

This is an adaptation of a paper originally presented in December 2006 to the conference of Global Connections, UK.

Combined Fuel

a whole people need a whole God (or how not to betray the Trinity in mission)

Introduction

Do you believe in the Trinity? Probably, if you are reading this journal, the answer will be a confident “Yes!” Most of us come from churches and agencies which subscribe to a doctrinal basis which includes a statement of belief in the Trinity: God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Mission Commission (of the World Evangelical Alliance), whose journal this is, subscribes to just such a doctrinal basis.

This article is not about establishing the biblical case for such a doctrine. It has after all been part of orthodox Christianity, and of the ancient creeds, since very early in the life of the Church. It is not spelled out explicitly in the Bible, but it is inescapably implicit. The question we are trying to look at is this: what difference does it make to what we actually believe, what we actually do, how we shape our understanding of what mission is all about, and how we develop our policies and strategies? Behind this question is a more basic one still: how and why is it that so much evangelical mission has become theologically superficial, too often shaped by secular values on the one hand and biblical selectiveness on the other?

The crisis of our shallowness

When the needle hits the red zone on the petrol indicator in your car, you know you

are almost out of fuel, and that if you don't put some more in very soon you'll grind to a halt. In the same way, much of the global church, including evangelicals, is running on theological empty. This includes the mission community. In some cases, the theological shallowness of mission has created grave problems. We have carried an infected, and defective, gospel.

In recent years, several penetrating observers have drawn attention to our theological shallowness and the consequences. In *No Place for Truth* (1993: IVP), David Wells sadly comments: “Theology does not fare well in the culture because it is not believed; it does not fare well in the church because it is not wanted” (p.190). Or listen to Os Guinness in *No God but God* (1992: Moody): “Contemporary evangelicals are no longer people of truth. Only rarely are they serious about theology... Repelled by ‘seminary theology’ that is specialised, professionalised, and dry, evangelicals are attracted by movements that have replaced theology with emphases that are relational, therapeutic, charismatic, and managerial (as in church growth). Whatever their virtues, none of these emphases gives truth and theology the place they require in the life and thought of a true disciple” (p.18).

If theology is quite literally the study of the nature and wisdom of God, what could possibly be more fundamental to authentic discipleship? And what could be more crucial, in the practice of mission, and in the responsibilities of mission leadership, than being aligned with the truth about God—not just in a schizophrenic way where we pay lip service to a doctrinal basis but then operate in practice as if it wasn't really there, but constantly measuring what we are and do against God's word, and constantly scouring it for the truth and the principles by which to shape what our churches and organisations look

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like, how decisions are made, what we do.

Let me illustrate, in headline form only, some of the consequences of ignoring theology and de-centring or side-lining God—that is, the Triune God as revealed in Scripture, made known to us by revelation and not by reason:

- Ecclesiology with God de-centred becomes sociology
- Pluralism with God de-centred becomes idolatry
- Contextualisation with God de-centred becomes anthropology
- Hermeneutics with God de-centred becomes sectionalism (e.g., radical feminism), or philosophy
- History with God de-centred becomes Marxism or existentialism
- Strategy with God de-centred becomes behaviourism
- Postmodernism with God de-centred becomes anarchy

It is not that sociology, anthropology, philosophy, etc., have no value. Far from it. But, for example, sociological analysis does not understand the profoundest realities about the church, which are spiritual; the church is far more than a mere human organisation. Anthropology does not understand the most important truths about human beings—that we are made by a personal Creator, in his image and for community relationships designed by the living God. And so on. De-centring God is dangerous, and leads us away from truth.

The argument, of course, is that these things are objective, and therefore trustworthy. But this is a false understanding of what objectivity truly is. True objectivity is living within and operating from a biblical framework, not from a secular framework. Nothing is neutral, because all systems have pre-suppositions. In this sense, objectiv-



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ity is paradoxically committed. Contrary to their admission, so is the so-called objectivity of the secularists and humanists. But the importance of biblical objectivity is that it relates to true truth in a way that secular frameworks do not and cannot. It highlights the priority of revelation over reason.

Please note, I am emphatically not calling for anti-intellectualism. Absolutely to the contrary. But I do want to emphasise that as we pursue our calling with full intellectual vigour—and rigour—it must be within a sustained and disciplined habit of constantly scrutinising our assumptions, our decisions, our policy and praxis, in the searchlight of Scripture. The alternative is that we accommodate, consciously or unconsciously, to secularism, which completely betrays the gospel. God himself must be at the heart of every part of our worldview: our beliefs, our values, our goals, our methods. Without that, there is no deep worldview change. And without deep worldview change, within a generation or two there is no transmission of the gospel.

In 1980, at the opening of the Billy Graham Centre at Wheaton, Lebanese scholar and diplomat Charles Malik said, “The problem is not only to win souls but to save minds. If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover you have not won the world. Indeed it may turn out that you have actually lost the world.”

Latourette, the church historian, famously called the C.19th “The Great Century” because of the unprecedented geographical expansion of the Christian faith. In those terms, the C.20th might be called “The Even Greater Century.” But it may be more accurate to call it “The Ambiguous Century,” because territorial expansion has not been matched by depth, and much of the world church is, as the saying goes, a mile wide and an inch deep. A shallow church is very vulnerable, as we have already seen in the collapse of the church in many places. The same pattern is alarmingly evident on every continent, and in many places where the church grew fast in the past fifty years, there are now significant losses as the next generation walks away.

Some reflections on the history of the modern mission movement

History is instructive, and helps us understand the present. The modern mission movement, of which we are still a part, arose largely out of the Pietist movement of the

C.18th. Under God, this was hugely instrumental in bringing renewed life into a church that was formal and increasingly shaped by contemporary rationalism, deism and humanism. Reacting to its context, it focused on personal, individual faith and piety, but mostly ignored the wider breadth of theology.

As a result, emerging evangelicalism, and for our topic especially, emerging evangelical mission, most commonly displayed great devotion and energy, conspicuous activism, rather few thinkers and missionary theologians (with some glorious exceptions!), and the basis for mission tended to be limited to a small number of biblical texts. Also, partly as a reaction to Unitarianism, it tended to be strongly Christological, but rarely fully Trinitarian.

Further, much C.19th and C.20th mission came to be modelled on revivalism. This may have been appropriate in the context of Christendom, where many people had at least some familiarity with Christian belief and practice and its impact on their cultures. But, transferred to a context of complete paganism or of another world faith, it led to little engagement with worldview and a disastrous scrambling of the gospel with Western culture. It was individualistic rather than communitarian, and while commendably clear on the person and work of Christ, was rarely fully Trinitarian.

I do not wish to be hyper-critical because I salute and admire the dedication with which many of our missionary forebears lived out their love for the Lord Jesus. It is fashionable but wrong to criticise without affirming. Nonetheless, the focus on individual, immediate conversion and profession of faith and complete preoccupation with the urgency of evangelism led to impatience with intellectual stretching and neglect of life-long progressive discipleship in every dimension of life. Many areas of worldview, deeply at odds with biblical truth, lay unchallenged. Most serious theology became the preserve of non-evangelicals. Too often it then became detached from Christian discipleship, and indeed from the Scriptures.

Today, the spectrum of those who call themselves evangelical has become so wide that it is hard to know exactly what the term means any more. There is woefully little theological clarity, even among those who, at least in theory, subscribe to a classic doctrinal basis. And then, from around the mid C.20th onwards, two major influences have added to the theological fuzziness in mission.

First, in many evangelical mission circles the behavioural sciences increasingly took over as the shapers of policy and praxis: anthropology, methods and strategies, a focus on measurable results, business management theory of leadership. These rather than theology became dominant. Useful though some of these things are as tools, they are very dubious masters, especially when they, rather than biblical missiology, determine what we do and how we do it. They also produce an endless (and wearying) stream of fashions—Unreached People Groups, 10/40 Window, AD 2000, Homogeneous Unit Principle, and many more. All bring helpful insights, but their proponents tend to overstate their case and see everything through their particular grid.

Second, the charismatic movement, which brought with it some great blessings, nonetheless produced among many evangelicals a functional dualism, where subjective experience may have little to do with objective truth. In today’s increasingly post-modern culture, here in Britain at least, this has critical consequences for church and mission. There is a widespread interest in spirituality, but even among professing Christians this may be divorced (in fact though not in intention) from the-God-who-is-there. It may have more to do with contemporary post-Enlightenment preoccupation with self and self-fulfilment than with the objective reality of the Triune God.

Some lessons from the early church

One of the reasons we shy away from Trinitarian truth is that we find it so difficult to get our minds around what is a unique category without any parallels. A very great deal about the Trinity is beyond our limited comprehension, and analogies such as water, steam and ice are of little value. It is often argued that getting into discussions about the Trinity deflects people from the gospel, or, in the case of Muslims in particular, is so offensive that it is better not to raise the issue.

It is then very instructive to see what the early church did. Far from running away from such a complex issue, much of the New Testament revolves precisely around establishing the divine identity of the Son and the Spirit alongside the Father. If the Son is not fully God eternally as well as fully human in his earthly incarnation, there can be no atonement, the Cross is simply another regrettable death among many, and the Resurrection is empty nonsense. If the Spirit is not fully God, then there is no possibility

of new life being created out of old life, no “God with us” in the here and now.

The early church outraged the Jews precisely because of the claims relating to Jesus and the Spirit, and challenged the pagan, pluralist gentile world on the same Trinitarian grounds—even if the “way in” to building bridges for the sharing of the gospel was sometimes variable and contextualised. Because of the differing worldviews, the early councils of the church revolved around clarifying the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity was not an embarrassing complication, to be owned up to only when necessary, it was the bedrock of the gospel. Without establishing the identity of Jesus and the Spirit as fully divine, and without then insisting that the Godhead comprised three equal persons in unity—however mysterious and difficult to grasp that might be—without establishing these truths, there was nothing significant to say about Jesus and the Holy Spirit in a world of competing claims about deities and spirits.

It is highly significant that one of the densest, most complex Christological passages in the New Testament is in Colossians 1. The context is a little church, drawn from monotheistic former Jews and pluralist pagans, either of whom would have considerable difficulty in wrapping their heads around Trinitarian truth, and Paul wades in quite unapologetically with the profoundest of statements about the eternal, divine nature and work of Jesus Christ, and interweaves Father, Son and Spirit, each as God.

As it was for the early church, so it must be for us. As we confront an astonishing array of religions, beliefs and philosophies, the truth of the Trinity is not something to graduate to but something central to the gospel. Whether we live and work among Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, pagans and secularists or anyone else, we must be able to hold out Christ as one person within the eternal and triune God. This is the anchor to his identity. The early church and the Fathers poured out a great deal of energy resisting theories of hierarchy and subordination, with Christ as a lesser being and the Spirit lower down still. This was not silly nit-picking. They knew absolutely that to concede would be a total betrayal of the gospel, and would quickly reduce the church to yet another variant of pagan religion. It was as crucial as that.

With the collapse of Christendom, and with the captivity of so much of the world to untruth, we need most urgently to grasp once again this foundation of all Christian revela-

tion. If we were bolder in this, our witness would be both more faithful and more incisive.

The Triune God as the missionary God

A proper grasp of God as Trinity is a wonderfully liberating and illuminating way to see that God has always been, and always will be to the end of time, a missionary God. From the very beginning of Genesis, where God creates a universe and a world for his delight and for communion with himself, God reveals his plurality of personhood: “Let us (plural) create....” Then, as God creates human beings, even more fundamental than distinctions of gender, male and female, is the fact that alone among all creation people are made in his image.

It is of the greatest importance we grasp that we are made in the image of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are created to reflect, as in a mirror, the character, the being, the doing, the speaking, of the Triune God. And all of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, shows his missionary heart, whose consistent longing is to draw people back into fellowship with himself and for our image-ness to be fully restored. Moreover, the most basic reason of all for our engagement in mission lies precisely in our being made in the image of God. Mission is not fundamentally a task to be completed, or even a task to be undertaken, so much as intrinsic to our DNA as image bearers of the God who is missionary in all three persons of his being.

It is not possible to overstate the significance of this. Because, if we think of mission primarily as a task to be undertaken, of course we will focus on strategies and timetables. That is how we think about most jobs to be done. Yes, there is a task, but it is the outworking of something far more fundamental—our very identity as human beings made in God’s image. It is what and who we are, not just what we do. Our eyes are on God-as-Trinity, engaged in mission from the beginning of time to its consummation, reaching and sending in order to reconcile the world to himself. When we understand it this way, we are more cautious about our strategies and planning because we need to align ourselves with the essence of God, not simply reason out how we think we will reach the world in the shortest possible time.

Further, the understanding of our essence is the resolution to the old vexed question as to whether proclamation or social action lies at the heart of mission. For, if we are made in the image of God, who is creator, sustainer,

judge, life-bringer, as well as saviour, then that is the wholeness of God that we are to reflect. God brings together in perfect harmony and integration his character (what he is like), his deeds (what he does, his activity), and his words (what he says). So we, too, must integrate word and deed and character: that is genuine wholism, springing out of all that God-as-Trinity is, does, and says.

Too many evangelicals are still polarised between a total focus on evangelism and church planting on the one hand, and concern for compassion, justice and environmental issues on the other. Global mission networks continue to have polarised agendas, regarding one another with suspicion. But, if we are to be faithful to being made in the image of the Trinity, we will not divorce what belongs together. If our main focus is on proclamation and church planting, we must also give ourselves to authenticity by getting involved in the whole bundle of life, caring about poverty and injustice and physical need, and discipling Christians to be concerned with the whole of life in every dimension, not just about some abbreviated and detached spiritual segment of life. To separate the two parts is dualism, which betrays the Trinity. But equally, if our passion is medical care, or caring for the environment, or rescuing street children, we must also explain in words what the gospel is all about, otherwise those we serve will only deduce some kind of humanism, not the truth about the God who loves them and longs for them to be reconciled to himself. Authentic mission (and indeed church life) must explain clearly, demonstrate clearly, act and live clearly—all inseparably bound up together.

And authentic mission will be communal as well as individual, because such is the template of the Trinity. There is differentiation between the persons of the Trinity, but there is also inseparable community. As members of the Body of Christ, we are bound up with one another. There is no place for independent lone-rangers. And we will give ourselves to long-term commitment, because in our short-term-obsessed world too little attention is given to deep engagement, the only place from which real insight into worldview and heart-concerns is possible. Our Lord himself invested thirty hidden years before three years of public ministry. Short-termism, and the impatience that lies behind it, breeds superficiality, and that in turn does great damage in the long term, whatever the immediate advantages seem to be.

The community of the Trinity also gives us a key into another ill-tempered debate, that over the primacy of churches or mission agencies. The Trinity demonstrates to us distinctiveness but loving unity, interdependent relationships, one eternal goal. Over the years, I have listened to many debates about modalities and sodalities, church and para-church so-called, and conclude that most of it is a load of nonsense.

It is a mistake to identify “the church” exclusively with local congregations. That is one, and only one, configuration of the ecclesia, the called-out people of God. From Pentecost, marking the birth of the church (with continuity but also discontinuity from the Old Testament people of God), there are the households and the crowds, the residents and the visitors, those who have been with Jesus for several years and the newcomers, some of whom may never have so much as set eyes upon him. Whether the believers met in twos and threes, by households, or in a vast crowd, whether they were at home or in the Temple, whether the Apostles happened to be along or not, they were still church. They were part of the universal Body of Christ, brought alive by the Spirit. The emphasis is on organism, not organisation. It was only later that the church became institutionalised, and the organisation, hierarchy and structure became more important than the essential life of the organism.

The Reformers did not disentangle themselves from the long-held assumptions of Christendom, in which a particular structure and line of command tracking back to people in control at the top of the hierarchy was the accepted way of organising people, including in the church. This reflected the way society as a whole was organised. But the inescapable logic of the priesthood of all believers, and of the ultimate authority of the Word and the Lord of the Word, not a Pope or Pope substitute, is a much flatter structure from which hierarchy is excluded and complementarity is the model. Such indeed is the pattern of the Trinity, in whose image we are.

Local congregations may be the most common and familiar configuration of church that we experience, and clearly the Lord intends us to be part of local committed communities: how else can we make visible to our unbelieving neighbours something of what the Kingdom of God looks like? But a mission agency can equally be a manifestation of church, equally a community of people committed to reflecting together the

dynamic life of God—who-is-Trinity, in so far as its members are bound together in meaningful life and service, with God at the heart, and mutually enriching one another through complementary giftings.

Rather than arguing about whether church, meaning local congregation, or mission agency, is the rightful instrument through which mission happens, it is surely more profitable to accept that Christians link together in a variety of ways in different situations, and that wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, there is the church. Moreover, whether in local congregation or in agency, the essential mark of authentic Christian life is imaging God, including his missionary heart. So, let’s celebrate unity in diversity, and seek to work in harmony and partnership in common purpose and for mutual good. We are designed for interwoven community within the one Body. Let’s live it.

The providence of God

One of the ways in which a properly Trinitarian theology transforms our thinking is that it brings to the forefront the providence and sovereignty of God—in individual lives, for the church universal and local, and for the world beyond the people of God.

I am not talking about fatalism, or absence of free-will, both of which are caricatures of divine providence. I am talking about the fact that God sustains the whole cosmos, and loves it; that he gives rain alike to the just and the unjust; that the life-bringing Spirit is at work in people long before we encounter them, preparing them for further revelation about the Son, and even on occasion through dreams and visions bringing conviction about Christ’s true identity without any apparent involvement of any Christian at all; that even when it seems that history is spiralling out of control, God is still the King, and it will be he, not humankind, that will determine when time is wound up; that the love of God is not incompatible with present human suffering, nor are Christians immune from the groans of a fallen world, but we have a sure hope of a new heaven and a new earth and the restoration of the Kingdom in all its fullness.

I may not be able to understand all that God is doing, either in my own life or in the lives of my loved ones. I may weep with those who weep and mourn, I may feel heartache and puzzlement about world affairs, I may feel helpless in the face of war and

injustice and all the destructive consequences of fallenness and sin. But this I know: the Father has not abdicated, the Son has not ceased interceding, the Spirit has not withdrawn from our world—and one day we shall know all that we need to know, and see face to face the glory and love of God.

We do not bring in the Kingdom, nor do we build it—God alone does that; but we do bear witness to it—the now and the not yet of the Kingdom—and seek by word and deed and character to image the King and to give a little glimpse through our communal relationships and faltering words as to what will one day be inescapably visible to all creation, the glorious reign of God. We do not build the Kingdom, but we do pray “Your Kingdom come!” in longing and in faith. And it is the understanding of the providence of God, of the sovereignty of God, and of the total engagement of Father, Son and Spirit in the whole of creation, that gives us the confidence, the right and the duty, to speak out boldly into the world of public affairs, the public square, the world of unbelievers. Our God, the Triune living God, is not God only of the Christians. He is the one and only, with sovereign rights over all humankind, whether or not they choose to acknowledge it.

Against such a background, we are delivered from inflated ideas about what we can do and what we can achieve, and do not have to paralyse ourselves in knots of guilt about all that is beyond us. We will look with eager anticipation and faith-filled expectation to see the fingerprints of God at work long before us, and follow where he leads. We will accept that the same activity of God will simultaneously lead some to seek the light, and others to prefer darkness and the rejection of that light. We will pray, not as empty ritual, but out of a profound sense of wanting to align ourselves with the will and heart of God, and in trusting faith that he is well able to direct our lives for his glory and our good. We will live as those for whom the Triune God is truly the living God, enmeshed with the reality of life on earth here and now, not some abstraction, nor God-at-a-distance. We will search for the way in which, in every dimension of our lives, the Three-in-One is the integration point and ground of our being. We will testify boldly to the fact that history, time and space, have a sure destination. We will not claim to know the timetable, because we do not, but in the meantime we will press on to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ took hold of us, as Paul puts it in Philippians 3:12.

Our churches and mission agencies are not to be indistinguishable from secular businesses apart from a little veneer of Christian political correctness. No, we need to be saturated in all that we do and say and decide and plan with the mind-renewing, life-transforming truth and grace of the living God.

Good management skills may be invaluable in our leaders, and we suffer when they do not have them. But even more crucial is spiritual calibre, the wisdom that is grounded in God's truth, and the capacity to think theologically and biblically so that policy and decisions are aligned with the mind of God. This will shape who we recruit or partner with, and what they will do. As we take stock of the world of 2007 in the light of all that the Triune God is and does and says, we need to ask ourselves whether we are recruiting and enabling the right people to do the right things in the right way, whether our mission statements are truly biblical in a full-orbed way, whether cherished ways of working are as pleasing to the Lord as they are to us. It will shape how we preach and disciple in our churches and Christian communities. It will shape our priorities and vision. It will re-fill our empty tanks. It could lead all over the world from the shallows to the deep.

Most of all, it will help us afresh to rejoice in the living God—Father, Son and Spirit—and to bring honour and delight to him.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14). <<

Member Care team



GLOBAL MEMBER CARE

NEWS AND UPDATES

The activities of the Global Member Care Network, under the auspices of the WEA/MC (formerly MemCa), were changed as a result of the meetings in South Africa in June 2006. At that time, Kelly O'Donnell stepped out of involvement in leadership and an interim leadership team was appointed.

In early June 2007, the interim team was appointed by the Mission Commission to be the official Leadership Team, with Harry Hoffmann functioning as Coordinator. Other members are: Marina Prins, Pramila Rajendran, Larrie Gardner, Carlos Pinto and Brent Lindquist. Although the current members of the Leadership Team come from different regions of the world, they do not formally represent their regions and continents.

Over the next eighteen months, the Leadership Team will be working on bringing the Network back "online" and developing a new website. Different lists related to member care will be updated, including mailing lists and resources list. A list of Global Member Care providers will also be developed as a resource for the WEA/MC network.

We would encourage you to pray for the Leadership Team as they work on these important developments and activities, aiming for a broad and truly global participation in the network.

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THE GLOBAL MEMBER CARE NETWORK VISION STATEMENT

We, the Global Member Care Network*, would like to see...

A healthy, spiritual, relational, resourced, vigorous global mission community serving God effectively, connected vitally to both the sending and receiving church, reflecting Christ accurately in life and task.

For us in Member Care, that means:

1. There is a culture of discipleship and of member care among evangelical leaders;
2. Pastors and church leaders have a vision of integral holistic care for their members and workers;
3. Churches care for their personnel and missionaries with a team of care-givers set apart for that role;
4. Theological seminaries and mission training institutions include member care issues in their curriculum;
5. Member care is fully integrated into the Mission Commission—pervasive in all different levels of the mission community worldwide and all the different elements of the Mission Commission, influencing and being influenced;
6. Mission organizations have a well developed strategy for member care, staffing and funding for this effort;
7. The mission community includes individuals with diverse backgrounds, singles, couples, families, teams, leaders, structures, systems, policies and practices—member care impacts all of these;
8. Missionaries serving worldwide are effectively cared for by mission organizations and churches (both sending and receiving) in order to enhance the missionaries' effectiveness;
9. Missionaries work effectively toward the vision to which they are called, caring for themselves and being cared for by the mission agencies and churches;
10. Tentmaker missionaries and independent mission workers are uniquely and adequately cared for by their sending and receiving churches;
11. Indigenous missionaries are encouraged to develop their own member care plans, and resourced adequately to meet their needs and goals.
12. Receiving churches and organizations have an accurate awareness about member care and have developed basic structures for that. <<