A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

FOR INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS STRATEGY

IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: A TRINITARIAN MODEL

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by

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Introduction

This work proposes that healthy biblical community must play a much greater role in international missions strategy than it currently does. There must be a paradigm shift both at home and on the mission field. At home there is a call for churches, who have outsourced their commission to reach the nations to individuals and mission agencies, to determine how they can assume more responsibility and play more of a central role when it comes to fulfilling the Great Commission. On the field, this strategy challenges the current model of sending individuals, or loosely connected teams, to live among and engage the un-reached peoples of the world, arguing for sending strategic teams, or communities, rather than individuals.

While other quality works have made similar arguments, they base much of their reasoning on the New Testament models of Jesus and Paul or the practical advantages of sending teams. The theological foundation of this work is the triune God and the fact that he exists as an eternal community and has used community from the beginning to accomplish his mission. It is important to note that the purpose of this work is not the justification of a trinitarian foundation for missions. Many of the sources cited in the bibliography thoroughly and convincingly argue for missional theory to be grounded in the triune nature of God. Instead, this paper seeks to ask how the Trinity should begin to shape missional theory and practice in churches and mission agencies.

I. Biblical & Theological Foundations

Trinitarian Community?

The term "Trinitarian community" is simply another way of expressing the reality that

the God of the Bible is revealed to humanity as one God who exists as three persons; Father,

Son, and Spirit. It is clear from verses like Genesis 1:1, Exodus 20:2-4, and Deuteronomy 6:4

that there is one God. Yet it is also true that the one God who is Creator, Sustainer, and

Redeemer is also referred to in the plural. This plurality in language regarding God is evident as

early as Genesis 1:26 when God said, "And let *us* make man in our image after our likeness...

(ESV)" and continues throughout the Scriptures.[1] God has eternally existed as Father, Son, and

Spirit. The Bible teaches that this is something inherent to the very nature of what it means to be

God. Stanley Grenz asserts, "There is no God but the triune God; God is none other than Father,

Son, and Spirit… the threeness of the one God is eternal; threeness is the way God actually is in

his essential being."[2] This cannot be forgotten if the mission of the church is going to be rooted

in the nature of God. As one begins to examine the divine community in the Scriptures several

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[1] Gen. 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8. 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 3:11-14; 4:6; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:14-21; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Tit. 3:4-6; 1 Pet. 1:1-2, and much of the Gospel of John. All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

[2] Stanley Grenz, *Theology For the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 66.

key characteristics become evident. The next section will briefly develop four of these characteristics so that it will be possible to determine exactly how the triune nature of God should impact our missiology.

4 Key Characteristics of the Trinitarian Community

In his final prayer, recorded in John 17, Jesus summarizes and explains the whole of his ministry and purpose.[3] This text, and the preceding discourse teach that the Trinity is a community of love, order, unity, and mission. This text also makes it clear that Jesus expected his followers to possess these same characteristics once he had ascended to the Father and sent the Spirit to live within them. The earthly, Spirit-filled community was to reflect and point people towards the heavenly divine community.

First, God is a community of sacrificial love. Jurgen Moltmann, has said, "Self-giving love is the Trinity's signature. This characteristic is at the heart of triune life... The obedience and humiliation of the Son, culminating in his death on the cross, are thus a revelation of the inner life of God."[4] This love is evident in John 17:24 when Jesus, prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have

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[3] John Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 494.

[4] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1981), 77-79.

given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." The way the Father, Son, and Spirit love one another perfectly defines what love is.

A mistake would be made if one supposed that God created or redeemed the world and humanity because he needed something or someone to share His love with. Fred Sanders comments,

> God the Trinity is the end, the goal, the telos, and the omega. In himself and without any reference to a created world or the plan of salvation, God is that being who exists as the triune love of the Father for the Son in the unity of the Spirit. The good news of the gospel is that God has opened to us the dynamics of His triune life and given us a share in that fellowship.[5]

God has created and redeemed humanity so that his children might participate in the loving intimacy of the triune community for all of eternity. In John 17, and especially in John 13, it becomes abundantly clear that the believing community now has the responsibility to love one another in a way that reflects the triune love and points unbelievers to God.

Second, there is a divine order pertaining to the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is clear in John 17:1-4[6] that Jesus was fully submitting himself to the will of the Father and sought to glorify him in every way. In 16:14 Jesus teaches that the Spirit will submit to and glorify the Son and the Father. Bruce Ware gets it right when he states, "The most marked

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[5] Fred Sanders, The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 70.

[6] See also Matthew 6:9-10 and Philippians 2:8.

characteristic of the trinitarian relationships is the presence of an eternal and inherent expression of authority and submission."[7] The Father is supreme in position and authority. He is the designer of creation, redemption, and restoration, working through the Son and the Spirit to accomplish His will.[8] Concerning these roles Scott Horrell notes,

> Although the three persons may in some sense be present in every divine act, the Bible never admits an inversion of roles of the Godhead. God the Father reflects generous preeminence. The Father loves the Son and gives everything to him, yet the Father is not left empty or without lordship for having given all things out of infinite fullness… There is no evidence anywhere, to my knowledge that the Spirit would ever exercise authority over the Father, rather devoting his every action to glorifying the Father and Son.[9]

The astonishing thing for humanity is that those in Christ, are welcomed into the divine order. Jesus' death and resurrection transfer his followers into the triune order as children of God and co-heirs with Christ. With this invitation, however, comes great responsibility to accurately reflect this order in the God-ordained ways of Scripture[10], thus pointing the world to behold the image of the Trinity.

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[7] Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 137.

[8] Sanders, 103-4.

[9] Sanders & Klaus, 69.

[10] The NT teaches that Christ's body, the church, is to be ordered in worship, ordinances, church leadership, spiritual gifts, family relationships and gender roles. This will be examined more later on.

The third key characteristic of the eternal Godhead is defined by the term "*perichoresis*."

This simply represents the mutual indwelling of each member of the Godhead in the other. In

John 17:11 Jesus prays that his followers, "May be one, even as we (Trinity) are one." Sanders

explains the unity of the trinity in regards to mission well when he comments,

> The Son and the Spirit are always together in carrying out the work of the Father.
> They are always at work in an integrated mutually reinforcing way, fulfilling the
> Father's will in unison. Yet they are not interchangeable with each other, and they
> are not duplicating each other's work. Understanding them as the Father's two
> hands helps depict their unity (they both come from the Father for one purpose)
> and their distinctness (there are two hands, not one).[11]

In the trinitarian community there is perfect oneness in nature, will, and mission. Another

glorious truth of the gospel is that Christ's followers are united with the Trinity. Romans

6 teaches that Christians are united with Christ in his perfect obedience, atoning death,

and victorious resurrection. Furthermore in John 17, Jesus prays that his followers would

be perfectly united with the triune community and one another so that the world might

know God.

Finally, the triune community's inner life of love, order, and unity would have remained

a mystery to humanity if God were not missionary by nature. In John 17:18 Jesus made it clear

that just as the Father sent him on mission into the world, he was now sending his followers into

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[11] Sanders, 138.

the world. To speak of God's mission without speaking of the Trinity is impossible.[12] The

Mission of God beginning with the "very good" creation, continuing with the redemption of

sinners from every nation, and culminating with the glorious restoration of all things is rooted in

the divine initiative and character of the Triune God.[13] John Flett puts it this way, "Mission must

begin with the identity of the one who loves His own proper life in reconciling the world to

himself, and it is in his acting for the redemption of humanity in sending his Son and Spirit that

we have to do with his being as God."[14]

In summary, the world exists in order to participate in the life of the Trinity. Grenz states,

"Just as the Triune God is the eternal fellowship of the trinitarian members, so also God's

purpose for creation is that the world participate in community."[15] Grenz goes on to write,

> God's intent to establish community with creation is a central theme of the entire
> biblical message. From the narratives of the primordial garden, which open the
> curtain on the biblical story, to the vision of white-robed multitudes inhabiting the
> new earth, with which it concludes, the scriptural drama speaks concerning
> community… In short the vision of the Scriptures is clear: The final goal of the
> work of the triune God in salvation history is the establishment of the

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[12] Peter offers a picture of the trinitarian nature of mission in 1 Peter 1:1 when he writes, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood."

[13] Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering a Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 62-67.

[14] Flett, 201.

[15] Grenz, 112.

eschatological community – a redeemed people dwelling in a renewed earth, enjoying reconciliation with their God, fellowship with each other, and harmony with all creation.[16]

While this eschatological community is the goal of God in salvation history the biblical narrative also makes it clear that God has chosen to accomplish this mission in and through community. The next section will briefly demonstrate the centrality of community in God's mission.

Community and the Mission of God

While God certainly began with one man, Adam, the ultimate goal was a community. In Genesis 2:18 the Lord declares, "It is not good that the man should be alone…" Without community humanity would find it impossible to obey God's command in Genesis 1:28 to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion…" In verses 26-27 one reads, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness… So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Concerning this passage John Sailhamer comments,

Verse 27 stated twice that humankind was created in God's image and a third time that humankind was created "male and female…" The singular, "human being," is created as a plurality, "male and female." In a similar way, the one God created humanity through an expression of his plurality. Following this clue, one may see the divine plurality expressed in verse 26 as an anticipation of the human plurality

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[16] Ibid., 112-115

of the man and woman, thus casting human relationships between man and woman in the role of reflecting God's own personal relationship with himself."[17]

In other words, God created humanity in his image for the purpose of reflecting his triune nature throughout the whole creation. So God's people from the very beginning were both commanded and invited to join God in his mission, not individually, but in and through a community that he had empowered to reflect his nature and glory to the ends of the earth. It was to be a community that lived in harmony with God, one another, and the world in which they lived. God would bless them for their worship and obedience and they would bless the world.

In Genesis 3 the story takes a tragic turn. Before this image bearing community begins to multiply, Adam sins. Condemnation and death enter into humanity rendering them unworthy and incapable of enjoying fellowship in the triune community and partnering with God in his mission. Genesis 3-11 depicts humanity as a wicked and corrupt community seeking to make a name for themselves, rather than God. Things appear hopeless until God acts to call out Abraham and promises to redeem and restore what had been lost in the garden through his seed.

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[17] John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 95.

From Abraham God created the community of Israel. While Israel would be the means through which God's Messiah would enter the world, it was also called to rightly reflect God's image to the nations around it.[18] Michael Goheen summarizes this well when he states,

> "The nation of Israel was to be a display people, embodying in its communal life God's original creational intention and eschatological goal for humanity. He would come and dwell among them and give them his torah to direct their corporate life in his way. God's people were to be an attractive sign before all nations of what God had intended in the beginning, and the goal toward which he was moving: the restoration of all creation and human life from the corruption of sin."[19]

Although there were moments in the life of Israel that appeared promising, in the end they ended up, like the community in the garden, a dismal failure. God exercised patience and grace by sending human agents such as Moses, the judges, the Davidic kings, and the prophets, to restore the people of Israel to their calling.[20] Eventually their external and internal failure to obey God's commands led to the destruction of their land, captivity, and eventually their scattering among the nations. The root problem with Israel, according to the prophets (Jer. 17:9), was that its heart was desperately wicked. Israel need a new heart, a new spirit; it needed God's law written on its very being. Only then could it fulfill its purpose and be the image bearing

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[18] Ex. 19:5,6, Deut. 6-7
[19] Michael Goheen, A Light To the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 25.

[20] Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 135

community it was chosen to be.[21] Goheen concludes, "The Old Testament story points forward to a time when just such a people will be gathered and renewed – and through them, God's purposes will be fulfilled."[22] This prophesied community would be birthed and revealed in the New Testament.

Paul refers to the church as a mystery hidden for ages. He defines the church as a community where, through the gospel, Jew and Gentile are united and the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Eph. 3:6-11) Jesus envisions this community in John 17 and this is precisely what unfolds in the book of Acts. Sailhamer notes, "This gospel of John presupposes and anticipates the establishment of the church. It hardly seems accidental that in the shape of the NT, the gospel of John has been placed just prior to the book of Acts."[23] While the New Testament teaches that there is a Universal church community, which includes all who have trusted in God's Messiah since the Fall, it is clear that the overwhelming emphasis is on visible, localized expressions of this greater community in this age.[24] So while it is true that God is working through the Universal church in this age, it is also true that he is doing this specifically through local churches.

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[21] Goheen, 73.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Sailhamer, NIV Compact Commentary, 494.

There is a great revival of passion and effort in our day when it comes to fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus gave the church in Matthew 28. While this is something to be thankful for we must resist the temptation of attempting to finish the task with little regard for how God has ordained that the task be completed. The Great Commission, and the rest of the New Testament, envisions a missional community that is a continuation, fulfillment, and restoration of the Old Testament community.

Christopher Wright believes that for Jesus the Old Testament provided the foundation of the Great Commission. He says,

> The Great Commission was not something Jesus thought up as an afterthought—something for the disciples to be getting on with while he went back to heaven. It was not just something that rested solely on His own authority as the risen Lord (though, of course, it is fully warranted by that, as Matthew's version makes clear). It was the inevitable outcome of the story as the Scriptures told it—leading up to the Messiah and leading on to mission to the nations.[25]

The echoes in the Great Commission of Genesis 1:26-28 & 12 are unmistakable. Concerning Genesis 1:26-28 the Great Commission makes it clear that God has not given up on the great community envisioned in the garden. Jesus has replaced Adam as the one through whom the new community will be birthed. He restores the community's dominion over creation (Matt. 28:18) and makes the task of becoming and making image bearers of the triune God a reality (Matt.

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[24] See Appendix 2

[25] Wright, *The Mission of God's People,* 39.

28:19) once again. Now, however, the community cannot fail to accomplish its mission because it is no longer the mission of Adam, but of Jesus. Matthew makes it clear in the first verse of his gospel that Jesus is the seed promised to Abraham, who would bless the nations. Verse 19 of the Great Commission makes it evident that Jesus is blessing the nations as his Spirit-filled community multiplies throughout the world teaching the nations all that he has commanded. The community birthed through the resurrected Christ and the sent Spirit is now capable of obediently fulfilling the mission of the garden community and Israel.

Although there is a great deal of continuity between the church, the garden community, and Israel it is important to point out that the church, in one sense, is different. Jesus promises in Verse 20 that he will be with his people until the end of the age. It is clear in John and Acts that this will happen through the Holy Spirit. "At Pentecost the church was equipped (and empowered) to be the community of proclamation that uniquely embodies in word and deed the in-breaking of God's reign."[26] Because of the Spirit's continual presence in the community, God's love, order, unity and mission can be reflected in his people like never before. Furthermore, Jesus commands that disciples be baptized "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" in verse 19. Two things need to be said concerning this command. First, Spirit baptism "Is the gracious gift of God the Father through which believers are

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[26] Tennent, 95.

incorporated into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and become part of the

forgiven, gifted and sanctified community of the Holy Spirit, which is a sign of the forthcoming

kingdom of God."[27] Baptism into the trinitarian fellowship also necessitates baptism into a local

community of believers for both sanctification and mission. Second, water baptism then serves

as an outward sign of a Christian's entrance into and devotion to both the trinitarian community

and the church. Concerning the importance of the visibility of the community, Lesslie Newbigin

writes,

> The new reality that he (Jesus) introduced into history was to be continued
> through history in the form of a community, not in the form of a book. All this
> language bears witness to the fact that there is a society in which the life of the
> crucified and risen Jesus lives on and his mission continues, not only as the
> proclamation of the kingdom but as the presence of the kingdom in the form of
> death and resurrection. It is not simply the continuance of a teaching… The
> presence of the kingdom, hidden and revealed in the cross of Jesus, is carried
> through history hidden and revealed in the life of that community which bears in
> its life the dying and rising of Jesus.[28]

The Great Commission moves forward only as the Gospel is proclaimed and God's

image is reflected within faithful biblical communities. There is no clearer picture of this than the

community Luke describes for us in Acts 2-4. So whatever the strategy may be for making

disciples, it cannot be detached from healthy biblical community. It is at this point that some

might argue, "Why does it matter who initiates and accomplishes the work as long as the work

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[27] Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 194.

[28] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 52.

gets done?" This response falls prey to pragmatism and ignores the biblical theology of mission articulated in the first part of this paper. This attitude undermines God's ordained means for reflecting his triune nature to the ends of the earth. The next section will highlight two general ways trinitarian theology must challenge and shape the way the Great Commission is fulfilled.

II. A Paradigm Shift: Two challenges to Southern Baptist missiology and methodology arising from a trinitarian theology of mission.

Restoring the local church to the center of missions strategy.

Timothy Tennent notes, "Ecclesiology lies at the heart of many of the most pressing issues in contemporary missiology."[29] If God is working primarily through local churches in order to accomplish his mission then what role do mission agencies play? Tennent is once again helpful when he comments on the relationship between churches and mission organizations based on the relationship between the Apostle Paul and the church at Antioch. He correctly concludes,

> Only the church infused with the Holy Spirit can embody the reality of New Creation in this present age. Mission organizations exist only to assist churches in this goal. These organizations are biblical and have historically served to mobilize the church in effective ways, however it is essential that they be held accountable to godly Christian leadership and that the members of various societies be sent out from, and be held accountable to, a local church."[30]

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[29] Tennent, 434.

[30] Ibid, 457.

Southern Baptist are blessed to have the International Mission Board as the primary

entity of their denomination for helping churches engage in overseas missions. God has used the

IMB to make countless disciples and plant great numbers of churches throughout the world. But

even such a fruitful structure must subject itself to what the Scriptures have to say about how

God's mission is to be accomplished. What would happen if the churches of the SBC woke up

tomorrow and learned that the IMB had been closed down? How capable would churches be to

reach the nations? These questions are frightening in light of the relatively small percentage of

SBC members and resources mobilized to reach those who have never heard the gospel[31]

Presently it takes about 8.5 churches to support one missionary and 98% of the money given in

SBC churches remains in the states.[32] Perhaps it is because many churches do not feel the burden

and responsibility of taking the Gospel to all peoples. They fail to see themselves as Christ's

missionary community, and are satisfied to simply outsource their obligation to reach the nations

to the IMB. The reality is that there is a great disconnect between many of the denomination's

churches and the IMB. Commitment for many SBC churches includes giving to the Lottie Moon

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[31] The SBC is composed of over 45,000 churches which support around 5,500 international missionaries. Currently, for every 8-9 churches, one missionary is sent and supported (see www.IMB.org; www.SBC.net).

[32] David Platt illustrates this in his book *Radical* with a story from a Christian news publication celebrating a new $23 million dollar First Baptist Church on one side of the page, while "celebrating" how Baptists had given $5,000 to help Sudanese refugees in a time of great need. 15-16 (see www.IMB.org). David Platt, *Radical* (Colorado Springs, CO:Multnomah, 2010), 15–16.

Christmas Offering, praying for missionaries, and providing a reference and signature of support

for a candidate from their congregation. Do these acts alone allow the SBC to continue to claim

that missionaries are sent out by churches, who are assisted by the IMB? This hardly seems to be

the case when it is the IMB that ultimately determines if a candidate goes, when and where he

goes, what he does, and whom he does it with.

The first challenge must be to patiently teach, inspire, and assist hundreds of local

churches to stop contracting out international missions. They must determine, through the help of

the Holy Spirit and through partnering with other churches and the IMB, to radically pursue the

glorious opportunity God has given to them to reflect his image to the ends of the earth. This will

inevitably require the IMB to give some of the forfeited responsibility back to local churches. A

partnership that truly makes the church central will require much prayer, collaboration, time,

humility and patience. The next sections offers one way that this might happen.

B. The challenge of sending strategic communities (church planting teams) rather than
individuals.

How can the world see, and not just hear, the good news that God is a God of love, order,

unity, and mission, and that through Christ he has invited humanity into this community? By

seeking to send communities, or teams, rather than individuals overseas. Though there is not a

Scriptural mandate for always sending teams, it is the only model found in the New Testament.[33]

The importance of this principle of community seems to be understood when it comes to North

American Church Planting, but ignored when sending missionaries overseas. Why is the IMB

process conducive to sending out individuals and not teams to unreached parts of the world?

Admittedly there are some practical challenges that come with sending teams which

include cost, sending to restricted access countries, the length of time it takes them to make

decisions, the inevitability of conflict, and the tendency to become inwardly focused.[34] These

challenges will require much prayer and wisdom, but we cannot allow these issues alone to

disregard sending teams. The primary reason to move to more of a team model is because it is

more faithful to the Scriptures. Enoch Wan writes,

> There needs to be a paradigm shift to a Trinitarian relational perspective that
> permeates every thought, plan, and action. The study of the Trinity reveals how
> the Persons of the Godhead interact and work together for the purpose of God. If
> this model is realized, honored, and embraced by the Universal Body of Christ, it
> will empower their ministries and their ability to work together for the Kingdom
> of God.[35]

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[33]Daniel Sinclair, *A Vision of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting in Teams* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2006), 33.

[34] J.D. Payne, *Discover Church Planting: An Introduction to the What's, Why's, and How's of Global Church Planting* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 17.

[35] Enoch Wan and Kevin Penman, "The Trinity: A Model for Partnerships in Christian Mission," *globalmissiology.org* 3, no. 7 (April 2010): 21.

Churches and teams of believers reflect the love, order, unity, and mission of the Trinity far more effectively than individuals. When trinitarian characteristics are reflected through community they are evangelical and provide a powerful apologetic for the gospel to those in foreign lands.[36]

First, if sacrificial love is the character of the Trinity then this type of love must be present in Christ's witnessing people. Not just love for God and the lost, but love for one-another. John's gospel provides perhaps the most convincing evidence for not separating Christian love and fellowship from missions. Jesus' statement in John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" is just as essential to the churches mission strategy as the Great Commission in Matthew. Disciples cannot be made, and the nations will not be reached, apart from deep relationships in communities of believers reflecting the Christian virtues of love, patience, gentleness, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, blamelessness, forbearance, and hospitality—none of which can be practiced alone. Francis Shaeffer once wrote, "But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians."[37] Teams that learn to love one another in the context of a local church as they fellowship, minister, grieve, and formulate vision and strategy together will

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[36] Ibid, 22.

[37] Francis Schaeffer, The Great Evangelical Disaster (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984), 164-165.

reflect this love far more effectively than individuals or teams randomly formed on the mission field.

Second, Paul makes it clear in the letter of 1 Corinthians that order in the church is intricately connected to the church's witness. Although a strategic team is not necessarily a church it is important that order in worship and leadership exist.[38] Minimally, a church planting team needs leaders who possess the characteristics of elders and who exhibit the Ephesians 4 gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher for long-term survival and sustainability.[39] Those with apostolic and evangelistic gifts prevent a team from being inward focused while shepherds and teachers prevent the community from becoming spiritually dry and from being driven by results. There are certainly numerous other gifts highlighted by Paul that would be extremely helpful for a team, but these are the ones that a team must have. As these leaders humbly lead and other team members submit to their authority, the Trinity is reflected.

Also in 1 Corinthians Paul describes ways that rightly ordered worship in the church evangelistically reflects the nature of God. One particular way is through the communities

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[38] There are recent examples however of churches sending teams overseas as churches much like the present North American church planting strategy.One example is the Summit Church: http://www.summitrdu.com/index.cfm/PageID/1667/index.html

[39] Paul R Gupta and Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Breaking Tradition to Accomplish Vision: Training Leaders for a Church Planting Movement* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2006)*,* 82-87. See Appendix 1 for a definition of each gift.

participation in the Lord's Supper. When the Lord's Supper is administered in the Christian

community it serves a transformational and an evangelical purpose. It has been said, "The

Eucharist is both the end and beginning of Christian mission; representing both the goal of

mission and the point of departure for the church, for we go into the world as those who have

met and encountered the living ascended Christ. And the gift of the Spirit then rests upon the

gathered body as it departs."[40] Without a team, and the qualified leaders mentioned above,

missionaries often go great lengths of time without participating in a rightly administered

Eucharist, thus impacting the missionary's spiritual vitality and effectiveness?

Third, teams will faithfully reflect the oneness of the Father, Son, and Spirit. In John

17:20-23 Jesus prays for unity in the church modeled after the unity present in the Trinity. Enoch

Wan has pointed out that this prayer for unity is not a prayer for unity for the sake of unity,

rather a "unity intended to provide a convincing testimony, a believable platform upon which the

gospel might be preached so that the world would believe that the Father sent the Son." He goes

on to note, "Except for the Great Commission itself this is one of the strongest comments Jesus

made on missions. He hinged the credibility of our message on our oneness in Him."[41]

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[40] Sanders, 233.

[41] Enoch Wan and Geoff Baggett, "A Theology of Partnership: Implications for Implementation by a Local Church," *globalmissiology.org* 3, no. 7 (April 2010) http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/62 (accessed November, 18, 2010): 5–6.

John Sherwood suggests several ways a team's oneness will reflect the Trinity. First, the

Trinity is reflected when oneness exists in spite of differences in function, skill, and personality.

He asserts, "We must not fabricate homogeneous teams with overtly compatible personalities in

a misguided effort to preserve unity."[42] Next, the Trinity is reflected as Christians bear with one

another through conflict and sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, "Sin demands to have a man

by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more

destructive will be the power of sin over him."[43] The mission is greatly aided when missionaries

are able, in community, to display confession, repentance, and forgiveness. Unity warrants time

and resources because it lies at the heart of what the Gospel accomplishes.[44] A desire for

unreached people groups to see small believing communities who are united in worship,

sanctification, and mission must influence missions strategy at every level.

Fourth, strategic communities reflect God's missionary nature and purpose for the world.

They are extensions of local churches which are able to focus the majority of their time and

resources on cross-cultural church planting. Here it is necessary to point out that a complete

Gospel witness does not simply proclaim and reflect what has happened in the past, but it also

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[42] John Sherwood, "The One-Many God and Team Ministry," *globalmissiology.org* 3, no. 5 (April 2008) http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/57 (accessed November, 18, 2010): 11–12.

[43] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1954), 112.

[44] Sherwood, 15.

points forward to the culmination of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. Strategic mission

teams, like churches, are meant to be, "a pilot project of the kingdom of God, a kingdom outpost,

and anticipation of Christ's reign on earth."[45] Through them unbelievers get a glimpse of men

and women living in a restored relationship with their Creator, one another, and creation.

Therefore, international church planting strategy must not neglect ministry to the poor, sick,

orphans, and widows. It must also be concerned with justice, cultural transformation, and

environmental stewardship. Clearly there is a need, not just for church planters on mission teams,

but those whose occupational skills may help the team meet these needs. Tennent writes,

> Missions is about extending the claims and realities of the new creation into the present order. Missions summons people not merely to "make a decision" to follow Christ but also to enter the community of the faithful, the church, and to live out the realities of the future in the present before the eyes of the world in real space-time history. This is why the Great Commission cannot be spoken of as fulfilled apart from the larger eschatological context of the consummation of the new creation.[46]

In summary, this section challenges local churches to partner with one another and the

IMB to send pre-mobilized teams formed within local churches who are already demonstrating,

to some degree, the triune love, order, unity, and mission. These teams are small groups of

people who share a common purpose, a relational bond, and effective leadership. More often

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[45] Ralph D Winter and Steven C Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 136.

[46] Tennent, 488.

than not teams will be formed before going overseas, and will fellowship, minister, and form strategy together before being deployed. They are living and organic rather than rigid and predictable. Many strategic communities will look different depending on where they are going and what they are doing. The number of people on a team, the strategy of the team, and the lifespan of the team may vary depending on the context into which they are entering into. Daniel Sinclair points out that Paul's teams looked different in each of his missionary journeys. In his first journey (Acts 13:4-14:28), Paul went out quickly with a good friend or ministry partner. In the second (Acts 15:39-18:22), he deliberately built a team over time to more strategically meet the needs of the vision God had given him. In his final missionary journey (18:23-21:17), after becoming a respected veteran, Paul established a base in Ephesus and networked with a wide variety of workers to reach a whole region with the Gospel.[47] This will require more sacrifice from churches and their leaders, as well as great humility from mission agencies as they release some responsibilities back to the local church. Not only are teams faithful to the trinitarian nature of God, but they offer a necessary environment of sanctification for the missionaries while providing a powerful apologetic for the Gospel.

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[47] Daniel Sinclair, *A Vision of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting in Teams* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2006), 36-37.

III. A few practical applications for local churches

A. Selecting Missionaries

      Local churches must take more ownership identifying and selecting missionaries for international missions. An argument can be made that only in the context of biblical community can an individual's character, gifting, and calling be assessed properly. J.D. Payne has noted that it was, "Within the context of the local church (Antioch) that Paul and Barnabas were set aside for missionary work (Acts 13)."[48] First, this text highlights the importance of local church leaders in the selection process. Paul and Barnabas were called out of the local church by the Holy Spirit, but this call was affirmed by the elders. Missionaries must be willing to submit their calling to the wisdom of their spiritual authorities in the church. Second, it is clear from this text that the spiritual growth of those selected to be missionaries must be evident to the community. George Miley shows the importance of this by stating,

> Absolutely nothing is more critical to the completion of God's purpose on earth
> than the formation of the inner person before God. No human enthusiasm, will
> power, or strategy can substitute. Thousands have been sent into the world with

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[48] J.D. Payne, "The Mother Church and Church Planting," http://www.northamericanmissions.org (Winter 2005) http://northamericanmissions.org/files/Mother-Church-JASCG.pdf (accessed January, 29, 2011).

the gospel who have returned wounded, disillusioned, and defeated. Many were unprepared in the inner person. This is not God's design.[49]

Godly character is shaped and identified in the context of biblical community and cannot be assessed sufficiently through a formal process no matter how in-depth that process may be. Third, Paul and Barnabas' spiritual gifts became evident to other church leaders as they used them in the context of the local church. Missionaries and gifted leaders are not primarily selected and anointed by a mission board. Instead they are those who have proven to be called, gifted, and approved over time within the context of the local church. In conclusion local churches must do more than simply sign off on, and fill out references for missionary candidates. While the IMB process for assessment is useful, it must concede that it as secondary rather than primary when it comes to identifying and selecting missionaries.

B. Sending Missionaries

The sending process should include forming these individuals into teams, training them, and sending them to the people and place in the world that God has called them. First, it is crucial that Ephesians 4 type leaders of these teams be affirmed and gathered in churches. The current IMB model tends to select and group those with apostolic and evangelistic giftings

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[49] George Miley, *Loving the Church and Blessing the Nations: Pursuing the Role of the Local Churches in Global Mission* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2003), 87.

together, while neglecting those with other gifts and talents necessary for effectively gaining

entrance into the target country and access to the target people group. Second, the team should

begin to function in their home church and community like they will be called to function

overseas. Teams need time together to cultivate the qualities that reflect the Trinity. They need

time to fellowship, minister, and formulate vision and strategy together. Many teams formed

under the current model are forced to do this living hours apart from one another on the field.

The church and the surrounding community provide an ideal training ground for church planters

to learn how to use their gifts and develop strategy. As the world continues to come to America,

teams are presented with opportunities to engage in cross-cultural ministry. Involvement in

cross-cultural ministry at home should be a pre-requisite for everyone desiring to sent out as an

overseas missionaries. David Sills comments, "Missionary qualifications can't simply be

someone who is willing and can share a gospel tract. Ministry experience once thought to be

essential for both missionary preparation and the demonstration of ministry skills is seen as

unnecessary."[50]

Finally, local churches and the IMB must strive for a new model that encourages and

enables the entire congregation at home to take ownership of the mission abroad. In many SBC

churches those who remain at home do not see themselves as an active and vital part of the

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[50] David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2010), 36.

missionaries work overseas. "In God's design, the man-power for global mission comes not from

one small group of Christian disciples (vocational missionaries) but from every believer.[51] The

work must be made accessible to every individual in the congregation. The Moravians provide

the SBC with an excellent example of what this ownership looks like. Beyond sacrificially

giving and praying for those they sent overseas, they also sought creative ways for those at home

to be more involved in the mission overseas. They knew it was not a select few that would reach

the un-reached, but rather it would take the sacrifice, gifts, and talents of the entire church at

home. Life at home was shaped by the mission abroad. They understood that many un-reached

cultures could only be effectively entered through "secular" roles.[52] Does the current process

encourage those with "secular" jobs to consider going, or does it simply ask them for their

resources?

In conclusion, concerning training and sending, George Miley writes:

Is it our goal to get to the field as quickly as possible or to be effective there for
the long haul? How can one who has never been a vital part of a church be
effective in planting churches cross-culturally? Learning the ways of the local
church is equally as important as learning the language and culture of our target
people. Learning to submit to a local church is a process that forms the human
spirit toward the likeness of Jesus. Learning to relate to the local church in a godly
way is not just a structure issue. It is a character issue.[53]

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[51] Miley, 54.

[52] Ibid., 175-81.

[53] Miley, 153.

It is necessary for churches and IMB to formulate a formal sending process that, forms teams, sets forth spiritual and practical requirements to be met by team members, and culminates in an appointment service within local churches. After all, it was the elders, representing the entire congregation, of the Antioch church that laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and not the governing board of a missions agency.

C. Shepherding Missionaries

Local churches must be more involved in shepherding missionaries they have sent to the field. There are a plethora of reasons why missionaries leave the field. Missionaries are normal people who struggle with sin, spiritual dryness, and difficult circumstances. They need wise counsel from spiritual authorities and shepherds just like the flock at home. Having individuals gifted in shepherding and counseling provide an important resource for struggling missionaries. Furthermore, church leaders, or members, from the sending church could go encourage and counsel them. The counseling support provided by the IMB could form the third level of support for missionaries increasing their chances of surviving on the field.

What happens once a strategic team begins making disciples, planting churches, and training leaders for these churches? At this stage there is not a single end-all strategy. The teams

work together will require constant evaluation and creative adjustments when necessary.[54] While

teams are necessary for trinitarian reflection, this does not require teams who start together to

remain together. Most teams who form, and are sent together, will rarely end together.

Circumstances arise, God redirects, and new team members are sent. They key is that team

leaders continue to work with sending churches and the IMB in order to prayerfully remake and

restructure teams. It should not be taboo for teams to stay together for a lifetime overseas if God

allows.

Finally, the Trinity calls missionary teams not only to image the trinitarian love, order,

unity, and mission among themselves, but also in their relationships with national believers.

Today, the fear of creating dependency cripples many church planters. Paul Gupta has

commented concerning the role of western missionaries in India saying:

> Some in the body of Christ have separated themselves from national movements,
> such as India, out of fear of fostering dependency in national churches. While
> colonialism often did lead to cultures of dependency, separation is not of God!
> The church is the Lord's and the God of the Bible made the church
> interdependent, connected in all of its parts. As we obey Jesus' command to
> make disciples of the nations, it will take the whole church, united under the
> Lordship of Christ.[55]

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[54] See Tom Steffen, *Passing the Baton: Church Planting That Empowers* (La Habra, CA: Center for Organization and Ministry, 2007), 83.

[55] Gupta and Lingenfelter, 209.

These relationships must begin with a posture of humility and a willingness to learn from our

national brothers and sisters. It is certain they will have much to teach us about what it means to

take up our cross and follow Christ. Ultimately discipleship and church planting take time and

commitment, because they are rooted in relationships just as much as teaching and training.

Though many may come to Christ in great movements of the Spirit, making disciples is a life-

long process. God is passionate concerning his mission of redemption, but he is also sovereign

and patient. The mission of the church to make disciples and plant churches is simply a means

to the great end of God's name being "hallowed" and his kingdom come among all nations. He

took thousands of years after the fall in Genesis 3 to bring the Messiah into the world, and he

now gracefully waits for the Spirit and the church to carry out his mission before sending him

again.

Conclusion

This work has sought to challenge churches and mission agencies to become more

trinitarian in the way they engage in cross-cultural church planting. This is important because as

Christopher Wright has said so well,

> At the end of the day, mission is a matter of loyalty. The mission of God's people
> has to start and finish with a commitment to the God whose mission we are called
> to share. But, that in turn depends on knowing our God - knowing God in depth,
> from experience of his revelation and salvation. Our mission flows from the
> uniqueness of the God of the Bible, supremely revealed to us in the uniqueness of

Christ. That is both the source of our mission, and also the content of our mission.[56]

Furthermore it has sought to demonstrated the inseparable link between the Trinity, mission, and biblical community, while suggesting ways to create more of a community based approach to missions. It has suggested that local churches ought to play a more central role in international missions, while presenting a potential paradigm shift in the way missionaries are sent. A shift to a team model will require much patience and humility from the IMB and the local churches of the convention. As this partnership continues, may there be just as much zeal for faithfully reflecting trinitarian love, order, unity, and mission as there is for finishing the task. In the end, the two can never be separated. Newbigin has said, "It is useless to talk about the task if you are not concerned about the agency that is to carry out the task. We have to ask not only 'What is to be done?' but also 'Who is to do it?'[57] In the years to come, this is a challenge local churches and mission organizations must embrace. If they do, it will be exciting to see how the Lord uses their obedience for is glory.

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[56] Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 32.

[57] Newbigin, *The Open Secret,* 121,126,127.

Appendix 1: A Description of The Ephesians 4 Gifts[58]

pastor: One who shepherds, loves, protects, equips, and mentors the body.

teacher: One gifted in teaching the Scriptures to the body for growth and maturity.

apostle: A visionary Paul type leader who does not pastor a church. He brings others together to envision God's purpose and mission for the church, then to develop a strategy together to accomplish that vision. This is the primary way in which apostle and apostleship are used in the New Testament when not referring to the twelve Apostles.

George Miley adds, "My understanding is that God has designed apostolic leaders to go first in sequence. They are to blaze the trail, to pioneer, to initiate kingdom break-throughs into new areas, and to lay foundations on which others can build. When it comes to extending the reign of God on earth, they have to go first."[59]

evangelist: One who has great compassion for the lost that compels him to take the good news to the lost. One passionate and gifted at helping communities and individuals be reconciled to God. Often leading in prayer for the lost as well.

prophet: Those God has given to keep the church from compromise with the world and sin. Can speak biblical truth into a particular cultural context effectively.

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[58] Gupta and Lingenfelter, 82-87.

[59] Miley, 96.

Appendix 2: The Great Commission and the Local Church?

1: To whom did Matthew write his Gospel to? Matthew wrote his gospel to local churches, and the same can be said of the other New Testament writers. Many scholars have suggested that the prominent church in Antioch of Syria, whose members included Jewish and Gentile Christians, was the intended audience of Matthew. However, it is also suggested that the Gospel circulated rapidly and widely to all the fledgling churches of his day. This suggests that the Great Commission, or any other missional text, was not given as a subjective command to the Universal Church.

2: The New Testament model reveals that ministry and mission were to take place in and through local, visible, communities of believers. John Hammett has noted that the word "ekklesia" is used 114 times in the New Testament. Of these, three refer to secular assemblies, two refer to the people of God in the Old Testament, and 109 refer to the New Testament church. The vast majority of these 109 uses refer to the local, rather than the universal church.
From the beginning this Spirit filled community in Acts 2, a local church, devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayer. Their love, order, unity, and mission were evident to the world around them, and through this witness the Lord added to their number daily. This restored kingdom community in Acts becomes a model for God's mission for the world.[60]

3. George Miley, in his work *Loving the Church and Blessing the Nations* asks why it is reasonable to conceptualize (local) churches as centers that initiate church planting among

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[60]John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclessiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 27-28.

unreached peoples?[61]

A few practical answers follow:

- Each member of the church can participate in mission. Each spiritual gift, natural talent, and vocational skill in the church is available to the mission.

- Christians who work in secular careers are naturally linked with opportunities among the target people group.

- Those who work cross culturally are connected with people gifted in pastoral care.

- Mission teams are mentored in the principles of church life. If new churches are to be the end products, to start them, let's send people who have proven themselves in the whole range of church life.

- There is a base for developing a common ministry philosophy and establishing personal bonding. An effective team is made up of many people who happen to be in the same location, which is made possible if a team comes from the same church. The members share relational bonds and a common sense of purpose. These take time and personal investment with one another to establish, but once they are present, they take teams though the rough spots that cause individuals on their own to stumble.

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[61] Miley, 66.

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