

Mission Affirmations Run Through a Law-Promise Sieve

Colleagues,

Last month's postings ThTh 291 and 292 featured the DAYSTAR conference in St. Louis at that time and the "Mission Affirmations," the Missouri Synod's ground-breaking mission manifesto of 1965. In ThTh 291 I did a bit of sifting through the MAs using the law-promise filter. Some aspects seemed good to me, some "needed a little work." When asked, "why not offer your own rewrite?" I said I'd try. Here it is. There were six affirmations. I take them one at a time. The original one-sentence mission affirmation from 1965 comes first, then comes the "RSV," revised Schroeder version.

Peace & joy!
Ed Schroeder

Affirmations of God's Mission Adopted by The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (1965)

I. ORIGINAL: The Church Is God's Mission. [RSV = Revised Schroeder Version]

The Church is Created by God's "NEW" mission to the world, God's unique mission in Christ.

The Church is both the product of God's new mission in Christ to God's old world, and thereafter its agent. God

sends Christ on a MERCY mission to God's own broken world. The depth of that brokenness is God's "other" deal with the human race—first articulated in Gen 2:17 ["you eat . . . you die."], first enacted in Gen. 5 [". . .and he died; ...and he died; ...and he died" ad nauseam]. In this old mission, God's own "old" mission, mercy for sinners is hidden. Instead God "counts trespasses." No sinner survives such arithmetic. In Christ's death & resurrection God offers these same sinners mercy, call it forgiveness of sins. God re-connects with them as Abba. It defies moral logic, yet that is the Christian claim. From which follows a simple definition of church: "Church = Christ-trusting sinners." All talk of Christian mission, namely, God's own mission #2, is grounded here.

II. ORIGINAL: The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole World[RSV] Christ sends that church to replicate Christ-trusting throughout the world, where God's other arithmetic is all-pervasive.

There is no technical NT term for mission as we use that word today. Closest is the language of God's "covenant," or again, God's "serving." The Greek technical terms in the NT are "diatheke" and "diakonia." But the way that God does covenant-service in Christ is very different from his alternate covenant-service apart from Christ. These two covenant-service-projects [hereafter CSP] are grounded in two very different—finally contradictory—words from God. St John differentiates them as God's "law coming through Moses" vs. God's "grace and truth coming through Jesus Christ" (1:17). St. Paul and other NT writers use other contrasting terms for these two CSPs.

Thus God's old CSP is as different from God's new CSP as

night from day, as death from life. There is no “generic” CSP that covers both. Thus they must be specified, distinguished. It is always God’s new CSP in Christ that rescues sinners from God’s old CSP with its bad-news bottomline for sinners. Christ sends his trusters to replicate for worldlings what he has done for them, namely, offer them Christ’s own CSP. To wit, to offer them the promise of Christ’s own cross and resurrection so that they too might move from God’s old CSP to God’s new one. Christ hands HIS project on to his trusters: “As the Father sent me, so send I you.”

III. ORIGINAL: *The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Church*[RSV] Christ-trusters continue to be agents of Christ’s mission to fellow church members. Christ-trusters need maintenance service—from other Christ-trusters.

Even though Christ-trusters are already “churchified,” they need constant nurture. For within their lives they too sense the “old Adam/old Eve” present – and operational. “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” is the standard, not the exceptional, admission of all Christ-trusters. In the language of the Smalcald Articles, they constantly assist one another with “mutual Gospel-conversation and consolation.” In short, they continue to offer the crucified and risen Christ to each other, so that “repenting and believing the Good news” AGAIN AND AGAIN becomes their own daily regimen. [This is perhaps the most important ecumenical phrase in the Lutheran Confessions. There are no barricades of any sort for any Christ-truster to practice this “means of grace” (so Smalcald) with anyone—both to those who claim Christ as Lord, and those who don’t.]

IV. ORIGINAL: *The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole*

Society[RSV] The Church carries Christ's Mercy-Mission to the Whole Society conscious that God's other CSP is already in operation there. That has required Christ-trusters of every age to see society with binocular vision, lest either of God's two covenant-service-projects gets short shrift.

Apart from Christ, God has from the beginning been at work in human society with his initial CSP. As wondersome as that CSP is—yes, good and gracious—it does not bring mercy to sinners. It preserves and cares for creation, yes. But forgiveness of sinners, no. The sinner's dilemma is healed only in the new CSP grounded in Good Friday and Easter. It is definitely something else. Ask any forgiven sinner.

Articulating that distinction for Christians in society is crucial for both CSP's to proceed well. Lutheran language has capitalized on the Biblical metaphors of God's left and right hands. Not two different realms (as territories), but God's two different operations on the same turf, in the one and only world there is.

Christ-trusters, even before they encounter Christ, already have assignments in God's "old" CSP, God-given assignments as caretakers, stewards, in God's world. Such assignments arise already at human birth whereby God places people into specific spots in his creation. And along with that placement come multiple callings from God to "be my sort of person in all the relationships wherein I've placed you." When human beings also become Christ-connected, they get a second assignment: "Replicate your Christ-connection, offer Christ's redemption, in all the relationships you already have in your initial CSP." A frequently used collect in the liturgy says it thus: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that

you [God] have made.” Care and redemption are two distinct jobs, not at all synonyms. Yet, the two come from the same God, and both become the assignments for every Christ-truster.

V. ORIGINAL: *The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Man*[RSV] *The Church Is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Person* – but not forgetting the 2-CSP distinction. Like God’s own self, God’s human agents work ambidextrously in the world. Their right hand DOES know what their left hand is doing—and vice versa.

Biblical anthropology does not divide humans into body and soul. Bible language sees people made of distinct components, yes, but as one unified whole person, no member of which is superior to the other. The Biblical focus is on relationships. How is this unitary, though multi-membered, person related to significant others in his/her God-given placements? That is the question.

The root relationship, of course, is someone’s God-relationship. Where that is fractured, only God’s right-hand CSP will do the job to bring healing. In all other relationships—with other humans, with one’s own self, with other creatures, with creation as a whole—God’s other hand is at work to care for and preserve what’s already created. Christians use the language of “social ministry, medical missions, inner mission,” etc. when they engage in such left-hand work. Such terms also apply to those who do not know Christ at all but are deeply involved in this CSP of God. They too are God’s left-handers. But they are not doing right-hand stuff, getting sinners to trust Christ. If there is some doubt about that in certain situations, ask them.

Designating such missions and ministries “left-hand” is

in no way derogatory. Those tasks are divine assignments, godly work. Labelling it "left-hand" is descriptive. It describes what God is achieving there, that is, caring for creation. That is not yet redemption. Left-hand CSP does not translate sinners into Christ-trusters.

In executing God's right-hand CSP Christ-trusters concretely offer the crucified and risen Christ to the receivers, God's offer of merciful forgiveness encountered nowhere else in creation. Right-hand CSP is more than just speaking or offering "God's love." God's love is already operating wherever God extends his left hand. Rain and sunshine are offers of God's love. Giving up One's only-begotten Son into death to rescue other renegade offspring is something else. It explodes the "love" category—"scandalously"—as St. Paul sometimes said.

The right-hand CSP is an offer of Christ's specific mercy-promise to folks who, for whatever reason, do not trust it, so that they may trust it. That offer occurs in concrete words and worded-actions (sacraments) designated as "means of grace." The Smalcald Articles specify five such word/actions that offer this promise. They are visible, audible. You can record them when they are happening.

God's left hand CSP—also assigned by God to folks who do not trust Christ—protects, preserves, restores the other relationships mentioned above. Christians have no scruples in joining God's other left-handed workers in this operation. In fact, Christ commends it.

VI. ORIGINAL: The Whole Church is Christ's Mission.[RSV] All Members of the Church are on assignment in both of God's

Missions.

If you are alive at all, you are God's left-hand missionary. If in addition you also trust Christ, you are membered into another body, the body of Christ. That gives you a second mission assignment beyond the first, God's CSP number 2. To be baptized is to be a CSP-2 missionary. When the congregation prays that offertory prayer IN UNISON, it is "all of us" who "dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you, God, have made." All means all. Working out the strategies in any given place and time for this double mission of care and redemption is a major piece of the agenda when the Christ-connected gather for "mutual conversation and consolation." The overarching rubric is that none of God's TWO Covenant-Service-Projects suffer loss.

All members of the church urge people to trust Christ. That finally amounts to urging people who do not trust Christ to switch gods, to "hang their hearts" [Luther's phrase] on Christ, to abandon whatever their hearts have been trusting before. That is what St. Paul proclaimed to his audience on Mars Hill: "You worship many gods here in Athens. I urge you to switch. Hang your hearts on the one that is still unknown to you, the Christ whom God raised from the dead." Christians do the same thing on today's Mars Hill where other gospels abound. In doing so they do not argue that their gospel is the best. Rather their claim is that it is Good News, an offer both "good" and "new" that they too had never heard before. Nor have they heard it elsewhere on the Mars Hills of today. They seek to extend the same offer to others. They urge them to trust it.