

# Luther's Theology as a Foundation for Twenty-First Century Missiology

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Although Lutherans from Philip Nicolai to Georg Friedrich Vicedom have contributed significantly to the missional thinking of the church, there has been something of a reticence in the recent year among Lutheran missiologists to bring Martin Luther's insights to the challenges of translating the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the idiom of contemporary cultures. Ecumenical Christendom needs the voice of Lutheran insights into the task of proclaiming the message of Christ in this time. This essay is designed to outline some of the possible avenues which Lutheran missiologists should be exploring in the application of our heritage to the tasks at hand.

Luther stood at a point in church history at which he was called to translate the biblical message anew into a different cultural situation than its long-time Mediterranean idiom.<sup>1</sup> That task had vital importance for him because he was convinced that the proclamation of that message brings individuals to trust in Christ. Luther's experiments in translating his understanding of the biblical message into the central, northern, European setting of his day provide some raw material for constructing elements of a twenty-first century missiology.

*The Person of our God.* In the last half century, North American Christians have experienced the deterioration of an understanding of what is Absolute and Ultimate in reality as a person, a person who creates. The proclamation of the Gospel must begin with our witness to the personhood of God as Creator. Luther's understanding of reality is intensely personal. Those who grow up in Christian cultures presume that the Ultimate and Absolute reality is a person, but increasingly today, people around us think in terms of the Ultimate and Absolute in other forms: multiple semi-personal centers and sources of power and order for their lives, or a single, ultimate spirit that radiates through what we experience and perceive, penetrating our beings when we do not resist, or perhaps even when we do. Others assign as much power as there is to human agencies, often supra-personal, such as race or party or class, but often to themselves or to another individual.<sup>2</sup>

From Scripture, Luther knew that God is a person, a person who takes on personal form as he speaks, who through his speaking creates community, that is, relationships between himself and his creatures and relationships among his creatures. Luther defined reality in terms of what God says. Luther had learned that well from his Ockhamistic instructors, who emphasized that God holds total power to order and to preserve that order. Luther placed that power in God's mouth. He created the worlds by speaking. Lecturing on Genesis 1, Luther stated,

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The words "Let there be light" are the words of God . . . this means that they are realities. For God calls into existence the things which do not exist. He does not speak grammatical words. He speaks true and substantial realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God.<sup>3</sup>

When the Creator said, "Let there be . . . ," things happened. His Word fashioned the reality of all we experience.<sup>4</sup> In 1535, Luther drew the implications of this mode of God's operation for the restoration of sinners to their full humanity, centered on faith in him. Paul had referred to God's creative commands in 2 Corinthians 4:6, where, Luther continued, the apostle was reflecting the biblical conviction that God is by nature a Creator and that he creates through the Word when he converts the wicked—"something which is also brought about by the Word—as a new work of creation."<sup>5</sup>

By his very nature, as Luther saw it revealed in Christ's suffering and death in behalf of sinners, God speaks, creates, and then cares for and is deeply concerned about his human creatures. This God of conversation and community has come personally as the Word made flesh to care for those who had missed the mark in fulfilling their humanity.

Many people do not want a person as God. They want to be able to manipulate abstractions or forces, or they have had such bad experiences with persons that they cannot imagine reliable help coming from a person. Luther shows us ways to transmit our experience with our personal God as we embody and speak his Word and his love.

For, Luther tells us, we as God's people are the agents—the tongues and lips—through which he carries on the conversation with other human beings. He told the entire Wittenberg congregation:

Everything then should be directed in such a way that you recognize what God has done for you and you, thereafter, make it your highest priority to proclaim this publicly and call everyone to the light to which you are called. Where you see people that do not know this, you should instruct them and also teach them how you learned, that is, how a person through the good work and might of God is saved and comes from darkness into light.<sup>6</sup>

God comes to others through us, who are means by which his powerful Word reaches those around us, Luther was convinced.

*What It Means to Be Human.* Luther's anthropology defined what it means to be human in a distinctive way, in two dimensions; and these insights are most helpful in any culture that strives to determine human worth and value on the basis of individual performance. The reformer's intensely personal view of God meant that he defined humanity, as Jesus did, in terms of two relationships: with God, who claims our central, life-orienting fear, love, and trust—above all God's creatures—and with the neighbor, for whom we are willing to sacrifice and give, on the model God gives us in his incarnation, in order to actualize his love in the lives of those around us (Mt 22:37–40). In his proclamation, Luther set out to bestow "passive righteousness," the God-given identity as his children, which is the way God views us first of all. Luther also wanted to promote

“active righteousness,” the performance of God’s expectations that demonstrates and renders concrete our identity as God’s children, both in our praise and testimony of him and in our acts of love toward his creatures, human and all the rest. This distinction assists us in making clear why moral performance does not determine the person our Creator makes us to be, out of pure and unconditional love. It helps us free people from the prisons created by their viewing themselves only in terms of their success at some kind of performance. Through such a witness of a life of hearkening unto the Lord’s words about how to enjoy life to the fullest, the Holy Spirit uses us to lead others to trust him and follow him in demonstrating his care and concern to others. That means providing for their needs on the simplest and most personal level, and it means seeking justice and peace for others, respecting or restoring their integrity and dignity, because that is God’s expectation for truly human living.

*Witnessing Eschatologically.* On this basis, we focus our witness on the relationship between God and the human creatures to whom he calls us to witness within the eschatological context that permeated Luther’s thought. That relationship is one that lasts forever, and so it also has something to say about life everlasting. The denial of death that twists our culture, as Ernest Becker pointed out a generation ago, has not abolished death: The unpleasant thoughts we try to suppress take their vengeance when death finally bares its teeth in our own faces.<sup>7</sup> However, on most days, for all of us, heaven can wait.

For Luther, eschatology was not simply a concept about the end of earthly existence as we know it. He felt the presence of God in the midst of the everyday, and he recognized the full breadth of the biblical concept of “shalom,” the order and peace which God bestows through his Word as it intervenes in broken lives and broken communities. Therefore, the first urgency that demands our witness to Christ is the urgency of bringing the peace and joy, the taste of God’s shalom, to people in the midst of the toil, tribulation, and terrors of everyday life.

*Witnessing with Law and Gospel.* Luther’s distinction of law and gospel concretizes Jesus’ observation that he came to call sinners, not the righteous, since those who are ill, not those who are strong, need the physician (Mt 9:12–13). Luther realized early on, as he planned instruction for Christian living, that people who do not recognize that they are ill do not normally seek a cure.<sup>8</sup> The distinction of law and gospel structures this diagnosis of dilemma and conveying of cure. It enables us to analyze and prepare for our witness more effectively. It is a logical observation that insists that law in Luther’s technical sense of the word must precede gospel. This ordering of our witness is not always psychologically or theologically appropriate, however, and presentation of God’s Word to those outside the faith is somewhat more complicated than that simple dictum, but the general rule is good to remember. At best, when we give information about Jesus to people whose false gods are still functioning fairly effectively, we cannot expect to do more than add him to their pantheon.

Regarding evil, Luther first counsels that the heart of the problem lies with the human failure to place God at the center of our thinking and living: we do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. That helps focus Christian witness precisely, on

acquainting those outside the faith with their Creator and Redeemer. Luther defined humanity around the focal point created by the human creature's trust in someone or something as the absolute and ultimate source of all good and the safe place of refuge in every distress (LC, Cr, 2–3). These objects of trust function as substitutes for God; they are false gods. By this definition, all people have more than one god—over time, to be sure, and most often simultaneously. All sinners have more than one substitute for their Creator since no single creature can serve as a sufficient substitute for God. We are all polytheists.

Nonetheless, in the Smalcald Articles (III.i.3), Luther points out that the doubt of God and the denial of his lordship that separates his rebellious creatures from their Creator is not something people can sense or recognize apart from “revelation in the Scriptures,” that is, apart from listening to God himself. Sinners can perceive the existence of evil, even within themselves, but they cannot comprehend its origin in their failure to fear, love, and trust the true God apart from knowing him at least a bit. Therefore, our witness to those who do not know God must begin by speaking of him and his regard for them but cannot presume that they have a full perception of their dilemma and therefore of the way out of their predicament. Because living apart from Christ is a life copied from the deceiver, the father of lies (Jn 8:44), we cannot even presume that they are able to be fully honest with themselves about the misshapeness of their lives and their own involvement in misshaping it.

The second insight that Luther offers for assessing why others might wish to come to Christ is that their predicament—what is wrong with human life apart from him—has a wide variety of symptoms. One popular, but false, impression of Luther's diagnosis of the human condition echoes Melancthon's observation in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: “the law always accuses.” Luther was indeed guilt-ridden as a young monk, but he described his quandary in a host of ways. His view of what the law does to those outside the faith is better summarized in the Smalcald Articles (III.3.1–2), where he described it as a “thunderbolt” which destroys open sinners and false saints, as a hammer that breaks the rock of human security in pieces (citing Jer 23:29). The law cracks and smashes; it terrorizes and casts into despair. Luther often enough points out that the victims of evil, as well as its perpetrators, have good reason to be on the search for a new source of identity, security, and meaning, and that is what opens people to our witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

That means that conversations about whatever is plaguing and oppressing our non-Christian acquaintances can help us find an opening to talk about what Jesus means to us and thereby introduce him to them. We do not have to wait for some perception of guilt or shame to creep up on them. Such feelings are seldom at the surface of human thinking, and certainly not in contemporary North American society. Guilt feelings condemn and threaten, and so it is natural for sinners to reposition responsibility for what goes wrong onto someone or something else's account.

Fears of illness and death, job loss and financial crisis, all shake the security systems, the false gods, of people's lives. So do tottering and collapsing relationships in the family, on the job, in the neighborhood. So does loss of dignity, worth, and

meaningful activities for life. Any of these kinds of distress and defeat can set people on the search for new sources of identity, security, and meaning. When they become present in the lives of the people around us, if we have built a relationship of trust with them, we become natural conversation partners and will have opportunities to introduce them to Jesus Christ as their true Lord and Savior.

*Trust as the Core of our Humanity.* We might paraphrase Luther's "source of all good and refuge in time of distress" by speaking of God and his substitutes as the source(s) of our identity, security, and meaning or worth. For contemporary North Americans, Erik Erikson has made the concept of our sense of who we are the equivalent of Luther's concept of righteousness: being the right person, the person that we are supposed to be. He has centered this identity on our ability to trust.<sup>9</sup> The need for some sense of safety or security in daily life is clear: the physiological and psychological implications of its absence are devastating, death-dealing. A sense of dignity or worth or meaningfulness in life is critical for "keeping going," and as the historical beings God created us to be, "shalom" is to be found in moving along the paths on which he has set us. Straying from those paths may be disastrous, deadly.

Trust empowers the movement of God's children on his paths. "Trust" and "believe" are not words that can stand alone. They take on meaning only when linked to an object, and they are words that necessarily describe a relationship when that object is a person. God is a God of conversation and community, and so the goal of his sending Christ into the world to save sinners is the restoration of the conversation he designed us to have in communion with him. Heidelberg systematician Wilfried Härle, examining Luther's disputation on justification of 1535, argues that the reformer's doctrine of justification by faith reflected the Old Testament concept of what both God and human creature are, or are supposed to be: centered in "communal faithfulness" [צדקה, *Gemeinschaftstreue*].<sup>10</sup> Therefore, bringing the gospel to those outside that community, who are living without that faithfulness to their Creator, involves the restoration of that communal faithfulness.

*God Restores the Righteousness of our Humanity.* Luther believed that God accomplished the fabrication of all reality through his Word in Genesis 1. He believed as well that God re-creates through his Word of gospel as it comes in oral, written, and sacramental forms. He understood justification—often labeled his favorite way of describing God's gracious action in Christ—as the doing to death of sinners through baptismal burial in Christ's tomb and their resurrection on the basis of, and empowered through, his resurrection, which leads believers to walk in his footsteps (Rom 6:3–11; Col 2:11–15).<sup>11</sup> This motif of justification by re-creation is, of course, only one of many ways Luther used to describe what Christ has done for us. When he used this motif, he was generally declaring the facts regarding the reality which God accomplishes through his word of forgiveness that fashions new creatures by fashioning new trust. When he focused on those who were preoccupied with the signs of their own sinfulness, he proclaimed away their guilt or shame by speaking of God's imputation, picking up a relatively seldom used word in order to emphasize that God reckons or regards those who

are battling the evil within themselves as his people, righteous in their identity because he judges them to be.

No legal fiction, God's judgment creates reality. Luther could speak of Christ's reconciliation to those who felt they had wandered far from their God. He could depict the gentleness and tenderness of parental love to those who felt fearful and alone, unlovable and unloved. His imagination moved out from biblical descriptions and metaphors of what God has done in Christ Jesus to similar expressions gleaned from his own situation in late medieval Germany. He models for us an agility of articulation of God's promise of new life in Christ.

*The Power of God's Word.* The Lutheran understanding of the means of grace that bear this promise sees them not merely as sources of information that direct our faith toward heaven. He understood them to be tools or instruments of the Holy Spirit by which God re-creates us by refashioning the trust that gives direction to our lives. Luther believed firmly that the gospel gives "the resources and aids" (Rat und Hulf) to combat sin and live the life of trust in God through various forms of his Word (SA III.v). Luther emphasized that God is rich in his grace and therefore gives his life-restoring Word to us in so many different forms, as the peasant told the priest when the priest thought absolution should be enough gospel and the peasant need not worry about going to the Lord's Supper—in Luther's *Short Order of Confession* (1529).<sup>12</sup> But he did not attempt to explain precisely how the Holy Spirit exercises the power to re-create sinners into trusting children of God through the various forms of the Word. On the one hand, this gospel power rests in God's commitment, his promise and pledge, that he will be faithful, even when we are not—since that is his very nature: "he cannot deny himself" (2 Tm 2:13). To have someone tell us that he or she will be with us through thick and thin, no matter what, is always encouraging, though sometimes not totally believable. To have God tell us that does evoke a reaction, sometimes of doubt, but sometimes of wonder, awe, gratitude, and the confidence and dependence that define trust.

Life comes by believing, Luther came to see, and he did not define believing as mere acknowledgement of a set of facts. Believing and trusting form the heart and basis of truly human living for Luther. And so, his preaching and teaching aimed at making people wise in truly human living—the saved life, the life made possible by Christ's removal of our sinfulness—which, he was convinced, would cause them to mature in the practice of the activities he had designed them to carry out in his world.

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Though he laid out no evangelistic theory, Luther's view of human interaction reminds us that we deliver God's Word as whole people, not just with our "religious" thoughts and actions. Trust in God may be very difficult psychologically for those who find few if any human beings to trust. Therefore, when we come with God's Word, we may have to wait patiently for sufficient trust to be built in our conversation partner to enable a hearing of our witness.

These are certainly not the only insights which Luther offers to those thinking about the evangelistic task of believers in the twenty-first century. But these short

thoughts may serve to provoke our thinking as we answer the Holy Spirit's call to give witness to God's love in Christ and the re-creative power of his Word

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> James A Nestingen, "Luther's Cultural Translation of the Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001) 440–452
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Kolb, "Confessing the Creator to Those Who Do Not Believe There Is One Part One Varieties of Belief in a Supermarket of Religions," *Missio Apostolica* 10, no 1 (2002) 24–36
- <sup>3</sup> *D Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar Bohlau, 1883–1993 [henceforth WA]), 42 17, 15–18, *Luther s Works* (Saint Louis/Philadelphia Concordia/Fortress, 1958–1986 [henceforth LW]), 1 21
- <sup>4</sup> "Lecture on Psalm 2," 1532, LW 12 32–33, WA 40, 2 230, 20–231, 28
- <sup>5</sup> "Genesis Lectures," 1535–1545, LW 1 16–17, WA 42 13, 31–14, 22
- <sup>6</sup> WA 12 318, 25–318, 6, as translated in Volker Stolle, *Church Comes from All Nations* (Saint Louis Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 20
- <sup>7</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York Free Press, 1973)
- <sup>8</sup> WA 7 204, 13–27 Cf Luther's *Prayerbook* (1522), WA 10, 2 376, 12–377, 14
- <sup>9</sup> Erik Erikson, *Child and Society* (New York Norton, 1950), *Insight and Responsibility* (New York Norton, 1964), esp 81–107, *Identity Youth and Crisis* (New York Norton, 1968), esp 91–141, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York Norton, 1975)
- <sup>10</sup> "Die Entfaltung der Rechtfertigungslehre Luthers in den Disputationen von 1535 bis 1537" *Lutherjahrbuch* 71 (2004) 211–228
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Kolb, "Resurrection and Justification Luther's Use of Romans 4 25," *Lutherjahrbuch* 78 (2011)
- <sup>12</sup> WA 31, 1 345, 9–12, LW 53 118



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