

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

Colleagues,

Below is the final installment of our serial post on Luther and mission, penned 15 years ago by Ed Schroeder. Here Ed moves from reportage to analysis and assessment. He also stirs the pot with some polite though pointed critique of positions and trends that people who passed as he did, from the LCMS to the ELCA via the fleeting AELC, were prone to regard as “sacred cows.” If you share that mini-tradition, you might still find yourself jarred by the pokes Ed takes at them. So be it. They deserve the pokes they get, especially the ones that have since morphed into the closest thing there is to missiological dogma within the ELCA. Ed’s final comment below is that “this is a work in progress.” This prompts me to report on progress having been made at the Third International Crossings Conference in 2010, where two of the papers dealt at length with crucial concept of God’s “ambidexterity” and its implication for thinking about mission. Jukka Kaariainen, now teaching at the Lutheran seminary in Taipei, wrote one of them. I wrote the other. Both papers were available on the Crossings website until it underwent some updates. I will let you know if and when they appear again. Speaking of Crossings conferences, yet another reminder that the seventh of them gets underway on Monday morning, January 29. A Sunday evening conversation with Ed will precede it. Presenters will include the newly appointed dean of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Kit Kleinhans. Valparaiso’s Matthew Becker will be there too. So will David Zahl, executive director of Mockingbird Ministries, a band of fairly young Episcopalians who use Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel to make sense of the world via a smashing website. Now is the time to register if you haven’t done that yet.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Luther's Theology of Mission (continued)
by Edward H. Schroeder

III. Warneck Revisited in View of These Sermons

Some thoughts about Warneck's verdict on the Lutheran reformers: "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."

The Markan text for Luther's Ascension Day sermons put a theological context on the "Go ye" imperative that Warneck doesn't notice, I think. Even though he cites those Ascension Day sermons frequently, in none of them does he find the "duty" for mission to the non-Christian world, "mission thinking in the sense in which we understand it today." That is, organized agencies generated by a mission mentality in people already Christian and factually bringing the Gospel to "unreached peoples."

Thesis 1: "Mission" for Luther is probably different from "the sense in which we [Warneck] understand it today."

A. The Gospel itself is the active agent, the subject of the sentence, for the Gospel's ongoing rippling. Granted, people are the Gospel's agents, but the Gospel itself is the main actor, the stone sending out the ripples. The ascended Christ can also be designated the subject of the Gospel's ongoing rippling. His ascension does not remove him from the scene, but transposes his presence as the disciples knew him into new formats. Thus he can be equally close to everyone.

B. With this notion that Christ—and/or the Gospel itself—are in

charge of mission history, comes Luther's image of the "Platzregen," the moving thundershower. When people no longer respond in genuine faith to the shower of the Gospel upon their dry land, Christ and his Gospel move on to other venues. It does not require a mission society decision for the Platzregen to move elsewhere. The Platzregen creates its own agents. The Gospel majors in ad-hocery for mission strategy. The book of Acts abounds in such Platzregen episodes of unplanned mission work.

C. When the Gospel ripples, when the Platzregen shifts to a new turf where it hasn't been before, it does not encounter an "empty land." Though the land is "dry" as far as THE Gospel is concerned, other "gospels" are already there. Even more, thinks Luther, what you can expect to be at the center of these other gospels is "salvation by works of the law."

Thesis 2: Even "Reached peoples" continue to be mission fields.

D. Nearly every one of the N.T. epistles (maybe the gospels too)—all within the first few generations of the church's history—speak of "other" gospels that were present inside the Christian communities (not just outside in the world—on Mars Hill). Luther saw 16th century Europe, where everyone was baptized, to be just like that. One of his comments above was his wondering if the Gospel had ever gotten to Germany through the vehicle of the mission of the Latin church.

E. What made 16th-century Europe a mission field? Other gospels were reigning. "Salvation by works" was their common denominator, he thought. If we didn't know it before, we know it now: 21st-century USA is a vast mission field—also and especially within the Christian churches. The "gospel of America" has millions of worshippers in both church and state. And the core of that gospel is salvation by works of the law. Self-righteousness is claimed as real righteousness.

F. Is the continuing focus—despite disclaimers to the contrary—of American Christian mission energy and efforts to

“unreached peoples” elsewhere a tacit admission that we cannot reach the unreached people within our borders, often the very people who we ourselves are with our confused faith, our garbled gospels about God Bless America and the crucified/risen Messiah? Do Jesus’ words: “Physician, heal thyself,” apply here?

Thesis 3: Luther’s Theology of the Kingdom of God and Mission Theology

G. To Warneck’s words: “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.” And again Warneck’s words about Luther’s “prejudicial bias in eschatology, [and his] defect in the doctrine of the Kingdom of God.”

H. Putting these two citations together signals Warneck’s theology of the Kingdom of God, namely, “that Christianity would become everywhere the ruling religion.” Nowadays we’d call that a repeat of Constantinian Christendom, wouldn’t we? I think Warneck is correct in saying that this contradicts Luther’s notion of the Kingdom of God. Luther did not see God’s kingdom becoming a “ruling religion” at all. That sounds more like Calvin’s Geneva than Luther’s Wittenberg. Luther’s conviction about “God’s two kingdoms” ruled out any notion of Faith-in-the-Gospel becoming a “ruling religion.” For him that was an oxymoron. Much of his critique of the medieval church and state was directed against that very notion. But that raises the question: is Warneck or Luther closer to the original NT witness about the Kingdom of God itself?

Luther’s own theology of the Kingdom of God is simply expressed when he treats the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer in his two catechisms. The Kingdom of God is not a territory at all, and surely not one with a “ruling religion,” but God’s act of reclaiming sinners. “How does God’s kingdom come?” he asks in the Small Catechism. Answer: “Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through his grace we believe his

Holy Word and live godly lives, both here in time and hereafter in eternity.” In the Large Catechism he speaks the mission motive in this petition: We pray Thy kingdom come “both in order that we who have accepted it may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world. In this way many, led by the Holy Spirit, may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of redemption, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom that has now begun.” (Kolb-Wengert: The Book of Concord. 357 & 447)

IV. Conclusions

1. Luther’s value for mission today lies less in what he may have said about the Great Commission than in the groundbreaking two-stage hermeneutics he proposed and practiced. Stage One is the law/promise hermeneutics for reading the Bible, and then Stage Two is a left-hand/right-hand hermeneutics for reading the world.

2. The Bible is constantly being read and preached legalistically both at home and abroad. If it was official papist legalism then, it is in so many places populist legalism now. What makes that bad is not just that it is a mistake, but that the merits and benefits of Christ go to waste and consciences do not receive God’s promising comfort from such teaching and preaching. Even if the receivers like what they hear, that is no sufficient test of its gospel-ness. So Christian missionaries today wherever in the world they are, and from whatever sending community, constantly need to be running the “double dipstick” test on preaching and teaching, the same one Melanchthon commends in Apology IV. How might that be implemented? Not easily, for sure. Initially because there are tens of thousands of Christian denominations/groups around the world these days, and secondly, proposals for “reformation-reexamination” do not automatically get welcomed. But something analogous to the Saxon Visitation of parish preaching in the

late 1520s might be a model.

3. The hermeneutics of the ambidextrous God for reading the world is sorely needed all over the place.

a. The universalism gaining ground in Christian circles reads the world with a one-handed God on the scene. All encounters with God are grace-encounters. ["Sloppy Agape"] Even Barth (way back in the days when I was doing my dissertation) said: "That God reveals himself to us at all is already grace." God's law, his left-hand work in the world, none of which redeems sinners, is unknown territory.

b. Antinomianism in a variety of formats is prominent. Here I'm not thinking about the realm of ethics, but about the fundamental theology of God's own word and work in the world. That God could be both Gift-Giver Creator AND CRITIC is an oxymoron for many—despite this double action of God so patent in Genesis 1-3.

c. From this notion that God is by definition gracious, the merits and benefits of Christ lose their uniqueness. They are just one more instance of God's "standard operating procedures" known as sola gratia. Even if Christ had never happened, God's grace-operations would continue and that alone would suffice for the world's salvation. Paul's verdict on such theology: "Then Christ died for nothing."

d. Now to link this to missions today and just stay within our own ballpark:

i. The print materials coming from the ELCA's Division of Global Mission not only eschew this Lutheran hermeneutic, they are clearly critical of it. Global Mission 21 is a case in point.

ii. Then there are those dear guys like "our" Jim Mayer: "We do not do mission work to bring God to the poor and the oppressed, rather, through our mission efforts we find God among the poor and the oppressed and seek to walk alongside them in their journey toward liberation." Not clear in Jim's bon mot when he "finds God among the poor and oppressed" is which hand of God he

found working among the poor. That's not an academic question. For its answer determines the mission agenda. If both hands were already operative (and not just the one that a Lutheran would anticipate), then the "walk alongside" is good mission strategy. If, however, God is there only with the left hand, then God's right-hand Reconciler is not yet there. Then Gospel needs to be inserted because it is not present. To use another phrase from Paul, "God is still counting their trespasses." To be clear on God already at work in any mission field (USA included) is a prerequisite to the Great Commission.

iii. The LCMS Mission Affirmations, groundbreaking as they were in the 1960s and hailed by many of us then, do not use either of the two stages of Luther's hermeneutics. See the item on "missio dei" below. That term was the new word put into LCMS mission conversation at that time. It has widespread acceptance today across the ecumenical spectrum—from Rome to the Mennonites—but it reads the Bible and the world with different lenses from the ones Luther proposed.

iv. Luther's hermeneutics addresses additional agendas in missiology today: I'll mention two.

Gospel and Culture: Luther would ask: What are you missiologists up to with your Gospel and Culture agenda? Granted, culture was not in Luther's dictionary; it's a modern discovery. But he does have a place to talk about culture, I suggest, with his theological category of God's "left hand." The corollary, of course, is God's "right hand," where the Kingdom of God resides. Luther would relegate culture, I'm sure, to God's left hand—even so-called "Christian cultures." Any "ruling religion" (Warneck's cherished phrase)—in any culture, I think, he would also locate in God's left hand. Whatever ruling the Gospel does, its venue for such ruling is human hearts, not human cultures. God's left hand "rules" in human cultures. Thus theological analysis of culture follows rubrics written by God's left hand.

Missio Dei, i.e. "the mission of God": Luther would ask us to

get more clarity on this big code word. The ambidextrous God proclaimed in the scriptures, he learned, has two missions going in the world—law and promise. Both of them have divine authorization, but they can't be blended into one *missio Dei*—except at the one place where God did indeed work simultaneously with both hands. That is the day Christians commemorate and call Good Friday. Grisly though it was, it was eminently good for us. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, but making him, the Christ, to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

Moving Toward Closure

I haven't read enough yet in mission history to know if or where Luther's two-stage hermeneutic ever got serious attention among the people doing mission. So far I've found none, but I've barely scratched the surface of the literature—especially in Yale's vast resources.

Two of my colleagues, Bob Schultz and Bob Bertram, have worked this turf in the past. Back in 1971 Bob Bertram did two essays for Bill Danker's mission workshops, and—no surprise—Bob used Lutheran hermeneutics for those essays. “Doing Theology in Relation to Mission” centers on the Biblical hermeneutical point. “A Theologian's Perspective on Economic Activities in the Christian World Mission” works from Luther's hermeneutics of the world. They are now available on the Crossings web site under “Works of Bob Bertram.”

Bob Schultz has called attention to the differing formats in which God's left hand works in different societies. Even though it is all “law,” the paradigms, the perceptions, can vary, especially when it comes to God's criticism. Careful attention to God's format for critique is necessary for finding fitting language for the Good News. If the bad-news experience is shame, then the Good News of Christ is acceptance. If guilt, then forgiveness. If possession, then redemption [literally

“regaining ownership”]. If alienation, then atonement. If bondage (e.g., to karma), then freedom. If orphaned (even bastards), then adoption as God’s kids, and so on. Here’s one Schultz quote: “When I think about Japan, I think of the novels of Endo f. I read Silence as a description of the successful Japanese resistance to the conversion to a guilt culture by using guilt to destroy the [Jesuit] missionary. What might have happened if that mission had primarily addressed issues of shame?”

Summa. As you can see, this is a work in progress.

Edward H. Schroeder