

"Missio Shaped by Promissio: Luth Missiology Confronts the Challenge of Religious Pluralism"
 Crossings Conference, Belleville, IL- 1/26/10 Rev. Jukka Kaariainen

Not all words are created equal. Some are more important than others. The Christian tradition gives us a rich vocabulary, words such as: salvation, reconciliation, faith, promise, law, Gospel, covenant, sin, grace, mission, and witness, to name but a few. In considering the specific topic the Church's "mission," mission has become a polyvalent symbol, with many definitions. Is mission Gospel proclamation, evangelism, common witness, *missio Dei*, liberation, work for peace and justice, humanization, prophetic dialogue, inculturation, or contextualization?¹ Yes. Recent book titles reflects this diversity and lack of consensus, titles such as: "What is Mission?" "Mission Under Scrutiny," and "Concepts of Mission." Stephen Neill, commenting on such diversity, has noted, "If everything is mission, nothing is mission."² The same concern applies to the Gospel itself: *If everything is Gospel, nothing is Gospel*.

Critics, following Gustav Warneck's lead, have argued that Lutheran theology, to the extent it utilizes Luther and the Luth Confessions, provides no real resources for a contemporary, relevant missiology. The late David Bosch agrees: "We miss in the Reformation not only missionary action 'but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today.'"³

Our conference theme is "God's Promise, Our Mission: Making the Crucial Link." In tackling this theme, I wish to argue that the words "Gospel" and "mission" are absolutely central, and that the word "promise" is a "promising link" (pun intended!) for relating the two, since the nature of both Gospel and Christian mission are grounded in the promises of God. The notion of

¹ David Bosch, in chapter 11 of his missiological masterpiece *Transforming Mission*, lists at least thirteen different elements of an "emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm," namely mission as: the Church-with-others, *missio Dei*, mediating salvation, the quest for justice, evangelism, contextualization, liberation, inculturation, common witness, ministry by the whole people of God, witness to people of other living faiths (including dialogue), theology, and action in hope.

² Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House, 1959), 81.

³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), p 244.

“promise” not only holds faithfulness with the Christian tradition and relevant engagement in mission together, but it is able to do so precisely because it articulates the very essence of what *both* the Gospel *and* Christian mission are all about. While Lutheran theologians- Ingemar Oberg and Klaus Detlev Schulz, to name but two- have recently endeavored to write a Lutheran theology of mission, I humbly submit that their arguments fail to focus on and utilize the Gospel as promise and the Law-Gospel distinction as absolutely central. Therefore: my thoughts are meant both as a gentle, corrective nudge to fellow Lutherans, as well as a humble proposal to the wider ecumenical and mission crowd. Here's my argument in a nutshell: 1) For Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, the Gospel is a promise. 2) The nature of the Gospel should shape/ direct the nature of mission. 3) Therefore, promise should be a central category in defining and understanding mission. I will now try to unpack the implications of these claims, aiming at practical engagement and application to the situations you find yourselves in.

For more than 50 years, mission theology has been defined by the category of *missio Dei*, the mission of God. Francis Oborji gives a basic definition of *missio Dei*: Mission is primarily God's activity, not the church's activity. God moves toward the world through the church, as an instrument of mission. The church's reason for existence *is* the *missio Dei*, not the other way around.⁴ While the phrase *missio Dei* has been widely accepted and used by virtually all mission theologians, its actual meaning and content is vigorously contested. Wilhelm Richebacher describes the current quagmire: "It seems that everyone reads into and out of this 'container definition' whatever he or she needs... Is such a term of any use at all, if it does not help us establish a clear single interpretation of the central concept? Should we give up this formula

⁴ Francis Oborji, *Concepts of Mission*, p. 135.

altogether...?"⁵ The title of his article bluntly asks: "*Missio Dei*: the Basis for Mission Theology, or a Wrong Path?" In concluding this introduction, I want to offer two very different definitions of *missio Dei* in order to draw a sharp contrast between the alternatives before us today. On the one hand, Stanley Samartha explains the task of mission in these terms:

In a pluralistic religious world Christians and their neighbors from other religious backgrounds are called to take part [together] in God's continuing mission to the world. Mission means continuing God's work through the Spirit to mend what is broken in the whole of creation, to overcome the destruction of humankind, and to heal the rift between God, nature, and humanity.

We'll return to Samartha's definition of the *missio Dei* later on as we examine one contemporary Roman Catholic model of *missio Dei*, that of Jacques Dupuis. On the other hand, Klaus Detlev Schulz describes *missio Dei* in these terms:

The *missio Dei* is the trinitarian redemptive and reconciling activity in history, motivated by God the Father's loving will for the entire world, grounded in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, and carried out by the Holy Spirit of Christ through the means of grace. God justifies [us] through the means of grace; delivers [us] from rebellion, sin, and death; subjects [us] under His kindly reign; and leads the redeemed community toward the final goal in history.⁶

The rest of my talk will unfold in five parts: 1) *Missio Dei*: one mission or two? 2) Lutheran resources for doing mission, 3) a Lutheran theology of revelation, 4) a theology of the cross utilizing the hiddenness of God, and 5) concluding hunches.

1) Missio Dei: One Mission or Two?

While I believe *missio Dei* is indeed a helpful, category, the very "structure of Lutheranism" (Werner Elert) would insist that this term requires nuancing: Does God have one or two missions to the world? This question directs us to the nature of the Gospel as giving Christian mission a

⁵ Wilhelm Richebacher, "*Missio Dei*: the Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?" *International Review of Mission*, Vol XCII, No. 367, 589.

⁶ Klaus D. Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: the Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St Louis: Concordia, 2009), p. 97.

distinctively dual or "duplex" shape (Ed Schroeder). God's mission always manifests itself in the dual form of law and Gospel, wrath and promise, judgment and mercy. Such is the Lutheran claim. In other words: *missio Dei* is shaped by *promissio Dei*, or *promissio* is the secret of *missio*.⁷ The law-Gospel distinction, while articulating and safeguarding the Gospel as promise, is more relevant than ever, and serves as a 21st century GPS in constructing a missiology that gets us "from here to there." Most contemporary missiologies arising from the basis of *missio Dei*, whether employing a "nature-grace" hermeneutic (RC theology) or a "sin-grace" hermeneutic (traditional Reformed theology), end up talking about grace and the Gospel in such a way that it *seems* that God has only one word to say, a word of loving grace. Lutherans find this problematic as addressing only half of the story, half of revelation, half of what needs to be confessed, trusted, and proclaimed.

Before we look at resources from Luther and the Confessions for constructing such a "duplex" missiology, I want to give you a taste of how differently a dual, law/ promise missiology and "univocal" missiologies approach some important missional topics. 1) In terms of *grace*: is grace primarily nature fulfilled, expressed as humanity's encounter with the God who reveals Himself as loving presence, or is grace the promise of mercy fulfilled on account of Christ, in contrast to the judgment against sin? 2) Is the *Holy Spirit's work* conceived of primarily as discovering "traces of grace and truth" in other traditions, or does the Spirit create both the conviction of sin and trust (faith) in the Gospel promise? 3) *Covenant theology*: do the various Biblical and extra-biblical covenants manifest the progressive unfolding of the one, universal covenant of grace, or is the distinction between covenants of law and the covenant of promise crucial for appreciating the "new covenant" in Christ? 4) The *mediation of Jesus Christ*:

⁷ Robert Bertram, "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission," in *The Promising Tradition: a Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology* (St Louis: Concordia Seminary in Exile, 1974), pp. 419-441.

is it to be understood in terms of an ontological mediation uniting human and divine natures, or is this mediation unique, differing from all other mediations by reconciling humanity to God through the forgiveness of sins? 5) *Reign of God*: is it "the dominion of God among human beings...reorienting human relations and organizing human society in accordance with God's intention"⁸, or is it constituted by and centered on the forgiveness of sins and promise of mercy delivered by Christ? 6) *The Church's proclamation*: do we announce the loving grace of God already present to all, or do we invite and exhort people to be reconciled to God through Christ? As one can see from this sketch of six missional themes, the conviction of a dual mission of God, rooted in the Gospel as promise and expressed by the law-Gospel distinction, results in a distinctively alternative proposal within today's missiological landscape.

II) Lutheran Resources for Doing Mission

The following three components, in my humble opinion, form the backbone and "DNA" of a Lutheran missiology: 1) the Gospel as promise; 2) the law-Gospel distinction; and 3) a theology of the cross utilizing the hiddenness of God. In other words: a Lutheran approach which seeks to be missiologically fruitful must seriously grapple with how best to interrelate three crucial themes: 1) divine judgment (as expressed in the law of God), 2) divine mercy (as expressed in the gospel of Christ), and 3) divine hiddenness (as expressed in a theology of the cross). I am indebted to Oswald Bayer for formulating this approach and, as far as I know, he is the only or first Lutheran theologian to do so. Whereas my Lutheran claim is that 1) the law accuses of sin and applies pressure, 2) the gospel promises comfort and freedom, and 3) God's hiddenness is terrifying, other proposals for mission not only largely overlook the theme of law and divine judgment, but also approach relating grace (Gospel) and divine hiddenness very differently,

⁸ Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, p. 21.

resulting in a radically different missiology. Like a 3-legged stool, I believe that all three legs-- divine judgment, divine mercy, divine hiddenness-- are crucial, and that to the extent one is missing or marginalized, to that extent Lutheran missiology falls flat on its face. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

When we turn to the Lutheran Confessions, we find these components explicitly spelled out. What is the motivating concern of the Lutheran confessors, what made them tick? First, that Christ be properly honored, that the benefits of Christ be utilized and not wasted. As Melancthon put it, "To know Christ is to know His benefits," or "For one has to distinguish the promises from the law in order to recognize the benefits of Christ."⁹ Secondly that consciences be properly comforted. One place where the hermeneutical function of the L/G distinction for rightly interpreting Scripture is spelled out in terms of these concerns is the *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration (FCSD), Article V* "Concerning Law and Gospel,"

The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God's Word properly [cf. 2 Tim. 2:15] and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law.¹⁰

Apology Article IV sums it up: "All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises. In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ."¹¹

⁹ *Book of Concord* 149.

¹⁰ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 581.

¹¹ *Book of Concord* 121.

Not only is the law/ gospel distinction fundamental for the Confessions, but likewise it forms the very heart of Luther's theology. As Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson put it:

For Luther, to do theology... meant constantly to distinguish between the history of salvation, heralded in the gospel, and the history of condemnation, proclaimed in the law. The decisive point of Luther's theology was the "correct distinction between law and gospel." Law and gospel are God's ways of dealing with the world. The law reveals sin, the gospel discloses salvation. Thus law and gospel are the ways in which God reveals himself as the god who justifies the ungodly.¹²

Let's try to highlight how differently the theme of divine hiddenness can be approached by asking some questions. As a starting point for discerning divine hiddenness in creation: is creation inherently graced, or has creation fallen *from* grace, *into* sin, and in desperate need of divine reconciliation and restoration? What is the nature of the task of exploring divine hiddenness: to discover and identify "traces of grace and truth" throughout creation, or a clearer discernment of how God's law is operative throughout creation, caring for and preserving it? Furthermore, what is the goal of exploring divine hiddenness: to discern how the "grace of Christ" is already implicitly operative in other religions, or a deeper appreciation of how the grace of Christ, as the promise of mercy realized, is *not* explicitly known and trusted and therefore all the more needed? How does the nature of the Gospel as truly "good" and "new" news shape what we look for and expect to find in exploring the hiddenness of God?

III) Theology of Revelation

Since clarity regarding a Lutheran theology of revelation is crucial for constructing a Lutheran missiology, we now turn to flesh out some core convictions regarding revelation, some of which I have already alluded. A helpful starting point is Bob Bertram's familiar axiom-

¹² Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 48.

"Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology."¹³ In other words: One's understanding of what constitutes salvation is intimately related to, and definitively shapes, how one interprets Scripture.

I believe the concept of revelation has become inflated in contemporary theology. Carl Braaten describes this development:

There is good reason to question the dominant role that revelation plays in modern theology. Revelation is not the supreme category of Christian dogmatics; salvation is! The supremacy of revelation [as a category] assumes that the basic human predicament is the lack of the knowledge of God. However, from a biblical perspective... the fundamental human predicament is the enslavement of the human will to the powers of sin, death, and the Devil. Then reconciliation- not revelation that answers to the question of knowledge- becomes the key category because it answers to the question of sin as estrangement. Furthermore, when revelation becomes the focal point... it relegates Jesus Christ primarily to the role of revelation... We hold... a twofold revelation of God... not only of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ but also of God's law through the structures of creation. It is essential to draw a proper distinction between revelation and salvation. Not all revelation is salvific; there is also the revelation of divine wrath and judgment through world historical events and personal experiences. Jesus Christ is not the sole revelation of God... The truly unique thing that happens in Christ is God's act of reconciliation.¹⁴

This quote directs us to the crux of the problem, from a Lutheran perspective: While much of contemporary *missio Dei* theology focuses on articulating how people can have knowledge of God as they work together to establish the reign of God, the underlying assumption is that such knowledge always salvific. The law-Gospel distinction questions this assumption.

In what follows, I will be engaging one specific proposal for mission, that of the late Roman Catholic theologian Jacques Dupuis, as representing some prevalent emphases in contemporary

¹³ Robert Bertram, "The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV," in *The Promising Tradition: a Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Carl Braaten, *That All May Believe*, pp. 12-13.

missiology, including the emphasis on revelation as revealing primarily, or only, God's loving grace. While Dupuis never identified his own proposal as representing *missio Dei*, and while many Protestants would object to some of his philosophical underpinnings, I believe his approach exemplifies some key emphases in *missio Dei* theology which my Lutheran proposal would critique and enrich. My intention is not to be polemical; simply to offer a concrete proposal to which my Lutheran approach offers a law/Gospel alternative.

I wish to ask two diagnostic questions: 1) "*What gets revealed?*" and 2) "*How is it revealed?*" For Dupuis' proposal, and for much of contemporary missiology, the "what" of divine revelation consists of God's self-communication and self-manifestation as grace. This is always, everywhere, by definition, gracious and salvific. In terms of "how," this gracious, divine self-communication is conveyed through foundational anthropology, which becomes elaborated as a view of how other religious traditions serve as "participated mediations" of the "one mediation" of salvation in Christ. One can see how this is congruent with Stanley Samartha's earlier claim that Christians and their non-Christian neighbors are together engaged in God's mission to the world. In this approach, experiences of God are, by and large, gracious.

1) "*What gets revealed?*" and 2) "*How is it revealed?*" For my Lutheran proposal the "what" of divine revelation centers of the distinction between law and Gospel promise. Simply put: *God speaks and reveals two words which are so diametrically opposed and contradictory that their reconciliation requires God to sacrifice, not only Jesus Christ as the reconciling atonement for human sin, but seemingly God's logical coherence as well.* The gospel is the promise of God's grace as reconciling the intractable problem created by the law's demands and human sinfulness, with grace specifically defined as the promise of mercy realized for Christ's sake.

How is this law-Gospel distinction, and the understanding of grace it implies, conveyed? Through the performative Word of God, proclaimed in its various forms (written, oral, sacramental) and active through the power of the risen, glorified Christ and his Spirit. It is received through faith as trust in the divine promises. God's Spirit freely binds itself to this Word, not only convicting people of sin but also driving them to the comfort of the Gospel's promise. I believe these two questions, "*What gets revealed?*" and "*How is it revealed?*" highlight basic differences between "univocal" missiologies such as Dupuis', and my "duplex" Lutheran approach.

"Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology." What Dupuis fundamentally believes about the nature of salvation definitively shapes his understanding of the nature of the gospel, grace, covenants, the reign of God-- in other words, his view of salvation determines, not just how he reads Scripture, but also how he "reads" the world of religious pluralism as he articulates his inclusive pluralism.

For theologians like Rahner and Dupuis, Christ's incarnation means that salvation consists of God's loving, self-communication to all people everywhere. Passages such as I Tim 2:4 ("For God wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.") and Eph 1:10 ("to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ") are filtered through Karl Rahner's transcendental anthropology to mean that God is universally present to all people in saving grace, not only as an eschatological possibility, but as a present reality in and through their religions. From this perspective, it becomes possible to view sin, as Dupuis does, as a relatively minor "bump in the road" on the way to communion and union with God. Once the problem of sin is marginalized, the law-Gospel distinction becomes largely irrelevant, and it

becomes plausible to look for "traces of grace and truth" in other religions as signs of God's saving presence. God is universally present, bestowing universal salvation, and the evidence of this is "signs of grace and truth." What Dupuis believes about the nature of salvation, within his Rahnerian framework, inevitably shapes how he reads Scripture and, by extension, religious pluralism. We live in a graced horizon. In terms of the second question, *how* is this revealed, Dupuis would view other religious traditions as participating in and legitimately expressing, through their own structures, the saving grace of Christ.

In contrast to Dupuis' approach of emphasizing Christ's incarnation and viewing grace as God's universal, loving presence to all, my Lutheran approach prioritizes a theology of the cross and a robust theology of sin as centrally important. 1) *The overcoming of sin*, rather than a marginal aspect of salvation, becomes its central dilemma: how to reconcile sinful humanity to God in a manner that does justice to both divine love and justice, mercy and holiness. 2) The law-gospel distinction, in addressing the depth dimension of sin, becomes central in articulating the nature of salvation and grace. 3) While divine truth permeates creation, including the world religions, such traces of truth would not be identified as "traces of grace," since the reconciling grace of Christ is not yet being explicitly trusted as good news. Again, Lutheran soteriology is integral to Lutheran hermeneutics: salvation as the promise of mercy and reconciliation, fulfilled in the work of Christ on the cross, leads to the law-Gospel distinction and a distinctive approach to religious pluralism, centered on God's hiddenness both in the cross and in the world. *The realities of law, Gospel, and divine hiddenness, understood in terms of the cross and filtered through the cross, shape what can and cannot be affirmed in terms of God's grace in the world.*

Unlike Dupuis, my Lutheran model intentionally refrains from elaborating how this saving work of Christ reaches people beyond the bounds of the proclaimed Word, leaving that within the realm of unrevealed mystery. In balancing the poles of God's universal, saving will (John 3:16, I Tim. 2:4) and salvation through Christ alone, it unambiguously affirms both truths- God wants to save all people, and God saves through Christ alone- while insisting that the mechanics of *how* God could or will save those who have never heard the Gospel remains a mystery.

The distinction between law and Gospel is centrally illuminative and crucial to properly relating the actions of God's two hands, the Word and the Spirit, within the one economy of salvation. The "verbal" dialectic between the conflicting Words of God's law and God's promise shapes how Word and Spirit should properly be related. To the extent that God's speech to humanity is understood as largely grace, to that extent the relationship between Word and Spirit is open to distortion or misunderstanding.

In other words: When the accusatory function of the divine law and judgment of sin are overlooked, the core, promissory nature of the gospel as divine-human reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins is obscured or insufficiently emphasized. Without a clear, robust theology of the law, a theology of the gospel as promise of God loses its sharp focus. This problematic highlights the importance of maintaining *both* terms of a key, Scriptural pairing (e.g. law and gospel, sin and grace, flesh and spirit, bondage and freedom, old creation and new creation, etc.). Whenever one term in such pairs is lost or marginalized, the remaining term loses the sharp focus of its core meaning. This is precisely what happens when the gospel, gospel values, and traces of grace are used in missiology without a solid anchoring in the divine law and human sinfulness. Simply put: without a deep appreciation of the role of sin and the divine law, the core nature of the gospel as promise of mercy becomes distorted.

How then might we understand the relationship between the Word and the Spirit? A Lutheran theology of the Spirit, incorporating the law-Gospel distinction, understands the Spirit's work as conveying God's dual mission, that of judgment against sin (law) and promise of mercy (gospel). Oswald Bayer expresses this well:

If the Holy Spirit calls only "through the gospel," but the gospel is gospel only as it is distinguished from the law, then the distinction between law and gospel is decisive with respect to... pneumatology, as well. Thus the work of the Spirit is, first of all, to sharpen the law and to bring about God's judgment against sin; only then does the Spirit work through the second and final Word of God, the gospel, in that he forgives sin and creates faith...¹⁵

The fact that Dupuis largely ignores the law's function in judging sin inevitably means that, in his theology of the Spirit, the Spirit always and only discovers "gospel values," "traces of truth and grace," and "the Christian spirit" manifested as love,¹⁶ rather than accentuating the reality of human brokenness and sin. In this way, what constitutes gospel shifts decisively from a solid anchoring in the Scriptural promise of forgiving mercy to something else.

My critique of much of contemporary *missio Dei* theology boils down to this: one cannot sufficiently understand the *gospel* without a sufficiently robust understanding of the *law*, just as one cannot sufficiently understand divine *grace* without a sufficiently robust understanding of *sin*. One cannot understand the gospel without the law, and one cannot understand divine grace without sin. In terms of both the law-gospel and sin-grace dialectic, when the categories of "law" and "sin" are overlooked, "gospel" and "grace" are likewise distorted. In such missiological proposals, the "center of gravity" shifts from the gospel as *promissio Dei* and grace as the promise of mercy fulfilled, to some other basis, whether it be Rahnerian, transcendental

¹⁵ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: a Contemporary Interpretation*, p. 247.

¹⁶ Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, p. 190 ff.

anthropology (as in the case of some RC models), an understanding of the reign of God as an interreligious reality, a common striving for peace and justice, or something else.

IV) *A Theology of the Cross and God's Hiddenness*

Lutheran theology insists that God's "alien work" of judging human sin in the event of the cross (the Law) serves God's "proper work" of justifying and reconciling sinners (the Gospel). Such a theology of the cross is deeply paradoxical. While a Lutheran theology of mercy as promise realized, utilizing the law-gospel distinction, best preserves and articulates the dynamics of Biblical salvation, I submit that the category of God's hiddenness (*deus absconditus*) serves as a bridge between a Lutheran theology of mercy and the broader context of religious pluralism. As a theology of promise, a Lutheran proposal for mission is best able to establish a point of contact and dialogue with other religions *when it seriously engages them through the category of God's hiddenness, a category which is readily understood by other religions*. In doing so, such a Lutheran proposal makes a distinctive contribution to interreligious dialogue, raises important questions for others and itself to consider, and opens itself up for genuine dialogue with and questioning from other religious traditions.

First of all, the hiddenness of God is a helpful category for navigating the ambiguity of actual human experience. It is a useful tool in at least three ways: 1) it establishes a bridge toward religious pluralism, 2) connects Lutheran missiological discourse with the wider, fractured, postmodern discourse, as well as 3) offers, in the Gospel, a hopeful word in the midst of ongoing disintegration and catastrophes.

While all religions have hopeful words to say, they also wrestle with whether such words of grace will indeed be the final word. I wish to contend that the most important similarities and overlaps concerning human religious experience are best described, not by categories of *being or*

existence, but rather as the paradoxical relationship between law and Gospel, divine wrath and promise, sin and grace, human brokenness and divine healing. Because human religious experience *is* ambiguous, left to our own devices, we don't really quite know how to "read" or interpret nature. The "hidden God" whom nature ambiguously reveals needs to be unveiled, in and through the revelation in Christ, if humanity is to have a gracious, trusting, salvific relationship with this God. As Ed Schroeder comments on the formulation, "There is grace, and there is grace," by Melancthon, "the 'grace' we encounter in our daily experience of God's creation is something other than the 'grace' that comes in Jesus the Christ."¹⁷

Lutheran theology, following Luther's lead, urges serious inquirers of all faiths to turn from the "darkness" of the "absolute" God (the unknowable God, God in God's inner being) to the mystery of Christ crucified. Luther's emphatic claim, "The cross alone is our theology,"¹⁸ directs our attention to God's paradoxical absence and presence, hiddenness and revelation, wrath and loving mercy, as those realities are conveyed in and through a theology of the cross.¹⁹

To the extent that a theology of the cross is helpful in interpreting and applying the Gospel as promise, to that extent it serves as a missiological tool. While other religions and philosophical systems have their own strategies for dealing with questions of divine hiddenness and human suffering, Lutheran theology would caution all such attempts to beware of exceeding their limits.

¹⁷ Edward Schroeder, "Encountering the Hidden God" in *Areopagus- a Living Encounter with Today's Religious World*. (Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, Hong Kong, May 1993), p. 2.

¹⁸ Martin Luther in *Luther's Works* 25: 287.

¹⁹ I am acutely aware of the immensely complex nature of issues related to the hiddenness and unknowability of God, apophatic and negative theologies, theology of the cross, and theodicy. While the limits of this study do not allow for more in-depth treatment of divine hiddenness and unknowability as they have been classically articulated by early Christian theologians as Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, Meister Eckhardt, and Maximus the Confessor, nor theologies of the cross of contemporary theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jungel, John Stuart Hall, and others, my aim is very modest: simply to suggest how the hiddenness of God, interpreted within the framework of a theology of the cross, can serve as a missiologically fruitful topic for interreligious dialogue.

Not only does the ‘hiddenness of God’ underscore the important, Biblical distinction between God’s law and God’s promise, I submit it also provides a better theological basis and springboard for interreligious dialogue than inclusive pluralism does. Martin Luther, employing the hiddenness of God, commented in his explanation to the third article of the Apostles’ Creed:

These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian Church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they *believe in and worship only the one, true God*, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, *for they do not have the Lord Christ*, and, besides, they are not illuminated or blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit (italics added).²⁰

Emphasizing the possessive verb ‘*have*’ throughout his explanation of the Creed, Luther makes the crucial distinction between having a natural, “first article” relationship with God, based on creation, versus having a saving, “second article” relationship with God through Jesus Christ. All people have a 1st article relationship, by virtue of creation; only Christians have a 2nd article relationship, by virtue of the Gospel. As Melancthon put it: “To know (have) Christ is to know His benefits.” Luther saw the gospel, defined specifically as God’s revelation of mercy fulfilled in Christ, as adding something significantly “good” and “new” to what sinners otherwise, by nature, do not have.²¹

Therefore: a Lutheran approach affirms that, while all people can inclusively, anonymously worship the one true God, their worship, apart from Christ, is deficient, literally Christ-less, and does not lead to salvation.²² Rather than a pejorative putdown, this distinction is meant to

²⁰ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1981), p. 61

²¹ Edward Schroeder, “Luther’s Commentary on the Third Article as a Clue to His Theology of Other Religions” in *Missio Apostolica: Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology* VII: 1 (May 1999), p. 7.

²² Edward Schroeder, “Luther’s Commentary on the Third Article as a Clue to His Theology of Other Religions” in *Missio Apostolica: Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology* VII: 1 (May 1999), p. 5.

highlight and emphasize the *crucial connection between the God one explicitly 'has' and the benefits that God bestows*. As Luther observed, without Christ, people's worship lacks all kinds of important benefits: knowing God's attitude toward them, being confident of God's loving grace, enjoying the gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc. That is why Luther, commenting on the sailors in Jonah 1:5 ("All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god."), asserts, "These men in the ship all know of God, but they have no sure God."²³ As Oswald Bayer notes: "The office of Christ is to make us certain of God."²⁴

Luther emphasized a double relation of God to the world: *outside of Christ*, God is the absolutely free, majestic, and awesomely terrifying God of law; *in Christ*, God has freely chosen to bind and limit himself to the promissory Word of the Gospel and the sacraments. This fundamental tension which my Lutheran proposal insists must be at the center of any missiological proposal, is largely missing in contemporary missiology. However, it forms the framework within which a "duplex" *missio Dei* unfolds: *the hidden will of God* (the wrath of God, manifested in God's law and divine hiddenness in creation) *seems to contradict and defeat God's revealed will of saving grace for all*. A Christian missiology must not avoid this dilemma: how can it be resolved? While the Rahner-Dupuis solution is to dissolve the paradox by largely ignoring the law as God's hidden will of wrath, my proposal directs us, not to resolution, but rather to trusting the promise entailed in the revelation of Christ crucified. With Luther, we urge people to flee from this hidden God to the revealed God in Jesus Christ.

What might be some of the implications of such a view of the hiddenness of God for relating God's promise to our mission? At least three emerge. First, the triune God is truly, but never

²³ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, p. 75.

²⁴ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, p. 75.

exhaustively, to be identified with the crucified Christ. There is much about God which we do not know and which will remain hidden, despite the revelation of God in Christ. In other words:

“The image of God does not, after all, [exhaustively] coincide with the picture of Jesus.”²⁵

Secondly, the hidden God drives us *to* the revealed Word of God in Scripture and Christ because the hidden will offers neither guidance nor comfort. Thirdly, Christian mission talk requires further, nuanced sophistication, realizing that it always lives and breathes on a continuum, between the paradoxical tensions of the God beyond revelation (the terrifying, unknown God) and the God revealed in crucified Christ.²⁶

V) Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the distinction between the hidden and revealed God, a Lutheran missiology offers six ‘hunches’ about the lived, faith experiences of adherents of other religions²⁷ (Ed Schroeder): 1) Nobody’s daily religious experience is one of “pure grace” (contra Rahner). 2) To ground a theology of religions or interreligious dialogue on how various religions articulate their experiences of grace leaves huge areas of religious experience untouched, assuring that Christian grace, as the promise of mercy realized in Christ, will become blurred or marginalized. 3) The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected, undeserved experience of diffuse ‘goodness;’ rather, it is a surprising word of mercy from our Creator whom we chronically mistrust, and to whom we owe an unending debt. 4) Should not the fact of Christian sinfulness- lack of faith, etc. - serve a central role in dialogue? Christians admit to being

²⁵ Brian Gerrish, “‘To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973), p. 276.

²⁶ Brian Gerrish, “‘To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973), p. 278.

²⁷ Edward Schroeder, “Encountering the Hidden God” in *Areopagus- a Living Encounter with Today’s Religious World*. (Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, Hong Kong, May 1993), pp. 4-5.

"simultaneously saints and sinners," and echo the Markan father's desperate cry, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief (9:24)!" 5) Christians are no better in their moral performance than others; their claim is not about themselves, but rather about a gracious Word of promise they have heard and received, giving them hope for salvation against all evidence to the contrary. 6) To the extent that Christian theology is not enriched by listening to the experiences of God's hiddenness and absence in other faiths, to that extent Christian theology remains impoverished. This can and must be done in a spirit of humility, empathy, and hospitality, and yet deep commitment to our Lutheran confessional tradition as a point of departure and return.²⁸

While God's ways are ultimately higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts, as we move out in mission and witness, we can take comfort in the promise that all the promises of God are "Yes" in Christ, and that this God of promise will never leave nor forsake us. I believe Bob Bertram's classic quote serves as a guidepost for Lutherans who take both their confessional heritage and mission engagement seriously: "*Promissio* is the secret of *missio*. For the mission's Sender was Himself the keeping of that promise. And the mission's gaps, across which we move, are ultimately spanned by that same promise – of Himself by the Spirit through His Word."²⁹ Thank you!

²⁸ Catherine Cornille, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroads, 2008).

²⁹ Robert Bertram in *The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology* (St Louis: Concordia Seminary in Exile, 1974), 1.