

# A Lutheran Missiology: God's Promise the Cornerstone

Colleagues,

One of the Christmas gifts that came my way was the complete text of Jukka Kaariainen's just-completed doctoral dissertation. The topic line above is what it's all about. The full title: *Missio Shaped by Promissio: Lutheran Missiology Confronts the Challenge of Religious Pluralism*.

I've been a "distant" advisor for Jukka as he navigated the grad school labyrinth at Fordham University in New York to get the degree just a few months ago. To convince the professors at one of the leading Jesuit universities in the world to accept his arch-Lutheran dissertation proposal was itself a bit of a coup. And then when he took on two of the "big names" in Roman Catholic mission theology today—Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis—and with winsome argument sought to show them a "more excellent way"—well, that was real chutzpah. And when his RC committee at Fordham not only accepted his dissertation but after the oral examination give him kudos besides, that was something else.

I'm overjoyed because it is the first—so far as I know—detailed proposal for a Lutheran theology of mission that takes the "Gospel is a Promise" as its starting point—and then runs with it, not only in dialog with RC heavyweights, but also onto the ramparts to encounter the "sea of faiths," the world religions encompassing our planet.

There are 337 pages, so I can't give you all of them. Jukka has given his OK to my showing you the pages copied below, namely, the introductory first pages and the one-page abstract of his

whole project appended at the end.

In the final years of his work on the dissertation Jukka has been town-and-gown pastor in Princeton, New Jersey. With his “union card” now in hand Jukka has been called by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission as theology prof at China Lutheran Seminary in Hsinchu, Taiwan. Jukka’s parents were Finnish missionaries to Taiwan. He was born there. Besides that mysterious native language of Finland, Jukka also speaks Mandarin. If Taiwan hasn’t yet had its Platzregen of promissio-theology, it can expect a sauna-soaking soon.

Should you wish to reach Jukka by email to follow up on this ThTh posting or other matters, he can be reached at: *(removed for security reasons)* Oh, yes, one more thing. Jukka was a keynote presenter at last January’s Crossings conference. At that time he gave us a preview of what all he was confecting in the dissertation. You can find it on the Crossings website . Click on CONFERENCE. Click on PAPERS. Click on 2010. Scroll down to his name.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Introduction: In Search of a Lutheran Missional Hermeneutic**

### **Statement of the Problem and Background to the Question**

The term “Lutheran missiology” is viewed by many as an oxymoron. Historically, ever since Gustav Warneck’s (the founding father of modern missiology) stinging critique of Martin Luther for lacking a theology and awareness of mission, conventional wisdom has dictated: to the extent that Lutheran theology derives its

impetus and motivation from Luther, to that extent it will be missiologically weak and inadequate. In other words, Lutheran theology provides no real resources for a contemporary, relevant Christian missiology and engagement with the world religions and religious pluralism. The late David Bosch agreed with the main thrust of Warneck's critique of Luther, claiming: "We miss in the Reformation not only missionary action 'but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today.'"

Beginning with Karl Holl in 1928 and Werner Elert in 1931, a school of Luther scholars arose, opposing and rebuffing Warneck's criticism of Luther's theology, claiming that to judge Luther's theology as lacking a missionary vision "is to misunderstand the basic thrust of [his] theology and ministry." Warneck anachronistically imposed a very particular, nineteenth century understanding of mission upon the Reformers. Describing missionary outreach in terms of organized missionary societies sending career missionaries to foreign lands, he judged the Reformers "guilty for not having subscribed to a definition of mission which did not even exist in their own time." While historically speaking it is true that the Reformation resulted in very little missionary outreach, the real issue and question is whether this is due to historical context or to theological deficiency. It is one thing to say that Luther and other Reformers viewed their main theological challenge as reforming the existing Church rather than mission outreach; it is quite another to charge their theology with missiological deficiency.

In contrast to Warneck's pessimistic assessment of Luther's theology, I agree with and wish to develop an argument in support of James Scherer's contention that "For Luther, mission is always pre-eminently the work of the triune God – *MISSIO DEI* – and its goal and outcome is the coming of the kingdom of God... [T]he rich but untested potential of Luther and the Reformation for mission practice comes down to the present, not as

definitive guidance, but certainly as inspiration and challenge for missiology today. It becomes a calculable 'benchmark' for testing today's missiological axioms." Among Lutheran theologians, Richard Bliese has issued a call for Lutheran missiology to move from "reactive reform" to "innovative initiative." It is the modest, yet ambitious, goal of this project to make a contribution toward such an innovative, missiological initiative.

In addition to the question of whether or not Lutheran theology has missiological potential and, if so, what resources it has to offer, this project will also address a second, closely related question: In light of the *MISSIO DEI* (mission of God), how should the Church's mission be properly understood, in terms of its distinctive shape, content, and emphases? This project will answer these two questions by interrelating them, using four distinctive resources from the confessional Lutheran tradition in addressing both questions: 1) the Gospel as promise; 2) the law-Gospel distinction; 3) a theology of grace as promise of mercy realized; and 4) a theology of the cross utilizing the hiddenness of God.

An introductory remark on terminology is in order before proceeding further. The creedal Christian tradition, as expressed in the classic Christological and Trinitarian dogmas, has always recognized the sin/grace dialectic as a central theme of Scripture. The confessional Lutheran tradition further nuances this classic dialectic, offering the terminology of law and promise (Gospel) as a more precise formulation of this dialectic. A Lutheran terminology seeks to avoid the connotations of the classic "nature/grace" paradigm, whereby grace can potentially be viewed as something quantifiable which fulfills sinful or defective human nature. In seeking to avoid views of grace as either quantifiable or internally enhancing human nature, a confessional Lutheran perspective views grace as

fundamentally relational reality, offer, and external word of surprising mercy.

While contemporary missiology is a multifaceted discipline, embracing many concerns and emphases such as evangelization, inculturation, the promotion of justice, liberation, and peace, and interreligious dialogue, I believe that mission as *MISSIO DEI* is the prevailing, dominant paradigm for missiology today. While it can be variously interpreted, its key features include emphasizing the Trinitarian origin of mission, God's *SHALOM* as the final, eschatological reign of peace and justice, and the Christian/human participation in that reign. Karl Barth, with his 1932 essay entitled "Theology and Mission," inaugurated contemporary Protestant reflection on mission as *MISSIO DEI* by grounding the theological foundation of mission in the doctrine of the Trinity. Theologically, mission came to be seen as a divine activity and attribute, originating from God himself, rather than the Church's activity. Francis Oborji clarifies the ecclesiological ramifications of this affirmation:

"Mission is not primarily an activity of the church but an attribute of God. The church is the movement of God toward the world. The church is an instrument of mission. The church exists because there is *MISSIO DEI*, and not the contrary."

While the phrase *MISSIO DEI* has been widely accepted and used by virtually all mission theologians, its actual meaning and content is vigorously contested. Wilhelm Richebacher describes the current quagmire: "It seems that everyone reads into and out of this 'container definition' whatever he or she needs... Is such a term of any use at all, if it does not help us establish a clear single interpretation of the central concept? Should we give up this formula altogether...?" The title of his article bluntly asks: "*MISSIO DEI*: the Basis for Mission Theology, or a Wrong Path?"

While I believe MISSIO DEI to be a helpful category, the very “structure of Lutheranism” (Werner Elert) would insist that this term requires nuancing: Does God have one or two missions to the world? This question directs us to the nature of the Gospel as giving Christian mission a distinctively dual or “duplex” shape (Ed Schroeder). A confessional Lutheran contribution to understanding the MISSIO DEI insists that the divine mission is BIVOCAL. The triune God, rather than saying and doing only one thing, has a dual mission: God’s mission always manifests itself in the dual form of judgment AND salvation, of condemnation AND forgiveness, of wrath AND promised mercy. These dual missions roughly correspond to the Lutheran dialectic of law and promise (Gospel), respectively. While these missions are complementary, with the first clearly serving the second, they are also in dialectical tension. In other words: MISSIO DEI is shaped by PROMISSIO DEI, or the promise of God is the secret to mission. Such is the Lutheran claim.

Barth’s immense influence is evident in the fact that most of the missiological discussion surrounding MISSIO DEI assumes God’s mission to be largely UNITARY, that God is doing and saying basically one thing (God’s loving salvation universally present). Most contemporary missiologies arising from the basis of MISSIO DEI, whether employing a “nature/grace” hermeneutic (traditional Roman Catholic theology) or a “sin/grace” hermeneutic (traditional Reformed theology), end up talking about the Gospel and grace in such a way that it SEEMS that God has only one word to say, a word of loving grace. Lutherans find this problematic as addressing only half of the story, half of revelation, half of what needs to be confessed, trusted, and proclaimed.

Confessional Lutheran theology insists that, to the extent that the first mission of divine judgment is ignored or marginalized, or to the extent that the two missions are conflated under one

rubric, to that extent the divine mission as a whole is misconstrued. This project will demonstrate how a clear understanding of the divine, dual mission, expressed in terms of wrath and promise, law and Gospel, leads to a nuanced, dialectical relationship between mission as proclamation and dialogue.

Viewing the Gospel as promise is gaining some appreciation beyond Lutheran circles. For example, Roman Catholic theologian William R. Burrows notes:

“The Gospel is not a new law, not even a new law of love, nor is it a social program. The Gospel of the New Covenant is, rather, an intensification and realization of the dominant theme of the Gospel of both Testaments – God is a God of promises. Concretely, God promises to save his people, and in Jesus we Christians believe we have the clearest revelation, indeed, the accomplishment of that promise, in the paschal mystery of Jesus of Nazareth – his TRANSITUS or passage from life through death to new life as he becomes the sender of the Holy Spirit, who is the inner witness to us that our sins indeed are forgiven and the first fruits of the realization that God’s promises to us will be fulfilled.”

This project’s view of the MISSIO DEI, stated in terms of an “economy of salvation,” will draw from the work of Oswald Bayer, Robert Bertram, Robert Kolb, Gerhard Forde, Edward Schroeder, and other confessional Lutheran theologians. As an alternative to the prevailing missiological models, an “economy of salvation” model situates itself between and contrasts itself with an uncritical acceptance of the salvation history model (epitomized by fellow Lutherans who see no need for missiological renewal and vision), on the one hand, and the inclusive pluralist model of Jacques Dupuis, on the other.

A constructive Lutheran critique insists that an insufficient view of the nature of the Gospel as promise, articulated and preserved by the law/Gospel distinction, leads to an insufficient theology of grace, one which marginalizes the centrality of the promise of mercy in Christ and therefore overly optimistically views the saving grace of God as operative throughout the world religions. Rather than a notion of the Gospel and grace which leads to a view of interreligious dialogue as a conversation between those already belonging to the reign of God, attributed to the power of the grace of Christ and the work of the Spirit (Dupuis), a Lutheran proposal insists that an interreligious dialogue, employing the Gospel promise of "loving mercy" in Christ and a theology of the cross utilizing the hiddenness of God, is both more faithful to the broad Christian tradition and Scriptures as well as more honest to our lived experience, accurately reflecting both commonality and difference of religious experience.

By articulating four Lutheran resources (the Gospel as promise, the law/Gospel distinction, a theology of grace as promise of loving mercy realized, and a theology of the cross utilizing the hiddenness of God) for constructing a nuanced, "economy of salvation" model of the *MISSIO DEI*, this project delineates how a particular view of the Gospel (as promise) undergirds a particular model of the *MISSIO DEI*, culminating in a very particular, dialectical relating of proclamation to interreligious dialogue.

The historical lineage of this approach can be traced from the confessional movement within late 16th century German Lutheran theology, through the Erlangen school in the mid-twentieth century (Werner Elert), to contemporary theologians such as Oswald Bayer (professor emeritus, University of Tübingen), the late Robert Bertram (Christ Seminary-Seminex, St. Louis), Robert Kolb (Concordia Seminary, St Louis, MO), Edward Schroeder



(professor emeritus, Christ Seminary-Seminex, St. Louis, MO), Carl Braaten (professor emeritus, The Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago), Richard Bliese, Gary Simpson, Patrick Keifert, and the late Gerhard Forde (Luther Seminary, St Paul, MN).

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## **Dissertation Abstract**

Contemporary missiology has been engaged with two central concerns: 1) how to relate the *MISSIO DEI*, the reign of God, and the church, and 2) given our global context of religious pluralism, what resources Christian theology has for building a constructive relationship with the religious other. These two concerns, while distinct, are intimately related and find their practical outworking in the important practice of interreligious dialogue.

Utilizing resources from Martin Luther's theology and the Lutheran confessional writings, this study offers an understanding of the Christian gospel as promise as key to addressing the above mentioned missiological challenges. In its construction of a confessional Lutheran missiology, it critically retrieves and constructively reappropriates four resources from the Lutheran tradition: the gospel as promise, the law/gospel distinction, a theology of grace as promise of mercy fulfilled, and a theology of the cross utilizing the hiddenness of God. The law of God as accusing, yet webbing humanity to its Creator; the gospel as the comforting promise of vulnerable, loving mercy, and the hiddenness of God as elusively mystifying form the overarching framework within which a contemporary Lutheran missiology seeks to engage the religious other by dialectically relating gospel proclamation and dialogue.

Such a Lutheran view of “mission shaped by promise” constitutes an alternative voice within the contemporary missiological landscape, dominated by an understanding of grace as human nature fulfilled and an approach to the missiological task as identifying traces of divine grace and truth in the midst of interreligious work toward human peace and justice. While humbly receiving the deepest witness of its dialogue partner, such a Lutheran approach boldly offers the paradoxical revelation and hiddenness of God in the cross as a distinctively Christian contribution to an interreligious dialogue centered on the ambiguity and hiddenness of God in daily experience.