Missional Theology

John R. Franke

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Missional God

The starting point for missional theology is the notion of a missional God. This means simply that God is, by God's very nature, a missionary God. In a more classical theological rendering, it means mission is an attribute of God. From this perspective, according to South African missiologist David Bosch, "mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God."[1] Put another way, in the oft repeated words of renowned German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way."[2]

Affirmations such as these represent one of the most significant developments in the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century. They are shaped by a broad consensus among virtually all

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

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 64.

theological and ecclesial traditions that participate in ecumenical discourse: that the mission of the church finds its rationale in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.

Missio Dei

The emergence of *missio Dei* theology is rooted in the history of reflection on the relationship between mission and the church. This reflection was fostered by the International Missionary Council (IMC), which came into being in the aftermath of the 1910 world missionary conference held in Edinburgh and was formally established in 1921. The Edinburgh conference brought together various mission organizations in hopes of fostering better cooperation among them in the task of evangelism, which was generally taken to be synonymous with mission.[3] Mission was assumed to be evangelism, and its practitioners were predominantly Western missionaries connected to Western missionary societies. In that era the tendency was to associate Christianity with the West, distinguishing Christianity from the rest of the non-Christian world. Mission work was understood to be the work of evangelizing the non-Western, non-Christian world. In that context the conference's focus was largely pragmatic, with little reflection on the theological framings of mission.[4]

With the formation of the IMC, theological questions began to emerge, and more forcefully in the aftermath of World War I in which the reputedly Christian nations of the West had attempted to destroy each other. This, coupled with the increasing recession of Christian commitment and the rapid growth of secularism, no doubt hastened by the war, considerably undermined the notion of the "Christian" West. In the midst of these circumstances, a

3. In 1961 the IMC became part of the World Council of Churches as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

4. For a detailed discussion of the Edinburgh conference, see Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

new mood prevailed at the IMC conference in Jerusalem in 1928. Debate arose about the traditional notion of mission as little more than the evangelization of non-Christian nations. Questions were raised concerning the significance of social and political action with respect to Christian mission, and about the relationship between the Christian gospel and other religions. While no consensus was reached, the conference significantly altered the shape of the conversation.

As the church and the world faced the challenges of fascism, communism, and a second world war, these questions intensified at subsequent IMC conferences in Tambaram, India (1938), and Whitby, Canada (1947). The language of Christian and non-Christian countries was abandoned, opening the way to new possibilities with respect to the understanding and practice of Christian mission. In the midst of wrestling with these pressing questions, a new imagination concerning the basis for mission slowly began to take shape. The IMC moved from focusing on pragmatic questions concerning the practice of mission to a more basic one: Why mission?

At the 1952 IMC conference in Willingen, Germany, the answer to this question began to take shape with the clear emergence of *missio Dei* theology. While that exact term would not come into vogue until after the conference, the theological assertion was unmistakably indicated. The rationale for mission found its basis in the very nature of God.

The historical impulse for this theological and missiological revolution can be traced to the work of Karl Barth. In a paper presented at the Brandenburg missionary conference in 1932, he articulated an understanding of mission as an activity that finds its first expression in the life of God. Barth and Karl Hartenstein, a contemporary who shared this conviction, began to shape German missiological thinking in the decades that followed the Brandenburg conference, and Hartenstein is credited with coining the term *missio Dei* after the 1952 Willingen conference.

During the centuries preceding the development of *missio Dei* theology, mission had been understood in a variety of ways: in terms of salvation, in which individuals are rescued from eternal condemnation; in terms of culture, in which people from the majority world are introduced to the blessing and privileges of the Christian West; in ecclesial terms, in which the church expands and survives; and in social terms, in which the world is transformed into the kingdom of God by evolutionary or cataclysmic means. "In all of these instances, and in various, frequently conflicting ways, the intrinsic relationship between Christology, soteriology, and the doctrine of the Trinity, so important in the early church, was gradually displaced by one of several versions of the doctrine of grace."[5] From the perspective of the *missio Dei* theology that emerged from Willingen, mission is understood as being derived from the very nature of God. "Willingen's image of mission was mission as participating in the sending of God. Our mission has no life of its own; only in the hands of the sending God can it truly be called mission, not least since the missionary initiative comes from God alone."[6]

From this perspective, mission no longer finds its basis in the church. Instead it is understood as a movement from God to the world, with the church functioning as a participant in that mission. Such participation invests the church in the movement of God's love for the world and calls forth a response of witness and action consistent with that movement. *Missio Dei* theology asserts that God has a particular desire, arising from God's eternal character, to engage with the world. For this reason, the idea of mission is at the heart of the biblical narratives concerning the work of God in human history. It begins with the call to Israel through Abraham to be God's covenant people and the recipients of God's covenant blessings for the purpose of blessing the world:

5. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389.
6. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

"Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Gen. 12:1–3).

The mission of God is at the heart of the covenant with Israel; it unfolded continuously over the course of the centuries in the life of God's people, as recorded in the narratives of canonical Scripture. This missional covenant reached its revelatory climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and continues through the sending of the Spirit as the One who calls, guides, and empowers the community of Christ's followers, the church, as the socially, historically, and culturally embodied witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the tangible expression of the mission of God. This mission continues today in the global ministry and witness to the gospel of churches in every culture around the world and, guided by the Spirit, moves toward the promised consummation of reconciliation and redemption in the eschaton.

Since Willingen, "the understanding of mission as *missio Dei* has been embraced by virtually all Christian persuasions" starting with Protestants and then by other ecclesial traditions including Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic.[7] One of the challenges of this consensus is that, while it inseparably links the mission of the church with participation in the mission of God, there is no specific shared understanding of the precise nature of the church's participation. Attempts to provide such specification have been contested and controversial. However, despite the lack of full conceptual clarity and continued discussion of its theological nuances, "*missio Dei* has become the defining paradigm of mission, being accepted by conciliar and evangelical Protestants, Pentecostals, and both Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. For almost

7. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390–91.

50 years, the concept has been often reaffirmed, for example by the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism."[8]

While the connection between the mission of God and the mission of the church remains murky, ecumenical consensus has been secured on two important points. First, God, by God's very nature, is a missionary God. Second, the church of this missionary God must therefore be a missionary church. To elaborate on the first point, mission is a part of God's very nature and is expressed in the being and actions of God throughout eternity. This is made known by the sending of the Son into the world. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). The term *mission* is derived from the Latin words "to send" (*mitto*) and "sending" (*missio*). Mission means to send and be sent. The sending of the Father and the sentness of the Son and the Spirit point to the being and action of the triune God as both sender and sent. Mission is an attribute of God and part of God's very nature.

The second point is connected to the first. There is a distinction between asserting that God has a mission and asserting that God is, by God's very nature, a missionary. In the first instance, the action of mission may be incidental to and disconnected from the being of God; in the second instance, however, the action of mission is consistent with the very being of God because mission is one of the divine attributes. A missional church might worship a God who simply *has* a mission, but it is also possible that such a God could be worshiped by a church that lacks a missional focus. On the other hand, if mission is part of God's very nature, then only a missional church can fully, truly worship such a God. As Stephen Holmes asserts, a church that refuses the call to mission is failing to be faithful to the God it worships, in the same way as

8. Mark Laing, "*Missio Dei*: Some Implications for the Church," *Missiology: An International Review* 37, no. 1 (January 2009): 91.

a church that refuses the command to love. "Just as purposeful, cruciform, self-sacrificial sending is intrinsic to God's own life, being sent in a cruciform, purposeful and self-sacrificial way must be intrinsic to the church being the church."[9]

When viewed from the perspective of *missio Dei* theology, the church's missionary activities can be understood in a new way. Mission in the singular, the mission of God, becomes primary, while the particular mission activities of the church, in the plural, are understood as derivative. In the post-Willingen context, the age of "missions" comes to a conclusion and the age of mission commences. Hence, we distinguish between the mission of God and the mission activities of the church and confess that the latter are authentic only when they faithfully participate in the *missio Dei*. The primary purpose of the mission activity of the church cannot simply be to save souls, or extend the influence of the temporal church, or plant new Christian communities. Instead it must be in continual service to the mission of God in and for the world, as well as against it. "In its mission, the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God's reign and participates in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil."[10]

Some have challenged the usefulness of *missio Dei* theology, claiming that it lacks conceptual clarity and noting that some have used it to promote mutually exclusive theological positions. Nevertheless, it has served to articulate the vital point that the basis of mission is neither the church nor any human agent, but the triune God. The church is privileged to participate in this mission, but its basis is found in God.

One of the consequences of affirming that mission is an attribute of God and part of the divine nature is that we also must affirm that the mission of God does not have an end point. It

9. Stephen R. Holmes, "Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology of God as Missionary," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 1 (January 2006): 89.

10. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.

will not cease at the consummation of the age; it will continue into eternity as an essential aspect of the divine nature. When we conceive of mission in terms of salvation, the church, culture, or social concern, it naturally seems it will have an end when God's creative purposes are fully realized in the eschatological future. However, if mission is an attribute of God, an essential element of the divine character, then it will never come to a conclusion and must continue throughout eternity. This eternal mission has its origin in the life of God who from all eternity has been in an active relationship involving the giving, receiving, and sharing of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the words of David Bosch, "God is the fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still."[11] There is mission because God loves.

The Trinity, Love, and the Eternal Mission of God

While the mission of God is complex and multifaceted, its central character, from which all other aspects flow, is love. The idea that God is love is surely one of the most common assumptions of Christians concerning the character of God. This assertion is found repeatedly in the pages of the Bible and has been affirmed regularly throughout the history of the church. But what does it really mean to say that God is love?

When we affirm with Scripture and the Christian tradition that God is love, we are not simply making a statement about the feelings of God toward creation and human beings who are made in God's image. Instead, we are affirming something about the very nature of God's being and actions. God is love for all time—past, present, and future—because God lives eternally in the communal fellowship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they participate in giving, receiving, and sharing love.

11. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 392.

Christian theological thinking on the Trinity provides additional support for the assertion that God is love. While the idea of God as Trinity is often viewed as a doctrinal abstraction, closer inspection reveals that it is in fact central to the notion that God is love. In order to understand this, it will be helpful to consider the formation of this basic Christian teaching.

The Bible does not contain an explicit confession of God as triune. Indeed, the term *Trinity* is not part of the scriptural vocabulary, nor is the theological concept developed or fully delineated in the biblical texts. This has caused some to wonder about this teaching and its primacy for Christian faith. It may be helpful, therefore, to think of the doctrine of the Trinity not as an explicit biblical teaching but rather as a theological teaching the early Christians understood as defending central faith convictions they found in the Bible.

By the fourth century the church had come to the conclusion that understanding God as triune was nonnegotiable because it encapsulated the Christian conception of God made known through the life and ministry of Jesus. The early Christian community came to regard confession of the Trinity as necessary on several levels: as an important theological conclusion, as a central component of the faith of the community, and as the definitive Christian affirmation concerning the identity of God. The doctrine was understood as a natural outworking of the faith of the New Testament community.

While the doctrine of the Trinity has often been viewed as a highly abstract and speculative teaching that emerged from the philosophical concerns of third- and fourth-century thinkers, it is more accurate to understand the doctrine as a response to the early Christian community's historical situation. The understanding of God as Trinity emerged and took shape as the followers of Jesus sought to make sense of their beliefs about him and their convictions about God.

It was a response to the challenge of reconciling the inherited commitment to the confession of the one God with the lordship

of Jesus Christ and the experience of the Spirit. Far from a philosophical abstraction, the confession of God as triune constitutes the culmination of an attempt on the part of the church to address the central theological question regarding the content of the Christian faith, a question that arose out of the experience of the earliest followers of Jesus. In keeping with their Jewish heritage, the early Christians continued to maintain a core belief in one God. This commitment led them to reject the practices of the surrounding culture of the Roman Empire, which were characterized by belief in many gods. By continuing to declare their commitment to one God, the early Christian community asserted their continuing participation in the covenant that God had initiated with Abraham, who early Christians continued to regard as one of the most important figures in the early history and development of the community.

In this context, the early Christians continued to maintain that there is only one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And this God, they asserted, is the same God as the one revealed in the life and witness of Jesus of Nazareth. This God and only this God is entitled to the worship of the Christian community. The early Christians understood themselves to be the ongoing manifestation of the one people of God, the continuation of the community initiated in the covenant God made with Abraham. Therefore they remained vigorously committed to the monotheistic tradition and practices they saw articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures.

This commitment to monotheism formed a basic assumption around which the early Christians reflected on the events that took place in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In the midst of their continuation of the Jewish practice of worshiping only one God, the early Christians also came to believe that the one God had come to dwell among them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Because of this belief, they ascribed deity to Jesus and worshiped him as the Lord of the universe and the head of their community.

Yet in spite of their commitment to monotheism and the worship of only one God, they also made a clear distinction, following the practice of Jesus himself, between the Son of God and the One whom Jesus addresses as the Father in the Gospel accounts of the Christian canon. While they maintained the divinity of Jesus, they also believed that he is not the same as the Father.

Early Christians also believed that the Holy Spirit is divine. Through the ministry of the Spirit, the followers of Jesus enjoyed an intimate relationship with God and the presence of God in their fellowship and in their own lives. The community believed that through the presence of the Spirit, Christians individually and corporately comprise the temple of God. The affirmation that the work of the Spirit constitutes the Christian community as the temple of God intimately linked the Spirit with God.

The close relationship between the three as God, and the distinctions among them, are evident in the summary formulations found in the New Testament such as Matthew 28:19: "Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and 2 Corinthians 13:14: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

The challenge of integrating these commitments into a coherent, composite understanding born out of their experience of God led to an emphasis on both the unity and the differentiated plurality of God. The church did not confess three Gods. Yet at the same time, encounters with and experiences of God in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were far too distinctive to be seen as simply different "modes" of the one God. As a result, the Christian confession of God as triune finds its basis in the practical concern of offering an account of God that reflects the experience of the community and witness of the early believers.

Throughout history the affirmation of the triune character of the divine has provided a framework for Christian thinking about

God and the ongoing development of trinitarian theology. The biblical witness to the early Christian community's experience with God points beyond this temporal encounter to the eternal life of God. The Bible pictures God as acting in the history of the world and also as having a history in which creation is not the beginning point but rather a particular event in the continuing story of the divine life that stretches from the eternal past into the eternal future.

While the acts of God in history are the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity, they are also indicative of God's ongoing internal life. Scripture invites us to think through the implications of this history with respect to the character of God. This suggests a theological principle: God is as God acts. The identity of God is known through the actions of God. The self-revelation of God reflects the character of God. The character and being of God is constituted and made known by God's actions in history.

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the actions of Jesus of Nazareth allow us to say that God is as God does, and what God does is love. Through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ we encounter the living embodiment and exposition of God's gracious character, as the One who loves, in relation to humanity. We must set aside all of our assumptions and preconceptions concerning what we already believe to be true of God and instead seek to learn from the God who is, through the actions of God. God is known through what God has done, and what God has done emerges from the person of Jesus Christ and the witness of Scripture. What we see in the life of Jesus and narratives of Scripture is that God is the One who loves. Therefore, as we seek to know the character of God in response to the action of divine self-revelation, we must seek to understand the fundamental biblical assertion that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16).

We should not presume that what we already believe about the character of love, based on particular individual or generally

accepted cultural assumptions, applies to the love of God. Rather, our knowledge of the love of God should be shaped by the particular way in which God loves through the ongoing establishment of communion between God and God's creatures in and through Jesus.

God's love for the world is not that of an uninvolved, unmoved, passionless Deity. It is the love of one who is actively and passionately involved in the ongoing drama of life in the world, and who lavishly pours out this love in Jesus Christ. This lavish expression of love for humanity and creation, revealed in Jesus Christ, points us to the internal life of God as an eternal trinitarian fellowship of love shared between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, explication of the triune God in God's self-disclosure in and to creation is at the same time the explication of the triune God in the divine reality. In summarizing this story, the Christian tradition affirms that from all eternity past and into the eternal future, God has been and will be in an active, loving relationship characterized by the giving, receiving, and sharing of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This relationship includes both difference and unity. This eternal fellowship of divine love is characterized by both unity-in-plurality and plurality-in-unity in which we affirm that the one God exists in three distinct persons (to use the classical language)—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that the three together are the one God. Difference and otherness are part of the divine life throughout eternity. While Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are one God, their unity is not an outgrowth of sameness. Rather, they are one in the very midst of their difference.

Perhaps the single most significant development in twentieth-century trinitarian theology has been the broad consensus that relationality is the most helpful way to understand the Trinity. This so-called relational turn is viewed as an alternative to the ontology of substance that dominated theological reflection on the Trinity throughout much of church history.

The traditional understanding of the Trinity placed emphasis on an abstract property of substance or a divine essence. This substantialist conception carried within itself the distinction between absolute essence and relational attributes. According to this understanding, essence is absolute, and therefore it must remain unchanged in order to preserve its identity. If change occurs in the essence of an entity, its identity is lost. Relationality, in turn, was deemed to belong to the dimension of attributes, not substance. Consequently, substantialist theologians suggested that God is absolute and immutable in the essential divine nature, while maintaining relationality to creation through the divine attributes. What could not be allowed in the classical tradition is the notion that the divine essence is somehow contingent on the relational dimensions of its life.

In much of the classical literature on the nature of God, this perspective obscured God's internal relationality and God's loving relationship to creation. Theologians today routinely critique the concept as implying that God is an isolated, solitary individual. At the heart of this critique is the apparent incompatibility of this idea of an eternal, essentially immutable God with the portrait in the biblical narratives of a God who has entered into loving relationship with creation. Although debate continues regarding the degree to which the category of substance ought to be abandoned, theologians voice considerable agreement that the primary accent should be placed on the category of relationality. Catherine LaCugna, to cite one example, asserts that *person* rather than *substance* is the primary ontological category, noting that the ultimate source of reality is not a "by-itself" or an "in-itself" but a person, a "toward-another." She concludes that the triune God is "self-communicating" and exists from all eternity "in relation to another."[12]

12. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 14–15.

Elizabeth Johnson claims that the priority of relation in the triune God challenges and critiques classical theism's concentration on "singleness" in God; because the persons are "constituted by their relationships to each other, each is unintelligible except as connected with the others." This assertion leads Johnson to the conclusion that the "very principle of their being" is to be found in the category of relation.[13] Similarly, Robert Jenson notes that the original thrust of trinitarian thought was that God's relations to us are internal to the triune life and that it is "in carrying out this insight that the 'relation' concept was introduced to define the distinction of identities."[14] David Cunningham notes that the breadth of the current consensus about the priority of relationality in trinitarian discourse is evidenced by the fact that one can cite both Jenson and Johnson in support of it, even though the two thinkers "are not usually noted for being in close agreement with one another."[15]

This theological consensus encompasses a diverse variety of thinkers including such luminaries as John Zizioulas, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Leonardo Boff, Colin Gunton, Alan Torrance, Millard Erickson, and Stanley Grenz. While they may differ from each other on the precise construction of relationality within the life of God, they have all followed the relational turn.

In addition to the consensus among contemporary theologians, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen states that the "move to relationality is also in keeping with the dynamic understanding of reality and the human being as well as human community in late modernity." He notes that the ideas of isolation, individualism, and

13. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 216.

14. Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 120.

15. David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 26.

independence are products of modernist thought-forms. "Over against the typical modernist bias to classify and categorize everything into distinct units [only think of the methods of the natural sciences], postmodernity speaks of relationality, interdependence, becoming, emerging, and so on. In this changing intellectual atmosphere, the value of communion theology is being appreciated in a new way."[16] Stanley Grenz speaks of this relational turn as envisioning a move "from the one subject to the three persons" with respect to our understanding of God.[17] In other words, God is social, not solitary.

Understanding God as relational plurality rather than a solitary being raises a crucial question: What does it mean to affirm that God is one? In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (10:30) and explains that his works were done so that those who saw them might "know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:38). In seeking to explain this, thinkers in the early church turned to an idea known as *perichoresis*. This refers to the mutual interdependence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their trinitarian relation with one another. It seeks to explain the nature of the divine life with the assertion that while the three members of the Trinity remain wholly distinct from each other, they are also bound together in such a way that the Father, Son, and Spirit are dependent on each other for their very identities as Father, Son, and Spirit. In other words, the Father, Son, and Spirit would not be who they are—that is, would not be God—apart from the interdependent relationality they share with each other.

This relational interdependence is manifested in the earthly life of Jesus, who did not function as an autonomous, independent individual. Rather, he says that he constantly seeks the will of the

16. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 387.

17. Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 23–57.

Father and that he can do nothing by himself but only what he sees the Father doing. At the same time, he also says that the Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son. Nevertheless, in rendering these judgments he says, "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30).

This understanding of perichoresis leads to the conclusion that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one by virtue of their interdependent relationality. The contemporary consensus concerning the relationality of the life of God brings us back to the affirmation that God is love. Articulating the doctrine of the Trinity in accordance with the category of relationality gives us an indication as to how this biblical and classical assertion is to be comprehended. From the beginning and throughout all of eternity, the life of the triune God has been and continues to be characterized by love. Love is an especially fruitful term for comprehending the life of God since it is an inherently relational concept. It requires both subject and object. Because God is a triune plurality-in-unity and unity-in-plurality, God comprehends both love's subject and love's object. For this reason, when viewed theologically, the statement "God is love" refers primarily to the eternal, relational intratrinitarian fellowship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The interdependent relationality of the divine life coupled with the presence of difference and otherness leads to the conclusion that the love of God is not an assimilating love. This love does not seek to make that which is different the same. Rather, God lives in harmonious fellowship with the other through the active relations of self-sacrificing, self-giving love.

The love that characterizes the life of God from all eternity is the basis for God's actions in the world; they flow from the fellowship of self-sacrificial love God has enjoyed throughout eternity. As Stephen Holmes puts it, "Purposeful, self-sacrificial acts of loving concern flowing from the Father through the Son

and Spirit to the world God has created are fundamental images of who God is, from all eternity."[18] The love that characterizes the mission of God from all eternity is the compelling basis for the extension of the divine mission to the world. It is to the mission of God as it is expressed in the world that we now turn our attention.

The Mission of God in the World

From the perspective of the eternal mission of God, creation can be understood as a reflection of God's expansive love, whereby the triune God brings into being another reality, that which is not God, and establishes a relationship of love, grace, and blessing for the purpose of drawing that reality into participation in the divine fellowship of love. In this way the love of God expands beyond Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to include others.

However, even though human beings are created in the image of God, they rebelled against the love of God and others. Instead of seeking the well-being of their fellow humans, they have sought their own good at the expense of others and established oppressive societies that colonize and marginalize citizens, particularly the powerless and vulnerable. This activity, along with the dispositions of the intellect, the will, and emotions that bring it into fruition, is what Scripture calls sin.

This activity created enmity among the peoples of the earth. From the perspective of the Jewish tradition, a focal point of this enmity is the relationship between Jews and gentiles. In response to this human rebellion and the resulting hostility among the people of the earth, God sends Jesus the Son into the world: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn

18. Holmes, "Trinitarian Missiology," 88.

the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16–17). The Son is sent into the world to redeem it through a cruciform life of humility, service, obedience, and death for the sake of others: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5–8).

By his teaching and example, Jesus called the world to follow his way of life and participate in the kingdom of God, a community of love where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. The Spirit is sent into the world to call, guide, and empower the community of Christ's followers in their missional vocation to be the people of God in the particular social, historical, and cultural circumstances in which they are situated. Through the witness of the church to the good news of God's love and mission, the Spirit calls forth a new community from every tribe and nation, centered on Jesus Christ, to be a provisional demonstration of God's will for all creation and empowers it to live God's love for the sake of the world.

This missional pattern, manifested in the world through the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit out of love for the world, is lived out and expressed in the context of the eternal community of love; it points to the missional character of God, who seeks to extend the love shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into the created order. Before giving attention to a more detailed summary of the mission of the church, it will be helpful to keep in mind the focal point of the mission of God as it moves from God's life and into the world through Jesus and the Spirit. Flowing out of the divine life in trinity, love is central to the mission of God in the world. When asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus replies: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and

with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37–40).

In 1 John 4:7–12, the primacy of love is underscored in the relationship of God to the church:

> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Above all things, the church is called to bear witness to the love of God for the world by imitating the life of Christ and living God's love. From this perspective, love is the central expression of Christian faith and extends even to our enemies. In the words of Jesus found in Matthew 5:43–45, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

Because the church worships the missional God who is love, the church must love all people, including those who are enemies. Nothing less than its witness to the gospel is at stake. If the church ignores this most basic calling or fails to live it out in the world, it is not characterized as a community of faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and is not practicing Christian faith, no matter what else it may do. Paul makes this point abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 13:1–8:

> If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

As an outworking of divine love, the mission of God is expressed in the world through the life of Jesus and the witness of the Spirit as salvation. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (1:16). As Paul makes clear in the letter, the means of that salvation is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God and the Lord of the world.

This salvation entails the liberation of the created order—humanity and the entire cosmos—from the powers of sin and death (Rom. 8:2–25). In the same way that the mission of God in Jesus Christ to love the world is passed on to the church, so the mission of salvation and reconciliation is entrusted to the church: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:18–20). As participants in the mission of God in the world, the church

shares not only in the love of God but in the work of salvation as well.

When speaking of salvation, it is important not to approach it from the individualistic perspective of modern Western culture. From this perspective, salvation has often been viewed primarily as the redemption of particular individuals for a heavenly future. To read the biblical witness in this way is to miss the full scope and grandeur of the divine mission. God's actions are on behalf of the whole created order so that it will be set free from its bondage to decay.

The cosmic scope of this mission is captured in the words of Beverly Roberts Gaventa, who writes that, according to Paul in Romans, the mission of God involves the work of rescuing the whole world "from the powers of Sin and Death so that a newly created humanity—Jew and Gentile—is released for the praise of God in community."[19] A focal point of this salvation is the realization of peace on earth. In the New Testament, a significant element of this vision is focused on the inclusion of the gentiles in the family of God. Ephesians asserts that the establishment of this inclusive community is part of the eternal purpose of God to establish peace in the world.[20] According to Ephesians 1:9–10, God "has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Michael Gorman observes that in Ephesians 2 we see that the mystery referred to here is made known in the gospel and is "best characterized with respect to humanity as a divine peace mission."[21]

19. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "The Mission of God in Paul's Letter to the Romans," in *Paul as Missionary: Identity, Activity, Theology, and Practice*, ed. Trevor J. Burke and Brian S. Rosner, Library of New Testament Studies 420 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 65–66.

20. For a detailed interpretation of Ephesians as a call to participate in the peace of God, see Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 181–211.

21. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 188.

This divine plan is intended to restore harmony to creation by bringing unity to that which is currently scattered and fragmented. This is the power of God working through Christ and the church, which is Christ's body on earth: "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:20–23). Commenting on this in the context of a detailed exegesis of Ephesians, Gorman writes: "The church, as described briefly here and in more detail in the rest of the letter, is intended by God to be a foretaste of the future cosmic peace and harmony that has been the eternal divine plan."[22] This is summarized in Ephesians 3:8–11:

> Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 2 articulates the consequences of the work of God in Christ to bring reconciliation between Jew and gentile, and therefore the world. Through Christ, Jew and gentile have been made one and the dividing wall of hostility has been broken down (v. 14); one new humanity has emerged in place of two, bringing peace to the world (v. 15); both groups have been reconciled, putting hostility to death (v. 16); both groups participate in the Spirit and have

22. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 189.

access to God (v. 18); Jew and gentile are no longer strangers and aliens to one another (v. 19). Through Christ and the Spirit, Jews and gentiles are members together in the family of God.

Peace and harmony in the world are central to the mission of God. For the church in the context of the ancient world, this meant peace between Jew and gentile. For the church in the context of Christian Europe, it meant peace among competing Christian communities. For the church at the outset of the third millennium, it means peace among the religions of the world. Apart from such religious peace, there is no hope for the peace God intends for the world.

The good news of the gospel is peace in the world and the end of the violence and hostility that leads to death. This is a fundamental part of the message of salvation. Hence, the communities of those who follow Jesus are exhorted in Ephesians 4:1–3 "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Commenting on this broad conception of the divine mission of salvation, Gorman observes: "God is therefore at work creating an international network of multicultural, socioeconomically diverse communities ('churches') that participate in this liberating, transformative reality *now*—even if incompletely and imperfectly."[23]

The New Testament uses numerous words, images, and phrases to articulate a comprehensive vision of God's mission of salvation including liberation, transformation, new creation, peace, reconciliation, and justification.[24] This salvific mission is rooted in the self-giving, self-sacrificing love of God expressed in the eternal trinitarian fellowship and made known in the created order through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is this

23. Gorman, *Becoming the* Gospel, 24–25.
24. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 25.

divine mission that forms the context for an understanding of the mission of the church.

Before focusing more specifically on the mission of the church, let us look at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel and consider the means by which God intends to accomplish this mission. These verses of Matthew's Gospel have come to be known as the Great Commission—to make disciples of all the nations: "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'" (28:16–20). Before turning specifically to the content of this commission, let us note that it is framed within the lordship of Jesus—"all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"—and the presence of Jesus—"I am with you always, to the end of the age." This is a crucial reminder that the commission given here proceeds by the power and presence of God. Throughout history, the followers of Jesus who have been baptized into solidarity with him and have therefore inherited this commission have not been left to fulfill it on our own—the Lord is with us in this work, and ultimately it belongs to God, not us.

In order to understand the content of the commission Jesus gives here to his disciples and by extension to the church, it will be helpful to know something about the nature and structure of Matthew's Gospel. It has particularly deep roots in Judaism. While this is true of all the Gospels and the New Testament generally, it is especially true of Matthew. Scholars have long noted that five distinct sections give overall shape to the work. This fivefold structure reflects the Pentateuch, the foundational document of Judaism. At the heart of the Pentateuch are God's covenant with Abraham; the

story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt; the creation of a new community under God; and the giving of the laws by which the community was to live. The fivefold structure of Matthew implies that the story of Jesus is analogous to the ancient story of Israel.

These connections show up in many of the details found in Matthew. For instance, the teaching material contained in chapters 5–7 is known as the Sermon on the Mount—yet Matthew is the only Gospel that says Jesus taught this from a mountain. In Matthew's account, Jesus is pictured as a new Moses, revealing God's will from a new Sinai indicative of the Gospel's central theme: Jesus as a new Moses leading a new exodus from a new pharaoh (the Roman emperor) into a new way of life in keeping with the covenant God made with Abraham. This background has led scholars to note the correlation between the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3, "Go . . . I will make of you a great nation . . . so that you will be a blessing. . . . And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The two commissions are indivisibly linked, showing that the Jesus story is intended as a continuation of Israel's story with a common concern: the creation of a new community formed by God's love and committed to the establishment of that love throughout the earth in order to bring about a new world—a world where the will of God is done on earth as in heaven.

In the Hebrew tradition, this vision of a new world is profoundly captured in the words of the prophet Isaiah. It will be a world in which

> No more shall the sound of weeping be heard . . .
> or the cry of distress.
> No more shall there be in it
> an infant that lives but a few days,
> or an old person who does not live out a lifetime. . . .
> They shall not build and another inhabit;
> they shall not plant and another eat;

> for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
> and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their
> hands.
> They shall not labor in vain,
> or bear children for calamity. . . .
> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
> the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (65:19–25)

This is a vision of an alternative to the reality we see around us—a vision of a world where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid. This is the world God intended from the beginning.

However, as stated previously, human beings have rebelled against God's intentions and sought their own good at the expense of others. In response, God made a covenant with Abraham and called a people to bless the nations of the world. God sent Jesus into the world to bless the nations and bring about salvation through his life, teachings, and death. But the death of Jesus is not the end of the story. Instead, leading New Testament scholar N. T. Wright describes the death of Jesus as "the day the revolution began."[25] Jesus institutes a covenant of vocation whereby he commissions his followers to go to the nations and make disciples who will follow his way of life and create a new world, the realization of Isaiah's vision, the kingdom of God—here and now, on this earth.

This is God's mission, not ours, and we are dependent on the power and presence of God for its fulfillment. That said, it is also important to understand that God has chosen us to share in this work; to be sure, it will not happen without God, but neither will it happen without our faithful participation. We are called not just to believe the gospel, not just to believe in Jesus, but to become the gospel by being disciples of Jesus. We share in God's life by sharing in God's work of bringing about the world God intends.

25. N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016).

Hence, the mission of the church needs to reflect the scope and size of God's intentions for the world. What might this look like?

The next chapter will offer a fuller delineation, but here it will help to mention the five marks of mission—a particularly prominent summary of the mission of the church articulated by the Anglican Communion. While these marks are not a comprehensive definition of mission, they are rich with significance and point effectively to the holistic scope of God's work in the world.

Evangelism: to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom
Formation: to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers
Compassion: to respond to human need by loving service
Justice: to seek to transform unjust structures of society
Creation care: to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.[26]

All of these intrinsically flow from commitment to the lordship of Jesus and the establishment of the kingdom of God, a new world where everyone will have enough and no one will need to be afraid. The realization of this vision accounts for Jesus's commission to his followers at the end of Matthew's Gospel to go and make disciples of the nations, teaching them to obey everything he commanded—the ways of the kingdom. The making of disciples is God's plan for creating a new world and establishing the kingdom of God. In other words, it is an intrinsic part of the mission of God in the world. Missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin has articulated the centrality of Christian congregational formation for the work of God in the world, suggesting that the church is the primary reality that needs to be accounted for and developed if we are to see a demonstrable Christian impact on public life in an increasingly secular world.

26. Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the Twenty-First Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

In making this assertion, Newbigin does not discount the importance of the numerous activities—such as conferences, evangelistic work, and the distribution of Bibles and Christian literature—Christians use to engage public life with the claims and implications of the gospel. While these are significant and worthwhile, he maintains they are ultimately of secondary importance and only have power to accomplish the purposes for which they are intended as they arise from, are firmly rooted in, and lead inextricably back to a believing community. He writes, "How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."[27]

This type of all-encompassing, interdependent, individual and communal formation is precisely what is called for in the New Testament as participation in the mission of God. It is discipleship in the way of Jesus that has the capacity to change the world and bring about God's intentions. However, it is a slow process that requires long-standing faithfulness in the face of difficult and seemingly insurmountable circumstances. This is why Jesus compares the kingdom to a mustard seed: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matt. 13:31–32). The growth of the kingdom is slow and sometimes even imperceptible, but in time it produces a harvest of righteousness.

David Bosch concludes that the comprehensive nature of the divine mission demands a more integral and holistic understanding of the character of salvation, and therefore of the mission of the

27. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

church, than has traditionally been the case: "Salvation is as coherent, broad, and deep as the needs and exigencies of human existence. Mission therefore means being involved in the ongoing dialogue between God, who offers salvation, and the world, which—enmeshed in all kinds of evil—craves that salvation."[28] It is this divine mission that shapes the vocation of the church sent into the world to continue the work of Jesus. As he was sent, so he sends the church.

28. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400.