

Is the Great Commission Still Valid for Lutherans?

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This lecture will focus first and primarily on the prior question: was the Great Commission ever valid for Lutherans? Church historians have tried to summarize the multi-faceted unfolding of the story of Christ's people as the history of exegesis or the history of dogma or the history of liturgy, and recently we hear that the history of the church is the history of missions.

Some would say that such a focus would make the history of the Lutheran church much easier to master since there is not much there. For reasons not totally clear to me Lutherans have gotten the reputation of being the lazy siblings within the church in mission efforts, a rather cruel joke in view of the fact that the first Protestant missionaries to establish a mission and church among a non-European people were Lutheran and that in India, the first of these lands where non-European church bodies arose, German Lutheran pastors not only built Lutheran churches but also aided Anglican mission efforts for more than a century.

The history of Lutheran missions is much richer than can be capsulated adequately in forty-five minutes, so we will focus on snapshots, quotable clips from leading thinkers or examples of missionary activity, to demonstrate

that concern for spreading the gospel among those outside the faith formed an integral part of Lutheran visions of the life

of the church throughout the past five centuries,

and therefore that Lutherans cannot be true to our heritage without being actively involved in carrying out our Lord's command to make disciples, to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins among all nations. For Lutherans define the church by its confession, and Luther and Melanchthon thought that you cannot define yourself by the content of what you confess unless you are confessing it.¹

Also of Luther's Reformation it can be said, "In the beginning was the Word." There are so many ways that this biblical verse could be reapplied to Martin Luther's life and thought. He would have had no career at all, we might speculate, had it not been for his happy confluence with Gutenberg's moveable-type printing press, which, in November 1517, in the hands of savvy printers, launched the first modern media event, that spread Luther's message and fame or notoriety further faster than had even happened before in history. Technology permitted Luther's witness to spread further faster than any witness to salvation in Christ had ever proliferated before in human history. Lutherans are by nature no Luddites.

But at the foundation of Luther's theology lay the Word as well – the performative, rather the creative and re-creative – Word of God, that had once shaped heavens and earth and that daily springs from Scripture into the mouths of God's people to forgive sins and renew true human life through salvation in Christ. God's words expressed his personhood, his very character, as he comes into conversation and forms community through that conversation with his human creatures. Theology is for proclamation, and the proclamation that God loves you, forgives you, and restores you to the full enjoyment of your humanity changes the reality of human lives.

Given that basis and framework for his concept of the tasks of theology, it is little wonder that, despite the contrast in circumstances and conditions, we find Luther preaching and writing of the mission of the church in ways quite compatible with and helpful for our thinking about what Christ sends his church to do. To be sure, Gustav Warneck, founder of the modern discipline of missiology, was correct, when, a century ago, he concluded that Luther does not meet the late-nineteenth profile for the ideal missiologist. With the imperialistic arrogance of western Europeans and North Americans of his time, he blithely ignored historical circumstances and the underlying construction of Luther's thought in reaching his judgment regarding Luther's failure to develop not only a "mission" but even "mission thinking."²

But Werner Elert's sarcastic evaluation of Warneck (1931) confirms the judgment made by Karl Holl seven years earlier. Commenting on Warneck's judgment, Elert wrote, "Indeed, Luther is no 'missions man in our sense.' The poor guy! Instead of founding a mission society or accompanying Cortez to Mexico or at least securing a professorship in missiology, he occupied himself with the reformation of the church! Warneck missed not only 'missionary activity' but also 'mission thinking' in Luther's story. If 'mission thinking' is understood not as organization- theory but as an expression of the reformer's orientation from the starting point of the gospel, then two things come to mind, first, that faith is almighty and that the gospel's goal is universal, as well as the affirmation of [Christ's] sending [his people] to proclaim it."³

Holl had noted that the excuse had often been given that Luther did not think in terms of Christian witness to those outside the faith because of his intense eschatological expectations and because he believed the apostles had indeed carried the gospel to the ends of the earth in the church's first generation. Holl

argued on the basis of plenteous textual evidence that, just as Luther's expectation that Christ would come for the final Judgment soon did not keep him from his reform efforts that aimed at recultivating Christianity,⁴ Christ's imminent return fit into Luther's understanding of God's larger plan for restoring sinners to his family that had included witness to those outside the faith throughout human history, also in his own day. Furthermore, Holl contended, Luther did repeat the scholastic view that the apostles spread the gospel to all corners of the earth, but he did not believe the stories that recounted apostolic activity in the first century on German soil: he believed that the general spread of Christ's message in the first century had to be repeated for non-Christians as well as uncultivated Christians in every era.⁵

Not only did Luther believe that God had given all Christians the task of witnessing to their faith; he proposed, Holl pointed out, concrete fields for German mission in his time, among the Turks at their borders and among the Jews within their towns. Particularly Luther's understanding of the "general priesthood" of all the baptized encouraged his hearers and readers to give witness to their faith. For his doctrine of sin made the task urgent; in spite of a "natural knowledge" that God exists, he was convinced that those who try to approach God apart from faith in Jesus Christ are, as Ludwig Feuerbach paraphrased Luther,⁶ creating God in their own image.⁷

Holl's and Elert's interpretation has been confirmed and expanded by a number of scholars over the past seventy-five years, including James Scherer and most recently in the monumental work of Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and Word Mission*.⁸

To the people of the Wittenberg congregation Luther explained in 1523, preaching on 1 Peter 2:9, that every Christian is called by baptismal rebirth to the tasks of priest and therefore

“proclaims to the other the mighty deed of God; how through him you have been redeemed from sin, hell, death, and from all misery, and have been called to eternal life. You should also instruct people how they should come to that light. 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.”⁹

In the same year, 1523, Luther wrote that all Christians have the duty to “preach and teach the gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians” in the absence of a pastor.¹⁰ This emphasis comprehended Luther’s conviction regarding the calling of baptized Christians to forgive one another’s sins

“at home in their houses, in the fields and gardens, wherever one of them comes together one of them comes to another in search of comfort and deliverance.”¹¹

He also taught his readers to pray for the conversion of those outside the faith.¹²

From early on, Luther also proclaimed to the Wittenberg congregation that God’s Word proceeded from Christ and his apostles into the world, and its movement will continue to the end of time, like a stone thrown into the water, which moves out in concentric circles, as he preached on Ascension Day 1522, expressing sentiments similar to those in the Christmas sermon on Titus 2:11 and the Epiphany sermon on Isaiah 60:1-6 composed for his *Wartburg Postil* earlier that year.¹³ Sermons from 1525 and 1533 echoed this sentiment,¹⁴ as does his lecture of 1530 on Psalm 117:1, in which he proclaimed that the nations praise the

Lord because the Word had spread, the heathen become subject to Christ, and "it is not finished yet."¹⁵

Luther was prepared to put this theoretical base into practice in his own time. He hardly met more than twenty-five unbaptized adults in his entire life, all of them Jewish, and the only other group of people outside the Christian faith which he believed his hearers had any chance of encountering were Turks, whom they might meet if taken prisoner in the Turkish invasions. He regarded good catechetical training as preparation for such witnessing, should Christians endure the misfortune of capture.¹⁶ Although his high hopes for mass conversions of Jews¹⁷ disappeared, he continued to counsel patience and sensitivity in Christian witness to Jewish people, beginning with an affirmation of Jesus' nobility and worth as a human being and only gently proceeding to his being God.¹⁸

The general framework of Luther's understanding of the Word of God, how it functions, and how it had spread across the nations through those whom God sends by virtue of his baptismal promise, was shaping the thinking of his colleague, Philip Melanchthon, when he went to Augsburg in 1530 to advise the governments committed to reform in the Wittenberg manner as they answered Emperor Charles V's summons to explain their deviation from the Roman obedience. Melanchthon chose "confessio" as the word for the document that was to identify what the Wittenberg Reformation was about, and to label the action which that document served to carry out in proclaiming the gospel. By discarding his initial title for his presentation, "apologia," and turning from defense to confession, Melanchthon embraced the active understanding of God's working through his Word that Luther had propagated for more than a decade in Wittenberg. In so doing Melanchthon gave the word "confession" a new usage in Christendom and arrived at a new way of defining the church on the basis of its public confession.

The Wittenberg understanding of this word, like several others, has been described by Peter Fraenkel as a “verbal noun,” that is, a noun that describes an action.¹⁹ One cannot have a confession without confessing it. In its historical, political, ecclesiastical context Melanchthon focused above all on the ecumenical witness to existing Christendom that formed the vital heart of Wittenberg reform. But the implications of the Wittenberg understanding of God’s Word commit the adherents of the Augsburg Confession to active evangelistic witness whenever they have opportunity to do so.²⁰

But did Wittenberg the mentors pass on their understanding of this aspect of the dynamic of God’s Word to their successors? As in every teacher-student relationship, there were successes and failures in regard to the Lutheran church’s understanding of Christ’s mission. On the one hand, some of Luther’s and Melanchthon’s devoted followers, such as Lukas Osiander, could not find a mission message in the book of Jonah,²¹ and some could preach on Epiphany texts and not discuss God’s desire to gather in the nations of the earth.²² In some instances the difference in context makes itself clear in treatments of specific passages. Luther had viewed Abraham’s proclaiming of the name of his God in Egypt – Luther could not imagine that he would have done otherwise –, but some of his students rendered a different interpretation of Abraham’s preaching there, describing it not as “mission” but as “reformation”²³ or “visitation” or the general call to witness in everyday life.²⁴

Others struck a more “missional” note in treating such passages. Johannes Brenz discussed the universal call of the gospel in his commentary on Jonah.²⁵ Nikolaus Selnecker used his comments on the book to make one practical suggestion for German involvement in God’s efforts to convert those outside the faith. On the basis of God’s clear concern for the Gentiles, he urged his readers: “If today people can take long, dangerous, extended

trips, from Germany to India or to the new world, to obtain merchandise, spices, and commodities, why should they be excused from taking along the Word of God, the most precious treasure, even if they have to preach the gospel more than a hundred miles away?" They should not speculate about why God has not given all people the message. Instead, they should do what God enables them to do to share Christ's message. Few of his contemporaries made such a journey, but Selnecker was nonetheless able to think in such concrete, practical terms.²⁶

Many in the Wittenberg circle did express a clear concept of God's plan for the salvation of all peoples and a sense of gratitude for what that meant to the Gentile Germans. In preaching on the Epiphany Gospel from Matthew 2 Martin Chemnitz told his Braunschweig congregation that they should consider "what a great blessing of God it is that he did not only have the Bible written originally in the Jewish language and entrust it to the Jews before all other peoples on earth, but also that when the Jews showed little interest, he had it translated into the languages of the Gentiles and placed it in their hands"²⁷

The sermons of one member of the Wittenberg circle did exhibit an explicit sense of the ongoing mission of the church and its importance in a broader range of texts, if not for the typical Christian of his day in practice, at least for a general understanding of God's working in the world. Georg Major described the growth of the Word of the Lord in a Christmas sermon in 1551. In that sermon his final topic was "how the church and congregation of God, after Adam's separation from God and fall into sin, is once more being gathered, built up, and preserved, sanctified and brought to salvation unto the end of the world." Major treated the spread of the faith after Christ's Ascension and Pentecost for his hearers and readers and concluded that Christ continues to bring the gospel to the world

and gather the church "to this day."²⁸ But he did not instruct his hearers and readers regarding their own responsibility in that mission. That lay beyond the realm of his imagination, beyond the realm of possibility, for they knew no people outside the church. Where they lived, the gospel had already been proclaimed, and repentance and reform, not mission, were the order of the day.

Luther's and Melanchthon's students and followers not only caught something of his vision for the spread of the gospel throughout the world. They also shared his understanding of the working of the Word of God and the call of all baptized Christians to give witness to Christ's saving work and power in their daily lives. Hieronymus Weller, school superintendent in Freiberg in Saxony, commented in his commentary on 1 Peter 2, "After you have been reborn and been made priests, you are to proclaim the mighty acts and blessings of God and to celebrate them with a grateful heart. This is the first office of a priest, to teach others the ways of the Lord and convey to others the true knowledge of God, to speak the limitless goodness, mercy, and grace of God."²⁹ Cyriakus Spangenberg reflected the world of his village in Mansfeld County when he insisted that his people recognize that "every Christian, from whatever walk of life he is, is duty-bound at every time, particularly our present time, to give public confession of his faith and teaching, orally, and if possible, in writing."³⁰

{Spangenberg perceived the world in which he lived as a world not of those outside the faith but of baptized Christians who misunderstood the Word and were thus involved in the eschatological conflict between God and Satan, life-giving truth and deadly mortal deception, as Luther had.³¹ In the midst of such conflict, Spangenberg firmly believed, the presentation of the biblical truths as Luther had taught them had to be the task and concern of both clergy and laity.³²}

Although he disagreed with Spangenberg decisively on the doctrine of original sin, Jakob Andreae shared his view of lay witness to the faith and tried to cultivate it when he preached a series of thirty-three sermons in 1566 in Esslingen, a town in which Lutherans often encountered no unbaptized people but rather Roman Catholics, Zwinglians, Anabaptists, and Schwenkfelder. He grounded his series in the lament of the “common people” that they did not know how to converse with those of other churches when they met them on the roads and in the markets.³³ “Every Christian is bound to give an account of his faith, and whoever is not able to do so should not call himself a Christian, as we read, ‘be ready at every time to give an answer to everyone who asks regarding the basis of your hope, and do so with gentleness and respect’” (1 Pet. 3:15). Artisans dare not be silent when asked to explain their work, and believers dare not fail to speak of their faith when given the opportunity.³⁴

{Andreae distinguished two kinds of Christian witness, that of those who can read the Scripture and use their reading to fashion their witness, and those who cannot read and must depend on their catechetical knowledge for their testimony.³⁵ “Just as the alchemists draw the best juice from a plant through the process of distilling, and call it the quintessential, that is, the very best power and juice, so it is with this juice that is drawn from the Holy Scripture. For if you would put the entire Holy Scripture under the wine press, or melt it into a nugget, you would not be able to press more out of it than these six chief parts.”³⁶ Andreae proceeded to instruct the latter in witnessing to their faith with examples. To those Roman Catholics who “might want to persuade you that you should doubt whether or not you have a gracious God through Christ or not because you sin every day and still have many transgressions to your credit”: “You tell

them no, and grab the first word of the Creed, 'I believe.' Believe means not doubting. I believe in the forgiveness of my sins. Therefore, I do not doubt. I sin daily because of my weakness, and therefore, I pray daily, 'forgive us our trespasses,' and I believe this forgiveness through our Lord Christ, who has paid for these sins and wants to reckon this to me"37 In this manner Andreae hoped to foster the testimony of common people in their situation.}

That Andreae's attitude was not unique can be seen in the claim of his colleague at the University of Tübingen, Jakob Heerbrand (1521-1600) that we "devote ourselves, in so far as it is humanly possible, to win many to the Lord Christ for eternal life, and in so far as they meet our attention, we want to neglect no opportunity" to do so.³⁸ At Andreae's time the liturgy of his church prayed in the regular general prayer for Sunday services, "that your holy name be spread ever further, ever more, and become familiar to all people."³⁹

The Württemberg court and church also supported active mission efforts. In addition to promoting reform among Slovenian churches through the ministry of Primus Truber, the Württemberg establishment supported Truber's plans for mission among the Turks in the Balkans. With the active cooperation of Hans, Baron Ungnad von Sonnegg (1493-1564), who resigned a position in the imperial government of Emperor Ferdinand to avoid suppressing Evangelicals in his Styria, and administered a printing operation designed to provide literature for Truber's efforts, Truber pursued the goal, in Ungnad's words addressed to the German Lutheran princes on September 14, 1561 (an appeal for funding the mission), of bringing "the pure message of the Word of God . . . to Turkey . . . as if by this means the merciful God wanted to strike the Turks with the sword of his almighty strength, in the same way as, through the blessed Martin Luther, he disclosed and struck down the entire papacy."⁴⁰ The preacher

Vlahovic called for engaging Turkish printers so that it might be proclaimed "that the Lord Christ is God's Son, that Mohammed misled the Turks and the pope misled Christendom. We intend to convert the Turks when personnel and such books are available."⁴¹

Throughout the sixteenth century the Swedish crown also sponsored mission efforts. That freshly-crowned Gustav Vasa began the mission to the Lapps in 1525 seems to indicate something less than Luther's understanding of Christ's mission as his motivation, but the efforts continued throughout the sixteenth century. This part of the imperialistic habit was inherited by Gustav Adolf, whose court a century later sent Johann Campanius to the Delaware to bring the gospel to the native Americans, in part through a translation of Luther's Small Catechism, complete with introduction by the royal secretary Liljenbladt.⁴² The Swedes were not alone. When Jakob von Kettler (1610-1682), duke of Courland, experimented with the European habit of colonization, he sent missionaries with the settlers who were to establish a trading post and colony on the Caribbean island of Tobago. After three failures, due to Spanish and native intervention, the Courland colonials erected Jekabsfort on Tobago in 1654, three years after a similar post had been established on the West African coast, in what later was called Saint Andrews island at the mouth of the Gambia river. The intention to bring the gospel to these climes disappeared with the preoccupation of Courland with the Swedish invasion of 1655 although efforts to keep the colonies alive continued throughout Jakob's reign.⁴³ Danish trading outposts on the West African coast in the mid-seventeenth century also had missional intentions along with their commercial ends, but they, too, disappeared before any lasting effects could be accomplished.

{Attitudes toward mission at the turn of the seventeenth century reflect similar trends and counter-trends. Major's

informal collection of mission history projected but a pale shadow of what the Wittenberg trained hymnist and preacher Philip Nicolai (1556- 1608) crafted in his massive *On the Kingdom of God* (1597). Trained during Andreae's sojourn in Wittenberg (1576-1579), Nicolai gathered the evidence of the medieval tradition into a call for repentance and for the spread of the gospel??? In view of impending end of the world, which he predicted for 1670???.44}

The record of seventeenth century Lutheran professors on the subject of mission is likewise mixed and has been subject to much interpretation. Wittenberg professor Johann Georg Volckmar argued instead that the church catholic as a whole participated in calling all people to faith although that did not mean that each part of the church necessarily participated in that mission at all times.⁴⁵ Balthasar Meisner, professor in Wittenberg (1587-1626), insisted that the churches in which his students served were obligated to carry on Christ's mission.⁴⁶ Meisner pioneered the Lutheran use of the concept of "religion" as a tool for discussion of the church and its activities in the cultivation of Christian faith and life. He defined "religion" first of all, as God's communicative act of teaching human beings through the Holy Spirit's active, effective conveying of biblical teaching and thus coming into communion with the faithful.⁴⁷ The activity of Christ's church must include bringing this true religion to those caught in false religions, Moslems, Jews, and pagans, so that they may be converted to the truth, Meisner taught.⁴⁸

Among the most famous statements of Lutheran Orthodoxy in regard to mission is the infamous Opinion of the Wittenberg faculty dated February 27, 1651, in which the faculty limited the command of Jesus to make disciples of all nations to the apostolic times. Long heralded as a proof that seventeenth-century Lutherans were not interested in mission, this text

bears closer scrutiny. For it was not answering a question regarding mission but rather regarding the legitimacy of the Lutheran church and the validity of its claim to be church at all. Roman Catholic critics, above all Robert Bellarmine, had argued that since the Lutherans did not engage in sending missionaries to distant shores, it was not truly the church which Christ had instituted.

An imperial counselor in Vienna, Erhard, Truchsess of Wetzhausen (1617- 1664), in the midst of the process of his conversion from Lutheranism to the Roman obedience, had posed six questions to the Wittenberg faculty regarding what constitutes the true Christian church. One of his "scruples" regarding the authenticity of the Lutheran church raised the question regarding the absence of preachers of the Augsburg Confession in the "Orient, the tropics, and the New World." Whether wisely or not, the Wittenberg faculty defended the legitimacy of the Lutheran confession by addressing only the question of the unmediated call to preach the gospel in the wider world. The Wittenberg answer repeated the medieval conviction, represented also two generations earlier in Philip Nicolai's *De regno Christi* (1597), that the gospel had indeed spread very early to all peoples and that they bore responsibility for keeping it alive in their own midst. Therefore, the Wittenberg faculty rejected participation in converting the distant heathen as a necessary mark of Christ's church even though it did not rule out activities of Lutherans such as those mentioned above in this Opinion.⁴⁹

Johann Gerhard's similar statement a quarter century earlier occurred in the same context, the contention of Roman Catholics, that the only true church was the papal church because the succession of the apostles devolved on the bishop of Rome: proofs for this included papally commissioned missionaries in various parts of the world.

{Gerhard was arguing against Hadrian Savaria (check to see if he is the Anglican, 1532-1612) on this point as he developed his defense of the legitimacy of his church,⁵⁰ but this argument fit into the larger dispute with Bellarmine over the proper marks of the church and whether the Lutherans qualified as a true church.⁵¹}

It is seldom noted that Gerhard also claimed that the calling of the heathen through the gospel continued in his day,⁵² that Lutherans were bringing Jews and Turks to faith in Christ,⁵³ and that Lutheran preachers of the gospel had converted people in "Iceland, Greenland, Lappland, Livonia, and other places to the true God."⁵⁴ Gerhard cited Roman opponents' complaints that "'the Lutheran sect' had dared to go to the Greeks, to the Indians, and to the new world" against Bellarmine.⁵⁵

The famous counselor of Duke Ernst the Pious of Saxony-Gotha Veit Ludwig von Seckendorf (1626-1692), perhaps the most prominent lay spokesman of the Lutheran church in the seventeenth century, stood at the crossroads where Lutheran Orthodoxy branched off into Pietism and the Enlightenment. On the one hand, Seckendorf shared the view of many contemporaries that mission outreach to "heathen and Turkish lands," in which those sent were being sent to certain death, as "tempting God." But in his exposition of the Christian state, he also regarded such outreach where possible as part of the church's life and of the divinely-imposed obligation and calling of the Christian governors of the church. "Those highly placed secular officials and municipalities that have the means and the opportunity, to bring to such lands Christian teaching in a proper, holy, and good manner, commit sin when they fail to do so."⁵⁶

When he thought of those who disappeared into land without proper support, he may have been referring to people like Peter Heyling (ca. 1607-ca. 1650) and Justinian Ernst, Baron von Welz

(1621-ca. 1668). Heyling, raised in Lübeck, studied law under Hugo Grotius and decided to go to Ethiopia to spread Lutheran teaching. There he translated the New Testament into Amharic before his Christology encountered objections from the Monophysite clergy of the land, and he was exiled, dying as he left Ethiopia, probably in the Sudan.⁵⁷ Von Welz grew up in a noble family that had been exiled from its Austrian lands by Counter-Reformation Habsburg forces; he associated with the reform movement around Johann Valentin Andreae and others and sought to organize a "Society of Those Who Love Jesus" to conduct reform and overseas mission. Suffering rejection from Lutheran church officials, he sought ordination from the rebel Lutheran pastor Friedrich Breckling, who shared his mystical views, and then departed for Surinam, where he disappeared. Traces of his mission have not been found.⁵⁸

The most usual date given for the initiation of Lutheran – indeed, Protestant – mission beyond Europe is 1706, when the Danish Mission Society's two German pastor-missionaries, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, landed, on July 9, at the Danish colony Tranquebar on the southeast coast of India. Indian Lutherans rightly protest against the Anglo-American historiography that has glorified the work of William Carey and ignored the fact that he came to an India which had growing Christian churches that can be traced back to Ziegenbalg's and Plütschau's efforts as well as the work of both Lutheran and Anglican missionaries over the course of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ Earlier mission efforts, particularly by Dutch Reformed pastors, had not taken root.⁶⁰ The team of Ziegenbalg and Plütschau had received training in Halle with the Pietist circle around August Hermann Francke, who regarded himself as a thoroughly "Orthodox" Lutheran and had support from others who counted themselves Orthodox. The Danish king, Frederick IV, wished to follow the example of his predecessors

and send missionaries to the non-Christian population around his colony in Tranquebar, where pastors had served the Danish colonial officials for a generation.

Ziegenbalg and Plütschau provided a paradigm for witness of the gospel to those outside the faith that modern missiologists treasure. Plütschau played the smaller role, to be sure, returning to Germany after but five years among the Tamil people, in order to teach Tamil in Halle and to spread the word of the mission among the Germans to insure further support. Ziegenbalg and Plütschau quickly concentrated their efforts, Ziegenbalg focusing on Tamil speaking people, Plütschau on those who spoke the local Portuguese patois.

Within three years reinforcements had arrived in the persons of J. E. Gründler and two companions, the first of more than fifty German Lutherans who worked in the Danish mission or mission efforts of the Anglicans in English- controlled areas in India. (The Anglicans had trouble finding sufficient clergy willing to go to India in the eighteenth century and welcomed the willing and able German Lutherans to their cause.⁶¹)

The Tranquebar mission moved quickly to bring technology to the service of the gospel; in 1712 the mission's printing press arrived, Tamil fonts were struck, and by 1713 Portuguese-reading and Tamil-reading pupils had Luther's Small Catechism at their disposal in their own languages, and their elders could read a number of devotional treatises of various kinds. Books in Latin and English followed in the years thereafter.

Children, both boys and girls, were being educated in schools set up by the missionaries. Very quickly native Tamils were instructed sufficiently to be baptized, and within a decade Ziegenbalg, recognizing the pressing necessity of a native ministry, had begun training catechists to expand the mission's

work. Arumugam Pillai, called Aaron, became the first Tamil pastor in 173x.

Ziegenbalg not only proclaimed the gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Christ to the people. He also worked for social justice, educating them in Christian standards for regarding other human beings as creatures of God. He became such a good model for Western mission that he even got himself thrown into prison for four months by vexing Danish colonial officials with his vociferous defense of a Tamil woman who was being unjustly treated. Danish local authorities in Tranquebar and Danish commercial magnates in the home country both found the missionaries unnecessary barriers to good colonial exploitation of their territory, and royal intervention on the side of the missionaries was sometimes slow in coming.

Alongside this active engagement for Christian ethical standards and social justice among the Tamil people, Ziegenbalg and his colleagues also demonstrated cultural sensitivity in dealing with the caste system and respecting social mores when possible. Indeed, Ziegenbalg also recognized the need for cross-cultural understanding and wrote a number of studies of Tamil civilization and of Hindu religious beliefs and practices. This effort met disapproval among the Pietists at Halle who had sent him, but he persevered, pioneering and modeling methods of cultural research and reporting.⁶²

Several prominent German missionaries in succeeding years continued many of these efforts; these included Benjamin Schultze (1689-1760), Johann Philipp Fabricius (1711-1792, and Christian Friedrich Schwartz (1726-1798).⁶³

Mission interest found its place in German Evangelical consciousness and in the wider European Protestant consciousness rather rapidly, even as European interest in lands beyond the

continent and its British appendages grew during the eighteenth century. But Christians could not depend on their monarchs to support the mission, and the leadership of the churches often showed reluctance to spread the witness of the gospel outside the areas for which God had made it directly responsible, in the thinking of the time. By the time of William Carey the ability to conceive of a specially organized mission society apart from formal church support and control was taking root.

The first such society among German-speaking people, the Basel Mission, was founded in 1815, the Danish Mission Society in 1821, and the Swedish Mission Society in 1835. Norwegian mission societies began work in 1842 with the organization of "Det Norske Misjonsselskap," followed by the Norwegian Mission to Israel in 1844 and a series of others arose over the next seventy-five years.⁶⁴ The first of seven Finnish mission societies came into being in 1859.⁶⁵

In the ever richer history of Lutheran mission in the nineteenth century, I wish to focus on one particular phenomenon, which is not the entire story of the topic but a significant element in it. The nineteenth century also saw a vital revival of Lutheran confessional theology and church life. Mission to those outside the faith constituted a significant and inescapable aspect of this revival of commitment to and use of the Lutheran confessions in the thinking of many of its leaders.

The Basel Mission Society embraced a wide spectrum of Evangelicals interested in overseas mission, and it won support from groups across German-speaking lands. One group, organized in Dresden in 1819, became an independent society dedicated to mission in accord with a Lutheran confessional vision in 1848. Its first director, Karl Graul (1814-1864), led the society into the work of the Tamil mission; it later opened up fields in Tanzania and Papua New Guinea.

As the first German to attempt to do doctoral work in missiology, Graul also pioneered the discipline that Gustav Warneck brought to fuller academic respectability a generation later. Graul did his work at Erlangen, where somewhat earlier a young student named Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872) had heard the lectures on the history of Christian mission by Johann Christian Krafft (1784-1845). "Exiled" by the governance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria to the village of Neuendettelsau because of his confessional positions, Löhe built there a center for the encouragement of personal devotion and piety through small groups, social outreach to the Germans in need because of poverty, illness, and age, and for missionary outreach to German immigrants and to native populations. His "emergency helpers," at first minimally trained lay people, were dispatched to North America, Brazil, and Australia. To North America he sent settlers as well to live and work among Native Americans and bring them to life in Christ. His mission organization later took up work in India, Africa, and Papua New Guinea.

Löhe depicted the "one church of God" as always in – missionary – movement as it "actualized the one, universal, catholic church." He believed that outreach with the proclamation of the gospel properly belong to the church itself, but in the absence of interest and mechanisms for the church to accomplish its actualization in mission, he organized his society. His missionary method stemmed from his belief that pastoral care under the proper distinction of law and gospel forms the heart of the proclamation of Christ.⁶⁶ Löhe's dedication to converting those outside the faith was shared by the confessionally-oriented Erlangen theological faculty that assembled in the years during which he was working in Neuendettelsau, among them Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810- 1877).⁶⁷

Perhaps most closely parallel to Löhe's efforts were those of

the brothers Louis (1808-1865) and Theodor (1819-1885) Harms, who made their intellectual trek from an Enlightened theology learned at Göttingen to a deep commitment to the Lutheran confessions. As his father's co-pastor and then successor in the village of Hermannsburg, Ludwig, along with his brother, cultivated a revival that reawakened churches across the Lüneburger heath and beyond.

They also built a mission training center and sending organization that assisted ministry to German immigrants in North America, but also sent settlers to Natal along with missionaries to proclaim and model life to the native Africans.⁶⁸

{The Harms brothers put into practice the views of a number of prominent church leaders who shared their confessional commitment, such as Ludwig Adolf Petri (1803-1873), pastor in nearby Hannover, co-founder of the earlier Hannoverian Mission Society, and an unswerving promoter of Lutheran confessional theology as well as the mission of the church among non-Christian peoples.⁶⁹}

Among the leading figures of the Lutheran confessional revival were also those who dedicated their energy to outreach to Jewish people, including Carl Paul Caspari (1814-1892), professor of systematic theology in Christiana and himself a convert from Judaism, and Old Testament professor Delitsch (1813-1890) of Rostock and later Erlangen.⁷⁰

The story continued into the twentieth century with the further expansion of the activities of Lutheran churches which confessed their faith around the world, within the household of faith and to those outside it. The result is our current experience of a radical shifting in at least the numerical balance within the Lutheran family. The old establishment Lutheran churches of

central and northern Europe are rapidly losing members and influence in their own lands. The oppressed minority churches of central and eastern Europe suffered much under Communist and National Socialist oppression as they had under Roman Catholic oppression centuries earlier. The immigrant churches, that had actually formed a special kind of mission activity for European Lutherans as their kinfolk emigrated to Australia, South Africa, Latin America, North America (Russia as well though it forms a special case), have varying degrees of liveliness. The mission churches of Latin America, Asia, and especially Africa are growing rapidly and displaying a dynamic that provides modeling and leadership for us, if we can only abandon our imperialistic arrogance and recognize how the Holy Spirit is making some things new in ways we never imagined. These churches are also assuming ever larger roles and ever wiser voices in the family. They find the imperative of spreading the gospel critical, self-understood, vital for the life of the Lutheran confession in the twenty-first century.

But the Great Commission is not only in effect for Lutherans in the two-thirds world. No Lutherans anywhere in the world live very far from some people who do not enjoy the peace and joy which Jesus Christ alone bestows. All Christians, re-created in the image of their Creator, are to be persons of conversation and community, who want to draw others into the most important conversation there is, talking with God, and into the community of the body of our Lord. That understanding is deeply rooted in Luther's exposition of our faith, and that is the topic for tomorrow.

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Bread for the World and the Promise of God

Art Simon

Crossings Conference, January 2010

I bring greetings from David Beckmann, my successor at Bread for the World, who has done an outstanding job of leading Bread. I thank God for him every day. I also want to thank, from the bottom of my heart, those of you who are members of Bread for the World. And for those who are not, I will do everything in my power to persuade you to join. In addition, I want to make the case for inviting and challenging people in the pews to become advocates for the hungry, not only because it's an effective way of helping hungry people, but also because it's a way of encouraging lay people to think of the whole of life as discipleship.

To do this I want (1) to show the link between the Gospel Promise and Bread for the World's mission; and (2) to demolish the myth that hunger is so massive and intractable that there's

little or nothing we can do about it.

First: the link between the Gospel and Bread's mission. I am here to tell you of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. That is the Gospel. I am also here to urge you to help those who are hungry. That is God's law. These are two very different expressions of God's will. The inner connection between the two is love, because "love is the fulfillment of the law." God's redemptive love in Christ sets us free to act in love toward those who are poor and hungry.

That's putting it simply, and most believers get the connection—however timidly they may carry it out—when helping hungry people means some form of direct private assistance. But Bread for the World invites people to become advocates for hungry people in the political arena, which makes the story more complicated, and for many problematic.

For me the story of Bread for the World began at my baptism. My brother Paul and I soon learned from little on (1) that life is a gift from God, and was meant to be given back to God; and (2) that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we were reconciled to God, a monumental act of love that prompts us to love others and seek justice for them. My parents not only taught this; they lived it.

When I was 11 years old, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor all U.S. citizens of Japanese descent who lived on the West Coast were rounded up and put in prison camps. It was a highly popular but shameful action. My father was one of the few in Eugene, Oregon, who spoke out publicly against it, on the local radio station and in the newspaper. Today in Eugene, on the spot where many of those citizens were taken away, there is a memorial to them. Last summer my wife Shirley and I visited the memorial and saw my father's name on one of its stones with the simple

inscription, "He spoke in protest. His courage inspired others."

Thanks to my parents, in the mid-1940s our family became active in what was then called the Lutheran Race Relations Association, a fledgling organization that called public attention to the cruelty of racial segregation and prejudice both within the church and in the nation.

I mention these examples of advocacy because they were rooted in the Gospel; they emerged from a promise-driven faith. They were also among the things that laid the foundation for my brother Paul's career in public service, and my own role in the founding of Bread for the World.

I became a pastor and spent most of my parish ministry on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a crowded, economically poor section of New York City, where within one square mile a hundred thousand people lived in old tenements. I came there as a pastor to share the Gospel and gather a community of believers around Word and Sacrament. In doing so, in connecting with the lives of people and getting acquainted in the neighborhood, I ran into one emergency after another, and the harder I worked at it the farther behind I got. Our congregation did what it could to provide help. But we came to realize that much more than emergency aid was needed to enable people to escape the grip of hunger and poverty. My father used to say, "It's better to build a fence at the top of a cliff than to have an ambulance at the bottom"—and we were driving the ambulance. Bread for the World emerged as a way of building a fence. The initial spark for it was a lively Lenten evening discussion about hunger with a dozen of our members.

Churches everywhere were helping with emergency assistance—and rightfully so—but almost nothing was being done to challenge Christians to use their influence as citizens to bring about

more effective national policies on hunger. So I gathered a group of 7 Catholics and 7 Protestants to consider how we might mobilize Christians, on the basis of their faith in Christ, to form a politically non-partisan outcry of citizens against hunger.

So 36 years ago Bread for the World was born and quickly became the nation's foremost citizens lobby on hunger. That wasn't hard, because we were the *only* citizens lobby on hunger. Please put the word "lobby" in quotation marks, because we do not wine and dine elected officials, contribute to political campaigns, endorse candidates, or seek financial advantages for ourselves. Instead we are ordinary citizens of conscience who send messages—letters, emails, phone calls, visits—urging Senators and Representatives in Congress to take action for poor and hungry people whom the political systems tends to ignore. Proverbs tells us, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves." That's Bread for the World. As Martin Luther King often said, God did not ask Moses to take up a collection for the slaves in Egypt. He said to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Advocacy. Policy change. In I John 1 we read, "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one." We who know Jesus as our advocate ought to be foremost among those who advocate for others.

Advocacy, of course, requires Bread to take positions on specific issues, and urge government action on them. That's the left-handed work of God. The actions urged are not divine prescriptions. God gives us a clear sense of direction regarding hunger and poverty, but not directives. God hasn't written the legislation. God gives people—leaders; citizens; us— the assignment of figuring out how to make it happen, and that is the challenge Bread for the World has taken up.

God passionately wants justice for the downtrodden, so we know

that letting millions of children go hungry in a land as prosperous as ours violates God's will. But God does not tell us that food stamps or the Earned Income Tax Credit are the ways to remove that injustice. So Bread has to weigh the evidence and make prudential judgments when it decides to support those initiatives or seeks to improve and expand them.

Let me give you a few examples of how Bread works, and in so doing chip away at the myth that widespread hunger is inevitable.

Our first national campaign focused on a **"Right to Food" resolution**—a statement of principle—that we drafted and got introduced in Congress in 1975. When it was introduced Congress paid no attention—until the letters began coming in, first a trickle, then a flow, then an avalanche. The campaign caught on and became a rallying point for churches in many denominations, and within a year it passed both houses of Congress. It showed for the first time that ordinary citizens working together could have a significant impact in shaping national policy on hunger. It also put Bread for the World on the map and laid the foundation for subsequent legislative initiatives.

We followed that by getting two significant grain reserves enacted— one a farmer-owned reserve that helped stabilize the price and supply of grain; the other an emergency wheat reserve that has been tapped a dozen times over the years and has provided enough grain to feed 100 million people for a five month period. Neither action would have occurred without Bread's initiative and messages to Congress from thousands of ordinary citizens.

In the mid-1980s UNICEF and the World Health Organization launched a children's health revolution based on the discovery that a few simple inexpensive interventions could dramatically

reduce the death rate among infants and young children in poor countries. Every day 40,000 young children died from malnutrition and disease—the equivalent of 100 jumbo jets, each with 400 little kids, crashing to the earth and leaving no survivors. One such crash every 14 minutes. So Bread proposed that we include in our foreign aid program a Child Survival Fund to help prevent some of those deaths. The campaign caught on, the letters flowed, and Congress made Child Survival part of our foreign aid. The last I saw, \$1.7 billion was being allocated each year for child survival and children's health. The U.S. response triggered similar responses from other donor nations. As a result, today the number of children's deaths have decreased to about 26,000 a day, still deplorably high, but when you consider the population growth in those countries, we've cut the deaths by more than half. This year 5 million fewer kids will die than did a couple of decades ago. This happened to a large extent because folks like you were willing to send those messages. The late James P. Grant, director of UNICEF and international champion of Child Survival, called Bread for the World "the key citizen force in translating the idea of child survival into concrete action." It's clear that on average, each letter sent to a member of Congress in support of Child Survival has had the affect of saving literally dozens, and more likely hundreds of lives. Yet we are inclined to bury a precious talent God has given us by thinking, "What I do won't make any difference."

I don't mean to suggest that everything Bread touches turns into an easy victory. Not so. We've had to fight for every inch of gain, and we have had setbacks as well. We took a beating on the **food stamp program** in the 1980s and fought with only partial success to get some of those cuts restored. We lost a close fight on the **2008 farm bill** to reduce subsidies that enrich wealthy landowners while impoverishing many farmers in poor

countries. And until recently we were unable to reverse the trend of shrinking aid **to help small-scale farmers abroad** produce more food. So we've taken our share of hits, but we've seen remarkable progress and evidence each year of the impact that citizens can have. We estimate a leveraging of \$100 in benefits for every dollar spent—a multiplying of the loaves and fishes.

I could give you many other illustrations—the **WIC** program that partly through Bread's work now offers a lifeline to 9 million infants, toddlers and pregnant and lactating mothers; **trade legislation** that has boosted opportunities for African countries; **Jubilee debt reduction** for some of the poorest countries which has enabled more than 20 million additional kids in Africa to attend school, and helps families in 33 countries produce more food, have better health care, and start or expand small enterprises. We worked in coalition with many others, of course, as we do in all of our campaigns. But debt reduction might not have gained U.S. support or happened on the scale that it did except for the thousands of Bread advocates, such as two young mothers in Birmingham who helped persuade their ultra conservative congressman, Spencer Bachus, to become a champion of debt forgiveness.

The Jubilee debt campaign demonstrated the critical mass of public support that is needed on a more sustained basis for ending widespread hunger. It shifted the political wind in our country. So when we, along with others, fought for more and better poverty-focused development aid to poor countries, the Bush administration and Congress gradually doubled it, and the expansion continues.

Let me comment on Bread's current agenda. For several years we have urged Congress to have the President initiate a government-wide study of U.S. global development policies. A few months ago

the White House called David Beckmann to tell him that President Obama had just signed a directive to initiate that study. Meanwhile the administration has committed \$3.5 billion over three years in new money for **agricultural assistance to poor countries** and gotten the G-8 countries as a whole to commit \$20 billion. At the same time we are pushing legislation in the House and Senate that could pave the way for a complete **rewriting of our foreign aid program**—which hasn't been done since 1961.* In short, we have before us a rare opportunity to make our foreign aid much more effective in reducing hunger and poverty.

In addition we will have an Offering of Letters campaign to improve and expand the **Earned Income Tax Credit** for low-income workers, which already lifts more than four million families above the poverty line.

I'm only giving you a few snapshots of the whole story, but enough, I hope, to challenge the myth that hunger is inevitable, and that ordinary folks can't do much about it.

When I was a boy, President Roosevelt used to talk about two-thirds of the world being hungry. When Bread for the world began in 1974, it was about one-third. Today it is about one-sixth. That's true despite setbacks in the last couple of years as a result of the increase in food and energy prices and global recession. In one lifetime we have seen a huge exodus from hunger for most of the world's people. That is a historic achievement. I believe it is a work of God. And I believe that God is inviting us to participate in completing that exodus.

That's where we come in. Each of us can make a difference. You and your people can have a hand in making it happen. The opportunity is there. It is up to each one of us to seize it—to speak up. To remain silent is to cast a vote for the status quo,

for accepting things as they are, for locking people into hunger. But if you and your people are willing to join others in expressing your convictions to members of Congress on key issues in a timely fashion, you can bring us closer to a nation and a world without widespread hunger.

You may disagree with what I've said and walk away. I would regret that, but respect it. But please do not say, "I agree," and then walk away and do nothing.

It's also essential that we encourage lay people in our congregations to become advocates for the hungry. People of the Promise, prompted by the Promise, can make a huge difference for hungry people in this way, and in doing so reflect the love of Christ.

It is also a way in which we can help people see their whole life, including the citizen-part of their life, as offered to God. Believers and unbelievers are hungering for a sense of purpose in life. That's why Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* has caught the attention of millions. But many, perhaps most, even within the church do not get the connection between Promise and purpose. We need to offer a *Promise* driven life that makes our purpose clear. Otherwise the Promise is reduced to an after-life insurance policy that has little or no relevance to daily life now. Bread for the World is one way of helping people catch the connection.

*House bill 2139, The Initiating Foreign Assistance Reform Act of 2009 (Berman and Kirk) and Senate bill 1524, The Foreign Assistance Revitalization Act of 2009 (Kerry and Lugar).

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