

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF MISSION
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God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us; That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations. Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. Psalm 67:1-3

From the bottom of his heart, the Psalmist's desire is to see the news of God's almighty deeds published throughout the world—that the nations would experience God's saving health and justice, and joyously sing his praises. Here the Psalmist expresses God's desire, that all would be saved, and come to knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).

A Lutheran understanding of mission will point to God in his Trinitarian economy as the original and ongoing *source* of mission. It is the mission of God, yet God uses fragile and sinful human beings to carry out that mission. Paul was called as God's "*chosen instrument*" to take His name "before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). An instrument does nothing on its own, but depends upon a user to make use of it for a specific purpose. Scripture is replete with other examples of reluctant messengers whom God nevertheless used powerfully in His mission (e.g. Moses, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, to mention a few).

An understanding of God as the Source of mission has its roots in the Creation of the world. God called the world into existence: the heavens, the earth, and all creatures (Gen. 1), and pronounced it all *good*. Man was given a privileged place in God's creation. He was told to name, as God had named: He was told to exercise dominion, as

God exercises dominion (Gen. 1, 2). There was a close and harmonious working relationship between man and God.

But then a catastrophic disruption occurred in this created order. God's creatures, Adam and Eve, desired to be like God the Creator himself (Genesis 3:1-6). In an incomprehensible act, man thrust himself into the jaws of sin and death and the perfection and goodness of the created order was destroyed. Natural man is now spiritually blind, dead and an enemy of God. He has neither the desire nor the power to do anything to bring himself back to the true God, and yet in his love and mercy God continues to seek and save the lost (Genesis 3:9, 15; Luke 19:10). God even now asks the question He asked of our first parents Adam and Eve: "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9).

God, the sending One, sent his Son (Mat. 10:40; Luke 4:18; John 17:3, etc.). Jesus Christ, "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary," broke forth into this sin-infested world to confront death face-to-face and arise victorious over it, thereby creating the possibility for a *re-creation*, the restoration of mankind to its original condition. Luther says it beautifully in his *Small Catechism*: "[He] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death." Now, by grace through faith, the creatures God originally created in his image have the opportunity to participate anew in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3-4) through a renewed knowledge of God.

Because man can do nothing to come to God, God's desire is that this Word of salvation would go forth to the entire world—to all nations. This message of the gospel

is universally necessary, for “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); and it is universally sufficient, because Christ “died for all” (2 Corinthians 5:14). In Christ Jesus every human being has been atoned for.

But there is also an *exclusive* dimension to the gospel. The Scriptures make it quite clear—faith in Jesus Christ is the *only way* to a restoration of the perfect relationship that existed in the beginning. Jesus himself said, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The Apostle Peter boldly preached this truth before the highest of the Temple authorities in Jerusalem: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Saint Paul, wrote to Timothy: “For there is one God, and there is *one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, . . .” (1 Tim. 2:5-6). The Scriptures are clear: Apart from faith in Christ, there is no hope (Mark 16:16).

In our post-modern, pluralistic and relativistic age, this exclusive dimension is a stumbling block to many. In a society where seventy-five percent of Americans believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth¹ and that many religions can lead to eternal life,² the “exclusive dimension” of the gospel is a “scandal.” It is not hard to see how the universalism of the post-modern world can sap the church of its missionary motivation.

¹ http://www.apologeticsresctr.org/why_an_apologetics_resource_cent.htm (October 30, 2004).

² The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Americans struggle with religion’s role at home and abroad,” news release, March 20, 2002.

Yet, in spite of all the objections and obstacles that humans and their vain philosophies put in the way, God continues to send. God the Father sent his Son. The Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit. And now, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit sends the church into the world to bear witness to the mighty deeds, to his “saving health,” among all nations.

And so the Church goes out, not with political power, not with economic power, not with the sword, not with acts of terrorism that, as some Muslims believe, will usher in the kingdom of Allah, but with the simple means of His Word and sacraments. The Father “draws people by the power of his Holy Spirit through the hearing of his holy, divine Word, as with a net, through which the elect are snatched out of the jaws of the devil.”³ Only in the revealed Word is the truth of God's salvation made known. It is through the Word that the Holy Spirit works to effect a change in man, making him willing to give up his trust in self and to receive the free gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation through faith in Christ.

Especially, Holy Baptism is called the “missionary” sacrament, for the church is called to “disciple all nations,” by “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all things” He has commanded us (Matt. 28:19-20). Through Baptism God grants to the sinner all that He has done for him in Christ. It is the initial sacrament, as Luther said, “which snatches us from the jaws

³ *SD*, XI, 76.

of the devil and makes us God's own."⁴ The Word and Sacraments are the tools that the church has at her disposal for her part in the extension of God's kingdom. Other tools cannot and will never be a substitute for them.

The goal of reaching out to the hurting, confused and lost world is expressed in the prayer our Lord taught us when He said we should pray "Thy kingdom come." Martin Luther demonstrated the global dimension of this petition when commenting in his *Large Catechism*: "This we ask, both in order that we who have accepted it may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and *advance with power throughout the world*," to which Luther added: "All this is nothing more than to say: 'Dear Father, we ask you first to give us your Word, so that the gospel may be properly preached *throughout the world* and then that it may also be received in faith and may work and dwell in us'"⁵

In a world torn by sin, violence and destruction, we remember that God's Word does and will continue to go forth. It will "advance with power throughout the world" to bring his saving health to the nations, so that now, in an incomplete way, and in the perfect fulfillment of the last day, the prayer of the Psalmist and Saint John's vision of heavenly worship will be realized: "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And

⁴ *LC*, IV, 83.

⁵ *LC*, III, 52-54.

cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9-10).