

Luther's Missiology. A Conference Paper

Colleagues: Here's the current shape of the text for a presentation I'm to make in August at IAMS XII. That's the 12th every-four-years conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, this year meeting in Budapest. Marie and I have been to the last eight, beginning with Bangalore in 1982. Every now and then I speak up, sometimes on invitation. This year I got an invitation. Take a look at it and let me know if you have thoughts to make it better.

*Peace & Joy,
Ed Schroeder*

Conference Theme: "The Gospel of Reconciliation and Human Identity: Mission Theology for the 21st Century."

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Title: Luther's Theology of Reconciliation and Identity: Mission Theology for the 21st Century.

Part I

Luther a Mission Theologian? Yes, Indeed. "Reconciliation" at the Center of his Mission Theology

Ever since Gustav Warneck declared that Luther had no mission theology (1892), Luther has had a bad rap among 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, HIS mission field, by the “accident” of God having placed him in the middle of it.

Now that 21st-century Europe—as once-upon-a-time “churched,” but now no longer— is patently a mission field, Luther is a resource not to be spurned in today’s mission to the formerly-Christian western world.

For Luther it was not widespread atheism nor the presence of European Muslims that identified Europe, or any land, as a field for Christian mission. With his reformation “Aha!” came the realization that a mission field is any place where people are trusting “other” gospels, that is, gospels clearly different from the Christ-gospel proclaimed in the New Testament scriptures. Today no one disputes that Islam, for instance, regardless of any further evaluation, is indeed an “other” gospel.

Luther came to see that alternate gospels were in circulation inside (not outside) the Christian church of his day. Is it any different today? He knew them well, for they had shaped his own piety and theology into the third decade of his life. But these alternate “Christian” gospels, as he came to see, were neither as “good” nor as “new” as the Christ-gospel at the center of the Christian scriptures. So for the “Reformer-years” of Luther’s life he understood himself as a missionary, a missionary “inside” the Christian church, inside the “Holy” Roman Empire. St. Paul’s term about an “other gospel” regnant in his Galatian Christian congregation became Luther’s term for the same phenomenon in his Latin Christian homeland.

Yes, in his day, apart from Jews in Europe, all were baptized, and most all doubtless would have confessed faith in God. Christ too would not be absent from the confession. But Luther

addressed that faith-in-God, even faith-in-Christ, among his fellow baptized by pushing (first of all within himself) to hear what gospel they actually trusted when making their God-and-Christ confession.

Such a probe was already a move away from understanding the Christian faith as what you believed in your head or the rituals you practiced. It focused on what you trusted in the heart – from the cerebral to the visceral. Better said, to the “cardiac,” the Scriptural metaphor of the human heart. “Fear, love, trust” became Luther’s verbs of the heart for what believing meant. Yes, even “fear” since fear was negative trust. His folksy metaphor for faith in God was “what you hang your heart on.” And we all know from our own hearts that fear, too, is a heart-hanger.

And those three verbs applied to all “faiths,” also those beyond the Christian realm. His Biblical studies and his own experience convinced Luther that every human heart “hangs” on some experienced (or imagined) resource/power “to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.” Explicitly moving away from thoughts of God in our heads, he says: “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, your real God.”

The “Aha!” about the Christ-gospel and hearts hanging on it was “*evangelium est promissio*.” The Christ-gospel is a promise, not a doctrine, a promise from God. All promises—Christ’s too—don’t “work” just because they are held to be true and given assent. No, all promises, both human and divine, call for trust. They only “work” to benefit the promisee when trusted. Promises untrusted are wasted promises. Only when trusted (= *sola fide*, by faith alone) do promises come true when offered. [That’s what the Lutheran *sola fide* mantra is all about.]

When placed alongside this Christ-promise, the alternate gospels within the church of their day, so Luther and his fellow reformers, were “semi-Pelagian.” That was a reference back to ancient Christian “heretic” Pelagius, who contended that genuinely serious people could work out their own salvation with no need of God’s grace at all. He granted that such self-savers were rare, but it was not impossible.

The semi-Pelagian variation was “semi” of that, a half-and-half gospel where “if / when you do your half, God’s grace will do the other half” for your salvation. The medieval mantra for this was “*facere quod in se est*” [you do what you are able to do] and then the grace of God, rewarding you for that effort, does the rest. Despite its manifold variations, that half-Pelagian axiom was an “other” gospel for the reformers. So their homeland was a mission field. The mission agenda: to supplant that gospel with Christ’s own “better” gospel, to move the already baptized who trusted the semi-Pelagian gospel to becoming the baptized who trusted the Christ-gospel “alone.”

The occasionally “extreme” rhetoric about this among the Lutheran reformers arose predominantly from pastoral experience. Semi-Pelagian gospels were not merely being promoted in much of church life, which was bad enough. But *horribile dictu*, in the parishes, in the confessional stalls, Pelagius’ promise (full or half) was being trusted far and wide among the parishioners. Ask a peasant what he was trusting when he purchased one of Tetzels’ indulgences, and he’d tell you.

The “missional theology” arising from this reformation heritage and practiced in the 16th century offers resources not to be spurned for mission in the 21st century. That is especially the case for the key terms of this year’s IAMS conference: Reconciliation and Human Identity. But before we get there, I

want to summarize these reformation theologoumena, the foundation for Luther's mission theology.

1. It is not theism, belief in God, that is the goal of Christian mission, but faith in the Christ gospel, humans "hanging their hearts" on God's promise in the crucified and risen Christ.
2. Everybody trusts some gospel in that everyone "hangs their heart" somewhere, and for many of us, we hang it in many different places, as we soon see when we review what it is, what ALL it is, that we fear, love, or trust – even in just one day! Atheists and nihilists and secularists are in their own way heart-hangers too.
3. The Christ gospel is a promise, not a "teaching." That, too, was a segment of the reformation "Aha!" for, because it is a promise, you don't accept and "believe" it in your head but you trust it, you hang your heart on it.
4. "Other" gospels are also promissory. The radical claim of the "Good News" promise is that it is both "good" and "new" in comparison with any other promise.
5. Going along with the promissory Gospel is the reformers' constant use of the verb "offer." The gospel is offered as a promise. It becomes effective, it achieves the goal intended by the promisor, when the offer is trusted. The reformation mantra "sola fide," by faith alone, is in a sense a no-brainer. Faith is trust, and promises only "work" when they are trusted. What gives faith its clout is not the strength of the person doing the trusting, but the power in the promise being trusted.
6. So what is that power in the promise being trusted? Luther's understanding of reconciliation is a good place to start.
7. [The missional element –the sending/moving out–of the Christ-promise, was seen by Luther as a "Platzregen," a

moving thunder-shower. In the Christ-promise Platzregen, God-in-Christ is the Holy Gust that moves the rain cloud “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. But the Platzregen metaphor goes beyond this paper.]

Part II

Luther a Mission Theologian starting with “Reconciliation” – for a Mission Theology for the 21st Century.

Were Luther to have encountered our modern mantra of Missio Dei, he’d probably have said “Good term, but only when you remember that Promissio Dei is the secret of Missio Dei. And if you’re holding a conference on Reconciliation and Human Identity, pay attention to this: Promissio is at the center of reconciliation. Promissio is what’s good and new in the Good News of reconciliation. Promissio generates what is “new” in human identities, namely, new faith, new hope, new love, new obedience, finally, a whole new creation.

We can start with the key verb “offer” mentioned above. The Christ-promise is an offer. One major NT metaphor for that offer is reconciliation.

Luther’s favored German term for “God reconciling the world unto himself in Christ” is “froehlicher Wechsel,” literally a “joyful exchange,” rendered into American English by my own teacher, the late Robert Bertram, as a “sweet swap.”

Early on (in Christian Freedom, 1520) Luther described it this way: “Faith unites the believing soul with Christ . . . so that

what belongs to Christ now belongs to the believing soul, and what belongs to the soul now belongs to Christ. Since Christ possesses every good and blessedness, these now belong to the soul. Since the soul is burdened with sin and wretchedness, these now become Christ's. Here now begins the joyful exchange [froehlicher Wechsel], and the struggle. When Christ . . . through the wedding-ring of faith, takes upon Himself the sins of the believing soul as though He had committed them, they must be swallowed up and drowned in Him. For his invincible righteousness is stronger than all sin. Thus the soul is cleansed from all sin, that is, because of her faith she is free and unhampered and endowed with the eternal righteousness of Christ, her bridegroom."

"Wechsel" is a word coming straight from the marketplace—the exchange of goods and services, buying and selling. In today's English that understanding of reconciliation is no longer common, though it does exist at the periphery as a commercial term. E.g., reconciling your bank statement with your checkbook, and reconciling accounts.

Today's use of reconciliation signals peace restored in the world of human conflict—"the exchange of hostility for a friendly relationship." [So even BDAG, 521 for the NT use of the term] But that does not capture enough of what Paul wants us to hear when he claims in the primal reconciliation text of the NT: "God was in Christ reconciling the world." As Paul interprets the God-in-Christ reconciliation he uses the marketplace meaning of the word. Yes, friendship does finally replace hostility, but that is not his point.

This God-in-Christ event is a more monumental, even more bizarre, exchange, namely, the sin of sinners being transferred to a sinless Christ and Christ's righteousness being transferred to very UNrighteous sinners. And God not only

approving the transaction, but initiating it. This reconciliation is just like a marketplace exchange where what was once the possession of one partner (e.g., Paul's handmade leather tent) becomes the possession of his customer, and the possession of the other exchange partner (e.g., Paul's customer's cash) becomes the possession of the other (goes into Paul's moneybag).

This 2 Corinthians text was key for Luther's understanding of reconciliation as "froehlicher Wechsel." And that text was not alone. It had a powerful Pauline parallel in Galatians 3:13f. Look at this exchange—curses exchanged for blessings! "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Look at that sweet swap. Christ takes ownership of the sinner's curse and the sinner takes ownership of the Abrahamic blessing. All of it transpiring "in Christ Jesus . . . so that we might receive the [Abrahamic] promise[!] of the Spirit, by faith [alone]."

Part III

Reconciliation in Missiology Today An Auseinandersetzung with Robert Schreiter

Although "reconciliation" is a major missional item these days, as our IAMS 12 conference demonstrates, the marketplace meaning of the term hasn't gotten much attention. From my place at the edges of the discipline I've seen none at all. Reconciliation as friendship replacing hostility is what "everybody" knows is the meaning of the term. Prominent example of this is the work of Robert Schreiter from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago with his several books from ORBIS BOOKS on the subject.

At least half a dozen of his books are on ORBIS's current list. Reconciliation is a central theme to many of them.

Two of his titles are: "Reconciliation. Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order" (Orbis, 1992) and "The Ministry of Reconciliation. Spiritualities and Strategies" (Orbis, 1998). The margins of my copies—no surprise—are now filled with Lutheran op eds and second opinions.

Two themes recur in these marginalia. #1 No awareness of the marketplace meaning of the key term and thus no attention to exchange (the sweet swap) for grounding a theology of reconciliation, and #2 the very INsignificant role that reconciliation coram deo [hereafter RCD] plays throughout Schreiter's work. That is true even when RCD is understood as Schreiter does (friendship replacing hostility between God and sinners). The gist of my complaint is that Schreiter's major focus, constant drumbeat, for Christian mission is reconciliation coram hominibus [RCH], human-to-human reconciliation—getting folks in conflict to stop fighting and be "human" to one another.

In Schreiter's oft-repeated definition, God's reconciliation project is God, Christ, and now Christ's people "staying in solidarity and hope with those who suffer . . . who struggle for a better world." The Christian gospel of reconciliation is God's own "peace and justice" agenda for the world.

Though never explicitly denied, the reality of a planet-wide humanity still UN-reconciled to God never surfaces for serious attention. It appears that since Christ's cross and resurrection all humanity IS now reconciled to God, any hostility between sinners and God is passe, finished, a done deal—even if multitudes around the globe (also inside the churches!) don't trust it.

The conclusion is: so now let's get busy with intra-human reconciliation, with undoing the daily news headlines of worldwide mayhem and madness. That's the only part of God's reconciliation project not yet complete. RS says point-blank that the "ministry of reconciliation" given to Christians is to carry out, carry through the human-to-human reconciliation project. He has the chutzpah to quote Paul's use of the phrase in 2Cor5 for this RCH, even though the apostle himself says expressly that the "ministry of reconciliation" means just one thing—"beseeching you —yes, you Corinthians Christians—be reconciled to God." For Paul it is RCD that is his mission agenda. From my reading of his epistles, I conclude that reconciliation with God is the only agenda Paul sees in what he calls the "ministry of reconciliation" entrusted to him.

Schreiter's reconciliation theology and praxis is on the one hand fascinating, on the other frustrating. Fascinating because of his insight into the dynamics of human conflicts, how reconciliation can work (and sometimes does happen), and fascinating most of all in how he grounds that all in the Bible.

But there is where my "Aargh!" arises alongside my awe for his theological work. And in my old age it finally comes as no surprise. Schreiter is working with classic Roman Catholic DNA in his bones. His is the classic RC blueprint of "grace perfecting nature." My theological genes are coded with the Lutheran Aha! of "God's promise trumping God's law."

You get two different reconciliation-theologies from those two different double helixes.

Here are some theses:

RS: Reconciliation coram deo is a done deal—the world (all of it) IS already reconciled to God. Granted, many do not know

that it is already a done deal, nor act accordingly. So that is a task still to be done: Inform them, tell them, let them know: "It's all finished—on Good Friday/Easter Sunday. You ARE reconciled to God—whether you acknowledge it or not. Know it, acknowledge it." What's still unfinished is reconciliation *coram hominibus*, getting people to treat one another the way God in Christ has already treated the world. In the language of nature and grace: Grace has been showered superabundantly in Christ upon the world of nature. All that is needed is for people—all people—to learn of the RCD grace-gift already given and then act accordingly in the world, i.e., the RCH calling.ES: God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Yes, indeed! And it was indeed God's grace, grace alone.. But "done deal" it is not. When the grace-gift is not trusted, the distruster is NOT graced. Is worldwide "trust" in RCD a done deal? Hardly. The key for worldlings to be reconciled to God—in one of Paul's favored metaphors—is to be "in Christ." Once the gift is offered, they need to "get IN on it." Worldlings get "in Christ" by faith, by trusting the Reconciler. Folks who aren't Christ-trusters aren't (yet) God-reconciled. 'Fact is, in Paul's own prose in that classic reconciliation text of 2 Cor. 5, the *coram deo* status of folks not yet "in Christ" is that God is still "counting their trespasses."

That is not the language of reconciliation. In Paul's vocabulary it is "law," not "promise," that is operative when God is counting trespasses. That is the God-relationship of all not-yet-reconciled sinners—willynilly their perception or opinion of it. Therefore Paul entreats his readers ("God making his appeal through us") "BE reconciled to God." If for them—these Corinthians Christians—their RCD was already a done deal, Paul's imperative would be nonsense.

In both of the two reconciliation titles referred to above, RS lays out a five-point paradigm for "The Christian Understanding of Reconciliation" he proposes. Yes, it "favors the Catholic position" which "focuses on the love of God poured out upon us as a result of the reconciliation God has effected in Christ. Here the emphasis is on the new creation. If there is a classic location for this theology, it is 2 Corinthians 5:17-20."

[RS designates Romans 5:6-11 as the Protestant "classic" text, with its "emphasis on reconciliation as the result of Christ's atoning death and the justification by faith. By focusing on the atoning death this position has the advantage of seeing reconciliation in continuity with the saving act of God through history, especially in the theology of the covenant." Sounds like Calvin and surely not Luther's sweet-swap to me. My claim is that 2Cor.5 is the text of the Augsburg Confessors for reconciliation. We're glad Schreiter thinks it's central for Roman theology too. But there's more there than he has shown us so far.]

Schreiter's five theses.

- *"First of all, reconciliation is the work of God, who initiates and completes in us reconciliation through Christ. . . .*
- *"The second point in a Christian understanding of reconciliation [is] reconciliation is more a spirituality rather than a strategy. . . .*
- *"Third, the experience of reconciliation makes of both victim and wrongdoer a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). . . .*
- *"Fourth, the process of reconciliation that creates the new humanity is to be found in the story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ [in (1992) number four becomes: "the new narrative that overcomes the narrative of the lie is the story of the passion, death,*

and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”]

- *“Fifth, the process of reconciliation will be fulfilled only with the complete consummation of the world by God in Christ. [(1992) “Reconciliation is a multi-dimensional reality. Reconciliation involves not just God’s reconciling activity. It involves coming to terms with the otherness and the alienation that situations of violence and oppression have created this, put rather succinctly, seems to summarize major Christian insights into the process of reconciliation. It is these that form the background to the ministry of reconciliation, a ministry in which Paul exults so exuberantly in 2 Cor. 5:20.”]*

When Schreiter proceeds to expound these theses, RCD isn’t there. It is significant by its absence, most patently in thesis #3 above where “both victim and wrongdoer become a new creation.” That cannot possibly be applied to both God and sinner. How can the creator ever become a new creation? New creation happens when RCH occurs. But RCD is something qualitatively different. Schreiter misses the magnitude of the RCD in 2 Cor 5. All the attention is given to RCH.

Au contraire.

I must confess that I can’t find a word about RCH in this classic 2 Cor 5 text. Major pieces of RCD are ignored in Schreiter’s “Christian Understanding of Reconciliation.” Such as, God “counting trespasses” with those unreconciled, the sin-for-righteousness swap, the mind-boggling claim that the divine person of Christ is “made sin” in the process of the sweet swap, Christ’s appropriation of human sin in the sin-for-righteousness swap being the “reason” for a crucified Messiah, the core of the new creation being that a trespasser now has a new righteous (=non-trespasser) connection with the creator,

and that the “ministry of reconciliation” and the “message of reconciliation entrusted to us” is to “beseech” fellow trespassers to “be reconciled to God.” RCH is an other agenda.

RS doesn’t attend to these fundamental themes of RCD in 2 Cor 5. For him the RCD in 2 Cor 5 is a “paradigm . . . metaphor. . . parallel . . . story . . . larger narrative . . . lesson to be learned . . . it gives insight” (his constantly used terms) for the task of RCH in our conflicted world. Primary for RS is that God’s RCD shows us how to do our own RCH. Example: “we must not ‘count trespasses’ anymore than God has.” Which prompts this Lutheran “Aargh!”– Has God NEVER counted trespasses? Was the sweet-swap at Calvary an event that God was ALWAYS doing? Paul didn’t think so.

Schreiter and Schroeder read the scriptures with different lenses. That means the issue is hermeneutics. His lenses for reading scripture are nature/grace hermeneutics, mine law/promise. With those lenses 2 Cor 5 is “perfectly clear.” God either “counts trespasses” (aka “law”) or he “sweet-swaps” them (aka “promise”). Calvary is the crossover.

Don’t Lutherans care about RCH? Indeed they do. Lutheran theology has much to say about RCH in our fractured world. But you don’t need RCD to get on with the RCH job. Folks with hearts hanging on other promises can take on the RCH agenda, and do indeed do so. Christ-promise-trusters can be their allies in the project, for it is a common project.

Lutheran theology approaches the RCH agenda like this: the frazzled un-reconciled world (God’s old creation) needs first of all God’s left-hand intervention to “preserve” [key term] it from complete implosion. Humans not yet enjoying RCD are still God’s human agents, actually under assignment to live out God’s “law of preservation,” using resources already available in the

old creation distinct from Christ's new creation.

That doesn't mean that the old creation is fundamentally godless. It's not that it is un-godly out there, but it is "un-gospel-ly." Promise-proclamation and promise-trusting are not the daily routine of the "old" creation. What is going on there is rather God's own "other" work in the world apart from Christ, the work of God's left hand, as Luther often labeled it.

The resources of God's left hand are already IN the "old" creation for maintaining and—where fractured—restoring peace among peoples. Human moral reason, debit-credit equity processes, fairness, functioning structures of recompense and retribution—yes, even human compassion—are already built in to the old creation. These God-given resources preserve that old creation and continue holding humans accountable—to each other, and finally to their creator. These are givens already available to reconcile human conflicts with no reference to Christ. That is patently so wherever the Christ-promise is not present for the simple reason that it is not being trusted.

Part IV

Sweet-swap Reconciliation and Human Identities. Some Theses.

- 1. RCD changes sinners into new creations. The very term "new creation" is a radical new identity. The sweet-swap of RCD is a humongous change of identity—from sinner to righteous, from slaves to free children of God. There are other NT metaphors, all of them speaking of the new God-relationship that comes with RCD. All human identities arise relationally. At the root of them all is the God-relationship and the identity that comes from that.*

2. In RCD it is God's own self who bestows on us the new identity. God's beloved Son is the one who does it. He assumes our identity and gives us his. When we trust the offer, we have it.
3. Already as creatures in God's old creation, all humankind shares in a plethora of identities bestowed from God's left hand.
4. Promise-trusters—yes, only promise-trusters—share in the new right-hand identities. But their “old creation” identities do not disappear.
5. Luther regularly called these multiple identities in the old creation as “callings.” Wherever God has linked me to some other person—parent, sibling, children, fellow-workers, fellow-citizens, neighbor—there arises a “calling,” an identity wherein God calls me to be God's sort of parent, sibling, citizen . . . in that explicit relationship.
6. Christ-promise-trusters get a change of identity in their relationship with God. This change—grounded in Christ's exchange—does not replace the creator-given identities already on hand. Instead it constitutes a new identity replacing an old one at the divine-human interface. Biblical metaphors for this: Child of God, righteous, redeemed—and yes, of course, “reconciled to God.”
7. Luther was especially fascinated by one of the NT's favorite descriptors for new Christian identity, namely, the move from slavery to freedom. The citation above from 1520 where he speaks of the “Joyful exchange” comes from his classic treatise on Christian Freedom. He articulated that “reconciliation-freedom” into the manifold daily individual identities/callings that each person has in family, gender, nation, vocation, social location, education, citizenship, etc.
8. The dilemma of sinners in all of their manifold callings

is that they are not “free” in exercising them. Primary “un-freedom” is that sinners are always in “bondage” to self-justification as they live out their multiple relational identities. Thus they are not “free” for 100% focus on serving “the other” in every calling. An “incurvatus in se” infects their lives—always and ever seeking to have “at least something” of their life-in-relationships come back to benefit them, to justify them. In Christ’s sweet-swap the sinner’s justification-agenda is fully covered. It is no longer a concern. The neighbor-in-relation can be given 100% attention. To be free from self-justification is freedom indeed. And every person-in-relation to that justified sinner is beneficiary.

9. Thus this new identity as “already justified coram deo” does not replace any of the prior “old creation” identities, but to make these already existing identities and relationships the turf for continuing the “ministry of reconciliation,” keeping the “mission” going wherein “God was in Christ reconciling the world.”
10. These relational identities provide the “mission field” for every Christian person’s carrying out the “ministry of reconciliation” that has been “given to us” in the new creation identity. God “entrusts the message of reconciliation” to just such agents. Their mission: “As ambassadors for Christ . . . we entreat you: Be reconciled to God. The new identity of the sweet-swap is also for you.”
11. For those who take the offer, take the swap, and thus take on the RCD’s new identity as their own, the consequences for RCH are carried out in the “old creation” identities of their callings. As they carry out their new-creation identity “in, with and under” the rubrics of their multiple old-creation identities, the

Platzregen, the Christ-Gospel, is on the move to new turfs where it had not been before. Their home-turf, their native locations—and vocations in these locations—constitute the primal mission field. Their local “mission” is cosmic: God’s new creation in RCD “subverting” God’s old one with both RCD and RCH.

- 12. Their primary “mission field” is thus local, yet cosmic. They are ambassadors for God’s new creation (RCD) “subverting” God’s old one. New for them is that they can pursue their manifold “left-hand” callings “in freedom.” New also is their partnership in God’s “right-hand” reconciliation operation. So they “entreat” their fellow worldlings: “Be reconciled to God.” It’s an ambidextrous way of life. It arises from being cross-eyed.*