

Luther as Mission Theologian -- 9.5 Theses

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation at the Forum of Lutheran Clergy of Metro St. Louis, University Club Tower, Brentwood, MO, October 31, 2005]

Preface: Luther's Reformation Aha!

1. Luther's 95 theses #1 signals his mission theology: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence."

"Mission field" is not a geographical term, but a cardiological one. The "field" is the human heart. The change signalled in the word "repent" is a change (ala Luther) in "what one's heart is hanging onto." Either in fear, or in love, or in trust--or some combination of all three "verbs of the heart." WHAT your heart is hanging on was thereby Luther's definition for a deity. And the question then was "which god?" True god or false god? Mission and repentance in Christian vocabulary signal changes in the de facto deity (and their name is legion) at the heart of the matter.

2. The goal of mission, what Jesus is calling for in Matt. 4, is expressed by St. Paul in the 2nd lectionary lesson for two weeks ago (Oct. 16) as he reviews the mission history of the Thessalonian congregation: "how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God and ... his Son ... Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming." I Thess. 1:1-10. The goal of Christian mission is finally to have people change gods, to switch where their heart is hanging.

That can also be true of folks who call themselves Christian. They too may--better said, regularly do--need a god-change. It all depends on what their hearts are REALLY hanging onto. If repentance is to be a daily event, then daily god-change is also in the mix--not primarily in the head, but in the heart where fears, loves, and trusts transpire. Here is where "true" fear, love, trust is constantly conflicted by "other gospels" knocking on the door.

3. At the end of his explanation to the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: "These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church [ausser der Christenheit], whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Taking his cue from Romans 1 and Acts 17 Luther clarifies what he understands about the switch that repentance/mission entails. He understands that God-encounters, yes, encounters with the one and only God there is, happen to everyone throughout history, and that "believing" and "worshiping" response regularly ensues. However, folks never perceive "from nature" the attitude of the "one true God" to be merciful to sinners. The universal drive throughout world religions to rectify things with the deity by sacrifices corroborates that this is not known. Even to his fellow God-believing Jews Jesus has to say: God "desires mercy, not sacrifice." That is: "I, God, desire to be merciful to you, rather than you sacrificing to me" in order to patch things up between us.

What "heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites" are missing, even with their theisms, is that "they do not have the Lord Christ." Note the word "have." It's a possession thing. And when you don't have Christ (who is "had" by trusting him) you lack being "confident of God's love and blessing. . .[and] are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." You do, sadly, continue to "have" something else: "They remain in eternal wrath and damnation." To modern ears that sounds way too harsh. Definitely not nice. Yet it is no harsher than Paul's words to the Thessalonians above who now "have" Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming."

4. The kind of salvation offered in the Christian Gospel is different from the salvation offered by other gospels.

As S. Mark Heim has shown, differing world religions offer different salvations. "Going to heaven" is not a universal salvation offer. In fact, going to heaven is more central to the salvation offered in Islam, than the salvation offered in the Christian gospel. Buddhist Nirvana and the Kingdom of God offered by Christ do not overlap at all. And the Good news of the crucified Messiah is not focused on going to heaven either. It offers survival from divine criticism, that God's last word for Christ-trusters is (and will forever be) mercy. And who knows what those "mansions" really look like? New Testament writers tell us very little. Might well be that they weren't all that interested. Already having God's last word about their upbeat futures, the architecture of eternity was no big deal.

5. God operates a "double mission" in the world, not just "one" Missio Dei as now permeates ecumenical mission theology----also in the LCMS and the ELCA.

Luther's thesis #62, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God," designates the Christic one of these two missions. But God's other "mission" in Moses still persists for those not yet covered by Christ's mission. If you think they are mostly the same--as Missio Dei theology tends to do--then read 2. Corinthians 3:4ff. Here Paul talks about God's old covenant and new covenant, God's old ministry and new ministry, God's two missions to the same mission field, "the tablet of human hearts," One mission kills, one makes alive. St. Paul's own Christian mission, so he claims, celebrates God's "regime change" with sinners. It is the move, first of all on God's part, from Moses to Christ, from a mission of condemnation to a mission of justification, from a lethal (though fading) glory to a permanent glory that outshines the

other one to the nth degree. Christian mission aims to move people out from under lethal glory into "the glory and grace of God, that treasure of the most holy Gospel."

6. One of Luther's favored images for mission is the Gospel coming into new territory as a "Platzregen," a thundershower, a cloudburst.

That can be both good news and bad. God sends the Gospel shower as a surprise, not expected, but much needed. That's good news. But if nothing grows in the soil where this rain falls, or if later the Gospel's nurture is ignored or spurned, God moves the Platzregen somewhere else. Then a "famine of the Word of God" (the grim word of the prophet Amos) moves in and parched earth is all that's left. Bad news indeed. Does this shed light on the apparent "move" of the Christian Gospel to the earth's southern hemisphere away from the churchly north where it has been moistening for two millennia?

7. If you're baptized, you're a missionary.

That's the self-understood mission theology of Christians in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church - Mekane Yesus. According to the Lutheran World Federation the EECMY is the fastest growing Lutheran church in the world today. In a recent survey of new members only 8% became Christ-followers through contact with a pastor. The rest heard the Good News over the backyard fence from their neighbors. "Everybody knows" that if you're baptized you're a missionary. The key verb is "offer." Anyone who has received the offer can make the offer.

8. Reformation Day's three lectionary texts spell out a sequence: Central terms--Forgiveness (God's NEW offer in Jeremiah 31), Faith in that offer (Romans 3), Freedom the result (John 8).

Christ's forgiveness is offered (with reference, if need be, to previous offers where people's hearts have been hanging). Recipients are "encouraged" to shift their faith to the forgiveness offered. The upshot is freedom, freedom from the slavery (as Jesus tells his Jewish hearers) that their prior heart-hanging had not remedied. The freedom in Christ's offer is "total freedom," whatever that all means. One might say that John's entire Gospel spells out the specs.

9. USA is as much a mission field as was the Holy Roman Empire of Luther's day, where everybody (except Jews) was baptized.

But where hearts were hanging in his day was another matter. And the penance/indulgences gospel of the day was an "other" Gospel. Hearts needed to switch to the church's true treasure. That's mission. Today's alternate gospels--churchly & secular--are legion. That is as true in the USA today as anywhere else in the world. These alternate gospels are being feared, loved and trusted all over the place. Also among folks who want to be Christians. Hearts need to switch lest God's Mosaic mission have the last word.

9.5. The theology of mission is the theology of the cross. The final 4 theses of the 95.

#92. "Away, then with those prophets [the indulgence hustlers in ML's day, the false gossellers--churchly & secular--in our day] who say to Christ's people, 'Peace, peace,' where there is no peace."

#93. "Hail, hail to all those prophets who say to Christ's people, 'The cross, the cross,' where [in the plethora of other gospels] there is no cross."

#94. "Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells;"

#95. "And let them thus be more conFIDEnt [note the word "fide," faith, in this term, also in Luther's Latin] of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance [securitas] of peace."

Edward H. Schroeder