

Missio and Promissio—Mission and Promise

Colleagues,

[A Pre-script. This ThTh #473 posting comes a tad early in the week. Here's why: Marie and I, d.v., early on the morning of July 4, are heading out of the country for most of the rest of the month. ThTh #474, 475, 476 are already in the pipeline. D.v., they will be posted by listmaster Nathan Schroeder at the appropriate times. Mike Hoy is composing 474 (Theology of Empire) and 475 (review of Carl Braaten's revised 2nd ed. "Principles of Lutheran Theology"), Steve Krueger is working on 476 (review of John Tietjen's posthumously published "The Gospel According to Jesus"). All of it worth waiting for.]

For about 30 years I've been a member of the American Society of Missiology [ASM]. Last month I attended our annual meeting at the "Divine Word" [Roman Catholic] conference center in Techny Illinois, not far from Chicago's O'Hare airport. It's a Friday, Saturday and Sunday event. This time I showed up a day early for the "mini-conference" that regularly precedes the ASM get-together, the 24-hour gathering of the American Professors of Mission [APM]. My reason for sneaking in on the APM, where I officially don't fit, is that their program this year was a real draw.

Truth to tell, I don't fit in the ASM either—a retired professor of systematic theology!—but Seminex's "real" missiologist (and Missouri Synod's first ever, and now of blessed memory) William Danker took me along once back in the 1970s to the ASM get-together. He was one of the founders, so he could get away with bringing in a Philistine. Even without the proper "wedding garment" I was let in, and I've been showing up ever since. The

“real” missiologists have befriended me. As a dear RC colleague in the ASM puts it recently: Schroeder had a “late-in-life conversion” to missions. And he’s not all wrong.

So I listen to them, and they to me, in the happiest ecumenical group I’ve ever known. And, no surprise, we don’t all agree—often on basic stuff. Such as: just what is THE Gospel? Which question often is just below the surface, but is hard to elevate into focused discussion.

However, that one was bound to surface, I thought, as this year’s APM program unfolded. Here’s how it went. Three recent missiology books, some approaching classic status, and widely used throughout the world, were the stuff for the entire agenda. In two cases where the authors were still alive, they were there to show-and-tell what they had in mind as they composed the texts, what they learned along the way, what they’ve learned since then, using the texts in their classrooms. For the third author, dear departed David Bosch, one of his brightest and best students initiated the discussion. Thereafter others who are using these texts in their own teaching came forward and gave their witness.

But before we get to those three texts, this detour: You need to know how the organizations (both APM and ASM) are put together. Way back when the founders did the founding they divvied up the diverse Christian world into three groups. Roman Catholics, “Conciliar” [=World Council of Churches] Protestants, and Conservative Independent Evangelical Protestants [who aren’t WCC affiliated]. Officers and board and committee members are elected according to this triadic formula, and since the beginning it’s worked. Doubtless the glue that holds us together is the common commitment to Christian mission—and for most of the members long years of “friendly” ecumenical contacts out on the mission frontiers.

But, of course, there are folks who don't easily find a place in the troika—Eastern Orthodox Christians, for instance, and the burgeoning numbers of Pentecostals world-wide that show up all over the triad. And according to my druthers, we Lutherans don't easily find our place in the troika either. Most world Lutheran churches are members of the WCC, so that suggests “conciliar,” right? Well, maybe not, since Lutherans world-wide also claim to be “evangelical” Lutherans. So does that mean the third group? And some Augsburg-conscious Lutherans will self-identify as “evangelical catholics,” so where does that put them? Even so, in the APM/ASM we're conciliar Protestants.

So far, the troika works. When questions come up, jurisdictional lines blur, the edges are porous, and no one objects. Which signals a missions-cause unity that transcends the organizational blueprint.

OK, now back to the APM meeting last month. It was structured according to the troika. Three textbooks, one each from the three traditions—RC, conciliar protestant, conservative evangelical protestant.

The RC text was Steve Bevans and Roger Schroeder's “Contents in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today” (2004). Steve and Roger were there to lead the discussion. The “conciliar” text was David Bosch's magnum opus “Transforming Mission” (1991). David is no longer alive. His spokesman was his one-time grad student Stan Nussbaum. Stan has recently published “A Reader's Guide to TRANSFORMING MISSION,” affectionately called “Baby Bosch” among the members. And for the third option we heard A.Scott Moreau present his recent “Introducing World Missions” (2004) coming from the conservative evangelical tradition.

All three of these currently classic texts seek to be ecumenically inclusive and non-sectarian. But as Steve Bevans

was quick to say, nudged by my comment mentioned below: “We can’t—nor do we try to—deny where we’re coming from.” And that “where we’re coming from” is finally a particular take on what the Christian Gospel, that central substance of Christian mission, is. Together with such particulars about the Gospel comes a particular take on what faith in that Gospel, the goal of Christian mission, amounts too. So we got “into theology,” and not “just” missiology—and I wasn’t the only one interested in pursuing that topic. But gadflies are still gadflies, and ecumenical etiquette appears to get stretched when alternatives are juxtaposed too briskly.

When Gospel-probing duty’s to be done,
A theologian’s lot is not (always) a happy one.

At one point in the discussion with Bevans/Schroeder, one of the APM’s veterans—Dana Robert, a Methodist—asked them something that sounded “Lutheran” to me. After their response I was next, so I picked up on Dana’s (possibly unwitting) Lutheran intervention and contrasted it with the primordial RC blueprint of Steve and Roger’s book: “Isn’t Dana’s proposal—whether or not she’d admit it—the Lutheran alternative to the fundamental RC blueprint of Constants in Context? Isn’t C in C building from the classic nature/grace axiom of medieval scholasticism? [And for them, Catholic theologians trained in Rome, I couldn’t resist quoting it in Latin! But then translated for the hoi polloi] Grace does not supplant nature, but brings it to fulfillment. Your Constants are the grace referent, and your Contexts are the nature referent. C-1 brings C-2 to perfection.” Said Bevans: “We cannot deny, nor do we wish to deny, where we are coming from.”

Here’s how it plays out: “Contexts” in their title are the 21st century “nature” components of the axiom, the God-created world—damaged, incomplete, needing help. The “Constants” are the

“grace” components of God’s restorative work throughout history, culminating in Christ and the 2 millennia of the church’s history thereafter. As in every age, grace-constants bring today’s world-contexts to their God-intended fulfillment. That’s the Bevens/Schroeder mission paradigm for the 21st century. Thereby the GOSPEL itself is understood as God’s multi-faceted goodness “constant” throughout church and world history and constantly pressing for the full and final transformation of “damaged” human nature, and the “groaning” creation still longing for its own complete healing. FAITH’s response is simply to stop saying no, and start saying yes to God’s constant grace-pressure. In Latin-language Roman piety, it is the Virgin Mary’s own “Fiat” response. “Let it be.”

The discussion didn’t get much further in plenum, though at the coffee break it did continue. Dana Robert assured me that she did not object to my tarring her with the Lutheran brush. “Though I am a Methodist, I learned my theology at Yale from George Lindbeck and Sidney Ahlstrom—and they were Lutherans.”

What surfaced when the “conciliar” Protestant textbook was opened was Calvin’s Protestantism, not Luther’s. Which, of course, is no surprise. That was David Bosch’s Dutch Reformed theology in his native South Africa. Even in his wide-ranging ecumenical sweep with impressive insight and expertise, the cantus firmus of “Transforming Mission” is “covenant and law” with roots going back to Geneva.

The “transforming” term in his title is Bosch’s intended pun. In the first sense “transforming” is adjectival. Christian mission is and always has been a transforming business. People get changed. In David’s core paradigm covenant-disconnected people are transformed into covenant-connected peoples.

In the second sense “transforming” is verbal and “mission” the

object of that verbal action. Mission-thinking, mission-practice, needs transforming for the 21st century because the Enlightenment paradigms that have been in place in the so-called “modern” mission era no longer hold water. The European Enlightenment set the rubrics for what we once called the “modern world” and mission thought and practice was in, with, and under that umbrella too.

But the Enlightenment no longer reigns. Post-modern, multi-cultural, globalization—terms such as these now signal that the old wineskins have burst. So Christian mission thinking and praxis, once wed to Enlightenment paradigms, must change too—be transformed—or it too shall pass away. Bosch’s agenda in the book is just that, “transforming mission.”

The paradigms of today’s very different post-modern “world contexts” call for the “transforming-as-verb,” for Christian mission to take new form, to orient itself to the post-modern paradigms. The urgency for doing that is precisely in order to enable Mission to be “transforming-as-adjective,” namely, to connect with today’s covenant-disconnected humanity and transform their lives into covenant-connected, and then covenant-obedient, disciples.

Both of these classics—Bosch’s and Bevans-Schroeder’s—I had read before. The latter I’d reviewed for ThTh when it was published. Bosch’s text I’d actually used as a text for a missions seminar on my first stint as Global Mission Volunteer in Australia at the Lutheran Seminary there way back in 1994, shortly after it came off the press. It is a monumental work, his life’s work, encyclopedic, and profound. So profound, that folks at the APM assembly welcomed Nussbaums’s “Baby Bosch,” a “Bosch for the Less Profound,” maybe even a “Bosch for Dummies,” as someone quipped.

Back in the 1980s I was blessed to become David Bosch's friend through missiology connections at the international level as Bill Danker also nudged me overseas to gatherings of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS]. David also showed up now and then at our ASM meetings in those days. I'd even crashed once in the Bosch home in Pretoria during an IAMS event in 1985. I wasn't very astute at that time about Luther's alternate to the "Missio Dei" mantra that was reigning then in the missiological world.

Though Bosch has kind pages on Luther in his magnum opus, Blessed Martin is a stone unused as he proceeds with his covenant-cornerstone architecture. So downunder in Oz, when I used his text, I added what I was beginning to learn from Luther on the topic to the class repertoire. In the intervening years there's been transformation going on with yours truly too. Especially on the Aha! that follows for Christian Mission theology from the "Augsburg Aha!" about the Gospel itself.

But back to the APM conversation this year.

Third text was A Scott Moreau's "Introducing World Missions" (2004). In the preface he tells us this is "the first in a series . . . focusing on mission from an evangelical perspective." It is "gentle" evangelicalism, I'd say, a scholarly, world-savvy (Bob Bertram might even have said "winsome") evangelicalism, but Scott in no way soft-peddles "where he's coming from." For example:

- Mission is the call to urge people to respond to Christ and to live lives reflecting his kingdom.
- The sovereignty of God is . . . in charge of mission. Through the panorama of Scripture . . . from beginning to end, the themes of God's deep love for all people, our subsequent rebellion against him, Christ's sacrificial

giving of himself, our responsibility to worship God by reflecting his glory, and calling the nations to repentance have been clear and compelling.

- What then is our foundation for mission? In the most general sense, the only possible foundation is the Bible itself.
- Evangelicals focus on God's concern for the world and human estrangement from God as the core issue that mission addresses, with PERSONAL EVANGELISM and CHURCH PLANTING being the core activities that address the human dilemma of separation from God.
- God's glory and our reflection of his glory through worship [are] the guiding themes for mission theology.
- The core of our responsibility of reflecting God's glory through worship is (1) to engage in evangelism and church planting, as well as (2) discipling those who enter the kingdom and enabling local churches to thrive and grow, (3) while glorifying God by living lives that act as salt and light in a hurting world.
- The kingdom of God . . . represents an attitude toward life that puts God first in all that Christians do, enabling personal and corporate growth.
- Mission is successful when God's rules are followed.
- Discipleship and growth, both individual and corporate, come through obeying all that Jesus taught and through teaching others to do likewise.
- Christians are to display kingdom ethics (i.e., ethics built on God's sovereignty over our lives) . . . to live their lives by God's rules.

The "conclusion" in Scott's chapter on "mission theology" is: "The mission of the church is that it be used by God (1) to witness to people about the reconciliation offered in Christ; (2) to invite people to worship their creator by leading them to Christ; (3) to incorporate these led to Christ into local church

contexts; and (4) to teach them, as people reconciled to God, to obey all that Christ commanded in being salt and light in the world.”

What I hear Moreau articulating is core conservative evangelicalism with its Arminian and perfectionist overtones:

1. It starts with the Bible.
2. From which we learn of sovereign God the creator, of our human disobedience in not giving God glory, of God’s own long-term reconciling mission offered in Christ.
3. Faith is the decision/commitment to respond to Christ’s offer and to live lives reflecting his kingdom, a kingdom characterized by its distinctive ethics.
4. Christians reflect Christ’s kingdom . . . display kingdom ethics . . . when they live their lives by God’s rules.
5. Discipleship is growth in such kingdom ethics.
6. Christ’s mission mandate is a major rule that disciples readily follow.
7. Mission replicates for others what has happened with each disciple.
8. It is the call to urge people to respond to Christ and to live lives reflecting his kingdom . . . wherein God’s rules are followed, which constitutes rightful worship and gives God glory.

I wish I had read his book before the APM meeting. Why? Because at the meeting I did, and now see that in his early chapter on “Encountering Mission in the Old Testament” it’s all about Promise! God’s good news to the ancients—Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah—is Promise. Six times over Moreau says: promise, promise, promise. But then the word disappears, and plays no role whatsoever in those fundamental theses cited above. So far as I noticed, Promise never shows up again in the book. Which is especially strange when Scott presents New Testament mission

theology. More than 60 times that term appears in the NT, over 30 times in Paul's prose. So had I known that Scott was "promise-full" in his OT survey, I might have asked him why he did not keep up the good work and connect it to all those NT promissory texts—and ring the changes from them for mission theology.

And that might have segued again to an opening for signalling a fourth option—Luther's promise-and-faith-focused mission theology, a clear alternative to nature/grace, covenant/law or sovereignty/discipleship proposals for mission in the 21st (or any other) century.

Promise-centered mission theology is not only a stranger in ecumenical gatherings such as the APM, ASM, IAMS. It's a stranger among Lutheran missiologists too, or at most, a stepchild. Long before I got bit by the bug, Bob Bertram—at Bill Danker's request for a conference he organized—crafted an essay that did just that—spelled out a mission theology following from the Augsburg Aha! about the Gospel. Its title: "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission." Way back in 1971. Crossings colleagues on this listserve roster will not be surprised by the last of the theses in that Bertram essay: "Promissio is the secret of missio." "The promise is the secret of mission." Preserving the Latin preserves the pun.

Here's the full text: "Thesis 28. Promissio is the secret of missio. For the mission's Sender was Himself the keeping of that 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 His Word." Bob makes it sound so obvious, especially if you go back and start with Bob's thesis #1. [The full text is on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> When you get to the Crossings homepage, click on "Works by Bob Bertram." Scroll down to the title "Doing

Theology in Relation to Mission.”]

Yet in today’s missiology marketplace promissio is unknown. Even Lutheran missiologists (and they are not legion) haven’t been doing promissio missiology. So it’s no surprise that none of the “top three” texts we looked at during the APM assembly last month has antenna for promissory missiology either.

I’ve been telling folks that Bob’s essay is a Magna Charta for Lutheran missiology. And telling that to non-Lutherans at the ASM/APM gatherings. But it doesn’t make the front page—yet.

However, a promising light at the end of the tunnel may be coming from Luther Seminary in St.Paul MN these days. They’ve conjured up, as I understand it, a mission statement for the whole seminary that explicitly connects promissio and missio. In some of their prose it comes out “Confession and Mission.” Confessing the Gospel as God’s Promise (the Augsburg Aha!) and working out the consequences for what they call a “missional” church. If they keep focused on that commitment, Bill Danker’s and Bob Bertram’s dream may well come true. Mine too.

The fact that there are three Seminex alums, now Luther Sem profs, at work on this enterprise is possibly not insignificant. Two of them attended this year’s APM/ASM meeting—and they did not hold their peace. They also brought along eight or so of their grad students to rub elbows with the significant others in the club and learn the ropes. Luther Seminary means business! And I a m glad. Promising indeed. Stay tuned.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder