

The Trinity and the Mission of Jesus

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In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that he came to “finish the work” the Father had sent him to do. He prays for his disciples that “all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” In John 17 especially, but also in earlier chapters, Jesus ties his mission to what we might call “the mission of the Trinity,” or the mission of God (*missio Dei*). In Jesus’ mind and action, the Trinity and his own mission were closely related.

Trinity and Mission

What does the Triune or Tri-Personal nature of God imply about Jesus’ mission, and about the nature and mission of the church? We are dealing with mystery here, but in essential ways Jesus revealed the mystery.

Since God is Trinity and the church is Christ’s body, the church is called to be a *Trinitarian community*. The most profound biblical affirmation of this is Jesus’ prayer in John 17:

My prayer is not for [these disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21).

The church is the “I in them and you in me” community, the community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinitarian existence of the church grounds the Christian community in Reality, the most fundamental of realities: God as source of life and being, Creator, providential Sustainer, and New-Creation-Bringer.

What does it mean to be a Trinitarian community? Here are five dimensions:

1. *The church is fundamentally a community gathered around Jesus.* It is incarnational—that is, existing on earth in flesh and blood—because of Jesus’ incarnation. Given the reality of the Trinity, the church is essentially social and relational, bound together by mutual love and self-giving interdependence because of Jesus.

Sadly, the church often is not perceived in this way and frequently does not visibly embody this essential truth. But the Bible constantly emphasizes that we are to *live into* and *live out* this reality. As Paul puts it, we are “to live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received” (Eph. 4:1).

The church is fundamentally the community of Jesus’ disciples, a missional community whose life, being, and mission are grounded in the Trinity and thus in the mission of God.

2. *The church is a Trinitarian worshipping community.* The church in its worship, and often most explicitly in its hymns, worships the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In worship the community draws near to God and comes to understand the Father’s creative

love and care for all God has made, the Son's self-giving in becoming a servant for our salvation, and the Spirit's call and push to go into the world "as the Father" has sent the Son (John 5:26, 15:9, 20:21). Thus the Trinity forms the basis of the church's mission as the community responds to the call of the Trinity to participate in the mission of God. Genuine worship impels into mission.

The call to worship God the Trinity reminds us that the church has a mission *to* God as well as a mission *from* God to the world. We give ourselves to God (our mission to God) and he gives himself back to us with an overflow of love that impels us out of ourselves and into mission.

So worship and mission are connected. Mission in Trinitarian perspective is never one-way. In response to God's grace, we carry out our mission to God and thus are "carried" into mission in the world by the Holy Spirit who in fact goes ahead of us. This happens not in a way that overwhelms us and turns us into robots. Rather, the Spirit empowers us to will to do God's will (John 7:17; Phil. 2:13; Gal. 5:23).

The church is Trinitarian. Its worship and its mission are grounded in the Trinity. And in Trinitarian perspective, the church's mission includes its mission to God, to one another, and to the world. It includes in fact the church's mission to the whole of creation, for God is the Lord of, and active in, all creation. The healing of all is part of the mission of God (Rom. 8:19-21).

3. *The Trinitarian community is sent especially to the poor.* Though "being in very nature God," Christ "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:6-7) in carrying out his mission. This is literally a demonstration of the "wisdom of God." For God "chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).

God's special concern for the poor, and Jesus' explicit mission to the poor, are grounded in the Trinity—not in sociology or politics. That is why the theme of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien runs throughout Scripture.

The Trinity is unbounded self-giving love each to the other, always seeking the best for the other and receiving back love in return. Since the church's mission grows out of the overflow of this love, it is a mission to all people and the whole creation.

Amazingly, however, in the Incarnation Jesus Christ becomes the suffering Trinity, and thus the Father and the Spirit have particular compassion for him in his sufferings. This is mirrored in God's concern then for the poor and the oppressed generally and for the "groaning" of creation. Thus this concern is mirrored also in the mission of the church.

God loves everyone, but especially those who suffer. The mutual love of the Trinity impels God, and therefore the church, to incarnate the gospel among the poor. Thus Jesus can say, in words that echo the mystery of the Trinity, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

4. *The church's whole ministry is grounded in the Trinity.* Ministry of all kinds

—“ordained” or “unordained,” paid or unpaid, local or global—is rooted in the Trinitarian mystery. The roots of authentic ministry are found in Spirit-empowered community, not in organizational hierarchy.

The Trinity is the opposite of hierarchy. The church’s ministry, including its leadership, is non-hierarchical. The deep theological grounding of this is the Trinity itself, not some philosophical egalitarianism. The Trinity, and the very nature of the material creation God has made, show us that we should conceive of the church and its ministry in organic, relational terms, not primarily in institutional or hierarchical ones. The church is not so much a rational organization or a religious machine as it is a complex interactive organism.

This is not an argument against institutional or administrative structures. It does however provide some guidance for structuring an organization. The nature of the church is determined by the nature of God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

5. *We are called to live in interdependent community.* The key principle here is, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21)—a statement that distills what Jesus taught and modeled.

All areas of Christian living are to be marked by interdependent community—the family, the church, and our educational institutions. A certain tension exists here. A key test of the authenticity of our discipleship is whether we maintain the functional centrality of this mutual interdependence, or allow it to be compromised by institutional structures and relationships.

The Mission of Jesus

Jesus says a lot about his own mission, especially in the Gospel of John.

The church too often focuses on its own mission before asking: What was Jesus’ mission, and what does that tell us? This is important, since the church’s mission derives from Jesus’ mission and the mission of God.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks over thirty times of being “sent.” He emphasizes that his mission derives from the Father’s mission. He speaks much more of the Father’s agency than of his own—“I am sent” more than “I have come,” for instance—though he does use phrases like “I came” or “I have come” about a dozen times.

What is Jesus’ mission, as reported in the Gospel of John? Combining Jesus’ many statements (but omitting Jesus’ important prayer in John 17) yields this summary:

My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working. The works that the Father has given me to finish testify that the Father has sent me. I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.

Three other very prominent terms in John relating to Jesus’ mission are “will,” “work,” and “works.” A dozen or so times Jesus speaks of the “work” or “works” of God that he

was sent to accomplish, and several times of doing the Father's "will."

Jesus of course says many other things about his mission in the synoptic Gospels. Most importantly, he ties his mission to the kingdom of God—preaching the kingdom, telling his disciples they should seek first God's kingdom, and praying, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is heaven" (Mt. 6:10). Key to fulfilling that goal is making disciples among all nations.

In short, the Father sent Jesus into the world to "finish the work" the Father gave him to do (John 4:34; see 5:36, 17:4). For Jesus, "finishing the work" meant his sacrificial death on the cross ("It is finished" in John 19:30) and the eventual total triumph of the kingdom of God ("It is done!" in Rev. 21:6). The church lives now between that first and second "It is finished."

Jesus' mission is accomplished through the presence and agency of the Holy Spirit. It is Trinitarian. Jesus speaks in John of the role the Holy Spirit will play, and many other Scriptures reveal the essential role of the Holy Spirit in bringing Jesus' mission to completion in the church and in all creation (e.g., Acts 1:8, Romans 8).

What does Jesus' description of his own mission tell us about the mission of the church? Four key things, at least:

1. *Our mission is not our own. It is Jesus' mission, and the mission of the Trinity.* Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). He said his disciples would do the "work" and "works" that Jesus did.

Jesus was concerned above all to do the will and works of him who sent him, not his own will. So it is with us.

2. *Our ultimate mission as disciples invited to participate in God's mission is nothing less than the kingdom of God, the reconciliation and restoration of "all things."* It is that grand and comprehensive. Our task as disciples in local Christian communities is to discern our specific and strategic part in that larger mission of God. The church as a discerning, discipling missional community is essential here. We must never lose sight of the big picture, the larger mission within which we find our particular mission.

3. *The power for us to accomplish our mission comes from God—from Jesus and the power of his resurrection and from the filling, empowering, and guidance of the Holy Spirit.* The power for mission is life in the Trinity through Christian community. This is what Jesus prays for in John 17.

4. *Like Jesus, we are called to servant leadership.* Leadership is essential to the fulfilling of God's mission. But equally essential is that leaders must lead in the way Jesus does, manifesting his spirit and character.

Christian leadership certainly is *more than* servanthood. But it is not less. Philippians 2 tells us not only about Jesus but defines our own leadership.

As Jesus' missional community, the church been given the exquisite privilege and high

honor of participating, as Jesus' servants, friends, and coworkers, in the mission of the Triune God. We are sent by the Father to be Jesus' ministers through the work of the Holy Spirit—agents of reconciliation and new creation.

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