SENDING, MISSION, THE TRINITY AND US

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Category: Mission

There is nothing quite so simultaneously frustrating and encouraging as reading a paper or article that says things that you have been teaching for years, but says them much more clearly than you ever could.

I had a strong case of these mixed emotions when I read Graham Tomlin's excellent paper Mission, Evangelism and The Nature of God. BecauseÂ you will need to subscribe to academia.eduÂ in order to read the paper, I'll attempt to give a brief outline below.

Tomlin kicks off by retreading familiar ground pointing out that though the term *mission* does not occur frequently in most English Bible translations, its root lies in the notion of *sending*, which does occur a great deal.

> *In Johnâ€™s gospel, there are three movements of â€˜sendingâ€™. The first is the sending of the Son. Repeatedly, Jesus refers to the Father asÂ the one who sent him. God is â€œthe one who sent meâ€ (1.33), he is himself â€œthe one whom God has sentâ€ (3.34). He describes his task as to â€œdo the will of him who sent me and to finish his work,â€ (4.34) and Â so on...*
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> *The second movement of sending is the sending of the Holy Spirit. John 14.26 speaks of the Holy Spirit as â€œthe Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name.â€*

He then briefly explores the notions of sending, begetting and proceeding Â in Trinitarian theology (which is a lot more interesting than it sounds). This allows him to root mission in the eternal life of the Trinity.

> *Theologically speaking, mission begins with the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit fromÂ the Father. It starts with the Trinitarian life of God before it ever involves the creation, let alone the human part of that creation. We have discovered a doctrine of mission and so far, humanity has not even come into the picture. There is at the very heart of God this movement outwards, the eternal begetting of the Son, and the eternal procession of the Spirit which issues in the sending of Son and Spirit intoÂ the world. This is not a secondary activity of God but is part of his very being, and it further enables us to say in the fullest sense that God is truly Love.*

From here, Tomlin demonstrates that it is the Trinity which allows us to talk about God being love in an eternal sense. If God were not Trinity, he could not love until he had created an object for his love. This is something that I've mentioned on this blog from time to time and which anyone who has heard me lecture on mission will be well aware of.

It is this love which leads to God's mission:

> *Love of course, isÂ closely associated to mission. The movement outwards that weÂ see in the eternal begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit is his love;Â it is also carried on into the sending of the Son and Spirit into the world. It is part of the same impulse, an expression of the divine nature. That â€œGod so loved the world thatÂ he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes inhim shall not perish but have eternal lifeâ€ is not a secondary activity of God, a subsequent thought or action that he resolves to put into place once the world has gone wrong: it is an expression of the very nature and inner being of God himself...*

From here, we move onto the way in which God sends the church out into the world.

> *There is however a third movement ofÂ â€˜sendingâ€™ in Johnâ€™s gospel, one which isÂ different from, but related to the other two: the sending of the church. As Jesus speaks to his Father, he prays: â€œas you sent me into the world, IÂ have sent them into the world.â€ (17.18), and at the end of the gospel heannounces to his disciples: â€œPeace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.â€ (20.21).*

The next step is to show the way in which the sending of the church is distinct to the way in which the the Son and Spirit are sent into the world, before setting out the nature of the mission of the church.

> *Why then is the church sent into the world, according to Johnâ€™s gospel?Â The simple answer is to bear witness to this missionary God who sends Son and Spirit, reaching out to his creation, rescuing and winning it back to himself.*

This paragraph is extremely important. Our mission is to bear witness to God's work, not to do it for him. Far too much missionary publicity and literature misses this point and seems to imply that God *needs* us to do some things because he can't do them himself. Tomlin continues.

> *Now it is important to understand precisely the role of the church here. The church is notÂ aÂ â€˜continuation of the Incarnationâ€™ or called in any way to complete the unfinished work of Christ. In the most important sense, the work of Christ is complete (John 19.3). In another sense, Christâ€™s work is unfinished, in that the world is not yet fully redeemed, but that is the work of God through Christ in the Spirit. The churchâ€™s Â task is to bear witness to the God who created the world through Christ(1.3), redeemed the world through Christ (3.17), and who will bring it to completion through the Spirit.*

He then goes on to suggest three ways in which the church can bear witness to this creator,

redeemer God; Uniting (building communities), Demonstrating (doing work like Jesus' work) and Telling (proclaiming the Good News). To my mind, this last section is the weakest one in the paper. It's not that I can argue with the importance of Uniting, Demonstrating and Telling, I've argued for all of these quite recently - and often on the basis of similar thoughts as Tomlin's.

However, I believe that by digging straight into the 'what should we do' sort of question, Tomlin has missed a prophetic, counter-cultural message within the passages he has examined. I would argue that John 20:21 talks about the manner in which the Father sent Jesus, not so much about the things which Jesus came to do. I wrote about this years ago:

> *God sent Jesus in humility, to serve and finally to sacrifice himself. Likewise, we should expect humility, service and sacrifice to be part of our lives as He sends us out. This sits very uneasily with some of the quasi-military rhetoric about marching and capturing and so on which is part of the current church scene. Our call is to be humble servants, not conquering heroes (and churches need to be prepared to support humble servants and not expect every prayer letter to be full of success stories).*

If you want to see more of my thinking on this, you could read my ebook on the Great Commission; the links are in the sidebar.

Despite my slight quibble with the application, this is a superb paper. I just wish I had written it.