

A Lutheran Theology of Mission¹

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” Luke 24:44-49 ESV

*Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! Psalm 96:3
And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Matthew 9:35-38*

What does it mean to be a Lutheran? What does it mean to be a Confessional Lutheran? Do the Lutheran Confessions form and shape us? Can one be a “confessional” Lutheran without being a “confessing” Lutheran? What does it mean to be a “Lutheran by conviction?”

The topic assigned to me is “A Lutheran Theology of Mission.” In other words, is there any such thing as a distinctively Lutheran theology of mission and outreach? I believe that the question boils down to a matter of identity. Often, when I see someone wearing a hat with a team logo on it, I will ask if they are a true fan, or just wearing the hat. The responses are usually fun and sometimes surprising. I am shocked at how many people are taken aback by the question, and couldn’t care less about the team colors they are promoting. What about you? I presume that you are “wearing the hat” of Lutheranism as you hear or read this presentation. Is that your true identity, your true confession, or are you just wearing the hat? Matters of identity are all around us; at times they may be spot on and at other times they may slightly off or even way off. When it comes to the topic of “mission,” just what is our identity as “confessional, confessing, Bible-believing Lutherans by conviction?”

¹ This paper utilizes several papers previously delivered by the author: October, 2007, at the Montana District Fall Pastors’ Conference titled, “Missions in the LCMS, Theology, History, and Today;” May, 2011 at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions titled, “The Confessional Relationship between The Word, The Sacraments, and ‘Mission;”” and my presentation on mission at the 2011 ACELC Free Conference.

Lutherans have historically been very precise with theological language. Many Lutheran writings, especially dogmatic works, begin with a section that clearly defines terms and terminology; prolegomena. We seem to have moved away from that practice in more recent times, and the result is often sloppy theology and practice. So there is no confusion, I would offer the following definitions:

Mission may be defined as God's task of reconciling the fallen world to himself. This is a universal undertaking because God is the creator of all and loves his creation. God accomplished this reconciliation by sending his Son to die and rise for sinful humans, by sending the Spirit through the Son, and by sending the church through the Son and the Spirit to labor for the conversion of sinners to faith in himself. Missiology is the study of that mission in terms of its basis in scriptural revelation, its manifestation in historical dimension, its challenges in facing cultural and theological contexts, and its implementation in terms of practical issues facing those involved in (or training for) the mission task.²

I believe most Christians would agree with these definitions. But just as Lutheranism is distinct from Roman Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Revivalistic theologies, there must be a distinctively Lutheran theology of mission. In order to clearly articulate this Lutheran theology of mission, we must dig down to our "first principles,"

It has become popular in the wake of the Church Growth movement, to compose "mission statements" for congregations and church-bodies. This can be a good exercise if it digs down to first principles. The danger lies in soaking up uncritically the torrents of "biblical" sounding verbiage pouring forth from sectarian circles and saturated with an alien, non-sacramental and therefore unevangelical theology. Lutheran congregations and synods must learn again to treasure the Book of Concord as their best and most authentic "mission statement," and to implement its doctrinal and sacramental substance full-strength in the actual shaping of their church-life.³

Being true to our Lutheran identity, we must dig down to our first principles. We believe, teach, and confess that The Holy Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God and the only rule and norm for our theology and practice. We also believe, teach, and confess that the Lutheran Confessions are a proper exhibition of that Word.⁴ Let us then turn to our "best and most authentic 'mission statement.'"

Luther teaches us, that where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.⁵ The mission of the church is the forgiveness of sins.⁶ In other words, the very reason for our existence as church is the forgiveness of sins. The material principle of Lutheranism, the thing

² Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, trans. by Dean Apel (St. Louis: CPH, 2007), xiv.

³ Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume IX. (The Luther Academy: St. Louis, 1990), p. 185.

⁴ Lutheran Service Book Agenda, Ordination Vows, 165-166.

⁵ *Book of Concord*, Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, Kolb/Wengert, 362.

⁶ Werner Elert, *The Christian Faith An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics*, translated by Martin Bertram and Walter Bouman (St. Louis: CPH, 1974) 280.

that matters most, is justification.⁷ We are justified, that is, declared righteous, by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of the person and work of Jesus Christ alone, as revealed to us in Scripture alone; to God alone be the glory! Justification is not only the chief doctrine in Lutheranism, it is the heart and soul of every other doctrine as well. To speak of “mission” apart from justification is to deny the material principle of Scripture. To have a theology of mission that does not have at its center the doctrine of justification is to cease to be Lutheran. Hear how Luther wrote about this subject:

Here is the first and chief article:

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4[:25*]); and he alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1[:29*]); and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53[:6*]); furthermore, “All have sinned,” and “they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . by his blood” (Rom. 3[:23–25*]).

Now because this must be believed and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:28*, 26*]: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”; and also, “that God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. As St. Peter says in Acts 4[:12*]: “There is no other name . . . given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53[:5*]).

On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it.

Otherwise everything is lost, and the pope and the devil and whatever opposes us will gain victory and be proved right.⁸

Lutheranism is Trinitarian and Christocentric; justification is our material principle. I submit that the Lutheran Confessions offer *several* clear and specific mission models or paradigms. While most Lutherans are well schooled in Luther’s Small Catechism, I would like to begin with the first six articles of the Augsburg Confession as they make the perfect framework for our discussion.⁹

All true theology, by definition of the word itself, begins with God. Who is the One, True God?

[I. Concerning God]

In the first place, it is with one accord taught and held, following the decree of the Council of Nicea, that there is one divine essence which is named God and truly is God. But there are three persons in the same one essence, equally powerful, equally eternal: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three are one divine essence, eternal, undivided, unending, of immeasurable power,

⁷ See *Theses On Justification*, CTCR Report, May, 1983.

⁸ Smalcald Articles, II, II, 1-5. Kolb/Wengert 301.

⁹ I would humbly submit that they also make a perfect framework for a study of stewardship, vocation, fellowship, etc.

wisdom, and goodness, the creator and preserver of all visible and invisible things. What is understood by the word “person” is not a part nor a quality in another but that which exists by itself, as the Fathers once used the word concerning this issue.

Rejected, therefore, are all the heresies that are opposed to this article, such as the Manichaeans, who posited two gods, one good and one evil; the Valentinians, the Arians, the Eunomians, the Mohammedans, and all others like them; also the Samosatzenians, old and new, who hold that there is only one person and create a deceitful sophistry about the other two, the Word and the Holy Spirit, by saying that the two need not be two distinct persons since “Word” means an external word or voice and the “Holy Spirit” is a created motion in all creatures.¹⁰

God is perfect, holy and Triune; what about us? How do we stand in relation to Him? Next comes the doctrine of man.

[II. Concerning Original Sin]

Furthermore, it is taught among us that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this same innate disease and original sin is truly sin and condemns to God’s eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit.

Rejected, then, are the Pelagians and others who do not regard original sin as sin in order to make human nature righteous through natural powers, thus insulting the suffering and merit of Christ.¹¹

Houston, or perhaps I should say Eagle, we have a problem! God is holy and we are not. Cut off from God and doomed as His enemy, we have no power to save ourselves, no ability to restore this broken relationship. We need help.

[III. Concerning the Son of God]

Likewise, it is taught that God the Son became a human being, born of the pure Virgin Mary, and that the two natures, the divine and the human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ. He is true God and true human being who truly “was born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried” in order both to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to conciliate God’s wrath. Moreover, the same Christ “descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, is sitting at the right hand of God” in order to rule and reign forever over all creatures, so that through the Holy Spirit he may make holy, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, also distribute to them life and various gifts and benefits, and shield and protect them against the devil and sin. Finally, the same Lord Christ “will come” in full view of all “to judge the living and the dead . . .,” according to the Apostles’ Creed. Rejected are all heresies that are opposed to this article.¹²

¹⁰ Kolb/Wengert, 36.

¹¹ Kolb/Wengert, 36,38.

¹² Kolb/Wengert, 38.

So Jesus is the Christ, true God and true man, sent by the Father as a sacrifice for sin. What, exactly, does that mean for me, a poor, miserable sinner?

[IV. Concerning Justification]

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21–26*] and 4[:5*].¹³

Forgiveness of sin and eternal life as a gift of God through the person and work of Jesus the Christ; awesome! How do I get it, since I am powerless to save myself?

[V. Concerning the Office of Preaching]¹⁴

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of
preaching, giving the
gospel and the
sacraments. Through
these, as through
means, he gives the
Holy Spirit who
produces faith, where
and when he wills, in
those who hear the
gospel. It teaches that
we have a gracious
God, not through our
merit but through
Christ's merit, when
we so believe.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external word of the gospel through our own preparation, thoughts, and works.¹⁵

Christ is gift, forgiveness is gift, eternal life is gift, and even faith is gift; how can I ever thank you Lord, for all Your benefits to me?¹⁶

¹³ KolbWengert, 38, 40.

¹⁴ AC IV and AC V are meant to be read together; salvation achieved and salvation delivered. For an excellent treatment of the 19th century theological shift in the interpretation of the Augustana which led to “actual departures” from this traditional understanding see, Norman Nagel, “Externum Verbum: Testing Augustana V on the Doctrine of the Holy Ministry.” *Logia* 6:3, p.27ff

¹⁵ KolbWengert, 40.

¹⁶ Psalm 116:12-13,17-19.

[VI. Concerning the New Obedience]

It is also taught that such faith should yield good fruit and good works and that a person must do such good works as God has commanded for God's sake but not place trust in them as if thereby to earn grace before God. For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness through faith in Christ, as Christ himself says [Luke 17:10*]: "When you have done all [things] . . . , say, 'We are worthless slaves.' " The Fathers also teach the same thing. For Ambrose says: "It is determined by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved and have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit."¹⁷

There you have it, the framework for our discussion of the theology of mission. A distinctively Lutheran theology of mission. The word *mission* seems conspicuously absent. Certainly it must be in one of the twenty two articles to follow, right? Wrong. *Somewhere* in the Book of Concord? No. How then, can The Lutheran Confessions serve as our "mission statement" when the word mission doesn't even occur? Either confessional Lutherans really don't have a theology of mission, or we need to rethink "mission" in biblical and confessional language. Time to rethink!

The Lutheran Confessions, without using the word mission, make clear the mission of God. The Father sends His Son to be the Savior of the world. Through His perfect life, obedient death, glorious resurrection and ascension, Christ Jesus wins salvation for all mankind. It is finished! This salvation is freely distributed by God's divine means. Christ delivers the benefits of His crucifixion and resurrection in the preached Word, at the baptismal font, in the bread and chalice, and in the spoken Word of forgiveness, in other words, the Gospel in all its glorious forms. God's mission is the gift of His Son for the life of the world. God fulfills this mission through the means of grace; God's means of grace, Word and sacrament, which grow and sustain the church. But what about the method? Isn't that important?

If there is to be such a thing as a Lutheran "paradigm" for the church's mission, its all-decisive, determining elements will have to be the pure preaching of the Gospel (orthodoxy!) And the right administration of the sacraments (infant baptism, bodily presence!)- and therefore also properly qualified incumbents of the divinely ordained Gospel ministry to do this. All stress is on God's gracious channels of salvation, on His own provisions for the delivery of the deliverance in His Son- to the exclusion of all man-made substitutes, like synergism, moralism, unionism, antinomianism, revivalism, anti-sacramentalism, subjectivism, millennialism, pentecostalism, and the like. Administrative, ceremonial, and other such details are significant only as they either implement and express, or else hinder and obstruct, the divine arrangements for the life and growth of the church (Augsburg Confession VII, compare Formula of Concord X).¹⁸

Method is important because doctrine and practice are intrinsically linked.¹⁹ What has

¹⁷ Kolb/Wengert, 40.

¹⁸ Kurt Marquart, "Church Growth" As Mission Paradigm A Lutheran Assessment, A Luther Academy Monograph, Houston: Our Savior Lutheran Church, 1994, p. 13.

¹⁹ For a short, concise look at this topic see Klemit I. Preus, *The Fire and the Staff* (St. Louis: CPH, 2004) 176-182.

happened, far too often, is that Lutherans have borrowed mission practices uncritically from non Lutherans.²⁰ The litmus test is not pure doctrine but “whatever works.” Much of what passes for “mission” practice among us is a mixture of Evangelical theology and revivalistic practice. We have a 21st century version of the “New Measures,” mission style!²¹ What I am proposing, rethinking our “Theology of Mission” today in light of a biblical and confessional framework is in fact, nothing new. We can learn much here from our Lutheran history and heritage.

The Lutheran Church has *always* been considered a missionary church. In 1523, Luther penned this hymn, based on Psalm 67, considered the first missionary hymn of Protestantism:²²

1 Would that the Lord would grant us grace
With blessings rich provide us
And with clear shining let his face
To life eternal light us
That we his gracious work may know
And what is his good pleasure
And also to the heathen show
Christ’s riches without measure
And unto God convert them.

2 Now let the heathen thank and praise
The Lord with gladsome voices;
Let all the world for joy upraise
A song with mighty noises,
Because thou art earth’s judge, O Lord,
And sin no more prevaieth;
Thy word it is both bed and board,
And for all folk avaieth
In the right path to keep them.

3 O let the people praise thy worth,
In all good works increasing;
The land shall plenteous fruit bring forth,
Thy word is rich in blessing.
May we be blest by Father, Son,
Blest also by the Holy Ghost
To whom by all be honor done,

²⁰ Charles P. Arand, *Testing The Boundaries; Windows to Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: CPH, 1995).

²¹ Crucial to this understanding were the “confessional” American Lutherans like the Henkels, Passavant, Gerberding, Charles Porterfield Krauth, and many others. Arand’s work gives an excellent overview of the issue, both historically and theologically, from the writing of the Augsburg Confession to the end of the 20th Century. This too is an area of much needed further study. Many of the issues that the “American Lutherans” struggled with five generations ago are the very issues of struggle in the LCMS today.

²² LW 53:232-4.

Whom all the world shall fear the most.
Thus heartily say: Amen.

It is interesting to reflect upon the theological content of this hymn. Luther desired it as a sending hymn or closing hymn in the service. You can almost pick out each of the first six articles of the Augsburg Confession. God's grace is ever present, Christ and His Word provide the power and forgiveness; the people hear, believe, and respond with good works. God's mission is the gift of His Son for the life of the world; that mission is carried on today in the means of grace. God's means of grace, Word and sacrament, grow and sustain the church. That is the way it has always been. That is the way it will always be, to the very end of the age.

As the LCMS was being formed, it is clear from the 1847 Constitution that was formally adopted, that this same theological progression was in mind.

Constitution of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States

I. Reasons for forming a synodical organization.

1. The example of the apostolic Church. (Acts 15:1-31.)
2. The preservation and furthering of the unity of pure confession (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and to provide common defense against separatism and sectarianism. (Rom. 16:17).
3. Protection and preservation of the rights, and duties of pastors and congregations.
4. The establishment of the largest possible conformity in church government.
5. The will of the Lord that the diversities of gifts be used for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:4-31.)
6. The unified spread of the kingdom of God and to make possible the promotion of special church projects. (Seminary, agenda, hymnal, Book of Concord, schoolbooks, Bible distribution, mission projects within and outside the Church.)²³

The key to this understanding is Ephesians 4:3-6, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

While the first six articles of the Augustana make an excellent mission framework, so does Luther's Small Catechism in general (Six Chief Parts), The Smalcald Articles, as well as specific parts of the Confessions. Another way to summarize the mission of the church is to review, study, and pray The Lord's Prayer. The first three petitions state it very simply and clearly. Let's try a little exercise right now. Open up your LSB hymnal to page 323...

²³ *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, 16 (April, 1943) no.1:1-18.

The pure and holy Word of God, taught, believed and lived. This Word bespeaks us righteous.²⁴ This Word strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in Christ until we are transferred to the kingdom of glory. This Word gives us a new identity, in Christ.²⁵ This Word moves us out into the world, where we live and move and have our being. This Word, connected to water, bread, wine and human words bring forgiveness, life, and salvation. The familiar post-Communion Collect says it this way, "... we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another..." This is the response of faith we call good works (AC VI). Having been called to faith, God now calls us to love our neighbor. In this area, most of what we would call mission work or evangelism takes place, in our vocation,²⁶ in the freedom of the Gospel.

The connection between Word, Sacraments, and mission can be summed up as salvation accomplished and salvation distributed.²⁷ Luther was fond of speaking of justification in just this way,

So that our readers may the better perceive our teaching I shall clearly and broadly describe it. We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word, as can easily be proved from Scripture. But now there is neither need nor time to do so.

If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross. Therefore, Luther has rightly taught that whoever has a bad conscience from his sins should go to the sacrament and obtain comfort, not because of the bread and wine, not because of the body and blood of Christ, but because of the word which in the sacrament offers, presents, and gives the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for me. Is that not clear enough?²⁸

This is clearly shown, again in Luther's Small Catechism, with Luther's explanation to The Apostles' Creed. Let's try another exercise. Open up your LSB to page 322... See how easy that

²⁴ "Thy Strong Word," LSB 578 verse 3.

²⁵ See essay by Herbert C. Mueller Jr., *Our True Identity*, Southern Illinois District.

²⁶ See Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God At Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).

²⁷ See note 16, "the delivery of the deliverance!"

²⁸ "Against the Heavenly Prophets," LW 40:213-214.

is!

For Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, a separate “theology of mission” is inconceivable. All of theology is Trinitarian and Christological and to use a current and somewhat faddish term, missional. The Confessions delineate a necessary order or hierarchy: first the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; then the Word and Sacraments as tools of the Trinity; working through indispensable human agents.²⁹ Only a church with the pure Gospel can “do” what we would call mission work that is faithful. If Christ and the doctrine of justification is not at the center of everything, the Gospel message will be perverted. If Scripture is not understood in its proper and intended sense of Law and Gospel, then the Gospel will be perverted. If sin and grace are not proclaimed as God intended, then the Gospel will be perverted. If a proper distinction between the Two Kingdoms or between the Royal Priesthood and the Office of the Holy Ministry is not held, then the Gospel will be perverted. Thus pure doctrine and the mission of the church not only go hand in hand, they are, properly understood, one and the same.

The modern mission movement began at least two hundred years after the death of Luther. It was born out of Pietism and has been perpetuated to this day by well meaning Christians who often hold to a very different understanding of sin, grace, Law, Gospel, Office of the Holy Ministry, Word, Sacrament, and most importantly justification. To borrow uncritically from these theologies is to tear at the heart of Lutheranism and true mission activity. To try to “Lutheranize” these mission models is naive and quite simply impossible. One must either admit that Lutheranism is somehow incomplete and lacking and must be supplemented by non Lutheran theology, or one must repent and return to our first principles. I would humbly suggest the latter approach.

Depending on your definition of “mission,” The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) has always been considered a *missionary church*.³⁰ The mission efforts of early Lutheranism and especially the LCMS are well documented, and yet there are many that see Luther and Lutheranism as either indifferent to mission and outreach or theologically inadequate. In my lifetime, I can’t remember a time when intentional mission and outreach has not been a part of our beloved synod. Let’s see how many of these programs and efforts you remember: “Into All the World,” “Each One Reach One,” “Preaching-Teaching-Reaching,” “Bringing Christ to the Nations,” “Great Commission Convocation,” “Dialogue Evangelism,” “Tell the Good News about Jesus,” and “Ablaze!” The effort and intention should be commended, but at the same time we should also take an honest look at these efforts and programs. Are they consistent with our Lutheran identity? Have they helped or possibly hindered the mission of God?

A quick perusal of LCMS web sites and mission statements can be quite revealing. It is quite common to see statements like the following: “The mission of the church is the Great Commission.” “The mission of the church is our job description.” “Every member a missionary.” “Our mission is to do whatever it takes to spread the kingdom of God.” “The

²⁹ Öberg, 10.

³⁰ *Heritage in Motion; Readings In the History of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, ed. August R. Suelflow (St. Louis: CPH, 1998) 315.

mission of the church is the main thing.” “Our church is a mission outpost with an outreach center.” Again, good intentions. But closer investigation will often result in the following types of comments: “Pure doctrine is a hindrance to the mission of the church.” “We need to be about mission, not doctrine.” “We need to care more about people than rules.” “You have a maintenance ministry and we care about mission.” “Doctrine and practice are not related.” “Doctrine divides but mission unites.” To say that there is confusion about “mission” in the Lutheran Church seems obvious. I would humbly submit that often the confusion goes deeper, much deeper. It is really a matter of identity. Much of what we would call mission and outreach activity in the church today is motivated and driven by guilt and duty; the Great Commission has in effect become the great obligation. Is this the best we have to offer? Is this way of thinking true to our Lutheran identity? Shouldn’t our mission and outreach efforts be motivated by something other than guilt, say the life giving and life changing Gospel?

In light of all of this, please allow me to direct our attention to perhaps one of the least known of our Confessional writings, the Smalcald Articles. As these Articles confess the faith in clear and precise terms, and also rightly point out common errors, they serve us well as a “Confessional Mission Model.” Time will not permit a detailed study in this paper, but a cursory view will illustrate my point. First, a proper distinction between Law and Gospel is necessary for the mission of the church:³¹

To this office of the law, however, the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace through the gospel. This we should believe. As Christ says in Mark 1[:15*]: “Repent, and believe in the good news.” This is the same as, “Become and act otherwise, and believe my promise.” Even before Jesus, John the Baptizer was called a preacher of repentance—but for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins. That is, John was to convict them all and turn them into sinners, so that they would know how they stood before God and would recognize themselves as lost people. In this way they were to be prepared for the Lord to receive grace, to await and accept from him forgiveness of sins. Jesus himself says in Luke 24[:47*]: “You must preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name to the whole world.”³²

Article VIII warns us about the error of enthusiasm and the importance of the Word, which if left unchecked will ultimately gut the Gospel and lead to universalism:

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, the “spirits,” who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word. On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure. Müntzer did this, and there are still many doing this today, who set themselves up as shrewd judges between the spirit and the letter without knowing what they say or teach. The papacy is also purely religious raving in that the pope boasts that “all laws are in the shrine of his heart” and that

³¹ Note also how this section refers to the “mission” of the church as the forgiveness of sins!

³² SA III, Article III, 4-6, Kolb/Wengert, 313.

what he decides and commands in his churches is supposed to be Spirit and law—even when it is above or contrary to the Scriptures or the spoken Word. This is all the old devil and old snake, who also turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts and led them from the external Word of God to “spirituality” and their own presumption—although he even accomplished this by means of other, external words. In the same way, our enthusiasts also condemn the external Word, and yet they themselves do not keep silent. Instead, they fill the world with their chattering and scribbling—as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the spoken word of the apostles, but the Spirit must come through their own writings and words. Why do they not abstain from their preaching and writing until the Spirit himself comes into the people apart from and in advance of their writings? After all, they boast that the Spirit has come into them without the preaching of the Scriptures.³³

Article XII teaches us the nature of the church, God’s Word taught in its truth and purity and hearers who believe that Word. Mission work then, as it seeks to extend the Kingdom of God on earth,³⁴ will put its trust not in human works or inventions, but in the Word:

We do not concede to them that they are the church, and frankly they are not the church. We do not want to hear what they command or forbid in the name of the church, because, God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and “the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.” This is why children pray in this way, “I believe in one holy Christian church.” This holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, long albs, or other ceremonies of theirs that they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures. Its holiness exists in the Word of God and true faith.³⁵

For Lutherans the bottom line is always the person and work of Christ, in other words justification. Many mission activities have at their center something other than justification. If the center is wrong, everything flowing from that center will be in error as well. Article XIII makes clear how first man is justified and then follows the response of faith:

I cannot change at all what I have consistently taught about this until now, namely, that “through faith” (as St. Peter says) we receive a different, new, clean heart and that, for the sake of Christ our mediator, God will and does regard us as completely righteous and holy. Although sin in the flesh is still not completely gone or dead, God will nevertheless not count it or consider it.

Good works follow such faith, renewal, and forgiveness of sin, and whatever in these works is still sinful or imperfect should not even be counted as sin or imperfection, precisely for the sake of this same Christ. Instead, the human creature should be called and should be completely righteous and holy—according to both the person and his or her works—by the pure grace and

³³ SA III, Article VIII, 3-6, Kolb/Wengert, 322.

³⁴ Lord’s Prayer, Second Petition.

³⁵ SA III, Article XII, 1-3, Kolb/Wengert, 324-5.

mercy that have been poured and spread over us in Christ. Therefore we cannot boast about the great merit of our works, where they are viewed apart from grace and mercy. Rather, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” [1 Cor. 1:31*; 2 Cor. 10:17*]. That is, if one has a gracious God, then everything is good. Furthermore, we also say that if good works do not follow, then faith is false and not true.³⁶

Perhaps the biggest issue before us today with regard to mission and outreach is the issue of free will. Much of what has been borrowed from others comes with a radically different understanding of the human will. Is the will bound since the fall or is there room for choice, decision, a “sinner’s prayer,” or some other first step by the unconverted? These issues are not new and are clearly addressed in the Formula of Concord. I am convinced that a serious study of both the Epitome and Solid Declaration regarding free will is needed in our church.³⁷ Many of the issues that are dividing us as Lutherans (worship styles, Communion practice, mission methods) can and should be addressed in light of this article of faith; in short, what power does man after the fall possess with regard to his regeneration? Again, a comprehensive study is beyond the scope of this paper, but a quick look should whet the appetite for more. Among the errors condemned:

Likewise, the teaching that, although human beings are too weak to initiate conversion with their free will before rebirth, and thus convert themselves to God on the basis of their own natural powers and be obedient to God’s law with their whole hearts, nonetheless, once the Holy Spirit has made a beginning through the preaching of the Word and in it has offered his grace, the human will is able out of its own natural powers to a certain degree, even though small and feeble, to do something, to help and cooperate, to dispose and prepare itself for grace, to grasp this grace, to accept it, and to believe the gospel.³⁸

Likewise, we also reject and condemn the error of the Enthusiasts, who contrive the idea that God draws people to himself, enlightens them, makes them righteous, and saves them without means, without the hearing of God’s Word, even without the use of the holy sacraments.³⁹

And stated positively:

On the other hand, it is correct to say that in conversion God changes recalcitrant, unwilling people into willing people through the drawing power of the Holy Spirit, and that after this conversion the reborn human will is not idle in the daily exercise of repentance, but cooperates in all the works of the Holy Spirit which he performs through us.

Likewise, when Dr. Luther wrote that the human will conducts itself pure passive

³⁶ SA III, Article XIII, 3-6, Kolb/Wengert, 325.

³⁷ I have recently concluded an in depth study of the Epitome with the congregation I serve. Contact me and I am happy to share it.

³⁸ FC Ep., Article II, 11, Kolb/Wengert, 493.

³⁹ FC Ep., Article II, 13, Kolb/Wengert, 493.

(that is, that it does absolutely nothing at all), that must be understood respectu divinae gratiae in accendendis novis motibus, [in respect to divine grace in the creation of new movements] that is, insofar as God's Spirit takes hold of the human will through the Word that is heard or through the use of the holy sacraments and effects new birth and conversion. For when the Holy Spirit has effected and accomplished new birth and conversion and has altered and renewed the human will solely through his divine power and activity, then the new human will is an instrument and tool of God the Holy Spirit, in that the will not only accepts grace but also cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the works that proceed from it.⁴⁰

The Solid Declaration goes into even greater detail:

Against these two parties the pure teachers of the Augsburg Confession have taught and contended that human beings were so corrupted through the fall of our first parents that in spiritual matters concerning our conversion and the salvation of our soul they are by nature blind, and that when God's Word is preached they do not and cannot understand it. Instead, they regard it as foolishness and cannot use it to bring themselves nearer to God. On the contrary, they are and remain God's enemy until by his grace alone, without any contribution of their own, they are converted, made believers, reborn, and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word as it is preached and heard [1 Cor. 2:4*, 12–13*].⁴¹

Therefore, on the basis of God's Word we now want to give a further account of how the human being is converted to God; how and through which means (namely, through the oral Word and the holy sacraments) the Holy Spirit desires to be active in us and to give and effect true repentance, faith, and the new spiritual power and capability to do the good in our hearts; and how we should respond to such means and use them.⁴²

This Article goes on to give a beautiful testimony regarding the will of God that all would be saved as a result of His boundless grace and mercy. This section is summed up:

Through these means (the preaching and hearing of his Word), God goes about his work and breaks our hearts and draws people, so that they recognize their sins and God's wrath through the preaching of the law and feel real terror, regret, and sorrow in their hearts. Through the preaching of the holy gospel of the gracious forgiveness of sins in Christ and through meditating upon it, a spark of faith is ignited in them, and they accept the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake and receive the comfort of the promise of the gospel. In this way the Holy Spirit, who effects all of this, is sent into their hearts.⁴³

⁴⁰ FC Ep., Article II, 17-18, Kolb/Wengert, 494.

⁴¹ FC SD, Article II, 5, Kolb/Wengert, 544.

⁴² FC SD, Article II, 48, Kolb/Wengert, 553.

⁴³ FC SD, Article II, 54, Kolb/Wengert, 554.

God's work is often hidden from human eyes. Rather than relying on our feelings, emotions, or human goals and expectations, dollars and seats, we can and should trust the sure and certain

Word:

Moreover, this doctrine points us to the means through which the Holy Spirit wills to begin this conversion and effect it. It also reminds us how these same gifts are retained, strengthened, and increased, and it admonishes us not to let God's grace have no effect in us, but to exercise ourselves diligently in considering what a grievous sin it is to impede and resist the working of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴

We could go on and on but our time has come to a close. To say that Lutheranism in general and specifically the Lutheran Confessions have no "theology of mission" would be sheer foolishness. A Lutheran paradigm for mission is clearly taught and it is complete; there is no need for supplemental material from non Lutheran sources.⁴⁵ The mission of the church is the forgiveness of sins, won by Christ with His Good Friday and Easter work and distributed by Christ in Word and Sacrament. The Triune God creates the church through the means of grace. God's "plan of salvation" and "the mission of God" are identical. Lutheran congregations and synods must learn again to treasure the Book of Concord as their best and most authentic "mission statement," and to implement its doctrinal and sacramental substance full-strength in the actual shaping of their church-life.⁴⁶ Now is the time to return to the Scriptures and Lutheran Symbols, to repent of our lack of trust in God and his appointed means, and to rededicate ourselves to a distinctively Lutheran approach to mission and outreach. I close with words of Luther from the Large Catechism, Third Article:

This, then, is the article that must always remain in force. For creation is now behind us, and redemption has also taken place, but the Holy Spirit continues his work without ceasing until the Last Day, and for this purpose he has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work. For he has not yet gathered together all of this Christian community, nor has he completed the granting of forgiveness. Therefore we believe in him who daily brings us into this community through the Word, and imparts, increases, and strengthens faith through the same Word and the forgiveness of sins. Then when his work has been finished and we abide in it, having died to the world and all misfortune, he will finally make us perfectly and eternally holy. Now we wait in faith for this to be accomplished through the Word.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ FC SD, Article II, 72, Kolb/Wengert, 558.

⁴⁵ Robert D. Preus, "The Confessions and the Mission of the Church," *The Springfielder*, Volume XXXIX, Number 1, June 1975, 20-39.

⁴⁶ Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume IX. (The Luther Academy: St. Louis, 1990), p. 185.

⁴⁷ LC, Creed, 61-62, Kolb/Wengert, 439.