

No “Mission” in Luther? A Re-examination (Part 2 of 3)

Colleagues,

Here is the next installment of Ed Schroeder’s exploration of Luther’s thinking on the topic of mission.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Luther’s Theology of Mission (*continued*)

by Edward H. Schroeder

C. The Sermon from 1536

The Mission Mandate

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 what Christ is telling his apostles: “Wherever you go into the world and preach, you shall not say that the people 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 own 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.”

Warneck noticed that in these sermons Luther never mentions anything like a mission society, never urges organizing to get the job done. No project-proposal, no project-management. One reason for that is his conviction that not just the mandate, but its execution is the activity of the living Lord Christ. Sometimes Luther speaks of the Gospel itself as a personified entity pursuing its own agenda, as with the ripples in the pond. The ripples are the Gospel, itself on the move, initially with no apparent concern that human agents carry it out to the edge of the pond. 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 funnel into his testimony about the church as Christ’s body in the world, even the church as the Gospel’s body in the world. Yet even here there is no mention of organizing for mission, the main point of Warneck’s complaint—“missions, in the sense in which we understand them today.”

The Church of God Throughout the World—Christ and His Gospel in Charge

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."

Baptism

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 testimony 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 creates 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." Luther sees baptism as "going public" with one's faith.

"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 isolated 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 simplicity of these means of grace—the one proclamation of the risen Christ, the one baptism—which are universally the same in contrast to the “wide multiplicity of countries and peoples, nations and languages” where they occur. The venue for Christ’s kingdom is manifold and multiplex, “all the world and to all creatures,” but the baptismal core is “everywhere one and the same.” The same is true of the proclaimed Gospel “one and the same here and in all places.” It renders all of 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 what he sees among us is one and the same word and sign that he had learned and received.” The church is a “people gathered from all tongues of the world” into the unity of faith.

II. OK, That’s Luther’s “Mission” Preaching. Now, What Does This Mean?

When presenting this report on Luther’s sermons at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in March of 2002 I got three questions from the audience:

1. There’s still no admonition from Luther to the Wittenbergers about their *duty to be missionaries*, and thus no mention of anything like a mission society to carry out the great commission. Why?
2. First a statement: For the Gospel to connect to people’s lives there must be some *anticipations of the Gospel* present in the culture of those people for the Gospel to connect to. Question: What “anticipations” did Luther expect to find in not-yet evangelized people?
3. Luther’s monumental translation of the Bible “incarnated” the Word of God into German language and culture. What substantive role does “*incarnation*” play when he’s

articulating his mission theology?

Some possible answers:

To #1. Duty to be missionaries

The mission society notion was unknown to everyone in the 16th century. In its place Luther, as indicated above, viewed the church itself as “body of Christ” to be the “mission agency” for the ongoing ripple effect of the Gospel. If he makes no concrete proposals about the “how to” for the church’s continuing Gospelling, I suspect it was because his trust in the Gospel convinced him that the ripples and Platzregen would take place by God’s own engineering and timetable. It’s also possible that he was myopic and “just didn’t see it.” Nevertheless there were a number of consciously organized Lutheran ventures in the decades right after Luther’s death. If the impetus for these didn’t come from him—maybe from his “much too exclusive focus on justification”—where did it come from?

[Werner Elert’s chapter on “Missions” in his *Structure of Lutheranism [Morphologie des Luthertums]* grounds these early mission starts right after Luther’s death in his mission theology. Perhaps even more fascinating is Elert’s 2-page footnote on the world mission survey—*Commentarii de regno Christi*—of Philip Nicolai (yes, the composer/hymnwriter of “Wake, Awake. . .” and “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star”) published in 1597. Nicolai chronicles all the places in the post-Columbus world where he knows (from documentation) that the Gospel has now arrived. And they cover the world. He even includes 13 Jesuit mission stations in Far East Asia. The Jesuits!? Why them? Because “to gain entrance there, the Jesuits proclaim the Christian religion as it is taught at home by the Lutherans... To begin with, they are silent about the papacy, human traditions, the Mass, purgatory, merits and indulgences. Instead they proclaim the doctrine of the fall of mankind,...of

redemption through Christ, of faith, and of Baptism.” To support this claim about “Lutheran” Jesuits Nicolai cites a Jesuit report sent from Japan in 1564.]

If Luther were asked why he didn't urge his parishioners in these sermons to be missionaries, my hunch is that he'd say: “I did, but the mission turf I urged upon them was not foreign fields. Instead it was their own backyards, their manifold callings in secular society, into which God sent them every time they awoke in the morning. Their mission was to be God's agents for the “care and redemption of all that you [God] had made.”

To #2: Anticipations

I've got no Luther quotes at hand, but I can guess what he would (ought to!) say. His law/promise hermeneutic for reading the scriptures, and its corollary left hand/right hand works of God for reading the world, would look for law/left hand work of God among every people before the Gospel gets there. In fact, 24/7 (as folks now say) data. Every day full of such God data. This would be his own anticipation of everyone's God-experience prior to encountering/hearing the Gospel. You don't need any proclaimer to bring this experience to people. It's the godly fabric of daily life in the “old” creation. If the preacher has any role in this, it is not bringing God's law/left hand into the scene. Rather it is helping people see God already operating that way in their midst. Paul seeks to show the Gentiles in the opening chapters of Romans that God is already on the scene in their daily lives, that they have the law functioning in their psycho-social fabric, and that repentance is the response called forth from these facts of life.

To label it “law” or “left-hand” in no way makes it all bad news. Not by a long shot. This 24/7 lived experience encompasses the gift of our own existence along with the panoply of ongoing

goodies we receive to keep that existence going—physical, social, political, etc. Luther laundry-lists these, e.g., in his two catechisms when he talks about “daily bread” in the 4th petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Or again all the gifts he lists when commenting on the first article of the Apostles Creed in his catechisms. All these elements of creaturely daily life and experience he calls “*larvae dei*,” masks of God. Really God-encounters, but God wearing a mask, so that it’s not obvious to everybody—maybe even not obvious to anybody—where the goodies come from—and even more important, what the appropriate response is for such beneficence. At the end of the First Article treatment in the catechisms he then comes in, you guessed it, with a “but.” “But for all of these gifts I am already in arrears in my obligations to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.”

You may call these “anticipations” of the Gospel, if you wish, but they are anticipations with a twist. The main “twist” is that all these gifts from God in 24/7 daily life experiences are gifts that obligate. Au contraire the Gospel. It is a gift that liberates from the accumulated unfulfilled obligations accruing in our God-encounters of the first-creation kind. The Gospel, by definition, does not impose new obligations. Even as you move from Gospel indicatives to Gospel imperatives, there is no obligation, not even subtle coercion anywhere along the line. For freedom Christ has set us free. Another ML text where I do know this surfaces is in his preface to Romans that accompanies his translation of the NT (1522). There he makes a big point—actually says St. Paul makes a big point—in distinguishing between God’s gifts and God’s grace. The distinction is focused as I’ve done above. For example., in Romans Paul claims that the Gentiles have had such God- gift encounters “ever since the creation of the world.” Then comes his “but.” “But they did not honor the giver as God or give thanks to him.” Even worse, they

did not repent. "So they are without excuse."

Now that could be a sort of anticipation of the Gospel—in the sense of a palpable need for a "grace-encounter" that would rectify the deficits arising from these "gift-encounters." If I remember correctly your own story [I was responding to Lamin Sanneh] in the OMSC journal some years ago, as you narrated your journey to the Christian gospel from Islam, you said something like this. Maybe not "rectifying deficits"—I don't remember it exactly—but something like this I recall: your growing awareness, perhaps even longing, for a grace-encounter (a "more" grace-full encounter?) with God that The Prophet had not supplied, but that the Suffering Servant palpably offered.

To #3: Incarnations

Luther's sermons on the Johannine prologue, his Christmas homilies, etc. are replete with the theology of incarnation. But I don't know if he would have called his image of the Gospel's ripple-effect "new incarnations" of the Gospel in previously unreached cultures. I'd also wonder if he saw his German Bible translation as an incarnation. My hunch is that he would hang his translation of the Bible on a lower peg. If two ancient languages, Hebrew and Greek, could be vehicles for the Word of God, any language could be. Incarnation, I'd expect him to say, is always soteriological. "For us and for our salvation" the Logos became incarnate, says Nicaea. And no one gets saved just because the Bible is now in German. True, the Word of God is taking on human linguistic form, but that's not yet the heart of incarnation. The "big jump" in Christ's incarnation was not that divinity assumed creaturely form. God in creaturely formats is constantly happening already in the "old" creation via the "masks of God." What's new in the incarnate Logos is not that God takes off the mask and we see God face-to-face, but that in Jesus God is turning a face of mercy to sinners that they could

never have divined from their earlier masked encounters.

So what Luther regularly does when exegeting the “Word becoming flesh” is to remind his hearers that the human flesh Christ assumed is mortal flesh. Not that the Logos literally became sinner, but in “assuming” sinners’ sort of flesh, the Logos also assumed an eventual death sentence. No surprise, the “full of grace and truth” that accompanies this incarnation gets contrasted three verses later in St. John’s prologue with what came in Moses. And you can count on Luther to ring the changes on this distinction, as he thinks John himself does in the frequent Moses-mentionings that Jesus makes throughout the Johannine gospel. Not that Moses was a bad guy. Au contraire. “But” (e.g., in John 6) even though the manna Moses brought (a.k.a. Sinaitic bread) was indeed from God (gift!), it was not good enough to meet the “grace” need Israel had. “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.” (48) Ergo, needed is better bread, the One that is baked from God’s grace and truth.

Equally dear to him is the Christ hymn in Phil. 2 with its classic linking of Bethlehem to Calvary. Christ’s incarnation is not just assuming a “human likeness,” but taking on our human “schemata,” i.e., the form of a slave, destined for death, in his case “death on a cross.”

To be continued...