



The Trinity and Congregational Planning: Between Historical Minimum and Eschatological Maximum

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IN THIS ARTICLE, I WANT TO JOIN TOGETHER SEVERAL DIFFERENT WAYS OF SPEAKING of God and the church.¹ I want to join theoretical theology and social scientific description: in particular, the highly abstract conversation regarding the doctrine of the Trinity—the church’s best discernment of the nature and mission of God—and that doctrine’s relationship to the doctrine of the church, on the one hand, and the results of ethnographic research² in contemporary congregations

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²In particular our work at Church Innovations Institute, Saint Paul, Minnesota, has followed the work of Marion Lundy Dobbert, *Ethnographic Research: Theory and Application for Modern Schools and Societies* (New York: Praeger, 1982), and J. P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979).

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Most members of congregations are inattentive to both the past and the future of their congregation. They live in a very present now. An adequate doctrine of the Trinity can liberate congregations from this imprisonment in the present; it will call for visioning and planning in congregational life.

of mainline Protestant denominations in the United States, on the other.³ In the long run, my desire is to create a mutually insightful and corrective conversation between those whose vocation is located in two different centers of theological education: the seminary and the congregation.⁴ I believe the Christian imagination can provide a crucial link between these two discourses.

I. IMAGINATION AND PRACTICE

The Christian imagination is intimately tied to the self-perception of the congregation. The self-perception of a congregation profoundly affects the behavior of the congregation and, hence, its destiny.⁵ For example, elsewhere I have argued that, when congregations perceive themselves as a family and their building as the home of their family, they are likely to exclude those whom they would not welcome into their private and intimate space.⁶ The congregation's self-perception as a family both prevents the congregation from supporting persons in safe and effective families and households⁷ and diminishes the primal public character of the congregation.⁸

One way to affect a congregation's behavior and destiny, then, is to affect its self-perception. Changing the self-perception is primarily a matter of educating the members in a shared Christian imagination.⁹

³I use the term mainline denominations to refer generally to Disciples of Christ, Northern Baptist, Reformed, Episcopalians, United Church of Christ, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans. Cf. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney in *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University, 1987).

⁴In the minds of many the congregation is not imagined as a center of theological education; however, historically it has been in several senses the critical center of theological education. More and more in the United States, the future of the Christian witness depends upon certain teaching congregations, who are *de facto* producing some of the innovative leadership for the next century. I in no way wish to suggest that seminary and congregation are the only centers of theological education, I merely take these two sociological locations as strategically important.

⁵Many congregational scholars note the relationship between a congregation's self-perception and its behavior. Kennon Callahan notes it as a critical part of his congregational long-range planning materials, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978); cf. also Callahan, *The Planning Workbook* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987). James Hopewell, in his seminal work, ties narrative analysis to the questions of self-perception and behavior, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); see also Carl S. Dudley and Sally A. Johnson, *Energizing the Congregation: Images That Shape Your Church's Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

⁶Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 29.

⁷The irony of the congregation as "family home" is that it offers "mock intimacy" rather than assisting individuals to participate in healthy, safe, intimate space; cf. Parker Palmer, *Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁸For an excellent overview of recent sociological and historical analysis of the congregation as public space, read Martin E. Marty, "Public and Private: Congregation as Meeting Place," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James Wind and James Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 133-166.

⁹For an excellent example of how congregations educate Christian imaginations through handing down tradition, employing as its philosophical frame the work of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), see Dorothy C. Bass, *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 169-191.

If this shared Christian imagination of the congregation is to be true, faithful, and effective, its content must grow out of the nature and mission of God. Attending to the nature and mission of God is a matter of spiritual discernment and critical theological reflection.¹⁰ Such spiritual discernment and critical theological reflection begin by listening. Listening deeply¹¹ to the word of God in scriptures, tradition, culture, society, and in the experience of the faithful, both personal and communal, sustains a conversation that leads to reinforcing present behavior or proposing new behavior.¹² Therefore, in a very practical and concrete sense, spiritual discernment and theological reflection, understood together, are critical to the faithful and effective life of the congregation.

The Christian imagination is the critical link between spiritual discernment/theological reflection and the practical faithfulness and effectiveness of the congregation and hence the life of the Christian.¹³ The shared Christian imagination is formed most consistently in the perduring activities of word and sacrament ministry. Forming the shared Christian imagination is a core activity of effective leadership of the congregation.

One of the perduring activities that grows out of the nature and mission of God is congregational visioning and planning.¹⁴ Church Innovations Institute over the past years has developed a visioning-for-acting training that understands visioning as an act of the Christian imagination. We define a vision for mission as one or two paragraphs that describe

the picture in our minds of a preferred future, given by God, based on an accurate understanding of God, ourselves, and our circumstances. Since it is to be mission focused, it describes activities over the next three to five years of members of the congregation carried on with persons who are not now members of

¹⁰This approach is to supplement the fruitful congregational studies movement which, strangely enough, is not known for integrating theological reflection into its work; indeed, it appears to be one more example of how a-theological theological education is. See David Kelsey, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and his *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 32. The formulation "spiritual discernment and critical theological reflection" is a way of reintegrating two moments of theology variously named in the Christian tradition. See Agnes Cunningham, S.S.C.M., and John Weiborg, *Prayer and Life in the Spirit* (Chicago: North Park Theological Seminary, 1993), for an attempt to integrate these moments in an ecumenical seminary situation.

¹¹Church Innovations Institute has developed a process of deep listening out of seven years of research in congregations who have successfully wrestled with difficult moral issues. Patricia Taylor Ellison describes this process both in her dissertation and in a forthcoming anthology.

¹²This formulation draws upon the work of Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), and its practical development by James and Evelyn Whitehead, *Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995). In fairness to both of these works, I have made major reconstructions of these categories through a more social and phenomenological approach to the basic philosophical categories of Lonergan.

¹³For background in the relationship between the imagination and the congregation and the life of the Christian, read the seminal work by Ray Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character* (New York: Paulist, 1981), and Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

¹⁴See Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1997) 326-327, on the critical importance of vision and planning.

any Christian congregation. These activities must grow out of the core values of the congregation and serve the perceived and depth needs of unchurched members of the community in terms that these persons being served experience these activities as adding value to their lives. In short, it's a description of members of the congregation coring and caring; coring to the center of their own faith and caring out of that center for those unchurched others in their lives.¹⁵

At the same time we have found that a vision for mission without a plan of action is but a dream and changes nothing, no matter how well intended. We have supplemented the visioning process with a long-range planning process. This process understands a long-range plan to be

a single page per year document that describes three to five focus areas for expanding existing mission of the congregation. The document distributes the activities that are designed to achieve the Vision for Mission over a three to five year period of time. Such a plan begins by asking, if this Vision for Mission is what we want to be reality five years from now, what must we do in four, three, two, one year from now; what must we do six months and six weeks from now to achieve it?¹⁶

At first this may seem like the imposition of very quotidian, even secular, business-like activity upon the life of the congregation—or, at best, practical tools for accomplishing the ongoing administration of the business life of the congregation—but hardly an activity that grows out of spiritual discernment and critical theological reflection on the nature and mission of God. Part of the burden of this essay is to sketch an outline of an argument that links the doctrine of the Trinity (i.e., the church's best discernment of the nature and mission of God) and visioning and planning.

II. IMPRISONED IN THE PRESENT

The impetus to think about this unlikely connection between Trinity and congregational planning comes from recent research at Church Innovations Institute.¹⁷ My colleagues and I have found that the shared Christian imagination of most congregations has very little past and almost no future. They are imprisoned in a very present now. Even when invited to imagine their congregation just three to five years into the future, they are apt either to describe the present congregation or project a utopian set of hopes that are unlinked with the present. Or, when invited to tell stories from the congregation's past, they are able at best—if they grew up in the congregation—to remember events at the time of their confirmation or slightly before. Any sense of passing on a living memory from previous generations is extremely rare. Even rarer is a sense for the deeper memories of the

¹⁵Patrick R. Keifert et al., *The Partnership for Congregational Renewal Notebook, Glossary*, 2d ed. (Saint Paul, MN: Church Innovations, 1997).

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Summary and analysis of this research is forthcoming in two books, an anthology written by the members of the Institute's Congregational Studies Research Team and a monograph by myself. The data base is over a thousand interviews in congregations throughout the United States and Canada gathered through a thick-description, applied ethnography method.

tradition of the congregation: the purpose and energies that founded the congregation, the worship habits of their tradition. In short, in the shared Christian imagination of most congregations there is a very, very short conscious memory.

We distinguish conscious memory from embodied memory, those perduring habits and beliefs that are profoundly tied to the past but not conscious to the membership. Time and time again, we have discovered patterns of past conflict of which contemporary members are not aware but which set the patterns of contemporary conflict. In one congregation, the past five pastors (over a period of forty plus years) have all resigned or sought calls for unknown or “personal reasons.” Upon investigation we found that all five had been removed from office by the same secret process, involving usually two or three lay male leaders. These male leaders over this forty plus years came from the same three households in the very large suburban congregation. Most leaders in the congregation, including staff, were unaware of this pattern. This amnesia that enables enduring patterns to go unexamined can severely harm the mission of the congregation. The inability to imagine their future is even more harmful.

Many pastors, especially those fresh from seminary, notice this amnesia and imprisonment to the now. Through their seminary courses, especially in church history and Bible, they have experienced an intense therapeutic liberation from the same imprisonment and are anxious to administer the same therapeutic liberation. Often, in recent decades, the most prominent place they assert their role as liberator is in worship. Especially since the introduction of the so-called ecumenical consensus in liturgical scholarship following Vatican Council II, many parishes have experienced an imposition of the “tradition” as a therapy for their amnesia and as liberation from their imprisonment to the present.

In too many cases, congregations have experienced this liberation as an intensification of their imprisonment, since the introduction of the liberation was by way of clever coercion rather than through consensus and connection with their living tradition.¹⁸ While surely the so-called ecumenical consensus in liturgical scholarship reflects a tradition, most Protestant congregations experience its form as quite discontinuous with the living tradition of the congregation over the past several hundred years! The result for the congregation is a high sense of being in the now, even though the desire of the liturgical renewal is to provide access to roots. The introduction of such a new form of worship was accepted more by those interested in newness than those seeking a past.¹⁹

Be that as it may, even if the congregation gains some deeper roots than the memory of its oldest member, another critical dimension of the life of the congregation has been lost: its future. The loss of the future of the congregation has practical and doctrinal significance. Without a future within the imagination of the congregation, the future is likely to be a result of a very passive or reactive behav-

¹⁸Regarding this coercive introduction and how it depends upon a romantic authoritarianism, see Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, chapter 3.

¹⁹It is no surprise, then, that twenty years later, the itch for newness needs to be fed again and again.

ior. In a changing environment, passive or reactive behavior can be deadly.²⁰ Without a future within the imagination of the congregation, the congregation profoundly reduces its sense of the truth of the gospel and the life of God. And, since the logic²¹ of any ecclesiology is grounded neither in tradition nor novelty but in God, our sense of the church grows out of our life in God, a life with a past, present, and future. Our best sense of this life in God is gathered in our doctrine of the Trinity; therefore, we need to consider how the logic of our doctrine of the Trinity reflects this life within time, a life with a past, present, and future.

III. TRINITY AND TIME

Trinitarian logic follows from the biblical narrative.²² Although the scriptures do not teach a doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the Trinity follows from the way the Bible narrates who God is and what the mission of God is. This narrative structure is inevitably historical and thus temporal. Out of this temporal narration comes a “three-point identification of the gospel’s God.”²³ As Robert Jenson notes, “we must point with all three of time’s arrows in order to point out this God: to the Father as Given, to the Lord Jesus as the present possibility of God’s reality for us, and to the Spirit as the outcome of Jesus’ work....The past, present, and future of all that is, is doubtless a peculiar sort of fact, but it is also the most inescapable.”²⁴

Although one literally cannot escape existence in past, present, and future, the church has consistently tried to escape it. Through major periods of its history, the church has tried to mitigate this very temporal nature of God through metaphysical claims of God’s being as timeless. Originally middle- and neoplatonism were drawn upon to make this escape. More recently, this escape into timelessness has drawn on existentialism’s move to privatized identity, authenticity, and meaning, away from truth and history. Modern theologies grounded in such existentialist moves accommodate themselves very nicely to the politics of identity, the ethics of authenticity, and the escape into meaning and meaningfulness. They foster and abet the imprisonment in the very present now, not as a discrete mo-

²⁰Ammerman, *Congregation & Community*, 346-370. Ammerman states conclusions regarding the general passive patterns of most mainline Protestant congregations and the ecology of death that comes with this passive pattern. She also documents in this outstanding study the importance of planning for congregations that are able to move to an effective proactive pattern.

²¹Here the term “logic” means the permutations and combinations allowed by Christian grammar to construct appropriate Christian sentences and practices.

²²For too long the doctrine of the Trinity has been relegated to esoteric discourse. It had lost its necessary connection to the biblical narrative and become imprisoned in accommodations to platonic constructions of truth and metaphysics. In more recent years a delightful renaissance of the doctrine has returned trinitarian discourse to portions of the church. Within that renewed trinitarian discourse are those who have joined the insights of biblical scholarship, especially attention to the narrative quality of the biblical text, with certain revised theories of truth and notions of history.

²³Robert W. Jenson, “The Triune God,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984) 101.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 101-102.

ment but as all-encompassing experience.²⁵ It is no surprise congregations fall prey to this same desire to escape the temporal and end up imprisoned in the present.

IV. QUESTIONS AND LIMITS

The nature and mission of God does not support this escape from the temporal. However, before moving too quickly from the nature and mission of God to the nature and mission of the church, some questions and limits to this line of reasoning need to be mentioned, if not fully resolved. We could proceed by examining the formal metaphysical questions often addressed within the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, the question of the one and the many could be an entrance point for reflecting on the nature and mission of God and its analogy to the nature and mission of the church. However, such a formal argument ignores the historical and soteriological

correspondence between the trinitarian and ecclesial relationships. Christians relate the trinitarian nature of God to the church because the means by which God chooses to save involves a unity within the life of the Trinity through the life of the church, especially the ministry of word and sacraments. In short, the “ontological” is soteriologically grounded.²⁶

Further, we have argued that this soteriologically grounded ontology of the church is profoundly eschatological; that is, it is a being in communion within the history of God that is drawn into a promised future, coherent with, but not fully available to us, in the fate and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

In addition to following the insight of the early Greek theologians of the soteriologically grounded ontological relationship between the Trinity and the church, we also follow the insights of the reformers when they underline the patristic theme of the hiddenness of God,²⁷ even in the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified and Resurrected One. We reject, however, those enlightenment figures who presume that the “hiddenness of God” negates any possible analogy between anthropology and theology.²⁸ With the early church and the reformers we hold that God’s self-revelation in a down-to-earth manner makes possible defensible analogies between trinitarian ideas and ecclesiological ideas. Doing so requires our not turning all anthropology into theology or all theology into anthropology.

Miroslav Volf, reflecting on these same matters, notes three mediations of such analogical reasoning. The first is the mediation between the self-revelation of God and the church. Person and community in God are only analogous to person and community in the church. We dare not collapse God into the church, there-

²⁵Richard Sennett, *Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage, 1976).

²⁶Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 195.

²⁷B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestant and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982).

²⁸E.g., Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris, 1979) 65, 67.

fore, deifying it or reducing the divine character of God. The second is the mediation between any given doctrine of the Trinity and ecclesiology. To speak of God is to speak in, with, and under our thoughts of God, since God is so mediated to us. The third mediation is between the historical and the eschatological existence of Christians.

The correspondence of ecclesial to trinitarian communion is always lived on the path between baptism, which places human beings into communion with the triune God, and the eschatological new creation in which this communion is completed. Here the correspondence acquires an inner dynamic, moving between the historical minimum and the eschatological maximum.²⁹

V. HISTORICAL MINIMUM AND ESCHATOLOGICAL MAXIMUM

Volf develops this dynamic between the historical minimum and the eschatological maximum through the image of the sojourning church. Any attempt to collapse ecclesiology either into the historical minimum or the eschatological maximum loses this critical sense of a sojourning church³⁰ caught in the dynamic life of the triune God's movement in, with, and under time. As Volf summarizes, "the ecclesologically relevant question is how the church is to correspond to the Trinity *within history*."³¹

For the purposes of our topic, the Trinity and congregational planning, this issue has immediate implications. Congregations that understand faithfulness as analogies only to the present community of the faithful fail to be faithful, since they ignore the being of the church in a continuum through time, both past and future. When we begin to draw analogies to the past regarding the faithfulness of the present we only attend to faithfulness by one-third. Faithfulness to the future also is required. For each congregation participates in the one true church only eschatologically, only out of the anticipation of their participation in the eschatological gathering of the whole people of God. Therefore, analogies to the past or present are insufficient for faithfulness. When the congregation carries on ministry only on the basis of its past and present, it is unfaithful to the nature of the church. Planning with those persons in the community whom God is calling the congregation to serve in mission is critical to faithfulness. Congregations who do not discern whom God is calling them to serve, in anticipation of their becoming a part of the whole people of God, not only fail in effectiveness but faithfulness. Congregations who do not draw analogies for their present life as congregation on the basis of those who do not yet belong to Christian community, but whom the congregation believes God is calling to belong, do not take seriously the eschatological character of the church.

At a bare minimum, this implies taking the culture and society of those not yet within the Christian community as seriously as we do those already well included within the present and the past. It means that congregations will listen to

²⁹Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 195.

³⁰It is important to realize that the sojourning church reflects analogically the sojourning God.

³¹Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 200.

the ways God is calling them to the mission of God. They will then shape their basic congregational practices to support these callings, just as they serve the callings of the past and the present. Planning with those who are yet to become a part of the community of the faithful, but whom the congregation believes God is calling them to serve in mission, is essential to faithful congregational life. Faithfulness, not just effectiveness, implies visioning, planning, and acting towards that shared sense of God's preferred future for the congregation.³² ⊕

³²Planning that simply reflects focus groups or even sophisticated survey methodologies but fails to incorporate spiritual discernment is bound to be unfaithful and ineffective. It fails to attend to the chief energy for effective mission and ministry: the Holy Spirit. Many congregations who borrow planning tools from secular sources find themselves with fine planning documents, but without either the sense of vision or the political will to accomplish them, since they have failed to engage in spiritual discernment.