

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



Volume XXVII, No. 1 (Issue 54) May 2019

# Fear and the Mission of Christ

**Robert Kolb**

**Abstract:** Fear is a natural reaction to God’s drawing us out of our comfort zones into the flow of human history, which He has created and over which He is Lord. Especially scary are the challenges of witnessing to the faith and taking into our fellowship people who come from backgrounds with little knowledge of the biblical message and often hostile attitudes toward the Christian Church. Christ’s commissions to give witness to Him deliver the promise of His presence precisely in our witness to the Lord. As Immanuel, He accompanies us into what seems for us an uncertain future, as Lord of the days to come.

One night in Corinth, the Lord came to Paul to tell him, “Fear not. Continue to preach. Do not be silent. For I am with you . . .” (Acts 18:10). We are not told that Paul was particularly afraid at this point, although we do know that he had reason to be filled with trepidation from time to time (2 Cor 11:23–29). In fact, after receiving the Lord’s encouragement that night, he did get beaten up during the year and a half he spent in Corinth giving witness to Christ amidst rank pagans (Acts 18:11–17).

Paul himself did not mention being afraid in the face of the violence he suffered, as he reviewed it in 2 Corinthians 11; he even took delight in his “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties” after mentioning his frustration with the Lord’s failure to relieve his vexation with the buffeting of the messenger of Satan (2 Cor 12:7–10). Reasons for fear abounded during Paul’s mission, and it is most likely that Paul suffered any number of anxious moments in carrying out the mission on which the Lord had resolved to send him as His “chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” That charge, the Lord had promised Saul through Ananias, would involve no little suffering for His name (Acts 9:15–16).



*Rev. Dr. Robert Kolb is missions professor for systematic theology emeritus and retired director of the Institute for Mission Studies at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis and former chairman of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations. He has lectured and/or taught in fourteen European countries, Brazil, Venezuela, India, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Kolb is also Editor of Lutheran Mission Matters, journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology. [kolbr@csl.edu](mailto:kolbr@csl.edu)*

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Indeed, as Christ sent His followers into the world, He knew that He was dealing with human beings who are easily possessed by fears of various kinds. In commissioning His disciples on the Galilean mountain, Jesus did not specifically mention that fear would plague them. But they greeted Him with a mixture of worship and doubt. Nevertheless, Jesus assured them of His presence to the end of the age (and implicitly to the ends of the earth) as these eleven disciples were to reduplicate themselves by making disciples through baptism and teaching (Mt 28:19–20). Whatever one may believe about the way in which Mark ended his gospel, fear played a significant role in those days after the crucifixion and resurrection (Mk 16:9). But whether Mark or another author is responsible for the longer ending of this Gospel, the church recognized that the genre “Gospel” was supposed to end with a commissioning of those who believe to go into all the world and preach the good news to everyone in hearing distance (Mk 16:15), fear or no fear. It was the appearance of Jesus Himself that caused the fear that gave way to joy when Jesus explained again what being His follower meant for them according to Luke (24:37): they were to be witnesses by preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins, calling people to turn away from their sin and to receive the new life of the righteous child of God that forgiveness brings (24:46–48). The commissioning that John reports focused on that forgiving and retaining of sin that produces repentance and the trust in the gift of righteousness as God’s children. In this instance, fear of persecution—fear of the officials in Jerusalem—was disabling the disciples. Jesus pierced their defenses: no door could keep Him from those to whom He was promising His presence (Jn 20:19–23). Only at the sending of His disciples on His mission in Acts 1:8 is there no fear lurking in the background of Jesus’ dispatch of His baptized messengers to the world.

There are several reasons why God’s children find the world scary at times. First, the world is a threatening place for human beings ever since the fall exposed them to Satan’s flaming arrows (Eph 6:16) and the roar of the devil’s lion’s call (1 Pt 5:8). But faith provides the shield to ward off Satan’s assaults, according to Paul, and Peter likewise observes that faith in Christ resists the devil’s ardent desire to devour. Christians take the might of Satan seriously. But they also know that the Lion of Judah has mortally wounded the devil, that the war has been won even if the mopping-up actions are sometimes fierce. Those who trust in Christ defy the devil, reversing Adam’s and Eve’s defiance of God and His Word. The confidence of those who trust the Holy Spirit actually do experience His sending and accompanying them into conflict with Satan. There He equips them, they know, with the same weapon Jesus used in defeating the devil in the wilderness (Mt 4:1–11), the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Eph 6:17).

Others fear the future. Its changes and fluctuations, its dark corners, appear to these believers as a threat to the way of life in the church and world with which they have become comfortable. Inherent in Western thinking is the equation of order and

stability with the absence of change and fluctuation. This non-biblical understanding of what gives order and stability goes back to the early history of the church as it was growing in Hellenistic cultures. The church had moved into these cultures with a way of thinking that was cursed by the absence of a personal, communicating Creator, who sought community with His human creatures. Such a mindset made it necessary for people to think of human life as reliant on their own efforts to conform their lives to the eternal law. I, with my performance of the law, rather than a Creator figure, was thought to be the key to establishing and preserving order in the universe and peace in the human heart.

Aristotle's Unmoved Mover did not have personal interaction with his people. Their world lay in the shadows of the natural sinful fears that cannot help but arise in view of the fragility of order and peace and life itself in the world that has turned its back on the living person of our God.

In that atmosphere, the Hebrew concept of relying on God rather than on any other source of stability and security in life gave way to a world in which immutability replaced reliability as the most important characteristic of life's framework. The Hebrew conception of God as a person who has placed Himself in the midst of human history gave way to belief that change was always a sign of decay instead of the field on which God has chosen to operate in His creation. That has made it easy for believers to fear even the movement of God as He sends His people with His gospel into new and ever-changing situations. This ever-moving historical unfolding of life is, however, the nature of the world in which our absolutely reliable God has placed us. The world in which change is natural is the world of His design, a world inherently shaped by historical movement, of both progress and regress. God continues to give His blessings in ever new, as well as old, forms. Satan challenges God by promoting old and new evils in new situations. These new instances of evil invite the believers' attack with the Word of the Lord.

We are clearly being pushed or drawn into the future presence of God in 2019. He has blessed us with changes in health care and food production and communication that we gladly embrace. It seems likely that there is more to come from His providing hand. We are glad to receive more benefits in health care, for instance. However, that He is pushing, overseeing, and accompanying His church into challenges for our witness to His faithfulness and love in Christ Jesus is not always such a welcome thought. We too easily ignore that He has claimed Lordship

Inherent in Western thinking is the equation of order and stability with the absence of change and fluctuation. This non-biblical understanding of what gives order and stability goes back to the early history of the church as it was growing in Hellenistic cultures.

of all of the twenty-first century. Our century is the newest locale in which He is ready to demonstrate His power even through our weakness if we stop trying to define how we can be strong.

We look into the future with more foreboding and fear than North American Christians have in some time. We cultivate phobias of all sorts in reaction to the new developments in our culture. We dig in our feet and try not to budge. We turn back to pick up baggage from the way we are used to doing things, security blankets that weigh us down as we follow God's paths. In the midst of our trepidation, He moves us along as His history unfolds. It would not be good if He awaits us in His 2030 garden and has to call out "where are you?" again, because we wanted to turn around and find our way back to the security of the 1930s garden. We long for the garden of 1980 or 2000 because we have failed to notice that it has turned into a wilderness. We ignore the fact that God has planted us in the midst of a new garden with new challenges for cultivating faith in Christ, difficult only because we have not yet struggled with such invitations from our God to give witness to His restoration of humanity for the broken and exhausted of our age.

We ignore the fact that God has planted us in the midst of a new garden with new challenges for cultivating faith in Christ, difficult only because we have not yet struggled with such invitations from our God to give witness to His restoration of humanity for the broken and exhausted of our age.

Testifying to the world and defying our own fears, both those accurately grounded and those simply mistaken or born of hesitance or sloth, are part of the DNA of Lutherans. Luther himself stood before Emperor Charles V and witnessed to his faith to the baptized of Germany who had strayed to one side or the other of the edge of true trust in Jesus Christ. He may not have actually said, "Here I stand," at the diet, but his adherents aptly noted that he stood firm—though with no little trepidation—on Scripture and his "conscience," a word that he understood as the orientation or worldview which Scripture had built into his way of thinking through diligent study and the experience of Satanic attack. Under the papal threat of execution for heresy and the imperial threat of execution for defying civil authority, Luther lived a quarter of a century after standing firm before the emperor. As he grew older, his life was constantly on the move as the world around him changed. He met successive challenges in bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to his people who had been living in darkness, or at least the semi-darkness of the medieval practice of the faith. The core of his proclamation remained firm for the last quarter century of his life, but he never ceased experimenting with the best way to express it in ever new situations, addressing constantly changing issues.

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 27, no. 1 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Luther's right-hand man, Philip Melancthon, has a reputation as a mild-mannered, somewhat fainthearted companion, but that picture does not correspond at all to the reports from Augsburg in 1530. Contemporary observers compared him to Daniel in the lion's den, as he withstood the arguments and attacks of Roman Catholic opponents in the several months of negotiations at Augsburg. By 1530, several of Luther's and Melancthon's followers had suffered martyrdom. In 1523, Luther had written his first "hymn," an account of the burning of two fellow Augustinian brothers, Heinrich Voes and Johann van Esch, in Brussels. He noted their joy and serenity as they praised God from the pyre that consumed their earthly life.<sup>1</sup> Luther went on to present to the public several martyrs among those who had studied with him, for instance, in his preface to the confession of the faith by Robert Barnes. Barnes had visited Wittenberg and carried the message being shaped by Luther and Melancthon to England before King Henry VIII had his former diplomatic agent executed for the Lutheran heresy.<sup>2</sup>

Lutherans continued to translate Luther's theology and the Gospel of Christ into forms that related to the needs of their time. In the seventeenth century, Lutheran "Orthodox" theologians found expression of the faith in Aristotelian categories that Luther had foresworn so that their testimony to the faith would cross confessional lines and be understood in terms set down by Roman Catholic and Calvinist theologians. Also in the seventeenth century, early Lutheran missionaries ventured outside Europe, for instance, the Swedish pastor, Johan Campanius, whose translation of Luther's Small Catechism brought testimony to Christ to the Lenape speakers of the Delaware valley. Lutheran mission has continued, sometimes with more imperialistic imposition of European or North American values, sometimes with more faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ. These efforts have gone on in ever-changing situations, in the face of a variety of threats. These threats have brought martyrdom to Sumatran and African adherents of the Lutheran confession as well as to those in Europe who resisted National Socialist and Marxist denials of the Gospel. My own teacher, Hermann Sasse, was among the first to point out that Luther's way of thinking forbade support of either the positive or the negative racism of National Socialism.

But far short of martyrdom and persecution, the challenges of witness in the twenty-first century arouse fears of economic distress, medical problems, personal relationships, and countless other situations of daily life that interfere with our witness in our

Martin Luther devoted no little time when he was preaching to combatting fear in his hearers. . . . His confidence that God chooses to be Immanuel, God present among His people, supplied him with words of comfort in the face of real threats of various kinds.

world. Martin Luther devoted no little time when he was preaching to combatting fear in his hearers—fear of death, fear of illness, fear of loss, fear of hell, fear of the wrath of God. His confidence that God chooses to be Immanuel, God present among His people, supplied him with words of comfort in the face of real threats of various kinds. He was certain that the Lord had sent the Holy Spirit to speak through him (Mt 10:20). Surveys of contemporary U.S.-Americans suggest that fear besets many who sit in church pews in our time—less fears of persecution than fears of being bothered, less fears of God’s anger than fears of His absence, less fears of hell than fears of loneliness or loss of one’s job or one’s spouse or one’s children, and, to be sure, fear of illness and death. Such fears reveal our forgetting and not feeling the presence of Immanuel.

North American society at the beginning of the twenty-first century is wracked with uncertainty about the direction of our culture. Our uncertainty easily reveals how little even Christians actually trust that God is present and providing in our world. Lutherans, too, easily lose sight of the fact that God is daily and richly providing us with all that we need to support this body and life, protecting us in the face of all kinds of dangers, and guarding and preserving us in the face of evils of every kind. His pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy are not dependent on any merit or worthiness of our own but only on His unconditional love. And that makes it part of our reborn nature to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him, an obedience that follows also His command to be overflowing with the good news in ways that speak to those to whom He sends us.

Our uncertainty easily reveals how little even Christians actually trust that God is present and providing in our world.

Instead, too often we find ourselves on a mad search for comfort and calm. We long to find satisfaction and contentment. We covet reassurance and relief in the midst of anxiety and insecurity brought on by many factors. We want to nestle in cozy zones of comfort and not venture any farther than the limits imposed by our feeling of safety or security. But the Lord wants to be our source of safety and our shelter in time of storm. Christ claims to be the protector and guardian of His people. And He is always on the move. He assures us that we can with all confidence move with Him—as scary as that may seem—out of our comfort zones into conversation with and commitment to the strangers and the strange.

The term “comfort zone” filtered into the language almost a century ago, referring first to the range of temperature tolerance a person had. A zone is a place, and knowing our place and being greeted by everyone calling us by name is very important in life. God wants to define the zone in which He calls us to serve Him. He knows better than we do where He needs us, where we are to be. We may try to stand still and preserve or retrieve a comfort zone, hoping to hang onto gifts meant

for a previous day or today but not for tomorrow. Despite our best efforts to slow it down, God moves history right along whether we like it or not. The football or basketball player who knows better than the coach where he or she should find the proper zone on field or floor will not last long on the team.

[God] knows better than we do where He needs us, where we are to be.

To be sure, God has chosen what seems like a risky zone in which He wants us to play in our time and place. We face these risks soberly and realistically. One risk involves the possibility that we will be called to endure exclusion and mockery. But baptismal water toughens the skin. We do not enjoy or seek being shut out by friends or casual acquaintances. After all, it is only being as human as we were in Eden to seek cordial relationships. But in a sinful world that does not always happen. We do not find merit or pleasure in such experiences of rejection or contempt, but we are not surprised when they come. And we do not dismiss the potential that the Holy Spirit will reap from our witness even though we may never know of it.

Much more serious is the danger that we make our own material and/or emotional security more important than the security that others can find in Christ if we only offer it to them. Our own view of our “necessities” can easily obscure the fact that our lives are secure in the hands of the providential God who is our Savior and Lord. People like us also need to hear the Gospel; but the handicapped, the lonely, the addicts, the ex-cons and the imprisoned, and the refugees that brush against our world also need our witness to the deliverance from evil and the gift of new life as righteous children of God. Only from us can they be restored to the full enjoyment of their humanity. That they be turned to Him is the desire of our God (Ezek 18:23; 33:11); and, of course, as children who want what our heavenly Father wants, it is our desire as well. Thus, we are called by God to resist the ever-present temptation to get caught up in the cultural values of North American societies that make “my rights” or my entertainment more important than the lives and welfare of others. The danger is real that we appear to the world around us as just one more typical U.S.-American or Canadian or Mexican, that we blend in with the rest of our own cozy corners of North American culture. If there is not enough evidence of our being disciples of Jesus to convict us in a civil court, will there be enough to convict those to whom Christ is sending us with His Word in their hearts. How can we generate the conviction that the Holy Spirit wishes to create in them if they cannot see and hear that we are Christians by our love in word and deed.

Giving witness to Christ and sharing the joy and peace He gives create a bridge that carries us into a new reality, out of our comfort zone into what may seem like darkness. But this darkness of a future different from what has made us comfortable in the past is actually inhabited by God. It resounds with His Word. In talking of Jesus and demonstrating His love, care, and concern for others, we experience His

assurance that He is present in our lives and eager to find a place at the center of the lives of those who do not know Him. All the places that seem risky to us are places He has visited. In the face of every danger, we know that He has already been there and done that.

Is being the people of God, the body of Christ, a member of the Lord's family a scary thing to be in the twenty-first century? Do I as a person who belongs to the One who has taken possession of me through His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death have reason to fear as I try to speak of the Lord to those who greet my first words with glazed-over eyes and ears? Of course! Naturally! My sinful nature has anxieties of several kinds in those situations—some valid, some invalid. But the Holy Spirit, whom Christ promised also to us (Jn 14:15–18), bestows upon us a spirit of courage, not cowardice; a spirit of confidence, not caution; a spirit of joy and hope, not retreat and withdrawal. The spirit that the Spirit gives, free of charge, carries us and the peace we enjoy into the lives of those with whom God has arranged encounters for us. These encounters turn out also to be rendezvous with Him, who casts out fear with His perfect love (1 Jn 4:18).

In talking of Jesus and demonstrating His love, care, and concern for others, we experience His assurance that He is present in our lives and eager to find a place at the center of the lives of those who do not know Him.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “A New Song Here Shall Be Begun” (1524) in *Luther's Works, Vol. 53*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and Ulrich S. Leopold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 214–216.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “Preface to Robert Barnes, Confession of Faith” (1540) (trans. Mark E. Garemaux, ed. Corey D. Maas) in *Luther's Works, Vol. 60*, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 230–233.