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The God Who Sends is The God Who Loves: *Mission as Participating in the Ecstatic Love of the Triune God*

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I. Introduction

The God who sends is the God who loves. If we are called to participate in the mission of God then we are called also, and more fundamentally, to participate in the Love of God. David Bosch writes, “Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is a mission because God loves people.”¹ Similarly, Gordon Fee writes, “The *love of God* is the foundation of Paul’s view of salvation (Rom 5:1-11; 8:31-39; Eph 1:3-14). The *grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* is what gave concrete expression to that love.”² And again, in more detail,

Thus for Paul, human redemption is the combined activity of Father, Son, and Spirit, in that (1) it is predicated on the love of God, whose love sets it in motion; (2) it is effected histor-

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¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 402. Quoted in Jason S. Sexton, “A Confessing Trinitarian Theology for Today’s Mission,” in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 182.

² Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 592.

ically through the death and resurrection of Christ the Son; and (3) it is actualized in the life of believers through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is expressed in any number of ways in Paul, of which Rom 5:5, 8 offers a typical example. The love of God that found expression historically in Christ's dying for us (v. 8) is what the Holy Spirit has poured out in our hearts (v. 5).³

Bosch and Fee clearly ground the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) in the *caritas Dei* (the love of God), which in my view is the proper order. This proper ordering, however, has not always been carefully followed in contemporary discussions about the mission of God. In recent years, many have attempted to recover an emphasis on missiology by articulating its significance for theology and ecclesiology. For example, the missional literature describes God as a missional or sending God. Just as the Father sent the Son and the Spirit into the world to accomplish the *missio Dei*, so now God sends the church into the world as "God's instrument for God's mission."⁴ While this renewed emphasis on mission is welcome and helpful, it sometimes has the tendency to promote a pragmatic and functional approach to church. The term 'missional' has become something of a buzz word in recent years, though its meaning in popular usage is frequently vague and its history not well understood.⁵ For example, 'missional' is often confused with emerging/emergent church, evangelistic or seeker-sensitive approaches to church, the church growth movement, a form of consumer ecclesiology, the practice of formulating organizational mission statements, an unbalanced focus on social justice (doing good works in the world is emphasized over gathering to worship), or simply a general, more strenuous emphasis

³ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 589.

⁴ Darrell L. Guder, "Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent," in Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 8.

⁵ See Todd J. Billings, "What Makes a Church Missional? Freedom From Cultural Captivity Does Not Mean Freedom From Tradition," *Christianity Today* 52, no. 3 (Mar. 2008), 56-59; and Alan Hirsch, "Defining Missional: The Word Is Every where, But Where Did It Come From And What Does It Really Mean?," *Leadership* 29, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 20-22.

on missions or outreach programs. Ironically, missional ecclesiology arose, in part, as a critique of such church models and trends. However, sometimes its own advocates have contributed to these misunderstandings.

Three brief examples illustrate this tendency. First, Michael Frost argues that *cause creates community*: “We build community incidentally, when our imaginations and energies are captured by a higher, even nobler cause . . . Christian community results from the greater cause of Christian mission.”⁶ Frost’s intention here is a good one, namely to call the church out of an insular and sentimental Christian subculture mentality. However, his proposal that *cause creates community* potentially reduces the church to a project, a means to a functional end. More seriously it grounds the mission of the church in something other than its intrinsic relational and participatory ontology and *telos*.

Second, Darrell Guder promotes “the preeminence of witness as the fundamental definition of the church,” regarding witness as “an all-encompassing definition of Christian existence” and hence subordinating all other functions of the church to witness (including proclamation, community, and service/ministry).⁷ Elsewhere, reacting to what he perceives to be Evangelicalism’s overemphasis on personal conversion (over-against corporate election for mission), Guder says that “The biblical record places no emphasis on the special significance of conversion stories.”⁸ In fact, “One does not

⁶ Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 108. See also Guder, *Missional Church*, 4-6, 8, 19, 227; and Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church’s Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 44.

⁷ Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 109, 233, 49.

⁸ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 129. Given the context of Guder’s statements, it should be noted that his intention is to overcome a false mission-benefit dichotomy, which he sees in traditional soteriology and ecclesiology. According to Guder, traditional Christian thought (i.e., since Constantine) has focused almost exclusively upon the individual believer’s salvation benefits. In contrast to this, Guder wishes to give voice to the missional elements of salvation by defining Christian existence according to the concept of witness. However, rather than transcending the mission-benefit dichotomy, I fear that he succeeds only in shifting the emphasis *from* the benefits of salvation *to* missionary service. Perhaps he actually intensifies the dichotomy by downplaying

find a concern for ‘the establishment of their personal well-being in their relationship with God’ in the stories of the call of Abraham, Moses, the prophets, the disciples or Paul. The issue in these encounters is not ‘the saving of their souls’ or ‘their experience of grace and salvation.’”⁹ While Guder’s critique of individualistic soteriology has some merit, his correction here is an over-correction.

Third, several missional writers argue that while traditional theologies of church and mission proceed from Christology to ecclesiology to mission, missional theology must proceed from Christology to missiology to ecclesiology.¹⁰ As Alan Hirsch articulates it, “Christology determines missiology, and missiology determines ecclesiology.”¹¹ Ben Wheatley explains, “Missiology needs to precede ecclesi-

benefits in favour of mission, as, for example, when he contends that the vocation of Christians to serve includes “their personal blessing, experience, and endowment as something secondary and accessory,” which “remains bound to the primary and essential element of their status,” i.e., Christ’s commission. Similarly, in equating Christian existence with the missional function or task, he gives precedence to doing over being: “Christian existence is ‘existence in the execution of this [missional] task.’” See Guder, *Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 130.

⁹ Guder, *Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 129. Guder tends to erect false dichotomies when making his claims. For example: “We must conclude that the church as an ‘institute of salvation’ (Heilsanstalt) has had a greatly diminished sense of mission to the world. It has been far more *preoccupied with its inner life*, thereby failing to grasp the essential linkage between its internal life and its external calling. Rather than understanding worship as God’s divine preparation for sending, it has tended to *make worship an end in itself*. Rather than understanding preaching as the exposition of God’s Word to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11ff), it has become the *impartment of clerical wisdom to help the saints prepare for heaven while coping with this ‘vale of tears’*. In fact, where the *concern for individual salvation grew and the focus upon missional calling decreased in the early medieval church, preaching lost its importance and the sacraments as holy, reified rites became central.*” (Guder, *Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 135; italics and bold mine to indicate the two sides of the false dichotomy)

¹⁰ My own view is that ecclesiology flows from a dialogical and holistic (even systematic) interaction between theological anthropology, soteriology, and missiology, each of which is grounded ultimately in a relational and participatory trinitarian theological framework. This is the approach that I pursue in my book, *Being Human, Being Church: The Significance of Theological Anthropology for Ecclesiology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016).

¹¹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 142. See also the discussion of this topic in relation to bounded and centered sets in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of*

ology because if ecclesiology precedes missiology, mission becomes just a subset of the church.”¹² Or, as Graham Cray puts it, “Start with the Church and the mission will probably get lost. Start with mission and it is likely that the Church will be found.”¹³ Such missional thinkers prefer to think about the church as a manifestation or outcome of God’s mission. This is a partially helpful move; a good biblical and theological case can be made that missiology is not simply a derivative of ecclesiology or a program of the church but is grounded more deeply in God’s own mission to save the world through Israel’s messiah.¹⁴ However, this move does not go far enough to ground the *missio Dei* itself ontologically in the nature of the triune God as ecstatic Love. Hence, it potentially falls into reducing the church to a means to a functional end.¹⁵

To avoid these problems, it is important to envision missional ecclesiology as flowing out of a participatory and relational trinitarian theology, in which God’s redemptive mission is grounded more fundamentally in God’s nature as love. God’s mission to redeem the world flows from God’s prior love for human beings and creation. God’s love for human beings and creation is rooted, in turn, in the other-centered, ecstatic, perichoretic love that constitutes God’s triune being and reflects the fullness and overflowing quality of

Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 255; cf. Frost, *Exiles*, 155.

¹² Cited by David Fitch (quoting Ben Wheatley), “Missiology Precedes Ecclesiology: The Epistemological Problem,” blog post (January 8, 2009); online: <http://www.missioalliance.org/missiology-precedes-ecclesiology-the-epistemological-problem/>

¹³ Graham Cray, ed., *The Mission Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (Brookvale: Willow, 2005), 116. Quoted in Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 143.

¹⁴ See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006).

¹⁵ To be fair, in talking about ‘ecclesiology,’ Hirsch seems to mean not the ontology of the church but its functional expression and structures: “By my reading of the scriptures, ecclesiology is the most fluid of the doctrines. The church is a dynamic cultural expression of the people of God in any given place. Worship style, social dynamics, liturgical expressions must result from the process of contextualizing the gospel in any given culture. *Church must follow mission.*” (Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 143.) Similarly, Frost writes, “Too many churches begin by trying to artificially develop an ecclesiology, determining first where to meet, what songs to sing, what to preach, how to have small groups and leadership structures” (Frost, *Exiles*, 155).

the divine life. In what follows I will outline and commend such a theology. The aim is not to reject or displace missional theology, but to ground it more deeply in a participatory and relational trinitarian theological framework.

II. A Participatory and Relational Trinitarian Theological Framework

1. *The Augustinian Mutual Love Tradition*

The New Testament declares that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). In attesting to this, Augustine believes that Scripture speaks of love not merely as an aspect of God's character or a description of how God normally acts (though both of these statements are true); more fundamentally, love defines God's *essential* nature. Now if love is God's essential nature then it must be true that love has always characterized God, even before the creation of human beings or other (heavenly) creatures. If love is essential to God's nature, then love is constitutive of the divine life itself and God is eternally a loving Being. As an essentially loving Being, God exists not as an isolated individual deity but in the eternal communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, the One God exists as three subsisting persons; and, as three divine persons-in-relation, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit subsist eternally as the One God.

The insight that God is love led Augustine to formulate his mutual love model of the Trinity. According to Augustine's mutual love model, the Father eternally generates the Son (without beginning or end) and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and subsists as their mutual love.¹⁶ Augustine begins his discussion with

¹⁶ Identifying the Spirit as the bond of Love shared between the Father and the Son is not unique to Augustine or even to the Western tradition. For example, we find this connection in Athenagoras of Athens, Athanasius (who says that the Spirit constitutes the union between Father and Son), Basil (the Spirit is the communion of the Father and Son, the bond of their union), Gregory of Nazianzus (the Spirit is the intermediate between Father and Son), and Epiphanius (the Spirit is in the midst of the Father and Son as the Bond of the Trinity). See Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 167. Augustine himself presents this teaching as having been passed down to him from his theological predecessors. On this point, see Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 88.

a reflection on the nature of love as depicted in 1 John 4:16: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” He discovers that love implies a Trinity of relationships and can serve as something of an analogy for the Triune God: “There you are with three, the lover, what is being loved, and love. And what is love but a kind of life coupling or trying to couple together two things, namely lover and what is being loved?”¹⁷ This analogy does not espouse tritheism, as if there are three gods loving each other, but rather illustrates that God is love and as such exists in complexity and differentiation. In contrast, human beings image God in this manner only in a partial sense, for, as Augustine says, “it is not the case that anyone who loves himself is love except when *love loves itself*.”¹⁸ For the human individual, love is not its own (hypostasizing) subject, but only gains transcendence in the encounter with another human person. However, Augustine implies that there is a kind of inter-subjectivity within God, because in God (and in God alone) “love loves itself.”¹⁹ Love takes on such an all-encompassing reality as to be a transcendent Subject.²⁰ For Augustine and the Augustin-

¹⁷ Augustine, *The Trinity*: VIII/5.14 (255). We must be somewhat careful with the word ‘analogy,’ especially if we are tempted to think that Augustine is trying to *explain* the mystery of the triune life. His ‘analogy’ does not simply proceed from something created to something divine, but employs a theological pattern (discerned from Scripture) already and necessarily operating in the created order itself (perhaps we might say that Augustine employs analogy in a kind of sacramental, rather than merely illustrative/symbolic, deductive, or inductive, way). As Lewis Ayres writes, “Moving from the created analogue towards the Trinity is done well, then, when it is recognized as, and performed as, a move towards that which defeats the exercised mind. The advance towards understanding is one that is only appropriately founded in humility before the divine mystery.” And, “The description of a triad in the act of love . . . is based on the assumption that love is necessarily triune *because* love is God. The description is part analogy, part invitation to use the language of faith to explore that which one *thinks* one understands.” Thus, “Augustine’s account is not an analogy between a structure of loving in the created order and the loving that constitutes the Trinitarian life, but a description of the manner in which we love in and because of the Spirit’s presence. It is a description of a structure of loving in the created order, founded in the divine love that will also illustrate the nature of the Trinitarian love *per se*.” See Ayres, *Augustine*, 141, 283, 284.

¹⁸ Augustine, *The Trinity* IV/1.2 (272). Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Augustine, *The Trinity*: IV/1.2 (272).

²⁰ Not to be confused with what we find in the creaturely realm, i.e., the human person as an autonomous individual. Rather, the Spirit’s ‘subjectivity’ has to do with agency, as the Spirit works inseparably together with Father and Son. Lewis Ayres is

ian mutual love tradition, the Holy Spirit is Love personified.²¹ For Christians, Love in its deepest sense is not simply an emotion or a sentiment; rather, Love is the divine Spirit who indwells us, awakens love within us, and draws us into loving communion with God and others.

To depict simultaneously the essential unity of God and the interrelatedness of Father, Son, and Spirit, the Greek fathers of the early church employed the concept of *perichoresis*. This term was first used by Gregory of Naziansus to express the way in which the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ co-inherited without the integrity of either being diminished. In subsequent trinitarian theol-

helpful here: “The Spirit is the communion of Father and Son which . . . is a mutual act of adherence and love; the Spirit is the love and fount of love between Father and Son who eternally gives himself; the Spirit, as also ‘God from God,’ shares in the simple mode of divine existence in which he is what he might be thought to possess. Thus, . . . Augustine presents the Spirit as the agent identical to the act of communion between Father and Son” (Ayes, *Augustine*, 258).

²¹ Augustine’s process of thinking this through is complex, involving several important mutually dependent affirmations, and thus difficult to capture in a brief summary. First, given the classical tradition’s emphasis on divine simplicity, implying that God IS as God acts, for God *to be* is the same as *to be wise*, *to be loving*, *to be just*, and so forth (whereas for creatures being is not necessarily identical with the predicates attached to it). As Ayres explains it, “Lacking any accidents [in the Aristotelians sense], God must be any qualities we predicate of God” (Ayes, *Augustine*, 216). Second, as a consequence, God’s act of love must be identical with God’s being Love. Thus, the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, IS Love (since, for God to be is to be loving, to be Love). Third, the love that comes to us from God is God’s very self, God from God, Love from Love, and thus one of the divine persons, either the Son or the Spirit (because both are sent, while the Father is not sent). Fourth, Augustine identifies this divine person as being the Spirit, because the Spirit is the one that God sends to indwell us as Gift (John 15:26; Rom. 8:9) and as God’s own Love (e.g., Rom. 5:5: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us”). Fifth, to say that the Spirit is Love is not to imply that the Spirit is impersonal or passive; rather, the Spirit is the active presence and activity of God, who loves us and draws us to participate in that love and thus into communion with God and others (e.g., Gal. 4:6: “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”). Finally, it is helpful to note that this movement of God’s Love follows from the doctrines of the unity of inseparable divine operations and the pattern of divine appropriation in Scripture, such that the manifestation of God’s being and acting as Love in the created order follows the eternal, internal processions within God: thus, God’s Love comes to us *from* the Father *through* the Son and *in* the Spirit. For a detailed and nuanced discussion of Augustine’s theological exposition of the Spirit as Love, see Ayres, *Augustine*, chapter 10.

ogy, *perichoresis* came to depict the mutual indwelling, co-inhering, or inter-penetrating of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²² As Catherine Mowry LaCugna explains it, *perichoresis* illustrates that the three persons “mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, ‘are’ what they are by relation to one another.”²³ According to T. F. Torrance, this move had deep and far reaching implications not only for the Christian understanding of God but also for the Christian understanding of the human person, with ripple effects influencing the development of conceptions of personhood. This new understanding of personhood distinguished Christian thinking from classical Greek ontology in which being (*ousia*) had been conceived as something static and unchanging, as for example in Aristotle’s distinction between substances and accidents and his restriction of relation to the latter category. Conversely, by admitting the category of relation into the concept of being the Cappadocians reconceived being itself (*ousia*) in dynamic and relational terms. In the new Christian understanding, “With God, Being and Communion are one and the same” and being could now be conceived as being-in-relation.²⁴

The New Testament speaks of Christians experiencing the *koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit, a word which is often translated ‘fellowship’ but also includes the idea of partnership or participation.²⁵ To experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is not just to commune with the Spirit; it is actually to participate in the Spirit and thereby to experience communion with God and each other. The same Spirit who proceeds as the mutual love between the Father and the Son, thus completing or perfecting the ecstatic and perichoretic relational unity of the Trinity, also unites Christian brothers and sisters together by drawing them to share in the divine Love, and thereby to partic-

²² On the historical development of *perichoresis*, see James. D. Gifford, Jr., *Perichoretic Salvation: The Believer’s Union with Christ as a Third Type of Perichoresis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015; Kindle edition), chapter 3.

²³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper SanFrancisco, 1993).

²⁴ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 104.

²⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 290. For this theme in Paul, see Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 30-31.

ipate in God's own trinitarian life. In the economy of salvation the Spirit's mission corresponds with the latter's manner of procession (as Love and Gift) in the immanent Godhead;²⁶ so, the Spirit as the bond of love, brings believers into union with Christ (and thus the Father) and with one another.

By participating in the Spirit, Christians share together in the trinitarian love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Stan Grenz puts it, "Through the Spirit, we participate in the love that lies at the heart of the triune God himself."²⁷ Or as James Torrance exclaims, "By sharing in Jesus' life of communion with the Father in the Spirit, we are given to participate in the Son's eternal communion with the Father and hence in the trinitarian life of God."²⁸ Through their sharing and participating together in the love of the Trinity, Christian brothers and sisters have unity in the Spirit and the church community begins to reflect the communion of the triune God.²⁹ This is why the church cannot simply be a means to an end, simply an instrument deployed functionally to achieve God's mission. With Bonhoeffer (and against some missional writers), we must affirm that the church is both means and end; it exists simultaneously for the sake of its

²⁶ As John Webster states, it is important to remember that, "as with all God's external works, the economic mission of the Spirit refers back to the Spirit's antecedent deity and personhood, in which the mission has its ground. Missions follow processions; the character of the work is determined by the nature of the one who works." John Webster, "Illumination," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011): 329. For Augustine's affirmation of and dependence on this notion, see Ayres, *Augustine*, 181, 183.

²⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 484.

²⁸ James B. Torrance, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in Our Contemporary Situation," in *The Forgotten Trinity*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (London: BCC/CCBI Inter-Church House, 1989), 7. Quoted in Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 325.

²⁹ Reflecting on Acts 4:32 ("They had one soul and one heart toward the Lord"), Augustine writes: "[if] many souls through love are one soul, and many hearts are one heart, what does the very fountain of love do in the Father and the Son? . . . If, therefore, 'the love of God [which] has been poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' [Rom. 5:5] makes many souls one soul and many hearts one heart, how much more does [the Spirit] make the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit one God, one light, one *principium*?" (Tractate 39.5; quoted in Ayres, *Augustine*, 257).

own community and for the sake of the world.³⁰ It exists for its own sake (as an end) because God's missional intention is to establish a new creation, a community of love and new life, in which people live in restored communion with God and one another.³¹ Yet, the church also exists for the world instrumentally (as a means), as the "church for others" because its Lord Jesus Christ, the "man for others," is conforming it to his image, which includes being-free-for-others and for the world.³² The church exists to experience and share the reconciliation and intimate communion that the gospel makes possible; everything it is and does bears witness to this.

In a sense, the church community images the Trinity and God's own trinitarian life informs human relationships in the church. Being bound together in the Spirit, we have become united in a way that is analogous (not identical) to the unity of Father and Son. As Jesus prayed to the Father, "My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father—that just as you are *in* me and I am *in* you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me" (John 17:21; emphasis added).³³ It is important for us to notice the "in" references in John as pointing to the mutual indwelling of the trinitarian persons. The Holy Spirit, who will be "in" Jesus' disciples, will place them "in Christ," who is "in" the Father.³⁴ Reflecting on this passage, Andreas Köstenberger and Scott Swain write,

The model for this unity is found in the Father and the Son, specifically, their mutual indwelling or perichoresis (17:21, 23, 26). Just as the unity of the Father and the Son is mani-

³⁰ See my discussion of this in my article "Bonhoeffer's Missional Ecclesiology," *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 9 (2007-2008), 118-25.

³¹ Köstenberger and Swain write, "Communion in the Son's eternal life of love, glory and giving with the Father in the Spirit constitutes the ultimate blessing of the gospel." Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 178.

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 501, 503.

³³ For a detailed exposition of the theme of participation in Paul, see Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 21-49.

³⁴ On the 'in' language in Paul, see Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 29.

fest in their mutual indwelling (14:10-11), so Jesus asks that the unity of the apostolic community will be manifest as they come to experience the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son (cf. 14:17, 23). The effect of this new perichoretic communion will be that the world will ‘know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me’ (17:23).³⁵

The church does not reflect the image of the Trinity simply because it is a community that tries to imitate the triune relationships.³⁶ It reflects the image of the Trinity because it is comprised of individual human beings (exocentric persons-in-relation) whom the Spirit of God indwells and thereby frees to love and serve God and others genuinely.³⁷ Just as God created individual human beings in the divine image to be other-centred and to find their fulfilment in relationship with God and other human beings, so now God redeems and transforms human beings to cultivate relational fulfilment with God and others in the church community (though complete fulfilment awaits eschatological consummation).

One implication of the foregoing discussion of Christian life as participating together in the life of the Trinity is that Christian soteriology must be conceived relationally rather than merely indi-

³⁵ Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit*, 176. Ladd writes, “The idiom of abiding is usually called mysticism, but it is difficult to define. There is a mutual abiding of the believer in Christ (16:56; 14:20, 21; 15:5; 17:21) and Christ in the believer (6:56; 14:20, 23; 15:5; 17:23, 26). This is analogous to the Son abiding in the Father (10:38; 14:10, 11, 20, 21; 17:21) and the Father abiding in the Son (10:38; 14:10, 11, 21; 17:21, 23). Once it is said that believers are in both the Father and the Son (17:21); and once it is said that both Father and Son will come to make their abode in believers (14:23).” George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 313-14. Quoted in Gifford, *Perichoretic Salvation*, Kindle loc. 1342.

³⁶ What I am proposing is not ‘social’ trinitarianism *per se* (at least as usually understood), but a relational ontology of human personhood informed by trinitarian theology, which proceeds not simply from Trinity to human community but from Trinity through theological anthropology and soteriology to ecclesial community.

³⁷ I am drawing here on Wolfhart Pannenberg’s notion of exocentricity discussed in his *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

vidualistically.³⁸ Being in the church is thus intrinsically related to the believer's salvation; it is not just a secondary application—not because the church is an institutional dispenser of salvation but because it is the community in which reconciliation is embodied and transformation takes place. It is the place in which redeemed human persons practice and live out concretely their restored relationships with God and others. The church is the phenomenological manifestation of what God has achieved ontologically. As Bonhoeffer argues, Christian communion is not a human ideal that we strive to achieve; it is a divine reality established by Christ in which we participate by the Spirit.³⁹

2. *Basil and Other Patristic Writers on Participation*

In a recent book on ecclesiology, Robert Sherman writes, “It is the Holy Spirit who acts as the effective agent of the Father in communicating Christ’s benefits to us, *and* it is the Holy Spirit who acts as the effective agent in us to enable and strengthen our grateful human response.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Leslie Newbiggin once wrote, “The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. His work is to enable us to participate in Christ’s Sonship, to be one with him in his obedience to the Father. And only he can enable us to participate in, and thereby be the occasions of, his witness.”⁴¹ New Testament scholar Gordon Fee explains,

The participation in the *Holy Spirit* continually actualizes

³⁸ Robert Sherman writes, “The Triune God does not save by plucking individuals up to heaven or by us establishing a particular social agenda or political regime following Jesus’s example. Rather, salvation is the fruit of God’s embedding persons in a community called and sanctified (which is to say, set apart) by the Holy Spirit to be a witness to God’s own fulfillment of creation’s ultimate goal in the work of Jesus Christ.” Robert Sherman, *Covenant, Community, and the Spirit: A Trinitarian Theology of Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 41.

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, vol. 5 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burness, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 35-38.

⁴⁰ Sherman, *Covenant, Community, and the Spirit*, 57.

⁴¹ Leslie Newbiggin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 50. Quoted in Sexton, “A Confessing Trinitarian Theology,” 183.

that love and grace in the life of the believer and the believing community. The *κοινωνία* (*fellowship/participation in*) of the Holy Spirit is how the living God not only brings people into an intimate and abiding relationship with himself, as the God of all grace, but also causes them to participate in all the benefits of that grace and salvation—that is, by indwelling them in the present with his own presence and guaranteeing their final eschatological glory.⁴²

These statements represent well the patristic doctrine of participation.⁴³ In this final section, I will draw on patristic sources, especially Basil's *De Spiritu Sancto*, to elucidate what it means to participate in the missional activity of the triune God.⁴⁴

In *De Spiritu Sancto*, Basil reflects theologically on two doxological statements that were being used in the church: (1) the doxology to God the Father *with* the Son *together with* the Holy Spirit; and (2) the doxology to God the Father *through* the Son *in* the Holy Spirit. Basil seeks to defend the first statement against his interlocutors, who took issue with the term “with” but not with terms “through” and “in” used in the second statement.⁴⁵ Basil finds problematic both their rejection of the first statement and their reasons for affirming the second. They reject the first statement due to their tritheistic and subordinationist leanings (since “with” implies unity and equality of the Spirit with the Father and Son, which they rejected) and therefore they affirm the second statement but in a way that rejects the orthodox position. As Basil explains,

⁴² Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 592.

⁴³ E.g., “[T]he Son himself partakes of no one and that which is partaken from the Father is the Son. We partaking of the Son himself are said to partake of God. This is what Peter said: ‘That you might become partners of a divine nature’ [2 Pet. 1:4].” Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, Book 1.16; Quoted from *The Trinitarian Controversy*, trans., ed. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 79.

⁴⁴ As a guide to my reading of the primary text from Basil (*De Spiritu Sancto*; NPNF2-08: *Basil: Letters and Selected Works*) I have learned much from Dennis Ngien, *Gifted Response: The Triune God as the Causative Agent of our Responsive Worship* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 1-34.

⁴⁵ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* II.4 (NPNF2-08, p. 4).

By the term ‘of whom’ they wish to designate the Creator; by the term ‘through whom,’ the subordinate agent or instrument; by the term ‘in whom,’ or ‘in which,’ they mean to shew the time of place. The object of all this is that the Creator of the universe [the Son] may be regarded as of no higher dignity than an instrument, and that the Holy Spirit may appear to be adding to existing things nothing more than the contribution derived from place or time.⁴⁶

Basil sets out to defend the legitimacy of both statements and to clarify their true meaning in light of Scripture and the orthodox tradition. Against his opponents’ interpretation of the second statement, Basil shows that the prepositions ‘of,’ ‘through,’ and ‘in’ are each applied to all three persons of the Trinity in the Bible: ‘through’ and ‘in’ are applied to the Father, ‘of’ and ‘in’ are applied to the Son, and ‘of’ and ‘through’ are applied to the Spirit.⁴⁷ While the meanings associated with these prepositions in the second statement are in one important sense distinct, they emphatically do not refer to ontological separation of or subordination within the Trinity. This is because this statement refers not to the immanent divine essence but to the economic activity of God *ad extra* in drawing that which is not God to participate in God’s creative, redemptive, and perfecting activity.⁴⁸ Basil explains,

I say that the Church recognizes both uses, and deprecates neither as subversive of the other. For whenever we are contemplating the majesty of the nature of the Only Begotten, and the excellence of His dignity, we bear witness that the glory is *with* the Father; while on the other hand, whenever we bethink us of His bestowal on us of good gifts, and of our access to, and admission into, the household of God, we

⁴⁶ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* I.3 (NPNF2-08, p. 3).

⁴⁷ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* III.5; I.IV.6; I.V.7-12 (NPNF2-08, p. 4-8).

⁴⁸ The theological formula *opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt* (“the external works of the Trinity are undivided”) expresses a theme that is common to the patristic writers and has its roots in the writings of Athanasius (Sherman, *Covenant, Community, and the Spirit*, 41 fn. 4).

confess that this grace is effected for us through Him and by Him.⁴⁹

For Basil, both statements are valid; indeed, both are necessary to safeguard the unity of the economic trinity and the differentiation of the divine persons. As Dennis Ngien explains, the second statement (which includes ‘through’ and ‘in’) “admits of the way the Triune God deals with us in the economy of salvation,” while the first statement (‘with’) “admits of the immanent unity and close communion of the members of the Trinity.”⁵⁰ The second statement makes possible theological expressions of appropriation (e.g., the three articles of the Creed following Father, Son, and Spirit) while the first statement reminds us both of the oneness and equality of the Godhead and of the unity of the divine operations or activity *ad extra* (i.e., each of God’s acts is one act with a threefold pattern, where external missions follow internal processions). Thus, when used doxologically, Basil argues that “the one phrase ‘with whom’ is the proper one to be used in the ascription of glory, while the other, ‘through whom,’ is specially [sic] appropriate in giving thanks.”⁵¹ Basil’s analysis of the economic significance of the prepositions ‘of,’ ‘through,’ and ‘in’ fits the pattern we find in New Testament texts such as Titus 3:54b-6, “He [God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal *by* the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously *through* Jesus Christ our Savior,” and Ephesians 2:18, “*Through* [Christ], we both alike have access *to* the Father *in* the one Spirit” (emphasis added; notice that both of these statements concern God’s economic activity *ad extra*, either toward us or in drawing us to participate in the double movement of divine grace). Basil’s analysis is also consistent with common patristic formulations.⁵² Consider the following:

⁴⁹ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* VII.16 (NPNF2-08, p. 10).

⁵⁰ Ngien, *Gifted Response*, 2.

⁵¹ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* VII.16 (NPNF2-08, p. 10).

⁵² As Lewis Ayres reports, “pro-Nicene accounts of inseparable operation frequently move beyond asserting merely that each of the divine three is involved in every act, by emphasizing the Father works through the Son and in the Spirit. Such assertions both emphasize the fact of Trinitarian order, and they begin to specify how we may conceive of the three as being unified” (Ayres, *Augustine*, 70).

Irenaeus: One God, the Father, who is over all and through all and in us all. For over all is the Father; and through all is the Son, for by means of Him all things were made by the Father; and in us all is the Spirit, who cries Abba Father, and fashions man into the likeness of God.⁵³

Irenaeus: And for this reason the baptism of our regeneration proceeds through these three points: God the Father bestowing on us regeneration through His Son by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁴

Gregory of Nyssa: But in the case of the Divine nature we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵

Ambrose: And of the Father, too, you may rightly say “of Him,” for of Him was the operative Wisdom [the Son], Which of His own and the Father’s will gave being to all things which were not. “Through Him [the Son],” because all things were made through His Wisdom. “In Him [the Spirit],” because He is the Fount of substantial Life, in Whom we live and move and have our being.⁵⁶

Augustine: Not that the Father should be understood to have made one part of the whole creation and the Son another and the Holy Spirit yet another, but that each and every nature has been made simultaneously by the Father through the

⁵³ Irenaeus, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 5, trans., ed. Armistage Robinson (New York: MacMillan: 1920), 74.

⁵⁴ Irenaeus, *Demonstration*, 75.

⁵⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter to Ablabius: On Not Three Gods* (NPNF2-05, p. 334).

⁵⁶ Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit* II.IX.92 (NPNF2-10, p. 126).

Son, in the Gift of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷

Having clarified the meaning of the second statement, including its proper relation to the first statement, we can now explore its implications for a theology of participation. For example, reflecting on the significance of Basil's thought for Christian worship, Dennis Ngien writes, "The saving import of the Spirit's deity lies in this: the Spirit places us in Christ so that our worship, as a participation in the Son's communion with the Father, is found pleasing. The believer, 'the place of the Spirit,' is enabled to offer doxology to God." In light of this, "The Church's worship is truly ours insofar as it participates in the Spirit's unitive movement through the only begotten to the Father."⁵⁸ As Basil asserts, "it is impossible to worship the Son, save by the Holy Ghost; impossible to call upon the Father, save by the Spirit of adoption."⁵⁹ Similarly, Nazianzus says, "[I]t is the Spirit in whom we worship and through whom we pray . . . Worshipping, then, and praying in the Spirit seem to me to be simply the Spirit presenting prayer and worship to himself."⁶⁰

Thus, as James Torrance argues, a thoroughly trinitarian theology of worship recognizes a "double movement of grace": first, "a God-humanward movement, from (*ek*) the Father, through (*dia*) the Son, in (*en*) the Spirit," and second, "a human Godward movement to the Father, through the Son in the Spirit."⁶¹ It is important to note that both of these movements occur within God; in the second movement we are not entirely passive but neither are we entirely active and we certainly do not initiate the human-Godward movement. Rather, by the Spirit we are placed "in" the Son so that we can participate in his efficacious offering. As Ngien points out, all of this depends upon God's triune soteriological activity achieved in time in

⁵⁷ Augustine, *De Vera Religione* 7.13 (*Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina 32.196; quoted in Ayres, *Augustine*, 62).

⁵⁸ Ngien, *Gifted Response*, 2.

⁵⁹ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* XI.27 (NPNF2-08, p. 18).

⁶⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations* 5.31.12, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 125-26

⁶¹ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 32.

the economy of salvation: “The divine descent presupposes the sending of the Son; the human ascent presupposes the homecoming of the Son to glory, but with our humanity eternally attached. The Spirit is the power of efficacy of both movements in us.”⁶² Thus, worship is the gift of participating by the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father.⁶³ In fact, all of Christian being and doing must be understood theologically as participating in the triune God. For example, patristic writers speak in participatory terms about human knowledge of God, holiness, and spirituality. Consider the following representative quotations:

Basil: Thus the way of the knowledge of God lies from One Spirit through the One Son to the One Father, and conversely the natural Goodness and the inherent Holiness and the royal Dignity extend from the Father through the Only-begotten to the Spirit.⁶⁴

Origen: As now by participation in the Son of God one is adopted as a son, and by participating in that wisdom which is in God is rendered wise, so also by participation in the Holy Spirit is a man rendered holy and spiritual. For it is one and the same thing to have a share in the Holy Spirit, which is (the Spirit) of the Father and the Son, since the nature of the Trinity is one and incorporeal.⁶⁵

Basil: Shining upon those that are cleansed from every spot, [the Spirit] makes them spiritual by fellowship with Himself. Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a fresh brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritu-

⁶² Ngien, *Gifted Response*, 31.

⁶³ This is a slightly modified version of James Torrance’s definition of worship (Torrance, *Worship. Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 30).

⁶⁴ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* XVIII.47 (NPNF2-08, p. 29).

⁶⁵ Origen, *On First Principles* IV.32 (ANF04, p. 379).

al, and send forth their grace to others.⁶⁶

With respect to participating in God's mission, I suggest that mission is the gift of participating by the Spirit in the Son's missionary activity of establishing the Kingdom of God the Father. Our mission is, first and foremost, God's mission; it is the *missio Dei*. Our mission is a participation in God's mission, made possible through our union with Christ in the Spirit. We minister and do mission in Christ by the Spirit; Christ is the true Minister and Missionary. All that we proclaim to the world and demonstrate with our lives as a living hermeneutic of the gospel comes *from* God the Father *through* the priestly and salvific mediation of Christ the Son *in* and *by* the new-creation power, illuminating guidance, and personal, fruit-bestowing presence of the Holy Spirit. Correspondingly, all that we offer and accomplish as we participate in God's mission (that is, all that *genuinely* participates in God's missional activity) we do *in* and *by* the Spirit through the sole priesthood of Christ (in which we participate as his kingdom of priests, purchased by his blood; Rev. 5:9-10) to the glory and honour of the Father, in obedience to "the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ" (Eph. 1:9).

III. Summary and Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the mission of God is properly grounded in the ecstatic, loving being and act of the Trinity. The argument can be summarized in four steps. First, God's mission to the world is rooted in God's love for the world. This idea is supported in scripture and in tradition, though it is not always explicit in the contemporary missional literature. Second, God's love for the world is itself rooted in God's own essential nature as Love. Third, through God's mission, we are lovingly drawn into union with Christ and one another by the Spirit, who is the very Love and Gift of God. Finally, by virtue of our union with Christ, we participate in God's mission. This involves a threefold economic pattern of human participation in

⁶⁶ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* IX.23 (NPNF2-08, p. 15).

divine activity, a double movement of grace that takes place in Christ by the Spirit. The God-humanward movement proceeds from the Father through the Son in/by the Spirit, while the human-Godward movement takes place in/by the Spirit through the Son to the Father.

While I do not have the space to develop the many practical implications this theological framework has for the church, some of these include: (a) the importance of spiritual discernment (and spiritual direction) for pastoral ministry, church leadership, and missional engagement; (b) the importance of the church's immersion in the biblical narrative, indwelling the text so as to embody its patterns and see the world through it (as Gorman suggests, the church must 'become' the gospel; *Gorman, Becoming the Gospel*); (c) due attention to discipleship as being/becoming and doing (thus a grace-based, holistic character ethics), since true missional witness calls the church to be and become that which it proclaims and does "in Christ" (e.g., Matt. 5:13-16); (d) a renewal of worship and liturgy shaped by the trinitarian *patterns* outlined in this article (not just dropping the word 'Trinity' here and there, or simply referring to Father, Son, and Spirit; thus the *structure* of our songs, prayers, and sermons must be trinitarian, not just the verbal content), informed by the whole of scripture, and articulated contextually and missionally; (e) a renewed theology of vocation, conceived missionally within a participatory trinitarian framework, so that the *whole people* of God can bear witness of the *whole gospel* to the *whole world*; and (f) a deeper understanding and outworking of a sacramental approach to theology, ecclesiology, and mission, within which the church is seen to be the sacramental presence of God in the world (this, in turn, has implications for how we understand and practice preaching, worship, the sacraments, Christian ministry and service within the church, solidarity with the suffering and marginalized, social action and community engagement, and so forth; in short, we are participating concretely in something God is mysteriously and graciously initiating, sustaining, and completing; e.g., Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13; 3:12; 4:8-9).