

THE CHURCH AFTER THE LIKENESS OF THE HOLY TRINITY IS THE CHURCH  
AFTER THE *MISSIO DEI*

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*Query & Proposal*

Allow me a few focused questions interspersed with several brief and occasionally packed comments pertaining to my assignment—*The Church as Mission*<sup>1</sup>—in order to establish a theological *context* and framework for my proposal: “***The Church after the likeness of the Holy Trinity is the Church after the Missio Dei.***”

God is a missionary God<sup>2</sup> who is unchangeably faithful in ‘*sending*’ God’s love. The mission of God unveils the character of God. God’s character is God’s mission and vice versa because God is love. Consider the warp and woof of God’s *Story* in Word and Event. From the very beginning of creation (human and non-human) to its fulfillment in the New Creation, is one astonishing tale of God ‘*sending*’ and ‘*breathing out*’ God’s Word. God’s character has been steadfast (*hesed*) in ‘*speaking*’ and ‘*embodying*’ His Word of condescending love. God spoke the Word by the breath (Spirit) of his mouth and the world came into being. And the world that came into existence by the very Word of God is the same Word that became flesh by the Spirit of God. This Word that became incarnate is God ‘for us and our salvation’ (*Nicea*). The Triune God of Holy Scripture is a ‘*sending*’ God, a missionary God.

Does the Church have a mission? What is the Church’s mission? Can we properly understand the Mission (*Purpose*) of the Church apart from what the Church is (*Being*)? What does the biblical witness pronounce about the relation of the Church to the Gospel, and the ongoing penetration of God’s Kingdom that is ‘not yet’ consummated in the New Creation?<sup>3</sup> In what ways does the Church unwittingly eclipse the future of

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<sup>1</sup> A most useful resource to this Conference theme is the work of J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Particularly helpful in thinking about the Mission of God: Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006). Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, volume 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), *The Triune Identity*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> I share the eschatological orientation of ecclesiology in the works of Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991); “The Trinity and the Kingdom,” (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1993); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); Robert Jenson,

God's kingdom with an overly realized eschatology? Why have we not always followed the Scriptures teaching that the Church is not the Gospel, nor is the Church the Kingdom of God? The Gospel instructs that the faithful posture of the Church is to lean into the future of God's Kingdom while it lives out the mission of the Gospel.

The *Great Commission*<sup>4</sup> (Matthew 28:16-20) is fundamental to defining the Gospel mission of the Church. But what happens when the *Great Commission* is understood as a 'program,' an 'agenda' of the Church, or when its *essence* is 'located' in the institutional structures of the Church?<sup>5</sup> What do we dare to say, when we audaciously presume that the aim of the Church's mission is to 'finish' the Great Commission? Are these aims the consequences of viewing the *essence* of the Church *apart* from the *mission* of the Church and vice versa? Do they fail to see that the Church is the result of the Gospel, and thus, the Church bears witness to the mission of the Gospel and God's kingdom? The Church serves the Gospel; it does not 'finish' the *Great Commission* of the Gospel. The mission of the Gospel determines the *being* and *mission* of the Church as the *missio dei*.

Despite the Church's best intentions, we must ask ourselves, why have we 'deliberately' separated the *being* of the Church, from the *mission(s)* of the Church? On the surface of that question one could easily answer that a woefully deficient ecclesiology

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*The Knowledge of Things Hoped For*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); Carl Braaten, *The Future of God*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); Nikos A. Nissiotis, "Pneumatological Christology as a Presupposition of Ecclesiology," in *Oecumenica: An Annual Symposium of Ecumenical Research*, (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1967); Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Often the *Great Commission* is located **only** in verse 19 and is thereby, cut off from the rest (verses 16-20) of the context. Doxology is at the heart of Mission. After all, the *Great Commission* is the Mission of God. One must spend time in the 'worship' of God before one is 'sent' to make disciples of the Triune God. Viewing mission as a mandate of the Church separate from the context of the worship of God has led to an unfortunate separation of the mission of God from the character of God. The *Great Commission* is the *missio dei*.

<sup>5</sup> Darrell L. Guder (editor), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); Lesslie Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today*, (New York International Missionary Council, 1958); Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984); Lesslie Newbigin, "The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission," (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

is to blame. While that may be true on one level, a deeper and more profound diagnosis would reveal that an incomplete Trinitarian concept of God touches the very nerve of our ecclesial failures.<sup>6</sup> Failure to ground the *being* and *mission* of the Church in the mission and character of the Triune God has often rendered confused and conflated attempts in narrating the epiphanies of God, in the Story of Incarnation and Pentecost, sometimes severing the Head from the Body in our ecclesiologies.<sup>7</sup> When the Church fails to understand the work of Christ and the Spirit as the *missio dei*, then the Church's service of the Gospel will not live after the likeness of Triune love, because the Church has dislodged the mission of God from the character of God.

What is the Church, <sup>(Being)</sup> and what on earth is the Church for? <sup>(Mission)</sup> The bi-directional nature of the *being* and *mission* of the Church will not only establish a theological context and framework for exploring, ***The Church as Mission***. It will also offer a more biblical and theological rationale for the *missio dei*. As the Church lives after the *missio dei*, the Church lives after the likeness of the Holy Trinity and vice versa. Since the mission of God moves in step with the character of God, a trinitarian theology of mission is doxological from the Alpha to the Omega. Once mission is grounded in the character of God, we can no longer think of the Church as having a mission, instead we will come to see the very *being* of the ***Church as mission***, a mission that is doxological from beginning to end. The *missio dei* for the people of God always begins and ends with never-ending praise, thanksgiving, and profound gratitude for *gathered life* in the character and mission of God.

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<sup>6</sup> This critique and insight has been shaped by: Robert W. Jenson's argument in *Unbaptized God The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). The late Colin E. Gunton made a similar argument one year earlier in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), cf. chapter 4, "The Community: The Trinity and the Being of the Church," 58-85.

<sup>7</sup> I first began working on the being and mission of the Church in my Wesleyan Theological Society Presidential Address in 2001. Cf. K. Steve McCormick, "The Heresies of Love: Toward A Spirit-Christ Ecclesiology of Triune Love," in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 37, No. 1 Spring 2002, 35-47. A continued reflection on the necessity of a Spirit-Christology was developed in a later WTS article. K. Steve McCormick, "The Church An Icon of the Holy Trinity: A Spirit-Christology as Necessary Prolegomena of Ecclesiology," in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 41, No. 2 Fall, 2006, 227-241.

This brief *essay-in-progress* will probe the salvific interplay of the promise and mission of the Gospel in the *one, holy, catholic and apostolic* Church.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, I intend to argue that to partake of God's nature <sup>(2 Peter 1:4)</sup> is to participate in God's redemptive mission to 'rectify' the whole creation. Further, I will contend that the *marks* of the Church are the marks of the *missio dei*. To be *sent* is to be *marked by love*, and our *mission* is to *love* in the same way we have been *marked* and *sent* by the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When the mission of the Church lives out of the character of God, the Church is truly after the likeness of the Holy Trinity. And, as the Church reflects the will and character of God in all of her mission, the Church is unified in love, holy in love, catholic and apostolic in love.

Why have these "marked practices" (unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity) of God's mission been stumbling blocks of division rather than the building blocks of 'unity and diversity'? Often, ecclesial '*difference(s)*,' rather than diversity, have eclipsed 'unity' only to more or less, script the mission of the Church by division. Perhaps a commonly shared flaw in these marks of ecclesial impasse is not grounding the marks of the Church in the mission of God, a mission that is 'constantly' rooted in both history and the future of God's kingdom. In times past, whenever the Church's point of reference was *only* to look backwards to the '*static*' permanence of history, instead of leaning into the future of God's kingdom, the Church tended to define the marks of *unity, holiness, catholicity* and *apostolicity* by the vested power and authority of the institution of the Church. In essence, the marks were mostly identified in the 'structures' of the Church and less in the *missio dei* that rests securely in God's final future, i.e., God's *Eschatos*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I owe a great deal to the ecumenical vision of Albert C. Outler in helping me to think about the *notae ecclesiae*. Cf. Albert C. Outler, "Methodism in the World Christian Community," in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, edited by Thomas C. Oden, Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 241-250. Cf. also the following chapters on Outler's vision for Methodism: "Visions and Dreams, the Unfinished Business of an Unfinished Church," 253-262; "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?," 211-226; "The Mingling of Ministries," 227-239.

<sup>9</sup> I am arguing that a '*static*' notion of history is inconsistent with the '*ek-static*' character of God unveiled in the mission of God throughout history. Pannenberg's view of 'proleptic history,' along with the work of Moltmann and Jenson, has shaped my understanding of eternity and time, especially in the broader context of the biblical narrative. Cf. Colin Gunton, *The Promise of*

If Pentecost means anything, it means that what the Spirit did for Christ in the mission of the Gospel, the Spirit will do for the Church on earth in the mission of the Gospel. In other words, just as the Spirit rescued the Son from the boundaries of history in his resurrection, the Spirit will rescue the Church from those boundaries in bringing in the new creation.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, today many in the Church seem to be *emerging* out of the Church's longstanding polarization, by discovering commonalities in shared mission, and gradually letting go of tightly clutched theological identities. Little by little, a commonly shared mission is pushing theological '*differences*' into the background, while that commonly shared mission is discovering a renewed vision of the unity of the Church. This is truly a strange phenomenon, where ecclesial traditions are discovering their 'common need' of each other to carry on the *missio dei*. When we are driven by our *marked* need to preach the good news and embody it in feed the hungry, caring for the sick, touching the poor, including the marginalized and downtrodden, healing the environment, extending forgiveness and liberation, offering eternal hope, etc., it does not take long to realize that this mission of God will take 'all the people of God.'

I can recall from my former conversations with the Orthodox in Romania, sharing their great appreciation for the Church of the Nazarenes' 'Compassionate Ministry' among the sick and orphaned children of Romania. While staying in an Orthodox monastery in Sighisoara, the abbot confessed to me that the Orthodox Church needed the Nazarene's help in caring for all the sick of Romania. Last year, as a participant in an Orthodox-Methodist Consultation at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York, I watched

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*Trinitarian Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), especially, chapter 4, "The Community: The Trinity and the Being of the Church," 58-85.

<sup>10</sup> John David Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 130. Zizioulas writes: "Now if *becoming* history is the particularity of the Son in the economy, what is the contribution of the Spirit? Well, precisely the opposite: it is to liberate the Son and the economy from the bondage of history. If the Son dies on the cross, thus succumbing to the bondage of historical existence, it is the Spirit that raises him from the dead. The Spirit is the *beyond* history, and, when acting in history, the Spirit does so in order to bring into history the last days, the *eschaton*. Hence, the first fundamental particularity of pneumatology is its eschatological character. The Spirit makes of Christ an eschatological being, the "last Adam."

Father Jillian, an Orthodox priest from Canada, step onto the floor of the assembly, and speak these astounding words to his presiding Bishop: “When are we as Orthodox going to confess our need of the Methodists in order to be the Church, and carry out God’s mission?” Surely, this is a sign of the Spirit moving in the midst of the *one, holy, catholic* and *apostolic* Church, and giving to the Church what the Church needs to live after the mission of God. Surely, these are signs of God’s kingdom breaking forth, a new creation in the making? Remember, when we participate in the character of God we participate in the mission of God. As I listen discernibly to these signs, I seem to hear the Spirit saying to the Church: The *common ground* for all the ‘people of God’ is to live out of the ‘*marked practices*’ of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity in the *missio dei*.

### *Story & Mission*

A closer look into the narrative of Scripture reveals that God’s Story is God’s Mission. Not only does the mission of God move in step with God’s character, but tightly woven into this tale of salvation is a mission to *include* all of creation into the narrative and mission of God. The nature of God’s Story is meant to *embrace* all of Creation <sup>(Romans 8:19-23)</sup> in this narrative because the immutably generous and hospitable character of God is love. God continues to unveil a much larger Story in God’s mission by ‘gathering up’ the Church, the people of God, to live in God’s character through the *missio dei*. This is the Gospel mission of the Church.

Listen to the constant refrain of God’s mission sung through the faith of Israel: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one.” Now, this “One,” “almighty God,” “maker of heaven and earth,” is God the Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; the eternal Son of God who became incarnate “for us and our salvation,” has given us his Spirit, whereby we cry, “Abba Father.” In this, we have been drawn into the life of God and share in the very character of God. <sup>(2 Peter 1:4)</sup> As we move deeper into this narrative we find a much larger vision than ever imagined. Here is a story of the *missio dei* where the past is not “fixed” because the “finish” of the story is still being unveiled through our participation in the character and mission of God. Hearken further to the promise and mission of the Gospel in the Letter to the Hebrews: “All of these died in faith without having received the promises. . . . since God had provided something better so that they would not apart from us, be made perfect.” <sup>(Heb. 11:13, 39-40)</sup> This is an inconceivably broad vision where ‘all

the people of God' have been *embraced* and "*gathered up*" into God's Story, so that in the new creation, when God has spoken the last Word in the Story, and is "all in all," 'all the people of God' will have 'become by grace what God is by nature.'<sup>11</sup> The *purpose* of God's Story unfolds in the *missio dei*; a mission where all the people of God will partake of the character of God by participation in the mission of God.

God's love is God's mission. And so, in the *missio dei*, adoption into the house of God rests on God *sending* the Spirit of God's Son into our hearts, enabling us to cry "Abba!" "Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6) Envisage this '*sending* love' in a slight change of metaphor; God's love poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5) is like a *parabola* in that it is always 'thrown out.' God's love originates "from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is effected in the Spirit." And in the continued sweep of God's *sending* love, the Spirit gathers up the body of Christ and, with renewed and grateful hearts, the people of God respond in love, by the energy of the Spirit, through conformity to the Son, and back to the Father. So, by the energy of the Spirit, in this ecclesial movement of gathering, "the whole Trinity descends into our faithful hearts" and we are "filled with the energy of love" 'sent out' and 'marked' with the same 'thrown out' love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God's *sending* love, similar to a *parabola*, is always open-ended "for us and our salvation." And God's *sending* love is always open because it always gives and receives. Finally, God's *sending* love is forever open because it must always be returned. This trinitarian description '*marks*' the *being* and *mission* of the Church. Hence, as the Church is "gathered" up into the life of the Triune God, her mission, in that continued sweep of triune love, is to "gather" up by the Spirit, by the energy of triune love, the whole creation into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic mission of God. When the Church

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<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 65. Vladimir Lossky depicts a vision of salvation as consisting in grace and glory, a share in communion with the Holy Trinity: "The goal of orthodox spirituality, the blessedness of the Kingdom of Heaven, is not the vision of the essence, but above all, a participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity; the deified state of the co-heirs of the divine nature, gods created after the uncreated God, possessing by grace all that the Holy Trinity possesses by nature."

returns back doxologically all that the Church has received, the Church participates in the *missio dei* in ‘making all things new.’

*The Marked Practices of the Missio Dei*

Pentecost, that radically new Day in history key to ‘making all things new,’ is the result of the Father having *sent* the Son and the Spirit<sup>12</sup> to carry out the *missio dei* in the Cross and Resurrection on earth, in time and history. The descent of the Spirit on that radically new Day ‘constitutes’ Christ and His Church, and opens space (*makom*) in the *oikodomē* for all the *gathered*, to participate in the life and mission of the Triune God on earth, in time, in history in a radically ‘new way.’ And yet, not only is this new Day of Pentecost, a ‘new way’ for the people of God in history, it is also a ‘new way’ for the Triune God in history. Simply put, for the first time in history, through the work of Christ and the Spirit, a new iconic window into the *oikodomē* was opened to the whole creation, so that in this ‘new reorienting way,’<sup>13</sup> not only do the gathered people of God have unimpeded access to the Triune God, but God has unimpeded access to all of creation.

Alfred Loisy made the notorious ecclesial maxim: “Jesus announced the kingdom, but it was the Church that came.”<sup>14</sup> This was touted by Robert Jenson as “an eschatological *detour* of Christ’s coming.”<sup>15</sup> What came on the Day of Pentecost, in this ‘eschatological detour’ was ‘a new and decisive epiphany of the Trinitarian God in

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<sup>12</sup> A ‘Spirit-Christology’ is an underlying assumption at work in this paper. In addition to Nissiotis’ work on Spirit-Christology, I have found Ralph Del Colle and Eugene F. Rogers to be extremely helpful and insightful. Cf. Ralph Del Colle, *Christ and the Spirit: Spirit-Christology in Trinitarian Perspective*, 28-29. “Spirit-Christology is after all a model that exegetes the divine economy. The risen Christ cannot be understood to be the ‘sender’ of the Spirit if the incarnate Christ is not already the “bearer” of the Spirit” (29); Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside the Modern West*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).

<sup>13</sup> In the earliest days of Christianity, the first Christians were those who were living in ‘*The Way*.’

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Loisy, *L’Evangile et l’Eglise*, (Paris: 1902) is quoted by Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 170. This quote can also be found in the English translation of Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 166.

<sup>15</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, page 170.



time.’<sup>16</sup> Nikos Nissiotis views this ‘eschatological detour’ as necessary and essential to the ‘second epiphany of God’ in history. Nissiotis writes:

. . . The descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost in a new and special way means the completion of the Christ event by a further Trinitarian revelation. The Church is not only people who are called to salvation but also the embodiment of grace, where salvation is received by Word and Sacrament. The Church is not an anthropocentric institution but a theocentric organism inspired by the Spirit. Therefore its value is neither in its hierarchical and juridical structure nor in its right administration of Word and Sacrament. This attitude shifts the centre of the Ecclesia to the anthropological side and diminishes the creative energy of the Spirit which is the main constitutive element of the Church. The Church is the receptacle of the Trinitarian presence in history through the action of the Spirit. . . . If this action on the part of the Spirit is denied the Church becomes anthropomorphic and is reduced to a sociological institution.<sup>17</sup>

Since both the *nature* and *purpose* of the *missio dei* has *always* embraced ‘the people of God’ to ‘become by grace what God is by nature,’ God’s eschatological mission in history would not move toward consummation until God became what we are (human) in flesh. This *purpose* of God’s enfleshment in the incarnation was eternally grounded in the *missio dei*, so that we might become in the *oikodomē* what God (divine) is in character and mission.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the descent of the cruciformed Spirit of Christ at

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<sup>16</sup> Nikos A. Nissiotis, “Pneumatological Christology as a Presupposition of Ecclesiology,” 249-250. Nissiotis explains: . . . the continuously renewed event of the Spirit and also as an established historical reality. If the act of the Spirit is recognized as the second personal revelation of God in history, if Pentecost signifies a new and decisive epiphany of the Trinitarian God in time, which is as important as the first one in Christ and which is inseparable from it, then the Church is God’s permanent gift to men, given in Christ.”

<sup>17</sup> Nikos A. Nissiotis, “Pneumatological Christology as a Presupposition of Ecclesiology,” 244.

<sup>18</sup> The Orthodox doctrine of theosis holds together the mystery of the incarnation with the mystery of salvation. Irenaeus and Athanasius viewed the purpose of the incarnation in the following paraphrase: “God became what we (human) are so that we might become what he is

Pentecost could not move the *missio dei* toward the future of the New Creation without the earlier work of Christ and the Spirit in the *missio dei* in Cross and Resurrection.

This new and decisive epiphany of God in history with the people of God would suggest that the *missio dei* is certainly not a detour of interruptions. Instead, these eschatological detours continue to unveil that the faithful character of God lives and moves kenotically in mission, in history, ‘for us and our salvation.’ In some ways, the enduring eschatological unveilings of the *missio dei* in the biblical narrative, are analogous to ‘why’ all the ‘cloud of witnesses’ still await perfection—‘they should not be made perfect apart from us.’ Similarly, in the ‘economy’ of God’s grace, as the *missio dei* in the Incarnation awaited Pentecost, the ongoing *missio dei* awaits the Church to become in the ‘marked-practices’ of the *missio dei*, one in love, holy in love, catholic in love, and apostolic in love. And finally, from the Alpha to the Omega of God’s Story, the *missio dei* awaits the consummation of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, in the New Creation.

Once Pentecost, is envisioned as the new epiphany of God in history, then the *being* and *mission* of the Church is essentially the ‘*sacrament par excellence*’<sup>19</sup> because the *oikodomē* is the ‘*new way*’ in history that the Triune God is presently working out the eschatological *missio dei* to ‘*rectify*’ the whole creation through the Church. This can be seen in the sacramental nature of the *Notae Ecclesiae*. The *marks* contain *descriptors*, not only of who the people of God *already* are as partakers of triune love, but the *marks* contain the ‘hidden promises’ of who the people of God shall become in the eschatological consummation of the *missio dei*. In similar ways to the Gospel, the Church is ‘*already*’ by the descent of the Spirit, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, but the Church is ‘*not-yet*’ in the eschatological unveiling of God’s mission, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The Church is ‘*already*’ the true Israel, the body of Christ, the people of God, the holy city, the temple of the Spirit, the light of the world, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, to name just a few of the biblical metaphors, but the Church is only what the Church hopes from God in the eschatological mission of

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(divine); and in becoming what we are God never ceased to be who God is; so that as we become what God is we will never cease to be who we are.”

<sup>19</sup> Nikos A. Nissiotis, “Pneumatological Christology as a Presupposition of Ecclesiology,” 250.

God. The Church is the *oikodomē* of an inexhaustible God, and therefore, metaphor and *mark* alike, are merely descriptors of the *missio dei*, and certainly not definitions. The Church's sole identity rests securely in the future of God. And yet, with 'gathered hearts' *already* full of the love of God, the Church *anticipates* in the 'marked-practices' of the *missio dei* that all the people of God will 'become by grace what God is by nature.'

Pentecost makes this possible because there 'the whole Trinity' descends, and the Spirit gathers up the people of God into the body of Christ, and inscribes upon their hearts the vestiges of the Holy Trinity. In that 'moment' of condescending love, on the Day of Pentecost, the Church is "**marked**" in the *oikodomē* of God with all the marks of triune love; namely, *one, holy, catholic* and *apostolic*. Keep in mind, that God whose 'name and nature is Love,' is the Holy Trinity: the *One* God, *holy* in nature, *catholic* in presence, *apostolic* in constant witness and mission. And once, the Church's very **being** is **marked** in the character of God; the Church is by that '*marking*,' a Church that lives by the very *missio dei*. By the cruciformed Spirit of Christ, the Church is gathered into the life of God, and **marked** by God's *sending* love to live after the **mission** of God. Further, to be gathered up into the body of Christ by the descent of the Spirit, is to be *sent to be* in the '**marked-practices**' of God's mission, *one* by her love, *holy* by her love, *catholic* by her love, and *apostolic* by her love. To be *sent* is to be *marked* by love and our mission is to love in the same way we have been *sent* and *marked*.

It will take both the work of Christ and the Spirit to exegete for the gathered people of God, this '*new way*' of living in history after the *missio dei*. Without both '*presences*' of Christ and the Spirit, the Incarnation and Pentecost quickly become confused and conflated where the Head is severed from the Body. Consequently, when the Incarnation overshadows Pentecost, the Church falsely moves backwards with the objective certainties of history and locates the *missio dei*, not in the future of God, but in the kinds of power and authority vested in socially constructed models of institution. Conversely, when Pentecost eclipses the Incarnation, the Church mistakenly moves forward, often looking beyond the past with a confidence in newfound freedom, novelty and unique difference. When the Church misplaces the *missio dei* beyond history, the Head is no longer present and apostolic memory is lost. Essentially, both positions of the *missio dei* are misplaced in that they are out of sync with the '*new way*' the character and mission of God are being unveiled in history. What both Christ and the Spirit teach is that the

Church is only one, holy, catholic and apostolic in the Spirit, and the Church is only one in the Body of Christ, only holy in conformity to Christ, only catholic in its redemption for all the world in Christ, and only apostolic in continued faithful witness to the life, death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Pentecost means that what the Spirit did for Christ in the eschatological *mission of God* in the Incarnation the Spirit will do for the church in the continuing *mission of God* post Pentecost.

As the Church leans into the future of God's kingdom and experiences the foretastes of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, what treasures of 'hidden promises' are contained in the '*marked-practices*' of the *missio dei*?<sup>21</sup> What fresh new ways of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity can be discerned as we give praise and thanksgiving for communion '*already*' enjoyed in the *koinonia* of the Holy Trinity? If the '*marked-practices*' of God's character and mission are 'movements' in shared fellowship with the Holy Trinity, then we must pay closer attention to the 'new ways' in which the *koinonia* of the Holy Trinity moves in unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity for the redemption of the whole creation. *Koinonia* is the contagion of triune love that fuels the *missio dei*.

Although these questions are immense and evoke an imagination of endless and creative possibilities, a few '*outline*' reflections are in order to push our argument that when the Church lives out of the fellowship of triune love, the Church lives after the *missio dei*.

First, the unity of the Church is grounded in the unified fellowship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The 'marked' Church is one *only* in the fellowship of triune love. How does the fellowship of the Holy Trinity model, pattern and structure unitive love in the *missio dei*?

The ecstatic love of God the Father moves to *send* the Son and the Spirit to live kenotically 'for us and our salvation.' The unitive love that exists in the fellowship of

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<sup>20</sup> For further reflection on this problem of the "constituting" and "instituting" mission of Christ and the Spirit, cf. my Wesleyan Theological Society presidential address: "The Heresies of Love: Toward a Spirit-Christ Ecclesiology of Triune Love," in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Volume 37, Number 1, Spring, 2002, 35-47, especially 39-41, 45-46.

<sup>21</sup> This question is part of a larger project on ecclesiology that I have undertaken. Currently, I am exploring the "Silent Orthodoxies" of the Church 'veiled' in the *notae ecclesiae* by plundering the wisdom found in both the heresies and orthodoxies of Nicea and Chalcedon.

God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit moves ecstatically in self-emptying love. This is God's mission. God who delights over us is a God who exists ecstatically to deliver us, making room, opening space, a "broad place" for us to *delight* in the fellowship of triune love and move in the same unitive love in the *missio dei*. (Psalm 18:19)

This fellowship of unitive love is not constituted by a single static substance or Subject, but rather by ecstatic love for and in the other. The one is in the other and the *difference* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is constituted by virtue of the free relations of love. As the Father is totally in the Son and totally in the Spirit communicating the Father's will to the Son, the Father opens up space for the Son totally in the Father and totally in the Spirit to become obedient to the will of the Father, while the Spirit is totally in the Father and totally in the Son making room, enabling and empowering the Son to do the will of the Father.<sup>22</sup> These mutually indwelling relations are relations of kenotic (self-surrendering, self-giving, self-sacrificing) and ecstatic love.

The way God exists in these perichoretic relations models and structures for the Church, life after the mission of God. Out of the contagious fellowship of triune love, the Church learns to *practice* unity in the mission of God from the same way in which the fellowship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are diversely unified in mission. As the Church lives in the '*marked-practice*' of unitive love, the Church learns that the *missio dei* requires fellowship with all the people of God. The fellowship of other believers is not only necessary to live in a diversely unified mission, but the koinonia of triune love is the very gift that motivates the fellowship of all believers to live in the commonly shared mission of unitive love. It takes the fellowship of other believers to be one in mission.

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<sup>22</sup> I have adopted Robert Jenson's trinitarian rule for the *missio dei*: "Given the Incarnation, so that the human person Jesus is in fact the Son who lives with the Father in the Spirit, the distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity holds only in the same way as does the distinction between two natures in Christ. Therefore the Father's role as unoriginated Originator of deity is concretely not other than his role as the One who sends the Son and the Spirit on their ecclesial missions; the Son's role as the one in whom the Father finds himself is concretely not other than his role as the head of the church that in him finds the Father; the Spirit's role as the one who frees the Father and the Son is concretely his role as the one who frees the Christian community." Cf. Robert W. Jenson, 'Systematic Theology,' vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173.

The fellowship of triune love, patterns in perichoretic relations a unity of diversity. But diversity without fellowship is merely chaotic. There can be no commonly shared mission of God without fellowship. And the Spirit is most creative in the diversity of the Body through the fellowship of believers. The infectious *koinonia* of God's people opens space and makes room for the creativity of the Spirit to teach in endlessly diverse ways for the Church to live after the *missio dei* in unitive love. Hence, any local Church setting out to write a mission statement ought to listen to the creative mission of the Spirit and discern ways to 'unite' with other local Churches to share in the *missio dei*. There can be no unity without the diversity of fellowship with all believers.

Second, the holiness of the Church is grounded in the holy fellowship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The 'marked' Church is holy *only* in the Holy contagious fellowship of triune love. How does the fellowship of the Holy Trinity, model, pattern and structure holy love in the *missio dei*?

Wesley believed that once the Spirit, 'the immediate cause of all holiness' pours the ecstatic love of God into our hearts we are made 'happy' because we have received the 'holy-happy' fellowship of the 'Three-One God.'<sup>23</sup> To be holy is to be happy and to be happy is to be holy. We are most happy when we love and we are most holy when we love. This is because the nature of holiness is ecstatic love which is God's mission. God *delivers* us because God *delights* over us. Again, in the fellowship of triune love, God does not exist *statically* in Godself, but exists out of Godself—*ek-statically*—for the

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<sup>23</sup> This Trinitarian pattern of ecstatic love as happiness is most pronounced in his sermon on "*Spiritual Worship*." John Wesley comments on I John 5:11,12: This eternal life then commences when it pleases the Father to reveal his Son in our hearts; when we first know Christ, being enabled to 'call him Lord by the Holy Ghost'; when we can testify, our conscience bearing us witness in the Holy Ghost, 'the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' And then it is that happiness begins—happiness real, solid, substantial. Then it is that heaven is opened in the soul, that the proper heavenly state commences, while the love of God, as loving us, is shed abroad in the heart, instantly producing love to all mankind; general, pure benevolence, together with its genuine fruits, lowliness, meekness, patience, contentedness in every state; an entire, clear, full acquiescence in the whole will of God, enabling us to 'rejoice evermore, and in everything to give thanks.' Cf. also John Wesley's sermon, "*On Zeal*," 92, §II.5; 3:313-314.

other. God is ecstatically happy because God is love, and God is ecstatically holy because God is love.

The Church is holy because the Church has been *marked* to live in the holy mission of God through the *ecstatic* fellowship of the Holy Trinity. The Church cannot be holy when the Church does not live in mission. Holiness apart from mission is a contradiction. When holiness is no longer grounded in the *missio dei*, it is reduced to a moral category and the holy life becomes mostly concerned with moralism or an individual experience of God, and less about the mission of God. When the people of God live as they are sent after the *missio dei*, they will be holy they will be happy. Nothing is as infectious as the holy fellowship of all believers living happily after the *missio dei*.

Third, the catholicity of the Church is grounded in the universal fellowship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ‘marked’ Church is catholic *only* in the fellowship of triune love that is wholly present. How does the fellowship of the Holy Trinity, model, pattern and structure catholic love in the *missio dei*?

Since the ‘*totus Christus*’ is present by the descent of the Spirit, “Wherever the Holy Spirit is, there is the Church of Christ.” And we might add to this ecumenical consent that wherever the ‘two hands of God’ are present there is the whole fellowship of triune love. This was evident in the earliest fellowship of believers who were already living in the ‘*way*’ of the *missio dei*. It is important to remember that before there was a canon of Scripture or Creed, there was only the fellowship of believers that continued to drive these Christian missionaries to live after the mission of God. Marked by the contagious fellowship of triune love the earliest Christian missionaries knew who they were in the fellowship of triune love and why they were *sent* into the world. These gathered hearts of faithful believers were so sure and confident of this abiding fellowship of triune love that they were ready to stake their very lives on God’s enduring love that was *marking* them in the *missio dei*.

The catholic presence of the Church is constantly attested in the ongoing fellowship of believers. Every local fellowship of believers is the church catholic because it continues to live after the *missio dei* in and through the fellowship of triune

love. Whenever one travels throughout the world in the Body of Christ, already, one is at home in the family of God because the catholic koinonia of triune love is constantly there marking 'all' the people of God in this 'holy-happy' fellowship to live after the mission of God. Wherever the catholic fellowship of believers is, there is the catholic fellowship of triune love.

Fourth, the apostolicity of the Church is grounded in the immutable fellowship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The 'marked' Church is apostolic in identity and witness *only* in the fellowship of triune love that is the same yesterday, today and forever. How does the fellowship of the Holy Trinity, model, pattern and structure apostolic love in the *missio dei*?

The apostolic identity and witness of the Church is best understood by the disciples' relation to Christ. To know Christ is to be known by Christ and to be known by Christ is to be loved by Christ. The apostles of Christ knew they were loved and they loved who they knew. This is the soteriologic of apostolicity. And now, at Pentecost, the descent of the cruciformed Spirit of Christ makes possible the continued work of Christ in the eschatological mission of cross and resurrection. This love of Christ is continuously poured into the gathered hearts of faithful believers.

In the fellowship of believers, the Church continues to live in the same apostolic love after the *missio dei*. When the church loses her apostolic memory, she loses her apostolic identity. And when the church is no longer apostolic in fellowship, she cannot be catholic in fellowship. And when the Church is no longer one in fellowship, she cannot be holy. And when the Church is no longer holy in fellowship, she cannot be one in fellowship. It is in this abiding fellowship of triune love that all the people of God are *marked* in the *missio dei* to be one in their love, holy by their love, catholic in their love, and apostolic in their love.

In closing, let us consider one final metaphor as we come to see that to live after the *missio dei* is what John Wesley deemed as, "*The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God.*"

"From what has been said we may learn, secondly, what the life of God in the soul of a believer is, wherein it properly consists, and what is immediately and necessarily implied therein. It



immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit: God breathing into the soul, and the soul breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith; an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be an holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus."

"And hence we may, thirdly, infer the absolute necessity of this re-action of the soul (whatsoever it be called) in order to the continuance of the divine life therein. For it plainly appears God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts upon God. He prevents us indeed with the blessings of his goodness. He first loves us, and manifests himself unto us. While we are yet afar off he calls us to himself, and shines upon our hearts. But if we do not then love him who first loved us; if we will not hearken to his voice; if we turn our eye away from him, and will not attend to the light which he pours upon us: his Spirit will not always strive; he will gradually withdraw, and leave us to the darkness of our own hearts. He will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him, a sacrifice wherewith he is well pleased."<sup>24</sup>

At Pentecost, once the Church receives the breath of God, the Church is '*sent*' to live after the mission of God. When the breath of God's Spirit is breathed into the Body, it 'pushes out.' Once the gathered people of God receive the breath of God—the energy of

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<sup>24</sup>John Wesley, 'The Works of John Wesley,' edited by: Albert Outler, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984). Bicentennial Edition, BE 1:442, Sermon 19: 'The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God.'

triune love—they are ‘breathed out,’ ‘thrown out,’ ‘sent’ by the breath of the Spirit to the very edges of creation, to the marginalized and disenfranchised. There is no place in all of creation (human and non-human) where the breath of God does not reach.

Wesley would often claim that a sign the Methodists were breathing deeply and in good health could be measured by the ‘*marked-practice*’ of “reaching out” to the poor. This he viewed as the supreme ‘marked-practice’ of the *missio dei* because it expressed the best ‘*means*’ by which we become like God. In the mission of God, the ‘ecstatic’ love of God moves outward, ‘kenotically’ through the Son by the breath and energy of the Spirit to the very margins of those in need. And so, the Church in turn exhales and breathes out by living ecstatically out of herself for the marginalized, the sick, the imprisoned, the disenfranchised, and the poor.

The doxological nature of the *missio dei* means that the people of God *must* return back to God what was started by God and will be finished by God. Remember, to ‘become by grace what God is by nature’ is to love ecstatically after the *missio dei*; i.e. love as God is love. As *koinonia* is the contagion that fuels the *missio dei*, breathing back (exhaling) the breath of God is how God’s breath is returned to fill the lungs of the Body to live after the mission of God, as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. When the Church stops breathing after the *missio dei* the people of God lose their breath and die. There is no life after the *missio dei* without the energy of triune love breathing into the people of God and the people of God exhaling back that breath, God’s love. Continue to breathe in your Church ‘O breath of God.’ And may your Church breathe back with all their breath your praise and thanksgiving. . . Amen.

*Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit:  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.*

### *Concluding Postscript: Driving Assumptions*

As a prologue, allow me to restate a handful of the most essential theological assumptions that have been driving the argument that to partake of God's nature is to participate in the *missio dei*.

1. The mission of God unveils the character of God. The Triune God of Holy Scripture is a 'sending' God, a missionary God. The biblical Story of God's mission unveils that God has embraced all of creation (human and non-human) to reflect the glory of Triune love. Soteriology and Ecclesiology alike are determined by the character and mission of the Triune God.
2. The mission of the Gospel determines the *being* and *mission* of the Church after the *missio dei*. The posture of the Church is to lean in *anticipation* of the future of God's kingdom in the New Creation. The Church serves the mission of the Gospel and bears witness to the constant in breaking of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. There can be no room for a triumphal stance in the Church that lives after the mission of God.
3. A Spirit-Christology is the necessary link for both the work of Incarnation and Pentecost. Otherwise, we will misconstrue not only the *being* of the Church, but we will not properly comprehend the *mission* of the Church. Pentecost means that what the Spirit did for Christ in the eschatological mission of the Incarnation, the Spirit will do for the church after the mission of God on earth as it is in heaven.
4. Pentecost, is a radically new Day in history that opens a '*new way*' for the people of God in history to 'fellowship with God,' and for the fellowship of the Holy Trinity to fellowship with the people of God. Pentecost is a new epiphany of God in history. Often, the Church's understanding of mission fails to consider this new revelation of the Trinitarian God in time.
5. The marks of the Church are the marks of fellowship with the Holy Trinity. The Church is *constituted* by the fellowship of Triune Love. And yet, the Church is '*sent*' to live after the *missio dei* in the fellowship of Triune Love by the '*marked-practices*' unity, catholicity, holiness and apostolicity.