

# Lutheranism's Crying Need: A Mission Theology for the 21st Century

*Luther's Own Mission Theology—Contemporary Lutheranism's Best-Kept Secret*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Since Warneck (1892), Luther's own theology has been ignored as a resource for the church's mission. Yet, growing Lutheran churches like the Ethiopian EECMY point to the "evangelisch" Gospel foundation for their growth, reminding that the true Gospel is proclaimed over-and-against "other" competing gospels in Luther's understanding. As much as Luther critiqued mono-covenantal theologies in his day, we need to reword for our time the "missio Dei" as a double mission of God, distinguishing Moses and Christ (John) and/or "law and promise" (Paul) to interpret God's two-handed mission operation to the world. To articulate this theology, Luther's rich word pictures of (1) "missio" as "promissio"; (2) promise pebble-dropping; (3) the Gospel as a "Platzregen" ("Thunderstorm"); (4) the Gospel's "Froelicher Wechsel" ("Joyous Exchange"); and, (5) the notion of the "Deus Absconditus" ("Hidden God") can provide vast resources for the church's mission understanding today. (Stephen C. Krueger)*

Ever since Gustav Warneck decreed that Luther had no mission theology (1892), Luther has been generally ignored, considered irrelevant, in ecumenical mission discussions. Also, sadly, among Lutheran missiologists. Too bad. Big mistake. Simply stated: Luther saw 16th century Europe—though perhaps already 99% “churched” (as we say today) – as a mission field.

The conference theme is THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF LUTHERAN CHURCHES: TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES TODAY.

My thesis is: If there is to be any future for LUTHERAN CHURCHES on into the 21st century, the primal place where TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES are called for is in Lutheran Mission Theology and Practice.

In the “theology and life of Lutheran churches,” neither in Europe nor in my North American homeland are there many signs that this is happening. Mission programs, evangelism programs, renewal proposals abound, but as an ELCA missiologist—one who DOES know what Lutheran mission theology really is—recently said of the mission program in his own denomination: “it is a program without a Lutheran theology, possibly without a theology at all.”

The most obvious place where “transformative perspectives and practices” within Lutheranism are occurring, as LWF publications inform us, is in the Horn of Africa, in the EECMY—Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Here is an LWF member church without even the word Lutheran in its name, but instead the “old” word for Lutheran, “evangelical.” Which signals what mission is all about—The Evangel, the Good News. More about this below.

Listen first to this EECMY report of February 26, 2009. Talk about “transformative perspectives and practices!”

Dear Friends in Christ,

We are filled with joy as the Lord has continued His mighty work of salvation amongst us during the last few months where thousands of people came to the knowledge of Christ in the course of the 50th Jubilee celebration of the establishment of the EECMY as a national church and its 10th birth anniversary. The one month evangelism campaign which was the main part of the celebration has caused the sharing of the Gospel to about 370,000 new people and the salvation of about 185, 000 people nationwide. While most members of the church have participated in sharing the Good News with those who did not heard it yet, students are the ones who played the greatest role. Since the outreach effort has continued in some synods exact figure will be known as soon as information reaches us. For me, this was the crown event as it holds the real meaning of 50th Jubilee in line with the idea of freedom of slaves in the Old Testament. The other part of the celebration was where missionaries of past and present were recognized in a celebration held at the national convention center. The jubilee celebration was finally concluded with a grand dinner where senior government officials were invited including the president of Ethiopia, Girma W/Giorgis. On this occasion the Word of God is read and songs were sung which might be the first opportunity for most of the senior government officials including the president to hear the Gospel in such a way. The evening also marked the recognition of some celebrities in the church's life and ministry where medals, titles and prizes were awarded.

Yours in His service,  
Dinku Lamessa Bato  
National Coordinator  
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[EECMY membership makes it the 2nd largest church in world Lutheranism—over five million members in last year's listing by the LWF from 20,000 of fifty years ago. Second only to the 6 million reported by the Lutheran church of Sweden.]

Lutheran = "evangelisch." It's all about the Gospel. So said the Augsburg Confessors—here in this very city 479 yrs ago. It's all about the Gospel, and the Gospel's own movement into and around the world. But for Lutheran theology, that always raises the question: Which Gospel? For already in the N.T. "other" gospels arose to supplant the genuine one. Many of the NT "books" are reports about differing gospels in conflict in the very first generation of Christ-confessors, the first Christian congregations that ever existed. Has it been any different throughout church history? Is it any different now? Gerhard Ebeling's memorable word about church history is applicable here: "Church history is the history of conflict in Biblical interpretation." And at the center of that variety of Biblical interpretation are varying answers to the question: Just what is THE Gospel?

If "Lutherisch" = "evangelisch," a particular notion of Gospel, how does that link to Mission?

Martin Luther's thesis about missions—if he had had one—would be this: "A mission field is anywhere that 'other gospels' are being proclaimed and trusted." Christian mission is offering—N.B. this verb—the genuine Gospel to replace the "other" ones.

Therefore, Luther's mission field was the church and world of the Holy Roman Empire of his day. Is our day any different? Where are "other gospels" to be found in our day? As much inside our churches as out there in the "secular" world. Not much different from what was confessed here in Augsburg on June 25, 1530.

A spinoff from that gospel-focus is Luther's critique of the mono-covenantal theology in his day, which claimed that everything God is doing in the world is all of one piece, fundamentally grace (according to the ancient scholastic axiom of "God's grace perfecting nature"). We need to reword Luther's proposal for our own time vis-à-vis the *missio-Dei* mantra that has dominated Roman and protestant missiology since the Willingen mission conference in 1952.

Last month I was interviewed on Luther's "mission theology" by Nelson Jennings, the editor of *MISSIOLOGY*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. Our "conversation" is scheduled to be published in the April 2009 issue of the journal. Here's the give and take.

Jennings said: **Let's follow this train of thought a bit. *Missio Dei* has been a central missiological concept for at least several decades. In your writings about Luther's mission-theology you have advocated speaking of *duplex missio Dei*. Would you mind encapsulating what you mean by this "Double Mission of God" metaphor?**

My response: "Mission" is not a common term in the writings of the Reformers. No surprise: the vocabulary for their theology comes from the Bible, where the word "mission" is not to be found. The term came into Christian vocabulary from European political and military colonialism in the post-Reformation era. But if Martin Luther had used that term – designating what God's project was in and for God's creation – he would have identified God's two missions in the world. And that duplex mission – God's two different projects in the one creation – he found spelled out in the Gospel of John and the letters of St. Paul, the two heavyweight theologians of the NT.

**Jennings: Keep going.**

In the Gospel of John it comes already in the Prologue: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Both Moses and Jesus were clearly God's agents, God's "missioners," but their missions were different. In Paul's epistles those two very different missions (Moses' and Christ's, "law and promise" in Paul's vocabulary), both coming from one and the same God, surface frequently, especially in Romans and Galatians. In 2 Cor. 3-5 he spells them out – and also details the differences. Here he uses two different words, each of which is his synonym for what we mean today by God's mission. One is "ministry" (*diakoonia*, in Greek). God has two of these, two different diaconates, operating in the world. The other synonym for what we today call mission is "covenant" (*diatheke*, in Greek). God has two covenants, two different covenants, functioning among humankind. Paul's predicates to each of these two missions are well known. One is letter, one Spirit. One brings death, one gives life. One has modest glory, one has glory "beyond all measure." One finally fades away, one lasts forever. When these two missions connect with people, one is Bad News, one Good News. For in one "God counts trespasses," while in the other "God is in Christ reconciling sinners unto himself, NOT counting trespasses."

**Jennings: And the connection with today's understanding of mission?**

What we today understand as Christ's mission mandate is clearly the second one. But if we forget, or ignore, the prior one, as God's own mission from which the Christ-mission sets us free, then our gospel is too small. Gospels that are "too small" are finally "other Gospels," and not the Good News intended for all humankind from the crucified and risen Messiah.

**Jennings: So in light of your explanation of how the phrase *missio Dei* risks misrepresenting the gospel, should**

**missiologists continue to use the phrase but with explanation, discard it altogether (and use, for example, *duplex missio Dei*), or what?**

Labels such as *missio dei* or *duplex missio dei* are not unimportant, but more important, of course, in human language is what metaphors point to. So in order to point to God's two operations in this one world of His – that doubleness pointed out by St. John in his prologue and Paul's frequent references to God's two ministries, two covenants – we could stick with *missio Dei* and add "duplex." Thus we missiologists could work out the implications of God's *duplex missio* in scripture, in mission history and for our 21st century. But that's still Latin, of course, nobody's native language today. So why not come up with something in English, the *lingua franca* (sic!) of today's ecumenical missiology?

**To wit?**

Well, why not go back to the Bible? Classic for some of us are Luther's own favorite biblical terms for this *duplex missio*, God's left hand work and God's right hand work. Metaphors, of course. Same one and only God, but different works done with the differing hands. God's right-hand mission is centered in the One who now "sits at the right hand of God the Father," Christ the world's redeemer. That's God's salvation work from way back at the beginning of the Old Testament culminating in Christ and continuing right on up to the *parousia*. God's left-hand mission is all the other works of God that preserve and continue creation, protect it from total destruction, hold us humans accountable as caretakers of that creation, but do not (yet) turn sinners into Christ-trusters.

**What about language for non-Lutherans in our American Society of Missiology?**

If my suggestions are “too Lutheran,” then back to St. John’s “Moses and Christ” in his prologue, or St. Paul and his use of the umbrella terms “law” for God’s left-hand agenda and “promise”

for God’s salvific work of his right hand. In his major epistles – Romans, Corinthians, Galatians – this law/promise duplex is Paul’s blueprint for articulating God’s duplex mission and message to the whole world. We could even appropriate that line from the American folk-hymn as our missiological mantra: “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” But then always add: “Yes, both of them!”

End of that conversation.

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Luther’s journey to becoming a mission theologian was his journey as a reformer. It began with his “Aha!” about the gospel and that began with his “Aha!” about how to read the scriptures in a manner very different from that of his own prior scholastic theological formation. He speaks of it in Tischreden (Table Talk) 5518 as a breakthrough. After describing his “old” way of reading and teaching the Bible, using the ancient “nature and grace” paradigm, he relates his discovery of the “discrimen inter legem et euangelium.” “Aber do ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud euangelium, da riss ich her durch.” “Durchreissen” equals a breakthrough. From this breakthrough followed not only the new evangelical catholic theology, but also a new evangelical missiology.

Strangely, perhaps, is how his mission theology surfaces in the many sermons he preached on Ascension Day, taking the lectionary gospel for that day (Mark 16) and ringing the changes on Mark’s version of the Great Commission.

Several of Luther’s “signature” expressions–bons mots that have



become standard lingo in Lutheran theology— emerge from these sermons (also in other of his works) to help us articulate his mission theology: First off is the overarching rubric “The secret of Missio is Promissio.” In addition these metaphor/word-pictures: Pebble, Platzregen (thundershower), Froehlicher Wechsel (joyful exchange—in American slang “a sweet swap”), and Deus Absconditus (God hidden).

I wish to present these terms to whatever audience I have at Augsburg and discuss with these colleagues the mission-theology resources they offer.

### **1. The secret of Missio is Promissio.**

The Gospel is a promise. This is axiomatic in Lutheran confessional theology. What understanding of mission arises when you begin with this axiom? A fuller treatment of that axiom can be found on the Crossings web site at <<https://crossings.org/archive/bob/DoingTheologyinMission.pdf>>

Relevance today. We witness today the worldwide failure of mega-promises. Promises which people by the millions (billions?) loved and trusted. The promise of communism disintegrated when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. The promise of capitalism collapsed when Wall Street fell in 2008. The former is now acknowledged by all, the latter by hardly any. We live in the illusion (so Parker Palmer), the deceit (so Walt Brueggemann) that green paper—with “images” printed on it— can save us. Before long capitalism’s empty promise will be evident to all. Needed—also within the churches where Christians too are despairing (without hope) vis-a-vis capitalism’s Humpty-dumpty fall (even while they, and world leaders too, still hope in it)—is a trustworthy promise. Trustworthy promise? Thought you’d never ask!

### **2. The Gospel as God’s promise-pebble dropping into a pool.**

Luther compared God's promise in Christ to a pebble, a promise-pebble, dropped into the pond of our world. Like all pebbles, it produces a ripple effect that moves out on its own from the very power of the gospel-pebble itself. Luther articulates his notion of mission expansion from this image. It is the energy within the gospel itself which moves out into the world. The ripple-effect shows up in the most surprising places, where mission executives haven't done any planning at all. E.g., today in the People's Republic of China. Or Ethiopia.

**Relevance:** Instead of "planning" mission programs, Christians are encouraged to see where the ripples are already on the move (possibly in the EECMY today)—and then join in there to "ride the waves."

### **3. Platzregen. The gospel is a moving thundershower.**

In the gospel Platzregen, the Holy "Gust" (sic!) moves the rain cloud of Gospel-promise—as Augsburg Confession 5 says— "ubi et quando visum est deo" – where and when God wills. Yes, humans are agents in God's Platzregen operation, but clearly secondary agents, mostly to divine where the Platzregen—on its own—is moving and then get themselves wet in the enterprise.

**Relevance:** Could help us understand the shrinking numbers in church membership statistics in the USA—even in the US Roman church at last count. At times Luther spoke of the negative side of the Platzregen-image, namely, God moving it away from lands where it bore no fruit. One such example is from 1520.

"I consider that Germany has never before heard so much of God's Word as now. There is no trace of it in history. But if we let it pass by without thanks and honor, I am afraid that we shall have to suffer plague and grimmer darkness. My dear Germans, buy while the mart is at your door; gather in while the sun is shining and the weather good, make use of God's Word of Grace

while it is there. For know this, that the Word of God's grace is like a sweeping downpour, which never returns to where it has already been. It has visited the Jews; but it has gone. Now they have nothing. Paul brought it to Greece; from there it has also gone. Now they have the Turks. Rome and the Latin lands have had their visitation; but it has gone. Now they have the Pope. And you Germans must not think that you will have it for ever, for it will not stay where there is ingratitude and contempt. Therefore, let all take hold and keep hold who can." (*To the Councilors of all German cities, that they should establish and maintain Christian Schools, 1520.*)

Further thoughts on Luther's Pebble and Platzregen as mission metaphors can be found at:  
<<https://crossings.org/thursday/2006/thur033006.shtml>>  
<<https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur071008.shtml>>

**4. Froehlicher Wechsel** (joyful exchange—in American slang “a sweet swap”).

This was Luther's metaphor for two passages in St. Paul's writings where the apostle portrays the event of Calvary and Easter as an exchange. In 2 Corinthians 5 our sins get transferred to Christ and Christ's righteousness gets transferred to us. In Galatians 3 it is the sinner's curse and Christ's blessedness that get exchanged.

**Relevance:** At last summer's quadrennial meeting of the International Association for Mission Studies, the international missiological guild, 140 participants from nearly 50 countries gathered in Hungary to discuss the theme “The Gospel of Reconciliation and Human Identity.” The fundamental Biblical text was Paul's classic in 2 Cor. 5. But here the participants parted. Some read the text as blueprint for “the ministry of reconciliation,” the clearly yet-to-be-fulfilled task of

intrahuman reconciliation, establishing peace and justice within the human race. Others saw the “ministry of reconciliation” as the unfinished task of getting humankind reconciled to God. For patently even though Christ’s saving work is full and complete, vast swathes of humanity are not yet trusting it and thus not yet enjoying it.

Which version of the “ministry of reconciliation” is our Christian mission agenda for the 21st century? That was the question. Not only among the alleged “experts” at IAMS in Hungary in August 2008, but throughout the worldwide church.

In my contribution to the conversation I offered Luther’s case for mission as the not-yet-finished task of getting sinners reconciled to God, and sought to show its relevance to the chaotic world of the beginning of the 21st century. Its internet location is <https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur062608.shtml>

## **5. Deus Absconditus** (God hidden).

At the end of his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: “These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites – 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, and 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.” [Book of Concord. Kolb-Wengert, edd., p. 440 (66)]

[German text: “Daruemb scheiden und sondern diese Artikel des Glaubens uns Christen von allen andern Leuten auf Erden. Denn

was ausser der Christenheit ist, es seien Heiden, Tuerken, Jueden oder falsche Christen und Heuchler, ob sie gleich nur einen wahrhaftigen Gott glaeuben und anbeten, so wissen sie doch nicht, was [wie] er gegen ihn gesinnet ist, koennen sich auch keiner Liebe noch Guts zu ihm versehen, daruemb sie in ewigen Zorn und Verdammnis bleiben. Denn sie den Herrn Christum nicht haben, dazu mit keinen Gaben durch den heiligen Geist erleuchtet und begnadet sind.”]

**Relevance:** Luther’s concept of deus absconditus, humankind’s common experience of “Godhidden” – in contrast to deus revelatus, “God-revealed-in-Christ” – is a fundamental resource for engaging people of other faiths—both the secular faiths regnant in the West and people of other world religions.

In the citation above Luther expresses one aspect of his “deus absconditus” understanding. All people do encounter God in daily life. Granted, that is a Christian conviction. God is NOT totally hidden from anybody. But what is hidden in humankind’s common experience of God is “what his attitude is toward them.” And thus, Luther concludes, “they cannot be confident of his love and blessing,” which leaves only one alternative, “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.” “Having Christ” is Luther’s other favored expression (other than “fiducia”) for what faith is. Faith is “having Christ.” Which brings to mind Luther’s maxim: “Glaubstu, hastu. Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.”

This notion of what humans “have” and “don’t have” when they have only deus absconditus encounters to go on, is absent in today’s mission discussions, so far as I know. It is a unique resource from Luther for Christian mission in today’s manifold “world of faiths” – especially to Muslims. [For more on this see “Using Luther’s Concept of Deus absconditus for Christian

Mission to Muslims” on the Crossings website  
<[www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)>]

Can Luther help us Christ-confessors—not just Lutheran folks, but across the ecumenical spectrum—respond to Christ’s Easter-evening Gospel-imperative “as the Father has sent me, so I send you”?

I think so.

Does Christian mission have any future in our “Apocalypse Now” world in the “sea of faiths” of the 21st century? Well, there is this: We have this promise. God did drop the pebble into this very sea and the ripples are showing up on distant shores. Christ still offers the joyful exchange. The Platzregen is still “platzing” on our planet. In Christ God continues to uncover his hidden face in people’s lives. What are we waiting for?

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