

Luther as Resource for Mission Theology

Colleagues,

Two weeks from today, d.v., a least a half dozen of us on this listserve will be assembling at the University of Aarhus in Denmark to deliberate with a 100-plus other folks from around the world on the "Future of Lutheran Theology." Robin and I will report on it when we get back. A recent add-on to the "big" conference at Aarhus is a mini-one the day before on "The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology." I've been asked to tell what I've found in Luther that speaks to the agenda. Below are my current thoughts for that assignment. ThTh readers have seen much of this before, and it's still a work in progress. Comments welcome. Peace & Joy!
Ed

"The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology."

Some Thoughts drawn from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

- 1. If Lutheran Theology has a future at all—a deserved future—that future is linked to the Gospel's own future.*
- 2. The Gospel's own future is grounded in Christ's promise that "his word," the Good-News-from-God that he not only spoke, but in person WAS, will not pass away. There are no other guarantees for the Gospel's future. It hangs on that thin promissory thread.*

3. Nothing else in creation has a guaranteed future, Jesus says. It will all pass away. So Lutheran theology too will pass away if/when it disconnects from the Gospel—even if people called Lutherans continue to theologize.
4. Fixation on the Gospel is the genius of the Lutheran reformation, and the fixation of Luther's "mission theology."
5. The term "mission" is hard to find in Luther's vocabulary (ditto for other 16th cent. Reformers) as far as I have learned. But his grasp of the Gospel carries many of the accents we today associate with the term mission.
6. Example: The Gospel is "the power of God for salvation" which signals movement, action, aiming for primal change in the lives of people. Luther's Gospel-metaphors of "Platzregen" and "ripples-from-a-stone-cast-in-a-pool" are mission metaphors derivative from that notion. Mission happens when God turns on the Gospel rain shower, when God tosses the Gospel-pebble into the water. The rain and the pebble do the "mission work." Major Luther sources for this are his many sermons on the Feast of the Ascension, where the assigned lectionary text always was the Markan version of Christ's Ascension linked to the Markan version of the "Great Commission."
7. By proposing the Gospel itself as central to the theological enterprise—and thus to the missiological enterprise as well—we cannot escape the question: What is the Gospel? What is the "Good News from God linked to Jesus of Nazareth?" Answers to that question have been conflicted—ever since Jesus appeared on the scene among his own people. Subsequent centuries have not changed on that score. The conflict has been among Christians themselves—in Galatia and Corinth, in 16th century "Christian" Europe and on into our third millennium A.D.

That “in-house” debate about what the Gospel is (and is not) has consequences for mission theology.

8. Fundamental to these differing, even conflicting, answers is hermeneutics: how you read the Bible, how you read the world. Bedrock for Luther’s understanding of the Gospel is the law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible. In one place he designates this law-promise discovery his great Reformation “Aha!” It was linked to Romans 1:17 and the before-and-after of his encounter with that text. “[Ich] lernet inter justitiam legis und evangelii discernirn. Zuvor mangelt mir nichts, denn das ich kein discrimen inter legem et evangelium machet, hielt es alles vor eines et dicebam Christum a Mose non differre nisi tempore et perfectione. Aber do ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud evangelium, da risz ich her durch” [“I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and that of the Gospel. Prior to that I lacked nothing except that I made no distinction between law and gospel. I considered them to be one and the same, and spoke of no difference between Christ and Moses except their location in historical time and [their different] degrees of perfection. But when I found the distinction, that the law is one thing, and the gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough.” Table Talk #5518].
9. Corollary to this Lutheran law-promise hermeneutics for reading the Bible is Luther’s hermeneutic of the distinction between God’s left-hand and right-hand for “reading” the world.
10. That hermeneutic for reading the world is Luther’s lens for reading world religions—and for reading Gospel-less Christianity. See his conclusion to the explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism: “...heathen, Jews, Turks, false Christians” do indeed have knowledge

of God, encounters with God, and “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. Therefore 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.” In the metaphor of God’s left and right hands, “not having the Lord Christ” equals linkage only with God’s left hand. The “power of God for salvation” is the worldly work of God’s right hand. Until humans have received that offer, they “do not know what God’s attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing.”

11. A parallel distinction in Luther’s theology is hidden God and revealed God. His understanding of the faith and life of “...heathen, Jews, Turks, false Christians” comes under the rubric of “hidden God.” The reality of God-hidden does not mean the absence of any God encounters. On the contrary, they are manifold throughout creation, and replete with God’s blessings. But as blessed as these encounters are, they do not go beyond the rubrics of God’s left-hand operations. Still “hidden” is what “God was in Christ [doing, namely,] reconciling the world unto himself. Not counting our trespasses against us, but making him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” That’s the archetypal “sweet swap” [froehlicher Wechsel] in Luther’s vocabulary. God’s left hand does not offer such a swap. With that hand God counts trespasses. Trespassers pay.
12. It seems to me that this metaphor of “God hidden” is valuable for accessing the God-experience in other world religions. Especially with reference to Islam, where Allah is so fundamentally “hidden” apart from the Quran,

that nothing in creation dare claim to present, to represent, him to humankind.

13. From two sides in recent days I have heard missionaries from India and Ethiopia tell me that this double-handed talk about God—also sometimes referred to as God's two kingdoms in our one world—makes no sense to local Lutheran theologians in these two countries. So they abandon it. The colleague from India even suggests that the distinction is a specifically Western conceptual construct and cannot be translated into Asian modes of thinking.
14. It seems to me that the issue is not Western modes of thinking at all, but the Bible itself, which is hardly a Western product. At least that's what Luther claimed. He had been operating in "western" modalities before his "Aha!" It was the Biblical texts themselves that opened his eyes—and his theological vocabulary—to the hermeneutics of distinction. Both for reading the Bible and for reading the world. Luther's claim is that the Bible itself operates with these primordial distinctions. Folks who disagree—especially Lutherans—need to present their alternate exegesis and the Biblical hermeneutics that undergirds it.
15. So the debate is not East vs. West, but exegesis of the Scriptures. Is God doing something in Christ that he didn't do before in his creation, a fundamental claim of St. Paul in 2 Cor. 5 referred to in #11 above? If yes, then there is already THE primal distinction that the "Good News from God in Jesus" is "something else." If the Lutherans referred to in Ethiopia and India ignore this archetypal Lutheran distinction, I wonder what they understand the Gospel to be, if it is not something "good" and "genuinely new" in distinction to all else that God is doing in the world.

16. For 50 years [beginning at Willingen 1952] the concept "Missio Dei" has been "in" in missiology. There is no place for practicing Luther's distinction in "Missio Dei" theology as far as I can tell. If my reading is accurate, then this is one promising "future" for Lutheran missiology in the century before us.
17. The same seems to me to be true of "Gospel and context" work in current missiology. It would benefit from law/promise hermeneutics in reading the Bible, and the corollary left-hand/right-hand hermeneutics for reading the world.
18. There are two gaps confronting the Gospel's own "Platzregen." [I am taking this from a 1971 essay by Robert W. Bertram "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission."] Both need to be bridged. One is the "horizontal" gap of differences in historical time and place and culture between the Gospel-bringer and the one brought to. Luther's Platzregen image, as well as his "ripples in the pond" reminds us that it is finally the lively Gospel itself that brings the bringer, and not vice versa. Lutherans need to work on that idea and offer it to future missiology.
19. The second gap, call it the "vertical gap," is the gap of unbelief. It is a reality everywhere, not really located in cultures, but in the hearts of people, even the heart of the Gospel-bringer missionary. Quoting Bertram: "For, after all, it really is incredible—indeed, it is humanly impossible to believe—that an itinerant, first-century rabbi would NEED to go to such lengths to achieve the merciful mission of God toward us." Weighing most heavily against believing the Gospel, according to Luther, is not the "other gospels" found everywhere in the world—both East and West—but the omni-presence of God's law in, with, and under the operations of God's left-hand.

20. Bertram again: "But once that Gospel is believed, as again and again it is, the believer can assimilate also the law, can take its criticism, and can even profit from it, advancing its commendable good work in society. Still LAW is only proximate to Scripture's distinctive PROMISE. And only the PROMISE, finally, is the solvent of the world's hard unbelief."
21. For the "New Areopagus" of the 21st century, the Lutheran axiom in Bertram's words is: "PROMISSIO (the promise) is the secret of MISSIO (the mission)." The Christ who sends us to today's Mars' Hill with his "Go in peace; serve me there" was Himself God's promise-keeper. As we do our theological work moving across these two mission gaps, it is the Promise itself (better the Promisor Himself) who spans the gaps—by the Spirit through the Word.