

Lutheran Mission Matters



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The Word, the Baptized, and the Mission of God

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Abstract: Many in the LCMS recognize that the United States is a vast “mission field” as exotic to our American churches as any mission field overseas. At the same time we primarily follow patterns of Gospel ministry developed in and for a highly churching society rather than the mission field. In order to proclaim the Gospel faithfully in our present American context we need to embrace God’s mission paradigm. That first requires that we understand the essential differences between the church dominated world (Western Christendom) and the non-churching dominated world (mission field). Secondly, we must consider God’s missionary paradigm as described in the New Testament and amply demonstrated in present-day mission fields. Two questions guide this consideration: (1) “Are the dynamics of missionary outreach presented in the New Testament and regularly found on our foreign mission fields applicable for the missionary context of twenty-first-century America?” and (2) “If they are applicable, how do we employ them in our churches?”

For centuries we Lutherans associated world missions with countries and people groups far away. More recently, however, we’ve come to realize that world mission is here and now. The majority of our Lutheran congregations find themselves planted in communities with increasing numbers of people who have little or no affiliation with a Christian congregation. For all intents and purposes, the United States has become a vast “mission field” as exotic to our American churches as any overseas. While we acknowledge living on a mission field, our methods for reaching the millions of unchurched people are not very mission-oriented. Instead, they follow a pattern of Gospel ministry developed in and for a highly churching society. Ministry in a churching context centers the proclamation of Gospel *in* our local congregations, around altar and pulpit, which rightly assumes the ministry of ordained pastors. Our churching-based model also assumes that non-Christians should naturally come to our congregations where they will hear the true Gospel and be saved.

We Lutherans would agree that our Lord did not build His missionary enterprise with the hope that lost people might grope around in the darkness of sin until they stumbled upon one of His churches. We teach, rather, that Jesus intentionally left His heavenly sanctuary to personally “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus’

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mission paradigm, therefore, operates from the understanding that non-Christians will meet Him not by them seeking and finding His church, but by His church—Christ’s baptized people—seeking and finding them.

We need to embrace God’s mission paradigm in order to proclaim the Gospel faithfully in our present American context. To do that, we need first to understand the essential differences between the church-dominated world (Western Christendom) and the non-churched world (mission field). Secondly, we need to study the patterns of missionary expansion in the New Testament, as well as present-day mission fields.

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The New Testament lays a sound missiological foundation upon which to build our current missionary thinking. Missionary activity common in today’s “foreign fields” also offers invaluable insights for us to consider as we develop our Lutheran missionary outreach in America. Throughout this brief exploration, we must ask ourselves a couple of questions: (1) Are the dynamics of missionary outreach presented in the New Testament and regularly found on our foreign mission fields today applicable for the missionary contexts in which we find ourselves? and (2) If they are applicable, how do we employ them here?

Churched World and Mission Field

Elsewhere I have written about mission work being carried out in three contexts: (1) pre-churched, (2) churched, and (3) post-churched.²⁷ (The term “church” in these contexts refers not to the “Holy Christian Church” that we confess in the Apostles’ Creed, but to the institutional presence and influence of Christian churches in a given society or community.) We generally associate *pre-churched* ministry with classical foreign mission work where the Gospel is proclaimed among people groups that are not yet Christian and local churches have not been established. As the Gospel bears fruit among these peoples, churches are planted and increase both in size and influence in the general society. Over time, the churches grow to such significance that the ministry context shifts from *pre-churched* to *churched*.

Ministry in a *churched* context resides primarily within and proceeds from local congregations. The general society accords the church significant prestige, position, and influence in the community, including special privileges. Thus, a strong cultural bridge connects the community to the church. I recall from my childhood that many of the shops on the main streets of our small town posted signs in their windows announcing their closure from the hours of 12:00–3:00 p.m. on Good Friday in respect of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. A crèche was also prominently

displayed on the town square every Christmas. Such was the social influence of Christian churches in Napa, California.

Just as the waxing of the church's influence signals the shift from a *pre-churched* to a *churched* ministry context, the waning of that influence signals a shift from a *churched* to a *post-churched*²⁸ context. As the church's social position and influence diminish, our society increasingly reflects the cultural characteristics of a *pre-churched* world. We find ourselves once again living and serving in a full-fledged mission field.

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Gospel ministry in churched contexts and mission field contexts (*pre- and post-churched*) is the same ministry of reconciliation through the proclamation of Christ crucified and raised from the dead. They differ, however, in how non-Christians encounter that ministry. Gospel ministry within a churched context operates from the assumption that the church is in charge of the arena in which the Gospel is proclaimed. Its strong presence and significance in the community makes it a natural go-to place for the general community. Assuming that non-Christians have an innate attraction to the

church, Christians organize the proclamation of the Gospel almost exclusively within their congregation-centered ministry of ordained pastors. The baptized see their role primarily as supporting the Gospel ministry as carried out by the pastor. This ministry model is often referred to as the "attraction" model of Gospel proclamation.

In contrast, a mission field is defined not by the strong presence of churches but by their absence or insignificance in the general community. The Gospel is proclaimed specifically in contexts in which the non-Christian community rather than the church is in charge. Here the ministry of all the baptized becomes central. Ministry organizes with primary focus on those outside the church (see Acts 6:3–4). Pastors and/or missionaries frequent the places where the unchurched live and work, proclaiming the Gospel in and to their context. They also focus heavily on equipping and supporting laypeople to do the same. This ministry model might be called the mobile model of Gospel proclamation.

Gospel Proclamation in the New Testament

The local congregation, whether the Temple in Jerusalem or a community synagogue, was a strategic location for Gospel proclamation in the New Testament. Our Lord, however, emphasized by teaching and action that His ministry must not be

centered or restricted to those places. Jesus taught God's Word and healed broken people in public places as much as, if not more than, in sanctuaries. He revealed to the woman at the well both by presence and word that, "the hour is coming [and is now here] when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (Jn 4:21). Later, in response to the disciples' request that the Lord restore the Kingdom to Israel (with Jerusalem's Temple at its center), Jesus redirected their attention to the ends of the earth. The altar and pulpit of the Temple would no longer serve as the attraction or "come to" place for the nations (Acts 1:8). The Lord no longer bound His saving presence to place (Temple) or office (Levitical priesthood) but to Himself and His Word alone: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," referring to the temple of His body (Jn 2:19, 21).

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The radical shift from God's dwelling in a fixed location to His dwelling personally in Jesus of Nazareth was the focal point of St. Stephen's preaching in Acts 6 and 7. The Jewish leaders bound God and, therefore, His salvation to their pulpit and altar, the Temple. Stephen, on the other hand, testified to the reality that God binds His presence and saving work (Divine Service) to Jesus alone. Jesus Christ is the sole dwelling place of God on earth and the "temple" in which He proclaims His Good News. Stephen saw the ascended Lord Jesus standing at the Right Hand of His Father. From that "place of authority," Jesus fills all creation and so cannot be bound to any particular place on earth. Stephen emphasized the fact that God cannot (and will not) be bound to a temple made with human hands and controlled by human will, but meets His people where and when it pleases Him. He defended his position by chronicling the great story of God's salvation plan from Abraham through Solomon. Essential points included

- God *appeared* to our father Abraham when he was in the land of the Chaldeans. Note the association with Babylon, Israel's archenemy responsible for destroying the Temple.
- God *was with* Joseph in Egypt. Note that God used Egypt to save the world, including the children of Israel, during the worldwide famine (Gn 41:57).
- Moses *worshiped* the Lord not in the Temple, but on the Holy Ground of a mountain in the wilderness of Sinai. There God commissioned him to lead His people out of bondage (Ex 3:1–12). It is also there that God commissioned Israel to be His priests for the nations (Ex 19:1–7).

- God dwelled among the Israelites as He led them through the wilderness for forty years, meeting them daily at the “tent of witness.” God designed His sanctuary to be mobile, a portable dwelling with which He and His people traveled and witnessed among the nations.

It is important to take note of the fact that during those forty years of wandering, God and His great Name (character) became known among the nations. Key to the essence of His character was the fact that, in contrast to all other nations and their gods, Yahweh dwelled personally among His people.

The story of a good and gracious God dwelling among sinful people was being played out on the center stage of history with the world watching. That fact formed the basis of Moses’ plea to God not to destroy the Israelites when they rebelled at Kadesh: “They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of your people. . . . Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, ‘It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’ And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, ‘The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love’” (Num 14:13–18).

The nations were obviously talking among themselves about Yahweh and His relationship with (authority over) Israel. It may have gone something like this: “The God who dwells among the Israelites is all powerful. He dwells among His people both blessing and protecting them. No nation can stand in His way or harm His people.” Such seemed to be the “talk of the towns.” The buzz reached the ears of Rahab in Jericho far ahead of Israel’s arrival there: “For we have heard . . .” (Jo 2:10). Hearing the story of God’s mighty acts among the nations for the sake of His people moved Rahab to believe that God (through Israel) would deal kindly with her and her family: “[For] the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father’s house” (Jo 2:11–12).

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The above underscores the fact that God binds His saving power to His Word, and His Word goes where He sends it—through the mouths of His people and even through the mouths of those who may not yet believe. Mission strategy must always take into account the power and mobility of the Word, working far beyond the altars and pulpits of local congregations and the direct ministry of called pastors. Such

Gospel proclamation featured prominently in Luke's account of Christ's missionary work in the first century. Following the death of St. Stephen, the Lord scattered His Word among the nations as the persecuted Christians fled Jerusalem (Acts 8:1–4; 11:19–20). The Lord Jesus was on the move, proclaiming His Gospel through His baptized just as He promised.

In the Great Commission passage of Luke 24:44–48, our Lord promised to send the Holy Spirit to His disciples, equipping them to participate with Him in His mission. His gift of the Spirit equipped them to be His witnesses in all the world. “[You] will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). St. Luke chronicled the movement of Jesus and His people into the world (Acts 1:8) by tracking the giving of His missionary Spirit to each new believer. Each of His steps along the way—from Jerusalem to Judea, then Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth”—was specifically marked by the outpouring of His Holy Spirit upon the saints in those places (Acts 8:15–17; 10:44). The Holy Spirit's coming to the Gentiles assembled in the house of a Roman centurion especially alerted the Jewish Christians that Jesus would not center His ministry in a certain place or among a certain group of people. “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 11:15). The Gentiles were full heirs of the same “Promise” that the first disciples received, which included full participation in proclaiming the Gospel to the world.

In the verses immediately following Peter's testimony regarding his ministry among the Gentiles, Luke continued his narrative of the Gospel's movement to the “ends of the earth”:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19–21)

There is no indication in the account that this ministry of the Word was carried out by a select group of clergy or the “ordained.” A careful reading of Acts 8:1b–4, of which these verses in Acts 11 are a continuation, makes clear that those “preaching the Word” were the Christian men and women scattered by persecution (Acts 8:1b, 3). Laypeople, in distinction from the Apostles (called ministers of the Word), proclaimed Christ's Kingdom to people in Judea, Samaria, and more distant places.

Participation in Christ's mission was shared by all who were baptized into Christ. St. Peter made this point at the conclusion of his Pentecost sermon when he

proclaimed, “[The] promise is to you and your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39). The “promise” referenced by Peter was specifically the gift of Christ’s missionary Spirit, who was poured out on the disciples on Pentecost. (See also Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–8; and Acts 2:33–35.) The Spirit was given to the baptized not for personal faith in this case, but for their personal empowering to be Jesus’ witnesses in the world.

Gospel Proclamation in Overseas Mission Fields

The Book of Acts tells the story of a missionary Lord, racing into the world with His Gospel message as His faithful disciples panted to keep pace. Many of us who have served as evangelistic missionaries in mission fields overseas testify to the same phenomenon taking place. The following story relates a common occurrence experienced by many who’ve proclaimed the Gospel in *pre-churched* contexts where Christian congregations are few and far between.

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As God’s Word grew among the Kankanaey people in the mountain region of North Luzon, Philippines, it became time to relocate my headquarters from the fairly churched area of the region to a village located in a valley yet untouched by the Gospel. As a thank-you for allowing me to live among them, I hosted a feast for all of the village and gave each family a copy of the Gospel of St. Mark as a remembrance. St.

Mark was the first book of the Bible translated into the Kankanaey language. I, along with several faithful lay men and women from congregations in the churched area, labored for three years, preaching and teaching the Gospel publicly and from house to house and village to village. Our faithful sowing of the Gospel seemed to produce little fruit.

One morning, the chief elder of the village visited me in my small cabin and announced that his family as well as all the other families in the village desired to be baptized into Jesus. Given the irregular attendance of individual villagers at our Bible studies, I expressed some skepticism of their readiness. I failed to take into consideration the fact that the villagers often discussed with one another the bits and pieces of the Gospel they gleaned from our public meetings. I further failed to consider that lay men and women from our established churches often visited the village when I was away, staying in the villagers’ homes for a few days to teach and discuss God’s Word. Most of all, I failed to consider that Jesus was busy working among them all by Himself through His written Word.

“Missionary,” the chief elder replied, “you remember that you gave us the book, St. Mark? Our children have read the book to us more than once and we discuss it among ourselves. It says on the last page that if we believe in Jesus and are baptized we will be saved. We believe that Jesus is our Savior. Can we be baptized?”

The entire village was baptized a few weeks later. The Lutheran church born that day still remains committed to God’s Word and the Christian faith. Jesus is personally present where and when His Gospel is read and where His baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, speak. He proclaimed salvation in a village far beyond the earshot of pulpit or the celebration of the Divine Service. Jesus’ presence beyond the local congregation, through the ministry of His Word and His baptized, remains the primary element in the ongoing story of God’s mission to save the world.

Endnotes

²⁷ Robert D. Newton, “Missionary Churches: Navigating in a Post-Church World” in *The Lutheran Witness*, 129, no.1 (January 1, 2010): 6–11. “Facing Challenges of the Post-Christian World” in *The Lutheran Layman* (November–December 2013): 1–5.

²⁸ The terms “*post-churched*” or “*post-Christendom*” should not be referenced as suggesting the demise of Christ’s Church on earth (Rev 5:10). It refers, rather, to the collapse of the institutional church’s influential role in society—the role upon which we Western Christians heavily depend in order to proclaim the Gospel. Furthermore, the *post-churched* phenomenon is most apparent among Anglo Protestants and Roman Catholics. *Christendom*, with its roots in the Roman Catholic Church, continues to enjoy great cultural and social significance in Latin America, including Latin American churches here in the United States.