

FROM PRAGMATISM TO PARTICIPATION: THE IMPACT OF TRINITARIAN FAITH ON MISSIOLOGY

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Abstract: *What happens when a burned-out North American pastor pragmatist drinks from the wells of good Trinitarian theology? A human-centered ministry driven by the effort to meet needs and respond to deficits — is invited instead to be shaped by God's grace and participate through the Spirit in Christ's response to God on our behalf. This theological truth not only changes hearts it can shape entire approaches to our engagement in the world. Studying with James Torrance opened up the recognition that good theology is immensely practical — and that all practice is rooted in good (or not so good) theology.*

James Torrance must have sighed with incredulity after his first conversation with me as his newly arrived Ph.D. student. How could someone so experienced be so theologically illiterate? I fulfilled the British stereotype of an American evangelical — pragmatic, solution and task oriented, with minimal theological training. I may have had a couple of Masters degrees and had completed the one-semester course in Systematic Theology that was requisite for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA), but otherwise I was not only illiterate, I was disdainful of systematic theology.

I justified my disinterest by naïvely disparaging systematic theology as a human effort to box up God in logical categories. How could the microscope of mental analysis guide our understanding of the living reality of the infinite God? I maintained that more important than endless disputes about doctrinal minutiae was our engagement in mission in the world. After all, wasn't the primary instrument for knowing God relational encounter rather than abstract logic? Our relationship with and service of God were surely more important than our doctrines.

However, that conviction had led me, via my wife Kerry, to Professor Torrance's office as a burned-out, human-centered, pastoral mission activist. (See her

chapter, *"Fifteen Years of Teaching Worship, Communion and the Triune God of Grace"* in this volume for further account of this journey). My focus for a decade had been on the attempt to do great things for God (or were they for my own "sanctified" ambitions?), modeled after the life of Christ, with occasional, in moments of desperation, pursuit of guidance from the Spirit. That was the extent of my Trinitarian theology. My preaching and sermons had been exhortations to "do more, love more, serve more, obey more" so that we cared for this world that God so loves.

Like many mission fanatics, my ministry was driven by deficits — all the unmet needs in the world and all the unsatisfied quest for significance in my own life — rather than by trusting confidence in the sovereign goodness of God. God's people are often eager to obey, and the congregation I served engaged in many remarkable acts of service in our city and around the world. But this carried the weight of an exhausting human-centered enterprise, rather than the joyful confidence that we've been "rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the beloved Son", in whom all things are summed up and reconciled (Colossians 1:13-19). The fullness of God might well dwell in the beloved Son, but my life was focused on the emptiness and poverty of the world — and my own need to make a difference in it. I was determined that for once in history there would be a church more concerned about the needs of the world around it than the furnishings of the building within. I repeated with enthusiasm Emil Brunner's stirring claim, "The Church exists by mission just as fire exists by burning."¹

Rather than commenting on my functional idolatry, or raising the question, might I be worshipping God to get God's guidance and provision for the success of *my* mission and the fulfillment of *my* ambitions rather than worshipping God for God's own sake — Professor Torrance simply said, "Why don't you begin by reading the Cappadocian Fathers? Come back and see me after you're done." I was too embarrassed to admit that I'd never even heard of them.

Three months later I returned to his office after feasting on their rich Trinitarian faith and the wonder of our life being "in" Christ and not just "like" or "for" him. Theosis, perichoresis, and participation by the Spirit through the Son in the life of the Triune God opened up for me transformative, utterly new dimensions of Christian life. The following nine months were a banquet of remedial theological education under Professor Torrance's tutelage, following the same broad guidance as he gave with the early Patristic Fathers. "Read Augustine's *Theological Treatises*." "Read the entire *Summa*." "Read all of the *Institutes*." "Now read all of *Church Dogmatics* and then we can start talking

1 H. Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), 108.

about your dissertation topic.” I met with him one on one less than a dozen times over my two years in Aberdeen, but these guided encounters with Trinitarian faith restored my soul and reshaped my engagement in mission.²

Following Aberdeen, I taught missiology for two years at a small evangelical seminary in Europe. Students came from throughout the world and were stunned to hear of grace not simply as “God’s unmerited favor” but as God’s life and action for us. Is it really true that God’s love is not simply an act of God’s will but is the overflowing of God’s Triune being — that God exists in a communion of loving relationships? Why have we not heard before that salvation isn’t simply our justification by faith but is our participation together in the life of God? And could it be true that mission and evangelism aren’t our human-centered efforts to serve God and bring others into the Kingdom, but are our Spirit-empowered participation in God’s work to set the world right?

“Is this really the gospel?” they would ask. “Is it ok to believe this? It seems too good to be true.” Students who had been taught that one could never preach or say to someone that God loved them, because we couldn’t be sure they were part of the elect, were stunned by the assertion that when John 3:16 says “for God so loved the world,” John really meant “the world.” We needn’t engage in an exegetical dance to limit “world” in that verse to merely the elect.³

My theological approach to mission shifted from asking “What is God’s will, what are the world’s needs, and to what response is God calling us?” to “What is God doing in the world and how is God inviting us to participate in it?” I say “theological approach” to mission because my “functional approach” has involved continual succumbing to, confession and repentance from the idolatry of my own effort. The Spirit has persistently called me to focus on God, and on God’s actions in and for creation rather than on the world’s deficits or my ambitions and obedience. Discerning God’s powerful and redeeming presence is more important than devising our own solutions to people’s problems. As James Torrance would often say, “We must first look long and hard at Who Christ is, before we can adequately answer What he has done and How he has done it.”⁴ If this is true of our knowledge of God, how much more is it true of our knowledge

2 For the author’s brief analysis of the implications of perichoresis for soteriology and missiology see T. Dearborn, “God, Grace and Salvation” in *Christ in Our Place*, ed. Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), 265-293.

3 “We deny that all mankind are the objects of that love of God.” John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, reprint of original edition, 1647 (London, Banner of Truth: 1958), p. 115.

4 James Torrance, “The Vicarious Humanity of Christ” in *The Incarnation*, ed. T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1981), 144.

of what God is doing in the world and of our role in God's mission? Rather than the wearisome effort to address a bottomless pit of unmet needs, with guilt and sacrificial giving driving our response — our involvement in mission is more like a treasure hunt to discern signs of God's presence and kingdom in our midst, and then live out our Spirit-empowered response in holiness, grace and gratitude.

Admittedly, I became so enchanted by the truth of perichoresis that I probably overused it, applying it to everything. Making tea became a perichoretic act of mutual indwelling and participation. Over the decades since then, I've frequently succumbed to the human-centered idolatry of my own effort, sanctifying my own ambitious need for impact and success by sprinkling a little perichoretic holy water over "my" ministry. At those moments I recall James' question, "Have you seen my diagrams?" and been reminded that our life is hidden in Christ, and that Christ offers the perfect response of faith, obedience, worship and service on our behalf, as we are united by the Spirit into his life and action. I'm reminded that we engage in mission with humble confidence and dependent gratitude, rather than strain and manipulation.

As a recovering narcissistic pragmatist, I've had many opportunities to witness the power of God at work well beyond our human agency. While serving for ten years as Director of Faith and Development for World Vision International, I had the privilege of seeing the acts of God in complex humanitarian crises. During the height of the recovery effort to the 2004 tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia that killed 170,000 people, I engaged with our Director of Interfaith Relations in conversation with the director of Islamic shariah law in the area. Shariah police were established after the tsunami, and constantly patrolled the streets looking for and punishing every offense. Public canings in the city square were commonplace. As the largest Christian relief organization serving there, with 100s of Muslim staff working for us, there were many questions about our motives and activities. The tensions were high and it was uncertain that World Vision would be permitted to remain in Aceh.

Our meeting occurred during the same week in October 2006 as the West Nickel Mines massacre of Amish school children in Pennsylvania. The *Bande Aceh* newspaper first announced it with headlines highlighting how dangerous infidel America is, where children weren't even safe at school. However the tone changed the next day as accounts of the Amish response to the massacre emerged. Acehnese society was stunned by the ways the Amish extended extravagant grace and mercy toward the perpetrator and his family.

The Director of Shariah Law, a well-educated scholar with a PhD in Islamics from a University in Cairo was more interested in talking about the Amish than

about World Vision. "Tell me," he asked, "do the Amish respond this way because of their culture, or is it because of their Christian faith?" I replied that their culture was shaped by their faith and by their daily reading of the Sermon on the Mount.⁵ They lived the gospel commitment to always practice forgiveness because that is the way of God. He sat silently. Without expecting a reply, and almost as a form of personal reflection, he mused, "I wonder what our world would look like today if America had responded to 9/11 that way?" He went on not only to support World Vision's work in Aceh but also to encourage the Christian staff of World Vision to engage more regularly with one another in worship, prayer and Bible study.

I wonder what would it mean for our personal lives, our witness and even for human history if we actually did live by the Spirit in the Son as "participants in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4)? Theology is anything but an esoteric academic human-centered pursuit. Good theology, when lived in the harsh realities of life, can change not just individuals but societies.

On another occasion I was in Gaza, meeting with Abuna Manuel, the Roman Catholic priest for Gaza. He had given World Vision a request for playground equipment. This was perplexing since Gaza needed so many, seemingly more urgent things, such as health care, clean water, jobs, security, justice and freedom. When I asked him about this priority, he responded with an indirect answer. He recounted how a few days earlier, on one of the days of Ramadan, he was in the midst of raising the host during Mass when he heard a small commotion at the door of the church. One of the staff was urging some people to leave. Troubled, he finished the Mass and ran to the door to see what had been the problem. To his dismay, he saw a contingent of all the Muslim clerics of Gaza City walking downcast away from the church. Running to them he asked, "Brothers, what is wrong?" They replied, "We wanted to come to the church to extend to you a Ramadan blessing but were turned away. We are so grateful for the ministry of your church in Gaza."

The church didn't merely serve the few Christians of Gaza. Its school, ministries of compassion and advocacy for justice had impact throughout the troubled community. Abuna Manuel then went on to say words that have remained with me ever since. "The children of Gaza are losing their capacity to play," and especially to play together as Muslims and Christians. "Play is the pathway to laughter, laughter opens up the door to joy, and joy leads us to hope. Without hope people are willing to do desperate things. We need to help the children of

5 For an excellent account of this see Donald Kraybill, et al. *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

Gaza learn how to play again.” The Catholic Church and the children of Gaza received their playground equipment.

Mission is our joy-filled participation in this extravagant, divine dance of love. The Triune God is at work in our world interceding for all creation’s groans, drawing all of life back into the harmony for which it was created and for which it is redeemed in Christ. I can’t echo Brunner’s stirring call any more. The Church doesn’t exist by mission. The Church exists by God’s grace, as the Spirit in the Son pours out the fiery life and love of God into us. Nor can I proclaim any more that the Church of God has a mission in the world. We don’t. Rather, the God of mission has the Church in the world. God’s world, God’s mission, God’s work, God’s victory — and our joyful participation in it. That change of subject and object changes everything. P. T. Forsyth proclaims this with clarity by saying, “The weakness of much current mission work and much current preaching is that they betray the sense that what is yet to be done is greater than what has already been done . . . The world’s gravest need is less than Christ’s great victory.”⁶

While seldom even using the word “mission,” James Torrance led me on a journey that has impacted my approach to life in the world.⁷ We don’t build or bring the kingdom of God. That’s not our work. Rather, as Paul says in the passage cited earlier in Colossians, we are “transferred” to the Kingdom. To be transferred is to be carried across, transported, literally “ferried across” to the Kingdom. In God’s extravagant grace, the Spirit ferries us in Christ from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of light. Our role is to give consent to this change, to agree with the work of God and then to bear witness to it with courage and kindness through lives transformed to bear the fruit of the Spirit. The Kingdom of God is not built by our strenuous service but comes to us in “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). And so we pray for the Church, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). Abounding hope in the utter reliability of the Triune God of love is one of the legacies of James B. Torrance.

6 P. T. Forsyth, *Mission in State and Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 10, 16-18.

7 For further development of the author’s understanding of this see T. Dearborn, *Beyond Duty: A Passion for Christ, a Heart for Mission*, Revised edition (Seattle: Dynamis Resources, 2013).