

LEADER'S GUIDE

The Mission of the Trinity

All creation was designed to do one thing, and the church's mission should be no different.

Simon Chan is a member of a Pentecostal fellowship not typically known for formal liturgy, earning an introduction by CHRISTIANITY TODAY as possibly “the world’s most liturgically-minded Pentecostal,” a seemingly self-contradictory description. But as a Pentecostal with an appreciation for traditional forms of liturgy, he brings an interesting perspective to the discussion over what must be learned and unlearned as we carry out God’s mission in the world.

In some ways, Chan rejects modern attempts to “re-think” the church, and to adapt it to contemporary contexts. But, if he’s right, his call to ground our thinking about the Church in proper Trinitarian theology could, itself, help us do exactly that: re-think the church.

Lesson #2

Scripture:

Matthew 22:34–40; John 14; 1 Corinthians 11:17–34; 12–14; Ephesians 1:3–4, 22–23; 2:15–16; 3:6; 4:16; 5:30; Philippians 2:1–18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Revelation 13:8; 17:8

Based on:

“[The Mission of the Trinity](#),” Interview by Andy Crouch, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (June 2007)

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the article "The Mission of the Trinity" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.



Simon Chan contends that our view of mission and the way we think about the church is simply not Trinitarian enough. That's a serious charge, considering the trouble the church has gone through historically to base its theology in a view of God as a triune being.

However one area where we fail to give proper acknowledgement of the Trinity is in our view of mission. Some, like Christopher Heuertz, define the church and its mission as: "the community that anticipates and seeks to express the kingdom of God" (see: "[A Community of the Broken](#)" at ChristianVisionProject.com). But, according to Chan, this does not go far enough for three reasons.

First, this answer, and others like it, fail to address the underlying question, "What is the church?" And in failing to answer that question—in light of the Trinity—the church becomes just another community among all the others the world offers. Instead, we don't have a "clear, coherent ecclesiology," we "lack a clear understanding of our own identity," and we are "driven by a pragmatic understanding of the church and its mission." The church then becomes a "pragmatic organization to fulfill certain tasks," like expressing the kingdom of God.

Second, asking this question fails to go far enough. Rather than asking, first, what the mission of the church is, we should ask what the mission of the *Trinity* is. If we can identify that mission, the church's mission then becomes much more clear and less pragmatic. Rather than changing the church's mission to adapt to changing cultural contexts, it becomes rooted in an unchanging mission with a clear, biblical end.

Third, because we have not based our ideas of the church and its mission in the Trinity and God's mission, we then fail to understand the proper role of liturgy in the church. Liturgy, in all its various forms, becomes just another pragmatic tool to adapt to the changing cultural seasons. This shallow understanding of the church can then drive us to adopt techniques and technologies uncritically—sometimes substituting the virtual for the real.

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** What do you think about Chan's assertion that we need to consider the mission of the Trinity before we consider the mission of the church?
- Does answering this question change your view of the church's mission in any way? If so, how?
 - Do you think Chan's background as a Pentecostal leads him to give an unbalanced emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in defining the nature of the church and its mission?



[Q] Thousands of churches are adopting the “Purpose Driven Church” model for ministry and mission: “The Purpose-Driven model focuses on these five elements: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism. It also seeks to move people from community, to crowds, to congregation, to commitment, and then to the core. Thus, it leads from knowing Christ to growing in Christ to serving Christ to sharing Christ” (see: “[Purpose-Driven Conflict](#)”). Does Chan’s push to understand the mission of the Trinity and all its implications fit within the PDC model? Why or why not?

- Some churches have abandoned formal liturgies because they are not “seeker sensitive,” yet many have left such churches in order to enjoy a more formal liturgy. Many move in the opposite direction as well, to less liturgical settings. How do we explain this dissatisfaction on both sides of the liturgical divide? Are there problems with the models themselves? How would understanding the mission of the Trinity address this issue for any kind of church?

[Q] For many Evangelicals, just mentioning “liturgy” inspires dread. For some it sounds like a return to Catholicism or watered-down ecumenicalism. For others it brings to mind lifeless traditions devoid of spontaneity or meaning. Why do you think formal liturgies are deemed dead and old fashioned by so many?

- What would happen in your church if some traditional liturgies were renewed?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: We must understand the true nature of the church.

Chan alludes to some ideas in this article that are more thoroughly explored in another interview he gave CHRISTIANITY TODAY. In “[Stopping Cultural Drift](#),” Chan insists that the idea and the reality of the church existed *before* creation. That we, the church, were chosen in Christ and that our names were written in the Book of Life *before the creation of the world* (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 13:8). In light of this, we must understand all of creation as existing so that the church could be realized. In other words, “God made the world in order to make the church, not vice versa.”

That understanding is the foundation of Chan’s assertion that there is an eternally unchanging nature to the church: that it is not a product of man, that the church is not a pragmatic tool for the gathered believers to re-tool and adapt to changing cultural contexts. If God formed creation in order to create the church, then, as Chan says, “All things are to be brought back into communion with the triune God. Communion is the ultimate end, not mission.”

One foundation of Christian theology is that God as a Triune being is inherently communal. Before anything existed there was God, who existed in relationship, or communion. Thus, man was created to enter into and enjoy that communion. The church, too, was created for communion with God. Further, the church is the Body of Christ—we are his redemptive presence, carrying out the same mission Christ fulfilled in the incarnation.

With this view in mind, Chan says mission is *not* the over-riding purpose of the church. Rather, communion with God is worship. This worship will find expression in four traditional structures: “gathering, proclaiming the Word, celebrating the Eucharist, and going out into the



world.” As we enter communion with God, we are “seeing God and seeing the heart of God as well, which is his love for the world.”

Thus going out into the world, or mission, is only one part of the church’s task, and that part is a *fulfillment* of communion, not the basis for it. And failing to recognize the role of communion in the nature of the church can lead to adopting technology and techniques that minimize the real presence of God and the need for face-to-face relationships.

Read Ephesians 1:3–4 and Revelation 13:8. (You may also review these other verses from Ephesians: 1:22–23; 2:15–16; 3:6; 4:16; and 5:30.).

- [Q] What implications do phrases like being chosen “before the creation of the world,” and “written from the creation of the world in the book of life” hold for the church?
- Many say that the church was only formed on the Day of Pentecost, after Christ’s ascension, when God poured his Holy Spirit out on the gathered believers. What do you think about that claim in light of these two verses?
 - What does it mean to be made one “in Christ” and “members together of one body”? How does that fit the idea of “communion” as God’s ultimate mission?
 - What other terms besides “communion” fit into and harmonize this idea?

Leader’s Note: *Look at the language of the verses cited above. Some terms come naturally out of their context, such as: making peace, reconciliation, put to death their hostility, heirs together, sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus, and joined and held together. Also consider terms such as “redemption,” “one with Christ,” “gather together in one all things in Christ,” and so on.*

- [Q] Throughout the New Testament “the body” is used as a metaphor for the church. But it is in some ways more than a metaphor: it is a reality, with Christ as the “head.” Why does this term fit the church so well? How well does it actually describe the contemporary church today?
- How does being part of the body of Christ harmonize with the idea of “communion” with God?
 - What is the chief danger to the body of Christ when we abandon traditions in order to explore more culturally relevant models of ministry?

Leader’s Note: *According to Chan: “liturgy creates a different habit of mind, a habit of stability. This has its strengths and weaknesses. ... [but] the danger of a short memory far outweighs the danger of not being willing to change.”*

- [Q] If bringing the world into communion with God should be the mission of the church, how does this differ from your church’s idea of mission? What would change in your church if you adopted this view?
- [Q] Do you agree or disagree with the idea that traditional liturgies have a place in the contemporary church? Why or why not?



- [Q] Chan says that “liturgy creates a different habit of mind, a habit of stability.” What do you think about that statement? Do you think habits can be a dangerous thing in worship, or do you think certain habits can be helpful? Why or why not?
- [Q] Many churches, in order to attract unbelievers, have adopted a “seeker sensitive” approach to their gatherings. Since traditional liturgies are often viewed as not being attractive to unbelievers, such practices have been abandoned. What do you think about this trend? Are they unattractive to unbelievers? Explain your answer.

Teaching point two: We must understand the true mission of the Trinity.

The mission of the Trinity, Chan says is communion: “Ultimately, all things are to be brought back into communion with the triune God. Communion is the ultimate end, not mission.” When mission, or “going out into the world,” becomes the chief aim of the church, then we must constantly re-evaluate our methods and practices so that our mission efforts become more cutting edge, more targeted, and more effective. Unfortunately, Chan says, this reveals a shallow understanding of not only the nature of the church, but a misunderstanding of the mission of the Trinity. Instead, if we have a clearer ecclesiology and, therefore, a clearer understanding of who the triune God is, we will have a better grasp of which techniques, models, and technologies to use effectively.

If we truly understand the ultimate meaning of communion and how it fits with the nature and mission of God, we would be more critical, for example, about the use of technologies that create “virtual realities” or present our message in disembodied ways. “Communion,” says Chan, “means bodily presence.” Without this understanding, we too easily lose sight of the incarnational reality of the Spirit with us, and the incarnational reality of the church as the embodied presence of Christ.

Chan says “Communion is not just introspection or fellowship among ourselves. It involves, ultimately, seeing God and seeing the heart of God as well, which is his love for the world.” Read Romans 12:1–2 and Philippians 2:1–18.

- [Q] How well does Chan’s view describe the contemporary church’s ideas about “communion” and community? What’s different between the modern view and Chan’s view?

- How do we go about seeing and being in harmony with the heart of God?

Leader’s Note: Consider Romans 12 (especially verses 1–2) and Philippians 2:1–18 when discussing this question. Romans 12 tells us that true worship leading to mental transformation is the way to know God’s will, also leading to humility and unity in the body of Christ. Philippians 2 describes Christ’s own humility and his selfless incarnation. Paul says, in this context of incarnational humility, that it is God who works in us and through us (in communion) to do his will.

- [Q] When the church gathers to worship, we praise to God and recognize his work through history. We give God what he is worthy of receiving and in doing so, we reaffirm our relationship to him as creatures to their Creator and sinners to their Redeemer. What role does the Holy Spirit play in worship?

- How does worship contribute to the communion in the church and communion with God?



- If the mission of God is to seek and save those who are lost, what role does worship play in that mission?
- If the mission of God is to disciple and grow believers, what role does worship play in that mission?
- If the mission of God is to bring all of creation into communion with him, what roles do worship, evangelism, and discipleship ultimately play?

[Q] Read John 14. What does Jesus say the role of the Holy Spirit is for the believers he is leaving behind?

- How does the Holy Spirit help us stay in communion with God?
- What are some of the church's biggest misunderstandings about the Holy Spirit? How well do we understand or how much do we misunderstand the nature and role of the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity?

[Q] Simon Chan traces the mission of the church to the purpose of creation and, from there, traces the purpose of creation to the mission of God. Do you think Chan goes to far, or not far enough? What do you think about the possibility of knowing God's mission since God himself said, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. ... [M]y ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9)?

Leader's Note: Contrast this with Ephesians 1:9–10: "And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." [Emphasis added.]

Teaching point three: We must appreciate the true nature of liturgy.

Many Evangelicals react negatively to the idea of any sort of liturgy in church. However, the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines liturgy as merely "a prescribed form or set of forms for public religious worship."

If that definition is accurate, then nearly every Western church has a liturgy, whether formal or informal. Does your church open with a song or two, segue into announcements, provide a baptism or baby dedication, move back into extended worship, then conclude with a 35-minute sermon? Do you stand for the reading of the Word? Do you stand to sing? Do you "turn around and greet your neighbor" when the pastor asks you?

If your church service exhibits any similarity from one service to the next, if your church is doing any of the practices above, then your church has a liturgy. It just may not know it. And to the degree that your church's liturgies are focused on teaching and forming "habits of mind" and bringing you into closer communion with God, then they are effective. But if your church's liturgies are merely in place to get from point A to point B in your structure, they may be simply part of a model, and may not be contributing to communion at all.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:26–40. In this passage Paul addresses the abuse of certain spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church, namely: tongues. However, whether your church practices this charismatic gift, or not, there is a lot here that is useful for church liturgy, that is: "a prescribed form or set of forms for public religious worship."



[Q] Why do you think Paul puts into place a rule for women remaining silent in the church? Is this a part of your church's liturgical model? How would women being silent contribute to the mission of communion with God?

Leader's Note: *Elsewhere we see that women were active in leadership roles. See Joel 2:28–29; Exodus 15:20; 2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34; Acts 9:36; 21:8–9; Philippians 4:2–3; Romans 16:3–4; Romans 16:1–2; Romans 16:7. Thus, some theologians see Paul's instruction here as a liturgical model that adapted to the specific cultural context of Corinth, where pagan women priestesses were spiritual leaders.*

- If silence in the church on the part of women was a culturally specific liturgical rule, why has that rule been relaxed in some Evangelical churches?
- If it was an absolute liturgical rule that should be unchanged, what harm is being done to God's mission of communion?
- Paul says that when the believers are gathered together, "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." What damage is done to the mission of God when this liturgical rule is not followed?

[Q] Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34. What specific rules for the Lord's Supper can you find in this passage?

- How well does what is seen in this passage fit with your own church's practice? What's different? Why do you think it's different?
- Paul says there are consequences to failing to follow this liturgy properly: "that is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." What is Paul talking about here? Are the Corinthians physically ill because they are not doing the Lord's Supper properly, or is Paul talking about spiritual health? Why?
- What can you identify in this passage as a liturgical practice that harmonizes with the mission of the Trinity as communion?

[Q] What liturgical forms do you think are biblically acceptable? Which one's aren't? Why?

[Q] Chan mentions that some expressions of liturgy have different emphases and different expectations depending on the surrounding culture. For instance, renouncing the world and idolatry may mean giving up literal (not metaphorical) fetishes and idols. Or water baptism, for example, may carry much more significance than it does in America due to expectations about what the ritual signifies and means.

- Are we missing something when we abandon some forms of liturgy because they seem like merely empty habits?
- Even as many of our largest megachurches have abandoned any form of traditional liturgy, newer "Emergent" churches are embracing liturgies of all stripe. What do you think is behind this new trend to adapt and embrace formal liturgy?
- What liturgical practices can you think of that provide a form of spiritual discipline?

[Q] How do liturgies (or regular practices) help you form habits of mind and habits of stability?



Optional Activity:

Apart from the preaching of the Word, other liturgical elements vary widely from church to church and between denominations. However, with the advent of praise-and-worship music “industry,” the music and lyrics we worship with has become more and more homogenous—even between vastly disparate denominations. Walk into any Evangelical church this Sunday and you’ll likely recognize much of the worship music being used. So, how about an experiment? Pick one of the following optional activities to help focus your discussion around the themes of this study:

- *Bring in a few of your church’s hymnals, distribute them to the group, and have them break up into dyads or triads before class. Have each of your teams find one hymn that illustrates the mission of God, as they understand it. After your study and discussion, have each of your groups present the hymn they found at the beginning of class and describe whether they would still choose that hymn, based on what they’ve learned above. Discuss why the hymn does illustrate the mission of God, or why not.*
- *Tell your group before the meeting that they should bring in their favorite praise-and-worship CD for “show and tell.” After your study and group discussion is over, have your class look over the CDs and, as a group, pick their favorite CD, representing the best in praise and worship, in their opinion. Then look at the titles of each of the songs. Ask, “How does this song fit into the idea of God’s mission being communion? How does this song reinforce that idea? Or does it?” If you find a song that really fits well with this theme, feel free to play it at the close of your meeting, and invite your group to a brief time of worship together. (You may need to be prepared to have several worship CDs of your own on hand for this exercise.)*
- *Invite your church’s worship leader to come visit your group and to give a small five-minute talk about his experience with various forms of liturgy and worship. Invite your leader to describe his view of the mission of the church and how worship fits into that vision. Be sure to leave time for questions and answers.*

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

In an age where various ways of “doing church” are competing for attention, where surveys and market research results are driving a church’s vision of how to reach their community, and where church growth seems to be driven primarily by church transfer instead of new believers added to the church and disciplined to maturity, it seems refreshing to hear a call for a return to biblical basics. After all, what could be more basic than the idea that in Genesis a triune, relational God created man to enjoy communion, and that in Revelation all of creation will be re-made to ultimately enjoy this communion?

But as with any theological premise, the danger lies in talking about it in the abstract, moaning about how we don’t measure up, and then not doing anything about it in reality. But this idea—that God created the church to enjoy community, that all of creation was made to help make this happen, that each of us is innately designed to enjoy a real, vibrant *relationship* with God—this idea is not merely an abstract notion that is hard to grasp, like eternity, Trinity, and the omniscience of God. Rather, this is an idea that must be acted upon. It has real implications for how you “do church,” and how your church views and fulfills its mission.

If Chan is right, we may well need to unlearn a lot of things we’ve taken for granted.



In the concluding verses of Matthew 28, Jesus commissioned his disciples, some worshipped him, and some doubted him. Nevertheless, whether they worshiped or had doubts, he gave them a parting command:

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Here, in one verse, we have God's mission, *communion* throughout eternity ("I am with you always"), *catechism* ("teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"), *mission* ("Therefore go"), *method* ("make disciples"), and *liturgy* ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit").

If communion is truly the mission of the Trinity, our first responsibility is a selfless selfishness: we must first know God in all of his power and majesty. Before we can disciple, we must first become disciples. And as we disciple others, we must do so *in relationship*. We cannot leave the task up to the pastor, preaching from his pulpit. Everything serves this end: Falling in love with and coming under the Lordship of Jesus.

Endeavor to make every relationship a communion with Jesus at the center. It's a big task, but even the largest ocean can be filled one drop at a time. And the first drop begins with you. Make some time this week—today—to commune with God. Your doubts, fears, and lack of emotions matter less than the relationship itself. Let God take care of the rest. Just spend some time with him

[Q] How do spiritual disciplines help believers enjoy and embrace communion with God?

[Q] Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:34–40).

- How does this dovetail with the idea of communion being the mission of God and the purpose of the church?
- What is the biggest barrier to most believers enjoying communion with God?
- How can we learn to truly love God and not just give lip service to the idea of loving God?

Action points:













- If God's chief aim for all of creation is to bring *everything* and *everybody* into communion with him, how does this change the way you view your role in life?
- How can you bring this idea of "communion with God" into the workplace? How does being a great janitor help promote this cause? How can a meticulous accountant make this mission a part of his own vision and mission? How does this vision affect the way you work as a caseworker, a parole officer, or doing paperwork in a cubicle?
- How should this vision of relationship and communion with God change the way you structure your family time? How does it challenge the way you parent your children?
- How does the mission of the Trinity challenge the way you view your physical world? How do we, as a church, go about bringing *all things* into communion with God?



- The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks: “What is the chief end of man?” This is, by the way, the same as saying, “What is my mission?” The answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” That, in a word, is *communion*. What new practice or spiritual discipline can you put into place this week to help you achieve that chief end?

—Study prepared by Rich Tatum, [blogger](#), freelancer and former online media managing editor for CTI.

Additional Resources

-  ChristianBibleStudies.com
-Missional Evangelism (6-session course)
-What Is the Significance of the Trinity?
-  [The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church](#), Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch (Hendrickson Publishers, 2003; 978-1565636590)
-  [The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church](#), Alan Hirsch (Brazos Press, 2007; 978-1587431647)
-  [God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice](#), Timothy George (Baker Academic, 2006; ISBN 978-0801027659)
-  [The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology And Worship](#), Robert Letham (P & R Publishing, 2005; ISBN: 978-0875520001)
-  [Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community](#), Simon Chan (InterVarsity Press, 2006; ISBN 978-0830827633)
-  [Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life](#), Simon Chan (InterVarsity Press, 1998; ISBN 978-0830815425)
-  [Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition](#), Simon Chan (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001; ISBN 978-1841271446)
-  [Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense](#), by N.T. Wright (HarperOne, 2006; ISBN 978-0060507152)
-  “[More than Saving Souls](#),” Mark Galli (*Christianity Today*, November 16, 2006 [Accessed: August 3, 2007])
-  “[The Church and the Development of Doctrine](#),” Simon Chan (*Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 57-77, 2004 [Accessed August 4, 2007])
-  “[Stopping Cultural Drift](#),” Mark Galli (*Christianity Today*, November 16, 2006)



ARTICLE

The Mission of the Trinity

Singaporean theologian Simon Chan says 'missional theology' has not gone far enough.

Interview by Andy Crouch with Simon Chan, for the study, "The Mission of the Trinity"

You have written a great deal about liturgical theology, but *missional* theology seems more popular these days.

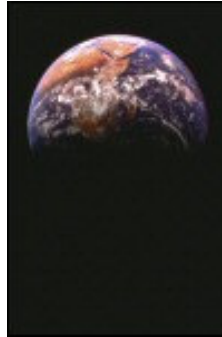
I think that missional theology is a very positive development. But some missional theology has not gone far enough. It hasn't asked, *What is the mission of the Trinity?* And the answer to that question is communion. Ultimately, all things are to be brought back into communion with the triune God. Communion is the ultimate end, not mission.

If we see communion as central to the life of the church, we are going to have an important place for mission. And this is reflected in the ancient fourfold structure of worship: gathering, proclaiming the Word, celebrating the Eucharist, and going out into the world. The last, of course, is mission. But mission takes its place within a larger structure. It is this sense of communion that the evangelical world especially needs. Communion is not just introspection or fellowship among ourselves. It involves, ultimately, seeing God and seeing the heart of God as well, which is his love for the world.

In many services today, the dismissal into the world is quite perfunctory. But if you go to an Orthodox service, you'll be amazed at the elaborate way in which the end of the service is conducted. It's not just a word of dismissal—there are whole prayers and litanies that prepare us to go back out into the world.

If liturgical worship is such a good preparation for mission, why are Pentecostalism and evangelicalism, which hardly follow the ancient structure of worship, growing so fast?

In the modern age, the free churches are evangelistically successful, but in the broader history of mission that hasn't always been true. Europe was evangelized in the



early centuries by missionaries who were certainly not free-church evangelicals. And think of the spread of the Orthodox Church from Russia to northern Africa.

In Singapore, we keep very close statistics about the growth of the Assemblies of God, which is currently the second-largest Protestant denomination in the country. We are good at evangelizing, bringing people in, but we have also noticed that many of those people that we have brought into our churches would over time go to more traditional churches and seeker-friendly megachurches. Our net growth isn't really that much, but in terms of bringing people in, yes, we have significant numbers of people being brought into the church for the first time. It may be that in God's providence he is using free churches, Pentecostals, and charismatics to reach out to the world, but I still believe that his aim is to embrace them all within the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Surely part of Pentecostalism's success is its ability to adapt rapidly in a technological culture.

Pentecostals are definitely very adaptable. They are quick to seize upon new opportunities for the sake of the gospel. They make use of the technologies of the times. There is a certain habit of mind that enables them to readily leave behind things that don't work and to move on to things that they think will work. Whereas the liturgy creates a different habit of mind, a habit of stability. This has its strengths and weaknesses, just as the Pentecostal mindset has its strengths and weaknesses. But in my view, in the modern world especially, the danger of a short memory far outweighs the danger of not being willing to change.

Many people would say the opposite: For the church to succeed in its mission, it needs to be ready to change.

But is that true in the long run? Coming from a Pentecostal background, I'm more sensitive to the dangers that a church is exposed to when it forgets its history.

What is the place of new communication technologies in worship and mission?

I believe that if we have a clear, coherent ecclesiology, if we know what it is to be the church, then technology will have its proper place. It's when we lack a clear understanding of our own identity and are driven by a pragmatic understanding of the church and its mission that technology becomes a threat to the life of the church. For too long, evangelicals have been driven by a rather shallow understanding of the church. We tend to see the church as a kind of pragmatic organization to fulfill certain tasks. And of course, if the church is viewed in this way, then we use technology very uncritically as long as those tasks are done.



This is especially important when it comes to the ultimate meaning of communion. Technology has created what we call virtual reality. It can give you a sense of intimacy. But whether it is real intimacy or not is quite another matter. I think this is where the Christian understanding of community enables us to look beyond what modern technology can offer, because the Christian understanding of real communion is embodied communion. Communion means bodily presence. That's at the heart of our incarnational theology, God coming to us in person; it's the meaning of the resurrection of the body. So no matter what virtual reality technology can create, it will never be an adequate substitute for communion.

But a high-definition video screen seems to bring us much closer to the preacher. Does that sense of intimacy happen in liturgical worship?

The traditional liturgy doesn't exist primarily to foster interpersonal relationships. It operates on a very different paradigm. In the liturgy we are, in a very real sense, objectively recognizing God for who he is. And in the midst of proclaiming who God is, we encounter God. At the end of the day, we may not be particularly drawn toward individuals, but in a good liturgy, we are drawn to God. We recognize him for who he is.

What can liturgical traditions learn from the charismatic and Pentecostal stream?

I think they need to be willing to recognize that God can and often does surprise us. We cannot control God. The Pentecostal willingness to change things at the spur of the moment may not be a bad thing at times! Liturgical churches need to be open to what Jonathan Edwards called "the surprising works of God."

What do we need to learn and unlearn about making disciples?

We need to rediscover this ancient word, catechism. In a way, it is very straightforward. Its purpose is to help people become the body of Christ and be incorporated into the church. And I don't think that the modern church can improve very much on what has already been given: the creeds, the great commandments, the Lord's Prayer. Those are the basic things that help the church develop its identity as the church of Jesus Christ. We can certainly add other training programs, but I think the catechism should be central to any training of disciples.

Now, the traditional approach was rote learning, asking questions and memorizing the responses. That may not be the most useful approach now, although it's surprising how some of those things we learn by rote stick at the back of our minds for a lifetime. But there are many other things that need to be addressed as the church enters into new contexts. The basic content of the catechism needs to address contextual issues.



For example, in some parts of the world, in the course of catechetical instruction, when we come to the Christian's renunciation of the world and of idolatry, that can quite literally mean that you have to give up your fetishes and idols. It's not metaphorical. Similarly, exorcism, which is still practiced in a liturgical way in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches when people are being prepared for baptism, may be much more than just a ritual in some parts of the world. People who are involved in black magic and the like actually have to renounce these things and have demons cast out of them.

In our context in Singapore, the act of baptism is seen even by non-Christians as the most critical moment of a person's life. Traditional Chinese do not mind their children going to church. In fact, they'll say, well, the church can teach you good things—but don't get baptized. Because the moment you get baptized, you burn your bridge with traditional religion. They understand baptism better than some of our evangelical Christians!

I'm an advisor to a local Assemblies of God church, and I know some of the people in our church who have been in our church for years, who have even taken up leadership positions in the church but who are not baptized.

What does the Asian church have to contribute to our understanding of discipleship and mission?

I believe the traditional Asian family structure, with its emphasis on extended family and authority within the family, could be very helpful to the Western church and its tendency to atomize the Christian community into autonomous individuals. Western people have great difficulty understanding that a hierarchical structure is not necessarily opposed to individual freedom. They tend to think of hierarchy as an arrangement of domination. But that is not the way we see it in Asia.

Likewise, in our more traditional cultures, the value attached to marriage helps us in instructing people in the importance of baptism. When you go through that process, there's a profound and permanent change of relationship and status. But in the context where marriage is a kind of convenient arrangement, it's very difficult to teach sacramental theology. So in a way, I can see why free churches in the West talk a lot about the church and leave out the sacraments.

Can't modernity be described as a loss of sacramentality? There's nothing particularly special about the world, and we can remake it as we will.

That's right. But I think in many traditional societies outside the West, the sense of the sacred is still strong. It is beginning to give way as modernity comes in, especially in urban places. But in many other contexts, the sacred is still there. I think that



provides a good point of contact for linking them with the Christian faith. This is one of the reasons why Christianity has a special appeal among what we might call tribal societies, where there is still a strong sense of the sacramental universe.

What does the church need to learn and unlearn about mission in your cultural setting?

Unfortunately, when Asian churches start to be involved in cross-cultural mission, especially churches in the more affluent societies like Korea and Singapore, many of them seem to repeat the mistakes of earlier missionaries. For example, after Cambodia opened up to the rest of the world, mission groups, many originating in Asia, rushed in. There are countless mission groups working in Cambodia. But they simply perpetuate the denominationalism that they so strenuously condemned in their own countries. So we haven't quite learned our lesson.

Asian Christians, too, can come with the same colonial mentality that Westerners once did, thinking that we've got all the answers because we have the money.

It's kind of reassuring as a Westerner to know we're not the only ones who make these mistakes.

At the same time, there's a lot to be thankful for. Many Asian churches are devoting huge amounts of money to the mission field. I was telling a colleague here at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary yesterday that some megachurches have mission budgets that are bigger than the budget of Trinity Theological College! And they are using that to go and preach the gospel. We can be thankful for that. But at the same time, we need to look at mission in the longer term and engage in things that are going to bear lasting fruit. There are still many parts of Asia, especially tribal regions, where the Bible is not available in the local language. I believe that the key to long-term mission success is to place the Bible in the hands of people in their local language. But this kind of work requires years and years of commitment. And I'm afraid that many of our churches are just not patient. They want to get things done quickly. They want to have results. They want statistics to show.

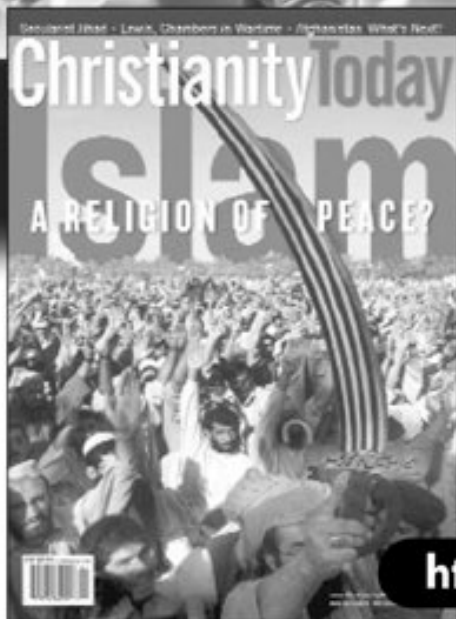
I suppose translation is just one aspect of contextualization, and it takes a long time to get it right.

Exactly. You need to have people who are willing to live in the place for a long period of time to do translation well. It can't be done quickly without doing harm to the very culture that you're seeking to serve.

["The Mission of the Trinity,"](#) Interview by Andy Crouch, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (June 2007)



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