Book Review

The Rev. Dr. Christopher Mitchell reviews a recent Lutheran World Federation publication and explains the danger behind its anti-biblical hermeneutic.

"You Have the Words of Eternal Life:" Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective, published by The Lutheran World Federation

by Christopher Wright Mitchell

The importance of hermeneutics for the theology and mission of the church can hardly be overestimated. All Christian churches begin with the Bible. The hermeneutics employed to interpret the Bible determine the direction in which that church will move and what its message will be. Sound hermeneutics enable a church to proclaim faithfully the Word of God, through which He bestows eternal life in Jesus Christ. Corrupt hermeneutics destroy the ability of a church to preach the Gospel and eventually steer a church into heresy, apostasy and eternal judgment.

Traditionally the field of biblical hermeneutics has begun with the goal of interpreting the divine message of the sacred Scriptures with accuracy and fidelity based on the text's original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) and analyzing how it spoke to its first audience, taking into consideration such contextual factors as the ancient historical and cultural settings. Then traditional hermeneutics asks how the original meaning is to be articulated for the Church today. Recognizing that the Word of God endures forever and remains universally true, the goal is to apply God's message appropriately given our vastly different languages and diverse historical and cultural settings. The purpose of the entire hermeneutical enterprise, from written text to proclamation to contemporary appropriation by faith, can be compared to the evangelist's own stated goal: "These things stand written for the purpose that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that by believing you have life in his name" (John 20:31, reviewer's translation).

It may be impossible to summarize the contents of this book in a way that is completely fair to all of the diverse viewpoints presented in the essays. Some degree of oversimplification is unavoidable. This review endeavors to offer some summary comments based on commonalites shared by authors, supported by the explicit statements of some and indirectly by others, despite possible protestations by still other contributors. Afterward, some specific comments will be offered about each of the essays.

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This book is an edited collection of essays from scholars around the world. They offer a variety of nuanced and learned perspectives. Some are constructive and insightful; others less so. Some disagree with others in certain respects, and a few might even be said to contradict themselves. This book, then, does not present one simple or coherent thesis, but an array of ideas. Assumedly the publisher intends the reader to look for common threads that run throughout the essays. On the other hand, ithe juxtaposition of competing and even conflicting viewpoints might suggest that such hermeneutical diversity is tolerable or even welcome within the Church. A book that lets clashing ideas stand beside one another intimates that there is no "right answer" to some hermeneutical questions or that what is "true" for one church in one part of the globe may not be "true" for another (as some of the essayists argue explicitly). This raises the question, then, of whether the sponsoring agency (Lutheran World Federation or LWF) believes in the concept of absolute, eternal "truth" (a key theme in John) or whether it is proposing that "truth" is a relative concept in constant need of redefinition, as is openly advocated by some of the essays.

The book as a whole discourages the pursuit of traditional hermeneutics, namely, the first importance of seeking to understand the biblical text more fully so as to be able to proclaim its message more faithfully. Instead, various essays attack the very idea that the biblical text is truth or even that its original message can be discerned by readers today. Instead of letting Scripture be interpreted by Scripture alone, authors argue that the Church should proclaim interpretations that are shaped by the particular context, needs and wants of each hearing community. Authors clearly urge churches not to place the highest priority on preaching the biblical teachings about the person and work of Christ for our salvation; instead, they urge churches to be open to novel interpretations of the Word that the Spirit allegedly is inspiring in the Church today. The result is an open-ended view of the Word of God as something flexible and always changing or in need of change, a tenet of a kind of progressive revelation, not unlike that of the church of Rome. At its core, this view of the Word is anti-Lutheran. It destroys the (commonly called) formal principle of Lutheran theology — that the Scriptures are the sole source and norm of the Christian faith and life — that was so vital to the reformers that they placed it at the start of the Formula of Concord (and which some authors quote before leaving it behind). This hermeneutic is anti-ecumenical and schismatic because it fractures the unity of the Church built on the Word. Indeed, it is anti-Christian, for it is by remaining in the Word that one remains a disciple of Christ and receives knowledge of the truth (e.g., John 8:31-32). This hermeneutic leaves the Church vulnerable to heresy, if not a sponsor of it.

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It also affects the shape of the Christian life in the realm of sexuality and marriage. Already page 8 refers to the "ethical" issue "of human sexuality." In the middle of the book (e.g., pp. 41-46, 71), convoluted gender-neutral language for God appears (e.g., "Godself" in place of "Himself"), raising the question of why the LWF (with the acquiescence of all but one author, Wilson; see the revealing footnote on p. 85) is so adamant about avoiding the biblical gendered language about the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Suspicions that distorted language for God is linked to a distortion of gendered human relationships are explicitly confirmed in the penultimate essay of the book (Melanchthon), which condones adultery, degrades marriage and actually praises sexual "transgression." In what can only be called blasphemy, the essay suggests that the polyandrous Samaritan woman of John 4 may be the one "opening the eyes of Jesus" (p. 145)! Jesus is the one who needs to be enlightened by the adulteress living in sin! The reader of these essays must wonder whether homosexual relations too are on the interpretive horizon. Not just the acceptance, but the advocacy of sexual sin can only take place after the Word of God has been completely nullified through "transformational hermeneutics." This should be of great concern to any Christian or church body who understands that Christ's love entails a paradigm for marriage and sexuality (cf. John 2:1-11; 3:29; also 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:16-24; Ephesians 5).

A recurring thesis (apparently deriving from Grosshans) is that the Bible, the Holy Scriptures and the Word of God are not identical, coterminous or concurrent, but are a trichotomy. These three distinct entities are distanced from each other sequentially: "The Bible is a book (*like other religious books*) which becomes Holy Scripture in its use in the church and which *may* become the Word of God when people are addressed by it in a salvific way" (p. 25, emphasis added). The purpose of this artificial partitioning is to permit different churches to have different and even contradictory understandings of what the "Word of God" is. Thus the Bible or Scripture no longer serves as the clear, authoritative source and norm for all doctrine and practice. Instead, each church body can end up with its own "Word of God" shaped by its own particular "context." These essays not only allow, but actively call for churches to construe the same biblical texts in different ways that permit doctrines and practices that may deviate from those in the Bible (see below). This document makes no exegetical attempt to justify the trichotomy of Bible, Holy Scriptures and Word of God (Grosshans attempts to extract it from a single Luther statement taken out of *context* [!]). The Bible can be considered "like other religious books" only if one has already renounced the Bible's divine inspiration and normative character or has elevated the Scriptures and beliefs of other religions to be on par with Christianity (hardly something justified by the Gospel of John). The trichotomy's fallacy can readily be

demonstrating by pondering any number of biblical texts. For example, Ezekiel is told, "Prophesy to the mountains of Israel, and say, O mountains of Israel, hear the Word of the Lord" (Ezek. 36:1; see also 6:3 and 36:4, 6). The divine message is "the Word of the Lord" even when addressed to geographical features and not (directly) to any people, nor in any salvific way (it is part of a judgment oracle). The definition's inclusion of "in a salvific way" (p. 25) would prevent any of the Bible's judgments from being considered a "Word of God." Such a radical Gospel reductionism opens the door for churches and their members to indulge in any kind of sin they like.

The remainder of this review will touch on noteworthy points made in each essay in the order they appear in the book, since the ordering clearly is intentional.

First, however, the book's subtitle deserves attention: *Transformative Readings.* The verbal adjective "transformative" implies that someone is transforming something from one state or condition into another. Who is doing the action? On what object? By what means? And to what end? The Preface (Junge) answers: "Biblical interpretation contributes to solidifying Christian commitment to *social transformation*" (p. 5, emphasis added). Thus by means of biblical interpretation (via the proposed hermeneutics), Christians are to commit to transforming society. Absent is the language of missions or evangelism or ministry or even any reference to Jesus Christ. Nothing is said here about the proclamation of the Gospel nor the conversion of unbelievers nor the bestowal of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Word and Sacrament. Many Scripture passages depict the mission Jesus gave to His Church, none is better known than the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations" by "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and by "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded" (Matt. 28:19). Christ's commission is to be the mission of the church "until the consummation of the age" (Matt. 28:28). But in the Preface, any hint of that mission has been replaced by "social transformation."

Laudably, the Introduction (Mtata) mentions some basic and essential hermeneutical principles. It alludes to the Rule and Norm of the Formula of Concord with its quote from a LWF document: "The Lutheran churches subscribing to the LWF have committed themselves to 'confess the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service.' " The author goes on to include the creeds and confessions of the Lutheran Church (pp. 7-8). Perhaps the Introduction is amending the Preface. Then, however, the Introduction pursues a second kind of "reading" mentioned in the Preface: "'Reading' is one's ability to make sense and make the best of (maximize) one's environment" (p. 7). The reader's own context is to shape the reading of the biblical text. This reviewer affirms a partial truth in this agenda: Certainly every interpretation is inevitably shaped by the interpreter's presuppositions (part of the hermeneutical circle or spiral), but that is reason for the interpreter to be self-aware and self-critical, not a license for proposing whatever interpretation seems most expedient for accomplishing social transformation.

The essay denies that truth can be communicated through a written text, that any Scripture passage has one correct interpretation and that anyone today could claim to know what a Scripture passage really means.

The Introduction then advocates the avoidance of "two extremes." "The first is to assume that what is written in the biblical texts should be taken literally and applied directly to contemporary life. The second is to assume that, due to their antiquity, the sacred texts are too alien to be relied on for shaping contemporary faith and life. Maneuvering between these two extremes is one task of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) hermeneutics process of which this volume is the first product" (p. 7). Thus the envisioned agenda would seem to involve a *via media* between literal(istic?) interpretation and rank unbelief. Again, there is some truth here. For example, as the Gospel of John shows, the Law of Moses that was prescribed for Israel is recast by Jesus in His teachings for His disciples and the church. But why should a study of biblical hermeneutics even include the second "extreme," namely, that Scripture is irrelevant? Such a wide and broad road leaves room for many travelers to abut the second extreme.

In "Lutheran Hermeneutics: An Outline," Grosshans develops the trichotomy of Bible — Scripture — Word of God previously mentioned in the Introduction (and above in this review): "One's engagement with the text is determined by whether one is simply reading the ' Bible,' the 'Holy Scriptures' or encountering the 'Word of

God'" (p. 20). This novel construct enables people with "a shared hermeneutical framework" to have "plurality and conflicting interpretations" (p. 22). In other words, it prevents the Bible from functioning as the source and norm of faith and life for all Christians. In several places, the author seems to contradict his own quotations or summaries of Luther, e.g., "Luther did not understand every biblical text to be of relevance for Christians" but Luther believed "without doubt the entire Scripture is oriented toward Christ alone" (both on p. 27). If "all Scripture is oriented toward Christ alone," and Jesus Himself declares that the Scriptures testify to Him (John 5:39), then every biblical text is in some way relevant for believers in Christ. On the next page, Grosshans rightly states that Luther "believed the Holy Scripture to be self-authenticating: Holy Scripture has and needs no guarantor other than itself." But this militates against Grosshans' view that interpretation is validated by the interpreter and his particular context. The author then seems to side with Flaccius versus Schwenckfeld (pp. 35-40), with Flaccius advocating the inspiration of Scripture and the importance of the Word and Sacraments as the means by which God deals with us, and Schwenkfeld advocating the role of faith and the Spirit even before and apart from Scripture. However, the position of Flaccius excludes Grosshans' trichotomy and the overall thrust of the essays collected in this book. In his conclusion, Grosshans attempts to depict traditional Christian hermeneutics as a kind of imperialism: "The Triune God is not an imperialistic emperor who has only one message for everybody in the world and wants everybody to live their lives in the same way." Such inflammatory rhetoric is undoubtedly designed to evoke antipathy from those in post-colonial contexts. Is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ God's "one message" for all humanity? Is not the new baptismal life in Christ the "same way" in which God desires everyone to live?

"Luther's Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics" (Hentschel) includes a strident (militaristic, imperious?) attack on the very idea of absolute truth: "From a Christian perspective, truth cannot be understood as a true and verifiable statement about reality" (p. 64; compare "What is truth?" [John 18:38]). "Even such words as 'meaning,' 'reading,' 'history,' or 'truth' are not really clear and have changed their meaning over the centuries" (p. 65). Moreover, the essay denies that truth can be communicated through a written text, that any Scripture passage in fact has one correct interpretation and that anyone today could claim to know what a Scripture passage means. "With reference to the Bible, this means that we cannot understand it from an objective and stable position" (p. 51). "The widespread assumption that literal meaning is to be identified with historical meaning and the author's historical intention is the literal truth of a text is obviously neither reasonable nor valid" (p. 54). The author anachronistically asserts that such postmodernism also characterized ancient times: "The idea that a text may have just one meaning that once grasped remains firm and unchanging for all time is a modern concept, which neither the biblical authors nor Martin Luther subscribed to" (p. 54). Really!

At the dawn of the eschaton, God will indeed "make all things new;" it is His prerogative! But until then, the church has no such prerogative; we are bound to His Word.

The inspiration of Scripture (e.g., 2 Pet. 1:21) is transmuted: "the biblical text itself cannot be seen as complete and sufficient … biblical hermeneutics must be grounded in the concept of a reader whose reading process is *inspired* by the Holy Spirit" (p. 57, emphasis added). Thus, *inspiration* supposedly is what happens when moderns read and interpret Scripture. In the 16th century, Luther strove against this kind of open-ended doctrine of revelation when Rome claimed the pope (and councils) had such power. This essay's view (see also Olson's concluding reflections) might be perceived as a reiteration of Rome's doctrine but with modern scholars occupying the papacy. The clarity of Scripture and the hermeneutical axiom that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture are also redefined by Hentschel (pp. 65-67). "A formal understanding of the Lutheran *sola scriptura* misses the point about his hermeneutical insights for he knew that the texts of the Bible cannot be brought together to form a unambiguous theological system" (p. 67).

These hermeneutics deny that it is possible for anyone to be sure what a writing means. "If the meaning of relevant words is ambiguous, how then can a sentence, i.e., a network of words, or even a whole text, a network of sentences, be clear at all? Hermeneutics warns us about taking too simply the idea that a biblical text says what I think it means" (p. 66). "Interpretations that propose being the one and only true interpretation of Scripture

are to be criticized" (p. 67). Here the Bible is being treated far worse than any other kind of literature. Diligent study of other ancient texts in their original languages (e.g., the Moabite of King Mesha's stele or the Attic Greek of Plato) does enable a modern learned reader to gain a fairly good grasp of what those ancient authors likely meant. Why should we consider biblical texts to be inferior and incapable of the same kind of communication?

A self-contradiction inherent in this approach is susceptible to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Did the author of this essay intend for it to communicate any meaning? If it were impossible for a reader in a *different* context to determine with any degree of confidence the author's original intended meaning, why did the author bother to write in the first place? And why should anyone read it, if any reader who claims to know what it means ("true interpretation") is "to be criticized"?

"An Introduction to the Gospel of John and Questions of Lutheran Hermeneutics" (Koester) is the most exegetically satisfying part of the book. At last, an essay that truly engages Scripture! It is not structured by (nor concerned with) the tripartition of Grosshans. Instead, it develops themes in the Gospel in a helpful sequence wherein each theme builds on previous ones. Taking a cue from Luther, Koester first focuses on "the Word" who became incarnate (p. 70). Next, Jesus' words are connected to His seven signs (actions). "Because the signs are ambiguous, the Gospel must shape the readers' understanding of them through the words of the surrounding literary context" (p. 76). Both Jesus' words and His signs are interpreted in light of His crucifixion and resurrection, where His work reaches fruition and He communicates God's love, which forms community. The author demonstrates how the Lutheran dialectic of Law and Gospel is "helpful" for the interpretation of John (p. 78–79). These hermeneutics are largely in accord with traditional Lutheran theology.

The reason why this book on hermeneutics has chosen to focus on John becomes clear here: It is because of the way this Gospel depicts the relationship between the Word and the Spirit.

> What readers living after the first Easter have are the words of testimony handed on through the community of faith. The Gospel presents this testimony in written form so that those of later generations might believe and have life (Jn 20:30–31). The Gospel also recognizes that words do not create and strengthen faith on their own and that it is the Spirit that continues to make the words effective (p. 80).

The conclusion calls for Christian unity: "The Gospel of John speaks of a unity or oneness that centers on a shared faith, which brings people of different backgrounds together in the crucified and living Christ" (p. 84). Instead of "shared faith," however, the basis for Christian unity is Christ and His Word (through which the Spirit creates the faith that is shared).

Doctrinally, "Law and Gospel (With a Little Help from St John)" (Wilson) is one of the best essays (together with Wannenwetsch) because of its solid Lutheran theology of Law and Gospel, based on Scripture, in harmony with Luther and with salutary application to the Church today. There seems to be no spurious transmutation of traditional theological vocabulary. "Law and gospel — more precisely, the distinction between law and gospel — is one of the nearest and dearest characteristics of Lutheran theology. It is not one piece of the puzzle among others, but the hermeneutical expression of justification by faith" (p. 85). Much more is quote worthy.

"Political Love: Why John's Gospel is not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as it Might Appear" (Wannenwetsch) pleases the reader who delights in a literary turn of phrase or who is looking for sound theology and practice. Initially it explores the moral or ethical dimensions of the Gospel of John before turning to broader topics of hermeneutics:

> We are to embrace a canonical approach that assumes the authoritative role for Christian discourses of Scripture as a whole, which implies the challenge to withstand the impulse to flee from or ignore the apparently difficult, non-congenial or scandalous passages in the canon… . In keeping with the Reformation slogan of relating Scripture and Tradition as norma normans to norma normata, I suggest reading Scripture as a sort of critical interlocutor of our tradition, so as eventually to trigger a fresh reading of both (p. 95).

The essay also appears to affirm historic Christian values about the vital role of the family in society, including reproduction and pedagogy (i.e., the birth and raising of children, pp. 103–104). In the context of the present volume, it is indeed refreshing and encouraging.

"Exploring Effective Context — Luther's Contextual

Hermeneutics" (Westhelle) starts by defining "context" by recourse to the etymology and analogy of weaving a tapestry to emphasize rightly the importance of interpreting biblical texts in their original contexts. But the rest of the essay focuses almost exclusively on the "effective context" of the receivers (readers) of the text. He begins rather abruptly in the 19th century with Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Gadamar and Ricouer (persons already explored in previous essays), then the historical critical method and liberation theologies. "The meaning of a text changes decisively depending on a series of factors: the author's setting, the circumstances under which a text is read, and also texts that are in- or excluded" (p. 108). This author, too, apparently presumes that Scripture has no absolute, enduring meaning. The eternal God was not able, or did not intend, to communicate an immutable message through the Scriptures; or whatever the original, authorially-intended meaning might have been, readers today are unable to recover it with any certainty because of our own different contexts. He invokes "the fundamentalists" as hermenutical opponents who "reject the importance of any sense of context: the grammar and placement within the work, the circumstances surrounding the author, and definitely the context of the receiving end were decried. The letter, the written word, is to be maintained in its assumed pristine purity" (p. 110). This reviewer puzzled over who the author might intend to include among these unidentified "fundamentalists" and whether he has set up a straw man. In any event, confessional Lutherans (past and present) who adhere to the high view of Scripture hardly fit this description. (Exegetes will notice a few gaffes, e.g., the assertion that Gnosticism was pervasive already in the first century A.D. context of John's Gospel (p. 109), and a couple of Greek mistakes, e.g., the statement about the connotation of *parousia* on p. 117 and the transliteration *metamorphete* on p. 119.)

The author of "Lutheran Hermeneutics and New Testament Studies: Some Political and Cultural Implications" (Becker) has resided in lands whose cultural and political histories have been strongly influenced by Luther. She starts out "looking for Lutheran tendencies in recent Protestantism in European cultures and/or in a globalized world" (p. 122) and perceives a stream of tradition from Paul to Luther (accused of anti-Judaism) to Bultmann to contemporary Protestant theology. "This leads us to the following preliminary conclusion: Our dealing with Lutheran hermeneutics partly has enormous political implications. In this light, it becomes obvious that it is still a matter of debate to what extent Luther's theological focus on justification and its hermeneutical implications are, in principle, legitimate or at least useful" (p. 125). She perceives the Church's agenda in these terms: "Twenty-first-century Lutheran hermeneutics still faces an immense political dimension. It will have to figure out how the Pauline doctrine of justification can be based on New Testament writings in such a way that it finally stabilizes the peaceful coexistence of Judaism and Christianity in and beyond European culture(s)" (p. 125). This presupposes that a cultural peace is the top priority and that the message of the New Testament itself — about justification! — may need modification in order to accomplish the higher goal. Modern political and social needs take precedence over Scripture. Since the doctrine of justification (AC IV) is the article by which the Church stands or falls, the very life and existence of the Church is at stake here.

"Bible, Tradition and the Asian Context" (Melanchthon) confronts the reader with horrific human rights violations in the context of armed conflict in the Indian state of Manipur. The author's strategy seems to be to convince the reader that these atrocities are so appalling (which indeed they are), the Church must make the righting of these wrongs the supreme agenda. The interpretation of Scripture is subservient to these goals: Defend human rights, protect the poor, make communities inclusive (in terms of caste, ethnicity, religions and people infected with HIV and AIDS), protect the environment and resist oppression. "This requires that scholars provide interpretations of Scripture and tradition that are in some organic manner connected to the many communities that experience the problems highlighted above. *These interpretations have to be different from traditional biblical interpretations,* innovative, and constantly in dialogue with the new questions and issues as they emerge on the continent" (p. 138, emphasis added). In this vision, Scripture has ceased to be the only source and norm for the Christian faith and life. There is no talk about the Church as the gathering of the baptized around the Word and Sacrament to be conformed to Christ to be led by the Spirit into truth.

The author speaks autobiographically about this reordering of priorities. After mentioning "sola scriptura," "the centrality of Christ," and "the sacrament of baptism"

(p. 143), she states:

> I agree that my identity as a Lutheran should draw upon my Lutheran heritage. But I am also an Indian and a woman and all these should also figure in the manner in which I approach the Bible … How can one best address the complexities of the Bible, the Lutheran tradition and the Indian context without privileging any one in particular?

Thus the essentials of the Christian faith are not to be "privileged" over other concerns. Even one's identity as a baptized believer is reduced to the level of other identity markers, contradicting Gal. 3:26-29, where Baptism into Christ supersedes matters of race, gender and socioeconomic status.

Melanchthon declares that interpreters of Scripture must be bold in "challenging traditional and orthodox ideas about *gender roles,* inequity, caste discrimination, corruption and power abuse" (p. 138). She praises feminist scholars who have "developed 'outlaw emotions' that afford them the unique opportunity to create alternative epistemologies" (p. 141). What are "outlaw emotions"? Are these impulses "outlawed" by Scripture (i.e., ones that are condemned by the Law of God)? That the author may be suggesting as much finds support in the sexuality on display on pp. 144–45. "Outlaw" sexual sin appears to be sanctioned by the author's remarks about the adulterous Samaritan woman in John 4: "I do not see this woman as one of ill repute nor do I judge her for having five husbands. I celebrate her agency and the role she played in perhaps *opening the eyes of Jesus* … Living with someone who was not her husband, she transcended barriers of gender and religion and made a space for herself that was characterized by freedom and agency." Such women "attain new power by renewed transgression" (p. 145).

In this author's scenario, it is not Scripture that opens our eyes to the presence of Jesus. Rather, the roles have been reversed: Human sexual "transgression" is so empowering, the transgressor apparently is able to open "the eyes of Jesus!" Is He the one who is blind? What kind of Christology is presupposed here? If the message is that Jesus needs to be enlightened by sinners as the revealers of truth, is this not blasphemy against our Lord?

"The Role of Tradition in Relation to Scripture: Questions and Reflections" (Olson) brings this volume to a close. Thankfully, the perspective returns to being a predominantly Lutheran one, focused on "the tradition of the church catholic" and "the proper relationship of Scripture and church tradition" (p. 154). The author traces the history of the patristic "rule of faith" back to Gal. 6:16. The Early Church (e.g., Irenaeus) distinguished the rule of faith from Scripture, but both played a role similar for later Christian interpreters. The author follows Pelikan in concluding that "the Christian tradition has retained a remarkable consistency in the midst of its expansions and rearticulations … over a broad swath of time (centuries and millennia) and of geography (every major region of the world)" (p. 159). *Sola scriptura* is to be "understood within a Trinitarian framework. The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* did not suggest that Scripture should be interpreted apart from any confessional tradition. Sola scriptura assumed the use of Christian tradition to guide biblical interpretation." Moreover, "'Christ alone' is the prior principle undergirding 'Scripture alone.' … Scripture proclaimed in the community of faith is the place where the living Christ encounters the church in the ministry of Word and sacrament" (pp. 160-161). Further reflections on Luther's doctrine of the clarity of Scripture are helpful.

Unfortunately, the final essay ends badly with an appeal (like that of other contributors) for the Church to employ hermeneutics that open it up to new (novel) interpretations: "Such a hermeneutic would be both informed by the rich resources of the Christian tradition while at the same time being open to the voice of the living God in Jesus Christ who works through the power of the Holy Spirit to 'make all things new' (Rev 21:5)" (p. 168). Biblical eschatology assists here. Revelation 21 is about what happens *after* the *parousia* or return of Christ. At the dawn of the eschaton, God will indeed "make all things new;" it is His prerogative! But until then, the Church has no such prerogative to alter the Scriptual message; we are bound to His Word.

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Book Review

The Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver III comments on the 84-year-old book by W. G. Polack: *Into All the World: The Story of Lutheran Foreign Missions.*

Into All the World: The Story of Lutheran Foreign Missions, published by Concordia Publishing House

by Albert B. Collver

Some 36 years after the Missouri Synod engaged into foreign mission work (1894), William Gustave Polack (1890-1950), a professor of history and liturgics at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, from 1925 to 1950, wrote the story of Lutheran foreign missions. The book apparently was written as a text for mission classes at the seminary. Eighty-four years later, the book has value for a couple of reasons.

First, the book attempts to address the accusation that Martin Luther, the Reformation and the Lutheran church were not interested in mission. Second, the book provides a history of Lutheran mission work that is unknown to most contemporary church-goers and leaders alike. For those interested in contemporary church relations and ecumenism, the book details the work of 19th-century Lutheran mission societies that provided the genesis of churches such as the Lutheran churches in India, Liberia, Madagascar and Ethiopia. The book also demonstrates that the Church in general, and Lutherans in particular, have taken an approach to mission that sends pastors to proclaim the Gospel and to establish seminaries, that establishes schools to educate children, that provides for human care and that translates important texts beginning with the Scriptures, the Small Catechism, the Book of Concord, selected writings of Luther and then other helpful Christian literature.

> In one sense, Dr. Luther believed that Jesus' command to proclaim the Gospel to the world was fulfilled by the preaching activity of the apostles. At the same time, Luther "recognized the duty of Gospel-preaching and that it is obligatory upon every age of the Church."

The Introduction defines a missionary as "one who is sent" (pg. 1) and quotes John 20:21: "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." He states that Jesus Christ is the "great Master Missionary," and because of this, Jesus sent out apostles to be His missionaries. Next, to address at this point the unstated criticism that Luther believed the task of proclaiming the Gospel to the nations was completed by the apostles, Polack writes, "The apostles did a great work, but they did not complete the task. Other Christians who came after them continued the work of teaching and preaching the Word of Salvation" (pg. 1). Polack's point is that the task of proclaiming the Gospel is handed down generation to generation.

He concludes the Introduction: "The church of to-day is also engaged in this work, and every Christian bears a part of the responsibility" (pg. 1). In describing the story of Lutheran foreign missions, Polack demonstrates by example how "every Christian bears a part of the responsibility," from the sent missionaries that included pastors proclaiming the Gospel, school teachers bringing Christian instruction to the young, doctors and nurses, agricultural experts, and other workers and laborers who assisted. For those not sent, both pastor and lay, his story shows how they supported the mission work with prayer and financial support.

The first chapter, which is titled, "The Biblical Background for Mission-work," and the second chapter, titled, "Survey of Missions from the Days of the Apostles to the Reformation," seek to provide a brief history of missions before the Reformation. Polack notes that although the missionary work of the Christian church began with Christ and particularly the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the Old Testament contains a

number of passages on the subject. The Old Testament "indicated in various ways the growth and glory of His Church" (pg. 3). After discussing various Old Testament passages, Polack states that the New Testament provides a fuller revelation regarding the missionary idea. The main New Testament passage for mission work in the New Testament is, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creation." Polack notes that the "Great Commission" appears five times in the New Testament but "not always in the same form and in the same connections and relations" (pg. 7). He concludes "no one can read the New Testament without being impressed by the fact that missions are a most vital factor in Christianity and that the men most closely associated with our Lord during His earthly ministry were thoroughly awake to this fact" (pg. 11).

At any moment from the time of the apostles until the present, Christ could return in His glory. The Gospel has gone out into the world, and any delay in His return is related to His gracious will to allow more time for the Gospel to be proclaimed.

In the second chapter, Polack recounts the missionary activity of the apostles. He also indicates where tradition said the various apostles brought the Gospel to the world. Saint Paul crosses the sea bringing the Gospel to Asia Minor, Cyprus, Macedonia and finally to Rome; John to Asia Minor, Matthew to Ethiopia, Peter to Palestine and Babylon. Thaddeus went to Armenia and Persia, Andrew beyond the Black Sea, Philip to Scythia and Phrygia (modern Turkey), Bartholomew to Arabia and Thomas to India. The Gospel went to the entire world known to the Apostles.

Over the next 200 years in the post-apostolic period, Christians were persecuted and the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church. Polack highlights key individuals who were missionaries to the pagans such as Ulfilas, Martin of Tours, Patrick, Columba the Elder, Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface, Ansgar, and Cyril and Methodius. Polack notes, "Thus the Church of Christ was spread during these centuries into all parts of Europe … By the end of the Middle Ages all of Europe had been brought within the pale of the Christian Church, but the Church itself had become seriously corrupted" (pg. 25). As Christianity advanced in the North, in the South where it had once flourished, it was overtaken by Islam. The Middle Ages drew to a close with the discovering of the New World and new opportunities for mission work.

In chapter three, Polack treats "The Age of the Reformation." At the beginning of the chapter, Polack notes that of the past four hundred years of Lutheran history, "The last one to two hundred years of the history of the Christian Church have been years of exceptional missionary activity" (pg. 34). In the 500 years since the Reformation, the Church has had the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel over a larger geographical area and to more people than at any other time. The Church has had more converts over the past 500 years than during the previous 1,500 years of the Church's history before the Reformation. The Church also has had more martyrs. More Christians were killed for their faith in the 20th century than in the previous 19 centuries of the Church's history. It is estimated that there were 45 million martyrs during the 20th century. In other words, a Christian is martyred every five minutes — making Christians the most persecuted group of people on earth. The new missionary age also has brought about a new period of martyrdom.

Polack begins his discussion about "The Age of the Reformation" by stating, "The Reformation restored to the Church the Gospel in its purity and in all its fullness" (pg. 34). It is of great significance that the Reformation restored the Gospel, for without knowing the pure Gospel, without have the message and doctrine to preach, in the worst case, there is no mission activity and in the best case, it is hindered. People frequently take for granted that the Church possess the pure Gospel and do not realize the challenge in keeping the purity of the Gospel. Mission work involves two aspects summarized succinctly by former Missouri Synod President Alvin Barry, "Get the message straight! Get the message out!"

The contemporary era seems to have emphasized one over the other at various times, usually at the expense of getting the message straight. Polack correctly notes the major aspect of the Reformation was "getting the message straight" and would encourage the reader not to underestimate the importance of that. In fact, the movement of the Church from one region of the world to another region is in part caused by a lack of thankfulness by people for the Lord's Word proclaimed in truth and purity. Formerly Christian lands, such as North Africa, Europe and

perhaps the United States, are caused in part by a lack of thankfulness and a lack of concern about keeping the message straight.

Even in 1930, the Lutherans in general and the Missouri Synod in particular faced the accusation that Reformation was not interested in mission. Polack quotes Dr. Gustav Warneck's monumental work *History of Protestant Missions*: "Notwithstanding the era of discovery in which the origin of the Protestant Church fell, there was no missionary action on her part in the age of the Reformation." This accusation against Martin Luther and the Reformation is oft repeated in missiology books throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. These accusations continue to be leveled against the Lutheran church both by people outside the Lutheran church and by those within who have been influenced by these missiology thinkers. Behind these charges are assumptions both about the definition of mission and the Church. If "mission" is defined as "Go into the world," then Luther and the Reformation were not missional. If "mission" is defined according to the verb in Matt. 28:19 as "make disciples" wherever you are by baptizing and by teaching, then Luther and the Reformation were among the greatest missionaries in the history of the Church. Most contemporary works on missions define being missional as "going" someplace, even though this is not the verb used by Jesus in the Great Commission.

The book helps us see that mission is, at its heart, the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which happens every Sunday in the local congregation, in various settings as Christians share the hope that they have and abroad on the foreign mission field.

As to the charge the Reformation and Luther did not "Go" into the world, Polack notes that it is based on "insufficient knowledge of history" and "on false judgment of the circumstances" (pg. 36). One aspect of the accusation involves Dr. Martin Luther's understanding that the preaching of the apostles "has gone out into all the world, though it has not yet come into all the world" (pg. 37). In one sense, Dr. Luther believed that Jesus' command to proclaim the Gospel to the world was fulfilled by the preaching activity of the apostles. At the same time, Luther "recognized the duty of Gospel-preaching and that it is obligatory upon every age of the Church" (pg. 37). Luther's view is consistent with the doctrinal position that all prophecy and commands of Christ are fulfilled so that He can return in glory at any moment. At any moment from the time of the apostles until the present, Christ could return in His glory. The Gospel has gone out into the world, and any delay in His return is related to His gracious will to allow more time for the Gospel to be proclaimed.

Another aspect of the accusation that the Reformation and Luther were not interested in missions revolves around the historical circumstances of the Holy Roman Empire (that is, the German lands at the time of the Reformation). The German people did not possess a navy or ships, as the predominantly Roman Catholic countries of Spain and Portugal. It would be two more centuries before sea travel became relatively common place for the rest of the world. (Not unlike the present age when people can travel in relative ease around the world on jumbo jets.) Part of the so-called lack of interest among Lutherans to take the Gospel to the world was simply the inability to do so. Polack notes, "A further reason why the Evangelicals in the Reformation Age did not carry the Gospel to the heathen in foreign fields was the fact that these were inaccessible to them. Throughout the sixteenth century foreign commerce and shipping, colonization and conquest, were under the exclusive control of the servants of Rome" (pg. 41).

Polack addresses these charges and points out: "Most of the critics of Luther hold that by missions we must think only of the evangelization of the heathen who have not the Gospel, of foreign missions in our modern acceptation of the term. That, however, is not correct, and our Church has never defined missions in this restrictive sense … we can truly say that the entire Lutheran Reformation was a missionary movement. It brought the Gospel to thousands who had had little or nothing of the saving Light before. In fact, Luther and his disciples were fairly submerged in the mightiest missionary undertaking since the days of the apostles" (pgs. 38-39). He concludes, "The dissemination of Gospel-truth into all corners of Europe, beginning at Wittenberg and going out into all parts of the Continent and the British Isles, was itself one of the greatest missionary movements in history … When Luther gave back to the world the Bible, the source of all true faith and Christian service, he laid the foundation for

all the Protestant missionary movements that came after him" (pgs. 42-43).

One of the single biggest hindrances to mission was the establishment of the State Church and the rise of rationalism. By definition, the State Church is concerned with the people within the State, not outside the State. The resources given to the State Church are to be used within her territorial boundaries. Polack notes, "No Protestant state church has made foreign missions, from the beginning, the concern of the Church as such" (pg. 81). Polack observed, "Only in a number of free churches, especially in America, are missions the affair of the Church as such. We may call this one of the evils of state-churchism" (pg. 81). All of the Lutheran churches and most of the other Protestant churches were state churches, and as such the State did not have an interest in investing resources in foreign missions. Because Rome was not beholden to any one State (in fact, the States were beholden to Rome in many cases), mission work flourished in the New World under the direction of the Roman Catholic church.

By the end of the 18th century, pious Lutherans and other pious Protestants who heard the call of Jesus to make disciples of all nations formed mission societies. Polack notes, "But as the State, of which the Church in Germany was a part, does not provide funds for missionary work, this necessitated the formation of voluntary societies in order to turn the new interest and zeal into practical execution" (pg. 82). Bible and mission societies came into existence and were funded by individuals rather than by the State. Both pastors and lay people were members of the mission societies. Some of the mission societies established missionary seminaries or houses of study. Several mission societies founded in the 19th century continue to exist and function today. Although many mission societies were unionistic in nature, some intended to be distinctly Lutheran. For instance, the Leipzig Mission Society desired (1) to carry on the work of missions in the spirit of the Lutheran Church, (2) to give the missionaries a thorough course of instruction, (3) to adapt the preaching to the needs of the people (4) and to leave the heathen unmolested in customs not in conflict with the Word of God (pgs. 95–96). The Hermannsburg Mission Society desired, "All the Lutheran symbols and especially the beautiful Lutheran liturgy to be recognized and used by mission-churches as well as by churches in the fatherland" (pg. 97). The mission societies carried out the mission work in foreign lands where the State Churches were unwilling to go.

The history of the mission societies had a significant effect on the Missouri Synod. Some of the pastors who later joined the Missouri Synod were initially sent by mission societies in Germany. Additionally, the Missouri Synod's Constitution did not allow members of the Synod (pastors, teachers and congregations) to cooperate and work with "heterodox tract and mission societies." In fact, the Missouri Synod was founded with the intention of doing missions as a church rather than through mission societies. Polack writes, "At the organization of the Missouri Synod in 1847 Foreign Mission effort was designated as one of its objectives, but the extensive Home Mission work to which the Synod was called to give immediate attention made it impossible to begin missionary operations in non-Christian countries. Nevertheless a mission among the American Indians in Northern Michigan was carried on" (pg. 124). Polack also notes that the Synodical Conference was formed in 1872 with the intention of carrying out foreign missions between the cooperating Synods.

In chapter nine, Polack treats, "The Foreign Missions of the Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States." As noted above, the Missouri Synod was founded with the intention of doing foreign missions. In 1893, the Missouri Synod resolved to begin mission work in Japan. However, these plans did not materialize, and the Synod began work in India. On Oct. 14, 1894, the first foreign missionaries for the Missouri Synod, Theodore Naether and Franz Mohn, were commissioned to serve in India. These men had been affiliated with the Leipzig Mission Society, but they found it necessary to depart for reasons of conscience. The Leipzig Mission Society was not remaining distinctly Lutheran so these men sought out the Missouri Synod.

Polack outlines the methodology used by the Missouri Synod in foreign mission. "Evangelization by missionary preaching tours was one of the chief methods of making Christ known to the people" (pg. 130). "Christian day-schools are considered to be equal in importance to evangelization" (pg. 131). "It is the policy of the mission to employ only Lutheran teachers" (pg. 145). Medical work began. "Divine services are conducted regularly at all stations and outstations" (pg. 131). Orphanages were established. A seminary was built. The elements of Missouri Synod mission, while not always called *Witness, Mercy, Life Together*, nevertheless followed this pattern.

Polack concludes his book: "Thousands and thousands of heathen have heard the Gospel-message, and

many, far more than we know, have been won by it for life eternal. May God help us to realize this thankfully, and may the blessing of God inspire us at home and aboard to still greater self-sacrificial and consecrated service! For the love of our Savior and of the whole redeemed human race let us labor while it is day" (pg. 156). Indeed, let us labor while it is day.

Into All the World: The Story of Lutheran Foreign Mission is a forgotten book that still tells a helpful story — a story that corrects some misperceptions some people still hold today regarding how the Reformation and Lutherans view mission. (Download the book at *http://www.scribd.com/doc/164714545/Into-All-the-World-Lutheran-Missions-1930*) The book helps us see that mission is, at its heart, the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which happens every Sunday in the local congregation, in various settings as Christians share the hope that they have and abroad on the foreign mission field. The basic elements of mission have not changed: (1) Proclaim the Gospel (Witness), (2) Show mercy and charity to those in need (Mercy), (3) Hold Divine Services and build schools and seminaries (Life Together). Polack also helps to show how Lutheran and Protestant mission emerged out the State Church by using mission societies. He also shows how the Missouri Synod sought to be different by being a church engaged in mission rather than carrying out this task through "tract and mission societies." The history of the first Lutheran mission efforts are as inspiring today as they were then. The book is a quick and easy read, well worth the time for those interested in mission and the history of missions.

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