SOME WORK TO BE DONE

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I am rather concerned that mission practitioners and missiologists are developing theories and strategies which are built on rather shaky theological foundations.
Category: Theology

I've just finished readingÂ The Holy Trinity Revisited: Essays in Response to Stephen R. Holmes, which I thoroughly enjoyed, though I'm not going to review it as such.

As you can tell from the title, this book is a response to an earlier work by Stephen Holmes:Â The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life. Both are excellent books, if a little hard going for the non-specialist like me. I would also suggest, that both books need to be read by people who are developing missionary strategy; especially those who are using theÂ *missio Dei*Â (mission of God) as their main motif.

As I have written previously, the term *missio Dei*Â is used in a wide variety of ways and is rarely clarified or unpacked by the mission practitioners who work with it. Quite frankly, in some circles, it has become little more than aÂ *shibboleth* which is used to demonstrate that the author is up to date with the latest missiological fashion.

However, there are also some serious writers who are exploring the concept ofÂ *missio Dei* in a more thorough fashion. The latest books by Goheen and Tennent would be good examples. There are also some practitioners and agencies who are making serious attempts to apply their conception ofÂ *missio DeiÂ* to their work.

But...

There is a problem. Many writers, myself included, have located the origin of theÂ *missio Dei* in the social Trinity. The eternal life of God is envisaged as one of relationships and communication, which spills over into mission. The problem is, that Stephen Holmes in his excellent review of Trinitarian theology effectively writes off the social Trinity model as being incompatible with historic Christian views. To be honest, I bought the follow up book of responses to Holmes in the hope that someone would prove him wrong. Unfortunately, each of the writers who mentioned the social Trinity actually agreed with Holmes.

So, we have a situation, where some evangelical writers on mission are basing a theory of mission practice on a foundation which is repudiated by a some rather serious theologians. As I said, we have a problem.

At the heart of this issue is the simple fact that missionaries and missiologists tend not to be theologians. They are practitioners; they examine practical issues of history and current methodologies, looking to Scripture to illumine and inform their actions. They are not in the business of wrestling with finer points of theology or scriptural exegesis. Equally, theologians are not generally known for their engagement with mission practice and strategy.

From where I'm sitting, there is a real need for someone to put some serious effort into examining the trinitarian basis for current thinking onÂ *missio Dei.Â* It could be that this work has already been done, but this quote from Skreslett's excellent review of missiological literature would seem to indicate that this is not the case.

> *John Flett has closely examined the origins of the termÂ missio Dei.He concludes that* ***the undoubted attractiveness of this formulation in the postcolonial era has obscured its basic incoherence, due to the illusory or nonsubstantial way mission theologians have related this concept to the doctrine of the Trinity****.*

Before anyone makes the suggestion, I am not the person to do this work, I have neither the time, nor the expertise. There are some missionary theologians out there, who could take this up.

Let me also add, that I do think that a case can be made for the concept of "the mission of God", from a missional reading of Scripture. However, the jury is most definitely out on the question of how it relates to the Trinity.

One final comment; if you don't like what I've written here, that's fine. ButÂ please, at least read Stephen Holmes' book before you tell me that I'm wrong!