

*PERICHORESIS* AND MISSIONAL THEOLOGY:  
HUMANITY'S INVITATION INTO THE MISSION OF GOD  
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*Introduction*

The mystery of the Trinity provides a theological concept that ministers, and theologians continue to wrestle with since the beginning of the New Testament church. The incarnation of Jesus Christ offers a new way of looking at the God that once felt lightyears away not only in the early church but also in the present day. Still, the gift of the Holy Spirit allows believers to connect to God in new and powerful ways, as well as to missionally engage others through the triune life of God.

In missional theology, the Trinity plays an important role in understanding the nature and mission of God. However, the internal relationship of the Trinity, known as *perichoresis*, is frequently overlooked by ministers and theologians when it comes to discussions regarding missional outreach and living. *Perichoresis* gives language to the intimate relationship of the Trinity, as well as the relationship God invites humanity into. This intimate relationship, or dance, allows humanity to both extend and fulfill the *missio dei*. The following defines *perichoresis* and missional theology, analyzes the intersection of the two, and describes the furthering of missional theology from the viewpoint of God's *perichoretic* invitation.

*Defining Perichoresis*

The word *perichoresis* was first introduced by the 4<sup>th</sup> century Archbishop, Gregory of Nazianzus. He utilized the verb *perichoreo* "to speak of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ."<sup>1</sup> John of Damascus later used the term in order to describe the relationship of the Trinity; He desired to "preserve both identity and difference, true union and yet intrinsic variety" of each person in the relationship.<sup>2</sup> Michael Lawler explains *perichoresis* as follows: "*chorein* means to make room for another, *peri* means round about. *Perichoresis* is the noun, naming the dynamic process of making room for another around oneself."<sup>3</sup> Molly Marshall describes *perichoresis* as depicting "a relationship of mutuality...[and] an ecstatic dance, in which the trinitarian persons literally 'stand outside themselves.'"<sup>4</sup> Each person in the Trinity makes room for the others, still operating as separate persons while continuously flowing as one

<sup>1</sup> John Jefferson Davis, "What Is 'Perichoresis'--and Why Does It Matter?: Perichoresis as Properly Basic to the Christian Faith." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 39 no. 2 (2015): 145.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn3780295&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Pickwick Publications, 2015), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Michael G. Lawler, "Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin." *Horizons* 22 no. 1 (1995): 49.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000897471&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>4</sup> Molly Truman Marshall, "Participating in the Life of God: A Trinitarian Pneumatology." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30 no. 2 (2003): 145.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001379740&site=ehost-live>.

united Godhead. In his text, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Jurgen Moltmann leans heavily into the idea of *perichoresis* as an essential way of speaking about the Trinity. He explains that this doctrine was also “understood by patristic theologians as the sociality of the three divine Persons.”<sup>5</sup> Moltmann shares that “this concept grasps the circulatory character of the eternal divine life. An eternal life process takes place in the triune God through the exchange of energies.”<sup>6</sup> They are forever united through their exchanges and relationships.

In the divine dance of *perichoresis*, the three members of the Trinity seamlessly and beautifully move together. Each one retains their own identity while also turning to one another, each needed by the others to keep the dance alive. This metaphor also fits with the union of natures in Jesus, each being completely their own whilst working together to become something united. Steve Wright explains that “the eternal life of the trinity is that of perfect mutual harmony in communion.”<sup>7</sup> Adonis Vidu looks at the question of how to assign actions to the Trinity and person. While each person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are ascribed actions of their own, they can really only be described fully when paired with a description of collective action.<sup>8</sup> On its own, this concept of three-in-one may be confusing and difficult to understand, but through the lens of *perichoresis*, each retains their own person while also being undeniably united. According to Vidu, one “can now think of the opera trinitatis ad extra in terms of an unfolding collective action of God.”<sup>9</sup> While the previous descriptions focused on the relationships of the Trinity and of the person of Jesus, ministers need to look at one final relationship that may fall under *perichoresis*: God and humanity.

While some theologians limit use of this term in reference to discussion on the members of the Trinity (including Jesus’s two natures), many scholars have pushed the boundary, advocating for a broader understanding. *Perichoresis* emerged as result of “search for the proper balance” of identity and difference.<sup>10</sup> A similar conversation of balance is found in the conversation of God and humanity; each continue to be separate persons, but God has invited humanity into intimate relationship. Wright asserts that entry into the communion of God “is not the erasure of our differentiation from God; rather, ‘to be taken into God is to be taken into the living of our own creation and redemption.’”<sup>11</sup> In other words, to be pulled in and invited into the divine dance is what it means to be truly and fully human, to be capable of participating in the mission of God in the world. Davis shares that to be made in the image of God means that humanity holds the capacity for *perichoresis*, “to enjoy a quality of life with God like that which

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<sup>5</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Fortress Press, 1993), Kindle Location 2868.

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann, Loc 2544-2545.

<sup>7</sup> Steve Wright, “The Creator Sings: A Wesleyan Rethinking of Transcendence with Robert Jenson.” *Heythrop Journal* 53 no. 6 (2012): 980.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=CPLI0000536146&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>8</sup> Adonis Vidu, “Opera Trinitatis Ad Extra and Collective Agency,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7/3 (Autumn 2015): 40. <https://philarchive.org/archive/VIDOTA>.

<sup>9</sup> Vidu, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Twombly. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, 980.

Jesus knew with the Father.”<sup>12</sup> This dance with God is possible because salvation is not a one and done, finalized state, rather it is a “constant moving toward *theosis* or deification, toward becoming like Christ.”<sup>13</sup> In this light, *perichoresis* serves as the proper term to describe how God has pulled humanity in. In order to see how *perichoresis* finds its place within missional theology, an overview of missional theology will be presented.

### *Overview of Missional Theology*

An issue directly addressed by missional theology is the starting point for conversations. While many began with the church or the “outside” world, missional theologians sought to begin “with the mission of the triune God.”<sup>14</sup> Instead of seeking out what the mission of the church should be, the focus moved to what the mission of God already was. The church must be missionary in all parts of life, “because God’s very life as Trinity is missionary...you cannot separate the church from mission.”<sup>15</sup> No longer does the word “mission” only mean going out to foreign places, but it now encapsulates a way of being. This missional way of being, according to Dwight J. Zscheile, is found not in going out to the world but in “God’s descent into the world in Christ.”<sup>16</sup> Looking to Jesus’s life is a perfect example of living out God’s mission. Christians called into relationship with Jesus will by nature be sent out, too.<sup>17</sup>

Missional theology proves essential to the life of the church and how Christians view church, God, and themselves. God has created the church to participate in the mission of God. What the church is and what its mission is “cannot be separated because of its participation in the mission of the indivisible God.”<sup>18</sup> Nature and mission are linked together, because actions in the world come from who the church is called to be. Darrell Guder asserts that “the missional congregation may be defined as the community that walks worthy of the calling to which it has been called.”<sup>19</sup> Living into God’s mission is not optional for the church, although many have lived like it is. Rather, God has called all Christians to join in on the work that God is doing through active participation inwardly and outwardly. Flowing from the mission of God, the missional church is called to engage in “restoration of community,” and to be “caught up in God’s communal life by grace through faith.”<sup>20</sup> Participation serves as a key word, as being on mission with God is active and engaging. Diving into local contexts, serving communities,

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<sup>12</sup> Davis, 155.

<sup>13</sup> William Abraham, Jason Vickers, and Natalie Van Kirk, ed. *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 125.

<sup>14</sup> Michael W. Goheen ed. *Reading the Bible Missionally* (Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, *Participating in God’s Mission* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Dwight J. Zscheile, “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation.” In *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*: 18. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/229909698.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Daryl Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 128.

<sup>18</sup> Guder, 167.

<sup>19</sup> Guder, 130.

<sup>20</sup> Zscheile, 15.

building relationships with others, being discipled, and making disciples all involve bold participation from those who love God.

### *Perichoresis and Missional Theology*

If missional theology begins with God, it is imperative to have a strong foundation in one's understanding of who God is. This theological mandate opens the first way that *perichoresis* impacts the conversation of missional theology. The descriptions mentioned above highlight the beauty that is found in the Trinity when seen through the light of the divine dance. God is three-in-one; Each member is fully their own person whilst fully united to the others, each submitting to one another and flowing together collectively in action. God is self-emptying, relational, and united. *Perichoresis* also highlights what God is *not*. God is not monarchical, hierarchal, nor selfish. Missional theology must reflect the relational nature of God and actively avoid any temptation to assert power over others.

Next, if missional theology sees the church as being sent from and through God, it is important to see how God has truly invited humanity (and the church) into relationship with God. This vision proves important because God's invitation into relationship sets the stage for understanding how humanity should live on mission. As seen through *perichoresis*, humanity possesses the capacity to be fully wrapped up into the presence of God. The trinitarian community highlights "God's outward movement to include," which means that "*perichoresis* describes more than intratrinitarian relationships."<sup>21</sup> Humanity receives the opportunity to enter into the divine dance with God, or as Wright explains it, "we enter into the song of God's life."<sup>22</sup> Full life comes through "being made participant in the trinitarian activity itself."<sup>23</sup> This activity, as examined in missional theology, extends in and through the world. The church and its members find themselves called to participate in the healing, redeeming, life-giving mission of God. When this calling is seen through the lens of *perichoresis*, the element of participation no longer appears optional or partial. Instead, humanity fully participates in God's mission out of unity in relationship and shared desires. Hearts become transformed, aligned with God's during the movements of the dance, in the midst of the song. Missional work flows out of becoming united with the God whose mission it is.

Missional theology also blurs the lines between staying and going, between "outward" and "inward" mission. Participants no longer see a divide in seeing the church's mission as something that is only sent out. *Perichoresis* helps theologians to understand the depth found in trinitarian relationship. The church exists not only to send people to save others individualistically, as Western theology traditionally assumed. The social doctrine of the Trinity, developed out of the East, shines light on the united Godhead.<sup>24</sup> The vision also creates space for

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<sup>21</sup> Marshall, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, 980.

<sup>23</sup> T Gerard Connolly, "Perichoresis and the Faith That Personalizes, According to Jean Mouroux," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 62, no. 4 (1986): 364.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000803267&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>24</sup> Zscheile, 13.

the church to live as a community that reaches all spaces, both locally and globally, both internally and externally. By understanding that God is community, as opposed to three divided individuals, the mission of the church becomes all encompassing. This awareness also leads to a view of the church united. Individuals do not have “a self-enclosed communion with the triune God.”<sup>25</sup> God’s *perichoretic* relationship calls all people, because “God relates to all that is, and in the Spirit all can participate in the movement of God.”<sup>26</sup> Through the Spirit of God, believers are united together both in God and with each other. The Church universal is such because of God’s invitation into relationship. The Spirit of God, not humanity on its own, “makes the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity.”<sup>27</sup> Moltmann shares that “God loves the world with the very same love which he is in himself.”<sup>28</sup> This intense love propels the church forward, while also continuing to make space for everyone in the church. God’s love for the world is not relegated to an extracurricular addition to the church, nor is it an afterthought beyond God’s love for those who have already said yes. God’s love for the world is seen in God’s invitation to all to become a part of the dance, so the church’s mission must reflect this nature.

When the church lives out this divine dance with God and others, it is second nature to participate in the wide-reaching mission of God. No longer do individual worries or desires come first, instead, each submits to one another and to the way of God. By looking at the Trinity, it is clear that “God’s life of communion is not a closed, inward one.”<sup>29</sup> Relationships in the church must seek to live in this same way. Instead of hiding away from the world or sending a few to go and do the work, “the missional church comprehends its embeddedness in world and culture.”<sup>30</sup> The *perichoretic* nature of humanity’s relationship to God helps resolve the tension found between living in the world but being in God. Just as Jesus came and lived while also being fully wrapped in the presence of the Godhead, humanity is invited into the same journey. God’s relationship to humanity is the starting point; sharing in the life of God, being transformed into the image of God, and living into the fullness of human life all lead to outward action. The church’s missionary vocation “is grounded in this deep sharing or abiding” with God, this *perichoresis*.<sup>31</sup> The church’s actions in the world flow out of relationship, the mission coming from participation in relationship with God. Being on mission begins with God and continues into all aspects of life.

As humanity is sent out through relationship, humanity is connected to one another through the Spirit as shown above. This connection allows for individuals to live in relationship

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<sup>25</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Wm. B Eerdmans, 1998), 173.

<sup>26</sup> Marshall, 147.

<sup>27</sup> Volf, 213.

<sup>28</sup> Jurgen Moltmann. *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Kindle Locations 2301-2303). Kindle Edition.

<sup>29</sup> Van Gelder and Zsheile, 268.

<sup>30</sup> Johannes Gerhardus Jacobus Swart, Scott J Hagley, John Ogren, and Mark Love, “Toward a Missional Theology of Participation: Ecumenical Reflections on Contributions to Trinity, Mission, and Church.” *Missiology* 37 no. 1 (2009): 85.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001751879&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>31</sup> Van Gelder and Zsheile, 278.

together that mirrors the relationship of *perichoresis* with God. Communion with God, through the Spirit, leads to “the communion of each with one another.”<sup>32</sup> This togetherness, when rooted in God, must reflect the nature of the Trinity. Communion expresses itself in a love that is self-giving and reciprocal.<sup>33</sup> Togetherness appears as “making room for and dancing hand in hand with one another.”<sup>34</sup> Individuals no longer rely on themselves, but they now turn to each other and lean on each other in ways that change who they are. This intimate relationship is something that sends out and draws in, showing God’s love to the world through how Christians live out God’s mission. The dance is inviting to those watching, and it always makes room for anyone who wants to join. Through the working of the Spirit, humanity is able to and should be in this self-emptying relationship with others. Participation in the life of God cannot be done by oneself, rather, joining with the “God who exists in an unmistakably open fellowship” must include others.<sup>35</sup> Humanity is called not only to dance with God but also to dance with each other.

While this idea of humanity participating in *perichoresis* falls in line with living out God’s mission, some have concern about lines that may be blurred. Wright asks this question: “if our goal is to become divine, how is it that God remains God?”<sup>36</sup> Ministers should remember that *perichoresis* leaves room for individuals to retain their selves while also submitting to unity and togetherness. This perfect unity may never be achieved perfectly in a broken world, but God’s mission is bold and reflects the ultimate desires of God. Twombly asserts that *perichoresis* relies on “the notion of union-without-absorption.”<sup>37</sup> Becoming like God does not diminish the human nature of oneself, rather it allows humanity to “become fully itself.”<sup>38</sup> Such a perspective holds true to the natures of God and person while also showing the fullness found in relationship. Union with God leads humanity into its fullest nature. God’s relationship with humanity does not make God any less, either. Instead, the relationship highlights God’s nature of love and invitation. God allows the world to affect God “in the very being of God.”<sup>39</sup>

Humanity is brought into the world as the song of God “opens up to allow the participation of singers other than the triune persons.”<sup>40</sup> This relationship, this *perichoresis*, shows the depth of God’s love for the world and desire for communion. God is not some uninterested deity high in the sky, rather, God is close, personal, intimate, and desires to be united with humanity. This desire does not take away from the being of God, no, it furthers one’s understanding of the richness and deep love that God has.

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<sup>32</sup> Lawler, 60.

<sup>33</sup> Swart, Hagley, Ogren, and Love, 80.

<sup>34</sup> Lawler, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Swart, Hagley, Ogren, and Love, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Wright, 973.

<sup>37</sup> Twombly, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Twombly, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Swart, Hagley, Ogren, and Love, 84.

<sup>40</sup> Wright, 977.

### *Furthering Conversations in Missional Theology*

Leslie Newbigin addresses the issue of humanity's narrow understanding of God. He states that "the ordinary Christian in the Western world who hears or reads the word 'God' does not immediately and inevitably think of the triune being...he thinks of a supreme monad."<sup>41</sup> By beginning with an understanding of the Trinity through *perichoresis*, conversations in missional theology are given a strong foundation. As previously stated, *perichoresis* gives language to the intimate relationship of the Trinity, as well as the relationship God has invited humanity into. From this, it is clear that humanity has been tasked with participating in the mission of God through unity with God. *Perichoresis* also furthers one's understanding of the collective nature of the church and the practical impacts this has on the world. This divine dance rejects the hyper-individualism that has taken over many churches in the West. Bryan Stone explains that if salvation (and relationship with God) is centered "in the here and now, then to talk about salvation is already to talk about our being formed into a new social existence."<sup>42</sup> This new existence is called to live out God's mission in the world as one body, together. Seeing God's invitation to humanity through the lens of *perichoresis* leads to a new view of living out one's faith. No longer is the focus on escaping the world and getting to some faraway place, no longer is the focus on saving individual souls from a fiery hell, no longer is the focus on a one-of-a-kind personalized relationship with white Jesus. Instead, humanity is called together, now, into a deep and intimate relationship with God, into a deep and intimate relationship with each other, and into the fullness of what it means to be human.

As the West latched onto the individuals in the Trinity, "the disappearance of the social doctrine of the Trinity has made room for...'possessive individualism', in the Western world."<sup>43</sup> The solution to this rampant individualism is restarting with the Trinity, seeing God through the lens of *perichoresis*, and understanding humanity's place in this divine dance, together. Moving forward, conversations in missional theology centered on the Trinity give way for beautiful change in the church, in how we live out God's mission, and how others are invited into God's song.

### *Conclusion*

By looking at the missional theology through the lens of *perichoresis*, the divine dance of God and with God, relationship is taken to a greater level. Seeing God's relationship in this intimate way leads to a better understanding of humanity's invitation into the mission of God. Missional theology is impacted by *perichoresis* in its foundation, in conversations regarding the church, and in humanity's place in the divine dance with God and one another.

Jesus proclaimed and ushered in the Kingdom of God through his death and resurrection. The Kingdom of God continues as the Spirit dwells in the hearts of people today, and mission of God remains actively at work in all areas of life. These core convictions holds practical

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<sup>41</sup> Paul Weston, *Leslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 91.

<sup>42</sup> Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism: The Ethics of Christian Witness* (Baker Academic Publishing, 2018), 99.

<sup>43</sup> Jurgen Moltmann. *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Kindle Location 2879). Kindle Edition.

implications for ministry today. As ministers and theologians continue to journey into, and articulate, the mystery of the Trinity, their message indicates that how we live our lives should be deeply changed. God's invitation and internal relationship should be shared not only individually but also corporately. This awareness should change how we view and teach God, how we live into mutual relationship with Christians, and how we communicate the good news of Jesus to the world around us.

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