Lutheran Missiology — An Oxymoron? Maybe Not — Especially, Not Now.

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WHERE ARE WE?

1. If 9-11-2001 was the "Endofawayoflife Day" [*Martin Marty's term*] in the USA, then the context for Christian mission in our own land has changed.

2. But America's civil religion has not changed. Tuesday brought no endofawayoflife to our civil religion. On the contrary. The "other" gospel of Americanism, so far, dominates public theological rhetoric. From Christian voices too. God-talk, yes, but the god-talk of "Rotary Club religion," as Dick Lyon calls it. Its gospel proclaims: The USA is God's choice. Its anthem: God Bless America [GBA].

3. For us at this consultation—ten days after 9.11—this is OUR mission field. These fields are "white unto harvest"—also within America's Christian churches, especially within them. There too "other" gospels abound, and especially a in these past days, the bland/blind gospel of GBA.

4. The Time Magazine special, in the main article, starts out something like this: "If you want to bring dishonor to a major

power, you would want to attack their cathedrals." Perceptive. Yet even with two cathedrals to the honor of America—money and the military [M&M]—in ruins, there's scant Christian witness, Christian mission, to bring the Word of God to us in this apocalyptic context.

5. This M&M gospel of America is not confined to our shores. We know that. This M&M gospel has its own massive mission program. Like the old Sherwin-Williams paint logo, it covers the earth. So Christian mission vis-a-vis this "other gospel" here at home has links globally to Christian mission elsewhere.

6. Jesus' first words in Mark's Gospel (1:15) are a mission text for such a time as this: "The make-or-break moment [*the Greek word is "kairos"*] is here. King God is at the gates. Repent and believe the Good News."

7. Christian mission to America, surely after 9-11-2001 (before too, of course) is a double mission call. It is a mission call to "repent" and also to "believe the Good News." [*If the sequence of the two imperatives Jesus uses here has a familiar ring for Lutheran ears— first listen hard to God our critic, then listen hard and trust God's Good News—don't be surprised. That's where Luther got it.*]

8. Where does the first of that double mission imperative get any serious attention in today's missiological world? I'm an amateur among the missiologists, but I've been around, and I've not seen it get any serious billing anywhere. So we might be starting from our own ground zero when we ask: How to move into Christian mission focused also on repentance—even first of all on repentance? That is the question, isn't it, for mission strategy, mission theology, after last week Tuesday? Christian mission to America is first of all a call to repentance. It probably always has been. How directly have we ever addressed

that? And even when we do, how do you do that? How to promote the penultimate mission “repent” so that it opens people to the ultimate mission goal “believe the Good News”? That is the question.

9. The addressee for such mission is not initially the “others” in our six-billion world, nor the millions of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists now in our land (though they might well need it just like the rest of us). The addressees we know the best are the mostly church- going folks of our American context—including our born-again national president—who are hooked on the Gospel of God-Bless-America, an “other” Gospel for sure.

USING REFORMATION HERMENEUTICS IN TODAY’S MISSION CONVERSATION

10. One part of our mission calling is “deconstructing” the theology of the Gospel of GBA. Back to the 16th century. The Reformers identified the false gospel dominant in their culture as semi-pelagianism: We do our part and God gives his grace and salvation happens. That is not without analogy to the “other” gospel fundamental to GBA religion in our land. But before going into that, let’s take a look at the way the Reformers pursued their mission in articulating Mark 1:15 for their day. From them we can find help for our own.

11. Fundamental to Reformation enterprise was the Reformers’ own new hermeneutics. A new way of reading the Bible, and subsequently of reading the world, especially, the religious world of the late Holy Roman Empire. So it is not Reformation doctrine or theology, but Reformation hermeneutics that I want to highlight.

12. When someone once asked Luther where his new hermeneutic came from, he told about an “Aha!” that came when for the

umpteenth time he was reading Romans 1:16/17. “Up till that time in my lectures on the Bible I knew I had my finger on something important, but I was not clear about just what it was. When reading those Romans texts again, something happened. Romans 1:17 says: ‘The one who is righteous by faith shall live.’ Romans 1:16 says: ‘The Gospel is God’s own righteousness. It is revealed through faith.’ I connected the two: God’s own righteousness [*=the ‘abstract’ righteousness in God himself*] and the ‘concrete’ righteousness of people who trust the Gospel to see that they were the same thing.

That discovery was my Aha. Before it happened I had never made any distinction between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I considered Moses (the law) and Christ (the gospel) to be of the same. The only difference, I thought, was that Moses was farther back in history and not so complete, while Christ was closer to us in time and 100% complete, but the substance of both was the same. But when I discovered the distinction [*Latin: discrimen*] that the law is one thing, and the Gospel is something else—that was my breakthrough! [*Da riss ich herdurch*.]” [*Original in WA TR V. 5518. English text above is my translation.]*

13. I’m proposing that ML’s breakthrough was not primarily doctrinal, but hermeneutical. It was a new pair of glasses for reading the Bible, very different from the standard medieval hermeneutic he’d been using before.

14. The reigning theological hermeneutic of medieval theology was not the distinction between God’s law and God’s gospel. It was rather the distinction between nature and grace. The axiom was “gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit.” [*Grace does not remove (or abolish) nature, but brings it to perfection*.] The reformers replaced that axiom for reading the Bible, and then for doing theology, with a law and Gospel—aka law and

promise–paradigm. They eventually claimed that it had much better Biblical warrant than nature/grace did. Even more, that it was the Bible's own hermeneutic. That had to have consequences when they talked about mission–despite Gustav Warneck's claim (and Carl Braaten's curious agreement with him) that mission was the "great omission" of the Lutheran Reformation.

15. I'm largely ignorant of whether (any? many?) Lutheran mission theologians have taken this Reformation "new hermeneutic" as the linchpin for doing mission work, or missiological work. Seems to me that Phillip Huber's 1992 essay "Recapturing Luther's Mission Theology" does just that. There may be more, many more.

16. From my own exposure of 20-plus years in the American Society of Missiology and its international counterpart, the International Association for Mission Studies, it seems to me that the nature/grace paradigm still dominates in ecumenical mission theology. Not only among Roman Catholics (where you'd not be surprised to find it), but also among non-Romans. The fundamental differences between nature/grace missiologists across the ecumenical spectrum surface when they discuss how much turf to grant to "nature," and subsequently how much is needed from "grace" to get that nature perfected.

17. But the Reformers had an alternate paradigm. My own teensy-weensy pursuit of that paradigm in Luther's own mission theology has led to two brief articles. One on Luther's sermons on the Great Commission (Mark's version thereof), the other on his surprising conclusion about world religions in his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism. [*Crossings web page www.crossings.org ThTh#119 for the first; and the journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology, "Missio Apostolica," 7:1 (May 1999) for the second*.]

18. I want to illustrate this Lutheran law/promise hermeneutic in considering two popular themes in today's world-wide missiology. One is the term "Missio Dei" [God's Mission]. The other is the "Gospel and Culture" program.

19. Missio Dei is a term widely used, and universally approved, across the ecumenical spectrum from Anabaptists to Roman Catholics. But from hobnobbing among the missiologists for a couple of decades I've learned that after a bit of consensus conversation on Missio Dei, differences appear, usually congruent to the theological traditions the conversationalists come from.

In discussing Missio Dei the Lutheran law/promise axiom asks: which one of God's two "missions" in the world are we discussing? I discussed, no, debated, this recently with a Lutheran missions pro. 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*]. Paul's 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 these two Greek terms for NT mission-talk.

But then we've got to parse the singular term "Missio Dei" 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 silenced. 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 ambi-dextrous,with two hands on two different missions? That's what the Augsburg Confessors heard not only Paul saying, but the whole of the scriptures. Luther's Table-talk comment above claims that what God is doing in Moses is one thing, and what God is doing in Christ is something else. "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 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—and it has suffered debilitating permutations—the Reformers found it in the Bible and found it fundamental there. They didn't invent it. If God really does have two missions going in our one world,

don’t we have to work that out in our missiology? I think so. Granted I haven’t done it in these paragraphs. My point is that this is what Lutherans ought to be inserting in today’s ecumenical mission dialogue. Isn’t that the same doublet expressed in Jesus’ double imperative: Repent and trust the Good News? I think so.

20. Using law/promise graph-paper when considering “Gospel and Culture.” Cultus is the root term in 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. [*E.g., the GBA gospel in American culture.*] 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.” Pouring the Gospel’s new wine into a culture’s old wine skins does not come on high recommendation. In our own USA, where the GBA Gospel now overwhelms us, the old wineskins and old wine of our cultural religion triumph. The new wine that Christians have sought to pour into those old skins goes into the sand.

The repentance piece of the double mission imperative is a call to abandon the old wineskins and the wine in them. To “trust the Good News” is to grasp the new skins and savor the new wine.

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 horizontal culture gap has finally been bridged.

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. Bob calls this "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 vertical gap and he concludes with this: "The upshot is that unbelief, the unbelief of the vertical gap, is taken with full seriousness. [*Call it repentance*.] 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."

21. Summa. Mark 1:15 urges a two-stage mission agenda for the world. Among us mission types we need a "Repentance and Culture" task force to work alongside the "Gospel and Culture" task

force. That would be one way, I suggest, to bring a Lutheran hermeneutic into today’s ecumenical mission enterprise. For USA Christians, the Pogo-ism is true: the mission field is us.

LutheranMissiology (PDF)