

No “Mission” in Luther? A Re-examination (Part 1 of 3)

Colleagues,

Advent is upon us, thrusting the world into a fresh year in the unfolding regime of the crucified and risen Son of God—another *Annus Domini*, as stubborn Christ-folk will continue to put it. In my own [idiosyncratic take on the season](#), Advent is first and foremost a time for baptized travelers to pull off at the scenic overlook, get out of the car, and spend a while drinking in the view. On the far horizon are the shadowy peaks of our ultimate destination. God will use Isaiah in particular to sketch these out for us during our next few weeks at church. Immediately below, and stretching into the distance, is the great jumble of country between here and there, some of it pleasant, some not so much. Death traps abound. Somewhere out there is the one that I’ll be falling into. “So what?” says Christ. “Take a fresh grip on that cross of yours. Fall in line. And on the way down the hill, hit the gas in the fearless confidence that with me in front you will reach those far off heights where babies play with snakes, lambs gambol with wolves, tables groan with the weight of the feast, and the Father waits with arms wide open to welcome his children home.”

Thus Advent, or so I think. And in so thinking I’m inclined as a preacher to spend at least some of the season talking “mission,” pointing eyes to that messy, broken terrain at the bottom of the hill. That’s where we live. It’s where God dispatches his saints, week upon week, from the hillocks of their Sunday liturgies, Christ in front, the Holy Spirit behind to push them into the work and witness that awaits them there. The proper name for this terrain is “mission field.” The question, as ever,

is what to say about it. In the wider Christian world, rumor has it that serious Lutherans are ill-equipped to say much about mission at all. As Ed Schroeder will point out in today's chief offering, Luther is thought to have been "mission-deficient." Ed, of course, will dispute that. In doing so he'll dredge up a welter of ideas that the rest of us can put to use as we think, pray, listen, and proclaim between now and Christmas.

This will be the third opus in a row that I send your way with Ed as either author or translator. Like the prior two, it comes to you in segments, the theory being that 2000 or so words are enough for one sitting. Much more, and eyes start glazing. Or so one suspects in this era of information overload.

The genesis of this piece was a semester-long stint that Ed spent as scholar-in-residence at [OMSC](#)—the Overseas Ministries Study Center—in New Haven, Connecticut. The year was 2002. Some months later he presented his research to a little group of like-minded thinkers that Bob Bertram had pulled together around the theme of "Setting the Agenda for Lutheran Theology." That's what you're reading here.

Mission, Ed argues, is high on that Lutheran agenda. I hasten to add that you'll hear much more along those lines at the forthcoming [Crossings conference](#), in Belleville, Illinois, at the end of next month. Our focus is the mission field of 2018 that God will send us into as sturdy bearers of the Gospel, and nothing less than Gospel. You haven't signed up yet? I pray you do!

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Luther's Theology of Mission

by Edward H. Schroeder

Introduction.

Are Missions Missing in Luther's Theology? The Accepted Wisdom in Missiology Says Yes.

Lutheran churches did not move actively into "foreign" mission work in the wake of the Reformation era nor in the next two centuries that followed. This delay has nourished the widespread opinion that in Luther—and other 16th-century Lutheran reformers (and John Calvin too)—"we miss not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this...because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction." So says Gustav Warneck in his *History of Protestant Missions*, 1882ff. [Citation from the 1901 English translation, p.9]

Warneck's work was itself a critical response to other Lutheran mission scholars of his day (Ostertag, Plitt, Kalkar) who claimed the opposite for Luther. But, as far as I know, Warneck's work was the only one that got translated into English. And English is the language of missiology. So his judgment has become the accepted wisdom of the trade.

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 (“Roman Catholic” nations) became worldwide colonial powers, opening the doors to Roman Catholic mission activity and mission theology.

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 to the entire church, and consequently no one should engage in evangelization without explicit call and authorization.

Warneck’s critique goes deeper:

“The great reformer did not see the mission task of the church. Luther did require and encourage the ‘spirit of witnessing,’ but not really the ‘spirit of mission.’ Within Christendom he himself missionized with ‘demonstrations of the Spirit and of power,’ but mission to the non-Christian world was far from his mind and from that of his coworkers.”

Why this defect? “The missing impulse for mission comes largely from an error in Lutheran theology, namely, (1) a biased notion of eschatology, [and] (2) a defect in the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. These flaws are understandable (and excusable) partly from Luther’s personality, partly from the conflicts going on at the time, partly from the justifiable polemics about justification which nevertheless led to *a much too exclusive focus on that doctrine.*” [13f., emphasis added.]

After noting that Luther thought the mission mandate already fulfilled, Warneck says: “This startling view becomes in some

degree intelligible when we further learn that the Reformer does not understand the progress of the Gospel through the whole world in the sense that Christianity would become everywhere the *ruling religion*, or that all men would be won to believe the Gospel.” [1906 English translation, p. 13, emphasis added.]

Those are hefty criticisms.

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Revisiting the Accepted Wisdom: Exploring Luther for Mission Themes

Luther himself 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? If he did talk about the Great Commission, and he did, what did he say?

1. Luther’s Preaching on the Great Commission Text of Mark’s Gospel

One place to look for “Luther on Mission” 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 medieval church’s lectionary—was Mark 16:14-20, the Great Commission pericope in Mark’s Gospel. It reads:

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the

whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Luther’s sermons on this text—I found twelve (from 1522 to 1538) in the Weimar edition of Luther’s Works—contain mission theology aplenty. Warneck knew these sermons too. He cites them often. But they didn’t satisfy him for the reasons mentioned above. We shall look at three of them here. This Markan Ascension Day text provides a context for Christ’s “GO” word that Matthew 28 does not have. Luther makes heavy use of that context, viz.,

- the disciples’ initial lack of faith, “not believing those who saw him after he had risen,”
- Christ’s faith-codicil to the commission “who believes and is baptized will be saved,”
- the ascended Lord as the mission commissioner, and finally
- the baptism addendum and the addendum about signs and wonders.

1. The Ascension Day Sermon of 1522

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 [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 end 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 Christ’s 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 the image of a stone tossed into a pond.

“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 fellow Germans, now enlivened by the revived Gospel, as part of the expanding waves of that original stone cast into the pond and now rippling through the world and hastening toward the Last Day.

Some additional context items in the 1522 sermon:

The factor of faith

The Ascension text begins with Christ upbraiding the disciples for their un-faith in his resurrection. Not that they needed one more item to believe in and thus be full-believers. But faith in the resurrection is fundamental to being out from under the power / curse of sin. Un-faith is the greatest sin there is. [*Der Unglaube ist die größte Sünd, die da mag genennt werden.*] (134) Not that the disciples had no faith in God, but without faith in the resurrection they were still in their sin. And if Christ be not raised, then sin is still in charge and any believer is still in sin.

But faith here is not believing THAT it happened—the wicked, Satan too, believe that. (137) “Rather they must believe the content of the resurrection, the fruit, the benefit of the resurrection. Namely, what we have received from it, forgiveness and redemption from all sins, and that Christ has gone into death and thereby sin and death, yes everything that could harm us, is gone. All this he has conquered, trampled under foot, conquering sin, devil, death, hell and whatever could harm us, and therefore he sits at the right hand of the Father. That all of this happened for our benefit, that is what unbelievers don’t believe.” (138)

To the passage: The one who believes is saved, he says: The “head” [*Haupt*] of righteousness is faith, as the head of wickedness is un-faith. There is no greater sin that might condemn [*verdammen*] a person than that. For un-faith alone is what condemns every one who is condemned. As corollary, it is only faith that saves all humankind, for faith deals only with God. (141)

Believe and be baptized, yes, but only un-faith condemns. Baptism is the seal on the letter. Faith in the resurrection and thus freedom from sin, etc. is the writing on the letter. Baptism without faith is a seal on a letter that has no writing in / on it. (142)

Preaching the Gospel to the whole creation□

“The rocks and trees too? Here’s what those words mean: the Gospel is a universal public announcement that is meant for everyone, is not done in a corner, but should be proclaimed openly in every place.... It arose and had its start through the apostles, but is not yet complete, has not yet come to all the places it is meant to come. In fact, I wonder whether Germany ever heard God’s word before. We have indeed heard the pope’s

word. That is true.” (143f)

Signs and Wonders□

Mark’s gospel concludes with Christ’s word about the signs that will accompany the proclamation of the Gospel. Since the Gospel is now widespread, signs are not necessary as they once were in the early days. But the time may come when they are in order again. That will be a signal of the dire state of the Gospel then and ML hopes it won’t come. Some people are driving out demons and Luther says, “I don’t know what to say about that.” [*weiß ich nit was ich dartzu sagen sol.*] This he knows, however, “that it is dangerous. For the devil may allow exorcisms, but he can be deceptive even then. He may be confirming people in their error that they have power over him. I wouldn’t trust him. We have many examples of this these days. I know about a number of them that happened not long ago.” (146) And then he concludes with an incident where a “church warden” seeking to practice exorcism wound up with the devil breaking his neck.

1. The Ascension Day Sermon of 1523

The message must be spoken out loud!

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 moves out unfettered throughout the world, so that no corner of the earth shall not have 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 earthly activity of the ascended Lord

The Gospel's ongoing ripple-effect, says Luther, is the work of Christ now exalted to the right hand of the Father. Christ's 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."

To be continued...