

Lutheran Missiology—Oxymoron?

Part II

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh #141 closed with the epigram of the Mekane Yesus church in Ethiopia: If you're baptized, you're a missionary. Those six words brought a jubilant response from one of you, and other elements of the posting [Lutheran Missiology: An Oxymoron?] elicited additional comments. Many added information supporting the thesis that Lutheran missiology is not an oxymoron. One told me that the "wheel" had already been invented, to wit, the doctoral dissertation, published 1994, by Russell Briese (Aussie Luth. pastor) with the title FOUNDATIONS OF A LUTHERAN THEOLOGY OF MISSION. I've ordered it from Amazon.com [\$60!]. We'll see.

Another showed me one of the local sources in the USA for the notion that there was no such thing as Lutheran missiology. That source, he said, was Carl Braaten's influential book THE FLAMING CENTER: A THEOLOGY OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSION (Fortress, 1977). He cited chapter and verse opening with this Braatenian salvo: "The problem of a Protestant theology of mission is that its classical sources, the theology of the Reformers and the confessional writings, are totally devoid of any missionary consciousness." Last week's ThTh edition, picking up on Gustav Warneck's identical charge (cited, of course, by Braaten), reported Werner Elert's survey of classical Lutheran sources to muster evidence au contraire. I smirk a bit wondering what all (or what little) Braaten read to support his totalist claim: "totally devoid of any missionary consciousness."

Another Lutheran respondent said yes to the oxymoron predicate, and said it was a good thing. "If we seek to spell out a

LUTHERAN missiology,” he said, “We’ll soon have a shelf-full of denominational missiologies: Methodist missiology, Pentecostal missiology, Calvinist missiology etc. And that will deflect us all from the one and only missiology there is: Missio Dei, God’s mission.”

This last response came over the phone, so I engaged the caller, a dear friend of 50 years and an un-clonable Lutheran mission pioneer during that half century, in reflecting on that current ecumenical consensus term: Missio Dei. From my meanderings in the missiological world I learn that Missio Dei is a term everyone agrees on across the ecumenical spectrum, at least, from Anabaptists to Roman Catholics. I sensed that my friend, committed to Missio Dei himself, was urging its centrality for the mission endeavor for two reasons.

1. It already had such ecumenical consensus.
2. Focusing on it we can avoid the denominational smorgasbord.

But I also know from hobnobbing among the missiologists for a couple of decades that after a bit of consensus conversation on Missio Dei [it includes both evangelism and social ministry] differences appear, usually congruent to the theological traditions the conversationalists are coming from.

On that phone call, I even asked whether Lutherans, conscious of their root heritage as he was, should so nimbly appropriate such a term. Granted, who can be “agin” Missio Dei? But then I asked: shouldn’t Lutherans in such missiology-confabs be asking another question in Missio Dei discussions. Namely, Which one? And that’s not meant as which one—Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, Roman? But “which one of GOD’S OWN TWO missions in the world?” I didn’t go back to the 16th century reformers to validate the question, but to Paul’s frequent utterances in the NT about God’s own double work in the world. At the moment that was too

much for my friend at the other end, and I think my patent Lutheran hermeneutic [bias?] surfacing here looked to him like the ghost of the denominational smorgasbord he found so miscreant.

I went to St. Paul, I imagine, because I'd just been reading the opening chapters of II Corinthians for my own devotions. In the classic chapter 3 Paul uses interchangeably the Greek terms "diatheke" [regularly translated "covenant"] and "diakonia" ["dispensation" in the RSV, "ministry" in the NRSV]. His main point, however, when using either term, is that God's got TWO covenants operating in our one world, or again, that God's got TWO dispensations/ministries in force in our one world. Since the term "mission" is hard to find in English Bible translations—e.g., never ever present in the KJV—I propose that these two Greek terms are useable for mission-talk.

But then we've got to parse the singular Missio Dei term into a plural, into its two scriptural-texted realities, and ask: What is God doing in the one "mission," and what in the other "mission," and then where/how do human agents (missionaries? missioners?) get into the operations? You can't simply say: Missio Dei is all just one ball of wax with two major components, perhaps, social ministry and Gospel-proclamation. Not if Paul has his way. For the dynamic duo that Paul is talking about cannot be yin-yanged together. They are not two sides of the same coin. They are antitheses. When one prevails, the other is eliminated. One is a "mission that kills." The other mission "gives life." And both of them, says Paul, are God's missions—one God's "mission of condemnation," the other God's "mission of righteousness."

So it seems to me that despite its wide-spread popularity in current mission rhetoric, "Missio Dei" needs some work. And yes, that will get us tangled into a similar debate that surfaced at

the time of the Reformation. Is God's operation, the *Missio Dei*, in the world fundamentally univocal? Namely, that wherever God's mission is in action, that mission is fundamentally God adding "grace" to "nature" in order to bring not-yet-perfected nature to its intended fullness? So said the Roman critics of the Augsburg Confession.

Or is God's operation in the world a doublet? Is God ambidextrous, with God's two hands on two different missions? That's what the Augsburg Confessors heard not only Paul saying, but the whole of the scriptures. In one of Luther's Table-talk comments he says of his discovery—what God is doing in Moses is one thing, and what God is doing in Christ is something else—"that was my breakthrough!"

This "doublet" hermeneutic of the Augsburg Confessors was not only their lens for reading the Bible, it was also their lens for reading the world, better, for reading what God is doing in the world. In short, for God's two missions in the world. Many of you readers will already have sniffed "two kingdom" theology coming through these paragraphs above. And even though "two kingdoms" gets a bad rap from some folks—some Lutherans included—its foundations are NT texts such as cited above, not Reformation theology. And if God really does have two missions going in our one world, don't we have to work that out in order to articulate mission strategy, mission praxis for today? I think so. Granted I haven't done it in these paragraphs. My point is that even if we eschew the term "Lutheran missiology," this is what Lutherans ought to be inserting in today's mission dialogue.

I think this double-lens, bifocal, hermeneutic—both for reading the Bible and for reading the world—has consequences for key topics on today's missiological agenda.

Just one example: Gospel and culture.

Cultus is the root word of the term culture, and we should not ignore that. Thus we always need to ask what is the “other” Gospel, the other worship, the other cult, already operating in any given culture. [That includes the other gospels in Western culture too.] The Gospel’s new wine anticipates finding cultural wineskins on hand already containing other wines. No wonder Jesus called for “new skins” for his “new wine.” Paul apparently bumped into this in Galatia, and his epistle to the Galatians is one resource for coping with this.

Even more, coming from the bi-focal hermeneutic proposed above, we need to ask what God is doing in that culture, God’s left-hand mission Luther called it, before God’s right-handed operation ever intersects the culture?

Crossings colleague Bob Bertram once wrote a missiological piece specifying the TWO gaps that needed bridging in Christian mission. One he called the “horizontal gap”—getting the Good News from its originating place to a new destination where it hasn’t been before. Nowadays that’s called the culture-gap, I sense. Plenty of work needed on that agenda, no question. But then Bob saw a second gap, beyond the “gospel and culture” gap.

That other one Bob called the “vertical gap.” This gap, he said, yawns when the culture gap has finally been bridged, when the Gospel has gotten across the horizontal bridge. The vertical gap is the gap of sheer unbelief, which finds God’s Gospel simply unbelievable. Its news is too good to be true—or too scandalous—or too demeaning—or too “whatever”—to the ears and hearts of folks who think they have managed well enough with the “other gospels” they already have. In Bob’s own words, “the perennial and universal gap of an unbelief which is scandalized by the gospel. That credibility gap, even more oppressively than the horizontal gap of historical [and cultural] distance,

afflicts Christ's mission wherever and whenever it touches the world."

Bob then walks the reader through the Lutheran paradigm for bridging THAT gap. [Who says the Luth. confessions have no mission theology!?] Of course, it is replete with Pauline theology too, but also from St. John and the rest of the scriptures. And then he concludes with this:

"The upshot is that unbelief, the unbelief of the vertical gap, is taken with full seriousness. For after all, it really is incredible—indeed it is humanly impossible to believe—that the itinerant, first-century rabbi would 'need' to go to such lengths [sc. cross and resurrection] to achieve the merciful mission of God toward us. But once that is believed, as again and again it is, the believer can assimilate also the law [sc. God's other "mission" in 2 Cor. 3 & passim], can take its criticism, and can even profit from it, advancing its commendable good work in society. Still 'law' is always only proximate to Scripture's distinctive 'promise.' And only the promise, finally, is the solvent of the world's hard unbelief."Promissio" [promise] is the secret of "missio" [mission]. For the mission's Sender was Himself the keeping of the promise. And the mission's gaps, across which we move with our theological doings, are ultimately spanned by that same promise—of Himself by the Spirit through the Word."

Peace & Joy!

Ed