

PARTNERING WITH GOD: Re-Imagining Mission for Today

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Introduction

The idea that I would like to unpack with you this morning is one that I hope I can convince you represents a fresh way to re-imagine Mission in today's world. The idea is this: Mission is participating in "Trinitarian Practice." By this I mean that Mission is doing what God is doing in the world, or, perhaps better, paraphrasing a wonderful line of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Mission is finding out what the Trinity is doing in the world, and joining in.¹ Mission is partnering with the Trinity.

In order to unpack this idea, we have to begin with an understanding of God's deepest self—an understanding, ironically, that develops only as we understand in faith how God works in the universe that God has created. We know God, as Elizabeth Johnson has written, not by looking through some kind of "high-powered telescope" of theological reflection, but in the way God has "drawn near and passed by" in cosmic and human history.²

God is a Verb

In 2009 I lectured in various places in Australia, offering a theology of mission that began with the conviction that the best way to speak about God is to imagine God not as a noun but as a verb.³ Of course, there is no way that God *can* be spoken of or imagined at all—God is both incomprehensible and ineffable. Still, imagining God as a verb captures in a particularly vivid way, if not *as such*, the reality nevertheless that God, in Revelation, offers to humanity God's very self, and yet remains Mystery, so overwhelming that God remains beyond grasping.

This is not really a new idea, either. God, Aquinas said, is *actus purus*, pure being, "the 'Verb'," as Elizabeth Johnson comments, "in which all beings participate, live and move and have their being."⁴ Or, to use other metaphors, God is, in Bonaventure's image, "self-diffusive love,"⁵ a love, says Aquinas' and Bonaventure's contemporary Mechtilde of Magdeburg, that is a "great outflow of divine love that never ceases."⁶ For Mechtilde, God *as such* is flow, a communion. The Father, to use Mechtilde's words, is

¹ "Fresh Expressions" website,

<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/principles/transform>. Williams's expression is "finding out where the Spirit is at work and joining in." Cited as originating with Rowan Williams in Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: Epworth Press, 2010), 1.

² Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 192. God "drawing near and passing by" is a frequent expression in the book, see, for example, 124.

³ The substance of this lecture was subsequently published by Roger Schroeder and me as Chapter 1 of our book *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 9-18.

⁴ Johnson, 239, cited in Kathleen Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2010), 155.

⁵ Bonaventure, *De Trinitate*, 3.16. See Ilia Delio, "Bonaventure's Metaphysics of the Good, *Theological Studies*, 60, 2 (1999): 232.

⁶ Mechtilde of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Book VII, Chapter 55, in trans. Frank Tobin, *Classics of Western Spirituality* 91 (Mahwah, NJ / New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 323.

the “restless Godhead,” a “flowing spring that no one can block.” The Son is a “constantly recurring richness that no one can contain except the boundlessness which always flowed and shall ever flow from God, and which comes again in its fullness with his Son.”⁷

Contemporary theology has highlighted this kind of dynamic language for God as well. I have already referred to Elizabeth Johnson’s interpretation of Aquinas. Edward Hahnenberg also insists that “God is closer to a verb than a noun; not a static supreme being, but the dynamic power of being, of being-in-relation.”⁸ British theologian Paul Fiddes quotes Karl Barth saying that “with regard to the being of God, the word ‘event’ or ‘act’ is final.”⁹ Fiddes speaks of God as an “event of relationships,”¹⁰ develops the idea that God is a mystery of participation. God is co-operation, persuasion—“The divine persuasion I am describing is also based on attraction, but the attractiveness of *movements* of love, patterns of the dance into which we are swept up.”¹¹ In a series of talks on the Trinity issued on CDs, popular author and speaker Richard Rohr speaks of God as the force of attraction that holds every atom and subatomic part together, and, like several other contemporary theologians, playing on the technical term *perichoresis*, imagines God as a dance—not the dancer, he says, but *the dance itself*.¹² I have often imaged God as the leader of a great conga line, weaving through the cosmos, gathering more and more dancers as the line moves along. I myself have experienced being pulled into the dance when I was a missionary in the Philippines, or when I visited Ghana, West Africa, several years ago. God, says Richard Rohr in another image, is like a rubber band wrapped around a person’s two index fingers, moving out and then back in—out to gather creation, in to bring them into communion, then moving out again, and gathering in again. In this way God as revealed as communion as such, for, to quote Kathleen Cahalan, “what God is in essence is what God does.”¹³

God is Mission

God is the movement, the flow, the dance through, the embrace of creation that calls it to fullness, wholeness, and, where necessary, healing. God is the mystery of participation that amazingly calls women and men on this small planet in a minor galaxy of an immense universe into relationship with Godself, and to partnership in calling others into that relationship as well. In the billions of galaxies and even more billions of planets in the universe, there must be other forms of intelligent life, as Thomas O’Meara has recently argued.¹⁴ We do not know if God has also called them to participate in God’s work, but we do know through the biblical witness that God has indeed called us.

⁷ Mechtilde of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Book V, Chapter 26, 207-8.

⁸ Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, a Herder and Herder Book, 2003), 91.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. By G. W. Bromily and T. E. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-77), II, 1, 263, cited in Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2000), 36.

¹⁰ Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 36.

¹¹ Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 133.

¹² Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: Exploring the Mystery of the Trinity*, Disk 1 of 4 (Albuquerque, NM: Center for Action and Contemplation, 2004). Other theologians would be, for example, Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 274; and Johnson, *She Who Is*, 22021.

¹³ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 149, referring to LaCugna, *God for Us*.

¹⁴ Thomas F. O’Meara, *Vast Universe: Revelation and Extraterrestrials* (Mahwah, NJ / New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

Another way of saying all of this is that God is Mission. God's first act of Mission is the act, or practice, of creation. From the very first nanosecond, the Spirit is present in creation, as Australian theologian Denis Edwards describes it, guiding, persuading, inspiring the evolution of the gasses, the formation of molecules, the development of the galaxies and their billions of planets, calling forth life in all its abundance, committing itself to healing and reconciling what has been broken by selfishness and sin as self-conscious, free-willed humans emerge, and living as a "secret presence," as Vatican II's mission decree puts it, among all human cultures and religions on this tiny planet earth.¹⁵

In our Judaeo-Christian tradition, the immanent, always-present, life-giving, persuading, inspiring, healing, and reconciling presence of God is imaged in the Older Testament by wind, breath, oil, water, and a brooding bird—all concrete and yet illusive images. This presence revealed itself in many kinds of acts or "practices," and, in Genesis, the Spirit is depicted as a creative wind blowing over the primeval chaos like a mother bird brooding over her nest (Gen 1:2). She is the breath of God breathing life into the "earth creature" (*ha adam*) in Gen 2:7. The Spirit is the power that stirs up prophecy (1 Sam 1):10; 19:20), that blows over the valley of the dry bones to restore Israel in Ezek 37, and that flows as life-giving water from the restored temple in Ezek 47. In Isa 61, the Spirit is the ointment that anoints the prophet for mission: to give comfort to the afflicted, healing to the brokenhearted, freedom to those in captivity. Once more in the book of Ezek, God promises to put God's own spirit within women and men when the new Covenant is finally inaugurated (26:27). In the book of Proverbs, the Spirit is personified Wisdom (Sophia), a woman prophet and street preacher who calls people to repentance (Prov 1:1-8). In sum, as Elizabeth Johnson writes, when we speak of the Spirit, "what we are actually signifying is God drawing near and passing by in vivifying, sustaining, renewing, and liberating power in the midst of historical struggle."¹⁶

"In the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), God's palpable yet illusive presence through the Spirit took on human flesh and gave that presence, as it were, a human face. If the Spirit is one way that the Bible signified God's creating, healing, inspiring, reconciling, life-giving, and challenging practices, Jesus of Nazareth is now God's *embodied* practice.¹⁷ Now the Spirit that has pervaded the universe from the first instant of its creation is, as Elizabeth Johnson so beautifully puts it, "manifest in time in . . . the loving, gifting, and befriending first-century Jewish carpenter turned prophet."¹⁸

The presence of the Spirit in Jesus seems to be particularly emphasized at the beginning of Luke's gospel. In Luke's narrative, after Jesus had been baptized by John, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (Lk 3:21). Several verses later, after the genealogy that links Jesus to "Adam, son of God" (Lk 3:28)—into whom the Spirit had been breathed in the beginning, Jesus is described as "full of the Holy Spirit," and "Led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (Lk 4:1), where he is tempted by the devil. After defeating the power of this evil spirit, the text then describes Jesus once again in 4:14 as "filled with the power of the Spirit" as he begins to teach in synagogues. Finally, in 4:16-21 we read of Jesus' return to the synagogue in his own town of Nazareth. Here Luke has Jesus speak his first public words,

¹⁵ Vatican Council II, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (AG), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html, 9. For the work of the Spirit in creation, see Denis Edwards, *Breath of God: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 43-49.

¹⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 127. For more extensive development of the Spirit as depicted in the Old Testament, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IV Academic, 2006).

¹⁷ Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 163.

¹⁸ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 150.

which are “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (4:18), the first words of a reading in which Luke conflates Isa 61:1-2 and 58:6, and sets the agenda of Jesus’ Spirit-filled ministry.

Jesus reveals in his own practice the practice of God. Jesus proclaims God’s message of acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, inclusion, and commitment to justice (“good news to the poor”—Lk 4:18) in stunning parables that speak of God’s overflowing mercy (Lk 15), of God’s generosity (Matt 20), of God’s radical inclusion of all (Matt 20), of God’s vulnerability and yet persistence in justice (Lk 18),¹⁹ and in pithy and challenging teachings (e.g. Matt 5, Mark 8:34-38, Mark 9:36, Lk 11:27; Jn 3:1-17). Jesus healed (“recovery of sight to the blind—Lk 4:18) and drove out demons (“release to captives”—Lk 4:18). These were all “parables in action,” practices that concretized and demonstrated the message of his preaching, and showed that the Reign that Jesus preached was not only a spiritual reality, but a fully material and human reality as well. As Edward Schillebeeckx and others have pointed out, Jesus himself was a parable.²⁰ In his own scandalous practices of personal freedom in interpreting the Law (e.g. Mark 2:23-27), fun-loving lifestyle (e.g. drinking wine—Matt 11:7-19), inclusive behavior (e.g. Matt 9:9-13), he pointed to the reality of a God who gives life and joy, who cares for all, who offers inclusion and freedom. Jesus preached, served, and witnessed to what he called the Reign of God—that community of forgiven and forgiving people, serving one another, equal to one another, including all.

But that was the problem. As Latino theologian Virgilio Elizondo has written, it was especially Jesus’ practice of not being scandalized by anyone that he was most scandalous to the religious leaders of his day, and was probably the biggest reason why they began quite early in his ministry to plot his death.²¹ Jesus died because of what he practiced, but his death, says Australian missiologist Noel Connolly, was not the denial of divinity but the true revelation of it.²²

The Mission Has a Church

Well-known Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig published a cartoon on Good Friday in 2009 of two Roman soldiers talking within sight of Jesus’ cross on Calvary. “Look at that! Brilliant!,” one soldier says to the other. “You kill the leader and you nip the whole movement in the bud.”²³ But we know that it didn’t happen like that. We know that you can’t kill God. You can’t stop God’s movement, flow, embrace, dance through the world. And so within days the disciples who had fled in terror when Jesus was arrested (Mk 14:50), who had left Jerusalem in disappointment and disillusionment (Lk 24:17-21), or who had locked themselves away in fear of the authorities (Jn 20:19) began to experience that Jesus was not dead, that he had been raised from the dead.

But not only that. At Pentecost the disciples began to realize that the mission given to the Spirit from the first nanosecond of creation, given to Jesus at his baptism and in the synagogue was now theirs. Just as the Spirit’s practices of life-giving, freeing, prophecy, and forgiving were embodied in Jesus, so those practices were now embodied

¹⁹ In interpreting the parable of the “Unjust Judge,” I rely on the brilliant exegesis of the passage by my colleague Barbara E. Reid. See her *Parables for Preachers*, Year C (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 227-36.

²⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 156, 158.

²¹ Virgilio Elizondo, “The Miracle of Conversion,” *Give Us This Day*, January 20, 2013 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2013), 205.

²² Noel Connolly, “New Evangelization in Australia,” draft of a paper given at the SEDOS Conference, Rome, in April, 2013, 14.

²³ Michael Leunig cartoon: <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-TIRJFBBAwto/T32FNfY6fHI/AAAAAAAAACjQ/VZUJKfjpAk8/s1600/leunig%2Bjesus%2Bgood%2Bfriday.jpg>.

in them. They came to realize all of this gradually, however, and not before some of their original ideas of their mission—that it was only to be to the Jews, that Jesus would very soon return—would be painfully challenged. After Stephen’s murder, with the persecution of the Hellenistic followers of the Way, they preached first to half-Jews (Samaritans), “wanna-be” Jews (the Ethiopian Eunuch), pious Gentiles (Cornelius), and then Gentiles en masse (at Antioch). Only as they crossed the boundary from Judaism to inclusion even of Greeks into their community, only as they realized that following Jesus did not necessarily mean converting to Judaism, did they begin to get a glimpse of the full implications of what the Spirit was ultimately up to in the world, and what the significance of Jesus’ preaching and witnessing to the Reign of God was really about. It was in realizing that they had indeed been invested with God’s mission that they understood themselves as church. This is why we say that the church is “missionary by its very nature,”²⁴ why the church, strictly speaking, does not have a mission. The mission, rather, has a church. The church is the church as it engages in the practices of the Trinity, as it engages in Trinitarian Practice.

Mission: Partnering with God

The Mission Theology that I have been developing in this first presentation is one that is often called the theology of the *Missio Dei*, or the Mission of God. It has a long history in Christian theology, with roots in the Scriptures, in the writings earliest theologians of the church through the Middle Ages, and appearing also in the seventeenth century in the Trinitarian theology of the French School. In the twentieth century the theology of *Missio Dei* appeared in the theology of Karl Barth, in Protestant mission theology after the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1952, and in Vatican II’s Decree on the church’s missionary activity in 1965.²⁵

The basic idea of *Missio Dei* theology is that the mission is primarily God’s, not ours. God’s mission is prior to our mission; God’s mission calls forth the church; God’s mission is wider than the church’s mission. God is primary; we are secondary. Our task is to point to where God is already at work. Our task is to sacramentalize God’s missionary presence by our own missionary practice. I think it is fair to say that this theology of *missio Dei* is the standard understanding of mission in today’s church.

Several months ago, at a faculty retreat, we had a discussion that gave me some pause, and set me thinking on a related but perhaps more engaging way of thinking about mission. My colleague Robert Schreier had given the retreat on the spirituality of reconciliation, and he had based his wonderful and inspiring ideas on *Missio Dei* theology: it is God who takes the first step in reconciliation; our work is guide people to see God doing that in their lives.

In the ensuing discussion, one of our faculty colleagues, John Pawlikowski, vigorously challenged this idea, much to my surprise, and I think to everyone else as well. John has immersed himself for some forty years in the Christian-Jewish dialogue, and is particularly sensitive to the horrors of the Holocaust and its implications for any kind of theological reflection. After Auschwitz, he said, God needs to “step back,” and let human beings take the lead. The idea that God is active in the world and that we need to support that primary action is simply incredible after the Holocaust.

I disagreed with John, but I also thought he had made a really important point. Quite tentatively I offered an alternative idea that I’d like to float again here, to conclude these reflections on the theology of mission. The idea is this: the mission of God is not primarily God’s, as I had thought before. But on the other hand, it is not wholly ours

²⁴ AG 2.

²⁵ On the twentieth century background of the theology of *Missio Dei*, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389-93.

either, as my colleague John suggested. It's more radical than either. God's nature is to be a partner. This is the point of the communion that is the Trinity, and it is the point of the mission that, through Jesus, in the Spirit, we have been invited to share. God is truly, as Paul Fiddes has said, a mystery of participation, and that means that we are not poor relatives in our participation in God's life and mission, but equals. What this means is that, amazingly, God needs us to be in mission. God cannot get along without us. If the mission is to succeed, we need to work with God, and God needs to work with us.

At first, this might sound like really bad news. If God needs us, and since we are weak, the mission will never succeed! But I don't think it really works like that. I think that as we commit ourselves to partner with God, and really work take on the responsibility that God holds out to us, we ourselves will be *transformed into partners*. As we engage in mission, and gradually allow God's dream for the world to become our own, as we try to imitate the humility and availability to Mary, we will grow in stature, we will become more and more worthy partners of God, who offers that partnership to us. Greek theology calls this process *theosis* or divinization. Paul spoke of living no longer himself, but Christ living in him (Gal 2:20). Jesus talks about coming that people will have more abundant life (Jn 10:10), and speaks of a seed dying to yield much fruit (Jn 12:24).

Mission indeed is Trinitarian practice. It is partnering with God. It is an invitation to amazing grace.