

## CHAPTER 9

# A CONFESSING TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY FOR TODAY'S MISSION

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OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES a steady effort has sought to expound what it might mean to be trinitarian to the point where just about everything conceivable might somehow fit the category for some theologians.<sup>2</sup> With much to celebrate about this renewed interest in the deepest ocean of Christian theology, the question often remains, especially for practitioners and ministers: To what end is this trinitarian reflection? How might it serve to bless our world?

The trinitarian emphasis has been complemented by a flurry of interest in what it might mean for today's church to be "missional" and to carry on the task of genuine Christian mission. In part, this has flowed from the wider world of global ecumenical missionary activity over the past century,<sup>3</sup> and especially from work over the past two decades,<sup>4</sup> lagging somewhat behind the trinitarian resurgence, but not by much.

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1. I am grateful to Rev. Dr. Paul Weston for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2. For an account of this among evangelicals, see Jason S. Sexton, *Evangelicals and the Trinity: Tracing the Return to the Center of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

3. See *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now* (ed. David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross; Pasadena: William Carey International University Press, 2009).

4. See Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

Also apparent is that these efforts have not produced much consensus about either what is “trinitarian”<sup>5</sup> or what is “missional” in the best possible forms. This is not necessarily a bad thing; however, we must hold forth yet better ways of expounding the trinitarian gospel in its well-developed contours and still better ways of understanding the role that the church is to play in fulfilling the mission to which God has called it in our ever-changing world. But the lack of consensus has also paved the way for the enthusiastic celebrators to carry on with exuberant proposals following fashionable trends,<sup>6</sup> or else, with wide popularizing effects to enable other disciplines to co-opt theology as a handmaiden while a little leaven does its work.

Of course, if everything can be understood as trinitarian or missional, then it’s likely that neither mean anything, and theologians may remain free to construct their own hyperrealities similar to Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who surmised,

If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn’t. And contrariwise, what is, it wouldn’t be. And what it wouldn’t be, it would. You see?<sup>7</sup>

Instead of attempting to bend whatever may or may not be real in these worlds or what may pass for “trinitarian” or “missional” theology through the selective editing processes for which theologians are notorious, it seems best rather to create space for addressing trinitarian theology plainly as it has developed, especially in organic ways and in indigenous settings.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, we may learn again to be “trinitarian without pretending to know more than in fact we do.”<sup>9</sup> And we may even learn how to be better missionaries in the process.

At the risk, then, of adding to the lack of consensus and contributing further confusion, with the explorative nature of trinitarian theology in

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5. See the essays and responses from leading classical trinitarians (Stephen R. Holmes and Paul D. Molnar) and relational trinitarians (Thomas H. McCall and Paul S. Fiddes) in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (ed. Jason S. Sexton; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

6. The most forceful argument against the trend is Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012); see also Thomas A. Noble and Jason S. Sexton, eds., *The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity Revisited: Responses to Stephen R. Holmes* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2015).

7. This quote is from the Walt Disney adaptation, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), [www.imdb.com/title/tt0043274/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043274/) (accessed 22 Jan 2014).

8. Such a full-orbed task would seem to require at least sustained effort from both systematic theologians versed in the interpretation of Scripture and the history of Christian doctrine as well as either missiologists or other social-scientists capable of tracing belief-systems in various cultures.

9. This phrase has been borrowed from Professor Karen Kilby.

view, this essay attempts to attend to concerns from the disciplines of systematic theology and missiology in hopes of suggesting better ways of confessing our developing trinitarian theology for the sake of the church's mission today.

## FORMULATING TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE

### *FROM INCHOATE AND TACIT TRINITARIANISM...*

Lesslie Newbigin sought something more than what he found with the inchoate trinitarian missiology implied in the International Missionary Council's (IMC) 1952 Willingen conference on "The Missionary Obligation of the Church," which identified "the Church's mission as participation in God's mission to the world through the Son and the Spirit."<sup>10</sup> With the church's missionary effort facing serious challenges from Communism, secularism, and religious pluralism, by the 1960s Newbigin began arguing that the church had resources within the Christian understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to address the perplexing moment. As a result he invited the missions movement "to bind itself to the strong name of the Trinity."<sup>11</sup>

Newbigin's call to develop "a fully and explicitly trinitarian doctrine of God" for a theology of missions was his response to what he considered a more "church-centric view of missions" that had been vogue since the IMC conference at Tambaram in 1938. He thought that this was perhaps "too exclusively founded upon the person and work of Christ and [having] perhaps done less than justice to the whole trinitarian doctrine of God."<sup>12</sup> This "fully trinitarian doctrine of God" he proposed would be aimed at "setting the work of Christ in the Church in the context of the over-ruling providence of the Father in all the life of the world and the sovereign freedom of the Spirit who is the Lord and not the auxiliary of the Church."<sup>13</sup>

Newbigin's concerns were not unlike those of Colin Gunton decades later, who warned of treating the presence of the Spirit in the church as

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10. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177–78. For an excellent discussion on the tributaries to the IMC Willingen conference and the origin of the *missio Dei* theology, see John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 123–62.

11. Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 33; first published as a pamphlet titled *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (London: Edinburgh House, 1963).

12. Ibid. See also Newbigin's explanation of his earlier work as "too exclusively church-centered" in Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda* (London: SPCK, 1985), 198–99.

13. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 198–99.

something of a “claimed possession” to the point where the actions of the church and the actions of the Spirit become convoluted. “It is not,” Gunton asserted, “as has often been suggested, if not actually taught, that the Spirit is in some way at the disposal of the church, so that what the church does the Spirit is doing. It is rather that the Spirit’s first function is to realize in the life of particular human beings and groups of human beings the reality of what God in Christ achieved on the cross.”<sup>14</sup> Shirking a similarly unformed christological emphasis, and for similar reasons, Gunton was also uncomfortable regarding the phrase “the body of Christ” as a metaphor designating the church.

Such cautions are worth emulating, especially in light of the postcolonial situation.<sup>15</sup> They emphasize the theological priority of *God’s mission*, and that our mission both “flows from and participates in” his mission.<sup>16</sup> Arguments of retrieval have recently been made on behalf of different ecclesiologies, highlighting how the emphases on Father, Son, or Spirit designate a tacit trinitarianism.<sup>17</sup> Yet such optimistic and even revisionist readings of the history have been interpreted as justifying a confessional reductionism. While acknowledging that few Latin American Protestants would actually deny the Trinity, late in the last century Argentinian theologian José Míguez Bonino noted that in the Latin American Protestant traditions it remained largely “a generic doctrine which does not profoundly inform the theology, and what is worse, the piety and life of our churches.”<sup>18</sup> But what does this trinitarian feature look like in some recent indigenous, localized theologies?

### ... TO INDIGENOUS TRINITARIAN EMPHASES

There are many examples that can be selected to highlight the recent localized developmental nature of trinitarian theology that show organic developmental doctrines of the Trinity at work. While these examples

14. Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 121.

15. It is said the ecumenical movement contributed to the demise of the earlier and highly unfortunate colonial model of missions; this was part of the argument of Lesslie Newbigin, “Mission to Six Continents,” in *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 2, 1948-1968 (2nd ed.; ed. Harold E. Fey; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 173–97.

16. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22–23.

17. Chief among these retrieving resources from a largely underexplored evangelical tradition is Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

18. José Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism: 1993 Camaham Lectures* (trans. Eugene L. Stockwell; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 113.

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could be mounted in near endless expressions—from nonliterate cultures (e.g., those where African Independent Churches exist) to the mentally ill or severely disabled peoples, and everything in between—this section aims to provide a brief sketch of select emphases from different indigenous groups working through how to better understand and relate the doctrine of the Trinity in their theologies.

Míguez Bonino sought to develop an understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity as a hermeneutical criterion informing the rest of theology. It would reference the range of the *loci theologici*, with particular significance for ecclesiology, sanctification, and eschatology, but then consider all doctrinal subjects as related to life and mission.<sup>19</sup> Kept in mind would be that the doctrine of the Trinity is nothing more or less than an attempt of the church to formulate and speak of “that inscrutable and inexhaustible wealth that we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> Thus Míguez Bonino pled for a move that placed various theological emphases within the total framework of revelation, yielding “a trinitarian perspective that will broaden, enrich, and deepen the Christological, soteriological, and pneumatological understanding which is at the very root of our Latin American Protestant tradition.”<sup>21</sup>

Peruvian theologian Samuel Escobar recently confirmed Míguez Bonino’s diagnosis from his own personal history and that of his generation within the *Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana*. He noted that the “Cochabamba Declaration,” with which the FTL was born in Bolivia (1970), included no reference to the Trinity, although there are brief references to the work of God, of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. Here Escobar reiterates the need for Míguez Bonino’s emphasis and has found Latin American theology largely moving in this direction, connecting Christology and the other doctrines more closely with the broader biblical revelation. The five Latin American Congress on Evangelization (CLADE) meetings have also confirmed this.<sup>22</sup>

Escobar sees the work of Justo L. González also moving in similar direction. As part of a Hispanic minority in the US, González has developed an economic doctrine of the Trinity concerned with socioeconomic consequences, something he also sees in the great theologians of the fourth

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19. Ibid., 117–27.

20. Ibid., 112.

21. Ibid.

22. Samuel Escobar, “New Directions for Evangelical Theology in Latin America: A Literature Review,” *JLAT* 8 (2013): 82–84.

century. Rather than reflecting on the Trinity in purely speculative or metaphysical terms, he affirms belief in “a God whose essence is sharing,” and thus the doctrine of the Trinity says, “God is love.” González then calls Hispanics “to discover, to imitate, and to apply to our societal and ecclesial life the love of the Triune God,” helping the wider church to see what this might look like for their brothers and sisters in the North Atlantic communities.<sup>23</sup> Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako finds that second century orthodox Greek theologians wrestled through the same concerns as mid-twentieth-century African theologians,<sup>24</sup> struggling with issues of identity and philosophical integration in order to understand the divine-creature relationship amidst the development of a trinitarian doctrine of the divine life and love, and divine intimacy with the created order.<sup>25</sup>

Korean theologian Paul Chung calls his proposal a “reconstruction of an irregular theology of the Trinity,” drawing from different epistemologies, including the Jewish wisdom of Kabbalah and the philosophical Daoism rendered through *Daodejing*. He begins with the Christian self-understanding of God revealed through Israel’s history and in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, but then uses these incipient epistemologies to develop a notion of divine economic speech bearing witness to God’s trinitarian life “as an eschatologically open movement of divine action and becoming in light of God’s coming.” This “provocative irregularity” maintains an eschatological reserve that understands God as “free to speak in a completely different and unexpected manner than that which is limited to the Church.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, in light of this, “human language and words may be a genuine witness and attestation when viewed as an analogical medium of God’s grace of speech.”<sup>27</sup>

Catholic theologian Peter Phan attempts to develop a Vietnamese American theology employing *tam tai* philosophy for a construction of a doctrine of the Trinity. Here the Father is correlate to “heaven,” the Son

23. Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 111–15.

24. Andrew Walls, “The Rise of Global Theologies,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 25.

25. Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford, UK: Regnum, 1992).

26. Paul S. Chung, *Constructing Irregular Theology: Bamboo and Mingjung in East Asian Perspective* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), 81–101. Note the discussion of how this orients the church in mission and genuine openness toward religious pluralism and ethical responsibility in the face of the Other in light of trinitarian openness, peace, and reconciliation in the world.

27. *Ibid.*, 100.

to “humanity,” and God the Spirit “to earth and to elaborate [trinitarian] roles in the history of salvation in the light of those of heaven, earth, and humanity.”<sup>28</sup> These roles are truly distinct, yet intimately linked together in a *perichoresis* or *koinonia* of life and activity, where divine transcendence and immanence are intrinsically related, conceived as internally connected with and even *dependent on* humanity and earth to fulfill divine action in the economy. Accordingly, “the Trinity is conceived as inscribed in the structure of reality itself.”<sup>29</sup>

While some of the above reflections may push the limits of what might denote genuine trinitarian doctrine, say, with the notion of divine eschatological reserve or with various panentheistic renderings,<sup>30</sup> Kärkkäinen still wants these and other localized forms of naming to complement the traditional ways of naming the Trinity.<sup>31</sup>

What Amos Yong means by “fully trinitarian” is a Christ-centered and Spirit-oriented theology, normed by Scripture and deeply embedded in the great theological tradition.<sup>32</sup> But of course, if this is Christ-centered and Spirit-oriented, it must include ecclesiology, at least if the church has any sense of self-consciousness in the salvation economy. This is not church as an institution, but as the called, gathered, and simultaneously sent community—both brought into and sent out by the divine life and being. Yong’s view and some of the others would benefit from a proposal like R. Kendall Soulen’s, which suggests that there is a threefold pattern yielding three different appropriate ways of naming the persons of the Trinity: the theological, the christological, and the pneumatological. The latter pattern is most significant here, looking to the life of the churches for how this pattern most fully unfolds the name of the Trinity with extraordinary breadth, intersecting with the range of human language and experience.<sup>33</sup> This pattern adapts itself to time and place, making use

28. Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 244.

29. *Ibid.*

30. See also the earlier treatment of Stephen R. Holmes, “Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology of God as Missionary,” *IJST* 8 (2006): 71–90, which risks having the economy or “missionary” constitute the divine being in ways that risk introducing *necessity* into the divine life (I am grateful to Keith E. Johnson of Florida for this point). Liberation theologies and other social models easily fall into this; yet the matter is avoided when Holmes notes, “it is a necessary perfection of God’s being that he is not sent” (*ibid.*, 77).

31. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 398–99. See also the selective survey in this vol. of various “global” trinitarian theologies.

32. Amos Yong, “Asian American Evangelical Theology,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective*, 207–8.

33. R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity, vol. 1: Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 247–51.

of what is readily available, insisting on “no single fixed vocabulary of its own, but unfolds the inexhaustible glory of the triune Name through the general forms of speech and possibilities of speech present in the discourse of all peoples, tribes, and nations.”<sup>34</sup>

Here Jonathan Wilson’s attempted corrective is set against these, suggesting that the already-not yet scheme draws us “back into the kind of historical captivity that opens the door to ‘theology-with-reserve,’” and thus places Christian mission in “a space where authorities and powers other than the Messiah circumscribe the sphere, range, and possibilities for Christian mission.”<sup>35</sup> Apocalyptic theology shows its weakness here by not having a real “place” in the already-not yet situation, where amidst our fallenness we truly participate in being Christ’s body in the world. In so doing, the church becomes the place of “his righteousness, the extension of his presence, the very inbreaking of his reign in the world,” which does not separate Christians from the world. Yet the church has a major role in history, preceding the world epistemologically on this account with God’s reign being “manifest in the midst of the church as a foretaste of what is to come in the world.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, the eschatological nature of the gospel finds history as the medium of truthful witness.<sup>37</sup> And if indeed it is a real place where witness occurs, it seems it is also the place where witness—indeed, witness to the triune action in salvation history—is enacted, formulated and developed.

While the above emphases resemble various attempts to reconcile theologies with Scripture and the church’s doctrinal heritage with a goal of being self-consciously “trinitarian,” often tending toward social models of the Trinity,<sup>38</sup> what they do not do is provide a sound means for precisely how the doctrine of the Trinity is both formulatedly and irreducibly mis-

34. *Ibid.*, 252.

35. Jonathan R. Wilson, “Aesthetics of the Kingdom: Apocalypsis, Eschatos, and Vision for Christian Mission,” in *Revisioning, Renewing, and Rediscovering the Triune Center: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. Grenz* (ed. Derek J. Tidball, Brian S. Harris, and Jason S. Sexton; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), ch. 8.

36. David E. Fitch and Geoffrey Holsclaw, “Mission amid Empire: Relating Trinity, Mission, and Political Formation,” *Missiology* 41/4 (2013): 398–99.

37. Stanley Hauerwas, “Beyond the Boundaries: The Church Is Mission,” in *Walk Humbly with the Lord: Church and Mission Engaging Plurality* (ed. Viggo Mortensen and Andreas Osterlund Nielsen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 61.

38. About which, see the critical comments by Stephen R. Holmes, Karen Kilby, and Lewis Ayres in this volume (chs. 3, 4, and 5). See also the recent attempts by Robert K. Lang’at, “Trinity and Missions: Theological Priority in Missionary Nomenclature,” in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship* (ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 161–81; and in the same vol., Leanne Van Dyk, “The Church’s Proclamation as a Participation in God’s Mission,” 225–36.



sional. For this matter, we return to Lesslie Newbigin's insights to seed the argument of this essay.<sup>39</sup>

## NEWBIGIN AND EARLY TRINITARIAN FORMULATION

Newbigin argued that the significance of trinitarian doctrine is seen in the church's earliest struggles to articulate it in the pagan world. The vehemence of this struggle highlighted how central the process of formulating the doctrine was to Christian witness, and it showed how early trinitarian theology was grounded in missionary activity. Despite the fact that there is no formally developed doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament, any attentive reader finds a trinitarian pattern therein, with prominence given to the Spirit active in the life of the church. As the church took the gospel to the world, as the argument runs, "it very soon found itself compelled to articulate a fully trinitarian doctrine of the God whom it proclaimed."<sup>40</sup> The most significant early doctrinal dispute about the nature of the Trinity (the mutual relations of the Son and Father) developed *right in the midst of the struggle* between the church and the pagan world. Thus as the church invested intellectually in the task of stating the gospel in the Greco-Roman culture's terms without compromising the gospel message, "it was the doctrine of the Trinity which was the key" to this, which allowed Christians to state both "the unity and distinctiveness of God's work in the forces of man's environment and God's work of regeneration within the soul of man."<sup>41</sup>

Just so, outside of the Christianized Western world that Newbigin called "Christendom," one learns that "the doctrine of the Trinity is not something that can be kept out of sight; on the contrary, it is the necessary starting point of preaching. Even in the simplest form of missionary preaching, one finds that one cannot escape dealing with this doctrine."<sup>42</sup> Thus while an understanding of the triune nature of God was the presupposition (*arche*) without which no gospel preaching can be done, it was also the struggle to communicate this gospel that *was* the trinitarian confession! It gave way to the content that was proclaimed. Nothing about this

39. Along with C. S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin is said to have given evangelicals in the age of late modernity "an intellectual armoury of a very different kind from that offered by the sterling efforts of conservative theologians" (Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* [Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013], 149). For an excellent introduction to Newbigin's life and writings, see Paul Weston, *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

40. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 34.

41. *Ibid.*, 34–35.

42. *Ibid.*, 35.

confession was tacit, but was dynamically and explicitly trinitarian since Trinity just *is* the confessional explanation of the nature and identity of this God in Christ reconciling the world.

## CONFESSING TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE TODAY

Trinitarian theology properly becomes such while confessing faith in the God of the gospel through the medium of missionary engagement. This manner of confessional theology locates historic creeds and ecclesial confessions as forms of contextualized gospel renderings insofar as they work centrifugally from the scriptural witness and Spirit-born confession, “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3a), which then takes expansive trinitarian shape in dynamic relation to all things the triune God stands in reference to. The meaning of this as faithful confession lies in its being shaped by Scripture and is thus consistently evangelical as well as inexhaustibly expansive in particular contexts. Accordingly, “trinitarian” theology covers the traditional loci and everything the triune reality touches, yet has a confessional home chiefly in *prayer* and *evangelism*, while reflecting the reality of eschatological hope and re-creation of all things (Rev 21:5). Therefore trinitarian confession—confessing this triune God—is the shape of mission today. Sent to proclaim salvation in Jesus’ name (Acts 4:12), when asked, “Who is this Jesus?” the question can only be answered in terms of trinitarian faith.<sup>43</sup>

While making this point Newbigin drew from his own evangelistic experience in Indian villages, noting that the evangelist and converts (in retrospect), upon believing the message of Jesus (essentially a message about the Father and Son), discover ways that the hearers have been prepared by the Spirit’s prevenient work to receive the gospel. It is this same Spirit who “made preaching his instrument and continues to work in those he has enabled to believe.” Such a trinitarian starting point provides grounds for fresh articulation of the missionary message amidst “the pluralistic, polytheistic, pagan society of our time.”<sup>44</sup>

Accordingly, if wise the missionary must take ample time to listen before talking. But when asked for the identity of the church in and bear-

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43. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 28. See also discussions from the 2013 Los Angeles Theology Conference, “Christology, Ancient and Modern,” which continually moved to discussions about the Trinity, especially in the final panel (<http://latheology.com/past-years>).

44. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 36–37; see also Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 179.

ing witness to Christ, there is a pneumatological answer to be given, as with all providentially-governed affairs of the triune God's work, and especially with the community of faith. When asked of the kind of union with God our faith indicates (and *which* God), it is that with the God of Israel, maker of heaven and earth, all things seen and unseen, whom believers confess as "*Abba, Father*" (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).<sup>45</sup>

## TRINITARIAN MISSIONARY TEXT

Newbigin was emphatic that true missionary work should start not by attending to aspirations of people in a particular culture, nor by answering questions on their terms, nor by offering solutions to problems as the world sees them. Rather, it begins and continues "by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people."<sup>46</sup> Newbigin's commitment to Scripture's supreme authority is complemented by his commitment to understanding it within the context of the church congregation. He noted the creeds as constituting a point of reference for all engagement with Scripture, paying special attention to the *homoousios* concept, a word expressing in contemporary philosophy the truth on which everything depended. Thus there is a sense in which, as Newbigin found when crucial biblical teaching is explicitly formulated, like the trinitarian formulations, the church "can never go back on what it has decided."<sup>47</sup>

Trinitarian doctrine therefore has taken no better shape than in what is worked out in the church's exposition of its own faith, set forth in its creeds, and manifestly located in various ways. Confession of the Trinity is the shape of trinitarian mission in the world, but in this way, trinitarian theology is normed by Scripture,<sup>48</sup> worship, prayer, and the translational practice of trinitarian evangelism (Rom 15:16).

There is therefore an archetypal trinitarian confession inherent to the life of God that works out centrifugally by means of mission in creation, the primary features of which find the redeemed community correspondingly

45. This matter emphasizing the pneumatological and the union with the God of Israel aims to move beyond Newbigin's answer to the question of the missionary's authority (*The Open Secret*, 16–18).

46. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 151.

47. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 27; Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 319.

48. Not the fully developed doctrine of the Trinity, but the trinitarian pattern, for example as developed in Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*; and Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 34.

confessing after the character of this triune God, in Holy Scripture,<sup>49</sup> creeds, councils, doctrinal statements, and all statements of gospel that, and insofar as they, testify mimetically to the reality of God's life.

### MISSIONARY TRINITY

The seeds of the nature of the confession give way to an apologetic and missional elasticity that appears in fresh ways wherever the Spirit blows (John 3:8). This message, of course, is about a Son (a true one going after wayward ones) and a Father. This cannot be preached without speaking of the Father and the Son<sup>50</sup> and carries proclamational power by virtue of the Spirit who creates life where there is none. This primary designation of God as "Father" denotes not only the trinitarian nature of God but also the sending nature of God,<sup>51</sup> whereby mission becomes constitutive of the triune God.<sup>52</sup> As David Bosch says, "Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is a mission because God loves people."<sup>53</sup>

While the above statement delineates an epistemological and indeed missiological framework, grounding mission in the triune life also resists the polarizing of evangelism over social justice since mission involves God putting the whole of himself, channeling his "creative, redemptive, eschatological energy ... into a mission whose ultimate goal is the total transformation of the whole of reality."<sup>54</sup> This whole movement of sending and bringing others within the sphere of his communion is beyond one-directional.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it is the promise of the triune God to be involved in every missionary endeavor, circumventing human failure, redeeming flawed attempts, and through creation extending his prior claim on all peoples, tongues, tribes, and nations (Ps 96:10). It is the triune God "who by His Son has provided a way back for His alienated, rebellious creatures (John 14:6) ... [and] who by His Holy Spirit selects, equips, and sends His

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49. Note the argument from the theological priority of God's mission that the Bible itself is grounded in a missional basis (Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22–23).

50. Newbiggin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 36.

51. Scott W. Sundquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 190.

52. David Fergusson, "Ecumenism and the Doctrine of the Trinity Today," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (ed. Giles Emery and Matthew Levering; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 552. See also Holmes, "Trinitarian Missiology," 72–90.

53. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (20th anniv. ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 402.

54. Martin N. Accad and John Corrie, "Trinity," in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (ed. John Corrie; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 398.

55. Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 261.

servants to all nations (Acts 1:8).”<sup>56</sup> Not only is God a missionary in the above senses, but the church also witnesses to the triune missionary activity.

## MISSIONARY WITNESS TO THE TRINITY

Witness is not primarily an act of the church, of course, but of the Spirit, who indelibly marks the church and sets God's people apart as witnesses (Matt 10:16–20; John 15:26–27; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor 6:11). This is no contrived witness but a martyrological act made possible by the Spirit, who unites and indwells the church. It may be in “a quite unexpected way and from a quite unexpected quarter that the Spirit will bear witness, using perhaps some small piece of simple fidelity, or some unstudied word, to illuminate with the authority of light itself what the Church has been trying to say about the purpose [and, indeed, nature] of God.”<sup>57</sup> Here a recovery of the centrality of the Holy Spirit for the missionary task should be plain: “The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. His work is to enable us to participate in Christ's Sonship, to be one with him in his obedience to the Father. And only he can enable us to participate in, and thereby be the occasions of, his witness.”<sup>58</sup>

The church, then, witnesses to Jesus' “supra-religious life,”<sup>59</sup> to his role as the subversive fulfilment of every cultural narrative. The church is not the source but rather the locus of witness, and carries the Spirit-enabled task of translation. It is the Spirit who *translates* the message from one culture to another (1 Cor 12:8–10; 14:26–28), and whose own action and translation work enable the nations to hear “the mighty acts” (*ta megaleia*) of God in their own tongues (Acts 2:4–11). The missionary activity of Bible translation functions in a similar capacity, having had the effect of recognizing and even preserving other cultures and dialects, as an action reflecting the translatability of the gospel message and its humanizing quality. As such the church is precarious, vulnerably present, open and hospitable for the work of translating and inviting all to experience this love. Lamin Sanneh notes this feature, stating that “solidarity with the poor, the weak, the disabled, and the stigmatized is the sine qua non of Christianity's credibility as a world religion.”<sup>60</sup>

56. Herman Buehler, “Pietism's Most Challenging Task: A Trinitarian Renewal,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gillingland, and Paul Pierson; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 238.

57. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 50.

58. *Ibid.*, 81.

59. Accad and Corrie, “Trinity,” 396–401.

60. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (rev. and exp.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis: 2009), 11.

Avoiding come-and-see versus go-and-tell paradigms of missions, which quite easily perpetuate the homogeneity principle or ecclesio-centric hegemonies, Andrew Walls's "principle of translatability" provides contours that find confessional Christianity anchored in the life of the triune God, yet shows God's own translation as his mode of action for salvation. "Christian faith," Walls argues, "rests on a divine act of translation: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'" God's own translation into humanity, fully being expressed in and as humanity while remaining fully grounded in divinity, is a cultural reality completely unlike ours and stands as the basis for all translation of his missionary action.<sup>61</sup>

This proposal avoids potential problems with so-called pneumatological naming of the Trinity<sup>62</sup> as it locates mission in the Spirit's work through the localized ecclesia and in the biblical text, making relevant the global as well as localized ecclesial expressions of trinitarian confessions. As such, this view possesses a unifying power for the churches, even while locating the possibility of a constant dynamic and dialogue between solid and liquid churches, enabling the missionary church to articulate its confession in many ways (cf. Acts 13 and *passim*) consistent with the inexhaustible and dynamic nature of the gospel, the *dynamis* of God.<sup>63</sup> Here our missionary activity—rather than exercising a confident knowing of traditional missionary models, the implications of particular models, of other disciplines that may shed light on contemporary models, or even of the particular ways we have articulated our trinitarian confession—as a missionary movement sets out in prayer with, "Our Father," "Lord Jesus," or "Come, Holy Spirit." And it blesses: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit..." It advances the trinitarian proclamation of Jesus as Lord and of the one faith, one hope, and one baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in hopes that the Lord may do again what he's promised in Scripture to do, speaking life and bringing healing and hope in this name among all peoples.<sup>64</sup>

61. Andrew F. Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years* (ed. Philip C. Stine; Leiden: Brill, 1990), 25–39. Insights in this paragraph are owed to Paul Weston.

62. Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*, 247–52.

63. Ken Gnanakan, "To Proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom," in *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (ed. Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 10.

64. For an expansive argument grounded in the history of revelation and proper rejection of the argument that a theocentric or christocentric emphasis leads to reductionism, see John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believer's Church Perspective* (ed. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 138–42.

*MISSIONARY TRINITARIAN THEOLOGIES*

So what will witnessing to the triune action yield? Shaped and nuanced by different competing epistemologies in our ever-changing, globalized world, today's missionaries might hope for unique ways that distinct trinitarian theology/ies can be developed while on mission in particular places: Siberian trinitarian theology, Thai trinitarian theology, Iranian prison trinitarian theology, Los Angeleno suburban trinitarian theology, "Hakka" trinitarian theology, Native American "Hopi" trinitarian theology, with different languages, experiential, and conceptual terms available.

The practice of theology itself is always exercised as a way of gathering conceptual and real tools available in a particular culture to expound the wonderful truth that God was in Christ reconciling the world and all that baptism into his name entails. As God's triune life has been revealed in Christ by the Spirit, just like there remain today unfathomable mysteries of the human brain to be explored, so also the wonders of the triune reality disclosed to us in Scripture and shaping the cosmic universe that bears the imprint of the triune God may yet hold forth ways of better expressing *homoousios*, or eternal generation, or other wondrous truths of the gospel.

So my argument is largely methodological. And while various proposals have been offered for relating trinitarian theology to mission, since mission is not *out there* as much as it is *right here* wherever we find ourselves (Acts 17:26–27), there is language readily available to us for the translation of the shape of the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Some of the best of it, I'm arguing, will perhaps never appear in print or be the subject of a global ecumenical council. When I was in a Parisian hospital waiting to hear about the results of my youngest child's emergency brain surgery following a cavernoma vascular malformation that had hemorrhaged on her left frontal lobe, our trinitarian reflection was not in our struggle to nuance the meaning of *homoousios*, but in our reckoning of the reality of its implications for the healing of all things now broken, for my wife, myself, and our small baby girl, and for all who may find themselves resting in the strong name of the triune God of grace.

The way we enacted the confession of our hope in Jesus before a Parisian neurosurgeon and his amazing medical team, as we prayerfully reflected on the hope of the incarnation and what this means, we found ourselves engaged in this kind of trinitarian reflection through prayer, setting our hearts on God in relation to his world and on God in triune relation to Godself that we see and are brought into by virtue of the incarnation, by virtue of which we find ourselves *right there* in the very



life of the triune God, in the Son by the Spirit, crying “Abba, Father.” That event—that hospital, those rooms, that small bandaged body on a hospital bed, that hot July Parisian sun—shapes everything I think about the incarnation, its implications, and how I articulate these.

### *TRINITARIAN CREEDAL CONFESSIONS*

As this all relates to our creeds and confessions of the Trinity, it’s important to note that when the church starts writing things down for codification and recognition, whether local, regional, or ecumenical, it forfeits the first-order activity that a trinitarian theology of mission may best thrive under, open to new possibilities of expressing the strong name of the Trinity in an expansive exposition. As such, we acknowledge that our creeds and confessions are *ours*, capturing moments of our confession of the triune God in a *developable* doctrine. It’s not that we capture the Trinity itself in our confession, who in the Spirit’s ever-opening, ever-renewing, ever imparting hope amidst the rubble and in the place of alienation brings loving reconciliation. But it moves out like a world-class doctor, scientist, or any researcher (*apostolos*) ever eager to confront unaddressed challenges and problems plaguing individuals and communities that can be aided with the healing power of just the right cure.

Various theological expositions so rendered have at times compromised other important theological loci with reductionism or misplaced emphasis, as may be seen in any context. These risk short-circuiting the coherent exposition of the gospel, especially when set forth as universal norming systems on par with Scripture, which as God’s inspired Word flows from the very life of God in revealed movement that shapes the way disciples of Jesus walk together in the present world for the sake of the future one, where the triune God will be all in all.

The dynamic impulse of the creeds and confessions, then, if understood properly as formulated dogma—polemical and apologetic—ought to propel us in our missional task, free to articulate in various imaginatively resourced and resourceful ways the nature of this God revealed in Scripture. Barth also sees continuity between this missionary practice and the early church by pointing out that “the [trinitarian] analogies adduced by the fathers are in the long run only further expositions and multiplications of the biblical terms Father, Son, and Spirit, which are already analogical.”<sup>65</sup>

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65. Karl Barth, *CD I/1*, 340.



## A CONFESSING TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY FOR TODAY'S MISSION

With further space, a rubric might be sketched for what confessional trinitarian theology on mission ought to look like through a reversed reading of the creed insofar as the realities in our present world—including cultural impulses and deeply personal longings for healing, renewal, forgiveness, community, purpose, and everlasting life (eschatology)—can be properly understood in light of the creed's third article. This missionary exposition of the third article gives way to the second and then first articles. It makes sense of our stories, bringing everything into the light of our confession of faith in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, and in the one Lord Jesus Christ, and in God the Father, Almighty Maker of heaven and earth.

For the missionary task Newbigin did not expect an “explicitly trinitarian theology” to be the substance of the missionary's initial talk or of the listener's initial understanding, but he did expect the message to be a trinitarian gospel nevertheless, resting in the reality of the revelation of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, fueling expansive exposition.<sup>66</sup> But how precisely do believers carry out their missional task of developing the explicit, fully trinitarian theology? May I suggest this is done by baptism—in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—and by following and by giving obedience to Jesus (Matt 28:18–20),<sup>67</sup> who in every way is like us (Heb 2:17; 4:15), and in the fullness of whose life we find ourselves living in dynamic, life-giving terms.

Does this dynamic mode of discipleship mean that concepts like *homousios* are up for grabs, or that the means of this Father-Son relationship described as eternal generation (reflecting relations of origin in the divine life) is up for grabs if something else or better can be found?

Newbigin himself observed:

it is not enough for the church to go on repeating in different cultural situations the same words and phrases. New ways have to be found of stating the essential Trinitarian faith, and for this the church in each new cultural situation has to go back to the original biblical sources of this faith in order to lay hold on it afresh and to state it afresh in contemporary terms.<sup>68</sup>

I suppose, then, that the answer to the question of what's up for grabs, at least on Newbigin's terms, depends on the questions that the display of the healing reality of God's reconciliation of the world through Christ

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66. Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, 36.

67. For an extended treatment of this text, see David J. Bosch, “The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16–20,” in *Exploring Church Growth* (ed. Wilbert R. Shenk; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 218–48.

68. Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 27.

are meant to subversively fulfil in the missionary moments of *euangelizometha*—our evangelism. Therein, rather than being an action of our own, our missionary activity shows that it is actually “the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power.”<sup>69</sup>

The way to avoid not squelching this power or aborting the ongoing confession is to be constantly conscious of the difference between God’s triune work in the world (which we celebrate in the form of baptism into the triune name) and that for which we labor through our prayer, worship, evangelism, and constant [extra]ordinary missionary work—first order theology as much as anything. When the time comes to develop these expositions further into full-orbed statements, confessions, or otherwise, we would do well to so saturate them with trinitarian, open-ended, and expansive explications, pointing to the triune God of love whom we love and who loves and cares for all that he has made.<sup>70</sup> Of critical importance today remains the need to keep central the core issues from the early church’s debates: (1) how God’s nature can still be one and not three, starting of course with the status of the Son; and (2) how the authoritativeness of the incarnation was to be explained as “the only valid point at which we can know who God is.”<sup>71</sup>

## PARTICIPATING IN TRINITARIAN MISSION

In the 2003 book *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, Colin Gunton defined theology’s task as “to essay a rational account of the creed of the Church whilst remaining deeply entrenched in the gospel.”<sup>72</sup> Yet his work was also shaped by listening to culture and responding to it *with* the gospel. Newbigin also developed his early sketches from the 1963 volume, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, into a more expansive trinitarian proposal with his 1978 book, *The Open Secret*,<sup>73</sup> adding additional features beyond his work in India, and reflecting further on the secularized post-Christian West. Simply because we have a roughly ecumenical understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that further nuances are not pos-

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

70. This has been capably done with the work of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, which met in Cape Town, South Africa, October 16–25, 2010, and among many other things produced the document *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action* (Cornwall, UK: The Lausanne Movement, 2011).

71. Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 136–44.

72. Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Essays toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 34.

73. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 199.

## A CONFESSING TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY FOR TODAY'S MISSION

sible if threats to a sound understanding of the nature of God are raised, or when new insights may be gathered that might illumine new problems, or grant better access or solutions to old ones. It is my suggestion that the best way, however, of participating in the triune mission is by prioritizing conversation and life together with our neighbors, whoever they may turn out to be. This will enable the followers of Jesus to transcend various approaches and to co-labor genuinely and seriously with the triune God by contributing to what Hans Urs von Balthasar described strikingly as the “unfolding of this dramatic tension.”<sup>74</sup>

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74. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 645.