# Rediscovering Missio Dei

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A Journal of Missional Theology and Praxis

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Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Praxis (MD) exists to provide a medium for exploring the rich tradition and ongoing practice of participation in the mission of God among the churches of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement.

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Please direct all submissions, suggestions, or inquiries to the editors at missiodeijournal@gmail.com.

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## Rediscovering Missio Dei (Vol. 1)

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Preparing to go to the mission field as a recent graduate student, I was compelled to consider subscribing to academic journals. These journals are the natural way to stay plugged into conversations that have become important for the ongoing formation of a soon-to-be practitioner such as myself. In my experience, if we learn anything from professional training, it is that we are very far from finished learning. Even the most modest amount of ministry experience confirms this, inciting us to find conversation partners that can speak to the realities we confront in the service of the kingdom. Some of these realities are very practical; some are very theological. And sometimes hard-won wisdom suggests that there is little difference between the two. Whatever their nature, these formative conversations have, for all of us, taken place within a specific context, a church tradition with its own voice in the discourse. Shockingly, however, there has existed no means (since 1996,1 at least) for missiological conversation partners from my own tradition to take their place at the table alongside my other subscriptions.

My consternation at this situation was compounded by the Stone-Campbell Movement’s (SCM) potentially rich contribution to the field. While my own experience is limited to the Churches of Christ (a cappella), I can assert as a matter of history that the SCM has been deeply involved in missions, and no few of its higher-learning institutions have taken part in the emergence of the sub-discipline of missiology in the last century. Yet, with a few notable exceptions (one of whom, I am pleased to say, is among our first contributors), the SCM’s chorus of voices has not been heard by the wider missiological community. And we are, I suggest, all the poorer for it, because it is the interchange that enables us to grow. It should probably be said at this point that there is little of brand loyalty in all this talk of tradition. Rather, it reflects the lesson, which the heirs of Stone and Campbell have learned the hard way, that a historical self-consciousness is far more productive than the presumption of autonomy and traditionlessness. Those working on the present project, though we are fundamentally committed to the mission of God, do so from within the SCM, aware that it affects how we hear and speak, in joyful communion with others in the same tradition, eager to engage generatively with those who hear and speak differently. This is the vantage from which we appreciate the SCM’s missiological contribution and also hope and pray to see it enriched by other perspectives.

As far as ministry experience goes, we also realize that it is not merely academic voices that long for an outlet but also those of seasoned practice. If we are really going to attempt to mine the riches of a tradition, why not go all the way, even at the risk of unconventionality? This impulse coincides with recent expressions in both missiology and theology that point toward a far more holistic vision of God’s mission in the first place. That is to say, by acknowledging previously unrecognized arenas of and participants in mission, a way has opened for us to bring new and exciting conversation partners to the table. Though the dialect from context to context is often somewhat different than scholar-speak, it is certainly no more incomprehensible (likely far less so, in fact), and we are all called, in the end, to the very missionary task of learning to communicate with one another. In short, we’re excited at the prospect of a medium through which

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any reflective participant in God’s mission can speak. So much, then, for a traditional academic journal.

The initial impulse to hold academia and practice in tension was but the first glimmer of a much greater endeavor to overcome false dichotomies between theory and practice. For that is what these dichotomies ultimately are: false. While we have grown accustomed to, even rewarded by, our niches and specializations and gifts, we only ever engage in monologues when we are trapped within the confines of our provincial subcultures. We manage to talk about “scholarship” and “practical ministry” as though they are competing forces, employing seemingly incompatible languages, each implicitly asserting the superiority of its epistemological norms. Scholar or minister, theory or practice, academic (journal) or popular (magazine), footnotes or endnotes, but never both, and so the great divide becomes indisputable and, perhaps, unbridgeable.

This caricature of “we” cannot really withstand experience, of course, as we all know professor-practitioners or minister-scholars. Yet, the dichotomy persists somehow as young editors begin to cobble ideas together and find that they “have to” cater to a niche audience. Why? Because publishing, perhaps in simpler terms than any other endeavor, reveals the actual state of the disunion and does so in terms of bald disinterest. Perhaps Sir Thomas More put it best when he said, “Low brows find everything heavy going that isn’t completely low brow. High brows reject everything as vulgar that isn’t a mass of archaisms.” We don’t speak each other’s language, and when it comes to actually listening to one another, it shows. “What could your academic prattle do for my actual situation on the ground,” says the practitioner. “What could your earthy anecdotes contribute to my studied reflection,” says the scholar. Of course, what the professor-practitioner and the minister-scholar know is that the answer to both questions is, a great deal. And what the missionary knows is that the real issue is communication, not relevance.

Yet, the niching of the publishing industry has only served to reinforce the natural barriers to communication across fields of expertise, and this plays right into the hands of postmodern consumerism, meaning there is also an economic incentive urging us not to challenge readers who know what they like. Needless to say (one might wish), the mission of God calls this sort of provincialism to account, issuing a vocation to the people of God to speak cross-culturally as both learners and sharers, not least when it comes to speaking within the Christian community about the mission itself. What this all means for the project we have come to call *Missio Dei* is not that we invent a mystical method of translation that makes the low brow palatable to the high brow and vice versa but rather that we set aside the boxes and create a hybrid, a journal that is about holding in creative tension the voices of the Christian subcultures that must be heard in a truly holistic dialogue about God’s mission.

*Missio Dei* is, therefore, neither academic nor popular, neither theological nor practical. It is a place for interchange. There will be unapologetically academic contributions, with latinisms and technical jargon and dense footnotes. There will be stories, anecdotes, and essays, with easy-to-read prose and contractions and an utter lack of secondary sourcing. There will be artistic expression as well, both lyric and graphic. There will be even more than all this. But let it be said that this is not an effort to provide “something for everyone.” It is, unequivocally, an effort to bring everyone into one conversation about the mission of God, in the deep mutuality that belongs to the people of God, for his kingdom and his glory.
It is perhaps dangerously close to cliché to name a journal _Missio Dei_. Yet, there is something about the idea of _missio Dei_ that remains fundamentally important for those of us advocating this discourse. It is, in that sense, always the fitting banner for missiological conversation. At the same time, there is something about the present moment that incites us to say once more, in words writ large, that this is _God’s mission_. These are times when it seems especially evident how exciting it is to be involved in what God is doing. All over the world, in the midst of a riotous variety of expression, the church is rediscovering God’s mission and, therefore, her own. This emerging awareness, accompanied by a rearrangement of frameworks and priorities, indeed, a reexamination of fundamental assumptions, beckons the whole church to community discourse.

Naturally enough, that discourse must begin with—and often return to—a conversation about the mission of God itself. Can God’s mission, as a theological concept, bear the weight that many would presently place upon it? Is it, as an expression, really just one way among many of saying what we all mean—a place holder, stylish one decade and antiquated the next? Or do we in fact mean very different things? And more fundamentally, is it really conceivable that Christianity sidelined and distorted something as central and essential to its very identity as even cautious advocates would suggest “the mission of God” to be? These questions, broadly sketched as they are, merely hint at the tangle of issues that comprise the ongoing discourse about the many concepts and practices rooted in a reality that has come to be identified as _missio Dei_—the mission of God.

Our first issue is themed “Rediscovering _Missio Dei_” as well, because we felt it would be valuable for readers to engage with the concept straightaway, encased as it is within one of those esoteric Latin phrases that make ideas feel inaccessible to some and irrelevant to others. Either way, we need to overcome a lot of (probably justified) shoulder shrugging and eye rolling by getting to the marrow of the matter quickly. There, we pray, a generative conversation will begin.
MISSIONAL THEOLOGY
The first article, my own modest contribution, intends to orient the reader to key issues that may be implicit in or assumed by subsequent articles. The real meat of the theology section, however, is found in the wonderful contributions of Gailyn Van Rheenen and Mark Love.

Dr. Van Rheenen, writing as a missiologist, demonstrates the way in which theological reflection on the *missio Dei*—particularly in its narrative shape—funds essential mission practices. His provocative opening sentence issues a challenge to balance Martin Kähler’s well-worn maxim “Mission is the mother of theology.” Van Rheenen’s challenge is vitally important, especially when issued by a church-planting facilitator who understands both the temptation of planting with a view to strategically planned exponential growth and the dire problem of theologically deficient foundations to such plans. Van Rheenen’s story about Jim the church planter exemplifies precisely what is at stake. Ultimately, the article describes a reciprocal movement from theology to practice and back to theology, challenging us to consider again whether accepting *missio Dei* as a starting point means beginning with a commitment to humble, obedient participation or beginning with profound reflection on the nature of God and his purposes.

Dr. Love, writing as a missional theologian, brings us back to the trinitarian roots of *missio Dei*. Within the context of that discussion, traditionally the province of the discipline of theology proper, Love indicates the way in which mission has deeply affected the idea of Trinity. The article is particularly exciting in that the ongoing missional reflection on the Trinity in which Love is involved continues to open new avenues of understanding. In particular, the challenge to the “linear” thinking that characterized the classic discussion of God-world-church vs. God-church-world, which followed the emergence of the *missio Dei* concept, is a major move. The way that this theological reflection affects assumptions underlying mission practice is another sign of the reciprocity that exists between missiology and theology.

In the intersection of these two well-represented perspectives we encounter the generative interaction of mission and theology that leaves us with the perception that they belong together, like hydrogen and oxygen, creating in their combination an element that is essential to the life and health of God’s people. The editors issue an open call for articles that contribute to this interaction. The Missional Theology section of the journal will feature articles on theology of mission, articles on missional interpretation, and contextualized interpretations, including both formal pieces (exegesis, interpretation, and application) and informal pieces (sermons and lessons). For more information, visit the Submissions page of the journal’s website (http://missiodeijournal.com/submissions).
An Abbreviated Introduction to the Concept of Missio Dei

GREG MCKINZIE

The emergence of the concept of missio Dei amid the struggles of Christian world missions in the mid-Twentieth Century occasioned a theological paradigm shift. Although its conceptualization has been contested and sometimes dichotomized, recent developments move toward a broad, integrative vision of God’s mission that may serve as the best framework for the church’s theology and praxis.

REDISCOVERING MISSIO DEI

Everything is mission. On the lips of a “career missionary,” those words seem far too self-involved to be true, or even moderately insightful. As a summary of the implications drawn from sixty years of ecumenical reflection on the sending of the Son and the Spirit, however, they are a legitimate challenge to every corner of Christianity to understand the world, the church, and Scripture in terms of missio Dei—God’s mission. In order to understand how missio Dei came to be a theological concept currently discussed on a broad popular level, we must enter a historical world that will be foreign territory for many readers. In so doing we may gain a clearer understanding of what is at stake theologically in the debate over terminology, which seems at first glance to be blown out of proportion. Our entry point into that world is a village in Germany called Willingen.

The ecumenical gathering of church leaders known as the International Missionary Council held its 1952 meeting in Willingen. Two immediate crises set the stage for the meeting. First, Mao Tse-tung closed China, removing all foreign missionaries. Naturally, this caused distress among these leaders, committed as they were to the spread of gospel among such a significant portion of the human population. Second, the realization was dawning that Christian missions had been deeply implicated in the colonialist project of Western civilization, a project that was beginning to crumble. Missions had been tied to the spread of Enlightenment culture, and the churches influenced by these ecumenical leaders were about to begin a long and painful struggle to differentiate their mission work—its motivations, means, and goals—from colonialism.

It is also necessary to mention a third looming specter. Colonialism aside, critical self-reflection also revealed that Christian missions was plagued by what would come to be called ecclesiocentrism. What the church expected to achieve in its missions was, through and through, too much about the church. We might characterize (or caricature) the worst of ecclesiocentrism this way: The church sends the church’s missionaries to accomplish the church’s mission, which is the expansion of the church and, implicitly, the achievement of the church’s agenda.

Willingen was host to a broad range of theological dispositions, but two polarized positions, which I will refer to as traditionalist and humanist, emerged as the dominant contenders battling over the conceptualization of missio Dei in the last century. Though they became two seemingly mutually exclusive options well after Willingen, they were

1Bolded terms are defined in a glossary at the end of this article.
not obviously diametric opposites at the conference itself. In fact, they were similar enough in their response to the problems mentioned above that participants managed to draft a unifying statement at conference end. Moreover, I will argue below that the currently emerging concept of *missio Dei* is a healthier blending of these two positions than many would have thought possible in the decades following Willingen.

The traditionalist position was traditional in that while it retreated from the paternalism and ecclesiocentrism of the past, it still maintained that the church was the means to the fulfillment of God’s eschatological intentions. For the traditionalist, therefore, *missio Dei* signified a move toward chastened self-perception by way of theocentrism. The church was freshly recognized as, we might say, merely the means, whereas God was the ultimate source, actor, and fulfiller of mission.

The humanist view did not immediately deemphasize the church’s role, though more radical elements were already present at Willingen. Instead, it focused upon a more realized eschatology, maintaining that God had already inaugurated his kingdom. The church, then, served as means to its realization but as proclaimer of its reality. Dutch missiologist Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk developed this line of thinking further. His essential argument was that because the realization of the kingdom in the world is God’s doing, and because the church is not a means to an unrealized eschatological reality, the reasonable conclusion is that mission is God’s work in the world regardless of (and, as history would suggest, often despite) the church. Thus, the humanist perspective became preoccupied with God’s work in the world apart from the church, which proponents naturally understood in terms of humanity’s socio-political concerns.

Though clearly at odds, the traditionalist and humanist views hung together on one major point of agreement: “Mission is ultimately God’s affair.” The expression of this fact in terms of “*missio Dei*” seems especially shaped by the theology of Karl Barth, who first revived the trinitarian idea of *missio* in 1932. In addition, the preliminary report from the U.S. study group hinged upon the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus, the statement that ultimately distills the conference findings reads:

> The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth His own beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself. . . . On the foundation of this accomplished work God has sent forth His Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus . . . We who have been chosen in Christ . . . are by these very facts committed to full participation in His redeeming mission to the world. There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. “As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.”

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3Ibid.


It was another document, written by Karl Hartenstein after the conference, that utilized the Latin phrase *missio Dei* in order to summarize the fundamental idea conveyed by the conference findings:

Mission is not just the conversion of the individual, nor just obedience to the word of the Lord, nor just the obligation to gather the church. It is the taking part in the sending of the Son, the *missio Dei*, with the holistic aim of establishing Christ’s rule over all redeemed creation.6

Hartenstein clearly wrote from a traditionalist perspective, though his terminology would also be co-opted by the humanist camp in order to signify an idea of mission exclusive of the church’s “taking part” in God’s movement toward the world. Yet, we may note that the dispute was not simply between those who advocated a “social gospel” and those who did not. The “holistic” notion of a kingdom over “all redeemed creation” was integral to the traditionalist view, which made room also for individual conversion, obedience to the word, and the gathering of the church. The issue remained, implicitly at least, one of eschatology and its implications for the church’s instrumentality. That is to say, a critical dialog between eschatology and ecclesiology had begun.7

Considering the concept from another angle, the intersection of trinitarian thought and salvation history was also a major variable for the alternative views of *missio Dei*. As Hartenstein indicates, the traditionalist view understood the “sending” of Son (and Spirit) to be constitutive of mission. It is that particular salvation-historical datum that qualifies the concept of *missio Dei*. In contrast, while movement within the Trinity was also basic for the humanist perspective, it was abstracted from the confines of salvation-history.8 According to this understanding, intra-trinitarian movement (*missio Dei*) continues in the world quite regardless of the particular sendings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels or of the Spirit experienced in the church. Moreover, despite trinitarian language in the humanist camp, without reference to the salvation-historical narrative of Jesus and the Spirit, *missio* “devolved into an immanent principle of world history” focused on “being, not God’s being” (emphasis original).9 At stake in this convergence of salvation history and Trinity is, again, one’s understanding of the kingdom. Is the establishment of the kingdom that Jesus announced a work that God does in world history apart from the proclamation of Jesus by the church and the power of the Spirit manifest in the church? An affirmative answer caused many to see the socio-political shifts toward a “better” (more humanitarian) world as proper to the concept of *missio Dei*.

At the risk of oversimplification, these basic observations lay a minimum of groundwork for considering some of the implications that this monumental shift within Western theology entailed. Because the rediscovery of *missio Dei* is still causing aftershocks in theolog-

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8 Ibid., 578-79.

ogy and missiology today, tracing the path of these implications will bring us to consider insights that are only now emerging.

**IN THE WAKE OF WILLINGEN: IMPLICATIONS OF THE SHIFT**

Relief was the most immediate payoff of recasting missions in terms of missio Dei.\(^\text{10}\) If the mission is fundamentally God’s, then the church’s failures (e.g., colonialism, ecclesiocentrism) and limitations (e.g., the closure of China) were not cause for despair. Even if, as traditionalists affirmed, the church is instrumental in God’s completion of his mission, it remains God who will complete it. Not only the justification for but also the viability of mission rests upon the sovereignty of God, even in the midst of terribly uncertain circumstances. To cast it more starkly, God’s mission cannot be compromised even when the church is.

A terminological evolution also occurred in the wake of Willingen, and its subtlety continues to beleaguer missiology today. Many began to reserve “mission” for reference to missio Dei and coined “missions” (note the added -s) for the church’s missionary endeavors. The distinction served to express differing concerns, depending on one’s understanding of misso Dei, but for all involved in the conversation it was a necessary result of missio Dei’s conceptualization. Thus, more than merely an antidote for anxiety, missio Dei was a corrective for both colonialism and ecclesiocentrism. “It is inconceivable that we could again revert to a narrow, ecclesiocentric view of mission.”\(^\text{11}\) As the mission is God’s, God’s agenda is determinative rather than that of colonialism, the church, or anything else. Theocentric missions is the upshot, with the church’s continual self-assessment the corollary. In light of missio Dei, the vital question for churches becomes: Are we on board with God’s mission in any given endeavor, or are we just calling it missions?

Critics have relentlessly leveled one charge in particular against advocates’ lofty claims for missio Dei: “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.”\(^\text{12}\) There are two different uses of this well-worn adage, and both call to attention important implications for the conceptualization of missio Dei.

First, missio Dei seems to imply an ontological assertion: God is missionary in nature. The corollary is therefore that everything God does is mission. Beyond the fear that this entails a “humanistic” or “social” gospel a la Hoekendijk, the problem with everything being mission is that it “necessarily makes light work of the distinction that Christian theology, because it is rooted in church members’ experience of God, has to make between the incomprehensible activity of God in the world and the redeeming and healing activity of Jesus Christ.”\(^\text{13}\)

Putting it this way, God is admittedly “doing” much more than the salvation-historically limited activity of Jesus and the Spirit in the church. The complaint is therefore semantic: because of the experiential (i.e., epistemological) difference between what are usually called “sustaining” activity and “saving” activity, there is legitimate need to distinguish between the two in our God-talk.

\(^{10}\) G"unther, 530.


\(^{13}\) Richeb"achter, 591.
In other words, if God’s “missionary nature” requires that we call everything he does from providence to personal salvation “mission,” what word then will we use for the activity traditionally designated as mission? Of course, this objection does not actually deny that we ought theologically to understand all of God’s activity in terms of his revealed activity (the sending of the Son). Rather, it is a caution against ascribing to God through the label “mission” a variety of activities that are not known to be God’s doing in the same way that God’s people know their own experiences to be his doing.

Second, if everything God does is mission, then mission becomes the proper descriptor of everything the church does in participation with him. “Mission” effectively becomes synonymous with “ministry.” Therefore, many object to the idea that “everything is mission” in reference to the church’s activity. Tormod Engelsviken is representative:

> It takes some courage to limit or restrict both the biblical basis and the theological understanding of mission, as well as the practical outworking of it to what is the specifically missionary “intention,” without denying the missionary “dimension” (to borrow the famous words of Lesslie Newbigin) of all the church is doing.14

This seems like another semantic grievance, however, if we are willing to admit that all Christian ministry (“all the church is doing”) has a missionary “dimension” by virtue of its relationship to all that God is doing. Although it is frustrating to our established linguistic compartmentalization, the “discovery” of missio Dei calls the church to speak about all that God does and all that the people of God do in participation with him in terms of the sending of Son and Spirit.

Indeed, the generalization of mission as a theological category was inevitable, for while the conceptualization of missio Dei occurred in the context of classically “missionary” concerns, its trinitarian basis meant that a shift necessarily occurred in theology proper rather than in missiology alone. That is to say, what is true of cross-cultural church work because it is true of God must also be true of every other church work. Whatever we are doing, we are merely participants in what God is doing. If this principle is true, the essential question remains: Is everything God is doing revealed paradigmatically in the missio of Son and Spirit? If so, we can hardly speak wrongly of everything God and the church do by calling it mission.

In contrast to the usual objection, Wolfgang Günther states:

> [Missio Dei] offers an umbrella, as it were, under which all the different biblical motives for mission and the corresponding different directions in our churches have their rightful place but are at the same time relativized. God’s mission is so all encompassing that all who take part in it can only ever take up one small part of it.15

These words are reminiscent of David Bosch, the theologian who spelled out the implications of missio Dei for evangelical Christianity in his landmark work, Transforming Mission:

> We do need a more radical and comprehensive hermeneutic of mission. In attempting to do this we may perhaps move close to viewing everything as mission, but that is a risk we will have to take. Mission is a multifaceted ministry, in respect of witness, service, justice, healing,

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14 Engelsviken, 484.
15 Günther, 530.
reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualization, and much more. And yet, even the attempt to list some dimensions of mission is fraught with danger, because it again suggests that we can define what is infinite. Whoever we are, we are tempted to incarcerate the missio Dei in the narrow confines of our own predilections, thereby of necessity reverting to one-sidedness and reductionism. We should beware of any attempt at delineating mission too sharply.16

It was indeed a risk that Bosch took, in that he dared to accept what missio Dei meant for the nature of the whole church itself: “There is church because there is mission,”17 “it is the missio Dei which constitutes the church,”18 and ultimately, therefore, “Christianity is missionary by its very nature, or it denies its very raison d’être.”19 It follows, then, that we should call all that the church does “mission,” regardless of the risk of misuse it entails or the change of vocabulary it requires.

The shift in theology proper continues to reverberate through the theological disciplines. These aftershocks are proving extremely generative and, reciprocally, refining the concept of missio Dei. As Bosch indicated, ecclesiology was foremost among the fields forever changed for those who would accept the implications of missio Dei. The widespread acceptance that the church, by virtue of missio Dei, is missionary in its very nature has led to a fundamental reorientation of the church’s self-understanding, its motives for participation in mission, and its view of the gospel vis-à-vis the kingdom message of Jesus. This has found expression in the “missional church” movement, which requires a brief explanation of the semantic evolution that produced the term “missional.” Darrell Guder, one of the leading missional church thinkers, explains:

This terminological experimentation is, to be sure, driven by all that we have learned in the twentieth century as we became more aware that the Christian movement was in fact a global reality, a “world missionary community” (Mackay). Understanding this “great new fact of our time” has encouraged the gradual shift away from ecclesial thinking that centers upon the church, especially the Western church, as an end in itself, and instead toward understanding the identity and purpose of the church within God’s mission, subordinate to and focused upon God’s purposes. The term “missional” was introduced in order to foster this more radical way of thinking about the church and, more generally, of doing theology. It was, as we stated in the Gospel and Our Culture network’s research project published in 1998, an attempt to unpack the operative assumption that “the church is missionary in its very nature.”20

Guder notes that the term has begun to suffer a fate similar to “missio Dei” regarding its overuse and subsequent vacuousness. Moreover, “missional” has become “a cliché, a buzz word” in pop Christianity, further diminishing the value of the word for many.21 In fact, that is a problem that confronts the entire missional church movement, as its impulse toward contextualization has caused it to be lumped together with the “emergent church” phenomenon. For many who so freely sling these labels about, “missional” and

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16 Bosch, 512.
17 Ibid., 390.
18 Ibid., 519.
19 Ibid., 9.
21 Ibid.
“emergent” seem merely to connote a culturally relevant or, less flatteringly, a “cool” way to be the church.22

Still, “missional” appears to have finally filled the terminological void over which the semantic arguments above languished. That is to say, the adjective “missional” denotes the “dimension” of the entire church that corresponds to the missio Dei, leaving “missionary” for the properly “sending” activity (“intention”) of the church. More generally, missional is “simply an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes or dynamics of mission. Missional is to the word mission what covenantal is to covenant, or fictional to fiction” (emphasis original).23

Given this development, we might now rather say that God is missional in nature, and therefore the church is missional in nature, reserving missionary for the persons and activities related to the church’s particular sendings.

In any event, the missional church movement is one of the most prominent aftereffects of missio Dei’s rise. In essence, it is the outworking of what it means for a congregation to be sent as the Son was sent in its context, apart from the issue of sending missionaries to other contexts. Ecclesiology has taken a turn for the participatory, thereby challenging ever greater numbers of the church’s members to consider what being a part of this missional body means for their own lives. Becoming part of a church as an end in itself is, thankfully, a dying model in many corners.

All of this church-talk is naturally taking place within the traditionalist vein of the earlier dichotomy. Church is a working assumption in the ongoing conversation. Sadly, the Church Growth Movement that rose to prominence among traditionalists, in part as a reaction to the secularizing trends of the humanist vein, stayed disconcertingly close to ecclesiocentrism.24 Yet, missional church thinkers represent a long-overdue, grassroots reconvergence of traditionalist and humanist concerns. Many churches have begun to ad-

Figure 1: One Evangelical View of Mission

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22 Such connotations are certainly not what the theological leadership of these movements intends.


24 The history of the split between traditionalists and humanists as it played out in the International Missionary Council and other gatherings, the “moratorium” on missions among liberals, the emergence of the Church Growth Movement among conservatives, and many other pertinent concerns cannot be addressed fully in this brief introduction to the concept of missio Dei.
vocate a vision of “shalom” or total well-being on a global, societal scale in conjunction with the church’s vital participation in God’s realization of that reality, which is called the kingdom of God. Figure 1, reproduced from a recent missions textbook, is indicative of the way in which evangelical theology is currently resolving the tension between the narrow, traditional use of “mission” on one hand and the somewhat novel understanding of God’s extra-ecclesial work in terms of “mission” on the other.

This represents a critical shift from a dialectic to a synthetic understanding of missio Dei, progress beyond the initial conflict that stood at the heart of the formula. While a holistic understanding of missio Dei was present in embryonic form in the theology of many Willingen participants, the dichotomy that emerged subsequently between traditionalists and humanists prevented its acceptance on a broad scale. We are now beginning to see a church-wide discovery of the whole mission of God, exemplified in Jesus’ total witness to the in-breaking reality of the kingdom.

Another potentially monumental shift is evident in the current discussions of missio Dei. It is move to a substantive teleology, signaling a step beyond the early intersections of ecclesiology with eschatology and salvation-history with Trinity. This shift is reflected in a subtle, albeit natural, change in the usage of “mission” in English-language missiological discussion, which echoes broad cultural usage of the term:

Many organizations talk about their mission. There are missions to explore space, diplomatic missions, mission statements of businesses, and fact-finding missions. All of these rely on the core idea of mission—the sending of someone or something to do a job.

While many have explained mission in terms of an over-simplified etymological notion of “sending,” the emerging sense of mission in contemporary usage is focused on the purpose, goal, or aim—in short, the telos—that drives the sending. It has been common to refer to “God’s purposes” in the discussion of missio Dei. For instance, Hartenstein’s initial formulation cited above refers explicitly to the “holistic aim” of participation in the sending of the Son; a conceptual union of Trinity and telos. Recently, however, teleology is becoming constitutive of the meaning of the missio Dei itself. In other words, while the sending of the Son is still paradigmatic and determinative for mission, and while the historical conceptual development discussed above still stands behind today’s ubiquitous reference to “God’s mission,” the concept of missio Dei has broadened theologically beyond discussion of the Trinity. This is distinct, however, from the humanist...

__25__A. Scott Moreau et al., *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical Historical and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 73. This way of presenting the terminology is problematic for the simple reason that missio Dei is very often translated as “the mission of God” in English literature. It is confusing, therefore, to use “mission” exclusively for “what the church does.” Likewise, “missions” for many means simply “what the church does,” leaving no special terminology for “evangelism, discipleship, and church planting” over against other acts of witness and service. Yet, the impulse among conservatives to define missions only in terms of those three aspects is still strong, and we may understand the diagram as a helpful compromise. In any case, the authors are right when they say, “... at least for now among evangelical writers, knowing how a particular person uses a term is more important than knowing what the term means in the larger discipline of missiology” (ibid.).

__26__Ibid., 71.

__27__There is still a good deal of work being done vis-à-vis trinitarian theology, and it remains the necessary starting point for the conceptualization of missio Dei. See, e.g., Mark Love’s article in the present issue, which calls the trinitarian conceptualization of missio Dei into new territory. Nonetheless, a broadening has undoubtedly occurred, with the result that trinitarian theology is no longer the only realm in relation to which missio...
AN ABBREVIATED INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF MISSIO DEI

camp’s abstraction of “sending” from the Gospel accounts in order to generalize it as a universal principle. It is, instead, a theological reflection upon the reason for the sending of the Son—that which stands behind and fuels the mission. In summary, to speak of the *missio Dei* is to denote its purpose.

In a way, the movement to a less exclusively trinitarian idea of God’s mission is an echo of the much-debated historical discord between the formal disciplines of Biblical and Systematic Theology. Mission seems to have presented itself as a contender for the ever-elusive “center” that Biblical Theology seeks, yet it is with tremendous difficulty that Trinity, the pinnacle of Systematic thought, should serve as such. The purpose manifest in *missio Dei*, however, is proving most promising. Thus, Christopher J. H. Wright’s watershed work, *The Mission of God*, puts mission to work for Biblical Theology, contending that the biblical narrative’s “whole worldview is predicated on teleological monotheism” (emphasis added). “The Bible presents to us a portrait of God that is unquestionably purposeful,” says Wright, and mission is best understood as “a long-term purpose or goal that is to be achieved through proximate objectives and planned actions.”

On this basis, Wright sets out to develop and employ a “missional hermeneutic,” which is the latest significant upshot of *missio Dei*. While Wright’s is the first major monograph on the subject, he is notably preceded by Richard Bauckham’s outline of a mission-centered narrative hermeneutic, which has a substructure justifiably described as teleological, in that “a metanarrative of this kind has a definite future goal towards which it moves.” These attempts at constructing a missional hermeneutic are merely another manifestation of the affirmation that “everything is mission.” If mission is an adequate conceptual category for all God’s activity, it naturally follows that we may read the entire narrative of Scripture through the lens of God’s purposeful movement toward his ends. Moreover, “missional” becomes the descriptor for the framework that holds together all the theological disciplines in proper relation to God’s agenda, which ultimately gives them their significance and which they serve.

A teleological definition of mission naturally raises the question of what God’s *telos* is. Even assuming that “the kingdom” is the goal, as much of the literature appears to do, our subsequent description of the kingdom continues to be subject to a variety of interpretations, as it was from the beginning of *missio Dei’s* emergence. But this is not the place to begin exploring the many possible articulations of God’s purposes for the world. For now, suffice it to note this most recent step in the conceptual evolution of *missio Dei*.

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*Drei* is rightly defined.

28 Biblical Theologians often consider doctrinal formulations such as the Trinity to be suspect on the grounds that they are read into the text (particularly the Old Testament), preventing proper exegesis. In contrast, mission as an expression of the teleological shape of the whole biblical narrative seems to some to be more native to the text.

29 Wright, 64.

30 Ibid., 23.

31 E.g., see the important work being done on missional interpretation at the Gospel and Our Culture Network (http://www.gocn.org/resources/newsletters/2009/01/gospel-and-our-culture).


33 Guder, 66-69.
CONCLUSION

What began as a contextually driven search for answers has led to one of the most significant theological developments of our time. There are perhaps other concepts that could have functioned to recenter the church in a similar way. Yet, it was immersion into the global vision that world missions uniquely engenders that called the church to account in the middle of the last century. In that sense, the conceptualization of missio Dei is itself another affirmation that mission is the mother of theology.

It was the need to reconsider what it means to be sent as the Son was sent, in his way for his purposes, that afforded a renewed theocentrism, a chastened ecclesiology, and a reframing of “everything” in relation to God’s being and act revealed in the sending of Son and Spirit. Undoubtedly, whenever a single formula attempts to designate what “everything” is about there must be tremendous repercussions. Many will continue to feel that missio Dei and its adjectival neologism “missional” are too provincial, too entrenched in the special concerns of missiology, to provide an adequate framework for “everything.” In the ensuing dialogue about the adequacy of our words, it is vital to remember that terminology is not what is truly at stake. Rather, it is the need somehow to speak about the concepts that should shape Christianity’s very worldview. Our capacity to obfuscate essential theological tenets is undisputed; our tendency to see ourselves and our world wrongly, undeniable. Whatever words we choose, we must not fail to speak about who God is in light of the sending of Jesus and the Spirit and what that means for everything we are and do.

GLOSSARY OF KEY WORDS

colonialism - n. (a) the expansion of influence from one society to another with the aim of control, whether by literal colonization or by political and cultural domination; (b) specifically referring to the expansion of Western civilization during the 18th-20th centuries

ecclesiocentrism - n. (a) literally, church-centeredness, i.e., the placement of primary importance upon the church; (b) in missiology, the view that Christian mission has its source, sustenance, and culmination in the church

eschatology - n. (a) the theological study of the “end” (eschaton), referring to the “last day” as envisioned in the biblical narrative; (b) realized eschatology refers to the realization, to one degree or another, of end events in the present time, as in the realization of the kingdom of God in human history

humanist view - n. in this paper, the perspective of those who understand missio Dei to refer to a principle of God’s action in the world without necessary reference to the sending of Son and Spirit, thus affording humanity’s social and political agendas preeminence in the description of God’s mission

missio Dei - n. (a) a Latin phrase literally translated as mission of God or sending of God, the meaning of which varies depending upon the theological disposition of the speaker; (b) originally, the sending of the Son and Spirit; (c) in other usage, the principle of God’s
immediate involvement in the improvement of the human situation through secular political and historical processes; (d) in recent English usage, the purpose or goal of God

**missional** - *adj.* (a) describing something that is related to God’s mission in an essential way; (b) often connotes the corrective assertion that something should not be understood apart from God’s mission, as in “missional church”

**missionary** - *n.* (a) a sent person; (b) in traditional usage, a person sent to carry out the purposes of God or the church, usually cross-culturally; *adj.* (c) of or related to persons sent, as in “missionary endeavor”; (d) sometimes used synonymously with *missional*, where the notion of being sent in the usual sense is absent, as in “the church is missionary is it very nature”

**missions** - *n.* (a) the church’s work of “sending,” whether near or far, for the purpose of participation in God’s mission, synonymous with mission work, as in “domestic missions” or “domestic mission work”; (b) sometimes synonymous with *missio ecclesiae*, a Latin phrase literally translated as *mission of the church*, which denotes the categorical difference between the church’s activity and God’s activity; (c) sometimes reserved for particular activities such as evangelization and church planting

**salvation history** - *n.* (a) a concept developed in Biblical Theology to express the relationship between secular history and history as the Bible tells it in terms of God’s saving acts; (b) denotes the continuous, epochal account of God’s work in history understood by virtue of particular moments of redemption or revelation recorded in the Bible; (c) functionally synonymous with postmodern usage of “biblical narrative” or “metanarrative,” which express a unified story not in terms of modernist “history” but in terms of a worldview that places all history in relation to its particular epistemological claims

**teleology** - *n.* (a) the theological study of purpose (*telos*); (b) specifically, the study of the purposes of God, especially in relation to his mission

**theocentrism** - *n.* (a) literally, God-centeredness, i.e., the placement of primary importance upon God; (b) in missiology, the view that Christian mission has its source, sustenance, and culmination in God

**traditionalist view** - *n.* in this paper, the perspective of those who understand *missio Dei* to define mission as particularly God’s, though never without reference to the church’s participation in that mission, thus maintaining the church’s traditional instrumentality

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From Theology to Practice: Participating in the Missio Dei

GAILYN VAN RHEENEN

This article seeks to reflect the reciprocal flow from theology to practice. People of God prayerfully read and discern the meanings of Scripture and are led to Christian practice by the Spirit of God. This flow from theology to practice is illustrated by the theology and practices of missio Dei. The narrative of Scripture describes God as the source of mission. This God, who is both holy and compassionate, calls and sends missionaries who carry out his purposes. These finite humans, however, typically question and doubt their abilities and calling along the journey. The theology of missio Dei implies a number of missional practices: entering God’s presence, interpreting and entering into God’s story, participating in trinitarian community, and incarnating God’s mission. These ministry practices, in turn, give rise to dilemmas and new questions, which lead the practitioner back to theological reflection. Missional growth occurs within this reciprocal interaction between theology and practice.

THEOLOGY AND MISSIOLOGY

In a very real sense theology is the mother of missiology. Out of theological reflections we form practical missiological categories and practices. It is equally true that missiology is the mother of theology. Out of missiological practice, we raise questions for theological reflection. These questions deal with how practices reflect the nature and purposes of God. Missions is best accomplished when there is a reciprocal flow from theology to missiology and from missiology to theology. Missiology and theology became distinct disciplines in the Modern Age due to the rise of pragmatism in the West and the need to differentiate teaching specialties within the academy.

When missiology is divorced from theology, practitioners make decisions by their own culturally-derived inclinations. They trust in human ingenuity and assume that they are theologically reflective. Paul Hiebert writes:

Too often we choose a few themes and from these build a simplistic theology rather than look at the profound theological motifs that flow through the whole of Scripture. Equally disturbing to the foundations of mission is the dangerous potential of shifting from God and his work to the emphasis on what we can do for God by our own knowledge and efforts. We become captive to a modern secular worldview in which human control and technique replace divine leading and human obedience as the basis of mission.1

Opting into a secular or other non-Christian worldview results in a type of syncretism. Frequently this is an unconscious blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture. Thus, Christianity speaks with a voice reflective of the culture. Syncretism develops because the Christian community attempts to make its message and life attractive, alluring, and appealing to those outside the fellowship. Over a period of years the accommodations become routinized, integrated into the narrative story of the Christian community, and inseparable from its life.2

2 Gailyn Van Rheenen. “Modern and Postmodern Syncretism in Theology and Missions,” in The Holy Spirit
For example, Jim and his family planted a church. The guiding question forming his strategy was “How can we meet the needs of the people of this community and make this church grow?” Jim raised money for the launch, built a staff, gathered a launch team, held events to gather those interested, held preliminary preview services, and launched a weekly meeting after six months with an attendance of 200 and three years later has an average attendance of 700 people each Sunday. His goal was to launch big in order to develop momentum. By all appearances he is very successful. However, Jim is inwardly perturbed. He acknowledges that his church attracts people because it caters to what they want. The church is more a vendor of goods and services than a community of the kingdom of God. Jim knows that those attending have mixed motives: attending is their duty, a place to meet people of influence, or where children receive moral instruction. Church attendance assuages guilt and declares to others (and to self) that “I am religious.” A spiritual responsibility has been discharged. Therefore, all is well. Observing the disconnectedness and worldliness of members leads Jim to ask himself, “What have I created?”

Developing a theology of missions helps overcome such syncretism.

**METAPHORS OF THEOLOGY OF MISSION**

Two “ship” metaphors help us discern this relationship between theology and practice.

A theology of mission is like the rudder of a boat or ship guiding the mission of God and providing its direction. My wife is fond of remembering how our children frequently wanted to “drive” when we took them on pedal-boats. At times they were so intent on pedaling, making the boat move, that the rudder was held in an extreme position, and we went in circles. Realizing their mistake, but still intent on pedaling, they would move the rudder from one extreme to the other so that we zig-zagged across the lake. When missionaries operate without the foundation of a missional theology, their lives and ministries tend to zig-zag from fad to fad, from one theological perspective and related philosophies of ministry to another. A theology of mission, like the rudder of a boat, provides us practical direction for Christian ministry.

A theology of mission is also like the engine of a boat or ship propelling forward the mission of God. One spring my wife and I taught at Abilene Christian University’s campus abroad program in Montevideo, Uruguay. During the semester, we traveled with our students to Iguazu Falls, a spectacular waterfall between Brazil and Argentina. One highlight of our visit was a motorboat excursion against the mighty currents of the river almost to the foot of the falls. I was impressed not only by the immensity of the flow of the water but also the power of the engine to pull the boat against the tide up the river. A mission theology, like the engine of a boat, provides the power that enables finite humans to carry God’s infinite mission against currents of popular cultures.

Jim, in our example, while believing in and preaching from Scripture, unintentionally applied the beliefs and practices of his secular culture to ministry strategy. He believed that human ingenuity employing marketing strategies of a secular culture would grow a church. And in a sense it did! He planted a church with great appeal to the local culture.

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But it did not reflect the love, holiness, and faithfulness of a people formed to live as participants in the kingdom of God. Jim caught in the ebb and flow of cultural currents inadequately employed the rudder and engine of theology to guide and empower the mission.

A theology of mission provides both direction and empowerment for developing practices of missions.

These metaphors illustrate that theology is indispensable to the mission of God. A theology of mission provides both direction and empowerment for developing practices of missions.

Mission Alive, the church planting ministry with which I minister, encourages participants to move intentionally from Theology to Practices to Structure. We reflect on overarching themes of Scripture like the kingdom of God, incarnation, and *missio Dei*—threads interwoven in the narrative of Scripture which form Christian reality. We then ask how these themes are practiced within Christian ministry. These theologies and practices guide us to develop spiritually formative structures commensurate with the theologies and practices.

In this article we will consider the theme of *missio Dei*, the title of this journal and a significant beginning point for discussing the movement from theology to practice.

**A NARRATIVE THEOLOGY OF MISSIO DEI**

This theology, *missio Dei*, “express[es] the conviction that mission is not the invention, responsibility, or program of human beings, but flows from the character and purposes of God.”\(^3\) God, the source of mission, who is both holy and compassionate, calls and sends his people to be his missionaries who carry out his purposes. As finite humans, however, we typically question and doubt our abilities and calling along the journey.

God, for instance, called Abraham to become the father of an elect nation and sent him to a land that he did not know (Gen 12:1-7). Abraham, however, doubted God’s promises. Why could he not settle in Haran where some of his own people lived rather than going on to Canaan (Gen 11:31)? Would God protect him (Gen 12:10-20)? How could he become a great nation since he had no son (Gen 15:2-6)? What sign would God give him that he would possess the land of Canaan (Gen 15:8-21)? Despite these doubts, Abraham “believed the Lord” (Gen 15:6).\(^4\) His faith grew so that he was willing to obey God’s command to sacrifice his son (Gen 22) because he believed that God, who is faithful to his promises, would raise him from the dead (Heb 11:17, 19).

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\(^4\) The New International Version (NIV) is used throughout this paper.
God called the reluctant Moses to go back to Egypt (Exod 3:1-12) to lead the Israelites from captivity. Moses, however, felt inadequate. Forty years earlier Moses, the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, identified the Israelites as “his own people” and felt the injustice of their bondage. He slew an Egyptian slave master (Exod 2:11-15), expecting that they would realize that “God was using him to rescue them” (Acts 7:23). God’s timing, however, was not the same as Moses’. After forty years in Midian, God called Moses to return to Egypt as his missionary of deliverance. Moses feared God’s call. He felt insufficient, afraid that he could not accomplish the task. He failed to realize that the mission was God’s, not his. He was merely the emissary carrying out the mission of God. Moses’ misunderstanding led him to object: “Who am I that I should go?” (Exod 3:11); “Who shall I say sent me?” (Exod 3:13); “What if they don’t believe me?” (Exod. 4:1) and “I have never been eloquent. . . . I am slow of speech” (Exod 4:10). These objections illustrate the human tendency to make God’s mission a mission of self. Each was based on human deficiencies or misunderstandings. God’s responses, however, proclaimed that the mission is greater than the missionary. The ever-present I AM WHO I AM was behind it. 

God’s calling and sending is reflected throughout Scripture. He called Isaiah by revealing his holiness, helping Isaiah realize his sinfulness, leading him to repentance and cleansing, and then sending Isaiah to Jerusalem as his spokesman (Isa 6:1-10). God called Jeremiah as a child to prophesy and weep over a disobedient nation (Jer 1:4-8; 8:21-9:2) who were about to go into captivity (Jer 5:18). God called Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah at various times and sent them to organize his captive people and lead them back to Jerusalem. God sent his only Son to earth to reveal his “glory, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10), and “to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8b). Jesus, in turn, sent his disciples, stating, “As the father sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21, cf. 17:18). Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, God sent his Holy Spirit as another Counselor so that his people would not be left as orphans (John 14:15-18).

The calling and sending of God was also evident in the early Christian church. By his authority as resurrected Lord, Jesus commissioned his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:18-20). These disciples were sent by divine power for divine purposes. God called and sent Peter by the Holy Spirit to the house of Cornelius, thus opening the door to the Gentiles (Acts 10). God called Saul as he was traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute Christians. In a vision Jesus told him: “I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:17-18). Paul invited Timothy to join Silas and him as they traveled on the Second Missionary Journey (Acts 16:1-4). Titus accompanied Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1). These early Christians defined themselves as apostles (Rom 1:1, 5; 1 Cor 1:1; cf. Gal 1:15-17) or ambassadors (2 Cor 5:18-20), in other words, those sent to represent God in his mission.

Sometimes God enters into the human situation himself and becomes the Sent One, the Missionary. For instance, when Adam and Eve first sinned, God himself walked in
the Garden of Eden seeking his fallen creation (Gen 3:8-19). God fought all night with Jacob, the deceiver who stole his brother’s blessing and birthright, and changed his name to Israel, meaning “one who struggles with God” (Gen 32:22-29). God in Jesus became flesh and entered human culture (John 1:14). God in his Holy Spirit indwells Christians to emancipate them from sin and to lead his people forward in witness to the world (Acts 1:8).

Understanding God’s trinitarian nature amplifies our understanding of missio Dei. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, though separate personalities, operate in perfect unity. The church, when living in communion with the Trinity, is called to reflect the harmony and qualities of this union (John 17:20-23). David Bosch describes this trinitarian unity of God’s mission: “The classical doctrine of the missio Dei as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit is expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”

![Figure 1: The Flow of the Mission of God](image_url)

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God continues to call and send his disciples into his mission, and these disciples continue to question and doubt their calling and ability to fulfill the mission. My wife Becky and I have both received the callings and experienced the doubts. To be frank sometimes I am so filled with insecurity that I question every step I take even as God calls me forward. I have been surprised to find how much I am like Moses, asking God, “Who am I that I should go?” I struggle to listen to God when he says, “I will be with you!”

Early in life I received the call to be a missionary. It was rooted in my upbringing, much like Timothy (2 Tim 1:5), from parental encouragement to experiences in a Christian high school and university to graduate studies. Becky made a decision to be a missionary by marrying one. We felt the hand of God in times of blessing and when Christian leaders spoke into our lives encouraging us as messengers of God. We doubted our ability to leave our parents and friends and form new relationships in another land, to raise our young son (and children to come) in a foreign land, to learn new languages and cultures, and to serve as God’s messengers opening a new area to his gospel. I especially worried because of a learning disability that hinders language learning. But God was faithful in the midst of our doubts and struggles.

The mission of God, as illustrated in Figure 1, originated in the mind of God. He is its source. The mission flowed from him to Christ, who proclaimed God’s kingdom and in his death enacted God’s kingdom plan. He prayed that the Father would send the Spirit. This Spirit empowered the church for mission. God’s mission flowed, then, from God to Christ to the church, who, empowered by the Spirit, carries the mission to the world. Mission, therefore, is derived from the very nature of God who sends and saves finite humans who doubt and struggle along the journey.

FROM THEOLOGY TO PRACTICE

What practices are implied by this theology of missio Dei?

Entering God’s Presence

First, the theology of missio Dei leads us into God’s presence—to be spiritually formed by him. We, as fallen humans, are not magically transformed from sinner to saint. That transformation takes place only as we dwell in God’s presence and allow him to shape us. There are no easy roads to God. The journey is more like navigating the ruts and holes of muddy, rutted roads through forests of obstacles and discouragements than traveling well-paved interstates. Like Abraham and Moses, we question and doubt along the journey, and frequently fall from God. We grow to maturity only by looking beyond ourselves to God. We move into his presence by listening, trusting, depending—moving beyond ourselves to absorb his transforming radiance. Only then are we “transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). Spiritual transformation occurs only by God’s power, despite and through our human frailty.

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This shaping of our minds and souls is called spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is walking with God in such an intimate way that our character reflects his love, holiness, and faithfulness. Imagine 1 Peter 2:1-3 played out in life: Deborah comes into a Christian community as a spiritually curious God-seeker and “tastes that the Lord is good” (v. 3). While walking with other Christians in community, God begins to mold her in amazing ways, helping her overcome “malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (v. 1). As she comes to Christ a radical transition occurs: “Like a newborn baby, she craves pure spiritual milk, so that by it she grows up in her salvation” (v. 3). It comes from a thirst for living water (John 7:37). God is molding her within a community of Christ-followers, the matrix of her spiritual formation.

This journey of spiritual transformation is an ongoing, threefold process of purgation from sin and the dominion of Satan, illumination of God’s love and holiness, and union with God. These three moves into God’s presence are “simultaneous rather than sequential, but our finitude prevents us from seeing their simultaneity, so that we perceive of them as distinct phases.”7 The “dryness and fruitlessness” of our souls hinders us from entering the mission of God.8 Only God can purge, illuminate, and unite us with him. Missio Dei ultimately flows out of this union with God.

Seldom does one enter the presence of God individually; it is typically in communion with others. An African proverb says, “Malale kwendet agenge” (“One piece of firewood alone does not burn”). Thus listening to God almost always implies listening with others on a heart level. One model practiced by many in our church plantings is called CO2, or “Church of 2”.9 Those on a journey toward God check in with each other to listen to each other as they mutually listen to God. They acknowledge, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up” (Eccles 4:9-10). Neil Cole says:

The basic unit of Kingdom life is a follower of Christ in relationship with another follower of Christ. The micro form of church life is a unit of two or three believers in relationship. This is where we must begin to see multiplication occur. Let’s face it: if we can’t multiply a group of two or three, then we should forget about multiplying a group of fifteen to twenty.10

In CO2 conversations the acronym SASHET (Sad, Angry, Scared, Happy, Excited, Tender) provides beginning words for describing the condition of the heart. CO2s may be daily phone conversations for two weeks or twice weekly exchanges for a more extended period. A church planter focuses on nurturing a few leaders who in turn nurture other leaders. Church planter Micah Lewis says:

I have found this practice to be the most exciting spiritual practice I have ever done. I don’t even think of it as a practice but simply as pouring myself into a relationship with God. I have started a CO2 with a good friend that I work with at Starbucks. We check in almost ev-

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8 Ibid., 31.
An important question is, What spiritually formative practices help sojourners and searchers as well as those of the community of faith come more fully into the presence of God? Practices will vary from culture to culture, context to context. CO2, for instance, is exceptionally appropriate in impersonal, individualistic cultures where people do not naturally walk together.

Imperative to this process is a contemporary catechesis for spiritual formation. This formation process should overview the narrative and fundamental teachings of the Bible; encourage memorization of Scripture (to put nuggets of God into Christian hearts); nurture holiness, love, and faithfulness within the context of ministry; and bring followers face-to-face with significant passages like the Sermon on the Mount. This spiritual formation is not so much taught as caught within a community of nurture, encouragement, and training. Alan Kreider’s *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* overviews the spiritual formation patterns of the early Christian church and illustrates our need to contextualize appropriate patterns with high expectations for those on a journey to kingdom living in this post-Christendom age.

Gradually we begin to listen to God and are surprised that God calls us into his mission. Despite questioning and doubt, we place our lives in his hands and allow him to form and lead us in his mission. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19). We likewise acknowledge that we can do nothing by ourselves but only seek to do what the Father does as illustrated by the life and ministry of Jesus.

This transformation leads us to read Scripture in a new and exciting way.

**Interpreting and Entering into God’s Story**

Second, *missio Dei* leads us to read Scripture as an amazing story of God’s movement through human history. The Bible begins with the story of creation (“In the beginning, God created . . .”) and the Gospels with the story of Christ (“In the beginning was the Word . . .”). Other genres of Scripture (Law, Letter, Prophetic Oracle, Wisdom, and Psalm, and Hymn) reflect their own particular historical settings.

Many of us, however, learned to think through Modern categories that sought to reduce the Bible to a logical compilation of facts. We assumed that “by avoiding human speculation and confining ourselves to bare scriptural facts, all people could come to understand the Bible alike. The biblical message was simple and clear, needing very little interpretation.”

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the kingdom of God (“hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized”) rather than the work of God in bringing us to him. We interpreted the Bible through a hermeneutic of “command, example, or necessary inference” rather than entering into the story of God’s redemptive history and allowing these narratives to form our identity. A new syncretism developed which took the facts of the Bible but interpreted them within the rational grid of our popular culture.

Trevor McIlwain of New Tribes Mission, seeking to understand the pervasive syncretism of the people served by his mission, realized that Christians only partially knew the storyline of Scripture and had inserted Christian components into their traditional narratives. His conclusion awakened me to the need for narrative theology:

We must not teach a set of doctrines divorced from their God-given historical setting, but rather, we must teach the story of the acts of God as He has chosen to reveal Himself in history. People may ignore our set of doctrines as our western philosophy of God, but the story of God’s actions in history cannot be refuted.\(^{14}\)

The Bible is a narrative describing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the Jesus who “appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (1 Tim 3:16); and the Holy Spirit leading his people in mission from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This trinitarian view of reality is progressively apparent throughout Scripture: the history of missio Dei portrays God the sovereign Lord in the Old Testament, the Anointed One sent to save us in the Gospels, and, in Acts and the Epistles, God’s leading in the church through the Holy Spirit. Bosch’s idea of God sending his Son and Spirit into the world, who in trinitarian unity send the church, becomes increasingly significant for understanding the mission of God. The Bible is a story of God’s sending; a story meant to be told, retold, and told again.

As we read Scripture, we hear within the words our own developing story(ies). Biblical stories focus our hearts, define our reality, and form our allegiance. Lives are shaped by hearing the doubt and faith of Abraham, the spiritual transformation of Jacob, the calling and ministry of Moses, and the gracious hand of the Lord upon Ezra to organize and lead God’s people. We define ourselves within God’s narrative.

**Participating in Trinitarian Community**

Third, a theology of missio Dei implies community. God, who exists in trinitarian community, calls us to form communities reflecting his kingdom unity. Jesus prayed:

My prayer is not for them 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. (John 17:20-24; emphasis added)

Christ partakes of God’s glory and is thereby united with his Father. A “perichoresis, or interpenetration,” exists “among the persons of the Trinity reveal[ing] that ‘the nature of God is communion.’” The church, when it reflects God’s glory, likewise participates in this unity. The church thus is a “finite” and “temporal echo of the eternal community that God is.” This trinitarian unity, seen in the church, is tangible, readily recognized by the world.

The ancient apologetic of Christianity, consequently, is not merely a set of rational postulates arguing for the existence of God but an incarnational apology of the presence of Christ in his people. “The church is a witness to the presence of Jesus in the world as it embodies and lives out its faith.” As “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,” we are able to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9). Roxburgh and Boren say that the church is called to be “a contrast community shaped by hospitality, radical forgiveness, the breaking down of social and racial barriers, and self-sacrificial love. As we live inside God’s story, we are shaped into habits of life that empower us to be the sign, witness, and foretaste of God’s dream.” The world, as it sees the church serving in its neighborhoods, among its relatives, and in its workplaces, recognizes the church’s distinctiveness. For example, bishops of the early Christian church wrote letters asking Christians not to flee to save their own lives like the Romans when pestilence broke out but to remain to serve the sick.

As a contrast society, the church serves the community by:

- Walking intimately with God, reflecting his love and holiness (2 Cor 3:18)
- Ministering to the poor, sick, and oppressed (Luke 4:18-19)
- Practicing hospitality (Rom 12:13; Lev. 19:33-34)
- Telling the story of God’s kingdom on different levels so that people can contextually hear it (Matt 13)
- Cultivating spiritual friendships (John 4)
- Giving and receiving ministry to help both self and others overcome sin and Satan (Acts 26:17-18)
- Fellowshipping all of God’s people (Gal 3:28)
- Making disciples (Matt 28:19)

These interconnected activities form some of the tangible ministries of a local church and lead the church to develop certain rhythms of Christian life and service.

How these activities are configured into the life of the church is not specifically mapped in Scripture but is learned on the journey. Churches are planted in different ways and with different emphases. Hugh Halter and Matt Smay describe three spheres of an incarnational community: mission, community, and communion. The kingdom becomes

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19 Ibid., 103.
tangible in the confluence of these three spheres. Some churches are planted out of mission: what Alan Hirsch calls communitas, or shared ministry. For example, compassionate ministry sometimes leads those serving the poor, sick, and oppressed to define themselves as a church. Some form more slowly out of personal relationship or community, with an emphasis on hospitality and cultivating spiritual friendships. Others form community out of deep communion with God and with each other. The deepness of the church draws sojourners and Christians into the journey with God.

These emphases are reflected within the ministry frameworks of various missional resource people: David Watson of Church Planting Movements emphasizes mission; Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, community; and John White of LK10 Resources, communion. While mission, community, and communion exist in all churches, there are varying emphases.

Developing trinitarian community is a great challenge in church planting and renewal. How does the church grow to reflect this trinitarian unity? The answers are not easy. Primarily, this challenge calls us to live in God’s presence continually being renewed by his Spirit. It involves churches restructuring around complementary gifts rather than hierarchal structures. Attention is given to equipping “God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:11-12), to become mature (v. 13). The church thus “grows up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (v. 15-16).

Participating in trinitarian community readies the church to participate in God’s mission.

**Incarnating God’s Mission**

Fourth, missio Dei implies incarnation—that God comes to us and lives in our midst! Sometimes God comes to us personally as he did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God incarnated himself in an elect people, the Israelites, so that they might be his light unto the nations, and came to them through prophets and priests. The ultimate expression of God’s incarnation, however, is Jesus Christ. God in Christ became a human being and lived among us so that humans witnessed “the glory of the One and Only, who comes from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God continues to come to the world through the church, “the continuation of the incarnation . . . the earthed reality of the presence of Jesus in and to the world” and through the apostles, prophets, and evangelists carrying God’s mission to the world.

The ministry of God’s living Messiah provides a model for our incarnational ministry. Even as Jesus taught and served the masses, he focused on equipping and sending disci-
His first priority was making disciples. He modeled, equipped, sent them out, and tutored them when they returned. This equipping prepared many for ministry in what eventually became a church planting movement. Thus the core phrase of the Great Commission—“go and make disciples” (Matt 28:18-20)—also describes the focus of Christ’s ministry.

This ministry of disciple-making is further defined by Jesus’ words to Saul on the road to Damascus: “I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 22:17-18). Thus Christ’s mission shows searchers a new kingdom reality (“open their eyes”) and breaks the fetters of sin and Satan (“turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God”). This mission creates a compassionate environment of forgiveness (“so that they may receive forgiveness of sins”), a nurturing community (“a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me”).

The mission of Jesus did not begin with the strong and powerful—within the upper class working downward or the middle class working outward—but with the poor and oppressed. The reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the Gospel of Luke is the climax of events describing Jesus’ ministry: he was led by the Spirit in his baptism (Luke 4:22), defeated Satan in the desert (4:1), and appeared in Galilee (4:14). Then Jesus read:

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me, 
> because he has anointed me 
> to preach good news to the poor. 
> He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners 
> and recovery of sight for the blind, 
> to release the oppressed, 
> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. 


These words defined—by God’s Spirit—Luke’s understanding of Christ’s mission!

“The year of the Lord’s favor” is the Year of Jubilee, which occurred every fifty years. At this time all debts were to be cancelled, all slaves released, and all lands restored to their previous owners (Lev 12:10, 38-42). The practices of Jubilee, seldom if ever observed, would now be realized in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus did not minister as a lord or earthly power broker. He came as a servant (Mark 10:45), a shepherd of the flock (John 10:11), and a steward of what God had entrusted him (John 5:19). He did not stand at the top of a pinnacle overseeing an earthly kingdom, but at the forefront of a wedge of people on mission being called and sent to minister within the culture and inviting searchers to listen and participate.24 At an appropriate time Jesus

24 George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North
called these searchers, saying, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” He first chose twelve apostles “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:14-15). He then sent out the twelve and then the seventy two-by-two to find a “worthy person” (Matt 10:11) or “a person of peace” (Luke 10:6) to replicate his mission.

Can these simple disciple-making practices of Jesus be reproduced with contextual adaptations in every tribe, people, or nation in the world?

This incarnational model tends to grow slower during the initial years because the emphasis is on disciple-making rather than gathering a crowd. Frequently, God uses these new disciples to teach others who teach others—resulting in a church planting movement. These churches, simple and with replicable processes of disciple-making, develop the momentum of a spreading virus, like the early church or the church in contemporary China.25

Missional leaders create environments for discipleship, not by replicating programs or developing projects but through life-on-life in the context of Christ-formed community. Programs and projects may aid specific facets of spiritual formation but often become a replacement for incarnational living. Life-on-life consists of incarnational living in existing cultural contexts, specifically the family, the neighborhood, the workplace, and Third Places.26

Misssional leaders create environments for discipleship, not by replicating programs or developing projects but through life-on-life in the context of Christ-formed community.

Family or kinship is the deepest relationship in the world, even in the Euro-American West. It is therefore not surprising that people come to Christ as a result of relatives influencing their own people. My co-worker Fielden Allison made a study of sixteen new churches among the Kipsigis of Kenya. Thirteen of the sixteen (or 81 percent) were started by a relative of one of the new Christians. The message of the Gospel generally flowed through consanguineal kinship ties (that is, related “by blood” rather than “by marriage”), and, as is typical in age-oriented cultures, from older to younger relatives.27 Sue Salazar brought two of her daughters to one of the first meetings of Christ Journey in Burleson, Texas. One daughter came with her husband and their three children; the other with her live-in boyfriend. This extended family became some of the first leaders of the church. It is important even in the West, where family relationships are waning

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26 “The third place is a term used in the concept of community building to refer to social surroundings separate from the two usual social environments of home and the workplace. In his influential book *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (1989, 1991) argues that third places are important for civil society, democracy, civic engagement, and establishing feelings of a sense of place.” (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, “Third place,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_place).

because of individuality and mobility, for Christians to be God’s missionaries to their families.

Neighborhood is likely the second most important context for missional ministry. Roxburgh and Boren say:

The task of the local church in our present situation is to reenter our neighborhoods, to dwell with and to listen to the narratives and stories of the people. . . . It will be in these kinds of relationships that we will hear all the clues about what the Spirit is calling us to do as the church in that place. But this is not a strategy we take to a context; it is a way of life we cultivate in a place where we belong.28

Missional Christians reflect all the practices of a missional church. They bring people together for community; neighborhood events, like a cookout or party in the park. They pray for the sick, welcome newcomers, mobilize resources to help those who have lost their jobs, paint houses, build patios, and welcome people to gather around their tables. They walk intimately with God reflecting his love and holiness and cultivate spiritual friendships. Living missionally in community naturally leads to the planting of neighborhood churches in homes, clubhouses, and storefronts. Roxburgh and Boren write, “We are learning to read Scripture with the eyes of our neighborhood, which reshapes our imagination about the mission of God and allows us to begin seeing Scripture in a new way.”29

We must also represent God in both our workplaces and in Third Places. Some develop prayer groups with workmates which opens doors to new families and neighborhoods. Christians with children may visit McDonald’s once a week to interact with other parents as they are together in the play area. Others office at Starbucks or Panera Bread or spend time each week in a local pub specifically to be God’s missional presence in those places. Wherever people gather, we are God’s presence . . . for the sake of the kingdom.

The major function of missional leaders is to equip disciples to represent Jesus among their relatives, where they live, and where they work, thereby developing groups listening to and being shaped by the living word of God. Their ministry is personal and empathetic, focused around hospitality and prayer and compassionate service. Through these practices the kingdom of God becomes tangible.

Dr. Gailyn Van Rheenen served as a church-planting missionary to East Africa for 14 years, taught Missions and Evangelism at Abilene Christian University for 17 ½ years, and is the founder and Facilitator of Church Planting in Mission Alive (http://missionalive.org). His books Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Perspectives (Zondervan), Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts (William Carey Library), and The Changing Face of World Missions (Baker Academic; authored with Michael Poook and Doug McConnell) are widely used by both students and practitioners of missions. He has edited Contextualization and Syncretism (William Carey Library, 2006), a compilation of presentations of the Evangelical Missiological Society. His Missiology Homepage (http://missiology.org) provides “resources for missions education” for local church leaders, field missionaries, and teachers of missions.

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28 Roxburgh and Boren, 85.
29 Ibid., 90.
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Missio Dei, Trinitarian Theology, and the Quest for a Post-Colonial Missiology

Mark Love

Missio Dei is the name given by theologians to the conception and practice of mission in a post-colonial world. Proposals related to missio Dei have appealed to and coincided with a rebirth in trinitarian theology. The present essay traces this conversation from Barth and Rahner to recent revising directions represented by Moltmann and Pannenberg, proposing that the way forward for understandings of missio Dei are tied to the reality of God constituted by dynamic, reciprocal, and open relations.

I am a self-professed “missional church” guy. I lead a graduate program in missional leadership, and I try to hang out where the missional church gang hangs out. I am in the finishing stages of a PhD in Congregational Mission and Leadership. Craig Van Gelder and Patrick Keifert are my professors. If there was a missional church lunch box and decoder ring, I would own them.

While I am happy with my new academic denomination, it is not without its problems. My computer’s spell-checker does not recognize the word missional. Nor do some of my colleagues who see it either as the latest buzzword, like seeker-sensitive and purpose-driven, or a curious conversation to which only missiologists must attend. Compounding the trouble surrounding this word is its less than disciplined use in the marketplace of churches where it can mean anything and everything. Everyone, it seems, is missional these days. This ubiquity threatens to stretch the word beyond its ability to mean anything substantive.

I am convinced, however, that this conversation is still worth attending despite all of its conceptual difficulties. The issues it addresses—an increasingly pluralistic North American culture, the social location of the church, the nature of the kingdom of God, practices of congregational leadership—are here to stay. Moreover, the resources used to respond to these issues go to the heart of Christian identity. Take, for instance, the statement of the authors of the seminal book Missional Church:

The basic thesis of this book is that the answer to the crisis of the North American church will not be found at the level of method and problem solving. We share the conviction of a growing consensus of Christians in North America that the problem is much more deeply rooted. It has to do with who we are and what we are for. The real issues in the current crisis of the Christian church are spiritual and theological. That is what this study is about.¹

The theological medicine prescribed by these writers begins with recognizing that mission belongs not to the church but to God. Missio Dei, or mission of God, is the name given to this theological impulse at the heart of the missional church conversation. This emphasis has in turn situated conversations about mission smack dab in the middle of trinitarian and eschatological concerns—the life of God and God’s ultimate intentions for all of creation. This conversation is not a still stream moving slowly by but a roaring river full of implications for the life of the church.

**MISSIO DEI MATTERS**

*Missio Dei* is more than an abstract exercise that allows missiologists to pass go and move on to strategic concerns. It is a response to real problems in the practice of mission. *Missio Dei*, it is hoped, forms a different kind of imagination for mission rooted in particular understandings of God, church, and world. This shift in imagination, in turn, offers a way past imperialist notions of mission for a post-colonial world.²

The significance, then, of defining the church in mission in relation to *missio Dei* is two-fold. First, it keeps the church from seeing its life as an end in itself. The church does not exist to propagate its own life or a particular cultural expression of Christianity, but to serve the interests of the inbreaking kingdom of God. The church is called always to give its life for the sake of something bigger than itself. *Missio Dei*, therefore, guards against a triumphalist church possessing an imperialist mission.

Craig Van Gelder makes this distinction nicely. The move to *missio Dei* “represents a fundamental reframing of God's primary location in relation to the world. When one starts by focusing on the purpose of the church, the church tends to become the primary location of God, which makes the church itself responsible to carry out activities in the world on behalf of God.”³ *Missio Dei*, in contrast, makes the Spirit of God the active agent of mission in the world, not just mission to the world. Additionally, mission is more than just an activity of the church. Mission is the church’s identity. The authors of *Missional Church* describe this identity as a “people sent.”⁴

Second, *missio Dei* makes theology, not strategy, the first task of a missional church. More particularly, this theological priority has turned the church’s attention more fully to God as triune. Making the trinitarian nature of God the condition of possibility for the church’s engagement with the world has the potential to bring fresh resources to notions of mission, especially in a Western Christianity trying to shake the lingering effects of Christendom. *Missio Dei* matters.

**MISSIO DEI AND TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY**

The term *missio Dei* has not been around forever. It arose among missiologists in the Twentieth Century. As indicated above, it was offered by some as a corrective to imperialistic forms of mission associated with Christendom. Karl Hartenstein, to whom many attribute introduction of the term *missio Dei*, played a prominent role in “The Missionary Obligations of the Church” working group at the International Mission Conference at Willingen, Germany (1952). The group produced a theological statement related to mission notable for its trinitarian grounding:

²By “imperialist notions of mission” I have in mind practices of mission wed to Christendom that failed to distinguish the interests of the gospel from the concerns of the empire. Taking Christ to the world was indistinguishable from taking them Western culture. As a result, local cultural practices and perspectives were largely seen as inferior, needing to be replaced with more civilized practice. In its worst forms, locals were converted through coercion, colonized, and exploited for Western gain.


⁴Guder, *The Missional Church*. This stands in contrast to seeing the church as “a place where things happen.” I will suggest later in the paper that the image of sending, while biblical and appropriate, has its limits.
The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself.
Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth his own beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all men might, through the Spirit, be made one in Him with the Father in that perfect love which is the very nature of God.5

According to David Bosch, after Willingen, “Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology.”6 Thus, the conversation about missio Dei became a trinitarian conversation.

This is a significant shift given the fact that trinitarian conversations had fallen on hard times among theologians in the wake of the Enlightenment. Catherine LaCugna suggests that this lack of interest is attributable in large part to its separation from the life of the church. Trinity simply didn’t matter to the everyday practice of the faith. And this lack of practical meaning, for LaCugna, owed to the fact that trinitarian theology had increasingly become preoccupied with immanent (God’s inner life) rather than economic (God’s saving work) aspects. Trinitarian thought was too often abstract speculation about a reality distant from everyday experience.7

Karl Barth is often cited as the figure who brought trinitarian perspectives back to the forefront of theological conversation. For Barth, theology rests on the prior action of God in revelation, and what God reveals is God’s self. The starting place, therefore, in Barth’s massive Church Dogmatics is the revelation of God, and that God as triune. Trinity becomes central to his project—prolegomena—not simply a dogmatic topic at the end of a list of other dogmatic topics. From this starting point, Barth reduces the distance between the immanent and economic Trinity since what God reveals is God’s self.8

Barth’s voice was not alone in this respect. As Stanley Grenz suggests, the theologian most often associated with closing the gap between immanent and economic notions is Karl Rahner. Rahner, a Roman Catholic theologian, is known for “Rahner’s rule,” which declares that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.” The relations between Father, Son, and Spirit are not stuck in some distant heaven but displayed in God’s saving action on creation’s behalf. While Barth and Rahner display impressive differences, “both sought to recast the doctrine of the Trinity in a manner that could open vistas for theological engagement in a modern world.”9

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7Catherine LaCugna, God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life (New York: Harper Collins, 1973). I appreciate LaCugna’s narrative and agree with most of it. However, I would suggest that Trinity was practical, perfectly suited for Christendom. Its practicality may not have appeared prominent in the imagination of most Christians, but it formed the basic framework of the faith in very powerful ways.


Early statements related to *missio Dei* reflected the impressive efforts of Barth and Rahner. The implications of their work for theology and mission were significant. For Barth, this gave the “work of God” priority over the work of the church. In turn, the church could no longer confuse its own life with God’s mission, including its cultural and national identities.

The achievement of these trinitarian statements, however, was not complete with regard to mission in a post-colonial world. Notice how Bosch summarizes the trinitarian thought that characterizes Willingen: “The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.” What Bosch identifies as “classical doctrine” represents Western trinitarian thought, emphasizing the unity or oneness of God. This might be contrasted with Eastern or Orthodox views that begin not with God’s unity but with the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit and their inter-relations.

These differences represent an important story related to both theology and mission. The trinitarian formulations represented by Nicea and other early Christian councils emerged in dialogue with Greek philosophy. The burden of these statements about God were related in part to the concerns of classical theism. In other words, before any descriptions of God’s life and work as found in Scripture, attributes related to a philosophical understanding of God needed to be accounted for. From this starting place, God must be undivided, simple, free, and impassable. God must be an absolute subject, all reality deriving from this undivided source—from the one to the many.

In Western theology, this meant starting with God as a unity of substance or being (*ousia*). However one understood the “threeness” of God, this unity of being was given priority. God was, therefore, expressed in the Johanine language of *sending*, as in Bosch’s summary above. Father sends the Son; Father and Son send the Spirit. All the arrows point in the same direction, the many proceeding from the one.

This understanding of Trinity is not without problems. Beginning with the one divine substance leads almost inevitably, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg, either to modalism or subordinationism. In other words, Father, Son, and Spirit are either seen as three modes (not persons) of the one *ousia*, or Son and Spirit are seen as subordinate to the Father. For Jürgen Moltmann, this philosophical understanding of God leaves theology susceptible to monism, everything proceeding from one source. If everything proceeds from one source, then there are only two options—subject or object, with us or against

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10. The theological implications move beyond what Barth and Rahner themselves envisioned. At the very least, their work moved speculation about the immanent life of God away from some prior philosophical set of principles and toward the actual history of the Trinity found in the biblical witness. This in turn allowed salvation to be seen in social terms, as a participation in the very life of God.


12. I certainly am not denying the importance of sending language in Scripture related to defining the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit. I would simply say that this language is not the only way Scripture defines those relations, and that the language of sending must be understood in light of other biblical pictures of God.


us, good or evil. Mission, in light of this understanding of God, is susceptible for both Pannenberg and Moltmann to imperialist strategies and methods.

Eastern trinitarian thought, in contrast, followed more closely the lead of the Cappadocians, who innovated notions of ontology related to God. The achievement of the Cappadocians, according to Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, was to redefine personhood in relation to community. Persons are only persons in community. Being itself is not related to a persisting single-subject or substance (ousia), but being is a being-in-relation. According to the Cappadocians, it was not a single, shared substance (ousia) that constituted deity, but rather the three persons (hypostasis) in relation. God is, therefore, social and is defined by the communion (perochoresis) of three persons.

While this marks a substantial shift in the classical understanding of God, the Eastern tradition does not fully escape the pressures of philosophical theism. As Pannenberg points out, Eastern theologians retained a single source concept of God by identifying the person of the Father as the one source of deity. What ties both classical trinitarian traditions together is a God defined by relations-of-origin. All the arrows, in relation to creation, still point in one direction.

This history is important related to current discussions of missio Dei. Both classical trinitarian traditions fit well a church identified with empire. The relationship between theology and social structure is complex and cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect formulas. But at the very least, there was a good fit between notions of God defined by relations-of-origin and missions flying under the banner of Christendom. The trinitarian imagination of the church did not provide an obvious critique to notions of mission that were colonial or imperialistic.

The question then related to Barth and the revival of the trinitarian tradition is, Would recovering classical understandings of God generate a new imagination about mission that avoids colonial or imperialistic tendencies? Barth and Rahner moved away from a preoccupation with the immanent Trinity and returned the actions of Father, Son, and Spirit revealed in Scripture to the center of trinitarian discourse. But they accepted other fundamental assumptions of “classic,” Western theology that had sponsored mission under Christendom in the first place. Recovering classic notions of God might not fully overcome the seeds of imagination related to colonialism.

The accomplishment of Willingen failed to sufficiently clarify the relationships between God, world, and church. In fact, divisions over the relationship between church and world deepened after Willingen. A “sending” Trinity left two basic options: (1) to see the church on the side of God, over/against the world or (2) to see the God-world relation-

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15 The Cappadocian fathers are Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus, leading theologians of the Fourth Century. Their contributions in trinitarian thought are significant and are represented in the final version of the Nicene creed.


17 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 259-99.

ship as primary, severely limiting the church’s place in God’s missional intent. A “sending” Trinity tends to limit the engagement of church and world to sender-receiver, or subject-object, which ultimately doesn’t deliver a church in mission from an instrumental relationship with world, even if that mission is seen as God’s mission. As I have written with others elsewhere:

The straight-line logic of either God-church-world or God-world-church finds a theological accomplice in straight-line Trinitarian thought, where all the arrows point in the same direction. Trinity conceived exclusively in terms of relations of origin lacks both the capacity to deliver a more dynamic, participatory God-world-church relationship and the imaginative capacity to fund mission in a post-colonial situation.\(^{19}\)

While we might applaud the intention of Willingen and subsequent attempts to reposition understandings of mission in trinitarian theology, it is not enough simply to update classic trinitarian understandings that gave warrant for the very kind of mission we hope to avoid.

**NEW TRINITARIAN DIRECTIONS**

Fortunately, the trickle that began with Barth and Rahner has become a mighty trinitarian stream. From Grenz’s perspective:

> Whenever the story of theology in the last hundred years is told, the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity that sprouted and then came to full bloom during the eight decades following the first World War must be given the center stage, and the rebirth of Trinitarian theology must be presented as one of the most far-reaching theological developments of the century.\(^ {20}\)

While Barth and Rahner remain pivotal figures in this story, Gary Simpson points beyond them to suggest a “revisionary direction proposed in some recent trinitarian thinking that will make an apostolic difference in the life and practice of today’s Christian congregations.”\(^ {21}\)

For many in the tradition of Western theology, this means paying greater attention to Orthodox trinitarian thought. This move usually begins with an appreciation for the theology of the Cappadocians, emphasizing the priority of the three persons. This is sometimes referred to as *social trinitarianism*. God doesn’t just have relationships, God is relational. The significance of a social understanding of the Trinity for many is that it provides warrant for a more communitarian ontology. In other words, God exists in community for the sake of community. Community, therefore, takes precedence over the individual. Reality rooted in the life of God is more fundamentally relational than instrumental. This is certainly a move forward.

The question is, how would social trinitarian perspectives impact understandings of mission? Put another way, how would a social Trinity alter our understandings of God, church, and world? Van Gelder illustrates the attempt to take cues from both “sending”

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\(^ {19}\) Ibid., 77.


and “social” trinitarian thought in defining mission. His approach is to merge the two perspectives. When brought together, “we begin to understand the church, through the redemptive work of Christ, as being created by the Spirit as a social community that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God’s mission in the world.”22 This certainly adds a social dimension to our understanding of God as a sending God. It does not necessarily, however, change the fundamental relationships between God, church, and world.

The Cappadocians did give priority to three persons (hypostasis) over the single substance (ousia) prioritized in Western theology. But, as we noted above, they were still concerned to preserve the impassability and subjectivity of deity by protecting the monarchy of the Father, a different way of naming a concept of God defined by relations-of-origin. Everything has its origin in the Father. The Father is eternally begetting the Son and spirating the Spirit. The Father is distant from creation, a massive ontological gulf separating them. Like Western theology, all of the arrows still point in one direction. Though Zizioulas updates this tradition in impressive ways, if anything the church recedes more deeply on the side of God in a God-world relationship marked by an impassable ontological gulf.23

It is not enough to augment “sending” with “social.” Notions of God, church, and world must be more fully participatory and mutually implicating to avoid the specter of paternal or imperialistic mission strategies. If all the good stuff is fully decided on the God side of the God-world relationship, and if the church is seen as mediate between God and world, then all that is left the church is a strategic relationship with the world. A more robust, participatory relationship between God, church, and world offers a new range of potential relations. And this begins with a more participatory view of the Trinity.

**MOLTMANN, PANNENBERG, AND A PARTICIPATORY TRINITY**

I find more hope for a post-colonial missiology in the work of theologians whom Grenz groups under the heading “The Trinity as the Fullness of History.”24 I want to focus particularly on the work of Moltmann and Pannenberg in these respects. These important theologians diverge at significant points, but they hold in common three emphases that are promising for understanding missio Dei.

First, by choosing a biblical starting place as opposed to philosophical, they establish the priority of three persons without the encumbrances of an exclusively relations-of-origin viewpoint of God.25 God’s identity is not defined beforehand in relation to speculative

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23 John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T & T. Clark, 2006). The identification of God and church is almost complete. Personhood is only a category for the baptized safely within the ark of the church. Zizioulas’s eschatology is, in my opinion, over realized. There is no emphasis on the coming kingdom of God.


25 Moltmann insists, “If the biblical testimony is chosen as the point of departure, then we shall have to
attributes or characteristics, but precisely through the activity of Father, Son, and Spirit within history. God is not a persisting subject over against creation as object. God is revealed as a character in the drama of history. For both, the three persons of the Trinity are revealed as differentiated and related through the “history of the Son.” As Pannenberg puts it, “The persons simply are what they are in their relations to one another, which both distinguish them from one another and bring them into communion with one another.”

Second, the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit are seen most clearly in relation to the kingdom of God. For Pannenberg, the drama of the kingdom reveals a much richer set of relations in the Trinity than relations-of-origin:

The Father does not merely beget the Son. He also hands over his Kingdom to him and receives it back from him. The Son is not merely begotten of the Father. He is also obedient to him and therefore glorifies him as the one God. The Spirit is not just breathed. He also fills the Son and glorifies him in his obedience to the Father, thereby glorifying the Father himself. In so doing he leads into all truth (John 16:13) and searches out the deep things of Godhead (1 Cor 2:10-11).

In similar fashion, Moltmann demonstrates that at various points in the history of the kingdom we find Father, Son, and Spirit in manifold and reciprocal relations to one another. The sequence of relations changes from one kingdom scene to another.

In the sending, delivering up and resurrection of Christ we find this sequence:
Father-Spirit-Son

In the lordship of Christ and the sending of the Spirit the sequence is:
Father-Son-Spirit

But when we are considering the eschatological consummation and glorification, the sequence has to be:
Spirit-Son-Father

The activity of the three persons in relation to the kingdom, therefore, reveals a robust interdependence. As Pannenberg describes it, Father, Son, and Spirit represent “a richly structured nexus of relationships.” The Trinity cannot be accounted for only in relation to the eternal begetting and spirating of the Father. The relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit are mutual, reciprocal, and diverse. All of the arrows do not point in the same direction, whether from a persisting substance (ousia) or from a monarchial Father.

This view of Trinity is social to be sure. The relations of the three precede any understanding of the unity of God. God is social, each person open to the other. But God is

start from the three Persons of the history of Christ. If philosophical logic is made the starting point, then the enquirer proceeds from the One God.” Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 149.

26 Ibid.
27 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 305.
28 Ibid., 320.
29 Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom, 94.
30 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 289.
31 Both Moltmann and Pannenberg suggest that the unity of God will not be fully known or revealed until
also open—open to history, open to creation, open to the stranger. The same kind of dynamic nexus of relationships that characterizes Father, Son, and Spirit applies to creation as well. The world constituted by a triune God is a participatory drama with multiple characters. As Father, Son, and Spirit, God is not only acting on the world, sending to the world, but God is also for the world, with the world, and through the world. God is no longer a series of one-way sendings in a straight line but a participatory God making room for the other with movement in all directions.

Moltmann is particularly compelling at this point. In contrast to Barth, who defines God's freedom in relation to self-sufficiency (God did not have to create the world), Moltmann defines God's freedom as the capacity to be true to God's self. And in this case that means being true to God's being as love. Creation is not incidental to God, but at the very heart of what it means for God to be triune. Creation is not merely an outward act of God external to God's identity, but an act of making room precisely within the loving relations of Father, Son, and Spirit. God's love demands an Other. “In his creative love God is united with creation, which is his Other; giving it space, time and liberty in his own infinite life.”\(^\text{32}\) Creation is more than simply the target at the end of all the divine arrows. Creation is constitutive of God's identity as love. The world participates in the life of God as more than just an object to God as single-acting-subject.

This trinitarian theology of participation\(^\text{33}\) bears significant implications for notions of identity. God's identity is established within history in relation to creation, not decided by a list of attributes that establishes God's identity apart from history. God is righteous and full of steadfast love, not simple and undivided. In the same way, the church's identity is an identity in time and space, not an essence constituting a pure church apart from the actual life of the church. The church's identity, especially as a church in mission, is defined in relation to the world. The church does not know its identity apart from loving God and neighbor. In a trinitarian theology of participation, the church not only takes God to the world, but discovers God there in dynamic participation. The relationship between church and world is more than simply strategic—it is inescapably and always relational and theological.

**TRINITY AND MISSION**

Simpson held out the promise that revising directions in trinitarian theology would make an “apostolic difference” in the life of the church. Is this indeed the case? And if it is the case, what is the difference? Wouldn’t it just be easier to say, “Stop being imperialistic!”? Is it really necessary to think this closely about the nature of the Trinity? Is this really practical?

Admittedly, the relationship between theological innovation and changes in practice is dynamic and cannot be reduced to a cause and effect relationship. However, it is also the case that a shift of the magnitude represented by a post-colonial missiology only comes

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\(^{32}\) Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 114. Moltmann accepts the label of panentheism at this point. Creation is not divine (pantheism), but finds its life within the divine life.

\(^{33}\) Hagley, et al., “Missional Theology of Participation.”
with a deep shift in imagination. Such a shift requires a revision, not just an updating, of theological sources.

More to the point, the Trinity is not simply a theory that then dictates a certain set of practices. The Trinity is an actual social reality in which we participate. Theology, in this sense, is a practice, a particular way of engaging God’s world. God’s life as triune is something in which we participate and through our participation come to saving knowledge with and through others. This kind of understanding of theology would call into question theories of mission that reduce theology to some prior theory that eventually gives way to strategy—the real payoff of missiology. Instead, missiology is participation in the life and purposes of God, which are immediately implicated by the world. In other words, theology isn’t determined first and subsequently applied to the world. Theology is participating with God in the actual conditions of the world. Because of God’s participatory life, the world is a partner in theological discernment, not simply theology’s destination.

This understanding of theology is a major shift and requires extended attention. Martin Heidegger points out that the very same philosophical project that gave us classical theism is also deeply embedded in the thought structures and languages of Western civilization. Our language can hardly express anything other than a world defined by subjects and objects.34 An understanding of God as participatory will have to travel in relation to a different grammar. Christians learn their grammar in worship.

A missional church, therefore, must make conscious efforts to practice its faith with trinitarian understandings in view. This sounds obvious, but in many congregations, especially those of the free-church tradition, this is hardly evident. This attentiveness to language, however, must go beyond merely mentioning Father, Son, and Spirit (though that would be an improvement for some); it must enact a sense of participation with and for the world. This enactment will lead in many directions. One shift, however, that might pay immediate dividends is to limit our language of “to the world” and increase our usage of phrases like “with the world” or “for the world.”

This kind of language is appropriate given our discussion of identity above. A missional church does not know its identity completely apart from its actual setting in time and space. It is not uncommon these days to see congregational “mission statements” written on bulletin mastheads or hanging from banners in our church buildings. Too often, these statements are written apart from any knowledge or input from the congregation’s immediate context. In a sending view of God and mission, this is unnecessary. Because God’s identity is determined beforehand in relation to persisting qualities, all the “good stuff” is taken to the world, not discovered in participation with the world. Because the church is imagined on the side of God in this series of arrows, the church does not need its neighbor to determine its identity in the world. All that is left in terms of the relationship between God and world is strategy.

In contrast, a missional congregation does not merely take God to the world, but participates in the life of the world expecting to find God more deeply. The nature and shape of mission is not already decided but must be discerned in relation to God’s participa-

tion in the world. The resources of the gospel are needed for this work of discernment. Clearly, not everything that appears in the world is an appearance of God’s redemptive concern for creation. Still, the church does not have the market cornered on God’s activity in the world. The church participates in the world to discern its life in mission precisely through giving its life away.

I work with several congregations in processes designed to lead them into missional innovation.35 It is rare to find a congregation that does not have an instrumental notion of the world around them. Strangers are prospects, bits of demographic data, to be turned into a plan of “outreach.” Beyond the barest demographic detail, most congregations have little idea who their neighbors actually are. There are massive untested assumptions about the lives and concerns of those around them. Not surprisingly, their neighbors seldom know anything about them either.

Some missional congregations are learning to see their neighbors as co-informants related to God’s missional intentions for the world. These congregations are becoming more adept at asking new questions. Instead of asking only the question, “How can we get these people to belong to us?” missional congregations learn also to ask, “How in the name of the Triune God do we belong to these people?”

Here the church mimics the life of God. The church’s life is a making room for the other. It is a life of hospitality. This life of hospitality is more than inviting others to church and treating them well. Because the church expects that the Spirit of God is already working in the world toward the final consummation of the kingdom of God, the church learns to expect God’s hospitality on someone else’s terms. As my colleague John Ogren has written:

> Our view of participation suggests that the church is always the guest of God, missional churches will be ready to move outside the role of host and the comfort zone of home turf. Following the example of Jesus, missional congregations will be willing to assume the vulnerability of the role of guest, so that the world may share more fully the hospitality of God.36

Practices of discernment with the world coupled with notions of hospitality rooted in the life of God are properly pneumatological. That is, they require a cultivation of the gifts and fruit of the Spirit to discern the leading of the Spirit in God’s mission. The fruit of the Spirit does not lead to self-sufficient agents who acquire their identity in relation to autonomy. Rather, the fruit of the Spirit requires both vulnerability and response, a being-in-relation.

These themes of mission rooted in participation in the life of the Triune God can be extended indefinitely, the proper subject of further reflections on Trinity and Mission. These few insights are offered to demonstrate that a theology of participation renders the world as more than the object of the church’s paternal concern. Understanding the world as constitutive of the church’s own participation in the life of God is a necessary move in overcoming the legacy of imperialistic mission. Missio Dei, to the extent that it

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35 I work with Church Innovations in a three year process, Partnership for Missional Church. For a detailed explanation of PMC, see Patrick Keifert, We are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery (Eagle, ID: Allelon, 2006).

moves beyond classical notions of the Triune God rooted in philosophical notions, serves as a vital impulse in the renewal of both theological and missional practice.

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MISSIONAL PRAXIS
Editorial Preface to Missional Praxis: Looney and Holton

By Charles Kiser

The Missional Praxis section emerges from the conviction that while orthodoxy, or “correct thought,” is important, it is incomplete without proper attention to orthopraxy, or “correct action.” Missional thinking apart from missional action is illegitimate. Moreover, the interaction between missional theology and missional praxis represents the critical rhythm required of any serious participant in the missio Dei: action leads to reflection, to better action, to deeper reflection, and so on.

In that spirit, the Praxis section of this first issue offers two responses by missional practitioners to the theology pieces written by Love and Van Rheenen. Jared Looney responds from his context as a missionary in New York City, calling attention to the importance of church planting in the missio Dei and warning against the dangers of consumer-oriented Christianity. Kyle Holton, a missionary among the Yao people in Mozambique, Africa, challenges the importance of trinitarian theology in missio Dei and cautions against the potential practice of missio Dei as an expression of Western cultural domination.

The editors welcome article proposals and submissions for future issues of the journal. Missional Praxis will include articles related to cultural anthropology, missionary principles and practices, and case studies of contextualized work. For more information, visit the Submissions page of the journal’s website (http://missiodeijournal.com/submissions).
Reactions to Van Rheenen, Love, and Missio Dei from the Bronx

Jared Looney

What’s it all about? The missionary enterprise faces significant challenges. Religious consumerism, established traditions, and personal temptations for self-fulfillment are difficult to overcome. However, the church is called to participate in God’s mission and to recognize that the mission is indeed God’s. Christian workers begin the missionary task by asking certain questions. Reflecting on the nature of God and imitation of that nature, practitioners of mission learn to listen to God’s leading while interpreting the culture. As a result, missional methodologies are shaped first by theological dialogue.

WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?

My first involvement with a brand new church planting project was in 1993 in an impoverished section of Memphis, TN. Since that time, I’ve had various degrees of interaction with church planting of various shapes and sizes. In 2001 I began the roller-coaster ride of a lifetime as a new church planter in New York City. Over the years, I’ve had the opportunity to enter the dialogue on the missionary enterprise, especially in Western contexts. I’ve been grateful to be part of the conversation, but during this time some of the dialogue on church planting has raised concerns for me. I have found myself in workshops and forums where planting new churches was emphasized as a solution for institutional survival. Maintaining the life of the tradition was foundational to the conversations. As various Christian traditions face either potential or real decline in a changing culture, planting new churches is a viable solution. This makes perfect sense. Growth counters decline. However, the mission of the church does not really belong to the church but rather belongs to God. Any emphasis that is overwhelmingly placed on the survival or advancement of a singular denomination, organization, or particular tradition misses the central concern for these types of activities. Church planting, personal evangelism, and social justice initiatives are kingdom activities that represent participation in the missio Dei.

STAYING ON MISSION

During the summer of 2008, I was in the car riding through the Bronx with one of our college interns. We were on our way to a Bible study, and as we rode together, I was explaining some of the challenges of working with the high turnover that takes place in ministry in the city. People are regularly seeking ways to relocate out of the Bronx. Individuals’ job schedules change. Families are under stress. There are numerous competing messages, and, sadly, some simply fall away. I ran through some of these challenges, and as we were getting out of the car, the student became the teacher as he commented, “You have to have a kingdom perspective here, or you’ll go crazy.” In one sentence he prophetically uttered both a theological mandate and a key to my mental sanity as a missiologist in the city. The crucial task for an evangelist in any context is God’s mission. All communities, institutions, or careers are subservient to that one true reality.
The mission of God is a central concern for God’s people, especially if the church is indeed to be a missional community. Debates may abound over what the priorities of the church should be. Evangelism? Community? Social justice? Worship? The answer is likely, “Yes to all.” Despite obvious attempts to do so, these functions cannot be easily divided and prioritized. They are each interwoven into the tapestry of the missio Dei as God’s kingdom breaks into human history. The central aspect of each of these activities is God’s missional agenda. Mission is ultimately the pursuit of connecting the created with their Creator and restoring the glory of God in the hearts of people. Mission is not a program of the church but the DNA of God’s call to participation with him. Every activity of the church bears witness to God’s redemptive purpose. It requires proclamation of the good news of God’s kingdom. Humans are called into an alternative story that points to the reality of their Creator and his sovereignty. Individuals and communities are transformed into representatives of God’s reign. These communities possess a shared purpose for experiencing and representing the reign of God in their midst. Mission shines a light on dark places in our world, and it leads to worship as it brings the glory of God into hearts that do not yet glorify him. Mission is a central concern for the church because the aim of God’s mission is the expansion of his redemptive reign in every crack and crevice of human societies. The kingdom of God is here and now, and yet the kingdom of God is also not fully realized. Until God’s reign is made complete, bearing witness is a key act of worship. God’s people continually call fellow human beings who do not yet worship nor submit to God to recognize God on his throne and to submit to him as the Sovereign Lord.

Just as Gailyn Van Rheenen emphasizes, being sent is at the heart of mission. God redeems humanity through incarnational encounter. “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14 NRSV). The Father sent Jesus into human culture bound by time and space. He modeled mission for a group of his followers and sent them out empowered and led by the Holy Spirit. This narrative forms us as we are sent by the Holy Spirit into a world full of both the brokenness of sin and the beauty of God’s creative genius. To participate in the missio Dei is to play a role in the movement of God’s redemptive action in every corner of human society. It is God’s mission, and it only belongs to the church to the extent that the church is participating in the mission of God. This may be particularly challenging to career ministers. It seems to be human nature to seek our self-worth in our work and in our personal accomplishments. There is an innate desire to build, and the temptation to erect our own Babels under the auspices of Christian mission is often present. However, the transformation of Peter, James, and John’s misplaced zeal into an obedient witness plays itself out again in every generation. Today, God is on the move in every corner of our world.

Embracing the mission of God in an age of globalization opens up the missional conversation to the wider body of contributions. Many cell church leaders and church growth gurus have looked to South Korea to draw lessons from the quintessential megachurch. Those desiring church planting movements look to Cambodia, China, or India, and many European churches are experiencing revitalization as they receive refugees of the African diaspora. North Americans look across the Atlantic as they learn to navigate post-Christendom contexts from a new generation of churches in Europe. As the West encounters increasing pluralism in the shadow of politicized culture wars, Christians in

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1 See Gailyn Van Rheenen’s article in the present issue, 33-37.
the East who have lived side by side with Muslims or Hindus for centuries may provide some lessons for peaceful coexistence and witness. No one nation or culture holds a monopoly as the master of missional enterprise, and these examples are only meant to highlight that fact. In a global society, a collective intelligence may emerge as a new humanity transcending borders collaborates together as participants in the mission of God.

THE CONTINUING CONVERSATION

Conversations around the missional church are not without precedent. This present conversation joins a wider global discourse. For example, several years before discussions on the missional church emerged in the United States, the Latin American Theological Fraternity and theologians such as René Padilla emphasized integral mission. Integral mission raises the holistic and universal nature of mission. Padilla states that “all churches send and all churches receive” in order to address the dichotomy between what have traditionally been sending and receiving nations. Western nations, particularly the United States, possess the status of “home” while the majority world is a “mission field.” Such a dichotomy has largely undermined the church’s role as a missionary agent within Western society while simultaneously nursing an ongoing dependency among receiving nations. Padilla correctly argues against this dichotomy and for greater holism. He writes: “The whole world is a mission field, and every human need is an opportunity for missionary service.” Padilla further contends that “every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ and to be committed to God’s mission in the world . . . . The Christian life in all its dimensions, on both the individual and community levels, is the primary witness to the universal lordship of Jesus Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.” Latin American theologians, such as René Padilla, have argued for some time for a church that is holistic and missional by nature.

Current conversations revolving around the missional church do not need to begin from scratch. Such theological voices from Latin America reflect several years of calling upon the church as a universal missional community. When our understanding of mission shifts from the church’s mission to the mission of God, we are empowered to surrender our sense of possession of the mission and see ourselves as part of a larger play on the global stage. The mission of God incorporates a rich and diverse tapestry of voices from all nations around the globe, each challenged to answer the same universal call.

FINDING OUR WAY

I applaud holistic views of mission. Nevertheless, I also insist that making disciples through planting Christian faith communities should be the key practice of the missionary enterprise because communities of faith in Jesus Christ are the primary agents for accomplishing the tasks that reflect the kingdom gospel. Admittedly, my point is negated if the church is characterized by consumerism and entrenched in programmatic mainte-
nance. However, if the church is faithful as a community shaped by a biblical framework for mission, it is a force for transformation and eternal hope.

I find it fascinating when I am asked whether my ministry, as an organic church planter in an urban context, involves social justice. It is difficult to answer without some nuance, because if I respond by considering what I suspect to be the prevailing cultural assumptions, I suppose I have very little to report. Oftentimes we think of social justice as a programmatic response that clearly addresses a recognized physical need in society. However, as a missiologist, I’m compelled to respond with my real answer. “Yes,” church planting in urban settings is also a work of justice because we are making new disciples of Jesus and developing Christian community. When shaped by the gospel, these individuals and communities represent the agency of the kingdom of God bringing transformational power to human culture. Such communities care holistically for both body and soul. By generating a gospel-shaped community in an urban society, we are bringing a truly holistic force to the city. The church has a biblical mandate to be deeply concerned about justice—and about eternal salvation.

For whatever reason, as a youth I was formed by Matthew 25 just as much as I was shaped by Matthew 28, and now as a church planter I recognize that the primary agent for societal transformation (i.e., social justice) and personal salvation (i.e., evangelism) is vibrant communities of faith in Jesus Christ. When we promote a reductionist gospel, it often becomes either divorced from social justice on the one hand or from evangelistic proclamation on the other. The mission of God, however, is driven by the gospel of the kingdom, and the gospel of the kingdom invades every sphere of human existence—body and soul. Communities representing the gospel are ambassadors of God’s reconciling power in the world.

Paul the apostle understood the importance of the Christian community as an agent of the missio Dei. As he traveled all over the Mediterranean region, he established beach heads of God’s kingdom. As a result of the church being present in a city, all sorts of initiatives are born out of that community sharing the concerns of the kingdom of God. At the heart of missional activity is the gospel that confronts, transforms, and saves.

Our faith community in the Bronx has hosted marriage seminars that have indeed helped people, but such events do not compare to seeing marriages transformed through participation in small relational communities gathered in the presence of Christ. We’ve partnered with food and clothing programs that have done much good in our struggling city neighborhoods, but the gospel is shared in unspeakable ways when a small house church responds by spontaneously emptying their pockets for a struggling family. The people of God form a community that brings healing where there is brokenness, a prophetic voice where there is corruption, proclamation of salvation where souls are lost, and community where there is isolation. Establishing and multiplying communities like these is an imperative of the church today. The missional church represents the participation of God’s people in the missio Dei. However, this brings me back to my opening thoughts. Are we planting churches that are primarily driven by preserving a brand or uplifting religious careers, or are we captivated by the mission of God? This is an important question, and asking these sorts of questions clearly leads us to evaluate what we have been up to so far. Stuart Murray writes:
Simply planting churches of the kind we already have is not the answer. Churches have been leaking hundreds of members each week for many years. Planting more of these kinds of churches is not a mission strategy worth pursuing. But planting new kinds of churches may be a key to effective mission and a catalyst for the renewal of existing churches.5

DODGING CONSUMERISM

An important corrective for the church is to recognize that planting churches that are consumer-driven is not actually participation in God’s mission. In contrast, such a practice may only promote self-centeredness. Creating an exchange of religious goods and services does little to realize the kingdom of God in our midst. Church planters are faced with a significant decision to focus on making and equipping disciples of Jesus to become agents of the missio Dei rather than becoming overwhelmed with programmatic maintenance or enslaved to the demands of religious consumers. This requires strategic decisions that emerge from theological reflection, the cultural context, and careful attention to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. God is seeking to redeem and transform, and the Christian community is his primary agent for the task. Ultimately, the people of God must cross boundaries to restore God’s glory in human hearts. As participants in the missio Dei, our drive is to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to see these disciples form communities that reflect the good news of the kingdom of God. God’s people are to manifest God’s kingdom in the world. Only then does the church find itself swept up in God’s drama of redemption. Building our own kingdoms will always fall short of the realization of the missio Dei. To participate in the mission of God is to realize his kingdom come. For the community of faith to live into this call, we pause and ask, “What is shaping our communities?”

Mark Love’s statement that “missio Dei makes theology, not strategy, the first task of a missional church” is an important declaration.6 We don’t begin with our marketing messages or our inherent desire to carry on meaningful traditions. As Alan Hirsch points out, missional workers must begin with christology, which then determines their missiology, and missiology determines their ecclesiology in a given context.7 Following this sequence really changes everything. We cannot begin the missionary task with our previous assumptions about the shape of the church or our own preferences for religious ritual. Rather, mission flows from the person of God through his people into a lost world.

Anthropological research and church strategies will continue to have prominence as we seek to contextualize the gospel and help the church to behave incarnationally in specific settings. Exegeting culture is an important facet of our participation in mission. However, participation in the missio Dei begins with our understanding of God, how we relate to him, and his vision for the world. All missional activity grows out of that relationship. As Love discusses in his article, church planting is—or perhaps should be—under the influence of a trinitarian worldview. Therefore, our particular relationship to the Trinity matters.

6See Mark Love’s article in the current issue, 55.
If our trinitarian view is of God as a social Being, that view is likely reflected in the manner in which we participate in mission. A relational view of the Trinity may lead to relational approaches to evangelism as opposed to methods that feel cold or detached. As we reflect a God who, by his nature, is community, a church may place a significant emphasis on relational approaches to ministry. A relational view of the Triune God then naturally flows toward the anthropological work of forming our particular missiology in a specific context. As we relate to God who is community, we then ask, “How do”—or perhaps, “How would”—people in this cultural setting express love, forgiveness, witness, and similar acts of grace? Before we can imagine the church in our setting, we must be awake to God’s nature as well as grasp the social dynamics of the culture around us.

I’m increasingly convinced that we are formed by our experiences far more than we realize. A year ago, I was interviewing a seeker participating in our church network. I asked two separate questions. One was about her experiences with this church community and the other was about her evolving faith in God. Later, as I went over the content of the interview, I realized that there was a common thread connecting her experience with the Christian community and how she was learning to relate to God. She explained that she was growing through the one-on-one interactions that took place in a small relational church setting. Then, when asked about her emerging faith in God, she continued to discuss how she was learning to relate to God in a one-on-one manner. She described her experience as personal and less “sterile” than previous religious encounters. Her description of her evolving relationship with God paralleled her experience in this type of faith community. There appeared to be a strong connection between her community experience and how she was beginning to relate to God. While Scripture was beginning to transform her worldview, her theology was being formed at least as much by her particular experience with God’s people. If the popular saying “the medium is the message” is true, our methods do matter. However, we need to make sure we are asking the right questions. Rather than asking, “How do I grow this church?” we instead contemplate, “What will facilitate people having a relationship with God and joining his mission?”

Similarly, David Watson points out in a Shapevine.com interview that the spiritual DNA during conversion influences the ongoing issues facing Christian discipleship. He explains that when someone comes to faith because they were hit with a confrontational message and had an inspirational experience in the context of an event, they will learn quickly to depend on these sorts of experiences in order to maintain their faithfulness because they constantly seek to remain inspired. However, Watson argues that discipling relationships are likely to result in a much more proactive faith experience leading to participation in mission. For missional workers, this raises the question, “How does our approach to mission reflect the nature of God?”

I see the move toward a relational understanding of the Triune God as a positive step. Rooting our missional orientation in the missio Dei, we focus our practices upon imitation of God. If we begin by seeing God as a relational Being, we are likely to see missional activity begin to emerge from a theological worldview that is inherently relational as well. Mission arises out of our own journey with the Holy Spirit. In the Book of Acts,

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it is clearly the Holy Spirit that is leading the charge of God’s mission into the world. In many cases, the first-century church is trying to keep up and catch on to what the Holy Spirit is doing. The point here is simple and yet quite challenging. God is passionate about his mission to the world, but we can only grasp our part in his mission as we keep in step with his Spirit. Impersonal approaches to mission may accomplish significant growth of a particular institution, but if God is relational, it is difficult to affirm that these approaches reflect the genuine character of the missio Dei.

My colleague in New York City, Hugo Monroy, often points out that the nature of God concerns the personal rather than the impersonal. Too often, our practices of mission are impersonal, but incarnation insists on a deeply relational understanding of God. Time and space encounter eternity in the expression of the incarnation. If we take theology seriously as the beginning point and if we begin with a foundational understanding that God is relational in his very nature, we will likely adopt strategies that are also, in their essence, relational. Whatever ecclesiological model is chosen, as missional strategies emerge we reflect upon how a particular expression or activity reflects the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in relationship to our world.

This is precisely why discussions about church models are merely secondary, if not tertiary. These discussions are not without merit or necessity, but they must take their proper place. Van Rheenen tells the story of a church planter named Jim. Jim asks the question, “How can we meet the needs of the people of this community and make this church grow?” The church does grow, but, as Van Rheenen explains, largely becomes a vendor of religious goods and services rather than a living expression of the kingdom of God. In the end, Jim privately contemplates, “What have I created?” This is an example of beginning with the wrong questions. I’ve heard similar stories repeatedly told in private conversations all over North America. Beginning with theological questions concerning the kingdom of God and moving into mission as a participant in God’s redemptive narrative would likely lead to a different set of considerations at the start of a church. Church models and strategies are important, but they must be an outcome of the theological and cultural questions explored by the missionary practitioner.

When the rubber meets the road, missional workers have to make choices. We have to decide what our priorities are. We have to decide how we’re going to deal with the forces that come to bear upon us. We were promised that participation in God’s mission would bring with it trouble, but not every challenge faced by missional workers is from the world. When a missionary crosses borders into another nation, he takes significant time to learn the language, become immersed in the host culture, and bond with the local people. When a church planter comes to New York City to evangelize unreached people, however, he often finds himself feeling under pressure to produce quickly in order to keep his funding. As a result, he quickly gathers existing Christians into a new group, establishes a brand, and launches a public worship service while the original intention to reach unreached peoples in the city fades into the background. In the current religious climate, missional workers make sacrifices and missional communities are forced to address systemic cultural shifts in order to place participation in the missio Dei at the center of their communal life and operations.

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9 Van Rheenen, 31.
CONCLUSION

As the church participates in the *missio Dei*, the formation of missional practice does not begin with tradition—as rich as a tradition might actually be—nor is the beginning point for a church’s missional life to develop effective recruitment strategies. Rather, mission begins with the very nature of God, his incarnation in Jesus Christ, and his ongoing activity through the Holy Spirit. The driving questions for the missionary enterprise focus on reflections on God’s nature, and a key task is to discover God’s present movement in the surrounding culture and find our place in his unfolding narrative of redemption. As the church aligns its own nature with the nature of God, the church itself is transformed and the world encounters a community with unveiled faces that reflect the glory of the living God.

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Reactions to Van Rheenen, Love, and Missio Dei from the Bush

Kyle Holton

Reflecting from a Folk Muslim context in sub-Saharan Africa, and in response to articles written by Mark Love and Gailyn Van Rheenen, the author questions the value of trinitarian language, traditional definitions of syncretism, and Western hermeneutical assumptions in narrative theologies. A post-colonial theology of missio Dei could help us move beyond modern, power-structured forms of mission and cultivate open congregations gathered around work and life together, not homogeneous belief or culture.

Recently, a young man in my congregation woke up in the middle of the night only to see his wife walking out of their two bedroom mud house. He followed her out into the night air calling her name. No response. He took hold of her arm and she lurched away from him screaming. “Where are you going?” he asked. The deranged wife responded in gibberish. He only caught that she wanted to go out into the bush, alone. Only with the help of his neighbors was the husband able to force her physically back into the house, where she collapsed.

The following morning, I came to visit after hearing of the event from my neighbor. I found the husband attending to a quiet but at present calm woman with a vacant gaze. There was tangible worry and fear in the room. After all, this had all the signs of witchcraft, and the antagonist could have been a neighbor. We discussed what happened and the husband said he had found medicine. He showed me an old wine bottle that was full of water. At the bottom of the bottle, shreds of soaked paper slowly dissolved in the water. Of course, this was not just ordinary paper. On the paper were inscribed Arabic words of power. For a people who have merged and mingled the worlds of Animism and Islam, such a concoction is surely as effective as a glass of scotch after a hard day on Wall Street. By having her drink words of divine power, they planned to rid his wife of the curse within her mind. I also learned in the conversation that the wife’s family had a dream. In the dream, the one who was sending the curses had managed to enter the house, but if they moved the wife to her mother’s house, then the curse would not find her. That afternoon, they moved the wife to her mother’s. A week later, I found them both happy and sane. The curse had been lifted.

I vaguely remember studying David Bosch’s paradigms in undergraduate school.1 I recall preaching about God’s mission, looking to join God’s mission, and enjoying the mildly post-modern explorations of Stanley Grenz’s trinitarian communitarianism during my graduate studies.2 I must confess, however, to being post-missional and post-trinitarian. I suppose there is nothing new in such a statement. After all, the Western philosophical world seems to be in a competition over who can be more “post” than the other. But I am not a passionless pew-pusher. Neither am I a secular sociologist bitter about my past. I am what many would call a missionary in sub-Saharan Africa, though I might

2 Stanley J. Grenz, Theology for the Community of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
be inclined to call myself a post-missionary. I say all of this not to trump theory with experience, but to offer a perspective forged in reaction to my neighbor. In the following essay, I would like to reflect on the missio Dei from the place where I sit. I live and work among a Folk Muslim people who hoe a dying ground for subsistence and who are working to navigate the encroaching, unstoppable force of globalization. Organized around the theme of missio Dei, I will intersect my context with my reading of Love and Van Rheenen’s articles along the following sub-divisions: (1) colonialism and missio Dei, (2) narrative theology of missio Dei, (3) human syncretism and missio Dei, (4) trinitarian theology and missio Dei, and (5) missional church and missio Dei.

COLONIALISM AND MISSIO DEI

Missio Dei in its plebeian sense is a concern of all human beings on the planet, regardless of religion. What is going on here? What is the point of my life? Is there divine intent on earth? A majority of religious revelations are an attempt to answer such questions and thereby explain God’s plan. From this perspective, “What is God’s mission?” is a universal question that we have been asking for thousands of years. But in a more narrowly defined, theologically evangelical orientation, missio Dei is an interpretive strategy forged from a systematic reading of the diverse biblical writings. Consequently, it is (to use George Lindbeck’s words) a second-order description of sacred texts. I would suggest that since missio Dei is a reflection from the Bible, we can find cultural aspects embedded within this theological construction. As a dominant Western key in missiology, missio Dei has a structural dualism that is expressed through word pairs such as: God/world, church/world, call/send, saved/unsaved, here/there, and so forth.

The dualistic nature of missio Dei cultivates colonialism. If the lost are always “out there,” then we will always set up the church and her members as imperialistic managers of God’s kingdom. I have had the gospel preached to me by an Imam. I was convicted, and my life was changed. I was deathly ill of cerebral malaria, and an Imam prayed for my recovery. I will return to how we can speak of the characters in missio Dei. But for now, let me at least argue that the dualistic tendency of us/them, church/world, and sent/receiver is unhealthy and born out of ignorance of many biblical stories. I am reminded of the conversation Jesus had with the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7. Jesus learned about the nature of the kingdom of God from this woman. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (Mark 7:28). When we read a parable, or quote the narrative, the Spirit of God swells into dialogue instead of monologue. It is the encounter, the event, that opens up a space for the kingdom to grow within all participants. In this sense, we are not sent but simply asked to be open to the event of God’s kingdom when it pierces our reality. I am again reminded of Jesus’ beautiful simplification of religion: love God/love your neighbor (Matt 22:36-40). Living with mission is simply loving your neighbor and allowing love to open a space for all participants to witness to the kingdom among us. Believing in missio Dei is more about reception. I am not sent to my stricken friend and his wife in the name of God. Rather, my love calls me to their doorstep. Our common life opens the possibility of the kingdom to germinate again in that place. I have nothing to give to my friend in a religiously cognitive, doctrinarian sense. Rather,

4 The NRSV is used in all biblical quotations.
our relationship creates the space for all of us to receive from the Great Physician. This is God’s mission, not mine. I need it just as much as my neighbor.

One final thought that disrupts this colonial, linear sender/receiver dualism is the sense of being a witness. We often think of witnessing to people as a kind of mini-sermon. We formulate an info-packet that combines certain doctrinal concepts with our lived experience in order to draw others into similar beliefs and hopefully similar experiences. I am not against sharing our lives with each other—this is essential to healthy community life. But if it becomes the way in which we allow individuals to enter our community it becomes imperialistic. I have learned from my experience here in sub-Saharan Africa that witnessing to the kingdom of God is a kind of typological, public interpretive act, an event that again transforms all participants. I have seen the story of the Good Samaritan acted out in front of me among Muslims. The experience was again a kind of event that interrupted my life and brought me to my knees. As a witness, I am obliged to tell my fellow friends that this moment is like that moment long ago. What we just saw, what you just did, is like what Jesus taught us. The performance of God’s kingdom surprises us. My job is not to leave it in the dark but to identify what just happened as holy. God just walked by! The kingdom is at hand!

NARRATIVE THEOLOGY OF MISSIO DEI

I appreciate Gailyn Van Rheenen’s emphasis on narrative theology as it pertains to missio Dei. But it is not sufficiently committed. God’s mission is often put into the “narrative” of creation, fall (under which the entire history of Israel is usually subsumed), incarnation, the age of the church, and Christ’s second coming. Yet contrary to popular opinion, the narrative of sacred Scripture, though written with an already existing interpretation, is open and pliable. The narrative of the Bible is diverse enough to allow multiple interpretations and arrangements. Furthermore, organizations like New Tribes Mission (referenced in Van Rheenen’s article) construct highly stylized, doctrinally laden forms of telling the story. These forms of storytelling are cloaked in Western doctrine and theology. Many of these narratives or missiological programs constrict the biblical text into a predetermined doctrinal outcome. These systematic, metanarrative constructions give answer to God’s intentions in a kind of true/false structure. Jesus’ own way of communicating God’s kingdom was unsystematic, ad hoc, and open to confusion and dialogue. If we are committed to the biblical narrative, why can we not tell the story and nurture the work of interpretation within our neighbor? Why do we also have to domesticate it for them?

I have been in sub-Saharan Africa long enough to know that people read stories differently. We notice different aspects. In general, literate readers are much more prone to abstraction, while oral peoples are more likely to interpret typologically, looking for the immediate connection in their own reality. There are also diverse ways of using a sacred text—from submerging it in water for medicine, to dissecting its parts and tracing etymologies, to arguing with the veracity of the text. The particular systematic way of talking about missio Dei is already hermeneutically sealed. Instead of assuming we know what God’s mission is all about, I would prefer a more ad hoc approach to the matter. When we “open” a sacred text in my context, it is often performed or merely spoken into

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5 See Gailyn Van Rheenen’s article in the present issue, 33-37.
the air for all to hear. After the reading, the meaning of the words becomes the responsibility of the community. Such an open-ended conversation is an attempt to place the job of imaginative interpretation in the hands of the hearers. Let me add that these hearers may be Christianized, Muslim, or Animist. The only pre-hermeneutical decision offered is the reader’s choice of the passage and its relationship to the day and work in front of the community. This opens up the door for debate about proper interpretation strategies and epistemology, but I believe we must be honest with the implications of post-colonial missional activities. I propose that we read specific stories with our neighbors and discover together—in this place, at this time—what God is doing or not doing.

HUMAN SYNCRETISM AND MISSIO DEI

Syncretism has been used to legitimate Western colonial power and discourage non-Western or indigenous hermeneutics of sacred texts. I do not share Van Rheenen’s concern about syncretism as a blending of popular culture and biblical truth due to my divergent perspective on syncretism. Our old definitions of syncretism often connoted a static view of culture. We were worried about foreign “worldviews” entering and polluting the Christian worldview. But I believe human beings are constantly shaping their beliefs and actions in response to experience. Culture and even our beliefs are in flux and in dynamic relationship to the world around us. If my wife gets sick, will I go soak a bit of the Gospel of Mark and have her drink it? No, I will probably look up something on the Internet or call a trusted Western physician. But that does not mean I am ready to call Arabic tea syncretistic and attempt to show the falseness of such behavior and the beliefs imbedded therein. My friend is attempting to navigate his way through a difficult situation based on tools within his cultural toolbox. What matters to him is not so much that Arabic tea works but the existential moment. The event has pierced his reality, and he looks for a way to respond. Fundamentally, this experience and his response will be another layer in his identity. We are all syncretistic because syncretism is about the formation of identity in lived experience. Syncretism is not about wrong answers. As a friend, as a fellow seeker of God, my interest is to help him maneuver through this experience, grow, and be healed. In this light, culture is the ecosystem by which we survive the world. Sacred texts offer tools to live within those environments. But the environment will cause the tools to be used differently. There are many people in the world who need to be given space as they integrate sacred narratives into their lives. Imagine the personal struggle to integrate foreign, biblical stories of God into a Muslim-dominated culture, complicated by animistic concerns for managing ancestors and impersonal powers! The hermeneutical process to internalize new narratives or reshape public practice by new biblical challenges is not a linear process that we can somehow predict, control, and moralize. Consequently, I’m not so worried about Arabic tea. Rather, I’m concerned about how fear can be managed, God can be identified within the context, and healing can occur.

TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY AND MISSIO DEI

Allow me to reflect upon the trinitarian theology that is emerging out of missional theology. I would like to offer four reasons for why I am post-trinitarian and why this theological dogma is not helpful in missiology.

6Van Rheenen, 31.
First, trinitarian theology is a second-order description of the essential biblical narrative. Like all theologies, it is not sacred but human reflection on the story. Consequently, I am not against trinitarian formulations as if they were statements of error but merely recognize that these statements are contextual. Trinitarian formulations are hypotheses based on readings of the biblical narrative. As already noted in Mark Love’s article, trinitarian theology has been a kind of religious, Western philosophical exposition over themes such as unity and personhood. Despite the beautiful and appealing philosophical work many have done, trinitarian theology is often dumbed down by missionaries into a kind of lesson we give to people about “who God is.” In other words, we are still fixated on the inner life of God (immanent trinitarianism). Instead of exploring who God is based upon what we see God doing (economic trinitarianism), we end up falling into a kind of theological abstraction. Again, I am okay with local theologies, even if they are abstract. But because trinitarian theology is so culturally laden, it is inappropriate to use as a key to how we interact with the world.

Second, I am going to have to play the Muslim card again. Trinitarian discussions with Muslims just are not helpful. The single, dogmatic Muslim appeal “God is one!” is not interested in such philosophical abstractions. My neighbor does not need to agree on the Trinity for him to be part of the kingdom. Even if we want to say that the Trinity is embedded in the narrative of the Bible, we still have to admit that it is an abstraction from the narrative. There is no Trinity. There is simply a character in the divine drama called Jesus who speaks to the Father in the garden. Living among an oral people, this level of abstraction is extremely foreign and not useful for spiritual development. No matter how nuanced the poetics of trinitarianism have become, reality simplifies the issue into two camps: those who believe in three gods and those who believe in one. I used to carry the sleek trinitarian card myself, but I have been called to let go of it. Trinitarianism might open wonderful doors of dialogue with Hindus, but it is not helpful where I live. My beliefs are local. I can understand its attractive qualities, but the reality I engage finds it false.

Third, trinitarian theology hides a dangerous concern for nailing down Jesus’ ontology. I am a follower of Jesus. I try to be. But I am called to follow Jesus, not explain how God’s mystery works. The only reason we have the Trinity is because we need to find a spot for Jesus. The Council of Nicea was a violent leveling of the conversation. But even the conversation had devolved into explaining God instead of following God. Why can we not allow the various terms for Jesus to fill our vocabularies in the local contexts where we live and work? Speaking of Jesus as prophet and Messiah are very helpful words in my context. I’m not reducing Jesus by using them. I’m sticking to the narrative. On a philosophical level, there are traces of modernity’s obsession with ontology within trinitarianism. God—God’s naked being exposed for the world to ogle—is not to be explained. God is to be engaged. God exposes us. We can speak of God like we speak of the effects of wind, but we cannot dissect the wind, or God.

Fourth, trinitarian theology limits the narrative’s characters and therefore the Scriptures as well. As mentioned in Mark Love’s article, new theologies of the Trinity have worked to dislodge the linear movement of the three characters. I applaud these works but find two problems.

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7 See Mark Love’s article in the present issue, 57-9.
One, the interdependence revealed within the Godhead is not consistently applied. By shuffling the order (Father-Son-Spirit; Spirit-Son-Father; Father-Spirit-Son), Moltmann shows a beautiful interdependence within God. But the language of “interdependence” is not applied to God’s dealing with the world. If God’s inner life is built upon a kind of cooperation, then God’s invitation to the world should also fit within this assumption of interdependence. From this model, God is not only making room for the other (i.e., the world) but is also dependent upon the world. This might go too far into process theology for some, but on a purely theoretical level, I find it helpful in my life in sub-Saharan Africa. God was dependent upon Moses to respond to the burning bush. Moses could have walked away from the event. God needs us to interpret God’s self into the world around us. A trinitarian God centered on interdependence is dependent upon the world for further self-disclosure, in the same way the world is dependent upon God for further redemption. This might be the deconstructive element within missio Dei, but I find it helpful. Yes, this is God’s mission, but let us not forget God’s presence is always an act of interpretation. To some extent, we must take responsibility for our actions and hermeneutical projects. The crucifixion, in this light, is a reminder of the dangerous ability we have to kill God. If we do not take responsibility to become part of God’s life, then God’s life will suffer and be miscommunicated or forgotten.

Two, threeness limits the characters in the divine drama. The historical way of explaining God’s trinitarian nature leaves out the primordial. In the beginning, God hovered over already existing waters. There is an element disturbingly missing in trinitarian theology. It is all God and humans. In the end, I would think it simpler to talk about a kind of interdependent dualism of God and world. But let me at least suggest that creation is a left-out character. We work with people who are suffering because the creation is suffering. We are not being stewards of creation—we leave the earth out of the trinitarian dance. But the groans of creation are also our groans. The people suffer because the land suffers. There is no divine drama without the stage. This is not about making sure we give a nod to the environmentalists because it is politically correct. Where I live, the land kills and gives life. There must be an integration of God’s life into the life of the soil.

Finally, the reason many churches objectify the “world” into demographic points is not because of a paternal trinitarian theology. The problem is soteriological. We have objectified the planet into the saved and the lost. Therefore, the move from linear to interdependent should be driven more by soteriology. Put differently, our trinitarian views will change when we change our soteriology, because Christians spend more time dividing their world up according to questions about eternity, salvation, and damnation than the structure of God’s life. Consequently, it is more pressing to talk about what we mean by salvation, heaven, and hell than to reformulate the structure of the Trinity. I can only listen and belong to my Imam friend if I first change my soteriology.

MISSIONAL CHURCH AND MISSIO DEI

A common application of current missiology, including specific interpretations of missio Dei, has centered on the concept of missional churches. A healthy movement of theologically aligning the identity of the church with God’s mission, missional church theology has integrated community, congregational theology, and missio Dei. This movement

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8Love, 63-64.
also providing a critique of modern church practice. However, the movement has been cultivated in a context where church culture is assumed and is even in the majority. This sociological context has shaped the theology in ways not useful for a missiology in other contexts. I live in an area where the Western form of church is absent. The majority of the people are Folk Muslim. I have learned to live without the division of church and world. Consequently, I do not deal with trying to help churches shift from objectifying the world to living with the world, as American missional churches do. My friend, mentioned at the beginning, is part of my congregation because he and I live in the same village. Our lives are intertwined and we are in community despite our differences. For this reason, I must argue that we do not learn the language of God in worship. If we believe that God is in essence relational—if God is love—then we learn about God not by speaking God-speak in homogeneous gatherings cut off from the world but in diverse conversation out in the field. I have come back to the States on furlough after being away for three years and have been literally unable to understand what my fellow brother is saying because his religious language has become so hermetical. I have learned to talk about God, argue about God, and listen to God literally out in the field. In the context of work or play, I have been part of discussions about who God is, the existence of Satan, and predeterminism. These concepts and characters only matter out in the world. We learn to talk about God only in the world, not in church. This has huge implications for religious practice in the West and missiological theory.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

The recent theological turn of missiology is healthy. In the past, we were driven by strategy. But I still believe the strategy was shaped and driven by deeper theological values. All the evangelistic strategies of the door-knocking era were still empowered by a certain soteriology. Consequently, I do favor more explicitly and publicly naming the theology that drives missiology. However, I am afraid that if we are not careful, an overly theological missiology will domesticate a very useful, marginal discipline. Missiology has been an aid for us to hear from anthropology, ecology, community development, and even history. These are the strangers of the academic theological world that we should continue to offer hospitality. The interdisciplinary nature of missiology has kept us on our toes. I suggest we not isolate missiology and therefore ourselves by allowing theology to overshadow and silence the voices from the outside. This is God’s mission and God often chooses those in the margins to carry the message. Missiology helps keep our ears tuned to be able to hear everyone from an ancient Semitic donkey to a secular anthropologist.

Kyle Holton lives with his family in northern Mozambique. He is married to Ginger Holton and has three children: Asher, Eli, and Eden. They have lived among the Yao of the region since 2004. Along with their colleagues, they have helped establish a non-profit organization called *Malo Ga Kujilana*, which means “place of reconciliation.” The organization is composed of local families who manage a sustainable, natural resource center and work to seed the kingdom of God among their neighbors in the community. Find out more at: http://kujilana.org.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


EDITORIAL PREFACE TO REFLECTIONS

by Jason Whaley

The Reflections section aims to represent the mission of God through creative modes and to witness to it in various media. We will present metaphors and stories of the kingdom that serve to illuminate God’s grand mission or highlight humanity’s unique part in it. We will share imaginative expressions in the tradition of scriptural metaphors like “God’s treasure in human clay jars,” yet for our modern times, to awaken us to join God’s activity. Basically, Reflections shares lyric, graphic, and storied metaphors that point to God’s kingdom revealed and coming.

A rocker in Australia brings Light into a dark industry. A film creator in Texas magnifies what God is doing in the least of these, including missionaries. An artist in California turns his gifts to reflect what God has done and is doing in the world. And a Brazilian minister uses soap to bring the Good News of peace. These are some highlights of this first issue’s Reflections, people called by God into artistic expression of God’s mission, which is certainly much grander than just what they are doing. They are aspiring to live imaginatively in the way, truth, and life of the Creator.

These artistic vocations and reflections remind me of Jesus’ penchant for telling parables. Media like these—parables, film, painting, etc.—demand participation. Allow these new parables of the missio Dei, if you will, to set off a chain reaction of gospeled creativity. By the power of God, may Reflections serve the Holy Spirit to empower a holy transformation in every aspect of your community’s life.

Like a time bomb—(bang!)
They explode in your mind
Jesus’ teachings, parabolic porcupines—
You can’t avoid the Truth—
Your unprotected heart—
He will find you
And change your life.

Like a surgeon—(slice!)
He will cut out the rot
And in His mercy, He will heal the whole spot—
And we’re lucky—
He hasn’t turned any away—
From the path
So we can follow in His way
On the path
So He can change our life.

We want to share what God is doing within your vocation, art, and life. Consider this an open invitation to those who live—heart and soul—in the missio Dei. If your own reflections come from living back and forth between mission and theology, visit the Submissions page of the journal’s website (http://missiodeijournal.com/submissions).
Featured Reflections

FOLLOWING GOD’S TUNE INTO THE AUSTRALIAN ROCK SCENE

by Del Hoehn

To me, the missio Dei is the core expression, the heartfelt desire, of the message that a loving Father is trying to get across to his beloved children. To do so he chose a specific time, a specific place, and a specific way to communicate his love. The time, place, and circumstance—from the manger to the cross and open tomb—are vastly different from my own routine. As I walk from my morning train to the office I am surrounded by crowds of people, all going somewhere or late for something. As I buy my groceries I am surrounded by throngs of people all on budgets and schedules and with a million things occupying their already crowded minds. As I go about my countless daily activities, surrounded by many different people, most of whom I will never even speak to, I am reminded that one thing has not changed from his day to mine: his people are still walking upon his earth, further from him than he would like, further than he ever intended. The Father still longs for his children; still, after all this time, like a mother waiting for her grown child to come visit after a long absence or two lovers being reunited after a stint apart. His heart yearns to spend time with us.

To put the mission of the Almighty effectively into practice in my daily life I need to break down the walls of my “routine,” see past the cultural differences of those who worship him in a different way, and learn to look through the eyes of a Father who doesn’t see crowds but rather individuals, who isn’t blinded by budgets and lists and “to-do’s” but instead sees hearts—hearts longing for completion and love and acceptance.

The missio Dei happens in its purest form, in my opinion, where his created beings live within the sphere of influence in which he has created them. I live and work within an industry that seeks freedom and glorifies the rebel attitude. My participation in God’s mission among this culture happens when I rebel against the mindset that says I must adhere to and glorify the “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll” lifestyle. True freedom is not being bound to carnal lust but instead choosing to follow the Father’s guidance in all areas, which includes natural desires.

Del is a vocalist for Sunset Riot, a rock band in Sydney, Australia. His aim is to use music to weave the message of God’s love into an industry that is often filled with darkness, greed, and debauchery. His band, Sunset Riot, while made up of believing members, plays in pubs, clubs, and bars as well as youth groups and schools. It is his firm belief that the missio Dei belongs amongst the people at a very grassroots level: change begins with belief. See Sunset Riot’s webpage at http://sunsetriot.com.au and meet them (in a social networking sort of way) at http://facebook.com/sunsetriot.

Listen to Sunset Riot at: http://missiodeijournal.com/md-1/31
I remember sitting in church one Sunday evening. It was “Missions Sunday,” which is usually code for “Preacher Vacation.” Missions Sunday at my church was when a visiting missionary came in (usually in the summer) and was basically given 15 minutes to share the story of his ministry. Typically, this was accompanied by a (boring) photo slideshow. Sitting there, even as a kid, I thought, “This guy spends all year in some amazing corner of the world, meeting amazing people, and he’s supposed to share all of his stories in 15 minutes or less?”

In January 2004, my dad and I were on a flight from Little Rock to Orlando, on our way to check out a film school there. It was my last semester at Harding University, and I was looking at pursuing a post-graduate degree in my newfound love: documentary filmmaking. On the flight, an idea crossed my mind that probably changed my life forever: “What if I used film to help missionaries ditch the slideshows on “Missions Sunday”? What if a missionary could show a relevant, ten-minute film, highlighting the sights, sounds, highs, and lows of their ministries, while still having five minutes to direct an inspired audience to their booth in the foyer?”

Over the next year, with that idea in mind, I eagerly studied the art of filmmaking at Full Sail University in Orlando, Florida. There I learned the craft and got to have as much hands-on time as I desired with any piece of equipment you could ever hope to find on a Hollywood set. Shortly after graduation, my wife Lauren and I moved to Los Angeles, where I spent the next two years working (mostly pro bono, the L.A. norm) in a variety of positions in the film industry.

The longest tenured job was at The Documentary Channel, a satellite TV network on the Dish Network that airs entirely independent documentaries. I loved my job there, which included assisting their editors and, the best part, screening hundreds of documentaries. It was almost like a second film school. I started hanging out around doc filmmakers and I soaked up how they operated.

In January 2007, Taylor Smith, a friend of mine from Chattanooga, called me up and said, “You should come down to Perth, Australia, where I’m working as a church-planter, and film what we’re doing.” This sounded like a great idea. Finally I would get to put my passion and energy behind a real life “Missionary Documentary.” The only problem: I’d have to quit my job.

In June 2007, I finished that documentary and began trying to get it in the hands of people I had been sharing my dreams with for the last three years. I was very proud of the way it turned out and others began to take notice. That film got me work on another promo film and so on and so on. Before I knew it, it was late 2008 and I had already traveled to four foreign countries on three continents, making high-quality, informational films about missionaries and Christian non-profits.

That’s still what I’m doing today. My company, C1 Entertainment, was created to bring high-quality, affordable HD video content to clients that might not otherwise be able to get their stories out there. I love my job and the opportunities it brings. I’m now doing all
kinds of work, including weddings, corporate gigs, and even developing my own feature length documentaries that focus on social and global awareness issues.

I take great pride in my work, being my own toughest critic. I am constantly looking for new, cutting edge ways to help tell great stories. It’s my passion; it’s what I love.

From my perspective as a filmmaker, the mission of God is helping tell His story in a relevant way. As a society, we are connecting more and more with people who put themselves in the line of fire for a cause. We admire their zeal, we connect with the people they reach out to, and we begin to project our own worldview into what we see or hear; that is, “Could I do that?” or “If they can do that, why can’t I do this?” “This” being a cause or concern near to our own heart. Whether these stories are told in the name of Christ or not, we are responding to them in a big way. Why not channel this power and use it to help those whose stories might otherwise be left out?

I am blessed with the gift of telling stories through the medium of film. Because I’ve been given this gift, it’s my part in the missio Dei to use it for his glory.

Patrick lives in Dallas, TX with his wife, Lauren, and dog, Sebastian. Check out his website at: http://C1entertainment.com or follow him on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/C1-Entertainment/147350212323) or Twitter (http://twitter.com/c1entertainment).

Get of taste of Patrick’s ministry at: http://missiodeijournal.com/md-1/30
TRANSFORMATION

by Daniel Weber

Daniel’s ministry is founded upon his desire to have a more experiential worship of God, much like Renaissance artist Fra Angelico, who considered the act of painting his primary form of worship. To Daniel, the act of painting is not only a form of worship but also a visual tool for audiences to participate more fully in worship. The act of painting in worship gives Daniel great joy, not only in the act of service but also in the response from the audience. From his perspective as a worshipful artist, the mission of God is to worship in the way that best exemplifies your passion for Christ, his people, and the celebration.

Daniel Weber has been creating art since 1999. Whether privately or in front of a large audience, he induces thought provoking images through storytelling. He incorporates history, culture, politics, religion, and humor into every work of art. Daniel received his Masters of Fine Arts in Painting and Drawing from California State University, Fullerton. See more of Daniel’s ministry at: http://danielalexanderweber.com.
ANOTATED LINKS

Touch A Life Foundation
This short documentary on the Touch A Life Foundation, produced by C1entertainment, provides a glimpse into one facet of God’s mission in Ghana.

Touch A Life Foundation—Ghana: http://vimeo.com/13749560

Turning Grease into Gospel
Claudio Oliver, a Brazilian minister, explains how turning grease into soap is a proclamation of the gospel. As this holistic ministry suggests, God’s mission encompasses every aspect of creation, granting us the opportunity to participate in ways that, for example, bless people with affordable hygiene, a parable of grace, and a chance to bless the environment in turn.

Turning Grease into Gospel: http://theooze.tv/thinkfwd/claudio-oliver

The Missio Dei Breviary
Typically, a “breviary” is a book of prayers traditional to the Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches. However, this “Missio Dei” group related to the Anabaptist tradition formed their own breviary by adapting some Franciscan traditions with heavy emphases on Scripture and on sending each other out into their neighborhood with Jesus. Morning and evening prayers around mission-oriented Scriptures might help your Christian community focus more on mission over consumerism.

The Missio Dei Breviary: http://thebreviary.com

The Meaning of Missional
The following is a compilation of posts on the evolving meaning of “missional.” Some of these pages are themselves compilations, so there is plenty of food for thought here. Among these conversations readers will find insight into what some leading advocates of the “original” idea have meant by the term and why it matters. The diversity of thought among even these missional leaders is evident, and it will become clear that website-driven discussions such as these are playing a prominent role in the ongoing negotiation of the “missional church” movement’s direction.

- http://blindbeggar.org/?p=1110
- http://kinnon.tv/2010/03/prologue-to-missional-discussions.html
A Dialogue on the Church’s Nature and Role

Some fascinating proposals and ensuing exchanges have popped up in recent months. Readers familiar with the contours of the *missio Dei* concept will recognize in these posts the historical dichotomy between those with an instrumental view of the church in the scheme of God’s mission and those predominantly concerned about ecclesiocentrism. Yet, the conversation has evolved over the decades, and these exchanges offer a glimpse into the state of the discussion.

EDITORIAL PREFACE TO REVIEWS

Missio Dei seeks to publish substantial reviews of a well-balanced selection of books that relate to both the interests of our subscribers and the vision of the journal. In addition to publications directly related to missiology, possible candidates for review include books on the culture or history of a particular mission field, theological or spiritual formation, developmental or relief work, etc. Due to the inclusiveness of these parameters, it is essential that each review relate its book’s contents to missions and to a particular context whenever possible. As a reflection of the journal’s commitment to the Stone-Campbell Movement, the review section will give particular attention to works published by members of this stream of tradition. Finally, each issue will usually include a featured seminal review of a book that has become a touchstone for missiological conversation. The editors welcome book review proposals. For more information, visit the Submissions page of the journal’s website (http://missiodeijournal.com/submissions).

There are many books on mission theology, a large number of which make a strong biblical case for mission. There are several books now that present the Bible as a book of mission. But Christopher Wright’s book stands out among all of these for a couple of reasons. First, and most obvious, he approaches the subject from the vantage point of an Old Testament scholar, focusing primarily on the *missio Dei* theme that runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. Beginning with God’s call of Abraham to the final pages of Revelation, Wright argues that God’s mission to restore God’s creation underlies every page of Christian Scripture.

Second, Wright is less interested in merely listing well-established passages that seem to speak of God’s desire to reach out to the nations than he is to show that Israel’s purpose as a nation was to be God’s outpost, leading the rest of the nations back to God. Israel was to be both priest and prophet to the world. In short, we need to approach the entire Bible with a missional hermeneutic rather than see “mission” as one of many biblical themes. “Mission,” in fact, is the glue that holds the Testaments together.

The book is well-structured for this purpose, divided into four main sections. Part one looks at “The Bible and Mission.” Wright quotes Charles Taber in claiming that the Bible is itself a product of God’s mission. He helps the reader to view the text from a broader perspective in order to see how the mission extends from God to humanity to Israel to Jesus and then on to the Church.

Part two covers “The God of Mission.” Again, looking at the text through a wide-angle lens, Wright shows how God consistently revealed God’s self to and through God’s people and later through God’s Son. He is especially keen to show how idolatry corrupted the mission and was, therefore, consistently targeted by God’s spokespeople.

Part three has to do with “The People of Mission.” Here Wright goes into a detailed exposition of Abraham’s call in Genesis 12:1-3, with particular attention to the meaning of being a “blessing.” God’s people are to be the instrument through which God will bless all peoples. This theme emerges throughout the Old and New Testaments. He looks at the themes of redemption and restoration using the models of the Exodus and the Jubilee. Both models reveal that God’s mission is multi-dimensional. God is interested in every aspect of God’s creation and every facet of humanity: spiritual, rational, physical, and social. Thus, the modern distinction between a gospel of proclamation and a “social” gospel is both ill-conceived and unbiblical. The ethical behavior of God’s people goes far beyond wooden legalism: it is the means by which they can become distinctively attractive as God’s emissaries to the nations.

Finally, part four deals with “The Arena of Mission.” Of particular note here is Wright’s understanding of how being created in God’s image has missional significance. He concludes with an overview of mission from both an Old Testament and a New Testament viewpoint.

Wright’s book is both masterful and comprehensive. Normally, we find books on mission written from the perspective of theologians or missiologists. The strength of this book lies in the fact that it was written from the standpoint of a biblical scholar. If there
is any weakness, it may be in his fairly light treatment of the New Testament texts; but even here I believe it was intentional. The New Testament and God’s mission have long been connected in the minds of missiologists. Old Testament texts have long been used either as isolated examples of God’s interest in mission (e.g., Jonah’s call to preach to Nineveh) or as proof that occasionally God took interest in the nations (Psalm 67, Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the Temple, and others.) Wright goes beyond using the Hebrew Bible for apologetic anecdotes and shows convincingly that “mission” is the central theme of all of Scripture, and that what we find of it in the New Testament is consistent with and founded upon what already was there in the Old.

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Fred Peatross ministers to a traditional church in the fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Huntington, West Virginia. His other writings include *Tradition, Opinion, and Truth: The Emerging Church of Christ* (iUniverse, 2000) and articles and interviews for Wineskins.org.

Peatross’s purpose in *Missio Dei* is to provide a primer on what it means to be a missional church for those who have lived their faith lives in established, conventional churches. The content relies heavily on authors in the emerging church movement, particularly Alan Hirsch (*The Forgotten Ways*, Baker, 2007) and Michael Frost (*Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, Hendrickson, 2006).

Peatross’s beginning point is recognizing that Christianity in the West has lost its place as society’s centerpiece and is now a marginalized influence, often irrelevant to the emerging culture. Established churches have typically reacted to this dramatic disconnect from their societal neighbors by turning inward, developing a protective mindset to minimize moral and numeric erosion.

The alternative Peatross leads the reader toward is to leave the established, attractionally-based church behind and launch into the new, explorative mode of the missional church. The emerging, missional church will be defined by two primary characteristics: (1) a focus on kingdom growth over church growth as a missional measure and (2) an emphasis on birthing new gospel communities over resurrecting or revitalizing established churches. The theological impetus for this decision is summarized in Jesus’ parable of new wineskins for new wine (Matt 9:16-17) and God as a sending God (John 20:21).

This brief introduction (92 pp.) to missional thinking ends with some practical “lessons learned” that call exploring Christians to live their lives intentionally in the context of those who are not Christians. In this way the leavening influence of faith can seep into contexts of unbelief.

Peatross writes with a gentle spirit, and he will help any reader develop their love for those who do not yet live in relationship with Jesus. *Missio Dei* provides a brief, reasonably coherent introduction to the reader who is uninitiated into the stream of missional church literature, which is this book’s best use. For readers who are already familiar with Hirsch, Frost, or Brian McLaren, *Missio Dei* will add little to either their comprehension or practice.

Two points call into question the validity of *Missio Dei* as a book to recommend to serious readers. First, Peatross bases much of this work on the assertion that Christianity has been on a 250-year decline (10). This assertion comes across as naive in the face of the evidence provided by the eminent historian of world Christianity, Kenneth Scott Latourrette, who describes the century of 1815-1914 as “The Great Century,” characterized by “abounding vitality and unprecedented expansion” (*A History of Christianity*, vol. 1 [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1975], vii).

The second point is the curious absence of any discussion of worldview as a reason for the disconnect between existing churches that were planted to reach and minister to 20th-century people and the rising 21st-century people who think in a different world-
view arena. Peatross hints at this in his discussion of online social networks but fails to bring the reader to an appreciation of why internet realities are important.

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Sherwood Lingenfelter, Provost and Senior Vice President and Professor of Anthropology, School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, has provided us with an important work. This book, the third in a series that addresses Christian service in cross-cultural contexts (*Ministering Cross-Culturally* and *Teaching Cross-Culturally* are the earlier two volumes) continues the discussion of various types of Christian service in cross-cultural contexts but focuses on the important area of leadership.

The book is a series of case studies, with most chapters centering discussions of important topics by using a specific case study as a centerpiece. Topics that Lingenfelter addresses include a wide variety of leadership-related issues: vision and inspiration, partnership and priority setting, building trust, teamwork and covenant community, and empowerment through power-giving leadership. Intertwoven through each chapter is the fundamental theme of empowering for effective leadership in cross-cultural contexts. Lingenfelter defines this theme as “inspiring people who come from two or more cultural traditions to participate with you in building a community of trust, and then to follow you and be empowered by you to achieve a compelling vision of faith” (155).

He states outright that his first task is to help readers understand their “personal culture of leadership” (8) and how this impacts every aspect of ministry. That is, those engaged in cross-cultural leadership must understand their own “default” culture vis-à-vis the cultures in which they work. Such self-awareness, Lingenfelter contends, opens up the possibilities of understanding critical areas of weakness and blindness. By doing so, God’s servants are better prepared to create understanding and to find greater opportunities for faithful and effective ministry. Conversely, leaders who do not grasp how default cultures pervade every ministry move and decision are seriously disadvantaged to carry out leadership and partnership goals. The book, to a large degree, is designed to do just that—to bring to light the tacit cultural assumptions of (primarily) Western leaders who interact with others from non-Western cultures.

Those familiar with Lingenfelter’s work will find much familiar material here. Notable is his consistent reminder that, at its core, the calling to Christian leadership and service is about submission to Christ. Everything ultimately stands or falls on this critical spiritual orientation. Also typical of Lingenfelter’s work is how he fluently interacts with and utilizes critical anthropological and leadership theory while drawing such theoretical discussions into tangible challenges and provocative insights. One primary way Lingenfelter accomplishes this is his use of grid and group theory (in Lingenfelter’s terms, “social game theory”) from British anthropologist Mary Douglas. Lingenfelter distills this theoretical framework in an easy-to-use fashion in order to frame issues involving cultural differences, especially as these differences affect leadership and partnering.

A significant portion of the book centers on the topic of power; namely, how missionaries and local leaders see power issues differently, how they configure their respective power-goals in often significantly different modes, and how power seeking is at the root of much leadership and partnership failure. Lest the reader think this is mere academic, theoretical rambling, Lingenfelter demonstrates in tangible ways how power inheres in
all social relations, particularly those types of relationships to which we refer when using the terms leader and partner. In opposition to “power-seeking” forms of leadership, Lingenfelter advocates “power-giving.” This type of leadership challenges much of what most (I would think) take for granted as “leadership.” Among the important qualities of a power-giving leader are a commitment to relationality over against position, personalistic concerns over against authority and control, and use of trust and character influence over against “powering outcomes.” Ultimately, power-giving leadership is about placing Jesus at the center of our wills and leadership goals. This commitment to power-giving expresses itself forcefully in Lingenfelter’s notion of being responsible to rather than for, a critical distinction for those engaged in leadership of any kind. The careful attention to and elaboration upon the hidden, mostly tacit ways power is in play in leaders’ relationships constitute one of the great merits of this book.

Personally, I found the concluding chapter entitled “The Hope of Cross-Cultural Leadership” both challenging and encouraging. Here Lingenfelter reminds us all of the critically important point that our values, vision, and sense of mission are always eroding. The real challenge is to become intentional in renewing these in an ongoing way. Such renewal work “must be intentional, it must become part of our regular work, and it must continue over a substantive period” (165). One cannot merely read a book or simply gain a new level of understanding. Rather, the more difficult and essential leadership capacity is that of reminding and renewing ourselves of what it means to lead and serve.

Lingenfelter’s challenging and helpful volume is precisely the type of resource that can assist us all in the ongoing work of auditing and renewing our vision and values as they relate to our calling of leadership. The case studies would be ideal for any teacher of missions or missionaries-in-preparation to use in guiding reflection on culture, power, and leadership. All involved in or preparing to work in a different cultural context simply must read this book. Though Lingenfelter writes specifically to those ministering in cultures other than their own, what he describes increasingly represents important issues for leaders in North American churches who find, due to shifting demographics, that they too lead a cross-cultural community. Thus, this is an important book for all who engage in the work of Christian service and leadership. I recommend it highly.

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Anthropology has become the science of choice for missionaries as they have come to understand more and more the impact of worldview and culture on their work. In this book, Glenn Rogers seeks to identify the importance of understanding worldview in order to connect more effectively with those to whom we take the gospel. He approaches his task by beginning at the most fundamental level, by defining worldview anthropologically rather than cosmologically, as the term has come to be popularly used. A key element is his discussion of “REALITY” versus “reality” (36-39). He maintains that there are essentially two realities: “God’s true REALITY and our culturally perceived and interpreted reality” (37; italics original). Recognizing that what we see as reality is only part of the absolute reality experienced by God should lead us to “critical realism,” or an understanding that “different people interpret their world (their reality) differently (39). By Rogers’s definition, then, worldview is “the unconscious, deep-level assumptions people have about reality as they perceive it; assumptions about how the world works and how to relate to and interact with all the things, events and people encountered in life” (27). Later he suggests that “another way to think about worldview is as a filter through which portions of the REALITY that we experience will pass” (55). Our worldview, thus conceived, is much smaller than God’s, of course. However, our worldview is still the biggest and most foundational component of our awareness, including everything in our field of experience (e.g., how we eat and sleep, how we perceive time and space, etc.). Thus, Rogers rejects references to a “biblical worldview” or a “Christian worldview,” since those terms suggest a narrower set of concerns than the anthropological definition of worldview demands. He refers instead to a “contextualized Christian orientation” (62-63), which may be a subset of (or a component of) a particular person’s worldview.

Having laid that foundation, Rogers goes on to discuss theories of cross-cultural communication, conflict resolution and counseling, hermeneutics, evangelism, and multiethnic ministry; each time emphasizing the significance of worldview in these areas. In each of these chapters, he first lays a theoretical and historical foundation by defining terms and briefly describing the development of thought in that component of the missiological task. He provides vignettes and short case-studies to illustrate his points and ends each chapter with a brief summary to clarify the essential elements of the discussion. He closes the book with three appendices: “Discovering Worldview,” “The Role and Responsibility of the Receptor in the Communication Process as it Relates to Interpreting the Scriptures,” and “Ministry to People with a Postmodern Orientation in Their Worldview.”

Rogers’s book evidences significant thought and scholarship. The overall organization of the book shows a logical progression from the early chapters on worldview and culture through the application chapters on communication, counseling, ethnohermeneutics, and evangelism. He consistently supports his thesis throughout the book and clearly relates each discussion to worldview. The illustrations from his own work in Nigeria and from the experiences of others help flesh out his theory and stimulate application to real situations. The introductions and conclusions of each chapter are well-written and provide a clear sense of what the author intends to do and what he wants the reader to remember. Even the appendices are helpful, particularly Appendix C, which provides a thumbnail sketch of the development and fundamental tenets of postmodernism, along
Criticisms of the book are limited. In terms of content, one might wish for more vignettes or case studies which illustrate concrete positive examples of ministry based on awareness of worldview difference. The principles are there, but more specific ministry applications would make the book even more helpful. Further, there are places where Rogers seems to momentarily abandon his solid theoretical and practical foundation. For example, he claims on page 142 that “God has not provided believers with hermeneutical instructions” (some might question if that is entirely correct), but that “missionaries and multiethnic ministers . . . must rely on the Holy Spirit to teach them, making it clear what God would have them do regarding the customs or practices under consideration” (152). He offers no information on how one can be “clear” about what God wants one to do when the Holy Spirit “enlightens.” Further, the author has spent a significant amount of time in the book focusing on how the missionary or multiethnic minister can determine the best course of action based on research and understanding of another’s worldview, and now it appears that he is saying that when it is time to apply the principles outlined in the book, the Holy Spirit will prescribe a divine solution that trumps human understanding.

On a more technical level, while repetition of the major ideas in the summaries of each chapter are helpful, there is too much repetition throughout the body of the chapters themselves, much of which is unnecessary and some of which actually interrupts the flow of paragraphs. Further, there are a number of typographical and grammatical errors in the text—these do not befit a book which is as well-conceived and researched as this one.

Glenn Rogers has written a helpful work on worldview and ministry. He describes his objective in his introduction as “understanding what worldview is and how to work with people who have worldviews different from our own” (13). He has certainly met this objective. The book provides thoughtful and challenging insight into the complex interaction that is intercultural evangelism. It would be a useful tool in both academic and practical settings to stimulate discussion on ideology and praxis in missions and church planting, both domestic and foreign.

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Does this much-reviewed missiological classic, now nearly twenty years old, really deserve another look? As a professor of the theology of mission for nearly all of the last twenty years, I say “yes.” No one since has done what Bosch does in his magnum opus. The breadth and depth of (a) his treatment of historical theology as it relates to missiology; (b) his perspectives on the ever-evolving missionary paradigms from the First through the Twentieth Centuries; and (c) his organization of the current trends in missiology (under the heading “Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm” in the all-important twelfth chapter, the heart of the book), combine to keep me coming back to Bosch again and again, despite the deficiencies. Other Bosch admirers like me (such as Norman E. Thomas in *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* [Orbis, 1995] and Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritzinger in *Mission in Bold Humility: David Bosch’s Work Reconsidered* [Orbis, 1996]) highlight weaknesses in *Transforming Mission*, among them his omission of the work of women in missions and his mostly indirect engagement with theologians in the developing world. But no other book has taken its place.

One might think that it would not be difficult to find an outline of the key issues in the theology of mission that is more accessible to undergraduate students than Bosch’s somewhat unwieldy “thirteen elements.” But alternative proposals have not impressed me as much. Christopher Wright’s *The Mission of God* (IVP Academic, 2006) is perhaps the most attractive challenger to come along lately. Wright’s approach, grounded in the Old Testament, more than makes up for Bosch’s scant attention (less than five pages) to mission in the Old Testament. Wright also addresses contemporary issues—such as the theology of ecology—that Bosch neglects (though surely he would have much to say on such matters were he alive today to revise the book). But Wright’s tripartite outline—“The God of Mission,” “The People of Mission,” and “The Arena of Mission”—doesn’t do it for me, maybe because parts two and three overlap so much. (On the other hand, Wright’s Chapter Five, “The Living God Confronts Idolatry,” is profoundly relevant.) The collection of essays edited by Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross (*Mission in the 21st Century*, Orbis, 2008) is organized around “The Five Marks of Mission”:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise, and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. (Walls and Ross, xiv)

I like the outline, but the essays that flesh it out are uneven. Timothy Tennent’s brand new textbook, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Kregel, 2010) is promising but ambitious. Tennent hangs the major features of an introduction to missions—including historical and strategic elements—on the framework of the theology of mission, which I appreciate. But I would still feel like I was cheating my students if I did not introduce them to Bosch’s more complete “thirteen elements,” presented as they are in the context of a rich and responsible historical theology.
It could be that the more accessible outline I seek is right under my nose, in Bosch’s concluding chapter in which he outlines the mission of God in terms of “six salvific events” in the New Testament: the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost, and the Parousia (512-18). Each of those moments in and beyond the earthly ministry of Jesus illustrates a key feature of the mission of God from Genesis to Revelation. For example, the embodiment of the Word in the person of Jesus puts the “new” in New Testament, but the presence of God is a theme of the mission of God from the Garden of Eden to the Tabernacle and beyond. Likewise, the cross communicates the self-sacrificial love of God that ought to inspire and characterize his representatives as we pursue the same mission. Perhaps it would be better to organize a theology of mission course around these six touchstones rather than around the “thirteen elements.” I will have to think about that possibility. Either way, for the time being, I’m sticking with Bosch.

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