

Cultural and Theological Specificity in Lutheran Missiology

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In this paper I will summarize three cultural and six theological specifics that pertain to "doing" missionwork from a distinctly Lutheran perspective. Certainly this is not all that might be said on the subject, but it may serve as an introduction to a more thorough study of the various issues involved.

In relation to the situational context in which missionwork is done, it is necessary to note the importance of three distinct performance settings. The first is the original context in which the Holy Scriptures were first transmitted, that is, composed under divine inspiration and received by the various primary groups intended by the "holy writers". Some forty or more human authors of the sacred message, living in different eras over a period of over 1600 years, in varied cultural, social, economic, political, and religious environments--surely that makes for quite a considerable diversity! This multifaceted nature of the origin of the Scriptures had--and continues to have--an important influence upon the writings themselves. For one thing, the original writers could presuppose certain facts and figures, people and places, situations and circumstances, that they knew would be familiar to their intended listeners, and ultimately, readers as well. Therefore, such information did not have to be stated explicitly in the text. The authors could simply take this conceptual framework for granted as they communicated their message--whether history, law, prophecy, praise, prayer, epistolary encouragement and instruction, or revelation--in the most effective way possible, being led by the Spirit of God.

For those of us today, however, who are greatly removed in terms of time, place, interpersonal situation, and cultural setting, there is a problem: we often do not have access to that same corpus and context of background knowledge. This makes it difficult, sometimes impossible, to determine precisely how a certain reference is to be interpreted or a specific statement is to be understood and applied. Thus a great deal of concerted scholarship is needed--biblical investigation that is directed towards the initial setting of the text, using the tools provided by such specialized disciplines as linguistics, comparative (ancient) literature, cultural anthropology, and sociology. To be sure, many of the secular presuppositions and theories of such fields of study must be ignored, repudiated, and/or replaced. But their basic methods and insights are frequently very helpful in providing a contextualizing framework within which a particular instance of Scripture--whether a single word or an entire book (e.g. The Song of Solomon)--can be more correctly viewed and construed.

So we come to the present day and the cultural setting in which we Lutherans have received and do now also interpret and apply the Scriptures. This is the current context that pervasively

affects our understanding of the Word of God. For this reason, we need to carefully and prayerfully consider our own situation so that we might better recognize the influence of language, culture, and also our distinctive theological formulations on our present perception and conception of the original text. How reliable (or emendable) do we consider the Masoretic Text to be? Which passages and pericopes do we view as being especially important to our Christian faith, life, and witness? Why do we think so? Which interpretation of the original do we prefer in cases of genuine ambiguity or unclarity and why? What difference would it make (if any) to our theology if an alternative reading or meaning were chosen instead? On what evidence is our exegetical understanding based, and which methods of analysis have we employed to arrive at our decision? Is there a possibility that we may have been influenced in a particular hermeneutical direction by our religious preunderstanding that is, the knowledge (especially of systematic Lutheran theology) that we assumed to be "given" as we approached the text and carried out our study?

Of course, we cannot deal with any text as it were *tabula rasa*. Our mind and all of the information and knowledge that it contains is to be fully utilized in service of the exegetical task. However, it is helpful--even necessary--to be aware of the perspective that we have adopted as we carry out our work in order to prevent (as much as possible) alien information, attitudes, values, and feelings from impinging upon the particular interpretation of Scripture that we ultimately arrive at. Our Western world view and way of life must play an important role in our application of the biblical text--otherwise we would have difficulty in making the timeless message relevant in terms of the present-day sociological and historical context in which it is being presented and received. But our cultural heritage must be forcefully suppressed as we enter the hermeneutical horizon of the original so that we do not import to, or impose our own way of thinking upon, the Word as it was first communicated to its receptors. Things that are difficult, strange, and at times seemingly contradictory must not be reduced, rationalized or smoothed over so as to conform to our supposedly enlightened twentieth-century perspective. Certain unclaritys and infelicities will always remain as we examine the biblical text from our distanced point of view. So much the more reason for applying all of the analytical resources at our disposal in order to arrive more closely to an approximation of what the Lord was saying then so that we can better relate his message to the listeners of here and now.

This immediate "horizon", or setting, of hermeneutics then includes also the transferred context of any people or nation, society or clan of a different culture to whom we wish to convey the Good News of our salvation in Christ Jesus. Undoubtedly, this new environment of message transmission and reception will be

different in various respects from our own. The biblical message will therefore have to be contextualized, or reformulated in indigenous terms, so that the intended receptors can both comprehend and utilize it in the most effective way, humanly speaking. That is, we do not discount or disparage the work of the Holy Spirit in this wide-ranging communication process. Our job is rather to ensure--as best we can--that we distort or complicate the original as little as possible as the message moves across the years, miles, customs, and circumstances from its biblical setting to the many situations of pressing spiritual need in the world today.

In other words, we must strive to let the Word speak for itself in the language and culture of the receptor group, large or small, for whom it is intended. In order to accomplish this objective, the same essential analytical tools mentioned earlier with reference to the biblical setting need to be diligently applied also in our contemporary hermeneutical efforts, e.g. linguistics, literary criticism, sociology, semiotics, anthropology, comparative religion, and so forth. Only now these methods and techniques are focused upon the context at hand and the specific people whom the Spirit wishes to touch through the Scriptures. The more that we understand about those with whom we are trying to communicate, the better will be the result of our efforts to meaningfully contextualize the divine message for them. Of course, Satan will always seek ways in which to derail and circumvent this life-changing process, but even here a greater cultural awareness will enable the communicator(s) to recognize such dangers more quickly and to make the necessary adjustments in their theological approach.

This sort of "third-party" operation in which one group (the biblical writers) is being made to speak to a second group (e.g. a non-Western people) by means of a third (i.e. Western missionaries) is clearly not an ideal. Nevertheless, it is an inevitable consequence of the Great Commission of Matthew 28 which encompasses the entire world of sinners, some of whom have the truth while many others do not. Thus those who receive the saving message are to pass it on in turn, not only to their own "kith and kin", but also to others who belong to different ethnic and social units. The message bearers will therefore have as one of their primary goals the establishment of a local ministry--one which is well-trained theologically in all disciplines so that they can one day proclaim the Word of the Lord competently and independently, without the assistance of foreign clergy.

However, indigenous pastors, teachers, and evangelists also need to become as culturally sensitive as their mentors so that they neither misunderstand the biblical text nor misrepresent it due to the bias imposed by the context of their own life-view and value system. So just as cultural "conditioning" is unavoidable--an automatic consequence of being enculturated

within a given world society--so also is cultural "contextualization" necessary in terms of the three settings specified above: the original, the transferred, and the current (in this case: "interposed") contexts that are normally involved in a mission-based communication of the divine message of Scripture across geographical and ethnic boundaries.

Thus far the principles outlined apply in large measure to all so-called "evangelical" ministers of the Word as presented in most of the popular missionary handbooks. It is necessary to take the specificity of society and culture into serious consideration when communicating the Gospel, not only in a foreign setting, but also in the increasingly complex ethnic diversity that characterizes many urban areas in Western nations. In what way then is "confessional" Lutheranism different (note the qualification)? The difference depends of course upon our traditional approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures--a theology, based upon our historical confessions--which has a number of distinctive facets that pertain to missiology, the theory and practice of missionwork. This subject cannot be treated in all its depth and diversity here, but the following observations may serve to point us in the right direction. Below are outlined six crucial doctrines (or doctrinal complexes) which represent a uniquely Lutheran approach to the cross-cultural communication of the Word. Each of the six teachings is briefly (and only partially) summarized, with just a few of the pertinent passages cited in support:

1. Justification by faith:

It may seem obvious, but explicit mention does need to be made because this is the doctrine by which any church stands or falls. The teaching of objective justification, namely, that God declared the whole world righteous on account of the perfect vicarious atonement effected by his Son (Rom.5:18; 2 Cor.5:19), constitutes the fundamental basis for all missionary (evangelistic) endeavor, whether at home or abroad. The doctrine of subjective justification in turn provides the essential motivation for missionwork, for the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and eternal life must be received by each and every receptor through faith in the divine Giver (Rom.3:22; Eph.2:8-9).

Many evangelical churches overlook the objective, universal nature of this teaching and as a result tend to over-emphasize the human, instrumental element in both the activity of proclamation and also in the conversion event itself. Thus sanctification is confused with justification whereby the fruits of faith are either directly or indirectly demanded as "evidence" of a genuine transformation of the sinful heart--rather than as the natural, inevitable response of a soul regenerated (2 Cor.5:14-15; Tit.2:14). The justified, Spirit-led believer

willingly demonstrates loving gratitude and sanctified devotion for everything that our gracious God has already effected through the vicarious atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal.2:20; 5:24-25 2 Cor.5:17; Eph.2:10).

2. The priesthood of all believers:

This doctrine highlights the fact that missionwork is an activity that every Christian can and must be engaged in. All believers in Christ have the obligation to "declare the praises" of their Savior (1 Pet.2:9), and this includes sharing with others the living faith that lies within them (Phm.6). In a sense then there is really no need for a separate corps of "missionaries" in the church, for the task and the commission (Mat.28:19-20) belongs to all of the Lord's true disciples. In order to effect this work in the most orderly and efficient way, however, a body of believers normally bands together and carries out the endeavor as a joint effort, with some playing a more overt role as called servants of the Word (Rom.10:15; Eph.4:11-12), and others engaged in an active ministry of multifaceted support, e.g. encouragement, prayer, finances, administration, etc. (Acts 6:2-4; 1Cor.12:28).

Luther stressed this overall mission orientation of the church--and of the individual congregation--as being an integral part of their constitution, and thus he did not find the need to speak separately about some elite agency within or alongside the church whose specific task was to do "missionwork". Unfortunately, for this reason Luther and Lutherans in general have often been accused of not being mission "oriented". Granted, we may have failed to carry out our responsibility as faithfully as we had opportunities, and for this we must repent and try, with the help of the Spirit, do better. But this challenge and commitment remains part of our normal sanctified activity as believers, both individually and as a corporate body (Acts 6:7-8; 8:1,4). This does not mean that those who have been specially equipped and prepared by the Lord should not be called and sent out to new fields by their fellow Christians (Acts 13:1-3). But it is important to recognize that foreign missionwork is simply an extension of our everyday witness to the Christian faith. It is not an optional "extra"!

3. The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper:

The Lutheran perspective on the Sacraments is unique in Christian theology: Baptism is a visible application of the gospel whereby a person is incorporated into the family of God through the action of the Holy Spirit working in the Word of forgiveness that is proclaimed and received by faith (Mk.16:16; Acts 2:38; Tit.3:5; 1 Pet.3:21). By the miracle of divine grace, this promise is extended also to small children, even infants

(Mat.18:6; Acts 2:39). What a comfort that this unique rite can give, especially to people living in parts of the world where nearly half of the population is under twenty years of age, where the birthrate is somewhere around 3% per annum, and where the child (under 5 years) mortality rate approaches 40% or more!

This saving faith, initially confessed at one's Baptism, is later publicly reaffirmed at the time of Confirmation--and thereafter on a regular basis through the reception of Holy Communion. The Gospel of sin's remission and a sure salvation in Christ is thereby made a prominent part of every believer's life, both personally and corporately in the Christian congregation (Acts 2:42-47; 1Cor.11:24-25). It also reminds those so blessed and renewed of their obligation in turn to bring others into an active fellowship with their Lord and with one another as an outwardly and inwardly growing community of faith and faithfulness (1 Cor. 10:21; 11:25-26).

How sad it is that only the Lutheran Church properly utilizes this special "means of grace"--this powerful resource for building and reinforcing the Church both at home and abroad. This sacred provision is especially important among the majority of the world's (non-Western) population who do not make a rigid distinction between the natural and the supernatural or the religious and the secular. For such people the efficacy and authority of the Sacraments are therefore much more readily assumed and valued, and the concept of a living interactive "Body" of believers is a natural reality.

4. The distinction between Law and Gospel, sin and grace:

Many evangelicals today proclaim the "gospel" in a manner which confuses or at best downplays this essential distinction between what God has graciously done for us and what He demands from us in terms of theological conception, complete consecration, and total commitment to a new way of life in the Spirit (Rom.1:16; 2 Cor.5:14-15). As a result, the Law is either made a part of the Gospel when doing primary evangelistic work, (e.g. "God can surely save you if you just believe in Christ"), or the Gospel is made part of the Law (e.g. "Give your heart/life to Jesus, and He will give you a new heart/life"). In either case, the uniqueness and reality of both our salvation and our consequent sanctification is dangerously compromised and hence probably misunderstood, especially by new "converts" who come from a religious tradition that stresses legalistic work-righteousness (Rom.2:14-15) and/or believes in the power of magical, spiritual, and demonic forces (Acts 13:6-11; 14:11-13).

Such errors are frequently related to an improper perspective on the devastating nature of sin, i.e. absolutely hereditary, totally corrupting, and continually corrosive (Eph.4:18-19;

Col.2:13), in contrast to the magnitude of divine grace that is manifested in--and only in--Jesus Christ (Jn.3:16; 1 Jn.4:10). This leaves no room for universalism on the one hand, or any form of syncretism on the other. The Christian Gospel is therefore all-exclusive (Jn.3:18; 1 Tim.2:5)--a biblical fact that is disregarded by those missionaries who would "accommodate" their message in order to attract peoples of antagonistic faiths as well as by those who "over-contextualize" the Scriptures by incorporating elements of a pagan religious philosophy and/or cultus.

5. The efficacy of the Word:

At times, as one reads some of the many articles and books on missiology that are currently available, one begins to wonder whether such an over-emphasis is being placed upon the various human models and methods being proposed that we are in danger of losing sight of the message which is the foundation for all true evangelism and outreach (Rom.10:17; Heb.4:12; 1 Pet.1:23). This is not to deny the importance of correctly evaluating and utilizing relevant knowledge from the social sciences. However, this must not be done at the expense of the all-sufficient and efficacious Word, in particular, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which must always be kept at the center of every type and aspect of mission theory and strategy (1 Cor.3:10-15).

Closely connected with such a biblical perspective is the recognition that it is the Holy Spirit who works through the inspired Scriptures in order to change sinful human hearts and to effect genuine conversion and spiritual renewal (Gal.5:24-25; 1 Cor.2:11-15; 2 Thes. 2:13-14). This emphasis is also necessary in order to prevent any notion of pride in the communicator, e.g. "Last year 'we' [= 'I'!] won 200 souls for Christ" (1Cor.2: 1-5) or any misplaced confidence on the part of those being communicated to, i.e. that their apparent change in religious status depends in any way upon the personnel who brought them the message of Christ (1 Cor.3:4-5). Indeed, one may plant the saving seed, another may water it, but God alone can initiate spiritual life and give sanctified growth (1 Cor.3:6-7; Phil.2:12-13).

6. The Kingdom of God:

The unique nature of the "Kingdom of God" from a Lutheran hermeneutical perspective needs to be stressed in view of the varied aberrations that are being manifested both at home (the USA) as well as by various mission agencies throughout the world. This kingdom, which is equivalent to the universal "Church of Jesus Christ" or the "communion of saints", is invisible--being constituted by faith that is worked through the operation of the Holy Spirit (Lk.17:20-21; Jn.18:36-37). The Kingdom of God is

also powerful, personal, and active, a product of God's sovereign and merciful rule on behalf of his chosen people (Mat.28:18). It is further distinguished in Lutheran theology according to two other characteristics: that of time and this life in which the "grace" of God is manifested (Eph.2:14-22), and that of eternity in heaven which will show forth in a special way the "glory" of God (Phil.3:20-21). Here on earth then all members of the Kingdom must be prepared to "take up their cross" to follow the Lord along the path of temptation, pain, problems, and perhaps even persecution (Mat.11: 28-30; 16:24-25; i.e. as set forth in Luther's "theology of the cross"). We will not be "glorified" until we finally enter into eternal "rest" in our heavenly home (Col.3:3-4).

This particular issue needs to be reiterated with increasing urgency nowadays in the face of many popular mission theologies that emphasize spiritual "power encounters", the manifestation of charismatic "signs and wonders", the supposed "slaying" of Satan, and all sorts of materialistic notions connected with an alleged millennialistic rule of believers in the present age. No--the Lord's Kingdom is not displayed in such an overt, worldly fashion (Jn.18:36), for it lies within the hearts of all repentant believers (Mk.1:14-15). Rather it becomes evident in a much more subtle, but infinitely more significant manner, that is, when these same disciples of Christ put their faith into action and bring forth the "fruit" of the Spirit who is actively at work within them (Rom.14:17; 1 Cor.13; Gal.5:22-25). One of the most prominent ways of declaring our allegiance to this Kingdom is to confess Christ (Rom.10:9-10) and to reveal the "hope" that He gives you (1 Pet.3:15), whether to a close friend or relative or to an interested alien living in a completely different environment on the other side of the globe.

These then are just some of the principles that distinguish evangelical and confessional Lutheran teaching and practice from other "missiologies" as we continue to cross many diverse cultures for the cause of Christ in the world today. It is important that we also strive to increase in our awareness and understanding of these crucial concepts and their correct application through a diligent study of the Word. Let us implore the Spirit's guidance as we devote ourselves ever more fully to this vital "mission", for it is the Lord's "work"--hence it is carried out to the glory of God and for the growth of His Kingdom of grace!