

MISSIO DEI, RECOUNTED AND REVISITED:
EXPLORING A MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY OF AGAPE AND *BASILEIA*
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I. Introduction

This paper explores a missional ecclesiology with reference to the contemporary *missio Dei* discussion. According to David Bosch, *missio Dei* is the creation-ward (i.e. human-ward as well as nonhuman-ward) movement of God's seeking, sending, and saving love.¹ This agapic movement eschatologically sublimates into the cosmic movement toward the ultimate fulfillment of God's shalom and Kingdom, all of which illuminate the motivation and orientation of *missio ecclesiae* on this side of eternity.

II. Mission as the Overflowing and Outpouring of God's Inner Life

The Bible declares that "God is love" (1 John 4:8; *ho theos agape estin* in Greek). As Jung Young Lee notes, the Johannine statement "signifies that agape is more than a mere attribute but the very nature of God."² This divine love, agape,³ is not an outsourcing emotion but a dynamic reality in God's own inner life. Monotheistic as it is, the biblical God is the three-personal being with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in loving relationship. Concerning this revealed mystery, Tertullian first termed the *Trinitas* in the context of "*una substantia—tres personae*" (one substance—three persons)⁴ and Augustine later stated that "in God, there are no accidents, only substance and relation."⁵ Self-revealed as the Great I-Am

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

² Jung Young Lee, *God Suffers for Us: A Systematic Inquiry Into a Concept of Divine Passibility* (The Hague: Martinus Nyhoff, 1992), 7.

³ As Martin Luther King comments, agape is "not a weak, passive love...[but] a love in action...seeking to preserve and create community." Martin Luther King, "Pilgrimage to Non-Violence," *American Religion: Literary Sources and Documents*, ed. David Turley (Mountfield, UK: Helm, 1998), 420.

⁴ Quoted from Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 249-250.

⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitas* 5.5.6. Quoted from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2004), 184. As an elaborator of Nicene

in Scriptures, God is undifferentiated in essence but triply-personalized in relation, which connotes the community-in-love within the single Godhead.⁶ Karl Barth is right when he claims: “The statements, ‘God is’ and ‘God loves,’ are synonymous. They explain and confirm one another.”⁷

As the hallmark of Christian monotheism,⁸ the Trinity alludes to God’s “interpersonal relatedness”⁹ characteristic of unity in diversity. God’s Triune identity was disclosed decisively by God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, in the Great Commission of triadic structure, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). As David Black observes, three Trinitarian persons are grouped into a unified entity by use of the singular form ‘the name of’ with emphasis on their respective individuality.¹⁰ To depict God’s unity-in-diversity noumenon, John Damascene aptly appropriated the Christological term, *perichoresis*,¹¹ which used to refer to “a complete mutual interpenetration” of Jesus’ two natures, divine and human, with their personal “identity...intact.”¹² Abounding implicitly in the Johannine Gospel,¹³ this Trinitarian *perichoresis* forms the *gestalt* of God’s

Trinitarianism, Augustine viewed “the Trinity which God is” as “a divine unity in the inseparable quality of one substance” with specific functional roles as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in his *De Trinitas* 1.4.7. Quoted from Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 96.

⁶ In this sense, Lesslie Newbigin argues that “God is no solitary monad” in his *Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 70.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 4.2. The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh, UK: T.&T. Clark, 1958), 755.

⁸ Islamic monotheism differs from Christian monotheism in that it holds on to the doctrine of *Tawhid*, namely the indivisible oneness of God.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 70.

¹⁰ David Black, “Trinity,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. Watson Mills et al (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 934-935.

¹¹ “Circumincession,” *Our Sunday Visitor’s Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Peter Stravinscas (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1998), 239.

¹² Verna Harrison, “*Perichoresis* in the Greek Fathers,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 35:1 (1991): 54.

¹³ For example, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and “in the Father and the Father in me” (John 14:10).

ontological essence, what Ruth Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner call “divine dance of love.”¹⁴

It is Karl Barth who links such intra-Trinitarian agapic communality to *actio Dei* in space and time.¹⁵ As George Hunsinger points out, Barth views the Trinity as “the *perichoresis* of three *hypostases* in the one *ousia*”¹⁶ eternally activated by the mutual indwelling of such tri-functional modes as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, with agape at His ontological core. As *der Liebende* (i.e. the One who loves),¹⁷ the *ad-intra* Trinity is social, communal, and relational, which is recapitulated in the *ad-extra* Trinity. Barth explains: “That he is God—the Godhead of God—consists in the fact that he loves, and it is the expression of his loving that he seeks and creates fellowship with us.”¹⁸ The divine vitality of “ceaseless flowing of love and share of life” cannot help but “open out toward

¹⁴ Ruth Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 35.

¹⁵ As Hoedemaker notes, in the 1928 lecture on mission Barth “connected mission with the doctrine of the Trinity.” L.A. Hoedemaker, “The People of God and the Ends of the Earth,” *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction*, eds. A. Camps et al (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 163. As Joseph Bracken mentions, “Barth here endorses the notion of *perichoresis* as set forth by St. John Damascene.” Joseph A. Bracken, *Three Who Are One* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier Press, 2008), 46. This Barthian thought influenced Karl Hartenstein to coin the term, *missio Dei*, in the 1930s. See further John Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

¹⁶ George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 192. In other words, the Trinity is “self-identical in being (*ousia*), self-differentiated in modes of being (*hypostases*), and self-united in eternal life (*hypostases*).” Peter Oh interprets the central thrust of the Barthian Trinity as a triadic interplay among God-in-esse, God-in-relation, and God-in-action. See further his *Karl Barth’s Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Karl Barth’s Analogical Use of the Trinitarian Relation* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2006).

¹⁷ According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “love is always God Himself.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: The McMillan Company, 1955), 174.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2:1, 275.

creation”¹⁹ (i.e. *missio Dei generalis*) and its redemption in the wake of the Fall (i.e. *missio Dei specialis*).²⁰

The Barthian nexus of the *ad-intra* and *ad-extra* Trinity is further highlighted by Karl Rahner from an angle of *missio Dei specialis*. In the Augustinian Trinitarian tradition,²¹ Rahner identifies the immanent/*ad-intra* Trinity with the economic/*ad-extra* Trinity,²² saying that “the Triune God can only appear in history as He is in Himself, and in no way.”²³ For Rahner, God’s inner self is nothing other than God’s self-revelation in Christ, which is “for us a mystery of salvation.”²⁴ Differently put, the immanent Trinity who “is love” (1 John 4:8) is the very economic Trinity who “so loved the world” enough to give “His one and only Son” (John 3:16). In the post-Fall relational brokenness and perverseness, God’s internal agape gives birth to His *kenotic* incarnation for the cosmic restoration of loving relationship with and among His created things and beings (Romans 8:19-22).²⁵

As such, mission is the overflowing and outpouring of God’s inner agapic life.²⁶ The Evangelical–Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (1977–1984), thus, reports that “mission arises from the self-giving life and love of the Triune God himself and from eternal purpose

¹⁹ Ruth Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship*, 35.

²⁰ Similarly, Donald Bloesch says that “because He experiences love within Himself, He can relate in love to His creation” in *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 40.

²¹ The Augustinian or Western tradition affirms the identification of the immanent and economic Trinity. On the other hand, the Eastern tradition posits that the immanent Trinity is more than the economic Trinity.

²² Simply put, the immanent Trinity refers to “what God is in God’s very self,” while the economic Trinity to “what God is in His history.” Laurence Wood, *Theology as History and Hermeneutics*, 210.

²³ Karl Rahner, *Trinity and Kingdom: the Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 153.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York, NY: Harper & Herder, 1970), 21.

²⁵ See Romans 8:19-22.

²⁶ Similarly, John Stott writes that “mission arises from the heart of God Himself” in *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1992), 335.

for the whole creation.”²⁷ The *perichoretic* relation of the Trinitarian persons translates into their functional roles in God’s generative and redemptive economy with the Father as the Creator, the Son as the Savior, and the Spirit as the Sanctifier.²⁸ The immanent Triune God is the community-in-agape, which missionally overflows and outgoes into space and time. At the same time, the economic Triune God conscientizes and actualizes the *perichoretic* shalom, vertical and horizontal.²⁹ In this vein, God’s mission is the *ad-extra* extension of the *ad-intra* Trinity, enabling, ennobling, and enlivening “the very heartbeat of all reality, all creation, all history and all that yet lies ahead us.”³⁰

III. Mission as the Foretasting and Foretelling of God’s Eschatological Kingdom

Missio Dei flows from God’s Trinitarian love and proceeds to God’s eschatological Kingdom. In addition to Trinitarian monotheism, Christian faith ratifies “teleological monotheism” in which God’s mission unfolds in His purposeful timeline with a beginning and an ending, to quote Christopher Wright, “a four-point narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and future hope.”³¹ In the teleological monotheistic framework, God’s Kingdom is placed at the center of God’s mission and salvation, since its final realization is the ultimate goal of God’s mission, and since its full actualization is the eventual completion of God’s

²⁷ J. Meyer Gros and W. Rusch, eds. *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 409.

²⁸ Timothy Tennent classifies the functional roles of the Economy Trinity into the Father as “the providential source and goal of *missio Dei*,” the Son as “the redemptive embodiment of the *missio Dei*,” and the Spirit as “the empowering presence of *missio Dei*” in his *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010).

²⁹ Walter Brueggemann states that “in its most inclusive dimension it (shalom) is a vision encompassing all of reality” in his *Living toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (New York, NY: United Church Press, 1982), 17.

³⁰ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 533.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 64. The biblical view on history is linear from the creation to the new creation.

salvation. It is no wonder that contemporary missiology is “more and more coming to see the Kingdom of God as the hub around which all mission work revolves.”³²

The fact of the matter is that the Kingdom or Kingship of God³³ is “a key thread in scripture, tying the whole Bible together.”³⁴ The Old Testament is predicated upon God’s universal Creatorship and, therefore, sovereign Lordship.³⁵ Subsequent to the Fall, God’s Kingdom becomes an anticipated reality in the messianic hope, as encapsulated in “Zion theology texts.”³⁶ To the Jewish messianic anticipation, God’s this-worldly entrance in the New Testament brings a new dimension: God’s Kingdom as an inaugurated reality. With God’s own in-breaking into human history, the messianic fulfillment turns into the eschatological intersection between the presence and the future of God’s Kingdom. As Bosch remarks, “the future has invaded the present” in the person and ministry of Jesus,³⁷ which renders God’s kingdom mysteriously both transcendent and immanent, and whose hermeneutical preferences determine the contents and contours of God’s mission.

According to Howard Snyder, Kingdom hermeneutics are basically “grouped as models of future hope, models of present blessings, or models of earnest anticipation.”³⁸

³² Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, trans. D. Cooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 203.

³³ The Kingdom of God includes both the realm and rule of God’s theocracy. With regard to its connotation, Ladd notes: “The primary meaning of both the Hebrew word *malkuth* in the OT and of the Greek word *basileia* in the NT is the rank, authority and sovereignty exercised by a king. A *basileia* may indeed be a realm...and it may be the people who belong to that realm...but these are secondary and derived meanings. First of all, a kingdom is the authority to rule, the sovereignty of the king.” George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 19.

³⁴ Howard Snyder, *A Kingdom Manifesto* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 12.

³⁵ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God*, 103.

³⁶ According to Willard Swartley, Isaiah 24:23, 31:4, 40:9, and 52:7 are Zion theology texts. He explains: “Zion theology is royal theology, related to the Davidic kingship tradition, but consisting essentially of the proclamation of God’s own Kingship and sovereign rule.” Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: the Missing Piece in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 16.

³⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 32.

³⁸ Howard Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 18.

From an eschatological angle, the first corresponds to the thoroughgoing Kingdom, the second to the realized Kingdom, and the last to the inaugurated Kingdom. Pioneered by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, the thoroughgoing Kingdom reverses Adolf von Harnack's kernel-husk metaphor,³⁹ taking Jesus' eschatological language seriously and centrally. For them, Jesus is not so much a great ethical teacher as the apocalyptic announcer of a new era that will imminently and cataclysmically bring the present age to a crashing end.⁴⁰ At the other end of the eschatological spectrum is the realized Kingdom espoused by C.H. Dodd who views Jesus' earthly ministry as the actual attainment of the messianic Kingdom. For Dodd, God's Kingdom is a present fact, not something to anticipate in the near or distant future, since "the eschaton has moved from the future to the present, from the sphere of expectation into that of realized experience" in the Christ event.⁴¹

In between those two extremes lies the inaugurated Kingdom championed by George Ladd. God's Kingdom is, for Ladd, "the presence of the future" that has begun in the Incarnation and will be consummated after the Advent.⁴² As Snyder articulates, this model "mediates between the strongly present and future orientations of the first two, holding together the already/not yet tensions of the Kingdom."⁴³ It is 'already' because Jesus has inaugurated the Kingdom, like the planting of the mustard seed of the parable in Luke 13:19. At the same time, it is still 'not yet' because the Kingdom seed has not grown fully into the Kingdom tree (Matthew 13:32). In the words of Joachim Jeremias, eschatology is "in the

³⁹ Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 57. The non-eschatological ethical kingdom is grounded in Adolf von Harnack's kernel-husk metaphor, in which Jesus' eschatological language is the 'husk' that must be cut away from the 'kernel' of his moral ideal.

⁴⁰ Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), 47-51.

⁴¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, UK: Fontana, 1961), 34.

⁴² Prior to its final and full appearance, God's Kingdom has become dynamically active in the person and mission of Jesus. See George Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 139.

⁴³ Howard Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, 18.

process of (complete) realization,”⁴⁴ so humanity is currently living in the overlapping of the two ages between D-Day (decisive battle) and V-Day (final victory).⁴⁵

Among the three Kingdom perspectives, contemporary missiology rightly leans towards the inaugurated Kingdom, since it can maximize the holistic aspect of *missio Dei*. The this-worldly attachment of the realized Kingdom tends towards the secularization and horizontalization of *missio Dei*, whereas the other-worldly adherence of the thoroughgoing Kingdom towards the spiritualization and verticalization of *missio Dei*. These typical reductionist approaches, which prevailed during the missiological Cold War between evangelicals and ecumenists in the worldwide Protestant movements,⁴⁶ are by no means compatible with “the biblical vision” of God’s mission and salvation including “both present and future, both societal and individual, both physical and spiritual.”⁴⁷ Only in the inaugurated Kingdom can this both-and tension be maintained in critical balance and be sublimated into holistic transformation, as confirmed at the Wheaton Consultation.

As such, mission is a teleological movement to the eschatological accomplishment of God’s Kingdom.⁴⁸ Assumed in God’s creation and inaugurated in God’s incarnation, God’s Kingdom will be consummated in God’s new creation, when the whole creation will be “no longer subjected to destructive forces”⁴⁹ in cosmically relational shalom.⁵⁰ Until that

⁴⁴ K.R. Snodgrass, “Parable,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel Green et al (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1992), 592.

⁴⁵ D. Lyle Dabney, “Oscar Cullmann,” *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Theologians*, eds. Patrick W. Carey and Joseph T. Lienhard (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 138-139.

⁴⁶ Cf. Peter Beyerhaus, *Missions: Which Way? Humanization or Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971).

⁴⁷ “Transformation: The Church in Response to Human Need, Wheaton Consultation June 1983, VIII. 49,” *Mission as Transformation*, eds. Vinay Samuel & Chris Sugden (Oxford, UK: Regnum, 1999), 274.

⁴⁸ In the same thinking line, Timothy Tennent says that “this end goal of the *missio Dei* ultimately is found in the eschaton, which securely positions missions within an eschatological context” in his *Invitation to World Missions*, 123.

⁴⁹ Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 29.

consummate moment, God's mission continues in the triadic schema of "the proclamation of the Kingdom, the presence of the Kingdom, and the prevenience of the Kingdom."⁵¹ To put it another way, God's eschatological hope can be both experienced and expected under God's sovereign Kingship in every dimension of space and time. In this light, mission is the foretelling and foretasting of God's eschatological Kingdom in holistic activation of spiritual, social, and ecological salvation.

V. Conclusion

The uniqueness of Christianity consists in its Trinitarian and teleological monotheism. The natural corollary of this monotheistic aspect in twofold is that "the living God is a missionary God" as John Stott succinctly puts it.⁵² The Triune God's inner life is marked by *perichoretic* agape whose theological outflow is creation in its original shalom and new creation in the wake of sin. As the unfolding theo-drama in history *missio Dei* starts with God's agapic nature in His Trinitarian trajectory toward God's shalomic Kingdom in His theocratic eschaton. That is, *missio Dei* finds its foundational source in agape as well as its directional vector in *basileia*.

The church is "the outcome of the activity of God who sends and saves."⁵³ Furthermore, the church is the instrument of God's redemptive mission to the world (John 20:21). *Missio Dei* is, therefore, the *ratio essendi* and *cognoscendi* of *missio ecclesiae*, defining the church's missionary nature and missional contours. Since *missio Dei* is agapically-motivated and eschatologically-oriented, the church should be a community-in-mission whose motivation and orientation are respectively attached to agape and *basileia*.

⁵⁰ In terms of God's Kingdom, Mariasusai Dhavamony mentions: "The Kingdom of God is that new order of things begun in Christ, which, when finally completed by him, will restore man's true relationship to God and to his fellowmen, and to nature. The whole of the church's wide and deep mission activity must receive its focus and orientation in this Kingdom perspective." Mariasusai Dhavamony, *The Kingdom of God and World Religions* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2004), 25.

⁵¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 64.

⁵² John Stott, "The Living God is a Missionary God," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph Winter & Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 10-18.

⁵³ Georg Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, 5.

The church is, first and foremost, a community-in-agape whose *modus vivendi* is the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). This agapic communality is the driving force behind the church's faithful and fruitful participation in *missio Dei* as a community-in-*basileia* whose *modus operandi* is the Great Commission inclusive of all creation (Mark 16:15). In this perspective, only when the church functions as a missional community of agape inwardly and *basileia* forwardly can she maximally fulfill her *raison detre* on earth.

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