

Some Items on Mission Theology

Colleagues,

Back once more to 1994, the year Marie and I spent in Australia at the Luther Seminary in Adelaide. One course I taught was Theology of Mission. Here are two artifacts that came from that.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

[The #1 book about Christian mission at that time was David Bosch's just-published TRANSFORMING MISSION. David was a superstar missiologist, a Dutch Reformed pastor/theologian from South Africa. In 1985 I was guest in the Bosch home in Pretoria. No surprise, his book was the textbook for the course. Here's the class handout for one of the chapters.]

David Bosch: Transforming Mission

Chapter 8 The Missionary Paradigm of the Protestant Reformation

The Nature of the New Movement

Luther re-discovers Augustine who had rediscovered Paul. That turned medieval Christian theology away from Aristotle and thus away from Aquinas. Rom1:16f. became the core text for Christianity and for mission. Thus the contours of a Prot. theology of mission are:

1. Theology starts at JbFaith. (grace, Christ, faith are THE truth about Christianity, not A truth)
2. Humans are viewed from the perspective of the Fall (everybody = sinner)

3. Subjective dimension of salvation. (Better term perhaps is "personal," God favor toward me, not God per se)
4. Priesthood of all believers.
5. Centrality of the Bible.

Each of these had its plus and its minus side.(242f.) See especially K ung's caveat (243)

The Reformers and Mission

Basically they have had a bad reputation with reference to missions. Is it also a bad track record? Yes and No. Depends on your definition of just what mission is. Overall it was a mixed bag. There were serious practical obstacles: Reformers' focus was on reforming European Xianity; had no real contact with non-Xians; War was going on in Europe over religion, survival was the priority issue; with no monks anymore who was going to do it? and finally unending internal disputes [Calvinists vs. Lutherans, "genuine" Lutherans vs. "so-called" Lutherans, etc.]

Significant exception in the first generation of the Reformation were the Anabaptists, a pain in the neck for Luther and Calvin, but being such a pain because of their missionary paradigm.

One good guy from that first generation is a contemporary of Calvin, Dutch theologian Adrian Saravia (Bosch too is Dutch!). He saw the great commission of Matt. 28 still to be in force. But he was hung up on apostolic succession, and thus made no headway on the continent with Calvinists –and of course not with the Lutherans. Finally went to England and became an Anglican.

Lutheran Orthodoxy and Mission

(The period after the publication of the Bk of Concord 1580. 2 centuries in Europe, even longer in non-European Lutheranism) The self-understanding of the Protestant churches is decidedly inward-looking. Who we are and why we are different from those

other groups. Not outward looking to our task and calling in the world. Philip Nicolai (Lutheran) gives the picture for the NON-mission paradigm of the age of orthodoxy:

1. Great commission (Matt. 28) applied only to the apostles. They fulfilled it.
2. Salvation is God's initiative. Ergo no running around to find folks to convert. Your neighbor—and your “calling” touching that neighbor—is your mission field. Serve her/him.
3. Though Nicolai is upbeat about RC overseas missions (surprising) [“If they're promoting Christ at all, their work can't be all bad”], the pessimism about how evil the world was – and that God was already on his way to bring the Last Day – pushed people to be passive.
4. If mission was to be done by Lutherans, it could only happen where Lutheran authorities ruled a region. And Lutherans had no colonies.
5. Besides, according to Romans and other Biblical sources, God's Word had long ago gone out to the nations. If they were still unbelievers, it was because of their rejection. So for them the verdict was already in.

There were exceptions within orthodoxy, e.g., J. vonWetz, but they never carried the day. It took the renewal-movement of Pietism within Lutheranism to break open Lutheran missions.

The Pietist Breakthrough

Spener and Francke, theology lecturers at the Luth. University of Halle, and nobleman Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (taught by them) brought a whole new focus to what Christian faith and life was all about. It's not pure doctrine and intellectual understanding, but faith in the heart and a life that demonstrates that. From that “aha!” about the Christian gospel there arose these consequences for mission: ordinary Christians

are missionary-candidates; improvisation was the Spirit's preferred mode of operation; spiritual and material needs go together; faith means commitment and commitment means risk; Christian fellowship transcends boundaries of nations and confessions; and mission is not the job of Christian rulers. (summary 255).

The Pietists did not really crack open the Lutheran establishment in Germany, but they opened the door to what was to become the way of the future for missions—both world missions and social ministry in the home churches.

Second Reformation and Puritanism

This is the Calvinist side of what followed the Reformation era. Called the 2nd reformation in Holland, and Puritanism in the UK and the N.American colonies. The “reign of Christ” is a central concept. It led to a mission paradigm with 1)theocratic images of a Christian society, 2)focus on God's sovereignty, and 3) God's glory, but not without clear accent on 4) God's grace and mercy. And all of this within the framework of 5) European colonial expansion, which brought with it then 6) the “cultural uplift” as uncivilized peoples learned European civilization. Interesting is 8) that the Great Commission played no role in the operation.

Summary: Bosch's evaluation of the plusses and minuses of the “Reformation paradigm” on p. 261.

[Another of our study documents was Bob Bertram's essay DOING THEOLOGY IN RELATION TO MISSION. Full text is now on the Crossings website. To find, click on “Library,” then click on “Works by R.W.Bertram.” Scroll down to the title.]

To help students with Bob's text I gave them this paragraph-by-

paragraph tracking of Bob's line of thought:

1. Mission makes gaps that theology straddles. Theology is "trans-mission."
2. The gap inherent in mission is between the Sending Christ and the world.
3. There are 2 gaps: horizontal and vertical, a time gap and a credibility gap.

THE HORIZONTAL GAP (between the time of Jesus and our time today)

4. Our age is attuned to this gap—we're busy with history and hermeneutics; the Luth.Reformers knew it too.
5. The Reformers' secret can also help us with our gap-spanning.
6. They don't just repeat the Bible, they add something.
7. Times change. New problems; new forms of old problems; new heretics. So "doing theology" is relating the message of THE SENDER to each new challenge.
8. Danger: substituting later confessing for the biblical original. [E.g., The Lutheran confessions or the doctrinal statements of the LCA or any church.] Nobody claims to be doing that, but . . .
9. . . . it can happen, especially with "quia"-confessing Lutherans. [Code term among Lutherans. Subscribing to the Luth. confessions "because" they affirm the scriptural Gospel. In contrast to "quatenus" = "in so far as" they affirm]
10. The Luth confessors do not want that. They want their readers to "check them out," to see if they are indeed confessing in today's world the same Gospel that came with Jesus. Open accountability.
11. Anachronistic reading of the Bible happens. Reading the confessions back into the Bible. Under-playing the

horizontal gap and thus de-valuing Scripture's own history.

12. How the word of God has "ruled" down through history thus loses its wonder. As though nothing different ever happened. De-historicizing the Gospel's power.
13. For bridging the historical gap we have today the "historical critical method." The criticism it exercises critiques our anachronistic interpretations, the things which we read back into the Bible. So the HC exegete says: No, that is not what Isaiah meant when he said such and so.
14. Of course, the HC exegete might protest too much—and say that a Biblical text can never mean more than it did at its origin. This denies the text a post-history.

THE VERTICAL GAP (between the Gospel's credibility and us)

15. Faith's need for biblical history, but what sort of biblical history?.
16. The vertical gap is more oppressive than the horizontal one.
17. There's a popular myth about unbelievers, namely that their unfaith is "plain and simple" unbelief. Not so.
18. What scandalizes us about the Gospel's credibility is not Jesus' cross/resurrection as such, "but rather our own need of them—our need of Him."
19. Thus the Confutators (first critics of the Aug. Conf. in 1530) rendered Christ "unnecessary," (not really needed, or not much needed), by denying the sola fide, that it is ONLY faith in Christ which rescues sinners.
20. Jesus' own "history" dare not be reduced to mere fides historica ["I believe the facts are true"], itself a form of unbelief.
21. On this item contemporary systematic theologians may well have failed. The Confessors can help.

22. The “systematics” of the Luth. Confessions takes the form of a hermeneutical procedure: (you guessed it) properly distinguishing Scripture’s law and promise.
23. Comes now a definition of each term, and then the question before the house: How to commend good works without sacrificing the promise? Answer: Promise dominant; law sub-dominant.
24. Is this just a systematician’s compulsion (putting asunder what God has joined together)? No, it’s because there is that other compulsion in all of us, the opinio legis that makes law dominant and promise its servant.
25. As an opinio it is an illusion, namely, that the law offers a soteriology. To preserve that illusion opinio-legalists must practice law-reductionism = scaling down the law to manageable size.
26. Therefore we need to distinguish because this prior perception (Vor-verständnis = prior-understanding), this opinio is finally fatal.
27. So we need to take this unbelief, this vertical gap, with full seriousness (for the Gospel really is incredible!). But then when the Gospel is believed, the believer can assimilate the law as well: take its criticism, even profit from it, advance the law’s commendable good work in society. “Promissio is the solvent (pun!) for the world’s hard unbelief.”
28. Promissio is the secret of missio. The Sender himself keeps keeping his promise. As we theologians do “promissory” theology to span the gaps, the Promissor himself is building bridges throughout the world by the Spirit through His Word.

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