

Luther's Theology of Mission

Colleagues,

Six months ago an ELCA bishop asked me: "Was Mission the 'Great Omission' in the Lutheran Reformation?" Robin Morgan and I had heard that question turned into an indicative statement earlier this year at the international missiology conference in S. Africa. Finally I've come across something that speaks to the question. It's an essay published in "Missionsblatt" (Mission Bulletin) of the Bleckmar (Germany) Mission Society from way back in October 1967. I've translated it for today's ThTh.

The Bleckmar Mission is rooted in the Lutheran Free Churches in Germany. Readers of these postings have already crossed paths with its work. To wit: the Enhlanhleri Lutheran Seminary in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. That seminary, where Dave and Darlene Schneider serve, is a Bleckmar founding. Dave's recent contributions—ThTh 108 & 117—come from that venue.

There was no author indicated for the piece that follows. My hunch is that it comes from Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, who was the "Missionsinspektor" [= head honcho] at Bleckmar in 1967. But that's only a guess.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

"Was Mission the 'Great Omission' in the Lutheran Reformation?"

Lutheran churches did not move into mission work in the wake of the Reformation era nor in the next two centuries that followed. This long delay has nourished the widespread opinion that there was no mission consciousness in Luther's own theology nor any

interest in mission activity in the church that arose from his witness. Such has been the accepted wisdom on this topic, most often expressed as a reproach and criticism of Luther and the Lutheran churches.

Many reasons have been adduced to explain this:

- The massive task of organizing church life throughout large areas of Europe where the Reformation took hold demanded all the time and energy they had.
- Very few of the Lutheran territories had direct access to international waters and thus did not acquire overseas colonies to raise the mission issue.
- By contrast, Spain and Portugal had worldwide colonies, opening the doors to Roman Catholic mission theology and mission activity in those centuries.

Also internal factors get mentioned:

- Luther expected Judgment Day to arrive soon, perhaps still in his lifetime, and was convinced that the Gospel already had come to all nations, so no mission operations were needed.
- It was also said that early Lutheranism understood Christ's mission mandate (Matt. 28 and Mark 16) to apply only to the apostles, not the entire church, and consequently no one should engage in evangelization without explicit call and authorization.

Granted, the Lutheran church in the past neglected important elements of its calling, as have Lutherans since then. And Luther too could well have missed the mission message in the scriptures. But if he was indeed the trustworthy witness to the Gospel, as the later Lutheran confessions call him, is it likely that he could be right about the evangel, and yet miss the element of evangelization intrinsic to it? Given Luther's

intense wrestling with the theology of St. Paul, the “apostle to the Gentiles,” how could he have missed the missiology in Paul’s theology?

One place to look for answers is the sermons Luther preached year after year on the Feast of the Ascension. Why those sermons? The text for that festival—year after year in the old church lectionary—was Mark 16:14-20, the Great Commission pericope in Mark’s Gospel. The fundamental words are in verse 15: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” Luther’s sermons on this text contain mission theology aplenty. We shall look at three of them.

In the 1522 sermon he says:

“What should they proclaim? Nothing less, says Christ, than that I am raised from the dead, have conquered and wiped away sin and all misery. Whoever believes this is saved (selig). That faith alone suffices for salvation. . . . Faith does not coerce or pressure anyone to the gospel, rather it invites and encourages everyone freely. Whoever believes, believes. Whoever comes to it, comes. Whoever stays away, stays away.”

How shall we understand the words: Go into all the world? What concerns Luther is the fact that the “apostles did not get to the whole world. For no apostle ever got to us in Germany.” In view of what he knows about the recently discovered New World [Ed’s note: Luther was nine years old in 1492], he says: “many islands have been discovered in our own time, where unbelievers live and no one has ever preached to them.” Doesn’t that contradict the scriptural word that Luther knows from Romans 10:18, where Paul (citing Psalm 19:5) testifies “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world”? How to reconcile this with the plain fact that there are vast places where neither the holy apostles nor anyone up to

Luther's time has ever proclaimed the gospel? Luther answers: "The message has gone out into all the world, although it has not yet arrived in all the world. The transmission has begun, but is not yet finished. It will be preached wider and further until the Last Day. When this message is proclaimed and heard throughout all the world, then the last day will arrive."

Luther sees three facts:

1. The Holy Apostles began the proclamation in response to the dominical mandate to bring this message to all peoples.
2. The movement of the Gospel throughout the world is not at all concluded, but persists and moves forward.
3. The Gospel's continuing movement is linked to the day of Christ's return. Luther illustrates this "mission theology" with a stone tossed into a pond, where ripples go out from the impact spot in ever expanding circles until the entire surface has been reached.

"The message of the Gospel is like a stone cast into water. It makes waves and the waves push outward relentlessly, one pushing the other, until they come to the shoreline. Even when the middle calms down, the waves do not stop, but go on and on. That illustrates Gospel proclamation. The apostles started it and it continues in ever widening circles through other proclaimers. Hounded and persecuted though it may be, it moves on to those who have not heard it before, even when in the process it is crushed and condemned as heresy."

Luther then offers another illustration. Even worldly rulers send proclamations throughout their entire territory, but it takes time before the messengers get that proclamation to all parts of the realm. "This is how we should understand apostolic preaching," he says.

Such preaching is a public event, not done “in a corner.” “Universal and public throughout the whole world, not to be kept away from anyone, till the end of the world comes.” “Thus the gospel has now come to us as well, us here at the end of the world, at the edge of that pond.” Here Luther shows that he sees himself and his Christian community, now enlivened by the revived Gospel, as part of the expanding waves of that original stone cast into the pond of the peoples of the world rippling through humankind hastening toward the Last Day.

The message must be spoken out loud!

On Ascension Day 1523 Luther again preaches on the lectionary text. This time he accentuates the Gospel’s quality as something not written in books, but an oral announcement from public messengers sent by God: “A palpable proclamation to be heard throughout the world to be shouted out before all creatures, so that all who have ears would have to hear it.” He also emphasizes its public character, “preached in such a way that it could not be more public for everyone to hear.” He contrasts it with the ancient law and what the prophets preached, “restricted only to the Jews in their synagogues. The Gospel however is not to be restricted at all, but move out unfettered throughout the world, so that no corner of the earth shall have not heard it before the Last Day. That is God’s decree, his decision, that those who cannot read, nor have heard Moses and the prophets, are still to hear the Gospel.”

The Work of the Exalted Lord

The Gospel’s ongoing ripple-effect, says Luther, is the work of Christ now exalted to the right hand of the Father. But his ascension does not mean that he has moved away. Rather just the opposite: now he is present and accessible in all places. “For had he remained on earth...all people could not have been equally

near him and able to hear him. Therefore he initiates a new way whereby he can work with everyone, reign in all, proclaim to all, and all of us can hear him and he be with all of us.”

Alongside these first two Ascension sermons from the early days of the Reformation we look at one more, his sermon from 1536. Here Luther is struck by the overwhelming magnitude of the mission mandate. “These are words of impressive majesty, pure majesty. Jesus commands these poor beggars to go and proclaim this new message—not in one city or nation, but to the whole world, every principality and kingdom. They are to open their mouths with confidence, with no inhibitions, to the whole creation, so that every human hears this message. A command so powerful, so overwhelming, has never been given in the world before.” The Lord gives “his eleven beggars” a command of such dimensions “that they are not to flinch or cower before anyone, no matter how high and mighty he be, but openly move on and on as far as the world extends, and proclaim as though everyone would have to listen and no one would be able to resist them.” Only with the Lord’s own strength is it possible to “move from Jerusalem to the ends of the world telling everyone about this King Christ.” “For he does not want his message stuck in a corner nor anyone to be ashamed of it or have it be secluded or under cover. He himself made it so public that the sun in heaven, yes even trees and stones, would wish to hear it—if only they had ears to do so.”

The Great Commission

Here is how Luther describes Christ’s commission to his apostles:

“Wherever you go in the world and preach, you shall not say that they must come to Jerusalem nor hold fast to Moses’ law. But this you shall say: if they desire to be saved, they should

believe your preaching about me and be baptized in my name. Begin such preaching among my people, who seek to be saved by their law and sacrifice, and then move out through the whole Roman Empire and all corners of the world, to those who hold to other gods. Reprove and condemn it in one heap, and tell them: this is the command that I, the Lord of Heaven and Earth give, that they believe in me. That is my sermon, intended to go throughout the world, unhindered, unprotected, regardless whether the Jews do not believe it...or the Gentiles seek to suppress it by force."

To this exposition of the mission mandate Luther adds some practical counsel for his hearers and for his time: "For us here this is a comforting sermon. For in these words of Christ we are included. He says: Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. "All the world" includes us, wherever we are and how many or how few we may be. The world is where people are. Thus the Gospel must be on the run, continually on the run. Even though it may not remain [if it bears no fruit] at some places, it must come to every place and be heard everywhere. And just as this is a universal command to have the Gospel reach all humankind, so it also is a universal command and mandate from God, that all should believe this word."

These examples show how Luther's witness moves directly to mission. One thing is clear: mission is not the product of human organizing and project-management. It is the activity of the living Lord Christ. Consequently the continuation of Luther's thoughts about the course of the gospel through the inhabited world and the public proclamation of the saving message to all humankind now funnels into his testimony about the church.

The Church of God Throughout the World

Luther says: "No longer need we go to Jerusalem or some other specific place, as God commanded for his ancient people. Rather God has now designated another place and built a church, whose walls encircle the entire world. St. Paul says that the gospel has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven (Col. 1:23). Its blueprint extends to all nations and its message to the ends of the world. That indicates a church as wide as heaven and earth are. When Christ gives the mission command (Mark 16:15) he is saying: "By the preaching of the gospel I want to build a church as wide and as large as the world itself is, where I wish to live and speak. For wherever in the world his word or his preaching office goes, there Christ lives, there he makes himself known and speaks with all of us." Even so Luther sounds a sober note. He knows well that hand in hand with the expansion of the church throughout the world goes opposition, to which the church is constantly exposed. "The church is destined to go to the ends of the world, even though in the world she will suffer persecution."

The correlation of gospel-preaching and baptism in Christ's mission mandate is, in Luther's 1536 sermon, evidence that Christ the Lord intends to expand and preserve his church in this world. For with baptism the faith created by the gospel becomes confession, a confession that binds Christians to each other and moves them to be witnesses to others. Christ's command "Teach the nations and baptize them" (Matt. 28:19) signals that "the faith which the Gospel proclaims must not remain hidden or kept secret as though it were sufficient for anyone to hear the Gospel and believe it for himself, without wanting to move out and confess that faith before others.

"Rather so that it become publicly evident where the Gospel is not only preached, but also accepted and believed, i.e., where the church and Christ's kingdom stands in the world, Christ wants to unite us and preserve us through the divine sign of

baptism. For if baptism were not present we would be dispersed (zerstreut) without external assembling and signs, Christianity would never expand nor survive till the world's end. Yet Christ wants to unite us via such divine gatherings so that the Gospel move on further and further and by our confessing it be brought to others. Thus baptism is a public testimony to the doctrine of the Gospel and to our faith before the whole world. Thereby all can see where and among whom this Lord reigns."

In this connection Luther also emphasizes that the true unity of Christians throughout the world is evident in the simple means of grace, which are universally the same in contrast to the "wide variety of countries and peoples, nations and languages." Christ's kingdom is to go into "all the world and to all creatures," but baptism is "everywhere one and the same." The same is true of preaching "one and the same here and in all places." It renders us "equal before God." "Should someone come from the end of the world and observe how we do these things, he would have to say that this is one and the same word and sign that he had learned and received."

Luther's notion of the gospel moving through the world reaches its conclusion in his picture of the church, a "people gathered from all tongues of the world" into the unity of faith.

We won't go on here to show what consequences arise from this mission theology of Luther, and to what extent he himself articulated them, for example, in his verdict on non-Christian religions, or his words about Christian responsibility for witness to Jews and Muslims, and not the least in his understanding of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer. In his Large Catechism he instructs us to pray for God's Kingdom to come with this understanding: "that we, who have received this kingdom, remain and daily grow in it, and that we seek to have that kingdom win acceptance and commitment from other peoples so

that it move through the world with power, that from those peoples many come into the kingdom of grace, participate in salvation mediated by the Holy Spirit, so that all together we remain forever in the kingdom now begun.”