

# The 2008 Meeting of the American Society of Missiology, Part II.

Colleagues,

*Preliminary Note: By the time next Thursday rolls around, Marie and I, God willing, won't be in St. Louis, but in Europe. For most of the rest of the summer—actually 41 days and 40 nights. Sounds almost Biblical. At either end of that stretch are two conferences we're attending.*

*First one is four days for the 200th birthday of Wilhelm Loehe at his home-town of Neuendettelsau in Bavaria, Germany. If this Lutheran superstar is unknown to you, Google his name, but don't believe Wikipedia when it designates him "a founding sponsor of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod." He IS the godfather of much of German Lutheranism in the USA, but of the "other" German Lutherans, not the LCMS crowd.*

*At the end of the itinerary is the week-long conference of the International Association for Mission Studies in Hungary. My contribution, slotted for presentation there, was posted to you two weeks ago. Three of you responded with good suggestions. I included every one received. [I'll ask our webmaster, Tom Law, to update the first draft already on the ThTh Crossings website, so these goodies go into the permanent record.]*

*For the days inbetween those conference brackets, we're taking a railpass—gas is \$10 a gallon, so no car rental and the murderous traffic on the Autobahn. A dozen or so folks from our ancient days in Germany on Marie's Fulbright scholarship to Hamburg (1955ff.) have invited us to pay a visit. So we intend to. From*

*fotos they've sent us, some of them have really grown old!*

*Robin Morgan will manage ThTh postings through the end of August. I've put a couple items in the pipeline, she'll fill in the blanks.*

*Now to the real text for this week.*

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Last week's Part I report of the June ASM meeting centered on the "fork in the road" for mission theology presented by Luther's theology and Karl Barth's theology—at the very points where Barth himself said "It's an either/or." That either/or surfaced at ASM 2008 at two fundamental places—how you talk about God and how you read the Bible.

God-talk (which is what "theo-logy" literally means) starts either with God's own self—that "aseity" term—or with God-and-humans already entangled with one another. Barth said the former, Luther the latter. Luther said that the aseity adventure was a no-no. It seeks to probe the hidden mysteries of God instead of starting with God revealed, finally God-revealed in Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah. It is an either/or.

And on reading the Bible, it's either "That God speaks to us at all is already grace" (Barth) or "That God speaks to us is true, but the messages are not all grace" (Luther). Example: "Adam, what have you done?" was indeed divine address, but it was not good news. When speaking those words God the critic, the just critic, was indeed "messaging" (as "they" now say) our primal parent. Grace it was not. No smiley face from either partner in that conversation.

God hasn't stopped sending messages of critique. They are not good news. They expose sinners, and finally eliminate them. Unless . . . unless there is a "sweet swap" intervention from

God's other word, God's "regime-change" with sinners, promised from Abrahamic days and filled-full finally in God-revealed in Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah. Those two messages are an either/or. At the end of the line sinners are either dead or alive. There is no Biblical basis for saying "That God speaks to us at all is already grace."

All the major presentations at ASM 2008 took Barth's fork in the road.

Suppose the presenters had taken the other fork in the road and appropriated for themselves those two "mistakes" (ala Barth) that Luther made.

Here are some hunches linked to the same 5 lecture topics.

## **Lecture #1: "Fixing" the Defect(s) in the Systematic Theology of Missio Dei**

How Luther's theology can help.

- A. Major theological defect of Missio Dei theology [hereafter MD] is not its fuzzy trinitarianism, as our keynote speaker told us, namely, that MD ignores God's "aseity," God's "underived or independent existence." A more basic defect underlying MD's acclaimed trinitarianism, is its blindness to the Biblical given that God has two "missions" operating in the world, not just one. MD#1 is to preserve the now-fallen world (sin-infested with evil on the loose) from total self-destruction. MD#2 is to redeem that world, in the literal meaning of redeem: God regaining ownership of the renegade humans who are central to the mess, and through them, once they are "re-owned," rescuing "old" creation into a new creation. That these two missions are very different is perfectly clear. God does not die in carrying out MD1. It did take such a death

to carry out MD2. Yes, same God, two distinct MDs. Two different agendas, agencies, instruments needed, for the two MDs. In Luther's Biblical metaphors: God's left hand and God's right hand, God's law and God's promise.

B. Important Biblical texts for Luther here:

- The Moses/Jesus juxtaposition throughout John's Gospel, beginning already in the prologue.
- Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.
- 2 Cor. 3-5 with God's TWO "covenants," two "ministries/serving projects" the central theme.
- Galatians 4.
- Letter to the Hebrews with its two priesthoods, two covenants, better and "worse" promises.

C. A distinctive trinitarianism (a promissory Trinity) arises from this different way of reading the Bible, different from the one that has come along with MD and different from the Barth model that our keynoter recommended for improving MD's defects. Gary Simpson (missiologist at Luther Seminary, St. Paul) argues that you don't even "need" a Trinitarian deity in your theology, if Barth's axiom is true: "that God speaks to us at all is already grace." Monism, just one undifferentiated deity, will do.

In Luther's Large Catechism it goes like this. The issue is not how to talk about God correctly, but how to be able to speak of God as "Father," for that term is grace-filled God-talk. Although we recite the trinitarian vocables in the sequence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the sequence is actually reversed in Christian lived experience. "We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrifying judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit." Connecting with God-Holy Spirit comes first, then God-Son, then God-Father. That is Trinitarian theology that comes

out as Good News.

Where's the good news in God's aseity? So don't take the aseity fork in the road. Instead take the fork marked "God-and-us entangled." Don't take the "every word/act of God is grace" fork, but the "Christic-grace trumps God-the-critic" fork.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a proposal for talking about God and having it come out as Gospel. Mission theology and praxis arising from such a trinitarian theology is what's needed to reconstuct MD for the 21st century. More below.

## **Lecture #2: Studying the Bible with Mission in Mind.**

The second presenter spent lots of time with 2 Corinthians 5. A classic text, no doubt. For Luther it was "super" classic. He found one of his major preachable metaphors there in Paul's propaganda (good sense) using the verb/noun reconcile/reconciliation. But he heard that fundamental Pauline term (the Greek word for it is found ONLY in Paul's letters, nowhere else, in the NT!) saying something different from what this presenter (and Barth too?) heard. Doubtless hermeneutics is in the mix, but also the initial common everyday meaning of the Greek term (katallassein/katallagee) in the language-culture of the Hellenistic world. Its root meaning is "exchange," taken straight from the marketplace for buying and selling, "exchanging" goods and services, either in barter or for cash. Paul doubtless used it every day that he was out in front of his shop doing propaganda (good sense) for his tents. It's not a religious term. It comes from the streets. Nor is it initially a human-relations term. Its first use in Hellenistic Greek does not designate what "reconcile" generally means in today's English: hostility being changed into friendship.

When Paul talks about God's reconciling the world unto himself (term comes five times in the 2 Cor 5 text), Luther put this

into German as “Froehlicher Wechsel,” a joyful exchange. A very “sweet swap.”

At the end of the sweet swap friendship does indeed replace hostility, but it takes the swapping to bring about the friendship. One is cause, one consequence. So what’s all involved in the exchange, the reconciliation, the transaction that results in friendship restored?

The God-in-Christ reconciliation event is a monumental, even bizarre, exchange, namely, the sin of sinners is transferred to a sinless Christ and Christ’s righteousness is transferred to very UNrighteous sinners. And God not only approves the transaction, but initiates it. This reconciliation is just like a marketplace exchange where what was once the possession of one partner (e.g., Paul’s handmade leather tent) becomes the possession of his customer, and the possession of the other partner (e.g., Paul’s customer’s cash) becomes the possession of the other (goes into Paul’s moneybag).

This 2 Corinthians text was key for Luther’s calling reconciliation a “froehlicher Wechsel.” And that text was not alone. It had a powerful parallel in Galatians 3:13f. Look at this exchange—curses exchanged for blessings! “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Look at that sweet swap. Christ takes ownership of the sinner’s curse and the sinner takes ownership of the Abrahamic blessing. All of it transpiring “in Christ Jesus . . . so that we might receive the (Abrahamic) promise(!) of the Spirit, by faith alone.”

So for Luther the “ministry of reconciliation” now entrusted to those already-reconciled is THE mission assignment. And what it

is, is simple: keep the sweet swap going. Its first word is not “you people who are fighting, stop fighting and be friends with each other.” No, it’s simply “Be reconciled to God.” Get in on God’s own sweet swap with you. Exchange with Jesus—your load for his largesse. If you don’t “un-load,” you don’t yet have it. Exchanges are bilateral, or they don’t happen at all. Both partners divest, both receive. Human-to-human reconciliation can be achieved by people not yet reconciled to God. God has MD#1 resources going for that. But with humans not yet reconciled to God, MD#1 human-to-human reconciliation is still “old” creation. It’s still part of that “heaven and earth that WILL pass away,” as Jesus says. Without Christ’s sweet swap no sinner’s God-problem is solved.

### **Lecture #3: Church History and Missio Dei**

Presenter number three focused on one major metaphor in Luther’s blueprint with his recurring propaganda (good sense) for reading church history with lenses looking for “cruciformity” in the life of the church, past and present. His Gospel as “theology of the cross” took Luther’s fork in the road. The way he paired that with his other key term “apostolicity” may have given the impression that these two terms were of equal character. Crassly put: Do church history this way: check out the cruciformity and the apostolicity of every segment in the church’s past. Wherever in the world people past or present confess Christ, check out the cruciformity (“is their Gospel centered at the cross-place?”) and the apostolicity (“are they hustling that center out to the peripheries in their own worlds?”).

Both good. But the former is primal, the latter (the propaganda—in the good sense) is second in line. If some “other” gospel is at that center, that too may well have its apostolicity. Case in point: today’s Islam. The connection between the two that I’d pursue if I could do it all over again

(and I was prof for systematic AND historical theology once upon a time) would be to listen again to the history of Christians, especially those outside my heritage, to learn what the connection was between the cruciformity or lack thereof in the gospel they trusted and the “urge to propaganda” that that very gospel did/did not ignite. My hunch is that the withering of the propaganda-push (apostolicity) in the history of the Body of Christ is directly linked to the quality of the cruciformity of the gospel at the center of the set. Christian communities that are “mission-minus” need a better Gospel at the center. If a Gospel-minus is at the center, all the hype to make them “more missional” is itself bad news and will propagandize more bad news.

In one of Luther’s favored mission metaphors, God drops his Christ-Cross-Gospel into our world as a pebble in a pool. The ripple effect is automatic. You need no instruction to generate the outward flow of the energy –e.g., mission. If there is little or no ripple effect, the problem is with the pebble at the center. It must have been the wrong rock, different from the Christ-pebble that God dropped into our puddle at the outset. Church historians need to sleuth out the ripple effects of the variety of gospels that have rippled through church history, checking how they reflect the original Christ-pebble at the center that started it all. That would be humongous help for those of us (mostly Western Christians, I suspect) who bemoan the demise of “apostolicity” in our day, the demise of “missional” consciousness in Christians.

[Better said, the demise of missional consciousness in “Western” Christians. Ripples, BIG ripples, are reported in many other places in the Christian pond these days. One example: The Mekane Yesus Lutheran Church in Ethiopia has now the second largest membership of all Lutheran churches in the world. And from what I know, they have never heard of MD—of its one-time supposed

promise, nor of its failure. Somehow the Gospel they hear and into which they are baptized makes them think “If you are baptized, you are a missionary.” Sounds like “and has committed to us (the ‘merely’ baptized) the ministry of reconciliation.”]

Back here in Western Christianity, we say (or think) “Pebble, yes, we are dropping the pebble, but no ripples.” Luther might counsel us thus: Check the pebble you’re dropping. It might be a diminished gospel, or even (horrors! ) an “other” one. Matter of fact, a diminished gospel IS an “other” gospel.

[Excursus. An “other” Gospel, Paul’s term for what confronts his Galatian congregation as he writes to them, is indeed a “diminished” Gospel. But note the nature of the diminishment in Paul’s analysis. Not that something has been taken away from the pebble in Galatia. They still promote and believe a crucified and risen Jesus. But they’ve ADDED stuff to the pebble. Requirements, requirements, requirements. “Gospel-plus” is now the pebble being plopped in pool at Galatia. So “other” is this Gospel-plus pebble that the end result is: “Christ died in vain.” Hence the oxymoronic axiom: “The original Gospel is diminished by add-ons.” Add on anything to the “cruciform Gospel” and it’s already less than the original. It’s an “other” gospel, on the slippery slide to the verdict: “if justification comes with any add-ons (you’ve gotta do this, you’ve gotta have that – in addition to “having” Christ), then Christ died in vain”].

## **Lectures #4 and #5: “Missio Dei and Practical Theology,” and “Missio Dei and Theological Formation”**

Someone else can do these two topics following Luther’s fork in the road. There’s a rumor out that we might get one like that at ASM 2009. If so, d.v., we can report it next year.

Classic for both practical theology and theological education is

Bob Bertram's essay (from 1971!) "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission." <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/DoingTheologyinMission.pdf>

A trio of rhyming Latin terms is the nucleus—promissio, confessio, missio. Arch-Lutheran axiom is that the cruciform Gospel is a promise. Trusting that promise is the bottom-line confession of sinners reconciled to God. God's Christic promise is THE pebble that reconciles. Mission ripples out from that center – by definition.

When THIS pebble drops, ripples happen. No ripples? Must have been a different pebble, not THIS one. In Lutheran lingo, God-in-Christ drops the MD#2 pebble into God's MD#1 world where the whole human race lives. It's the offer of a sweet swap, a regime change. Mission is propaganda (good sense) on the part of those already enjoying the sweet swap, already "lifted" when the pebble's ripple-effect got to them. If that hasn't yet happened to you or your ecclesial community, then God needs to send a missionary to plop THE pebble into your puddle again.

Unless God retires me beforehand from ASM membership, I'll keep paying my dues until something like this shows up on the conference program: Luther's proposal that God's TWO missions, MD#1 and MD#2, are the ecumenical blueprint for mission coming from the Pebble Himself. [It's not just Luther's Wittenberg whimsy.] Let the presenter show us how to tell them apart—why that is important for the whole ball of wax—and then how to hold them together. And then tell us what sort of missiology flows down Luther's fork on the ecumenical road.

"Promissio is the secret of missio." That's Bertram's last sentence in the essay mentioned above. It is Luther's mission mantra.