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Mission in Community

God does nothing alone because God has never been alone and never will be alone. The Father and Son have always known each other, loved each other, and worked together in the communion of the Holy Spirit - and they always will. Everything the Trinity does, from creation, to adoption, to salvation, the Trinity does together in relationship. This is the power and significance of Jesus' life of prayer as it is portrayed in the Gospels. We see Jesus doing only what the Father tells him to do and doing everything under the guidance of the Spirit.

So, it is vital that we see mission as the communal, relational work of the Trinity. It is also vital that we see the missional life of the Trinity being expressed exclusively in and through humanity. The Son did not hover above the creation shouting down at us. The Son became human, entering into flesh and blood as a real man, and fulfilled his mission from within humanity. Not only does the Trinity never do anything alone, the Trinity also - because of the humanity of Jesus, the Son - never does anything without involving human beings.

The relational life of the Trinity, and the relationship established between the Trinity and Humanity in Jesus, tells us that true, Christ-centered mission always takes place in community. Jesus will never send people out by themselves to do mission. In Luke 10 he sends them out two at a time. In Matthew 28 and Acts 2 he sends them out together, as the believing community of the Church. Even when individuals sometimes work more independently, as with St. Paul, we see that they are supported by communities that pray for them and contribute material support to their mission. (See, for example, Paul's appeal to the Romans that they "pay and pray" for him, Rom. 13:24, 30.) In fact, even St. Paul was rarely by himself but almost always had others traveling with him and working together in mission.

For these reasons rooted in the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the history of the Church, I have decided to quit using the term "personal evangelism." I certainly believe that we should each share the truth we know about Jesus with anyone and everyone as we have opportunity, so in that sense I know and agree with what is meant by the term "personal evangelism." What disturbs me, however, is that so much Christian talk, training, and work in evangelism is rooted in helping individuals do mission on their own.

So, for example, Christians are often encouraged in sermons to be diligent about witnessing to their family and friends. We are often trained in how to do one-on-one sales pitches of the gospel. The pattern in this form of evangelism seems to often be this:

Befriend someone for the purpose of witnessing to him.

Share Christ with the person until he runs you off or gives in and prays the sinner's prayer.

Bring your new convert to church.

In that pattern of mission each Christian must be "omni-competent" in evangelism. Each Christian has to be able to do it all: you have to be an extrovert who makes friends easily. You have to be a skilled presenter of the gospel who can answer many questions and objections. You have to

be capable of shepherding, discipling, and teaching others. In that pattern of mission it is only after you have done the hard work that you get to work together in community with others. After the person has accepted Christ, then you bring them to church.

But what if you're not an extrovert? What if you have trouble making friends? What if your giftedness in ministry is in helping, serving, or working behind the scenes and every time you try to talk about the Bible or Jesus you get tongue-tied and confused? In the non-communal pattern of mission you are out of luck. You'll never be good at personal evangelism so you'll never really get to be a part of the Church's mission to make new disciples.

I believe that one of the principle reasons this personal evangelism model has been so strongly emphasized in our culture is because our Theology has been hijacked by the individualism of our culture. Most Christians perceive faith as something that happens individually. We believe that each individual must hear and respond to the gospel for himself or he is not saved. We think that each individual must then engage in personal evangelism or he is not really living up to his calling in Christ.

Yet there is nothing individualistic about the Triune Life of God or the Trinity's relationship with humanity. The distinct individuals of God do nothing by themselves and they do nothing without including humanity. None of us comes to faith by ourselves. The Father calls us to faith, Jesus gives us his faith, and the Holy Spirit opens our hearts and minds to receive that faith. How does the Trinity do this? Through our parents, siblings, friends, and fellow church members. Statistics show that the vast majority of Christians became believers while in their late childhood or early teen years and came to their faith because of the influence of believing adults and peers with whom they had strong relationships.

In light of this communal nature of mission, and of faith itself, it seems to me that the community of believers ought to always be working together in mission. Instead of the pattern described above, I would suggest this pattern:

Be friends with people because you like them and want to be friends with them. Be friends with them even if they never believe the truth of who they are in Christ.

Invite your friends to church so that they can experience the life of the Trinity first hand. At church they can be taught by gifted teachers, served by gifted servers, and helped by gifted helpers.

When your friends believe, join with the church in baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This communal pattern of mission emphasizes two key elements of the Trinity's relationship with humanity: the Church and Baptism.

First, let's think about the Church. We each have different gifts: some are evangelists, some are teachers, some are cooks, some are musicians, some are encouragers, some are givers. When we all come together and do mission together then we bear witness to the world of how Jesus has baptized us all into the life of the Trinity. When we all come together and do mission together we are able to each use our unique gifts to each play our unique role in baptizing others in the assurance of who

they are in the Triune Life.

Secondly, a communal approach to mission takes Jesus' command about baptism seriously. The goal of the Church's mission is not to convince individuals to individually save themselves by their confession and prayer. The goal of the Church's mission is to baptize humanity in the assurance of their adoption in Christ as the Father's children. The end goal of this immersion in the gospel is immersion in the water that is a sign to us of how we have died, risen, and ascended in Christ.

The greatest damage done by an individualistic approach to mission is that it hides from us the fact that "it" is all about all of us - not just about some of us (whatever "it" may be: life, love, relationships, salvation, the Church, etc.) In Christ we are all in this together. Life is not just about me. Life is also not just about others. Life is about me and others. Life is about the Father, Son, and Spirit, and all of us together. When we do mission together, as a community, we are participating with Jesus in baptizing others in the assurance of the reality that - in Jesus - we all belong and we are all included.

~ Jonathan Stepp