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The Kingdom of the Triune God – Implications for Mission
James O'Brien

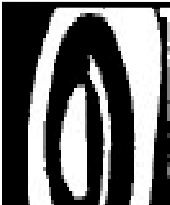
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Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools



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The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* aims to stimulate the writing of theology by Melanesians for Melanesians. It is an organ for the regular discussion of theological topics at a scholarly level by staff and students of the member schools of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS), though contributions from non-members and non-Melanesians will be considered.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* is ecumenical, and it is committed to the dialogue of Christian faith with Melanesian cultures. The Editors will consider for publication all manuscripts of scholarly standard on matters of concern to Melanesian Christians, and of general theological interest. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, and in duplicate.

The opinions, expressed in articles, book reviews, etc., are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the editors, or the member Colleges of MATS.

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Editorial Team: **Jamie O'Brien**
 Revd Rod Macready
 Russell Thorp
 all of Christian Leaders' Training College

Production: **Max Edwards**
 Christian Leaders' Training College

Subscriptions: **Revd Rod Macready**
 Christian Leaders' Training College

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EDITORIAL

In this issue, we have articles that have come from two sources.

The first three articles are essays that were written for a master's unit held at the Christian Leaders' Training College in September 1997. The College is investigating establishing a master's programme within Papua New Guinea. Max Liddle visited from the Bible College of New Zealand to conduct a block course on "The Trinity: Community in the Life and Witness of the Church".

Several students attended the course. Unfortunately, not all were able to complete the assignments. The three articles presented here are all written by expatriate lecturers of the Christian Leaders' Training College. It is hoped that a fourth essay (the only student from outside the College, who completed the course) will be published in the next edition of the Journal. It was written by a Melanesian student, but was too long to be included in this edition of the journal.

The final two articles come from B.Th. students at the Christian Leaders' Training College. These were essays written for one of their courses at the College. The students were asked to wrestle with the age-old question: What happens to those who die, and have never heard the message of the gospel? These essays have been included, because they represent Melanesian reflections about this issue.

We hope that you find all these articles stimulating. Again, we apologise for the lateness of the production of the Journal. We are endeavouring to catch up, and hope to have another edition produced before the end of the year. Again, we thank you for your patience.

Rodney Macready

THE KINGDOM OF THE TRIUNE GOD: IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION

James O'Brien

James O'Brien is an Australian lecturing at the Christian Leaders' Training College. He completed a Bachelor of Ministry at the Bible College of Victoria.

Mission is God's Work

In recent times, a concept of mission, which has gained widespread acceptance, is that God is a God of mission. The term used to express this concept is *Missio Dei*.¹ That is, mission is the mission of God; it is something that God does; it is His work. In His mercy, He sends His son to rescue His people.² This concept is seen as a helpful corrective to other views of mission, which previously have been utilised, but were found lacking.³ More than this, however, this concept of mission has value, because it reflects the very nature of the Triune God.⁴

The Trinity and Mission

God's work of mission involved the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. *Missio Dei* reveals who God is. Thus, while it is true that the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ occupy the centre of the redemptive story, this story can only be properly understood in its

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1991, pp. 389-390.

² George F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, Gilbert A. Thiele, and Denis Hilgendorf, trans, St Louis MO: Concordia, 1965, pp 51-52.

³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 389, provides a quick summary on this. See also H. Buehler, "Pietism's Most Challenging Task", in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1965, p. 235; and James A. Scherer, "Church, Kingdom, and *Missio Dei*", in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 82ff.

⁴ George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1972, pp. 57ff.

context: the triune God.⁵ God is present in His mission in all three persons. Mission can be said to be based on the will, movement, and action of the grace and love of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶ As Vicedom has said:

Through His Son, in the incarnation and enthronement, God makes Himself the very content of the sending. Through His Son, it becomes clear, once for all, who God is, what He is, how He works, how He thinks in regard to men, how He redeems them, what salvation He has prepared for them, how men may draw nigh unto Him, and how they are received into fellowship. . . . Mission . . . today is possible, only because God continued His sending, and, through the gift of the Holy Ghost, out of the one-time sending of His Son, made a continuing mission.⁷

It has been noted that this mission activity of God occurs within the context of a sending group (the Trinity), and a receiving group (humanity).⁸ Logically, this leads many to conclude that the Trinity is a model for the church's mission.⁹ While this is, indeed, true, what Vicedom is seeking to show is that, because mission originates in the Triune God, who sends, it must be more than just a model. As Bosch points out, the sending of the Son and the Spirit can be, and has been, "expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, sending the church into the world".¹⁰ Because *Missio Dei* arises out of the nature of God, the mission of the church becomes participation in God's mission. The implications of this will be

⁵ Ray S. Anderson, "Mission . . . in the way of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit", in *International Review of Missions* LXXVII-308 (1988), p. 487.

⁶ John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 69.

⁷ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, pp. 52, 54-55; see also Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, London UK: SCM Press, 1975, pp. 53-54.

⁸ Anderson, "Mission", p. 487.

⁹ See, for example, Carl E. Braaten, "The Triune God: The Source and Model of Christian Unity and Mission", in *Missiology: An International Review* XVIII-4 (1990), p. 416. A. H. Mathias Zahniser, "The Trinity: Paradigm for Mission in the Spirit", in *Missiology: An International Review* XVII-1 (1989), p. 70.

¹⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

discussed later. There is one more element, which must be considered first.

The Kingdom of God and Mission

As the One, who was sent, Jesus began His public ministry with a bold announcement:

“The time has come,” He said, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15 NIV)

From that time on, Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven¹¹ is near.” Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matt 4:17, 23 NIV).

The kingdom of God was not a new theme. While the actual term is not mentioned in the Old Testament, the idea of God as King is readily found.¹² However, in Jesus, a radical shift occurred. The long-awaited kingdom had arrived, in the person and mission of Christ.¹³ His opening declaration, shown above, and the subsequent words and deeds of His earthly ministry, recorded by the gospels, suggest that the kingdom of God was a central motif for Jesus.¹⁴ In other words, Jesus saw His mission primarily as being the proclamation and establishment of the reign of God.

If, then, the kingdom of God was so central to the mission of Jesus, and, as has been said earlier, the sending of Jesus arose out of the nature of

¹¹ It is assumed here that “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” are synonymous terms.

¹² Wilbert R. Shenk, “Kingdom, Mission, and Growth”, in *Exploring Church Growth*, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983, p. 207.

¹³ George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1964, p. 140.

¹⁴ D. Senior, and C. Stuhlmüller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, London UK: SCM Press, 1983, p. 144. It is not necessary, at this point, to enter into a lengthy discussion of the meaning of the kingdom of God. George Eldon Ladd has a good summary of the various interpretations of the kingdom of God in his book, *The Presence of the Future*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974, pp. 45-147. In this essay, the generally-accepted understanding that the term refers to universal reign or rule of God is assumed.

God as Triune, then it follows that the establishment of the kingdom of God is also important to the other members of the Trinity. We can even say, with Vicedom, that “the kingdom of God might be described as the goal of the *Missio Dei*”.¹⁵

The Kingdom, Trinity, and Mission

Connections between these three concepts can be identified, even in Mark 1:15, and the verses preceding it. After examining Mark 1:1-15, Newbigin lists the following three points:

1. The reign of God is announced.
2. Jesus is acknowledged as the Son of God.
3. Jesus is anointed by the Spirit to be the bearer of God’s kingdom to the nations.¹⁶

Through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, the mission of Jesus is to announce and establish the reign of God, His Father. Each member of the Trinity, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, is involved.¹⁷ This co-involvement, of course, goes beyond a mere partnership of three interested, but separate, parties. Its reality lies within the mystery of the “three-in-oneness” of the Trinity.

the Father, Son and the Spirit . . . are wonderfully united by their common historical-redemptive purpose, revelation, and work. . . . Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “members, one of another” to a superlative and exemplary degree . . . [through] their interpenetration, . . . or *perichoresis*.¹⁸

Thus, the kingdom of God encompasses not only the saving acts of Jesus, but also “the complete dealing of the Triune God with the

¹⁵ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, p. 14; where *Dei* is understood as the triune God.

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995, pp. 21-23.

¹⁷ Emilio Castro, *Freedom in Mission: The Perspective of the Kingdom of God*, Geneva Sw: WCC Publications, 1985, pp. 66, 68.

¹⁸ Cornelius Plantinga Jr, “The Hodgson-Welch Debate, and the Social Analogy of the Trinity”, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, quoted in Buehler, “Pietism’s Most Challenging Task”, p. 236.

world”.¹⁹ Each member of the Trinity is involved in this mission of establishing the reign of God. To be in the kingdom of God means to experience the fellowship of the Trinity.²⁰ Boff borrows from Irenaeus the useful picture of identifying the Son and Holy Spirit as the “two hands of the Father”, sent to gather us into the communion of the Trinity.²¹ This concept was also recognised by the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra. It affirmed that “the purpose of God, according to holy scripture, is to gather the whole of creation under the Lordship of Christ Jesus, in whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all are brought into communion with God”.²² It is necessary, therefore, to examine, in more detail, the relationship of each member of the Trinity to the kingdom of God, so as to more-fully understand the implications for mission.

The Kingdom and the Trinity

The direct linking of each member of the Trinity to the kingdom was explored many years ago by Joachim of Fiore (c1132-1202), who classified three separate kingdoms, one each belonging to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and, thus, really spoke of three different dispensations.²³ Moltmann avers that Joachim was borrowing from the eschatology of the Cappadocians. He sees great value in the concept, not because of its assignation of three separate eras of God’s rule, but

¹⁹ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, p. 23.

²⁰ G. Mar Osthathios, “The Holy Trinity and the Kingdom of God”, in *The Indian Journal of Theology* 31-1 (1982), p. 2.

²¹ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Paul Burns, tran., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 26.

²² Emilio Castro, “Themes in Theology and Mission Arising out of San Antonio and Canberra”, in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993, p. 133.

²³ F. L. Cross, ed., “Joachim of Fiore”, in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 739-740. The kingdom of the Father was the age in which mankind lived under the Law, and ends with the demise of the OT dispensation; the kingdom of the Son is the age of grace, and covers the NT dispensation, which Joachim believed would last until around AD 1260; the age of the Spirit was anticipated to begin at this point, and would see the rise of new religious orders, which would convert the whole world.

because its Trinitarian view of history helps to overcome the Western unipersonal view of God.²⁴

Moltmann, then, develops the idea, preferring to see the kingdoms of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as “continually present strata and transitions in the kingdom’s history”.²⁵ He identifies the relationship between each person of the Trinity and the kingdom as such:

The kingdom of the Father “consists in the creation of a world, open to the future”.²⁶ This future entails the ultimate fulfilment of all that God has planned. As the Creator, God is Lord over all, and humanity, as created beings, are His property.²⁷

The kingdom of the Son is the “liberating Lordship” of the crucified Christ, and “fellowship with the first-born of many brothers and sisters”.²⁸ In this kingdom, believers are no longer only possessions of the Creator God, but become the children of the Father.²⁹

The kingdom of the Spirit “is experienced in the gift, conferred on the people liberated by the Son – the gift of the Holy Spirit’s energies”.³⁰ Here again, the relationship between God and humanity changes. We are not only His possessions and children, but now also become His friends.³¹

Moltmann then suggests a fourth kingdom, the **kingdom of glory**, which, in a sense, unites these three, as the “future”, anticipated in the kingdom of the Father. The kingdom of glory should be “understood as the consummation of the Father’s creation, as the universal establishment of the Son’s liberation, and as the fulfilment of the

²⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, Margaret Kohl, tran., London UK: SCM Press, 1981, pp. 204-206.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Spirit's indwelling".³² All of God's works in the world have the kingdom of glory as their goal.

In a critique of Moltmann's views on this matter, Roger Olson identifies some conceptual inconsistencies, but, nevertheless, recognises value in its contribution to a clearer understanding of the relation between economic and immanent Trinity.³³ Moltmann's work is also valuable, in that it suggests a distinct role for each member of the Trinity, in the total activity of the kingdom, and thus affirms the vital interest and participation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the kingdom of God. It will be helpful at this point to examine, in more detail, the biblical data on this.

The Father and the Kingdom

It soon becomes clear from scripture that the Father has a unique relation to the kingdom. Jesus Himself declares that only the Father knows the time of its consummation (Mark 13:32).³⁴

The Fatherhood of God is strongly linked to the kingdom. This occurs specifically in Luke 12:32; 22:29; Matt 13:43; 25:34. The Lukan references depict the Father as the One, who gives the kingdom to Jesus and the disciples.³⁵ In Matthew, the righteous will enjoy their future salvation, by entering into the kingdom of the Father. It is the Father, who has prepared this inheritance for them. Matt 26:29 also speaks of Jesus enjoying a future renewed fellowship with His disciples in the Father's kingdom. Thus, we can say that the concept of the Fatherhood of God is qualified by the kingdom. It is the Father, who allows redeemed humanity to enter into the kingdom; it follows that those, who

³² Ibid., p. 212.

³³ Roger E. Olson, "Trinity and Eschatology: The Historical Being of God in Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg", in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983), p. 213-227, esp. pp. 220ff.

³⁴ C. Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985, p. 188.

³⁵ I. H. Marshall, "The Hope of a New Age: the Kingdom of God in the New Testament", in *Themelios* 11-1 (1985), p. 9.

do not enter the kingdom, will not experience the relationship of God as Father.³⁶

However, this relationship is not only future. It also has a present reality. Jesus taught His disciples to call God their Father, and to pray to Him as such (Matt 6:9, 10; Luke 11:1, 2).³⁷ This petition for “your kingdom to come”, addressed to the Father, attests that the King is a Father. Marshall suggests that this indicates that the kingdom of God is primarily concerned with the creation of a family.³⁸ While this may seem simplistic, it should be remembered that the “family of God” is an important concept for our understanding of salvation. Ladd provides a valuable connection, when he looks back to find the basis of Jesus’ teaching on the Fatherhood of God. In the Old Testament, the Fatherhood of God is a way of describing the covenant relationship between God and Israel.³⁹ Thus, when we refer to God as Father, we are addressing none other than Yahweh Himself, the God of the Old Testament, the sovereign creator and Lord of the whole universe.⁴⁰ This has salvific significance:

The ultimate source of the kingdom metaphor, at its deepest level, was the saving relationship between Yahweh and His people. Israel experienced its God as a saving God, who rescued it from slavery in Egypt, forged a covenant, and brought His people to a land of promise. This same God was recognised as the “one God”, who ruled the universe, and all peoples.⁴¹

Not surprisingly, then, it is God the Father, who is at the centre of Jesus’ teaching. Along with praying for the Father’s kingdom to come, Jesus commands His disciples to petition the Father, to cause His name to be

³⁶ Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, p. 179.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

³⁸ Marshall, “The Hope of a New Age”, p. 9.

³⁹ Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, p. 179.

⁴⁰ Castro, *Freedom in Mission*, pp. 42-47.

⁴¹ Senior, and Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations for Mission*, p. 144; P. D. Miller notes that this connection between God, the Father of the New Testament, and Yahweh, of the Old Testament, is important, because it undergirds the church’s connection to Israel, and to the Lord of Israel. See P. D. Miller, “A Strange Kind of Monotheism”, in *Theology Today* 54-3 (1997), pp. 293-297.

hallowed. Marshall concludes that, from this, we can say that the “character of the kingdom of God is determined by the character and activity of the Father”.⁴²

Some have taken this one step further and claimed that Kingship and Fatherhood are one and the same thing.⁴³ While this does show the close relationship between the two concepts, it fails to give proper due to the fact that the kingdom of God has come in the very person and mission of the Son, Jesus Christ. This Christ, crucified, risen, and proclaimed as Lord, has not only made it possible to enter into a relationship with the Father, who reigns, but has also defeated evil, and, at the consummation of the kingdom, will bring about a restoration of the whole creation. We will now explore further the matter of the Son and the kingdom.

The Son and the Kingdom

As Son, Jesus receives the Father’s mission to install the kingdom. This is a function of the fact that only the Son is able to reveal the Father, and, thus, only the Son is able to initiate the kingdom of the Father (Luke 10:21-22).⁴⁴

As was mentioned earlier, Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom in His inaugural public speech (Mark 1:15; Matt 4:17, 23), He was also the very embodiment of the kingdom. Newbigin makes the interesting observation that, while Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God, the first generation of Christians spoke about Jesus. This was because the kingdom of God was no longer a vague idea, or distant hope. Now, in Jesus, it had a name and a face.⁴⁵ In His person and work, the kingdom of God has both come, and is coming.⁴⁶ Vicedom gives a helpful summary:

⁴² Marshall, “The Hope of a New Age”, p. 10.

⁴³ Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, p. 182, gives the example of T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1935, p. 163.

⁴⁴ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 30-32.

⁴⁵ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ J. Verkuyl, “The Biblical Notion of the Kingdom”, in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993, p. 72.

He [the Son] is the one sent in the name of the Lord (Matt 21:9), to whom all regal honours are due, because of His exaltation into the highest heavens (Luke 18:38). He is the King who royally cares for His own, and returns to them hundredfold what they have sacrificed for Him (Luke 18:29). There is no power, which will not be subject to Him, and which He will not destroy when He brings the kingdom (Matt 28:19). God's reign and Jesus Christ are one and the same thing. Therefore, he who proclaims the name of Jesus, also proclaims the reign of God (Acts 8:12; 28:31). Jesus is God's answer to man's quest, and, therefore, the content of the proclamation of the kingdom (2 Tim 4:1). All of this is summarised in Colossians, where everything that is ascribed to God in the Old Testament is said of Jesus Christ Himself.⁴⁷

The kingship of Jesus is also evident in other ways. Firstly, in regards to His priesthood, Torrance claims that Christ's incarnation was the breaking-in of the kingdom of God into the Jewish cultus.⁴⁸ This is deduced from the royal nature of His priesthood, because "His word is identical with Kingly act; . . . [and] because His offering is identical with His Person. This is royal priesthood, in the coincidence of grace and omnipotence, in the identity of person and work."⁴⁹ Attention is also drawn to the clear exposition, by the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, of Christ's royal priesthood.⁵⁰ Secondly, Christ proves Himself King by being the judge of humanity (Acts 17:32). At His return, Christ will pronounce the verdict, which men and women have brought on themselves, through their attitude to the gospel, and He will carry out that verdict (John 5:22-29).⁵¹ Thirdly, the messiahship of Jesus points to Him as king. The word "messiah" has the meaning of "anointed", and was used to refer to someone endowed with the Spirit by God for a particular purpose. Marshall maintains that, in the case of Jesus, the reference is to an anointed king, and thus, in the Messiah, we see God setting up His rule, through a king, anointed by the Spirit.

⁴⁷ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, Edinburgh UK: Oliver & Boyd, 1955p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 15ff.

⁵¹ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, p. 28.

Jesus' acceptance of, and self-use of, appellations, such as, "Son of David" and "Son of Man" indicate that He recognised His role as the agent of God's rule.⁵² Finally, we can note that the resurrection vindicated the kingship of Jesus, revealing Him to be the Lord of the universe.⁵³

As king, Jesus offers no definition of the kingdom, but this can be gleaned from His words and deeds.⁵⁴ The parables Jesus told, His fellowship with outcasts, His healings and exorcisms – "all of these become a cumulative definition of what the kingdom of God meant".⁵⁵ In His preaching, Jesus disclosed the riches of the kingdom: reconciliation, forgiveness of sins, mercy, grace, and power.⁵⁶ He also revealed that the kingdom of God is not like worldly kingdoms (John 18:36). It is opposed to the natural tendencies of humanity (Matt 11:29), such as self-righteousness, legalism, and hedonism. It is also different, because it is moving toward a final, future reality that will eventuate when Christ returns.⁵⁷

The kingdom finds its ultimate and most-telling demonstration, however, in the cross. Jesus steadfastly and knowingly moved towards His earthly destiny of the crucifixion. His sacrificial death revealed, simultaneously, the mystery, the love, and the power of the kingdom.⁵⁸ Any true understanding of the kingdom will, thus, be a theology of the cross.⁵⁹

Thus, the Son reveals the Father, and is devoted to instigating and establishing a kingdom of redemption and liberation, where the Father reigns as king. The exercise of kingly rule implies the use of power, and

⁵² Marshall, "The Hope of a New Age", p. 10.

⁵³ Senior, and Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations for Mission*, p. 158.

⁵⁴ Castro, *Freedom in Mission*, p. 40.

⁵⁵ Senior, and Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations for Mission*, p. 146.

⁵⁶ Verkuyl, "The Biblical Notion of the Kingdom", p. 72.

⁵⁷ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, pp. 23-26.

⁵⁸ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 53.

⁵⁹ Verkuyl, "The Biblical Notion of the Kingdom", p. 76.

the Bible reveals that the source of this power in the kingdom of God is the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰

The Holy Spirit and the Kingdom

Jesus' awareness that the Spirit was the source of His power is clearly enunciated in the gospels. In Matt 12:28, Jesus claims that it is by the Spirit of God that He performs His miracles, and the kingdom of God has arrived (cf. Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). It is possible to conclude from this that the working of the Spirit, in and through Jesus, constituted the actual coming of the kingdom. Marshall observes that the Spirit was promised in the Old Testament as a gift for the last days, in the same way as the kingdom of God (Joel 2:28f.). Thus he suggests that the kingdom of God, and the Spirit, are both signs of the eschatological activity of God in Jesus.⁶¹

The close connection between Jesus and the Spirit is evident, also, in the fact that "it is by the Spirit that Jesus is conceived, by the Spirit that He is anointed at His baptism, and by the Spirit that He is driven into the desert, for His encounter with Satan".⁶² This last point highlights the truth that the kingdom of God is in direct conflict with another kingdom – the rule of Satan. The power of the Spirit, at war with the power of the devil, is a dominant theme in the gospels.⁶³

Another important passage is John 3:3-5. Here, the Son of God is the agent of redemption, through whom the saving sovereignty of God is realised.⁶⁴ This redemption is described as entry into the kingdom. Entrance into the kingdom comes from God alone, and is given only to those who are born again. This new birth comes from the Spirit.⁶⁵ Thus, the Spirit makes the sovereignty of God real to the believer, by

⁶⁰ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 33-34.

⁶¹ Marshall, "The Hope of a New Age", p. 10.

⁶² Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 57.

⁶³ Marshall, "The Hope of a New Age", p. 10.

⁶⁴ George Raymond Beasley-Murray, "John 3:3-5: Baptism, Spirit, and Kingdom", in *The Expository Times* 97-6 (1986), pp. 167-170.

⁶⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, "The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit: Trinitarian Pneumatology", in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37-3 (1984), pp. 287-300.

allowing him entrance into the kingdom, and by providing manifestations of the kingly power in the believer's life.⁶⁶

The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, for it is only by His enabling presence that believers may declare Christ as Lord (1 Cor 12:1-3).⁶⁷ Interestingly, the Spirit is Himself declared as Lord in 2 Cor 3:17.⁶⁸ He, too, has a claim to sovereignty in the kingdom, which is only to be expected, when considered from a Trinitarian perspective. The Spirit is God, and is revealed as such in the Bible.⁶⁹

The kingdom is given in the Spirit, for "He Himself is this kingdom, in the working of God (Matt 3:11; John 1:20, 27, 33; Acts 1:5)".⁷⁰ Pentecost occurred so that the kingdom of God could continue to be a present reality, through the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church.⁷¹ On this basis, the Great Commission can be seen to be not just a command, but a law, which expresses the nature of the church. The outpouring of the Spirit is the actualisation of the Great Commission in the life of the church. Because the church is indwelt by the Spirit, she is, by her very nature, a witnessing body.⁷²

This leads us now to briefly examine some of the myriad implications for mission, which arise from consideration of the kingdom of the triune God.

⁶⁶ J. E. Yates, *The Spirit and the Kingdom*, London UK: SPCK, 1963, p. 202.

⁶⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, London UK: Edinburgh House Press, 1963, p. 74.

⁶⁸ Admittedly, it is not exactly clear what Paul meant when he referred to the Spirit as Lord. A good summary of the various views can be found in D. Greenwood, "The Lord is the Spirit: Some Considerations of 2 Cor 3:17", in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* XXXIV-4 (1972), pp. 467-472. The view of Greenwood is ostensibly that κύριος (*kurios*) here refers to Yahweh, and πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) refers to the Holy Spirit. This is very similar to the view of James D. G. Dunn, "2 Corinthians 3:17: The Lord is the Spirit", in *Journal of Theological Studies* 21-2 (1970), pp. 309-320.

⁶⁹ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, p. 34.

⁷⁰ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, p. 56.

⁷¹ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, p. 191.

⁷² Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1961, pp. 217f.

Implications for Mission

The principal implication for mission is, of course, that the work of the church in mission is to participate in the proclamation, and establishment, of the reign of the Triune God.⁷³ The church is to witness to the kingdom, not only because of her spirit-filled nature, as mentioned above, but because the kingdom is a gift to be shared.

Kingdom as Gift

The Son received the kingdom as a gift, and in turn, gives it to His disciples.

And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29, 30, NIV).⁷⁴

Jesus can give the kingdom, because it is His to give, as a gift from the Father. There are several points to draw from this:

1. The kingdom is not man's to take; nor can it be forced on anyone – humans have freedom to accept the gift or refuse it.
2. Jesus gives the kingdom of God to liberate men and women from the kingdom of darkness.
3. Service in the kingdom becomes a gift.
4. Jesus shares His regal authority with His disciples, as participants in His mission.⁷⁵

⁷³ Newbigin, *Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine*, p. 50.

⁷⁴ Luke 12:32 indicates that the Father also gives the kingdom to believers.

⁷⁵ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, pp. 26-27; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: vol 2: 9:51-24:53*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996, pp. 1739-1740; John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol 35C, Dallas TX: Word Publishing, 1993, pp. 1064-1068; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1985, pp. 1414-1419.

Kingdom Mission

The church's work is not primarily either preaching the gospel, or the planting of churches in every people group, or the translation of scriptures, or the provision of services, or whatever else may be promulgated as mission, but it is living in the reality that God is King. All of these things are valid, but only have any true value in the light of the kingdom. Scherer maintains that the call of Lausanne II for the "whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world" can only be realised in the "eschatologically-grounded *kingdom* context of the mission of the Triune God".⁷⁶ This shapes our mission, for it compels us to remain focused on the King.

This correct emphasis should bring at least three results:

1. **Mission work will be rooted in prayer.** God, the King, is at work in the lives of people and nations, to bring about His rule, long before we arrive as missionaries. It is not that the church moves God around the world, but instead "God moves the church around the world, through the ongoing activities of all three persons of the Trinity".⁷⁷ Prayer is essential, not only as a recognition of His prevenience, but to ensure that our mission work follows His lead.
2. **There will be a sense of urgency to our work.** The King is returning to consummate the kingdom, and we are to be preparing for His return.
3. **We will avoid becoming self-centred, as individuals, and as churches.** Our thoughts will be preoccupied with bringing those who do not know Christ as Lord into the kingdom of the loving and merciful God.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Scherer, "Church, Kingdom, and *Missio Dei*", p. 84.

⁷⁷ Braaten, "The Triune God", p. 425.

⁷⁸ These three points are taken from Paul G. Hiebert, "Evangelism, Church, and Kingdom", in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993, p. 160.

Repentance

This last point leads to an issue of vital importance in a correct understanding of kingdom and mission. Jesus' opening proclamation (Mark 1:15; Matt 4:17) not only announced the kingdom, but declared that repentance was necessary to enter into it. Wherever the church proclaims the reign of God, that declaration must include a call to repentance and conversion.⁷⁹ Unbelievers belong to the kingdom of the world/devil, which is opposed to God's kingdom.⁸⁰ There must, by necessity, be a change of allegiance for those who wish to enter the kingdom of God.⁸¹ This repentance is more than just a change of allegiance, though. In the context of Western culture, it is a call to leave the misery and futility of selfish individualism, and enter into the joy of Trinitarian fellowship.⁸² From a Melanesian perspective, it is a call to leave the fear and destructiveness of animism, and enjoy the protective power of the Triune God, who created all things, defeated death, is actively engaged in battle with the forces of the other kingdom, and will ultimately be victorious in restoring all creation under His rule.

Mission and Social Responsibility

Because the kingdom of God is the mission of the Triune God, it is concerned with the whole of reality, and it is through each member of the Trinity that the kingdom reaches every community and every person.⁸³

The mission of the church is a continuation of the mission of Jesus, who inaugurated the kingdom. The church must reflect the values of the kingdom. In the early church, this was seen, not only in the preaching of the gospel, but in signs and wonders, and in a radical kingdom lifestyle (Acts 2:42-44; 4:32-37). Through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, the early church began to taste the reality of the kingdom, and be a credible sign of the kingdom. As the community of the kingdom, indwelt by the Spirit, the church is obviously called to impact every area of life. The church is not only to proclaim Jesus as Lord, but to do the

⁷⁹ Senior, and Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations for Mission*, p. 146.

⁸⁰ Vicedom, *Mission of God*, p. 32.

⁸¹ Castro, *Freedom in Mission*, pp. 61, 68.

⁸² G. Mar Osthathios, "The Holy Trinity", p. 2.

⁸³ Castro, *Freedom in Mission*, pp. 66, 68.

good works, prepared in advance for her by God (Eph 2:10). Social action is, thus, not something to be tacked on to the “real” work of mission, but is an integral part of living in the kingdom.⁸⁴

There must be caution here. McQuilkin rightly warns that if social action is given the same emphasis as evangelism, then history shows that the former will crowd out the latter.⁸⁵ This, however, is more likely the result of ignoring the need for a call to repentance, which often occurs in programmes of social action.

The nature of the kingdom of God, as an expression of God’s ultimate kingship over the whole creation, demands that social responsibility be an integral part of mission. In the kingdom, word and deed are united. The gospel is the good news of the kingdom, and good works are signs of the kingdom.⁸⁶

Humanity’s greatest need is to be redeemed from sin, and brought into the kingdom of God, through an encounter with Jesus. The gospel is the story of how this need has been met, and so, it must be widely, and openly, proclaimed.⁸⁷ Sadly, this need is not always felt by unbelievers, and, instead, other needs are given priority, for example, nutrition, health, etc. However, because God’s kingship is universal, these needs are also enveloped by the kingdom, and so, the Holy Spirit is able to use the meeting of these needs as a demonstration of God’s kingly power.⁸⁸ Any social action, therefore, if conducted in an understanding of the kingdom, is not in competition against evangelism, but partner with it.

⁸⁴ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, pp. 191-193.

⁸⁵ J. Robertson McQuilkin, “An Evangelical Assessment of Mission Theology of the Kingdom of God”, in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 176-177.

⁸⁶ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, p. 197.

⁸⁷ Avery Dulles has a helpful chapter on the church as herald of the kingdom, discussing both the strengths and weaknesses of an emphasis on gospel proclamation in missions. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Dublin Ire: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, pp. 76-88.

⁸⁸ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, p. 198.

Dialogue in Mission

Dialogue is valuable, not simply because of the pluralistic world, in which we live, but because it can remove prejudice and misunderstanding between adherents of differing faiths.⁸⁹ However, in the face of the prevailing radical theocentrism of people such as Paul Knitter and John Hick, the Trinitarian understanding of God must be guarded, as the way, in which the Christian speaks of God.⁹⁰

Newbigin echoes this thought, suggesting that “the Trinity provides us with the true grammar of dialogue”.⁹¹ From this he posits the following:

1. God is the Father of all humanity, and so, we share a common nature with those of other faiths, with whom we enter into dialogue. We meet them at a particular place in time and history that is under the Father’s providence and rule.
2. We take part in the dialogue, as members of the body of Christ, who have been sent into the world by the Father to continue the mission of Jesus. Like Jesus, we must identify with those to whom we are sent, yet remain obedient to the King.
3. We participate in dialogue, believing that the Holy Spirit is able to sovereignly use what is said, to glorify Jesus and bring conversion.⁹²

Dialogue is also valuable, because it encourages us to cast our nets wider, reflecting the inclusive nature of the kingdom. The invitation to enter the kingdom is to be given to all the nations (Matt 28:18-20), and this is reflected in Jesus’ use of the messianic banquet theme, and the Gentiles’ favourable response to it (Matt 8:11; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Luke 14:1, 15-24; 15:6, 9, 22-24; 22:16, 28-30). This is seen by some as a

⁸⁹ Verkuyl, “The Biblical Notion of the Kingdom”, p. 78.

⁹⁰ Braaten, “The Triune God”, p. 420.

⁹¹ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 183.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 183-187; this conversion may be in both the unbeliever and the Christian. The Holy Spirit may well use the dialogue to profoundly change believers, and bring them into a richer relationship with the Father.

corrective to the motif of eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Zion. The Gentiles come to Zion, not in subjugation, but to share fully in the joy of the kingdom.⁹³

Unity

The attitude of non-cooperation, competitiveness, and divisiveness that exists in some regions between mission organisations, as members of the church, is unacceptable within God's kingdom. The unity of the church is based on the Trinity (Eph 4:4-6).⁹⁴ The Trinity is a community of divine persons, existing in unity. This divine community in unity, established and maintained by love, constitutes the plan for humanity.⁹⁵ The church, as participant in the mission of God, is to display the unity, which is a "prefigurement of the unity of humankind, which God is working to bring about".⁹⁶ Thus, failure on the church's part to display unity is an abrogation of the divine intention, a denial of the triune nature of God, and irreconcilable with the proclamation of the kingdom.

It almost goes without saying that a lack of unity invariably arises from a lack of holiness on the church's part. The church must constantly strive to imitate her Lord, so as to avoid this, and other hindrances to her witness.

Optimistic View of History

In light of this, it is reassuring to note that the teaching of Jesus displayed a positive, hopeful view of history.⁹⁷ Conzelmann contends that the parables of growth, told by Jesus, are not so much to do with the way the kingdom grows, as with the assured harvest, and, therefore, speak of the final triumph of God's Lordship.⁹⁸ Elsewhere, in

⁹³ Senior, and Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations for Mission*, p. 153.

⁹⁴ Braaten, "The Triune God", p. 424.

⁹⁵ Castro, *Themes in Theology and Mission*, p. 135.

⁹⁶ Braaten, "The Triune God", p. 424.

⁹⁷ Senior, and Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations for Mission*, pp. 155-156.

⁹⁸ Hans Conzelmann, *Jesus*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1973, pp. 74-81.

apocalyptic discourses, such as Mark 13, Jesus displays the conviction that the coming of the kingdom will mean victory over evil and death.⁹⁹

Conclusion

This theme of hope is a worthwhile one on which to conclude. The kingdom of God originates in the Father; Christ initiated it in history, and the Holy Spirit is here to carry forward its consummation, until its final fulfilment when Christ returns.¹⁰⁰ The Trinitarian basis of the kingdom means that it is not a vague, unknown entity, nor is it an ethereal dream. The kingdom of God has come, and is coming, because its full and final establishment is the goal of the Triune God.

For the church, this is cause for celebration, and reason for hope. God's motivation for His mission is love (John 3:16). The Christian knows that this love is all-conquering, and so, in turn, God's love motivates the Christian to hope that sharing this love will bring conversion, and entry, into the kingdom. This hope leads Christians to believe that they can change the world, and so, they go out into the world, as God's agents of transformation, participating in God's work of restoring all of creation under His rule.¹⁰¹

Emilio Castro summarises this well:

The kingdom of God is . . . the historical manifestation of His trinitarian love. God is in command; He speaks; He preserves; He purifies; He will judge; He will complete. . . . As a priestly people, fulfilling our vocation, we obey our calling, by pointing to Jesus the King, in whose life every life can find a new beginning.¹⁰²

And so we pray, "Come Lord Jesus".

⁹⁹ Senior, and Stuhlmüller, *Biblical Foundations for Mission*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁰ G. Mar Osthathios, "The Holy Trinity", p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Charles Van Engen, "Faith, Love, and Hope", in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 260-261.

¹⁰² Castro, *Freedom in Mission*, p. 88.

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THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Russell Thorp

Russell Thorp is a New Zealander, who was born in Papua New Guinea. He holds a Bachelor of Ministries from the Bible College of New Zealand. He is currently teaching at the Christian Leaders' Training College.

Introduction

Christian education, at its best, will help persons to worship the one true God in all God's totality and splendour. Education for mission, or for whatever task God gives us in extending His kingdom, is ultimately to bring glory to Him.

Theology is arrived at in the process of Christian education, or formation. Christian education would not be "Christian" without theology. We cannot separate one from the other. Thus, the theological foundations of Christian education are significant, in that our knowledge about God, and His dealings with His creation, including human beings, are central to the way we go about teaching, learning, and living as Christians.

In this essay, we explore the doctrine of the Trinity, and its relationship to Christian education. In doing so, a brief survey of some more-recent Christian education texts will be carried out, to see their treatment of the subject. The biblical basis for Trinitarian foundations in education will be looked at. A social view of the Trinity is offered as the basis of a Trinitarian foundation in education. Interaction is shown to take place between the Trinity and the three essential elements of education: content, persons, and context, or community. All education is grounded in the authority of God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Recent Texts

Some of the more-recent texts were examined to see if Trinitarian doctrine was used as a basis for "a theology of Christian education", or even as a theological foundation for educational method. Texts examined include De

Wolf's *Teaching Our Faith in God*,¹ Richards' *A Theology of Christian Education*,² Miller's *Story and Context*,³ Gangel and Hendricks' *The Christian Educator's Handbook On Teaching*,⁴ Johnson's *Christian Spiritual Formation*,⁵ Seymour and Miller's *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*,⁶ Habermas and Issler's *Teaching for Reconciliation*,⁷ and Robert Pazmino's trilogy of Christian education texts.⁸

All of the writers mentioned have made significant contributions to Christian education. However, few found a basis, or theological foundation, in a doctrine of the Trinity. De Wolf's book is based on a Trinitarian approach to Christian education. He emphasises the doctrine of the Trinity, because he believes it acts as a "theological corrective", an outline, summarising the message of the Bible, and because it provides "some especially important clues for the philosophy and method of Christian education".⁹

Between De Wolf (1963) and Pazmino (1988), few have shown genuine interest in linking the doctrine of the Trinity with Christian education. Richards says that "we cannot have an adequate Christian education without attending to, and fostering, the development of the kind of relationships, which scripture describes as appropriate within Christ's body".¹⁰ Richards' emphasis on interpersonal relationships is important. However, it is not given a theological foundation that links it with the

¹ Harold L. De Wolf, *Teaching our Faith in God*, New York NY: Abingdon Press, 1963.

² Lawrence O. Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1975.

³ Donald E. Miller, *Story and Context*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1987.

⁴ Kenneth O. Gangel, and Howard G. Hendricks, *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Teaching*, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1988.

⁵ Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1989.

⁶ Jack L. Seymour, and Donald E. Miller, *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1990.

⁷ Ronald Habermas, and Klaus Issler, *Teaching for Reconciliation*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1992.

⁸ Robert W. Pazmino, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1988; *Principles and Practices of Christian Education*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1992; *By What Authority Do We Teach?*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1994.

⁹ De Wolf, *Teaching our Faith in God*, pp. 55-58.

¹⁰ Richards, *Theology of Christian Education*, p. 315.

doctrine of the Trinity, especially the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity, which flows out to creation and humanity.

Surprisingly, Habermas and Issler's book, which is about "Teaching for Reconciliation", also lacks any real development of Trinitarian theology, as a foundation for this approach to Christian education. One would expect some significant use of Trinitarian doctrine in this approach, as reconciliation is truly a Trinitarian affair, involving God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Robert Pazmino does use the doctrine of the Trinity as a theological foundation to Christian education. In his book, *Principles and Practices of Christian Education*, he links the doctrine of the Trinity to the educational trinity of content, persons, and context.¹¹ Again, in his book, *By What Authority Do We Teach?*, he suggests a Trinitarian understanding of Christian education, founded on the Trinity, by suggesting God the Father as educator, Jesus as exemplar, and the Holy Spirit as tutor.¹²

Biblical Analysis

Is there substance to a claim that there should be Trinitarian foundations for Christian education? An examination of Old Testament texts to do with teaching or learning reveals that "the Lord God" is the One who teaches,¹³ or is the One to learn from. The "law" is often referred to as a teacher (Ps 119:99). These reflect the centrality of the Hebrew concept of "one God". However, Judg 13 says that "*the angel of the Lord* teaches Manoah and his wife". Job says, "I thought, 'age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom'. But it is the *spirit* (Spirit) in a man, the *breath of the Almighty*, that gives him understanding" (Job 32:7-8). Even in the Old Testament, then, through the use of personification and anthropomorphism, there was an understanding that God's activity went beyond a transcendent, static state of affairs to a more immanent, dynamic involvement of His being within the very lives of those who sought Him.

It is not until the New Testament that the revelation and activity of God is described in a pervasive Trinitarian pattern. While both the Old and New

¹¹ Pazmino, *Principles and Practices*, pp. 23ff.

¹² Pazmino, *By What Authority*, pp. 21ff.

¹³ Ex 4:12, 15; 18:20; Lev 10:11; Deut 4:9; 11:19; Is 2:3; Mic 4:2.

Testaments affirm that there is only one God (Deut 6:4, Mark 12:29-30), a Trinitarian understanding of the reality of God is mapped out in the history of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

New Testament texts to do with teaching, or learning, reflect the Trinitarian understanding of the reality of God. John 14:26 says "But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will *teach* you all things, and remind you of everything I have said to you". The Triune God is involved in the educational process.¹⁴ Paul reminds the Corinthian readers of the triune work of the one God in relation to the activation of gifts: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone".¹⁵ The "great commission", given by Jesus in Matt 28:19-20, is not only a statement about mission, if mission is seen as going out to convert people to Christ. Mission, in this passage, includes discipling, baptising, and teaching: all carried out within a Trinitarian context that is revealed in the history of salvation.¹⁶ Christian education has a theological foundation, which is Trinitarian.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Tertullian invented the word "Trinity", when he described God as one substance (ουσία = ousia), or essence, in three persons (ὑπόστασις = hypostasis). *Hypostasis* is the Greek word Tertullian translated into Latin as *persona*. "It is quite possible that Tertullian wanted his readers to understand the idea of 'one substance, three persons' to mean that the one God played three distinct yet related, roles in the great drama of human redemption."¹⁷

Two different emphases, in the understanding of the Trinity, began to emerge. Tertullian, Augustine, and the Western tradition, sought to

¹⁴ Note also John 15:26.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 12:4-6.

¹⁶ This is the "economy" of salvation, in which the Father, Son, and Spirit are active (the economic Trinity). However, the ground of this activity is in the depths of the divine being (the immanent Trinity). See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III*, 2nd edn, 1975, pp. 384-489.

¹⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, Oxford UK: Basil Blackwell, 1994, pp. 249-250.

discover the Trinity in the *unity* of God, interpreting the relation of the three persons in terms of their mutual fellowship.¹⁸ The Cappadocian Fathers and the Eastern tradition were more concerned with God's *relational "threeness"*. In emphasising the "distinct individuality of the three persons", they safeguarded "their unity, by stressing the fact that both the Son and the Spirit derived from the Father".¹⁹

The *modern view*²⁰ of the Trinity starts with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, living in eternal perichoresis, being one in the others, through the others, with the others, and for the others:

The unity of the Trinity means the union of the three Persons, by virtue of their perichoresis, and eternal communion. Since this union is eternal, and infinite, we can speak of one God. This interpretation runs the risk of being seen as tritheism. We follow this current: first, because it starts from the *datum* of faith-existence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as distinct, and in communion; second, because it allows a better understanding of the universe and human society, as a process of communication, communion, and union, through the interpenetration of creatures with one another (perichoresis).²¹

The modern view of the Trinity is a better starting point to understand Trinitarian doctrine, as a foundation for Christian education, because it is a more-dynamic understanding of God that heightens the value of persons, while underlining the importance of community and relationships, as formative agents in the education. "God is not a solitary monad, but free, self-communicating love. God is not the supreme will-to-power over others, but the supreme will-to-community, in which power and love are

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ There are also two other classic currents of thought that seek to deepen an understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity: Greek and Latin. We do not have space to explore these. See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Paul Burns, tran., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 234, for a good summary.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

shared”.²² The importance of a dynamic Trinitarian understanding of God has application to epistemology, and, thus, to education:

we could say that the basis of our epistemology is a concrete relation, a kind of knowledge by acquaintance. In place of the information processing model, we have quite the opposite: a claim that, primarily in worship, but in other relations as well, the Christian community is brought to the Father by the Spirit, through the Son.²³

If we are to continue to bring out the significance of the modern doctrine of the Trinity for Christian education, we need to ask, “What is Christian education?” Susanne Johnson’s summary is a good one:

Christian education is ministry that helps the church immerse believers in the many forms of spiritual discipline (worship), reflect upon their meaning (praxis), and integrate them into their lives, as skills or aspects of Christian character (instruction).²⁴

Essentially, Christian education is a relational activity, carried out with the three essential educational elements of content, persons, and the context of community or society. When these are understood in relation to God’s entire Trinitarian revelation, they become a guide to the thought and practice of Christian education, affirming God as the dynamic centre of life and of education.²⁵ As such, God is seen to interact as Father – the source of all truth and content; as Son – being an example of true personhood, learning and teaching, redeeming and transforming humans, through their faith in Him; as Holy Spirit, in being the formative agent, building and sustaining community, the context of Christian education.²⁶

²² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 63.

²³ Colin Gunton, “Knowledge and Culture”, in *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, Hugh Montefiore, ed., London UK: A. R. Mowbray, 1992, p. 97 (pp. 84-102).

²⁴ Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation*, pp. 138-139.

²⁵ Pazmino, *Principles and Practices*, p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

God as Father – the Source of all Truth and Content in Christian Education

All knowledge and wisdom comes ultimately from the Father, as the creator and sustainer of all things. This is the case with creation, and all general revelation, as it is with God, as revealed to us in Christ and the Spirit, in special revelation. God, as Father, is responsible for sending the Word to the world in the incarnate Christ. This Word becomes the objective content of the message that Christians are empowered by the Spirit to learn, obey, and teach, taking it to the world, in order to extend the kingdom of God.

As creator, God is responsible for creating human beings in the image of God. As such, human beings were created to be sons and daughters of God, who, by the work of the Spirit, are able to be in relationship with God, calling God “Father”(Rom 8:15-17). An emphasis on autonomy ignores a dependency on God, and an interdependency with other persons, and the created world. God as Father has “initiated efforts to be in communion with persons”,²⁷ through His sending of the Son into the world, and of the Spirit through the Son. What we do in Christian education should equip persons to respond to God. The realities of sin need to be dealt with. Evangelism is very much a part of Christian education. Just as the Father has sent the Son, and, through the Son, the Spirit into the world, so He sends us.

God, the Creator or Father, has also placed humans in a created world, as an arena for “personal creativity, social cooperation, and harmony”.²⁸ As part of the creation mandate given to humanity, we are to care for nature as God’s stewards. Christian education needs to reflect this concern for the intrapersonal dimension of persons in society.

God, the Creator or Father, is the source of all truth and content. As such, He is also the source of our authority as educators. Without potential for relationship, there would be no authority. God’s authority has been passed on to us through Christ, who has asked us to make disciples, baptise, and teach, in the name of the *Father*, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19-20). It

²⁷ Pazmino, *Foundational Skills*, p. 60.

²⁸ Todd H. Speidell, “A Trinitarian Ontology of Persons in Society”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), p. 298.

is God, as Father, that activates the different varieties of gifts, services, and activities, in which His people are involved (1 Cor 12:4-6).

The word of God is central, as the objective authoritative content of Christian education. However, as truth and knowledge are obtainable from creation (Rom 1:19-20), Christian education should not neglect what can be learned from the natural, created order. Educators can facilitate responsive communion with God, by valuing persons, as God's image-bearers, and by promoting dependency on God, and interdependency with other persons and the created world. Models of Christian educational method and philosophy need to include the above as goals or objectives. Conscious dependence is needed on God as Father. He is the One, from whom ultimate authority comes, and He is also the One, who activates all our human attempts at serving and glorifying Him.

God the Son, the Example of True Personhood

The use of the word "person" has become synonymous with "individual" today. However, the word "individual" bears the concept of separateness, thus distorting the modern perception of the meaning of "person". "Person" should be, and is, used in this paper to emphasise "the capacity and need of the individual to find expression in relationship".²⁹

While the emphasis in this section is on the Son, it needs to be remembered that "the Father is, and, indeed, must be, the principle of the unity of being in the Trinity. The Son and the Spirit receive their divine being from Him. Each is, therefore, fully divine, and indwells the others in mutual relationships".³⁰ Thompson calls this "being in communion", and draws the concept together by suggesting:

that the three persons are ontologically one in their being and relationships, and, as such, constitute the divine unity. Moreover,

²⁹ Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1993, p. 238. Bray calls for a preservation of this meaning of "person" today. He devotes several pages to this discussion.

³⁰ John Thompson, "Modern Trinitarian Perspectives", in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44 (1991), p. 143.

each shares in the divine being, in the distinctive work of the others, and, in these ways, also exhibit God's unity.³¹

Thus, though we are dividing up the work of God into that of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are talking of the work of one God, whose very being is grounded in personal relationship.

The Son appeared as a person: one who was able to live life fully as a person. The Son was no less a true person, in giving up His personal privileges,³² and He was no less God, in His humility (Phil 2:1-5). As an example of true personhood, the Son redeems and transforms all those who come to Him through faith, regardless of ethnic, social, or lifestyle background. Christ's person and work "has a particular connection with the second element of education, namely, persons".³³

The church can be a:

model for society, when it reflects . . . the perichoresis of God's being: the giving and receiving of free communion between Father, Son, and Spirit."³⁴ Jesus prays for all believers to indwell the mutual love and knowledge and fellowship of Father and Son, as the ground for their unity, and as a witness to the world (John 17:20ff).³⁵

Christian educators need to work out ways, in which their content, persons, and context facilitate the church towards being the perichoretic model that Speidell suggests it should be. If Christian education promotes individualism, concentrating on "self-help" methods and "self-improvement", it is in danger of denying humanity to those who cannot get on so well on their own. On the other hand, if Christian education overemphasises uniformity, there is a danger in denying the differences necessary for genuine community.

Christian educators should be genuinely concerned for persons, both for others, and for themselves as teachers. Christian education is to be an

³¹ Ibid., p. 144.

³² Though he did not give up His divine attributes.

³³ Pazmino, *Principles and Practices*, p. 24.

³⁴ Speidell, "Trinitarian Ontology", p. 283.

³⁵ Ibid.

interpersonal transaction. “Whereas conservative Christians have stood for the truth, they have not always exemplified Christian love, in concern for a diversity of persons.”³⁶ Issues of race, gender, justice, and peace are not high on the Christian educator’s agenda. However, Jesus was concerned about these issues. Jesus says we are to love our enemies (Matt 5:43-48). We are not to judge (Matt 7:1-6). Jesus welcomes little children (Mark 10:13-16). Jesus allows a sinful woman to anoint Him (Luke 7:36-49). Jesus’ acceptance of all, especially the oppressed, is seen in His teaching on social relationships (Luke 14:1-14). Jesus’ shows willingness to speak to, and receive, water from a Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26). There are many more examples.

How are we addressing these societal concerns within the church in our Sunday School classes and youth groups? A more searching question is: how do Christian educators address these issues, when they arise in their midst? Teachers are called to seriously consider those whom they teach, being sensitive to “the felt and real needs of students, to their learning styles, and to appropriate responses at teachable moments in their lives”.³⁷ Christian educators should see themselves as persons in relationship with other persons bringing about growth in relationship, both with one another and with God (1 Thess 2:8; 1 Tim 4:12b, 16).

Jesus, the Example for Christian Education

Firstly, Jesus was one who could teach with authority (Matt 7:28-29),³⁸ because His words and authority were from the Father.³⁹ He taught only what the Father instructed Him to teach. As educators faithfully study and then teach the scriptures, they communicate the words of the Lord to others. Christian educators are part of a divine chain of communication from God the Father, to God the Son, through God the Spirit, to the teacher (by revealed truths in the Bible), and to the students.⁴⁰ Jesus possessed an innate knowledge of what others were thinking.⁴¹ Educators can study their

³⁶ Pazmino, *Principles and Practices*, p. 136.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See also Luke 4:16-21, 22, 32; Mark 1:27; 6:2; 10:24; 11:19; 19:48; Matt 7:28; 19:25; 22:22.

³⁹ Matt 28:18; John 5:27; 17:2.

⁴⁰ John 17:8.

⁴¹ John 1:47-48; 2:24-25; 4:18.

students, seeking to know the characteristics of the age group they teach, and seeking to know them as persons, their backgrounds, characteristics, interests, problems, strengths, and weaknesses. Jesus made unique claims about Himself and His teaching,⁴² giving many commands to groups and persons – imperatives to follow Him, His example, and His teachings.⁴³ Christian educators can lead others to this One, whose claims are demanding and absolute, and to the scriptures, which faithfully record them. They can encourage students to know and obey the commands of Christ.

Jesus fully represented the Godhead in His earthly ministry, and exercised an authority that uniquely disclosed God. In this plenipotentiary role, Jesus was able to fulfil the purposes of God for the salvation of humankind and all creation. Therefore, in His teaching, a distinct authority was incarnated that called for the response of His hearers.⁴⁴

Jesus said, “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me” (Matt 11:29). There is much that we can learn from the example of Jesus. While we do not have the space to analyse all the qualities that marked Jesus as an outstanding teacher,⁴⁵ we will look at some of them.

We observe Jesus as a balanced, mature person. As the Son of God, He was, indeed, spiritually mature. Luke 20:40 says that, as a growing child, Jesus “grew and became strong, He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him”. Here we see physical, mental, and spiritual development. As He grew into His teens, He “grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men” (Luke 2:52). Here, we see continued development, with the emphasis on relationships. Jesus grew as a person, as One in relationship with others, and the scriptures suggest He was more and more highly esteemed and loved by those who knew Him. If teachers learn from Jesus’ example, they will strive, through the empowering Spirit

⁴² Mark 8:38; John 5:24; 15:7. Note also the “I am” claims in John 6; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9; 11:25.

⁴³ Mark 1:25; 3:12; Luke 18:40; John 13:34; 14:15, 21; 15:10, 12, 14, 17.

⁴⁴ Pazmino, *By What Authority Do We Teach?*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Some of these characteristics are: maturity, mastery, humility, consistency, spontaneity, variety, empathy, intimacy, sensitivity, and relevance.

of God, to have balanced personalities – to be growing mentally, spiritually, and socially.

Jesus was noted as a great teacher. However, He did not follow a set curriculum that meant He had to set aside a special time each day for His learners. Though He knew what He wanted to communicate, and He often gave lengthy discourses, many times His lessons came as “teachable moments”, as unplanned, spontaneous occasions, when the teaching was determined by the situations that came up.⁴⁶ LeBar makes the observation that “just about half the teaching incidents in the gospels were initiated by the learners themselves. . . . How much easier it is to teach, when our pupils begin a lesson! When they begin, we may be assured of their interest, attention, and personal involvement.”⁴⁷ Just as Jesus was flexible, treating individuals as persons, by being open, and listening to questions and issues that arose, so teachers, today, can learn to be more flexible. The use of informal teaching sessions, and a willingness to discuss personal inquiries out of class settings, would be a start in modelling Jesus’ spontaneous teaching style.

Another quality that highlighted Jesus’ teaching ministry was the quality of intimacy. He was close to His disciples, spending extended periods of time with them alone. This was one of the reasons that Jesus had called them to follow Him, “that they might be with Him” (Mark 3:14). Interestingly, after Jesus had ascended to heaven, and His followers began their ministry as apostles, the Jewish leaders noted the courage of Peter and John, realising “that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). What characterised Jesus’ teaching was the amount of interaction He had with those He taught, both in formal and informal situations. The quality of intimacy should mark Christian education just as it was a mark of Jesus’ teaching.

⁴⁶ There are many situations like this. For example: The question by Peter on the extent of forgiveness (Matt 18:21) was followed by the teaching of Jesus, given in the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:22-35). Matt 19:16, followed by 19:28-30; Matt 20:20-21, followed by 20:24-28; etc.

⁴⁷ Lois E. LeBar, *Education That is Christian*, Westwood NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1958, p. 81.

Pazmino suggests that Jesus is the exemplar, or mentor, the model, or master teacher, “who, in His person, exemplifies all that a teacher should be in his relationships with his disciples or students”.⁴⁸ Jesus’ teaching was so effective, because of His perichoretic relationship with the Father and the Spirit, which overflowed into His relationships with humanity. When our personalities, as Christian educators, reflect the Lord of life (God as Father), and the Word of Christ dwells in us richly, in all wisdom, and the Spirit of God is working through us, people will come to us, as they did to Jesus, and we shall find teaching most thrilling and fruitful.⁴⁹

God the Holy Spirit, who Builds and Sustains the Context of Christian Education

God, as the Spirit, can be seen as sustainer, the formative agent in the birthing of the Christian community, the church, at Pentecost.⁵⁰ The Spirit continues to bring life and transformation to faith communities, and the restraining of that which opposes spiritual growth. Thus, the Holy Spirit can be connected with the third necessary educational element: the context of the community or society.

There is a danger of conveying an inadequate view of the relationship of the Spirit with God the Son. Pneumatology can tend to be subordinated to Christology. When anyone of the persons is less than the others, or simply a relation on the others, “it tends to blur the distinctive character of the Spirit”, and questions the viability of the Trinity, if the third person of the Trinity is more obscure than the other two.⁵¹ Thompson suggests this difficulty can be overcome if:

we look at the economy of salvation, and move from there to the immanent Trinity. In the economy, the Holy Spirit is the One who brings a community, the church, into being. In this way, He acts as Lord, and is known as the personal presence of God with and in us.

⁴⁸ Pazmino, *By What Authority Do We Teach?*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Lois E. LeBar, and James E. Pluddemann, *Education that is Christian*, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1989, p. 92.

⁵⁰ Pazmino, *Principles and Practices*, p. 24.

⁵¹ Thompson, “Modern Trinitarian Perspectives”, p. 152.

In this way, the Holy Spirit has a distinct personal existence, being the union, communion, and goal of all three persons of the Trinity.⁵²

It is this work of the Holy Spirit that enables participation in the faith community to be a means of grace. “The ecclesia is built up by all the other means of grace we practice, such as the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, searching the scriptures, prayer, meditation, confession, repentance, works of mercy, and other spiritual disciplines.”⁵³ This grace is available, because of the work of Christ (not our works), and is extended to us by the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, all that Christian education seeks to do, as it places itself under the authority of God, will be given life and relevance by the Holy Spirit.

The authority of the Holy Spirit in teaching can be looked at in relation to the authoritative Word of God. The Word of God is creative, living, and written. “The living Word is a person, and the living Word’s ministry is in relation to the persons engaged in authoritative teaching.”⁵⁴ The Holy Spirit brings the Word of God to the church, the community of God’s people, through His inspiration of the scriptures, and then His illumination of the Word, within the context of the learner. The experience of those, who hear and receive this Word, is one of joy (Luke 8:13; Mark 4:16). This is a joy given by the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:6).

The Holy Spirit is the ultimate teacher or tutor,⁵⁵ the counsellor, who sustains the life of the Christian community, and the wider society, in ways that fulfil God’s purposes. Human teachers (Eph 4:11-12) are in addition to the Spirit, not a substitute for Him. As the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), He is the Source of truth, the Revealer of truth, and the Applier of truth (17:17).⁵⁶ As such, Christian education needs divine enabling, in order to be effective. The Holy Spirit extends the work of the Triune God, who is forever relational, by making the Word of God effectual in students’ lives (John 10:25; 12:47-48; Acts 7:57-59). It is not

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Johnson, “Education in the Image of God”, p. 136.

⁵⁴ Pazmino, *By What Authority Do We Teach?*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Pazmino’s expression, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Roy B. Zuck, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Teaching”, in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook*, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1988, p. 35.

enough to pour knowledge into people's heads, if the goal of Christian education is to know God and to glorify Him.

As the Word of God regenerates lives (Ps 19:7; Rom 10:17; James 1:18), the Holy Spirit removes spiritual blindness, and gives eternal life (John 3:5-7; Tit 3:5). Both the Word of God and the Spirit of God bring about spiritual transformation in the teaching/learning process. "Christian educators are called to be responsive to the teaching of the Holy Spirit, and to recognise that the Spirit guides persons 'into all Truth' " (John 16:13).⁵⁷

As we see the triune God at work, in the context of Christian education, namely the community, we must note that:

The church, as a community of persons, who reflect the tension and balance of the tripersonal God, must avoid mathematical and impersonal models of community that opt for either unity or diversity. Modalistic ideas of God parallel an overemphasis on unity: integrated churches (or schools) that often fail to appreciate the particularity of one's background (unity as uniformity). . . . Tritheistic notions of God parallel an overemphasis on diversity.⁵⁸

Speidell goes on to suggest that the church has an opportunity to become mediating communities, where unity exists within diversity,⁵⁹ thus, persons are able to live fully as Christians, without relegating their Christian faith to the private domain of life.

As part of the church's mission, Christian education can reflect the triune God in society by:

questioning depersonalising models of human relations that simply opt for unity or diversity, individualism or collectivism, integration or separation. In pointing the world toward more personal relations in society, the church may reflect the very being of the triune God.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Pazmino, *Principles and Practices*, p. 26.

⁵⁸ Speidell, "Trinitarian Ontology", p. 293.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 298-299.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

In all of this, God's personal relationship with the educator, through His Spirit, and His empowering of the ministry of Christian education, is essential for effectiveness.

Concluding Comments

All three persons of the Trinity must be seen as working cooperatively, and in concert, in the task of Christian education (1 Cor 12:4-6). A Trinitarian approach to education affirms that it is important to teach God's revelation to persons, in the context of their community and society, thus bringing about transformation.

With a Trinitarian foundation, Christian education is seen to be a relational, interpersonal affair that seeks to bring glory to God the Father, through Christ the Son, by the Holy Spirit. As such, Christian education is seen as part of the mission, to which Christ has assigned all Christians. God, in Christ, seeks to reconcile us to Himself, and us to each other, through the power of His Spirit. The potential for reconciliation has been effected, because the triune God exists in relationship, ever seeking to increase the scope of His interpersonal relationships to include persons, who reflect the wholeness of His own being.

“Christian education is ministry that helps persons form their self-awareness as beings created in the image of God. Such participation is not individualistic or private. It is communal”.⁶¹

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⁶¹ Johnson, “Education in the Image of God”, p. 137.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AS A BASIS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Philip Tait

Philip Tait is a New Zealander, who taught at the Christian Leaders' Training College. He holds a Bachelor of Ministries from the Bible College of New Zealand. He is currently preparing to take up a teaching role in Ethiopia.

Introduction

This essay is concerned with the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity, as a basis for understanding spiritual growth.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the way of understanding God's revelation to us as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is the belief that the one true God is a community of three "persons", who are distinct, yet perfectly in union, to the extent that they are one. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the Trinity, and its relevance to Christian life. Many are now seeing the Trinity as the supreme Christian doctrine.¹ There has also been a shift in focus from the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity, which has taken the doctrine from a speculative, and theoretical, inquiry to a more-biblical, and practical, investigation.²

¹ For example, Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* has placed the Trinity in his Prolegomena. Both Wolfhart Pannenberg and Stanley Grenz argue that God's triune nature should be at the centre of our theology. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994, pp. 84, 99.

² See, for example, Leonard Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Paul Burns, tran., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988; Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: the Trinity and Christian Life*, San Francisco CA: Harper & Row, 1991.

The New Testament uses a variety of terms to describe becoming a Christian, and growing as a Christian. Some of the main ones are as follows:

ENGLISH	GREEK	VERSES ³	MEANING
Justify	δικαιῶ <i>dikaioō</i>	Rom 2:13; 3:20; Gal 2:16	Sinners are declared righteous by the Saviour, as an act of the grace of God.
Redeem	ἐξαγοράζω <i>exagoradzō</i>	Gal 3:13; 4:5	To deliver from captivity to sin by the atoning death of Jesus Christ.
Regenerate (rebirth)	παλιγγενεσία <i>palingenesia</i>	Titus 3:5; John 3:5-6	New birth. Divine life is imparted to one dead in sin.
Sanctify	ἁγιάζω <i>hagiadzō</i>	Eph 5:25-26 1 Thess 4:7 1 Peter 1:2	Make holy, with the sense of separating from the sinful practices of the world, and consecration to God's service. ⁴
Transform	μεταμορφῶ <i>metamorphōō</i>	2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19	Change into another form; i.e., change into the image of Christ.
Renew	ἀνακαινῶ <i>anakainōō</i>	Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 4:16; Col 3:10	Discard the old nature, and adoption of the new.
Grow	αὐξάνω <i>auxanō</i>	Eph 4:14-16; 1 Peter 2:2	Natural growth and progress.
Glorification	δοξάζω <i>doxadzō</i>	Rom 5:2; 8:17-18, 30; 1 Thess 1:12; Heb 2:10	Ultimate perfection of believers, having the glory-image, revealed in Jesus Christ, restored.

³ Selected verses only.

⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989, p. 194.

Spiritual growth has often been considered in systematic theology under the heading of sanctification, for which there are a variety of theological views.⁵

Peterson argues that contrasting understandings of sanctification result from inadequately distinguishing the various biblical words used, such as, “sanctify”, “transform”, “renew”, “glorify”, and “become mature”.⁶ It is not the concern of this essay to delimit these terms, but, in looking at the Trinitarian aspect of a Christian’s growth, it is necessary to understand the different ways the Bible describes this. Although “sanctify”, and, to a lesser extent, others of these terms, are sometimes used in a definite and positional sense, it is the progressive meaning of these words, which is of interest here. This essay will mostly use the terms “spiritual growth” or “Christian formation” to encompass the progressive aspect of sanctification, renewal, transformation, and present glorification.

The Beginning of Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth, as the progressive aspect of our spiritual life, presupposes some starting position. Spiritual life must precede spiritual growth: becoming a Christian must precede Christian formation; justification must precede sanctification. One is foundational to the other.

The different aspects of becoming a Christian, and growing as a Christian, are interrelated. Karl Barth sees justification and sanctification as “two different aspects of the one event in salvation”.⁷ Reformed evangelicals, as a whole, see the two as linked. Existential

⁵ This is evidenced by the existence of two books, canvassing the alternative views: Donald L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1988; Melvin E. Dieter, et al, *Five Views on Sanctification*, Stanley N. Gundry, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987.

⁶ David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1995, p. 136. Peterson argues that there is no such thing as progressive sanctification, according to the New Testament, but that the progressive side of Christian life is dealt with, using the words “renew”, “transform”, and “grow”. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-137.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: vol 4: The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Part 2*, G. W. Bromiley, tran., Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1958, p. 503.

holiness follows from the positional holiness, available through the redemptive work of Christ.⁸ Both result from the grace of God, activated by faith.

Conversion is like the foundation, upon which Christian formation is built. Hendrikus Berkhof suggests two models to describe the relationship between justification and sanctification. The first is the fruit of a tree, where a good tree cannot bear bad fruit (Matt 7:18). Hence sanctification is a natural consequence of justification. A second model is a jumping board, where justification launches the believer into the Christian life. Neither of these is satisfactory on its own. Spiritual growth is not just a natural process, but a battle, involving the grace of God, and the will of the individual. The jumping board takes human responsibility seriously, but does not have the sense of justification, as the continued foundation for our life.⁹

Created in the Image of God

God has created humankind in His own image (Gen 1:26-27).¹⁰ The main meaning of “image of God” is now widely understood in terms of relationship.¹¹ Stanley Grenz defines the divine image as the capacity, and need, for fellowship with God, and fellow humans. Our fellowship with God is our response to the special standing we have, as recipients, both of His love, and delegated responsibilities. The divine image, he says, “is fully present only in community”, when we “express the relational dynamic of the God, whose representation we are called to be”.¹²

⁸ Gordon R. Lewis, and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol 1, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994, pp. 184-185.

⁹ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, Sierd Woudstra, rev./tran., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979.

¹⁰ Although creation is appropriately the work of God the Father, the Son, and Spirit are also involved (John 1:3; Col 1:16; Gen 1:2).

¹¹ For example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/1*, J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and H. Knight, trans., Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1958, pp. 184-185. A summary of views on the “image of God” is given in G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1987, pp. 29-32. The idea of the image of God is linked with the creation of human beings as male and female.

¹² Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, pp. 230-232.

The fall, and human sin, have damaged (but not destroyed) the image of God in us, such that we have lost fellowship with God, and can no longer live in harmony with one-another. A biblical concept of spiritual growth is restoring the image of God to its fullness.

In the New Testament, Christ is the image of God,¹³ and the goal becomes perfecting mankind, in the image of Christ.¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

But God does not neglect His lost creature. He plans to recreate His image in man, to recover His first delight in His handiwork . . . but there is only one way to achieve this purpose, and that is for God, out of sheer mercy, to assume the image and form of fallen man. As man can no longer be like the image of God, God must become like the image of man.¹⁵

Conversion and spiritual growth (justification and sanctification) both involve the restoring of God's creation plan for relationship, with God, and with one-another. This is reflected in the Great Commandment:

Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' " (Matt 22:37-39).

Conversion and the Trinity

In God's provision of salvation, we see the Trinity at work. By God's grace, He chose for Himself a people, and gave them His law. The law highlighted man's sin. The love and righteousness of God motivated the provision of salvation by grace. God, the Father, is portrayed as the One, who initiates our salvation. This involves sending the Son, and the Spirit. He is also the One, who calls each person to respond to His saving provision, and live out His will in the world.

¹³ 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3.

¹⁴ See, for example, Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London UK: SCM Press, 1995, pp. 269-270.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, obeyed the call and will of the Father, to the extent of dying for sinful humankind, to provide for their redemption. The Father delegated salvation and judgment to the Son. The Father honoured the Son's obedience, by raising Him from the dead, and giving Him all authority. The saving work of Christ has brought victory over sin, Satan, and death, by which the believer is free to progress in his salvation and Christian life.

It is also by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Word of God became flesh, that He fulfilled His ministry, and was raised to life.¹⁶ The Spirit also inspired the written word, by which the gospel is available to us. The Holy Spirit applies the work of salvation to the believer. He brings conviction of the need for salvation (John 16:8), and enables the believer to acknowledge Christ as Saviour and Lord (1 John 4:2; 1 Cor 12:3). The Holy Spirit seals us into Christ in baptism (Eph 1:13) and brings to completion the divine plan for salvation.

Without seeing the three persons of the Trinity fully involved in our salvation, we would have an inadequate starting point for spiritual growth. To see salvation without the Father is to lack the sense of love and righteousness undergirding God's act to redeem us and God's personal call on our lives. To see salvation, without Christ, is to lack the solid assurance of God's objective provision of a once-for-all sacrifice for our sins. To see salvation, without the Holy Spirit, is to lack the inner enabling, and empowering necessary, for us to have union with God.

The Essence of Spiritual Growth

The redemptive work of God removes the barrier of sin to fellowship with God. Spiritual growth is an ongoing fellowship, and participation with the Triune God. This is not to leave out the aspect of character development (which is dealt with in the next section), but to see participation in the Trinity as primary.

Participation is derived from the New Testament word *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*), meaning "fellowship, sharing, and having everything in

¹⁶ Charles Sherlock, *God on the Inside: Trinitarian Spirituality*, Canberra ACT: Acorn Press, 1991, pp. 112-113.

common with those whom we love”. This is different from Plato’s idea of “partaking of, or participation” (μετέχω = *metechō*) in his theory of forms.

For Plato, a tree is a tree, because it participates in the form of a tree. Likewise, a Christian is a Christian, because he imitates Jesus’ ideals. But, in the New Testament, we are Christians because we participate in Christ’s life and ministry, as part of fellowship with the Trinity.¹⁷

Union with God

The Christian life is described in the New Testament as union, communion, and fellowship with God. Our communion with God is to be with each of the three persons of the Trinity.

God, the Father, has chosen and adopted us as His children, so that we call Him *Abba* (ἀββᾶ) (Gal 4:6-7). We are to us to pray to “Our Father in heaven” (Matt 6:9). We are to live according to the will of the Father.

The Apostle Paul frequently describes the Christian life as being “in Christ”.¹⁸

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him (Col 2:6).

I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (Gal 2:20).

In John’s gospel, the believer is to abide in Christ, meaning to rely on the resources of Christ (John 15:4-7; cf. John 17:19). Union with Christ involves joining with Him in His death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-6). We are to be baptised “into Christ” (Gal 3:27), and share in the sufferings of Christ, as well as His glorification (Rom 8:17). Richard Lovelace asserts that “spiritual life flows out of union with Christ, not

¹⁷ James B. Torrance, “Contemplating the Mystery of Christ”, in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality*, J. I. Packer, and Loren Wilkinson, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1992, p. 150.

¹⁸ For example: Rom 8:1; 12:5; 16:7-10; 1 Cor 1:2, 30; 6:17; 15:22; Eph 1:1-3. The phrase “in Christ” is found eight times in Galatians, 34 times in Ephesians, and 18 times in Colossians. R. David Rightmire, “Union with Christ”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Walter Elwell, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 789.

merely imitation of Christ".¹⁹ Jesus Christ has a continued role as our advocate, in pleading our cause to the Father, and praying for us.²⁰

The Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to dwell in the believer (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:22). He becomes our personal advocate and counsellor (παράκλητος = *paraclete*). We are told to "be filled by the Spirit" (Eph 5:18), not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30), and generally to live in the Spirit (e.g., Gal 5:25; Rom 14:17). It is the fellowship of the Trinity that flows from the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). Some scholars consider the Holy Spirit as the bond of love uniting the Trinity.²¹ The indwelling Holy Spirit allows us to share in the inner life of the Trinity.

At the same time, the Trinity is not working separately, but in unity. To be "in Christ" is to have the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9; 1 Pet 1:11), and also to be in the Father, because God was in Christ (2 Cor 5:19). It is by the Spirit that we can "cry *Abba* (ἄββᾶ), Father" (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15). It is by the Spirit that we are baptised into Christ (Tit 3:5).

The Social View of the Trinity

Whereas the church of the West, since Augustine, has generally held to a unipersonal view of the Trinity, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in the social analogy of the Trinity.²² Starting from the perspective of three persons, the unity is seen in terms of *perichoresis*, meaning interpenetration, or, as Catherine LaCugna defines it, "being-in-

¹⁹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1979, p. 74.

²⁰ See Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1.

²¹ Following Augustine, Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 91. This view tends to undermine the personal attribute of the Holy Spirit.

²² Significant contributions have been made by: Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, Welwyn UK: Nisbet, 1943; Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, V. Green, tran., London UK: Burns & Oates, 1977; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, M. Kohl, tran., London UK: SCM Press, 1981; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, G. W. Bromiley, tran., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991; Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Paul Burns, tran., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988; LaCugna, *God for Us*.

one-another, permeation without confusion”.²³ The three persons of the Trinity share in the life of each other.

Whereas the traditional Eastern view, originating from the Cappadocian Fathers, considered God the Father as the source of Triune life, a “modern view” is proposed, whereby the perichoretic relationship provides the source of the Trinitarian life.²⁴ The idea of *perichoresis* and communion, seen in the Trinity, provides a model for life in the church, and wider society. Clearly, it is also a pattern for our relationship with God. Catherine LaCugna suggests that the Trinitarian life becomes our life.²⁵ This has been criticised as losing the distinction between God and His creatures, and tending toward pantheism.²⁶ Yet, it seems possible to understand communion with God as a participation in the life of the Trinity, while, at the same time, retaining the transcendence and mystery of God.

The perfect love and harmony that exists among the members of the Trinity is available for us to participate in. Jesus prays to His Father that believers might be “in us” (John 17:21), and “that the love You have for Me may be in them, and that I Myself may be in them” (John 17:26). We have been grafted in (Rom 11:17-24) to receive the riches of God, but, also, in some insignificant way, contribute to the life of the Trinity, by our worship.

Participation in the Life and Realm of the Trinity

Susanne Johnson sees participation as the key word in understanding Christian spiritual formation.²⁷ Ray Anderson says:

The inner power of sanctification is relatedness, experienced immediately by Jesus as the *koinōnia* (κοινωνία) that He shares with the Father and the Spirit. The exclusive holiness that

²³ Ibid., p. 271.

²⁴ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 234-235.

²⁵ LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 228.

²⁶ Thomas G. Weinandy. *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity*, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1995, pp. 131-132. Also Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1991, preface to 2nd edn.

²⁷ Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 24.

properly belongs to God alone has opened out into the world, through the incarnation, resurrection, and Pentecost, so that all humanity can share in this *koinōnia* (κοινωνία) of holiness.²⁸

In the Old Testament, we participate in God's reality through covenantal relationship. In the New Testament, God is revealed to us in His trinity, and we are invited to participate in the life of the Trinity. "He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4).

Not only are we to participate in the life of the Trinity, but also in the activity and realm of God. We are to be coworkers with God (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 6:1), and share in the ministry of redemption (2 Cor 5: 18). We are not to participate as slaves, but as sons and daughters (Gal 4:4-7).

The role of the Holy Spirit is twofold: to draw us into the life of the Trinity, and to empower us for ministry in the world (Acts 1:8). Both personal growth and service are part of our Christian formation.

Many Christians focus on one person of the Trinity, as a basis for spiritual growth, mostly either union with Christ, or walking according to the Spirit. This is to lack the sense of participation in the full Trinitarian dynamic. We are grafted, not just into a person, but into the love relationship of the Trinity. Without a focus on God the Father, we lack a sense of transcendence and holiness in our fellowship with God. Without a focus on Jesus Christ, we lack a sense of God's identification with our experiences. Without a focus on the Holy Spirit, we lack a sense of the immanence and love of the Trinity.

Our spiritual growth is, then, a matter of our participation in the life and realm of God. It is mystical, in the sense that it is by God's grace and revelation, and not a result of human effort, through spiritual disciplines.²⁹ Yet, it must be lived out in practice, with an ethical dynamic. Human effort is involved, in the sense of a willing submission

²⁸ Ray S. Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline: A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 76.

²⁹ David Rightmire, "Union with Christ", p. 892.

to what God is doing: yet, like conversion, it is a matter of grace and faith.

Union with God does not mean a loss of individuality, but an enhancing of individual qualities. In the Trinity, diversity is not lost, despite their unity.

Evidences of Spiritual Growth

Participation in the Trinity must have a concrete outworking in the believer's life. With relationship, there come responsibilities. Charles Sherlock puts it this way:

The wonderful privilege of entering "inside" God's life brings with it an awesome responsibility. Those, who have received God's grace, are called to live it out: response means responsibility.³⁰

Our participation in the Trinity is God's gracious provision. We do not earn this place of fellowship with God. Having been grafted in, we are both transformed, and motivated, to exercise our free will responsibly. Spiritual growth involves both human responsibility, and the grace and empowering of God. The Bible's use of various metaphors for spiritual growth shows this balance, as well as the Trinitarian dynamic.

Fruitfulness

Fruitfulness is a biblical image, which illustrates how union with God has an outworking in one's actions and character (Matt 7:16-20; Luke 6:43-44). In John 15:1-16, Christ is pictured as the trunk of the vine, with believers represented by branches. As believers continue to relate closely to Christ, they are able to bear fruit. Apart from Christ, they "can do nothing" (John 15:5). Intimacy with Christ is maintained through obedience (John 15:10).³¹

The same passage in John 15 pictures the Father as the gardener, and, hence, owner of the orchard. The Father prunes not only the shoots that

³⁰ Sherlock, *God on the Inside*, p. 164.

³¹ Lawrence O. Richards, *A Practical Theology of Spirituality*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987, p. 22.

do not bear fruit, but also some which do bear fruit to make the branch even more fruitful (John 15:1-2). In the Old Testament, God is described as the potter, who has the sovereign ability to rework the clay, where there is a flaw in the pot (Jer 18:4).

Good character qualities are also pictured as the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). It is the Holy Spirit that empowers us to live, consistent with our relationship with God.

Sanctification

Biblical references to being sanctified have both a definite and progressive meaning.³² For John Calvin, sanctification consists of mortification and vivification. Mortification is a point in time, when God breaks the dominion of sin, and weakens fleshly desires. Vivification enables the Christian to put on the “new man”.³³ Anthony Hoekema defines sanctification as:

The gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which he delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature, according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to him.³⁴

Sanctification involves the three persons of the Trinity. Jesus prays to His Father, “Sanctify them by the truth, Your word is truth” (John 17:17). We are to live in the context of God’s call on our life (Eph 4:1). God, the Father, also disciplines us, so that we might “share in His holiness” (Heb 12:10).

Yet, it is Jesus, who makes the church holy, “cleansing her by the washing with water through the word” (Eph 5:25-27). It is Jesus, who “purifies for Himself a people” (Tit 2:14; cf. 1 Cor 1:2). Jesus sanctified Himself, so that we might be sanctified (John 17:19), and, hence, has

³² David Peterson, *Possessed by God*, p. 1, has argued convincingly that the biblical use of *sanctified* emphasises a definite event, and that other words are used in relation to the progressive aspects of spiritual growth. This concurs with a Lutheran view of sanctification. However, generally, scholarship sees both the definite and progressive senses combined.

³³ Lewis, and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, pp. 185-186.

³⁴ Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 192.

become the perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2). Jesus became our priest, on “the basis of the power of an indestructible life” (Heb 7:16). Christ has become our holiness (1 Cor 1:30).

We are also sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:16). We have been saved “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and through belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13; cf. 1 Pet 1:2), and “through the washing, and rebirth, and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5). The Counsellor (παράκλητος=*paraclete*) will teach us all things (John 14:26; cf. 16:13).

Christlikeness

Christ provides the model for our character development. “For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Rom 8:29). This happens, both by being transformed into the likeness of Christ,³⁵ and by following the example of Christ.³⁶ Paradoxically, we are to engage our human effort to that which is the gracious and sovereign provision of God. Being conformed to the likeness of Christ is not achieved fully until we are raised to be with Christ (1 John 3:2-3).³⁷ Being transformed has past, present, and future dimensions, which happen in tandem with the present struggle to follow the example of Jesus.

Being restored into the likeness of Christ is the same as having restored in us the image of God that the Father created in us.³⁸ While we are to imitate Christ, Jesus Himself was imitating the Father.

The Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because, whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all He does (John 5:19-20).

³⁵ 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21.

³⁶ Phil 2:15; Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 2:21.

³⁷ Various views of perfection, such as the Wesleyan doctrine, do not hold to complete sinlessness.

³⁸ Michael C. Griffiths, *The Example of Jesus*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, pp. 182-183.

Imitation is Closely Associated with Obedience³⁹

When Jesus was crucified, the 12 disciples were left without a master to follow. Yet, Jesus assures them that it is better that He goes away, so that He can send the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). Through the Holy Spirit, the believer can continue to experience the presence of Jesus, and be instructed in His teaching and ways (John 15:26; Rom 8:9). It is the Holy Spirit's coming on believers at Pentecost that launches them into a new phase of discipleship. The power to be transformed into the likeness of Christ "comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). The Holy Spirit also convicts and awakens us to areas of our life needing growth. "The Spirit searches all things" (1 Cor 2:10).

Other Evidences

These evidences of spiritual growth relate primarily to character development. Other biblical images of spiritual growth include discipleship, renewal, maturity, and running a race.

Two other evidences of spiritual growth are: an orientation toward mission, and dependent prayer.⁴⁰ The scope of this essay does not allow these to be explored. Both have a Trinitarian perspective.

It is important to see the Trinity involved in our character development. Without God, the Father, we lack the sense of the sovereign God at work in all the events of life to mould and discipline us. Without Jesus Christ, we lack the perfect man to imitate and follow. Without the Holy Spirit, we lack the empowerment to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Neill Hamilton has proposed that there are two phases of spiritual formation. The first is discipleship, where the believer follows Jesus, largely in their own strength, based on a parenting relationship with God. This can be a legalistic type of religion. The second, more advanced, stage is "transition in Spirit", with the image of new birth. The receiving

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, pp. 145-160. He calls these "secondary elements in renewal", and also includes the community of believers, theological integration, and disenculturation.

of the Holy Spirit allows for a new intimacy with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and empowering the believer for holiness and ministry.⁴¹

Although Neill Hamilton helpfully points out the deficiencies of Christian formation without an adequate understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit, there are, equally, problems without adequately including God, the Father, and God, the Son. The progressive revelation of God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit, in scripture, and in the experience of the first believers, does not mean that this is normative in the experience of all Christians. There is a danger, particularly in Pentecostal churches, for people to know the Holy Spirit, without following Christ, by daily taking up one's cross.

The Goal of Spiritual Growth

The glory of God is both the goal and motive of spiritual growth. We have been chosen for His praise and glory (Eph 1:4-6; Phil 1:9-11).⁴²

The life of the Trinity is one of mutual glorification. The Spirit brings glory to the Son (John 16:14), the Son brings glory to the Father (John 17:4), and the Father, the Son (John 17:5). Participation in the Trinity, is to share in the giving and receiving of glory.

Giving glory to God involves worship. James Torrance defines worship as not something we do, but "the gift of participating, through the Spirit, in the (incarnate) Son's communication with the Father".⁴³

Christians are described as those "who, with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory", and spiritual growth is described as "being transformed into His likeness, with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Through sin, we lost the glory of God (Rom 3:23), but, in the future, we will share in God's glory,⁴⁴ through Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate revelation of the glory of God.^{45 46} Through the Holy Spirit, we are beginning to share in the

⁴¹ Neill Q. Hamilton, *Maturing in the Christian Life: A Pastor's Guide*, Philadelphia PA: The Geneva Press, 1984.

⁴² Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 232.

⁴³ Torrance, "Contemplating the Mystery of Christ", p. 142.

⁴⁴ Rom 5:2; 8:18; Heb 2:10; 1 Pet 5:1, 10.

⁴⁵ For example, John 1:14; 2 Cor 4:4-6.

glorification of Christ, which is fully achieved, when we are raised with Him.

Glorification brings participation in the kingdom of God (1 Thess 2:12), even to the point of reigning with Christ.⁴⁷ Mission is a way we bring glory to God, and a way we participate in the ministry of the triune God, as He establishes His kingdom.

The Context of Spiritual Growth

The context of spiritual growth is community. Stanley Grenz has written a theology text with the integrative motif of community. He sees God's programme directed at bringing about community, in fellowship with God, and one another.⁴⁸ Susanne Johnson states that community "is not only the context of spiritual formation; it is the very shape of Christian spiritual existence".⁴⁹

The three members of the Trinity are involved in the constituting and enabling of the church. The church is described in the New Testament as the people of God (2 Cor 6:16), the body of Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 12), the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-27), the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).

Furthermore, relationships in the church are to be modelled on the Trinity. The love and fellowship that the Father has with the Son is to exist in the community of believers (John 17:26; cf. 13:34-35).

The individualism of Western culture has affected our understanding of the church, to the extent that people belong, so as to fulfil their needs. Susanne Johnson describes the current situation, as it pertains to Christian formation:

⁴⁶ Peterson, *Possessed by God*, pp. 118-119.

⁴⁷ David Huttar, "Glorification", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter Elwell, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 287.

⁴⁸ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ Susanne Johnson, "Education in the Image of God", in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, Jack L. Seymour, and Donald E. Miller, eds, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1990, p. 136.

Dangled before us, is an extremely voluntaristic view of the church, as though it is simply an arrangement for the individual spiritual quest. Spiritual disciplines are packaged, and sold as technologies for self-discovery, and self-actualisation.⁵⁰

Rather, spiritual growth is to be achieved as the outworking of community. Spiritual gifts are given “so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith, and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). The result of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was not just conversion of individuals, but creation of fellowship (Acts 2:44-47).⁵¹

Biblical references to spiritual growth are given for corporate application. Paul generally uses plural pronouns with regard to the Christian’s experience of the Holy Spirit.⁵²

Resources for Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is both a gift and a task; it is obtained by grace, and by effort. Participation in the life of the Trinity is not something we can attain, or maintain, humanly. Yet, it is not possible, either, unless there is a commitment of heart, and use of the resources that God gives us. Some of the resources include:

1. **Word of God.** The scriptures are inspired by God, and give direction to the Christian life (2 Tim 3:14-17). The Word of God has a Trinitarian dimension, in that the Word became flesh in Christ (John 1:14), and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, who guides the believer into all truth (John 16:13).

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

⁵¹ Max S. Liddle, *Trinity and Communion*, unpub, BCNZ, 1997, p. 9. Habermas and Issler present a model of Christian maturity, based on Acts 2:42-47, concerning communion, community, character, and commission: Ronald Habermas, and Klaus Issler, *Teaching for Reconciliation: Foundations and Practice of Christian Educational Ministry*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1992.

⁵² James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: a Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: William B Eerdmans, 1975, p. 260. For example, “being the temple of the Holy Spirit” refers to the community, not the individual.

2. **Sacraments.** These can be described as the enacted Word. Baptism symbolises incorporation into Christ, by identifying with His death and resurrection. The Lord's Supper is a symbol of the ongoing fellowship with Christ, and other believers, through the Holy Spirit.⁵³
3. **Prayer.** The essence of prayer, is "not my will, but Yours, be done". We are encouraged to pray for "wisdom from above" (James 1:5; 3:13-17).
4. **Church.** Although the church is the context, it is also a resource, in the sense of pastoral care, moral guidance, discipline, encouragement, support, provision of good role models, and the traditions and writings, accumulated over the ages. The intimacy of small groups in the church can provide the support and encouragement, often lacking in the larger congregation.
5. **Conscience.** The human conscience is a God-given witness, and compulsion to do what is right. Our consciences have been damaged by sin, and need re-educating, but, nonetheless, are a resource for spiritual and moral formation.
6. **Circumstances.** The circumstances, or providences, of life are where the sovereign God brings pleasant and unpleasant experiences, to teach and correct us. Being in union with God, opens up the possibility of them being used for our growth.⁵⁴

These resources are utilised by the believer, through various spiritual disciplines. These resources, and, even more so, the disciplines, by which they are applied, are secondary to the life of fellowship with the holy Trinity.

⁵³ Liddle, "The Trinity and the Communion of the Church", p. 18.

⁵⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed View", in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Donald L. Alexander, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1988, p. 71.

Conclusion and Applications

The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to have a balanced understanding of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is primarily a matter of participation in the life of the Trinity, and, only secondarily, a matter of bearing fruit, living holy lives, and becoming like Christ (to use a few of the biblical metaphors). Spiritual growth is primarily a matter of God's grace, and, secondarily, a matter of commitment and effort. Spiritual growth is primarily God's work, in and through community, and, secondarily, God's work in individuals. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have distinct, yet mutually interdependent, roles in our growth.

God, the Father, by creating us in His image, has given us the capacity of spiritual growth. His love, holiness, and call on our lives, motivates us to live according to His will. He has provided us with His Word, with consciences, and with access to Him through prayer. Furthermore, He is sovereignly controlling our paths.

God, the Son, became one of us, was tempted, suffered, and died as our sin offering. Salvation has freed us to live and grow. Jesus Christ is the perfect man, and the true image of God for us to follow. He continues to minister to us, as our advocate, praying for us, and leading the church.

God, the Holy Spirit, draws us into the Trinity, and into the church, to receive salvation and fellowship. The Holy Spirit empowers us for the Christian life, and gifts us to help others.

Spiritual growth is generally held to be the goal of Christian education, and one of the purposes of the church. Many would also see Christian colleges and Bible schools having this as a goal.⁵⁵ How can this Trinitarian understanding of spiritual growth help the church, and college, in its ministry? Here are some suggestions, in outline form:

⁵⁵ For example, see: Bruce J. Nicholls, "The Role of Spiritual Development in Theological Education", in *Evangelical Theological Education Today: Agenda for Renewal*, Paul Bowers, ed., Nairobi Kenya: Evangel Publishing, 1982, pp. 13-25; Dieumeme Noelliste, "Toward a Theology of Theological Education", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19 (July 1995); Gordon T. Smith, "Spiritual Formation in the Academy: A Unifying Model", in *Theological Education* 33-1 (1996), pp. 83-91.

1. **Teaching on the Trinity and our union with God.** Teaching and preaching in the church often tends to moralism. Ethical teaching is necessary, but must be given in the context of our life in God, and the resources available to the believer.
2. **Worship and liturgy should focus fairly on all three persons of the Trinity.** The songs, prayers, and liturgy in worship services influence the way believers perceive their relationship with God. Many churches emphasise one person of the Trinity, to the detriment of others.⁵⁶
3. **Create a community context.** The church must provide close fellowship, as a basis for mutual ministry, and personal growth. Cell groups are necessary in all but the smallest of churches, in the college, there are benefits in a live-in situation, but spiritual growth can also be encouraged through small groups and mentoring relationships.
4. **Encourage spiritual disciplines, as a means, not an end.** Spiritual disciplines include Bible study, meditation, prayer, fasting, scripture memory, and praise. These are ways of taking hold of God-given resources, and can be a catalyst for spiritual formation. Yet, a preoccupation with these, can take our focus off the real essence of spiritual growth, which is union with God. Legalism should have no place in spiritual growth, because God esteems our individuality. Spiritual growth cannot be reduced to a single secret, or program of disciplines.
5. **Use a praxis-learning approach using people's experience of life.**⁵⁷ Often a false dualism is established between theory and practice. We need to provide opportunity for people to experiment with life (even if just through role-playing), and experience the Holy Spirit's

⁵⁶ See Peter Adam, *Living the Trinity*, Bramcote UK: Grove Books, 1982.

⁵⁷ See Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline*.

enabling and empowering. This is not to do away with instruction, but to make truth concrete in people's lives, through experience. Where a person is required to act in a situation, to which they are unaccustomed, this can often be a catalyst for spiritual growth.⁵⁸

6. **Engage the world not asceticism.** The Trinity has reached out to us, and our life in God is to likewise reach out. Spiritual growth is not to be divorced from mission.

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⁵⁸ David Lonsdale, "Fostering Spiritual Growth", in *Can Spirituality be Taught?*, Jill Robson, and David Lonsdale, eds, London UK: Association of Centres of Adult Education and British Council of Churches, nd, p. 85.

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PRE-GOSPEL BELIEF IN VANUATU

Roy B. Yosef

Roy comes from a Presbyterian church in Vanuatu. He is currently studying for his B.Th. at the Christian Leaders' Training College.

Introduction

We read in Gen 2:15-17 that God made man to serve and obey Him. God said that you are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.

Now, we know from the scriptures, that the moment Adam ate of the forbidden tree, he brought spiritual death to himself, and to all humanity, as well as bringing judgment on creation. Peter Cotterell said there are three elements of death, which came about by the one act of disobedience by Adam, and “they are spiritual death, psychological death, and death in nature”.¹

Rom 5:12 confirms that, because Adam sinned, we are all dead, spiritually. This is both because of our own sins, and because Adam sinned in the first place.

We know that, when God created us, He breathed into us a spirit, but it is not the Holy Spirit. So, when Adam sinned, it is this spirit that is dead to the holiness of God. It is, if you like, contaminated, and alive only to uncleanness. And, because of that, man is alive to the whole spiritual kingdom of Satan, instead of living in submission to God.

We also know from the scriptures that the purpose for man's life is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever, but this has not been the case, because of the fall. The gospel of Jesus offers an answer to the fall, indicating men and women can have a restored relationship with God.

¹ P. Cotterell, *I Want to Know What the Bible Says about Personal Salvation*, Eastbourne UK: Kingsway Publications, 1980, p. 28.

However, millions have died before the good news of the kingdom reached them.

Clark Pinnock asks, “Why should they suffer for a failure to hear the gospel that was due not to their sins, but to the sins of others? God wants His house to be filled (Luke 14:23); how can it be filled without them?”² Unreached millions go to hell, without having the opportunity to avoid it. It is not their fault that they did not hear the gospel.

These are the questions, as well as others, that people ask, when they wrestle with what happens to them, and their ancestors. My discussion, therefore, will be based on the Melanesian (in particular, Vanuatu) perspective of the whole idea, and is based on Dr Graham Miller’s findings about our forefathers’ ideas about God, etc. I shall also discuss the issue of whether or not those who follow other world religions are saved.

Heathen Worship and Duties

In Vanuatu, our forefathers worshipped, and revered, the High God, under such local language names as *Supe*, *Etarō*, *Ictar*, *Tar*, etc. In Polynesia, the name for the High God is *Io*.

They knew the High God, who created all things, and they showed their thanks, by the yearly new-yam feast. Also, they held a feast for a new baby, because they believed that a child is a gift from God. They always gave the best for Him. But, although they believed in this High God, they knew very little about Him.

Our forefathers were fulfilling Gen 1 and 2, even though they did not yet have the Bible. What they had was a set of rules, handed down from their parents, tribes, chiefs, and old people. Anyone who broke any of these rules was likely to be put to death. So, our ancestors had a “God-given” rule of life, which kept them safe, if they knew it, and obeyed it.

I believe that, if our forefathers failed to live up to the standard, which this general revelation required, then they would fall under the statement

² Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1992, p. 150.

of Rom 1:21-23. The standard here is that God had given them a conscience to obey the law, written in their hearts (Rom 2:14-15), and that tells them what is right, and gives them warning of what is wrong. So, they were required to live according to the amount of light that they were given. Failing that, they will perish (Rom 2:12).

Although they did not have the Bible, they knew that God expected good behaviour from them. They knew, in their local languages, that He is a living God, that He created all things, that He is a high and mighty God.

However, as in Old Testament times, our ancestors did not know that God had a Son, Jesus. They only knew that God is Spirit – a powerful Spirit, who is everywhere.

They also knew that they must honour and reverence God, by offering straight gifts, and sacrifices of thanksgiving. If someone sinned, he or she must confess that sin, and offer sacrifices, with the shedding of blood.

Further, they had to recognise the chiefs as God's leaders on earth, and know that the laws for the village and family life were God-given. Restrictions given by the chief must be obeyed.

Heathen Ideas about God

They believed in a High God, who is Spirit, and who was not flesh and blood, like themselves. This was very important, as far as their security was concerned, because the bad spirits were their enemies. In their prayers, they would say:

“We men are flesh, we do not have any power, but you, God, are the Mighty Spirit, and the Good Spirit; you can help us, so that the bad spirits may not do us harm.”³

They believed that God was good and just, and rewarded good people, and punished wicked people. He created all things, sustains all things, knows all things, could do all things, and ruled all things in His mighty

³ J. Graham Miller, *Work Book on Christian Doctrine*, Melbourne Vic: Lawsons, 1974, p. 6.

power. The chiefs were His high men on the earth. They were to offer the proper sacrifices to God.

This, to me, shows that, in many parts of Melanesia, animism was not the deepest of our ancestors' religious ideas. The above prayer reflects what the Bible says about God (John 4:24, Rom 1:20, 2:4).

What they Knew About Other Gods

Our ancestors knew and worshipped the High God, but they were also afraid of the bad spirits, which, they believed, could make hurricanes, too much sun, or rain, sickness, and death. Dr Miller said about their beliefs:

They believed in Tapu men, who had power to speak to these spirits, and make sacrifices to them. These Tapu men (witch doctors, *munuais*) had great power in olden times, and often caused death by their charms and spells (called poison), and by their false accusation of innocent people.⁴

Our heathen ancestors believed that it was the High God, who had placed special powers in certain trees, leaves, and charms, to enable the Tapu men to make miracles.

It is obvious to me that it was these Tapu men, who fall under the statement of Rom 1:23, 25. It was this category of people who went to hell. Our ancestors were worshippers of the one God (Deut 6:4). The point I want to emphasise here is that there were people, within the community, who fell away from worshipping the one High God, and became worshippers of stones, trees, reefs, volcanoes, etc.

Heathen Ideas about Sin, Death, and Life after Death

All our ancestors knew that they had fallen into sin and death, but did not know how to escape from it. We have various stories of man sinning against God by eating fruit. They also have prayers, and here is one that Dr Miller heard, when he was a missionary on an island called Torgoa:

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

We are just ordinary men, we have no power, but You are the Good Spirit, You can look through a rock or a tree. Please come and help us, so that we may have power.⁵

The above stories indicate that one of our ancestors had spoiled the work of the Creator, but that some day they will hear about the one who can wash away all their sins. And when the missionaries came with the gospel, our people remembered these stories.

They knew that God has laws that cover all the big things of daily life, such as: payment of offering for use of land, dedication of children, sacrifices for births, marriages, deaths, chiefs, etc., punishment for adultery, stealing, dishonouring the chief or his wives. All these are summed up in one Law: you shall not steal.

The chiefs are God's leaders, who make sure that the people, who break these laws, are punished, and sometimes the punishment was death.

Our ancestors also knew that God could forgive sins, when they are confessed to Him, and the proper sacrifices are made, with the shedding of blood, or of some substitute. But they did not know about God's only Son, Jesus.

They knew where the spirits of wicked people go to after death, and where the spirits of good people go. For example, on my island, when a person dies, if the family or community wants to know where his or her spirit goes, they had to go and check his or her name in a certain cave, and, if they found the person's name in that cave, then they knew that he/she had gone to the good place. But if the name was not there, then they knew that his/her spirit goes to the volcano.

What About Today

The sad thing is that, even today, with the presence of the gospel, people are dying without hearing it. Why? Often it is because they are ignorant. They know the name of Jesus, and see church buildings, but they are not interested. Many educated people, even in Melanesia today, do not care about what the Bible says about God.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Evolution has led many people astray from the truth about God in creation. Furthermore, many people in Western society do not believe in life after death, so they make most of this life. This thinking has also influenced many Melanesians.

Many people in Melanesia today are unevangelised, because of their ignorance. They reject the gospel, by not wanting to listen to it, even though they all have the opportunity available to hear it. A lot of our people, today, have forgotten the truth about God, man, sin, and sacrifice, which is within our culture. As Paul says, “although they knew God, they neither glorified Him nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21). These are the people who are in danger of ending up in hell.

What About Other Religions

The teaching of comparative religion has led to a common idea that all religions are good, and that they all lead men to God, even if it is by different routes. But we know from scripture that this is not true. Most religions are without Christ (Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.). Some, like Islam, Baha’i, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, say that Jesus was a good man, but that He is not God. So, already, by these statements, they fail to lead people to Christ, as the one true Saviour and Lord. The Bible makes it clear that there is no other name given under heaven, whereby we must be saved than the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). From the Bible, it is clear that these other religions cannot lead people to God, but, rather, they make people careless about the need for salvation in Christ alone.

More and more, we find these false ideas being expressed in Melanesia. It must be accepted that those who reject Christ are lost. And, in the case of those who die before Christ returns, Paul says they are without excuse, because they rejected God when He revealed His presence to them through nature (Rom 1:18-32), and when He spoke to them through their hearts (Rom 2:6-16).

How can the Unevangelised be Saved

The Bible tells us that people are saved by faith. This means that it doesn't matter how far they go with their theology, if they fail to have faith in God, through Jesus Christ, then they are lost.

And, since God did not leave anyone completely without a witness, people are judged on the basis of the light they have received, and how they have responded to that light. I do not know how this light came to Western culture, but I have explained, already, how it came to Melanesia. Faith in God is what saves. Heb 11:6 says:

And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

So, for Old Testament people, and for our Melanesian ancestors, they had to respond appropriately, in faith, to the revelation God gave them in the cultural laws.

It is not so much a question of whether the unevangelised know Jesus, but, rather, the truth that God will give to each person, according to what he/she has done, according to the light they have been given. If people try hard to seek God's glory, honour, and morality, God will give eternal life. Paul, in Rom 2:6-8, says: "God does not show favouritism." I believe this suggests that the unevangelised can be saved by faith, just like anyone else.

Conclusion

The Bible is clear that God did not leave heathen people without some witness of Himself (Acts 14:17; 17:28; Rom 2:14-15). In the case of Melanesia, the Holy Spirit was at work in our islands, long before the coming of the gospel. As in the Old Testament, He prepared our ancestors, with the knowledge of sin, sacrifice, the High God, punishment, life after death, atonement for sin, through the shedding of the blood of pigs, prayer, and thanksgiving. God also gave some of our ancestors additional special revelations, through dreams, visions, and deeper understanding. These, we believe, were done, in God's goodness, to encourage our ancestors to wait in hope for the true salvation. There

are many customs in Melanesia, which are same as those in Old Testament.

To conclude, I do not think that all of those who died before the gospel came, went to hell, but only those who chose to live outside God's revealed laws to the culture, under which they come. Secondly, those from other religions, who reject Christ, and who are not leading people to God, are lost. Lastly, those who reject the gospel, even in these modern times, are lost, also.

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WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO DON'T HEAR THE GOSPEL?

Samuel Timothy

Samuel Timothy completed his Diploma of Theology at Maria Molnar Bible Training Centre. He has been ministering with the Evangelical church of Manus. He is currently completing his B.Th. at the Christian Leaders' Training College.

Introduction

Since I became a Christian, and as I began to experience more of the Christian journey with the Lord Jesus, I began to realise, and see, certain issues, which I often pondered, and which often seemed unsatisfactory to me. The one, which I have always considered seriously, concerns our Melanesian ancestors, and their salvation. What happens to these ancestors, who have died in the period between the death of Christ and the pioneer missionaries reaching our land? I have often thought: If only our ancestors would have had the opportunity of God's revelation. Somehow, I feel sure that there will always be available some alternative salvation for them.

I will seek to argue on the basis of assumptions, which I feel reasonably convenient, from my point of view. I am assuming that our Melanesian ancestors must have received revelation from God, and that some fortunate ones must, somehow, have received salvation through Christ.

I will not deny the fact that the entire Bible gives no definite room for those, who have had no chance of hearing the gospel. It seems that, for them, there will only be doom to eternal hell. Yet, my feeling is otherwise. My argument will focus strongly on those, who have not had the chance of hearing the message of the gospel – that they must have received some kind of revelation from God. And, along this line, they must have certain possibilities of salvation through Christ, and not apart from Christ. This is, perhaps, contrary to much scholarly argument in this area.

The Orthodox View

Most scholars have argued that the biblical point of view is that those who have not heard the gospel will certainly be doomed to eternal hell. My basic summary of the orthodox view is as follows:

1. All humans are sinners by nature, and by choice, and, therefore, are guilty, and under divine condemnation.
2. Salvation is only through Christ, and His atoning work.
3. Belief is necessary to obtain the salvation achieved by Christ. Therefore, Christians and the church have the responsibility to tell unbelievers the good news about Jesus Christ.
4. Adherents of other religions, no matter how sincere their belief, or how intense their religious activity, are spiritually lost apart, from Christ.
5. Physical death brings to an end the opportunity to exercise saving faith, and accept Jesus Christ. The decisions made in this life are irrevocably fixed at death.
6. At the great final judgment, all humans will be separated, on the basis of their relationship to Christ during this life. Those who have believed in Him, will spend eternity in heaven, in everlasting joy and reward, in God's presence. Those who have not accepted Him, will experience hell, a place of unending suffering, where they will be eternally separate from God.¹

It is clearly understood that the orthodox view is, indeed, based on the Bible. I acknowledge the fact that God's Word is the authority for believers, who follow Him. Likewise, as I have said, above, my assumptions will be touching on certain aspects, from the biblical standpoint, as well as viewing the situation from a Melanesian context.

¹ William V. Crockett, and James G. Sigountos, *Through no Fault of Their Own*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1993.

General Revelation

Its Nature

Man is finite, and God is infinite. If man intends to seek to know God, this may always be impossible for man. The only way it may come about, is by God's revelation of Himself to man. This implies the necessity of God's manifestation of Himself, so man may be able to relate to God, and obtain consciousness of whom God is to man.

There are two basic classifications of revelation. On the one hand, Erickson states: "general revelation is God's communication of Himself to all persons, at all times, and in all places. Special revelation, on the other hand, involves God's particular communication, and manifestation, of Himself to the particular person, at the particular time."²

This definition of general revelation obviously refers to God's self-manifestation, through the nature, history, and the inner being of the human person. According to Erickson, "It is general in two senses, its universal availability (it is accessible to all persons at all times), and the content of the message (it is less particularised and detailed than special revelation)."³

The Place of General Revelation

The traditional place of general revelation is in places, such as, nature, history, and the constitution of the human being. Scripture, itself, proposes that there is a knowledge of God, available through the created physical order:

"The heavens are declaring the glory of God" (Ps 19:1).

"It clearly exposed the very fact that, since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power, and divine nature, have made man without excuse in the judgment day" (Rom 1:20).

² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1987, pp. 154-155.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

There are many other passages, such as the “nature Psalms”, that suggest that God has left evidence of Himself in the world He has created. General revelation is most-frequently thought of in connection with the amazing, and impressive, character of the creation, which seems to point to a very powerful, and mighty, and wise person, who is capable of designing and producing intricate variety and beauty.⁴

The second place of general revelation is history. God has a certain goal for the world, and He is working towards it. It should be possible to detect the trend of God’s work in the events that occur as part of history.

The third place of general revelation is God’s own image, which He has placed in the highest earthly creation: man. God, revealing Himself, can be seen in the physical structure and mental capacities of man. The moral and spiritual qualities of man reveal God’s character.

General revelation is found in all religions of man, in all cultures. Human beings have believed in the existence of a higher being, who is much more superior, and all powerful, over the entire universe.

Special Revelation

The definition, according to Erickson, is “God’s manifestation of Himself to particular persons, at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with Him”.⁵ Both the Hebrew and Greek words for “reveal” express the same idea of “uncovering what was concealed”.

The reason why there should be a need for special revelation is that man, in the beginning, had a pure relationship with God, and then lost this relationship, due to disobedience. Special revelation is a means, used by God, to link again this broken relationship between man and Himself.

The Style of Special Revelation

The style, first of all, is personal. God presents Himself in a personal way to persons. This is seen in several ways: for example, in the Old Testament, God revealed Himself, by telling His name, when Moses

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 175.

sought to know Him. Nothing is more personal than one's name. "God said to Moses; 'I am who I am!' This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent you' " (Ex 3:14).⁶

The Anthropic Nature of Special Revelation

It is claimed, according to the Bible, that God is unlimited in His knowledge and power. He is not at all subject to the confines of space and time. For man, it is impossible to reach God by himself, and he would not understand, even if he could. Therefore, God had to reveal Himself, by a revelation in anthropic form. This is simply a revelation, coming in human language, and human categories.⁷

The Holy Spirit and Life

The work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is commonly referred to in relation to the creation of the cosmos. In Gen 1:2, the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters, like a bird hovering over its young ones. And later on, in Ps 104:30 and Is 40:12f., there is indication that God brought life out of nothing at the very beginning. The Spirit is God's power, which gives life to man, in both the physical and spiritual senses.

The Holy Spirit illuminates man's mind with the knowledge of God's truth (Deut 34:9; Ps 143:10). The Holy Spirit, then, does the work of giving life, illuminating man's mind, and convicting man's heart, to realise his sins.⁸

Election

Election is simply a matter of foreknowledge. God knows all the future of every human being. He knows who will be responding to the gospel, if the gospel was preached. He "elects" those He foreknows will freely be responding to the gospel. "For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many" (Rom 8:29). God knew the "elect", in the sense of choosing them by His grace, before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). Similarly, in 2 Tim 1:9, it is stated that God has saved us,

⁶ Ibid., pp. 177-178.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 178-179.

⁸ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1982.

because of His purpose and grace, and that this grace was given in Christ. However, God knew everything already.⁹

The Melanesian Point of View

The New Hebrides Contextual Perspective

Let us review certain “heathen ideas”, which prepared our people for the coming of the gospel. It was obvious that the Bible did not exclude the heathen from the things, which God used as a means of His witness to them, e.g., in Acts 14:17; 11:28; Rom 2:14, 15. The Holy Spirit was already at work in our islands before the gospel came. The Holy Spirit prepared our ancestors beforehand, with a consciousness of the guiltiness of sin, of sacrifice, of the High God, of the consequences of immorality, of hope of life after death, of atonement for sin, through the shedding of pig’s blood, and of prayer, and thanksgiving, as acts of worship.

In addition, God somehow seems to have given some of our ancestors special revelations through dreams, visions, and deep insights of understanding. We came to realise that this was done in God’s goodness. Its purpose was to encourage our ancestors not to despair, but, rather, that they should wait, hopefully, for the coming of salvation. I feel that our ancestors cannot miss out on salvation. There must be a way, somehow, in order for Christ to be presented as Saviour to them.

In heathen times, our people had men and women who lived moral lives, and who attempted to tell the people about a divine message from God. There were some, who also were regarded as false prophets, but *munais*, and sacred men and women often spoke for God. They attempted to say who was guilty, who had caused sickness, and who should be killed. These men and women were highly honoured and feared, because of the special power they had.¹⁰

Manusian Contextual Perspective

The ancestors were worshipping the living God (*Nydrei*). I am picking on a story told by my great-grandmother, or the mother of my grandmother.

⁹ Don W. Hillis, *Are the Heathen Really Lost?*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1961.

¹⁰ J. Graham Miller, *Work Book on Christian Doctrine*, Melbourne Vic: Lawsons, 1974.

Our ancestors, indeed, were conscious of who God was to them. They knew God as a triune God: the names used for them were *Nydrei* (God the Father), *Ndro Lapan* (God the Son), and *Sameluwa ndoruei* (God the Holy Ghost). They knew of the dwelling place of God. The name given to the dwelling place of God was *Lundialong*, which means “beyond the clouds above us”.

Before the gospel arrived in our lands, our ancestors had already been acquainted with practices of worshiping the living God. They knew Him from general revelation, special revelation, and history from their ancestors. Despite the fact of cannibalism, yet, there were men and women, who were living moral, righteous lives. There were certain men and women, who were given a mandate from God to govern by their moral and ethical standards, as well as their spiritual standards. These people were called *Lapans*. Among these *Lapans*, there were some, who were highly esteemed, and they were often feared by the people. They spoke words of wisdom, they foretold, they predicted, they cursed evil people, and they were intelligent, and very powerful.

Our Melanesian ancestors also observed certain occurrences of events. I pick on two, which I have grasped in my memory. The first one was an Easter event. There would be a day, when the daylight would become blacked-out in the middle of the day, children would cease from games, and adults would have to cease from what they were doing. They would have to light fires, and other means of providing light, and that period of time would be observed by keeping silent, until the daylight returned. This event occurred annually, and our ancestors knew, for sure, that Christ was crucified by the evil ones.

The second one was the observance of Christmas. There would be a great day of feasting and celebrating for a week. This day was called *Urruh*, which means “year”. When the feasting was over, the *Lapans* would pronounce that the commemoration be stopped, and they would welcome the new *Urruh*, so that the community could proceed again with new life.

My great-grandmother lived to a ripe old age. My grandmother did not live that long, but my great-grandmother's life was prolonged, due to her faithfulness. She was almost faithful in everything. She was blessed by the *Lapans* to live longer on the earth, and I became her fourth generation. She died in 1983, at the age of 116-120. Her life signifies that the ancestors had a fair idea of God's word. In fact, she acknowledged that the gospel later came as confirmation to what she already had – and that was faith in God. And the observance of these things indicates that our ancestors were already practising acts of worship. This, I assume, was conducted by the special *Lapans*, who were highly esteemed, and regarded as powerful.

My Point of View

With the above approach, I would assume that our Melanesian ancestors must, somehow, have had access to salvation through Christ, somewhere in these places. From the above, I would point to the possibilities of our ancestors having received revelation from God. The possibilities, I strongly suggest, may come from general revelation, special revelation, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the history passed on from generation to generation. Also, there were godly men and women, despite cannibalism. If this is true, then some of our ancestors must have been fortunate in obtaining salvation, not apart from Christ, but through Christ, due to what has been discussed, above.

According to the Melanesian point of view, our ancestors were already practising acts of worship to God, through observing certain special events. Also, there were men and women, who were living moral, righteous lives. I want to stress the fact that they had already related to God, in this sense. My great-grandmother was involved in the period of cannibalism, when she was in her teens. She was illiterate, but yet she was fully aware of what our people were doing (e.g., the celebration of Easter and Christmas). She related the new celebrations, brought by the missionaries, to what had already been happening. She was able to understand clearly, without difficulty in her comprehension, because of past traditions and events. She found her faith before the gospel came.

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