



No Trinity, No Mission: The Apostolic Difference of Revisioning the Trinity

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THRONGS ARE LAMENTING THE DIMINISHED MISSIONAL CHARACTER OF TODAY'S Christian congregations in North America. Some have thought to do something about this poverty of missional imagination.¹ One aspect of our abated apostolicity involves our deep-seated denial that even North America might be a mission field ripe unto the harvest and that multitudes actually suffer eternally the consequential maladies of our denial. Pray God that this denial—an ineradicable feature of christendom's habit of ecclesial life—will also pass away as christendom itself rapidly approaches the "do not resuscitate" state. A second aspect of our abated apostolicity lies in an inadequate view of the God whom we believe and confess. The first aspect might, in fact, arise from the second, from a

¹Prominent among the latter are Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1991); George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and Darrell Guder, ed., *The Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

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Moral and experiential monotheism, twin bequests of the enlightenment, have robbed recent doctrines of God of an essential apostolic difference. A revisioned formulation of the Trinity will provide good news for the modern world.

frail doctrine of God shaped as we have bent away from the trinitarian implication of the biblical narrative.

To my mind, it is no mere coincidence that we are developing a consensus regarding the dearth of missional imagination at the congregational level at the same time that some are deploring the non-trinitarian character of Christian theology, life, and practice. I will investigate, therefore, the link between “no Trinity” and “no mission” and suggest a new trinitarian way to commit an apostolic difference. First, I will explore the basic contours of the western doctrine of God over the last two hundred years, noting the fate of the trinitarian imagination in modern and contemporary theological reflection. Second, I will examine the laudable, though flawed, early-twentieth-century attempt to retrieve a trinitarian trajectory. Finally, I will indicate a revisionary direction proposed in some recent trinitarian thinking that will make an apostolic difference in the life and practice of today’s Christian congregations in North America.

I. CONTOURS OF A TRAVESTY

At high noon of the modern era in the west, between 1775 and 1825, two forms of the doctrine of God beamed scorching rays over Protestant Christianity, and still do.² Let us call the first form moral monotheism and the second form experiential monotheism. At times some have ably blended these forms of monotheism.

Immanuel Kant offered the originating vision for modern moral monotheism, though it is the basic vision rather than Kant’s precise formulations that has enduringly mattered. “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe,” observed Kant, “the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”³ The “mind” to which Kant referred is, of course, the mind of the enlightened people of the modern era. Notice also what is missing, no longer immediately catching the enlightenment mind’s attention: God. Enlightened attention focuses instead on the natural world of “the starry heavens above” through the sciences practiced by luminaries like Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton; then the enlightened mind fastens on the social world of moral progress generated by the cultural and political upheavals during the extended aftermath of the Thirty Years War. Furthermore, as Kant noted, the starry heavens of the natural world “broaden the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude of worlds beyond worlds and systems of systems and into the limitless times of their periodic motion.” However, this newly discovered immensity of the natural world “annihilates, as it were, my importance as an *animal creature*,” a mere speck in the universe. Fortunately, argued Kant, the moral life of the social world “infinitely raises my worth.”

Many of Kant’s enlightened associates thought likewise and displayed their

²See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 2-9.

³Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 169.

heightened esteem for morality as a moral optimism in which every day in every way the human race was getting better and better. Not so! thought Kant. "The history of all times cries too loudly against it." "That 'the world lieth in evil' is a plaint as old as history."⁴ The moral life exists as a conflict between the rational duty to benefit others through our conduct and the striving after our own happiness embedded in the natural desires of our physical makeup. The highest good exists when doing our duty to others entirely for their sakes simultaneously results in our own happiness. Of course, such a state of affairs does not always naturally occur; perhaps, indeed, it seldom does. Given such a typical scenario it is just plain reasonable, argued Kant, for any person, indeed, for every person to postulate this minimum possibility: that God exists to ensure that duty and happiness kiss, if not in time then in eternity. "Only if religion [God] is added to it [morality] can the hope arise of someday participating in happiness in proportion as we endeavor not to be unworthy of it." Moral monotheism imagines religious life specifically as "the recognition of all duties as divine commands."⁵

For a significant segment of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christianity, moral monotheism becomes the operative hermeneutic for the interpretation and use of scripture. Moral monotheism portrays Jesus as "the archetype" of a life "well-pleasing to God" or as the historical exemplar and mentor for being faithful to one's vocation even to the point of death or as some such moral variant.⁶ Moral monotheism elevates those aspects of the Christian witness that are immediately translatable into the practical moral conduct of reasonable people and marginalizes, even jettisons, distinctive aspects of Christianity that fall outside the sphere of reasonable moral conduct. In Kant's judgment, for instance, "the doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has *no practical relevance at all*....Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Deity makes no difference...no difference in rules of conduct."⁷ No difference? On the contrary, here the apostolic difference is not negligible, but negative and destructive! Indeed, is anyone surprised that Christian mission under the sway of moral monotheism has often been little more than culturally conditioned western moral imperialism? No wonder the missional imagination of moral monotheism withered; it ought to have done so.

Experiential monotheism emerged as an alternative to moral monotheism. Friedrich Schleiermacher offered the originating vision. In order to be a fully functioning human being or human community more was necessary than the standard

⁴Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Green and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960) 15.

⁵Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 136; *Religion*, 142.

⁶Kant, *Religion*, 54ff.; see also John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 177-191; 252-258. See Thomas McCarthy's Kantian interpretation of major forms of contemporary Protestant and Roman Catholic political theology in *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991) 200-215.

⁷Immanuel Kant, "The Conflict of the Faculties," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996) 264.

enlightenment focus on scientific knowledge and ethical conduct. The experience of religious “piety” was also necessary.

Only by keeping quite outside the range both of science and of practice can it [piety] maintain its proper sphere and character. Only when piety takes its place alongside of science and practice, as a necessary and indispensable third, as their natural counterpart, not less in worth and splendour than either, will the common field be altogether occupied and human nature on this side complete.⁸

Schleiermacher recognized the great gains brought about by enlightenment science and morality but these gains would subside if science and morality alone were to rule the enlightened roost. Because science and morality attend to finite realities, they dwell only with surfaces and fragments (124-125). Life’s depth dimensions and breadth connections go unattended, and humans remain restless. Enter religious experience!

The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal....[Religious experience] is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All, in God, having and possessing all things in God, and God in all....In itself it is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it [finitude] and it [finitude] in God. (36)

Experiential monotheism traces this deep and abiding “sense and taste for the Infinite” (39) through an “intuition of the Infinite in the finite” (237). This sense and taste for the Infinite emerges as persons “descend into the inmost sanctuary of life” (41), for here arises the consciousness of “the operation of God in you by means of the operation of the world upon you” (45). Jürgen Moltmann rightfully concludes that “it was quite consistent” for Schleiermacher to relegate the doctrine of the Trinity to an appendix in his theological *magnum opus*. As the transcendent ground of our experience of absolute dependence, the deity need only be singular, *one*. For Schleiermacher, Christianity is essentially a “monotheistic mode of belief” and the “doctrine of the Trinity is superfluous.”⁹

For another significant portion of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christianity, experiential monotheism becomes the perspective for the interpretation and use of scripture. Experiential monotheism portrays Jesus, for instance, as a fully human being distinguishable from all other humans by “the constant potency of His God-consciousness.” That is, Jesus has a constantly potent sense and taste for the Infinite in and through everything finite. Furthermore, Jesus’ redemptive work is the founding of a community in which the effective influence of Jesus is to “awake” religious experience and “assume believers into the power of His God-consciousness.”¹⁰

Quite recently, Lutheran biblical interpreter Marcus Borg has portrayed Je-

⁸Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. J. Oman (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) 37-38. Page numbers cited in the text refer to this volume.

⁹Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 3.

¹⁰Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1928) 385; *On Religion*, 247; *Christian Faith*, 425ff.

Jesus from a perspective consistent with the hermeneutical lenses provided primarily by experiential monotheism and secondarily by moral monotheism.¹¹ The Borg portrait casts Jesus according to four broad strokes. Jesus was (a) a spirit person; (b) a teacher of wisdom; (c) a social prophet; (d) a movement founder. Jesus as spirit person and movement founder corresponds with experiential monotheism, and Jesus as wisdom teacher and social prophet resonates with moral monotheism. Borg prioritizes spirit person as “foundational to everything else Jesus was” (31), so we will concentrate our attention on this aspect.

Perhaps the reader of Borg’s “new image of Jesus” (1) will not be surprised that Jesus as spirit person proffers precisely the antidote to that which, as Borg sees it, most ails the modern sojourner. Quite candidly Borg notes how vexing the modern western enlightenment worldview has been to him and to the rest of us raised under its “dominant” sway (33). The modern west promotes “its image of what is real as the world of matter and energy and its vision of the universe as a closed system of cause and effect” (7), and it “sees reality in material terms” (33). Modernity entails a “collision” with Borg’s “childhood beliefs” (7), particularly with God’s omnipresence. Modernity prevailed as Borg became first a “closet agnostic” and then a “closet atheist” (8, 13). He is quick to acknowledge that his theological problem “began not with Jesus, but with God” (6), though his “doubts about God affected how [he] thought of Jesus” (7). Having given up on the “notion” and “reality” of God, Borg interpreted Jesus from a moral point of view in relationship to the socio-political realities of “this world,” “apart from the God question” (13).

Borg notes that during his mid-thirties he had “a number of experiences of what I now recognize as ‘nature mysticism.’” These were experiences of “‘radical amazement,’ moments of transformed perception in which the earth is seen as ‘filled with the glory of God,’ shining with a radiant presence...moments of connectedness in which I felt my linkage to what is” (14). Accompanying these ecstatic experiences were “*aha!* moments...[of] a new understanding of the meaning of the the word *God*...[as] the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and within us...the nonmaterial ground and source and presence in which...‘we live and move and have our being’” (14).

Once God became “real” for Borg through nature mysticism, his interpretation of Jesus was transformed. He gave up on his “childhood image of Jesus as one who was God...still held by some in the church.” To such a confession Borg unabashedly says, “‘No, the pre-Easter Jesus was not God’” (37), though he notes that “this denial [of Jesus’ divinity] does not preclude affirming that Jesus was an epiphany or disclosure of God” (44). For his interpretation of Jesus, Borg turns to the category of spirit person provided by cultural anthropology. As a spirit person Jesus is “one of those persons in human history to whom the Spirit was an experiential reality...to whom the sacred is an experiential reality” (32). Furthermore, as a spirit person Jesus is a “mediator of the sacred...[one of the] funnels or conduits for the power or wisdom of God to enter into this world” (33). As such, Jesus is “a

¹¹Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994). Page numbers cited in the text refer to this volume.

particular instance of a type of religious personality known cross-culturally" (37). Borg acknowledges that such a Jesus "subtracts from the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian tradition" but doing so, in Borg's judgment, adds to the credibility of both Jesus and Christian tradition (37). Is diminished uniqueness the price of credibility? Does genericizing Jesus offer the world—even the world of modernity—news good enough to be worth the bother of being found credible and the bother of going out of one's way to relate to others, much less risking one's life to do so?¹² Borg's Jesus stands in the shadow cast by the basic logic of experiential monotheism and discloses the damage and destructiveness that experiential monotheism exacts on the apostolic imagination.

II. RETRIEVING THE TRINITY

Today's retrieval of trinitarian thinking began in Protestantism with Karl Barth and in Roman Catholicism with Karl Rahner.¹³ They aimed to recover the doctrine of the Trinity as the only effective response to the deterioration of Christian theology, life, and practice in the directions of moral and experiential monotheism. They undertook their retrieval by refining the western paradigm of trinitarian thinking as it was forged by St. Augustine.

Augustine commenced his reflections on the Christian doctrine of God by giving priority to the oneness of God, only subsequently considering what threeness would mean in reference to oneness.¹⁴ This direction in the logic of the doctrine of God, definitively set forth through Augustine's powerful Christian Platonic thought, has affinities to the christological thought embodied already in the mid-second-century, so-called *Second Letter of Clement* 1:1: "We must think about Jesus Christ as we do about God." This line of theological logic appeared to the west to be the best antidote against the return of the Arian heresy, which portrayed the Son as merely the firstborn of the one God's creatures. However, the Augustinian trajectory, followed and solidified by Thomas Aquinas, subtly but significantly shared in the basic theological logic that was followed by Sabellius and others known as modalists.¹⁵

Sabellius's monistic logic of God begins with the divine monad, the One God, who subsequently appears as Father, as Son, as Spirit. The three only come into being functionally in order *to reveal* to humans the divine monad in the form of the Father as creator, the Son as redeemer, and the Spirit as sanctifier or sus-

¹²See Jürgen Moltmann's trenchant critique of what he calls "modern Protestant Jesuology" in *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1974) 96-98.

¹³See Ted Peters's helpful recap of this twentieth-century retrieval of trinitarian thinking and of various contemporary theologians: *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

¹⁴Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 45 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1963). For the best and most comprehensive historical overview of the history of the doctrine of the trinity available in English, see Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972).

¹⁵Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 16-20, 134-137; see Wolfhart Pannenberg's more exhaustive analysis in *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 280-299.

tainer. But in the history of religions, what deity worth its salt doesn't function as creator, redeemer, and sustainer? While Augustine and Aquinas avoid modalism in the severe sense, they nevertheless set in motion a modalistic tendency and piety that remains deeply inscribed in western Christian theology, life, and practice.

Barth and Rahner, each in his own way, take up this single-subject logic of God, as it was recovered in the German idealism of Georg Hegel, in an attempt to counter the modern trends set in motion by moral and experiential monotheisms. What Barth and Rahner failed to see with sufficient clarity is that moral and experiential monotheisms are the logical outcome of the very western pattern of the doctrine of God with which they commenced. Unintentionally, they handed over "a late triumph to the Sabellian modalism which the early church condemned."¹⁶ Might not their failure to recognize this situation be due to the still pervasive situation of christendom in their place and time? With the collapse of western christendom and the vigor of religious pluralism in North America, the playing out of the historic western logic of God in moral and experiential monotheisms is arriving like a thief in the night, robbing Christianity altogether of missional imagination, of the apostolic difference.

III. REVISIONING THE TRINITY TODAY

Eastern Orthodoxy has long been wary of the west's modalistic tendencies. Several of the new trinitarians are exploring a logic for the Christian doctrine of God more in accord with the eastern pattern set forth by Athanasius and the Cappadocian theologians, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. According to this line of inquiry theological reflection begins with the history of the relationships of the three persons as narrated in the biblical witness and subsequently attends to what these relationships in communion mean for the oneness of God.¹⁷ At the core of this logic of the doctrine of God lies the narrated history of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Son. With this line of theological reflection in mind one attends hermeneutically to an underlying question woven in various ways throughout much of this narrated history: What difference does Jesus make for the very being and identity of God?¹⁸ Does not this hermeneutical line of inquiry also fundamentally animate Martin Luther's own

¹⁶Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 139.

¹⁷Along with Moltmann and Pannenberg, I include among the major new trinitarians Robert Jensen, Eberhard Jüngel, John Zizioulas, Catherine LaCugna, and Ted Peters—notwithstanding the significant differences among them. While I am convinced that this aspect of the eastern logic of the doctrine of God is fundamentally true to scripture, a basic flaw still persists in the eastern pattern, i.e., a patriarchal monarchy of the Father and corresponding subordinationism of Jesus the Son. For such a critique, which lies beyond the confines of this inquiry, see Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* I:319-325, and Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 240-241.

¹⁸See my colleague David Fredrickson's important exegetical investigation of this trinitarian hermeneutical line of inquiry in "What Difference Does Jesus Make for God?" *dialog* 37 (1998) 104-110. Pannenberg has undertaken the most thorough investigation of the nature and implications of the reciprocal dependence of the Father and the Son, and especially of the notion, largely undeveloped in the entire history of trinitarian theology, of the Father's dependence on the Son mediated in the history of Jesus. The underdevelopment of the reciprocity of the persons discloses "a defect which plagues the trinitarian

theology of the cross as he sought to counter the theology of glory resulting from the western logic of God as presented by Thomas Aquinas and the Thomistic updaters of the *via moderna*?

Time and again Luther articulates a key aspect of the redemptive dynamic of the theology of the cross through “the joyous exchange” between Jesus and sinners:

Learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.”¹⁹

Along with the bearing and bequeathing in this scandalous friendship of Jesus the Son Luther stresses a second aspect of the redemptive dynamic of the theology of the cross, an aspect often overlooked by Luther’s interpreters: “how He [Jesus our Friend] made the Father our Friend” (*LW* 24:252). In a famous query Luther probes St. Paul (Gal 1:3) regarding the significance of the reciprocal dependence of the trinitarian persons for the very constitution and identity of the crucified God. “But why,” inquires Luther, “does the apostle add ‘and from our Lord Jesus Christ’? Did it not suffice to say [Grace to you and peace] from God the Father? Why does he link Jesus Christ with the Father?” (*LW* 26:28). Luther’s inquiry throughout his *Lectures on Galatians* represents an extended argument with the theo-logic of the majestic monotheisms of the pope and the sectarians as well as of Islam and Judaism, because these monotheisms leave humanity in an “intolerable” situation (*LW* 26:28-29; also 41:101ff.).

By bodily bearing with sinners the abandonment of God, Jesus the Son extends to his Father the cruciform character of his scandalous friendship and bodily communion with sinners. The Father’s sending of the Spirit to resurrect the crucified Son testifies to and, indeed, constitutes the Father’s favorable reception of and agreement with the Crucified’s character as the Father’s own identity. In this reciprocal dependence of the Father and the Son through the Spirit, the crucified God is the one and only trustworthy God. Fields are ripe for such news, and they are in our back yard. ⊕

theological language of both East and West, namely, that of seeing the relations among Father, Son, and Spirit exclusively as relations of origin” (*Systematic Theology* 1:308-319). Moltmann employs the notion of “perichoresis” in order to describe this reciprocity of persons (*Trinity and Kingdom*, 174-176). Both Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel bring the crucifixion itself into the very midst of divine identity more fully than does Pannenberg (Jüngel, “The Truth of Life,” in *Creation, Christ and Culture*, ed. R. W. A. McKinney [Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1976]). In this investigation I have dealt primarily with the relationality and not the eschatological temporality of the Trinity. In a future inquiry I hope to bind both dimensions with the category of “promise.”

¹⁹Martin Luther, *Letter to George Spenlein*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 48 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 12 (hereafter *LW*). Other later and more famous accounts of “the joyous exchange” occur in *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (*LW* 31:293-306) and *The Freedom of a Christian* (*LW* 31:327-377). The phrase, “the joyous exchange”—in German *der fröhliche Wechsel*—appears in the German language version of *The Freedom of a Christian*. Because the translation of this treatise in the American Edition was made from Luther’s Latin original, the precise phrase “joyous exchange” does not appear, though the dynamic does. The phrase does appear as “happy exchange” in Bertram Lee Woolf’s translation of Luther’s German version of the treatise (*Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, vol. 1 [London: Lutterworth, 1952] 363). Also noteworthy are *Lectures on Galatians*, particularly Gal 2:20 and 3:13 (*LW* 26:172-179, 276-288).