

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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“Here I stand.
I can do no other.”

Martin Luther, 1521

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Luther Traveling Exhibit at CTS - March 7-28, 2004

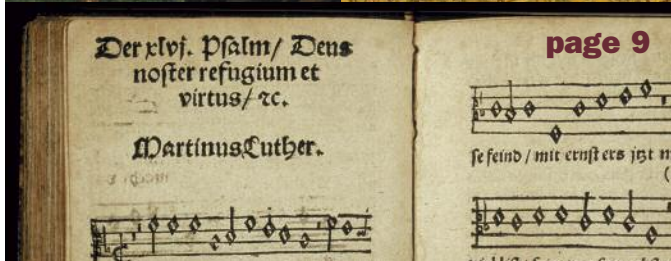

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PUBLISHER
Rev. Scott Klemsz

EDITOR
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ASSISTANT EDITOR
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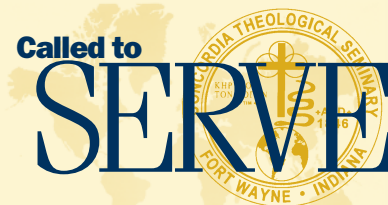
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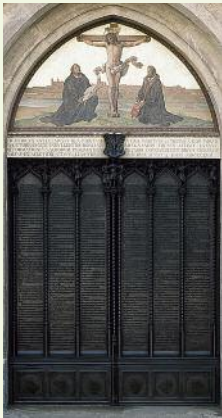
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Luther and Missions in the 16th Century

By the Rev. Dr. Klaus Detlev Schulz



Almost 500 years have passed since Martin Luther allegedly nailed his 95 Theses on the doors of the Castle Church. These modest beginnings precipitated a wave of events and an unstoppable movement that embraces today more than 65 million Lutherans. All of them, in varying degrees of course, see the legacy of Luther foremost as theological, passed on to posterity in a voluminous way. We have from Luther commentaries on books in Scripture, great theological tracts, Confessions, innumerable sermons, and humorous Table Talks. The work of translating Luther into English will continue for generations to come.

Unfortunately, Luther never systematized his theology, so discerning his view is often a tug of war, between the early and late Luther, the reformer who censures enthusiasm or reproves Roman Catholicism. Controversies flared among Lutherans after his death. Thankfully with the Formula of Concord (1577) and its authors many were put to rest. We are indebted to Luther for our doctrinal position, and seeking guidance from him is not an arbitrary choice but a must. His faith is built, as is ours, on the unchanging Scriptural foundation: God justifies us by Christ through faith.

In some ways, though, Luther's counsel appears limited. The arena of politics comes to mind. Luther lived in a monarchical system; we don't. And in missions, too, a disparity exists. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod simply bustles with missionary activity; Luther's time didn't. The Mission Board sends missionaries, districts call our students for church planting projects, mission societies mushroom to address specific local and international concerns, the Lutheran Heritage Foundation translates literature, the Lutheran Women's Missionary League (LWML) offers invaluable monetary and moral support, the Laborers for Christ provides hands-on services, the People of the Book Lutheran Outreach (POBLO) works in dangerous Muslim countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, India), and the Lutheran Hour Ministries (the Lutheran Laymen's League included) speaks our faith out loud for the world to hear. Indeed, the Missouri Synod's missionary activity has become expansive.

How then do we explain the 16th century's inertia and lack of organized sending—quite puzzling to the modern mind? But then again, in the 16th century lands were just being discovered on which the Spanish and Portuguese immediately placed their stakes. Lutherans' mission activity was restrict-

ed and confined to other means. And so upon a second look, Luther and the Reformation suddenly come alive. Let's list a few examples.

All Christians are obliged to missionary witness. They live for the sake of their neighbors and assist them in witness and deed. Even in extreme cases this rule applies. Should a Christian find himself in foreign lands amongst unbelieving and hostile neighbors, he must be unyielding and firm in his Christian testimony. *"If he [a Christian] is in a place where there are no Christians, he needs no other call than to be a Christian ... Here it is his duty to preach and to teach the Gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians, because of the duty of brotherly love, even though no man calls him to do so."* Among Christians, however, different rules apply: *"If he is at a place where there are Christians who have the same power and right as he, ... he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place and by the command of others."* Luther contrived no fictive cases, real threats were imminent: the Turks were close, and he advises Christian prisoners of war. *"I must here be of encouragement and give a word of comfort to those Germans who already have been captured or may still be captured in Turkey ... they should be patient in captivity and remain firm in the faith until the time of their redemption, in order that they may not be scandalized by the Babylonian faith and worship ... Pay attention, therefore, my dear brother. Be warned and admonished, that you remain in the right Christian faith and neither deny nor forget your dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who died for your sins."*

Sound Christian witness is based on proper catechesis: *"I strongly urge that the children be taught the catechism. Should they be taken captive in the invasion, they will at least take something of the Christian faith with them."* A Christian's faith must be well defined through training: *"Study now, while you still have room and place, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and learn them well, especially the article in which we say, 'And in Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,*

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born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died and buried, descended to Hell, on the third day again raised from the dead, ascended to Heaven, sitting on the Right of God, the almighty Father, from whence He shall come, to judge the living and the dead, etc.' Because everything lies in this article. From this article, we are called Christians and are also called through the Gospel to the same, baptized and counted in Christendom and accepted, and receive through the same Holy Spirit the forgiveness of sins."⁷⁴

Christian faith and witness must set clear contours against other beliefs. The key lies in the proper identity of God. And so Luther throws Jews, Muslims, and false Christians together. All equally reject the Triune God: "Our faith is distinguished from all other beliefs on earth. The Jews don't have it, the Turks and Saracens also do not, furthermore a Papist or false Christian or any other unbeliever does not have it but only the orthodox Christian."⁷⁵

But what motivates the church to proclaim and Christians to witness in the first place? It's the confidence in God Himself, who justifies the sinner and seeks him out. Yes, in the "article on which the church stands and falls" resides a missionary motive. And God Himself puts His will into action through the preaching of the Word that must go on till the end of time: "One must always preach the Gospel so that one may bring some more to become Christians. The kingdom of Christ stands in becoming, not in being."⁷⁶

Will the whole world become Christian? No, says Luther, and lets his realism speak: "You must therefore not understand it in such a way that the whole world and all people will believe in Christ. Because we must always have the holy cross, the greater portion will be those who persecute Christians."⁷⁷ Even if the Germans momentarily enjoy a great rise in faith, it will not be for always: "The movement of the Gospel is now among us, but our ungratefulness and scorning of the divine Word, pettiness, and decadence make it so that it will not remain for long. There shall then follow after it a large rabble, and great wars will come later. In Africa, the Gospel was very powerfully present, but the liars corrupted it, and after it the Vandals and the wars came. It went likewise also in Egypt: first lying then murder. It will also go exactly the same way in the German land. The pious preachers will first be taken away, and false prophets, enthusiasts, and demagogues will step into my place and that of other preachers and divide the church and tear it apart."⁷⁸

Thus, the church of Christ must be vigilant and prepare itself for battle against the true enemy who stops the preach-

ing and faith from becoming. In this regard, prayer and missions are close correlatives: "Dear Father, we pray, give us Thy Word, that the Gospel be properly preached throughout the world; and secondly, that it be received in faith, and work and live in us, so that through the Word and the power of the Holy Ghost Thy kingdom may prevail among us, and the kingdom of the devil be put down, that he may have no right or power over us, until at last it shall be utterly destroyed, and sin, death, and hell be exterminated."⁷⁹

The preaching of the Gospel must be heard and understood. Luther furthered the cause and value of translation. A good preacher and missionary must take great pains in his choice of (German) words by mingling with his audience and watching them closely: "We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German, ... Rather we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are



speaking German to them."¹⁰ In fact, there is no limit to learning about people and their ways. To demonstrate this point, Luther addressed the German people's ignorance of the Koran and Muslims by translating and commenting on the *Confutatio Alcorum* (Confutation against the Koran) by an Italian Dominican monk and missionary Ricardus (+1320).¹¹

What exactly is the divine goal in all this and with what objective should the church engage in preaching? For the furtherance of the kingdom of God, Luther would say, but concretely of incorporating individuals into the Christian community through preaching and baptism. Furthering the

Church universal and the kingdom of God go together: “The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy community or Christian people until the Last Day. Through it He gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word ... in this Christian community we have the forgiveness of sins, which takes place through the sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel ... For He has not yet gathered all of this Christian community, nor has He completed the granting of forgiveness.”¹²

The Christian church is in her movement just like an organism, reaching out to all corners of the world as the Word is being preached. All congregational work, directly or indirectly, stands in service to that goal, liturgy included: “The second is the German Mass and Order of Service, which should be arranged for the sake of the unlearned lay folk and with which we are now concerned. These two orders of service must be used publicly, in the churches, for all people, among whom are many who do not believe and are not yet Christians.”¹³ The singing of hymns serves the Gospel witness also: “God has made our heart and spirit happy through His dear Son, whom He gave for our salvation from sin, death, and the devil. Whoever honestly believes this, cannot leave it alone, but he must cheerfully and with joy speak about it in order that others might listen and draw near. If, however, one does not want to sing and speak about it, it is a sign that he does not believe and is not in the new cheerful testament but belongs under the old, rotten, unhappy testament. Therefore, the printers do very well when they diligently print songs and make them pleasant for the people, with all kinds of ornamentation so that they are stimulated to this joy of the faith and gladly sing.”¹⁴

Throughout his life, Luther stood at the brink of imminent eschatology, the approaching of the end of the world. But he rejected calculators projecting the date of Christ’s return—as Augustine had done before him centuries ago: “To all those who make calculations ... Relax your fingers and give them a rest.” Nor was Luther paralyzed in his activity or in his outlook on those who were not in possession of the salutary Gospel. The Reformation was on the move, the Gospel was doing its work,

The Reformation was on the move, the Gospel was doing its work, boundless in dynamic, drawing concentric circles like a pebble falling in water. What the apostles had begun since the time of their commission, is continuing by Christian communities around the world.

boundless in dynamic, drawing concentric circles like a pebble falling in water. What the apostles had begun since the time of their commission is continuing by Christian communities around the world: “Here there rises a question on this passage: ‘Go ye into all the world,’ as to how it is to be understood and held fast, since verily the Apostles have not come into all the world, for no Apostle has come to us, and also many islands have been discovered in our day where the people are heathen and no one has preached to them: yet the Scripture saith their voice has sounded forth into all lands [Luther refers to Romans 10: 18]. Answer: their preaching has gone out into all the world, though it has not yet come into all the world. That outgoing has been begun and gone on, though it has not yet been fulfilled and accomplished; but there will be further and wider

preaching until the last day. When the Gospel has been preached, heard, published through the whole world, then the commission shall have been fulfilled, and then the last day will come.”¹⁵

The theology of Luther provides proper basis for missions, and much was put in practice for us already then. The immense enterprise we call today foreign missions has its roots in the Reformation. That era brought to the surface truths that we take so much for granted. True, it lacked organized foreign sending agencies. Perhaps entrusting church affairs to territorial rulers and looking upon them for initiative proved to be in some ways the Achilles’ heel also for foreign missions. And yet the church was on the move. The Gospel was preached and the faith witnessed. Mission during the Reformation was a way of life, a grass-root-level movement—it was not a subject only for specialists or enthusiasts. That makes it surprisingly contemporary. The church is now, in a sense, in a missionary situation everywhere. For “missions is no longer understood as a thing which plays itself out chiefly on the outer edges of Christendom, but instead as a way of life or, rather, as a lifestyle for every Christian congregation within its particular surrounding.”¹⁶ Mission is a task differently conceived from the great 19th century. Competing faiths are no longer separated by distance, over the horizon, but wherever the church exists, in the midst of us. Good congregations, known for their yearly offering for foreign missions, may suddenly face the tough question of outreach to others who contest the salvation only found in Christ.

We thank God for the bold witness of the Reformers. May He keep us in their faith and forthright as they were in confession.

1 Martin Luther, “The Right and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community...1523”; Almost all citations below are taken from Volker Stolle, *The Church Comes from All Nations. Luther Texts on Mission*. Translated by Klaus Detlev Schulz and Daniel Thies (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 22.

2 A Campaign Sermon against the Turks, 1529; Stolle, 71.

3 Admonition to Prayer against the Turks, 1541; Stolle, 46.

4 A Campaign Sermon against the Turks, 1529; Stolle, 71.

5 A Campaign Sermon against the Turks, 1529; Stolle, 71.

6 Sermon on the Good Shepherd, 1523; Stolle, 26.

7 Sermon on the Good Shepherd, 1523; Stolle, 26.

8 Sermon on Matthew 24:8ff., 1539; Stolle, 83.

9 The Large Catechism, Third Chief Part, Second Petition; Stolle, 51.

10 “On Translating: An Open Letter, 1530”; *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 35:189.

11 German title of Luther’s tract: “Verlegung des Alcoran Bruder Richardi, Prediger Ordens. Verdeutscht und herausgegeben von M. Luther.” 1542.

12 Large Catechism, 2nd Chief Part, 2nd Article.

13 German Mass, 1526; Stolle, 43-44.

14 Preface to Babst’s Hymnal, 1545; Stolle, 47.

15 Ascension Sermon on May 29, 1522; Stolle, 24.

16 Stolle, 3.

The Rev. Dr. Klaus Detlev Schulz is an Associate Professor and Chairman of the Pastoral Ministry and Missions Department at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.