A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation

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At the heart of the missional church conversation lies a challenge: to recover and deepen the church's Christian identity in a post-Christendom world in light of the triune God's mission in all of creation. This essay explores how the commitments of missional theology might inform the church's practice of forming disciples of Christ. In societies in which the surrounding culture can no longer be assumed to produce Christians, the church must engage the shaping of disciples with fresh intention. A missional view of God offers rich resources for reenvisioning how disciples might be formed in the power of the Spirit for faithful participation in the triune God's communal, creative, and reconciling movement in the world.

A Christendom Hangover?

As has often been noted, churches in Western societies whose cultures were once deeply influenced by various forms of Christendom (the formal or informal cultural, social, or political establishment of Christianity) are facing a crisis today. State churches — or former state churches — in Europe claim minuscule rates of Sunday attendance and participation relative to their populations.¹ In the United States so-called "mainline" Protes-

¹. According to the European Social Survey, in 2004, weekly attendance at church services in Denmark was 3 percent, Sweden and Finland 5 percent, and France and Germany below 10 percent. Robert Manchin, "Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews," Sep-
tant churches, whose identities were most directly linked to establishment, have experienced acute decline: membership, participation, and influence within their contexts have steadily eroded over the past several decades.\(^2\) A resurgent evangelicalism has countered this trend in some respects, but evangelical growth is mixed.\(^3\) Willow Creek's *Reveal* study demonstrated that even highly "successful" evangelical churches struggle with deepening the faith of their members.\(^4\) Churches of all traditions face challenging questions of discipleship formation in a post-Christian culture.

In the United States, the percentage of persons claiming adherence to Christianity has stayed relatively robust.\(^5\) Yet only a small minority of people actually attend weekend worship (17.5 percent on an average Sunday in 2005).\(^6\) Moreover, the depth of the Christian identity of those who claim to be Christian warrants further scrutiny and concern. With the disintegration of cultural Christianity in the United States, what kinds of beliefs, practices, and identities are functioning among those who profess Christian adherence?

Perhaps the most provocative answer to this question comes from recent research conducted among young people. In *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith describes a predominant faith that surfaced in extensive interviews with teenagers from a variety of religious backgrounds, the great majority of whom were Christian. Smith calls it "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" and defines its central tenets as follows:

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1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

In Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, religion operates somewhere in the background of life, largely invisible. It is instrumental, aimed at making one feel good about oneself and at resolving personal problems. Religion is a matter of individual, subjective choice; substantive differences between faiths are assumed not to exist. God is disengaged from everyday life in the world, unless a problem arises: “God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.”

The individual is at the center of the universe. Alan Wolfe draws similar conclusions in his book *The Transformation of American Religion*, pointing out how American religion has become co-opted by American culture, including the prevalence of therapeutic individualism. He writes: “American religion survives and even flourishes not so much because it instructs people in the right ways to honor God but because people have taken so many aspects of religion into their own hands.”

Given that young people’s views are deeply shaped by older adults, there is good reason to believe that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is also widely present among American adults. Smith argues that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has essentially colonized Christianity, as well as other major religious traditions, in the United States. A frightening indicator of this is the stunning inability of most young people in Smith’s study to articulate their faith in the categories or language of their religious tradi-

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ations, including Christianity. While highly articulate on many other matters, "the vast majority simply could not express themselves on matters of God, faith, religion, or spiritual life." Smith concludes that these young people could not express matters of faith because they have been insufficiently educated in their religious traditions and not given opportunities for talking about their faith. This echoes Wolfe's finding: "[I]n [American] religion, whatever the Lord requires, knowledge of his teachings is not among them. . . ."13

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism must be understood against a larger cultural backdrop of what Charles Taylor calls "a secular age" in modern Western societies. Taylor traces the development from the Reformation through the twentieth century of particular sets of assumptions, attitudes, and perspectives that constitute the modern secular worldviews shared by members of contemporary Western societies. He charts the shift from an earlier "enchanted" universe characterized by a self that is relatively open and porous to others and to the presence of God, to a sharply bounded, "buffered" self disengaged from everything outside the mind. Whereas once life proceeded in a rhythm of sacred or heightened moments (feast days and festivals) interposed with "ordinary time," in the modern era time was regularized to the ticking of mechanical clocks. In a process of "excarnation," religion became disembodied from communal ritual, emotion, and practice and focused in the mind, until humans were left alone, concentrating on their own individual flourishing, which could be accomplished more or less without God.

The power of grace was replaced in this transition with striving to attain moral norms available to all (not just spiritual elites, as in medieval Europe). Taylor notes that "the plan of God for human beings was reduced to their coming to realize the order in their lives which he had planned for their happiness and well-being." God's agency is largely eclipsed in this modern worldview: "There is a drift away from orthodox Christian conceptions of God as an agent interacting with humans and intervening in human history; and towards God as architect of a universe operating by unchanging laws, which humans have to conform to or suffer the consequences."14

12. Smith and Denton, Soul Searching, 133.
The legacy of this secularism, despite various historical and contemporary counterstreams, is still pervasive in both the church and culture in Western societies today. Many church members struggle to name God's presence or activity in their daily lives or in the world, particularly in categories, images, metaphors, or narratives from the Christian tradition. While nominal observance among Christians has been a recurrent problem since Christianity's establishment after Constantine, the contemporary situation seems particularly acute. In Christendom, churches could assume that the surrounding culture or families would make Christians; all the church had to do was make them members. Today that is no longer the case. Without the scaffolding of cultural Christianity to support the church, fewer and fewer church members benefit from immersion in an integrated set of communal Christian practices, beliefs, and norms. Instead, many assemble beliefs, perspectives, and practices fluidly out of a variety of sources, some of which may be antithetical to core Christian commitments (see Moralistic Therapeutic Deism above). Taylor calls this the "nova effect" of an ever-widening variety of moral and spiritual options in late-modern societies whereby individuals seek to find their own way, express their true selves, or discover fulfillment. By and large, the church has failed to take this reality seriously, preferring instead to operate as if nothing has changed, as if the old formative patterns of cultural Christianity still prevail. In this chapter I offer my attempt to address these realities in light of missional theology, a theology that offers a very different picture of God, the world, and human flourishing.

What Is “Missional” Anyway? Defining Some Terms

The missional church conversation started with a recognition that the church’s relationship to its surrounding culture in the West had changed: the era of functional Christendom or a churched culture was over, and the

15. Among these are various forms of pietism, evangelicalism, revivalistic Christianity, nineteenth-century Romanticism, and Pentecostalism, which have sought to reassert an active spiritual presence in the cosmos or a sense of mystery and the numinous. It should be noted that this secularism has been strongest in the dominant white culture, while many oppressed groups and ethnic immigrant cultures have been more resistant to it.


17. Taylor, Secular Age, 299.
primary source of the church's identity and vocation could no longer rest on social centrality. In the years since its popularization in the 1998 book *Missional Church* 18 (from the Gospel and Our Culture Network), the term "missional" has taken on a life of its own.19 Given the elasticity in its usage, the concept "missional" warrants closer definition.

**Missional Church**

By "missional church" I mean a church whose identity lies in its *participation in the triune God's mission* in all of creation. In the view of missional ecclesiology, it is God's mission that has a church, not the church that has a mission.20 Much of the church's discussion of mission (even some of what is found under the "missional" term) still operates via the previous functionally Christendom paradigm of church-with-a-mission. In this paradigm, mission is something the church does on God's behalf. Mission is ancillary to the church's life (thus "mission" budgets, committees, and so on) rather than constitutive of the church's core identity. Mission takes place "over there" somewhere by specialist "missionaries." Local churches are only tangentially involved in mission in the church-with-a-mission view.

In contrast, missional church views mission as definitive of what the church is because the church is a *product of and participant in God's mission*. It exists to share meaningfully in the triune God's creative, reconciling, healing, restoring movement in the world. All its members are missionaries through baptism, not just a select few. Local churches are central to God's mission as they discern God's movement in their particular times and places and join up with it.

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Missional Theology

This missional view of church is rooted in a missional view of God — thus "missional theology." Missional theology describes and interprets the mission of God (missio Dei), and the biblical story witnesses to this mission. The God we know in the biblical narrative creates humanity for a life of faithful and just community (Hebrew shalom) with God, each other, and the whole of the created order. When humans turn away, fail to trust God, and break relationships with God, one another, and the earth, God works tirelessly to restore them. God establishes a universal covenant with Noah, then chooses a particular family, Abraham and Sarah. This family grows first into a clan and later into a nation (Israel), called to bless all nations. God breaks the powers of empire to free God's people from slavery and gives them the Law to show to the world life in faithful covenant community. When they turn inward and fall prey to their own imperial patterns of idolatry and oppression, God raises up prophets to call them back to faithfulness. Finally, God sends his own Son, Jesus the messiah, to participate fully in human life, even to the point of suffering, torture, and death, so that humanity might be restored to community with God and all of creation. Jesus is raised from the dead as the first fruits of a new human future. The community of Jesus created and sent by the Spirit (the church) exists as a tangible sign and witness to God's reign over all creation, of a promised future already present that will be consummated on the last day.

Spiritual Formation

By way of defining "spiritual formation," I offer a slightly appended version of James Wilhoit's helpful definition: Christian spiritual formation refers to the "intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit," for the sake of the world.21 Spiritual formation must be understood first and foremost as a work of the Holy Spirit. It is a communal process that unfolds over time, uniquely for each Christian and often in nonlinear patterns. Christ is the new Adam into whose image we are being formed.

21. James Wilhoit, Spiritual Formation As If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 23. I have added "for the sake of the world."
but Christ must be understood in light of Trinitarian relationships. Spiritual formation is not just for our own individual growth; it is for love of God and neighbor. I will explore all these themes in more detail below; but first we must revisit spiritual formation in Christian history, for our present predicament is the product of a long line of contextual developments.

How Did We Get Here? Revisiting the Tradition

Christianity includes a rich complexity of traditions of spirituality and spiritual formation, far more than can be unpacked in any great detail here. Christian spiritual formation takes place between multiple polarities: inner and outer; active and contemplative; individual and communal. For the purposes of this chapter, I want to highlight a particular development in the history of Christian spirituality, a turn in construing Christian spiritual formation that coincides roughly with the advent of Christendom and reflects the influence of Greek philosophy. It is a tendency to comprehend the Christian spiritual life as one of withdrawal from the world that continues to exercise significant influence on Christianity today, especially in its individualized, privatized, and modern Western forms.

The New Testament contains a multiplicity of voices and emphases regarding spiritual formation, from the synoptic Gospels' emphasis on the inception of the reign of God to Paul's teaching on participation in Christ through the Spirit. What is striking throughout is the missionary framework within which spiritual formation takes place, always in relationship to Christ's ministry, the work of the Spirit, and witness to the world. Just as, for Israel, the vocation of living a holy life was not an end in itself but to be a light to the nations, so the unfolding drama of Jesus' ministry and the formation of a community of believers play out on a public stage, in contact with multiple cultures, beliefs, powers, and ways of life. Spiritual transformation occurs within the emerging Christian community and in relationship with nonbelieving others. Often the apostles' own spiritual growth takes religious lines, striking a New Testament characteristic of the Christian church's mission.

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growth takes place as the Spirit sends them across social, cultural, and religious lines, such as Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10. The New Testament church is a church participating in God’s mission — the first missional church.

During the centuries between the New Testament apostles and the conversion of Constantine, mission and spiritual formation unfolded in the context of costly public witness within a hostile Roman society: the spirituality of the martyrs. Martyrdom (literally, “witness”) was a way of life for the small but growing Christian communities who faced misunderstanding, resistance, and persecution. They attracted notoriety for their compassion, their egalitarianism, and the high standards of their moral conduct. Spiritual formation had a decidedly ethical — as well as an eschatological — character. The dramatic faith of the Christian martyrs who died painful public deaths called into question the norms and values of pagan Roman society, attracted notice, interest, and commitment from non-believers, and deepened the faith of other Christians. Entry into the Christian community involved a long and intensive catechetical process that shaped new believers into a baptismal identity that stood in contrast to the norms and values of the surrounding pagan imperial culture.

A shift began to take place, however, with the toleration and eventual triumph of Christianity within the Roman Empire. Rather than being a community whose spiritual identity was shaped primarily through witness and service to non-Christian neighbors, the church found itself increasingly focused on influencing culture and consolidating its own institutional presence. The leading spiritual figures at this time and for the next few centuries found their identity in fleeing from society into the desert as monastics and hermits in order to grow into Christlikeness. Desert monasticism — as well as the later forms of early medieval monasticism that followed — represented a significant turn in the history of Christian spiritual formation that corresponds to this change in the church’s missionary context.

For the desert fathers and mothers and the budding monastic tradition, leaving life in the ordinary world allowed a purity of focus on cultivating holiness through prayer, spiritual exercises, work, and communal

formation. What was once a very tangible struggle by the church against external social and political opposition became interiorized into a fight against the spiritual powers of the devil, the passions, and the human will. The ideals were *ascesis* (discipline, training, or deprivation) and *apatheia* (freedom from the passions). The goal was *agape* (unconditional love), the highest virtue, reached only through a long process of self-discipline and renunciation.27

One of the major influences shaping this spirituality was Neo-Platonism, mediated into the Christian church through a variety of key thinkers, including Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Evagrius of Pontus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and John Cassian.28 While Platonic influence took different shapes in the thought of various patristic theologians, a number of common threads do appear. These include an abstract, transcendent view of God as pure truth and beauty, beyond the suffering and changeability of this world; a negative view of bodily passions; a focus on spirituality as interior attentiveness of the mind to God; and spiritual growth as a process of ascent out of the world, from the many to the One, from the material to the immaterial, and from temporality to eternity, often as a kind of return of the soul to its true home.

The reformulation of Christian spirituality in the terms of Neo-Platonism and Greek philosophy was a move of contextualization that fit the church's environment in the late-Roman Mediterranean world in many ways. The church must always be incarnationally translated (contextualized) into the cultural forms of its time and place; the danger lies in overcontextualization or undercontextualization. In this case, something important was lost. To begin with, spiritual growth increasingly became seen as an elitist enterprise accessible primarily to those who renounced ordinary life in the world. Jesus does call for a reordering of relationships, family, and community to follow him. Yet, what was once a spiritual call available to people of all social classes and walks of life became focused on those few who walked away from their homes, cities, villages, and vocations for the desert and the monasteries.

Second, the role of missionary witness with those outside the Christian community diminished as the church came to occupy a central place in society. The church's spirituality was less defined and heightened by its contrast with the prevailing norms of its context than its embrace and attention.

A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation

No longer tempted transformation of those norms. Along the way, the intentional, disciplined, and rigorous process of making Christians developed by the early church gave way to a cultural Christianity, and with it, the problem of nominality. Finally, Christian spirituality was interiorized and immaterialized by this embrace of Greek philosophy, with its tendencies to denigrate the material world and construe the spiritual path as an escape from it. The resurrection of the body was replaced by the immortality of the soul. David Bosch notes: “The church established itself in the world as an institute of almost exclusively other-worldly salvation.” Therein lies the paradox of an increasingly worldly, institutionalized church aimed at getting people out of this world to heaven.

The later medieval period saw the flourishing of monasticism as a primary locus for Christian spirituality. The missionary role of monastic communities in the Middle Ages, especially in spreading the gospel through northern Europe, derived in part from the depth of Christian spirituality that these communities fostered. However, the spiritual formation of members of local parish communities typically received less rigor and intentionality. Benedictine monasticism brought a rich new spirituality of work and hospitality in which ordinary tasks were seen as spiritually formative; but the dualism of spiritual and temporal estates perpetuated spiritual elitism and escapism from the world.

Medieval mysticism brought the Neo-Platonic stream of Christian spirituality to the fore. In such seminal texts as Bonaventure’s *The Journey of the Mind to God*, the material world is primarily an early stage to be contemplated on the way to the mind’s mystical union with God. While the world is in some ways instructive, it is instrumental and to be left as quickly as possible on the spiritual ascent toward higher realms.

Spiritual formation in society beyond monastic relationships receives little attention.

Martin Luther’s recovery of the priesthood of all believers and his reframing of the doctrine of vocation represent a key turning point in this narrative. Luther rejected the spiritual elitism of the monastic tradition and asserted the integrity and vitality of spiritual formation in ordinary life for all manner of people. He did so by recasting Christian freedom from escap-
ing the material world to loving the neighbor. Luther thereby retrieved the public and ethical dimensions of spiritual formation for all people, while retaining a strongly sacramental focus. The Reformation was in large part a project of deepening the Christian faith and identity of the church in Europe; yet it was essentially a Christendom Europe, and the church’s mission remained primarily the maintenance of Western culture.

The Pietistic movements that arose during the late seventeenth century in Europe similarly sought to address lax Christian spirituality by a renewed emphasis on personal spiritual experience, conversion, and moral holiness. The evangelicalism that grew out of these movements continued the Western tradition’s long-standing focus on individualized spiritual growth. Yet salvation came to be envisioned primarily as an escape from this world to heaven, the assurance of which is marked by disciplines of personal sanctification in the meantime. Pietism fueled the modern missionary movement, as well as major social reform efforts (such as the abolition of slavery). However, in many streams it fostered a view of God as uncontaminated by this world and a view of the church as separate from society.

Deism and liberal Protestantism took the long-standing tradition of Christian formation as moral discipline in a new direction by eclipsing God from a universe from which God was already understood to be largely removed. Humanity was now on its own to realize moral and social perfection. Thus we end up, in the late modern period, with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and other distortions of Christian belief that diverge profoundly from the biblical narrative’s emphasis on an active, participatory God engaged with human affairs — in other words, a missional God. The eschatological horizon of the New Testament and orthodox Christian thought is replaced with only the immediate present, a present that we construct by ourselves in the face of what seems increasingly an ambiguous future.

This brief narrative is, admittedly, an oversimplification of a very complex history. Nonetheless, the pattern of a turn away from the world that corresponded with the shift to Christendom bears critical reflection as we consider spiritual formation in the church’s new missionary context today. The church now finds itself in a missionary environment that in many respects resembles Christendom era. Trinitarian theology must play a central role in the church’s mission as it faces the present in the world.

**Spiritual Formation**

The development of Trinitarian theology must in mission as a further understanding of the Triune God.

Spirtual Formation within God's Ecstatic Communal Life

The development of missional theology in the West is rooted in the rediscovery of Trinitarian theology, with Karl Barth exercising particularly significant influence. In mid-twentieth-century ecumenical missiological circles, particularly at the 1952 International Missionary Council conference in Willingen, Germany, the theological basis for mission shifted from Great Commission obedience to the Trinity: “The classical doctrine on the missio Dei as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.” This view of mission as the church's participation in the sending movement of God has come to be embraced across ecumenical lines, including by Vatican II. But it has taken hold more slowly at the grass-roots level.

The Trinity is integral to a missional theology of spiritual formation. The God we know in salvation history, in Jesus Christ, and in the community of the church is a communal, relational God. Such a theology must take into view not only the sending concept of the Trinity so characteristic of Western theology but also the social doctrine of the Trinity that has been so richly developed in Eastern theology and, more recently, by contemporary Western theologians. To conceive of God, in

34. Bosch, Transforming Mission, 373, 89-90.
whose image we are created and who is the primary agent of mission, not as a monad but rather as a relational community of three persons who share a common, interdependent life, has significant implications for how we envision spiritual formation.

In John 17:21, Jesus prays, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." The deeply relational identity of Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit in the Gospels came to be described in later centuries in terms of perichoresis, or the mutual indwelling of the three divine persons. Perichoresis literally means “whirl,” “rotation,” “circulating or walking around.” With regard to the Trinity, it describes a relationship of dynamic mutuality, equality, openness, and shared participation among Father, Son, and Spirit. This divine community is composed of the relationship of genuine others; otherness is constitutive of God’s Trinitarian life. To be a person (whether human or divine) is to be in relationship, as John Zizioulas says: “The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.” The triune community is composed of distinct persons united in a life of loving communion (koinonia, fellowship, sharing, belonging, or participation) precisely because of their otherness and difference. Difference makes communion possible.

**Creation**

At its Trinitarian heart, God's mission begins with the generation of others to share in loving communion: the Father’s begetting of the Son and Spirit, and the creation of the cosmos itself out of nothing (ex nihilo). The Trinitarian life is not closed in on itself, but rather it is open, generative, and outward-reaching ("outside"). Creation created others, created beings is created in Creation is compromised new. This Trinity for communion fruitful starting all too readily fracturing of mission. Adam’s from a loving, upon himself. Other as constant explanation of is only in Christ without division other words, whole is healed by

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39. “[A] study of the Trinity reveals that otherness is absolute. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are absolutely different (diaphora), none of them being subject to confusion with the other two,” John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 5.


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outward-reaching. The classical term for this is ekstasis (literally "standing outside"). Creation is God's self-limitation in love and freedom so that created others might exist in relationship with God, not as equals but as created beings with their own creaturely integrity and otherness. Humanity is created in the image of God (imago Dei) for relational community. Creation is continuing and looks forward to the new creation — the promised new heaven and earth.41

This Trinitarian vision of a God of communion who creates humanity for community with God, one another, and the rest of creation offers a fruitful starting point for reconceiving spiritual formation. As we can see all too readily around us, the present human condition is marked by the fracturing of community, disordered and unjust relationships, and division. Adam's response to his freedom was to break communion, to turn from a loving, reconciled relationship with God, Eve, and the earth inward upon himself. "By claiming to be God," says Zizioulas, "Adam rejected the Other as constitutive of his being and declared himself to be the ultimate explanation of his existence." This is the tragedy of the human situation. It is only in Christ, the one in whom the human and divine natures coexist without division or confusion (in the Chalcedonian formulation) — in other words, where otherness and communion coinhere — that this condition is healed. Drawing from Irenaeus of Lyons and Maximus the Confessor, Zizioulas writes:

> The call has a specific content: the human being is called to bring creation into communion with God so that it may survive and participate in the life of the Holy Trinity. To this call, Adam in his freedom answered with a "no." It was Christ who fulfilled it, thus revealing and realizing in himself what it means to be truly human.42

God's mission is about the restoration of community, and our formation in Christ means our being redeemed, healed, and caught up in God's communal life by grace through faith.

Understanding the world as created by God in genuine otherness, with a dazzling array of difference in human cultures, ethnicities, perspectives, and ways of life that need not be cause for division, is critical for a postcolonial missiology. Christian mission involves building and restoring community in Christ through the power of the Spirit. Any attempts to

41. See Moltmann, God in Creation.
42. Zizioulas, Communion and Otherness, 43.
suppress, erase, or coercively denigrate genuine creaturely differences in
the name of mission must be rejected. Seen in this Trinitarian light, the
world is by no means godforsaken but rather imbued with deep integrity,
richness, and vitality. Missional theology and spiritual formation must
work from a robust and positive doctrine of creation that is also willing to
name and address candidly and prophetically the distortions of human
community brought about by human sin. Christian mission must point to
Christ as the one in whom God’s judgment and promise for humanity are
most clearly revealed.

Life in the Spirit

Central to God’s mission and presence within creation is the Holy Spirit, a
key Christian way of talking about God’s ongoing involvement in the
world. The Spirit is the one who relates humanity with the Father and
Christ, creates communion, restores relationships, and is a primary agent
in mission. Jürgen Moltmann writes: “If the Creator is himself present in
his creation by virtue of the Spirit, then his relationship to creation must
rather be viewed as an intricate web of unilateral, reciprocal, and many­sided relationships.”43 Biblically, the Spirit makes God’s power knowable
through public works of communal restoration, justice, and mercy. It is in
the Spirit that Jesus announces the jubilee promises from Isaiah of release
to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and emancipation for the op­pressed (Luke 4). The reconciliation of difference lies at the heart of the
Spirit’s communal work, as Michael Welker notes: “The Spirit of God gives
rise to a multi­place force field that is sensitive to differences. In this force
field, enjoyment of creaturely, invigorating differences can be cultivated
while unjust, debilitating differences can be removed in love, mercy, and
gentleness.”44

Therefore, it is crucial that we understand Christian spiritual forma­tion as Spiritual formation — formation in and by the power of the Holy
Spirit.45 The spiritual life should not be understood as the nonmaterial di­mension of human existence, but rather the new identity we have through

45. See Gordon Fee, “On Getting the Spirit Back into Spirituality,” in Jeffrey
P. Greenman and George Kalantzis, eds., *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological
Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).
baptism when we dwell in the power and community of the Holy Spirit. Gordon Fee points out that there has been an unfortunate tendency to turn Paul's adjective *pneumatikos* ("life in the Spirit") into a more generic and bland English term ("spiritual") that misses the very powerful agency of the Holy Spirit so central to Paul. The Spirit is the prime actor in Christian spiritual formation, and that action is *relational*. Our identities are reshaped and restored as we are brought by the Spirit into right relationship with God through Christ, as we experience the restoration of community in the church, and as we engage our neighbors and non-Christian others in mission in which the Spirit works between us.

**Life in Christ**

Paul talks not only about life "in the Spirit," but also life "in Christ" (see Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 1:30; and 2 Cor. 5:17, among the many uses of this phrase). Christology gives the Christian spiritual life definition, for Christ is the one in whom the image of God is restored and through whom, in the power of the Spirit, we are brought into community with God by grace through faith. The justification of the ungodly is at the fulcrum of God's mission. The incarnation signifies God's full participation in human life, even in its worst circumstances, so that humanity might once again participate by grace in the triune God's communal life.

Athanasius famously said, with regard to the incarnation of Christ: "He was made man so that we might be made God [literally, "he was humanized so that we might be deified"]." The theme of participation in God (*theosis*, or divinization), derived from 2 Peter 1:4, has a long history in Christian thought. Developed by Athanasius, Irenaeus, and the Orthodox tradition most prominently, it also appears in Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and others in the Western tradition. In many of its uses, the idea of participation in God operates within a Neo-Platonic framework, whereby


participation is the ascent of the human mind through a process of purification to union with divine truth and beauty, similar to the weaker participation of the material world in the greater being of the immaterial forms in Platonism.49

I am not using the concept of “participation” in this sense. Rather, I am speaking of participation in God’s gracious movement of reaching out to all of creation in reconciliation and service (diakonia) in Christ and through the Spirit. We find our missional identity not in our ascent out of the world to God, but rather God’s descent into the world in Christ. In that descent, we are justified and caught up in God’s grace, which extends to, through, and beyond us to our neighbors. Participation in God’s missional life is not our work or attainment; rather, it is a free gift received in faith. The integrity and distinctiveness of our created humanity is not confused or lost along the way, for reconciliation and communion are predicated on the very existence of otherness.50

Martin Luther understood this kind of deep participation of the believer in Christ in terms of the “happy exchange,” according to which Christ takes on all human sinfulness and suffering and gives us the benefits of his righteousness (see 2 Cor. 5:21).51 We are reborn and freed in Christ in this grace. Yet we are reborn and freed not as an end in itself, as if our individual salvation were a self-contained matter, but rather to share in the power of the Spirit, in God’s ongoing work of loving service and reconciliation in the world — the creation and restoration of communion among all kinds of people. In The Freedom of a Christian, Luther says:

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love. . . .52

We receive a new identity in which allows for relating. No longer are we self-actualizing in a journey of self-fulfillment, but rather God, in Christ, decenters those and empowers the Spirit, new relation.

The focal point with humanity is that the human cultures a Jesus "was crucified in us coming to us in suffering under in those condemnation. In this sense, God, in Christ, relation in mission companionship, conclusion, and forming into a forsakenness. He says, "I have been is Christ who mission involves strength; solid.

49. For a helpful discussion of the Platonic background, see Paul S. Fiddes, Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 11-56.
50. See Zizioulas, Communion and Otherness, 37.
51. Martin Luther, On the Councils and the Church (1539), in Luther’s Works, 4:93-106 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966); see also Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32.
We receive a new identity in Christ that draws us closer both to God and our neighbor. Spiritual formation as missional participation involves an ethical dimension that leads us into the world.

Life "in Christ" means the decentering of the self in a reordering of identity in which our relationship with God is primary. This decentering allows for relationships with others to flourish, for it makes space for them. No longer are we at the center of our own universes, focused on individual self-actualization in isolation from God and others, as a kind of lonely journey of self-construction. Instead, we live with and for others, just as God, in Christ, gave himself to be with and for us. The Spirit's movement decenters those whose social location affords them privilege and power and empowers those whom society has dispossessed. In the power of the Spirit, new relationships of mutuality and equality become possible.

The focal point of Christian mission is God's utter identification with humanity in the incarnation, passion, and resurrection — an identification that takes place with humans, as we are, in the particularity of human cultures and historical moments. In the Nicene Creed we affirm that Jesus "was crucified under Pontius Pilate," thereby recognizing that God comes to us in the very specificity of our circumstances, even to those suffering under imperial oppression and injustice, to the victims of torture, to those condemned to die the most shameful and horrific deaths, as Christ did. In this sense, compassion is at the heart of God's mission to us in Christ: the sharing of our sufferings, the bearing of our burdens, the commitment to walk in our shoes all the way into the lowest, worst, most unjust, sin-scarred places in human life, the places of greatest despair ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). Christian spiritual formation in mission involves compassionate identification, participation, and companionship with those suffering under sin, oppression, injustice, exclusion, and despair. We are to go where Christ went in order to be formed into his likeness, to walk with others the ways of the world's forsakenness because we are found by him and find him there. As Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19b-20). Sharing in Christ's cruciform mission involves vulnerability, not coercion; weakness, not worldly strength; solidarity and service, not "lording over" or mere benevolence.
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(Luke 22:24-27); embracing others, not excluding them.\(^55\) It is a mission that takes place on the cultural and social terms of those to whom we are sent (as did the incarnation), not primarily on the missionaries' terms. Above all, it is a sharing of the loving communion in which we have been restored and which is a gift given to us so that we might give it away.

**The Curriculum of the World**

From a missional perspective, God and neighbor (the Other and others) play central roles in spiritual formation. Such formation plays out not just within the limited sphere of church gatherings, activities, or programs (though the formative role of the gathered community is critically important), but also in the workplaces, streets, markets, family rooms, and public squares where we encounter our neighbors, especially those who are strangers. Missional theology insists on the importance of the curriculum of the world in spiritual formation, not as a place to be shunned, rejected, or withdrawn from, but rather as a place to encounter God — especially in those who have been shunned or rejected.

Benedictine tradition, echoing Matthew 25:35 and Hebrews 13:2, has recognized the spiritually formative promise of the stranger, encouraging that strangers be "welcomed as Christ."\(^56\) Missional theology leads us one step further. A Trinitarian theology of otherness and communion invites us to recognize that our neighbors, in all their difference, are integral to our growth in Christ. It is through encounters with strangers, especially those unlike us, that we come to know the richness of the image of God and learn new insights into the gospel. God's own Trinitarian life is reciprocal in its mutual sharing. Our life in Christ must also be open to receiving from others, especially strangers. Indeed, biblically speaking, it is precisely in these encounters with strangers that disciples often are converted, deepened, provoked, and encouraged (see Luke 10:1-12; Luke 24:33-35; John 4:1-42; Acts 9-10, among others). Lamin Sanneh has explored this provocatively in the context of missionary encounters in Africa.\(^57\) Paul Chung


draws on Luther's concept of "irregular grace" to highlight the mutually transformative, enriching potential of dialogue with those from other faiths. Missional theology calls us to an expansive understanding of God's work in those most unfamiliar to us and in God's wider world. I must emphasize that our relationships in mission with diverse others are not merely instrumental to our own self-growth but anticipatory of the eschatological communion that is our destiny, where we will join with people of every tribe and nation at the heavenly banquet.

**Discerning God's Reign**

Jesus used the image of the banquet as one of many to describe the reign of God, which further defines God's mission. God's reign is now and not yet, hidden but provocatively present. It involves the reordering of human community so that the proud are humbled and the lowly raised up. It encompasses healing, forgiveness, mercy, and restorative justice. It springs from the seemingly smallest and most insignificant sources (the mustard seed), yet calls into question the very foundations of empires. The excluded, marginalized, poor, and shunned go to the head of the line in the reign of God — before the socially prominent and powerful do. It is embodied in practices of service, hospitality, peacemaking, reconciliation, care, and witness.

The reign of God gives shape to the formation of Christian disciples. It calls us to a new kind of attentiveness to God's presence and movement as we discern and participate in that reign in our lives and world. We must be prepared to encounter God in unexpected places, moving in surprising and paradoxical ways, often at the edges rather than the center. The reign is fundamentally uncontrollable: it is not something we build or extend; rather, it is a reality that we are invited to seek, enter, receive, and inherit.

As we discover and name the reign of God in our midst, we are called to testify to it, even in the face of the ambivalence, hostility, misunderstanding, or the persecution of society. The reign is fundamentally connectional, bringing people into right relationships with God, one another, and

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all of creation. Discerning and participating in it leads us into relationship with our neighbors.

When we understand mission as primarily God’s movement in our lives and in the world, we are confronted with a significant challenge: discernment. Given human sinfulness, how can we faithfully identify what is, in fact, God’s mission in our time and place? The history of the *missio Dei* concept is riddled with contention in this regard, for its expansiveness encompasses a wide range of interpretations of God’s missionary activity. This accounts both for the concept’s attractiveness and the limits of its usefulness: it can become a vacuum for us to fill. Ditches lie on either side of faithful interpretation. The first ditch, which emerged most prominently with J. C. Hoekendijk’s secularized approach in the 1960s, is that God is primarily or exclusively at work in the processes of secular history, eclipsing the role of the church. The other ditch tends to equate the church with God’s mission or reign too narrowly. The solution is communal discernment that must be rooted in the biblical narrative, theological tradition, and the leading of the Holy Spirit as the Christian community engages its neighbors in the world. Spiritual discernment is one of the gifts of the Spirit to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:10).

In the lives of many congregations today, “discernment” is seen as an episodic or extraordinary activity, often associated with preparing to call a new pastor, launch a capital campaign, or select candidates for ordination. There is a specific outcome in mind, after which discernment can be put aside until the next project or problem arises. However, missional theology calls for a quite different approach.

In the congregation where I serve part-time, we have engaged in a series of practices and processes over the past several years aimed at building the congregation’s capacity to discern God’s presence and movement in its own life and in the surrounding community. These have included using


63. For a more detailed mapping of interpretations of *missio Dei* and the reign of God, see Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective.*

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Appreciative Inquiry,64 Dwelling in the Word,65 Dwelling in the World,66 and various forms of small-group exercises. At a recent annual meeting, when the fruits of some of these discernment exercises were presented by members of the church board, a particularly astute lay leader commented that he had not liked “discernment” in the past because he thought it was just a way to get a problem solved. However, he now realized that it is really about a process of wondering that must be ongoing.

This comment captures a powerful idea: missional Christian formation means cultivating a posture of wondering: wonder about the Bible’s narrative of God’s surprising and powerful acts in history; wonder about the mystery of God’s presence and movement in our own lives; wonder about what God might be up to in our neighborhoods and world. A posture of wonder and awe means surrendering many of the plans, programs, and projects by which we in late-modern society seek to manage and control the future. It invites us to open our hearts and hands to God, one another, and our neighbors. It expects surprise. It anticipates God’s promised future of reconciliation and communion to break into the present.

When we engage in this kind of discernment and wondering, we use our imaginations. Missional spiritual formation involves the shaping of imagination. I began this chapter with the challenge of Christian formation in a culture whose social imaginary remains deeply secularized. By “social imaginary” I refer to the ways in which ordinary people understand their social existence, how they assume the world works, the expectations that are normally met, the “largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have.”67

In using the term “imagination,” I’m referring specifically to its socially embodied sense.68 A socially embodied view of imagination recog-

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64. See Mark Lau Branson, Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).
65. See Keifert, We Are Here Now.
66. Dwelling in the Word is a practice developed by South African churches whereby members are invited to think of a time during the past week when they had an opportunity to share the peace with someone in their daily life. They are encouraged to revisit that moment imaginatively and consider what God might have been doing and what God might have wanted to do in that encounter.
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recognizes the formative power of social and cultural relationships to shape human thought and perception. When we speak of Christian spiritual formation, we are talking about the shaping and formation of the social imaginary within which Christians live. As Charles Taylor notes, social imaginaries are highly complex, influenced by a variety of conscious and unreflected-on forces and norms. For most of us, they are the air we breathe, something we take for granted, something by which we make sense of our lives and world.

Imagination is shaped by practice. As a number of works in recent years have explored, such practices are deeply formative, particularly when socially embodied in communities. Spiritual formation happens when we engage in mission. Simultaneously, practices of spiritual formation have a missionary dimension. At times in the church's life, spiritual formation has been construed distinct from relationships of service and witness with our neighbors. Yet, biblically speaking, there is no distinction. The disciples learn what it means to follow Jesus as they experience ministry with him; their formation takes place in the context of mission. The posture of wonder and awe that missional theology invites us to adopt suggests an understanding of missional spiritual formation in which action and reflection, service and contemplation, individual and community are deeply integrated in a seamless rhythm.

**Being Conformed to Christ**

One of the primary ways in which the New Testament talks about spiritual formation is imitation or being conformed to Christ. Paul sees the Christian life as a modeling or patterning after the life and ministry of Christ. Moreover, he is unhesitant to offer his own life as an example to be imitated, recognizing that those to whom he writes must have living examples of Christian discipleship to see and experience (see Phil. 3:17; 2 Tim. 3:10). This imitative approach accords with the predominant Greco-Roman paradigm of education.
Adigm of education as *paideia*, or character formation through a process of relational apprenticeship. When understood in this mode of relational and experiential patterning, imitation remains a fruitful way to conceive of Christian spiritual formation.

Imitative approaches to spiritual formation and mission, however, have also fallen prey to distortions in which God's active presence is minimized, especially in the modern period. In the church-with-a-mission approach that I have referred to above, mission is primarily construed as something done *on God's behalf*, often through trying to imitate what Christ did. Not only does the reality of human sinfulness severely constrain our ability to imitate Christ effectively, but God's own primary role in mission is underacknowledged. For Paul, imitation of Christ was only possible through the power of the Spirit. It must be so for us, too.

The paradigm of *participation* must be set alongside imitation, for it places the priority on God's agency in mission and spiritual growth. The epistemological revolution in Western thought that began with Descartes made the individual self the center of the universe. Human knowledge came to be seen as constructed by the self. This has led, in part, to approaches to Christian theology and mission focused on human self-growth or actualization, understood in terms of individual autonomy and self-determination. There is little space within these conceptions for God's role. In late-modern Western cultures, many people still inhabit this modern social imaginary in which God has set moral laws for us to follow but isn't directly involved in our daily lives. Missional theology invites us to something of a reverse revolution: a God-centered view of mission that stands in care of the other.

What does it mean to direct our focus on God's presence, movement, and activity in mission and spiritual formation? This calls for a healthy dose of hermeneutical humility and disciplined discernment. The Word and Spirit must be at the center of discernment. We must always take into

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73. Much of the contemporary literature that claims the term “missional” perpetuates this approach, often through an incarnational emphasis without a sufficiently Trinitarian framework.

74. For further discussion on a participatory approach to mission, see Scott Hagley et al., “Toward a Missional Theology of Participation,” *Missiology* 37, no. 1 (Jan. 2009); Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective.*
account our propensity to misconstrue and distort our views of God. One of the key avenues to correct for this is a relational approach in which otherness and difference play a pivotal role. We are more likely to recognize God’s missional movement faithfully when we do so in dialogue with others whose social location, life experience, and perspectives may challenge our own.

At root, a theocentric approach to missional spiritual formation expects that God is up to something big in our lives, in Christian community, and in the surrounding world. We are caught up through the Spirit in the reconciliation of the world by God in Christ (2 Cor. 5). This movement generates communion as it unfolds within relationships with God and our neighbors. It breaks down divisions while retaining created differences. Through the power of the Spirit we are conformed to Christ. The way of the cross, of descent, disempowerment, and loving service becomes the way of resurrection, empowerment, and human flourishing in a new and just human community.

These movements are focused in the church’s life in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Through baptism, we find our new identity as people of the new creation, forgiven and initiated into a community of promise. In the Eucharist we participate in God’s self-giving grace as diverse people united in Christ. The symbols of daily life (the bread and wine) are broken open in solidarity with all the brokenness of the world. Through the brokenness of the body and blood of Christ comes grace that heals and reconciles, offering a foretaste in the Spirit of our destiny. We participate partially but meaningfully in that end toward which the Christian spiritual life moves: that great heavenly banquet around which people from every imaginable tribe and culture gather with God in love.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have emphasized participation: God’s mutual, perichoretic, participatory life in the Trinity; Christ’s participation in human life and suffering in the incarnation and passion; our participation through Christ and the power of the Spirit in mission in the lives of our neighbors; and our promised participation in Christ’s resurrection and eternal communion with the Trinity. Missional spiritual formation is a multifaceted, participatory endeavor that unfolds within and outside the gathered community in a web of relationships and influences with God and others in the world. The church, fellow, and extension of God’s reconciling, visible witness and hopelessness.

If the evaluation period begins from the we reimagine for new monastic to live a covenant, is a fruit society, is a fruit of desert father choosing to relationships with other social and neighborhood. These many streams engage communities and society. Illustrate a deep time in ordinary community is a time in witness and a central to enrich

The church’s living community...
world. The core Christian practices, such as worship, prayer, service, Sabbath, fellowship, and witness all have missional dimensions. Through them God shapes us into a called people who are sent to testify to the inbreaking of God’s reign in a world of many faiths and no faith. That testimony unfolds in part through the public practices of the Christian community as it lives a way of life marked by mercy, forgiveness, generosity, reconciliation, and hope. Through the Spirit this community offers a living, visible alternative to a society rent by enmity, division, greed, injustice, and hopelessness.

If the emergence of Christendom in the late patristic and early medieval period brought a turn inward in Christian spiritual formation, away from the world, today’s post-Christian cultural context invites us to reimagine formation in deep engagement with the world. The advent of new monastic communities in the West, which are intentionally choosing to live a covenantal life of Christian formation amid their neighbors in society, is a fruitful sign. Rather than abandoning the places of empire, as the desert fathers and mothers did, these communities in many cases are choosing to dwell in the “abandoned places of empire,” where they live in relationships of hospitality, service, and witness with those on the underside of society.75

These communities represent contemporary expressions of the many streams of monasticism that have historically found their identity in engagement with, rather than withdrawal from, the world. Such monastic communities function as parables of Christian life for the wider church and society. They embody gospel values in their sacrificial service and illustrate a depth of life in Christ and community for others to see. At the same time (and in collaboration with these communities), Christians in ordinary congregations must innovate new ways of living as disciples. Now is a time in which the whole church would benefit from the mutual sharing of lived stories, parables, and illustrations of vital and risky Christian witness and service.76 Every context is different, yet such stories are integral to enriching our communal imagination for mission.

The church’s vocation to serve as the body of Christ in the world — a living community that continues in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation in

75. See Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).
76. For an example from the United Kingdom, see Susan Hope, Mission-Shaped Spirituality (New York: Seabury, 2010).
the power of the Spirit — requires us to go more deeply in Christian for-
motion at the same time that we go more deeply and broadly in loving our
neighbors. Ultimately, the two movements coincide. Without cultivating a
renewed identity as a community of disciples, the church loses its ability to
witness to salvation in Christ and serve in God's world. Yet that very culti-
vation occurs in part through witness and service as the church and its
members discover their identity in participating in the triune God's com-
munal mission in all of creation.

In this chapter, I have described the concept of formation. In this same set
of scholarly resources, I have described the nature of formation, briefly describ-