service of the missionary or missional church. It is noteworthy that his approach bears no resemblance to H. Richard Niebuhr's use of the Trinity as a framework for ecumenical theology;³² Niebuhr proposed a "balance of unitarianisms in tension"—all heretical in isolation, but all necessary for the whole faith of the whole church. This framework rightly earned the sharp critique of John Howard Yoder.³³

²⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, 3.2, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), §72.

²⁸ Gunton, *Act and Being*, 66.

²⁹ Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten*, 102.

³⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, 827.

³¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 725 [translation slightly altered –ANF].

³² H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3 (1946): 371-384.

³³ John H. Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasons: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John H. Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996),

Niebuhr's trinitarianism—unlike Barth's christocentric trinitarian-missional model—is laden with the problems of trying to reconcile the tensions between the God of natural theology and the God of revelation. For Barth, any knowledge of God we claim to get from reason, nature, or tradition must be tested with reference to the norm of Jesus Christ as he is attested in Scripture.

It is this trinitarian “grammar” which John Howard Yoder learned from Karl Barth. Yoder emphasized to his own students that

. . . the problem which the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to resolve, the normativeness of Jesus as it relates to the uniqueness of God, is a problem which Christians will always have if they are Christian. The doctrine of the Trinity is a test of whether your commitment to Jesus and to God are biblical enough that you have the problem which the doctrine of the Trinity solves.³⁴

This practical trinitarian “test” of one's theology functions for Yoder as a type of “grammar” by which theological claims depend for their coherence. According to Craig Carter, Yoder's own “Christology presupposes the two-natures doctrine and the full deity of Jesus Christ, his eschatology presupposes the ontological reality of God and his sovereignty over history, and his ecclesiology presupposes the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community.”³⁵ These Yoderian affirmations follow a trinitarian grammar; and it is precisely this logic, for example, that allows Yoder to attest the deeper reality-making claim that “people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe,”³⁶ that is, in accord with the way things truly are. Like Barth, Yoder connects social ethics with the actual being and activity of God and can make a claim about the ultimate shape of reality based on God's trinitarian history with the world. This logic and procedure lies behind Yoder's important ecclesiological affirmations. Arne Rasmussen calls this grammar or account of reality governing Yoder's work an “eschatological and trinitarian

35, 62; see also Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 122ff., 233.

³⁴ John H. Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christological and Theological Method* (Elkhart, IN: Co-Op Bookstore, 1983), 140.

³⁵ Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 232f.

³⁶ John H. Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1, no. 1 (1988): 58.

metaphysics.”³⁷ Rasmussen writes, “This kind of metaphysics, embedded and implied in an ecclesial discourse-practice, creates a framework for historical, social, and political interpretation and practice. It cannot simply be read off the surface of history, because the trinitarian understanding of reality is implicit in it. . . .”³⁸ For Yoder, as with Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a speculative theory that is descriptive of the inner life of God. It is not creedalism divorced from the life of faith. Rather, the doctrine has a regulative function as the supreme summary of the grammar of the whole of Christian faith—a perspective grounded on the eschatological experience of the risen Christ, safeguarding, regulating, and correcting Christian thought in service of the church’s sending: “There would be no theology if there were no community specially obligated to the witness of its word.”³⁹

A Believers Church Recovery of the Doctrine of the Trinity for Ecclesiological Reflection

The relative neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity—not only in Believers Church traditions—was a reality of Christian theology until the last decades of the twentieth century. Today there is a broad theological consensus across denominational lines that the doctrine of the Trinity really is *the* Christian doctrine of God. Thomas Finger is, as far as I am aware, the first to unfold a consciously Believers Church theology with a full-fledged trinitarian framework or grammar. Finger’s trinitarian reflections begin not protologically from the Father and his initiative, but from below, from “the acts of the Spirit who brings the *eschaton* alive and hastens all things towards consummation.”⁴⁰ In this way Finger follows the critical (yet sympathetic) post-Barthian work of Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann writes that the “doctrine of the Trinity is the conceptual framework that is necessary if we are to

³⁷ Arne Rasmussen, “Historicizing the Historicist: Ernst Troeltsch and Recent Mennonite Theology,” eds. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation, *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 241f.

³⁸ *Ibid.*; cf. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 239f.

³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, 879 (translation slightly altered-ANF).

⁴⁰ Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 434.

understand this history of Christ as being the history of God. . . . It is not directly practical; but it changes practice more fundamentally than all the possible alternatives which 'the active man' can think out."⁴¹ Specifically, Moltmann affirms a social-Trinity which argues that God is in God's inmost being a tri-unity. This clarifies why co-humanity is essential to humanity made in God's image and implies, according to Finger, that salvation is at one and the same time personal and intimate as well as corporate and social. Importantly, this account finds creatures and the church caught up in different ways in the flow of divine energies, in the mission of God.⁴² No later than 1982, with Moltmann's lecture series at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) and at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (Winnipeg, Manitoba), North American Mennonite theologians have been considering seriously the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity for an understanding of discipleship and ecclesiology. At that time Finger argued that the doctrine of Trinity

. . . provides the strongest possible theological foundation for the Anabaptist emphasis on community. . . . God is essentially an intertwining of relationships marked by self-giving, response, acknowledgement, sharing, and enjoyment of one another. This is the deepest reason why true salvation cannot be individualistic. . . . Christ's community not only follows him, but is also caught up into his life which he shares with his Father and his Spirit.⁴³

Over the years Finger has argued consistently and persuasively that a trinitarian framework is crucial for an account of the ecclesiological emphases of the Believers Church. A growing number of Believers Church theologians—most comprehensively Miroslav Volf⁴⁴ but also Stanley Grenz,⁴⁵ A. James

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 81.

⁴² Cf. Finger, *Christian Theology*, vol. 2, 450-455.

⁴³ Thomas Finger, "Moltmann's Theology of the Cross," in *Dialogue Sequel to Jürgen Moltmann's Following Jesus Christ in the World Today*, ed. W. Swartley, Occasional Papers 10 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 19; cf. also Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*.

⁴⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

⁴⁵ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*.

Reimer,⁴⁶ Howard A. Snyder,⁴⁷ and now most recently, Fernando Enns⁴⁸—have argued for and presented robust trinitarian frameworks for unfolding ecclesiology, missions, and ethics for a greater appreciation of the Believers Church heritage. Below I will critically examine the respective trinitarian contributions of Volf and Enns, both of whom stand on the shoulders of Barth and Moltmann, and, in the case of Enns, Yoder in particular.

Miroslav Volf

Miroslav Volf is a Pentecostal-Baptist-Episcopalian Croatian American trinitarian theologian (and more!) who has made perhaps the most significant contribution to date towards an ecclesiology for ecumenical consideration from a free church, Believers Church perspective. In his landmark study, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*,⁴⁹ Volf shares the concern of Believers Church theology to develop an ecclesiology that will facilitate “both culturally *sensitive* and culturally critical-social embodiments of the Gospel.”⁵⁰

Volf—like Barth, Moltmann, Yoder, and Finger—begins with the ontological and epistemological priority of the all-embracing framework of God’s eschatological new creation for his reflections on the church: The gathering and sending of the people of God is grounded in the coming of the reign of God in the person of Jesus. The church, which emerged after the resurrection of Christ and the sending of his Spirit, is seen by the New Testament as the anticipation of the coming new, obedient world intended by God’s righteousness. The “eschatological character of the church demands that systematic ecclesiological reflection begin not immediately with the

⁴⁶ A. James Reimer, “Doctrine of God (Trinity),” in Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

⁴⁷ Howard A. Snyder, *Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of Christ’s Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); “The Missional Church and Missional Life” (paper presentation at the meeting of faculty of Tyndale University College and Seminary, Toronto, August 2007), <http://www.tyndale.ca/seminary/inministry/downloads/-SnyderMissionalChurchandLife.pdf> (accessed 1 July 2008).

⁴⁸ Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*.

⁴⁹ Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

church itself, but rather with God's new creation in relation to God's people."⁵¹

Perhaps Volf's most important contribution is his trinitarian foundation and clarification of the unity and catholicity of the church from a free church perspective. On the one hand, "[i]n every congregation assembling in Christ's name to profess faith in him, the *one and the whole* Christ is present through his Spirit. For this reason, the congregation is not a *part* of the church, but rather is the *whole* church."⁵² On the other hand, the "same presence of Christ through the Spirit that makes each local church 'independent' of the other churches simultaneously connects them with one another."⁵³ Thus on the one hand, the relation of the local congregation to "the eschatological gathering of the people of God in the new creation"—or the hoped for universal church—is Spirit-mediated;⁵⁴ it does not need to be mediated sacramentally. And on the other hand,

. . . since the eschatological gathering of the people of God will include all these churches as its own anticipations, a local church cannot alone, in isolation from all other churches, claim to be a church. It must acknowledge all other churches, in time and space, as churches, and must at least be open to diachronic and synchronic communication with them.⁵⁵

Thus, on the one hand, local churches are "not the variously concrete modes of existence of the universal church, but are rather *historical* anticipations of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God;" they "arise through the pneumatic anticipatory connection to the yet outstanding gathering of the whole eschatological people of God, that is, to the *eschatological* universal church . . ."⁵⁶ And on the other hand, profession of faith in the one Jesus Christ implies the openness of a local congregation to all other churches, according to Volf. This basic openness is the "*interecclesial minimum* of the concrete ecclesial proleptic experience of the eschatological

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

gathering of the whole people of God.”⁵⁷ This is a very significant and unique free church argument and contribution to ecumenical discussion on the unity and catholicity of the church.

Volf also follows his teacher and mentor, Jürgen Moltmann, in his pioneer thinking of a non-hierarchical and truly communal ecclesiology based on the social Trinity.⁵⁸ Volf argues that the unity of God is best understood perichoretically; that is, each person stands in relation to the other persons and is also a personal centre of action internal to the others; that is, alive in one another and through the others in a mutual exchange or circulation of the eternal divine life.⁵⁹ If one thinks of the unity of God as the complementary nature of person and relation, then “ecclesial communities also appear as independent and yet mutually related entities affirming one another in mutual giving and receiving.”⁶⁰ That is, in correspondence to a social trinitarian understanding of God, Volf argues that the church too is not a single subject, but rather a communion of interdependent subjects, or a *polycentric* community. And insofar as the Trinity is an open and inviting communion, so too churches seeking communion with other churches correspond “to the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God in communion with the triune God, and in so doing [are] actually a church in the first place.”⁶¹ As local churches enrich one another, “they will also increasingly correspond to the catholicity of the triune God, who has already constituted them as catholic churches, because they *are* anticipations of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God.”⁶² The people of God are constitutively related to the triune God and simultaneously integrated into the new world of God.⁶³ “The church is catholic because the Spirit of the new creation present within it anticipates in it the eschatological gathering of the whole people of God.”⁶⁴

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁸ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993).

⁵⁹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 203; cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. M. Kohl (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 174f.

⁶⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 207.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 213.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

This anticipatory character which grounds the correspondence between eschatological and historical catholicity also relativizes historical catholicity. "Within history each church is catholic insofar as it always reflects its full eschatological catholicity historically only in a broken fashion. This is why no church can claim full catholicity for itself."⁶⁵ The catholicity of the local church is not a realization or concretization of an already existing universal church *à la* Ratzinger, "but rather the anticipation of the still outstanding gathering of the whole people of God, albeit an anticipation in which communal eschatological salvation is experienced concretely."⁶⁶

As noted, this is a major contribution to ecclesiology in a trinitarian framework from a free church, Believers Church perspective. Surprisingly, however, despite the brilliance and comprehensiveness of the argument of this book, Volf writes in complete ignorance of all Believers Church conference publications and of the entire corpus of John Howard Yoder's work. In one sense, this allows Volf's work to complement Yoder's and others. However, on the whole Volf's argument would have been strengthened immeasurably if he had taken up and critically engaged Yoder's thought as well as the Believers Church's heritage of attempting to embody this communal witness of the divine community. Such important cross-fertilization is still outstanding. It is worth noting that the eschatological orientation of the work of Volf and Moltmann is particularly appropriate for the development of a trinitarian missional ecclesiology.

Fernando Enns

Fernando Enns' trinitarian theology follows Miroslav Volf's contours, but also embarks on new directions. He examines peace church ecclesiology within the larger context of current ecumenical discourse and, in turn, presents and recommends to the larger ecumenical network the theological and methodological premises of the historic peace churches. This broad horizon of ecclesiological dialogue and its wide-ranging distinctions brings to light some significant correctives not only for the ecumenical community, but also for peace church ecclesiology—and by extension—Believers Churches, according to Enns. After a broad but very careful study of contemporary Mennonite

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 272.

theology, Enns argues that the central “regulative principle” of “community” requires a further foundation “in a Trinitarian-based theology.”⁶⁷ This is especially urgent with respect to questions regarding the unity and catholicity of Believers Churches as well as for thinking about the connections between ecclesiology and ethics, and, more generally, for the ongoing process of ecclesiological reflection.

Our study leads to the conclusion that the Historic Peace Churches have prematurely foreclosed the trinitarian option which, as ecumenical discussions have demonstrated, can offer a solid foundation for a peace church ecclesiology in providing not only a substantial community-model, but helping the church to conceive itself as participating in the triune community.⁶⁸

Specifically, Enns argues that the trinitarian framework secures oneness in the midst of plurality and shields plurality from uniformist tendencies. Individual confession and voluntary participation in community—which the Believers Church accentuates—can only succeed “in the context of an interdependent congregation understood as *differentiated* community.”⁶⁹ A view of the Trinity as a *perichoretic* community gives this ecclesiology an alternative foundation that also draws the church into the divine community which precedes the voluntary decisions of individuals.⁷⁰ This move guards theologically the voluntarism of the Believers Churches and its own affirmation that the church does not belong to its members, but to Jesus Christ.⁷¹ As with Volf and Moltmann, the social-trinitarian *perichoresis* of the divine persons becomes the model and prototype for church as *koinonia*. Enns recommends that an ecclesiological model of “‘differentiated communion’ (Miroslav Volf) can be derived from this conception, which is essential for the self-understanding of the peace church as a visible symbol of the anticipated messianic community.”⁷² Again, Enns points to Volf and Moltmann and presents a view of church as the “proleptic experience within history of the

⁶⁷ Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, 232.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁷¹ Garrett, ed., *The Concept of the Believers Church*, 322.

⁷² Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, 233.

eschatological integration of the entire people of God into the communion of the triune God.”⁷³

The contribution of the Believers Church (specifically Mennonite) theology to the ecumenical discussion, according to Enns, is to provide “the framework of an ethically-directed, local, and experience-oriented (hermeneutical) understanding of community that complements and completes the predominantly ontological description of trinitarian *koinonia* in ecumenical discussion.”⁷⁴ The believer’s request for baptism and voluntary entrance into the *koinonia* of the church illustrates and preserves the person’s independent identity in community. This is a major contribution to ecumenical discussion of ecclesiology from a Believers Church perspective. Believers Church temptations or deficits are also corrected when modelled analogically to the *koinonia* of the divine Trinity.⁷⁵

Perhaps most provocatively Enns argues that the authenticity of the peace church’s life as community—including the central, identity-forming principle of non-violence and the way of Jesus as the key source and pattern for life—is deficient if the theological foundation is one-sidedly christocentric. “If the ethical community claims that, in the final analysis, its motivation is grounded in the kingly *authority* of Christ, she remains prisoner to metaphorical and categorical thinking, which is precisely what she seeks to expose.”⁷⁶ The motivation for discipleship is not Christ the king or ruler, but “the *koinonia* of God with humanity, the *participatio* of the church as a community constituted by the Holy Spirit and qualified by the Spirit as ethical community.”⁷⁷ When the discipleship ethic of non-violence is placed in the trinitarian *koinonia* framework, the church’s “mission of reconciliation, the recovery of community, as well as peace *and* justice coalesce.”⁷⁸

Enns argues that the trinitarian community model of “co-inherence” or “mutual indwelling” (*perichoresis*) is a necessary corrective for the peace churches in particular and the Believers Churches in general. Enns is very aware that in these churches the doctrine of the Trinity has never played a role

⁷³ Ibid., 240; with reference to Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 175, 127.

⁷⁴ Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, 234.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 235f.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 234.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

comparable to its role in the mainline churches. One of the key “correctives” which Enns’ method identifies well, is the need to interpret community in all its dimensions (including the unity and catholicity of the church) as *koinonia*, grounding it in a trinitarian-based theology.

Fernando Enns’ contribution to the ecumenical discussion on the being of the church from a Believers Church-peace church perspective, together with Volf’s landmark ecumenical study, have clearly laid the trinitarian foundation for a missional understanding of the church. I provide a few initial critical comments for further study.

First, Enns’ larger trinitarian recommendations for the Believers Church are not as new as he sometimes presents them. However, Enns supports these imperatives with new ecumenical acumen and urgency which require serious attention. His deep awareness of the opportunities and operations of current ecumenical discussions is unparalleled among Believers Church theologians. Second, Enns is an extremely alert reader of John H. Yoder’s writings and has read widely in current North American Anabaptist-Mennonite thought. Astonishingly, however, Enns apparently has no awareness of Thomas Finger’s *Christian Theology*⁷⁹ or of the trinitarian-missional proposals already under discussion in the North American peace church-Believers Church circles since Moltmann’s lecture tour in 1983. James McClendon’s work⁸⁰ is also passed over. Moreover, it is not entirely obvious to his readers why he does not embrace more fully and engage more thoroughly Volf’s substantial ecumenical-free church contribution⁸¹ and his writings on peace. Third, it could be expected that Enns would want to make connections between the deeply influential ecumenical figure, Lesslie Newbigin: his early proposals on free church ecclesiologies in the ecumenical family,⁸² and to Newbigin’s later work on a theology of the *missio Dei*.⁸³ This, however, is surprisingly absent in Enns’ study. The missional theological impulses outlined at the start of this

⁷⁹ Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vols. 1-2.

⁸⁰ James McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994).

⁸¹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*.

⁸² Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 94ff.

⁸³ Lesslie Newbigin, *An Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

essay—including the references to the works of Bosch, Shenk, and Blough—would bring another level of urgency to Enns' trinitarian contribution for the church in western, post-Christendom contexts.

Conclusion: The Believers Church of Tomorrow

At the 1978 Study Conference on the Believers Church in Canada, John Howard Yoder began his plenary address with the affirmation: "The Church of tomorrow cannot be but a Believers Church."⁸⁴ Thirty years later this claim continues to be valid, although the language that most, both inside and outside Believers Church circles in Canada and the United States, are now using is different: most would say that the church of today and tomorrow cannot but be a "missional church."⁸⁵ And if this is the case, then perhaps what we did not see thirty years ago is that the Believers Church as an essentially missional church cannot be but "trinitarian." Moltmann's summary statement—that the doctrine of the Trinity is the "conceptual framework that is necessary if we are to understand this history of Christ as being the history of God"⁸⁶—will only be contested with great difficulty, even—and perhaps especially so—from a Believers Church perspective. Finger, Volf, and Enns—among others—have embraced the logic of this conclusion and provided deep trinitarian foundations for the construction of a more robust ecclesiology from a Believers Church perspective. Moreover, these newly uncovered foundations provide the groundwork for Believers Church theologians to engage in a much more meaningful and fruitful dialogue with their missional-theologian counterparts who, coming via another path, have also arrived at the broadly affirmed consensus that this church, which is essentially caught up in the being and action of the triune

⁸⁴ John H. Yoder, "Believers Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believers Church in Canada*, ed. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (with the assistance of John D. Rempel) (Brantford, ON; Winnipeg, MB: Baptist Federation of Canada/Mennonite Central Committee, 1979), 3.

⁸⁵ Cf. Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2000); George Hunsberger and Craig van Gelder, eds., *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁸⁶ Moltmann, *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays*, 81.

God, is missionary by its very nature. The common questions to be explored will be: What do we do when we do missional theology? How do we do missional theology? Moreover, missional theologians will bring the tools of cultural analysis to the endeavour to further assist the church in North America and Europe to embody effectively the witness to the trinitarian, missional God in a post-Christendom context.⁸⁷

It is with this latter point—the embodiment of the witness—that another student of Barth’s work, Stanley Hauerwas might be allowed to have the last word. Hauerwas is a Methodist whose thought is very close to the Believers Church tradition, especially the work of John Howard Yoder. In his Gifford Lectures, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology*, Hauerwas provides a very sympathetic account of “The Witness that was Karl Barth” (chap. 6); however Hauerwas notes that “[a]ttractive accounts of the world can often turn out to be no more than fantasies. The needed incentive not just to entertain but to live Christian convictions requires the display of a habitable world exemplified in the life of the Christian community.”⁸⁸ Here we have a trinitarian-missional proposal that goes beyond what Hauerwas calls Barth’s “over cautious” presentation of the church in the economy of God’s salvation.⁸⁹ The witness requires churches—like those represented by John Howard Yoder and Pope John Paul II—who embody the “kind of witnesses who must exist if Christians are to recover the confident use of theological speech that Barth exemplifies so well.”⁹⁰ These churches “have challenged the presumptions of modernity” and “called into question attempts . . . in the name of rationality and democracy [to] relegate God to ‘what we do with our privacy,’” and they represent “the recovery of the politics necessary for us to understand why witness is not simply something

⁸⁷ A good example of this kind of work is David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman, eds., *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in our Pluralistic World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).

⁸⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 214.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 216f.; compare John H. Yoder, “Karl Barth, Post-Christendom Theologian” (paper presented at the meeting of the North American Karl Barth Society, 8 June 1995), <http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoderjohn/documents/KARLBARTH.pdf> (accessed May 28 2008).

Christians 'do' but is at the heart of understanding how that to which Christians witness is true."⁹¹ Earlier than Barth, the Believers Church had challenged "the accommodation of Christian theology to the presumed conditions of truthful speech set by the world."⁹² In post-Christendom North America and Europe, however, they now share their strategic space on the margins of society with many others who were, until recently, "mainline" or "territorial" churches and who have now embraced a missional understanding of the church. Here, I believe, we will benefit deeply from the resources and gifts that each brings, and as we learn together what it means to be the faithful church of Jesus Christ in our context. The Believers Church will continue to have a distinctive (but not exclusive) witness because of the experience of creating voluntarist communities of faith and witness without which the trinitarian theological framework or grammar will remain unintelligible.

⁹¹ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 217.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 216.