

Luther On Missions

[Prepared for the Nebraska-Colorado Missionaries' Conference on November 6-7, 1984]

By Ernest H. Wendland

INTRODUCTION

When the topic "Luther on Missions" was assigned to me, your conference through its "Theme Committee" expressed two primary concerns which it wished to have explored. First of all, how did Luther "do the work of an evangelist to carry the gospel to the people"? Secondly, how can "Luther's methods be applied to our fields today"? (*Letter from Pastor John Schneidervin*, November 12, 1983). These concerns are important. They are far-reaching. They touch on some of the basic principles relating to the whole topic of evangelism today, whether that be carried on here at home, or abroad.

The topic of evangelism has occupied prime attention in most church bodies today. When our own Synod met in convention in 1981, it authorized the calling of an Executive Secretary for *Evangelism*. This resolution was repeated in 1983 (*Proceedings*, 47th Biennial Convention, WELS) and implemented soon thereafter. When the Board of Control of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary called for nominations to replace Dr. Siegbert Becker on its faculty, it specified: "The man called will be asked to teach pastoral theology with emphasis on *evangelism ...*" (*Northwestern Lutheran*, November 15, 1983). Within the Synod there are District Commissions on *Evangelism*, a Mass Media Ministry established for the purpose of promoting evangelism efforts, a publication called *TELL* which concentrates on outreach programs. The whole emphasis in our Synod's *home-mission program* has shifted in more recent years toward *reaching the unchurched* rather than gathering in stray Lutherans. We are living in a day of area mission counselors, of Travel/Canvass/Witness teams and of instructional brochures designed to help conduct local witnessing efforts.

In regard to *world missions* my own call to the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary included the strong encouragement that I use my experience as a world missionary to promote the cause of *worldwide outreach* in my classes and wherever possible in this school's program. Elective courses on world missions for Middlers and Seniors at our Seminary have been inaugurated, with most of the students participating. The calling of a Worker Training Counselor for our world mission fields, particularly for developing areas where the placement of resident expatriates is not feasible or possible, has been authorized by the Synod. (For lack of funding this position has to date not as yet been implemented.) World Missionary and Seminary Conferences have been held for over a decade in order to study and exchange ideas for employing the best methods in *worldwide evangelism*.

In all these endeavors where does Luther fit in? In what respect was he an evangelist? Are any of his methods applicable to our efforts today? These questions aren't all that easy to answer. For one thing, Luther lived in an entirely different situation as far as practical needs in the church were concerned. These didn't require that he write a manual on evangelism, or a tract on how to reach the unchurched. Moreover, the close tie-up between church and state in his day involved restrictions in outreach which do not affect us in the good old U.S.A. No doubt largely because of this different situation it should be mentioned now that Luther's attitude toward mission outreach has come in for a lot of criticism by men today who presume to be experts in the field of missiology.

It is therefore necessary, I feel, to consider some of these problem areas when discussing “Luther on Missions.” Simply to ignore the expressions of some of his chief critics would not only fail to exhaust our assignment. It would also neglect calling attention to some of the real strengths which a more basic consideration of Luther can contribute to our subject, a consideration which these critics in their negative statements seem to overlook.

This paper may therefore possibly take on a direction and end up in conclusions which may not be anticipated by this conference. It will not, in other words, consist of a lot of quotes from Luther which can be incorporated in an evangelism manual. Neither will it provide a list of practical methods to be implemented in the Synod’s next evangelism program. It will rather try to look at some basic principles which need to be emphasized, I feel, also in our circles, concerning our whole approach to the important matter of mission outreach both at home and abroad.

I.

LUTHER’S MISSION INFLUENCE IN HIS DAY

WAS LUTHER MISSION-MINDED? THE CRITICS SAY “NO”!

Luther, it seems, doesn’t fare very well in the estimation of many modern missiological experts. Gustav Warneck (1834-1910), a man who toward the end of the previous century occupied the first chair of missions at a university in Europe, taught in his history of missions that Luther was insensitive toward mission outreach. “Luther,” he writes, “failed to support the sending of messengers of the gospel to non-Christian nations” (*Outline of a History of Protestant Missions*, p 10).

Warneck’s view was quickly picked up by later mission historians and spread to our continent. Alfred Mason, an American missiologist at the turn of our century, writes: “There has been hardly any period in the entire history of the Christian Church so destitute of any concerned effort to spread the gospel in heathen lands than just this period of the Reformation” (*Outlines of Missionary History*, p 53).

This evaluation of Reformation mission-mindedness, if anything, has become even more negative in recent years. J. Herbert Kane writes in his recent survey of world mission expansion: “There is all too abundant evidence that most of the leaders of the Reformation, including Luther ... seem to have had no serious sense of responsibility for direct missionary efforts in behalf of heathen or Muslim ... Great mission fields lay round about them. Yet for these they did nothing and apparently cared nothing” (*The Progress of Worldwide Missions*, p 40).

Even well-known Lutheran missiologists are critical of Luther’s approach to missions. Bengt Sundkler writes: “Luther’s insight into the expansive power of the preached Word failed to lead to any missionary contributions” (*The World of Mission*, p 96). Peter Beyerhaus comments: “Luther sees clearly that the Word must encompass the earth, but he does not show quite so clearly that the Word needs agents” (*The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission*, p 114).

AN UNFAIR EVALUATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE TIMES IN WHICH LUTHER LIVED

Obviously these critics of Luther’s mission-mindedness fail to take into consideration a number of factors which account for his so-called lack of missionary contributions as we are inclined to look at these today. For one thing, as Ewald Plass points out, “Luther naturally had to establish the Gospel in its purity at home and have a ministry trained before it could spread the

good news abroad” (*What Luther Says*, p 957). In spite of this problem we know that almost spontaneously the teachings which Luther proclaimed from classroom and pulpit spread to many surrounding areas and countries through his students, who flocked to Wittenberg to hear him. We also know how through the use of the printing press his writings were circulated far and wide.

The Lutheran Church as such, however, was hardly organized in Luther’s day to carry on extensive evangelism programs. It was still in the process of formulation and development. Soon after Luther’s death both Pope and Emperor joined hands to crush what they considered to be a diabolical heresy. The result was the Smalcald War. Theologically things were far from settled. Even some of Luther’s bosom friends were connected with controversies by teaching doctrinal errors. Bente writes in his historical introduction to the *Triglotta*: “A prominent theologian reported that by 1566 matters had come to such a pass in Germany that the old Lutheran doctrine was publicly proclaimed in relatively few places” (*Historical Introduction, Triglot*, p 93). It wasn’t until the adoption of the Book of Concord several decades after Luther’s death that Lutheranism was confessionally established. In the meantime the Papal Church with its organized religious orders (Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians etc.) had a veritable field day in reaching out to a world which was being explored and colonized as never before.

In this connection one needs to emphasize that world-mission outreach in those days was invariably associated with colonization, and the leading colonialists of Luther’s day were Spain and Portugal, countries dominated by Roman Catholicism. The ruler who fought the infidel Turks was Charles V of Spain, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Protestantism was isolated from the mission lands of Asia, Africa, and the New World. This was the heyday of Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, and Francis Xavier (1506-1552), regarded as the greatest Roman Catholic missionary of all time. It should not surprise us at all that, as J. Herbert Kane puts it, “Between 1500 and 1700 the Roman Catholic Church actually won more converts in the pagan world than it lost to Protestantism in Europe” (*A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, p 73).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle in the way of Lutheran gospel-outreach in Luther’s day was the entire state-church system at that time. Dr. Paul Peters sums up this problem as follows: “The first impediment of overseas missions was the ‘government of the church by sovereigns’ (*das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment*), which linked the political and ecclesiastical factors into a state-church. State-churches, to which all appeals for foreign missions had to be made, were anything but missionary” (*The Fruits of Luther’s Mission-Mindedness*, WLQ, Vol LXVII, p 47). This was true especially when the rulers themselves had no particular interest in spreading the faith, or when a church body was restricted from entering into an area governed by a territorial ruler of another faith. One can readily see how mission outreach in our sense of the word was under these circumstances very limited indeed, and how it was only through the presence of individuals who came into contact with Luther at Wittenberg that Lutheran teaching was able to penetrate certain areas at all. Some of these individuals, in fact, suffered martyrdom in those countries where evangelical teachings were outlawed (Netherlands, Spain, France, Italy, Poland, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, and England).

AN UNFAIR EVALUATION IN THE LIGHT OF LUTHER’S OWN TESTIMONY

In the light of these factors it isn’t difficult to see that to judge Luther’s mission-mindedness on the basis of a lack of organized mission outreach as we know it in our day is as naive as it is unfair. That Luther was committed to a worldwide outreach of the gospel is apparent throughout his writings. “How could Luther,” Werner Elert exclaims, “who expounded

the Psalms, the Prophets, and Paul, have overlooked or doubted the universal purpose of the mission of Christ and his Gospel!" (*The Structure of Lutheranism*, p 386).

Anyone who has done any reading in Luther at all has to come to the same conclusions. We could cite any number of passages from Luther's writings to show how he felt that "there is an absolute need of salvation for all mankind" and that the gospel should "not be restricted but should fill the whole globe" (op. cit.). In his expositions on the Psalms he dwells repeatedly on the world-wide nature of Christ's rule as King (W. XII, p 72). In his exposition of Jonah he writes that Jonah above all had to learn "not to restrict God's grace to any place, boundary, time, measure, person and merits" (St. L., XIV, p 85). In his Ascension Day sermons, based on the Great Commission, he declares, "When this sermon has been preached in all the world, then the message is accomplished and everywhere carried out, then the Last Day will also take place" (St. L., XI, p 951). One should also not forget Luther's explanations in his *Large Catechism*, particularly his prayer that God's Kingdom of Grace proceed with power throughout the world, so that many might enjoy the blessings of Christ's redemptive work (*Triglot*, p 711).

The negative evaluation associated with Luther's mission-mindedness lies not with himself but unfortunately can be applied to his epigones, who became involved in all sorts of theological disputes which hindered rather than furthered the progress of the gospel. One such argument pertained to the legitimacy of the call to preach, in which the Wittenberg faculty declared that the "immediate call of the first apostolate had ceased" (*The Structure of Lutheranism*, W. Elert, pp 385-402). This statement was interpreted by some to mean that the Great Commission pertained only to the original apostles, and that since according to Romans 10:18 the apostles fulfilled the Great Commission by taking the gospel to the ends of the world, the church in later ages had neither the authority nor the responsibility to send missionaries to the ends of the earth (*A Concise History of the Christian World*, J.H. Kane, p 73). This was undoubtedly just the kind of interpretation a stagnant state-church organization was looking for, a set-up which was concerned more about perpetuating its own institutions than reaching out aggressively with the gospel. It wasn't until the organization of mission societies in the 18th and 19th centuries that serious efforts were begun in Germany to do world mission work on an organized basis.

AN UNFAIR EVALUATION IN THE LIGHT OF LUTHER'S PERSONAL INFLUENCE AND WRITINGS

It is also very unfair and totally unhistorical to give the impression that Luther in his own way failed to exert a mission influence upon the world of his times. As we have already mentioned, his influence reached out far beyond the confines of little Wittenberg. Although he personally may have never traveled very far "in a skiff on the Elbe," as he himself once stated, his students conveyed his message far and wide. Luther himself once compared the preaching of the gospel to throwing "a stone into the water. The stone causes ripples, circles and streams round about it; and the ripples move farther and farther outward, one driving the other until they come to the shore" (St. L., VII, 951).

Nothing could better describe the mission outreach of Luther himself. His dynamic presence alone caused the stones which he threw into the water to make ripples which rolled out farther and farther. "Wittenberg," Walter Tillmanns writes, "a sleepy little town in the 'Sandbox of the Holy Roman Empire' woke up one day and found itself famous" (*The World and Men around Luther*, p 82). Students from all parts of Germany, from Scandinavia, Austria, Switzerland, Bohemia, the Baltic States, the Netherlands, and England came in great numbers to

hear him lecture. Between the years 1520 and 1560 about 16,000 students enrolled at the University of Wittenberg. As they returned to their respective homelands they brought with them not only the effects of Luther's lectures and sermons, but also of his writings.

It was through his publications, perhaps, that Luther's influence made the most waves. "Now God has begun to speak German," said Agricola of the printed works of Luther, whose translation of the Bible, Catechisms, hymns and liturgies became a force in the nurture of the religious life of the country. Luther's writings were also brought by students to other countries, where they were translated, printed, and sold by the thousands. Especially in Scandinavian countries these writings had a tremendous impact already in Luther's day. As a result of the testimony of Olavus and Laurentius Petri, who had studied in Wittenberg, Sweden was reconstituted as a Lutheran Church in 1529. Hans Tausen, often called "the Danish Luther," introduced Lutheranism to Denmark, where the church was later organized along Lutheran lines by Bugenhagen. From Denmark the Lutheran Church was introduced into Norway and Iceland, and from Sweden it penetrated into Finland. Other emissaries of Luther were active in East Prussia, Livonia, and Estonia. Lutheran churchmen worked as translators, authors of prayer books, hymn writers, preachers and organizers. In these countries to the north and east of Germany Lutherans were able to secure royal good will, which in those days of state-church organization helped the Lutheran cause considerably.

Even in countries where Lutheranism failed to gain governmental preference we find that students from Wittenberg introduced Reformation writings. We are thinking here of areas such as parts of Poland, Bohemia, Moravia, and Hungary, where evangelical writings were to some degree at least "tolerated" among the German element in the population. In other lands such as the Netherlands, Spain, France and Italy those who propagandized Lutheranism often suffered martyrdom. We know that Luther's writings were circulated in England in the early 1520s, and received added impetus from Tyndale's translation of the Greek New Testament, printed in 1526 in Worms. We also know that some early disciples of Luther such as Robert Barnes, Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart who helped introduce evangelical teachings into England and Scotland unfortunately suffered martyrdom.

James Mackinnon pretty well sums up this far-reaching influence of Luther as follows: "He was one of those rare master spirits who create an epoch in religious history. In himself and his work, he stands forth as the embodiment of the power of ideas, operating through a great personality, which creates and inspires a new order of things ... Luther also had many co-operators in the creation of this far-flung movement, and some of them made a distinctive contribution to the ultimate outcome of it" (*Luther and the Reformation*, Vol. IV, P 359).

SUMMARY - LUTHER'S MISSION INFLUENCE IN HIS DAY

Thus we see that Luther in his own day was not an "evangelist" or a "missionologist" in the sense that many experts in these fields today like to think of these terms. The historical and ecclesiastical conditions prevailing in his day render all comparisons along such lines with our own day rather meaningless and lead to unfair conclusions. The immediate tasks before Luther, moreover, did not fit into 20th-century ideas of emphasis upon outreach. Ironically Werner Elert comments: "Instead of founding a missionary society, accompanying Cortez to Mexico, or at least assuring for himself a professorship of missionary science, Luther devoted himself, of all things, to the reformation of the church!" (*The Structure of Lutheranism*, p 385).

Whatever Luther did accomplish by way of evangelistic outreach happened spontaneously. His evangelism, we might say, was a by-product or a fruit of a deeper concern occasioned by the situation in which he was living. There was a need for the clear testimony to

the truth of God's Word. There was a need that the basic message of salvation be boldly proclaimed and confessed over against the errors which had undermined the work of Christ's kingdom on earth. There was a need that the teachings relating to this truth of God's Word and this message of salvation be presented in such a way that young and old alike might come to know their Savior and enjoy eternal life in his kingdom.

Luther in all that he did embodied and reflected the urgency of these needs. Truth was not to be compromised. Its message meant life—or death—for all mankind. The gospel of Christ was truly “the power of God for the salvation of every one who believes” (Ro 1:16). That is why Luther, like Paul, was “obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish, eager to preach the gospel” wherever and however he could (Ro 1:14). He was a man on fire. And he kindled a flame by reflecting the importance of his work and the urgency of his task in all that he did.

Is there anything of importance for us today as we think of Luther in the light of our own evangelistic efforts? We know we are living in an age of methods, programs, and statistics. The computer has permeated every aspect of modern activity. We work more through organizations than on an individual basis. We can't turn back the clock and wish for the “good old days” when all these things were not so important. It is also well for us to remember that modern methods and tools are not necessarily negative forces which by themselves discourage spontaneity in what we do. All of these things can be used as tools for a better implementation of what we are aiming to accomplish.

But we do need to remind ourselves from time to time of the basics, of our heritage, of that which gives us as Lutherans a purpose for that which we do as members of Christ's body. We need to appreciate the unique quality of our doctrinal foundation among the churches of today. We need to realize the importance of our confessional position among the churches of today. We need to make the fullest possible use of the distinctive tools which we have as a part of our Lutheran heritage, tools which are particularly useful in proclaiming the truth of God's Word clearly and effectively.

It is in these basic areas that Luther can remind us of some very important principles, principles which we shall consider in the next section of this presentation.

II.

LUTHER'S MISSION INFLUENCE IN OUR DAY

UNSHAKABLE CONVICTIONS FROM THE BIBLE

When applying the subject of “Luther on Missions” to the present day, it may be well to begin with a statement from a man who has written extensively on missionary theology, one who writes out of an extensive background of experiences with missionaries from all over the world. He writes: “That which actually makes Christian men and women become genuine missionaries is their arrival at certain unshakable convictions from the Bible regarding God's world plan and their Christian responsibility toward the world according to that plan” (*The Heart of Missionary Theology*, G. Christian Weiss, p 7).

“Unshakable convictions from the Bible,” we are told. Shouldn't this be self-evident? Doesn't it seem rather simplistic to emphasize a statement of this kind? Not at all. We are living in a time when techniques are often stressed at the expense of the basics, when it is felt that some kind of social program is needed in order to make mission work a viable force in this world, yes, when humanistic theories have led people to question whether or not mission work in a biblical sense is really all that urgent anymore. Harold Lindsell puts it this way: “Each generation must

find for itself a satisfactory answer to the question, 'Why Missions?' In our generation this question is more pertinent than ever.... Thoughtful men are increasingly aware of the spiritual drift away from the foundation of bygone days, and many see that having forsaken the old foundation the missionary cause is no longer a valid enterprise to them" (*Evangelical Theology of Missions*, p 14).

One has to experience life in a struggling mission field, either at home or abroad, to appreciate fully the need for "unshakable convictions from the Bible" in order to carry on from day to day. Where the church is well established, and where it is backed up by tradition as an accepted institution in the community, the battle seems less a matter of survival. When one is struggling to get established, particularly in an atmosphere or in a culture where the Lutheran Church is a relatively unknown quantity, these "unshakable convictions from the Bible regarding God's world plan" and one's "Christian responsibility toward the world according to that plan" take on a sense of real urgency. A missionary, if he is to be genuine, is especially in need of these "unshakable convictions from the Bible."

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS UNDERMINED IN PROTESTANTISM IN GENERAL

Especially the 20th Century has seen great changes in theological emphases relating to world mission work. While at the turn of the century most nominally Christian churches were still primarily interested in the "conversion of the heathen to Christianity," it wasn't long before serious questions arose within the church as to what "Christianity" was really all about. This all started, of course, when as a result of the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation the very underpinnings of scriptural truth were taken away, when in the minds of these negative critics God no longer spoke to his Church with authority. This approach to Scripture led to the social gospel movement, to increasing tendencies to see in education the answer to all needs, to the rise of theistic evolution, to the revival Pelagian teachings of the inherent goodness of man, even to the idea that there is "some good in all religions" – all of which has contributed to a philosophy of humanism which has not only infiltrated but eventually dominated the thinking of the World Council of Churches, and for all practical purposes has imposed the death sentence on missions in a true scriptural sense as far as the WCC is concerned.

Anyone who has traced the history of Protestantism's world-embracing missionary councils leading up to the formation of the WCC will have noted this increasing breakdown of scriptural authority. When the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC last met at Melbourne in 1980 under the theme "Your Kingdom Come," the "kingdom" which occupied most discussions was an earthly kingdom. "Sin" was defined as "oppression of the poor." To "evangelize" meant to "make people aware that exploitation of the poor was sinful." The "coming of the kingdom" was thought to be realized when one could hope for the "ultimate humanization of life." Arthur Glasser, an Evangelical member of the WCC's Commission, expressed his disappointment with Melbourne as follows: "Liberation is in, the unreached out" (*Christianity Today*).

When the joint body of the WCC met in 1983 at Vancouver, its 838 delegates managed to vote in favor of a nuclear arms' freeze, endorsed Palestinian rights, urged sanctions against South Africa and accused the Reagan administration of trying to "destabilize" Central America. Resolutions pertaining to theological matters or mission outreach were either passed over quickly or tabled. Even *Time* magazine in its review of WCC's activities at Vancouver described this assembly as "an ecclesiastical clone of the United Nations."

This is the extent to which nominal Christianity's largest ecumenical organization has left its scriptural foundations, a body which embraces 301 Protestant and Orthodox church

denominations with more than 400 million members. Emilio Castro, its newly elected general secretary, perhaps best summarizes the missionary goals of this organization when he writes: "The mission which is conscious of the kingdom will be concerned for liberation, not oppression; justice, not exploitation; fullness, not deprivation; freedom, not slavery; health, not disease; life, not death" (*International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXIX, Nos. 276-277, p 380).

HAVE THE EVANGELICALS FILLED THE GAP?

It is no secret, of course, that many Evangelicals have for over a decade felt increasingly restless about WCC pronouncements. While many of their leaders hesitate to leave the confines of the world's largest ecumenical umbrella, they have become increasingly vocal in expressing their concerns about the goals of this body, a body which started with the purpose of "the evangelization of the world in our generation" (Edinburgh Mission Conference - 1910).

They have organized their own meetings (Berlin, 1966; Lausanne, 1974; Bangkok, 1980) in order to express their concerns about the several billion "unsaved" peoples of this world and to endorse aggressive evangelization and church planting activities. They have sponsored massive programs (Theological Education by Extension; Evangelism Explosion; Evangelism Crusades; Evangelism in Depth; Church Growth) in efforts to "involve the total mobilization of all church members" and to reach every family in a given country "with an oral or written presentation of the gospel." They have produced films, books, home study programs, Seminar materials, computerized surveys and many other aids geared toward helping local churches organize evangelism programs in their own communities. They have at great cost established research institutions (Missions Advanced Research and Communication Center; ULSL Center for World Mission) in order to provide information centers and computer technology for developing information on world Christianity and planning strategies for "reaching the unreached peoples" with the gospel.

It would be unwise simply to dismiss all these efforts out of hand in a negative sort of way, as though nothing good could be learned from taking a closer look at these movements. In a general way they can encourage us to take a more aggressive stance over against mission outreach. They can offer suggestions, perhaps, as to keeping accurate records, evaluating our progress, analyzing situations so that we deploy our manpower wisely. They can, on the basis of a longer and a wider experience offer valuable advice concerning working in cross-cultural situations. They can help us learn how better to employ modern technologies in the field of communication. We know that we should use every possible legitimate strategy within our means to reach out with the gospel of Christ as effectively as possible, and when it comes to strategies, practical implementations of communication, and working in cross-cultural situations we know that these people have been working at this a long time before we ever thought of getting started at it.

There is one thing that we need to remember about the so-called "Evangelicals," however, and that brings us to one of the chief points of this presentation: it is a serious mistake to think that these people have "filled the gap," so to speak, in the Protestant void that has been left by the wholesale defection from the truth on the part of the WCC. The Evangelicals are the present-day representatives of Reformed theology. Basically there is as much difference between them and us as there was between Luther and Zwingli at Marburg. While at first glance it may seem that we come from the same biblical background, it becomes ever more apparent as we explore some basic principles thoroughly that we operate "with a different spirit." To go into a detailed analysis on every little point where we as Lutherans may disagree with the Evangelicals on various outreach programs and methods would go beyond the scope of this presentation. Far

better, it would seem, to remind ourselves in a positive way of some of the basic principles of Lutheran doctrine and confession which Luther brought back to light and enunciated so clearly, principles which give our Lutheran church a unique theological position on the basis of Scripture among all churches today, a position which really should place us at the forefront of mission outreach both at home and abroad.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

The first basic principle which Luther restored to its rightful position in the work of God's kingdom was the SOLA SCRIPTURA principle: the Bible alone.

It is hardly necessary for us to go to great lengths here to substantiate this fact from Luther's own declarations. Anyone who has done any reading in Luther at all with an open mind will agree that for Luther the Holy Scriptures were the clear, inerrant, all-sufficient Word of God, the infallible authority and guide for everything we believe and do. "Let the man who would hear God speak read Holy Scripture" he declared (W 54, 263). "Not one letter in Scripture is purposeless ... for Scripture is God's writing and God's Word" (W 50, 282). Dr. T. Engelder comments in this connection: "It is one of the mysteries of the ages how theologians who claim to be conversant with Luther's writings can give credence to the myth that Luther did not teach verbal, plenary inspiration" (*The Scripture Cannon Be Broken*, p 290).

Not only did Luther restore biblical truth in the Church over against papistic errors and traditions; he maintained a strong position on this principle over against Reformed enthusiasts who purported to base their teachings on the Bible but who followed the inclinations of human reason instead. "In order not to slip or flutter about and go astray with one's own thoughts," Luther wrote, "a person should take hold of the letters of Scripture as one clings with one's hand to a tree or a wall. That is the trouble with our enthusiasts; they imagine that they will hit upon the truth with their high spiritual thoughts and do not see that without the Word they will get on the wrong track. They allow mere will-o'-the-wisps to mislead them" (W 28, 77).

Let's pause here for a moment and reflect upon what this SOLA SCRIPTURA principle means to a missionary. It simply means that he speaks with authority. This authority comes from God himself. The Word which he brings is God's very own Word. As the prophets of old he can declare: "Thus says the Lord ..." Jesus assures him: "He who listens to you listens to me." As the apostles he can say, "We speak not man's wisdom, but God's wisdom." And this wisdom is true. It does not err. It is not subject to our own rationalizing. God does not lie!

This Word of God which we bring is also clear. It is sufficient. We don't have to add or subtract anything from it in order to make it more persuasive. We don't have to augment it with all sorts of social betterment programs to add to its power. And we as Wisconsin Synod Lutherans have what it takes. There should be no doubt about this, no doubt at all!

Can we appreciate what this means when as a world missionary one is sent to a strange land, a land with a foreign culture, with different traditions, even a difficult new language to work in, commissioned to change people's hearts and lives to believe and live in an entirely different way? Or for that matter as a home missionary in this country commissioned to work in a new area, sent to organize a Christian congregation amidst people who are surrounded by every possible diversion and distraction that money can buy? A miracle certainly needs to happen – in both fields of labor. Only God can accomplish miracles.

But God is right at our side. With Paul we are his "fellow workers" (2 Cor 6:1). "We implore ... on Christ's behalf" (2 Cor 5:20). We have this inexhaustible treasure of God's Word "in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us." Trusting in this fact we can be encouraged to carry on, as Paul says: "Hard pressed on every side, but not

crushed, perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed ... It is written: 'I believed; therefore have I spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak"(2 Cor 4:7-9; 13)

I like to think of Elisha and his servant at Dothan, surrounded by an army with horses and chariots, how Elisha says to his servant, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." As Elisha prays that the Lord may open the servant's eyes that he may see, the servant sees the hills full of the horses and chariots of the Lord protecting Elisha (cf. 2 Kgs 6:15-18). In our war against the devil and all his hosts the Lord has also equipped us with his Word, an all-powerful Word that can prevail.

One sometimes wonders if we treasure enough this SOLA SCRIPTURA inheritance of ours, an inheritance which really should make us missionaries *par excellence*. We say we have God's Word in all its purity. As Lutherans we alone have it in its unadulterated truth. We have a message, therefore, which proclaims God's saving purpose for all mankind more clearly than any other church, a message which is centered in another basic principle which Luther firmly upheld and which he bequeathed unto us, namely:

SOLA GRATIA

To appreciate SOLA GRATIA, a principle which Luther emphasized throughout his writings, means to have the correct understanding of both sin and grace: sin in all its seriousness, grace in its boundless mercy to the undeserving sinner. "Grace consists in this," Luther wrote, "that God is merciful to us, shows himself gracious for the sake of the Lord Christ, forgives all sins, and will not impute them unto us for eternal death. This is grace: the forgiveness of sins for the sake of the Lord Christ, the covering up of all sins" (W 46, 658). And again: "The entire Bible has two principal thoughts. The first: Human nature is in its entirety damned and ruined by sin, nor can it come out of this calamity and death by its own power and efforts; the second: God alone is just and out of mercy destroys sin and justifies" (W - T 5, No 5-751).

We see how Luther connects sin, the forgiveness of sin, and *justification*, that article which he called "the chief article of Christian doctrine" (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). The grace of God in Christ was to him centered in that forensic declaration of righteousness to a world of sinners. In that objective truth rested sinful mankind's only hope. "So far as we are concerned," Luther writes, "the whole procedure in justification is passive. When we are most holy, we want to be justified actively, that is, by our works. Here we ought to do nothing and undertake nothing but this: that we open our ears, as Psalm 45:10 tells us, and believe what is told us. This hearing is hearing of gladness, and this is the only thing we do, through the Holy Spirit, in the matter of justification" (W 4 II, 410).

One has to wonder if the Evangelicals with all their concern for doing something about "the unsaved billions" and with all their zeal for "church growth" programs have a full appreciation for the two important truths which Luther stressed in connection with SOLA GRATIA, namely the seriousness of sin with man's total inability to save himself on the one hand, and on the other hand the unconditional nature of God's grace as expressed in his justifying act of salvation in Christ.

One searches in vain in their writings for a clear statement on the doctrine of original sin. Since many of these Evangelicals are of Baptist persuasion, it isn't difficult to see why this doctrine is soft-pedaled. One also searches in vain in Reformed teachings for a clear expression on the unconditional nature of God's grace in Christ as expressed in the doctrine of justification. The emphasis upon the objective truth that God has in Christ declared a world of sinners free from sin is foreign to their thinking. Their emphasis, as we know, is rather upon a subjective

decision on man's part to accept what God has provided. This difference in emphasis between Reformed and Lutheran theology, of course, reaches its climax in the different teachings concerning the Lord's Supper. For us the miracle of Christ's real presence in the sacrament is just another demonstration of God's rich assurance that our forgiveness is complete and the Christ has done it all. God's Word has declared it so. For them the sacrament is just another sign or token of God's love, with nothing especially miraculous about it.

It is to be expected, therefore, that very few missiological treatises coming out of Evangelical or Reformed circles have anything to say about the *Means of Grace*. George Peters in his otherwise exhaustive treatment entitled *A Biblical Theology of Missions* scarcely mentions the subject. He does refer to the word "baptize" as "a controversial word" which he prefers "to define no further on this occasion." He ignores the subject of the Lord's Supper completely. Robert Glover in his *The Bible Basis of Missions* has the same blind spots when it comes to the sacraments. David Hesselgrave in his *Planting Churches Cross Culturally* has a very brief section on baptism as an "act of symbolic confession" (p. 257).

The whole use of the Means of Grace is such an important part of our *modus operandi* in our Lutheran Church that we are inclined to take it for granted. We sometimes wonder if we appreciate our emphasis upon the important role which the Means of Grace play in our entire approach to building up and edifying the Body of Christ. To us they are the marks of the Church, not only the visible signs and tokens of grace, but the very means through which God offers and assures his grace to mankind (cf. A.C., Art. XIII; Apol. Art. XII and Art. XIII).

Surely this doctrinal heritage centered in the SOLA GRATIA principle which Luther so strongly emphasized should find its outlet in a zeal for doing mission work! At a recent series of lectures on *The Significance of the Reformation for our Ministry Today* Professor Armin Schuetze summed this all up as follows: "How can we possibly believe the true doctrine of original sin—that all men are conceived and born in sin and that this damns—without concern for the masses of humanity and for each individual on the way to death? Or are we more concerned about seeing people die in a burning building? We believe the truth about Christ, that his atonement is for all men, that God will have all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. That is part of our sound doctrine. But can we truly believe that and not be concerned that all men get to hear what God has most surely prepared for them too? Can we have the truth without concern about the many people who don't yet know it? If having the truth does not lead to sharing the truth, one wonders whether the truth is really known" (From a lecture presented at the Mequon Pastors' Institute, 1980).

SOLA FIDE

The SOLA GRATIA principle which Luther so strongly emphasized stands side by side with SOLA FIDE as the third touchstone of Lutheran preaching and teaching. Instead of emphasizing faith as a necessary "response" on the part of the believer whereby he by means of a subjective decision "secures" for himself the forgiveness of sins and "turns to God in such a fashion that the beliefs and practices of the old religion are completely forsaken" (cf. *Planting Churches Cross Culturally*, David Hesselgrave, pp 233-235), we emphasize "justifying faith" simply as "a trust in Christ and his redemptive work," or faith which "justifies, not because of any inherent virtue, but only because of the salvation prepared by God in Christ, which it embraces." (*This We Believe*, IV JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH, pp 11-12).

Luther put it this way: "Faith thinks thus: I know not where I am going. Go I must. I see and feel nothing; but I will commend myself to him who has said in the Psalm: 'Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee'" (W 24, 24bf). Again Luther: "That man is really a

believer who, without anything in hand, nevertheless clings to God's Word" (W 52, 517). Or as follows: "When I feel my sins most painfully, when they bite, hound, and frighten me most severely, I look at Christ, believe weakly in Him, hold to Him, and say: I am certain that Thou has said, 'He who believes on me shall have eternal life'" (W 33, 111f).

What a difference between this kind of presentation and that of many sincere, well-meaning Evangelicals, whose entire method makes of the believer's "response" and "commitment" the all-important issue, the deciding factor upon which his eternal salvation must finally rest. There is a profound joy in proclaiming with Luther: "Such a faith cannot fail, for it is based on the Word of God, which is almighty" (W 52, 517). Our message is truly a "gospel" message, "good news" or "*uthenga wabwino*" as the African calls it, who rejoices in the message of the Lutheran Church because he perceives it to be the "Bible Church."

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR CONFESSIONAL BASIS IN MISSION WORK

This joy which we find in proclaiming the message which we have inherited from Luther,—a message which is unfortunately all too obscure in the world today—should help us appreciate the uniqueness of our confessional position throughout this same world.

Dr. Herman Sasse emphasized repeatedly in his writings that the Lutheran Church should never forget its position in the world as a confessional church. He himself spearheaded the *Lutheran Bekenntnisfront* movement in the Evangelical Landeskirche in Germany under Hitler. In his later years, after moving to Australia, he often stressed how this confessional nature of the Lutheran Church really gives it an *Existenzberechtigung* (right of existence) also as a missionary church in the world today.

This idea did not originate with Dr. Sasse, of course. The Apostle Paul, declared to the Corinthians: "We also believe and therefore speak" (2 Cor 4:13). In the context of this declaration Paul might just as well have said, "We also believe and therefore speak *and boldly confess* what we believe."

As missionaries this is why, in the words of Paul in the very next verse, we can say triumphantly "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jews and present us with you in his presence" (2 Cor 4:8, 14). And then Paul adds to his Corinthians: "All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God" (2 Cor 4:15).

Paul's voice was outwardly but a "gentle whisper" (NIV 1 Kgs 19:12; AV "still small voice") amidst the strident shoutings in behalf of various causes heard in his day. It was not proclaimed "with wise and persuasive words," as he says. But it was done "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor 2:4). Faith was not something which rested "on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor 2:5). This same confessional boldness was expressed in Old Testament times. Paul could say, "with that *same* spirit of faith we *also* believe and therefore speak," quoting Psalm 116:10 where "It is written: 'I believe; therefore I have spoken'" (2 Cor 4:13). Again we know that the Psalmist who is quoted here was in his own words threatened with "the cords of death" and "the anguish of the grave." In his dismay he had to say, "All men are liars." "Overcome by trouble and sorrow" he "called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, save me.'" But because of a gracious Lord's "cup of salvation" he was moved to confess boldly and declare his vows of thanksgiving to the Lord "in the presence of all his people" (Quotations from Ps 116).

Bold confession, in other words, does not depend upon an experience of outward success. The Psalmist's voice to begin with was a lonely cry for help. Paul's confession came out of a background of persecution and personal perplexity. Children of God in their witness to others often do so as people in minority positions rather than from a popular bandwagon. We need to

remind ourselves of this and of the basic principle expressed previously in this presentation: “That which actually makes Christian men and women become genuine missionaries is their arrival at certain unshakable convictions from the Bible regarding God’s world plan and their Christian responsibility toward the world according to that plan” (*The Heart of Missionary Theology*, G. Christian Weiss, p 8). Conviction based on Scripture leads to bold confession, no matter what the outward circumstances may be. And bold confession is the basis of mission proclamation.

I remember starting out in a home mission field years ago, surrounded by large sectarian churches, preaching in a home, gathering my little flock every week in circumstances that outwardly were anything but propitious. While in a foreign field I can also recall sitting under a tree in a remote bush area, with a handful of Africans, struggling to speak with them in a strange language, again in a circumstance that promised little by way of success. How easy to become discouraged in such situations! On the other hand what an encouragement to know that the tiny mustard seed still grows, that the leaven of yeast still permeates, if only we continue to go out into the byways and beat the bushes and trust that our confession of God’s saving truth still works miracles!

LUTHER, THE BOLD CONFESSOR, THE CLEAR TEACHER

Luther’s missionary genius also rested primarily in his fearlessness in confessing the truth of God’s Word. Quoting Psalm 116:10 which we have cited above, Luther declared: “This noble Word brings with it a great hunger and an insatiable thirst, so that we could not be satisfied even though many thousands of people believe on it; but we wish that no one should be without it; it moves us to speak, as David says: ‘I believed, therefore I have spoken’ “(W 10 II, 54). As the Psalmist and as Paul, Luther to begin with confessed boldly from a minority position. Imagine standing before the highest authorities of Church and State, as he did at Worms, and under the threat of banishment and death refusing to change his confessional position with regard to his writings!

This confessional boldness of Luther is apparent especially in his Smalcald Articles. His confessional simplicity and clarity are reflected in his Catechisms. Each of these confessional writings has become a part of our Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord, serving as valuable instruments not only in stating unequivocally what we believe, but also as precious tools in our teaching ministry. There is no more valuable instrument in the missionary activity of our Lutheran Church, both at home and abroad, than Luther’s Small Catechism. Next to the Bible it is the first book in need of translation in our world mission fields, whether in Indonesia or Central Africa. It presents the teachings of God’s Word, as Luther himself declared, “in the simplest way.” It gives us an especially favored position, one might say, among all Protestant churches which are engaged in Christian teaching and in outreach to others.

OUR UNIQUE CHARACTER AS A LUTHERAN MISSION

It should be quite apparent, then, that our WELS doctrinal-confessional position offers us a unique character among world mission agencies today. We say this not because we like to be different. We are what we are by the grace of God, and we regret it very much that many more of the 55,000 United States world missionaries don’t see things as we do.

This unique character reflects itself in everything that has to do with our way of carrying on our mission as a church, both at home and abroad. It includes the care we exercise in guarding the truth of that gospel treasure which the Lord of the Church has entrusted to us. It involves our use of the precious Means of Grace in our work, a use which at all times occupies the central place of our preaching—teaching—disciplining activity. It is reflected in the thoroughness with

which we instruct our confirmands as well as in the care of the souls which the Lord has placed under our responsibility. It includes our approach to and carrying out of theological education at our worker-training institutions. It points us to the goals toward which we in our mission work are striving.

In foreign fields our goal is to plant churches which can stand together with us doctrinally and confessionally. Critics sometimes accuse us of trying to establish carbon-copies of the WELS wherever we are working in other countries. We recognize the dangers, of course, of trying to impose our culture on other societies. But if we mean carbon-copies of those who stand upon the Scriptures as we do, so be it! Planting indigenous churches to us includes more than the “three selfs” usually associated with the indigenous church policy. At one of our World Mission Conferences Pastor Richard Lauersdorf expressed it this way: “We must plant churches that will be not only self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, but also *self-disciplining*. We must plant churches which know God’s Word and which follow that Word in practice, churches which can detect and correct departures from that Word” (*Developing Indigenous Churches*, Leland, 1979).

The same principle applies to home mission fields as well. Our insistence upon the thorough doctrinal instruction of our members and maintaining clear scriptural principles in our practice may not be the most appealing way to go in gaining new members. But we are convinced that it is the only way to go. If we lose our doctrinal-confessional heritage, we are like Esau, selling our birthright for a mess of pottage. In Dr. Sasse’s words we give up our *Existenzberechtigung* as a confessional church. Above all we lose that conviction which rests upon the sure Word and promise of God, that faith which keeps us going as co-laborers with him, which prompts us to say with the Psalmist, with Paul, with Luther: “We also believe, and therefore speak.”

People often ask those of us who have been in foreign fields, “Are there any other Christian churches working where you are?” One gets the feeling that they are somewhat disappointed to hear that other churches have been there long before we ever thought of coming, that our WELS is “late in the day” when it comes to world mission work. In foreign fields, of course, there are still those people to be reached who have never had an opportunity of hearing the saving message of Christ before. These mission frontiers, however, are becoming less in evidence all the time. While many foreign countries are generally less saturated with Christian churches than as we experience it here in America, our need for reaching out aggressively to foreign areas is just as urgent and pressing as here in our home mission fields, if not more so.

Brazil, for example, is 85 percent nominally Christian. Yet only 10 percent of its people have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Nigeria has some type of independent Christian sect on practically every corner. Most of these, however, teach a strange mixture of African spiritism and witchcraft couched in biblical terms. Latin American Catholicism in many sectors preaches more liberation theology than scriptural truth. In other sectors Mariolatry holds full sway. Much of Protestantism in African Third World countries is more concerned about aiding freedom fighters and staffing political refugee camps than in preaching the gospel. Much of it is so involved in aiding national governments in agricultural development programs that it has little time for real evangelism. European State-Church theology, we know, is so shot through with the historical-critical approach to the Bible that even its “Lutheran” branches have degenerated in their teachings to some kind of humanistic philosophy. In the Far East, of course, even nominal Christianity is so overwhelmingly outnumbered by Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism and Muhammedanism that it reckons its numbers in some places as less than 1 percent.

CONCLUSION

There is a need throughout the world for a strong confessional voice, a Lutheran voice with a sound biblical message. Both at home and abroad we need trained workers who can stand on their own feet theologically. Both at home and abroad we need Christian literature which truly conveys the *Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide* message as we confess it. Both at home and abroad a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to mission work is of the essence.

Our doctrinal-confessional position, a position which reflects our Lutheran heritage, answers the need. In this position we are as unique in our day as Luther was in his. He answered the need in his day by his bold confession of the truth of God's Word. He did this as best he could in the situation in which he found himself. We can answer the need in our day in the same confessional way, with the same confessional principles, and with the opportunities for outreach that the Lord our God gives us, wherever we may be. That is where our mission work begins.

May the Lord of the Church give us these unshakable convictions from the Bible – and help us appreciate also our Christian responsibility toward the world according to these convictions. That will help us to serve as “genuine missionaries” wherever we may be.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

PART I

1. To what extent have our own Synod's actions in behalf of evangelism (p. 1) taken effect in the “grass roots”?
2. Why is world-mission outreach no longer connected with colonization? Is this a good or a bad development?
3. “It wasn't until the organization of mission societies in the 18th and 19th centuries that serious efforts were begun in Germany to do world mission work on an organized basis” (p. 6). Is world mission work primarily an outgrowth of pietism?
4. It is a well-known fact that Luther's writings (Bible translation, Catechisms, hymns, liturgies, tracts etc) were a tremendous force in the spread of the gospel (p.6-7). Discuss by way of comparison our own efforts in this direction.
5. Many Luther-commentators emphasize his “power of ideas”, his “dynamic personality,” his ability to “inspire a new order of things” as greatly responsible for spreading his influence to others (p. 7). Was Luther's mission genius a *personal* thing, or did this “man on fire” find his strength in something more basic? How does this apply to us?

PART II

1. What factor more than anything else has led to a radical decrease in mission interest within the WCC (pp. 10-11)?
2. Why are the Evangelicals for all their mission zeal unable to fill this gap (pp. 11-12)? What positive suggestions and ideas, however, can we gain from their work?
3. Review how our Lutheran principles of SOLA SCRIPTURA, SOLA GRATIA, SOLA FIDE should place us at the very forefront of mission outreach. Discuss whether or not this has happened.
4. Discuss Prof. Armin Schuetze's statement: “If having the truth does not lead to sharing the truth, one wonders whether the truth is really known” (p. 17).
5. How does our doctrinal-confessional position influence our whole method of carrying on world mission work (p. 20)?
6. Which “self” do we add to the “3 selves” of the indigenous church policy of planting churches (p. 21)? Why?

7. What gives us an “*Existenzberechtigung*” in world mission outreach today?
8. Do you think that we are doing (too much – too little – just about right) in our mission outreach as a church body? Explain.