

Is Luther's Way of Thinking Missional?

Robert Kolb

Readers are asked to excuse the not-quite-polished nature of the essay and notes

Martin Luther stood at a point in church history at which he was called to translate the biblical message anew into a different cultural situation than its long-time Mediterranean idiom. That task had vital importance for him because he was convinced that the proclamation of that message brings individuals to the trust in Jesus Christ, and that trust gives life. Luther's experiments in translating his understanding of the biblical message into the central, northern, European setting of his day provide some raw material for constructing elements of a twenty-first century missiology.

In trying to assess how we proceed to give witness to our faith in our settings and situations, it may be worthwhile to look to such a conversation partner who stands outside the stresses and strains of our own circumstances.. Engaging such a person should not be seen as a shortcut to thinking through our own problems, as prescriptive or directive, a substitute for our own intellectual sweat and muscle. Luther can do no more than stimulate and fire our imaginations and give us vantage points from which to view both the biblical message and the world around us. In this way his thinking can aid us in shaping our testimony to God's love for his human creatures.

In turning to conversation partners from the church's past, we

must be careful not to expect too much from them – although we are probably tempted to expect too little from them. But it is part of God's design for humanity that we are historical beings. Being created in his image means, among many other mysteries, that we reflect something of the wonderful variety which apparently belongs to the nature of God even if human beings also have something of his ultimate simplicity. That means that people in North America differ from people in Europe, and when we introduce the time factor, the differences between Luther's hearers and readers in his own day and us are many.

Nonetheless, Luther had the gift of a penetrating vision both of the temper of his day and of the insights offered by biblical writers into the human condition and the kind of God God is. These insights could stimulate our thinking on several aspects of what we mean by "missional," but I wish to concentrate today on some factors in his way of addressing God's Word to his people that may help us in thinking through the task of our individual, evangelistic, witnessing to the gift of life and integrity God gives us in Christ. For Luther had his own way of addressing the question, **"What's a person to do, to say, when encountering someone who is living apart from Christ?"**

The first question that Luther might pose when addressing this enterprise might well be: **"Who cares?"** The "who" is the center of the question, for Luther's understanding of reality is intensely personal. Those who grow up in Christian cultures presume that the Ultimate and Absolute reality is a person, but increasingly today people around us think in terms of the Ultimate and Absolute in other forms: multiple semi-personal centers and sources of power and order for their lives, or a single, ultimate spirit that radiates through what we experience and perceive, penetrating our beings when we do not resist, or perhaps even when we do. Others assign as much power as there is to human agencies, often supra-personal, such as race or party

or class, but often to themselves or to another individual.

From Scripture Luther knew that God is a person, a person who takes on personal form as he speaks, who through his speaking creates community, that is, relationships between himself and his creatures and relationships among his creatures. Luther defined reality in terms of what God says.

That Luther had learned from his Ockhamistic instructors, who emphasized that God holds total power to order and to preserve that order. Luther moved to place that power in God's mouth. He created the worlds by speaking. In lecturing on Genesis 1, Luther stated,

"The words 'Let there be light' are the words of God . . . this means that they are realities. For God calls into existence the things which do not exist. He does not speak grammatical words. He speaks true and substantial realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God."¹

He had said much the same thing three years earlier, commenting on Psalm 2 that God communicates through a

"word of reality [*verbum reale*], not just a sound, as our words are . . . That is a language different from ours. When the sun rises, when the sun sets, God is speaking. When fruit on the tree grows in size, when human beings are born, God is speaking. Accordingly, the words of God are not empty air but things very great and wonderful, which we see with our eyes and feel with our hands."

When the Creator said, "Let there be . . .," things happened. His Word fashioned the reality of all we experience.² In 1535 Luther drew the implications of this mode of God's operation for the restoration of sinners to their full humanity, centered on

faith him. Paul had referred to God's creative commands in 2 Corinthians 4:6, where, Luther continued, the apostle was reflecting the biblical conviction that God is by nature a Creator and that he creates through the Word when he converts the wicked – "something which is also brought about by the Word – as a new work of creation."³

By his very nature, as Luther saw it revealed in Christ's suffering and death in behalf of sinners, God cares. This person, who created through speaking, this God of conversation and community, has come personally as the Word made flesh to care for those who had missed the mark in fulfilling their humanity. This person, who created human beings as persons for conversation and community, has cared enough to send his very best, his Son, Jesus Christ.

In addition, Luther tells us that we as God's people care.

"Everything then should be directed in such a way that you recognize what God has done for you and you, thereafter, make it your highest priority to proclaim this publicly and call everyone to the light to which you are called. Where you see people that do not know this, you should instruct them and also teach them how you learned, that is, how a person through the good work and might of God is saved and comes from darkness into light."⁴

Luther's anthropology defined what it means to be human in a distinctive way, in two dimensions. His intensely personal view of God meant that he defined humanity, as Jesus did, in terms of two relationships: with God, who claims our central, life-orienting fear, love, and trust – above all God's creatures – and with the neighbor, for whom we are willing to sacrifice and give, on the model God gives us in his incarnation, in order to actualize his love in the lives of those around us (Matt.

22:37-40). In his proclamation Luther set out to bestow “passive righteousness,” the God-given identity as his children, which is the way he wants to view us first of all, and Luther wanted to cultivate “active righteousness,” the performance of God’s expectations, that demonstrates and concretizes our identity as God’s children, both in our praise and testimony of him and in our acts of love toward his creatures, human and all the rest of God’s happy collection of the products of his speaking reality into existence.

Therefore, caring involves bringing the life-restoring love of Christ to whole people, as we act as whole people ourselves. Our first priority in general – though not in every specific case – demands the creation and cultivation of the personal relationship of trust with our Creator, who has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth and who works in us as the Holy Spirit. But at the same time we are also very much concerned to bring God’s love to meet the penultimate as well as the ultimate needs of our neighbors; often the penultimate needs demand chronological priority.

We are also intent on training those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to trust God through our witness into a life of hearkening unto the Lord’s words about how to enjoy life to the fullest, trusting him and following him in demonstrating his care and concern to others. That means providing for their needs on the simplest and most personal level, and it means seeking justice and peace for others, respecting or restoring their integrity and dignity, because that is God’s expectation for truly human living.

On this basis we focus our witness on the relationship between God and the human creatures to whom he calls us to witness within the eschatological context which permeated Luther’s thought. That relationship is a relationship that lasts forever,

and so it has something to say about heaven, or at least about life everlasting. The denial of death that twists our culture, as Ernest Becker pointed out a generation ago, has not abolished death, and so the unpleasant thoughts we try to suppress take their vengeance when death finally bares its teeth in our own faces. However, on most days, for all of us, heaven can wait.

For Luther eschatology was not simply a concept about the end of earthly existence as we know it. He felt the presence of God in the midst of the everyday, and he recognized the full breadth of the biblical concept of “shalom,” the order and peace which God bestows through his Word as it intervenes in broken lives and broken communities. Therefore, the first urgency that demands our witness to Christ is the urgency of bringing the peace and joy, the taste of God’s shalom, to people in the midst of the toil, tribulation, and terrors of everyday life. There, too, God cares, and we care, and that leads to another question.

The second question Luther might pose as we consider the task of Christian witness is: **“why would any other human being be interested in our message anyway?”** For Luther realized early on, as he planned instruction for Christian living, that people who do not recognize that they are ill do not normally seek a cure. Luther’s practice of the distinction of law and gospel structures this diagnosis of dilemma and conveying of cure. It enables us to analyze and prepare for our witness more effectively. It is a logical observation that insists that law in Luther’s technical sense of the word must precede gospel. This ordering of our witness is not always psychologically or theologically appropriate, however, and presentation of God’s Word to those outside the faith is somewhat more complicated than that simple dictum, but the general rule is good to remember. At best, when we give information about Jesus to people whose false gods are still functioning fairly effectively, we cannot expect to do more than add him to their

pantheon.

Regarding evil Luther first counsels that the heart of the problem lies with the human failure to place God at the center of our thinking and living: we do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. That helps focus Christian witness precisely, on acquainting those outside the faith with their Creator and Redeemer. Luther defined humanity around the focal point created by the human creature's trust in someone or something as the absolute and ultimate source of all good and the safe place of refuge in every distress (LC, Cr, 2-3). These objects of trust function as substitutes for God; they are false gods.

By this definition all people have more than one god – over time for sure, and most often simultaneously. All sinners have more than one substitute for their Creator since no single creature can serve as a sufficient substitute for God. We are all polytheists; “we” includes Christians since the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized means that the struggle to hold life together in an evil world continually diverts us into trusting someone or something God has made instead of him himself.

We might paraphrase Luther's “source of all good and refuge in time of distress” by speaking of God and his substitutes as the source(s) of our identity, security, and meaning or worth. For contemporary North Americans Erik Erikson has made the concept of our sense of who we are the equivalent of Luther's concept of righteousness: being the right person, the person that we are supposed to be. The need for some sense of safety or security in daily life is clear: the physiological and psychological implications of its absence are devastating, death-dealing. A sense of dignity or worth or meaningfulness in life is critical for “keeping going,” and as the historical beings God created us

to be “shalom” is to be found in moving along the paths on which he has set us. Straying from those paths may be disastrous; stopping on them deadly.

Nonetheless, in the Smalcald Articles (III.i.3) Luther points out that the doubt of God and the denial of his lordship that separates his rebellious creatures from their Creator is not something people can sense or recognize apart from “revelation in the Scriptures,” that is, apart from listening to God himself. Sinners can perceive the existence of evil, even within themselves, but they cannot comprehend its origin in their failure to fear, love, and trust the true God apart from knowing him at least a bit. Therefore, our witness to those who do not know him must begin by speaking of him and his regard for them but cannot presume that they themselves have a full perception of their own dilemma and therefore of the way out of their predicament. Because living apart from Christ is a life copied from the Deceiver, the father of lies (John 8:44), we cannot even presume that they are able to be fully honest with themselves about the misshapeness of their lives and their own involvement in misshaping it.

The second insight for assessing why others might wish to come to Christ that Luther give us is that their predicament – what is wrong with human life apart from him – has a wide variety of symptoms. One popular, but false, impression of Luther’s diagnosis of the human condition echoes Melanchthon’s observation in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, “the law always accuses.” Luther was indeed guilt-ridden as a young monk, but he described his quandary in a host of ways. His view of what the law does to those outside the faith is better summarized in the Smalcald Articles (III.3.1-2), where he described it as a “thunderbolt” which destroys open sinners and false saints, as a hammer that breaks the rock of human security in pieces (citing Jeremiah 23:29). The law cracks and smashes,

it terrorizes and casts into despair. Luther often enough points out that the victims of evil as well as its perpetrators have good reason to be on the search for a new source of identity, security, and meaning, and that is what opens people to our witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

That means that conversations about whatever is plaguing and oppressing our non-Christian acquaintances can help us find an opening to talk about what Jesus means to us and thereby introduce him to them. We do not have to wait for some perception of guilt or shame to creep up on them. Such feelings are seldom at the surface of human thinking, and certainly not in contemporary North American society. Guilt feelings condemn, and threaten, and so it is natural for sinners to reposition responsibility for what goes wrong onto someone or something else's account.

But fears of illness and death, job loss and financial crisis, all shake the security systems, the false gods, of people's lives. So do tottering and collapsing relationships in the family, on the job, in the neighborhood. So does loss of dignity, worth, and meaningful activities for life. Any of these kinds of distress and defeat can set people on the search for new sources of identity, security, and meaning. When they become present in the lives of the people around us, if we have built a relationship of trust with them, we become natural conversation partners and will have opportunities to introduce them to Jesus Christ as their true Lord and Savior.

Thus, when Luther describes what Christ has done for sinners, for instance in the Large Catechism, he speaks not only of their forgiveness, but also of their liberation – redemption and release – from fear, entanglement with self-centeredness and blindness, condemnation to death. Christ tackled the troika of enemies that the ancient fathers had fought: the devil, the

world, and the sinful desires that guide our own ways of thinking about reality. These foes deceive people into focusing and ordering life in false, self-defeating ways; they alienate us from God and other people; they send us down false paths. From such captivities and addictions Christ sets his people free. He provides resources for genuine human living to those whose alternate sources for living had proved bankrupt; he aids those whose alternate sources of help have run dry; he comforts those who are despairing of their plans, their hopes, of life itself. He restores truly human life in its fullness to those on the run from their God; he is a God who raises from the dead (LC Cr, 26-30).

God cares about those who are trapped and caught in evil. **What has he done about it? How has he solved the problem?** Luther does not supply a definitive explanation that delivers mastery of God's actions into our hands. Gustaf Aulén's valuable study of atonement theory in the history of the church, *Christus Victor*, argued that Luther departed from the "Anselmian" model of the medieval church to which his followers returned, and taught instead, as had ancient theologians, that Christ atones for sinners by defeating their enemies, conquering them through his resurrection.⁵ Ian Siggins offers a more accurate assessment of Luther's atonement thinking when he asserts that Luther had no atonement theory – in the sense of that kind of explanation that claims to plumb the depths of God's mind – and instead offered his hearers and readers an abundance of images and descriptions of what God has done to accomplish the liberation of his people from sin, death, Satan, God's wrath, and the crushing and condemnation of the law.⁶

As we address the perceived cracks in our conversation partner's way of holding life together, we may have to challenge presuppositions that place his or her experience in a false context, to which a proper answer cannot be given. This task

obviously requires patience, sympathy and understanding, as well as an appropriate and plausible glimpse of the content of God's revelation of himself and his will for his chosen people in Christ.

Among Luther's many ways of driving Christ into the lives of his hearers and readers and changing their way of thinking (for that is what repentance is) and thereby their orientation to life, particularly important was his application of baptism to the ongoing struggle against their own defiance of God and denial of his lordship for the faithful because they continue to experience sin and evil in their lives. "The old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand, a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever," he wrote in the *Small Catechism* in explaining the ongoing significance of the sacrament.⁷

Jonathan Trigg argues that Luther's understanding of justification by faith is "predicated upon" his understanding of God's baptismal action as his re-creative Word, which restores the proper relationship between God and his human creature.⁸ Luther believed that the only way out of the tragic dilemma of human revolt against God and alienation from him is to end the self-forged identity as people who center lives in some creatures or others. For the payoff for this sin is death, and only death. Sinners must die, eternally or baptismally. When Christ shares with them his death and thus buries all that is wrong with their lives in his tomb, he then gives them the gift of eternal life by sharing his resurrection with them.

Thus, when we encounter those who "wish I were dead," with some degree of seriousness, we stand ready to say to them, "Do I have a deal for you!" For only God can change the past. He can lay

our old identities in Christ's tomb, into which he never looks, and he can help refocus our attention away from the haunting memories of our old identities. In the mystery of Christ's claiming us as his own and sharing his death and resurrection with us, he re-creates the very person we are, even when the battle against old ways of trying to accomplish a worthwhile life continues.

This motif of justification by re-creation is, of course, only one of many ways Luther used to describe what Christ has done for us. When he used this motif, he was generally declaring the facts regarding the reality which God accomplishes through his word of forgiveness. When he focused on those who were preoccupied with the signs of their own sinfulness, he proclaimed away their guilt or shame by speaking of God's imputation, picking up a relatively seldom used word in order to emphasize that God reckons or regards those who are battling the evil within themselves as his people, righteous in their identity because he judges them to be.

No legal fiction, God's judgment creates reality. Luther could speak of Christ's reconciliation to those who felt they had wandered far from their God. He could depict the gentleness and tenderness of parental love to those who felt fearful and alone, unlovable and unloved. His imagination moved out from biblical descriptions and metaphors of what God has done in Christ Jesus to similar expressions gleaned from his own situation in late medieval Germany. He models for us an agility of articulation of God's promise of new life in Christ.

What is it that God wants to accomplish through the death and resurrection of Christ? Christ came that his human creatures might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). John wrote his gospel so that those who were trusting in false gods could come to know Jesus as Messiah and that by trusting in him

they might have life in his name (John 20:31). Life comes by believing, Luther came to see, and he did not define believing as mere acknowledgement of a set of facts. Believing, trusting, forms the heart and basis of true human living for Luther, and so his preaching and teaching aimed at making people wise in truly human living – salvation – which, he was convinced, would cause them to mature in the practice of the activities he had designed them to carry out in his world.

“Trust” and “believe” are not words that can stand alone. They take on meaning only when linked to an object, and they are words that necessarily describe a relationship when that object is a person. God is a God of conversation and community, and so the goal of his sending Christ into the world to save sinners is the restoration of the conversation he designed us to have in communion with him. Heidelberg systematician Wilfried Härle, examining Luther’s disputation on justification of 1535, argues that the reformer’s doctrine of justification by faith reflected the Old Testament concept of what both God and human creature are – are supposed to be –, centering in “communal faithfulness” [Gemeinschaftstreue, *Gemeinschaftstreue*].⁹ Therefore, bringing the gospel to those outside that community, who are living without that faithfulness to their Creator, involves the restoration of that communal faithfulness.

In this disputation Luther repeated his long-time insistence that saving faith is not merely “historic faith,” the acknowledgement of the facts of Jesus’ story. “It grasps Christ, who died for our sins and arose again for our justification,” (Rom. 4:25) and “understands the love of God the Father, who wants to redeem and save you through Christ.” It “joyfully embraces the Son of God given for it with arms outstretched joyfully, saying, ‘He is my beloved, and I am his.’” It recognizes that Christ died and rose “for me.” Good works flow from this faith, not under compulsion but voluntarily, as a good

tree naturally and freely produces good fruits (Matt. 10.)7:16

The Holy Spirit creates and preserves this trust in the same way God has created and preserves the rest of reality, through his Word, and indeed, his Word in a specific form. He enters into conversation with us in order to pledge to give us life, and thereby to restore us to truly human living. Luther came to recognize that God spoke his words of re-creation and life in the form of a promise. At the foot of the cross the reformer discovered the presence and power of the God who had earlier seemed to him to be absent and angry. He discovered God's wisdom and power in what he had formerly thought to be foolishness and impotence and therefore signs of God's anger and absence (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16).

Instead, God was very much there on the cross, on his way to and through the tomb into new life, and from the cross and tomb he spoke the promise that he would return to our lives as our Lord and that he would restore the humanity we had damaged and tried to discard.

The nature of God's address to sinners in the form of a promise in the midst of the continuing presence of sin and evil meant for Luther first of all that the proofs he had sought in signs and logic as a scholastic theologian lost their significance. They had repeatedly revealed themselves as inadequate and deceptive anyway. Luther did maintain high respect for God's gift of reasoning, and as an Ockhamist he firstly believed in exercising dominion by empirical examination of God's world. But he also recognized that empirical and logical learning both place what is being studied under the control of the one who is learning. The parameters for definition and for searching out meaning from something are set by the one who is learning or by a teacher.

Promises are different. The receiver of a promise is dependent on the one who gives the promise. The receiver does not control the learning; the giver does. If God is to remain God, he cannot submit himself to human testing and proving. He communicates with us in the form of commands, which put burdens on us, light as his yoke may be to those who follow the commands with the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the form of promise, which puts the burden on him.

Promises evoke trust. Just how trust arises is something of a mystery. It is akin to love. Poets can describe falling in love, and they do better at the task than psychologists. Psychologists recognize the importance of trust for human life, for human peace of mind. Whatever one may think of Erik Erikson's attempt to do analysis across the centuries in *Young Man Luther*, his repetition of Luther's insight into the heart of what it means to be human, trust, is a very helpful beachhead for talking of the gospel in North American culture today. Erikson perceived that trust is the fundamental building-block of human personhood and personality and that learning to trust more or to mistrust more in the first two years of life determines much of how a person lives, the quality of our lives, for the rest of our days.

Luther also viewed faith in God as the fundamental constitutive element of our humanity. To live by faith for meant to have all of life oriented toward and empowered by the object of trust, the source of good and refuge, of identity, security, and meaning. "To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that [source of good and refuge in distress] with your whole heart." "To have a God, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to

turn us away from everything else apart from him and to draw us to himself because he is the one, eternal good" (LC, TC, 2, 13-15).

He draws us to himself by talking to us. "Faith is nothing else than believing what God promises and reveals. . . . The Word and faith are both necessary, and without the Word there can be no faith."¹¹ Luther told his students that as a mother might say, "Darling baby, my dear little mouse," so God comes to us in our tears to reassure us, and in trust we react with joy. For living by faith means trusting God's Word. "Faith judges according to the Word and by the Word and faith perceives a profoundly paternal love and thoroughly maternal caresses."¹² This trust is what God wants our witness to Jesus to create.

But – **"how shall they come to trust him?" "How does God deliver his gospel?"** Luther's understanding of the Word of God as his instrument for creating reality, also in the midst of the chaos and rejection of shalom, the chasing after false gods, that constitutes our sinfulness, forms a very important part of what we have to offer to twenty-first century missiology. Luther's Ockhamist framework for reading Scripture combined with his exegetical calling to immerse him deeply in the Bible and to catch there the presupposition of the biblical writers that God creates through his Word in some mysterious fashion which they report but do not analyze. Luther had experienced the power of the gospel's proclamation to him as it arose from the printed page as well as – and above all – from absolution, from preaching, from the Word in baptismal form, from the Supper of the Lord, and from conversation with other Christians. He spoke from personal encounters with God's presence and power as he heard and read, recalled and feasted upon God's gift of his own love in Christ that he had received new life from the forgiveness and reconciliation that God's speaking to him bestowed.

Luther believed firmly that the gospel gives “the resources and aids” [Rat und Hulf] to combat sin and live the life of trust in God through various forms of his Word (SA III.v). But he did not attempt to explain precisely how the Holy Spirit exercises the power to re-create sinners into trusting children of God through the various forms of the Word. On the one hand, this gospel power rests in God’s commitment, his promise and pledge, that he will be faithful, even when we are not – since that is his very nature: “he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). To have someone tell us that he or she will be with us through thick and thin, no matter what, is always encouraging though sometimes not totally believable. To have God tell us that does evoke a reaction, sometimes of doubt, but sometimes of wonder, awe, gratitude, and the confidence and dependence that define trust.

But the trust that the Holy Spirit creates through our witness does involve human “action,” though not one that we can explain by normal decision-making processes. I can decide to kill or not to kill, even to hate or not to hate, but I cannot force myself to trust you, and you cannot coerce trust in yourself out of me either. Trust takes place in a way, as we said, that remains mysterious. And so, we will never fathom or explain the power of the Holy Spirit’s creating the trust that is the human side of the relationship God establishes through his promise. But we can observe enough about the psychological side of trust to sharpen our ability to help people to learn of Christ, to listen appropriately to his approach to them, and to place their confidence in him.

Luther models for us how we should keep in tension God’s total responsibility for our salvation and at the same time affirm the full responsibility of the human being to be about the psychological acts of fearing, loving, and trusting in God. Most Christian thinkers have tried to homogenize and harmonize God’s grace and human efforts and have used a number of devices to do

that. Luther and Melanchthon tried to hold the two in tension, sometimes more successfully, sometimes less. That means that, to put the problem in law and gospel language, the law demands human actions – that is, it describes what happens on the human side according to God's design – and the gospel conveys God's action, as mysterious in re-creation as it remains in creation, not only describing but effecting his saving will for us. And you cannot have the one without the other, at least as a general rule.

In thinking about God's restoring the fullness of our humanity through his Word, we dare not forget that Luther emphasized that God is rich in his grace and therefore gives his life- restoring Word to us in so many different forms, as the peasant told the priest when he priest thought absolution should be enough gospel and the peasant need not worry about going to the Lord's Supper – in Luther's *Short Order of Confession* (1529).¹³ In the Smalcald Articles Luther lists five – what he occasionally called (and his followers made into a dogmatic category) – “means of grace,” preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, and, absolution in its broader form, the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another.

A student recently surprised me by observing that for post-modern times the sacraments were probably the most effective forms of the Word to use in conversing with those outside the faith. I pointed out to him that he was wrong: where I came from, when you were converting people to Lutheranism, and they were generally the newly-married Methodist or Baptist spouses of long-time members of the congregation, you tried to avoid the embarrassing subject of the sacraments for as long as possible. He pointed out that I was wrong: God's speaking in his sacraments is no problem for post-moderns, who presume that, if he is going to talk, he can use media, and that God's gift of a new identity, a new birth, a death and resurrection in baptism,

as well as his gift of sustenance for days of toil and trouble in the Lord's Supper, concretize and materialize the promise of new life in very meaningful ways.

Though he laid out no evangelistic theory, Luther's view of human interaction reminds us that we deliver God's Word as whole people, not just with our "religious" thoughts and actions. Trust in God may be very difficult psychologically for those who find few if any human beings to trust. Therefore, when we come with God's Word, we may have to wait patiently for sufficient trust to be built in our conversation partner to enable a hearing of our witness.

In connection with our assessment of how best to echo God's promise into the lives of others, we dare not forget that Luther's doctrine of creation directs our evangelistic strategy with the entire person in view, taking seriously every aspect of the whole human being whom we are engaging. His doctrine of creation also takes away any spiritualizing fear of academic study and disciplined research into how human communication, human thinking, and human community function. This larger view of what it means to be human and of the blessings of the academic disciplines flourished in Wittenberg, a university that in Luther's lifetime promoted the study of botany and astronomy, of Latin poetry and world history, and his colleague Melanchthon made contributions to the study and teaching of rhetoric and logic that kept his textbooks on those subjects in print for two hundred years. These two colleagues actively encouraged student use of rhetoric and dialectic skills in interpreting and communicating the promise of Christ.

Luther's understanding of the goodness of creation also directs us toward a healthy appreciation of God's gifts within specific cultures while at the same time not freeing us from the obligation to exercise godly criticism of our societies when

they are defying God's plan and rule for their people and subjecting them to injustice and abuse. Luther's distinction of the two realms also permits us to distinguish the positive contributions to life in this world of those who still are not enjoying the fullness of their humanity by placing their ultimate trust in some creature rather than their Creator. At the same time, within this distinction we recognize the challenge to our witness imposed by the intermeshing of the two realms, and we are sensitive to the fact that some things we regard as religiously neutral and restricted to the horizontal realm in our own thinking may indeed have religious significance to those with whom we are conversing. Luther's insights into the nature of Christian freedom concentrates our attention on liberating people from their enemies and oppressors, from Satan and sin to death and the condemnation of God's law and on the gospel's liberating them for service to others, but his understanding of our freedom also means that we are not bound to particular cultural forms or expressions of the faith. Those whom we draw to Christ may indeed find different ways of expressing our common faith within their own context of experience and upbringing.

Is Luther's way of thinking missional? In more ways than we have reviewed here, I am sure. In so far as his way of thinking can be designated a "theology of God's Word," this way of thinking has a dynamic that simply cannot be anything but sending us, Christ's people, into the lives of others to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins. The Wittenberg way of understanding who God is and what it means to be human impels us into conversation, conversation with our God and conversation that delivers God's reality-creating promise of his presence and power, the power of God that saves, that gives life and peace and joy in Christ.

References:

1 WA 42:17,15-18, LW 1:21.

2 “Lecture on Psalm 2,” 1532, LW 12:32-33; WA 40,2:230,20-231,28.

3 “Genesis Lectures,” 1535-1545, LW 1:16-17; WA 42:13,31-14,22.

4 WA12:318,25-318,6, as translated in Stolle, *Church Comes from All Nations*, 20.

5 Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor, An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (1931; New York: Macmillan, 1961).

6 Ian A. K. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 108-113.

7 BOOK OF CONCORD, the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church/ ed. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert. MP 2000, 360, BSLK 516, 29-517,7.

8 Jonathan Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 2. 9 Ibid., 217-19.

10 WA39,1:45,11-46,10, LW34:109-11.

11 “Proceedings at Augsburg,” 1518, LW 31:270-271; WA 2:13,18-22.

12 “Lectures on Isaiah,” 1527-1530, LW 17:410; WA 31,2: 580,14-18.

13 WA 31,1:345,9-12, LW 53:118.

[Is_Luthers_Thinking_Missional \(PDF\)](#)