

FROM TRIUNE MISSION TO TRANSFORMATIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY:  
EXPLORING THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK

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As a Wesleyan scholar deeply engaged in church planting, I often hear questions about the role of the church in today's world. Why do we need to plant new churches? How can we equip and energize God's people to carry out his mission? How should local churches participate in the *Missio Dei*? These questions reflect a renewed interest in theological discussions that inspire fresh ideas about what the church should (and should not) do as God's agent in the world.

Sometimes, our contemporary reality feels paradoxical. We may live in our own countries, never travel, and yet still be involved in cross-cultural ministry. What, then, do the words "mission" or "missional" entail when we consider Christianity in the twenty-first century? In this paper, I will explore the church's missional identity within a Trinitarian framework that includes the sending nature of the Trinity, the transformational guidance of the Spirit, and the ministry of Christlike disciples.

*Participation in God's Redemptive Work*

There is always a perspective from which a theological approach is developed. The most appropriate Christian foundation for discussing mission is a biblical one, as "the whole Bible is itself a 'missional' phenomenon."<sup>1</sup> In this light, the mission of God begins in the book of Genesis at the moment of creation, as it generally implies a long-term purpose or goal to be achieved through planned actions. It is essential to acknowledge that God, who called everything into existence, had a plan for his creation. Once this is recognized, we understand that God's original plan and his mission are inseparable, and both encompass eschatological consequences for humanity. From the beginning, God's plan included the creation of human beings who may grow, multiply, advance in knowledge, and have a relationship with their Creator.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the ultimate purpose of God's mission appears to be the same: to create a community characterized by righteousness, faithfulness, and the mutual exercise of love, where God is present and glorified.

It must be noted that Scripture does not provide all the details about the life of humanity before the Fall. We are only informed that there was a perfect environment for people to live in and prosper. Unfortunately, the biblical account of the human rebellion informs us that a tragedy occurred: humanity betrayed God and chose the wrong path. This act led to sin, suffering, physical weakness, spiritual corruption, and potential death. The salvation and redemption of God's creation became the priority of the *Missio Dei*. Thus, the original plan is redefined and corrected, but not canceled. God's mission begins with seeking faithful servants who can hear his call and are ready to obey their Creator. Therefore, God's agenda of restoration and re-creation is not reserved only for the New Testament activity and the *eschaton*. He starts his work anew

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:28.

immediately after the Fall in response to the consequences of sin and the destruction of the original beauty and harmony of the world.

What we have said above regarding God's mission leads to the conclusion that he intentionally invites people to participate in his redemptive activity related to the salvation of his creation. God is the one who initiates everything. The whole universe was created *by* him and *for* him. In this sense, our mission begins from and is included in the mission of God. As Christopher Wright perfectly formulates: "Our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's initiative and command, in God's mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation."<sup>3</sup>

Mission originates with God and is not a human initiative. We are invited to participate in what God is doing. This is God's ongoing work in the world, and we are partners in a mission that is already underway. Scripture tells us that throughout human history, God chooses people and calls them to carry out this mission. In the Old Testament, God chooses individuals, but there is always a corporate aspect as well. In Genesis 9:9-17, God makes a covenant with Noah.<sup>4</sup> However, the whole creation is included in God's promise to a new humanity: "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth."<sup>5</sup> The words "for generations to come" and "between me and the earth" describe the scope of God's mission. He thinks of salvation and redemption not only for a few isolated individuals but for all future generations of people and the whole earth.

This corporate notion is obvious in the covenant with Abraham, when God mentioned other people and promised to make him "into a great nation."<sup>6</sup> God's intention is to bless as many people as possible, and through these blessings, reveal himself to them, making them praise their Lord for who he is. This reminds us of the original and ultimate purpose of God: to gather and unite all into one loving community, where he can communicate with his children and continue to bless them with his presence.<sup>7</sup> The next covenants with Moses and David confirm God's plan of restoration for all of humanity. The chosen nation of Israel, which God created through his faithful servants, is supposed to become a blessing for all other nations and introduce them to God. In a sense, the people of Israel were entrusted with God's mission to bring salvation to the entire world. They were called to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,"<sup>8</sup> which implies their special role in delivering humanity from sin and death. Unfortunately, this part of the plan did not work as anticipated. Israel's disobedience altered God's agenda for many generations of their descendants.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> See more details in Roger L. Hahn, "The Mission of God and a Covenant People," in *Mission Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding*, ed. Keith Schwanz and Joseph Colenson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 9:12-13 (all the Scripture quotations are from the NIV, if not mentioned otherwise).

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 12:2.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 21:1.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 19:6. See more in Hahn, "The Mission of God and a Covenant People," 61.

The only hope that remained was the promise of the Messiah, who would change the situation and help the people to re-establish their relationship with their Creator. God's expectations are clearly described by the words of Jeremiah: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."<sup>9</sup> God will write his law—and his missional statements—on the hearts of all his people. He will use his unique divine ability to incarnate into human flesh and redefine the understanding of who God's people could be, what their mission is, and how they may participate in God's redemptive work.

### *Christ-Centered Mission for Christlike Disciples*

Although the Old Testament only implies the triune nature of God—mentioning the Spirit and offering allusions to Christ as the suffering Servant—in the New Testament, it becomes clear who our triune God is and how he will bring his plan of redemption to fulfillment and the consummation of all things. Divine disclosure happens when Jesus Christ reveals himself through his incarnation, life, death on the cross, and resurrection.

The Jewish hope and expectation that God would intervene and rule over his people was fulfilled in Jesus. His death and resurrection became highly significant in God's plan of salvation and restoration for all humanity. As the Apostle Paul explains, "when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law."<sup>10</sup> The good news for the world—the gospel, *evangelion*—became the message about Christ and his saving work.

The sending nature of the Trinity is evident when Jesus proclaims, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."<sup>11</sup> He is the Person of the Trinity who is supposed to complete the work that was begun by the triune Creator at the beginning of the world. Although Jesus' death is described using categories drawn from the Old Testament understanding of sacrifice—which removes the barrier that sin created between humanity and God<sup>12</sup>—the fact that God raised him from the dead became the hope and central belief of the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the gospel is Christ-centered news: the Savior has defeated the evil forces and overcome death for God's people. His resurrection is a supernatural event that is available for everyone who follows him and takes part in his sending mission to "go and make disciples."<sup>14</sup> However, there is a condition for that participation. The disciples should know Jesus as their personal Savior, which includes repentance, reconciliation, justification, and sanctification. As Howard Marshall asserts: "The saving event is made known through the proclamation of the gospel, which lies at the heart of the mission that Christ entrusted to his

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<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 31:33.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 4:4.

<sup>11</sup> John 4:34. See more ideas about the "sending God the Father" in Thomas A. Noble, "The Mission of the Holy Trinity," in *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding*, ed. Keith Schwanz and Joseph Colenson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), 78.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:26.

<sup>13</sup> The idea is from I. Howard Marshall, *A Concise New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 284-285.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 28:19.

followers... what is emphasized is the divine command to the church for believers to go and make disciples. This mission is itself an integral part of the saving event.”<sup>15</sup>

Christians take part in Christ’s redemptive mission, and, at the same time, they continue to “work out *their* salvation.”<sup>16</sup> In order to save the world, they must imitate Christ<sup>17</sup> and become an example<sup>18</sup> for others who will follow them. This leads us to an understanding that *our mission* includes *our own transformation* into Christlikeness.<sup>19</sup> The concept implies not only imitation of Christ’s actions, but a deeper internal transformation of the heart and mind.<sup>20</sup> If believers want to participate in God’s mission and represent Christ in this world, they have to develop his character, which includes love, compassion, and complete obedience to God’s will. In this sense, Christlikeness defines our identity as people of Christ, the incarnate God and Savior. We are sent to say and do what our Lord wills, so that this world may be redeemed. Our identity as Christians is “missional identity.” We are the people of God “whose visible embodiment of the good news” changes the lives of others and draws them to worship the true God of the universe.<sup>21</sup> As Christlike disciples, we are reoriented by God toward evangelism and the fulfillment of his mission in this world. In a sense, God’s mission defines how we function in this life. From the beginning of the world, humanity was created by “the missional God” for a special purpose. Therefore, we are missional because “we are formed for mission.”<sup>22</sup>

The more we go through the process of restoration—sanctification and the restoration of God’s image—the more fully we are able to participate in the divine mission and the re-creation of the world. As Douglas Hardy perfectly phrased it, “We who were *formed* at the creation of the world, but who have been *deformed* while living in the world, can be *reformed* to enable living *for* the world.”<sup>23</sup> The broader idea is that Christians must become restored and missional people of God in this world. The third Person of the triune Godhead, the Holy Spirit, guides us through an ongoing process of spiritual transformation that begins at conversion and continues throughout life. He regenerates and sanctifies believers, equipping them for the mission. This includes changes related to their desires and motivations when love becomes the inner source of their actions. A Christian may repeat the words of the apostle Paul: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Christ may work through his people in the world and change lives and circumstances. In this sense, our ministry becomes incarnational ministry when we allow Jesus and his Spirit to guide our activity. The foundational idea is that we participate in the triune mission. Although we read the words of Christ in the great commission, “go and make disciples,”

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<sup>15</sup> Marshall, *A Concise New Testament Theology*, 285.

<sup>16</sup> Philippians 2:12.

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 5:1.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1.

<sup>19</sup> Romans 8:29.

<sup>20</sup> Philippians 2:5-8.

<sup>21</sup> The idea is from Dean Flemming, *Why Mission?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 103-104.

<sup>22</sup> The idea and phrases are from Douglas S. Hardy, “Becoming Who We Are Formed for Mission,” in *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding*, ed. Keith Schwanz and Joseph Colenson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), 178.

<sup>23</sup> Hardy, “Becoming Who We are Formed for Mission,” 182.

<sup>24</sup> Galatians 2:20.

the truth is that the whole Trinity is sending us to reconcile the world to themselves, and to re-establish the relationships that were broken during the Fall.

*Redeemed People of God as Servants of the Spirit*

Christ's incarnation and resurrection *re-articulated* the mission. Jesus did not change the law of love toward God and neighbor. He showed the future of humanity from God's eternal perspective. As redeemed people of God, we have the potential to become his agents of transformation in this world so that the whole earth may be renewed and recreated by his power of resurrection. As N. T. Wright explains, "Our task in the present . . . is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second."<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned above, this was God's initiative to create us, redeem us, and restore his image in us. However, we need to remember that we were created and designed for shared life, and that "it is not good for the man to be alone."<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the Spirit of God brings us together into a community of his children, where he works *in* us to reshape us and sends us into the world to work *through* us. The community of believers, or the Church—Christ's body—becomes the place where we are transformed and prepared for the mission of God. Through fellowship with each other, Christians are supposed to learn how to live "on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>27</sup> In a sense, they participate in the shared life of the church through the power of the Spirit, so that they may become a model community for future relationships. The interaction inside the congregation is supposed to show the world what they may expect in the kingdom of God. As Keith Schwanz explains, "The church exists to be and live as God intends, a microcosm of God's plan for the whole world."<sup>28</sup> The future life of saved and redeemed people may be exemplified by the community of Christians who are living out their mission. Believers from the church live in the world and for the people of the world in order to change them and bring them to the reality that is not of this world, where the world can still be called the church.<sup>29</sup> In a sense, we are supposed to demonstrate the attitude of the triune Creator toward humanity and his plan for people.

Christians need to cooperate with each other in order to accomplish their mission. While we live our lives and learn new things, we evolve together with other believers as citizens of the heavenly kingdom. The church becomes a "school" or a "training ground" where Christians are brought up by God's grace into a community of love.<sup>30</sup> We go through a gradual process of

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<sup>25</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 189-201.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 6:10. See similar notion in Dean Blevins, "A Missional Catechesis for Faithful Discipleship," in *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding*, ed. Keith Schwanz and Joseph Colenson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), 146.

<sup>28</sup> Keith Schwanz, "Worship: The Heartbeat of Missional Living," in *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding*, ed. Keith Schwanz and Joseph Colenson (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), 136.

<sup>29</sup> The idea is from Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (London: Clarke, 1957), 175.

<sup>30</sup> The original idea from Basil the Great. See details in Olga Druzhinina, *The Ecclesiology of Basil the Great: A Trinitarian Approach to the Life of the Church* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 53.

education so that we may faithfully participate in God’s mission together with all his children. This corporate experience provides a unique opportunity to establish the relationship that we will be able to keep in eternity, first with our Creator, and then with his creation, including people from different contexts.

In addition, when believers serve one another in love, they bear witness to a better world—one where people may have life not only after death, but here and now. God wants people to “have life, and have it abundantly.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, our mission is not only to share information about the great life after the resurrection, but also to transform this world and help people experience compassion, kindness, acceptance, forgiveness, and love within their own context and culture. In a sense, we may bring reconciliation and healing not only to individuals but also to their societies. Christians are called to be the servants of the Spirit, who leads us to the places where he already works. We need to admit that God’s prevenient grace is provided not only for isolated believers but for communities, cultures, and nations.

However, *Missio Dei* is not limited by the traditional view of mission as simply evangelism in a different part of the world. We can meet people who have never heard the good news about Christ on the next street in our town, among our neighbors, schoolmates, or even members of the city government. We should trust the power of the Spirit when he provides the opportunity to share with people and fulfill his mission. The transformation of people’s worldview includes the explanation of our reality from a biblical perspective. We need to introduce them to the good news of how things could ultimately be for them—here and now, and for eternity. We can share with them the eschatological hope of the new creation. At the same time, we should not be indifferent to the problems people face in this world, while we genuinely anticipate the consummation of all things. This implies that our mission not only changes spiritual aspects of our reality but, in some sense, depends on our actions in this material world. The church that “is missionally engaged with the world” needs to practice hospitality, justice, a merciful attitude, and liberation for the oppressed.<sup>32</sup> The church should be involved in the public life of the society, but “it is public for no other reason than it is mission.”<sup>33</sup> In a sense, believers take part in social actions because our mission is a relational one, encompassing both our relationship with God and our relationships with others. Thus, to be a church with a mission means “to be a social creature ecclesiastically” and to be present “for others in a loving manner.”<sup>34</sup> We need to remember that God acts through the church, and this is what he calls the church to do in this world—to be a relational entity that represents God and fulfills his plan of redemption.

The Spirit assembles all who have been saved into a different social reality where he destroys the barriers that separate people on earth. In the church, God creates the environment in which people are supposed to grow in love. As “holiness” people, we believe that love is the principle that holds the church together and is the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian community. In addition, believers are sent by this love of God to the world that needs to be

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<sup>31</sup> John 10:10, (NASB 1995).

<sup>32</sup> The idea is from Leclerc and Maddix, “Introduction: Wesleyan Ecclesiology,” 19.

<sup>33</sup> Henry W. Spaulding II and Henry W. Spaulding III, “Trinitarian Identity: The Church’s True Foundation,” in *Essential Church: A Wesleyan Ecclesiology*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

saved, redeemed, and sanctified. This leads us to the understanding that to be a missional church means to participate in the grand story of God, to see the world from God’s point of view, and to allow God to shape us for a special task. As Newbigin explains, to affirm “the missionary character of the church” means “the recognition of the unfinished task,” which implies that “the church is a pilgrim people on its way to the ends of the earth and the end of time.”<sup>35</sup> Part of our task is to build a new model of relationships based on mutual love, respect, and interdependence, so that people may experience justice and mercy in the present time.

*Practical Application: Mission as the Church’s Core Identity*

The previous discussion leads to the understanding that the existence of the church is due to the work of God, the Trinity. Our mission is trinitarian in the sense that all persons of the trinitarian communion empower believers so that we can strive together toward the glorious transfiguration of the world. The goal is to bring people to a new reality where they will be able to dwell in the Spirit and abide in Christ’s love as he abides in his Father’s love.<sup>36</sup> A more practical reflection on our participation in *Missio Dei* may help us to realize the role of believers and the church in this process of redemption.

God wants his children to comprise the community—or the “body”—where people may acquire their identity. Although we live in a particular socio-historical context, we need to know who we are from a cosmic perspective. We are co-workers with God, enabled by divine sending to participate in his mission of reconciliation and restoration. In addition, we need to remember that the individual identity of every Christian is related to our corporate identity as a people of God, as a new, re-created humanity. The church is something bigger than the collection of the congregations scattered geographically. We are the “nucleus and firstfruits of the new humanity.”<sup>37</sup> This identity defines not only who we are, but how we are supposed to live.

Remembering God’s initiative brings us to the idea of spiritual discernment and the importance of communal prayer as we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit together. God may provide his life-transforming wisdom to a community with a missional mindset. This ensures that the church’s activity remains theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Thus, our understanding of the church’s communication with the world can be reshaped and deepened by the Spirit. At some point in their development, communities may learn that they need to pay more attention to sanctification and transformation, rather than to the expansion of the church. In a different context, believers will intentionally create strategies and plans that facilitate interaction with people in their culture.

Our teaching and discipling practices should equip believers for their missional calling. When the church’s educational structures deepen the “missional thinking” of its students and disciples, it influences the lives of local congregations. Christians realize that only together can we form an instrument or tool that God uses to complete his mission. Witnessing divine purpose

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<sup>35</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 1.

<sup>36</sup> John 15:10.

<sup>37</sup> The idea is from Goheen, Michael W, and Timothy M. Sheridan, *Becoming a Missionary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 276.

and active engagement with the world leads to the saving activity of the church and the incorporation of new members into the community. The idea of mission reminds us that we are not merely individuals gathered by the Holy Spirit, but a family of God that shares a corporate responsibility for bringing up a new generation of his children.

The church needs to provide believers with the opportunity to go through a spiritual formation and learn God's way of dealing with this world. As his redeemed children, we should develop a different attitude toward other people: not negative thinking, but life-giving and transforming. As followers of Christ, we announce the good news about the cosmic renewal of creation and the coming of God's kingdom. Thus, the church is God's herald. However, the church is also his transformational force that works in the world and changes sinful and oppressive patterns. Guided by the Spirit, Christians are called to practice what they believe is God's mission and his plan of reformation and recreation. If our eschatological goal is the union of redeemed humanity with the Triune God, then the life of the local congregations should be shaped by this mission. This is not one activity or program among many others; rather, the mission of God must become the church's core identity. We must build the communities that give people a foretaste of what is coming. In this sense, the "missional church" is not equivalent to missions located abroad. The church needs to grow not only in size and numbers, but also in its faithfulness to God's mission in our local communities. Our churches should structure themselves to be "missional in nature, incarnational in ministry, and active in participation."<sup>38</sup> Thus, our ecclesiology should be transformational, and this may affect all areas of the internal life of the church: education of ministers, ecclesial structures, forms of social interaction, and the practice of worship.

### *Conclusion*

In his love, our triune Creator prepared a wonderful plan for our existence. From the beginning, he purposefully placed the human race into the "garden" where they could develop, grow, multiply, and live in fellowship with the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We learn this all-encompassing story from Scripture, which perfectly explains and provides the perspective of the mission of God. He called us into existence, and he keeps working with this world in order to reconcile it to himself and save and transform it into a blessed community of his beloved children.

Each person of the trinitarian community interacts with humanity and encourages people to participate in the process of restoration and recreation. The biblical narrative is very clear about Jesus' role as the sent Son of the Father. He is the one whose image we must obtain and become like. However, this mission can be carried out only in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God gathers those who become members of a new, redeemed humanity. He ensures that renewal is present at the heart of this special entity—*ecclesia*, the church. The Spirit guides, sustains, encourages, equips, and sends believers to serve. Through the church, God

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<sup>38</sup> Phil Stevenson, "A Theology of Church Planting," in *Great Commission Research Journal* 2, no 2 (2011): 258, <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol2/iss2/7>.

invites people to participate in his mission of salvation and transformation of the world, which includes influencing societies toward justice and righteousness.

The missional identity of the church is shaped by and flows from the *Missio Dei*. All who respond to the call of God in Jesus constitute his “body,” which fulfills God’s redemptive purposes. As a special assembly, Christians bear witness to the heavenly kingdom, which becomes a present reality among them. They are called to live out what they believe as a transformational community that participates in the mission of God, so that his name may be worshiped and glorified at the end of the mission and at the end of time.

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