

Lutheran Missiology: An Oxymoron?

Colleagues,

Five months ago our posting ThTh 119 [Sept. 21, 2001] offered some data on Luther's Theology of Mission. It was gleanings from Luther's sermons on the Great Commission text. The trigger for my checking to see if Luther had any "feel" for mission was an ELCA bishop's inquiry: "Was mission the 'great omission' in the Lutheran Reformation?" I don't know where the bishop came upon that question. Another impetus for me was that we—Robin Morgan, Marie and I—had heard such talk at the international missiology conference we attended last January in Pretoria, South Africa. Formulated most crassly it was: "Isn't the term 'Lutheran missiology' an oxymoron?" Since that seemed to be accepted wisdom among many at the conference—Lutheran missiologists included—I've continued on the search.

This coming weekend a few of us are gathering at our house to find some answer to this: If "Lutheran missiology" is not an oxymoron, what is it really? Trigger for that get-together is Rick Bliese's presence in town. Rick (Seminec '81), past missionary in Zaire and elsewhere, is now Prof. of Missions and Evangelism at the Luth. School of Theology in Chicago. He also attended the Pretoria conference a year ago, and tweaked us then already: Well, if it's not an oxymoron, then we've got to show what it is.

I've been doing a little reading to get some data. It seems that the bad rap for Luther and Lutheranism about missions has a major root in the work of Gustav Warneck. His book, "Outline of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time," appeared in German in 1881 and then in English translation in

the early 1900s. Absent in Luther, says Warneck, is “not only missionary activity, but even mission thinking, in the sense in which we understand them today.” Warneck was not expressing current scholarly consensus with this opinion. In fact he was polemicizing against three authors of his day, Ostertag, Plitt, and Kalkar, who had recently published their own research and claimed that just the opposite was true of the Reformers.

Warneck’s work was the only one that got translated into English. Consequently for almost a century in the English-speaking world (and English IS the language of the international mission scene) Warneck’s view has been “what everybody knows.”

But on the German scene his claim drew heavy fire, especially from “Luther experts,” such as Karl Holl and Werner Elert. Elert’s chapter on Mission in his magnum opus “Morphologie des Luthertums” [Morphology of Lutheranism] is framed as a polemic response to Warneck. Elert’s two-volume Morphology was published in 1931—when I was but a few months old. I did have the blessing of being his student 22 years later at the University of Erlangen (Germany). The one and only publication of his that ever appeared only in English was an essay he wrote for our student theological journal THE SEMINARIAN at Concordia Seminary in the fall of 1953. But I digress.

Elert grants that Luther never founded a Mission Society, “missions in the sense in which we understand them today,” to use Warneck’s words. But that doesn’t mean there was no sense of “mission activity” in Luther and his colleagues. And surely not that there was no “mission thinking.” For this latter Elert brings pages and pages of Luther texts that center precisely on that, many of them—no surprise—from his lectures on the Bible and his preaching on Biblical texts.

But Elert doesn’t seek to make his case by finding more Luther

quotes than Warneck apparently had found. Elert argues with Warneck for having missed Luther's missiology because it was a different "mission thinking" than Warneck himself had. Warneck's own mission-thinking was more like a "Betriebstheorie," a theory, a concept, for setting up an organization to carry out a project. That's what the mission societies of Warneck's day looked like to him. Even if Luther had lived in the 18th and 19th centuries, Elert thinks, he would not have seen his own mission-thinking, which he claimed to be that of the Bible, necessarily replicated in the mission society movement.

Luther's mission-thinking was Gospel-grounded. Of course, which mission-thinker wouldn't say the same? But for Luther Gospel-grounding is the sine qua non. Elert in his Morphology coined the term "Evangelischer Ansatz" as the Reformation "Aha!" central to all of Luther's theology. The term is tough to render into English. The English translator of vol. 1 of the Morphology [The Structure of Lutheranism, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962] called it "the impact of the Gospel." "Impact" signals the Gospel's consequences. Not bad, but what gets lost is that Ansatz means starting-point, point of departure. It points to beginnings, not ends. For Luther's mission-thinking Elert says: "When you do mission-thinking moving out from the Gospel-starting-point, it can only mean these two things: 1) faith in the omnipotence and universal teleology of the Gospel itself, and 2) saying yes to the assignment to proclaim that Gospel.

The first of those two needs some explication. First the term "omnipotence." The Gospel is the power of God for salvation. As power it is itself operational. Even if humans won't promote it, God sees to it that it moves forward. Luther's famous "Platzregen" image of the Gospel is like that. On its own the Gospel like a rain shower falls on this nation or that. The Reformation itself was such a Platzregen. For reasons known only

to the God of the Gospel, the Gospel was raining down on Germany in the 1500s. Luther and his associates were not the ones who made that happen. And before long, especially if the German lands didn't receive the shower, God would move it elsewhere. Doubtless it would do its showering via human agents, but the human agents didn't determine beforehand where the next shower was to fall.

And it is OMNI-potent. Christ said so: the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Gospel can, of course, be rejected, but that won't undo it. It will then move elsewhere. It won't stop. And that leads to Elert's words about the "universal teleology of the Gospel itself." The Gospel's goal (telos) is to reach and be believed throughout the whole world. So its unstoppable character is that it will keep on going—by its own energy, its own dynamic—until it has covered the planet. I imagine that Elert didn't know the old logo of the Sherwin-Williams paint company, but he could have used it to illustrate Luther's mission-thinking, if he had. The Gospel is God pouring out the Gospel over the planet until it "covers the whole world."

The turning world supplied Luther another metaphor, "Aufgang." The Gospel is always coming up over the horizon, even in places where it's been shining before. One favorite image Luther has for the Gospel's own energy is a stone tossed into a lake. The ripples keep on going even though the original toss, and the first splash, happened long ago.

Elert's chapter on Missions in the Morphology adds a lot of "plain historical facts" about the "evangelischer Ansatz" in the mission practice of churchmen and secular leaders in the territories that eventually became "Lutheran." It was no way as bleak as Warneck claimed, even though it was not without setbacks, especially as the state-church system—initially an emergency measure in the 16th century—became the regular pattern

for church life in Germany. Lutherans leaders already in the first post-Reformation decades worked out specific plans for the Gospel's Platzregen to the non-Christians known within Europe: Jews, Muslims, and the Lapps of northern Scandinavia. They also made moves beyond their borders—to Abyssinia and North Africa. Not until the Danes established a colony, the first Lutheran land to do so, did overseas missions become an option.

But even so, the thought was not lost that it wasn't human mission agencies that guaranteed the Gospel's "universal teleology," the Sherwin-Williams effect. It was the Gospel's own interior electricity that empowered its ongoing rippling. Possibly taking his clue from Paul's frequent mission work in prison—surely not part of the original plan—Luther expected Christians taken captive in war by the Turks to be missionaries. Not only by Christian conduct, but also by explicit Gospel-witness the prisoner would "adorn and praise the name of Christ...show the Turks a faith better than the one they had, and perhaps you would convert many."

Can such ad hoc mission work proceed without a "proper call?" Of course, says Luther. "Where there are no Christians, there he needs no other call than that he is a Christian who is inwardly called and anointed by God. There it is his obligation to preach to the erring heathen and non-Christians, and to teach the Gospel as a duty of Christian love, even though no one calls him to do this."

Ad hocery is not the only way the Gospel comes up over the horizon. But that is true of many of the Christians we've encountered in recent years as Global Mission Volunteers. Especially in Ethiopia. The most recent issue of the Luth. World Federation newsletter indicates that it's still going on there. In the past calendar year 766,000 (sic!) new Christians became members of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. The

mission-thinking we heard more than once during our time there was simple: If you're baptized, you're a missionary.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder