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Rethinking Denominations and Denominationalism in Light of a Missional Ecclesiology

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A new organizational expression of the church came into existence in the American colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the denominational, organizational church. This new type of church was marked primarily by its organizational character. Its identity was quite different from that of the established churches and sects in the European context from which the early immigrants came. This article examines the core identity of the denominational, organizational church and contrasts this identity with the recent emphasis in ecclesiology introduced by the missional church conversation.

Congregations of established churches understand themselves to be the institutional expression in that location of God's presence on earth; that is, they represent the one, true church. While they have an organizational makeup, the key to their legitimacy is their claim to represent the primary horizon of God's activity in the world.[1] The problems associated with this understanding became painfully evi-

The denominational church had a functional self-understanding, established to do something on behalf of God in the world. The missional church understands itself to be missionary by nature—called, equipped, and sent into the world by the Holy Spirit to participate fully in God's mission.

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[1] An example of this perspective is found in chapter 25, section 2 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), *Of the Church*: "The visible church...is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ." This interpretation of Jesus' announcement of the kingdom (see footnote references in the confession to this section) make the visible church and God's kingdom on earth the same entity.

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dent in the wars of religion that raged throughout Europe from the late 1500s into the early 1600s. The eventual political solution—"whose realm, his religion" —ended these hostilities, but left unresolved the basic identity of the established church.[2] This is reflected in the continued efforts most established churches made in persecuting other expressions of the church, which they labeled as *sects* and which they viewed as illegitimate.[3]

Immigrants from the European state churches and from the sects persecuted by them began to settle after 1600 in the colonies of what became the United States. They soon discovered that a different core identity was required to give them legitimacy as church. An alternative conception came into existence, namely, an organizational self-understanding, here referred to as the *denominational, organizational church*. By the mid- to late 1700s, this became the normative understanding of the newly forming denominations and their congregations in the colonies.

FORMATION OF THE DENOMINATIONAL, ORGANIZATIONAL CHURCH

A basic premise of this article is that the denominational, organizational church finds its primary identity in its organizational self-understanding. This organizational self-understanding results in thinking about the church primarily in *functional* terms, where the church is responsible to do something on behalf of God in the world. The formation of the denominational, organizational church evolved over time with five distinct phases being observable during the past 350 years.[4]

The Colonial Experience, 1600s–1780s

The formation of the American colonies was the result of diverse interests. In relation to the concerns of this article, many of the more radical sectarian groups in Europe immigrated to the colonies to secure their religious freedom. Some of these groups, such as the Puritans in the New England colonies, attempted to set up their own version of what might be identified as a type of state church, what some have inappropriately labeled a theocracy.[5] But dissenting groups within these colonies, such as the Baptists in Rhode Island, soon challenged this approach. While the Congregationalists (former Puritans) created an established church in the New England colonies, the seeds of religious diversity in these areas were planted and began taking root by the early 1700s.[6]

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[2] The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 established this principle (*cuius regio, eius religio*), but it was not until the end of the thirty years of religious wars and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that this principle became the accepted practice. See Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 109–113.

[3] Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2 (1912; reprint, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 461–494, 671–673, 691–694.

[4] These five phases are introduced as a framework for understanding denominations in Russell E. Richey's article "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 77–90.

[5] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 146–150.

[6] John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004) 47–48.

Immigrants to the colonies included persons who were members of the state churches of Europe, especially English Anglicans, but also Scottish Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, and German and Scandinavian Lutherans. Roman Catholic immigrants settled in some of the colonies, especially Maryland. Although the Anglicans established a territorial, parish-church system in most of the southern colonies, by the early 1700s these areas were experiencing the reality of religious diversity.[7]

This shared experience of religious diversity throughout the colonies required a new way to conceive of the church. The old formula of a state church with an establishment identity was obsolete almost from the beginning, although vestiges of it lingered into the late 1700s.[8] A new identity was required, and it was in the middle colonies that this new identity was first formulated.[9]

> ***"the denominational, organizational church resulted from the coalescence of two influences—free-church ecclesiology and voluntary association"***

The formation of this new identity, here identified as the *denominational, organizational church with an organizational self-understanding*, resulted primarily from the coalescence of two influences. One influence was the development within the colonies of free-church ecclesiology. This ecclesiology had emerged over against the European state churches among the Anabaptists, who conceived of the church primarily as a gathered social community who governed their own affairs.[10]

A second influence that contributed to the formation of the denominational, organizational church was the development of the *voluntary association*, an organizational form based largely on the principles of social contract theory.[11] By the early 1800s, de Tocqueville would identity this type of organization as one of the more unique features of the emerging American society.[12] The rich fabric of voluntary associations within the colonies included many that were secular in origin and others that were religious. This set of organizational structures reflected the democratic principles being nurtured in the colonies and fit well into the logic of free-church ecclesiology. The nature of the voluntary organization deeply impacted the genetic code of the organizational self-understanding of the emerging denominational, organizational church.[13] Regardless of their formal ecclesiologies and polities, most congregations of the emerging denominations practiced some version of a functional understanding of the church as a voluntary organization.

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[7] Ibid., 51–52; and Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 184–199.

[8] Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 151–165.

[9] Corrigan and Hudson, *Religion in America*, 62–63; and Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 200–213.

[10] See, for example, the Dordrecht Confession, adopted by the Mennonites in 1632, especially Article 8, "Of the Church of Christ."

[11] Corrigan and Hudson, *Religion in America*, 52, 162–165.

[12] As quoted by Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 386, from Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835).

[13] William W. Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (1930; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 155–171.

The call for independence and the subsequent Revolutionary War cemented the formation of denominations. The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights in 1789 made provision for the legal separation of church and state. No church would be established. Every church would be protected to practice religious freedom. The organizing principle of denominationalism was affirmed with this decision. Within the last two decades of the 1700s, representatives of numerous church bodies in the newly formed United States met to form their own national organizations.[14]

The Formation of National Denominations, 1790–1870

The newly formed denominations were unique. As noted by church historian Martin Marty, they represented a turning point in the history of the church, one that departed from the previous 1400 years of the church's self-understanding.[15] The development was largely the pragmatic result of a variety of circumstances and events. Not surprisingly, although some historical precedents were available, it was usually rationalized biblically and theologically after the fact, if at all.[16] By 1800, most of the newly formed denominations had created assembly structures at three levels—a national assembly, regional judicatories, and local congregations.

> ***"by the 1830s, what had earlier been committees or boards made up of active pastors and lay leaders became formal, denominational agencies at the national level with permanent staffs"***

The inherent logic of a denomination is that it is organized to do something, normally doing something on behalf of God in the world. It is essentially functional in its identity and purpose. This follows the logic of organizational sociology.[17] An organization when it is formed must seek to accomplish some goal. Building on the foundations of free-church ecclesiology, denominations and their congregations were formed around a functional and organizational rationale.

Inspired largely in the early 1800s by the revivals of the second awakening on the frontier, different denominations developed a variety of methods to carry out their functional purpose of bringing the church to these new regions. Methodologies such as camp meetings, anxious benches, itinerant preachers, and Sunday Schools became the order of the day.[18] This expanding work on the frontier re-

[14] Corrigan and Hudson, *Religion in America*, 138–146, illustrates how this was true for the Methodists in 1784, the Anglicans in 1785, and the Presbyterians in 1789.

[15] Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial, 1970) 67–68.

[16] Russell E. Richey, ed., *Denominationalism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977) 19–21.

[17] Mary Jo Hatch, *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 119–122.

[18] See Marty, *Righteous Empire*, 68; Corrigan and Hudson, *Religion in America*, 150–157; and Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 429–454.

quired new organizational structures at the national level. By the 1830s, what had earlier been committees or boards made up of active pastors and lay leaders became formal, denominational agencies at the national level with permanent staffs.[19] The purpose of such agencies was to plan for and coordinate the expanding denominational ministries.

By the mid- to late 1800s, the modern denominational, organizational church had become the norm for church life in the United States. Congregations of a particular denomination usually differentiated themselves from others in terms of theological and confessional distinctives. These distinctives were related to the different polities of the Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal forms of church government. But underneath these theological, confessional, and polity differences lay a common genetic code. The denominational, organizational church with its organizational self-understanding was now the common reality for most denominations—at the national, regional, and local levels, and throughout their boards and agencies.

The Churchly Denomination, 1870–1920

Coming out of the Civil War, most denominations developed a more elaborate infrastructure as the frontier filled in and as cities began to grow. By the latter part of the 1800s, another phase in the development of the denominational, organizational church became discernible. Most churches during this time took on a more programmatic approach to their ministries, such as developing standardized curriculums for their Sunday Schools[20] and organizing youth ministry patterned after the ministry of Christian Endeavor.[21] In effect, a total denominational church program was being put into place that would deal with members from cradle to grave.[22]

Also during this period increasing numbers of ministers were becoming seminary trained, leading to a growing professionalization of the clergy as well as the increased importance of seminaries within denominational church life. In the midst of these developments, denominations were becoming complex, organizational systems with multiple boards and agencies at the national level. Over time, these national-level structures began to find their counterparts at the regional level and, to some extent, at the local level, where organized committees tended to parallel the design of the national church. The churchly denomination was now a reality, and new approaches to governing it were required.[23]

The Corporate Denomination, 1920–1970

While the suggested date that divides the previous phase from this current phase is somewhat arbitrary, a discernible shift became evident in the first decades of the new century. The growing complexity of the churchly denomination required new ways of structuring and managing the church. The newly emerging field of organizational management provided the answer. Especially influential were the ideas of Frederick Taylor and what became known as scientific management.[24] This movement focused on bringing productivity and efficiency into the business organization. It did so by deskilling tasks, organizing similar work activities into functional units, and building coordination systems through the establishment of hierarchical bureaucracy.

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[19] See Smith in Richey, *Denominationalism*, 108–136.

[20] Corrigan and Hudson, *Religion in America*, 246–254; and Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 741–742.

[21] Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 858.

[22] Mullins and Richey, *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 82–84.

[23] Ibid., 84–87.

> ***"The increasingly rationalized world of modern bureaucracy began to become the norm for denominational church life. Boards and agencies at the national level increasingly adopted corporate forms of organization and management as the number of departments was expanded and the number of staff increased."***

This movement found its voice in the emerging world of complex churchly denominations through the work of Shailer Mathews, dean of the Chicago School of Divinity, who in 1912 published *Scientific Management in the Churches*. The focus was on treating the church as "something of a business establishment."[25] The increasingly rationalized world of modern bureaucracy began to become the norm for denominational church life. Boards and agencies at the national level increasingly adopted corporate forms of organization and management as the number of departments was expanded and the number of staff increased.

By the end of World War II, in the midst of the rapid growth of suburbanization, denominations were well positioned to wage the campaign of starting new congregations in cooperation with their judicatories. Thousands of denominational, organizational congregations were started. Their identity, based on an organizational self-understanding, was now coming to full expression as the good life of the American dream was packaged and commodified as the suburban ideal.[26] This life was an ideal to which millions aspired, but which was mostly realized by the emerging white middle class. The darker side of this suburban success was what Gibson Winter labeled in 1962 as the *suburban captivity*.[27]

It is interesting how rapidly the suburban success of this type of congregation, with its organizational self-understanding, imploded in the midst of the dramatic cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s. A whole range of movements define this transition,[28] but particularly important is the erosion in loyalty among the emerging generation toward institutions.[29] The boomer generation left the church in greater numbers than any previous generation and came back in fewer numbers. By the mid-1970s, the approach by denominations of starting new congregations as franchise models collapsed.[30] Standardized, denominational educational curriculums went into decline, and most were out of business by the 1980s. In the midst of these dramatic changes, the denominational, organizational church entered into yet another phase of development.

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[24] In the early decades of the twentieth century at least three streams emerged: scientific management by Frederick Taylor (1911), administrative management by Henri Fayol (1919), and bureaucracy by Max Weber (1924).

[25] As quoted by John Taylor Gatto at http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/5k.htm, from Shailer Mathews, *Scientific Management in the Churches*, published in 1912.

[26] Gatto, ibid.

[27] Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (New York: MacMillan, 1962).

The Regulatory Denomination, 1970 to Date

Denominations since the 1970s, especially mainline denominations, have struggled to maintain their viability. Revenue to national church offices is dramatically down, which in turn has led to the continued downsizing of national agencies and church-wide staff.[31] The median age of members of most mainline denominations now exceeds the national median age in many cases by 20+ years (55+ versus 35).[32] In the midst of these changes in the mainline denominations, some churches that are more conservative have shown growth, and a new movement of independent congregations is now rapidly expanding.[33]

Clearly we are in a period of transition in the life of the denominational, organizational church in the United States. From the 1960s through the 1990s, new movements emerged that tried to give direction in the midst of change. These include the church renewal movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, the church growth movement of the 1970s and early 1980s, and the church effectiveness movement of the late 1980s and 1990s.[34]

In the midst of these movements, a host of market-driven models of church, which some label as mission-driven, also came into existence (best illustrated by Willow Creek and Saddleback).[35] At the heart of these models is a theology of the Great Commission, where mission is understood primarily as something the church must do. This approach reinforces a functional view of the church within its organizational self-understanding.

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[28] For example, the civil rights movement, the youth movement/counterculture, the feminist movement, the ecological movement, the anti-war movement, etc.

[29] Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 48–57.

[30] Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Questions for Church Planters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 13–36.

[31] The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, newly formed in 1987, is a case study in continuing patterns of denominational downsizing at the national level as revenues to church-wide offices continue to decline. Most other mainline denominations follow a similar trend.

[32] Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, 152–155.

[33] Ibid., 148–151.

[34] Darrell Guder et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 72–73.

[35] Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 20–21.

Declining denominations have not been immune to these recent movements as they struggle to reinvent the logic of the denominational, organizational church. When denominational loyalty is lost, one of the options available is to turn to rules and procedures to seek compliance. Another option is reinventing the core identity. But the genetic code of the organizational self-understanding of the denominational, organizational church has yet to be sufficiently examined to allow for this. A functional approach to ecclesiology and polity still undergirds the basic identity of the denominational, organizational church.[36]

THE DENOMINATIONAL, ORGANIZATIONAL CHURCH VERSUS THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

During the last half of the twentieth century, a vibrant discussion took place regarding ecclesiology. Expressions of this discussion were evident in such developments as the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1947 from the earlier Faith and Order and Life and Work movements; the merger of the former International Missionary Council (IMC) into the WCC in 1961; Vatican II in the early 1960s; multiple church mergers in the United States throughout the 1960s; and a convergence in missiological circles around a mission theology related to the *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God. These various movements and discussions by century's end led to a fresh understanding of ecclesiology from a missiological perspective, which has come to be known as the *missional church*.[37]

The missional church conversation brings together two streams of understanding God's work in the world. First, God has a mission within all of creation—the *missio Dei*. Second, God brought redemption to bear on all of life within creation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This redemptive work of God through Christ is best understood in terms of its announcement and inauguration by Jesus as the presence of the kingdom of God in the world.

A missional understanding of God's work in the world from this perspective is framed as follows: God is seeking to bring God's kingdom, the redemptive reign of God in Christ, to bear on every dimension of life within all the world so that the larger creation purposes of God can be fulfilled—the *missio Dei*. This missional understanding has the world as its primary horizon, and the church is placed at the center of the activity in relating the kingdom of God to the *missio Dei*. The church's missional self-understanding is grounded in the work of the Spirit of God who calls the church into existence as a gathered community, equips and prepares it, and sends it into the world to participate fully in God's mission.

The missional church conversation has introduced a new dimension into the discussion of the identity of the church. In this conversation, mission is no longer understood primarily in functional terms as something the church does—as is the case for the denominational, organizational church—rather, it is understood in terms of something the church is, something related to its nature. This means that mission is not subsumed under ecclesiology, as in the established church where the church is seen as the primary location of God's activity in the world; rather, the missional church shifts the focus to the world as the horizon for understanding the work of God and the identity of the church. This understanding is expressed in terms of the relationship of the *missio Dei* (the larger mission of God) to the kingdom of God (the redemptive reign of God in Christ). The *organizational self-understanding* of the denominational, organizational church is replaced by a *missional self-understanding* for the missional church. To catch the fuller implications of this shift in perspective, one needs to understand the trinitarian foundations for the *missional church* or, more technically speaking, a *missiological ecclesiology*.[38]

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[36] See, for example, the recent book by Episcopal Bishop Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

[37] A helpful summary of the wide variety of missiological and ecclesiological influences during this period is available in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 368–510.

TRINITARIAN FOUNDATIONS FOR ECCLESIOLOGY

There have been significant developments in the past few decades in trinitarian studies regarding an understanding of mission. It should be noted that the concept of mission emerges in the colonial period of Catholic missions.[39] The twentieth century saw the unraveling of the massive colonial systems spawned by both Catholic and Protestant nations over the previous several centuries. In their embarrassment, many churches in the West that had come to be associated with these colonial systems began dropping words like *mission* or *missions* from their ecclesiastical vocabulary during the last half of the twentieth century.[40] However, during this same period, some significant developments took place in trinitarian studies that brought missiology into direct conversation with ecclesiology.

Growing out of the strong tradition of biblical theology that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, several important theological streams began to find their voice shortly after midcentury. One stream is represented in the work done by the former International Missionary Council (IMC). Building on a renewed emphasis on the role of the kingdom of God in relation to mission as expressed during the Whitby gathering in 1947, the Willengen meeting of the IMC in 1952 gave fresh expression to understanding mission. Although not formally used until after the conference when the summary documents were prepared, the concept of *missio Dei* was formulated in trinitarian terms as the foundation for engaging in mission.[41] The emphasis was placed on the mission of the Triune God in the world in relation to all three persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Subsequent

[38] Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, 31–44.

[39] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 302–304.

[40] Many previous doctoral programs in missiology have now changed their nomenclature to "intercultural studies" in order to move past the appearance of Western imperialism that is often associated with the word "mission."

[41] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389–393.

meetings of the IMC and its successor body, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) within the World Council of Churches (WCC), continued to draw on this significant reconceptualization of mission and the missionary nature of the church to formulate an understanding of the role of the church in the world.

During the 1960s, some mission scholars were writing about the missionary nature of the church on the Protestant side.[42] This focus, however, tended to remain more on the discussion of the church's mission in the world[43] rather than engaging in a fuller reconceptualization of ecclesiology. In contrast, the Catholic Church at Vatican II developed a more substantive understanding of ecclesiology in light of the missionary nature of the church.[44] But by the 1970s, the field of missiology was dominated by a conversation about the *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God. The level of convergence that emerged by the 1980s around these concepts among ecumenical, evangelical, and Roman Catholic missiologists is remarkable.[45]

Now, after fifty years of wrestling with these issues, their fuller implications for our understanding of the church have begun to come into play. The more intense light of trinitarian studies in regard to mission is being directed toward the field of ecclesiology. There are two streams within trinitarian studies that inform this conversation.

The Western emphasis on the economic Trinity. One stream is represented by the theological tradition usually associated with the Western church that tended to focus on the work of the three persons of the Godhead—the economic Trinity. An example of this can be found in the work of Lesslie Newbigin.[46] The focus is on the sending work of God—God's sending the Son into the world to accomplish redemption, and the Father and the Son's sending the Spirit into the world to create the church and lead it into participation in God's mission. This stream of trinitarian studies comes directly into the missional church conversation through the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network.[47]

The Eastern emphasis on perichoresis. The Eastern church, especially the Cappadocian Fathers, placed an emphasis on relationality within the Godhead. In this approach, the social reality of the Godhead becomes the theological foundation for understanding the work of God in the world. Created humanity reflects this social reality of God through the *imago Dei*, the image of God.[48] The church, through the redemptive work of Christ, is created by the Spirit as a social community that is missionary by nature, called and sent to participate in God's mission in the world.[49]

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[42] Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

[43] J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

[44] See especially the "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, Ad Gentes Divinitus," as available in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

[45] This convergence is helpfully discussed by James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987).

[46] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 19–64.

[47] For information, see www.gocn.org. Especially significant is the widely read volume edited by six missiologists in that network: *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrel Guder et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[48] Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 23–57.

These theological streams of trinitarian studies are contributing today to a renewed understanding of ecclesiology in relation to missiology. The fuller mission of God, understood as the *missio Dei*, is now being related to the redemptive work of God, as best expressed in the kingdom of God. This relationship provides the framework for understanding the nature, ministry, and organization of the missional church.[50]

> ***"the fuller mission of God, understood as the*** **missio Dei*****, is now being related to the redemptive work of God, as best expressed in the kingdom of God"***

The missional church lives between the times. It lives between the now and the not yet. The redemptive reign of God in Christ is already present, meaning that the power of God is fully manifested in the world through the gospel under the leading of the Spirit. But the redemptive reign of God is not yet fully complete, as the church looks toward the final consummation when God will remove the presence of sin and create the new heavens and new earth.

The kingdom of God, the redemptive reign of God in Christ, gives birth to the missional church through the work of the Spirit. Its nature, ministry, and organization are formed by the reality, power, and intent of the kingdom of God. Understanding the redemptive purposes of God that are embedded within the kingdom of God provides an understanding of the church as missionary by nature. The church participates in God's mission in the world because it can do no other. It was created for this purpose. This purpose is encoded within the very nature of the church.

In this approach, ecclesiology comes to expression and identity in relationship to God's mission in the world. The genetic code of the missional church makes it missionary in its very essence. Congregations are created by the Spirit and exist to engage the world missionally, bringing God's redemptive work in Christ to bear on every dimension of life. In being true to their missional identity, they can never function primarily as an end in themselves—a tendency of the self-understanding of the established church. In being true to their missional identity, they can never be satisfied with maintaining primarily a functional relationship to their contexts and communities. The missional church has a different genetic code. ⊕

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[49] A recent work that reflects this trinitarian approach is Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[50] This is the position argued by Van Gelder in *The Essence of the Church*.