

Luther's Practical Mission-Mindedness

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Answers to two questions concerning Luther's concern for mission are being seriously sought and found today by many mission-minded theologians. The first question is whether Luther was mission-minded to the extent that he was aware of missionary obligation as such. The other question is whether his mission-mindedness led him to practical missionary contributions. The answers to both questions can, of course, only be found in his expositions of Biblical books and in his sermonic and confessional writings.

Before, however, searching for answers in these his writings, we shall do well to realize the fact that the Reformation itself was a tremendous missionary effort. With Luther's discovery of the justification by faith as the heart of the Gospel the groundwork for all mission-mindedness and mission work had been laid. The spread of the Reformation before the Counter-Reformation set in amply testifies to the missionary influence of the Reformation. But it was not only the spread of the Reformation from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, from the Balkans to Britain that bespeaks its great missionary influence. There is another dimension of which we must be mindful, the depth of its influence. Prior to the Reformation the spread of the Gospel among many European nations had only too often been a superficial one, in the beginning at times even brought about by force of arms. Altogether the Gospel made new inroads into the hearts of the people, "bursting forth once more" (SW 2, p. 346)¹ as preached and taught by Luther and his coworkers, their aim was to "restore ... the office of preaching ... again to its right and proper place" and "the service ... again to its rightful use" (p. 375).² Religious Luther and Melancthon introduced religious instruction in both church and school, and "effected an integration of the Gospel" as had never been experienced before. This instruction "resulted in strong, well-rooted congregations everywhere."³ The reaction of the Roman-Catholic Church, the Counter-Reformation, only attests to the missionary influence that the Reformation had even on the papal church itself.

I

As to the first question, to what extent Luther was mission-minded; we can begin with his exposition of passages from Genesis. Our aim is not to ascertain how far we can agree with everything in Luther's exposition of relevant passages—Luther's mission-mindedness often carried him far afield—but rather to what extent Luther's exposition of such passages reveals his mission-mindedness to us.

Beginning with the Protevangelium, Genesis 3:15, Luther not only takes cognizance of the comfort which Adam and Eve and all who believe in it found and find in these words of promise, but has Enoch, who "walked with God" (Gen. 5:22), "give instruction about the future Seed and about the head of the Serpent that will be crushed, and about the kingdom of Satan that will be destroyed" (cf. LW 1, p. 344).⁴ In other words, Luther finds in Enoch's walking with God "something public, namely, to carry on God's business before the world, to occupy oneself with His Word, and to teach His worship" (LW 2, p. 56). Here we find two words, "world" and "Word," which throughout Luther's expositions are to play an important role and which testify to a mission-mindedness which encompasses both the Word as a means of spreading the good news of salvation,

¹ This abbreviation (SW) is used in the text to identify quotations taken from *Selected Writings of MARTIN LUTHER*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967). The above words were used by Luther in his *Ordinance of a Common Chest*.

² As asserted by Luther himself in his writing, *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*.

³ E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 862 and 682.

⁴ The abbreviation (LW) in the text identifies quotations from *Luther's Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955-).

and the world as the width and the breadth of this spread of the Gospel Word. Therefore Luther even has Noah traveling “over the entire world” and preaching “everywhere” (p. 57).

No less did Abraham preach “publicly” (p. 287) and erect “a public chapel or an altar, at which he preached and taught about the true religion—mainly, of course, to his household but then also to the neighboring Canaanites who came together at this place” (p. 332). It is characteristic of Luther’s mission-mindedness to add that Abraham did not do this “in some corner . . . but in a public place, in order that by his own example and that of his own people he might lead others to the knowledge of God and to true forms of worship” (p. 333).

Moreover, when Luther speaks of the great promise which Abraham received, that in him all families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:3), he finds it necessary to emphasize that three words should be written in golden letters and should be extolled in the languages of all people, because they offer eternal treasures. For “the words clearly indicate,” he reiterates, “This promise is to be extended to all nations or families of the earth.” But then in speaking of the one “who has dispensed this blessing among all nations,” he does not confine it to Abraham or Abraham’s children. For “who else, shall we say, has dispensed this blessing among all nations except the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ?” (p. 260). Luther’s mission-mindedness included the fact that the Old Testament mission promises found and find their final fulfillment in the Messiah, the promised Savior.

The Psalms give him a wonderful opportunity to repeat this fact again and again. In his exposition of the royal Psalms he dwells on the worldwide nature of Christ’s rule as King and of His Gospel-preaching. In this connection it is worthy of special note that Luther speaks of a “new kingdom” and a “new teaching” after Moses (LW 12, p. 72), as if Moses and the prophets had not prophesied this “new kingdom” and “new teaching.” Indeed, they had prophesied it, but *only* prophesied it. They were not yet sent out to the nations to preach it. Even Israel had to live under the Law, which “was added” (Gal. 3:19), and to wait for the promised kingdom. Christ, not Moses, preached, “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15).

But it belongs to the spirit of Luther’s mission-mindedness to define, first of all, this new Kingdom. According to his exposition of Psalm 8, “Christ’s kingdom is on earth, in all the lands, and yet at the same time in heaven. It is not an earthly, physical, mortal kingdom, but an eternal kingdom” (LW 12, p. 106). As such, Christ’s Kingdom “is founded and regulated only through the Word and faith, without sword and armor” (p. 98). It is also without “legalistic worship ceremonies” (p. 85), since this kingdom spells the abrogation of the Law. Luther’s repeated emphasis on the abrogation of the Law is essential for a deeper insight into the spirit of his mission-mindedness. “Even today,” Luther asserts, “it requires a great and lofty insight to understand that the substance of Christianity is a much nobler thing and altogether different from all secular and spiritual laws, outward holiness, government, and whatever other such things there may be among Jews or heathen” (LW 14, pp. 22f.). Therefore in his exposition of Psalm 2:7 he distinguishes the kind of doctrine taught in the New Testament from that which was taught in the Old Testament. “Formerly,” he tells us, “the Law was taught, which produced wrath and increased sin; but now it is faith, which works remission and fulfills righteousness. There the lawgiver was Moses, a man and a servant; here the Lawgiver is Christ, God and Lord of all. The former produced servants of sin; the latter, free men of righteousness” (p. 331). From this there follows that the message of grace is characteristic of the New Testament, while that of the Law is characteristic of the Old Testament. Therefore he does not want us to look for a mission activity in Old Testament times on the part of Moses and the prophets as if grace were characteristic of the Old Testament dispensation. For “St. Paul himself affirms in Ephesians 3:5,” he tells us in his exposition of Psalm 117, “that it came as a revelation even to the Apostles that the heathen could be God’s people without the Law of Moses, yes, without and beyond all law” (p. 23).

All this adds up to the wonderful fact that the Holy Spirit gathers up and together “the whole world with all its wisdom, righteousness, merits, services, adorations, and chastisements” (LW 12, pp. 89f.) and “places all things under Christ” (p. 69). Not only the Jews, but also all nations have been given to this King so that He might be King of kings and Lord of lords. Therefore this Kingdom “must be spread to the end of the earth” (p. 69), it “will extend as far as the world” (p. 104). The new Word, the Gospel, will be preached in all lands,

nations, and languages, not only among the Jews, not only in Jerusalem, but in all tongues” (p. 140). In short, “God’s grace will be preached everywhere” (p. 141).

Luther’s mission-mindedness, which thus foresees the spread of Christ’s Word throughout the world, does not blind him to “the ingratitude of the people, the contempt and weariness with the Word,” not to mention the persecution of the Word (p. 220). Consequently he does not fail to tell us that we are engaged in “a difficult battle, not simply because of our obvious weakness and our small numbers, but because of the power, wisdom, and multitude of our adversaries” (p. 219). Nevertheless, he does not want us to be discouraged when we look at present circumstances that disturb us, but we should much rather look at the promises which Christ’s Word gives us. Those who are in the teaching office “should teach with the greatest faithfulness and expect no other remuneration than to be killed by the world, trampled under foot, and despised by their own” (p. 220). When Luther sees things going his way, he cannot refrain from confessing that he occasionally loses patience and thinks seriously: “If it were not for the fact that this doctrine has already been spread abroad in the world, I would rather do something else than make it known to an ungrateful world” (p. 220). Still “we must ... not give up the office of teaching,” he hastily adds, but must commend “to God the success and good fortune of the Word” (pp. 220f.). He calls our attention to “a lone Paul,” who “fought against the entire world” (p. 219). Therefore he admonishes us to “be armed and trained not only to teach and instruct the good, who think correctly in the faith, but also to combat and reprove the adversaries” (p. 216).

Luther’s mission-mindedness is not only of such a serious nature because he is fully aware of the enmity of the world, but because preaching in public and not in a corner is such hard work for us. To dare proclaim the mercy of God in public and not in a corner, Luther declares to be “boldness above boldness, strength above strength and courage above courage” (p. 393). There are various factors that close our lips. “Sometimes the fear of danger, sometimes the hope of gain, often the advice of friends intervenes.” All this makes it quite evident why the Psalmist (Ps. 51:15) “asks that his lips be opened by the Lord Himself ... to bear the name of the Lord before the devil, the world, kings, princes, and all flesh” (p. 393). Tyrants we will vanquish “only through patience and silence,” so that “we must arm ourselves with patience, with faith, with the example of Christ’s cross. The lying teachers, however, we will overcome not by patience and silence, but against them we must draw the two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12) with which ‘we destroy all knowledge that exalts itself against the knowledge of God’ (2 Cor. 10:5)” (LW 12, p. 216). Thus Luther encourages us in our mission work, as if he were aware of the political and ecclesiastical conditions of our day.

It belongs to Luther’s mission-mindedness that he confides in the Holy Spirit to give our preaching about Christ “good fortune and success,” so “that there will still be some from among the nobility, kings, princes, and the wise of the world who will join themselves to us and will accept the Word.” He does not doubt that “God will have His tithes from the mass of kingdoms and peoples... God always converts a few through this doctrine of faith—in spite of all reason and opinion—so that the church may increase, since there are always some who persevere and shed their blood for His testimony... Even at the courts of godless princes there are many good men who honor the Word in true piety, attend to its ministry in humility, and aid the brethren in every service of which they are capable... From the outset of this preaching in the church it occurred, and it still occurs today” (pp. 290f.).

God always gives a place where the Word can be taught, Luther assures us. Consequently “He will have a kingdom not only among the Jewish people, but in the whole earth, throughout the world. Christ will have His baptistry, His chancel from which He teaches, His apostles and teachers in cities and towns where there are hardly one or two who believe. So Christ’s name and the altar ... remain. They will be extended in length as well as in breadth, so that Christ and His name will be found in every extremity throughout the world” (p. 297). Here Luther’s mission-mindedness is carrying him beyond the confines of the Protestant churches. “Thus under the papacy there have always been and still are some believers whom we do not know, whom God preserves by means of the Word and the Sacraments, against the will of the devil and the pope” (p. 297). “Or can there be no Christians,” Luther asks, “where the Turks and the Scythians rule temporarily” (LW 14, p. 333), i.e., in the former Byzantine Empire, in the Orthodox Church? His answer is in the affirmative, for the Orthodox Church “was not subject to the pope and yet was Catholic and Christian. We are not to limit,” he warns, “the heritage of

Christ too closely ... neither on account of the perfidy of the Turks nor because of the many others who have strayed away. Besides, which of us can know who is truly a Christian? And do not wicked people abound among us while the good are few?" he argues. Yet "the authority of the divine Word transcends our ability to comprehend it. How much more, then, does it transcend our suspicions and our fantasies, which occupy themselves with outward custom" (p. 334).

Here we can only pause and repeat Luther's question: "Besides, which of us can know who is truly a Christian?" In our polemics, whether they are being carried on by word of mouth or in writing, we must keep this question well in mind. First of all Luther tells us in his exposition of Jonah that we must know that God is "no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). We are therefore "to judge no one nor are we to despair concerning anyone" (StL XIV, 854).⁵ Jonah was still under the impression that God is a respecter of persons as regards Nineveh in comparison with Israel, judging the former to be nothing in the sight of God, condemning it unto death and despairing of its ever receiving the grace of God. Where he does not at all expect the grace of God to be found, there it presents itself. And where he does not expect the Word of God to be heard or accepted, there the Ninevites are the first ones to receive it in all modesty. Jonah had to learn from God that he was not to judge anyone, also not to despair concerning anyone, and "not to restrict God's grace to any place, boundary, time, measure, person and merits as was done by the carnal-minded Jews... Everyone should be mindful of that which is entrusted to him. God's grace will run its course both in regard to those who perform works and those who do not work, as Paul teaches us Romans 4:4-5" (85f.). This is the manner in which Luther's mission-mindedness expresses itself.

It also becomes quite apparent when Luther insists that we are not to limit the large number of Gospel preachers. In view of the many vacancies in the territorial church of Saxony and in all of Germany and in view of the small number of pupils in the schools and of the critical decrease in enrollment which the German universities suffered, Wittenberg not excluded, Luther in his *Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530) wrote of the need of more pastors and schoolmasters and of maintaining boys' schools and universities properly (SW 4, p. 142 and n. 39). The decrease in enrollment of seminary students throughout our country gives us every reason to take heed to what Luther has to say to us in this connection.

On the basis of Psalm 68:11, which Luther has translated: "God will give the command that the host of the evangelists be great," he states: "In the present verse God says that He will give a host of evangelists... This came to pass in the apostles and their successors throughout the world. God blessed the world with a host of these, dispatching them into the entire world, as befits the time of grace" (LW 13, p. 12). Let us note that Luther here does not only speak of apostles but also of their successors (cf. also p. 265). But in his exposition of verse 12 he interprets "the kings of the hosts" as being only the apostles, "who converted the whole world," bearing so much fruit since they were all "of one mind" and "preached one and the same message of faith—all this in conformity with the Gospel... By reason of their unanimity of mind they bore such rich fruit and converted the world, a feat that has never been equaled" (p. 13).

How Luther can say that the apostles converted "the world" is difficult to understand, especially when he adds that it was "a feat that has never been equaled." One can only ask whether he actually means that the apostles converted the whole world, as we know it today. We learn from his sermon on Mark 16:14-20, where Christ tells His disciples to go into all the world and to preach the Gospel to all creatures, that his understanding is not that "the apostles actually went into all the world, for no apostle has come here to us" (StL XI, 950). And living in a time when America had just been discovered, he is well aware of the fact that many islands even in his day had been found, which were populated by heathen and that no one has preached to them. Therefore he asks how these facts can be in accord with the words which Paul in Romans 10:18 quoted from Psalm 19:5: "Their rule has gone out into all the world and their speech unto the end of the world." His answer is to be found in his exposition of Psalm 19 where he tells us that David "here ... teaches explicitly that in the future God's grace will be preached everywhere ... that His kingdom will extend under all of heaven ... that Christ

⁵ Quotations from *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880-1910) are identified in the text with the abbreviation (StL).

will reign and rule in all the lands that will believe in Christ, and that the holy Christian Church will be as broad as the world” (LW 12, p. 141). Here Luther is speaking of the future without limiting the preaching of God’s grace to the time of the apostles. “It has run abroad and still runs,” Luther adds in reference to our verse in his exposition of Psalm 110:2 (LW 13, p. 269). How he wants these his words to be understood he tells us clearly in his Ascension Sermon: “Their preaching has gone forth to all the world, although it has not yet come into all the world. This going forth has begun and has gone out, although it has not yet been accomplished and completed, but the preaching will be heard ever farther and wider until the Last Day. When this sermon has been preached and heard and proclaimed in the entire world, then the message is accomplished and everywhere carried out. Then the Last Day will also take place” (StL XI, 951).

Luther compares this constant and progressive course of the Gospel with a stone thrown into the water: “It makes ripples and circles around itself which move farther and farther outward, the one pushing the other, until they reach the water’s edge. Although it may become quite still in the middle, yet the ripples do not rest but move outward. So it goes with the preaching of the Gospel: it began with the apostles and continues on and on. Preachers carry it forward; it is hunted and persecuted from place to place, yet continues to be made known to those who have not heard it before, although in the middle where it first began it may have completely disintegrated and become heresy” (951).⁶ In this connection he also compares our Gospel message with an imperial proclamation, which is being carried by a messenger from one province to another. “One says of it: it has gone out to Nuernberg or to the Turks, although it has not yet reached its destination. The same can be said of the sermon preached by the apostles. Now it also has come to us to the end of the world, for we dwell close to the ocean” (955). “It is no longer confined to the narrow land of Canaan as in a little corner of the world. It has grown larger and sounds out farther” (LW 13, p. 363).

This spread of the Gospel Word Luther often contrasts to the preaching of the Law in the Old Testament dispensation. While the old Law and the preaching of the prophets was not spread abroad in the whole world and preached to all creatures but only to the Jews in their synagogues, the Gospel shall not thus be harnessed but shall go forth freely into all the world. If it is to be proclaimed to all creatures, this can mean nothing else than that there should be no tiny earthly corner where it does not reach before the Last Day. Therefore in his exposition of the Second Psalm he has God turning to the King and addressing Him as though He wanted to say: “Before Thy coming to earth, O King, Thou art praised and thanked only in the tiny narrow corner of Judea and in Jerusalem. But after Thy coming there will be more ringing and singing, thanking and praising, not in the narrow corner of Judea alone, but in all the lands under heaven throughout the world. By this, He prophesies and proclaims at the very beginning of the psalm that through the coming of the King God will be praised and worshiped throughout the world” (LW 12, p. 99).

It therefore also belongs to Luther’s mission-mindedness to emphasize that mission work in the last analysis is God’s work. Although he always equates “public preaching and the visible revelation of the Spirit” (LW 13, p. 271), yet in his exposition of Psalm 110 he tells us: “As has been said before, here God has set up the kind of dominion which He leads and manages in person so that things will go as they ought, as it is written in Psalm 22:31: ‘And proclaim His righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has wrought it.’ Since it says, ‘The Lord sent,’ it is clear that He is in charge and, as they say, does it Himself; for anything done through others, by giving commands, is never done right. But when the Lord does it Himself, it works and endures, so that one has to say: ‘It is the work of God.’ Formerly He sent Moses and others and gave many commandments regarding what men ought to do; still it was not done. ‘Some day,’ He says, ‘I shall come Myself and do it Myself.’ How? By giving His Son Jesus Christ, who has one divine, almighty essence with Him, letting Him shed His blood, die, and rise again, preach Himself and bestow the Holy Spirit from heaven, that the Gospel may be preached with power until the end and accepted by people. This is not the work of Moses, or of any man, but His very own work. Things move along and are accomplished because He Himself preaches and promotes preaching, and also because He Himself does and produces what He preaches” (p. 270).

⁶ Translated by Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 19f.

Indeed, we are all in need of such words of encouragement when we begin to doubt whether the Christian Church has a future in this modern world of ours. Therefore a reconsideration and restudy of Luther's explanation of the Third Article and of the Second Petition is also in place, in order to sense Luther's confidence in God's own work as the most essential part of his mission-mindedness. In his explanation of the Third Article he speaks of the Holy Ghost calling and gathering the whole Christian Church on earth and keeping it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith (cf. Trigl., p. 545).⁷ When Luther makes mention of the Church it is always "the whole Christian Church on earth." According to his *Large Catechism* the Church is "a peculiar congregation in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God" (p. 689). For Luther the Church is "on earth," "in the world" and is not limited to one country or people. It is God Himself who works among all nations through the gift of the Holy Ghost, who calls together and gathers all believers. This is nothing less than the world-wide mission work of the Holy Ghost or for that matter of the Triune God, of which Luther wants to make us fully conscious in his explanation of the Third Article. There is therefore nothing that testifies more to Luther's mission-mindedness than his explanation of this Article.

The same, however, can be said of his explanation of the Second Petition in his *Large Catechism*. In it he prays that God's "name be so praised through the Holy Word and a Christian life" that not only "we who have accepted it may abide and daily grow therein," but "that it may gain approbation and adherence among other people and proceed with power throughout the world, that many may find entrance into the Kingdom of Grace, be made partakers of redemption, being led thereto by the Holy Ghost, in order that we may altogether remain forever in the one kingdom now begun" (Trigl., p. 711). This prayer does not only testify to Luther's mission-mindedness in a general sense but to a mission-mindedness in the specific sense of missionary obligation. The Lord Himself makes prayer our missionary obligation (Matt. 9:38). The only question is whether *our* mission-mindedness is of such a nature as to lead *us* to pray unceasingly for the coming of Christ's Kingdom to us and to others also; and to "pray ... the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest" (p. 711).

Still the question remains how the coming of Christ's Kingdom is done. To this question Luther in his *Large Catechism* has a twofold answer: "First, here in time through the Word and faith; and secondly, in eternity forever through revelation" (p. 711). He prays that, "both these things ... may come to those who are not yet in it, and, by daily increase, to us who have received the same, and hereafter in eternal life" (p. 713). The above words must always be added in thought to his explanation of this Petition, so that virtually it will read: "We pray in this petition that it may come unto us also" and "to those who are not yet in it."⁸

Then Luther continues to pray that God may give us first His Word, "that the Gospel be preached properly throughout the world" (Trigl., p. 713) and "proceed with power throughout the world, that many may find entrance into the Kingdom of Grace" (p. 711). Here we have Luther's awareness of the power of the Gospel Word, which led him "to the new understanding of the expansive power of the preached Word. 'Preachers shall fly round the globe and find those who are awaiting them and also to receive them joyfully.'"⁹

But how is the coming of Christ's Kingdom also done through faith? Luther's answer is: "That it (Thy Word) be received in faith, and work and live in us, so that through the Word and the power of the Holy Ghost Thy kingdom may prevail among us, and the kingdom of the devil be put down" (p. 713). Accordingly through our faith in the Word and through our confessional attitude the mission of the Church is established, regardless where it is carried out, at home or abroad. It is from this faith, which "works and lives in us" that our missionary performance flows. Brought to this faith, we have become disciples of Jesus and as such have received the Holy

⁷ References to the Lutheran Confessions are taken from *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), abbreviated in the text (Trigl.).

⁸ Luther's explanation of our Petition as found in *The German Mass and Order of Service* lays this emphasis on "those who are not yet in it" and reads: "That His kingdom may come to us and expand; that all transgressors and they who are blinded and bound in the devil's kingdom be brought to know Jesus Christ His Son by faith, and that the number of Christians may be increased" (SW 3, p. 415).

⁹ Bengt Sundkler, *The World of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), p. 96.

Spirit through whom we become the Lord's witnesses and coworkers in the Kingdom of God (cf. Gal. 4:11). For Christians listening to the Word also become living witnesses to this Word.

Finally and of the greatest importance, Luther has Christ's Kingdom coming through revelation, when "sin, death, and hell shall be exterminated, that we may live forever in perfect righteousness and blessedness" (p. 713). This is what Luther means here by revelation, as he also tells us in his explanation of the Third Article, where he has the Holy Ghost at the Last Day raising up "me and all the dead," and giving "to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life" (p. 545). In his *Large Catechism* Luther has the Holy Spirit carrying on "His work without ceasing to the last day" (p. 595). Such a statement makes it quite evident that Luther never thought of the Church's missionary work ceasing before the Last Day. His mission-mindedness knew no other time limit than the Last Day. And in view of this Last Day he did glory in the fulfillment of the missionary work of the Holy Spirit, who "has appointed a congregation upon earth by which He speaks and does everything" (p. 695).

II

While Luther's mission-mindedness included a missionary obligation, we still must answer our second question, whether it also was a source of missionary contributions. Bengt Sundkler in *The World of Mission* states categorically that Luther's insight into the expansive power of the preached Word "failed to lead to any practical missionary contribution."¹⁰ Beyerhaus and Lefever in *The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission* are not quite as categorical in stating that Luther "sees clearly that the Word must encompass the earth, but he does not show quite so clearly that the Word needs agents."¹¹ Plass in *What Luther Says* grants, "while Luther was mission-minded, he naturally first had to establish the Gospel in its purity at home and have a ministry trained before it could spread the good news abroad."¹² Prof. R. Hoenecke in a Bulletin, *The 450th Anniversary of the Reformation at Dr. Martin Luther College*, agrees "that Luther's prime legacy to the church was the restoration of the Gospel," but adds: "Yet Luther's burning zeal for doctrinal purity did not, yes, could not co-exist with an indifference over against the privileged task the Lord of the Church gave such as continue in His Word." He then proceeds to quote from the *Missionsblatt*, edited by the Rev. Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, Bleckmar, Germany: Luther "was and ever remains a true and reliable witness to the Gospel and so the foremost teacher of our Church. But exactly for that reason it is most unlikely that interest in mission work, yes, mission activity itself should be wanting with Luther. Mission work, as an assignment and function of the Church of Jesus Christ, is founded in the Gospel, which the Lord through the faithful efforts of Luther restored to the church."¹³

While our foregoing quotations from Luther's writings can leave no doubt in our minds that he did not lack interest in mission work and missionary activity, the question always remains to be answered whether he actually performed mission work or exercised missionary activity. Speaking of mission work, we are not only to consider missionary activity in foreign heathen lands, but also that very activity in Christian countries of Luther's day including his own fatherland.

In seeking for such activity in Luther's life, we at first will have to proceed negatively and inquire whether also according to Luther's view the Great Commission to preach the Gospel to all nations was only binding on the apostles. Harry R. Boer, in *Pentecost and Missions*, treats this question at some length. He quotes Luther from his exposition of Psalm 82, verse 4, as saying: "That the apostles entered strange houses and preached was because they had a command and were for this purpose appointed, called and sent, namely that they should preach everywhere, as Christ had said, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

¹¹ Beyerhaus and Lefever, *The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 114.

¹² Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), Vol. II, p. 957, n. 1).

¹³ *Mission Evangelisch-Lutherischer Freikirchen in Missionsblatt*, 3041 Bleckmar über Soltau (Hannover), October 1967, pp. 264f.

creature.’ After that, however, no one again received such a general apostolic command, but every bishop or pastor has his own particular parish.”¹⁴ He also has Calvin declaring definitely in his commentary on I Corinthians 12:28 that pastors and teachers “are, in a manner, tied to their particular churches. For the pastor has not a commission to preach the gospel over the whole world, but to take care of the church that has been committed to his charge.” Likewise he tells us of Melancthon, Bugenhagen, and Zwingli envisioning no “organized missionary program,” since “the Great Commission ceased to be in effect when the apostles died.” Only Bucer according to Boer “stands out among the Reformers as a man with a missionary concern.” He wants the elders of the Church to seek the lost lambs. “*And though they do not have an apostolic call and command to go to strange nations*, yet they shall not in their several churches ... permit anyone who is not associated with the congregation of Christ to be lost in error.”¹⁵ Boer then lists a number of “protesting voices,” which without avail took issue with this general interpretation of the Great Commission.

Still we must not overlook that both Calvin and Luther did not teach a complete cessation of the apostolic office. Calvin distinguishes between a temporary and permanent office. The permanent office is that of pastors and preachers. The temporary office is that of apostles, evangelists and prophets. God may raise them up again in times of great need to lead churches back to the truth. But their office would only be of a temporary nature, while pastors and teachers serve the Church permanently. Luther, however, does not draw this distinction, since it does not have a Scriptural basis. He simply speaks of apostles and preachers through whom Christ has brought the heathen together into “one Christian congregation” spread over the whole world and then unexpectedly adds that “their office is still in existence and that it has not yet run its course” (StL XI, 801). This one Christian congregation has had its beginning after Christ’s Ascension and continues daily to grow until the Last Day (829). According to Luther there is no essential difference between the office of the apostles and that of later servants of the Church. Both as to content and power their office is one and the same. Both apostles and their successors have the one call to preach the Word of Christ, or as Luther puts it in his exposition of the 45th Psalm, verse 15: “The apostles teach Christ; the same is taught by the prophets, the teachers, the bishops, the pastors, the ministers, who baptize and administer the Sacraments” (StL V, 465). The only difference as far as the preaching of the Word is concerned lies, according to Luther, in the call, that of the former being an immediate, that of the latter a mediate one, both, however, having a divine call (cf. StL XI, 1910ff.).

But how about the difference as to the scope of the call, which both Luther and Calvin emphasize, defining the call of the apostles as being “a general apostolic command,” that of the bishop or pastor a call limited to “his own particular parish.” Is Luther, whose words we are quoting, forgetting the missionary call of the Church altogether, of which he was so well aware? By no means - for what Luther wants to say by limiting the call of bishops and pastors to their respective parishes can only be learned from the context, in which we find it (cf. StL V, 720ff.; also LW 13, pp.64f.).

In this context Luther is differentiating between “public preaching” (*von öffentlichen Predigten*), to which one has a divine call, and the private preaching of the Anabaptists (*Winkelprediger*, preachers in corners), who without being called and sent succeeded here and there to steal their way into Lutheran homes and parishes. That is why Luther says that only the apostles had a command to enter “strange houses” and to preach. He is emphasizing the sanctity of the call, which assigns to each bishop or pastor certain parish-limits as to his preaching, a call which is not to be encroached upon. The same applies, according to Luther, to any pastor, “however pious or upright,” who preaches to or teaches in secret “the people of a papistic or heretical pastor ... without the knowledge or consent of that pastor” (LW 13, p. 65) and without the call to do so. According to this context Luther is not betraying a lack of mission-mindedness, but is carrying on a controversy against mission endeavors for which there is no command or call. To justify his argument, he quotes none others than the apostles themselves, the Apostle Peter (I Pet. 5:3: “Tend the flock of God that is in your charge,” RSV)¹⁶ and

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 20.

¹⁶ Luther uses this passage to substantiate his argument on the strength of the etymological meaning of “κλήρον, that is, ‘parts,’ indicating that to each of them a part of the people has been committed” (LW 13, p. 64).

the Apostle Paul in his letter to Titus (1:5). Today we also have those itinerant and erring missionaries (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses), who without a call enter the houses of our parishioners to deceive their minds and to upset whole families by their teaching (cf. Tit. 1:10f.).

It is in this very context that Luther speaks of his missionary work in answer to the question addressed to him: "Why then do you teach by means of your books in all the world, since you are only a preacher in Wittenberg?" (StL V, 723). His answer is: "I was called both by papal and imperial command to be a Doctor of the Holy Scriptures and as such according to my sacred office to interpret the Scriptures before all the world and to teach every man. But even," he adds, "if I were no Doctor of Divinity, yet I am a called preacher and therefore duty bound to teach my parishioners by means of my writings, as well as those who have desired and requested to read my works. Even as other still more pious pastors and preachers write books and by means of them teach in all the world, and still do not steal their way into a parish which is not theirs" (cf. also LW 13, p. 66). Here Luther is declaring his writings to be a means of a worldwide missionary activity, as they indeed were. For "the business of writing ... is a divine office and work," he asserts in his *Sermon on Keeping Children in School*. Of course, the "many bigwigs ... do not see how necessary and useful it is to the world" (SW 4, p. 155). Luther found it necessary "for one" to "praise" his own occupation as a writer (p. 154). Because when the writers or, as Luther calls them in this connection, "the theologians disappear, God's Word also disappears, and nothing but heathen remain" (p. 159) in the world.

But let us not at once go into the entire world with Luther but rather stay with him and his missionary activity in his Wittenberg, in the Electorate of Saxony, and in his fatherland. For mission work, as one cannot say it often enough, is not only performed overseas, but also at home, in the home congregation, where it is usually called "evangelism." But both are one and the same. The fact that Luther wrote so many of his writings in the language of his people, and not in ecclesiastical Latin, was a means of entering the homes, nay, the hearts of the German people. At the head of these writings is, of course, his translation of the Bible, but which at the same time formed the basis of Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Dutch and other versions. By means of this Bible translation the Word of God had "free course" (II Thess. 3:1), sped on and triumphed (cf. RSV), going forward unhindered (cf. Phillips).

Next to his Bible translation, Luther's hymns were sung in the homes by young and old, in the workshops and in the houses of worship. Roman Catholics regarded them as the most instrumental means in the spread of the Reformation. No less did his *Large* and *Small Catechism* serve as such a means.¹⁷ Added to these we do not want to forget his Postils, which not only brought Luther's sermons into the homes but also on the pulpits in aiding pastors in their public preaching.¹⁸ When we include his many other popular writings distributed in pamphlet form, we can gain an impression of the effects of Luther's missionary activity within the confines of his own country.

Through these his missionary activity extended—and not only by means of his writings—beyond the confines of his own fatherland to all European countries. Luther has already spoken to us of "the host of evangelists," "the apostles and their successors," whom God dispatched "unto all the world." Such evangelists were trained at the University of Wittenberg, students who came from all European lands to study under Luther and Melancthon. They went back to their respective countries and there planted the Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith by translating Luther's writings and by their own writing and preaching. This was foreign mission work, even if it was not conducted as a modern missionary program.¹⁹

¹⁷ In *The German Mass* Luther defines "catechism" as meaning "the instruction in which the *heathen* (italics ours) who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they would believe, know, do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith" (SW 3, p. 440). By means of this definition Luther's mission-mindedness again becomes apparent.

¹⁸ Luther even thinks at the time of his writing *The German Mass* (1526) "that if we had the postil for the entire year, it would be best to appoint the sermon for the day to be read wholly or in part out of the book—not alone for the benefit of those preachers who can do nothing better, but also for the purpose of preventing the rise of enthusiasts and sects" (SW 4, p. 414). His emphasis on the unity of the Church is an essential part of his mission-mindedness.

¹⁹ "World Missions" are defined by the *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, Erwin L. Lenker, Ed. in Chief (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 698, as "missions carried on in foreign countries, whether they be Christian or heathen countries."

What did Luther advise, regarding the non-Christian peoples of his time? The ones within the reach of Luther's missionary activity were the Balkan Turks and the Jews in Germany. His writings on the Turks were in the nature of the case polemical writings, since the Turks threatened the very existence of Germany. Nevertheless, Luther gave thought to missionary activity among them, not in the sense of an organized mission program, but in advising Christian men and women who were taken captive by the Turks how to conduct themselves as Christians. He compared their activity with that of the Jews in the Babylonian captivity and follows Jeremiah chapter 29:5ff in admonishing them to remain firm in their faith, to "be careful to maintain good works" (Tit. 3:8) until the day of their redemption (cf. StL XX, 2180ff.). Doing this "you may convert many," he says (2191). Aiming thus at the conversion of the Turks, Luther is carrying on a missionary activity in regard to at least one heathen people. He did this, although he was well aware of the Turks' opposition to the Scriptures and of their strict adherence to the Koran. Therefore he declared, "we cannot convert the Turks" (2221), thereby implying that he was mindful of the conversion of the Turks. Such a statement should also make it clear to us why Luther's last resort as to actual mission work among the Turks was the Christian slave, whom he could only admonish as Paul had done regarding the Christian slaves of his day: "Obey in all things your masters in singleness of heart, fearing God" (Col. 3:22). But Luther did not only think of the Christian captive and his exemplary, god-fearing life, but of every Christian who might find himself among a heathen people in "genuine mission territory."²⁰ Such a one not only had "the right and power to teach the Word of God but was duty bound to do this, so as not to lose his soul and God's grace."²¹

This foreign mission-mindedness of Luther bore fruit. Shortly after his death Carniola Primus Truber (1508–86) and Hans von Ungnad (1493–1564), an Austrian official, directed their efforts to the spread of the Gospel not only among the southern Slavs, but also among the Turks, by providing the former with Lutheran literature, and the latter with a catechism in Cyrillic letters. The New Testament was translated by Stefan Consul (1559) in the Cyrillic alphabet and recommended by a committee of ecclesiastical and secular experts as "a means of also bringing the true Christian religion and the saving Gospel into all of Turkey."²²

While Luther never had personal contact with the Turks, he found himself in touch with the Jews. His faith in the power of the Gospel led him to believe that "many Jews would be converted if they but heard our sermons and the exposition of the Old Testament" (StL XII, 1574). He even gives advice on how to convert a Jew whose heart is not hardened beyond repentance (StL XIX, 1014). And in his letter to Jesel, a Jew residing at Rossheim, he informs him of a booklet (*Büchlein*) which he intends to write in the hope of winning over some of his people to their Messiah and closes his letter with the assurance that he is desirous of benefiting the Jews; that he hopes to do this for the sake of "the crucified Jew, whom no one shall deprive him of" (StL XX, 1826ff.). Thus Luther sought to bring about the conversion of the Jews, although he already had amply experienced their misuse of his service to Jewry and the hardening of their hearts as a result of his kindness toward them. The letter to Jessel was written as late as 1537 and makes his untiring efforts of winning the Jews for Christ quite evident. It is Luther who said: "We love the Jewish people ... and yet they are arrogant and proud" (StL XXII, 1584). Luther's disappointing experiences with them continued and climaxed in their efforts to convert Christians to the Jewish religion. This moved him to speak differently of them in his later years. But it does not invalidate his original serious and sincere mission-mindedness and mission contribution with which he served and intended to serve them.

²⁰ Quoted from *The Theology of Martin Luther*, by Paul Althaus, translated by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,) p. 315: "Luther admittedly, limits the public preaching of the word within the church to those who have been called through the community (cf. p. 329) and permits an individual who has not been called to preach publicly only in *genuine mission territory* (italics ours) or in time for trouble when the called teacher fails or errs. Within these limitations, all have been called to proclaim God's word to one another. The community as a whole possesses the power, the unlimited authority and duty of such preaching. Whoever believes can do nothing else. 'I believe, therefore I speak.' Luther recognizes no community which is not a preaching community and no community in which all have not been called to be witnesses."

²¹ Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums* (Muenchen: C. H. Beck'sche Verlangsbuchhandlung, 1965), Bd I, p. 339.

²² *Ibid.* p. 344.

Luther's mission-mindedness and mission contributions set an example to all his coworkers including Melancthon, Bugenhagen, Rhegius,²³ and others. It even extended in its influence to the later dogmaticians. Elert points out that not one among the Lutheran dogmaticians including Gerhard denied the Church's call and duty to preach the Gospel to the heathen also. The latter even uses Luther's designation for all called ministers of the Gospel as "successors" of the apostles. Gerhard can quote Bellarmine "that the Lutheran sects even dared to navigate to the Greeks, the people of India, and to the New World itself."²⁴ This mission activity, however, belongs to a chapter of world missions, which exceeds the scope of our topic. But let us not overlook that to this chapter also belongs the answer to the question—the question which the writer of this article hopes to have raised in the minds and hearts of his readers—in how far Luther's concern for mission has set and is setting an example to us as synodical Lutherans in the past and the present.

²³ The *Catechismus minor* by Urban Rhegius 1535 contains the prayer "that according to the omnipotent Father's prophetic promises His great name and loving-kindness may be magnified among all Gentiles, to the end that the inheritance of Christ, the rule of grace and the Holy Catholic Church may grow throughout the world" (Quoted from Reu, Quellen III, 2, S. 619, by Werner Elert, *op. cit.*, pp. 343f.).

²⁴ Elert, *op. cit.*, p. 349, n. 3.