

Deconstructing the Concept of MISSIO DEI “in the Light of the Gospel.”

Colleagues,

God willing, we're to return to St. Louis on this very day, August 26, from a month-long stint mostly in Malaysia. At the Eleventh Quadrennial Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, meeting in Malaysia the first week in August, I presented this paper. Not all of my paper for IAMS XI will be new to long-time ThTh readers. But some is. When jetlag subsides I'll attempt a report on the conference. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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Conference Theme: “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel”

Deconstructing the Concept of MISSIO DEI “in the Light of the Gospel.”

A paper by Edward H. Schroeder

1. Deconstruction is not destruction. I shall use the term

as follows to 1) take apart a construct—Missio Dei—to see how it is put together, 2) seek to identify the theology that is the “mortar” which holds this construct together, 3) evaluate the foundations, the groundings, of the construct to see just how “good” it is “in the light of the Gospel.” In the process I shall propose an alternative construct—God’s Two Missions in our One World—and seek to show its value as a better mantra for “The Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel.”

2. Missio Dei has been an ecumenical mantra, possibly the most widely acknowledged metaphor, in missiology since the Willingen Conference in 1952. I was privileged to attend the 2002 conference in Willingen commemorating the 50 years, and my understanding of what the Missio Dei metaphor means was confirmed at that event.
3. An overarching umbrella for Missio Dei is given by Vicedom in his book by that very name “Missio Dei.” He grounds Missio Dei in the Kingdom of God, and then gives this definition of that kingdom: “[I]t has to be pointed out here that the kingdom of God embraces more than the saving acts of Jesus, namely the complete dealing [Vicedom’s German term is “Handeln”] of the triune God with the world.”
4. Vicedom’s definition of God’s kingdom is the mortar for Missio Dei. I challenge Vicedom’s definition of Kingdom of God as impossible to match with the usage throughout the N.T. for the term. Au contraire, Kingdom of God is always focused on “the saving acts of Jesus,” and not at all on the “complete dealing of the triune God with the world.”
5. Of course, God has other dealings with the world. But in Jesus and the “regime” God is initiating in him, a new “dealing” has entered the world of God’s “other dealings.” This is the unanimous testimony of the N.T.

E.g., John, who contrasts God's dealing in Moses [law] with God's dealing in Jesus [grace and truth]. Paul is another example, with his distinction throughout his epistles between God's two covenants—God's two “dealings” with humans. The synoptic Jesus also juxtaposes “mercy” with “sacrifice,” both of them God's dealings with his people. The Hebrews writer specifies two authorized priesthoods—both from God. Et passim.

- 6. Sifting through all this “in the Light of the Gospel,” our conference theme, necessitates articulating what the Gospel is—and what it is not. After examining all the N.T. references to that term (as noun and as verb) I conclude that Paul's summary in 2 Cor. 5 is overarching. Gospel is both a report [indicative] and an appeal [imperative], a Good News report linked to Jesus and an appeal to appropriate that Good News as one's own. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself....(=report) Therefore, we appeal to you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”*
- 7. When the Missio Dei construct is measured in the light of this Gospel, it falls short, on two counts. The full spread of God's “other dealings” with the world is diminished (especially God's critical dealings with sinners) and God's dealing with the world in Christ is itself reduced.*
- 8. An alternate metaphor, better than Missio Dei, with better Gospel-groundings, is needed. It must be capable of encompassing, really encompassing, “the complete dealing [“Handeln”] of the triune God with the world.” In the light of the Gospel itself a “Two Missions of God” metaphor is needed. If you say it in Latin, Duplex Missiones Dei is the mantra.*
- 9. I will seek to articulate such a construct by examining a Missio Dei document from the history of my own church in*

the USA. It is the “Mission Affirmations” of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod adopted as the synod’s mission theology in 1965. In substance it is a Vicedom model, and Vicedom’s own theology factored into its formulation. It has strengths and weaknesses. Both would be improved—the strengths made stronger, the weaknesses repaired—with a Duplex Missiones Dei theology as new mortar for a new construct. My thesis is: there is more light in “the light of the Gospel” for constructing a better missiology than Missio Dei.

DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE MISSIO DEI THEOLOGY IN THE “MISSION AFFIRMATIONS” (1965) OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH – MISSOURI SYNOD.

[There were six affirmations in the original 1965 text. I take them one at a time. The original one-sentence mission affirmation from 1965 comes first. Then comes an “RSV,” a “revised Schroeder version,” a reconstruction grounded in a theology of “God’s two missions” in the world.]

Affirmations of God’s Mission Adopted by The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (1965)

- I. ORIGINAL: The Church Is God’s Mission.[RSV = Revised Schroeder Version] The Church is Created by God’s “NEW” mission to the world, God’s unique mission in Christ. The Church is both the product of God’s new mission in Christ to God’s old world, and thereafter its agent. God sends Christ on a MERCY mission to God’s own broken world. The depth of that brokenness signals God’s “other” operation in the world, call it God’s other mission with*

the human race. That “other operation” was first articulated in Gen 2:17 [“you eat . . . you die.”], first enacted in Gen. 5 [“. . .and he died; ...and he died; ...and he died” ad nauseam]. In this old mission, God’s own “old” mission, mercy for sinners is hidden. Instead God “counts trespasses.” No sinner survives such arithmetic.

In Christ God enacts a new mission, a new covenant, as Jesus labels it the night before his death. In Christ’s death & resurrection God offers these same sinners mercy, call it forgiveness of sins. God re-connects with them as Abba. It defies moral logic, yet that is the Christian claim, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” From which follows a simple definition of church: “Church = Christ-trusting sinners.” All talk of “Christian” mission, namely, God’s own mission #2, is grounded here in “the theology of the cross.”

II. ORIGINAL: The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Whole World[RSV] Christ sends that church to replicate Christ-trusting throughout the world, where God’s other arithmetic is all-pervasive.

There is no technical NT term for mission as we use that word today. Closest is the language of God’s “covenant,” or again, God’s “serving operation.” The Greek technical terms in the NT are “diatheke” and “diakonia.” But the way that God does covenant-service in Christ is very different from his alternate covenant-service apart from Christ. These two covenant-service-projects [hereafter CSP] are grounded in two very different—finally contradictory—words from God. St John differentiates them as God’s “law coming through Moses” vs. God’s “grace and truth coming through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

St. Paul and other NT writers use other contrasting terms

for these two CSPs. One of Paul's favorites is law and promise. As Paul develops the contrasting characteristics of God's two missions, he asserts that God's old CSP is as different from God's new CSP as night from day, as death from life. There is no "generic" CSP that covers both. Thus they must initially be distinguished in order to be rightly related. This is the pattern: God's new CSP in Christ rescues sinners from God's old CSP with its bottomline bad-news for sinners. Christ sends those who trust him out into the world to replicate for worldlings what Christ has done for them. Simply stated: to offer them God's own new CSP in Christ. To wit, to offer them the promise of Christ's own cross and resurrection so that they too might move from God's old CSP to God's new one. Christ-trusters keep the project going: "As the Father sent me, so send I you."

III. ORIGINAL: The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Church[RSV] Christ-trusters continue to be agents of Christ's mission to fellow church members. Christ-trusters continually need maintenance service—from other Christ-trusters.

Even though Christ-trusters are already "churchified," they need constant nurture. For within their lives they too sense the "old Adam/old Eve" present – and operational. "Lord I believe, help my unbelief" is the standard, not the exceptional, admission of all Christ-trusters. In the language of Luther's Smalcald Articles, they constantly assist one another with "mutual conversation and consolation" of the Gospel. In short, they continue to offer the crucified and risen Christ to each other, so that "repenting and believing the Good news" AGAIN AND AGAIN becomes their own daily regimen. [This is perhaps the most important ecumenical phrase in

the Lutheran Confessions. There are no barricades of any sort for any Christ-truster to practice this “means of grace” (so Smalcald) with anyone—both to those who claim Christ as Lord, and those who don’t.]

IV. ORIGINAL: The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Society[RSV] The Church carries Christ’s Mercy-Mission to the Whole Society conscious that God’s other CSP is already in operation there. Thus Christ-trusters of every age see society with binocular vision, and do so lest either of God’s two covenant-service-projects gets short shrift.

Apart from Christ, God has from the beginning been at work in human society with his initial CSP. As wondersome as that CSP is—yes, good and gracious—it does not bring mercy to sinners. It preserves and cares for creation, yes. But forgiveness of sinners, no. The sinner’s dilemma is healed only in the new CSP grounded in Good Friday and Easter. It is definitely something else. Ask any forgiven sinner.

Articulating that distinction for Christians in society is crucial for both CSP’s to be honored. Lutheran language has capitalized on the Biblical metaphors of God’s left and right hands. Not two different realms (as territories), but God’s two different operations on the same territory, in the one and only world there is.

Christ-trusters, even before they encounter Christ, already have assigned tasks in God’s “old” CSP, God-given assignments as caretakers, stewards, in God’s world. Such assignments arise already at human birth whereby God places people into specific spots in his creation. And along with that placement come multiple callings from God to “be my sort of person in all the relationships wherein

I've placed you." When human beings also become Christ-connected, they get a second assignment: "Replicate your Christ-connection, offer Christ's redemption, in all the relationships you already have in your initial CSP." A frequently used collect in the liturgy says it thus: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made." Care and redemption are two distinct jobs, not at all synonyms. They arise from God's own two CSP's. Yet, both care of creation and its redemption come from the same God, and both become the assignments for every Christ-truster.

V. ORIGINAL: *The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Man*[RSV] *The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Person* – but not forgetting the 2-CSP distinction. Like God's own self, God's human agents work ambidextrously in the world. People not (yet) connected to Christ are still agents of God's left-hand mission simply by virtue of being God's human creatures. Christ-trusters have another assignment in addition to God's left-hand mission which they share with all humankind. Their second assignment is to be agents of God's new CSP in Christ, God's right-hand mission. Their right hand DOES know what their left hand is doing—and vice versa.

Already in New Testament times Christians were engaged in "left-hand" ministries—God's work to care for and preserve God's broken creation. Christians use the language of "social ministry, medical missions, inner mission, development" etc. when they engage in such left-hand work. Such care and preservation is also carried out by those who do not know Christ at all but are deeply involved in this particular CSP of God. They too are God's left-handers. But they are not promoting God's right-hand ministry, viz., getting sinners to trust

Christ. If there is some doubt about that in certain situations, ask them.

Designating such missions and ministries “left-hand” is in no way derogatory. Those tasks are divine assignments, godly work. Labelling this “left-hand” is descriptive. It describes what God is achieving there, that is, caring for creation. That is not yet redemption. Left-hand CSP does not translate sinners into Christ-trusters.

In executing God’s right-hand CSP, Christ-trusters concretely offer the crucified and risen Christ to the receivers, God’s offer of merciful forgiveness encountered nowhere else in creation. Right-hand CSP is more than just speaking or offering “God’s love.” God’s love is already operating wherever God extends his left hand. Rain and sunshine are gifts of God’s love. Giving up One’s only-begotten Son into death to rescue other renegade offspring is something else. It explodes the “love” category—“scandalously”—as St. Paul sometimes said.

The right-hand CSP is an offer of Christ’s specific mercy-promise to folks who, for whatever reason, do not trust it, so that they may indeed trust it. That offer occurs in concrete words and worded-actions (sacraments) designated as “means of grace.” Luther’s Smalcald Articles specify five such word/actions that offer this promise. They are visible and audible. You can record them when they are happening.

God’s left-hand CSP—also assigned by God to folks who do not trust Christ—protects, preserves, restores human life in a broken world, though it does not heal a sinner’s God-problem. Christians have no scruples in joining God’s

other left-handed workers in this CSP. They see it as their calling.

VI. ORIGINAL: The Whole Church is Christ's Mission.[RSV] All Members of the Church are on assignment in both of God's Missions.

If you are alive at all, you are God's left-hand missionary. If in addition you also trust Christ, you are membered into another body, the body of Christ. That gives you a second mission assignment beyond the first, God's CSP number 2. To be baptized is to be a CSP-2 missionary. When the congregation prays that offertory prayer IN UNISON, it is "all of us" who "dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you, God, have made." All means all. Working out the strategies in any given place and time for this double mission of care and redemption is a major piece of the agenda when the Christ-connected gather for "mutual conversation and consolation." The overarching rubric is that none of God's TWO Covenant-Service-Projects suffer loss.

All members of the church urge people to trust Christ. That finally amounts to urging people who do not trust Christ to switch gods, to "hang their hearts" [Luther's phrase] on Christ, to abandon whatever their hearts have been trusting before. That is what St. Paul proclaimed to his audience on Mars Hill: "You worship many gods here in Athens. I urge you to switch. Hang your hearts on the one that is still unknown to you, the Christ whom God raised from the dead." Christians do the same thing on today's Mars Hills where other gods and other gospels abound. In doing so they do not argue about whose religion is "better." Rather they simply make an offer. Their claim is that they too received it as an offer, an offer that is Good News. It is an offer both "good" and "new" that

they too had never heard before. Nor have they heard it elsewhere on the many Mars Hills of today. They seek to extend the same offer to others. They urge them to trust it.

Conclusion:

This is my argument for a mission theology grounded on God's own Two Missions in our One World. My claim is that such a mission theology is better grounded in "the light of the Gospel" than the regnant *Missio Dei* of the last half century.

I suggest this "double *Missio Dei*" does a better job in retaining the work of both of God's two missions. The critical accent in God's left-hand mission largely disappears in the traditional *Missio Dei* paradigm. The double mission motto restores the reality of God's judicial role in the old creation whereby sinners are not only preserved, but also judged for their unfaith: "the wages of sin is death."

This larger picture of God's left-hand mission points to the larger picture of God's right-hand mission in the person and work of Christ. Christ is "necessary" for sinners to cope with God's judgment. That necessitates not just a "merciful Messiah" but a Messiah so merciful that on the cross "he is wounded for our transgressions... so that we might be healed." The old *Missio Dei* model underplays this necessity, and therefore the full Good News of a crucified and risen Messiah is blurred.

"In the light of the Gospel" Christ comes to our world to rescue us not only from our sin, but also from the deadly consequences of God's mission number one. As the Father sent him, so he sends us.

The two-missions paradigm also gives clearer focus to what faith is all about "in the light of the Gospel." Faith in the

Gospel is always faith in the promise of forgiveness from the crucified and risen Christ. It is not generic belief in God's goodness or even simply trusting God. Christian faith is always Christ-focused, focused on the Good News he offers to sinners. The sinner's stance before God is that of the tax collector in Christ's parable: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Christ's word to such a sinner is: "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven," not by God's generic kindness, but by virtue of Christ's authority arising from Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Sinners trusting that offer, which is what faith is, "go down to their house justified."