

THE INTEGRAL MISSION OF THE TRIUNE GOD

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Summary

The present theological reflection postulates that the integral mission, as an expression of the *missio Dei*, originates and flows from the Triune God. The article examines the inseparable articulation of missionary activity between the three divine Persons. It emphasizes its full revelation in Jesus Christ. The thesis is developed that the *integral* character of mission gives attention to human needs (spiritual, social, material, and emotional) and to creation, which is sustained by the integral and loving nature of the Triune God. In addition, the relevance of incarnational Christology, the preferential option for the poor, the place of the ecclesial institution, and its place in the integral mission are addressed. Mission, Trinity, and church are inextricably linked.

Introduction

I hope this writing can be of assistance to those seeking guidance or a reference for the next theological conference. As I put it in the summary, I want to link mission to the God in whom we believe, who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, and, through him, his Holy Spirit, because, according to his nature, so too is his mission.

Our reflection begins with the analysis of fundamental questions that guide the ecclesial praxis of mission: “How can the Church of the Nazarene carry out God’s mission (*missio Dei*) in this world?” and “What is the central mission of the church?” The theological discussion that I will follow in this paper affirms that mission is *missio Dei*, and its origin and nature center exclusively on the initiative of the love and will of the Triune God. In this regard, we can affirm that mission is a divine act that precedes the church, the latter being an indispensable instrument of mission and defining it as an essentially missionary church. In this sense, the understanding of God’s Mission (*missio Dei*) constitutes the central axis of the identity and action of the Church of the Nazarene.

God is the origin of the mission. We also affirm that he is holy, not only in the sense of being transcendent (*totally Other*), but, crucially, in the sense that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). This means that God’s mission begins with God’s decision of free and sovereign love, as John 3:16 (KJV) testifies: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son....” The Father gave his Son out of love, communicating and relating to humanity, created in his image and likeness, in an act of grace to reconcile it to himself through Christ (2 Cor 5:18). It was God’s overflowing love that prompted *mission as a divine plan*, to restore humanity and the whole of creation in Jesus Christ (Rom 8:19–23).

This immeasurable love of God is manifested in his plan of salvation in the person and work of Jesus Christ, constituting the very essence of the *missio Dei*. This loving impulse of God seeks the integral restoration of humanity and all creation. From this overflowing source of God’s love, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit is breathed forth, as a gift that proceeds from the Father to the Son, and from the Son, the gift of the Spirit to the church. The *missio Dei* is the story of God’s active presence in the world. God, in Jesus Christ, is “Emmanuel,” “God with us” (Matt 1:23).

In short, the integral mission of the Triune God flows from his love in a perfect collaboration and substantial interdependence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Both the Son and the Spirit work inseparably with the Father, and the Father with them. In the Trinity, unity and plurality coexist, so that “in everything he does there is perfect communion” (Escobar 2003, 117). This coexistence of unity and plurality, the One and the Many, is conceptualized by the Greek Fathers as *perichoresis* (Escobar 2003, 118), indicating that each divine person interpenetrates and dwells in the others, guaranteeing perfect communion in every action. In this way, the three Trinitarian persons collaborate in communion to fulfill the integral mission.

The Triune God, the Beginning of All

God’s self-revelation has been accomplished through his Word, not only the written Word in Scripture, but fundamentally, the Word made flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ; so Christian theology begins with Him. We can say that, on this argument, Christian theology is Christ-centered and missional. Here, the doctrine of God in the Holy Trinity is revealed in Christ (Noble 2013, 18). Any theological matter of primary importance begins with the Triune God.

While we profess the doctrine of the Godhead and identify as a missional church, there is often little connection between the two. We need to revitalize this connection between the Trinity and mission, both conceptually and for the praxis of the church.

The Trinitarian doctrine is not an ethereal theme of Christian thought, but one that is organically related to the *missio Dei* and exists in coherent unity, where Christ is the Revealer. The *missio Dei* is grounded in integral theology. As Thomas Noble puts it: “It is seen that doctrines are interconnected, flow into each other, not in an amorphous way but in a holistic theology that has the form of the ancient creeds, is Trinitarian in its general form and Christocentric in its approach” (Noble 2013, 19).

Theology is not a dead letter, or it should not be, but it is practical theology. If our theology of mission is interested in expressing our experiential and rational knowledge of the living God in whom we believe, it should be a living theology, nothing less than the DNA of the church. Moreover, this is precisely what integral mission theology is all about.

The *missio Dei* continues to live and work in history. It is about a living, incarnational experience of the Triune God in the person of Jesus Christ, to which the church bears witness by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:23; John 1:14). Mission and church are a project of the three Trinitarian persons. To speak of mission is to speak of God, of his loving nature, and of his character expressed through Jesus Christ. This notion of the Triune God’s love and mission is presented in a particular way in John’s Gospel (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8, 16).

God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a substantial connection between God as the Trinity and the church’s missional nature. We can call it the foundational DNA of the church that makes the church faithful, Spirit-living, and committed to God’s mission. Its fundamental DNA makes it an echo, sign, and foretaste of the kingdom of God (Snyder 2002, 49).

The Church of the Nazarene and the Integral Mission

The Church of the Nazarene expresses in the *Manual* (Article XI, 2023), the meaning of the church as follows:

- 1) *We believe in the church, the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the covenant people of God renewed in Christ, the body of Christ called to be one by the Holy Spirit through the Word.*
- 2) *God calls the church to express its life in the unity and fellowship of the Spirit; in worship through the preaching of God's Word, in the observance of the sacraments, and ministry in his name; in obedience to Christ, holy living, and mutual accountability.*
- 3) ***The mission of the church in the world is to share in the redemptive work and reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit. The church fulfills its mission by making disciples through evangelism, education, showing compassion, working for justice, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God.***
- 4) *The church is a historical reality that is organized in culturally adapted ways; it exists both as local congregations and as a universal body; it sets apart people called by God for specific ministries. God calls the church to live under his rule in anticipation of the consummation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Exodus 19:3; Jeremiah 31:33; Matthew 8:11; 10:7; 16:13–19, 24; 18:15–20; 28:19–20; John 17:14–26; 20:21–23; Acts 1:7–8; 2:32–47; 6:1–2; 13:1; 14:23; Romans 2:28–29; 4:16; 10:9–15; 11:13–32; 12:1–8; 15:1–3; 1 Corinthians 3:5–9; 7:17; 11:1, 17–33; 12:3, 12–31; 14:26–40; 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:1; Galatians 5:6, 13–14; 6:1–5, 15; Ephesians 4:1–17; 5:25–27; Philippians 2:1–16; 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12; 1 Timothy 4:13; Hebrews 10:19–25; 1 Peter 1:1–2, 13; 2:4–12, 21; 4:1–2, 10–11; 1 John 4:17; Jude 24; Revelation 5:9–10). (Manual, Article XI, p. 25).*

For practical purposes, I divided the *Manual* paragraph into 4 sections. The most interesting paragraph is number 3, which expresses very well the concept that the church fulfills its mission:

- a) Making Disciples
- b) Evangelizing
- c) Educating
- d) With compassion
- e) Working for justice

The five dimensions mentioned above are surrounded by a kind of “brackets.” The first, at the beginning, says: “To share in the redemptive work and the reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit....” And, the second: “... bearing witness to the kingdom of God.” Therefore, without these, the work of making disciples, evangelizing, educating, showing compassion, and working for justice would have no meaning, because they give it meaning and direction.

In my perception, we are experiencing an awakening of discipleship in the Church of the Nazarene. It is possible to hope that it will become more than a four-year program in this decade and increasingly be an organic essential part of the life of the local church and of every believer worldwide. Since Christ is the head of the church and he is its source, he also calls the church to what he himself practiced: faithful discipleship.

Evangelism is part of the life of the Church of the Nazarene. As heirs to a nineteenth-century evangelical tradition, we expressed this in the twentieth century primarily through the so-called “Evangelistic Campaigns.” These consisted mainly of bringing unbelievers to the temple to hear the message of salvation. It was a type of evangelistic practice practiced by the vast majority of evangelical churches. We did not have a Nazarene identity practice.

At the end of the twentieth century, paradigm shifts began to occur in Western society, forcing us to rethink our methods. Postmodern contexts, for example, require a more dialogical-relational and personal approach. These are the new generations born at the end of the decade of the last century and so far in the twenty-first century. The relational and experiential dimensions are key aspects of the contemporary ethos. The mission will be sensitive to these dimensions of human life if it seeks a meaningful response. Because the gospel of integral mission is the very person of Jesus Christ, with whom every human being can experience salvation.

Evangelistic practice has not been organically linked to discipleship. These have been treated as separate matters. However, neither discipleship nor evangelism is a separate practice. Rather, the two should be related as an expression of the church’s integral mission. Now we must understand that this is a discipleship-evangelism dyad, working synergistically.

As for education, broadly understood, it is the education of the people of God. This includes pastors and shepherdesses, as well as the entire laity. In many of our churches in Latin America, we must awaken to the idea that seminaries serve the church and its congregations, providing opportunities for theological studies for both pastors and laity alike to acquire tools and skills for mission.

As for compassion, we have grown, and it has been taking an ever-greater place in the life of the church, locally and globally. It needs to take hold as a lifestyle of the believer as well.

Finally, in terms of justice. The Wesleyan tradition included social justice as part of the church’s integral mission. Most believers have ignored this dimension of integral mission. However, righteousness is supported by the entire prophetic tradition of the Bible. It calls us not to remain neutral in the face of social injustice that denigrates human beings. Such as genocidal acts perpetrated by dictators or dominant political systems within world geopolitics. For example, since the COVID-19 pandemic, population migration has reached levels never seen before. Our silence can become complicity. Biblical social justice is an inescapable prophetic task of the church, a struggle in the arena with the principalities and powers of evil.

The Body of Christ in Integral Mission

The use of *biotic*, organic, or systemic metaphors, such as the biblical expression “body of Christ,” illustrates important aspects of the economy of salvation. These organic images of the church as the body of Christ are very useful for our understanding of God’s mission in the world, rather than technocratic and institutional analogies.

Even if our understanding of God is primarily that of a being in relationship, this places the institutional side of the church in a secondary place. God does not first establish his primary relationship with the institution, with programs or committees, but with the people who compose them; They are the *ekklesia*, properly speaking.

The *missio Dei* is a divine movement and event impelled by the Holy Spirit. It is the mission that has an agenda, and the church is attached to it and to Jesus Christ, God’s Great Missionary. Since mission is the work of the Triune God working synergistically, we can expect

God's Spirit to empower the church with gifts and ministries (1 Cor 12; Eph 4:11–12; Rom 12:4–9). This places greater emphasis on the church as the body of Christ, focusing on community, interpersonal relationships, mutuality, and interdependence. It is flexible and leaves room for a high degree of spontaneity (Snyder 2005, 119).

Ephesians' portrayal of the church as the body of Christ shows us how it functions organically with all its members, so that "we may grow in all things into him who is the head, that is, Christ, from whom the whole body . . . receives its increase to build itself up in love" (Eph 4:15b–16, KJV).

Integral Mission and the Church

The Triune God, in revealing himself in history, uses the church as his instrument par excellence. The church is not the Kingdom, but its agent, who embodies its values and is oriented towards the Kingdom and Jesus Christ (Matt 6: 33). The mission of the church is expressed in different but united dimensions:

1. **The Adoring Church.** The mission in the Trinitarian key always operates on a *double track*. It comes from God and returns to God. His grace extends to the world, and our response in worship and service closes the circle of mission. Authentic worship always impels us toward mission. There is no worship without a call to mission. The Christian community is called to live "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph 1:6 and 3:21, KJV 60) (Snyder 2003, 50).

In worship, God not only equips believers for mission, but worship itself becomes a form of witness to the world.

2. **The Church Sent.** When we are sent, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus put it: "As you sent me into the world, even so have I sent them into the world" (John 17:18 KJV). It is the Trinity that provides the basis for the church's mission as a community that responds to the call to participate in the *missio Dei* (Snyder 2002, 54).

3. **The Preferential Option for the Poor.** An integral mission from a Wesleyan approach involves a particular orientation toward the poor. Christ became a servant by becoming incarnate and fulfilling his mission: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." (John 3:16a, KJV 77). In the same way, the church, as a missionary community, is called to replicate this pattern.

Mission flows from God's love for the whole world and is expressed in the gift of the Son, in his incarnation, suffering, and redemption on the cross. Out of love, the Son is sent, and out of love, the Father and the Spirit share in his suffering and compassion for the world (Snyder 2002, 55).

God loves every human being, but He shows special compassion for those who suffer. As Snyder suggests, "The mutual love of the Trinity impels God, and therefore the church, to embody the gospel among the poor" (2002, 56). John Wesley asserted that the poor have a "particular right to have the gospel preached unto them" (*Wesley's Works*, Vol. I, Sermon 1, p. 39). This evangelical option for the poor firmly underpins our denominational origins.

4. **Justice.** "...working for justice and bearing witness to the kingdom of God." With regard to justice, Wesleyan thought has much to teach us. John Wesley understood the signs of his time. As for the Industrial Revolution, he had to see the social havoc it caused.

People were left jobless and moved to cities, where they formed belts of misery. He saw the increase in wealth and poverty. He saw how far man could enslave his neighbor and spoke and wrote against it. However, one of the most terrible evils of his time was slavery, against which he wrote vehemently:

However, hereby renouncing all other considerations, I strike at the root of this complex villainy: I absolutely deny that the possession of slaves is consistent with any degree of natural justice. ("Reflections on Slavery," *Works of John Wesley*, vol. VII, p. 113)

Mission and Ecclesial Structures

What is the role of ecclesial structures? Organizational structures express the way we function as a church. From simple, poorly structured, and hierarchical structures to those with a high degree of hierarchy and specialization, the church has adapted to them at different times.

Organizational structures are everywhere. They are part of our lives and our relationships. For example, from the institution of the family to a governmental institution of a country. Our *Manual* notes that the church is culturally organized and adapted (Article XI, *Manual* 2023); I add: within whatever historical period it is in to carry out the mission. Should we make the system of governance more flexible to reflect the culture of the district and its churches? Or, more specifically, should we adjust the organizational structures of local districts and churches to their cultural contexts? This statement in the *Manual* suggests that the local church's organizational structure is related to its cultural context.

The crisis of institutions at the end of the twentieth century has extended into the twenty-first century and also reached the Christian church, especially denominations. Distrust in institutional authority, financial concerns, growing pastoral burden, control issues, poor growth, and stagnation or decline in membership are salient aspects in many cases. We need to transform our organizational structures.

Better mission performance will not be achieved with the traditional structures that have been in place for less than 100 years of our history. I propose a change that, theologically, facilitates and furthers our missional work, arising from a better understanding of Trinitarian relationships of equality, collaboration, and fellowship. Biblically, from a study of the first early Christian communities, and historically of the first three centuries of the church.

Institutionalization

The DNA of mission creates a Kingdom culture that will be countercultural in any context where the church follows the Spirit's prompting. In other words, it is a matter of being an alternative community today and building a new culture of being the church.

When the processes of institutionalization and specialization reach a high level, generating multiple hierarchical layers, paradoxically, their functioning tends to become slower and less efficient. This organizational phenomenon, especially in the ecclesial sphere, slows organizational dynamics, negatively affecting the structure's functionality and hindering its multiple tasks and ministries in the mission. Constant vigilance is required to identify and prevent what was created to contribute to the mission from becoming a serious obstacle to the Spirit's missionary impulse.

Biblical analysis of the New Testament reveals that in the early church of the first century, there was already an incipient degree of institutionalization. This is evidenced in

constant meetings and “regulated” leadership (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, Eph 4:11), yet each was highly functional and organic.

The Christology of Integral Mission

Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the one sent and model of mission: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21). Samuel Escobar (2003, 77) identifies key objectives of integral mission derived from Christ:

1. To recover the integrity of the gospel regarding the fullness of the person and work of Jesus Christ.
2. To recover the integral vision of the human being.
3. To recover an integral vision of the life of the church in its task of discipleship.

The recovery of the integrity of the gospel must be committed to Christ’s nature as a person: divine-human. The evangelical faith in Latin America suffers from a practical Docetism. Historically, twentieth-century postwar Protestantism in Latin America, in controversy with liberal theology, promoted a message with an apocalyptic note and an understanding of evil that was excessively spiritualized and dehistoricizing (Escobar 2003, 84). The underlying problem with this is Christological: a mutilated understanding of the nature of Christ, known in the early centuries as Docetism. This lack generated a disembodied mission incapable of responding to the person’s integral needs.

An integral Christology maintains the tension between Jesus’ humanity and divinity and frames it trinitarily. The incarnational note in Christology is fundamental: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). As Jesus did, the Gospel witness calls the community to its immersion in the reality of the world and human circumstances. He did not colonize the world, but inhabited it, committing himself to liberating justice (Luke 4:18).

The Latin American theologian, Justo L. González pointed out, “Although it seems that Docetism glorifies Jesus, in reality it deprives him of what in the New Testament is his glory: his incarnation and suffering on the cross” (cited in Escobar 2003, 84). An integral Christology keeps the humanity and divinity of Jesus in tension, recognizing both natures as an inseparable part of his person.

The Incarnate and Crucified Jesus of the Integral Mission

The incarnational note of Christology occupies a fundamental place in the integral mission. The Gospel of John, primarily, offers us the theology of the Word made flesh: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...” (John 1:14). Like Christ, John’s witness calls us to deep immersion in the reality of the world and in the concrete circumstances of human suffering.

The biblical witness of the cross reveals God’s great love for humanity and his creation. The miniature gospel, John 3:16–17, testifies to boundless love. A Christology of integral mission recognizes the unique and singular character of Jesus’ incarnation and crucifixion, understanding the redemptive and atoning meaning of his death as an integral part of the gospel.

This calls for a lifestyle that marks a Christian missionary style (Escobar 2002, 101). Paul expresses it emphatically by saying, “I am crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me...” (Gal 2:20, KJV). The Gospel of John complements this crucial note: “...

if the grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24b, KJV).

Jesus Christ, the Great Missionary of God, is referred to in the Gospel of John through multiple metaphors: bread, light, resurrection, good shepherd, door, vine, and the way. Therefore, the missionary community must become incarnate as its Master did and intervene in the great needs of the world, “such as sharing bread, ... fighting death...”, our historical place through which we affirm that God is love through action (Suess).

Mission and Spirit

The third person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit. He also participates in the *missio Dei*. The church’s best missionary agenda cannot substitute for the dynamic impulse of the Spirit of the missionary God. God the Father sent his Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13).

A sound Christology affirms the vital place and function of the Spirit in the life of Jesus and the church (Luke 4:18; Acts 2). A church driven by the love and power of the Spirit will experience the need to go out and obey Jesus’ command: “... go ye and make disciples in all nations...” (Matt 28:19, KJV).

Evangelism is an essential part of the church’s practice and mission. However, without the Spirit’s empowerment, it becomes mere proselytizing. Evangelism can be understood as the dynamic proclamation of the good news of the gospel of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ, operated in the power of the Spirit.

Snyder points out a distinctive, Wesleyan-like question that should guide our action: to whom should we prefer to preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God? (Snyder 2003, 51). Our response should not be generic, such as “We preach to all equally,” but of a Wesleyan character: we preach *to all equally, but preaching the gospel primarily to the poor*.

The Evangelist Luke says it this way: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to heal the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and sight to the blind; to set the oppressed free...” (Luke 4:18, KJV). Jesus also confirmed this to the emissaries of John the Baptist: “The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are preached the gospel” (Luke 7:22, KJV). There would be no authentic missionary impulse without the Holy Spirit. He is the one who makes it happen. The Father sends him through the Son.

Mission-Driven

We declare that “We are a Missional People” in the midst of social contexts that oppose this call. One of the great challenges we face in the twenty-first century is dealing with the pervasive market mentality in our societies that defines the existence of a large part of the population in a globalized world.

Contrary to this mentality, we must consider that there are no standardized methods for the mission. Our racial and cultural differences affirm this. We are part of a plurality of cultures that demand diversity in the methods we use to reach such populations in their own cultural contexts.

Our confidence is not in the methods we use. God does not “anoint” methods; he anoints people with the presence and power of the Spirit. A good example of this is the biotic or agricultural analogy Paul refers to when he says, “Therefore neither he who plants is something,

nor he who waters, but God who gives growth” (1 Cor 3:7, KJV). Without God’s action, which only he can give in the mission, all our work is in vain.

The church needs in many places “to re-enter as a missionary presence and with an apostolic stance, to live riskily as if it were a subversive movement, and to be aware again that it needs to depend totally on the Lord” (Gibbs 2005, 57).

Conclusion

What is mission? What is a missionary church? We do not believe in mission because we are a missional church. We are a missional church because we believe in God’s mission. We are a missional church because we believe that God calls and sends the church to be, do, and think as a missionary church embodied in its context and culture. This means that we are sent out as a Christian and missional church, empowered and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

We need to make a significant strategic effort to make the integral mission theology of the Triune God an essential part of the missional life and experience of our church worldwide. His teaching and practice must penetrate every church, in every corner of the world where we are. Today, we have a better understanding of the mission. One of our core values makes this clear: “We are a missional church.” Alternatively, even better, “We are an integral mission church.”

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