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# MISSIO DEI

by Scott R. Murray

WHAT QUESTIONS are being asked about mission today? I come at mission from the side of praxis. As a fulltime parish pastor of 30 years, I have been a missionary calling to repentance and baptizing unto life. Doing the mission and talking about doing the mission and then talking about the mission are very different things. Don't misunderstand me: It is valuable to do these things. But practice and theory aren't the same thing. That distinction alone is worth being concerned about. Practice and theory demand to be united for the benefit of both.

The context of the *missio Dei* is the world, a world shrinking because of the media. The foreign/home mission distinction is less and less significant. For instance, we are seeing openness to confessional Lutheran theology by theologically adept national church leaders in the developing world and a willingness to confess over against Western church bodies. Old ties, perhaps long taken for granted, are being sundered. Therefore, the Lutheran question of "How is this done?" demands an answer in a radically changed context in which Westerners are now becoming the mission targets of their former mission children. We are now like the parents who, in their dotage, come under the guardianship of their more vigorous child. Especially our African friends are showing us the way; parent and child are changing places. Given that fact, what does mission look like? I tell my dear friend Charles Wokoma, a Nigerian teaching at the Nigerian Lutheran seminary, that I expect his grandchildren to come to America and proclaim Christ to my grandchildren.

Questions are rising in those who think about the mission of the church. How does our theology inform our practice? In keeping with the strong and indissoluble

tensions given by the divine Word and that cut through the whole corpus of Lutheran theology — like Law and Gospel, two natures in Christ, the two realms, office and priesthood — the *missio Dei* is also held in tension with the Church and her baptized priesthood.

There exists a circular relationship between mission and Church. Which gives birth to which? Does the mission impetus give birth to the Church or does the Church give birth to the mission? Of course, the answer is "yes." However, everyone seems to come out in a different place on this issue, emphasizing one or the other side of the equation.

Is there really a uniquely LCMS approach to mission?

How does that correspond to Lutheran claims to catholicity? If there is such an approach, what does it look like?

The 16th-century Reformation responded to the deep anxiety of the late medieval world about the spiritual condition of the sinner in God's sight. Luther was concerned with assuring the sinner of righteousness in the presence of God. Mid and late 20th-century theologians simply dismissed the doctrine of justification as answering

a question the modern person was no longer even asking. Luther's angst was no longer a problem relevant to the modern.

And yet anxiety is again on the rise. Peggy Noonan, in this past Saturday's *Wall Street Journal*, referred to a second "Age of Anxiety" made worse by the Obama administration with its Rube Goldberg provisions in the ridiculously named Affordable Care Act. "In the middle of a second Age of Anxiety they (the Obama administration) decided to make Americans more anxious."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this

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There exists a circular relationship between mission and Church. Does the mission impetus give birth to the Church or does the Church give birth to the mission?

The answer: Yes.

<sup>1</sup> Peggy Noonan. "ObamaCare Disaster Recovery," *Wall Street Journal* (November 2013): A15.

is the last big scheme that claims to fix everything thought up by baby boomers.

The *missio Dei* can name the ultimate cause of anxiety for people. Bodily health is an analogue to spiritual life. We die because we are fallen. We are attempting to forestall the last enemy in the mistaken notion that by so doing we are solving the great human problem. And then the Church and her children can bring the Bible's solution to that anxiety with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified for the world, who has defeated the last enemy. The answers remain the same.

The world is shrinking. How does that affect the *missio Dei*? Maybe so too are the issues; so too the methods prescribed to fix them. There is a rise of neo-paganism in the West. Perhaps we need to recover the methods and fervor of our

Perhaps we need to recover the methods and fervor of our forefathers of the late nineteenth century who worked where Christianity had not been heard before.

forefathers of the late 19th century who worked where Christianity had not been heard before. They broke down strongholds. As St. Paul says, "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (1 Cor. 10:3-4). I'm not sure how many mission summits our forefathers had before they followed the Lord's mission impulsion, but off they went. If we leave here satisfied with having talked about the mission without delivering the Word that creates the Church, we shall have failed. And maybe the first stronghold to be assailed is our own hearts. These days together must remain a call to repentance.

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