



# Mission amid Empire: Relating Trinity, Mission, and Political Formation

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**David E. Fitch and Geoffrey Holsclaw**

Northern Seminary, Lombard, IL USA

## Abstract

This article explores the relationship between different construals of the Trinity and *missio Dei* and their resultant understandings of political formation necessary for the church in mission. We evaluate the *Spirit-centered view of mission* which frontloads the Trinity into the Spirit's work in the world as well as the *Jesus-centered view of mission* which backloads the work of the Trinity onto the historical work of Jesus. In each view we expose an inherent problem in forming the communal presence necessary for gospel witness coupled with resistance to empire. Instead, we propose the *Incarnation-centered view of mission* as a trinitarianism sufficient for mission amid empire.

## Keywords

Mission, missional, empire, christology, incarnation, trinity, trinitarian, discipleship

## Introduction

In the last decade, since the publication of *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in 2000, much has been written on the church's witness in the face of empire.<sup>1</sup> According to Hardt and Negri, the “new logic and structure” of the global market and its massive “circuits of production” now dwarf the power of nation-states to shape and configure our lives (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xi–xiii). As a result, there is now a heightened awareness that people are being fashioned into consumers and willing participants by the economy, culture industries, and political processes.<sup>2</sup> Individuals within society are being shaped by global forces of production that are irresistible apart from

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## Corresponding author:

David E. Fitch.

Email: [dfitch@faculty.seminary.edu](mailto:dfitch@faculty.seminary.edu)

some sort of political counter-formation. This is the new reality of “empire.” The question before the church is not simply how do we resist “empire,” but how do we bear witness to the gospel in the face of it?

If this global empire, as the interweaving of commercial, social, political, and international life, represents the new context for mission, if indeed empire describes the forces of the world in rebellion against God, then it seems the church also requires a political formation as part of its very existence in mission. Without such a formation the church faces being absorbed or made invisible by empire (Katongole, 2005). In the terms set forth by Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder, mission entails rejecting the Constantinian alliance between church and empire because the church must have a distinct existence from which to witness to a reality other than empire. The church’s struggle for “de-constantinianization” is what makes “contextualization” (and/or mission) possible (1984: 145). Thus, the church’s first task in mission must be to embody a faithful political formation such that it might properly participate in God’s mission in the world.<sup>3</sup>

And yet certain theological understandings of God actually work against the political formation of the church. Specifically, certain construals of the Trinity actually work to hinder, if not evacuate, the church’s political existence in the world, and therefore mission itself (this is ironic in that the Trinity has been a central focus of much missional theology). With this in mind, this article examines two well-known modern construals of the Trinity, what we will call *the Spirit-centered view of mission* and *the Jesus-centered view of mission*. We will show how each one works against the political formation of the church in mission. After this we then propose a third understanding of the Trinity that both grounds the church in the triune mission of God and by doing so provides the wherewithal for the church’s faithful political formation within mission. We show how this third option avoids the colonialist mistakes of past church history, a complaint commonly offered against ecclesial-centered views of mission. We call this third understanding *the Incarnation-centered view of mission*, arguing that this construal of the Trinity best makes way for the church’s political formation so as to participate in the mission of God.

## Spirit-Centered Mission

The first construal of the Trinity sees mission as primarily determined by God’s all-encompassing activity for “liberation” and “shalom” in the world as unleashed by the sending of the Spirit by the Father and the Son. The Son, having been sent, announcing the Kingdom of God and accomplishing its inauguration, sends forth the apostles into the world to proclaim its reality. Central to this understanding is Jesus’ charge to the disciples in John 21:20: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you,” and then he breathed upon them the Holy Spirit. This text then indicates a role for the church in the trinitarian sendings. The Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Spirit, and the Son sends the church in the power of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> In the post-World War II European missionary movements, this sending of the church was interpreted in more generalized terms as the sending of God’s Spirit into the world for the

work of God's mission in which the church was called to participate. Reacting to the colonizing history of the church's missionary endeavor in the West, as well as to the horrors of the *Volk* religion of Germany during World War II, theologians and churchmen like J.C. Hoekendijk made arguments for seeing *missio Dei* in terms of God's establishing shalom over the whole world. *Missio Dei* was not the property of any church (or nation for that matter). Rather, the church must see itself, not as possessing a mission, but as being sent to participate in God's already-in-process mission in the world. Hence, at the 1952 Willingen Missionary Conference of the IMC, Hoekendijk famously counteracted what he saw as the traditional European "ecclesiocentric" concept of mission with a plea for a more generalized sending of the church outward where the Spirit was already at work in the world of secular history (Bosch, 2000: 381–86).

These influences were felt for many years. Jürgen Moltmann, for instance, in his earlier work, can be seen as an unwitting contributor to this view of trinitarian theology. He depicts the triune God at work in the world ushering in a new future and the church's task is to join in this work (Moltmann, 1993b, 1975). His brand of "panentheism" provided the groundwork for some to secularize the *missio Dei*. Contemporary emerging church thinkers, for instance, often identify God's work in the Spirit with (a Hegelian/Marxist) generalist justice and peace efforts in the world (although Moltmann himself is much more nuanced in his own position).<sup>5</sup> Instances of this construal of the Trinity in mission carry on to this day in some popular streams of Protestant liberal and/or process theology (see for instance McLaren, 2007; Clayton, 2008, 2010). For these thinkers the work of the Spirit, though sent out from the Father and the Son (in the West), exists in the world largely undetermined by the person and work of Christ. The mission of God is seen in the Spirit's work of liberating the oppressed, the announced kingdom of justice and the practice of righteousness wherever it may be found. Any a priori political formation offered in continuity with the life of Christ and his church tends to be viewed suspiciously as territorial, self-preservatory, and (in the case of mission) colonialist. Political formation by definition is submerged within the advocacy for justice or peace as determined by an already existing political discourse.

### *Social Trinity*

Recently, social trinitarian proposals have gained influence in shaping the understanding of the church's participation in *missio Dei*. And yet these approaches to the Trinity perpetuate a similar conundrum for the church's political formation in mission. Prompted by the relational turn in theology that emphasizes the categories of person over substance, relationality over ontology, and the dynamic over the static, social trinitarians locate interpersonal love within the godhead (*perichoresis*) as the source of God's love for the world, and which then becomes the basis for the church's missional engagement with the world (Franke, 2009). The social triune relation "gives us a vision of God as a dynamic community of mutuality, openness, difference, and love which makes space for others to participate." The church emulates this dynamic in the

world as the very image of God and by so doing participates in God's mission for the world (Van Gelder and Zscheile, 2011: 108).

This turn to social trinitarianism, however, works to counteract political formation in ways similar to the one mentioned above. It starts by positing an analogy that *as God is immanently in God's self so also the church should be in mission*. In this analogy, the Creator/creature distinction is diminished and we are left with, in theologian Mark Husbands's terms, "an inordinately idealist account of social relations" to live up to. We are left to conceptualize out of our own social experience what it means to live socially as God does. And then, by extension, we are given an idealistic (conceptual) account of mission as pursuing the same social experience (Husbands, 2009: 125).

But from where does this idea of "social" come? In the words of Karen Kilby, social trinitarians turn to the concept of divine *perichoresis* "to name what is not understood, to name whatever it is that makes the three Persons one." But what happens in fact is that the concept *perichoresis* "is filled out rather suggestively with notions borrowed from our own experience of relationships and relatedness" (Kilby, 2000: 442). This borrowing from human experience is then problematically projected *onto* the inner life of the Trinity, and then offered back as a model for human society (2000: 441). The social trinitarian approach therefore leaves us susceptible to being absorbed by, as opposed to resisting, the political discourse of "empire," because current or idealized human society is the unacknowledged source of our trinitarian speculations filtered through the pre-existing political aspirations of love, justice, mutuality, and equality. The church becomes a reflection of the predominant view of "shalom" as found within the political discourse in which it finds itself.<sup>6</sup>

### *Missional Trinity*

Missional theologian John Flett illustrates another way in which this same mistake takes place. Flett also criticizes the communal ecclesiologies discussed above (based on the social Trinity). The problem for social trinitarian conceptions of the church, for Flett, is that these ecclesiologies make mission a secondary derivation flowing out from the inner life of church communion. In that participating in the social relation of the Godhead becomes the focus of the church, "Christian witness takes the practical form of an ever-intensified internal focus" on its own well-defined communal life and internal devotion (2010: 26–27, 206). Mission is demoted to a secondary impulse, or overflow, of an already complete communion, such that "the church's being exists apart from its missionary task" (2010: 27). For Flett, in that the church possesses an internal social integrity apart from mission, mission becomes an "add-on" to the church. Mission becomes an after-effect. For Flett this puts the church back in control of mission thereby creating the conditions for the colonizing mistakes of the past.

While doing all this, Flett affirms the same analogical move between God and the church that the social trinitarians do, albeit in a different way (2010: 178–79, 196, 247). He asserts that God's missional nature (i.e. that sending is God's very nature/being) is necessarily true of the church's being, which means that just as there is no distinction between "internal acts" and "external acts" in the being of God, there can

be no such distinction in the church either, between internal devotion and external mission. Therefore the fact that “God exists for the world” in one act means that the community of God also must “exist for the world” in the same way. The church’s ecclesial existence cannot be separate from its existence as mission in the world. The “Christian community is a missionary community, or she is not the Christian community” at all (2010: 293). In this way Flett replaces the analogy moving from God’s “social nature” with his own moving from God’s “missional nature.”

While much can be said for Flett’s understanding of the essential nature of mission for the Trinity, the same objection aimed at the social trinitarian construals of mission applies. In both cases, a strict analogy between the immanent Trinity and the church quickly projects over-idealized forms of ecclesial life, whether it be the inward communal life of God (which Flett fears) or the missional “being” of God (which Flett advocates). This is because the distinction between Creator and creature is lost. In Flett’s case, this results in a church that can no longer be capable of a *process* or a *history* in which sinful humanity might overcome estrangement.<sup>7</sup> When Flett claims that “the story of who Jesus Christ is cannot be told apart from his relationship to those he called and their subsequent history” (2010: 263) we emphatically agree, but then wonder why he does not say more about the life of this Jesus and this history extended in those he called and how they were formed into mission. It appears that the only history Flett is interested in is the eternal history of the Son’s election, rather than the economic history of the triune God’s invasion into the world in the Son as carried out in Jesus and his disciples. The result is a static church that just “is” in mission but can have no involvement in history. Indeed, Flett’s rhetorical strategy results in an underlying univocity, not of *being*, but of *mission*. Put differently, the problematic *onto-theo*-logy of the social trinitarians has been replaced with an *onto-missio*-logy, erasing historical political formation.

In both cases, the social trinitarians and Flett fail to provide the means by which the church can inhabit a political formation sufficient to give witness to the gospel in the face of empire. Instead, the church is left to form wherever God’s mission is discerned. Yet the question remains, how will the word be preached in mission without a prior language, a cultural expression, or a history out of which to bear its witness? Indeed, how does the church avoid being dispersed and/or absorbed by the powers of empire in the process of such a witness? Therefore, instead of looking to the immanent life of the Trinity to see the *missio Dei* more clearly (supposedly correcting a Spirit-centered mission, but really just continuing it), we ought instead to turn to the triune work of God as revealed in the history of the reconciliation of humanity accomplished in Jesus Christ. This leads us toward our second construal of the Trinity in mission, a *Jesus-centered mission*.

## Jesus-Centered Mission

The second construal of the Trinity sees mission as primarily determined by the singular sending of the Son. It affirms that while “the unity of the Trinity in God’s mission has to be maintained” we must also realize “that mission always must have a Christological core” because “neither the Father nor Spirit can be known apart from

the Son” (Engelsviken, 2003: 493). While the third person of the Trinity proceeds from the Father and the Son, in this construal, the Spirit is sent to make present the salvific effects of the already accomplished person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son, who has ascended and returned to the Father.

### *Missional Jesus*

Popular missiologists Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch provide an example of these tendencies within North American evangelicalism (as transplanted from Australia). For them *missio Dei* is determined by a direct, unmediated encounter with Jesus. The person, work, and teaching of Jesus, as revealed in Scripture through the Holy Spirit to the individual, is the basis of God’s work in the world. This is made explicit in their recent collaboration entitled *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for the Missional Church*. Here they reiterate a common theme in their work: that Christology determines (or precedes) missiology, and then missiology determines (or precedes) ecclesiology (Hirsch, 2009: 142–44). By Christology they mean to focus on what the person, work, and teaching of Jesus mean for his followers as they *emulate* him, rather than one’s doctrinal affirmations on the two natures of Jesus (Frost and Hirsch, 2009: 15, 43). An essential component of this recovered Christology (which determines missiology, which determines ecclesiology) is the related premise of a direct and unmediated relationship with Jesus which short-circuits, in order to circumvent, apostate church tradition (2009: 50). Frost and Hirsch turn to Kierkegaard’s concept of *contemporaneity* to explain how a disciple is to “reach beyond the church’s entire two-thousand-year tradition and, free of inherited presuppositions, encounter Jesus, seeing him with the eyes not of the first Christians but of the first eyewitnesses” so as to be able to make one’s own choice whether or not Jesus is really God (2009: 55).

But this desire for the immediacy of Christ has serious missiological and political ramifications. For when Frost and Hirsch advocate for Jesus to be the norm of our lives and mission, it is necessary to ask, “Whose Jesus? Which gospel?” The immediate and direct relationship with Jesus not only leaves unanswered these epistemological questions, it also leaves unexplained the action of the Spirit in the church and the world, tending to reduce missiology to an applied science, exposing disciples to an individualism ripe for ideological manipulation and imperialist programming. Without a prior political formation founded in Christ, how would we know if our purported model/emulation of Jesus is being assimilated to already understood roles and purposes of empire? How would we know if “our Jesus” is being positioned by the logic of empire? Perhaps worse, without a political formation, this “missional church” becomes a recruitment center for individuals to emulate certain “imperialistic” versions of Jesus. In the words of David Bosch, the church is then reduced to a “kind of spiritual gas station from which all and sundry [can] draw energy for a great variety of worthwhile projects” (2000: 384). But these “worthwhile projects” can easily become absorbed in the culture of “empire.” The “missional Jesus” can easily turn out to be apolitical in nature and fail to be a christology in the robust sense. It does not have the wherewithal to shape a people incarnationally into political existence over against “empire.”

## Apocalyptic Jesus

Nathan Kerr has recently proposed a more nuanced version of Frost and Hirsch's proposal for Christian mission which engages issues of political formation. For Kerr, much like Frost and Hirsch, mission determines the church (Kerr, 2009: 169–75),<sup>8</sup> for otherwise the church can succumb to an ecclesial concentricity which (1) becomes focused on its own identity, even if it be as a counter-polis amid empire; (2) tends to instrumentalize worship as a mode of communal construction; and therefore (3) engages in a domestication of the Spirit to the practices of the church (2009: 170–71), all of which, for Kerr, fundamentally undermines the mission of Jesus in the world. Indeed, for Kerr, Jesus must be independent of moral, political, and historical schemes of universality or teleology. The mission of God in Christ must be diasporic, based in the apocalyptic independence of Jesus,<sup>9</sup> which breaks open and disarms the political and moral powers of empire, replacing it with the logic and power of the cross and resurrection, thereby challenging all teleological frameworks of history used by empire (2009: 134–44).

For Kerr, this breaking open of history is not merely behind us (as for Frost and Hirsch in looking back to Jesus in Scripture), but actually lies ahead of us as Christ breaks into our histories ever anew (2009: 132). This in-breaking is accomplished by the Spirit who interrupts and liberates us from our own histories, and makes us participants in the in-breaking of Jesus (2009: 157), a participation which is the “apocalyptic politics of mission” (2009: 173), apart from which there is no real church. The true gathering of the church therefore happens wherever Jesus “in his apocalyptic historicity breaks into the world in all its contingency and singularity and secularity, and opens it to that mode of life which is in excess of the powers and principalities,” an event which neither belongs to the church nor the world (2009: 190). This breaking open of history is not merely behind us, but actually lies ahead of us in political faithfulness as Christ breaks into our histories ever anew (2009: 132). The formation of church therefore always happens in its diasporic scattering into the world (2009: 181), “the very ‘non-site’ of the church’s gathering” (2009: 192). The church is always coming into being in the event of mission.

Kerr offers a powerful political reading of Jesus via an apocalyptically nuanced rendering of his mission. He is to be applauded for these accomplishments. Kerr nonetheless ends up essentially agreeing with Frost and Hirsch and running into their same conundrum. Kerr's apocalyptic independence of Jesus mirrors the emphasis on immediacy by Frost and Hirsch, based now in apocalyptic interruption ahead of us rather than contemporaneous reflection behind us. Like Frost and Hirsch, Kerr asserts that (the singularity of) Jesus' life determines mission, and mission determines the church. But we have to ask again, How is it that we come to *see* this Jesus as the in-breaking Lord? How do we learn to *see* him and his in-breaking in the world as *his*, and not an imperial simulacra and re-appropriation of empire? Is it a sudden overwhelming epiphany that takes us captive?

Whether it be Frost and Hirsch or Kerr, *this Jesus-centered mission*, like *the Spirit-centered mission*, fails to account sufficiently for the political formation necessary to



resist empire in faithfulness to Christ's mission. This is because Frost, Hirsch, and Kerr deny the necessity of political formation by submerging ecclesiology under missiology, finding its basis in what might better be called a Jesusology, rather than a robust christology. But rather than episodic in-breaking or individual emulation, it is our contention that God has made possible a continuous in-breaking of Christ in history based in a robust trinitarianism which is foundational for mission amid empire.

## Incarnation-Centered Mission

The two prior understandings of God's mission fail because they construe the way the Spirit (augmented by sociality or not) and/or the Son (augmented by apocalyptic or not) works in the world in a way that forsakes ecclesio-political formation amid empire, therefore failing to adequately ground God's mission in the world as a historical process. In contrast we propose a third way of construing the Trinity, *the Incarnation-centered view of mission*, which provides both the basis for the church's political foundation as well as the foundation for this church's participation in God's mission.

In an *Incarnation-centered view of mission* the Incarnation is not only central to the sending movement of the Son, but remains essential to the processing of the Spirit from the Father and the Son into the world as the triune work of mission. The triune movement of God is known through the historical-redemptive incursion of God in Christ entering history, living, dying, and being raised from the dead, then ascending to the right hand of the Father as Lord upon whom he shall reign until he has "put all enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:25). But, unlike the Jesus-centered view, this third view acknowledges that the Incarnation of God in Christ was not a singular occasion, an entry into and departure from the world requiring emulation or apocalyptic repetition. Rather the Incarnation of God into history continues in the Father and Son sending the Spirit as an extension of the Son's presence through the church—the Body of Christ.<sup>10</sup> Just as it is by the power of the Spirit that the Son entered the condition of humanity in birth and baptism (Luke 1:35; 3:22), so too it is by the power of the Spirit that the Son is extended in humanity as the church (John 20:21, 22; Acts 2), his body, in our re-birth and baptism. The church is a social extension of God's kenotic incarnation in the world, a kenotic existence from all eternity (Balthasar, 1992: 513; Yoder, 1984: 145). Upon the ascension of Christ, this Incarnation is not merely returned to the Father. Rather it is extended to include the twofold movement of (1) the global/cosmic reign of Christ over the whole world working through the Spirit to bring all things under his Lordship, which is known and witnessed to through (2) the extension of Christ's Incarnation, or his body, the church.

This unites two ecclesiological positions that Moltmann sees in competition: the *Christus prologatus* and the *eschatological Christ*. In describing the relationship of Jesus to the church Moltmann offers five options in his *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (1993a: 72–75). Moltmann's fourth option is the church as "the other Christ," or the church as a continuation of the Incarnation, the *Christus prolongatus*. The church here is the Body of Christ in the fullest sense. Moltmann complains that this



ecclesiology “blurs Christ’s freedom with regard to his church.” Christ’s “otherness, his mission, his death and his future for the church are all shut out” and the “work of the Spirit is subordinated to the work of Christ” (1993a: 72–73). Moltmann wants instead to define the relationship between Christ and the church “from the end instead of the beginning,” from what Moltmann calls Jesus’ “eschatological position,” such that from this place “the risen Christ represents in this transitory era of the world the God who is to come” (1993a: 74). In many ways, the position we are arguing for—the “Incarnation-centered view of mission”—combines these two options offered by Moltmann by uniting the two movements of Christ’s cosmic rule and the ecclesial extension of his body.

As Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar describes, the Trinity structures the drama of the world from all eternity and the church is grafted into this drama by participating in the triune work of God to redeem the world (Williams, 2004: 50). The drama of God is always bigger than the church, and the church only knows God and participates in this drama via the Incarnation of the Son by the Spirit. Yet, in and through the Son, God has become active in the whole world for his redemptive purposes. The church is a particular “extension” of Christ in that the church is “Christ’s body,” “an extension, a communication, a partaking in the personality of Christ” (Balthasar, 1991: 145). As such, in the “in-between time” the Spirit is at work both generally in the world as the manifest work of Christ’s lordship over the whole world, yet equally at work particularly in the social embodiment of Christ and his lordship in the church, these two movements working together as one to usher in the consummation of the triune drama to reconcile the whole world to himself (2 Cor 5:16–22).

The church as Christ’s social body always lives among the world and what God is doing. It is the extension of the Incarnate Christ sent by the Father to join in with what He is already doing by the Spirit. As such the church is inextricably part of the triune mission already ongoing. (Fitch, 2011: 170)

As such, this *Incarnation-centered view of mission* forms the basis for the church’s political (communal) formation without in any way detracting from her participation in God’s mission in the world. In fact, the church’s political formation is shaped seamlessly by the Incarnation in becoming part of God’s mission. The twofold movement makes the community’s internal political formation part and parcel of the same mission God is working in the world. There is no antipathy between the community’s own political formation as the body of Christ in the world, and that body’s participation in the ongoing *missio Dei* in the world, for they are one and the same.

How does this political formation take place? Historically the church has gathered around the practices of the Word, the Eucharist, and community. These are the “Body practices of the church.” The church (as emphasized by Protestantism) gathers regularly to hear the proclamation of the Word and then respond. As the story of the Word is unfolded and the Spirit inhabits the proclamation, the church is formed to live under this proclaimed reality. The church in essence participates in what Christ is doing through our submission to and living out of God’s ongoing story as revealed in

Scripture. This practice in no way circumscribes the Son or the Spirit within this church practice, as feared by some. Instead the proclamation of the Word always shapes us as a people to see God at work in the world. It shapes us outward to be part of God's mission in the world.

Likewise, the church (as emphasized by Roman Catholicism) gathers regularly to partake of the body and blood of Christ at the Lord's Table. As the church partakes, we are re-membered into his one Body. In de Lubac's words, the visible body is formed such that the Eucharist makes the church, even as the church makes the Eucharist (2006: 88). By this we participate in the being of "Christ's body" in the world, we become the place of his righteousness, the extension of his presence, the very in-breaking of his reign in the world. The communal nature of this reality does not separate us from the world. Rather, by becoming the very righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21), taking on the reconciliation of Christ in our social life, we can humbly and vulnerably incarnate justice and reconciliation in the world. We become his social body at work in the world in his mission (Dibeela, 2008: 194–95).

Likewise, the church (as emphasized by the Anabaptists) gathers to engage regularly in the practices of community. For John Howard Yoder, the Lord of the church inhabits the very sociality of his people via "the gifts" and what he calls the practices of "body politics" (Yoder, 1992; 1984: 22–34, 93–94). He describes five practices—binding and losing, breaking bread together, baptism, the universal ministry of the gifts, and the rule of conversation—that bind individuals together under a living social relationship to Jesus as Lord. We would argue for more practices such as the practice of being "with" the least of these (Matt 25:31–46). In each case, in these practices, the very authority and presence of Jesus Christ—the Lord of the church *and* the world—inhabits the universal ministry of the gifts in the community. This exhibits the fullness of Christ in and to the world. By participating in these practices, Christ's reign is present in the church community, birthing a politics in and for the world such that Christ's Lordship becomes visible to the world, or rather, is able to be seen by the world. For Yoder, this fullness of Christ describes a new mode of political existence (1992: 47). And so here in the dynamic processes of Christian community is a political formation shaped in the actual participation (through the "body practices") in the Lordship of Christ over the world. These practices directly challenge the power of empire without themselves returning to mere identity formation or disguised colonization.

In each case, the church has been given these practices from the Lord of the church. From the proclaiming of the Word, to the Eucharist, to the gifts (Eph 4) of the Spirit, to the discernments of conflict (Matt 18), the Lord of the church has not merely given these practices to the church through the apostles, but inhabits them with his very presence and authority via the Spirit. Herein is a political formation that is the extension of Christ into the world incarnationally that contributes to the resistance of empire. This social presence, however, is never colonial or imperialist in posture. For in these practices the ecclesial body takes on the very humility of Christ, always renouncing worldly power so as to live under her Lord as servant to the world. Whenever the church does not exhibit itself as a humble and incarnational servant, it has disqualified itself as Christ's body and lives as unfaithful witnesses.

And yet the church is not given these practices so as to keep Christ's presence to itself. Rather each practice becomes the means for joining with what God is already doing. From the proclamation of the gospel as a community, we go to proclaim the gospel in our contexts. From sharing the hospitality of the Table in Christ, we go to share that same hospitality in the neighborhood. In practicing reconciliation, being "with" the least of these, and even in prayer, we are then able to go and extend these means of grace into every place we live. The church's political formation provides the unique social presence that is able to work for the transformation of the world. It makes possible the church's incarnational inhabitation of the world as the very presence of Christ. It makes possible a contextualization that is truly incarnational; that is, possessing an "in-ness" with the world, also yet a "not of this world" presence extending the presence of the living Lord working for God's mission in the world. It makes possible the community's participation and discernment of the kingdom by neither blending in nor remaining separate from the world. God's reign is manifest in the midst of the church as a foretaste of what is to come in the world. It can do this because in a real sense the church "precedes the world epistemologically" (Yoder, 1984: 11). By learning to *see* God's kingdom take shape socially as the church, the church learns to *discern* the kingdom in the world so as to join in the bringing of it to fulfillment. In all these ways, this *Incarnation-centered view of mission* makes possible both the church's participation in God's mission as well as the political formation in the Spirit necessary to fulfill this mission amid empire.

## Notes

1. A version of this article was presented at Empire, Church, *Missio Dei*, Wesleyan Theological Society Meeting, March 4, 2011.
2. This awareness is not new. Social theorists such as Daniel Bell (1976), Jean Baudrillard (1998), and Zygmunt Baumann (2007) have been writing on this theme for decades. What is new is the heightened awareness by Christian thinkers of what the social formation of consumer capitalism has done to the church in the West. See for instance Cavanaugh (2008), Miller (2005), and Metzger (2007).
3. This follows the thinking of writers/theologians such as Dibeela (2008), Miller (2005), Walsh and Keesmaat (2004), and of course Yoder (1984).
4. See for instance the influence of Moltmann on Tony Jones a key leader in the Emerging Church movement in the US. This influence can be seen in Tony Jones's book and dissertation *The Church Is Flat* (Jones, 2011) as well in blog posts like his [www.patheos.com/blogs/tonyjones/2011/08/23](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tonyjones/2011/08/23).
5. The Gospel of John is central for the revealing of the nature of the sent-ness of God in Christ. See John 3:34; 5:24, 37, 38; 6:57; 8:16–18; 17:18–21; 20:21.
6. Miroslav Volf for instance, an advocate of social trinitarian theology, notes the contradictory application of the Trinity onto society by such diverse thinkers as Michael Novak and Leonardo Boff, the former arguing for a democratic capitalism and the latter for democratic socialism, making the Trinity an instrument for promoting the politics of the West regardless of what side you're on (Volf, 1998: 419, n. 14).
7. It must be said, but cannot be fully outlined here, that Flett does seek to handle the Creator/creature distinction and reconciliation, but does this in a way that evacuates the historical

- process and the significance of reconciliation, and therefore falls prey to the well-known tendency of Barthian ecclesiology to be ahistorical (Mangina, 1999).
8. Kerr's phrase is "mission makes the church," but this is equivalent to Hirsch and Frost's "missiology determines ecclesiology."
  9. The word "apocalyptic," deriving from a genre of literature in Scripture, refers to the fundamentally cataclysmic discontinuous, interrupting nature of God's action in history with all that has gone on before. For Kerr, "apocalyptic is fundamentally a means to thinking history, politics, and the church on the basis of the 'objective reality' of Jesus' singular historicity" (Kerr, 2009: 131).
  10. This is a nod to the *filioque* clause which declares that the Spirit proceeds not just from the Father (as in the East) but from the Son as well. In so doing, the creed acknowledges that the Spirit is not undetermined from Christ, but rather is known through and is an extension of the cosmic work of God through Christ to redeem the whole world to Himself. In line with the position of this article, it is interesting that Bonhoeffer saw the filioque clause as the protector against the German Christians introducing "a nature spirit, a folk [*Volk*] spirit, into the church, which is not judged by Christ but rather justifies itself." Thanks to Professor Ben Myers for pointing this out on a blog post, Oct. 24, 2009, on his blog [www.faith-theology.blogspot.com](http://www.faith-theology.blogspot.com).

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## Author biographies

David E. Fitch is the Betty R. Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary, and author of *The Great Give away* and *The End of Evangelicalism?*, both concerning mission in North America.

Geoffrey Holsclaw is an adjunct professor of theology at Northern Seminary and the author of several articles on political theology. Both serve as co-pastors at Life on the Vine Christian Community outside of Chicago, USA, and co-wrote *Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signpost for the Missional Frontier*.