
THE ROOTS AND NATURE OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF 'MISSIO DEI' IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS REFORMATION AGENDA

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Abstract

Long before reading and interpreting the Bible as professor in Wittenberg, Luther's piety had been shaped by his own monastic experience as Augustinian friar. He had also come across medieval mystics and the mysticism of 'Theologia Germanica'. Similar emphases could be found in diverse church renewal movements, select renowned scholastic teachers, reformers who had come before him, the intellectual potency of 16th century humanists, a number of his contemporaries who shared his zeal and desire of a renewed Christendom (most notably Johannes Staupitz). Last but not least, Luther's colleagues from the 'Wittenberg Circle' – Philip Melancthon, Justus Jonas, Johannes Bugenhagen, Caspar Cruciger, and Georg Major – each endowed with unique gifts, helped form Luther's understanding of how the Church in Germany could be faithfully involved in the continuing drama of God's mission to save the lost. Luther's understanding of mission is strictly Trinitarian and should be understood against the background of his apocalyptic thinking.

Keywords: reformation, Martin Luther, monasticism, mysticism, apocalyptic framework

1. Introduction

Up until recently (20th century), Luther was considered to be relatively silent on the topic of mission. Tormented by his own doubts, involved in theological controversies and political negotiations, landlocked within the heartland of Germany, Luther did not seem to have had the strength or vision to think of missions. This may be true to the extent to which we consider missionary endeavour to be a task of global dimension oriented primarily on converting the heathen to Christianity. Luther's 'missionary zeal' was focused elsewhere: he set out to 'Christianize' Germany, above all, with the hope that his vision of renewed Christendom would catch on in other parts of 'Christian' Europe. His task was that of reconverting the 'faithful' to a true, genuine, liberating faith oriented on Christ and inspired by the Spirit.

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Nevertheless, mission for Luther was not an alien concept. The Gospel of forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life in Christ belongs to (and is constitutive to) Christendom as well as the whole human race [1]. According to Luther, every single person, being a helpless sinner in the eyes of God, needs to hear God's word as Law and Gospel. We can see this most clearly in his letter from 1521. Luther exhorts his closest co-workers in Wittenberg: "For goodness' sake, do you want the Kingdom of God to be proclaimed only in your town? Don't others also need the Gospel? Will your Antioch not release a Silas or a Paul or a Barnabas for some other work of the Spirit? I tell you: although I would be very happy to be with you all, yet I would not be disturbed if the Lord deigned to open to me a door for the Word either at Erfurt or Cologne or anywhere else, since you already have a surplus [of preachers and teachers]. Look how big a harvest there is everywhere — and how few are the harvesters! You all are harvesters. Certainly we have to consider not ourselves but our brethren who are spread out all over the country, lest we live for ourselves, that is, for the devil and not for Christ." [2]

When we speak of Luther's concept of mission we have to expand the meaning of missions beyond the typical idea of pioneer missions that take place on heathen territory. Reading Luther's writings we will quickly notice there to be a close relationship between Luther's concern for reforming the Church and the Church's mission. Church doctrine and real-life practice of one's Christian identity converge on the mission field, that is, in our daily life of witness as we fulfil our human callings in the new freedom of Evangelical faith.

2. 'Missio Dei' in Luther - exploring the roots

Luther came to realize (especially after his Saxon visitations of 1528) that it was not merely the heathen who needed to experience this witness. The medieval Christendom of his time exhibited signs of deeply entrenched paganism and mediocre, superficial understanding of constitutive Christian doctrines [3-6]. The Church was ripe for not just a reform but rather a thorough re-conversion or 'Christianization' [7].

Luther drew from several important sources when it came to his understanding of the *missio Dei* and its application on the situation of Christendom in the 16th century. What follows here is a brief description of them.

2.1. Scholastic teachers - Nicholas of Lyra and Jean Gerson

Two prominent people from the earlier centuries should be noted, given the proximity of their perception of the need of reform, the venues of the reform they championed, and the fact that young Luther drew heavily from their ideas: Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349), a Franciscan friar and great exegete of Scriptures who in his famous *Postillae* stressed the literal sense of the Bible over against its allegorical scholastic interpretations and Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363-1429),

the celebrated French scholar and reformer, chancellor of the University of Paris who managed to combine academic excellence with a clear focus on church reform, mystical Christian spirituality, and pastoral emphasis. (Nicholas of Lyra sermon *Postil - Postillae perpetuae in universam S. Scripturam* – was so popular that it became the first printed Biblical Commentary (printed in Rome, in 1471). Luther depended on it especially in his commentaries on the Book of Genesis.)

2.2. Earlier 'Reformers' - Girolamo Savonarola, John Wycliffe, John Hus

Luther also engaged the ideas of other, more recent and controversial reformers, such as Girolamo Savonarola, John Wycliffe, and, above all, John Hus. Like his predecessors, Luther too was bothered by a high degree of ungodliness in the supposedly Christian society, only his focus was on the latent core and root of that ungodliness in false doctrine [2, vol. 54, p. 110]. This difference in focus, however, did not prevent him from exclaiming that “[t]he gospel that we now have had been born of Hus’ blood” [8]. In the debates with the Bohemian Brethren (led mainly by Lukas from Prague in early 1520s), Luther could consolidate his views on several central issues that would later be disputed, above all the Lord’s Supper and baptism of infants. The Christianization of Christendom was happening, according to Luther, in the Bohemian lands as well as part of one movement of reform [9].

Other theologians from Luther’s vicinity seemed to have similar emphases and desire for reform, such as Luther’s superior, Johannes von Staupitz [10], Johannes von Paltz (professor in Erfurt), Stephan Fridolin (Nuremberg), and others. Among recent Catholic historians, Jean Delumeau speaks of a strong movement that had existed within the European Christianity to Christianize Christendom by reforming its piety and practice [11].

2.3. Monastic mysticism, ‘observant friars’ and semi-monastic renewal movements

Another interesting source of renewal that Luther was familiar with were The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life (or: Brethren of the Common Life; New Devout), a movement that stood between the clerical-synodical reform of the Catholic Church and the lay reforms of the Protestants. Luther was familiar with Thomas à Kempis’ (1380-1471) and Gabriel Biel’s (1420-1495) works, both of whom actively participated in the movement. He was also familiar with the mystical theology of Bernard Clairvaux (1090-1153), Johannes Tauler (1300-1361) and the *Theologia Germanica* (known also as *Theologia Deutsch*, which some have attributed to Tauler) which constituted a theological dissent against the scholastic theology of the time, emphasizing humans’ dependence on God, the need for humility and for an intense, personal devotion to God [12]. Also important were the revitalization efforts within Western monasticism in the form of the ‘observant friars’ dedicated to grow deep in their piety and commitment to Christian ideals. Martin Bucer, Johannes Oecolompadius,

Stephan Agricola, Andreas Osiander, Martin Luther, and other important figures of Church reform and renewal had matured in devotion as monks (mostly Augustinians, but also Benedictines, Franciscans, and Dominicans) before they became Church reformers. Despite critical remarks that he had about monks and monasteries in general, Luther could and did also speak positively about monastic ideals. Instead of denying the applicability of the Evangelical counsels from the Sermon on the Mount to the lives of common believers (i.e. those outside of monasteries), Luther included every baptized Christian into the fold of those both obliged and privileged to follow Jesus as Lord and heed his call in all situations of their lives [2, vol. 21, p. 7]. Luther reminds his readers that “no one can understand this [Jesus’ words] unless he is already a real Christian. This point and all the rest that follow are purely fruits of faith, which the Holy Spirit Himself must create in the heart. Where there is no faith, there the kingdom of heaven also will remain outside.” [2, vol. 21, p. 15] This emphasis could partly be seen as a follow up on a strong late-medieval drive to make religion more present and relevant in common people’s lives through the mission of certain type of monastic and semi-monastic religious communities [7, 13]. In addition, monastic theology, especially of the Augustinian type, with its wish to cultivate spiritual knowledge in order to enhance the love of God and of neighbour, helped Luther and other reformers clarify their vision of the kind of Christian life and Christian society they wished to attain.

2.4. Christian humanism

Christian humanism was yet another important factor that influenced Luther and his colleagues in their struggle to re-Christianize Christendom. Emphasizing the importance of going back to the original sources of Christianity – Scripture and early patristics – for the cultivation of inner religious life and a subsequent change of behaviour, the humanists such as D. Erasmus, P. Melancthon, J. Reuchlin, L. Valla, M. Ficino (etc.) helped prepare the climate of reform ripe for changes more fundamental than those accomplished earlier. With their skills in education and debate, Christian humanists became an important force of reform both in the Catholic and Protestant environments. The monastic and humanist visions of new European Christianity helped Luther and countless other reformers conceive of and work toward their own vision of genuine Christianity.

2.5. Luther’s personal experience of spiritual renewal and first encounters with opposition

Based on the type of ideas and actions contained in his Christianizing agenda, Luther’s reform may be seen as more than another step toward intellectual awakening and moral transformation of individuals and societies. We should rather perceive it as a “second step in the process of Christianizing the entire culture, an extensive attempt to rid Europe of superstition ... and to

produce a purified Christian culture” [7, p. 35] based on a specific agenda of reform because “for most reformers ... [the Middle Age type of] Christianity was in many ways seriously deficient” [7, p. 17]. In his letter *To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany* (1524), Luther puts in stark contrast the ‘darkness’ and ‘misery’ of the past with the new reality of the Gospel [14], urging his countrymen to do everything they can to spread it on: “Let us remember our former misery, and the darkness in which we dwelt. Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God’s word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history.” [2, vol. 45, p. 352] Luther wanted other people to experience that which he had experienced when he discovered the Gospel of the undeserved grace of God which seeks and justifies the repenting sinner: “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.” [2, vol. 34, p. 337]

2.6. The Wittenberg (inner) circle

Finally, even with a clear agenda, Luther could never have pulled his reform of Christianity off without the inner circle of his Wittenberg colleagues: Philip Melancthon, Justus Jonas, Johannes Bugenhagen, Caspar Cruciger, and Georg Major – each uniquely contributing to theological consolidation, institutionalization, and spread of the reform [15].

3. Nature and framework of ‘Missio Dei’ according to Luther

Luther understood mission as a way of life, an intense spiritual experience of the presence of Christ that resulted in one’s following His lead, individually and as a liturgical community. God sends “the pure Gospel, the noble and precious treasure of our salvation. This gift evokes faith and a good conscience in the inner man, as is promised in Isa. 55[:1], that his Word will not go forth in vain, and Rom. 10[:17], that ‘faith comes through preaching’.” [2, vol. 40, p. 146] As a result, helpless sinners are ushered into a new freedom for selfless love toward one’s neighbour [2, vol. 31, p. 365-366; 16; 17].

Those who know the liberating power of the Gospel by experiencing its liberating power cannot keep this ‘news’ to themselves [9, vol. 52, p. 602, 8-26]. For Luther, every “real Christian” [2, vol. 36, p. 262] lives for the sake of spreading the Gospel [9, vol. 12, p. 267, 3-7] and has the duty to give a missionary witness. Luther exclaims: “if he is in a place where there are no Christians he needs no other call than to be a Christian, called and anointed by God from within. 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.” [2, vol. 39, p. 310] This then becomes a concrete, authentic way for humans to participate in the movement of the Spirit that began with the apostles and continues until the end of times [9, vol. 10, p. 139]. The Church exists and is structured in such a way as to facilitate the spread of the

Gospel: “If He is to be their God, then they must know Him and believe in Him; if they are to believe, then they must first hear His Word; then preachers must be sent who will proclaim God’s Word to them” [2, vol. 14, p. 9]. This is then the very reason for the existence of the Church – through it the *missio Dei* continues until the end of times [9, vol. 47, p. 565–566]. (In His *The Structure of Lutheranism* Werner Elert argues for a rehabilitation of Luther’s views on mission [18].) God continues to be on a mission to find the lost and reconcile them with Himself.

Luther’s focus on preaching the ‘pure Gospel’, however, did not mean that everything old and external (practices, rituals) needed to be discarded. Luther did not champion a one-sided internalization, spiritualization, and individualization of faith. “Now when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the Gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him...” [2, vol. 40, p. 146]

Much of the medieval heritage could be re-appropriated in the renewed Christian faith and practice, providing the old forms were conducive to Evangelical teaching. While having its source and power solely from above, Christian faith was directed at the temporal reality. It was to permeate human thinking and action in one’s specific earthly callings. In addition, without appropriate external rituals and means of grace, according to Luther, guilty consciences could never be adequately consoled, the needs of one’s neighbour were not seen in the proper light and, above all, the saving presence of Christ in the power of the Spirit mediated through the mundane means of the proclaimed word and sacraments in the context of the living Body of Christ, was overlooked.

This mission of God to save the lost does not unfold in a neutral context, however. There is and, ever since the fall, has been an apocalyptic battle being waged between God and devil, between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Christians will always be a minority in this world, constantly under attack by the evil one [9, vol. 12, p. 529-540]. Rather than complaining, losing courage and faith, they should rather trust God’s plan, according to which persecution may help the church to live and spread the Gospel. In what Luther considered to be the final stage before imminent apocalyptic closure of history, the newly Christianized, Evangelical church must use all its resources for the sake of faithful proclamation of the Gospel – even to Jews, Turks, and newly discovered territories, although these emphases were rather marginal in Luther. (Answering to the papal bull *Coena Domini* in 1522, Luther argues that the true way to spread the Christian Kingdom is through preaching the word even to the Turks with the hope of evangelizing them [2, vol. 46, p. 184].) Luther writes: “We

must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us, that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, hear our Christian teaching, and witness our Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff-necked, what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either.” [2, vol. 45, p. 229]

The German reformer further believed that his fellow Germans were then living in the final ‘dispensation’ which made the last possible missionary activity all the more acute. “For you should know that God’s word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It has been with the Jews, but when it’s gone it’s gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it’s gone it’s gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it; but when it’s gone it’s gone, and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.” [2, vol. 45, p. 352-353]

4. Conclusions

Luther’s initial analysis of the state of Christianity in the European Christendom was similar to his predecessors and contemporaries. His missionary voice became unique within the European Christianity only after he subjected the Church’s tradition to the testimony of Scriptures (and his own Evangelical interpretation) [9, vol. 2, p. 17, 37 – 18, 6]. However, a concrete application of the *missio Dei* in the context of the church in Germany became clear only after 1520, the year when he published his four major reformation treatises delineating his agenda of reform: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *Treatise on Good Works*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*.

Luther’s understanding of God’s mission – *missio Dei* – is thoroughly Trinitarian in character and is situated in an apocalyptic framework of Luther’s conception of salvation history. This kind of theological approach prevents believers from lapsing into a ‘works-righteousness’ scheme (or piety) and stimulates an awareness of urgency when it comes to actively participating in the works of God’s Kingdom on Earth. On the other hand, the above mentioned apocalyptic framework exerted a detrimental influence on Luther’s thinking, especially when he dealt with his opponents. It prompted him to consider his opponents, such as the papists [2, vol. 45, p. 60; 2, vol. 37, p. 367; 2, vol. 22, p. 163-164; 2, vol. 54, p. 346], Turks [2, vol. 46, p. 180], Jews [2, vol. 32, p. 147], but also those who disagreed with infant baptism and Christ’s real presence in Lord’s Supper, as opponents of the Gospel and, therefore, in the service of the Antichrist [2, vol. 38, p. 282; 2, vol. 40, p. 261]. (Luther further asserts that Jews are under divine wrath because of their “lies, cursing and blasphemy” and should be expelled from Christian territory [2, vol. 47, p. 268].) Here Luther failed to uphold his own theological principle of hoping and trusting in the divine,

Trinitarian plan to usher the God's Kingdom, relying instead on the power of magistrates to maintain orthodoxy. It is precisely because Jesus, the Crucified *is* Christ, the Risen, that we must never succumb to despair as if the world (and our dire personal circumstances) were left to the devil.

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