

Toward A Missional Polity

A paper submitted

by

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## INTRODUCTION

For the past 39 years, I have been privileged to serve as a parish pastor in 13 congregations across the United States. In reflecting upon these experiences, I have discovered a common thread. I believe that many of the organizational structures and decision-making processes in the church are not grounded in a biblical or theological foundation. How can the church actively participate in God's mission in the world under these circumstances?

The purpose of this paper is to address this situation by presenting a biblical and theological foundation that will inform the development of organizational structures and decision-making processes that are consistent with the missional nature of the church. I believe that structures which are appropriately grounded in the nature of God will sustain the church as it participates in God's mission in the world. These structures and processes must empower and release the people of God to bear and witness to the perichoretic nature of the triune God.

I will begin by establishing a biblical and theological foundation centering in the nature of God with specific attention on the Trinity. Four texts will guide the discussion. Genesis 1-3 will establish the destiny of human creation as God intended it from the beginning and how that destiny was wounded mortally in the fall. In Romans 12:2, Paul describes the nature of transformation which God brought about to heal the mortal wound and restore relationships. Ephesians 4 explains the charismatic participation and new relationships among those called and sent. Finally, Revelation 21 will reveal the foreshadowing of God's great consummation.

Based upon these texts, the missional nature of the church will be extrapolated and a move toward a missional polity will be made. I believe that understanding the nature of God is foundational to building a missional polity. Therefore, it is critical that the perichoretic nature of God is understood by the church. My goal is to assist the church in creating organizational structures and decision-making processes through which the church may bear witness to the principles it affirms and create the relationships which begin to reflect God's own nature.

## BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

### *Creation*

As Christians, we believe in a triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that the Trinity was in existence at the beginning. We also affirm that the Trinity has existed in perfect harmony from all of eternity. In classic theology we have declared that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “co-equal, co-eternal.” It is this perichoretic God, this God-in-relationship who designed the creation to reflect this very mutual intimacy. The opening chapters of the Old Testament reveal an idyllic scene.

In Genesis 1:26-28, God’s purpose for human creation to share God’s own image is revealed with a concomitant invitation by God to participate in God’s rule.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

This trust from the Creator encompasses all areas of creation and human existence. Nothing escapes the scope of God’s design and everything is subject to God’s granting of dominion to humanity. As stewards of God’s creation, humanity was assigned the purposeful tasks of cultivating the ground and naming the creatures. But more significant than their tasks was the reflection of God’s own being-in-relationship in their intimacy with each other. It is the very picture of serenity and intimacy.

Within those relationships, we find the first evidence of order. God gave dominion to man and woman as stewards of creation. They had the privilege of naming all the creatures, the birds of the air, the beasts of the field. Everything came to them to be named. God established a pattern of order. Craig Van Gelder writes concerning this great purpose:

God created the whole of the world in relation to himself. The most important truth built into God's design is that humans are to understand their existence as creatures before the living God, their creator: All of creation exists according to his purposes and for his glory. God gave a special place to humans within the creation, making them in his image and assigning them responsibility to exercise stewardship over the whole earth.<sup>1</sup>

God's purpose in creation was to bring glory to God's own self and to value those who are created in God's image and likeness. This is the order as God intended it in creation. The first two chapters of Genesis describe a world at peace, nature reflecting cooperation rather than contest. Not only do the animals come to the man and woman for naming, there is no record of discord among them. Nature is beneficent and relationships are intimate.

God's good creation manifested itself in the intimacy of God's communion with the man and woman. Everything changed after the fall. Creation no longer reflected God's design and purpose. The dominion of the idyllic garden has been supplanted by the domination of individual self-aggrandizement. In Genesis 3, the tempter promises independence and self-determination. He convinced them that they could live as well or better without God's presence. He seduced the couple with an exaggeration. From that

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) 91.

moment to the present, humanity has sought to cover its misdeeds with lies. The independence promised has devolved into alienation.

God's design for intimate relationships was replaced with the quest for power to control others for one's own benefit. The intimate creation hardened into fractured relationships and a sense of futility ensued. The bliss of vulnerability reflected in Adam and Eve's nakedness was now replaced by curse of hiding. Their intimate and egalitarian relationship was replaced with recriminating and self-protecting blame. God's original design and destiny for creation was broken.

### *Redemption and Transformation*

In Romans 8:19, the apostle Paul writes that "...the creation waits with eager longing for revealing of the children of God" against the futility that developed in sin. The only remedy for this great loss is found in God's plan to restore the creation in Jesus Christ. This became the theme of the gospels and the epistles. God's new creation is found in the people of God who in turning from the darkness and alienation of isolation created by sin engage in a different way of relating to each other in an interdependent community.

By turning away from accusations and isolation, the church is called into a new interior way of relating. In contrast to relationships of superior and inferior positions where power and influence are wielded to the detriment of others, Paul calls us into a transformational relationship. In Romans 12:2, he writes:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Here the apostle creates a vivid juxtaposition by using two words “conformed” and “transformed.” This juxtaposition can be easily missed in the English translation but it becomes crystal clear in the Greek. The word translated as “conformed” is the Greek word συσχηματίζεσθε (suskematidzesthe) from which the word “scheme” is derived. A scheme imposes an external force upon an object in order to squeeze it into a form not indigenous to itself while disregarding the natural contours of that substance.

A simple example of a “scheme” is the standard street layout for the city of Chicago. Every address can be identified on a north-south, east-west grid since the topography is level. The grid is perfectly suited to Chicago. However, this grid can not be imposed on the topography of the San Francisco Bay area with its hills and valleys. The result will be streets that cannot be driven.

Scheme implies the nature of unmediated power, raw and uncaring. It seeks to impose its own desires and will upon another. Inherent within it is the desire to control for the sake of the controller’s own interests rather than the needs of the controlled. This is the way in which much of our world operates. The one with power and position can impose upon the less forceful. Scheme is the very incarnation of sin’s corporate consequences. But for Paul there is another way.

Contrast συσχηματίζεσθε (scheme) with “transformation.” This word has been so over used that it has nearly lost all significance. Paul uses μεταμορφοῦσθε (metamorphousthe) from which we derive “metamorphosis.” It is a much more vivid descriptor than “transformation.” Where the scheme imposes from without, metamorphosis is endemic in the genetic code of the thing metamorphosed. It is an inexorable process which inheres in the “subject” once life begins.

The monarch butterfly provides an illustration of this stunning process. The monarch actually begins life as a worm crawling on milkweed from which it derives its sustenance. Over a period of two to three weeks, this caterpillar will shed its skin several times as its size continues to increase until the outer vessel can no longer hold its greater substance. In the final stage, the caterpillar attaches itself head-down and its final skin



morphs into the chrysalis. During this process, the entire body of the caterpillar emulsifies leaving no vestige of its previous self.

The picture on the left (photo courtesy of William Zittrich) reveals this moment in the process. Out of that primordial liquid, a new shape begins to take place which was destined from the beginning. The creature that emerges from the chrysalis bears no resemblance to the creature which entered.

Romans 12:2 reflects this process. It establishes a biblical foundation for creating transforming processes in our relationships as well as their corporate expression. We move from coercion to destiny, from raw power to shared discovery. These two dynamics reflect the contrast between an organization whose goals are achieved by coercive power and one whose goal is transforming the decision-making community to reflect the values of the reign of God.

The perichoretic nature of God reveals God's intimate purpose in creation. God-in-relationship in that dance of mutual indwelling is the source from which the human

creation emanated. Tragically, God's intimate design was broken in the fall when intimacy was replaced with individualism and hiding supplanted vulnerability. But God determined to bring about a new creation through the transforming power of Christ. Through the church, God is bringing about a new creation fashioned by metamorphosis into a community invited to participate in God's mission and to incarnate that relationship for the world.

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in and emphasis upon the perichoretic nature of the Trinity evidenced in the writings of numerous theologians.<sup>2</sup> In particular, John Ortberg writes "The ancient Greek word for this 'mutual indwelling' of the Trinity is perichoresis, which is related to our word choreography. The Trinity exists as a kind of eternal dance of joyful love among Father, Son, and Spirit."<sup>3</sup> Miraslov Volf also uses the term perichoresis to describe the Trinity.

Perichoresis refers to the reciprocal interiority of the Trinitarian persons. In every divine person as a subject, the other persons also indwell; all mutually permeate one another, though in so doing they do not cease to be distinct persons. In fact, the distinctions between them are precisely the presupposition of that interiority, since persons who have dissolved into one another cannot exist in one another...Being in one another does not abolish Trinitarian plurality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Among the authors and works are Miraslov Volf *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Michael Welker *God the Spirit*, and John Ortberg *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*.

<sup>3</sup> John Ortberg, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 35.

<sup>4</sup> Miraslov Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 209.

In this reciprocal interiority, there is a delightful relationship of mutual deference. In the New Testament accounts of God's interaction with humanity, we discover that each part of the Trinity points away from itself toward the other.<sup>5</sup>

At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, we find the Father pointing to the Son, affirming Christ's purpose, and declaring God's pleasure. In Mark 1:9-11 the gospel writer describes the baptism of Jesus and the response of the Father.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In John 14:9 - 11, the Son points away from himself to the Father acknowledging that all the teachings and the works of power Jesus is doing are the work of the Father.

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. . . The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

The Spirit always points to the Father and the Son. In John 14:26, Jesus promises the disciples that they will not be alone.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to John Ortberg for this insight. In *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*, quoting Frederick Bruener he refers to the "shyness" of God.

## A MISSIONAL APPROACH – PARTICIPATION

The perichoretic nature of the Trinity and the church, reflecting that nature is invited to further God's purpose of transformation in the world. How then does the Church participate in God's mission? The Apostle Paul gives us insight in Ephesians 4:11-16:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

The Holy Spirit creates the church by gifting it to fulfill the mission of God. These gifts come embodied in persons who have been called out of the world into fellowship, and sent back into the world as mission. In this body, since all gifts are necessary none is more significant than another. As God is God-in-relationship, the church is the people-of-God-in-relationship.

But, here is the central question. What is the *missio dei*? In what is the church invited to participate? Why is necessary to understand the nature of God's called and sent people?

At the beginning of this paper, God's purpose for human creation was to be a reflection of God's own being in intimacy. In Revelation 21:3-5, God's preferred future for humanity is revealed.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

In this vision, the destiny and consummation of God's creation is revealed. The intimacy which was broken in the fall and transformed by the cross now finds its consummation in the New Jerusalem. This God-in-relationship who walked with the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day (Gen. 2:8) once again takes up dwelling among mortals. The Creator who "breathed into their nostrils the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7) in intimate proximity now "dries every tear from their eyes." (Rev. 21:4) Death will die and mourning will cease. Sorrow and pain will flee. All things will become new. God's purposes will no longer be thwarted and the veil that dims our view will be lifted. The *eschaton* where creation is transformed reflects the glory of God and intimacy is restored.

This is the destiny of God's *ecclesia*. But what does that have to do with the church today? The church is called to participate in, model, and foreshadow the fullness of God's reign. The church is to be the locus of God's coming *eschaton*, the completion of God's design. The church is invited to lift the veil which clouds that destiny and to behold God's destiny and consummation. The vision of the New Jerusalem becomes the design upon which to shape the structures so that now to live out that intimacy together.

The church is the people called out (*ecclesia*) of isolation and into community by God with this vision clearly focused. This community is much more than a casual collection of individuals who have come together to hear the Word of God preached and receive the Sacraments. It is an intentional community called and gifted by the Holy

Spirit to participate in God's mission to reconcile the hostile world back to the intimate God. This community is charismatic formed by the presence of and gifted by the Holy Spirit, so its organizational structures and polity, its decision-making processes and its relationships are the substance of witness to the world.

This vision, modeled and lived by the gathered community, constitutes an integral part of extending the reign of God into the world. As the church creates structures which implement this vision of the New Jerusalem in its own congregational life, those church leaders who participate in decision-making processes will carry those same processes back to their positions of leadership and influence in the wider community.

Since the church is the foreshadowing of that heavenly vision, its processes and organizational structures must nurture intimate relationships. Just as biology has discovered that the DNA print in the macrocosm is also found in the microcosm, the nature of the church as institution must have the biblical and theological DNA imprimatur in its structures.

Therefore, the structures adopted by the church should recognize that the relationships are the witness. They will then reflect and facilitate the gifts that the participants are. Craig Van Gelder in his book *The Essence of the Church* writes:

In dealing with matters of church structure, processes, and leadership, the key is to start by considering the nature of the church, proceed to understanding the ministry of the church, and then move to the development of organization in the church.<sup>6</sup>

In short, Van Gelder declares that the church is, the church does what it is, and the church organizes what it does. As it organizes itself, the church must always remember

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000) 157.

that “The rightful role of organization within the visible church has always been to serve the purposes of the nature and ministry of the church under the creating, leading, and teaching of the Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> The nature and ministry of the church are to reflect God’s glory, God’s mutual indwelling, other-preferring, blessing presence in the world. Unlike other organizations the church exists to create relationships that witness to God’s redeeming love and grace. Reflecting this relational truth becomes more important than setting goals.

Van Gelder’s emphasis on organizing to further the nature of the church as a community of the Spirit is central to any understanding of its structure. This is not to deny the church has institutional dynamics. It is necessary to remember that this organization must be responsive as an organism and not merely as an institution though. Darrell Guder says “There is no continuation of the Christian movement within history without institutional forms and patterns.”<sup>8</sup> The organization must be developed from deep philosophical and theological convictions which will respond to the ever-changing cultural scenes in which the missional church must minister. Further, Guder says:

Whether or not the missional church is an institution is, therefore, not really a question to be debated. The question, rather, is whether its institution supports and serves its missionary vocation. Does the institutional dimension of the church, as one necessary aspect of its existence in the world, incarnate the gospel of God’s reign in Christ?<sup>9</sup>  
(Emphasis mine)

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 185.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 185.

The church is always to be an imperfect reflection of the nature of God. Lesslie Newbigen, in commenting on this imperfect reflection of the “fullness of God” as discussed in Colossians 1:19 says:

But this presence was a veiled presence in order that there might be the possibility of repentance and freely given faith. In the Church the mission of Jesus is continued in the same veiled form. It is continued through the presence and active working of the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of the reign of God in foretaste . . . The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission. It is God who acts in the power of the Holy Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

The church’s imperfect rendition of God’s perfect mutual indwelling of persons is a part of that “veiled presence” continuing the ministry of Jesus in the world “creating signs of the new age. . .” Here the church shares in itself the reflected glory of God’s own delightful self-giving, dancing relationship. Even in its imperfection, the Church finds its nature centered in the very notion God who is God-in-relationship. In confessing this truth, the Church finds its center of being and its charter for structure. But living into it will require constant vigilance.

Most readers will recognize that the “normal” experience of church structures doesn’t match the biblical/theological foundation here laid out. Our meetings are more like the following illustration.

The question exposed the distrust. “Are we really going to make a decision about the use of this space, or has the decision already been made and we are just here to be told what is going to happen?” Members of the staff team had been called together because the growing congregation had pushed space requirements for office, children’s

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<sup>10</sup> Lesslie Newbigen, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 118-119.

ministries, and committee meetings to the limit. All of these needs had converged in one space which was the subject of this discussion. But while the space was the subject matter under discussion, the underlying distrust was the result of a systemic relational breakdown.

The entire system in this congregation consisted in a culture of deference to the will of senior staff. Rather than bringing participants to the table where all the participants had opportunity to contribute their perspective the senior staff had, in the past, simply made the decision and then directed the rest of the team. The resulting organization was very fragile with little participation by the staff and little buy-in to vision and goals. In addition, individual members of senior staff became the targets of anger and suspicion because, not only were they the most visible gate-keepers, they were positioned to make decisions without consulting those who would be required to implement them. There was no sustaining structure to assure that staff members would be heard thereby eviscerating confidence in the decisions made. Little attention had ever been paid to the need for consistency which is required to elicit confidence by the staff.

Given this history, decisions like the one now under consideration created suspicion and a palpable jadedness. Incidents like this in the past had increased resentment and fostered an unwillingness to speak honestly in meetings. This pattern eventually lead to resignation to “the way things are” and finally to a complete withdrawal from the process altogether.

Incidents like this one enervate people and shatter relationships denying the very essence of God’s perichoretic nature. Rather than affirming persons, the system had denigrated them.

However, this time senior staff approached the matter differently. Recognizing the significance of each ministry represented at the table, the participants were assured that no decision had yet been made. Further, they were promised that no decision would be made in which they did not participate. At this meeting each one around the table was asked to give their perspective bearing in mind that no one would be allowed exclusive use of the room. Each was asked to listen to the needs of the other and to consider any and all possibilities for room configuration.

As of this writing the decision is still not made. The Facilities Manager is drawing various configurations. But even though the decision has not yet been made calm seems to reign in the staff because a structure which values them has been implemented.

As we evaluate the example we can see how the previous expectations could compromise the church's witness. But this time the staff accepted a structure that will guide the decisions and nurture the relationships. This is part of living into God's perichoretic nature.

Rather than seeking to impose their wills upon each other the church can live into destiny of our dominion. Only in mutual interdependence will that destiny blossom. And the church is to be the locus of that new humanity.

## CONCLUSION

We began by stating “These structures and processes must empower and release God’s people to bear and witness to the perichoretic nature of the triune God.” The church must give careful attention to the processes by which it governs itself but the biblical and theological foundations will always be more important than the specific structures implemented. These foundations will allow authentic relationships to develop because they assure persons they will be valued as those created in the image of God. Their wisdom will be recognized and their participation honored. The church’s structures will give credence to God’s work of reconciliation foreshadowing the intimate consummation. When committees and Session, councils and consistories allow the biblical and theological foundations to order their corporate life the church will bring glory to the perichoretic Three-in-One and honor God’s desire for intimacy restored.

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