

Trinity. Whereas in recent decades much scholarly thought about God has been drawn toward process theology or to some form of universalism, a small but healthy list of books has probed classic Trinitarianism, and some of this work has sketched the missiological implications.

Rejecting the speculative and frequently post-modern argumentation of the former, the latter approach anchors itself in what the Bible says about God's dealings with his covenantal people, and with the world, across the centuries, culminating in his gracious self-disclosure in Christ. While the biblical witness strenuously insists on the oneness of God, this one God is not *simplex*: the biblical material cries out for the kind of elaboration that issued in the doctrine of the Trinity. If the later elaborations (e.g., technical distinctions between "person" and "substance") should not be read back into the pages of Scripture, it does no harm to apply the term "Trinity" to what the Bible discloses of God, provided anachronism is avoided.

Even the Old Testament includes hints of the non-*simplex* nature of the one God (see, e.g., Erickson). But the biblical furnishing of the elements that called forth the doctrine of the Trinity comes to clearest focus in its treatment of Jesus the Messiah. Already in the Old Testament, one stream of prophetic expectation pictures Yahweh coming to rescue his people, while another stream pictures him sending his servant David. When these streams occasionally merge (e.g., Isa.

9; Ezek. 34), they do so in the matrix of anticipated mission.

Selected features of New Testament witness to God as triune become clear when their missiological bearing is articulated.

First, the kind of monotheism disclosed in the Bible is far more successful at portraying God as a loving God than any *simplex*-monotheism can ever be. A unitarian God may be thought to love his image-bearers in the space-time continuum. But it is very difficult to imagine how such a God could be said to be characteristically a God of love before the universe was created, unless the word "love" is stretched to the breaking point. Although little is said in the Bible regarding the intra-Triune relationships before creation, there are important hints. The Son enjoyed equality with God before the incarnation, but, far from wishing to exploit his status, in obedience to his Father's commission emptied himself, became a servant, and died the odious death of the cross (Phil. 2:6–11). In John's Gospel, the Son's love for the Father is expressed in unqualified obedience (e.g., John 8:29; 14:31). The Father's love for the Son is displayed both in withholding nothing from him and in "showing" him all that he does, including commissioning him with a mission that ensures all will honor the Son as they honor the Father (John 3:35; 5:16–30). Embedded deeply in Paul's thought is the conviction that the Father's giving over of the Son to death on the cross is the ultimate measure of God's love for us (Rom. 8:32; cf. 1 John 4:9). The love of God that ultimately stands behind all Christian mission is grounded in, and logically flows from, the love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father. As much as the Son loved the world, it was his love for the Father which drove him to the cross (hence the cry in the Garden, Mark 14:36). The Father loved the world so much that he sent his Son (John 3:16). Thus it was the Father's love for the Son that determined to exalt the Son and call out and give to him a great host of redeemed sinners.

Second, the doctrine of the Trinity stands behind the incarnation. If God were one in some unitarian sense, then for God to become a human being the incarnation would either so exhaust God that the incarnated being would have no one to pray to or the notion of God would have to shift from his transcendent personhood and oneness to some ill-defined pantheism. Incarnation in the confessional sense is possible only if the one God is some kind of plurality within unity. The Word who was with God (God's own companion) and who was God (God's own self) became flesh, and lived for a while among us (John 1:1, 14). The Lion of the tribe of Judah comes from God's own throne (Rev. 5).

For God to become human, something other than a *simplex* monotheistic God was necessary.

This is more than a technical point. The high point of revelation is the coming and mission of Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 4:1–4). His disclosure of God (cf. John 14:7) not only through instructive words and deeds of justice and mercy, but supremely in the cross, depends on the incarnation, which itself is dependent on biblical Trinitarianism. Conversely, if it were not for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, if it were not for what the incarnate Lord accomplished, it would be difficult to assign any sense at all to the conviction that believers come to "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

Moreover, the sending of the Son becomes the anchor for the sending of the disciples (John 20:21). As he has had a mission from his Father, so we receive our mission from him. Indeed, in this sense the Christian mission is nothing more than a continuation of the mission of the Son, the next stage as it were. None of this would be particularly coherent if unitarianism replaced Trinitarianism.

Third, although orthodox Trinitarianism insists that all three persons of the Godhead are equally God, it insists no less strongly that each does not perform or accomplish exactly what the others do. The Father sends the Son, the Son goes: the relationship is not reciprocal. After his death and exaltation, the Son bequeaths the Spirit: the reverse is not true. The Spirit is given as the "down payment" of the ultimate inheritance: that cannot be said of the Father or the Son. When the exalted Christ has finally vanquished the last enemy, he turns everything over to his Father: once again, the two persons of the Godhead mentioned in this sentence could not have their roles reversed without making nonsense of the biblical narrative.

The bearing of these observations on missiological thought is twofold. First, God discloses himself to the ideal community, the archetypical community, "a sort of continuous and indivisible community," as the Cappadocians taught (the words are attributed to Basil of Caesarea). This stands radically against the isolated individualism espoused by many forms of liberal democracy. It is an especially important component of our vision of God in all attempts to evangelize and disciple societies less enamored with individualism than are many Western nations (*see also* INDIVIDUALISM and COLLECTIVISM).

Yet the Persons of the Godhead are not three indistinguishable godlets, like three indistinguishable peas in a pod. They interact in love, and, in the case of the Son to the Father and of the Spirit to the Son and to the Father, in obedience, they each press on with distinctive tasks in their unified vision. In confessional trinitarianism, the three Persons of the Godhead are equally omniscient, but they do not think the same thing, that is, the point of self-identity with

each is not the same as with the other. The Father cannot think, "I went to the cross, died, and rose again." Each is self-defined over against the others, while preserving perfect unity of purpose and love. This observation, lightly sketched in Calvin, has been probed more thoroughly in recent times. It preserves the individual person without succumbing to individualism. This stands radically against a collectivity in which individuals are squeezed into conformity or submerged in the community, no longer a community of free persons.

It is within such a framework, then, that the church should pursue the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17). This unity is in fact precisely what has been lived out among countless Christians over the centuries, in fulfillment of Jesus' prayer: a oneness in love, in shared vision, despite all the diversity—mirroring, however imperfectly, the oneness of God. The oneness of the collective, or of a unified ecumenical structure, is a poor reflection of this glorious reality. Indeed, this oneness in love becomes a potent voice of witness to the world (John 13:34–35). We love, not only because he first loved us, but because God is love (1 John 4:7–12).

Fourth and finally, full-orbed reflection on the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for mission demands extended meditation on how the Triune God pursues a lost and rebellious race of those who bear his image, on the distinctive roles of the Father and the Son, on the part played by the Holy Spirit in this mission. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:7–11), enabling the person without the Spirit to see and understand what would otherwise remain closed off (1 Cor. 2:14). The Holy Spirit also strengthens believers for every good work, conforming them to Christ in anticipation of the consummation of the last day. His is the initiative in explosive evangelism in the Book of Acts; his is still the regenerating power that transforms men and women when the word of the gospel is heralded today.

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SEE ALSO Image of God.

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