

The 2008 Meeting of the American Society of Missiology

Colleagues,

Two weekends ago, June 19-22, (for what might be the 30th time) I was with the mission studies crowd at the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology. Many of them are dear (and now, like me, “old”) friends, and each year a bunch of youngsters shows up to add to the collegiality and the friendship. Dear for me this year was also connecting with half a dozen grad students (possibly only two of them Lutherans) from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. From what I heard from them I think they’ve got it.

ThTh posts in the past [if interested, check them out on the Crossings website, usually in July of the year] have brought reports of these gatherings, often telling of my one-string-banjo with its alleged Lutheran notes chiming into the ecumenical symphony that characterizes ASM annual meetings. As usual I encored it again. [A “vox clamantis in deserto”? Not really. See ThTh 523 on the website as evidence.]

Though ASM membership is across the entire ecumenical spectrum (a vast array), a consensus-theology often gets wide approval—from Roman Catholics all the way over to the Mennonites. I’ve told you about it in those past reports. It comes under the rubric of “Missio Dei” (Latin for “God’s Mission”). Mission work is God’s own work, not the church’s work. But the notion of what God’s mission is, what God’s up to in the world, is perceived according to the axiom made famous by Karl Barth: “That God speaks to us at all is already grace.”

My constant counterpoint to that ASM cantus firmus of God’s ONE

mission (encompassing all of God's word and work in the world, and all of it grace-full) has been—you guessed it—God's DUPLEX mission. One of them is grace, yes, the other is something else. Sometimes I even recite Luther's own words: "When I discovered that God's law is one thing and God's Gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough."

Well, you had to be there at this year's get-together in order to believe what I'm going to tell you now.

Three things, maybe four, were jolting.

1. In inviting us to this year's assembly our president simply announced "The theology of Missio Dei has failed." That was jolting to me, since I hadn't heard. Up until this 2008 meeting it was the shibboleth at every ASM annual meeting. But others—"real" missiologists active in the discipline—apparently knew that this was true. Yes, I'd been doing my banjo tune for years that MD had failed to address God's duplex mission in the world, but that wasn't the failure that all apparently acknowledged. And no one ever told us point-blank what the failure was. So in view of MD's agreed-upon failure we were gathering this year to see if we could put humpty-dumpty back together again—basically retaining that logo after serious repairs to render MD "apostolic." That is the key concept apparently lacking in earlier "theology of MD," and by its absence contributing to the failure. "Apostolic" is to be understood in its literal Greek meaning of "being sent." So we met under the theme "Envisioning Apostolic Theology: As the Father Sends"

The invitation said: "At the ASM meeting we shall consider an apostolic theology that, by recovering a robust trinitarian account of the life of God, re-envision the missionary act as the form that human fellowship with God

takes here and now.” Goal: “The conference will propose a vision of the mission of God [yes, the term is redeemable] for theological education and mission practice.”

2. Second jolt was that four of the five major speakers all came with Princeton Theological Seminary credentials—two are current profs there, the other two have Princeton Ph.D’s. I complained to the prez when the announcement came out that it seemed a tad lop-sided for our consciously ecumenical society, but nothing happened. It was a done deal. Four of the speakers addressed the two key words in the theme, “trinitarian and apostolic,” in terms of the four classic seminary disciplines of their daily work: systematic theology, Biblical exegesis, church history, practical theology. In the fifth address the president (one of the Princeton profs) gave us his “vision of the mission of God for theological education and mission practice.” It was a neatly crafted program, but in its own way a patently one-string banjo.
3. Then came this jolt. Every one of the four called on Karl Barth—some with dozens of footnotes—as their theologian for repairing *Missio Dei*. The program was not only “all Princeton,” but also “all Karl Barth” as doctor to heal MD’s malady. After the fourth Princetonian sang Barth’s praises, I realized that I should not have been surprised. Barth is still the guru for today’s Reformed theological tradition—also among those who are that tradition’s brightest and best.
4. Fourth jolt came from the fifth speaker, a European Roman Catholic theologian with three doctoral degrees (Sorbonne, Rome, Munich). Nothing in that sentence was the jolt. Genuine shock—not just for me— was that on the very first slide of her powerpoint presentation, who should be smiling down on us from the screen but Karl Barth! I kid

you not. For whatever reason, she started with Barth as her guru too. As she subsequently showed us, Barth connected well with the Vatican II theology that was the infrastructure of her remedial work on MD in the field of practical theology.

You just had to be there.

Some reflections:

1. Someone quoted the grand guru of missiology David Bosch and his caveating missiologists not to slide into “propaganda” in doing their work. Bosch was not cited in reference to the Princeton-and-Barth take over for the weekend, though that was my immediate thought. But then another thought occurred
2. Propaganda is not a dirty word. It’s a good word in the ancient Latin language of both Roman and Lutheran theology. Remember its actual meaning: “propago,” to spread, expand, extend, enlarge, prolong something—a cause, a project, an idea, a “gospel.”
3. It’s a good missional term. Christ’s disciples are under assignment to be propagandists for HIS distinct Gospel.
4. In that good sense of the word we had a weekend of Princeton propaganda.
5. Barth was also the blueprint for the presenters’ theological propaganda (good sense of the term) even when not cited by footnote. [How do I know? I was Barth’s student in Basel in the early 50s. I also was a student in those days of Barth’s Lutheran critics in Erlangen and Hamburg, and did my dissertation on Barth (and Troeltsch) and Luther.] Barth’s concept of grace was sympatico even with the classical Roman Catholic tradition.
6. Luther’s “case for grace” in the 16th century—drawn, he

also claimed, straight from the Bible—was clean contrary to what grace had come to mean during the preceding centuries of scholastic theology. Barth's Lutheran contemporaries critiqued him on the same grounds during his lifetime. When Luther and Barth speak of grace, they are not talking about the same thing.

7. In my old age I've come to see that over and over again in theological discussion the issue is hermeneutics: How do you read the Bible? All Christian theologies claim to be Biblically grounded. And despite great variation they are. Yet not all read the Bible through the same lenses. "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology" is Bob Bertram's classic axiom. It's simply true, true, true. How you read the Bible is always linked to what you think salvation is all about—and vice versa. ASM 2008 was a weekend exercise in Barth's hermeneutics (and soteriology). Barth's hermeneutics (and soteriology) shaped the original 1952 Willingen notion of *Missio Dei*, and the half-century of "theology of MD" now deemed to have failed. So it was ironic that Barth's lenses were commended to us by every one of the five presenters for "fixing" MD's defects. Can Barth's theology be both the cause of MD's failure and at the same time the remedy for that failure? Remarkable.

Excursus. After strumming an occasional note on my banjo in the discussions, more than one friend asked me: "Ed, is everything wrong that Barth says?" Not my point, I tried to say. Barth and Luther start at two different places to do theology. Barth knew this and said so—over and over again. He said the options at crucial points between him and Luther were either/or. Luther made two big mistakes, Barth claimed. Number 1: "Luther emphatically shifted the interest from what God is in himself to

what God is for man.” Thus Luther opened the door for man-centered theology in the 19th century, notoriously in Schleiermacher, Barth’s arch-enemy. Barth’s shelf-long Church Dogmatics seeks to correct Luther’s mistake. “What God is in himself” is the subject-matter for theology again. Number 2: Luther’s “discovery” of the law-gospel distinction as lenses for reading the Bible was wrong. The sequence was wrong (should be gospel and then law), and as a hermeneutic it leads us away from, not into, the Bible message of grace.

Neither of these two items is a “doctrine.” They’re presuppositions, starting points, forks in the road that leave their mark on everything that follows. Luther claimed that these two “mistakes” were the very “Aha!” at the center of his move from being a Roman Catholic to being an Evangelical Catholic. If they are mistakes, then everything that follows in his theology is flawed too.

Was this either/or on the scene at Techny? In one place right in our face. The keynote lecture was 15 pages on God’s “being and act” (and the consequences for MD). It articulated in crisp detail God’s “aseity” (technical term for “underived or independent existence”). Aseity is “what God is in himself.” Barth is right, Luther wrong.

Luther’s Aha! turned him away from God’s “aseity” as theology’s starting point. Starting with God’s aseity had been what he’d learned in his own scholastic theological formation. It amounted, he later learned, to playing around with the “hidden God.” Not only a mistake, but dangerous, even lethal. He labelled it a “theology of glory,” from which you could never get to the Biblical “theology of the cross.” It was a fork in the road. You start either with the hidden-God’s aseity in your theology or with the revealed-God’s cross. It’s a fork in the road.

But our 10 hours of program time at Techny were overstuffed. Five major presentations and a business meeting tucked in left no space at all for any conversation like this. No wonder my couple of quips sounded like a curmudgeon grouching that everything Barthian is wrong. Not the issue. I'll grant the curmudgeon part, but not the grouching. It's about fundamental theology. Where are the foundations for Barth's propaganda (good sense) and for Luther's? Why are the differences significant for MD?

I scribbled a note the next morning to the keynote speaker (with a new Princeton Ph.D.) after his opener, "Missio Dei: A Trinitarian Envisioning of a Non-Trinitarian Theme." His was a massive Barth-grounded Trinitariansim to repair the defective doctrine of the Trinity in MD. Probing God's being and God's act were at the center, from which he drew the beneficial consequences of such a better Trinitarianism to hold the church's own being and act together when it comes to mission. He'd said in the discussion following his presentation that he had read my own "Deconstructing Missio Dei" essay of four years ago. So in my scribbles I listed some items we might talk about, captioning it "An Op Ed." Though we did have one good conversation at one coffee break, we never found time to pick up any of the items I'd scribbled.

D.v., that will be the starting point for ThTh #526 next time. The angle? Delving into God's being and act sounds too much like probing the "hidden God" in theologies of glory. Luther designated both of them a no-no. And for this reason: "God revealed" in the theology of the cross is all we've got for Christian God-talk. As the Lutheran confessions say "satis est," it is enough. Searching for more than that is dangerous. Even worse than that, it's deadly.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder