Christology and the Trinity

Len Hjalmarson, DMin

In my early days in bible college it was said that Christology would be the theological buzz of the new millennium. In the end, however, it seems Missio Dei, and ecclesiology, are the larger buzz. Both require a strong Christology.

Christology alone, however, is an insufficient foundation for ecclesiology or missiology. Only the Trinity can anchor a solid foothold for mission, because it is from Godself, the perfect community, that love springs forth. And it is in that relational image that humankind is formed. Salvation itself is a Trinitarian expression made manifest in a covenant community. As Newbigin writes, “Interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God. Therefore there can be no salvation for human beings except in relatedness.” (The Open Secret)

The formula I see everywhere is this: Christology → mission → ecclesiology

I want to rewrite that formula: Trinity → mission → ecclesiology.

I think there are several reasons that we appeal to Christology more readily than to Trinitarian thought. First, because Christology anchors our doctrine of salvation and therefore our experience as believers. Jesus, however, continually points us to the Father. And when he leaves the earth he sends us the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts – the story of the church in mission -- majors on the work of this mysterious third Person. As we seek to rediscover missional frameworks and practices we will need to recover a Trinitarian lens.

Second, Christology is more amenable to individualistic frameworks for practice. We readily think, “Jesus was sent – I am sent.” With our absorption in popular evangelical thought we become vulnerable to non-covenantal expressions of community. Our leadership structures and our practices are shaped more by consumer practices than by any biblical mandate. We go out on mission as individuals. We embrace “heroic” models of leadership. We consume spiritual practices but are not formed by them and don’t know how to integrate them with community or mission.

Third, un-nuanced Christology quickly becomes practical Christomonism. One of the heresies rejected by the early Christians, this particular error emphasizes Jesus divinity and locates salvation somewhere “out of this world.” We can no longer pray, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” Justice concerns are relegated to the margins of life where Jesus placed them at the center of God’s kingdom agenda (Luke 4).

Finally, an emphasis on Christology for missional practices tends to place soteriology at the center where a Trinitarian frame makes anthropology – and the Imago – the focus. With the Trinity as a starting point we ask what we have in common with our neighbors. With Christology as a starting point we ask how we differ (“in” or “out?”) With the Trinity at the center we ask “How is the Spirit active in the life of my neighbor?” rather than what Christological formula she must repeat to be saved.

The Spirit goes before us in all things, and in the post-colonial world belonging comes before believing. As an Anabaptist people our apologetics need to shift from the cognitive and declarative frame to the demonstrative and performative frame. As William Cavanaugh puts it,

“People are usually converted to a new way of living by getting to know people who live that way and thus being able to see themselves living that way too. This is the way God’s revolution works. The church is meant to be that community of people who make salvation visible for the rest of the world. Salvation is not a property of isolated individuals, but is only made visible in mutual love.” (The Church as God’s Body Language, Zadok Perspectives (Spring, 2006)