

UUCHAPTER 4

“Mission” and *Missio Dei*:

Response to Charles Van Engen’s “‘Mission’ Defined and Described”

Enoch Wan

My response to Charles Van Engen’s “Mission Defined and Described” is organized in the following order: observation, evaluation, and suggestion. I shall endeavor to suggest a briefer, but more holistic, definition of mission that better reflects the Trinitarian impetus for mission.

Observation

Purpose and Presentation

The stated purpose of the article is quoted below for the sake of easy reference and review:

The purpose of this essay is to offer a brief historical overview of some ways in which the Christian church has defined “mission” down through the centuries, and to demonstrate how the various definitions have influenced the thought and practice of the Christian church’s ministries in the world. In this sense this essay addresses the **PAST** of what has traditionally been termed “missions” (p. ?).

Van Engen is to be credited for having achieved the stated purpose by providing “a historical overview” of how the term “mission” has been defined, and he has successfully demonstrated how variations in this definition have impacted the thought and practice of the Christian Church.

The format of the presentation is quite creative and realistic. It begins with his meeting with the Global Outreach Task Force of a local congregation on a Sunday afternoon and closes with his attempt to answer Gloria's question: "So, how do you define mission?" By using this device the author avoids the typical dry and boring historical narration, and provides a sense of realism in dealing with the questions, including details of place, personnel, and process.

Definition and Description

The entire study chronicles the changes in the understanding and practice of "mission," drawing from the author's 40 years of experience in teaching, research, and publication. It describes the shift of emphasis in the conception and implementation of "mission" throughout the centuries. The author's review of varying definitions of the term "mission" by mission statesmen, scholars, and mission leaders is clear and to the point. The diachronic description of the practice of "mission" by various groups of different periods is both interesting and helpful.

Emphasis on the Institutional Dimension of Mission

In this study, however, there is a tendency to focus more on the institutional dimension of "mission" at the expense of the individual dimension. The author is very conscious of the difference in these two dimensions, as indicated by the illustrative samples below:

- the reference to H. Venn's "more institutionalized perspective" (p. 12);
- the extensive quote of J. Scherer's comments on "church-centrism" (p. 15);
- the reference to D. McGavran versus the World Council of Churches in terms of "the departure from a church-centric view" (p. 18).

The evaluation below is provided in light of the author's awareness of two dimensions of Christian mission, that is, "individual" and "institutional."

Evaluation

Over-correction of Evangelical Emphasis

on Individual/Spiritual Salvation

In the review on W. Carey and the Student Volunteer Movement of section #4, the author observes that

for about a hundred-and-fifty years, up until the 1960's...Protestants who used the "Great Commission"...assumed the following: That salvation is individualistic...personal relationship with Jesus Christ...new individual converts (pp. 10–11).

This is the only portion in the entire study that deals with the individualistic aspect of "mission." The rest of the paper deals with the institutional aspect of "mission." This institutional focus of "mission" is clearly shown in the last section ("Defining 'Missional' and 'Mission': A Suggestion") where the definition of "mission" is being narrowed down to become "missional church." (pp. 22–24).

Theological Understanding of "Mission"

It is good and proper that the author begins with word studies (Greek and English) and continues with exegetical work on key texts (e.g., Matt 28:18–20; Luke 4:43; John 20:21). But the author does not unpack the theological significance of these passages for his readers. Instead of being true to the texts that are trinitarian—and despite the fact that the author does cite some key trinitarian texts (Matt 28:18–20; Luke 4:43; John 20:21)—the author limits the theological understanding of "mission" to "The Sender is Jesus Christ, whose authority defines...Christian mission." (p. 7). Thus the richness of the theological foundation of "mission" being trinitarian has been reduced to merely being Christocentric. This runs counter to the contemporary trend in missiological and theological literature that is richly trinitarian in orientation. Significantly, trinitarian missiological studies have entered into the mainstream of **theology** as evidenced by

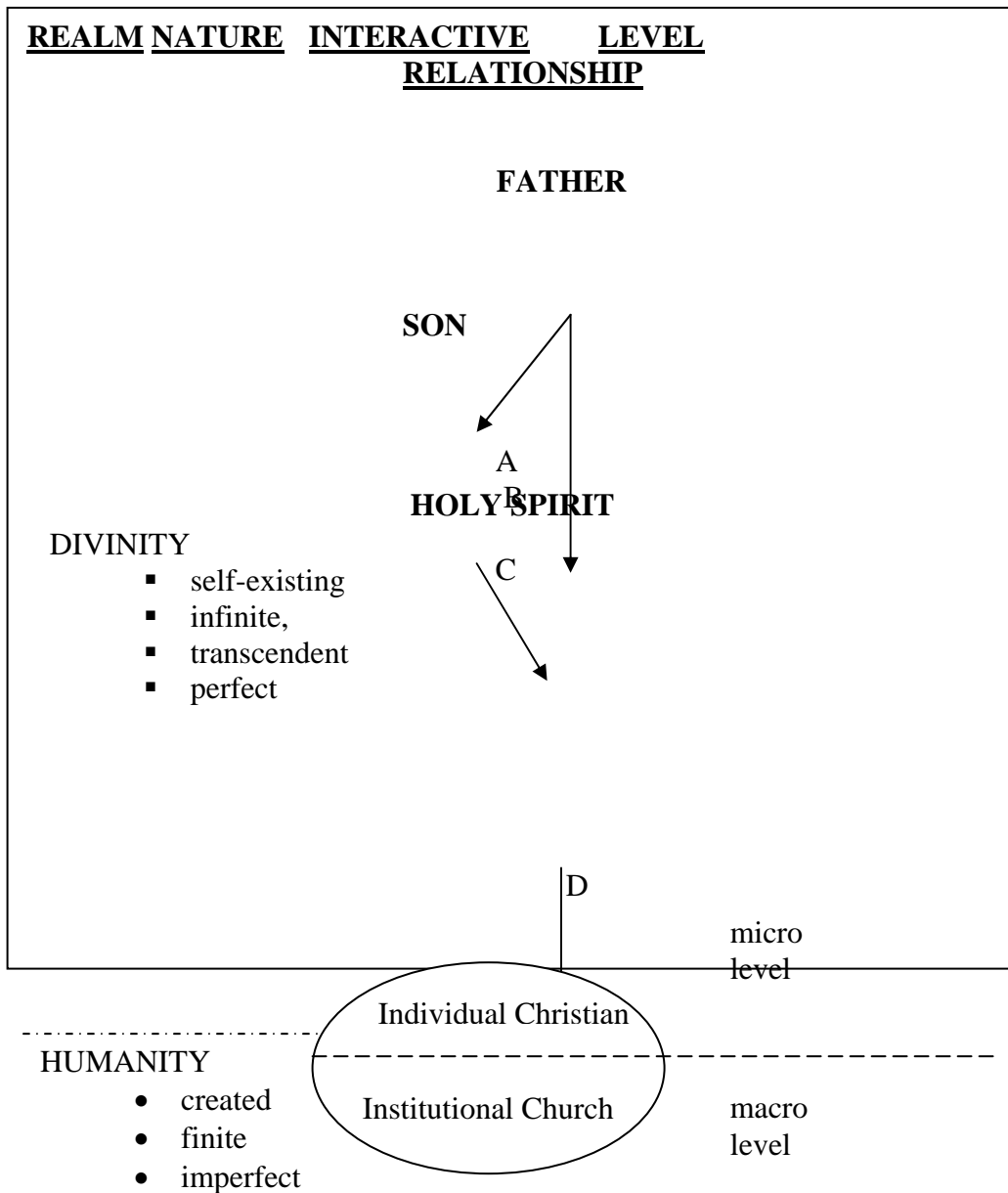
contemporary theologians such as C. LaCugna, D. Coffey, E. Jüngel, E. Johnson, J. Bracken, J. Moltmann, L. Boff, L. Newbigin, R. Jensen, and Y. J. Lee. This trend has also impacted the theology of Christian missions, stimulating it towards a new trinitarian orientation. I have provided a brief bibliography of these recent publications at the end of this chapter. Hopefully, the works I have selected are sufficient to show a trend towards trinitarian orientation in missiological and theological studies. Yet Van Engen, though citing many Scripture references to the Trinity, unnecessarily limits the theological understanding of “mission” to “The Sender [who] is Jesus Christ, whose authority defines...Christian mission.”

Suggestion

***Missio Dei* of the Trinity and Christian Missions at Two Levels**

One of the most outstanding features of this study is the author’s repeated references to *missio dei* (pp. 12, 14, 15, 20, 21, 25) in key places. In light of these multiple references, this reviewer would like to use Figure 1 to explain “The Interactive Relationship within the Trinity and Beyond” at two levels:

Figure 1: The Interactive Relationship within the Trinity and Beyond



NOTE: references cited in the article

A – Luke 4:43;

B – John 14:16;

C – John 16:17;

D – John 20:21; Acts 13:2

Figure 1 shows the two realms (divinity and humanity with dotted line in between) converging by the interaction of the Trinity, the interactive pattern of the triune God (*missio dei*) at two levels: the personal, individual Christian; and the institutional church.

Van Engen cites trinitarian texts but unnecessarily reduces *missio dei* to being Christocentric only, and “mission” is reduced to becoming the “missional church” at the institutional level. In addition to the needed emphasis on the individual career missionary, there is also a personal dimension of Christian mission for all believers. For example, while the apostle Paul was a key figure in the spread of the gospel (obeying the Great Commission) in the book of Acts, his conversion, calling, and commission had much to do with the “little mission” that God had entrusted to a relatively unknown figure of the Bible, Ananias (Acts 9). Yes, the “missional church” in Antioch (Acts 13) was prominent in carrying the Great Commission, but it had much to do with individual leaders (e.g., Simeon, Lucius of Cyrene, Mana'an, Barnabas, Saul) and with the sending of Barnabas and Saul by the church. There is no dichotomy between the individual and institutional dimensions of the “Christian mission” (see the dotted line in Figure 1). It is therefore not correct to leave out the “individual” aspect and focus exclusively on the institutional “missional church” as Van Engen does.

Figure 1 can help correct the unbalanced treatment in Van Engen’s piece and rectify its reductionistic tendency. Figure 1 clearly portrays the complexity of divine and human realms converging plus the dynamic interaction of the triune God with personal human beings and the institutional Christian church. Figure 1 also shows the more holistic understanding of Christian mission to be inclusive of individual Christians (at the micro level) and institutional church (at

the macro level as marked by dotted line). From the point of this reviewer, it is apparent that Van Engen's institutional focus is an over correction of the individualistic character of Christianity and mission in the Western tradition. In this case, it is not a matter of "either-or" but "both-and" at two levels.

Definition of "Mission"

The title of the article is "Mission Defined and Described," yet the entire piece has the "missional church" as the only focus. "Mission" is broader in scope than the "missional church." The Christian mission cannot be accomplished apart from individuals obedient to the Great Commission. The personal dimension of "mission" somehow escaped Van Engen's attention. He does a good job describing mission historically, but fails to define "mission" holistically and realistically.

Towards the end of the article, after providing a diachronic review of the description and definition of "mission," Van Engen makes the following observation: "A cohesive, consistent, focused, theologically-deep, missiologically broad and contextually appropriate evangelical missiology has not yet emerged for this new century." Then, at the conclusion, in his response to Gloria's quest for a definition of "mission," Van Engen proposes one that is eight-lines long but which does not measure up to the criteria he himself provides. This reviewer proposes the following definition as an alternative, believing it to be closer to the above criteria and more true to the title of "Mission Defined":

"Mission" is the Christian (individual) and the church (institutional) continuing on and carrying out the *missio dei* of the triune God at both individual and institutional levels, spiritually (saving souls) and socially (ushering in *shalom*), for redemption, reconciliation and transformation.

This definition is a better alternative for several reasons. First, it is shorter in length but more comprehensive in scope. Second, it is holistic and balanced instead of being reductionistic. Third, it is enriched by the trinitarian orientation rather than impoverished by being merely Christocentric in emphasis. Fourth, it truly reflects the essence of the key texts Van Engen cites. Fifth, it includes spiritual and social aspects of Christian mission in general and particularly in the missions of redemption, reconciliation, and transformation. This proposed alternative definition is hopefully more “cohesive, consistent, focused, theologically-deep, missiologically broad and contextually appropriate.” It is hoped that this definition can lead to the emergence of an “evangelical missiology...for this new century.”

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