

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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

# **LUTHERAN MISSION MATTERS**

## **Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology**

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

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—Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology, Inc.—  
ISSN 2470-1874 (print); ISSN 2470-1882 (online)

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The journal is an open-access publication and is available online at <https://lsfm.global>. Members of the society who contribute more than \$30 per year may choose to receive an identical paper copy of the journal.

The journal is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database (online journal index of the American Theological Library Association) and its related online full-text component, ATLAS (American Theological Library Association Serials). ATLAS may be accessed at no charge by alumni of many seminaries upon request to the library of their alma mater.

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ALL CORRESPONDENCE SHOULD BE SENT TO THE OFFICE OF THE EDITOR:

*LUTHERAN MISSION MATTERS* TEL: (314) 505-7116  
14100 Sunland Dr. FAX: (314) 505-7124  
Florissant, MO 63034, USA

BOOKS FOR REVIEW SHOULD BE SENT TO THE BOOK EDITOR:

Joel Okamoto TEL: (314) 505-7152  
14100 Sunland Dr. E-mail: [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com)  
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# Inside This Issue: Faithful in Mission

It is fitting that this issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters* explores faithfulness in mission as the major theme, actually a postscript to its predecessor that discussed a closely related theme, “Released for Mission.”

“A More Hopeful Future for the LCMS” was the lead article in the November 2018 issue. Four authors together composed the cover story as the summation of over one hundred responses received from the more than five hundred influencers in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod who were surveyed. The study centered on concerns about the future of the church in these postmodern times. Respondents included pastors, district presidents, mission executives, and other church leaders who significantly influence the church body and its operation. Everyone agreed that the church’s ministry expansion must begin with “looking outward, getting outside the building, and getting our hands dirty in the community.”

The editorial committee has since carefully deliberated this point and wanted to further explore ways to encourage the church to become more outward looking and “to get hands dirty” in God’s mission in Jesus Christ to the whole world. Dr. Robert Scudieri volunteered to take the lead. Scudieri has been a member of the editorial committee since its formation in 1992. Throughout his career, Bob has been serving as an outward-looking pastor, a forward-looking mission developer, mission executive, and Executive Director of North American Missions, preparing the entire church intentionally to “get its hands dirty” in God’s mission.

Our theme is based on the biblical text of Matthew 25:14–30, famously known as the parable of the talents. In this parable, our Lord is teaching His listeners an important lesson on the stewardship of God’s gifts. In the lesson, the landlord gave three of his servants his assets to invest wisely and multiply before he set out on a journey. The first two went to work hard with their master’s investment and brought him a sizable profit, while the third servant simply sat on his portion and did nothing to increase it. The master came home expecting a sizable return from his investment, with interest. He praised the first two and rebuked the third slothful servant. Scholars note that the word translated “interest” in verse 27 is equivalent to “child bearing” in classical Greek. Thus, the servants who received the master’s money were expected to reproduce more money! God has given His people talents to grow and increase. Inertia and stagnation have no place in God’s kingdom.

An ensemble of sterling scholars and well-respected authorities on confessional theology, Christian ministry and mission fill this volume with missional substance. The contributors include Bible academics, theologians, district presidents, mission executives, mission developers, church planters, as well as those directly involved in Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Braille work, and ethnic immigrant ministries

intent on making Christ known among all people. They dig deeply into the biblical text and interpret its meaning in contextually appropriate ways for ordinary people to understand and believe.

One theologian of the church and a district president buttress the position that fear and doubt will have no place in all God's children who trust in His promises and step out of their comfort zones to reach out to outsiders with the Good News of salvation. Yet another district president and a mission executive reiterate that the church's ongoing interaction with the surrounding cultures provides endless breakthroughs for ministry and mission. God keeps bringing new immigrants to our neighborhoods, even to our doorsteps, so that we may serve them as God-ordained people of peace. North America is ripe for cross-cultural mission and multiethnic ministry as new immigrants from all over the world are flocking to this country and make it duly their home.

God's people who serve internationally see the big picture of God's faithfulness as He accomplishes His will through ordinary people. They acknowledge how the one true faith meets different cultures and religions across the globe and transforms peoples and communities fundamentally in Christ. For God's people in the majority world, salvation bespeaks liberation, freedom from oppressive forces, and embracing the divine gift of new humanity in Christ.

This issue calls God's people across the globe to serve Him faithfully in the various vocations in which He has placed them as His witnesses. The authors present a wide-ranging, inclusive interpretation of ministry and mission in the twenty-first century. The essays, mission encounters, reflections, and reviews here presented are but a minuscule contribution to the vast, massive, and virtually impenetrable area of mission that calls for further study and exploration. Welcome to happy and thoughtful reading and reflection on how God leads us to serve Him wherever He rules and reigns.

Victor Raj,  
Editor  
*Lutheran Mission Matters*



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Prof. Lamin Sanneh at a conference in 2014.

## **Dr. Lamin Sanneh 1942–2019**

### **Translating the Message with Lamin Sanneh**

**Joel Elowsky**

Professor Lamin Sanneh died this past January 6, 2019, in New Haven, Connecticut, from complications due to a stroke he had suffered a few days earlier. He had just accepted an invitation to speak at Concordia Seminary's Multiethnic Symposium and was looking forward to the visit this May, as was the seminary community. His death is a loss to the church and to world Christianity. There have

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been any number of tributes to a man who had such a significant influence and impact on world Christianity.

The Yale website details all the different academic positions he held in Africa, England, and here in America at Harvard and Yale. He authored and edited at least a dozen books on relations between Christianity and Islam, along with over two hundred articles that were stand-alone monographs or parts of collected works on history, Christianity, or Islam. He received numerous awards, among which was the *Commandeur de l'Ordre National Du Lion du Senegal* and appointments on commissions by two popes. He was a professor, prolific author, colleague, church-statesman, mentor, husband, father—and friend.

I first got to know Lamin in 2007 when he had reluctantly accepted an invitation to return to Africa for a conference I and others were hosting on early African Christianity. I say “reluctantly” because by that time in his career his attention had turned from world Christianity to Islam. He was born into a Muslim family and so always had a special place in his heart for Islam. He was convinced the future of Islam lay in the pacifist tradition, but was not naïve enough to believe that all Muslims would agree on that point. One of his last books, *Beyond Jihad: Pacifist Impetus in Muslim West Africa and Beyond* (Oxford, 2016), which I reviewed last year, details his thesis more fully. He championed support for those Muslim clerics who were trying to take on the more radical forms of Islam, often at risk for their own lives.

The readers of this journal are more likely familiar, however, with his seminal text, *Translating the Message* (1989, 2nd ed. 2009), which has had an impact on a generation of missionaries and mission scholars alike. The premise was simple: Jesus spoke in Hebrew and Aramaic, and yet the very Scriptures that recorded His life were already immediately after His death and resurrection rendered in translation into Greek, and then Latin, Syriac, and a host of other languages up to the present.

Christianity, Lamin never tired of saying, was the most translated religion in the world. And this was by God’s design. Other religions relied on a particular language for their authority. For instance, the authentic Q’uran must be read in Arabic in order for it to be authoritative. Authentic Judaism finds its roots in Hebrew. But Christianity is not tied to one language or one people or culture, as the events at Pentecost made clear. It was and always is meant to be translatable across cultures, ethnicities, every tribe, language, and tongue (Rev 5:9; 14:6). The implication for missions was clear: one culture is not “better” than another culture or closer to authentic Christianity. The Gospel is for all.

This message resonated in Africa and has resonated in other parts of the world as well. When I was asked to lecture in Uganda to four hundred military leaders from around the continent, the question they wanted answered was: Is Christianity the White Man’s Religion? This was the message they had been hearing from their

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Muslim neighbors and practitioners of African Tradition Religion (ATR). It seemed an obvious question to me. No, Christianity is not the white man's religion. "Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight" went the childhood song. But to my audience, the question was anything but childish. It was a burning question and one the African Lamin Sanneh, scholar from Harvard and Yale, had taken seriously. He answered not only directly, but in a way that took into account the way of thinking of the majority world, the Two-thirds World, the global South. Whatever expression you may choose to describe where the majority of Christians are living in the twenty-first century, it is not the exclusive domain of the white man, woman, or child, and definitely not that of only Western Christianity, as Lamin insisted in his introduction to the second edition of *Translating the Message* when he wrote:

It is past time we overcame the barrier of the Western restriction of the religion. Colonial powers, for example, suppressed non-Western cultures even where they happened to embrace Christianity. The Christian name was not sufficient protection against political disfavor. On the contrary, in many places it was a handicap to be a Christian: the name as such did not spare you the fallout of Western secular distrust or of local suspicion. Many people saw that Westernization bestowed benefits that took no account of Christianity. Yet the obverse of the case was also obvious: Christians became such for reasons eminently independent of Western support. The situation called for adopting a confessional position to the effect that the achievement of Western civilization is not Christianity's prescription for the backwardness of non-Western societies because the gospel supersedes claims of progress and backwardness. That stance is implicit in Bible translation.

When we were traveling around Nigeria, Ghana, and other countries in Africa to packed crowds of young African students who flocked to the lectures, the refrain of Christianity's translatability across languages, cultures, and times never grew old. But what fascinated me most about Lamin and these lectures was how he always had such a deep interest in the students, in the young people he encountered—perhaps more so than for the administrative officials or others who were always clamoring to see him for photo-ops, although he was always gracious. But the students were always his first concern and it was evident he enjoyed the encounters immensely.

In the acknowledgment section of *Translating the Message*, Lamin notes, "The academic life is notorious for the toll it takes on time, concentration, and personal isolation for which a true, if often rare, collegiality is the real antidote." I enjoyed that true, rare collegiality on many occasions over the last eleven years with him. I learned what it means to be a scholar, a gentleman, a devout Christian, but most of all, a friend.

*Requiescat in pace*

## *Editorial*

# **Forgotten, That Is, Neglected, Treasures**

**Victor Raj**

With the coming of Jesus Christ into our world, God ushered in His rule and reign on earth. This good news for humanity's sake is at the heart of God who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. God has commissioned His Church to witness this truth for the life and salvation of all God's creation (Mk 16:15).

Jesus taught that in Him the full revelation of God's kingdom is given to His disciples, even though it remains hidden from those outside His circle of followers (Mk 4:11). Jesus equated His kingdom's enigma to a treasure buried in the ground, perhaps for security reasons, to guard it from thieves, robbers, and looters (Mt 13:44). One shrewd individual, however, risked everything he had and invested in the property in anticipation of the hidden treasure (Mt 13:44). In every age, the gracious God raises up and empowers His baptized children to announce to outsiders the complete understanding of this profound mystery.

God bequeathed to the apostle Paul the stewardship of preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus Christ across cultures and continents, to the Jews as well as those outside the traditional Jewish households (Acts 9:15; 2 Cor 5:17). According to Paul, God has placed in His Church as stewards a variety of people in leadership positions, such as apostles and prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers, for training and equipping His people so that they serve the Church and world in a variety of ways (Eph 4:11–13). God continues to build His Church on earth as His instrument to spread the Good News of salvation in Christ throughout the world, locally and globally.

In New Testament times, landlords authorized stewards (οικονόμος)<sup>1</sup> and overseers (επισκοπος) (Ti 1:7) to serve as trustees to manage their property, assets, and their entire household. Stewards were invested with the power of attorney over everything under their masters' ownership as administrators and superintendents.

Our Lord used another one-verse parable to illustrate the role of God's people in unraveling His kingdom on earth. The people of God, who are given ownership of the most precious gift of the Gospel, are like the master of the house who brings out of this mysterious treasure what is new and what is old (Mt 13:52). They must therefore train well and sharpen their skills to participate in God's kingdom activities, unearthing the treasures God has invested in His chosen people. Christians

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rest assured that God uses them to accomplish His purposes in mighty ways far beyond human planning and strategizing.

Those who are placed in leadership positions are God's stewards set apart to serve people in the various callings God has given them. For the sake of God and His kingdom work, church leaders must deliberately stay away from controversies, polemics, and arguments that only obstruct Gospel proclamation and do not contribute to mutual consolation and edification. Under divine guidance, Paul exhorts that they must make every effort at working towards resolving conflicts, reconciliation, and peace-making, especially within the community of believers (1 Cor 3:6; 4:1–2; Col 4:1–4; 1 Tim 1:4).

In the same vein, God has privileged His Church of the twenty-first century to unravel in one voice the mystery of the Gospel across cultures and contexts. All Christians must acknowledge with Paul that they are God's chosen people, who are no more than earthen vessels and fragile clay jars (2 Cor 4:7), God's own instruments set apart for His mission to the world.

Christians in America today are on assignment to welcome to God's household especially the new immigrants from around the world. These people and their households have come to our shores to find their new home in the land the pilgrims envisaged for all who seek prosperity and freedom. For a fact, the early immigrants to America foresaw that God had primed this country for ministry and new mission starts. Lutherans, too, found their new American neighborhoods ripe for evangelism and mission.

In his book, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church*, Michael W. Newman points out that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) during the early decades of its formation grew exponentially as a missional community. Newman observes that eventually, for a time, the church's true treasure got buried in the ground unlike that of their forebears, who zealously shared the faith with their friends and neighbors. "Our forefathers were heroic in their strenuous efforts to start new churches for those who had no access to faith communities and for many who had never followed Christ," Newman wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Early on, churchmen and theologians of the LCMS perceived that "the unchurched, that is, such as are not members of a Christian church, are the missionary's mission material."<sup>3</sup> Newman further augments his case with Walter A. Maier's assertion that the "mission would grow through converts, not through Lutheran transferees."<sup>4</sup> Lutheran leaders understood that the church truly is a place for those who do not yet belong. In recent years, however, most churches are in a hiatus, since institutionalism has impaired its vision and vanquished its mission direction for proclaiming Christ outside the church doors and beyond the borders.

A noticeable majority of the LCMS partner churches are experiencing a similar pause in their outreach and church planting ministries in our generation. Not only in theology, but in practical matters too, partner churches have carbon-copied their parent organization in minutest detail. These churches have built for themselves a hierarchal structure that simply squelches outreach and favors top heavy administrative institutionalism. A book titled *A Church in Mission* proves this point as it relates to the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC), the first overseas mission of the LCMS.

*A Church in Mission*<sup>5</sup> is the aggregate of reflections on the IELC's formative years (1958–1978) as a missionary movement becoming an indigenous church body in a foreign land. Author Meinzen gathered information for his work from fellow missionaries, Indian church leaders, pastors' conferences, convention delegates, constitution committee members, lay fellowships, and youth groups to present a holistic picture of the church, especially during the first two decades of the church. The IELC experienced overall growth through Lutheran teachers and lay evangelists visiting with people in their homes, starting small groups and house churches, and later transforming such units into local congregations. Ordained clergy, who were in limited supply, served as ecclesiastical supervisors and circuit riders. The IELC has plateaued since, just as the constitution made provision for clericalism to dominate and institutionalism to prevail.

Meinzen's survey noted that "the growth of institutionalism has greatly weakened and stifled growth in the church," and "structures have no sanctity of origin, they only have a functional value. They should therefore be adapted to the missionary aim of the church."<sup>6</sup> Among numerous other significant observations, the IELC membership was highly critical of a clergy hierarchy in the church. They reiterated that their church "is so top heavy now that it cannot move," just as "a deeply clergy-centered set-up is choking the very life out of the church."<sup>7</sup>

*A Church in Mission* has identified the stagnation of the IELC primarily as a spiritual problem. Perhaps by oversight, the IELC's constitution was designed to protect *status* or *structure*. It hardly laid out objectives that stress the church's function to serve its membership and the communities surrounding them.

These narratives in some way resemble the third servant in the parable of the talents that our Lord first presented to His disciples. That servant buried the one talent the master gave him intended initially for trading and multiplying. The irony of this parable is that the first two servants understood the value of the talents they received and worked with them to maximize their potential. The third servant, however, did not see the immense value of the treasure his master had given him, nor did he want to grow and multiply it as the first two did. Such stupidity on his part made the master at his return address him as "wicked and slothful," a description he deserved because he was sitting on the master's invaluable treasure and hiding it

instead of investing it. The master did not mince his words. The story would not have the happy ending that the third servant may have been hoping for.

Faithfulness means faithfully engaging the tasks God has invested in His Church for His Gospel's sake. As the people of God, Christians in the world strive to do everything well, fully aware of the stewardship of the treasures that God has invested in them and maximizing their use for service in His kingdom. In each situation, our missionary God is inviting people of all nations to come to Him in Christ and celebrate His faithfulness. Our Lord is faithful. These pages show how God's faithfulness in growing His kingdom across the globe flourishes through ordinary people who share His desire for the salvation of all people.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> R. Clark and D. McLaurin, III, "Stewardship," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, and Rebekah Hurst (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Michael W. Newman, *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church* (San Antonio, TX: Ursa Publishing, 2016), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Newman, *Gospel DNA*, 89, quoting John Fritz, *The Practical Missionary* (CPH, 1919), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Newman, *Gospel DNA*, 90, quoting Paul Maier, *A Man Spoke, A World Listened* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), 105.

<sup>5</sup> Luther W. Meinzen, *A Church in Mission* (Vaniyambadi: IELC Concordia Press and Training Institute, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Meinzen, *A Church in Mission*, 134, quoting the Rev. A. Enose, IELC General Secretary.

<sup>7</sup> Meinzen, *A Church in Mission*, 125, quoting a member of the IELC Constitution Committee in January 9–10, 1974.

## Articles

# Fear or Faithfulness, Burial or Boldness? Charting the Course for Today's Church on Pause

Michael W. Newman

**Abstract:** What do God's servants do when the Master goes away for a long time? In Matthew's Gospel account of the Parable of the Talents, Jesus describes such a scenario. He said that the kingdom of heaven "will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away" (Mt 25:14–15).

He went away. The action Jesus described created a significant change in the lives of the servants. Now they possessed his property. They were the legal holders of the treasure. They were responsible for stewarding the gifts. What should they do now?

The context for these verses is Jesus' conversation about His sudden return and the end of our temporal age. God entrusts His people with His gifts. He is "away" on a journey until the last day arrives at a time when no one expects or can predict. The church has received the treasure. Now what should the church do?

This paper will discuss the two scenarios that unfolded in Jesus' Parable of the Talents and will compare the servants' actions and the master's responses to the church today. Analyzing three episodes in the history of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as case studies, this paper will recommend a course of action for the church as it awaits the Master's return.



*Rev. Michael W. Newman is President of the Texas District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He has written several books including *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church*, *Hope When Your Heart Breaks: Navigating Grief and Loss*, and *Creciendo en la Adversidad: Viviendo a través de las tormentas de la vida*. Michael lives in San Antonio, Texas and helps encourage faithful and bold ministry in a culture that desperately needs Jesus. You can find more of his books at [www.mnewman.org](http://www.mnewman.org). [mnewman@txlcms.org](mailto:mnewman@txlcms.org)*

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## Departure

It's nice to have the master of the house around. He has the know-how, he runs the business, he makes the big decisions, and he keeps everyone on track and in line. But in Matthew 25, the master decided to go on a journey. The Greek word is ἀποδημέω. This word does not mean a quick trip to the corner store for a half-gallon of milk. It means to be away from the local territory or to be abroad.<sup>1</sup> The distance was far and the separation was wide.

Verse 19 reinforces this truth: “After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.” Much time passed before the master returned. What does a servant feel like when the master is away?

Think about Jesus' disciples. As Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, His eager followers asked Him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” They would have preferred His immediate leadership and presence. But Jesus said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:6–8).

Jesus' disciples were entrusted with a treasure while the Master went on a journey. What was it like to be without their teacher and Lord? Acts 1:13–14 tells us they “went up to the upper room where they were staying” and they “were devoting themselves to prayer.” The disciples' lives appeared to be on pause. Together, they stayed inside, waited, and prayed. The Master's absence is never easy.

And so, the church waits for the Master's return. Sometimes He seems farther away and longer in coming than we prefer. Consider three episodes from the history of my humble denomination, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I call them “pauses” in the history of my little church.

The first was just before the synod was officially formed. After Bishop Martin Stephan was deposed in the fall of 1839, the high hopes of the immigrants from Saxony were dashed, as confusion and questions began to dominate. What were they to do without a leader? Should they return to their homeland? Did they have any right to call themselves “the church”? With no sanctioned church body, no valid bishop or hierarchy, no official liturgy, no seminary, and no approval from any external authority or institution, what were they to do? Fear, confusion, sadness, and

God entrusts His people  
with His gifts.  
He is “away” on a journey  
until the last day arrives  
at a time when no one  
expects or can predict.  
The church has received  
the treasure.  
Now what should  
the church do?

despair began to take hold. Pastor C. F. W. Walther, one of Stephan's protégés, was only twenty-nine years old. He grieved what seemed like an erroneous course. The Master seemed far away as the community of immigrants were left to themselves. Their new venture was placed on pause.

The second pause took the LCMS by surprise some eighty years later, thirty years after the 1887 death of C. F. W. Walther. After experiencing decades of dramatic growth and becoming a church body of nearly one-million baptized members and over three-thousand congregations and preaching stations, change began to sweep the nation. Fueled by World War I nationalism in the United States, anti-German sentiment overwhelmed German organizations. Posters that declared, "Don't Speak the Enemy's Language: Speak American," pushed the Missouri Synod far out of its comfort zone. Known at that time as *Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten* (The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States), denominational leaders were sent scrambling. At its 1917 national convention, the LCMS voted to drop the word "German" from its name. German-speaking churches became English-speaking overnight. Youth confirmation classes were directed to redo their instruction in English. German-speaking pastors were told that only English would be acceptable. Laws were passed making the German language illegal. These laws were later overturned, but the impact was clear. The rug was being pulled out from under the LCMS. Evangelizing German-speaking people—the sweet spot of the LCMS for the previous seventy years—would no longer be an accepted or practical methodology.

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In the early 1900s, the momentum of the nineteenth century experienced radical disruption. The World War stole young men from communities and churches. Many of these soldiers did not return home. The flu pandemic killed nearly 700,000 people in the United States alone in 1918. By 1919, the LCMS recorded the first membership loss in its history. The 1937 *Statistical Yearbook* of the LCMS noted: "1919 is the only year in the history of our Synod in which a decrease in the number of souls had to be recorded. A decrease of 4,027 souls was caused by the drafting of thousands of our boys for the Army."<sup>2</sup>

Then the immigration laws changed. The United States passed the Emergency Immigration Act in 1921. New immigrant numbers fell from 805,228 in 1920 to 164,667 in 1924–25.<sup>3</sup> A prime audience for LCMS evangelization dried up

overnight. It seemed as if the Master had packed up and left the LCMS alone. The church was on pause. What was the LCMS to do?

The third pause seemed to coincide with a heartbreaking rupture of the LCMS in 1974. After a buildup of theological infighting and structural battles for control, faculty and students at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis left the institution and severed their ties with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Relationships and loyalties were tested. Churches and families broke apart. Battle lines were drawn. The turbulent cultural upheaval of the 1960s spilled over into the church. It is still too early to understand every factor at work in this tragic turn of events, but the result was clear: the once-growing and vibrant LCMS of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s began to stumble. The hurt of division and the fear of compromising God’s truth gripped the staggering denomination. The statistical loss unfolded gradually. But the shock, the loss of confidence, and the fear of anything that might cause this to happen again wormed its way into the hearts and minds of LCMS leaders and members. One retired pastor who lived through the LCMS heyday in the mid-twentieth century and the events surrounding the “walkout” told me, “We stopped doing what we did best.”<sup>4</sup> Even the development of National Youth Gatherings and The Mission Blueprint of the 1990s couldn’t stop the statistical decline of the LCMS. The synod lost about half a million people in the thirty years after the walkout. Then it lost another half million people in the next fifteen years—the same loss in half the time.

There are many reasons for this accelerating decline; however, just as the LCMS struggled in the past, my church finds itself in the middle of another decline in membership, a challenging pause. The Master seems to have left on a long journey.

## **Servant Scramble**

What are the servants to do?

In Matthew 25, Jesus spoke with clarity about the master’s expectations for his servants. Each one was entrusted with precious treasure. The amounts differed, but the calling was the same. The one who “was a hard man,” reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he scattered no seed (v. 24), clearly expected his servants to follow his lead and produce profitable results. More than a simple expectation, however, the master knew that he was giving his servants a power-packed commodity. The treasure he handed over was the same treasure that produced profits for him over and over again. Packed into the treasure was great promise. Off he went, knowing that the talents could do for the servants exactly what he did for him.

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Two simple sentences describe the action of the talent-laden servants: “He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more” (Mt 25:16–17). The word for “traded” is ἐργάζομαι. It’s a word that is rooted in “ergo” like “ergonomics”—how things work. The servants went and put the treasure to work. That verb “went” is important. The past-tense passive participle of πορεύομαι (πορευθείς) in verse 16 reappears three chapters later in the plural form when Jesus said, “Go (πορευθέντες) therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Servants go their way to serve. They move. That’s what the first two servants did in the Parable of the Talents. Going, they served as stewards of the treasure. The servants took the risk modeled by the master and saw their treasure double.

Servants go their way to serve. They move.

But the third servant was afraid. He told the master, “I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours” (Mt 25:25). He went, but he didn’t venture out like the first two servants. The verb for his going communicates “going away” (ἀπέρχομαι). It intimates flight instead of determined fight. This intimidated steward collapsed inward and scurried away from the action in order to protect and preserve the treasure entrusted to him.

He probably believed he was being fully faithful. Like the other servants, this fearful steward didn’t lose a dime. Like the other servants, the steward who leaned toward burial and against boldness may have looked in the mirror each morning and thought, “When the master returns, he won’t be disappointed.” But the master’s assessment tells a different story.

To the first two servants the master exclaimed: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Mt 25:21, 23). The servants were good (ἀγαθός) and faithful (πιστός). We might think that the master would call the third servant faithful too. After all, the talent entrusted to him was intact. It was in mint condition. After digging it up from its buried location, the servant probably brushed it off, shined it up, and presented it proudly to the master. There was no loss to the master. The treasure was treated with care and respect. The servant may have even checked on the talent every day. He may have pulled it out occasionally to make sure it was not being compromised by the damaging elements of the world. With some fear and trembling, the servant may have been expecting a “well done” of his own. He was faithful, wasn’t he?

The master’s response shakes the pages of Scripture. No doubt, this punch line shocked the listeners. The protectors of the Torah may have been hit between the eyes when the master said to servant number three:

You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt 25:26–30)

Wicked, slothful, worthless. Who saw that coming? Clearly, being faithful means more than simply preserving and protecting the master's treasure. Being faithful means promulgating and promoting the gift given.

Clearly, being faithful means more than simply preserving and protecting the master's treasure. Being faithful means promulgating and promoting the gift given.

### **Paused, yet Proclaiming**

The pre-Pentecost pause in the Book of Acts found the disciples gathered in prayer: "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). As they waited, they proceeded to heed the Scriptures and replace their lost comrade, Judas. They didn't know what would happen next, or when, or how, but they knew the Master would return. So they stewarded the treasure.

What happened during the difficult days of pause in the LCMS?

In a May 4, 1840, letter to his brother, C. F. W. Walther confessed: "Thereupon follow the shameful idolatry with Stephan, the sectarian exclusiveness, the condemnation of other upright people, the departure from many essentials of the Lutheran Church, and who will name it all? Every sad look of a member from our congregations is to me like an accuser before God; my conscience blames me for all the broken marriages which occurred among us; it calls me a kidnapper, a robber of the wealthy among us, a murderer of those who lie buried in the sea and the many who were stricken down here."<sup>5</sup>

Walther went on to learn an important lesson. After searching the Scriptures and Confessions, after reading Luther, and after the Altenburg Debate affirmed that the Saxons were truly the church, Walther moved forward with a new outlook. No longer bound to exclusivity and inward thinking, his stirring 1842 sermon entitled, "Bringing Souls to Christ: Every Christian's Desire and Duty," displayed his new outlook:

The Christian looks upon his neighbor with sadness when he knows that the neighbor does not yet know the Gospel. . . .

A Christian might even wish that he could persuade the whole world to know that they can leave their sins and futile life behind and take hold of Christ. The holy desire to bring souls to Christ begins immediately, as soon as the light of true faith comes into a person's soul bringing with it the fire of true love for others. This holy desire is inseparable from a true faith. Whoever has no desire to bring someone else to the knowledge of the saving Gospel has certainly not yet come to know the heavenly power himself.

Dear friends, through faith a Christian receives not only the holy desire to bring souls to Christ. He receives this task as a sacred duty. No one should say, "I am not a pastor, teacher, or a preacher; let them teach, instruct, comfort, and lead souls to Christ. I wish to remain in my own vocation." No. Christian, you are baptized, and through holy baptism you have already been called and anointed to be a priest of God.

Go through all the chief parts of the Catechism and in each part you will find the declaration that a Christian should care for the salvation of his neighbor.

The Christian Church is a great mission-house. Each Christian in it is a missionary sent out by God into his own circle to convert others to Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Having learned a heartbreaking lesson from his inward thinking and blind loyalty to Stephan, Walther wrote a letter to William Sihler on January 2, 1845. He said: "We, who in unbelievable blindness formerly permitted ourselves to be led by Stephan, have special reason to seek out those of orthodox faith. . . . God knows that we ourselves under Stephan had nothing else in mind but to prove ourselves completely faithful to the true Lutheran Church. But there was nothing which caused us to fail in this very thing more than our stubborn exclusiveness."<sup>7</sup>

The LCMS faced the first pause with faithfulness. Walther insisted that the Word of God be put to work, that the treasure was not only protected, but that it was proclaimed.

The LCMS met the second pause with similar faithful resolve. In 1919, as the realization of dramatic change and the beginning of decline took hold in the LCMS, Western District mission board chair and soon-to-be dean at Concordia Seminary, Rev. John H. C. Fritz, wrote: "A Lutheran missionary who ferrets out only the former Lutherans, or the people of a certain nationality, as those of German extraction, is not doing his mission work in accordance with his Lord's explicit directions. Christ, who died for all, would have us bring His Gospel of Salvation to

all. The unchurched, that is, such as are not members of a Christian church, are the missionary's mission material. These the missionary will find everywhere."<sup>8</sup>

At the 75th anniversary of the LCMS in 1922, echoes of staying the mission course abounded. Rev. F. W. Herzberger, the first city missionary of the LCMS, wrote about the core identity of the LCMS as he lifted up outreach ministries to the disenfranchised. Herzberger noted:

By [God's] grace, His divine grace alone, Missouri's faith is *no dead historical faith*, but *the faith that worketh by love*. Missouri confesses in the words of Luther with the Fourth Article of the *Formula of Concord*, treating of good works: "Faith is a *divine* work in us that changes us and regenerates us of God, and puts to death the old Adam, makes us entirely different men at heart, spirit, mind, and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Ghost. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing."<sup>9</sup>

In the post-depression years, as the LCMS faced major obstacles, Rev. Lawrence Meyer, former missionary to China then serving as an assistant to the president of the synod, wrote a stirring call to faithfulness in preparation for the 100th anniversary of the LCMS. It was 1937. A courageous Meyer sounded the Master's call to steward the treasure with boldness:

When we think of the tremendous necessity of preaching the Gospel of Christ Jesus to a billion pagan peoples, to a world driven by lust and greed headlong into another world war, to a Protestantism devoid of Christ, to a slowly disintegrating Lutheranism, then the challenge of our times comes over us with such overwhelming force that only with faith and courage and a Christ-centered passion for souls such as filled our forefathers can we even begin to meet it.

In contrast to that lion-hearted faith of the early Christians and the heroic sacrifices which it cost our forefathers to leave us the heritage which we possess today, we ask ourselves, What have we done, and what are we doing, to make Christianity a moving, living faith in the hearts and lives of men and women in the world? What have you laymen done for the Church today? What have you as laymen done to prove to the world that your faith is a moving, living faith? How many of you can claim the distinction of having been the means of winning one soul during the past year? Is that a harsh and searching question? Let me ask again, How many of you have any reason to believe that directly you have been made the means this year of the salvation of a single soul? I will go farther and ask those of you who are among the older Christians, Have you any reason to believe that ever since you have become a member of the Church you have been the direct means of leading a soul to Christ?

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This is an indictment not only against the laity but at the same time against us preachers. How often have we not preached the Word of God to you, and yet how seldom have we wept over you! How often have we failed to pray, charge, adjure you, to become winners of souls!<sup>10</sup>

Just two years before his writing, only twelve new congregations and seventeen new preaching stations were added in the entire LCMS. Some low points were surprising the once-robust synod. But the clarion call of trusting the Master and stewarding His gifts continued to be sounded loudly.

Being faithful—whether during times of expansion or during confusing pauses—meant stepping forward with evangelistic risk and challenge. Faithfulness meant venturing outward, exploring mission possibilities, and bearing the mantle of outreach in a cold and confused world. The perfect love of Jesus Christ drove out fear. Burying the Word was not an option. The call to boldness in theological understanding and action was the order of the day. The treasure of the truth catapulted trembling stewards to tenacious telling of the Good News. John H. C. Fritz summed up the faithful action of a biblical and confessional church well: “In the exclusive doctrinal position of our Lutheran Church is not only to be found its strength, but therein also lies its great missionary possibility.”<sup>11</sup>

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## **Faithfulness for Today’s Pause**

Nearly twenty years into the twenty-first century, the LCMS is experiencing its longest and most daunting pause. Everything is changing; we don’t know how to keep up. Moral confusion makes us doubt that we can befriend a fallen culture. Biblical illiteracy and devaluation seem to pull the rug of influence out from under the Christian community. Church corruption and Christian hypocrisy push people away from gifts that give life. Disillusionment with institutions exposes our hierarchical, costly, and slow-to-respond systems. Our church is aging. Members are dying. We know our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but change seems too painful.

It is during seasons like these we are tempted to equate faithfulness with burying the treasure given to us. We want to veer into protection and preservation of what we have—a beautiful and wonderful treasure.

But, as we follow in the footsteps of our forefathers, we, too, are called to have ears to hear and hearts that understand the Parable of the Talents.

What does it mean for the LCMS—or for any Christian church—to be faithful? What is the course of action for the church as the church awaits the Master’s return? Three servant postures are essential:

First, we live lives of **repentance**. We need to repent of putting our fear and confusion before our trust in God as the head of His Church. We need to repent of treating God’s Church as if it was our possession to take where we want it to go and make it look like that which suits our personal preferences. We need to repent of our sinful desire to please ourselves rather than sacrifice for others. We need to repent.

Second, we live lives of **restoration**. By God’s grace, we walk in the newness of life given in our baptisms through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Trusting God’s grace, we let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly, we love one another because we have been first loved by God, and we let Jesus Christ be first in all things.

Third, we live lives of **rigor** in the Gospel. Guarding against fear, laziness, ego, and apathy, we put the Word of God to work. We walk in faithfulness, taking bold risks and refusing to let God’s mission fall from our list of priorities. We trust the promise implicit in the treasure of God’s living Word and try new things to reach new people with the new life given in the Gospel. Yes, we gather in our church buildings, but we do not hide. We fellowship with one another, but we do not exclude. We tend to the important matters of the church, but we never forget that the Master will return to inquire about the gift He has given us. Until the Master returns, we constantly ask, “What’s next in mission? Who needs to be reached with the Good News? How can we bring the treasure to people who need it most? What will help them hear, understand, and receive God’s gifts?”

Guarding against fear,  
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living Word  
and try new things  
to reach new people  
with the new life given  
in the Gospel.

While the clergy of the church, professional church workers, and people in positions of leadership most definitely and urgently need to adopt the servant postures called for by the Master, the Parable of the Talents speaks to every follower of Christ. Both clergy and laity need to pay close attention to Jesus’ words. The pause happening in the LCMS—and in Western Christianity—will not be remedied by institutional programs or convention resolutions. All of the Master’s servants are called to serve. The priesthood of all believers—the people of Christ’s Church—are

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called to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9).

Rigor in the Gospel means that God’s people do not outsource the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) to the “professionals.” Both laity and clergy need to steward the treasure of God’s Word by digging into it deeply and presenting its riches to a confused culture. This presentation and proclamation must not lazily echo the clichés of our twenty-four-hour news cycles or of our divisive political rhetoric. With a spirit of humility and an intimate and ongoing connection to God’s Word, God’s people must elevate the conversation of the culture so that all people will see and hear the beautiful and soul-penetrating height and depth of the living Word and ways of God. God’s Word *does* speak into the cultural, spiritual, and moral conundrums we face. Will we listen to the Master and steward the treasure He has given us for the benefit of this generation’s brokenness and sin?

Both laity and clergy need to steward the treasure of God’s Word by digging into it deeply and presenting its riches to a confused culture. . . . This calls for the posture of the faithful servants in the parable of the talents.

It calls for an understanding of what faithfulness really is—not merely preserving the gifts received, but proclaiming them in Word and deed by putting God’s treasure to work.

This calls for the posture of the faithful servants in the parable of the talents. It calls for an understanding of what faithfulness really is—not merely preserving the gifts received, but proclaiming them in Word and deed by putting God’s treasure to work.

May the Holy Spirit move us to repentance, bring us restoration through Word and Sacrament, and lead us to a rigorous and undistracted pursuit of faithfulness in all that we say and do as a church. By grace, may we hold firmly to the treasure entrusted to us, courageously put it to work, boldly engage in God’s mission, and rejoice one day when the Master returns and says, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume 2, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics of the Missouri Synod 1847–1937. Compiled for the Saxon Immigration Centennial by Rev. E. Eckhardt, Part IV, note 22.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census bureau, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1968/compendia/statab/89ed/1968-03.pdf>, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with the sainted Rev. Buck Holm, Mount Prospect, Illinois, circa 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 515.

<sup>6</sup> C. F. W. Walther, “Bringing Souls to Christ: Every Christian’s Desire and Duty,” Bruce Cameron, trans., *Missio Apostolica* (May 1998): 6–16.

<sup>7</sup> Roy A. Suelflow, trans., ed., *Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther: Selected Letters* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 86.

<sup>8</sup> John H. C. Fritz, *The Practical Missionary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 3.

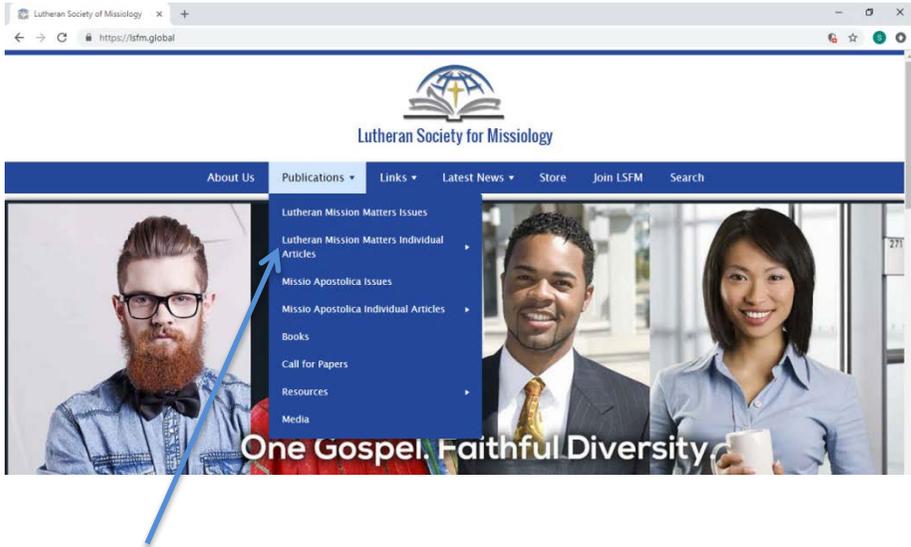
<sup>9</sup> W. H. T. Dau, ed., *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 446–447.

<sup>10</sup> L. Meyer, *Torch Bearers* (St. Louis: General Centennial Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, 1937), 19, 53–54.

<sup>11</sup> Fritz, *The Practical Missionary*, 11.

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# 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)*

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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

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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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.

# Confessions of a Fourth Steward

Robert Scudieri

*“Did God give these gifts to the church for nothing? Does not our God clearly show by these gifts that every Christian is a fellow laborer in His vineyard? Yes, indeed, our Lord spoke not only to Peter but to every Christian when He said, ‘When you have turned back (are converted), strengthen your brothers.’ Or again, St. James says to all Christians, ‘My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.’”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground.” Matthew 25:24–25a*

**Abstract:** This article follows the emphasis in the Fall 2018 issue. In that issue, authors offered a more hopeful vision of the church in America than what was presented in a statistical report to the Synod, demonstrating a loss and projected further loss in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod of five hundred thousand souls.

This article looks at the hemorrhaging that has taken place in light of Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30. It is the belief of the author that the church in America has been unfaithful, and he suggests what might be done to restore her as a faithful steward. The article will share ideas for a conversation about what faithfulness means in Christ’s mission and suggest a few practical ways for the church in America to once again become a faithful steward.

In 1992, as the new executive for national missions for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I shared my first update on the Synod’s mission in America. It was at the annual meeting of the Synod’s North American Mission Executives (NAME) conference. A decline in the number of members in the Synod had already begun.



*Rev. Dr. Robert Scudieri served as a parish pastor for thirteen years, as Mission Executive for the English District for seven years and for eighteen years was the head of national missions for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In retirement he serves as president of Mission Nation Publishing, “Giving a voice to the missionaries to America.” [bscudieri@gmail.com](mailto:bscudieri@gmail.com)*

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The title of my presentation was “Aspirations of a Fourth Steward.”

Obviously this was a reference to Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30, the parable of a landowner who leaves on an extended journey and puts three servants in charge. To each he gives resources for the work ahead. The focus of my sharing was on being “faithful.” After all, in the parable, the Lord does not commend the two productive stewards for being “successful”; He says, “Well done good and faithful servant.” The third steward, who buried his trust, is labeled unfaithful. The “fourth steward” was someone who faithfully worked to serve the master, but could rely only on forgiveness. It is the final grace each of us must embrace.

During the eighteen years I served as head of national missions, we learned to distinguish between “inputs” and “outputs”—inputs being the resources we put into a project and outputs were the solid results. The outputs were more disciples of Jesus, a la His co-mission in Matthew 28:16–20.

We know that only God’s Holy Spirit can work in the heart of a human being to bring him to faith. Obviously God’s gifts of His Word and the Sacraments are the means the Spirit uses to re-create human beings dead in sin to make them alive in Christ. Our question was what it would take to deliver those life-giving means to the most people. The means of grace are the “inputs.” The “outputs” would be souls won for Christ.

In addressing the first Iowa District convention, C. F. W. Walther said,

The church is the mother of us all (Galatians 4:26). Just as surely as we are now members of the church so surely we should also be fruitful mothers, and if we are not fruitful mothers, i.e., if we do not produce spiritual children or fail to do those things whereby such children can be produced, then we are not obeying our calling, and then God will not say to us, “You pious and faithful servant.” But he will say to us, “You unfaithful servant.” God grant we never hear those words.<sup>2</sup>

But those very words are being directed at us today.

God has given the church in America many resources; we have much to be thankful for. It is necessary to look at how faithful we have been in using those resources to carry out the mission of Christ—making disciples. If we are not making disciples, if we are instead losing souls, we are in a most sorry state. We may have fine buildings, a billion-dollar church extension fund and properties around the world. But if we are falling behind in new

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disciple making, there is something wrong.

The only time I shed tears in my role as national ministry executive was the first time I tried to work with our thirty-five district mission leaders. We were at a meeting to set goals and objectives for reaching the lost in America. That effort ended in a blunt refusal on their part. They did not see this as their responsibility. My inexperience clouded my ability to lay a groundwork for cooperation to accomplish the mission. As time went by, a majority of districts did come to work with the national church body, and significant advances were made to address the losses we had seen over the past twenty years. In the end, this was not enough.

The districts of the LCMS invested mightily with human capital, financial resources, and prayer; however, looking back twenty-seven years to the beginning of my time as a leader of the mission in the United States, it seems we have not been, in the light of Jesus' words in Matthew 25, faithful. The evidence is clear.

During the last round of district conventions, we learned as much from a demographic study<sup>3</sup> the Synod commissioned. While many congregations of the LCMS have brought more people to Jesus, the demographic study showed that in the last forty years as a church body we have lost over five hundred thousand souls; and, it has been suggested, it is possible we will lose another five hundred thousand. What was astounding to me was that this was accepted as inevitable. The message of the demographic study was, "Accept it—there is nothing we can do, except encourage LCMS families to have more children. We have to plan for this new reality." There was no rallying cry, no special initiative, no hope, only acquiescence.

According to Merriam-Webster, the defense mechanism of "denial" is defined as "avoidance of a confrontation with reality." But, as everyone knows, in the long run, denial does not work. Reality breaks in. Inevitably denial becomes "blame," which shifts responsibility onto someone or something else. Where there's denial, blame is always available to ease the pain when reality bites. In our circles it seems some want to blame God. They explain our decline as something God has done, maybe to punish America for drifting from His truth. I do not think so; it seems to me that we in the LCMS are not doing "*those things whereby such children can be produced.*"

I am doubly chagrined, since a successful effort to win more to Christ had been under way but was terminated. Under the leadership of President Jerry Kieschnick, the Ablaze! Initiative had raised millions of dollars for mission, and more gifts were lost by its early ending. Its termination was surprising more so, since Ablaze! had been the result of actions taken by previous Synod presidents and national conventions—actions that laid a groundwork for winning more for Christ.

One of those early attempts had begun in the 1980s under President Ralph Bohlman and Mission Executive Ed Westcott. It was called the "Mission Blueprint

for the Nineties.” For the first time, North America was declared a world mission field. Efforts begun in “Blueprint” opened doors into areas where our church body had not been involved in substantial ways. It is well known that Lutherans in America are more than 90 percent white English speakers—a demographic group in which there are more deaths than births in America. The Mission Blueprint for the Nineties recognized this. A 1996 report from the US Department of Commerce showed that for every African American who died in America, he or she was replaced by three African immigrants and births of African American children. Each Spanish-speaking American who died was replaced by eleven. For every one Asian American who died, more than twenty Asians immigrated to the United States or were born here.

During the Mission Blueprint for the Nineties, leaders of new immigrant groups were identified, and volunteers from those new groups were empowered and recognized as task forces of Synod. The leaders were brought into formal teams and given education and support to begin more new mission stations/congregations. More leaders were identified and empowered with prayer, with education, and with funding to reach more and different ethnic groups. Most district leaders recognized the opportunities God was giving us for sharing the Gospel with immigrants, many of whom were not able to hear the Gospel in their own lands.

Blueprint set the stage for the new century and Pentecost 2000. Leaders of the Synod, its districts, congregations, and new ethnic leaders were challenged to begin a thousand new cross-cultural ministries. Why cross-cultural ministries? In an article in the January 10, 2019, *Religious News Service* Wesley Granberg-Michaelson shared:

Where there is growth in American Christian denominations, it is driven by nonwhites, whether Catholic or Protestant, evangelical or mainline. Over the past half century, 71 percent of growth in Catholicism, for instance, has come from its Hispanic community. In the Assemblies of God, one of the few denominations to show overall growth, white membership slightly declined while nonwhite membership increased by 43 percent over 10 years.

Our own P2K effort (Pentecost 2000—an effort to begin one thousand new cross-cultural ministries in the LCMS) was blessed with *more* than one thousand new cross-cultural ministries. Doors were opening, new church doors. And existing church doors were opening to new ethnic groups that were growing in numbers in the United States. Today the largest LCMS congregation in the city of New York is an African immigrant church; that is true also in other large urban areas. On average, three hundred ethnically diverse worshipers attend Christ Assembly Lutheran Church on Staten Island. Worship services are two to four hours long, enhanced by a band and words and music not always from the *Lutheran Service Book*.

However, Ablaze! would not last. A new president sought a different way forward. Furthermore, while the LCMS has continued to emphasize new church development, it does not fund the mission in the United States at nearly the level we support new work overseas. In essence, we are extending our reach overseas while our base at home shrinks.

When I pastored Christ Memorial Lutheran Church in East Brunswick, New Jersey, a new retirement community was established, with possibly the worst logo ever: a frog on a lily pad. People in our area said the message was, “Come here and croak.” If we continue our present path, someday the LCMS will be a shell of its former self.

The church in America has been unfaithful. While church bodies around the world grow at incredible rates, the church in America is in decline. This is a time for repentance. Repentance for unfaithfulness is not a result of the law. It is a result of the working of the Holy Spirit, who uses the law to convict us. But the old Adam does not like to hear the law. It makes us uncomfortable, so we deny, we blame others.

Only by the power of God’s Holy Spirit can a change be made, new actions taken and our church become faithful once more.

But then, we have a question in our church body about what it means to be faithful.

### **What Does It Mean to Be Faithful?**

In my opinion, one of the major causes for our unfaithfulness in mission is a confusion over what it means to be faithful.

First, there is a difference between faith seen through the lens of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed, and faithful in the Third Article. This is a distinction between justifying faith, a gift of God’s Holy Spirit, and sanctifying faith, a Spirit-led response to God’s grace. It is justifying faith that saves. Sanctification is the result. In this paper we are talking about faithfulness to the mission of Christ, a Third Article subject. Our success or failure in Christ’s mission will not save us or damn us. In Baptism our Lord has made us His own. Nothing and no one can take us away from Him. But we can turn away, disobey Him, and become unfaithful.

One of the major causes for our unfaithfulness in mission is a confusion over what it means to be faithful.

We are “*simul Justus et peccator*.” In his commentary on Romans, Luther wrote, Note that every saint is a sinner and prays for his sins. Thus the righteous man is in the first place his own accuser. And again (Ecclus. 39:5), the

righteous man “will make supplication for his sins.” And again, Ps. 38:18: “I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin.” Therefore, wonderful and sweet is the mercy of God, who at the same time considers us both as sinners and nonsinners. Sin remains and at the same time it does not remain.<sup>4</sup>

We are sinners from birth (Ps 51:5; Gn 6:5). No one is righteous in God’s sight (Rom 3:10; Ps 12:1). We have been given a mission, and in America we are failing. Thank God there is forgiveness. We see that in St. Peter (Jn 18:13–27), who had only His Lord’s sacrifice to lean on. He gained strength from God’s love, and his life demonstrated his repentance. Only One has been faithful enough. The rest of us poor missionaries must live in His forgiveness.

### **What Is the Mission of the Church?**

We have another distinction to make before focusing on what it means to be faithful on the American mission field. The focus is faithfulness in *Christ’s mission*—but what is the mission of the church? We preach Law and Gospel, we share the Sacraments, but to what end? It seems to me that for some, those are ends in themselves. In other words, Word and Sacrament become ends in themselves.

In my opinion, for some in our national leadership, being faithful means a return to sixteenth-century European roots—in contemporary parlance, the mission is to “Make the Lutherans Great Again.” To be honest, at times in my ministry, I made preference for a northern European culture more important than contextualizing words, music, and format to reach a group with a different culture.

But the co-mission we have, using Word and Sacrament, is to make disciples, not to preserve a particular culture. That takes courage, creativity, and compassion; but as we do that, Jesus will be with us—always.

But the co-mission we have, using Word and Sacrament, is to make disciples, not to preserve a particular culture. That takes courage, creativity, and compassion; but as we do that, Jesus will be with us—always.

Pastors became derailed, thinking that as long as we preach the pure Gospel and celebrate Holy Communion and Baptism correctly we were being faithful. But if, as we believe, it is the Gospel that changes hearts, and if more people are not being brought into the Body of Christ, we should question if we really are preaching and teaching Gospel, or, if we are, if we do have a pure Gospel to share, then we should consider if we are doing that teaching and preaching effectively.

Being productive in the mission means making disciples.

Early on Missouri was very clear on this. Walther, in a sermon preached on the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity in 1842, told his parishioners:

Dear friends, through faith a Christian receives not only the holy desire to bring souls to Christ, he receives this task as a sacred duty. No one should say, “I am not a pastor, a teacher, or a preacher; let them teach, instruct, comfort, and lead souls to Christ. I wish to remain in my own vocation.” No, Christian, you are baptized, and through holy baptism you have already been called and anointed to be a priest of God.

Through holy baptism, every Christian has been consecrated, ordained, and installed into the ministry to teach, admonish, and comfort his neighbor. Through holy baptism each Christian has obtained not only the authority, power, and right, but also the high, holy obligation—under pain of losing the divine grace—of rousing himself to care and to help so that others may be brought to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The mission given to God’s church is to make disciples.

After we have agreed on what the mission is, we can benefit from a conversation on what it means to be “faithful” in the mission.

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### **What Does It Mean to Be *Faithful* in Christ’s Mission?**

A while back I sent an email to leaders in the LCMS asking them to send me a brief response on how they understood what it means to be faithful. The answers were all over the board. A district president responded, “To be faithful in the Lutheran sense is to be faithful in teaching the whole counsel of God revealed in Holy Scriptures . . . and to be true to the doctrines as interpreted and expounded in the Lutheran Confessions.” A Lutheran school principal wrote, “Hebrews 11, of course, recounts a number of those who were ‘faithful’. None of them were ‘Lutheran.’” From a pastor, “Faithful in LCMS terms is really adherence to the institutional standards like worship, closed communion, tradition, etc.”

When we talk about faithfulness, we need to see both doctrine and practice in light of their ability to win souls for Christ.

As part of the mission leadership of the LCMS, this is my confession—the confession of a fourth steward, one who has tried to remain faithful and has often failed. As a Synod we have buried our talents—for example, when we have insisted the cultural aspects of our traditional liturgy cannot be changed—creating barriers to understanding the Gospel focus of the Lutheran liturgy.<sup>6</sup> We have buried our talent when we have not recognized the importance of “home” missions, not appreciating

the significance of North America becoming the third largest mission field. We bury our talents when we have eschewed the use of human reason in our planning to carry out the mission (reason is a gift from God, if you believe Luther's explanation of the First Article). We have buried our talent in the way we have traditionally formed church leaders as we prepared them to serve those already gathered into Christ's church and not sufficiently teaching the importance and opportunity to bring to Christ those outside the faith and so not providing enough preparation for our church workers to reach them.

When we talk about faithfulness, we need to see both doctrine and practice in light of their ability to win souls for Christ.

From my perspective, we have buried these "talents" because we have been afraid—afraid we might lose—lose members, lose our heritage, lose our identity. In repentance, everything should be on the table, especially the Lord's Table where forgiveness for past sins and strength to start over are found.

### **Some Ways Back to Faithfulness in Christ's Mission**

What might repentance look like? We are seeing signs, tender sprouts that have risen out of the soil of the mission in America. For instance, we are seeing more effective ways of forming missionaries for America. New strategies at schools and our seminaries equip missionaries, not only pastors, for America. There are still many faithful pastors and congregations that are winning more for Jesus than they are losing. But have we studied all those pastors and churches, LCMS churches that are preaching pure Gospel and growing, growing even in areas where the population is declining? What can we learn from these faithful pastors and churches? Do we know the gifts given to graduates or our seminaries so that those who have the gift of starting a new mission or reaching new people are identified and prepared for this work?

There is an increasing number of new ethnic groups whose churches are reaching many for Christ. As was done by the LCMS of old, these ethnic groups (new to Lutheranism) focus much of their mission work on new immigrants arriving here. Instead of German immigrants, they reach Vietnamese, Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Dominicans, Venezuelans, Nepalese, Guyanese, and a host of others. These new immigrants and refugees contribute to our ability to reach many more for Christ.

Furthermore, out of love for us, our God has also been sending missionaries from other parts of the world to strengthen His Church. Missionaries are being given to us as gifts from our heavenly Father. They have helped us see with new eyes the

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opportunities and challenges and a new passion for re-evangelizing a White Anglo population that has drifted away. And there are other “talents” given to us to do our Master’s work.

The Center for US Missions was begun as a partnership between the Synod and Concordia University, Irvine, after the Synod recognized the United States as a world mission field. Up to that time, it was assumed that all pastors had to be “formed” in the same way. That was true when our church body had a predominantly northern European heritage, and we were starting churches for sister and brother Lutherans who had moved “over there.” Today America is more ethnically diverse; what would reach the souls of European people is not necessarily the same as what can reach Asian and African and Latin or Middle Eastern seekers. The Center provides help in finding and forming missionaries—a vocation different from that of pastor or teacher.

The Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology was started during Pentecost 2000 to form leaders in and for their context. We are able to provide the doctrinal formation necessary without imposing uniform practice. This was extended to American citizens through the Specific Ministry Pastors program. Churches in rural areas in need of a pastor and congregations in need of a leader with a specific talent now were able to benefit from public ministers of the Word. This was home missions catching up with what had been done for over a century on the foreign mission field. These programs require nurturing as we continue to learn how to be more effective in forming missionaries for America.

The Master has given His servants in the LCMS many wonderful talents and resources to accomplish His desire that “All be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). The still emerging digital age is being capitalized on by Lutheran Hour Ministries in very effective ways; the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League provides vision and funding on a scale never imagined by its founders; our large Church Extension Fund provides us with more capital than we need to build new missions and enlarge existing church outreach; our National Missions department understands the challenges and is working very hard to provide resources to the districts. The Transforming Churches Network is a resource for congregations that know they need to refocus their “talents” on bringing Christ to their neighbors. What will we do with these “talents”?

For one thing, move away from seeing our mission as re-creating sixteenth-century Lutheran practices, for example, in worship.

It is in worship that most people in America today will hear the Gospel. I think as a Synod we have done a disservice by not embracing worship services that use contemporary songs and hymns and more variety in instruments, i.e., drums and guitar. Contemporary words and music that could have benefited from an influence by LCMS worship leaders and seminaries have been lost—not to mention the loss of

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influence we might have had on other church bodies because we have only affirmed a traditional form of worship.

Too much of what I have seen and heard about worship style is more about personal taste than about effectively preaching and celebrating the Sacraments so that disciples are made. I believe there are hundreds of LCMS churches that in an effort to reach young and contemporary people are using a truncated form of worship that does not effectively offer the pure Gospel. Much of this is because they have not received support to design such a service. Under the current leadership of our church body, many I know feel apologetic about using liturgies other than what is found in the *Lutheran Service Book*.

I am adamant about this because for many in America the worship service is the first place they can clearly hear the good news of salvation. I am not suggesting doing away with traditional Lutheran worship. I do believe there

I do believe there needs to be places where new Christians can experience God's love without having to surmount high cultural barriers. Championing a greater variety of styles in worship is another way that would allow us to be more faithful in Christ's mission.

needs to be places where new Christians can experience God's love without having to surmount high cultural barriers. Championing a greater variety of styles in worship is another way that would allow us to be more faithful in Christ's mission.

### **Now Is Our Time to Repent**

We are "*simul justus et peccator*." We have not always been faithful. There is no perfect person or perfect church, perfect pastor or missionary or professor. Not one. There is no perfect teacher or mission executive or denominational leader. But there is a perfect God, a perfect Savior. We have not been faithful, but what is more important is that He is faithful. God is giving us another chance, a new day; washed in the waters of Baptism we can begin again. When He returns, we cannot plead our success; and we cannot be faithful without His aid. We have all we need from Him.

The amazing thing is that our Lord still stands with us, continuing to pour "talent" upon "talent" upon us. Jesus stands in front of us, our advocate, barring the door to "outer darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth." With His love, He is moving us to examine our past failure to win souls for Christ. That is all a fourth steward can depend upon.

There is no reason we have to lose another five hundred thousand souls. With the proper leadership at the national and district levels, a new day of first stewards is possible. Right now we should set in place a time of repentance and prayer, asking

for forgiveness, and for the Lord to allow us to gain five hundred thousand souls in the next ten years!

Pray to the Lord of the harvest that it may be so.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> C. F. W. Walther, Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Trinity, 1842 AD in Donald E. Heck, ed. and trans., *Year of Grace* (La Valle, WI: Donald E. Heck, 1964), 269–270.

<sup>2</sup> “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” First Iowa District Convention St. Paul’s Church, Fort Dodge, Iowa, 1879. Translated by Everette Meier and included in *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 328–29 (in the section Thesis IV).

<sup>3</sup> Special Issue, *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 3, no. 3 (December 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, Lectures on Romans. *Luther’s Works* 25. Hilton C. Oswald, ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 1972), 258.

<sup>5</sup> Walther, 12th Sunday, 270.

<sup>6</sup> Liturgy is a complicated question as we try to retain our unity with the church catholic and consider important cultural contexts.

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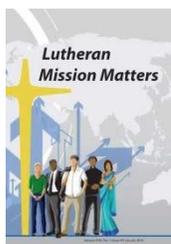
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# Faithful in Mission: An Alternative Reading of Matthew 25:14–30

Gregory Klotz

**Abstract:** We are all bound to our cultural worldview. It influences how we read Scripture and find it meaningful. What are ways that we can read this parable in a way that makes us conscious of our cultural predispositions to reading it in a specific way. In this article I attempt such a reading in order to build an alternate reading to a greater extent faithful to the text. The purpose in doing so is to provide a way of critiquing the decline of membership in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) churches that are biblically and missiologically sound.

God is good. I have been blessed with the opportunity to be an LCMS missionary in Latin America for twenty years. I have studied anthropology, ethnomusicology, and linguistics. I have taught cultural semiotics and contextualization of New Testament worldview and other courses dealing with theology and culture at Concordia Theological Seminary Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and the Center for Hispanic Studies in St. Louis. So, I have an ongoing special interest in exploring culture's<sup>1</sup> role in the hermeneutic process.

Exactly how much does culture contribute to the meaning we give a biblical narrative? It is impossible to find meaning in a story without reflecting on some perceived similar association with observed elements in the text. In other words, we are never *neutral* in our reading of a text. We cannot completely step outside our culture or how we give meaning to the world around us. At best, we can translate the meaning. Culture opens our eyes to observe only those parts of the text that have meaning for us. In this way, our culture provides the framework for interpreting scripture and its application for Christian life.



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*Rev. Gregory Klotz has served twenty years as an LCMS missionary in Guatemala, Panama, and Venezuela and twenty years in church planting and pastoral theological education. He is a former assistant professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, teaching in the missiology program and an adjunct professor in the Hispanic program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Presently, he is pastor at Grace Lutheran Church, Pittsburg, California. He has an MDiv from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and PhD studies at Indiana University in Folklore and Ethnomusicology—semiotics and phenomenology studies. [ethnograves@gmail.com](mailto:ethnograves@gmail.com)*

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While it is impossible to be *neutral* in interpreting a text, it is equally impossible to simply extricate the theological significance of a text independently from the culture in which the narrative was created. We cannot separate the cultural elements from the theological meaning, although it has been tried (*Entmythologisierung*), in order to arrive at a core *truth* void of cultural form. Being cognizant how your cultural worldview possibly influences the interpretation of the text can provide needed *checks and balances* for questioning *what* and *why* you might find something meaningful in a text. Recognizing the role of culture in communicating and interpreting aids in uncovering the meaning of a text. Doing so can discover different themes or nuances in the text without necessarily compromising the truth of the text theologically.

While it is impossible to be *neutral* in interpreting a text, it is equally impossible to simply extricate the theological significance of a text independently from the culture in which the narrative was created. We cannot separate the cultural elements from the theological meaning.

Personalizing this, the biblical narrative is only meaningful and recognizable to me. When I read, I observe only those elements that have meaning for me, within my worldview.<sup>2</sup> At first, certain textual elements will be observed and thought to share the same meaning that they do within my own culture. However, though the textual elements may appear the same, they may refer to something completely different in the other cultural setting.<sup>3</sup> As I interpret the elements of the narrative, I naturally will find their meaning based on what those elements refer to within my own culture. In so doing, I may possibly bypass the significance of what they mean within the author's purpose.

A specific example from Scripture of the effect of Western/Capitalist cultural worldview can be illustrated here. In Mathew 22:21, Jesus ends the dispute to whom taxes need be paid; a trap set by the Pharisees and Herodians with the words, "Whose visage do you see on this coin?" Their reply, "Caesar's." To which Jesus replies, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's."<sup>4</sup> My Western/capitalist/political cultural paradigm recognizes the signs—taxes, government, paying taxes—as they refer to something I do. It is therefore thought that this directs the obedience of civilians to their government, and the paying of taxes as a God-given directive. What these same signs signify to the Pharisees and the Herodians lies outside my cultural paradigm and so goes unnoticed. I might understand Jesus' words, "Render to God what is God's" as a directive to stewardship or paying taxes. Since I do not share the Jewish perspective on this, as did the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus' words signify something different; they have no sign-referent identification. Jesus is not talking about the coin and the rendering,

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but rather the relationship to the visage and the rendering. Jesus' words point to Genesis 1:26, that "we are created in the image and likeness of God." "Render Caesar his coin; render yourself to God" is a slap in the face to the Pharisees and Herodians. "You are faithful to Caesar in what belongs to him. But you belong to God and are not faithful to Him."

It is my purpose in this article to attempt an alternate reading that may discover a different thematic focus in Matthew 25:14–30. The meaning will then serve as the basis for a critique of the present decline of membership in most mainline denominations.

I believe a popular understanding of this parable is influenced by a North American/Western/capitalist cultural worldview. The problem I perceive is the tendency to jump to a theological meaning based on that worldview while overlooking an alternative focal point perhaps more faithful to the author's cultural context. What's more, as you will see, the North American/Western/capitalist cultural worldview has influenced the choice of English terms used for the Greek, which in turn has influenced the interpretation of the parable theologically as well as missiologically.

## **Exposing My Cultural Interpretive Paradigm**

I read, the Greek words *money, slaves, masters, investment, banking, gains, lazy, faithful, put the money to work, ability* from a Western capitalist worldview. Accordingly, within my culture, the meaning of the words is found within a network of related terms that I use in a particular category: *finances*.<sup>5</sup>

Since the use of these terms altogether has meaning in this category, I am not surprised that English language commentaries focus on the *financial*. *Money* is discussed in many commentaries on Matthew 25 and has served to influence the overall meaning of the narrative along the concepts of related categories, such as *investment banking*. This influence, in turn, leads to related terms within my worldview such as *industriousness* related to the *return on the investment*. Accordingly, by *gains* (κερδαίνω, BDAG<sup>6</sup>), its use in this category refers to *financial gains* as the result of *financial investment*. This leads me to believe that the slaves got a return on their money because they were *industrious*. Additionally, since my Western/capitalist worldview values *industriousness* and the *acquisition of goods*, this accumulation of material possessions is tantamount to *success*. From this point, it is easy to equate *success* with being *faithful*.

In my worldview, this category of meaning would then lead me to interpret the slaves' *abilities* (δύναμις, BDAG) as a reference to their *potential industriousness*. According to my cultural values, *industriousness* serves to assess the quality and character of the slave, thus describing him as *able*. I am led to conclude, then, that

this is the reason that *more was given* (καθίστημι, BDAG). The fact that the slaves went out directly to make money confirms their industriousness and their ability. The fact that they brought in a *gain* proves their market-ability and means that they were *faithful* with what was entrusted to them. (Note: that even *entrusted* [παραδίδωμι, BDAG] is understood within the scope of productivity.) The one slave who does not *put it to work*, or *invest* (ἐργάζομαι, BDAG) and do business is seen as *lazy* (ὀκνηρός, BDAG). He is the opposite of culturally prized *Western* industriousness. In the text, therefore, Western/capitalist culture lauds the two industrious slaves and despises the one slave who buried the money (κρύπτω, BDAG).

In this parable, we have an example of a word in the Greek culture that was translated by a similar word in English. Each word, however, means something different in each culture. Each word belongs to two distinct categories of meaning in each culture. The word is *talents*. In the King James translation, the English word *talents* is used to translate Τάλαντα (τάλαντον, BDAG). While the Greek word refers to a *measure of silver or money* and is a *financial* category, the similar English word is in a category that refers to *performance ability*. Because of the confusion, *talents* is used in a figurative meaning signifying personal *performance abilities* and compromises the Greek literal meaning, *money*. As a result, Western cultural values commonly read talents as referring to specific gifts that will produce gains if used properly. Within the cultural worldview, then, the English translation influences the English interpretation relating faithfulness with stewardship of personal abilities. And, to the contrary, unfaithful stewards of such gifts show laziness and lack of industriousness that will result in the loss of the gifts, as well as the returns.

## Preparing for an Alternative Reading

If I am conscious of my culture and its influence on my interpretation, might I intentionally adopt an alternate reading that more closely centers on an original meaning other than *investment, bankers, abilities, talents*? Will alternative meanings of Greek words be possible or necessary to reflect this? Are there any structural devices within the narrative, linguistic or otherwise, that might help facilitate a different thematic focus, e.g., chiasms, binary oppositions, play on words?

I begin with a reading of what I observe to be the central concepts and words. The fact that I am identifying these as possibly significant lets me know that, in some way, these elements have a meaning within my own cultural worldview; otherwise I would not have noticed them. I want to question their perceived meaning within my own cultural worldview. The question is, are they significant? Do they mean the same thing? If not, what is the different meaning? In the course of my study, I found the following alternative meanings to Greek terms helpful to an alternate reading.

They are highlighted in bold. I also found Scripture passages that contain the alternate meanings and serve to clarify the alternative reading.

παραδίδωμι—translated as “entrust,” meaning to turn things over to another, commit, commend, and surrender. (BDAG)

ὑπάρχω—translated as “property,” meaning things I am in possession of, exist, I being, am. (BDAG)

δύναμις—translated as “abilities,” meaning physical power, force, might, ability, efficacy, energy, **authority**, and marvelous work. (BDAG)

τάλαντον—translated as “talents,” meaning money, a weight of silver. (BDAG)

ἐργάζομαι—translated as “put the money to work,” meaning to make gains by trading, to perform, **and to win over**. (BDAG)

συναίρω—translated as “settled,” to take up together, settle accounts, make a **reckoning**, to **compare accounts**. (BDAG)

λόγος—translated as “accounts,” meaning a **statement**, speech, analogy, a word as embodying an idea, reported speech, narration. (BDAG)

κερδαίνω—translated as “gain,” **meaning to increase, to avoid loss, to regain**. (BDAG)

ἀγαθός και πιστός—translated as “good and faithful,” meaning of joyful character and trustworthy, honorable and believing. (BDAG)

καθίστημι—translated as “put in charge of,” meaning set in order, **appoint**, put in charge. (BDAG)

χαρά—I translated as “joy,” meaning gladness, a source of joy, joy (BDAG)

κρύπτω—translated as “hid,” meaning to **conceal (that it might not become known)**, escape notice. (BDAG)

ὀκνηρός—translated as “lazy,” meaning **timid**, shrinking, **idle**, troublesome, slothful (BDAG)

βάλλω—translated as “deposit,” **meaning to throw or let go of a thing not caring where it falls, to scatter**. (BDAG)

τραπεζίτης—translated as “banker,” meaning money trader, banker. (BDAG)

I also observed what would appear in my culture to be themes or concepts in binary opposition in the structure. Some of these observations are textual and others are interpretive.

Observed in the text include the following: slave versus master; entrusted versus fearful; good and faithful versus evil and lazy; joy versus outer darkness; multiples (talents) versus singularities (one talent); put the money to work versus bury the money; cruel versus benevolent; enter into the joy versus throw out the slave.

Interpretive observations<sup>7</sup> include: faithful versus doubtful; to engage versus disengage; security versus insecurity; fellowship versus aloneness; knowledge versus action; steward of possession versus steward of relationship.

## Reading with an Intentional Altered Focus

I notice that the Matthew 25 parable has elements similar to the parable of the sower and the seed (Mt 13:12) in two ways.

First, in the Matthew 25 parable, the one slave claims that the master “*harvest[s]* where [he] did not *sow*, and *gather[s]* where [he] did not *scatter* seed.” This characterizes the master as cruel, but it perhaps describes the master as the rightful owner of both what is harvested (*gains*) and what is sown (*talents*). If the master owns everything, being *faithful* relates to the actual going and scattering of the talents for fruit to be born and not to the industriousness of the sower. The *talents* are not the reward or payment for the *ability*; they are what enables.

Secondly, there seems to be a play on words/concepts of equal rudeness when Jesus responds to the slave’s claim by using the word βαλεῖν, translated as in a *financial* category of meaning, *to deposit* (βάλλω, BDAG). Figuratively, however, it can alternately mean to *scatter or throw something not caring where it falls*. The meaning: “If you knew I claimed everything that was harvested and scattered as mine, why then didn’t you scatter my money around so that I could harvest it.” In both parables, the sending and the sowing brings the harvest.

In the Matthew 25 parable, the master *turns over* (παρέδωκεν, BDAG) what is in his *possession* (ὕπαρχοντα, BDAG). The slaves were to care for it on behalf of their master. The slaves were given additional money in order to care for their master’s belongings. There are no criteria mentioned to determine what *ability* (δύναμις, BDAG) is. The slaves’ abilities (δύναμιν, BDAG) might be their earned authority, experience in service, perhaps seniority, or specific to what they normally had been responsible for up until now. No criteria are given, and so no conclusions can be drawn as to what constitutes the abilities.

We might well assume that the money given to the slaves is not based on the worthiness of ability. It is based simply on the master’s selection. Their ability is determined by the selection of the master, not an inherent quality or character, just as the Virgin Mary was “favored” by God without regard to her virtue or other positive qualities. Besides, if the master had chosen a slave who had shown previous *abilities*, he would not have picked a slave who was lazy. All three slaves were given money

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by the graciousness of the master. They did not earn it. The Holy Spirit gives His gifts as He chooses (1 Cor 12:11).

The slaves' *abilities* lie in the fact that they were chosen. They were chosen to have authority over the master's possessions. The authority came from the master, not the slaves' *abilities*. The money belonged to the master and not the slaves. They were chosen to do what the master had previously taught them. Two of the slaves *put the money to work* (ἠργάσατο, BDAG) probably in the same way they saw their master work it.

Did the slaves trust their master? This question is raised due to the comment of the one slave who feared the master for being cruel. He feared judgment, and though he had the authority and the money, he was afraid to use them. On the other hand, the other two slaves did not fear. It can be assumed they were on good relations with the master and did not *work the money* out of fear.

What then motivated the slaves to do what they did? Was it their faith in the master, or their fear of the master? More specifically, did the two slaves trust that the money, which the master gave, was sufficient and would accomplish what it was supposed to do? It's the master's money, and they do not doubt. The slave who buried the money, however, did not have such faith, neither in the master nor in what the master gave to carry out the task. The two slaves acted in faith; the one slave acted in unbelief. For the two slaves, then, the money that the master provided rendered the gains. But, the focus of the one slave was on himself, his work. Also, slaves during this time were allowed to have businesses through which they could purchase their own freedom. The text does not say that they wished to do this, but it could have well been assumed that this was the motivation to engage in business while the master was away, as he gave them the right to do.

The concept of *gains*, however, is a problematic point for a Western/capitalist worldview. The word (ἐκέδησα, BDAG) has the alternative meaning to *win over*. It can also mean to *regain*, or *to win back*. Examples from Scripture include Matthew 18:15.<sup>8</sup> It can mean to gain someone to faith in Christ, as in 1 Peter 3:1<sup>9</sup> and 1 Corinthians 9:19–22.<sup>10</sup> I believe it is significant that the Greek term for *gain* does not merely fall into the cultural category of *financial*.

Later, when their master returns, the slaves *talk through their accounts* (συναίρει λόγον, BDAG). It was rightfully the master's, although he did not sow it or harvest it. Seeing that the slaves were faithful in taking care of his possessions, the master grants them their freedom (εἴσελθε εἰς τὴν χάριν τοῦ κυρίου σου), his joy. Though the gains made with their master's property could have possibly secured their freedom, they were faithful and returned their master's property.

Was turning the money over to the master the reason they were called *faithful*? If their faith was placed in the authority and power of the master's money, then their gains were not based on their industriousness, but rather on their *sent-ness*. They went forth immediately. Good and faithful, then, deals with the going and the doing, the *scattering* (βαλεῖν, BDAG) of the *talents* and the reliance on the master's power and authority, thereby to do as the master had done. The one slave, however, was *lazy*, a term that I culturally link with lack of *industriousness*. However, that is not the case here. Here, *lazy* (ὀκνηρέ, BDAG) has the alternative meaning of *timid* (ὀκνηρέ, BDAG). The one slave was *timid*, *shrinking*. He was timid in using the authority and power of the master due to the lack of faith. Though sent, he did not go.

Good and faithful, then, deals with the going and the doing, the *scattering* (βαλεῖν, BDAG) of the *talents* and the reliance on the master's power and authority, thereby to do as the master had done.

Considering an opposing scenario reinforces even more that the slaves' faith was placed in the power and authority of their master. What if the slaves had gone out and lost everything? Did they consider this possibility? Rather, they trusted in his graciousness beyond their own loss or failure. They were faithful, *not* defined by being *industrious*, but in *risking* their own lives and their potential to be freed. On the other hand, the slave who buried the money opted for self-security and remained a slave. This slave's lack of faith makes him content and secure with what he has and therefore does not risk the possibility of loss. He in fact, chooses to save his own life while the two slaves run the risk of losing everything for the sake of their master (Lk 9:24).

The context of the parable and the theological scope of the chapter carry the narrative into an eschatological context. Here, it fits with the previous parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13) and the subsequent narrative regarding the final judgment (Mt 25:31–46). Judgment in both of these contexts is based on the ability to persevere in the faith until the end. The first parable shows the faith of expectation of the coming kingdom; the second shows faith moved to action of the faithful. Both are aspects of a living faith. This faith is based on a relationship. In the present parable, the two slaves wanted to please their master with whom they had a relationship in faith. They acted out of faith as the fruit of their relationship. The one slave's preoccupation was with the possessions of the master. He hid and did not live out this relationship by engaging it in the world around him. He did not have a faith relationship with the master.

When accounts are rendered in the final judgment of the parable, the master sets the two slaves free to enjoy his joy (Jn 8:36). This joy is the fellowship with the

master. And the result of that fellowship is the authority and power of the master to be appointed over greater things (Καταστήσω, BDAG).<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the remaining slave is to be thrown out into darkness. His judgment is to be alone; the opposite of fellowship. Faith = fellowship; no faith = alone.

The basis for judgment, then, was not faithfulness based on industriousness and productivity; nor was it the return on the investment of talents. It was the faith relationship with the master that trusted in the master's powerful gift so that all risk could be taken. Engaged in a faith relationship with their master, they neither hid nor hoarded what was given to them; rather, they were empowered to go and engage the master's possessions with the world. They confidently risked everything. The one slave was not engaged in such a relationship with the master. He was not empowered to go out and engage the world. He took no risk, but rather found security in hoarding and holding on to what he had. The two slaves risked everything because of the relationship with the master.

## **Comments on the Mission of the Church and Declining LCMS Membership**

### ***Missiological Potential from This Parable***

To me the missiological potential of the parable is clear. The focus is on a faith relationship with the master that leads to risk-taking. The *Τάλαντα* (*talents*) refer to God's Word and the faith that we possess to use that Word in everyday life. This is what all three slaves possessed, a degree of faith and knowledge of their master. All three were to be empowered by that faith relationship to engage his Word in the world. Though all had the knowledge of their master and his graciousness, only two of them acted upon their faith to go into the world with the *Lord's Word*. Their faith relationship with the master led them to engage with the world around them. Our faith relationship with the Lord should empower us to go out and engage God's Word effectively with the world.

The focus is on a faith relationship with the master that leads to risk-taking. . . . Only [a faith relationship with our Lord] will move us to openly share His Word.

The critique on missions, therefore, is not based on the use of our gifts, rather a faith relationship with the Lord. Only this will move us to openly share His Word and allow for His growth across diverse cultural worldviews. To do this effectively, we need to understand the dynamics of cultural communication and allow that the Holy Spirit's power and authority in the Word grow within the cultural worldview of the people.

As a former missionary who has had to take this risk, it should not surprise us that, as the word of God goes out and engages people of other cultures, the living out of that faith, the confessional formulations, the worship structures, *et al.*, will and should utilize words and objects (signs) that communicate within that culture. For the missionary, these may not carry the same form, but nonetheless retain the same Gospel meaning. How do we keep it in check? How can we control it? We can't; that is the Holy Spirit's work through God's scattered Word as faith is worked and lived out in that culture.

### ***Part I: Our Synod-wide Problem in a Nutshell***

Our Synod is experiencing drops in attendance and membership. It is not sufficient simply to ask if we might be *hiding* God's Word, but rather to ask *how* or *why* we might be doing so. We rightfully and truthfully say, "Go, preach the Gospel." I believe that every Lutheran means this with all faithfulness to the teaching of Christ. However, how do I go and preach? Am I engaging the Gospel in the world in an intelligible way, or is it being buried under a cultural worldview? If I am preaching in German to a people who understand French, what do I expect to happen? If I insist that non-Western cultures<sup>12</sup> develop worship in a way that is not communicated through their cultural worldview, is the Word being engaged among the people of that culture? Would we not want the rich heritage and joyful sound expressed in our cultural worldview to find expression in such a way that it can work to *win over* people according to their ability, according to their cultural worldview? Is our faith strong enough to take the risk and simply scatter God's Word?

Am I engaging the Gospel in the world in an intelligible way, or is it being buried under a cultural worldview? . . . The task, however, is difficult and risky because we feel more secure when we take charge of communicating that message.

The task, however, is difficult and risky because we feel more secure when we take charge of communicating that message through words and objects that hold meaning within our own cultural worldview. It is easier and less *risky* to assume we are maintaining the purity of God's Word as we have expressed it in our lives, in our confessional formulations, and our worship structure, because these forms, words and objects (signs) have meaning for us. Are we keeping a one-world culturally meaningful expression of orthopraxis and orthodoxy?

In reality, however, this *hides* the Word. This is to *bury it*, from which Greek word we get the English word *crypt*. Our security needs to be in our ongoing faith relationship with a living and active Word that engages people of all cultures in a

faith relationship with Him, not in our reluctance to accept culturally diverse expressions of that faith for fear of losing the purity of the Word. This word will give birth to expressions of faith in a diversity of cultures that will be able to communicate competently to their own. Again, are we willing to take the risk?

This, then, is the church in mission: to scatter God's Word (Is 55:11).<sup>13</sup> It will engage with the culture of people in their daily lives. As a Synod, in faith, we must take the risk to scatter His Word, knowing that He is totally in control. In faith, we allow the Spirit to work on the hearts of men and women who will express it in a form that has meaning for them. In worship and daily living, in church structure and congregational organization, we should give thanks for cultural differences so that every believer cultivates this faith and see himself as one sent. All believers should own it, taste it, and feel it. It should speak their heartfelt language and enter into Law and Gospel interaction with their cultural values. It should convict of sin from within their cultural worldview. It should liberate from sin and death in culturally intelligible and effective ways as they know it. This alone unleashes the power of the Gospel, which is understood by them, expressed through them and lived out in cultural diversity.

Take the risk to scatter  
His Word, knowing that  
He is totally in control.  
. . . We should give thanks  
for cultural differences

## ***Part II: Opting Out of Our Present Model of Missions and Outreach***

Keeping this parable linked with our *financial* cultural category stifles us from taking a *risk*. It is common in synodical planning as well as congregational outreach. It is a traditional Western/capitalist cultural model. When we think finances, most churches, and Synod as well, strategize and plan on the basis of a budget. We approve plan funding based on potential outcome: *gains*.

And, when we think of the financial aspects of a strategy and planning, we naturally think of another aspect of Western/capitalist worldview: cost over length of time. We may consider time to be wasted if there is no quantifiable production, i.e., *gains*. We don't want a strategy or plan that wastes our time and our money. We rarely, if at all, consider entering into a project without determining the financial risk or the feasibility of our financial abilities, as well as the time that it will take to accomplish the goal. And, finally, to achieve the goal, we select the people with the best *abilities* (talents) to accomplish the task. In our Western/capitalist cultural worldview, our *modus operandi* is to limit our risks on our investment in order to reach the projected outcome.

As a result, we historically have chosen pastors and missionaries as part of the goal or strategy to accomplish the goals. Offerings enable the structured strategy and

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plan to be operational. Funding comes in as the gains are lauded and progress is reported. But our cultural worldview puts us in a “catch 22” situation interpreting our *abilities* financially and our *talents*, as *spiritual gifts*. This interpretation brings a point of tension and guilt for the self-conscious Christian because we know that the growth is the Lord’s and we are not guaranteed a calculable return.

If we try to see a missiological significance from the narrative in this way, it will lead us to a works-righteous interpretation of the parable. It leads us to conclude that the stewardship of our *talents* is the possible reason by which success or failure of the growth is determined. The supposed failure of a strategy to produce then leads to a frustrating conclusion, “We try our best, but it is the Lord who gives growth, and so I will use my gifts whenever I am able, but He has to cause growth wherever and whenever He chooses.”

The problem is that mission today is budget-driven and talent-driven. This model relies on money and personal financial stewardship to achieve business-like returns. This is a cultural Western/capitalist model of stewardship taken from our cultural influence on and interpretation of the Matthew parable. However, as we learn from this parable, stewardship is not financial. Stewardship is the cultivation of a lifestyle in a faith relationship with the Lord. According to the parable, we are not the owner of the *talents* as our possession; everything belongs to the Lord. Our life belongs to the Lord, our employment, family, children, everything. We are called to be stewards of God’s Word in our daily life. All things are given to us to be utilized as we are sent out into the world every day. As His *servants*, we engage His Word with everyone around us. And, we do this at all cost of self and our possessions on loan from Him. Daily, we are risking job, friends, ridicule, etc., while living in the gracious fellowship and faith relationship with our Lord.

Stewardship is the cultivation of a lifestyle in a faith relationship with the Lord.

This, then, is the faith we *possess* (ὕπαρχοντα, BDAG), that His Word has been *entrusted* (Παρέδωκεν, BDAG) to all Christians, that we should be confident to take risks of loss, because our relationship is with a gracious and loving God who abundantly provides and abundantly forgives. He made us *able* (Δύναμιν, BDAG), through His choosing, to put His *Word* (Τάλαντα, BDAG) to *work* (ἠργάσατο, BDAG) that some might be *won over* (ἐκέρδησα, BDAG) and that we may enter into His *joy* (χαρὰν, BDAG) and have fellowship with Him.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I define and use *culture* as that ongoing process of socialization among people through a developing communication system that allows for the sharing of experiences in the world, through which meaning of the world around them is constructed. Experiences have meaning and are communicated through the use of *signs* (words, objects, sounds, etc.) which over time acquire agreed upon a shared *referent* (meaning). An understanding of these *signs* in relations to their *referent* is necessary for effective communication to take place. Anyone outside the system (the outsider) cannot share the meaning of the experience because they do not know the proper sign-referent codification. This is precisely the problem of reading the biblical text: the storyteller creates meaning by wisely choosing signs that are recognizable to the readers from shared experience, and have meaning in their daily lives. We are the outsiders to the New Testament world.

<sup>2</sup> Worldviews are like *lenses* through which the world is seen according to core values held in common by persons of a culture. These core values are constructed as part of ongoing socialization occurs, described in the first footnote.

<sup>3</sup> Herein is the importance of semiotics, the study of communication in which anything that holds meaning in my culture is a *sign*. The *sign* has value only because it serves as a *referent* to something that holds meaning in my community. Beyond that, a sign can *signify* a concept or idea from my real world.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture quotations in this article are from *NET Bible*, Full Notes Net Bible, 2nd ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Foundation, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> In the study of semiotics a *category* is a *domain of meaning* in which words function as a group of *signs* that altogether serve as *referents* in a network of meaning. The group of words (*signs*) is used together to create meaning when talking *finances*.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Textual versus interpretive observation has to do with observations that are actually in the text. Interpretive observations are binary oppositions of my view of the interpretation of the parable.

<sup>8</sup> “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have *gained* your brother.”

<sup>9</sup> “In the same way, wives, be subject to your own husbands. Then, even if some are disobedient to the word, they will be won over without a word by the way you live. . . .”

<sup>10</sup> “For since I am free from all I can make myself a slave to all, in order to gain even more people. To the Jews I became like a Jew to gain the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) to gain those under the law. To those free from the law I became like one free from the law (though I am not free from God’s law but under the law of Christ) to gain those free from the law. To the weak I became weak in order to gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all means I may save some.”

<sup>11</sup> This strikes an eschatological chord with 1 Corinthians 6:3, where Paul says that Christians will “judge even angels.”

<sup>12</sup> And, by culture here I also refer to age groups and generational differences as distinct cultural groups.

<sup>13</sup> “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

# Faithfulness Versus Unfaithfulness

## According to Matthew 25:14–30

Carlos Walter Winterle

**Abstract:** God entrusted talents to each of us, to some more, to others fewer. How are we managing these talents? A talent may be understood as money, as a skill, or as the Gospel itself. The growth of the church, under God’s blessings, depends on how we manage these talents. We depend exclusively on God’s grace for our salvation. But we cannot deny that God entrusts us with talents to be used and multiplied, and we are responsible for them. Are we “faithful” servants, or “lazy” servants?

*Faithfulness* and *unfaithfulness* are terms often related to marriage. God uses these terms several times in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between Himself and His people. He describes sometimes in very rude and realistic pictures how His people were unfaithful, running after other gods.

Maybe the Prophet Hosea is the best example, as he was asked to marry “an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD” (Hosea 1:2). The Prophet also wrote (4:1–2): “Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: ‘There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.’” Does it look familiar to you? Is it not a report of our time?

Jeremiah wrote about the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah:

During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, “Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after



*Rev. Dr. Carlos Walter Winterle, LLD, DD, DD, Brazilian, was ordained in 1973. He is President Emeritus of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, Rector of the Lutheran Theological Seminary—LTS—in Tshwane, Pretoria, South Africa, and Coordinator of the Theological Education Program—TEP in Mozambique. He and his wife, Lídia, have three children: Léo, Tatiana, and Paulo, and six grandchildren.*

[cwwinterle@gmail.com](mailto:cwwinterle@gmail.com)

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she had done all this, she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD. (Jer 3:6–19)

Ezekiel 23 presents God's judgment against Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem) in a very harsh way:

They became prostitutes in Egypt, engaging in prostitution from their youth. In that land their breasts were fondled and their virgin bosoms caressed. . . . Oholah engaged in prostitution while she was still mine; and she lusted after her lovers, the Assyrians. . . . Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister. . . . She carried her prostitution still further. . . . When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her naked body, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister. . . . Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. . . . Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Since you have forgotten me and turned your back on me, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution. . . . You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD."

Why does God use such "pornographic" language to depict the unfaithfulness of His people? Because this was the way the neighboring countries worshiped their gods, many of them gods and goddesses of fertility. God uses something real to describe the spiritual relationship of faithfulness and unfaithfulness between Him and His people. And to show that nothing is hidden from His eyes, not even all the pornography that surrounds our Christians, taking many of them away from the church to whom they had promised faithfulness on the day of their Confirmation. It is nothing new under heaven. This is the reason why I quoted these texts. Pornography and unfaithfulness are still a stumbling block on the way of many Christians to divert them from the church and from God.

On the other hand, in spite of the unfaithfulness of His people, God is always faithful to us. "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim 2:13). In His faithfulness, He sent His Beloved Son to die for the unfaithful, "the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pt 3:18). We

are not able to remain faithful, due to our human sinful nature. But God's grace covers us with the white garment of Christ's righteousness, and *He daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers* (Small Catechism, Third Article), renewing His love every single day. His love and His strength make us able to come back to His arms, and He accepts us back in spite of our unfaithfulness. Therefore, "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his *righteousness*, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Is 61:10, emphasis added). This is the positive way God speaks about His relationship with His people, like the faithful relationship at a wedding. "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness / My beauty are, my glorious dress; / Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, / With joy shall I lift up my head" (LSB 563:1).

We are not able to remain faithful, due to our human sinful nature. But God's grace covers us with the white garment of Christ's righteousness, and *He daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers* (Small Catechism, Third Article).

In this way Jesus presents Himself in Revelation as the faithful bridegroom celebrating His wedding with the church.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Rev 21:1–5)

Jesus portrays Himself as the bridegroom and the Church as His bride in the parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13), just before the parable of the talents. The same image is used in the parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1–14). And Paul makes the analogy between the relationship of a man and a woman, and Christ and His Church (Eph 5:21–33) and calls it "a profound mystery."

This analogy refers to our individual relationship with God, and also to our corporate relationship with God as a church body. First Corinthians 12:12–27 is my favorite image of the Church. I understand that this relationship has a side effect

from both sides: If the members are faithful to God in word and deeds, the church (organization) is also faithful. On the other hand, if the church is faithful to God's Word and Sacraments, the members will have no excuse to be unfaithful to God. But the reality shows a different picture. Is the unfaithfulness of our members a result of the unfaithfulness of the church? Maybe not in the same sense portrayed by God in the Old Testament; but due to the church's selfishness, not looking to the real needs and reality of the members in this twenty-first century, the church has been unfaithful to God's original plan and, as a consequence, the members have been unfaithful as well, abandoning the church, following their own desires or the promises offered by other church bodies.

The challenge proposed by our editor is: "Has the church in America, which for almost fifty years has been losing more members than it has won for Jesus, been unfaithful? Are we like the third servant in the text?"

As for me personally, I have to look to this challenge with other eyes than the majority of the writers of this issue. America doesn't mean only North America (have you ever realized that?). America means also South and Central America. And, as a South American, a Brazilian, I will try to write about the proposed challenge from a South American point of view. Of course, I will refer to the Christian Church in North America as well, as I have had several opportunities to visit Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregations and interact with pastors and members, as well as with the national leadership.

The LCMS was always set as an example during my seminary time in Brazil (1962–1972) of a church body that manages well the talents she received. What a frustration it was when I began to know the LCMS from inside. Besides lots of faithfulness, I saw practices that don't match with a faithful church. "A household divided against itself will not stand" (Mt 12:25). Maybe the root of the lack of growing begins here?

I will work with the text from three different approaches:

- 1) A talent as a currency
- 2) A talent as a gift
- 3) A talent as the big treasure God handed over to His Church: The Holy Gospel

## **1. A Talent as a Currency**

One talent is equivalent to 6,000 denarii (about twenty years of labor). Depending on the exchange rate of the dollar, it may come to one talent equals 500,000 US dollars (USD). How many USD talents were sent to Brazil to establish and to maintain the church in my home country? It was a huge investment! Did the

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (IELB) manage well those talents, being faithful to what was entrusted to her?

The German immigrants brought the Lutheran Christian faith to Brazil first in 1824. It was not for a religious reason that the Germans moved to Brazil, as it happened in North America. It was an economic and political matter. Lack of land, poverty, and famine moved many German families to accept the invitation of the Brazilian government to settle in South of Brazil. It was a very poorly populated province (state) that needed to be colonized, but under the risk that the Spanish countries around it might annex it. Also, Brazil's first Emperor, Peter I, who had proclaimed the independence of Brazil in 1822, was married to Austrian Princess Leopoldina, from the House of Habsburg. She encouraged the Germans to come to Brazil.

They organized themselves in small communities, with a school, a church, and a dance hall. Very few pastors were available, and the religious degeneration was visible. But some Lutherans wanted to remain faithful to the faith of their forefathers. When they heard about the Missouri Synod, they contacted the leadership in North America, and Pastor Broders was sent to check on the possibilities in 1900. He was very frustrated with the lack of biblical knowledge and with the behavior of the so-called "Lutherans." In his report, he was not in favor of supporting the plan to send Missouri Synod pastors to Brazil. But then it happened, by God's hand, that he missed his ship back to North America. While he was waiting in the city for the next ship, some people realized that he was a Lutheran pastor, and they told him about some Lutherans living in a rural area not too far from the harbor. He decided to visit those people.

Father Gowert, the leader of that group, had dreamed the night before and saw some coins in his dream. When Pastor Broders arrived and introduced himself, Father Gowert, a faithful German-Russian Lutheran, made a "colloquy" with the pastor, based on the Small Catechism. Father Gowert was happy with Pastor Broders' witness of faith; and when he saw the coins the visitor showed him, he recognized the same coins he had seen in his dream. This was like a sign that the Missouri Synod was the true church that would send pastors to serve the Lutherans in Brazil.

Following the old paternalistic mission system, the Missouri Synod paid for almost everything necessary to establish a district of the LCMS in Brazil, investing a lot of talents. In 1903, a small seminary was established by Pastor Hartmeister; and, in 1904, *Der Brasilianische District der deutschen evangelisch-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten* was established, with the presence of a LCMS representative, Rev. Louis Lochner, fourteen pastors, one teacher, and ten laypeople, representing ten congregations with around three thousand members.

The USD talents sent to Brazil were well invested, and they multiplied not only 100% as in the parable, but much more. At the very beginning, the mission was

given the German name, “*Sammelmission*,” meaning to collect German background Lutherans dispersed in southern Brazil. Many churches, when they heard about the work the Missouri pastors were doing, contacted them, asking them to come to where they were living. My grandfather had a small grocery business and a dance hall; and, along with some other leaders of that community, they went on horseback to call a Missouri Lutheran pastor to serve them. The dance hall was used as a church. The place is Moreira, where the oldest orphanage and home for the aged of the IELB are located.

Usually the congregations built their own churches and schools, some of timber, some of bricks. But they were not able to afford the salary of the pastors. The Missouri Synod was paying the salary of most of the pastors sent to Brazil, and also of the professors of Concordia Seminary, the school fees of the candidates, the trips, etc. Some pastors got their income from the parish school, charging school fees, as they were teachers and pastors at the same time, serving many congregations in one parish. Some members used to give to the pastor part of their crops, and the pastor’s family had some land to cultivate and to keep pigs, chickens, and sometimes a milk cow. This was the situation of my father when he graduated from the seminary, first as a teacher in 1929, and after that as a pastor in 1944.

The USD talents did not stop growing and generated plenty of interest. After the first stage of *Sammelmission* among the German immigrants, the church decided to begin a mission among Portuguese-speaking people in 1918. Pastor Rudolph Hasse, my wife’s grandfather, was born in Brazil, had married a Portuguese woman, and was fluent in Portuguese. He was chosen to begin this mission. The local population all had a Roman Catholic background, and it was not an easy mission. The Lutheran school opened many doors to evangelism. The teacher and pastor, Octacílio Schuler, worked together with Pastor Hasse. He married the daughter of the local pharmacist, a woman with a Portuguese background. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil celebrated the centennial of the first Portuguese-speaking congregation last year in 2018.

Pastor R. Hasse was later sent as missionary to the former capital of the country, Rio de Janeiro. From there he began the mission in several cities in the northeast and in the north of the country; and he also crossed the Atlantic Ocean and began the mission in Portugal. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil has congregations and mission stations in all twenty-six states that

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And what about the USD talents? Due to the paternalist mission system adopted by the LCMS, the IELB was dependent on the USD for one hundred years. Only in 2000, after a strict ten-year independence plan, and a huge effort in teaching stewardship to the congregations, did the IELB become financially independent from the LCMS. The church in Brazil had shown faithfulness in managing the USD talents she had received from the LCMS, and the talents were multiplied uncountable times.

Many congregations had become independent during the twentieth century. But it took a while for some to begin to dig out their own talent to invest in mission around them and in other places. The paternalist mentality was still strong. One of the seminary professors used to say, “Don’t speak about money to your members. The Missouri Synod provides. . . .”

Slowly, some larger congregations began to support smaller congregations and mission stations. The challenge was to support the seminary and the synod’s headquarters. But, by God’s grace, and by the good administration of the talents collected in Brazil, the IELB is a financially self-supported synod, managing well the talents received from the congregations.

Since 2010, the IELB has crossed the Atlantic Ocean again, this time reaching the Indian Ocean and supporting the theological education of the recently founded Lutheran Church in Mozambique. The mission began in 2006 and was officially accredited by the government in 2018. The church has seven ordained pastors, sixty candidates in training to become pastors, around eighty congregations and preaching points, and about eight thousand members.

The talents (\$) entrusted by God to the IELB have multiplied, and even if we were able to do everything that is expected from us, we have to confess as Jesus told us: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Lk 17:10). But, by God’s grace and mercy, I hope that the IELB will be able to give back at least another “five talents.”

## **An Analysis of the Administration of the USD Talents by the LCMS and by the IELB**

The IELB managed to centralize the financial administration. The congregations send 10% or more of their budget to the headquarters. Many individuals have adopted a mission project like that of Mozambique, and they send their donation to the IELB headquarters. The Brazilian LWML and the LLL support the seminary via the headquarters. The synod administration is entrusted with these talents and it manages the talents entrusted to her faithfully. This causes a growth in trust between

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the donors and the synod’s headquarters, who regularly present a financial report to the congregations. The mission opportunities and the social needs are growing, and it is difficult to attend all requests. Many districts and congregations support also local mission and social projects besides their contribution to the Synod.

The LCMS works in a different system. Every missionary, the seminaries, the mission agencies, the Recognized Service Organizations (RSOs), several foreign churches/organizations, and so on, all do their own fundraising among congregations and individuals, visiting them, giving reports, and asking for support. What happens is that many are “milking the same cow,” and some cows are becoming tired. LCMS Mission Advancement manages several projects, but, as far as I know, it is not aware of all the ongoing projects inside and outside of the USA. Having served in Africa now for thirteen years, I experience many mission teams coming to churches and to social agencies, and sponsoring even non-Lutheran churches and entities or Lutheran churches who receive support from LWF or from other entities as well. This movement doesn’t have a central coordination. I am not sure if this is the best way to manage the USD talents entrusted to LCMS members and congregations. While some who “cry” more receive more, others are struggling to survive because they don’t have the contacts and access some have.

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Lk 12:48).

See below the diagram showing the growth of the IELB from her beginning up to 2017.

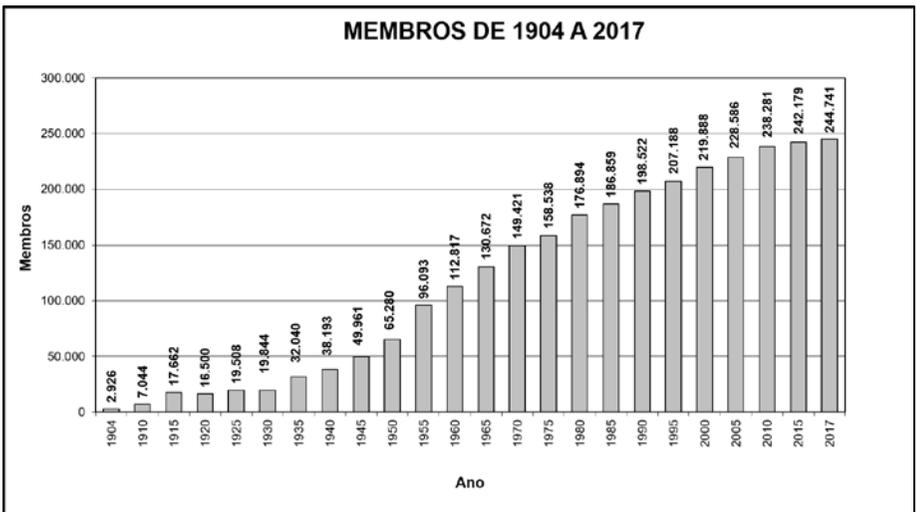


Figure 1. Courtesy of the IELB Central Office.

## 2. A Talent as an Individual Gift

Every one of us is a gifted/talented person. Some are more gifted than others, but this does not diminish anyone. We do not deserve God's talents, but He entrusts each of us according to His love and wisdom.

When it comes to a talent as a gift, I like the text of Romans 12:4–8:

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

“We have different gifts, according to the *grace* given to each of us.” With how many of the above-mentioned gifts do you identify yourself the most? Are you working with them in a manner to multiply them? Are you faithful to the gifts entrusted to you?

I still envy some talents entrusted to others. This is the natural reaction of my Old Adam. Why do some receive five talents, others two, and the other only one? I will never have the answer this side of heaven.

On the other hand, God gave me the talent to acknowledge the gifts I do not have and to work as a team, joining the gifts of others to do God's work. The background of the gifts mentioned above is that we are Christ's body, members of one another. As in 1 Corinthians 12:12ff., the apostle Paul appeals to our own experience as we observe how the members of our body work harmoniously. This is for me the best image of the church. If the members do not work harmoniously for the good of the body, something is very wrong and we are sick.

Returning to our churches in America: How many gifts has God entrusted to our members? If everyone is faithful with the gift he receives, working in harmony with the gifts of others, the church/body of Christ, will be strong and healthy! If not, the church becomes weak and stops growing. Are we an old church that is running fast to the grave? No! God, by His grace, renews the members of His body daily, bringing new members to His fellowship and also giving them talents.

Maybe we are selfish, or jealous of the new members who are brought into Christ's body? Sometimes we think we are self-sufficient and that we do not need our fellow Christians. This often has to do with politics in the church.

We know that Jesus' kingdom is not of this earth (Jn 18:36). We know what Jesus said to His disciples when they were struggling about “who is the greatest.” Jesus said: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high

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officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:25–28).

Even so, the churches copy the model of the politicians. “I am the boss!” is the rule in many church bodies and also in congregations. Instead of serving, some want to rule. Instead of cooperating with one another, some cause divisions. “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mk 3:25). Instead of humility, arrogance and pride characterize many church leaders. Power and riches are the goal of many bishops and pastors.

How can the talents be multiplied if we use them in a selfish way?

Comparing the Lutheran churches in Brazil and in the USA, the IELB does not have a label on the head of each pastor, saying: “liberal” or “conservative.” Of course, we have big differences among us, and the gifts are various. Of course, we have problems, and the church on earth will never be perfect. But the IELB is united in one doctrine, faithful to the Bible and to the Lutheran Confessions. The leadership is elected as a natural development of the leaders detected by the church, without politics or opposition parties. This is the reality for the last couple of years. The church body’s history shows that there was much political activity in the past that caused many problems for the church body. But thanks be to God, the elections at least for the last twenty-five years have run smooth and quiet.

Comparing the Lutheran churches in Brazil and in the USA, the IELB does not have a label on the head of each pastor, saying: “liberal” or “conservative.”

For the unity of the church, a daily devotional book is edited every year. Eighty thousand copies are sold and distributed. Also, the Lutheran Hour Ministry, which works in perfect agreement with the church body’s central administration and the Brazilian CPH, has a daily devotional book. Home Bible studies have their national yearly plan, as do the Sunday School, the LWML, and the LLL. The pastors receive guidelines for the sermons, and sermons are prepared for reading services when the pastor is not available. The auxiliary organizations have seats at the annual meeting of the Board of Directors, and they present their reports and plans. The gifts of each leader are acknowledged and respected, with a good balance between clergy and laypeople (men and women). Strong personalities cause reactions, but with a healthy debate for the sake of a healthy church body.

Evangelism and social work are always on the table. The IELB has as a general watchword: CRISTO PARA TODOS = CHRIST FOR ALL; and each year some aspect of this mission-minded watchword is highlighted in a national plan as

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reported above. A banner and specific study guides about the watchword are shared with all every year.

### **3. A Talent as the Big Treasure God Handed over to His Church: The Holy Gospel**

Luther wrote: “The true treasure of the church is the Holy gospel of the glory and the grace of God” (Thesis #62 of Luther’s 95 Theses).<sup>1</sup>

God entrusted the Gospel to the church. It is much more than five, two, or only one talent. As the Gospel is Jesus Himself (Jn 1:1, 14), there is no way to measure His cost and value.

How is the church managing this large number of talents? Even the tomb could not retain Jesus. Shall the church retain Jesus only for herself? This is what the third servant did. He saved in a very secure place, according to his point of view, the talent that he had received from his master. He was afraid of the master, afraid to lose what he had received; he was jealous that something could happen with the gift. And we know the end of the story.

The Gospel was brought to the “marketplace” in different ways to be invested and to be multiplied. It began with a verbal message, shared mouth to mouth by the believers. And the church grew amazingly the first decades (Acts 2:47). Crossing the Jews’ border, the apostle Paul went to almost all known countries of his time, preaching the Gospel and presenting it to all in written form. The Evangelists and others wrote the New Testament on scrolls and parchments (2 Tim 4:13). After a while, the same Gospel was presented in books with pages, similar to what we have now. The printing press was invented, and the same Gospel became more accessible through Luther’s translation. We now have the Gospel in several versions, editions, and translations, from very simple and popular editions to luxury and expensive ones. And now, we are living in the era of digital technology. I was shocked the first time I saw a pastor reading the sermon text from his cell phone. No Bible in his hand? But the Gospel was the same as I learned it as a child.

The Gospel was brought to the “marketplace” in different ways to be invested and to be multiplied.

This brief excursion through the history of the Bible allows me to say that the Gospel can never be changed! As St. Paul wrote in Galatians 1:8: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.” But the Gospel may be “wrapped” and presented in different ways: the classic black-bound Bible, the many colorful ones, electronic versions, and translated into as many languages as possible, and so on.

The same may be said about our Divine Services. Our Order of Service has a strong tradition and presents the Gospel in a very clear way. As one of my colleagues once said: “If it were not for the liturgy and the hymns, I would have nothing from the last service I attended, because I could not understand the sermon.” But this does not mean that the Order of Service must be followed with the same tunes or words as in the sixteenth century. The *Lutheran Service Book* itself has five different options. Pastors are using Power Point presentations to illustrate the Gospel with pictures. Sign language has become more and more common in many services. The black robe gave way to a white one, with colorful stoles. Music has been played by several instruments, and not only by the organ.

Does this change the Gospel? I understand that churches who are doing these and other changes in the Order of Service are going out and learning from the “marketplace” how to invest the Gospel in a way that it will produce double and much more. Maybe some are running a big risk, going too far? But at least they are not hiding the talent in the ground, closed inside the four walls of a church building or in some theological books, scared that the talent may be contaminated by the world. The Gospel was given by God to be invested!

And when the Landlord comes back and asks what we did with His talent,—yes, it is still His talent, not ours!—what will we say? *Here you have it, Lord. I preserved it from being rotted or contaminated. I wrote several books defending it and preserving it in its purity. But . . . nothing else happened. I don't have anything else to give you back.*

Too bad for those who do not take the risk to invest the Gospel in the “marketplace.” They will never see any profit.

A colleague and good friend of mine came to my office after finishing his PhD, while I was president of the Lutheran Church in Brazil. He proposed that the church should have a kind of laboratory of theology, where the scholars could study and do research without having to give classes or to preach. It was theology for itself. He compared his proposal to a chemical laboratory where scientists were doing experiments and maybe they would discover some new element. I replied to him: Theology does not exist without people. Jesus did not entrust the Gospel to the church to be examined and dissected, but to be read and proclaimed to all for the salvation of many.

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This takes me back to the question proposed by the editor: *Why is the Lutheran Church in (North) America not growing in the last fifty years?* Does it have to do with a dead orthodoxy again?

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil never stopped growing. Look at the diagram again. And the time it grew more was just during and after World War II, when the German language was prohibited in the country and the church had to go out from her “German ghettos” and face the Brazilian reality. The talent had to be dug out from the ground where it was hidden and brought to the “marketplace” to produce interest. And it worked! Also, when the USD talents stopped coming, the church reacted in an amazing way and opened her eyes wider to the ripe fields around her and in other countries. Could it be better? Of course! As long as the Landlord is not back, it is our duty and privilege to work with the talents entrusted to us. Much more can be done to reach the unreached and the unchurched with the Gospel. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pt 3:9).

Jesus did not entrust the Gospel to the church to be examined and dissected, but to be read and proclaimed to all for the salvation of many.

## Conclusion

It is a well-known joke: What should be done to get rid of the bats in the church’s tower? Confirm them, and they will never more appear in the church again.

Thinking about the reasons why so many confirmed youths abandon the church, I have a theory. Going back to the beginning of this paper, I mentioned the unfaithfulness of God’s people in the Old Testament due to the pagan sex rituals as part of their worship of fertility. When our youths begin to experience sex before marriage, their consciences accuse them and they do not feel comfortable coming to the Service. Having to choose between a pure and godly life according to God’s Commandments and a life of pleasure, especially when they experience the freedom of living independently far from home—they choose the false freedom. Drunkenness and drugs help them to go farther and farther away from the church. Am I right in my theory? I am not sure, but lots of evidences and experiences in the ministry show that this is a possibility.

Divorce is also a reason for young couples to leave the church. I become frustrated when I look back to my forty-six years of ministry and I see so many former faithful youths and young couples now far from the two congregations I served in Brazil for fifteen and twenty years, respectively. Many of the weddings I

performed ended in divorce, in spite of talking about this to exhaustion before the wedding and after it.

On the other hand, God's promise is still valid: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" (Prov 22:6). Many of my former youth who were far from the church at certain points in their lives came back and confessed again their faith in the gracious God, who reveals Himself in Jesus. Hope never ends.

God entrusted many talents to our Confessional Lutheran churches: money, skills and, over all, the Gospel. Let us not hide them, but bring them to the "marketplace" and invest them to double, triple, or more. The churches of the International Lutheran Council have the blessing to preserve the pure Gospel, not being contaminated by the so-called "Other Gospels" (Galatians 1). Let us share it in a loud and clear voice by words and deeds, not isolating ourselves as in a monastery, or just pointing our finger to what is wrong, but rather pointing our finger to show the Way.

God entrusted many talents to our Confessional Lutheran churches: money, skills and, over all, the Gospel. Let us not hide them, but bring them to the "marketplace" and invest them to double, triple, or more.

Faithfulness to the Holy Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions does not mean living in a monastery, but it means going out into the world to invest what God entrusted us!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kurt Aland, ed. *Martin Luther's 95 Theses* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 56.

# Faithfulness in Christ's Mission

John T. Pless

**Abstract:** Hermann Sasse (1895–1976) taught theology in Germany and Australia, emerged as a leading Lutheran theologian of the last century. His ecumenical contacts were broad and his knowledge of developments within global Lutheranism was informed and perceptive. Not the least of Sasse's interest was the place of mission within the Lutheran Church and how it relates to the confession of the faith. This essay explores this connection based on two primary essays by Sasse.

Presumably, Jesus' parable of the talents was chosen to give focus to this issue to accent the tragic possibility that the Lord's people might also bury the endowment entrusted to them in the ground, not utilizing it for the good of the Kingdom. While, no doubt, this parable has multiple applications for missions, this article focuses on confessional faithfulness in mission. Sasse himself recognized as much when in a 1942 essay, "Flight From Dogma: Remarks on Bultmann's 'Demythologization' of the New Testament," he wrote on a similar parable of accountability in Luke 16, "Must she [the church] who should have been a steward of the mysteries of God hear in that voice the voice of one who says to her: 'Give account of your stewardship, for you cannot be a steward any longer! [Lk 16:2].'"<sup>1</sup> And again in a 1956 essay, "The Confessional Problem in World Lutheranism," he makes a direct reference to the parable of the talents when he writes, "Is that really burying one's talent if he [the Lutheran] does not enter into every fellowship of that [in this case, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA] ? Did Luther bury his talent when he refused the hand of fellowship to Zwingli [at Marburg in 1529]? Did the apostles do it when they refused fellowship with false teachers?"<sup>2</sup> Sasse recognized that the church of Jesus Christ has been entrusted with the good deposit of the Gospel, which can never be divorced from dogma. The Lord requires faithfulness in the confession of His truth. Sasse develops the implications of this fidelity to the truth of the Gospel for mission.



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*John T. Pless (BA, MDiv, DLitt) is assistant professor of pastoral ministry and missions at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana and a visiting professor of practical theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Pretoria, South Africa. He is author of several books and numerous journal articles. His previous work on Sasse has appeared in The Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Tradition ed. Timothy Wengert (Baker Academic Press, 2017) and Twentieth Century Lutheran Theologians ed. Mark C. Mattes (Vanderhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013). [john.pless@ctsfw.edu](mailto:john.pless@ctsfw.edu)*

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To understand how Sasse does this, we need to pay some attention to his own biography. Who was Hermann Sasse (1895–1976)? He was born into a middle-class family in Thuringia. Sasse would enter the University of Berlin, where he studied with some of the most prestigious theologians of the early twentieth century, including Adolph von Harnack, Adolph Deissmann, Julius Katfan, Reinhold Seeberg, and Karl Holl. His university studies were interrupted by World War I, as he enlisted as an officer in the Germany army where he would see action in some of the bloodiest battles of that war.

Like many of his contemporaries, Sasse would find the war to be the crucible that would test and ultimately crush the convictions of classical liberalism which were mediated to him by his Berlin teachers. The devastation and suffering that Sasse witnessed as a soldier convinced him of the futility of liberalism's optimistic view of the human capacity for ethical progress.

After the war, Sasse would complete his doctoral studies and serve as a pastor in Berlin. In the 1925–26 academic year, Sasse pursued a year of post-doctoral studies at Hartford Seminary in the United States. This year was significant for two reasons. First, it would give Sasse intimate knowledge of church life, including that of the various Lutheran bodies in the United States. Second, Sasse himself states that it was during this year that he became a confessional Lutheran through his reading of Wilhelm Loehe's *Three Books about the Church*.

Sasse's knowledge of the American religious scene in these years is reflected in his first book, published in 1927 under the title, *American Christianity and the Church*. This monograph contains Sasse's observations on the place of "undogmatic Christianity" in American life. The young German theologian describes the pragmatism of the American church when he writes "It is a church which has renounced the idea that it is possible to possess the truth and the requirements necessitated by that truth for carrying out its work."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to mainline American Protestantism in 1927, Sasse held out hope for Lutherans in America. Largely spared the skirmishes of the so-called Modernist/Fundamentalist debate over the Bible, the works righteousness of the Social Gospel Movement, and the suspicion that creeds and liturgy were detrimental to growth and unity, Lutherans were not institutionally united; and they were something of wallflowers in the American religious garden. Sasse wrote,

And the Lutherans are not united, leading an isolated life, having little influence on the intellectual life of the nation. But they are living and growing churches. If the movement toward unity (the first great consequence of which was the formation of the United Lutheran Church in America in 1918) continues and leads to the unification of all Lutherans it will be one of the most significant churches in America. The life of these churches dispels the notion that Lutheranism's doctrine of justification

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necessarily leads to quietism. There is in America perhaps no more active a church than the Missouri Synod, which is the most dogmatically rigorous Lutheran Church in the country. The history of the organization of this church demonstrates that Lutheranism can exist in forms other than a state church or dependent upon the state (as we hear happily repeated time and time again in Europe). Lutheranism is never more vibrant than where it is free from guardianship by a secular authority.<sup>4</sup>

Sasse would remain conversant with American Lutheran leaders and theologians for the remainder of his life. He was particularly interested in the Missouri Synod, for he saw in it the last large confessional Lutheran church body that stood against the forces of theological liberalism and unionism. Shifts in the Missouri Synod led Sasse to wonder if the synod had buried its legacy and instead embraced a future more attune to the predominant ecumenical trends of the middle twentieth century.

[Sasse] was impressed by Loehe's understanding of the church as apostolic, catholic, and confessional. Loehe's description of mission as the one church of God in motion would leave its imprint on Sasse.

It was the nineteenth-century Bavarian pastor, Wilhelm Loewe, that Sasse would identify with most closely. He was impressed by Loehe's understanding of the church as apostolic, catholic, and confessional. Loehe's description of mission as the one church of God in motion would leave its imprint on Sasse. While he was not uncritical of Loehe, Sasse appreciated his courage in both confession and mission.<sup>5</sup>

It might be said that Sasse was both an ecumenical confessionalist and a confessional ecumenist. His passion for the truth of the apostolic Gospel and his love of the Church catholic compelled him to be both. It is with this in mind that we turn to two essays where Sasse addresses the Lutheran Church's responsibility for mission.

The first essay, written in 1946, "The Question of the Church's Unity on the Mission Field," addresses a practical challenge that would naturally arise in the years immediately after World War II, as Western churches were able to either resume or initiate mission endeavors in Asia and Africa. In this piece, Sasse observes that, given the multiplicity of denominations involved in evangelistic work in places where the Gospel had not been previously preached, the contemporary question of the unity of the church arose from the mission field. The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh in 1910 was the birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement. At Edinburgh, the issue of unity was not theoretical but pragmatically driven by the desire to evangelize the world effectively in the twentieth century. John Mott (1865–1955), an American Methodist layman, spearheaded the conference,

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optimistically declaring “It is our hope that before we close our eyes in death, all people on earth will have had the opportunity to know and await the living Lord Christ.”<sup>6</sup> The Edinburgh Conference was more at home in the optimism of the nineteenth century rather than in the disappointment that would come with the twentieth century. The missional optimism of Edinburgh would fade with two world wars and the rise of secularistic nihilism.

But for Sasse there is a deeper issue: “How can Christian mission call the peoples of the world to the *one* truth of the *one* Gospel if its bearers themselves are not united on what the Gospel actually is?”<sup>7</sup> Sasse argues that the message of the Gospel has definite and identifiable content; it is the word of the cross. It is not a denominational message but the apostolic kerygma of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God and Lord, put to death and raised to life for the justification of sinners. This Gospel is not simply a message about Christ’s repeating the history of His life, death, and resurrection. It is the proclamation of His saving work, always predicated for sinners, and it is delivered in the oral word of preaching and in Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar, instituted by the Lord Himself. It is not to be confused with a philosophy of life, a system of morality, or mystical experience.

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In contrast to the activism that prompted those inspired by Edinburgh, Sasse does not seek the unity of the church as a goal to be pursued for the sake of mission. Rather, the unity of the church is a given to be confessed: “Genuine faith in the *una sancta* as an indestructible, divinely established reality in the world can guard us all, Christians of churches young and old, from doubting the church of God. For the present state of Christianity will plunge anyone into despair who only sees the outer state and knows nothing of the hidden glory of the *regnum Christi* (“kingdom of Christ”), which stands behind it.”<sup>8</sup>

The Christian stance is not despair, but rather faithfulness and patience in the face of outward fissures in Christendom. The unity of the church is constituted in Christ alone. Where this is forgotten, Sasse observes, a lethal synergism sets in that would attempt to create some other unity than that described in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, i.e., unity established by the pure preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to the divine word. This was the

error, says Sasse, of Pietism as expressed in the slogan, “Doctrine divides, service unites.”<sup>9</sup>

Erudite church historian that he is, Sasse reminds his readers that if the Early Church had neglected doctrine, Christianity would have come to an end. The Marcionites, Valentinians, Montanists, Nestorians, and Arians were not simply alternative versions of a single Christian reality. Had these heretical distortions of the Gospel been recognized as legitimate and reconcilable narratives of Jesus Christ, the Church would no longer exist, her mission ruined. “Just as a man whose kidneys no longer eliminate poisons which have accumulated in the body will die, so the church will die which no longer eliminates heresy.”<sup>10</sup> Sasse’s essay anticipated what would come to be known as the ecumenical paradigm of “reconciled diversity” and talk of “post-denominational Christianity.” Yet he understands that both miss the point of the necessity of confession. Where there is a confessional vacuum, it will be filled by an eclectic mixture of truth with error. The outcome, Sasse predicts, will be a reversion to paganism: “And so today, too, wherever the church no longer is able to separate from heresy, it will fall back into paganism and be destroyed.”<sup>11</sup>

Sasse does not end this article on a negative note of pessimism or despair, for the Lord is exceedingly rich in mercy and preserves His Word in this dying world. Sasse takes his readers back to Jesus’ high priestly prayer, which is a missionary prayer:

These young Christians also read the apostolic warning against heresy. And there are many gripping testimonies to the fact that they have begun to understand why the high priestly prayer of the Lord, both the petition for the preservation of unity and the petition for the preservation of truth belong inseparably together. “That they may be one” (John 17:21) is merely the opposite side of “Sanctify them in your truth; your Word is truth” (John 17:17). It is Jesus Christ himself and no one else who tells us that the question of the *one* church is the question of the *true* church.<sup>12</sup>

A second major essay from Sasse’s pen would come in 1954 under the title, “The Lutheran Church and World Mission.” Written roughly five years after his arrival in Australia, Sasse is aware of the challenges to the church’s mission in India and Asia.<sup>13</sup> He recognizes that many questioned whether there should be a Lutheran Church in southeast Asia, referring to the particular circumstances of the Batak Church, which had been accepted into membership in the Lutheran World Federation even though it did not subscribe to either the Small Catechism or the Augsburg

Sasse observes that the question is pressed on us both by Christians and non-Christians: Why should there be a Lutheran Church on the mission field?

Confession. He notes that some equate the importing of Lutheran teaching to Asia as a kind of confessional colonialism. Sasse observes that the question is pressed on us both by Christians and non-Christians: Why should there be a Lutheran Church on the mission field?

Sasse answers this question by returning to the dominical words that institute the preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. God has provided for these that human beings might come to justifying faith to echo the language of Article V of the Augsburg Confession. He is critical of Karl Hartenstein and others whom he believes ground mission in human energies rather than the Means of Grace, which are the marks of the church: "So the world's mission churches are in danger of becoming churches without sacraments, at least without the real Sacrament, which is means of grace and not a harmless sign which one can, if needed, even omit. The LWF with its mission department can't help either. For the Sacraments, without which Luther couldn't even imagine a church, don't interest it very much, as both its words and deeds show."<sup>14</sup>

A product of the Rhenish Mission Society, the Batak Church could not distinguish between the Lutheran and the Reformed doctrines of the Lord's Supper. Sasse recognized this as unionism incapable of making a clear confession. Without confession, mission is made sterile no matter how impressive it may seem outwardly. In a similar vein, Sasse worries that the church in India is in danger of losing the Lutheran doctrine of Sacrament. Such a loss, he opines, would be particularly disastrous there in that it would deprive Indian Christians of teaching of "the real incarnation and the real presence as concrete forgiveness"<sup>15</sup> throwing them back on spiritualistic interpretations carried over from Hinduism.

Lutheran missions are such not simply in name, but by actual confession. There is an urgency to Sasse's appeal that Lutherans not bury the treasure of the confession but proclaim it with boldness and confidence:

As at home, so today also in the mission field, the Lutheran pastor stands before the difficult, and yet so thankful job of speaking the Gospel so clearly, as clearly as the catechism and the Augsburg Confession do. The Confession must become alive [in] us again, and we want to begin with ourselves. For basically, contemporary humanity of all races has had enough of nonbinding chatter. Communism would never have achieved such victories if it hadn't satisfied the hunger for dogma which the churches weren't able to satisfy anymore. But why have we kept from people the true dogma of the pure Gospel. May God strengthen us all for the battle for the true confession, and help us, in the power of Christ's love, to call back to the Gospel's truth a Christendom which is sinking into relativism.<sup>16</sup>

Lutheran mission will lead to Lutheran churches not merely in denominational affiliation, but in doctrine and practice. This theme would be ably carried forward by

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Sasse's student and associate, Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (1910–1982), director of the Bleckmar Mission from 1950 to 1978. In an essay entitled, "The Lutheran Church Plants Lutheran Mission," Hopf largely encapsulates the major themes of his mentor's thinking on mission, concluding

To stewards of the older and younger Lutheran churches, being trustworthy and faithful belongs to their ecumenical responsibility to the whole Christian church on earth. Woe to every Lutheran church who so misunderstands her confessional bond, as if she should introvertedly eke out her own meager existence in seclusion, protect her stock, and leave parts of Christianity polluted or ruled by false doctrine to their own resources. If Lutheran mission should and must lead to Lutheran church, then this in no way means the isolation of a young Lutheran church that is just emerging. It means, rather, the responsibility of the mission to preserve the unity with all rightly believing Lutheran churches on earth, but just as much its responsibility to the testimony to the biblical truth of salvation and its consequences beyond all borders and boundaries of painful divisions in the church.<sup>17</sup>

For Hopf, as for Sasse, the question of mission always stands or falls with the doctrine of the church and particularly the confessional unity of the church in the marks of the church.

For Sasse, doctrine and mission could never be played off one against the other. The whole of Sasse's theology runs through the assertion of Article VII of the *Augustana* that it is sufficient, but also necessary, for the true unity of the church that the Gospel preached purely and the sacraments be administered evangelically. It is this treasure that has been entrusted to the Lutheran Church. Faithfulness in mission entails faithfulness to the Means of Grace from which the Church has her life and growth. Sasse's sharp and often unwelcome critique of moves within global Christianity in general and Lutheranism<sup>18</sup> in particular were necessary that the one saving Gospel of Jesus Christ not be buried away under the rubble of ecclesiastical proposals that ignore the need for doctrinal truth in mission. In this sense, Hermann Sasse remains a prophetic figure for confessional Lutherans in our own day, calling us to embrace mission with boldness and confidence that the Word of the Lord might have free course in a dark and dying world.

Sasse remains a prophetic figure for confessional Lutherans in our own day, calling us to embrace mission with boldness and confidence that the Word of the Lord might have free course in a dark and dying world.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Flight from Dogma: Remarks on Bultmann's 'Demythologization of the New Testament'" in *The Lonely Way, Vol. II: 1941–1976*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 98.
- <sup>2</sup> Hermann Sasse, "The Confessional Problem in World Lutheranism," in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. II: 1951–1956*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 497.
- <sup>3</sup> Hermann Sasse, "American Christianity and the Church," in *The Lonely Way, Vol. I: 1927–1939*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 47.
- <sup>4</sup> H. Sasse, "American Christianity and the Church," 55.
- <sup>5</sup> For more on Sasse's critical appreciation of Loehe's work, see John T. Pless, "Hermann Sasse's Reception of the Loehe Legacy" in "*Die einigende Mitte*" *Theologie in konfessioneller und ökumenischer Vertantwortung: Festschrift für Werner Klän*, Hrsg. Christoph Barnbrock and Gilberto da Silva (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2018), 334–342.
- <sup>6</sup> Cited by Henning Wroegemann, *Intercultural Theology, Vol. II: Theologies of Mission*, trans. Karl E Böhmer (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2018). Sasse makes reference to Mott and this citation in numerous of his essays on unity and ecumenism. For other assessments of the Edinburgh Conference and its impact on mission down to the present day, see *Walking Humbly with the Lord: Church and Mission Engaging Plurality* ed. Viggo Mortensen and Andreas Østerlund Nielsen (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2010). This volume was published in commemoration of the centennial of Edinburgh and as such provides helpful historical background and critical analysis and reflection on the significance of the Conference.
- <sup>7</sup> Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity on the Mission Field" *Lonely Way, Vol II: 1941–1976*, 183.
- <sup>8</sup> Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 186.
- <sup>9</sup> Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 188.
- <sup>10</sup> Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 190.
- <sup>11</sup> Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 191. Here one may also see Sasse's essay from 1960 "On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit" in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. III: 1957–1969*, 200–222. Here Sasse notes the theological "enthusiasm" that seeks to find God where He has not promised to be present and how this is manifested in those who look for outward success in numbers of converts or the size of ecumenical gatherings. Instead Sasse reminds his readers that discernment is a gift of the Spirit as by the Word, He enables churches to distinguish between truth and error.
- <sup>12</sup> Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 191.
- <sup>13</sup> For example, see Hermann Sasse, "Die Kirche in Asien" in *In stau confessionis III*, Hrsg. Werner Klän and Roland Ziegler (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2011), 215–225.
- <sup>14</sup> Sasse, "The Lutheran Church and World Mission," in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. II: 1951–1956*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 321.
- <sup>15</sup> Sasse, "The Lutheran Church and World Mission," 327. Sasse was a keen observer of ecumenical developments in India. See, for example, his "Some Remarks on the Statement on the Lord's Supper Agreed Upon Between the Church of South India and the Federation of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of India" (1956) in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kloha and Ronald R. Feuerhahn (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1995), 260–270 and especially his 1962 piece, "The Union of South India as a Question for the Lutheran Church" in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. III: 1957–1969*, 321–339.

<sup>16</sup> Sasse, “The Lutheran Church and World Mission,” 333.

<sup>17</sup> Wilhelm Friedrich Hopf, “The Lutheran Church Plants Lutheran Missions” trans. Rachel Mumme with Matthew C. Harrison” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* (April 2015), 28.

<sup>18</sup> See for example the 1956 essay, “The Confessional Problem in Today’s World Lutheranism” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. II: 1951–1956*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 475–501, and Martin Kretzmann’s critical response, “Letter to the Editor” in *The Lutheran Layman* (August 1, 1957), 7ff.

# Autonomous LCMS Congregations: The Burial Ground of Ecclesiology and Merger as an Additional Tool for Unburying the Gifts of the LCMS

Brian J. Hesse

**Abstract:** As C. F. W. Walther shaped the LCMS early on, the unique system of self-governance positioned the church body for both confession and mission. Today that self-governance has often been described as congregational autonomy. This has led to poor stewardship of declining congregations, and it is time to repent and consider new partnerships in ministry mergers as an additional tool for sharing what Christ has given to the LCMS.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we read about a certain servant who took the generosity of his master's money and hid it in the ground. I would argue that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) is becoming much like this third servant in Jesus' parable.

Saint Matthew states that the third servant “was afraid, and [he] went and hid [his] talent in the ground” (Mt 25:25 ESV). The temptation to hide the talents of theological truth and faithful use of the means of grace in the ground of LCMS structures has become real. There is no better time than the present to review what it means that we are church.

For Lutherans, the Augsburg Confession's definition of the church shows what it means that we are church. Article VII states:

Likewise, they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of



*Rev. Dr. Brian J. Hesse serves as Senior Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Amarillo, Texas. He earned his Doctorate of Ministry from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in December 2018, on the topic of LCMS Mergers into Multisite Ministry. He can be reached at [bhesse@trinityama.org](mailto:bhesse@trinityama.org).*

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the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5, 6]: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that the reformers were not attempting to create a new church. The Lutheran doctrine of the church was not defined in an effort to remake the church. It was rather to show that Lutherans were part of the one Church. Robert Kolb states, “Article VII exhibits Melancthon’s skill at combining his and Luther’s theological concerns with language designed to make a decisive case to the emperor that Luther’s reform program did not carry the Wittenberg theologians beyond the pale of the church, as their Roman Catholic foes were charging.”<sup>2</sup>

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Article VII continued the faithful notion that the church is ultimately a gathering of believers around the Gospel. By the time the Augsburg Confession had been presented, the church had already manifested itself into a different role. Kolb explains, “On the official level, it had become a religion in which a question of polity defined the church, not as a people of God but rather as the structure of following Christ in submission to his vicar, the bishop of Rome.” Kolb goes on to state, “Luther and Melancthon believed that the church was instead a creation of God’s Word, his identifying himself and his human creatures through the message of the prophets and apostles, as given in Holy Scripture.”<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of Article VII is the tension between the structural institution of the church that was present in Luther’s day and the location of the church in the Gospel and sacraments. In confessional Lutheranism, there is always a tension between church function and church polity or structures. Repeatedly, Lutheran theologians note that, “Scripture does not prove anywhere that a certain external church organization has been or is to be established.”<sup>4</sup> Yet the external church is still important and necessary for the purpose of sharing this faith and bringing others into the life of the church.

This was a tension that C. F. W. Walther recognized as the LCMS was brought to fruition in the religiously pluralistic new world of the United States. John Wohlrahe carefully recounts the history, challenges, and issues that faced Walther and the birth of the LCMS. The tension that Walther holds has been foundational to the doctrine of the church in the LCMS and remains so still today. Wohlrahe concludes:

Walther's doctrine of the church grew directly out of his experiences: the Saxon immigration, the colonists' experience with their leader Martin Stephan, the Altenburg Debate, and the controversies with J. A. A. Grabau of the Buffalo Synod, and J. K. W. Loehe in Germany. Yet his doctrine of the church was based on his understanding of Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and distinguished church fathers. The freedom of religion provided in America allowed Walther to distinguish the doctrine of the church from church polity.<sup>5</sup>

Today, when we examine the state of the church in the LCMS, many are still tempted to believe that the doctrine of the church is centered only in the faithful teaching of the Gospel and right administration of the sacraments. As this tension still exists in the church today, the dominant view is that the institutional church is less important.

When this balance between understanding that *no particular church structure is divinely instituted* and appreciating that *church structure does matter* is not properly maintained, the church runs the risk of becoming the burial ground for the "talents" we have been given in the LCMS. Walther's distinction of church polity separate from and connected to ecclesiology is a unique distinction that should enable LCMS congregations to be an active church body on both levels. Charles Arand states, "Individual persons do not come to the faith apart from contact with the church." Arand goes on to state, "The church gives birth to new Christians."<sup>6</sup> That is, external church polity and structures are important. External churches, congregations, and other church structures must facilitate and provide service to the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

An important, common, and unrecognized hindrance to maintaining this balance in the LCMS is that many congregations regard themselves as independent of each other. Frequently, the reason is that many LCMS pastors and Lutheran Christians will claim their congregations are autonomous. Congregational autonomy is often defended as given in Article VII of the LCMS Constitution. But the term autonomous is never used. The Article states: "In relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation's right to self-government it is but an advisory body."<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that a congregation is a law unto itself and should only be concerned with itself.

Congregations should not overlook their relationship to the synod or other opportunities for trans-congregational relationships. To be sure, the external structure of the LCMS is designed as self-governing congregations. However, self-government was never, and is not now, in any way to mean abandonment of the larger trans-congregational relationships that still exist for the purpose of supporting the whole church body. Congregations must not divorce trans-congregational

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relationships from our understanding and doctrine of the church. Congregations who work jointly through trans-congregational relationships position themselves for the greatest opportunities for growth in their understanding of ecclesiology and as Lutherans. For a more in-depth examination of trans-congregational relationships, one helpful resource is Jeff Kloha's "The Trans-Congregational Church."<sup>8</sup>

In Jesus' parable of Matthew 25, a characteristic of the master is to transcend the boundaries his servants are willing to go. The master admits he will "reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed" (Mt 25:26, ESV). Congregations committed to being autonomous create the sort of boundaries for ministry rejected by the master of the parable. Extreme commitment to external structures, polity, and congregational autonomy become burial ground for talents of Word and Sacrament ministry to be traded or administered rightly in the ecclesiastical work of the church.

The LCMS, individual congregations, pastors, and individual LCMS Lutherans are beginning to see the lack of fruit, growth, and gains that burying our talents in external structures has created. There is a serious wrestling taking place in Lutheranism regarding the lack of growth, the decline in members, and other issues facing the church. Martin Noland best expressed this wrestling when he writes, "What should confessional Lutherans do about this? Imitating Evangelical worship practices, sheep-stealing, accepting charismatic or unionistic practices or any other Evangelical practices or theology will only erode the membership of 'confessional Lutheran' churches. These are not options for us."<sup>9</sup> However, LCMS Lutherans do not have to remain the wicked servant hiding the talent in the burial grounds of external structures.

The formation of a dual parish or a multipoint ministry has been one method used in the LCMS to preserve congregational self-governance and remain viable in mission. The LCMS has labeled these ministries "multi-congregation parish relationships." The LCMS provides guidelines to circuit visitors in the formation of these multi-congregation parish relationships.<sup>10</sup> In these multi-congregation parish relationships, the external structures of congregational self-governance and church polity are maintained. The structure is defined as "Two or more congregations of the Synod served by the same pastor."<sup>11</sup> The LCMS Circuit Visitors Manual offers a six-point list for establishing these multi-congregation relationships. Upon examination of the list, a commitment to the traditional polity and external structures is obvious. There are numerous congregations in the LCMS that are effectively using dual parish agreements to facilitate ministry. In the right context, dual parish ministry can be a useful agreement and structure for parish ministry.

However, beyond such agreements, there is little to till the soil where we have buried our talents for ministry. The only other approach ordinarily provided to LCMS circuit visitors and LCMS congregations for consideration is the so-called

“Satellite Worship Site.” But little guidance is given for this congregational structure. Instead of guidelines for establishing satellite locations, a single definition states, “A satellite worship site is not intended to become a separate LCMS member congregation, and its establishment is not to be reported by district president or the mission executive. Instead, it will be reported by the corresponding congregation on forms that will be provided annually to the congregations by the Office of Roster and Statistics.”<sup>12</sup>

The guidance given to congregations for dual parishes and satellite worship sites gives attention to preserving the sort of congregational self-governance that continues to breed the attitudes of autonomy that plague the LCMS. Despite these structures, the LCMS continues to decline.

There is a third option for ministry that is now beginning to take shape, both outside and inside the LCMS. For example, many communities are now seeing the trend of larger megachurches purchasing and allowing smaller congregations to join them. These mergers come under the umbrella of the ministry of the larger megachurch. Frequently, these congregations are nondenominational in character and lack the doctrinal integrity to shape true mergers of ministry and are more corporate in nature. Some large congregations maintain those merged congregations as multisite ministries and additional campuses. They attempt to create a growth model much like a bank with different branches scattered throughout the town.

Church mergers are becoming more frequent and common. Church mergers are also taking place in a variety of ways. With church mergers becoming more common, many speculate why church mergers are necessary. The most common perception of a church merger is that it has become one of necessity. Like the business world, mergers are often seen as the result of a failure. One resource on church mergers states in its opening comments,

In the boom times of Christendom, when congregations multiplied in a culture favorable to faith, ‘merger’ was synonymous with ‘failure.’ Today however, the positive anxiety is often uppermost in church leaders’ minds and hearts. In these lean times of post-Christendom, when congregations struggle to just hold their own in a culture suspicious of faith, ‘merger’ has become synonymous with ‘opportunity.’<sup>13</sup>

This strategy can be a model for growth. The corporate nature of these mergers has led some members of LCMS leadership and some congregations to reject the idea of mergers as an idea that is more corporate than Lutheran. However, this growth strategy can be done better in the LCMS, given the commitment to unified doctrine and practice within the church body.

It is time for the LCMS to seriously consider another tool that tills the soil of our unique distinctions of ecclesiology and polity. Church mergers can be a useful tool that unburies our talents from the dirt of our usual external structures and once again puts them to work in service to the Kingdom of God. The lean times referenced above have been well documented by many. Thom Rainer states, “As many as 100,000 churches in America are showing signs of decline toward death.”<sup>14</sup> In the LCMS, the news is even bleaker. One recent study states:

However, this growth strategy can be done better in the LCMS, given the commitment to unified doctrine and practice within the church body. . . . Church mergers can be a useful tool that unburies our talents.

In 1971, the number of LCMS adherents stood at 2,772,648. By 2010, the total number was only an estimated 2,270,921 adherents—a drop of about 500,000 people. While there was a decline in every decade since 1971, about half of that decline occurred between 2000 and 2010—the number of adherents dropped by 250,000 people over that ten-year period.<sup>15</sup>

These realities might be cause for panic in some circles. In the post-Christian world, many congregations are panicked over questions of survival. However, panic and survival do not need to drive the landscape of church mergers. Bandy and Brooks also state, “The resulting panic attack led church people to ask: *Is it time for a merger?*”<sup>16</sup> There is a better reason than panic and survival to consider church mergers. Bandy and Brooks go on to say, “Sometimes, however, the question is raised out of a *kairos* moment. *Kairos* is a New Testament word that describes an unexpected moment of divine revelation that changes everything for the good. It is stressful, but it is positive.”<sup>17</sup> Church mergers have a goal to create a situation where everyone involved wins. To meet the challenges, church mergers are becoming a vital tool towards successful transformation of congregations.

In 2016, two LCMS congregations agreed to pursue church merger. Each congregation created exploratory committees that would investigate the feasibility of merger. One congregation was stable (maybe even plateaued) in ministry. The other congregation was in rapid decline. Both congregations had numerous reasons for merger and numerous reasons not to merge. As a result of the exploratory phase, the congregational merger was recommended. The two congregations shared common DNA and ministries. They agreed to form one ministry together, retaining both congregational campuses. Imagine a marriage of two congregations becoming one.

This merger into a multisite ministry for these LCMS congregations meant restructuring operations, committees, leadership, staffing, and finances. All of this restructuring was accomplished through a jointly established implementation team.

The merger was completed with careful attention to both ecclesial care of members from both congregations, as well as to the external structures and polity necessary to complete a legal merger. These two LCMS congregations made the decision to merge because they believed they could be better together in their God-given kingdom work. They did not choose to do ministry jointly as a dual parish. They chose to do ministry together as one merged church family. Church mergers are different from dual parishes, the table below highlights the key differences.

They chose to do ministry together as one merged church family.

Multisite Mergers or Satellite Structures	Multi-Congregational Structures (Dual Parishes)
Motivated by common mission goals.	Motivated by maintaining church polity.
Unified single governance for all sites.	Each congregation retains its governance.
Organizing Document: Articles of Partnership	Organizing Document: Statement of Agreement
Pastor(s) called to one unified ministry	Pastor(s) called to all congregations involved.
Reporting is unified by congregational reports	Reporting of agreements filed with District Office.
Single, unified mission and ministry	Joint mission and ministry efforts with a separation clause.

**Table 1.** Table by Brian J. Hesse, David Peter, Mart Thompson, and Gerhard Bode. “Best Practices in LCMS Congregational Mergers into Multisite Ministries.” Doctor of Ministry. Major Applied Project, Concordia Seminary, 2018.

The surveys and research surrounding church mergers provide a wealth of knowledge regarding the blessings, wisdom, and values of two churches becoming one. The research also demonstrates that a multisite model provides a best practice for the church merger to be successful. Any congregation considering this relatively new tool should do the necessary homework, follow specific steps, and be intentional about the decisions surrounding church mergers.

Church mergers are a growing trend. They represent a significant opportunity for LCMS congregations to retain their self-governance and also revitalize the Word and Sacrament work of the church in new ways that promote growth of Christ’s kingdom.

In 2016, the two LCMS congregations agreed to merge into a multisite ministry. After one year, the congregation completed a legal merger. The two congregations

worked together as one. They worshiped together as one congregation on one site. They maintained children's ministries, Bible studies, and other activities on both campuses. After nearly three years, in November, 2018, the merged congregations finally launched worship services on that multisite, merged location. The newly merged congregation is seeking to expand the witness of the Gospel and revitalize Gospel outreach from both campuses. The merger has been a more effective tool than the dual-parish structure.

In conclusion, the LCMS has developed a long-standing commitment to congregational autonomy. This has, in many ways, become a corruption of the unique self-governance that Walther created to facilitate the mission of the church. A new opportunity now exists to maintain our self-governance, while at the same time to incorporate an additional tool for the ecclesial work of Word and Sacrament ministry in the church. LCMS congregations need to be informed about what the possibilities of church mergers could mean for their ministries.

Despite the opportunities that church mergers offer, few resources are available to LCMS congregations. Circuit visitors are trained in creating dual parishes but rarely have the knowledge, training, or experiences to guide congregations to consider church mergers. Circuit visitors need more information for equipping congregations to consider this additional model for accomplishing ministry in God-pleasing ways that are consistent with LCMS doctrine. It is time for the LCMS to consider church mergers to facilitate missional work, revitalize our congregations, and potentially reverse the declines experienced for so long.

## Endnotes

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Kloha, "The Trans-Congregational Church in the New Testament," *Concordia Journal* 34, no. 3 (July 2008): 172–190.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Noland, “Why Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Its Kin Have Declined in Membership and What To Do About It,” *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* (April 20, 2016).

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<sup>12</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Circuit Visitors Manual*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas G. Bandy and Page M. Brooks, *Church Mergers: A Guidebook for Missional Change* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 7.

<sup>15</sup> George Hawley, “The LCMS in the Face of Demographic and Social Change: A Social Science Perspective,” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 3, no. 3 (December, 2016): 38.

<sup>16</sup> Bandy and Brooks, *Church Mergers*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Bandy and Brooks, *Church Mergers*, 2.

# Enter the conversation: “Why Lutheran Mission Matters.”



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# God Still Answers Questions and Prayers

David P. E. Maier

**Abstract:** This article is a revised version of David Maier’s presentation at the annual banquet of the Lutheran Society for Missiology in St. Louis on January 29, 2019. In it, he views the expanse of God’s redemptive history from Pentecost (Acts 2) through the description of the Church Triumphant in Revelations 7, highlighting the encouraging picture of the “intercultural” church. God’s people, in whatever “time” or place they live, should not be fearful in their witness, but fully trust God and His Word, which are powerful beyond our imagining. The Holy Spirit still gifts the priesthood to accomplish divine purposes.

I am grateful for this opportunity to be with you, and in particular to present some considerations for earnest contemplation, prayer, and conviction regarding the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*).

## Full of Joy, Are We Ready to Face Persecution . . . OR Are We Afraid?

Although there are many who question the influence of the Christian Church today and feel as if we are undergoing some form of suppression, intimidation, and/or discrimination—and this may be true—it is good to remember that the Apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation to encourage Christians who were enduring horrible, unimaginable persecution, and even martyrdom. Christians were being sold into slavery. They were being fed to lions, burned at the stake, and



*Rev. Dr. David P. E. Maier was elected president of the Michigan District, LCMS in June of 2009, and re-elected for three consecutive terms. In 2018 he was also elected to serve as the Chairman of the Council of Presidents for the LCMS. Maier received his BA from Concordia University Ann Arbor with a double major in Biblical Languages and Christian Doctrine. He received his MDiv from Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and was awarded three honorary doctorates: one in 2007 from St. Peter Confessional Lutheran Church of South Africa, and two in 2012—a Doctor of Laws degree from Concordia University Ann Arbor and a Doctor of Letters from Concordia University Wisconsin. He began his ministry at Our Savior in Marlette, Michigan, a mission plant of the district.*  
[david.maier@michigandistrict.org](mailto:david.maier@michigandistrict.org)

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crucified because they believed in Jesus and His resurrection. Not only did they believe in Jesus, they were absolutely convinced that there was nothing more important for them to do than tell other people about Jesus.

As with much of the persecution of Christians in the past, pagans today do not fear *what* an individual believes; they rather fear the *transformation* that occurs in believers and when *transformed believers* start living and spreading the Good News.

Think about what those believers faced as John wrote Revelation. Most of the known world was ruled by the Roman emperor. The emperors thought of themselves as deities. In some ways they *were* like gods. They had the power of life and death. They could make a slave a free man. They could make a free man a slave. They set the morality and the values of the nation. You could not own property, travel around the country, or choose whom and how you would worship without permission of the emperor. There was no free speech, no democracy, no free press.

As with much of the persecution of Christians in the past, pagans today do not fear *what* an individual believes; they rather fear the *transformation* that occurs in believers and when *transformed believers* start living and spreading the Good News.

*Talk about facing an impossible situation.*

Under these circumstances, how could you possibly share the Gospel when to do so meant the possibility of slavery or persecution or death? Why would your family, friends, or neighbors possibly want to hear about Jesus when to follow Jesus meant that you might be imprisoned or killed? What could those early Christians offer the nonbeliever? They had no buildings, pipe organs, or praise bands.

*All they had was Jesus and persecution. And JOY!*

*Joy that is found only in Jesus! Joy that celebrates God's gift of forgiveness which brings new life, eternal life, and hope!*

Yes, confessing/sharing the faith was a crime, but the greater crime would have been for them to keep silent and not share the certainty of salvation that was theirs in Jesus. Listen as John encourages the church under fire in Revelation 7:9–10: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

I can't wait for that day when the multitude, a multitude beyond number, gathers in praise of Jesus Christ. Imagine looking over a sea of people dressed in white, the

thunderous sound of thousands upon thousands of voices declaring and singing like Lutherans, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Did you notice another important point in John’s portrait of the return of Christ? The multi-cultured multitude cannot be counted! Numbers aren’t everything, they aren’t even the most important thing, but they say something about the growth of God’s kingdom. Twelve disciples grew by three thousand after Peter’s Pentecost sermon and Luke recounted, “The Lord added to their number daily those being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Church history indicates that mostly the additions came one person or one family at a time. A slave girl shared the Gospel with her master’s wife who also believed; and where there was one, now there were two. The master’s wife shared with her sisters; and where there were two, now there were almost a dozen and the cycle continued. Believers witnessed and discipled. The broken, the imprisoned, the poor, the fool, and the one who had nothing shared their treasure with those around them. And those who were rich in this world felt their poverty for the first time and fell on their knees before the cross.

John takes us to the end  
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John takes us to the end of the sharing, the receiving, the believing . . . and there a massive number joins in *one voice* to proclaim the deity of Jesus.

Notice, too, that *the multitude no one could number* was made up of ALL tribes, peoples, and languages of the earth. The kingdom of God is not just about the United States or Europeans. It is not just about people who are comfortably different from anglo-Americans or anglo-Slavics. It also is inclusive of the Sudanese immigrant in the market where you shop; the Pakistani family that moved in down the street; the Muslim store owner and his family that live above the store on the corner; and, if you live in Detroit, of those living in the Muslim “area” that is forty-square blocks or more.

With his beautiful description, John dispels several myths that might leave us in fear:

- First, the myth that God’s kingdom will be diminished by the secular culture of this age or any age!
- Second, that the Gospel is not enough of an “incentive” for conversion. Really? It’s God’s *Word*, it’s God’s *power*, and it’s God’s *way*. Isaiah 55 reminds us: “So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (v. 11).

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- Third, that the Gospel is limited by our language ability or comfort with other cultures. We might think we're limited; but the power of the cross of Christ and the Gospel that we bear and confess are NOT! The Holy Spirit is NOT!

I believe that the “intercultural” picture of the beginning of the New Testament Church at Pentecost—and the similar picture of the Church Triumphant before the throne and the Lamb—are the strongest of promises and encouragements that the Gospel has been, is, and will forever be “the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes” (Rom 1:16)!

Are we ready, as Peter encourages, to “sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt 3:15); or, are we too fearful? Are we ready to endure? Are we living with the joy of the Lord?

### **Are We People of Peace?**

Are we open to the Holy Spirit’s encouragement and leading as suggested in Luke 10:1–7? There, Christ’s disciples were encouraged to be aware of, look for, and discover *the person(s) of peace* in the communities, contexts, and cultures around them *as we should be*—especially around the churches where we worship. In this passage He shares that strategy with the newly appointed seventy-two disciples, beginning with these words, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Lk 10:2).

Missionaries and church planters talk about finding “*persons of peace*” in a neighborhood, city, or marketplace. Often the person of peace—inevitably, a “kind” and “open” individual—will have friends and relatives who also have been prepared by God to be open to Gospel witness and are welcoming to followers of Jesus. Finding them is but one “tool of the trade” that assists us in locating those in whom God may be at work in a community. Often, these people or “households of peace” are like a gateway relationship into a family, neighborhood, community, or culture. Prayerfully seek them out as you live more intentionally.

While we’re not required by Scripture to use this approach, we can see this pattern or principle in the New Testament:

- The Centurion—Luke 7:1–10
- The Samaritan Woman—John 4:1–30
- The Ethiopian Eunuch—Acts 8:26–40
- Cornelius—Acts 10:9–11
- Lydia—Acts 16:13–15
- The Philippian Jailer—Acts 16:22–38

Here's another *equally important* question: Are WE “persons of peace” in the contexts, cultures, and communities in which God has placed us? Would we be recognized as such? God deliberately chose the time and place in which we live. As Paul reasoned every day in the synagogues and marketplace in Athens, he was taken by those intersecting with him to the Areopagus—a kind of “open court,” the “*Judge Judy*” studio of the day—where he confidently states: “And He [God] made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their [OUR] appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist” (Act 17:26–28).

God's wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit, who gave Peter his bold message at Pentecost and inspired Paul with his courageous words and witness in the Areopagus, makes this promise: If you are “*in Christ*” (Cf. Rom 6:1–14; Phil 4:13)—*ἐν Χριστῷ*—through the waters of Holy Baptism and/or the hearing of the Word of God, God's Spirit *is in you* and will speak *through you* (Lk 12:11–12). Jesus intimated the same at the start of His ministry. In His first sermon by the Galilean Sea, He told His listeners: “You are the salt of the earth; . . . You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Mt 5:13–14).

At Pentecost more than a hundred people spoke, each one proclaiming “the mighty deeds of God” (Acts 2:11) in a different language. Fifteen *different* people groups are mentioned with *different* languages and dialects. But all those present hear the disciples speaking in their native tongues a singular, multifaceted message: “*the mighty deeds of God.*” Is it possible that on Pentecost Thomas further describes “grace” in Farci? Or Matthew explains “mercy” to Jews who have pilgrimaged from various countries? Maybe John explains “God's *ἀγάπη*” to some Roman visitors? Bartholomew expounds on the meaning of the cross and proclaims the resurrection to the Cappadocians. Possibly, James talks with those from Asia and Pontus about how God saved Noah and his family from the flood.

Some in the crowd accused the disciples of early-morning inebriation, while others were similarly cynical. But others were amazed and asked a good, familiar, Lutheran question: “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12).

God's wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit, who gave Peter his bold message at Pentecost and inspired Paul with his courageous words and witness in the Areopagus, makes this promise: If you are “*in Christ*” (Cf. Rom 6:1–14; Phil 4:13)—*ἐν Χριστῷ*—through the waters of Holy Baptism and/or the hearing of the Word of God, God's Spirit *is in you* and will speak *through you* (Lk 12:11–12).

It's a great question! Crowded city. Prayerful, awe-filled, joyful, believing Jesus-followers. The sound of rushing wind. The appearance of tongues of fire. The disciples speaking like well-trained, Lutheran Bible translators. Indeed, "*What does this mean?*"

## **Are We Prepared to Love the Nations?**

We know at least this much: God loves the nations. He loves Iraqis, Somalians, Israelis, New Zealanders, Hondurans, Arabs, Africans, Hispanics, Americans. (All of these nationalities are now found all over the world.) He has a blood-red passion to harvest His children—the lost, least, and lonely—from every jungle, neighborhood, village, city, rural area, tenement, suburb, and slum. And for whatever reason, He desires to use us to accomplish His purposes. God spoke through Isaiah: "I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is 49:6). And David commanded in Psalm 96: "Sing to the LORD a new song; Sing to the LORD, all the earth. . . . Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day. Tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples" (vv. 1–3).

God longs to have His "*mighty deeds*" proclaimed in the almost seven thousand languages that exist in the world today, many of which are spoken in the United States, the third largest mission field in the world. He wants His love demonstrated and proclaimed and His grace and mercy clearly and convincingly explained to subcultures as well: whether the Bedouins of the Judean wilderness or the cowboys of West Texas; whether the red-necks of \_\_\_\_\_ (you name the place—because they are everywhere) or the white collars of Wall Street. He has a heart for the addicted, the sex-trafficked, their pimps, and all who have ever lusted.

Get this: *He loves sinners* (thank God) and He has graced and privileged us to be His voice. God equips and gifts His followers to cross cultures, generations, languages, and dialects—and to touch hearts. He teaches us the vocabulary of distant lands, the dialect of the discouraged neighbor, the vernacular of the lonely heart, the idiom of the young, and how to love and communicate with the millennial, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z generations.

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Friends, we cannot miss this opportunity to discover “our language” and celebrate these opportunities.

According to His sovereignty, God has formed us each uniquely and shaped our hearts individually (Ps 33:15) to show forth His glory (proclaiming His “mighty deeds”). For who or what, does your heart break and when does your pulse race? When you spot the homeless? When you travel to the inner city? For the boisterous, but struggling, fellow-worker? For hurting, broken, and beleaguered families? For the gay couple that lives next door? For those whom you perceive to be illegal immigrants living in areas you pass every week on your way to and from worship?

According to His sovereignty, God has formed us each uniquely and shaped our hearts individually (Ps 33:15) to show forth His glory (proclaiming His “mighty deeds”).

Think through Paul’s inquiry carefully: “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). Is it possible that you have been chosen to speak of Jesus and His love . . . by God, in eternity, as but one of the good works you perform as His perfect workmanship? (Cf. Eph 2:10)

Have you asked, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17–19)?

Have you prayed that God, who still performs “mighty deeds” and who “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph 3:20), would use you to reach the lost, least, and lonely as His light in your world?

May I encourage you to do so; and may the Holy Spirit embolden and empower you to proclaim and demonstrate the “mighty deeds” of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! Indeed, “to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:21).

s.D.g.

# Moving from Cross-cultural to Intercultural Collaboration in Missions

Todd Jones

**Abstract:** The article is an expanded written version of a presentation at the annual banquet of the Lutheran Society for Missiology in St. Louis on January 29, 2019. Since a cross-cultural approach to mission work has reinforced divisions between cultures, an intercultural approach to mission is encouraged. Unlike cross-cultural interactions, in which both parties can separate and return to their respective cultures with little change, intercultural interaction changes those involved so that they become a new culture. Intercultural interactions are driven by the desire to form lasting relationships. Gert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions framework is a helpful tool for examining cultural assumptions that influence our multicultural mission work. In a collaborative team process, as an example, it was demonstrated that an individual's understanding of terms such as collaboration, team, and community has been influenced by cultural assumptions. To prevent our cultural assumptions from becoming a barrier, we must work with those of other cultures to forge a new set of cultural values.

Mission work, by its very nature, is culture crossing. Paul pointed out, "how can they believe in him whom they've not heard. How can they hear unless someone is sent." He further outlined the necessity of adapting to the mission field culture in 1 Corinthians 9, "I have become all things to all people so that I might save some." While mission work across cultures is not new, today we stand at the door

While mission work across cultures is not new, today we stand at the door of unprecedented opportunity to bring the Gospel to unreached people internationally and domestically.



*Rev. Dr. Todd Jones serves as an assistant to the president in the Michigan District where he assist in the development of new mission starts and develops continuing education. He has trained church planters in a variety of overseas context. He has earned a PhD in the field of global training.*  
[todd.jones@michigandistrict.org](mailto:todd.jones@michigandistrict.org)

of unprecedented opportunity to unreached people internationally and domestically. The bring the Gospel to opportunity is ours due to the large influx of immigrants into the United States. The opportunity is ours because of the rise of social media and economic opportunity, which allows us to collaborate with international brothers and sisters in Christ to a degree that was not possible in the past. To seize the opportunity before us, we believe that our cross-cultural interactions in mission need to embrace the challenge of intercultural collaboration in service to God's mission.

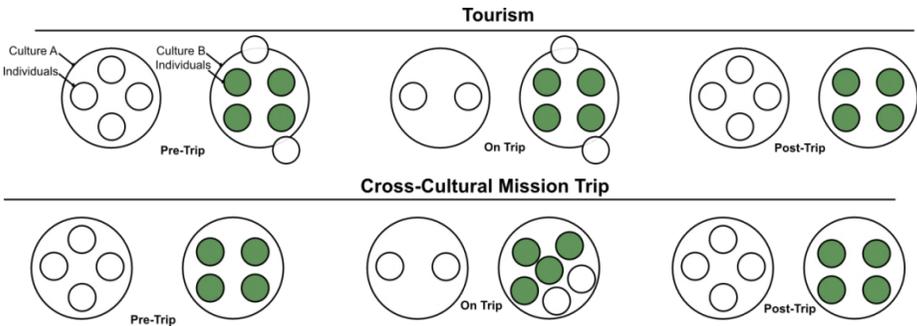
More and more congregations are sponsoring overseas mission trips or urban mission projects. More congregations are also opening their doors as rental properties for ethnic immigrant churches. Much of the mission development in the international mission field is being funded and led by pastors of LCMS congregations in the US. While these trends are a blessing, leading to more people hearing the Gospel message, the trends also speak of the importance of shifting from cross-cultural to intercultural mission work.

The terms *cross-cultural* and *intercultural* are often used synonymously. However, they describe two distinct forms of interaction. The term *intercultural communication* was described first by Edward T. Hall in his influential book, *The Silent Language*.<sup>1</sup> The term describes the development of meaningful communication and interaction through the merging of cultures. Cross-cultural interaction describes reaching across boundaries. However, intercultural interaction is characterized by comprehensive mutuality, reciprocity, and equality.

Cross-cultural interaction describes reaching across boundaries.

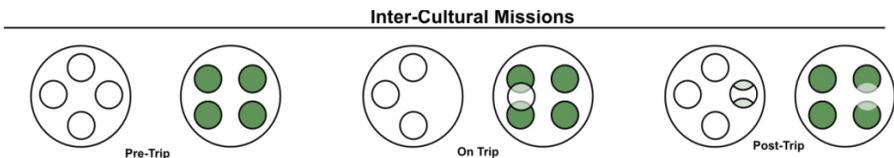
However, intercultural interaction is characterized by comprehensive mutuality, reciprocity, and equality

The challenge with cross-cultural interactions is that we settle for accommodation rather than embracing transformation in intercultural interactions. A great deal of mission work has been cross-cultural in nature. We go overseas and eat the food, listen to the music, hear their stories, but always we cling to our culture and process the experience through our culture. We allow ethnic ministries to use our facilities. We may, on occasion, share a worship experience in which some of their music is played and some of our music is played. Some of the worship is in their language and some of it is in our language. We may have a potluck where we may try some of their food to be polite, and they may try ours, so as not to be rude. Notice that the differences are tolerated rather than being celebrated. There is a clearly defined line of *us* and *them*. The illustration below is a visualization of interaction that is typical of tourist and cross-cultural mission teams (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.**

Unlike cross-cultural interactions in which both parties can separate and return to their respective cultures with little change, intercultural interaction changes those involved so that they become a new culture—not a 50/50 mixture of the two cultures, but a combination of the two cultures and new values which can only be discovered through the interaction of individuals who are more committed to the relationship than to their cultural values. Intercultural interactions are driven by the desire to form a lasting relationship bond. Huang and Hsiao noted the distinction in intercultural interactions: “It is not simply information being transferred from one to another but also a way to create and preserve social relationships.”<sup>2</sup> The illustration below is a visual representation of intercultural work (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.**

To be effective and seize our mission opportunities to the next generation of our culture and the next generation of the cultures of the world, we must make the conscious shift from cross-cultural interaction to intercultural collaboration. This shift does not require a change in our theology, but it does necessitate a reassessment of the cultural values that shape our interactions with people from other cultures. It necessitates a commitment to form a lasting relationship with those of other cultures.

To be effective and seize our mission opportunities to the next generation of our culture and the next generation of the cultures of the world, we must make the conscious shift from cross-cultural interaction to intercultural collaboration.

The quest for healthy intercultural collaboration necessitates a conscious shift from cross-cultural to intercultural interaction. By understanding our cultural assumptions and the cultural values of others, we will promote a healthy vibrant mission community that transcends cultural boundaries. We will move beyond accommodation to the genuine community that is ours in Christ. If we do not make the shift, our culture will continue to serve as a barrier, preventing the outward expression of the inward unity we have in Christ. We, believers in North America, will continue to wonder why our denomination is so white and European; and our international mission partners will always feel like clients rather than team members.

By understanding our cultural assumptions and the cultural values of others, we will promote a healthy vibrant mission community that transcends cultural boundaries. We will move beyond accommodation to the genuine community that is ours in Christ.

Gert Hofstede describes culture as the programing of the mind.<sup>3</sup> His framework uses six value dimensions (see Table 1) to describe the culture of a particular country. While there are other frameworks that have been developed, Hofstede’s framework is approachable and continues to be widely used for cultural studies. Therefore, I will use two of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to describe the challenges and opportunities we face in intercultural collaboration.

Table 1.

Dimension	Description
Power/Distance	The degree to which a culture accepts inequity among its members.
Uncertainty Avoidance	The acceptable level of stress due to the unknown.
Individualism/Collectivism	The value the individual places on self in comparison to the group.
Masculinity/Femininity	The values that shape a culture’s response to conflict and competition.
Long Term/Short Term Orientation	The propensity of members of a culture to focus on the present or the future.
Indulgence/Restraint	The degree to which gratification can be delayed.

Hofstede, “Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context,” 2011.

Our view of collaboration is that of a group of people who engage in rigorous debate and cooperative work as the group solves the problem for which it was organized. Our understanding of collaboration reflects our cultural values of individualism and power-distance. Individualism, according to Hofstede, is the

cultural assumption that individuals represent only themselves in interactions. In a culture that scores high on Hofstede's individualized scale, a decision's impact on others is not intuitive; it requires a conscious decision. The power-distance dimension of Hofstede's framework describes a culture's expectation of power distribution. In a low power-distance culture, power is perceived to be equally distributed. Everyone has the right to speak up, and opinions are to be considered equally. In a high power-distance culture, there are few social rules and little fall-out should the rules be broken. Because we are from a high individualist culture with low power-distance, we do not rely on the group to develop our opinions and we do not hesitate to share our opinions or challenge the opinions of others.

In contrast to the US culture of high individualism and low power-distance, most other cultures tend to gravitate toward collectivism and high power-distance. People from collectivist cultures are keenly aware of their position within society and their families. The individual does not like to make decisions without the input of the family. The individual's actions can bring honor or shame upon the family and the community. Rigid social rules protect the honor of the community.

People from collectivist cultures value collaboration. However, research has shown that expectations regarding collaboration differ between people from the US and people from collectivist, high power-distance cultures.<sup>4</sup> Collectivist cultures value collaboration for the development of group identity and for the strengthening community. For people from these cultures, community is the goal of collaboration; the task to be accomplished is a tool for achieving deeper community. This is in contrast to the US assumption that the effective accomplishment of a task is the goal of collaboration and developing a sense of community is the tool to facilitate the accomplishment of the task. You will note that both cultures value community and the doing tasks in collaboration, but from very different perspectives. The task-oriented approach to collaboration in the US continues until the task is completed. In contrast, in cultures that value community in

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This is in contrast to the US assumption that the effective accomplishment of a task is the goal of collaboration and developing a sense of community is the tool to facilitate the accomplishment of the task.

collaboration, the need to collaborate continues beyond the completion of a task as an expression of community.

A high power-distance culture is one in which inequality of people is accepted. We envision collaboration as a round table where everyone has equal opportunity and all opinions are valued equally. In the US a lower power-distance society, power is shared and great care is given to provide equal opportunity. People from high power-distance cultures expect the leader to lead the group process. Others may contribute to the group work as they are invited to do so by the leader. Those who hold a high position in the group context are not to be challenged or contradicted. It is every member's responsibility to avoid bringing shame upon the leader or more valuable members of the team. While there are differences among cultures, generally the leader is the oldest and the most accomplished person in the group, regardless of who was selected to be the leader by the organization.

There is need to have a deeper conversation about the implications of differences in cultural assumptions regarding collaboration. Additional information on the subject of interculturalism and the church can be found by listening to the presentation of the 2016 Multiethnic Symposium at Concordia Seminary, which was organized under the theme "Communities of Hope: One Community in Christ." While the topic of interculturalism versus cross-culturalism is rooted in academic research, it has practical implications. It is helpful to consider three practical applications that can facilitate a transition from cross-cultural to intercultural work:

There is need to have a deeper conversation about the implications of differences in cultural assumptions regarding collaboration.

First, respect authority. Know who has the power and show respect to the leader. It means using titles to address people. It means that you speak first to the leader and get his or her permission to involve others in the project. This can be challenging, because in many cultures the leader is an elderly member of the culture who has little or no English language ability. The translators are younger members. We need to avoid the temptation to talk to the translator rather than through the translator or to engage the translator in leadership discussions.

Second, recognize that people from collectivist high power-distance cultures seek to avoid bringing shame on those in leadership position. Therefore, they may not share information or viewpoints that could harm the reputation of the leader. Our cultural values may perceive such action as a lack of integrity or even sinful deception. However, in the collectivist culture, bringing shame to the leader or upon one's family is a greater sin. Therefore, communication strategies need to be

developed that support clear and accurate reporting while eliminating, or at least minimizing, the potential for shame.

Third, relationships are very important. Take time to get to know the other person's family. Take note of names, birth order, and significant family lore. Be prepared to talk about your family and community. While most of our interactions are task oriented, for those of a collectivist culture, strengthening community bonds by sharing food, drink, and family information is the most important task at the start of any endeavor.

We have the unprecedented opportunity for collaboration with foreign missionaries to reach the ethnic immigrants populating our cities and to expand our mission reach into new areas of the world. And yet, to be successful, we will need to understand that, for many cultures, collaboration isn't just about getting a task accomplished in a more efficient manner. It is about building a community that endures beyond its assigned task. It is about giving recognition to respected leaders in a community and learning how to empower the least of a culture to be a part of the collaborative process.

The impact of culture on the collaborative process is one example of the impact of culture on our efforts to work interculturally on mission. Cultural assumptions shape our understanding of commonly used mission field concepts such as team, identity, body language, and community. What is needed is not just adaptation to cultural differences, a good first step, but a merging of cultures as we form long-term, transparent relationships. Through that merger, the body of Christ is strengthened and healthy mission collaboration may occur.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Xiaoxia "Silvie" Huang, and E-Ling Hsiao, "Synchronous and asynchronous communication in an online environment: Faculty experiences and perceptions," *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 13, no. 1 (2012): 37.

<sup>3</sup> Gert Hofstede, "Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2011): 8.

<sup>4</sup> Manuela Aparicio, Fernando Bacao, and Tiago Oliveira, "Cultural impacts on e-learning systems' success," *The Internet and Higher Education* 31 (2016): 58–70, retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.06.003>, and Sehoon Kim, and Gary N. McLean, "The impact of national culture on informal learning in the workplace," *Adult Education Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2014): 39–59, retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.1177/0741713613504125>.

# The Antioch Model for Faithful Participation in Christ's Mission

Will Sohns

**Abstract:** In addressing faithful participation in Christ's mission, do we know, understand, and believe the essence of Christ's mission? Are we faithfully participating in and executing Christ's mission? Are the mission practices faithfully based on and aligned with God's mission disposition and principles? As helpful and necessary as they may be, the answers to these questions do not come from sociological, cultural, and demographic studies. In the face of experiencing decline and loss in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (baptized membership in 1981: 2,721,883; 2017: 1,968,641<sup>1</sup>) and a post-Christian world, the answer lies in God's Word. It is missional. It is theological. It is spiritual.

Beginning in 2001, the “Ablaze movement” was a laudatory effort to engage the Synod's members to be faithful in carrying out the reason for the Synod's existence, as expressed in the Preamble of its Constitution, “The example of the *apostolic church*, Acts 15:1–31.” It sought to execute an objective of the Synod (Constitution Article III.2): “Strengthen congregations and their members *in giving bold witness* by word and deed to the love and work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and *extend that Gospel witness into all the world.*” (emphases added)

In an 1879 essay, C. F. W. Walther addressed faithfulness in mission with a quote of Luther:

A Christian and also a congregation are plants that have grown from the seed sown by other Christians and congregations. Therefore, this congregation and every individual Christian is to be a seed from which new Christians and congregations can ever again grow. That is why the apostle says so emphatically, ‘The church is the mother of us all’ (Gal. 4:26). Just



*Rev. Dr. Will Sohns is a retired (age 85 +) parish pastor, church planter, and evangelist. He also served the synod formerly as a pastoral advisor of the Lutheran Laymen's League (Lutheran Hour), member and chairman of the Board for Missions (LCMS), district president (Wyoming) and most recently member and chairman of the Commission on Constitutional Matters (LCMS). He was also a co-founder of Jesus Is Lord Mission Society and has produced many ecclesiastical and missiological studies. [sohnswill@gmail.com](mailto:sohnswill@gmail.com)*

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as surely as we are now members of the church, so surely we should also be fruitful mothers; and if we are unfruitful mothers, i.e., if we do not produce spiritual children or fail to do those things whereby such children can be produced, then we are not obeying our calling, and God will not say, ‘*You pious and faithful servant,*’ [Matthew 25:21, 23<sup>2</sup>] but rather, ‘*You unfaithful servant!*’ God grant that we never need to hear Him say those words to us!<sup>3</sup> (emphases added)

With Luther’s calling our attention to Christ’s mission of building HIS Church<sup>4</sup> and the urgency of being faithful in Christ’s mission, the Synod must recognize that “*a pious and faithful servant*” is to be faithful in mission principles, purpose, and practices. It is essential if the Synod’s assemblies of believers and its individual believers are to participate faithfully in the mission of Christ.

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## Introduction

Assessing the faithful stewardship of the church’s mission can be facilitated by using the scriptural Antioch Model (Acts 13–15) of an apostolic church. Faithfulness must be measured by *reviewing God’s mission and His design, creation, description, and purpose of the “church” for the sake of congregations that exist or are to be planted with the purpose of being and planting His church.*

In his sermon/address at the first meeting of the Synodical Conference in 1872, C. F. W. Walther reviewed and evaluated the purpose of the church: “For what would happen if we really would make the saving of souls the ultimate purpose, the end and aim of our joint work?” He went on to say, “Whatever will win the most souls for Christ, that would decide between us...”<sup>5</sup>

In a description of God’s design of “church,” Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs’s statement is revealing and helpful: “The New Testament itself uses the term ‘church’ . . . as the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Augsburg Confession all teach us, ‘*one holy Christian and apostolic church.*’”<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added)

## **The Antioch Model for Evaluating Faithful Participation in Christ's Mission**

The “Antioch Model” of mission, which reflects the Christ-created “*one holy, catholic and apostolic Church*” in the Book of Acts, is helpful in assessing faithful participation in Christ’s mission. It is a description and prescription for congregations at any time and in any place in the world. The “Antioch Model” prescribes the necessary missional disposition and purpose of “*Church,*” which puts into practice cognitive consonance<sup>7</sup> in accord with the essential biblical nature, purpose and mission of the “*Church*” as confessed in the Nicene Creed: “*one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.*”

In an article, “Released and Sent: Verbs and Their Subjects in Acts 13,” Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Oswald wrote: “The sending of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1–4) is rightly regarded as a crucial text for understanding the Church’s role in God’s mission to save His world.”<sup>8</sup>

The “Antioch Model” leads us to understand and practice faithfully *missional principles* of Scripture. For example, see Acts 13:1–4:

Now there were in the *church* at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were *worshiping* the Lord and fasting, the *Holy Spirit* said, “*Set apart* (ἀφορίζω—separate, set apart, appoint, mark off) for me Barnabas and Saul [Paul] for *the work* (ἔργον) to which I have *called* (προσκαλέω—summon, call to oneself) them.” Then after fasting and praying they *laid their hands* (ἐπιτίθημι χεῖρ—placed hand) on them and *sent them off* (ἀπολύω—release, set free, let go, loose from, dismiss [sent away]). So, being *sent out* (ἐκπέμπω—send out, send away) by the *Holy Spirit*, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. (emphases added, including parenthetical explanations)

The Church in Antioch lived and breathed “*sentness*” and “*one holy, catholic and apostolic Church*” in their *participation* and *partnership* with Christ and the Holy Spirit. The “Antioch Model” is a useful tool in *evaluating* the faithfulness of and in *executing* faithfully the design, creation, execution, and best practices<sup>9</sup> of the church engaged in Christ’s mission.

Using the “Antioch Model” under the outline of “*one holy catholic and Apostolic Church*” beginning with “*Church,*” let’s evaluate: *Are we (the church) “pious and faithful servant[s]” participating in Christ’s mission and in need of repentance?*

## “Church” (Congregation)

Acts 13:1–4 refers to “church,” “Now there were in the *church* (ἐκκλησίαν—assembly, a calling out, congregation, community) *at Antioch*” (v. 1; emphasis and parenthetical explanation added). As Christocentric church and sent-ones by Christ, the *assembly* of believers were *gathered* around Christ’s Word. And as church, they were a *sent Church*, a *sending Church*, and *sent* ones into the world with the Word of salvation through Jesus alone.

Under the power of the Holy Spirit, the participation of the assembly of God’s people in Christ’s mission demonstrates a foundational missional disposition and principle. The “Antioch Model,” which includes individual believers, the assembly of individual believers, called leaders and other congregations, all alongside with one another, shows forth faithfully engaged participants in Christ’s mission and Church.

## “One”—The “*Una Sancta*”

With Acts 15:11 saying, “But *we* believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just *as they* will,” the Gentile church in Antioch consisted of believers who were one, one Spirit, one Lord, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, and *one in Jesus Christ* with *all* believers, Jew or Gentile. Even after having been scattered, the oneness was in “*believing* [people] *turned to the Lord*” (Acts 11: 21). (emphases added)

As a “body” consisting of many and different parts and functions, yet not fragmented, and as members of one another, the church is a community of “*people brought to the same Lord*” (Acts 11:24), an assembly together not with distinctions as Jews or Gentiles, males or females, rich or poor, but of “we” “brothers,” “Christians,” and “disciples” of Jesus Christ.

The Antioch believers practiced and pursued the God-granted *unity with Christ and unity with one another*, including the believers in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Africa, in the provinces of Asia, in “Councils,” and gatherings. Unity with Christ is a missional disposition, principle, and practice!

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## “Holy”—The “Una Sancta”

Conversion is described in Acts 15:3: “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.” Cleansing is described in Acts 15:9: “having *cleansed* their hearts by faith.” The Church in Antioch comprised believers granted “*repentance unto life*” (Acts 11:18), the holy righteousness of Christ.

The believers were converted and made holy not by “circumcision,” councils, institutions, polity, church arrangements, observance of certain ceremonies, traditions, programs, or human works and piety, but by the holy blood of Jesus and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

A central missional purpose (focus) is the conversion and transformation of *people* who are being established in a *holy saving faith relationship with Jesus*. “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). It is all about Jesus’ seeking and saving the lost whether Jew or Gentile, male or female. The church is *all about the conversion mission* of transmitting or conferring the *holiness in Jesus* to a wicked, pagan world. It is the sending of a holy forgiveness (Jn 20:23) of the unfaithfulness, worldliness, hypocrisy, absorption in self, pride, prejudice, indifference, immorality, idolatry, imperfection, and all the rubbish of the world.

For the sake of the “holy” mission of Christ, the church then and now is to focus on being sent to the lost, on declaring the lost “holy” by Christ with a focus on a community of saving faith and mission!

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## “Catholic”

The “catholic” (universal) nature of the “church” is shown in Acts 11:19–20, 25–26:

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. . . . So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Whether living in Antioch, Tarsus, Cyprus, Phoenicia, Samaria, Cyrene, Jerusalem, or among the dispersed around the world, the church consisted of believers who possessed the universal Christian faith, which is centered in a personal relationship with Christ. It is not centered in a denominational, religious, trade, or cultural center, continent, urban area, rural area, or capital city. The Church in Antioch was “catholic.”

Since the Gospel of Christ is “catholic,” there are no distinctions between Jew and Gentile, no geographical distinctions, no prejudice, no denominationalism, no individualism, no racial barriers. It is not provincial, parochial, or institutional, but living stones of a spiritual house of all times and places. It is “*catholic, amid all the complexities of human relationships, racial, national, social, denominational, and individual.*”<sup>10</sup> (emphasis added)

Not fragmented, the universality of the Church exists wherever the Gospel is proclaimed. This quality and disposition of mind and heart is a fundamental mission principle to be practiced, fundamental to the life and witness of every *sent church*, *sent called Leader*, and *sending church*.

### “Apostolic”

In Acts 13:3–4, the “apostolic church” is described: “Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and *sent them off*.”

<sup>4</sup> So, *being sent out* by the Holy Spirit, *they went* down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.” (emphases added)

The Church in Antioch comprised believers who were *sent* believers, a *sent* church with *sent* called Leaders, and a *sending* church.

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The Antioch assembly sent its believers with Christ’s authority to the people of Antioch and the world. The Gentile missionary congregation partnered with the Holy Spirit in sending missionaries, who returned and were sent back again. And as

“apostolic” (*sent*) bearers of the truth, the church was devoted to the teaching of the Apostles (Acts 2:42) and built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets (Eph 2:20).

Being apostolic meant the *continuity* of Christ's and the Church's *sending*. The assembly were sent participants representing Christ with the apostolic Word of Christ to save the people of the whole world. The church was not sent to save human institutions,<sup>11</sup> property, buildings, church signs, Lutheran traditions, ceremonies and rituals, a Lutheran ethos or “arrangements,”<sup>12</sup> but *people*—and not just a select few, at that.

The Apostles were sent, the Church was sent, *and they went*—APOSTOLIC!

“Christians today are not Apostles, but the ‘*sentness*’ aspect of apostleship is incumbent on every Christian—hence the apostolic character of the New Testament church.”<sup>13</sup>

This *missio Dei* disposition, principle, and practices are to be faithfully evaluated and executed! The community is to be both a community of faith *and* mission, and thus truly apostolic. It is the essence of “apostolic Church” to have the quality and nature of a living saving faith and be both sent and sending!

### **Selective Review of the Antioch Model in Acts 11–15 for a Faithful Church (not exhaustive)**

A review and evaluation of *faithfulness in Christ's mission* using the “Antioch Model” in the context of “I believe *one holy, catholic and apostolic church*”:

- Being a sent church composed primarily of sent dispersed Jewish believers from Jerusalem, of sent believers from Cyprus (island in the Mediterranean)<sup>14</sup> and Cyrene,<sup>15</sup> and of sent Greeks/Gentiles living in Antioch<sup>16</sup> (Acts 11:19–26; Cf. John 17:18 and John 20:21–23)
- Being focused on proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to both Jews (at first) and Greeks living there (Acts 11:18–26)
- Being composed of the “uncircumcised,” of pagan origin, of believers “sent” to Antioch by God's providence, and a “great number” of converts living in Antioch, all of whom became “brothers” or “disciples,” a predominately Gentile congregation (Acts 11:18–26)
- Experiencing a *multiplication* of God's *Word* and *workers* (sent leaders, prophets, teachers, and “apostles” (Acts 11:22–26; 12:24–25; 13:1–5; cf. Eph 4:11)
- Being set apart (2 of the 5 leaders), prayed for, “commissioned,” (as apostles—authorized representatives) and “released,” (Acts 13:1–4) Apostles Barnabas and Saul (Paul, Acts 13:9) were sent out (“*apostled*”) by the Holy Spirit to establish and give birth to the sent believers and

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congregations (churches) under the power of the Holy Spirit, with the Word of God being spread throughout the whole region (Acts 13:49)

- Participating and partnering in the “great number of Jews and Gentiles” coming to “believing” (faith), winning “a large number of disciples,” in “strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith,” and appointing (seeing to the appointing) elders (pastors) in the context of praying and laying on of hands (Acts 13:2–4, 49; 14:1, 21–23)
- Committing Paul and Barnabas “to the grace of God for the work (the mission) they had now completed,” welcoming them back home (the sending Church) and gathering together to receive the report of “all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:26–28)
- Recognizing the Church at large, such as believers in Phoenicia, Samaria, and Jerusalem and respecting the ecclesiastical leaders, the apostles, and elders, in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:2–4)
- Sending Apostles Paul and Barnabas and congregation members to have a “meeting” and participating with the fellow believers in Jerusalem, especially with the apostles and elders there, including Peter and James, to consider and discuss the matter of salvation (Acts 15:2–19)
- Participating in the judgment that “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” based on the Word of God as revealed by Apostle Peter (the vision, Cornelius), experienced by Apostles Paul and Barnabas in their mission to the Gentiles, and revealed by Elder James (the Chairman) (Acts 10; Acts 15:7–18; Amos 9:11–12)
- Participating in sending and receiving “visitors-leaders” and a letter of encouragement from the Jerusalem Council (Apostles, Elders, *whole church*) concerning the matter (Acts 15:22–35)
- Continuing to support the release of Apostles Paul and Barnabas to return and visit the new believers and congregations to whom they were sent in order to “see how they were doing” and to “strengthen the churches” in the faith in Jesus (Acts 15:36–41)

Acts gives very little or no mention to arrangements such as “place,” “property,” “grounds,” “buildings,” “architecture,” “space,” “technological, musical, and sound instruments,” or even “language” and “time,” except an occasional reference to public places for the proclamation and teaching such as “synagogue,” “beside the river,” “place of prayer,” “house,” “Mars Hill,” “market place,” “prison,” “theater,” and, of course, the particular city/country. Acts demonstrates *the focus* on *Christ* and His Word, *proclamation*, and the *people* receiving the *Gospel message* of *oneness in the Christ*, who died and rose again for the appropriation of *Christ’s holiness* for *salvation*. It was and is all about the mission of converting and transforming souls for eternity with Christ (John 17). It is all about HIS MISSION, HIS CHURCH!

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## Summary

A faithful planting of the church (*ἐκκλησίαν*), which is described as the *one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church* (Antioch congregation model), is faithful to Christ and His mission, is armed with a Christ-mission disposition and practices as a community or assembly of believers. It is a divinely established congregation, which has originally been given the “sending-mission keys.” It is faithfully *apostolic*, simultaneously gathered around the apostolic Word of Christ and being a “sent,” “sender,” and “sending” one, just like the sent-sender-sending Jesus (Jn 17:18<sup>17</sup> and Jn 20:21–23<sup>18</sup>) with His missional heart, disposition, and practice [*“habitus,”* “DNA”] (Lk 4:18–19<sup>19</sup>).

This faithful “Church” is *Christ-centered* with a focus on saving faith and a relationship with Jesus; is *congregation-engaged* (the priesthood of believers) with God and fellow believers; and is *sent-sending-absorbed* (*apostolic*) with authority to reach the lost, the unclaimed, de-churched, and the Jesus-disconnected under the power of the Holy Spirit.

This faithful “Church” is led by called *apostolic leaders*; is *apostolic Scripture-based* under the power of the Holy Spirit; *executes Christ-modeled leadership*;<sup>20</sup> *carries out mission practices* which are based on and reflect Christ’s missional disposition and principles (“cognitive consonance”); and is *one (unity) with Christ* and with one another in Christ (Christ-fellowship).

This faithful “Church” is being God’s Church with the *multiplication*<sup>21</sup> of the (1) Word, of (2) converts (people coming to faith), and of (3) sending, sent ones, of sent leaders, sent churches and sending churches!

## Synopsis and Conclusion

With Holy Spirit-sent, called, and released leaders, the faithful *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church* of Antioch (a largely Gentile congregation), set off a mission fire-storm of the unleashed Gospel power (Rom 1:16–17) of God from Antioch to Rome (maybe to Spain), to Phoenicia, Samaria, Jerusalem, and to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The Church was sent under the sending authority of the apostolic Word of Christ and the God-sent Jesus as His personal representatives (Jn 17:18; 20:21–23; cf. Acts 9:15) for the conversion to Christ of an untold number of people for their salvation and for the creation of a great number of believers—assemblies all over the world. The sending was for the continuation of the *one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church* “*in fidelity to the apostolic Word and way, the apostolic message, and the apostolic mission.*”<sup>22</sup>

## Thus the Antioch Model of a Faithful One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church!

SO! Do we know, understand, and believe the essence of Christ's mission? Do we understand mission as demonstrated in the "*one holy Christian and Apostolic Church*" and reflected in Antioch? Are we faithfully participating in Christ's mission? Are mission practices faithfully based on and aligned with God's mission character and principles? Are mission principles faithfully applied in all the practices of the congregations (and the Synod)?

May we come to hear God say: "*You pious and faithful servant[s]*" participating in Christ's mission!

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> LCMS Rosters, Statistics, and Research Services (as published in The Lutheran Annual).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:21, 23; "His master said to him, 'Well done, good [ἀγαθός – good] and faithful [πιστέ, – reliable, believing] servant. You have been faithful [πιστός – reliable, believing] over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master...'" <sup>23</sup> "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'" (emphasis added)

<sup>3</sup> C. F. W. Walther, "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod," (1879), Thesis VI, *Essays for the Church* Vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:18–19: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock *I will build my church* (ἐκκλησίαν), and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven*, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> C. F. W. Walther, "Our Common Task: the Saving of Souls," Opening of the first meeting of the Synodical Conference, July 10–16, 1872, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "Church Fellowship in the New Testament," in Convention Proceedings 2001, 61st Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Missouri, July 14–20, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Dale Meyer used the term "cognitive consonance" in reference to its use by Rachel MacNair (writing about the pro-life cause) to describe that our behavior [practice] must fit together or match with (consonance) our thinking and thoughts [mind set] (cognition) and not be contradictory or dissonant. The Meyer Minute (January 18, 2019), <https://themeyerminute.typepad.com/meyerminute/2019/01/the-meyer-minute-for-january-18-2019.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey A. Oswald, "Released and Sent: Verbs and Their Subjects in Acts 13," *Lutheran Mission Matters* 26, no. 2 (Nov. 2018): 209.

<sup>9</sup> A practical study guide document entitled "Best Practices for Church Planting," setting forth best practices for "church planting" aligned to missional disposition and principles, is available from Dr. Stephen Sohns [stephensohns@gmail.com](mailto:stephensohns@gmail.com).

<sup>10</sup> Oswald C. Hoffmann, "The Doctrinal Essay: I Believe One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church," in Convention Proceedings 1967, 47th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, New York, New York, July 7–14, 1967, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> “The well-being and growth of the District/Synod [institution] is not to be our primary goal. Our primary goal should be to spread God's glory, to rescue souls and bring them salvation.” Walther, “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod.”

<sup>12</sup> “*Arrangements* are not means of grace but simple, *outward means of assistance* so that the means of grace can be utilized and can be put into operation” (H. Schwann, convention presidential address, 1896 Convention Proceedings). (emphases added)

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Dr. Robert J. Scudieri, *The Apostolic Church—One, Holy, Catholic and Missionary* (Naples, FL: Mission Nations Publishing, 2016), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Deacon Stephen (Cf. Acts 6) was “sent” by God to Cyprus, where many Jews lived and which was the home of Barnabas, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus (Acts 11:19–20).

<sup>15</sup> Cyrene was a Greek colonial city in what is now Libya, Africa.

<sup>16</sup> A city in Syria, founded in 300 BC with a reputation for immorality and superstition.

<sup>17</sup> John 17:18: “As you *sent* me into the world, so I have *sent* them into the world.” (emphasis added)

<sup>18</sup> John 20:21–23: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has *sent* me, even so I am *sending* you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’” (emphasis added)

<sup>19</sup> Luke 4:18–19: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has *sent* me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (cf. Matthew 28:18–20 and Matthew 9:30–10:23). (emphasis added)

<sup>20</sup> Pastoral Leadership Institute (PLI) offers training in leadership essentials

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Acts 1:8; 2:47; 4:4; 5:14, 42; 6:1,7; 8:1, 4, 40; 9:15, 31; 12:24–25; 13:49; 14:1, 21, 27; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31.

<sup>22</sup> Hoffmann, “The Doctrinal Essay,” 73.

# Where Gutiérrez Got It Right: Reflecting on Liberation Theologies in Light of the World Immigrant Crisis

Douglas R. Groll

**Abstract:** This paper was originally presented at the North Central Region of the Evangelical Missiological Society at Trinity Seminary, Deerfield, Illinois, on March 16, 2019. 1968 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Gustavo Gutierrez's original paper, *Una Teología De Liberación, Perspectivas*, first delivered in Chimbote, Peru, and published as a book in Spanish in 1971. 2018 signaled the forty-fifth anniversary of the English translation and publication of Orbis Publication's *A Theology of Liberation*. This document will invite the reader to give a new consideration of Gutierrez's message in light of today's political, economic, and spiritual realities, shorn of the East-West, Communist-Capitalist ideologies and rhetoric of the 1970s and 80s that often clouded a clear understanding of Gutierrez's original intent.



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*Rev. Dr. Douglas Groll was born and raised in Northwest Ohio, where as early as 1949 he began a life of interaction with Hispanics. Upon graduating from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1966, he served as missionary in rural congregations in Monagas State, Venezuela, ultimately moving to Caracas to administer Concordia School and the Venezuelan mission. The Grolls returned to the United States in 1978 to Trinity Lutheran Church in Cleveland, where he served the historic Anglo congregation as well as an emerging Pto. Rican Lutheran community. In 1987 he was called to organize the Hispanic Institute of Theology and implement the Synod's first theological education program by extension which established learning centers in over twenty cities in the US and Canada. Although initially dependent on the television studios of Concordia University, River Forest, as technology changed it was possible to reorganize the Institute on the home campus of Concordia Seminary in 2006 as the Center for Hispanic Studies. Pastor Groll has contributed to theological journals and has authored *La Adoración Bíblica*, a textbook for Hispanic liturgists.*

[douglasgroll@sbcglobal.net](mailto:douglasgroll@sbcglobal.net)

## Introduction

To be quite frank, giving much thought to Gutiérrez a year ago was not a part of my daily thinking. Specific events of the summer and fall of 2018 prompted me to re-read Gutierrez and reflect on the continuing relevance of his perspectives. The first questioning came after reading a summer version of *Engage*, an attractive, informative update about the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s mission endeavors around the world. Committed men and women were seen actively engaged in different forms of wholistic ministry. One article on street evangelism was coupled with sincere projects to show God’s mercy to children in underdeveloped nations that desperately need all the help they can get. The names of the men and women in mission had changed, the objects of their efforts might have been slightly better dressed, the pictures in the magazine were in full color and beautifully formatted. However, I could not escape the conclusion that the real nature of the systems that perpetuated these realities had not changed. A color-enhanced *Lutheran Witness* of fifty years ago would have looked substantially the same. It struck me that although we might be using more modern communication techniques to better tell a narrative, our narrative of a first world–third world, we–they, patron-dependent model of a colonial approach to mission was still operative.

A second moment that struck me as a timely commentary on our collective misunderstanding of historical realities was manifest in a major network’s interview of Ohio’s ex-Governor John Kasich in July as he reflected on the humanitarian crisis brought about by the federal government’s implementation of family separation at our southern border. In that interview he basically said that what we were observing was not really a problem of our borders but of the humanitarian crisis evident in Central and South America. The potential catastrophe for both Latin American peoples and North American society was further heightened by the fall “Caravan” of asylum seekers marching toward the US southern border and the reactive militarization of the southern border by the US government that signaled the possibility of far-reaching social and political upheaval in both the Latin American and North American contexts.

The third event that perhaps highlights even more failed national foreign policies and Christian mission strategies of dozens of Roman Catholic and Protestant mission endeavors is the abject breakdown of civilized order and all social systems in Venezuela. Thousands of Venezuelans are fleeing their homeland to Columbia, Brazil, Chile, and Peru each day. As one of dozens of long-term missionaries who spent careers in evangelistic, education, and health ministries in that country, I have had to ask the questions, “What did we do wrong? What were we not seeing? Were there ideas out there a half century ago that theologically addressed the sinful systems that have brought about this complete breakdown of the one country of all of Latin America that should not be experiencing this tragedy?”

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A fourth event was only a 20- or 30-second sound clip of a reporter interviewing a young Central American mother desperately trying to get her daughter across the border. Her words, “It is God’s will that I save my child!” posited haunting questions: Where does God fit in all of this reality? How is God on one side of the border or the other or on both?

I believe that Gutiérrez can be helpful in addressing some of the underlying challenges the Church faces in our day. The import of this presentation is to invite you to read critically this creative Christian thinker, now in his nineties, and dare to let him challenge you. As in my own case, you probably will not have a thorough grasp of the vastness of Roman Catholic statements, encyclicals, and conference publications and consequently will not understand or feel the doctrinal or cultural impact of all that he says. Nevertheless, through his writings, he has invited me to stretch my grasp of the nature of sin and salvation beyond the dogmatic and perhaps docetic nature of at least a good part of my Lutheran experience and, I suspect, other North American Protestant thinking. He will engage you and hopefully help you shape an even better proclamation of the Gospel so that even the poor can hear and experience Good News in this world as well as the world to come.

I am sure you can understand that I can’t summarize a fifty-year movement in twenty-five minutes. What I propose to do in this time is (1) establish the context of Gutiérrez’s original thought, (2) try to set forth what I consider the main theological contributions of Gutiérrez’s thought, and (3) convey Gutiérrez’s critique of his own thinking and evolution of his thought based on the introduction to the second edition of *A Theology of Liberation*; on his commentary on Job (*On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*); on amplification of his thoughts on the poor as actors in theological methodology as reflected in *We Drink from Our Own Wells*; and, in a sense, on a defense of liberation theology in both *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*; and finally on recent comments made in a 2015 compilation of essays, *On the Side of the Poor*, in collaboration with Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller.

Through [Gutiérrez’s] writings, he has invited me to stretch my grasp of the nature of sin and salvation beyond the dogmatic and perhaps docetic nature of at least a good part of my Lutheran experience and, I suspect, other North American Protestant thinking. He will engage you and hopefully help you shape an even better proclamation of the Gospel so that even the poor can hear and experience Good News in this world as well as the world to come

## **Understanding the Contexts of Gutiérrez's Work**

### **Late Twentieth-Century South American Theological Awakenings**

Fifty years ago most international news and events were filtered through Cold War ideologies. Events that would happen even in Latin America would be processed through the East-West rivalry. Throughout Latin America, the transition from rural self-sustaining economies to First World–Third World dependency models left millions poorer than before. World War II had shown Latin America that the prosperous industrialized nations needed raw materials from the Third World. Latin Americans saw themselves as a part of this dynamic in the negative sense of exporting much with little positive return. There was unrest and anger. The United States had engineered the overthrow of the leftist Arbenz government of Guatemala in 1954. The Nixon motorcade was stoned as it entered Caracas in 1958. Fidel Castro came to power in January 1959. In March 1961, the Bay of Pigs invasion, planned under the Eisenhower administration and approved by John F. Kennedy, ended in disaster. In October 1962, the world seemed to edge toward conflagration during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The effects of these localized outbreaks of criticism and confrontation with North American hegemony took different turns. In an attempted national answer to long-term neglect and fear of a second Cuban Revolution, the Kennedy administration launched the Alliance for Progress programs to develop the underdeveloped nations of Latin America. Millions of dollars in aid moved into the Americas to attempt to economically and militarily pacify the South and stop potential revolutions. The area was flooded with hundreds of expatriate workers, advisors, and Peace Corps and US military advisory contingents. At the same time that secular programs of development were rushing into the Americas, Christian churches from the United States and Europe bought into theologies of development. As a young missionary in Eastern Venezuela in 1966, I was a part of that mind-set. We were active in extensive Word and Sacrament ministry in traditional evangelism and educational ministries. At the same time, however, we opened a bakery, a barber shop, an agriculture coop with extensive irrigation technologies, and a taxi line. A heady optimism empowered our activism.

There were reactions to theologies and philosophies of development from within and without ecclesial communities throughout Latin America. Indigenous voices, often priests who worked with the poor in barrios far removed from the official hierarchies of the Roman Church in Latin countries, began talking about theologies of revolution. Within a few years of the declaration of the Alliance for Progress, it became obvious that it was not working. After a decade, the region was still rife with right wing dictators. One would hear voices saying, “Development is not enough!” “The whole system has to go!” Theological voice to one theology of revolution was embodied in the life and death of the Columbian priest, Camilo Torres. Born of a

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wealthy Columbian family, this priest–sociologist spearheaded development movements to educate Columbian peasants through innovative radio instruction in Columbia throughout the early 1960s. As hard as he worked, he ultimately concluded that this “development” was not working. He joined the guerilla forces and was killed by government soldiers in 1965.

His strategic death had far-reaching implications for Christian Latin identity. As I traveled to my congregations and mission stations in Eastern Venezuela from 1967 to 1970, I would see painted images of Camilo Torres on the walls of remote rural villages alongside those of Che Guevara. Revolution and theologies of revolution merged in the memories of Camilo. Evangelical churches were not immune from the thinking about the need for something beyond development. Young evangelical pastors were speaking about “*concientización*–consciousness raising” and meaningful agrarian reform. Images of Che and Camilo could be seen at youth “evangelism” rallies.

I not only saw pictures of Father Torres as I traveled around Eastern Venezuela, I also saw evidence that armed revolution or any form of a repetition of the Cuban experience would not be allowed throughout the Americas. Venezuelan army movable checkpoints were set up to impede the movement of Venezuelan leftist guerillas that controlled parts of the mountains of Monagas state. US Army insignias on ammunition belts and water canisters were plainly visible.

By the late 1960s, Christian thinkers within the church throughout Latin America had concluded that neither “development” nor “revolution” was a theological answer to empower a change in the totality of the problems of their nations. Ten years of development had not changed power structures or the plight of the poor. Armed revolutionaries had ultimately been outgunned.

Theologies of development and revolution had not been articulated in a way with which the faithful or their leaders could identify. In 1968, Gutierrez wrote his seminal essay, then expanded and published it in Spanish in 1971 as *Una Teología De Liberación*. This initiative invited an alternative theological answer to Christian witness in Latin America and the world.

By the late 1960s, Christian thinkers within the church throughout Latin America had concluded that neither “development” nor “revolution” was a theological answer to empower a change in the totality of the problems of their nations. . . . This initiative invited an alternative theological answer to Christian witness in Latin America and the world.

## An Initial Reflection on *Una Teología De Liberación*

Gutiérrez's original *Teología* of 1971 was significant for both Roman Catholic and Protestant Western Hemisphere Christians insofar as he (1) articulated a different methodology for doing theology unfamiliar to either Roman or Protestant faithful or their theologians; (2) explained the reality of the presence of a "political theology" present in the entire history of the Christian Church, even as it has ebbed and flowed from assumptions of "Christendom" to complete denials through spirited attempts to separate church and state and privatize the Christian's role in the realm of civic responsibility; and (3) postulated definitions of the Biblical "poor" broad enough to encompass physical, emotional, and spiritual poverty imposed on the poor to the extent that his focus on the "preferential option for the poor" remains a driving mantra in Roman Catholic understanding of bringing the Gospel to the world as both historical and eschatological liberation-salvation.

Before attempting to summarize or evaluate these major themes in Gutiérrez's writings, it is important to note that he writes from the context of largely mid-twentieth-century Roman Catholic theology but with an intense pastoral focus on ministry to the poor in Latin America. One might say that his first edition of *Teología* is speaking out of and to the Roman Catholic Church and its ministry. His documentation is a treasure of the Roman Church's studies, conferences, Papal histories and encyclicals. His writings dialogue with those of German Roman Catholic precursors to liberation, Johannes Metz and Karl Rahner. He shows broad familiarity and deep understanding of German Protestant theologians Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, Bultmann, and Von Rad. This must be stressed and understood by Christians coming out of a North American Protestant or Evangelical background.

Though, in the initial work, he references broader ecumenical relationships post-Vatican II and in the preface to the 1986 edition reflects on liberation theologies in reference to the North American Civil Rights Movement and liberation theologies of Africa and Asia of the late seventies, he basically wants to speak to the thought world of Roman theology and its essentially European history. With the exception of Harvey Cox, there is no mention of other North American Protestant luminaries such as Richard or Reinhold Niebuhr or Billy Graham. Put another way, he is not in a polemical relationship with North American Protestant tradition or its ministry in Latin America. It simply is not on his radar. He speaks to his church, but, in a sense, he speaks

[Gutiérrez] speaks  
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but, in a sense, he speaks  
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## 1. A Different Understanding of Doing Theology

Central to Gutiérrez's thoughts are three related questions: What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be Church in the unknown circumstances of the future? How will the poor hear the Gospel? The first question has to do with the Church that we know, with those who call ourselves Christian. It challenges us to ask about how we live out our faith over against our neighbor. The second and third are in a sense more situational. Throughout his work, he comes back again and again to the pastoral question coming out of his Peruvian pastoral situation as to how the Gospel can become meaningful on the most nominally Christian of all continents, yet with the most suffocating situations of abject poverty.

### Orthopraxy and/or Orthodoxy

The Church is challenged to rethink its way of thinking and living out its message of salvation. Here, as a churchman, Gutiérrez acknowledges the historic Roman understanding of orthodoxy, that state where God's revelatory Word interacts in the life, liturgy, and traditions of the Church to bring a teachable message of God's love in Jesus Christ. Out of this orthodoxy, this "right teaching," the Church then has historically extrapolated all doctrines and practical applications of the Gospel. Seen from this perspective, there is a type of immutable treasure of truths or doctrines that is exercised in a rather spiritual plane that then becomes operative in the life of the person. Practice follows thought or formulated truth in this model.

Gutiérrez prefers to move away from this model to *orthopraxis*, a situation in which the Holy Spirit, the Word, the history, and the historical moment all interact to determine God's will in that moment in that place. In this model, theological articulation and orthodoxy follow the living Spirit-filled dynamic of the moment. In practical application, this means that the Spirit-filled impoverished Honduran refugee who tells an American reporter, "It is God's will that I save my child," as she tries to get asylum in the US becomes the theologian. It is out of this dynamic that one hears of the creation of the "base communities," where people come together as people to hear what God's Word is saying to their lives in their contexts at a moment in time and empowers them to realize that they, too, are recipients of God's love to be cherished persons. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Gutiérrez references the literacy work of Pablo Freire in Brazil as the innovator of what became known as "*concientizacion*" through literacy.

"To do the truth," as the Gospel says, thus acquires a precise and concrete meaning in terms of the importance of action in Christian life. Faith in a

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God who loves us and calls us to the gift of full communion with God and fellowship with others not only is not foreign to the transformation of the world; it leads necessarily to the building up of that fellowship and communion in history. Moreover, only by doing this truth will our faith be “verified,” in the etymological sense of the word. From this notion has recently been derived the term orthopraxis, which still disturbs the sensitivities of some. The intention, however, is not to deny the meaning of orthodoxy, understood as a proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Reality of the Presence of a “Political Theology”

A second theme that Gutiérrez wrestles with throughout *Teología* is a focus on the reality of a political theology that has consciously or unconsciously been present throughout both Old and New Testament history. Before arriving at a formal treatment of this theme some three-quarters through the work, the author carefully sets the stage by inviting a consideration of aspects of the history of the people of God that could lead one to conclude that political theologies in one form or another always have and always must be a part of human presence in God’s world.

In the previous section of this presentation, we spoke about orthopraxis as a necessary methodology in the Church’s ministry in this world. Behind this argument is Gutiérrez’s argument against a persistent dualism that he contends has plagued Christian witness and ministry. It has seemingly always been easier to think than to act. Any analysis of New Testament writings—the constant battles with Docetism and the constant threat of Greek Platonic philosophies that would separate body and soul to the point of ignoring flesh and blood presence of humanity in general and the Biblical witness of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in the first century—certainly point to an acceptance in some form or other of the need for theological reflection on the Christian’s relation to the powers that govern.

From Constantine on for many centuries, the church in one form or another could operate out of a Christendom model where one could contemplate a church-centered society that to some degree operated out of an established order. With the Enlightenment, we see human reason and its constructs as the center with the church moving to the periphery. There is a privatization of the faith. Gutiérrez saw how that had developed in Europe and how the Roman Church reacted to that reality by its speaking of “The Distinction of Planes”—the insistence of the definition of the

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priesthood and the hierarchy as the “spiritual” side of the church, i.e., one plane, and the various lay movements and even political lay movements as the church’s second plane, a way of becoming incarnate in shaping a just society. Christian Social Democratic parties so prevalent in mid-twentieth-century Latin American countries would be a manifestation of this attempt. My own Lutheran tradition’s way of speaking of “left hand” and “right hand” kingdoms or our North American founding fathers’ focus on separation of church and state—with insistence of the individual person of faith influencing the political power over against a structured Christian answer to the church in society—are outcomes of this development over many centuries.

According to Gutiérrez, as societies have become increasingly society-centered, moving around rational organization and discourse, these constructs of division of planes seem to break down. Any North American Christian living in March 2019 simply cannot escape the theological implications of everything going on around us and especially the theological implications of political decisions. Gutiérrez states it this way:

Nothing lies outside the political sphere understood in this way. Everything has a political color. It is always in the political fabric—and never outside of it—that a person emerges as a free and responsible being, as a person in relationship with other persons, as someone who takes on a historical task. Personal relationships themselves acquire an ever-increasing political dimension. Persons enter into relationships among themselves through political means.<sup>2</sup>

In Christian circles there was and continues to be—difficulty in perceiving the originality and specificity of the political sphere. Stress was placed on private life and on the cultivation of private values; things political were relegated to a lower plane, to the elusive and undemanding area of a misunderstood “common good.” At most, this viewpoint provided a basis for “social pastoral planning,” grounded on the “social emotion” which every self-respecting Christian ought to experience. Hence there developed the complacency with a very general and “humanizing” vision of reality, to the detriment of a scientific and structural knowledge of socio-economic mechanisms and historical dynamics. Hence also there came the insistence on the personal and conciliatory aspects of the Gospel message rather than on its political and conflictual dimensions. We must take a new look at Christian life; we must see how these emphases in the past have conditioned and challenged the historical presence of the Church.<sup>3</sup>

If we listen only to these strong, succinctly articulated statements, we can readily see how and why within the Roman Church and certainly within our Protestant and Evangelical communities Gutiérrez would be cast only in a leftist

political dimension, devoid of an explicit Christian message. The reality, however, is quite the opposite. Simply because he is so insistent in reducing prevalent spirit-body dualities he invites his readers into the Word. His understanding of Jehovah's relationship with Israel interfaces with that of Von Rad's *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history)—the God of a sinful people who are led and fed body and soul as a people in the Exodus. The history of Israel from beginning to end, from David through the Exile and Return, is a political history of interaction between God and flesh and blood beings. Jesus the Christ is born of Mary the Virgin, who had to be in Bethlehem because there was a political census. The Child King fled to Egypt because there was a political price on His head. Our Lord Himself could speak of Herod as “that fox.” Ultimately, Jesus of Nazareth could be tried and executed, perhaps viewed as a Zealot in a very political setting.

The Sanhedrin had religious reasons for condemning a man who claimed to be the Son of God, but it also had political reasons: the teachings of Jesus and his influence over the people challenged the privilege and power of the Jewish leaders. These political considerations were related to another which affected the Roman authority itself: the claim to be Messiah and King of the Jews. His trial closely combined these different reasons. Crespy can therefore state: “If we attempt to conclude our investigation we see clearly that the trial of Jesus was a political trial and that he was condemned for being a Zealot, although the accusation was not solidly established.”<sup>94</sup> From the moment he started preaching, Jesus' fate was sealed: “I have spoken openly to all the world” (John 18:20), he tells the High Priest. For this reason John's Gospel presents the story of Jesus as a case “brought, or intended to be brought, against Jesus by the world, represented by the Jews. This action reached its public, judicial decision before Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman state and holder of political power.”<sup>4</sup>

How this presence of a “political reality” in the very center of the New Testament itself and how it plays out in the Church then becomes the challenge today, even as it was in 1968 or 1971. Gutiérrez dialogues with Oscar Cullman in how one reacts to this “political reality.” Gutiérrez respectfully disagrees with Cullman as they embody responsible Christian understanding of the tension between individual conversion and structural Christian response:

For Cullmann—one of the authors who has studied this problem most seriously and carefully—the key to the behavior of Jesus in political matters is what he calls “eschatological radicalism,” which is based on the hope of an impending advent of the Kingdom. Hence it follows that “for Jesus, all the realities of this world were necessarily relativized and that his allegiance, therefore, had to lie beyond the alternatives of ‘existing order’ or ‘revolution.’” Jesus was not uninterested in action in this world, but because

he was waiting for an imminent end of history, he “was concerned only with the conversion of the individual and was not interested in a reform of the social structures. . . .”<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Cullmann uses this belief of Jesus to support his insistence on personal conversion as opposed, in a certain sense, to the need for the transformation of structures; the latter would appear only when the waiting draws long. But, in fact, when he preached personal conversion, Jesus pointed to a fundamental, permanent attitude which was primarily opposed not to a concern for social structures, but to purely formal worship, devoid of religious authenticity and human content. In this, Jesus was only turning to the great prophetic line which required “mercy and not sacrifice,” “contrite hearts and not holocausts.” For the prophets this demand was inseparable from the denunciation of social injustice and from the vigorous assertion that God is known only by doing justice. To neglect this aspect is to separate the call to personal conversion from its social, vital, and concrete context. To attribute the concern for social structures—except with the qualifications operative today to the prolongation of the waiting period impoverishes and definitely distorts this dimension.<sup>6</sup>

The position reflected in this essay is that Gutiérrez is not indifferent to personal conversion or to the certainty of an eternal home past this life, but rather that the proclamation of Good News in the here and now of humanity in history, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, is the launch point into a trajectory that involves both an individual and communal (political) future that in a sense is a seamless continuum into eternity.

Gutiérrez has not been deaf to a certain “pushback” from within the Roman Church to a seeming indifference to an individual faith relationship which might seem to be dominant in a political theology. The reader is invited to read responses to this critique and others in the publication of his doctoral dissertation and defense of his theology at the Catholic Institute of Lyon in 1985 in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*.

### **3. Poverty Defined and the Preferential Option for the Poor**

The underlying question that has prompted Gutiérrez’s critique of theological methodologies and the development of a political theology has ultimately been this basic concern for the poor of Latin America. In his *Teología*, all themes lead to this and ultimately to his articulation of the Roman Church’s embrace of what has become known as “preferential option for the poor.” To get to that, however, one must get closer to workable definitions of poverty so as to properly apply meaningful Good News to sad situations.

Perhaps the easiest aspect of defining poverty goes to the most obvious physical realities of the lack of food, housing, and physical support. In addressing this theme, Gutiérrez is careful to avoid any implication that there is something remotely good, salutary, or inherently noble in suffering material or physical poverty. “In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.”<sup>7</sup> To build on this concept, it is important to understand that throughout this work the author does not see poverty as only a negative loss or lack of physical sustenance, but that poverty is no accident. The poor are poor because others make them that way. Gutiérrez’s use of the Old Testament prophets posits the willful intent of people to take advantage of others and profit from them:

Poverty is not caused by fate; it is caused by the actions of those whom the prophet condemns.<sup>8</sup>

“These are the words of the Lord: For crime after crime of Israel I will grant them no reprieve because they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes. They grind the heads of the poor into the earth and thrust the humble out of their way. . .” (Amos 2:6–7).<sup>9</sup>

There are poor because some are victims of others. “Shame on you,” it says in Isaiah, “you who make unjust laws and publish burdensome decrees, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, despoiling the widow and plundering the orphan” (Isaiah 10:1–2).<sup>10</sup>

Simply put, there is no good Biblical rationale for individual actions or systemic structures that destroy physical, spiritual, or emotional wellbeing.

Running parallel to this prophetic denunciation of poverty throughout both the Old and New Testaments is a second and nobler definition of poverty that must be recognized, cherished, and not confused with the first. This is a vision of the “poor” who willingly cast total dependence on God.

There is a second line of thinking concerning poverty in the Bible. The poor person is the “client” of Yahweh; poverty is “the ability to welcome God, an openness to God, a willingness to be used by God, a humility before

Gutiérrez is careful to avoid any implication that there is something remotely good, salutary, or inherently noble in suffering material or physical poverty. . . . it is important to understand that throughout this work the author does not see poverty as only a negative loss or lack of physical sustenance, but that poverty is no accident. The poor are poor because others make them that way.

God.” From the time of Zephaniah (seventh century B.C.), those who awaited the liberating work of the Messiah were “poor”: “But I will leave in you a people afflicted and poor, the survivors in Israel shall find refuge in the name of the Lord” (Zeph. 3:12-13). In this way the term acquired a spiritual meaning. From then on poverty was presented as an ideal: “Seek the Lord, all in the land who live humbly by his laws, seek righteousness, seek a humble heart” (Zeph. 2:3). Understood in this way poverty is opposed to pride, to an attitude of self-sufficiency; on the other hand, it is synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than use this ultimate spiritual definition of poverty as an excuse for neglecting or encouraging a material poverty, Gutiérrez calls the Christian to surrender to the spiritual poverty so as to be capable of loving service to the other poverty.

We turn now to a third meaning of the term: poverty as a commitment of solidarity and protest. The taking on of the servile and sinful human condition, as foretold in Second Isaiah, is presented by Paul as an act of voluntary impoverishment: “For you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been: He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). This is the humiliation of Christ, his kenosis (Phil. 2:6-11). But he does not take on the human sinful condition and its consequences to idealize it. It is rather because of love for and solidarity with others who suffer in it. It is to redeem them from their sin and to enrich them with his poverty. It is to struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides persons and allows that there be rich and poor, possessors and dispossessed, oppressors and oppressed.<sup>12</sup>

Working out of this synthesis of material and spiritual poverty to this commitment of solidarity, Gutiérrez can then articulate the Biblical **preferential option for the poor**. This was no easy task simply because, in the Cold War context of the 1970s, it was immediately assumed to be a Christianized cosmetic makeover or dressing up of Marxist theories of class struggle. Especially in the 1986 revision of the original work, the author admits to rewriting this section precisely to clarify so many misconceptions. Through it all, however, there are three affirmations that help to give a Christian perspective

1. In a divided and sinful world one must acknowledge the existence of economic and social divisions in the society. There is a struggle between groups and classes of people any time one group dominates or oppresses the other. This reality will inevitably bring confrontation and sometimes conflict, and the Christian’s entry into this dynamic is painful simply because Christians know that division and separation of humanity is not God’s will. “The class struggle is a fact that Christians

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cannot dodge and in the face of which the demands of the gospel must be clearly stated.”<sup>13</sup>

2. Because conflicts arise between groups in which often times one group composed of people is more powerful than the other and uses people for its ends, there must be concern for people. Real people and often real Christians will be in conflict. “What we have, then, is an opposition of persons and not a conflict between abstract concepts or impersonal forces. This is what makes the whole matter so thorny and challenging to a Christian conscience.”<sup>14</sup>

3. The Church’s words and actions in a preferential option for the poor does not mean a lack of concern or love for all people.

The gospel proclaims God’s love for every human being and calls us to love as God loves. Yet recognition of the fact of class struggle means taking a position, opposing certain groups of persons, rejecting certain activities, and facing hostilities. For if we are convinced that peace indeed supposes the establishment of justice, we cannot remain passive or indifferent when the most basic human rights are at risk. That kind of behavior would not be ethical or Christian. Conversely, our active participation on the side of justice and in defense of the weakest members of society does not mean we are encouraging conflict; it means rather that we are trying to eliminate its deepest root, which is the absence of love.<sup>15</sup>

The universality of Christian love is, I repeat, incompatible with the exclusion of any persons, but it is not incompatible with a preferential option for the poorest and most oppressed. When I speak of taking into account social conflict, including the existence of the class struggle, I am not denying that God’s love embraces all without exception. Nor is anyone excluded from our love, for the gospel requires that we love even our enemies; a situation that causes us to regard others as our adversaries does not excuse us from loving them.<sup>16</sup>

Gutiérrez’s devotional commentary, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, eloquently draws the reader into God’s love for those whose suffering seems as incomprehensible as Job’s and yet their dynamic possibility of faith.

### **Gutiérrez’s Reflections Based on Subsequent Publications**

The original intent of this presentation and article was and continues to be that of an invitation to the reader/attendee to listen to Gutiérrez after these fifty years from her or his current context, especially keeping in mind three realities: (1) Geopolitical ideologies of a half century ago, i.e., Marxism versus capitalism, as a pretext for rejection of liberation theologies seem to be non-applicable today given the economic globalization that has capitalist enterprises in China, Russia, and the

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prior Iron Curtain countries on the par with Western capitalism, even though in recent weeks there seems to be an increasing political rhetoric on both sides of a capitalism-socialistic debate. (2) Responsible economic analysis of reputable study groups such as OXFAM continues to show that the gap between rich and poor is widening. (3) The question of how the poor will hear the Gospel continues to challenge Christians and their ecclesial communities to a constant critical reflection of their theological methodologies and practical incarnations of the Gospel. Father Gutiérrez's own trajectory over this past half century has been that of an ongoing conversation with his academic studies, the broad exposure to the wider church, the historical moment, and his walk in Word and worship.

Central to understanding the author's reflections on his own thought is a return to his first major theme of the need to see the pursuit of theology as an ongoing exercise that will continue to bring together Spirit, Word, people, and historical moment.

Central to understanding the author's reflections on his own thought is a return to his first major theme of the need to see the pursuit of theology as an ongoing exercise that will continue to bring together Spirit, Word, people, and historical moment. Consequently, in his various writings referenced in this presentation, one senses a constant "upgrading" of thought. Without entering into great detail, one can see where he has adjusted and expanded his thinking. These include but are not exhaustive of the changes:

1. The development of theologies of liberation and subsequent people movements in Asia, Africa, and North America.
2. His recognition that he had not called sufficient attention to racism in earlier writings.
3. Although exploitation of women is mentioned in his first edition he heightens attention to this theme already in the 1986 edition and sees it as a major challenge in his later essays.
4. Although contact and collaboration with other Christians is not a part of his original *Teología*, it is seen as a necessity in later documents.
5. His essays of 2015 especially call for a continual evaluation of how ecology impacts all economies and the suicidal implications of current international threats to global stability.
6. He reflects that advances in science could make it possible to analyze problems and bring about more suitable outcomes for advancing the poor.
7. Postmodern philosophies with their inherent tendency toward individualism and a privatization of truth can relativize and threaten any universal truths and bring about the subsequent loss of jointly shared care and service to and with the poor.

8. What has not changed in Gutiérrez thought and focus is his insistence on and satisfaction in the Roman Church's "preferential option for the poor" over this past half century. While he has recognized how this has often been misunderstood, this one succinct statement seemingly summarizes how, properly understood, it can so enrich the ministries of all Christians:

*.the poor merit preferential attention, whatever may be the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves. In other words, the poor deserve preference not because they are morally or religiously better than others, but because God is God, in whose eyes "the last are first." The entire Bible is stamped by God's loving predilection for the weak and mistreated of human history.*<sup>17</sup> (emphasis added)

In his initial writings, subsequent contributions, and reflective essays, as he has spoken of the Church's call to the "preferential option," he has heightened the need for churches to ultimately be poor and walk in martyrdom with the poor.

## Postscript

Two events of the month since the original presentation of this document have prompted me to suggest a brief postscript. The first has to do with intense political debate about the southern border of the United States and the recognition by almost everyone that the presence of one hundred thousand or more immigrants from Central America seeking asylum is in one form or another a humanitarian crisis.

The second event is the announcement made in the second week of April of the electronic imaging of a black hole M87 some 53 million light years into space. These two realities prompt interrelated questions: Is the God who created and sustains M87 in its almost incomprehensible greatness the same God of the Guatemalan child sheltered by a plastic tent under a bridge near El Paso? Has this question in any way been addressed by our current traditional theological systems in such a way that the Guatemalan child or the Christian scientist/astronomer can both find a loving God and hear and experience Good News in their contexts? Has the past half century of theologies of liberation given us yet just another failed trend or cosmetic soundtrack of optimistic answers that have ultimately failed, or are they worthwhile initiatives in legitimate thought and action? A renewed reading of Gutiérrez can invite the reader into new dialogues and action in the three major areas suggested by this presentation.

## The Dialogue between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

Meaningful theological development has seldom been a quick or hurried answer to complex realities. Even a cursory review of the creedal development of the Church's historic symbols leads us to a difficult and often contentious struggle over at least three centuries. They were developed in their contexts and left the church of

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subsequent centuries a basic *orthodoxy* to be cherished as fundamental. Yet they were not without the *praxis* of their moment. This was also true of our Lutheran framers of Augsburg who scrupulously articulated their faith statements as German political leaders to be taught in their specific parishes. All of this is simply to say that a call for the mutual dialogue between methodologies of orthodoxy and orthopraxy can only serve the Church. An orthodoxy based on somewhat static scientific world views prior to modern science's looking at the grandeur of the universe and simultaneous genetic studies of our DNA and chromosome variations in the minutiae of our bodies cannot survive without the Spirit-driven worshiping community reflecting and articulating the Word-driven meaning of life as it relates to the *practice* of daily living in each age.

### **Political Theologies in Unstable Political Realities**

In every age the church has needed to struggle to articulate how it relates as individuals and corporately to the powers and policies of the state. Ours is no different and is especially necessary in our context of unpredictable governments ruling by the weight of public opinion driven by social media in the midst of a seeming privatization of the faith experience in North American Christianity. Gutiérrez's insistence that there is a political side to all theological experience and at the same time the need for theological

In every age the church has needed to struggle to articulate how it relates as individuals and corporately to the powers and policies of the state. Ours is no different.

reflection about political directions is a necessary counter to our tendency to keep political discourse out of our faith expressions. In this regard, his articulation of a methodology of *orthopraxy* stemming from the Christian witness of Spirit-driven Christians applying the Word to their contexts in an environment of Christian love can be an antidote to so much of our refusal to seriously dialogue with one another within our Christian communities, let alone in a broader context. Serious, honest discussions of the Word in the political world could be a welcome alternative to the statement by a pastor of a prominent Evangelical congregation at the recent Evangelical Missiological Society in Illinois: "Just the mention of a conversation about the immigration crisis is like throwing a hand grenade into the middle of my congregation!"

## A Preferential Option for the Poor in the Midst of the Globalization of Poverty

Poverty in its many forms is a direct or indirect result of sinful humanity's warfare against God and our fellow humankind. Gutiérrez is blunt at times in refusing to accept a premise that the poor are poor because they choose to live in such a way that invites such poverty. He openly states that in many cases the poor are that way because the more powerful declared war against them. The powerful oppress. Oppressor and Oppressed dance a dance of spiritual and physical death. In contrast to this negative denunciation of our sinful condition, theologies of liberation bring a worthwhile insistence on the possibility of a meaningful ministry by God's people as they identify with the poor along with the Christ of the Beatitudes, while at the same time employing the blessings of the possibility of using the sciences and systems to study our world and the universes beyond, as well as all of creation, in such a way that even the smallest child in a caravan under a bridge has the security to live out his days healthy, happy, and productive until his Lord returns.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: 15th Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 8.

<sup>2</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 133.

<sup>5</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 134.

<sup>6</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 134.

<sup>7</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 134.

<sup>8</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 166.

<sup>9</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 167.

<sup>11</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 172.

<sup>13</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 157.

<sup>14</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 158.

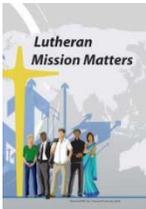
<sup>15</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> *A Theology of Liberation*, 160.

<sup>17</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez and Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), Location 1799, Kindle.

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## *Encountering Mission*

# **Faithfulness and Fruitfulness in Mission: American Churches' Mission among Ethnic Communities**

**Yared Halche**

**Abstract:** This article examines mission efforts of American churches among various ethnic groups. It closely looks at the parable of the three tenants from Matthew 25:14–30 through a missiological lens to determine faithfulness and fruitfulness in mission. It underscores the significance of the Gospel's "investment" among others, particularly *ethnes* (ethnic groups). The study included biblical reflections followed by a brief historical overview of mission work by American church bodies. Recommendations are given to maximize missional engagement and partnership with the global *ethnes* who reside in America.

### **Introduction**

I sometimes hear people in Ethiopia associating ineffective religious teaching with a roasted wheat that is eatable, but not good for sowing or harvesting. God desires that His people do not just settle for tiresome belief traditions but experience the energy of the new life in His name (Jn 20:30–31).



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*Rev. Dr. Yared Halche was born and grew up in Ethiopia. He studied theology in Ethiopia, Norway, and the United States. He earned his PhD in missiology from Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 2009. Yared is married to Bethel and the Lord has blessed them with two children. Yared started his ministry journey in Mekane Yesus Church in Ethiopia as a youth leader during the difficult Communist era. His professional career started as a seminary teacher in south Ethiopia and continued as a missionary and mission developer in the United States. He served as a regional director for African Immigrants Ministry in the West Coast. He pastored a congregation in Indiana that has members from seventeen different countries. He currently serves as a Facilitator for Interethnic Mission in the Southeastern District of the LCMS. [yaredhalche@gmail.com](mailto:yaredhalche@gmail.com)*

The purpose of this study is to present a missiological reflection on Matthew 25:14–30 and assess the mission work of American churches to global nations in their backyards. By looking at the historical trend, this article discusses the contribution American churches made to mission and also critically evaluates the current decline of church membership arguably due to obsession with self-preservation. The study encourages spiritual alertness among the followers of Jesus that they preach the Gospel and spread it in the world beyond conventional ministry and mission fields.

## **Biblical Perspectives**

The Gospel of Matthew describes the continuity of God’s saving work among the Jewish people as it also keeps the larger Gentile’s mission in closer view. Matthew uses the word *ethne*/ethnicity in different ways. One of the dominant usages is to see it as a larger category of people groups beyond the Jewish nation. In this instance, kinship and places are stretched and redefined to serve the larger evangelistic purpose. Dennis Dulling states: “The Matthean group thus stands on the boundary ‘between’ Israel and non-Israel, which is just where the marginal Matthean writer himself stands. The group is therefore in the process of (re-)constructing its ethnic boundaries.”<sup>1</sup>

The genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew discloses that the Messianic mission involves Gentiles beyond the Jewish lineage. The four Gentile women mentioned—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bethsheba—are prominent biblical figures and mothers who carried the non-Jewish branch of the Messianic genealogy (1:3, 5, 6). The Gentiles in Galilee, together with the Jewish communities, are also referred to as recipients of Jesus’ message of the good news (Mt 4:14–15).

Furthermore, Matthew mentions nations not only as recipients of Christ’s good news but also partners and messengers of the Gospel. He stated: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Mt 9:37). The harvest signifies people groups. Matthew sees a larger mission harvest in need of a larger number of harvest workers. Matthew’s use of comparisons at times highlights the missionary call given to the nations: “Therefore I say unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation (*ethne*) bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Mt 21:43). As Gentile nations are entrusted with the Gospel, they will also be held accountable on how they receive and welcome Jesus’ messengers (Mt 25:31–45). More clearly, the Great Commission emphasizes that Christ’s saving work involves nations (*panta ta ethne*) as recipients and

Sin has a universal impact that requires the universal people of God to work against it, sustained by God’s empowering grace.

partakers of His Messianic mission. His disciples are commanded “to baptize and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:16–20).

Jesus in His apocalyptic parables on burning lamps (Mt 25:1–13) and the parable of the steward (24:45–51) addresses His followers so that they faithfully shine His light and serve others. Schuyler Brown specifically describes it as “the community’s responsibility for the ethne (28:19).”<sup>2</sup> According to Matthew, sin has a universal impact that requires the universal people of God to work against it, sustained by God’s empowering grace. Dennis Dulling noted: “evil is so pervasive that an ethnos [“nation”] based on descent, ancestral customs, or land always falls short. There is both continuity and discontinuity with historical Israel; ethnic boundaries grow to include outsiders. In short, ‘Matthew metaphoricises ethnicity’ (318–19).”<sup>3</sup>

Evangelist Matthew in chapter 25 emphasizes the need for preparedness for the Second Coming of Jesus and His followers’ role in His Messianic mission among all nations. The three tenants were entrusted with talents. The talents do not signify some sort of skills or skill sets, as we usually think. They are precious and expensive items, such as gold or silver units. For a regular worker, a talent is worth of twenty years of labor. This indicates that the master entrusted his servants with a significant amount of treasures. According to the response and actions of the first two tenants, they seem to have a good attitude towards their master. There was no specific command given by the master that they invest the talents with bankers. They seem to engage in a profitable investment out of sheer sense of responsibility and trustworthiness that stems from the goodness of the master and their good attitudes towards him. In light of this, it appears that the two tenants were so excited about the generous treasure that they went out and hit the streets on behalf of the master and made investments with the bankers and doubled the profits. The master’s extended delay in a distant country didn’t deter them from working for him. It rather propelled their efforts to multiply the return.

This parable reminds the readers of the Gospel about the gracious riches of God as He entrusts His people with the precious message of the Gospel so that it will be shared with others outside of the immediate household. The tenants’ favorable attitude towards their master and their seemingly close relationship with him compelled them to engage in his mission faithfully and fruitfully. Their passion for the master’s investment intersects with the greater joy he offered to them as a reward. He told them “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your

Their passion for the master’s investment intersects with the greater joy he offered to them as a reward.

master's happiness!" (v. 21). In other words, they have already tasted the joy in mission before fully realizing it.

The third tenant did not seem to understand nor embrace the loving heart of his master. He confirmed that he acted in fear. By doing so, he disclosed his allegiance more to self-preservation than to the master's mission. Furthermore, he did not put any effort to make profit out of the treasure at his disposal. He was lazy. The only thing he thought to do was to bury the talent and give it back to the master as it was. It is obvious that the servant was neither task oriented nor relational. It is not a surprise that his investment went flat. Nonetheless, his motive was more problematic than his actions. He portrayed the master as "a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed" (25:24). His wrong perception and characterization of the master contributed to a negative outcome and ultimately put his safety at a greater peril. Bernard of Clairvaux stated that "people who do not progress in the spiritual life, regress."<sup>4</sup>

This parable serves as a stern warning to the Jewish religious leaders that their failure to have a vibrant relationship with God and their lack of concern for others will have a dire consequence. This story also sends a strong message to the followers of Jesus and Matthew's community that, while getting ready for the Second Coming of Jesus, they need to wait for Him through active service and evangelistic works among people groups beyond their immediate community members.

## American Churches' Context

Modern American mission can be described in various ways. Mark Noll characterizes it with the following notions: "regional predisposition, ethnic flavors, division of church and state, and secularization."<sup>5</sup> I challenge the notion that historical Christianity in America has had ethnic flavors. Sunday morning still is "the most racially segregated time" in the country. Both older and newer immigrant churches tend to organize themselves around clearly demarcated racial categories. Strong socio-ethnic ideologies and narratives played a huge role in shaping communal identity in the United States. The churches in general reflect the social make-up and ethno-political discourse in the society.

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The advent of secularism, in addition to promoting individualism and consumerism, brought religious leniency, boredom, and deeper divisions. With it the *Christianization of America* seemed to give way to the *Americanization of Christianity*. Ethnocentric worldview and self-preservation became the norm for

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worship and ministry among many churches. In the process, not only did the church become a recipient of divisive racial rhetoric, it also became a major proponent of it. Donald Moorman stated that historically political discourse tends to influence the church's role as had been seen in the 1830s anti-Catholic movements by Protestant opposition groups.<sup>6</sup> The exclusion act of Chinese immigrants in 1882 and racial discrimination against Southern Europeans also unmask the existing ethnocentric sentiments over the years.<sup>7</sup> Like the third tenant, many churches in America seem to be preoccupied with self-referenced theological excuses that are devoid of faithfulness and fruitfulness to the mission of God. Many people call themselves Christians without having the passion and joy of Christ in their life. As a result, today's church suffers from acute spiritual fatigue, as evidenced by shrinking membership, diminishing volunteers, and impoverished mission outcome.

Like the third tenant, many churches in America seem to be preoccupied with self-referenced theological excuses that are devoid of faithfulness and fruitfulness to the mission of God. . . . As a result, today's church suffers from acute spiritual fatigue, as evidenced by shrinking membership, diminishing volunteers, and impoverished mission outcome.

It is evident that churches with strong ethnic background—be it Irish, German or Norwegian—have been challenged and stretched to embrace people from different ethnic backgrounds. As a result, former Northern European ethnic lines continued to grow blurry. However, larger racial unity and integration among Anglo, African American, Hispanic Christians, etc., still seem to be complex and difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, the influx of non-European immigrants to the country and the unreadiness of churches to welcome them created a deep puzzlement in the already struggling mission context. The immigration reform act in 1965 introduced the inclusion of non-European immigrants into the American social fabric. As a result, a large number of immigrants from the Southern Hemisphere began to arrive. Many of them came from a vibrant Christian background. However, on their arrival they observe that a good proportion of American churches are strictly divided across denominational and racial lines. Thus, due to existing divisions and the need for social bonding, immigrant Christians appeared to maintain tight ethnic, social, and religious ties of their homelands. As a result, they continue to congregate in narrow religious enclaves that often impede mission growth, particularly among the second generation. On the other hand, a postmodern worldview, supported by rapid technological means and global connections, reconfigures cultural values and fosters relativistic morality, theological fallacies, religious marketing, and divisions. As a

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result, churches either lose their foundational ground or become very defensive and inward focused. In either case they tend to lose on mission. America's emerging generation, particularly, seems to be caught up between the changing cultural shift and the churches' uncritical or antagonistic response to it.

Nonetheless, as we can see from the parable of the three tenants God's gracious call, His strength and advent cause us to be grateful and hopeful. It appears that the master's gracious acts compelled the first two tenants to be faithful and fruitful in their vocation. God is always at work among His people. He has faithful and fruitful remnants in America who enjoy the favorable heart of God and hit the road with the saving message of the Gospel and bring many more into His kingdom. Mark Noll noted: "The major 20th-century shift in denominational strength was reflected in the size of missionary contingents. The high point of missions among the older Protestant denominations came in the 1920s, when about half of the world 29,000 missionaries were Americans or Canadians. In 1925 there were more than 3,300 American missionaries in China alone. By the 1950s, the proportion of Christian missionaries from North America had reached two-thirds of the world total."<sup>8</sup>

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Right after World War II, as Europe experienced economic crisis and depleted moral and religious vibrancy, spiritual awakening had been restored in the United States. The placing of the slogan "In God we trust" on stamps in 1954, anti-communism revivals, women's growing role in mission and the Pentecostal movement were some of the characteristics of the changing religious environment in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the growth of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere and the migration of many Christians to the West has a positive and promising impact for the church of God. Christian migrants' vibrant Christian witness play a significant role in strengthening faith in the host society and churches. In the greater Washington, DC, area where I currently serve, there are approximately 350,000 to 400,000 Ethiopian immigrants. There are over 100 Ethiopian Christian immigrant churches that mainly come from Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Evangelical Churches such as Mekane Yesus, Mulu-Wongel, and other churches' background. About 65 of these churches are Evangelical churches. Christians in these places seem to be very busy planting churches.

Our Southeastern District chartered nine congregation in its last district convention in 2018, and six of them were immigrant Lutheran churches. In the early 1990s, there were probably a few African immigrant Lutheran churches in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Over the last few years, these churches have grown in hundreds and are planted in almost every major city in the country. Particularly, there is a harvest that the Lord has provided through immigrants' second generation that we need to prayerfully and proactively engage in.

## **Passion**

The main problem of western Christianity is not the declining membership. It is rather the loss of passion and joy for Christ and His mission. The first two tenants in the gospel story took seriously the abundant trustworthiness placed on their shoulders. They were not deterred by the delay of their master nor outside pressure. They focused on one thing and only one thing: multiplying the precious treasure! However, the third tenant had a distorted and wrong perception of his master. He served from a fear and scarcity mindset. He became the victim of his own ill-fated views and impoverished mission outcomes. The Lord has given His people the gift of joy and freedom abundantly. Anything that detaches His people from His gracious gifts will inevitably bring them down. According to the parable, burying a talent is equal to losing it all together. The church needs to align with the generous work of God's Spirit and act kindly and freely. Remember, whenever the people of God are at peace with God, they become compassionate, generous, and kind toward others.

The main problem of western Christianity is not the declining membership. It is rather the loss of passion and joy for Christ and His mission. . . . They focused on one thing and only one thing: multiplying the precious treasure! . . . The church needs to align with the generous work of God's Spirit and act kindly and freely.

## **Invest in "Gentiles" too**

The Great Commission is preceded by the great missionary parables, including the story of the two sons (Mt 21:28–32), the burning lamps (25:1–13), the parable of the steward (24:45–51) and the three tenants (25:14–30). The common thread in these parables is the focus on dedicated service for others beyond oneself. For Jewish Christians, the otherness of Gentiles might be seen as a liability due to an antagonistic historical past. What makes the Gospel unique is that it provides a new foundation of love that compels to love the unlovable and love them into the Father's

kingdom. Thus, the otherness of others is seen as a potential mission opportunity, not a mission threat. Sharing the Gospel of Jesus is the main purpose of Christianity. We cannot afford sacrificing it because of fear, indifference, or other strategies.

The good news is that the Lord uses “others” to bless us. As Israel failed to carry out her mission, the Lord brought Gentiles to continue the mission. As the Lord of His Church and nations, Jesus uses anyone to bless His mission on earth. The three tenants had one master, one household, and one mission. Yet, the third tenant seemed to disassociate himself from the larger family and acted independently and wrongly. It cost him terribly. Christian unity is a necessity, not a luxury. We might be given gifts in various shapes and forms. Our level of effectiveness also may vary. Nonetheless, we have one Lord who loves us all and rewards us accordingly. We are unified in Him and in His mission. The Gospel is dynamic. Its nature moves it as well as others. The church has no option but to gratefully join the flow and move. Faithfulness to Christ is faithfulness to His mission. Right alignment with the will and passion of Jesus leads to courageous sharing of His love with others.

The third tenant used excuses and kept himself away from responsible and profitable investments. However, the master said that the tenant’s unprofitable dealing was due to his laziness and untrustworthiness. He buried the talents, which was obviously the easiest thing to do. It did not require hard work, complicated dealings nor negotiations. The tenant might have interpreted his action of burying the talent as a sign of faithfulness. So, faithfulness without fruitfulness? Reaching out to people who are different from us is not an easy thing to do. It can be a hard work. The easy way out will be just to let the status quo continue without requiring much from us and continue to hide behind our own self-referenced traditions and theological excuses. However, no excuse is worth the dedication to Christ’s mission, His unfailing glory, and the satisfaction that it brings to our heart. Christ is risen, and the tomb is empty. Our hope and labor for His name and sake cannot remain in the grave. Jesus has given life to our dead bodies and deeds. We are risen with Him and have joined His victorious mission.

The tenant might have interpreted his action of burying the talent as a sign of faithfulness. So, faithfulness without fruitfulness? . . . However, no excuse is worth the dedication to Christ’s mission, His unfailing glory, and the satisfaction that it brings to our heart.

## **Urgency**

The parable of the talents as part of the end times discourses emphasizes the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It begs for diligent alertness. The first two tenants knew that the precious treasure was given for a limited time. They knew that the master who left for an extended time would inevitably come back. His delay did not deter them from working for him. It rather caused them to keep multiplying the talents for him. They chose to act promptly and diligently, trusting the favorable return of their master. And they entered into the master's eternally blessed joy. However, the third tenant seemed to waste his time in idleness and deceiving himself with unproductive and inappropriate excuses. And he seemed to misunderstand the delay of his master and used it to bolster his ill-informed perception of the master and the work he was supposed to do. At the end, the coming of the master was not good news for him.

Matthew describes that the end times are unsettling for nations (Mt 24:7–14). He stated that “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (24:7). And nations will rise against Jesus’ followers too (24:9). However, the Evangelist affirmed that in spite of all these difficulties “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (24:14). The power of the Gospel overcomes hostilities among nations. It will be preached to all nations before the closure of time. How does the church act in mission in a timely manner? How does the Second Coming of Jesus inspire the church for more engagements with His mission among all nations?

The resurrection of Jesus provides new life in abundance to our mortal body and forgiveness for our sinful deeds. Those who have “buried” their talents still have hope through the risen Lord and can take part in His mission in a renewed mind and spirit.

Nonetheless, Jesus shared these parables in the context of His imminent death and resurrection for His people. Those who repent of their deceptions, laziness, and unfruitfulness will be forgiven through His Calvary blood. The resurrection of Jesus provides new life in abundance to our mortal body and forgiveness for our sinful deeds. Those who have “buried” their talents still have hope through the risen Lord and can take part in His mission in a renewed mind and spirit.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Duling, "Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism, and the Matthean Ethnos," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (Nov. 2005): 125–143.

<sup>2</sup> Schuyler Brown, "The Matthean Apocalypse," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2, no. 4 (July 1979): 2–27.

<sup>3</sup> Duling, "Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism, and the Matthean Ethnos," 125–143.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Carlson, "Between Text and Sermon: Matthew 25:13–46," *Interpretation*: 69, no. 3 (2015): 344–346.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Noll, *Protestants in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133–141.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Moorman, *Harvest Waiting* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Moorman, *Harvest Waiting*, 92–93.

<sup>8</sup> Noll, *Protestants in America*, 133–141.

<sup>9</sup> Noll, *Protestants in America*, 242.

# Buried under Excellent Soil: Matthew 25:14–30

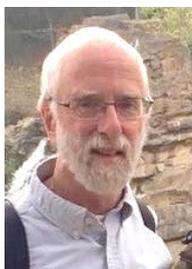
Rich Carter

**Abstract:** That we might focus on the third servant, who buried the treasure in the field, is to suggest that we might be the third servant. Perhaps by mistake we do such burying. More so, perhaps we do not even recognize that we bury the treasure under our good work in theology or worship. Will we risk personal reflection, to consider ways in which our fear, guilt, pride, or shame leads us to the field instead of the marketplace?

May I take it as a given (and that is an honest question; your feedback is welcome) that the thrust/focus of this parable is the third servant? Commentaries, reflecting the Matthew text itself, show some ambiguity: the third servant confesses to fear while the master labels him wicked, lazy. One commentary extends the servant's own word, calling him "timorous and faithless."<sup>1</sup> Whatever the adjectives, the focus is on the third servant.

Then I must correct myself. Whatever the details about the servant, those who practice a Lutheran confession of the faith must argue that "the first and chief article is that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, was crucified for our transgressions and raised again for our justification."<sup>2</sup> That is, for whatever emphasis is rightly given to the third servant as our Lord tells the tale, it is our Lord's treasure, our Lord Himself, about whom the parable and all Scripture speaks.

It is the proposal of this article that just as easily as the first paragraph "launched itself" in my thinking and writing, so easily I am and we are the third servant. We can certainly excuse ourselves from such an accusation. He was called lazy, but if you and I are taking time to read professional journal articles, it is likely that we are not so lazy. I disagree with the master in the story (and our Master?). The third servant was not lazy; it takes some planning and energy and hard work to bury a treasure. You know how it goes in the old movies and TV shows. It's not enough to dig the hole and put the treasure into it. Then you have to fill in the hole; and then



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*Rev. Dr. Rich Carter earned degrees from Concordia, Chicago; Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; and Yale Divinity School; earning his ThD at Luther Seminary in St. Paul in 1991. He taught at Concordia University, St. Paul from 1991–2013 and has taught in Lutheran seminaries in Africa, Europe, and Asia. Volunteering in retirement, he is serving full-time at Concordia Theological Seminary, Hong Kong. You can reach him at [carter@csp.edu](mailto:carter@csp.edu).*

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you have to cover all the traces and tracks. The third servant, after all, did desperately want to return the treasure to the master, kept safe for him until his return. He had hard work to do.

I disagree with the master.  
. . . The third servant  
was not lazy.

I can imagine that the energy for the hard work came from his fear. Would this have been something akin to the adrenaline or cortisol reported to kick in for the “fight or flight” syndrome? You know reports of people who exhibit great strength in emergencies. And we can imagine some health and strength in this servant in the first place, for his hard work in house and home, with fields and cattle. I think the master got it wrong: “You wicked and *fearful* servant! You misunderstand me entirely. You could have done more for me with my treasure while doing less for you, digging so deep, if you had trusted me.”

I propose that this parable applies to us, to me. Fear? Why, many of you reading this are deeply engaged in ministry, even in leadership in ministry, for the sake of the Good News of Jesus. Why ever would I think that fear might be an issue that would lead us to bury the treasure? Well, OK, sometimes for us the treasure might be buried by accident. Without fear and with good intent we make mistakes.

I make this proposal of mistakes with some evidence at hand. In the office a couple days ago, I rushed to reply to a question, to an idea, because I knew the correct answer. You could tell on the face of the person with whom I was speaking that, while my words were correct, my style was a mistake. I had buried the treasure of God’s Good News, God’s care for someone, under my rush to be right.

More publicly, there seemed to be a burying of the Good News by mistake, not by fear, in the work of LCMS president, Dr. Matthew Harrison. In his Q&A published for the 2016 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod presidential election, he wrote concerning Lutheran identity, “Christ’s Gospel is at the heart. Salvation is pure gift. . . . What happened on the cross is delivered here in God’s Word preached/read, Baptism, absolution and the Supper. We retain the Church’s pattern of worship (invocation, confession/absolution, lessons, sermon, Supper, etc.). . .”

I wrote to President Harrison my thanks and my concern. “I appreciate the vigor of ‘What happened on the cross is delivered here in God’s Word. . .’—and thank you for mentioning absolution, so easily bypassed. My concern comes in your next sentence, ‘We retain the Church’s pattern of worship (invocation, confession/absolution, lessons. . .). . .’ This comment has to do with church history and practice but not with essential doctrine. . . . I regret that sentence. It seems to fail to distinguish between our history and our theology, our changing practice and our Lord’s unchanging Gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

When this exchange was made public, appropriately, a brother pastor noted to me that my concern was only a small mistake. I agree: a few words would have made the difference, e.g., “Besides our identity, we retain the Church’s pattern . . .” As it stands, this small mistake binds the Good News of Jesus to one pattern of worship, thus burying the treasure under tradition.

Before I return to the question of fear or other motivations that lead us to bury the Good News of Jesus, let me acknowledge the richness of the soil in which the third servant buried the treasure. That was my immediate recognition when I heard the proposed theme for this issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters*. Good soil! No doubt the master became rich by running a farm with good soil. Whether the servant buried the treasure in the center of the field or at the edge under the trees, it would have been good, rich, productive soil for its purposes, only now put to shameful use to bury a treasure.

Is there a parallel in John 5 when Jesus heals the man? The religious leaders had concern for the rules which seemed to them so important. They buried the Good News of the man’s walking in their concern for his not conforming to the rules.

I wonder whether we could be those religious leaders. The good soil is perhaps not so much rules as it might be excellent doctrine or well-done worship, whether the worship format be traditional or contemporary. The challenge or question of this article is whether we focus so much on doing it well—afraid to do otherwise?—that we hardly notice that we are digging a hole and burying the Good News of Jesus under our good conduct, our theological terms, or worship skill. If you want to argue that worship practice and technical terms are themselves the treasure, then you should risk taking them into the marketplace, at least to receive interest. If we simply tell people the terms and perform the worship, we are burying the Good News under good soil. Will we unpack our terms, explain our forms, so that people hear and see Jesus?

The good soil . . . might be excellent doctrine or well-done worship.

One congregation took the risk; this is a bit of its story.

In good humor and trust the minister and the people said to each other: “Look, when you come right down to it for us, in this suburb, nearing the twenty-first century, there are forms potentially richer than either a chanted Psalm or the ‘Old Rugged Cross.’” They even disbanded the choir, and those who had needed the choir now found some of their needs better met in the team that every Thursday evening (formerly choir practice night) planned the coming week’s worship, and some other needs met in introducing and explaining the Sunday worship to their congregation each week....<sup>4</sup>

The concern of this mission observer article might be an educational one; that is my professional thinking style after five decades as a Lutheran educator. Can we, in worship and theology and community service, teach? “Teach” not defined as “telling” but as “engaging people with.” And, yes, I’m sure it is possible to bury the treasure of the Good News under good educational practice, as much as under good worship or theological practice.

There is no question about the soil. Good stuff! The question is, “Why is it so important for us to bury the treasure? Not even to notice that we should be heading for the marketplace?”

Let us return to the third servant, to his self-confessed fear. To the degree that I am correct, that you and I in our leadership in the church are in fact burying the Good News of Jesus, I propose that a profound reason is *our* fear. Choose your poison: fear of elders, fear of brothers in nearby parishes, fear of disappointing your (long-dead) mother? Is it possible, on my way out to the field, treasure and shovel in hand, to pause for a moment and reflect? Whence cometh all this energy to hatch this plot and carry it out?! What feelings are mine that may be disconnected from the facts of this setting, that cut me off from trusting the Master about whom I preach “love”?

Is it possible, on my way  
out to the field, treasure  
and shovel in hand,  
to pause for a moment  
and reflect?

Luther sets a challenge and opportunity in front of us, to confess the sins that we know and feel in our hearts.<sup>5</sup> Often we don’t know our hearts well. It may be exactly in our best behaviors that we hide our worst heart. Permit a personal story:

I was a good doctoral student. The professor said to us, “Read one of these books and write a review on it.” I can do that. I see that one of the books is short, and it’s in the library, free. I’ll read that one! It could have been on thirteenth-century Aramaic or how to blow up balloons for Sunday School. Anyway, it’s short and it’s in the library. I’ll read that one.

The book was titled *Adult Children of Alcoholics*.<sup>6</sup> That certainly doesn’t apply to me. My parents were both sober. As I understand it, my mom’s dad was a gifted musician, Lutheran school teacher, and drunk. But he died before I was born; his drinking doesn’t have anything to do with me. But then, “Interesting,” I thought, as I read a list of thirteen characteristics of adult children of alcoholics, personal deficits in their lives because there has been such a focus, a hovering around the alcoholic person. “I recognize eight of those in myself, this one in particular, the sense that real life is over there somewhere and I am here on the sidelines. Isn’t that the way life feels for all of us?” I thought. “We’re not really engaged; real life is over there somewhere.”

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As I turned the page, this observation greeted me: If these emotional dynamics are not confronted in the family of the alcoholic, the dynamics will pass down through the generations, even if everyone is sober. Yup, that's me. My parents were sober, my grandfather's alcoholism not mentioned, the emotional reality hidden but absorbed—inhaled—while I grew up.

On my way out to the field to bury the Good News of Jesus under good soil, let me ask at least whether I don't see, might even be in denial about, emotional issues in my life that led me to the field instead of the marketplace.

I can take this topic out of the realm of personal story and into the realm of professional literature.<sup>7</sup>

There is a kind of bondage to preaching—as to any other role or form of ministry—which is a self-investment so thorough that it is more than investment and becomes self-identification. . . . Because the minister and ministry find their center, their justification, [!] indeed the basis for their being in the activity of preaching—rather than in the fuller apprehension of ministry which preaching partly expresses and to which it points—one must unquestioningly serve and defend this activity as though *it* were the saving faith—which, in fact, it is for such persons. . . . Signs that preaching, or one's own preaching in particular, is not having the effect one "believes in" must be resolutely denied.

. . . Since one is not a minister who preaches . . . but *is* a preacher, this must be clearly affirmed to self and to others at every opportunity. So that when one seeks him for personal counsel, is visited in the hospital, sits with him in a committee meeting or beside him at worship, one still must be made aware in tone and theme that here is the preacher. Such a minister is not free to minister or in the long run even to preach, because he is in bondage to his preaching, a bondage fashioned of exclusive reliance on it for definition and justification of self and of vocation.<sup>8</sup>

If this mission observer article sounds a little critical, perhaps it is, beginning with myself. A reading recently about a missionary helps me to think through the issue.

[John] was killed while serving as a missionary. But he was not killed on account of the Gospel. He was killed on account of his unpreparedness. . . . Christian media figures have defended Chau as a sincere missionary: he was. Nothing can be said against his motives or the sincerity of his faith. Liberal critics have claimed he was a colonialist: he wasn't. He genuinely cared for the people he felt called to and had no desire to dominate or control them. Both sides miss a key point."<sup>9</sup>

How many pastors and other church leaders have been “killed” professionally because of their unpreparedness? In all their studies, in all their excellent academic work in good soil, were they left unprepared personally and emotionally? In their self-understanding and relational skills? Did anyone ever point out their needs? Did they ever learn to risk listening to criticism even though, or precisely because, it might expose their needs? Their sins they could confess, perhaps; their mistakes, their deficits they could not or would not. How much, heading out to the field instead of into the marketplace—how much do we insult the Master, unaware, not trusting Him or His treasure, but covering it with our good work?

In all their studies,  
in all their excellent  
academic work  
in good soil,  
were [pastor and other  
church leaders] left  
unprepared personally and  
emotionally?

In fairness, perhaps the two servants who went to market were also unaware. Simply, they heard his words and went to work. They trusted the master who first trusted them.

There is a sense of newness in ministry, when we listen to the Master’s words. “Words—especially religious words, words that have to do with the depth of things—get tired and stale the way people do. Find new words or put old words together in combinations that make them heard as new, make yourself new, and make you understand in new ways.”<sup>10</sup> When we take our words and work, our doctrine and practice to market, there can be a return on investment. Otherwise we bury the Good News of Jesus in our use of words, especially religious words, that denies that God makes all things new.

The risk of newness, of engaging in the market instead of burying in the field? “Often . . . the words of a psalm will strike with a physical impact: tears come to my eyes, and I see myself and my life in a new light. The moment passes, as it must, but when I feel both regret over my failings and the certitude that they need not define me, I am inspired anew to believe that not despair but hope will have the last word.”<sup>11</sup> The risk is personal engagement, our people’s and ours, our hearing how much we are—I am—loved.<sup>12</sup>

If we prefer not to hear such comment from a woman with Roman Catholic connections, perhaps we can hear this: “While Thomas [Aquinas] seeks wisdom for its own sake, Luther always wants to draw the implication of a given doctrine for our faith. He does not just want to know God; he wants to know God *for us*. Theology for Luther, then, is not a cognitive exercise, but a practical one; a form of confession or prayer. . . . In the same vein, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* defines faith as ‘that worship which receives the benefits that God offers. . . . God wants to be

honored by faith so that we receive from him those things that he promises and offers.”<sup>13</sup>

If I understand the professional readings well, the likelihood increases that we hardly notice ourselves on the way to the field to bury the treasure if we have had (denied or undiscussed) Adverse Childhood Experiences. We have learned good behavior; we’re good; we can cover up bad “stuff.”<sup>14</sup> But if the “good behavior” we learned puts us in denial about ourselves, our “masters,” and the world around us, we may be very skillful buriers and actually insult the Master. Alternately, we may have well learned “bad” behaviors, unhealthy ones. “Adult health-risk-taking behaviors . . . are often an individual’s attempt at coping and self-regulating the experiences of emotional pain, anxiety, anger and/or depression related to unresolved adverse childhood experiences.”<sup>15</sup>

The likelihood increases that we hardly notice ourselves on the way to the field.

Of course, we are all self-aware. We are not in denial. Most of us reading this article hold a BA and likely some kind of master’s degree, at least. We’re intelligent. We know what’s going on. Or not. I was twenty-five years old. My wife asked me to go out and close the garage door, to push it down the last six inches. She correctly observed that I slammed it. Of all the things she could have said when I came in, she said, “I think you’re angry.” My response?—internal—“Is that what that is?” For good growing-up reasons, it took that long for me to begin the journey to emotional self-awareness. How’s your journey going? How easy to head out to the field, unaware.<sup>16</sup>

Permit a gender focus.

“If you are ‘manly,’ . . . You don’t admit that you have been programmed, automated, scripted. You insist that you are supremely in control, in charge of your life (and many other lives, too). You don’t admit that you are playing out other people’s plans for your life, puppet to their strings even—maybe especially—when you most act ‘in charge.’ . . .” What we do know about [Mary’s] Joseph from the Bible and what does make him a close model for modern men’s lives is his mute obedience; his steadfast acquiescence; . . . his eagerness to play out energetically and unhesitatingly the script assigned to him, without pausing to question. . . .”<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the issue is (unrecognized?) shame, rather than fear or guilt or pride. A counselor, noting the masking of feelings, might explore with a person, “searching out the shaming events in particular, to develop empathy for a sometimes ‘unlikeable’ persona. . . . By naming the shaming events, the clients come to see that as young children in shame-bound systems they had little power to determine how they would interact with the world.”<sup>18</sup> Such people, facing shame, grow to be more

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competent people “through breaking family rules and commenting on reality, expressing feelings and talking with family members about [their] own reality.”<sup>19</sup> How frequently is it the *church* family rules that need breaking, that need comments about reality and appropriate expression of feelings?

Have I perhaps buried the treasure under not so fine a soil, under too many words? To quote a Hong Kong phrase, “Apologies for any inconvenience caused.” I am grateful for your persistence and, where necessary, your personal courage or clarity to read such a critique as this article intends, for our treasure-burying good behaviors. It was my wish in the writing that we would each hear the invitation to pause, as we carry the treasure, to be clear that our Master invites trust, not fear; that the treasure of the Good News of Jesus is for the marketplace—and for us!—not for the field. I am so grateful for a Lutheran heritage and identity that carry the treasure to market in so many ways, so that our Master might richly enjoy the return of many people in grace, in Christ.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*. (London: The Tyndale Press, 1961), 236.

<sup>2</sup> SA II, i:1

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from the author to President Harrison, May 27, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> James E. Dittes, *When the People Say No: Conflict and the Call to Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 88.

<sup>5</sup> SC (V)

<sup>6</sup> Janet G. Woititz, *Adult Children of Alcoholics* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Well, OK, I chose this professional literature because I think it makes the same personal point.

<sup>8</sup> James E. Dittes, *Minister on the Spot* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 81.

<sup>9</sup> Lyman Stone, “John Chau’s Death Was A Missionary Failure Nobody Should Emulate,” *The Federalist*, Nov. 28, 2018, accessed March 14, 2019, <http://thefederalist.com/2018/11/28/john-chaus-death-missionary-failure-nobody-emulate/>.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 93.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Acedia and Me* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 276.

<sup>12</sup> I am mindful of and grateful for Dr. Michael Walcheski at Concordia University, St. Paul. He challenged my thinking, that people are afraid of confession because of telling the truth about themselves. He remarked, “They are afraid of the absolution.”

<sup>13</sup> David R. Maxwell, “Justification in the Early Church,” *Concordia Journal* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 36, 38.

<sup>14</sup> “Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs),” National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>.

- <sup>15</sup> Teresa Gil, “Adverse Childhood Experiences: Trauma and adult health consequences,” *Psychology Today*, Jan. 16, 2019, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/breaking-the-silence/201901/adverse-childhood-experiences>.
- <sup>16</sup> Peter Scazzero raises these issues in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*.
- <sup>17</sup> James. E. Dittes, *The Male Predicament: On Being a Man Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), ix, 3.
- <sup>18</sup> Merle A. Fossum and Marilyn J. Mason, *Facing Shame* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 37–39.
- <sup>19</sup> Fossum and Mason, *Facing Shame*, 37–39.

# Faithful in Mission: “What Does That Have to Do with Me?” A Look at the Church in America in Light of Matthew 25:14–30

Noemí Guerra

**Abstract:** The church in America has been losing many of her baptized members every year. This article aims to discuss the reasons why this generation has grown to be unfaithful by asking Noah, a 1.5 generation latinx millennial who grew up in church. Noah has loved God ever since he was young and had been very active in church too. Noah had a strong connection with God throughout his life until . . . he didn't. Going to church began to feel like a burden. I discuss in this article why I think this is happening to Noah and many other thousands of baptized members every year. I also discuss what does the church has to do with this new trend.

## Introduction

It isn't news that the church in America has been losing many of her baptized members every year. But why? Why is this generation so unfaithful? I decided to ask Noah, a millennial who grew up in church. Noah has loved God with all his heart since he was young. He was very active in church too. Noah had a strong connection with God throughout his life until . . . he didn't. Going to church began to feel like a burden to Noah. He still went to church, but he found himself thinking about many other things while sitting on the pews. Was he beginning to become unfaithful? Or was the church unfaithful in its mission *to* him? I wonder. . .

Was he beginning  
to become unfaithful?  
Or was the church  
unfaithful in its mission  
to him? I wonder. . .

The sermon that Sunday was about the parable of the talents, “Well done, good



*Deaconess Noemí Guerra graduated from Concordia Seminary St. Louis in 2014. She is currently a church planter deaconess at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in West Des Moines, Iowa. She is also a Spanish and Religion teacher at Mt. Olive Lutheran School. Dcs. Noemí is a 1.5 generation millennial latinx who is currently working toward a psychotherapy degree at the University of Iowa. [noemiguerra@me.com](mailto:noemiguerra@me.com)*

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and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master," heard Noah in a distant echo as he came back to earth. Noah's mind wandered as he asked himself some questions that made him feel SO guilty: "What does it even mean to be faithful? What does this have to do with me? To whom or what am I supposed to be faithful? Do I HAVE to be faithful? What would happen to me if I am not faithful? How can I tell if I am not being faithful? Is there a faithfulness meter?" The questions did not stop in his mind. They followed him to school, work, games, home, and even to the shower!

Noah's mind wandered as he asked himself some questions that made him feel SO guilty: "What does it even mean to be faithful? What does this have to do with me?"

I invite you today to help me try to answer some of these questions for poor, black-sheep, rebel, unfaithful Noah, who dares to question church and even the sermon! Shame on you Noah! (Did I say that out loud?)

### **What Does It Even Mean to Be Faithful?**

The dictionary defines faithfulness as being loyal, reliable, constant, and true to the facts or the original. But what does it mean to be faithful in light of Christianity? Is it being reliable, constant, and true to the Word? The church? God? Our neighbors? Is faithfulness *not* to miss a Sunday worship service? What about Sunday School? How many Sundays can Noah miss before being counted with the *unfaithful*? If he comes back to church, is he part of the *faithful* again?

### **What Does This Have to Do with Me?**

"In the parable of the talents, the master represents Jesus, the servants represent the believers and the talents represent the gifts that God has given to His children. The master entrusts his servants with a substantial amount of money as their capital. Each servant is given according to his business ability and each servant is expected to trade with it and make profit for his master," the sermon continued. Noah asks himself again, "What does that have to do with *me*?" as he silently stares at nothing.

See, Noah is a millennial, 1.5-generation latinx (yes, latinx can have names like "Noah" too), who is in college working toward his graduate degree. How is the parable of the talents relevant to him? He wants to be faithful to God and his church, but he doesn't find a connection between his actual life and the requirements of the faithful saints of his church.

## One Point What?

One point five (1.5) generation latinx are individuals who migrated to the United States at 18 years of age or younger. They speak fluent Spanish and (almost) fluent English. The problem is that first-generation latinx who came to the United States after 18 years of age consider Noah and his 1.5 friends to be “gringo-wanna-be” because they speak English and learned the US culture. Noah does not really identify with first-generation latinx, because they consider 1.5s to be “*vende patria*” (pardon my Spanglish). Noah does not really identify with second-generation latinx, on the other hand, because of his “almost” fluent English. Second-gens constantly acknowledge the 1.5s’ accent and feel the “responsibility” to “help” them to perfect their English. Noah is left to be torn between these two worlds for his entire life. Could Noah be faithful in his attendance to church while having a hard time connecting with his church family?

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## What Does It Even Mean to Be *Faithful* for a 1.5-Generation Latinx?

Help me here. Noah needs some answers! If being faithful equals coming to church, we are losing Noah. Church is not attractive to him anymore. The service in English is awesome, but it doesn’t connect him with his roots. The service in Spanish is awesome, but his kids get bored because they do not understand the language, plus their jokes do not seem to be funny for Noah anymore. “Is there a church for *me*? How am I supposed to be faithful to God and His church if the church is not being faithful to *me*?” asks Noah. Ouch. This Noah sure is a lost soul.

He likes the Wednesday night Bible studies in English, but he can’t “abandon” his first-gen *compatriotas* of the Spanish Bible group. He decides to make up an excuse and sneak into the English Bible study anyway. (How brave of him!) He walks into the Bible study in English, and they are talking about the sermon on Sunday. “We need to be faithful and reach out to our ‘neighbors of color,’” says someone. To which the leader responds: “I do not see color. . . . we are all equal” (Noah rolls his eyes, as this is one of the most common racist sayings of all times).

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Rough start? What would *you* tell Noah?

## **To Whom or What Am I Supposed to Be Faithful?**

Before you say something to poor, black-sheep, rebel, unfaithful Noah, who dares to question church and even the sermons, you must know that Noah is really . . . *me*. The story of Noah is really my story. I began to question many things and ask myself if the decline in faithfulness in the church in America, which is losing thousands of souls every year, is really due to the unfaithfulness of the church itself. "Why is the church not paying attention to *me*? Why does it not realize how different *I* am and how different *my* needs are?"

I thought, "Poor, black-sheep, rebel, unfaithful church who dares to ignore 1.5-generation millennial latinx even in its sermons!" Then it hit me. . . It is *I* who needs to be faithful to my *calling of faith and love* even in the midst of identity crisis or any other crisis, for crying out loud!

## **Faithful to God in Faith**

I know this subtitle sounds redundant, but focus! Going back to Matthew 25 and the parable of the talents, the kingdom of heaven is "like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability" (vv. 14–15). (Don't go "Noah" on me. Come back to earth!) One of the talents or gifts that we receive from Jesus is *faith*. Martin Luther, in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed, reminds us that the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel. He calls us *to faith* in Christ and gives us a new identity in our Baptism so that the old Adam (and old Noemí), who was only focused on his *own* needs, could now look up and believe in (something other than his needs) the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins. By faith you and I receive the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life every time we attend church, whether in English or Spanish or Sign Language.

## **Faithful to God in Love**

The talents gifted to us by God also include intellectual and physical abilities, as well as material possessions. But the one talent I am more fond of is the *opportunities* that God provides us to use these other talents to serve Him as we serve our neighbor. This is called *love*. The love that we received from God through Jesus in the Sacraments becomes active in our faith, as our mouths proclaim that Jesus is God and our hands *serve* our neighbors.

## Do I HAVE to Be Faithful? What Would Happen If I Am Not Faithful?

See, the master in Matthew 25 expected his employees to trade with the capital he gave them and make profits for his business. The first two servants gained 100% of profits for their master. Our Master expects us to be faithful, full of faith, so we can bear fruit. As Christians, we are the salt that God shook through the world. We are the light that dares to enter darkness. We are to live for Christ as we live for our neighbor. The new Adam (and new Noemí) can now live outside himself and be faithful to the calling of faith in Christ and love for his neighbor, strengthened with the Blood and Body of the Covenant.

Our Master expects us to be faithful, full of faith, so we can bear fruit.  
As Christians, we are the salt that God shook through the world.  
We are the light that dares to enter darkness.  
We are to live for Christ as we live for our neighbor.

God's kingdom cannot be stopped. If we decide to be unfaithful and ignore our new identity, given to us in our Baptism, becoming negligent or indifferent to the *opportunities* that God places in front of us to love and serve our neighbor (because we are full of ourselves), He will give those opportunities to someone else. The last servant in Matthew 25 did just that. He said: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours" (Mt 25:24–25). What happened to the negligent servant will happen to those who hide their opportunities. His master told the negligent servant: "you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. . . . And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 25:27–30). God's kingdom cannot and will not be stopped. If we decide to allow our circumstances to become an excuse to be unfaithful and negligent to the opportunities that God places in front of us to expand His Kingdom, He will give those opportunities to someone else. Period.

## How Can I Tell If I Am Not Being Faithful? Is There a Faithfulness Meter?

Yes, there is a faithfulness meter. His name is Jesus. You must be thinking: "If Jesus is who I need to compare with, I am SO losing at this faithfulness thing." Well, it is true. Jesus is the only one who is faithful, indeed. He is the only one who is perfect. In Him only, through the faith received and strengthened in our Baptism and the Sacraments, you and I can say we ARE faithful. Not because of how awesome

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we are, but because He paid it all—“All to Him I owe.” (I know you are singing the hymn in your head. Come back!) He was and is faithful so that we, too, can face God in His earned faithfulness.

### **So, What Does This Have to Do with Me?**

Yes, I know that going or not going to church does not prove that one is being or not being faithful in one’s Christian life, but the gifts of Absolution and the Lord’s Supper that are offered in church are necessary for our lives of faithfulness. In any case, we are losing Noah and many others. As the Church, the Body of Christ, we still have quite a way to walk to respond to the opportunities that God is placing in front of the new face of the church in America. We need to find ways to better serve the 1.5-millennial latinx and all of the other specific generation and ethnic groups. And let’s NOT start talking about the intersectionality that most of us browns face daily, even in the church.

If we want to stop the church in America from losing many of her baptized members every year, maybe we need to teach more about growing aware of our dependence on God too. He calls us through the Word and Sacraments and reminds us that we cannot be faithful on our own. Through His Means of Grace, we receive forgiveness of sin and, along with it, the faith to do His will. God reminds us in His Word that because of our dependence on Him and the victory won on the cross, we can fulfill our responsibility of bearing fruits of faith and love toward God and our neighbors.

“And Noah?” you may ask. If you asked that, it is because you were so distracted that you missed a couple of paragraphs up. Read it again. As for me, I am SO thankful that my Master opened my eyes and led me back to the Truth. My eyes do not need to be on what the church does or does not do. My eyes are on Christ, *el autor y consumidor de mi fe*. As for you, don’t be so hard on the black-sheep Noahs. They can end up being a smart, talented deaconess who got a *little* distracted. . .

*Coram deo, coram mundo.*

Amén.

# As We Go . . .

## Miguel Torneire

**Abstract:** Jesus gave us a model for training Christian disciples when He trained the twelve disciples for mission. Jesus identified, invited, selected, and sent an unlikely and underqualified group of ordinary men to seek the lost as they were going to proclaim and demonstrate the Good News and Good Works, respectively. Jesus' training of the Twelve has to do not only with the faith in Him, but also the courage to go and serve. This article portrays the personal findings and learnings of a missionary who went from formal theological training to training disciples as he went into the mission field.

### Introduction

Jesus gave us a model for training Christian disciples with His own training of disciples. We find an instance of this training in the story of a boy possessed by an evil spirit (Mk 9:14–29). The boy's father asked the disciples to drive out the demon, but they couldn't do it. So the man brought his son to Jesus, who, of course, cast out the evil spirit. The disciples were confused by what happened and asked Jesus why they couldn't drive away the evil spirit. Jesus told them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."<sup>1</sup>

This is the essence of training for many activities and walks of life—not only teaching about what they should do, but actually showing what to do as they go.



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*Rev. Miguel Torneire, Bachelor of Divinity (BD), Bachelor of Theology (BA), and Master of Arts in Christian Outreach (MA), serves as the Executive Director of Developing Our World. He previously served as the Director for Central America & Missionary-at-Large for Central American Lutheran Mission Society, 2008–2018, and Missionary Pastor at Iglesia Luterana El Divino Salvador (Divine Savior Lutheran Church) in Zacapa, Guatemala, 2004–2008. He co-founded GELNET (Global Evangelical Lutheran Network), which is a think-tank and hands-on mission planting networking platform for mission leaders and church planters, an alternative space for local congregations looking to engage, encourage, equip, and partner with indigenous leaders and churches around the world. He and his wife Diane have two children: Sam and Lucas.*

[miguel@developingourworld.org](mailto:miguel@developingourworld.org)

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Jesus wasn't okay with the disciples' not casting out the demon. At one point, Jesus became frustrated with the boy's father and the disciples. He said, "O faithless generation . . . how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me" (Mk 9:19). It is clear from the larger context of Mark 9 that Jesus had already taught the disciples about faith, prayer, casting out demons, fasting, engaging their surrounding communities, serving them in their needs, and reaching out with the Good News. But when they were unable to put into practice what He taught them, He took the time to teach them again. Jesus showed ongoing commitment to them as well as His own mission.

This kind of commitment is needed to train disciples. Rarely will a person learn how to engage in outreach efforts effectively the first time that he is taught. This is especially true of those activities related to engaging the wider community. Mission is more than reaching out to individuals. It is incorporating people into a community, and that community, itself, needs to be fostered and nurtured. This ongoing development is a process.<sup>2</sup> What's more, people are individuals and need differing amounts of training to lead these efforts. Eventually, like the disciples, the people being led will be able to serve on their own. When they reach that place of maturity, they will be one step closer to becoming disciples themselves.

Mission is more than reaching out to individuals. It is incorporating people into a community.

Since my ministry started, my own missiology—my own account of Christian outreach—has grown and developed as well. I used to focus on personal evangelism, Bible studies, and sermons. But now, my main focus is on training leaders to be prepared and equipped not only for personal evangelism. They are being trained also for engaging their surrounding communities with both the Good News of Jesus Christ and with Good Works for the benefit of many neighbors, as well as for incorporating new believers into the church as followers of the Lord. My understanding of missiology<sup>3</sup> has grown immensely these past ten years. I have been training people in Central America by words and deeds so that they will be prepared to take the initiative and leadership in their own communities and, therefore, in their own countries. The apostle Paul's words, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men [and women] who will be able to teach others" (2 Tim 2:2), have made more sense to me than ever before, because I have put them into practice. Furthermore, my long experience of training leaders, in which I served as a non-residential missionary, has shaped my missiology and given me experience and practice to make disciples as I go, as they go, as Jesus did.

I learned that there is no way to have a healthy church—a church that depends on God, seeks the lost, equips leaders, and has a message that is relevant to its

community—if the disciples are not healthy. By healthy disciples I mean Christians who build capacity in others and live by grace and forgiveness, just as Jesus’ twelve disciples did in their formation. This dynamic shaped my entire process of discipleship during these years.

In this process of training, I taught and demonstrated by words and deeds that the disciples should go, proclaim, and demonstrate God’s love into the world and live by grace. When it was not understood or practiced, I showed the learners how to do it all over again by giving examples until they got it. That was part of Jesus’ success in discipleship and, I believe, is relevant for today’s discipleship as well.

I learned that there is no way to have a healthy church—a church that depends on God, seeks the lost, equips leaders, and has a message that is relevant to its community—if the disciples are not healthy. By healthy disciples I mean Christians who build capacity in others and live by grace and forgiveness, just as Jesus’ twelve disciples did in their formation

### **Missiological Keys**

The biblical foundation of this missiology is based on Jesus’ training of the Twelve for mission,<sup>4</sup> His training of the Twelve focused on the intentional formation of the apostles—an unlikely and underqualified group of ordinary men. He was not training them for an event or to complete a task; Jesus was training them for a lifetime of mission. The idea was to have healthy disciples that spread and demonstrate the Gospel to the entire known world through a small group of people in whom Jesus invested Himself.

Jesus worked at building courage in these twelve men after identifying, inviting, and selecting them. Courage, as I understand it, is not the absence of fear but the presence of faith. I believe that courage is what is lacking in many of our leaders today, which is why they are so reluctant to step out of their narrow ministry of Word and Sacrament to meet the unreached world. Our Lord, in His work with His disciples, intentionally built courage until they were bold and willing to go and serve Him anywhere.

Jesus also used grace and forgiveness in His formation process. An example of that is Peter’s training while he walked with Jesus for three years. Compare and contrast his actions and words to Jesus in Luke 5 (after the catch of many fish) and in John 21 (after the catch of many fish). Luke 5 finds him wanting to withdraw from Jesus; John 21 finds him wanting to draw near to Jesus. Both movements have to do with Peter, his sin, and how to interface with God in the context of his sin. John 21 shows that Peter is a real disciple—drawing near to Jesus because he knows how

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much Jesus loves him. That is discipleship. That is training. That is essential in the mission of God.

During this process of discipleship, Jesus more than once showed love, care, and patience toward His disciples. He knew that training them would not be easy. However, He was consistent and persevered with His disciples. When they were unable to put what He taught them into practice, He took the time to teach them again. Jesus did that several times until they got it. Mark 9:14–29 describes a good example of this process. Jesus did not hesitate to teach and to demonstrate to the disciples again after a long period of training.

[Jesus] was not training them for an event or to complete a task; Jesus was training them for a lifetime of mission.

The biblical foundation of this training in mission has to do with sanctification as well. Jesus Himself said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (Jn 20:22). Jesus’ purpose in this step was to empower His disciples with the Holy Spirit as they went. Jesus told them, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). Jesus was sanctifying them to be His disciples for a lifetime of discipleship and mission.

Jesus had a lot to say about sanctification in John 17. In verse 16, the Lord says, “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world,” and this is before His request: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” Sanctification is a state of being set apart for God; all believers enter into this state when they are born of God. Paul writes, “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). This is an eternal set-apart-ness unto God. It is an intricate part of our salvation, our connection with Christ (Heb 10:10).

“Sanctification” also refers to the practical experience of this being set apart for God. It is the effect of obedience to the Word of God and Sacraments in one’s life and is to be earnestly pursued by the believer (1 Pt 1:15; Heb 12:14). Just as the Lord prayed in John 17, believers in their vocation are set apart for the purpose for which they are sent into the world: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth” (vv. 18–19). That He set Himself apart for the purpose for which He was sent is both the basis and the condition of our being set apart for that for which we are sent (Jn 10:36). His sanctification is the pattern of and the power for ours. The sending and the sanctifying are inseparable. On this account they are called saints, or “sanctified ones.” Whereas previously their behavior bore witness to their standing in the world in separation from God, now their behavior bears witness to their standing before God in separation from the world.

When Jesus sanctified His disciples for mission, He expected this level of

sanctification from them, one that required set-apart-ness for God, the practical experience of this state, and ultimate separation from sin. Once disciples are empowered by the Holy Spirit and reach this level of sanctification as they go, they will have more courage and ability to live by grace and forgiveness and seek to put faithfulness into practice.

Finally, this missiology takes into account the history and experience of the church universal. Jesus started making and training His disciples as they went to reach the world. Making disciples started with Jesus, and, as a result, the disciples came before the church. The church appeared after Jesus ascended to heaven and when the disciples, moved by the Holy Spirit, began to announce the Gospel. The disciples reproduced what Jesus began; they engaged in the communities and spread the Gospel to many regions, beginning in Jerusalem, next to Judea, then to Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. The spreading of the Gospel happened as it was described in the Bible, and we experience it today, as the Gospel was spread to our homelands, including Brazil, Guatemala, and the United States of America.

This brings me to an important conclusion: It is impossible to have strong and healthy churches without healthy disciples. As Jesus did in the beginning, we have to equip Christians, the ones with whom we are working, and train them. Only after we do that can we have a healthy church, one which depends on God, seeks the lost, train leaders, and has a relevant message to its community. It is a church that is vibrant, fervent, creative, and goes into the world to make a difference, no matter what.

## **Putting Missiology into Practice**

Currently, many churches are trying to return the church to what it was like in its genesis. Such a church is described in the Book of Acts with these words:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

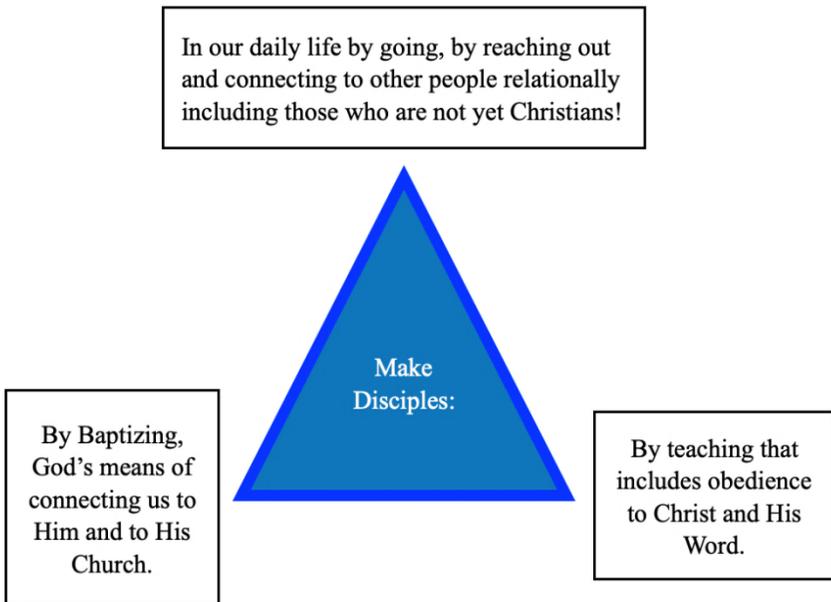
In order to have a healthy church that resembles the one described in Acts 2, Pastor Steve Hughey<sup>5</sup> and I prepared a method, while working together, that I believe is relevant, meaningful, and appropriate to any culture, while still very simple. This method is biblical, Christ-centered, and mission-focused, which allows

us to use it in any situation.

It starts with the discipleship challenge Jesus Himself gave to His disciples and to us. He said, “As you go make disciples of all peoples by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to observe everything which I have told you” (Mt 28:19—translation by Hans Kasdorf). This challenge was given to the church as a whole and also to each individual Christian in every generation and nation.

The first aspect of this method is what we called the “Discipleship Challenge and Opportunity,” based on Christ’s Great Commission in Matthew 28:19. Jesus Himself gave the discipleship challenge to His disciples, to the whole church, and to each individual Christian in every generation.

The Discipleship Challenge and Opportunity is summarized as follows (see Figure 1):

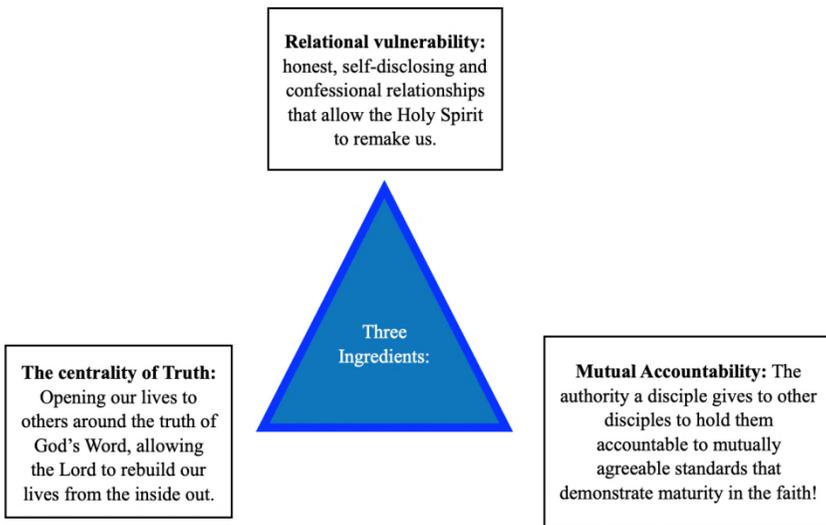


**Figure 1. Discipleship Challenge and Opportunity.** Chart from Steve Hughey. Central American Lutheran Mission Society Board Meeting. Spring, Texas. October 4–7, 2012.

This first part elaborates Christ's own command. One of the actions is *going*, which implies reaching out and connecting with others, including non-Christians. Another action is *baptizing*, which means connecting believers and nonbelievers to God's means of grace. The third action is *teaching*, which means growing in the Word of God in order to grow in their faith and consequently obey what He has taught us to do.

Three ingredients are necessary to produce mature disciples: relational vulnerability, centrality of truth, and mutual accountability.

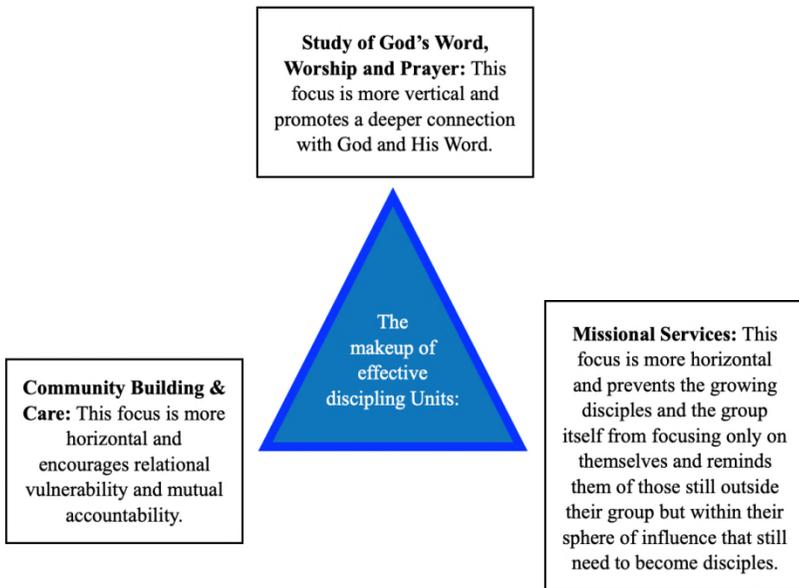
The second part of this method addresses the type of disciples we should make as we go. Three ingredients are necessary to produce mature disciples: relational vulnerability, centrality of truth, and mutual accountability. It is summarized in the graphic below (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Three Ingredients Necessary to Produce Mature Disciples.** Chart from Steve Hughey. Central American Lutheran Mission Society Board Meeting. Spring, Texas. October 4–7, 2012.

We see ourselves multiplying mature disciples by multiplying small discipling units, which brings us to the third aspect of this method. It is impossible to have strong and healthy churches without a growing number of mature disciples. This

result happens effectively in small groups that encourage the three previously noted ingredients (relational vulnerability, the centrality of the truth from God's Word, and mutual accountability) combined with missional service<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 3).

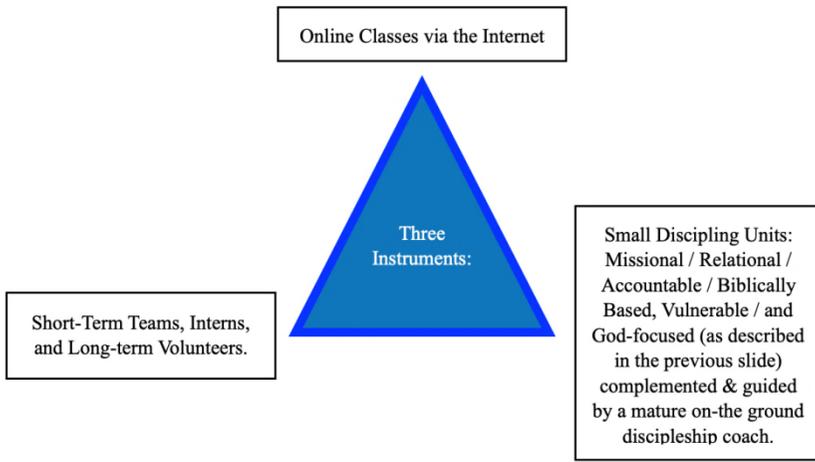


**Figure 3. Multiplying Mature Disciples by Multiplying Small Discipling Units.**

Chart from Steve Hughey. Central American Lutheran Mission Society Board Meeting. Spring, Texas. October 4–7, 2012.

In these small units, we study God's Word, worship, pray, build community, learn to care for one another and for the rest of the creation, and practice missional service that includes proclamation and demonstration of the Good News and Good Works respectively.

The last part of the discipleship method involves three instruments that help equip mature disciples as they go into the world (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4. The Instruments that Help Equip Mature Disciples.** Chart from Steve Hughey. Central American Lutheran Mission Society Board Meeting. Spring, Texas. October 4–7, 2012.

Online equipping and short-term teams, interns, and long-term volunteers are perfect for non-residential missionaries. Online equipping is best for content delivery; it addresses the need to grow intellectually as a disciple and to understand biblical facts and principles of faith and doctrine. Short-term teams, interns, and long-term volunteers can both deliver needed information and model discipleship behavior, values, and attitudes as they go on a mission trip. However, they should never replace the locals' work; rather, they should complement it as they go to teach and demonstrate how to proclaim the Good News and to do Good Works. Last but not least, the discipleship units and mature discipleship coaches can provide needed feedback, clarify and correct misunderstandings, answer questions, encourage accountability, and keep the disciples moving forward toward maturity while they are learning and sharing with one another and practicing how to engage their surrounding communities, serve them faithfully in their needs, and proclaim the Good News.<sup>7</sup>

My experience has shown that these principles and methods work very well together. Pastor Steve Hughey and I had fun experiencing them and making disciples as we went. During Steve's ten years as the Executive Director of Central American Lutheran Mission Society, discipleship was the main focus of the organization and the use of strategic short-term teams was one way that disciples were made. At that point, no other organization in the Missouri Synod used this approach. At *Developing Our World*, we employ similar principles and methods. However, the

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main focus will be in holistic community development as we make disciple. Jesus never separated the Good News from Good Works in His messages, teachings, and training. In addition, He never chose to work only with Christians. Jesus identified, invited, selected, and sent an unlikely and underqualified group of ordinary men to seek the lost as they went, proclaiming the Good News and demonstrating the Good Works. That is why individuals, groups, churches, schools, universities, and organizations that work with Developing Our World will be encouraged both to learn how Good News and Good Works go together in mission and to value the importance of practical training, in addition to gaining knowledge and understanding. In order to make this work, individuals and groups will need to think outside the box.

At Developing Our World, we employ similar principles and methods. However, the main focus will be in holistic community development as we make disciple.

I believe that a holistic community development approach to mission is both biblical and Christ-centered. Moreover, it is very timely for the era in which the church is living right now. That is why Developing Our World is committed to training Christians who are thirsty and hungry to serve in the United States and overseas.

I give thanks to God for having reached this level and understanding of discipleship. I am grateful for being able to achieve this personal mission strategy and practice of Christian outreach. I have no doubt that God guided me to discover it and put it into practice. My fifteen years of experience working in the mission have been shaping me as I go. I have also learned from my experience how combining Good News and Good Works matters, and that it is possible to be accomplished, so that we may have healthy churches. There is a lot more to do, and I will continue to work as I go.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All the Bible quotations are from English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> See Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 98–110.

<sup>3</sup> The book *When Helping Hurts* has to do with theme. See chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>4</sup> Based on Miguel Torneire's *Missiological Research Paper* (St. Paul: Concordia University, 2012) in its entirety.

<sup>5</sup> Pastor Steve Hughey and I wrote a discipleship method while Dr. Hughey was still the Executive Director of Central American Lutheran Mission Society (CALMS).

<sup>6</sup> Based on Steve Hughey, Miguel Torneire, Dawn Timm, David Reed, Grace Hughey, *Board Meeting Report* (Spring, Texas: October 4–7, 2012), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Hughey et al., *Board Meeting Report*, 25.

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# Lutheran World Relief: Seventy-Five Years of Faithfulness in Mission

Jon Diefenthaler

**Abstract:** Founded in 1945, out of a desire to send emergency aid to war-torn Europe, Lutheran World Relief is now engaged in “relief” and “development” projects designed to meet the physical needs of victims of natural disasters as well as families facing abject poverty on a daily basis in forty-two countries around the world. This article argues that an examination of the nearly seventy-five-year history of this independent, pan-Lutheran organization provides another example of the faithfulness in mission that Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30 highlights for us. At the same time, the author asserts that LWR has remained true to the Lutheran tradition of human care, and that it is currently modeling several pathways that may help lead to the revitalization of Lutheran churches in post-churched America.

The year 2020 will mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of Lutheran World Relief (LWR). Lutherans throughout North America are already being asked to observe this important milestone by giving thanks for all that God has accomplished through the work of this organization and to renew their commitment to serving their international neighbors who face poverty, suffering, and injustices on a daily basis. Delegates to the 2019 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) Convention in Tampa will be given an opportunity to consider encouraging their congregations to set aside an annual Sunday to bring the work of LWR to the attention of their members and to avail themselves of the tools and resources that it will freely provide to educate, inspire, and motivate them to support this same organization with their prayers, hands, and financial gifts.<sup>1</sup>

Several members of the Lutheran family of denominations in North America founded LWR in the immediate aftermath of World War II in Europe. A visit to a defeated Germany, devastated by heavy Allied bombing, on the part of Ralph Long, who at the time was serving as the executive director of the National Lutheran



*Rev. Dr. Jon Diefenthaler is a president emeritus of the LCMS Southeastern District. He is currently serving as a church-relations advisor for Lutheran World Relief and as an adjunct professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He received his PhD in American Religious History from the University of Iowa, and he lives in Columbia, Maryland. [jtdiefen@aol.com](mailto:jtdiefen@aol.com)*

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Council (NLC), Augustana Synod President P. O. Bersell, and Lawrence Meyer of the LCMS, followed by another visit that included LCMS President John W. Behnken, provided the impetus. The spectacle of thousands of people, some of whom had Lutheran relatives back in the United States, who were displaced, homeless, and on the brink of starvation, deeply moved them. Without delay, therefore, LWR was incorporated in October of 1945 as an independent nonprofit organization for the purpose of giving Lutherans in America a way to respond to this life-or-death humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Since its inception in 1945, LWR has expanded its efforts to provide particularly Lutherans with opportunities to put their faith into action. The current list includes forty-two countries, located in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and more recently the war-torn Middle East. Emergency aid in the wake of earthquakes, hurricanes, and famines, as well as human disasters, continues to be dispatched in the form of hand-crafted quilts, all fashioned in Lutheran churches and homes across the country, along with personal care and school kits assembled most often by various other groups within their congregations, plus food and clean water supplies. Such “relief” is often augmented with cash-for-work programs, shelter repair kits, and tools for teaching aid recipients how to be better prepared in the event of future disasters. In addition, the mission of LWR has become one of helping end poverty in our world. “Development” projects are purposely designed to enable regional partners to come alongside small, local famers to equip them with better agricultural techniques, to organize them into cooperatives, to help them with short-term loans, and to assist them with the marketing of what they grow. The objective is “lasting results” that will put them on the way to self-sufficiency and give their families and communities the hope of a better future.

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For the past three-quarters of a century, LWR has clearly demonstrated faithfulness in mission. It has been true not only to the mission of God in Christ in our world, but to the Lutheran heritage of human care. Such faithfulness also has been reflected in its administration of the resources that Lutherans and other agencies have supplied, and, like the faithful servants in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:14–30, LWR has prudently invested these in ways that have served to transform the lives of millions of people in need around the world. At the same time, or so I will contend in this article, there are features of the LWR’s faithfulness in mission that can serve to strengthen Lutherans and their congregations in bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as they reach out to their neighbors in the post-churched environment of twenty-first century North America.

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## **Faithfulness in Christ's Mission to the World**

LWR has been faithful throughout the course of its history in furthering the mission of God in Christ. All of the New Testament Gospel writers make numerous references to the fact that Jesus sought to address the physical as well as the spiritual needs of the people whom He encountered during His days on earth. In Luke 6:17–19, for example, the author tells us of the great crowd of people from all over Palestine and beyond who came “to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.”<sup>3</sup> They “all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.” It is only then that St. Luke goes on to set forth his version of Jesus’ Beatitudes. For evidence of Christ’s concern for hungry people, moreover, one has only to read Luke 9:10–17, where Jesus saw to it that five thousand of them were fed.

The disciples whom Jesus called to be His apostles clearly sought to carry on these same aspects of His mission to the world. Already in Acts 3:6, St. Luke informs us that it was Peter, as he was being accompanied by John, who said to the crippled beggar at the temple gate, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” In Acts 5:12–16 we read of the people who “brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.” And in Acts 6:1–6, we learn of the “seven” who were chosen to look after the well-being of widows in “the daily distribution of food” among the growing number of Jesus’ followers.

Throughout the course of its history, LWR has sought to create significant ways for Lutherans in particular to implement this same apostolic mandate. The emphasis it has consistently placed on meeting the physical needs of people without any religious, ethnic or political conditions, however, has been the subject of conversation, and even debate, within, as well as outside of, the organization. “How does LWR bear witness to the Gospel that is at the center of the Christian confession of faith in God?” is a question that has been asked many times over the years. A “Critical Review” of its operations in the early 1960s stated that LWR “recognizes that the purpose of its existence is to provide explicit Christian witness through service related to specific needs and that normally the witness will be expressed in

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the lives of the people who carry out the program.” It also asserted that LWR seeks to give “special consideration” to projects where there is “a strong Lutheran presence” and to ones that serve to extend and to strengthen “the life and witness of the church.” Veteran LWR board member, Paul Empie, added that while relief “should not be an instrument of evangelism,” the “style of service and Christian personalities of staff bear witness to Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

Since then, LWR leaders have continued to insist, as chief executive Kathryn Wolford did in 1988, that “the healing, reconciling and transforming ministry of Jesus is an act of discipleship” and that it is “our individual responsibility as Christians and our corporate responsibility as the Church to serve people in need throughout the world.”<sup>5</sup> Others have argued that by giving witness to the Christian faith in nonverbal ways, LWR has avoided the impression of using food and other forms of material assistance in order to seduce people into becoming “rice Christians.” And still others have stated that when LWR is permitted to work in countries where the church is excluded, it has a God-given opportunity to correct negative images of Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, LWR has purposely sought concrete ways to work with churches abroad and at home in their efforts to reach overseas populations through Gospel proclamation. It recognizes that the seeds sown by evangelists and missionaries are more likely to take root in places where the soil has been prepared for them through the meeting of people’s physical needs. This, in fact, is one of the reasons the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) and LWR have continued to maintain their strong partnership. While ELCT’s diocesan network of congregations and preaching stations function as the delivery system for the material resources that LWR supplies for the prevention and treatment of malaria, the life-saving difference this effort to alleviate human suffering makes in people’s daily lives has helped to fuel the ELCT’s rapid membership growth.<sup>7</sup>

LWR has purposely sought concrete ways to work with churches abroad and at home in their efforts to reach overseas populations through Gospel proclamation.

“Isaiah 58:10—Project Kenya” is the name of a current effort supported by five of the largest congregations in the LCMS. Here LWR, at the request of the senior pastors of these same churches, has partnered with Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM) in order to address the spiritual as well as the physical needs of people in one of the poorest regions of East Africa. LWR has focused its expertise on helping the impoverished farmers and their families become more self-sufficient. In this regard, programmatic elements have included the planting of varieties of crops that better withstand drought and heat, the introduction of poultry as an additional source of

income, the establishment of village savings and loans, and business-plan training for farmer organizations. In turn, LHM has aimed at building the capacity of Lutheran congregations in this same region through the use of training programs for evangelists. As a result of this partnership, the lives of some twenty-five thousand people have been transformed.<sup>8</sup>

## **Faithful to the Lutheran Tradition of Human Care**

In seeking to fulfill its mission, LWR has been faithful to the robust Lutheran tradition of human care. As a figure in history, Martin Luther was a “game changer,” one who turned the commonly held understanding in his day of what it means to be Christian upside down. While the accent of medieval Christianity was on how we, with the aid of clergy-directed church rituals and practices, must come to God, Luther emphasized how God comes to us through Word and sacraments. Justification by grace through God-created and God-sustained faith in His Son Jesus Christ’s accomplishments, rather than one’s own, became the article on which the church stands or falls. As Reformation scholar Robert Kolb has pointed out, one of the key ways Luther framed his revolutionary thinking was with his two-kingdoms distinction, one that emphasizes how God is the ultimate ruler in both the “temporal” and the “spiritual” realms of life in this world.<sup>9</sup>

Luther’s “temporal” realm focuses our attention not only on God as the Creator of the world, but on His ongoing determination to preserve, to protect, and to further the wellbeing of everyone and everything in it. This is indeed the realm in which God works through governments and rulers in authority. But God has also given these same “temporal” responsibilities to every member of the human family. In Genesis 1:28, God commands us to employ beneficent ways to “rule over” not only the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, but over “every living creature that moves on the ground.” In Genesis 2:15, moreover, we have the example God putting those whom He has created in His own image into the Garden of Eden to “work it and take care of it.”

Luther’s “spiritual” realm, on the other hand, is grounded in the work of redemption performed by Jesus Christ. The chief center of its activity is the church, where the Gospel is proclaimed and delivered to people through the sacraments as well as in the word of God. The work within this realm is carried out by pastors and other church workers. But their objective is always to empower the laity whom they serve to give witness to the Gospel in all of their callings in life, through both the faith they place in God above all else and by means of their acts of love toward their neighbors in the world around them. For all of Jesus’ followers, it is a matter of living out the “great commandment,” to which He still directs our attention (Mt 22:37–39). While their purposes clearly differ, the two realms, as Luther saw it, constantly intersect with each other in the daily lives of every follower of Jesus

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Christ. As human beings, we are indeed called in the “temporal” realm to partner with God the Creator in furthering the preservation and care of everything in the world that He first brought into being. But at the same time, it is in the “spiritual” realm that we partner with God in the redemptive work of His Son, whose Spirit sustains us so that we might be empowered on the basis of love for our neighbors to actually carry out our God-given “temporal” responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Care for the poor is one of these same “temporal” responsibilities that Luther modeled for us in his *Ordinance of a Common Chest*. In this treatise, he upended the medieval view of poverty. The church had tried for centuries to make it a virtue. The vow of poverty turned monks and mendicants into beggars, whom he and others encountered in public places almost everywhere. In addition to this, “handouts” given to the poor had become just another way for the more pious rank-and-file to merit their salvation. In contrast to this ecclesiastical perversion, Luther’s desire was to alleviate, if not to end, poverty. For this reason, he helped see to it that a “common chest” was set up in Wittenberg, as well as in the nearby town of Leisnig, and seeded with money from the income of monasteries and other church properties that the Reformation movement had now put at the disposal of local and regional governments in various parts of Germany. The “chest” made gifts and loans available to all the needy in the land. Ongoing funding for this experiment in

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“social welfare” came from the alms and coin boxes in churches and a quarterly tax that the government levied on its citizens. Administration of the “chest” was assumed by ten trustees, who represented all classes in the community, rural peasantry as well as the nobility, among whom keys to four separate locks to the “chest” were distributed. The motive for this “common chest” that Luther articulated in his treatise was that “all internal and external possessions of Christian believers are to serve and contribute to the honor of God and the love of the fellow Christian neighbor.”<sup>11</sup>

Helping the poor and other forms of human care remained an integral part of the Lutheran tradition that followed Luther’s Reformation. The Pietist movement that

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swept through its European churches in the eighteenth century tended to accentuate this. At the University of Halle, for example, August Herman Francke's compassion for the needy as well as the lost led him to establish a school for poor children, an orphanage, a home for widows, and a pharmacy and hospital for the sick. Halle soon became the center of Lutheranism that helped facilitate the sending of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg to America, where this Lutheran "patriarch" faithfully ministered to families scattered throughout the colonial landscape. What Muhlenberg, as well as other Lutheran missionaries, provided for those who were in need of healing was not only prayer, but medicines from the case with which Halle had furnished for them.<sup>12</sup> Among Lutherans in America during the nineteenth century, it was William A. Passavant in particular who, much like the champions on the German home front of the "inner missionary" human-care movement, stood out because of his dedication to founding and promoting of Lutheran orphanages and hospitals and, in conjunction with them, establishing programs for the training of female deaconesses capable of attending to the physical as well as the spiritual needs of patients.<sup>13</sup>

In Germany at the time, Wilhelm Loehe's heart for mission was similarly "holistic." It prompted him not only to establish a missionary training center, but to found first a deaconess house, then a rescue home for the poor, and then hospitals for women as well as men. Loehe's "Institute" in the Bavarian village of Neuendettelsau also appears to have performed a role similar to that of Halle for some of the earliest Missouri Synod Lutherans, one that served to encourage the missionaries he sent to the American frontier to set up ministries for persons with disabilities and special needs. Interestingly, Pastor G. Speckhard, a great grandfather of the current LWR President and CEO Daniel Speckhard, was a pioneering leader during the 1870s in work begun on behalf of the LCMS among deaf persons in Detroit and throughout the state of Michigan.<sup>14</sup>

On his visit to war-torn Germany in 1945, LCMS President John W. Behnken found himself haunted at the sight of refugees, some shuffling along the roads while pushing carts or carrying bundles of all their remaining possessions, others in long queues waiting for a bowl of potato soup, and still others huddled closely together in the railroad station corners in order to keep one another warm. "Obviously something had to be done, and very quickly," he wrote in his memoir, "for the relief of these homeless, wandering, suffering thousands."<sup>15</sup> Behnken's Missouri Synod did not officially affiliate itself with LWR until 1955, choosing instead, as it had in the past, to employ its own "Emergency Planning Council." The unofficial support LCMS congregations provided for LWR's "relief" effort, however, was significant.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Behnken, ever-mindful of Missouri's "fellowship" concerns, had already drawn a distinction in 1941, on the eve of America's entry into World War II, between the "physical" and the "spiritual" side of joint Lutheran ministries.<sup>17</sup> By the 1960s, therefore, the LCMS was ready to affirm his rubric of "cooperation in

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externals” (strictly humanitarian ministries). The LCMS also saw fit in convention in 1965 to adopt a ground-breaking series of “Mission Affirmations.” Among these was the assertion that “The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Man,” which went so far as to state that “God’s mission to the world in Christ brings human life to its fullness” and that the “whole man, not only the soul, is meant to have eternal life here now in time and to have the full realization of it when he enjoys full fellowship with God beyond the limitations of space and time.”<sup>18</sup>

In seeking to be faithful to this long-standing tradition of human care, LWR has sought to expand the scope of Lutheran efforts to respond to physical human needs out into the world beyond our North American borders. Like Martin Luther, this organization recognizes that ending poverty and alleviating human suffering are “temporal” responsibilities to which we as human beings, created in God’s own image, are called to carry out in the world their Creator is determined to preserve. At the same time, LWR continues to welcome ways to partner with churches committed to the “spiritual” task of Gospel outreach in ways that will strengthen the efforts of both parties. For example, LWR is currently providing a “mercy” component that complements the “witness” efforts of the LCMS and some of its partner churches in Latin America. Projects involve everything from much-needed services for intellectually and developmentally delayed young adults in the Dominican Republic, to after-school programs that support inner-city children in Chile and Peru, to building community centers in rural regions of Uruguay and Paraguay.<sup>19</sup> Above all, LWR has been faithful in creating opportunities for Lutherans in America to exercise the love of neighbor that remains a chief outcome of their Word and Sacrament ministries, and thereby to put their faith in Jesus Christ into action in ways that promise to bring the hope of new life to millions of people around the world.

### **Faithful Stewards of God’s Gifts**

“Well done, good a faithful servant!” was the commendation in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25 that the master heaped upon each of the two servants who had wisely invested what he had entrusted to them. “You have been faithful with a few things,” or so he told them; “I will put you in charge of many things” (Mt 25:19–23). Throughout the past seventy-five years, LWR has likewise attempted to make the best possible use of the support it has received from every funding source in order to enlarge the scope of its God-entrusted mission to impoverished populations and to disaster victims on the world scene. Already in 1945, when the government in Washington was resisting the idea of providing “relief” for recent mortal enemies, President Franklin Clark Fry of the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) went to the White House and helped persuade President Truman to intervene on behalf of LWR. By March of 1946, therefore, sorely needed “relief” began to flow through LWR from America into Germany. During the Cold War of the 1950s,

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moreover, when objections were raised to aiding people whose governments might not be sympathetic to America's foreign policy or to the beliefs of Christians, Edwin Nerger, an LWR board member and venerable LCMS pastor of historic St. Paul's congregation in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, called attention to the New Testament words of Jesus, "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?" (Lk 6:33) and to the apostle Paul's imperative, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink" (Rom 12:20). As a result, LWR was able to help provide the breakfast and lunch that nearly two million public-school students in Yugoslavia might not otherwise have received.<sup>20</sup> This same policy of aiding people in need without discrimination remains one that LWR for the sake of its God-given mission has consistently sought to follow.

This same policy of aiding people in need without discrimination remains one that LWR for the sake of its God-given mission has consistently sought to follow.

In order to multiply its impact as a comparatively small organization with limited resources, LWR has taken a number of other notable steps over the years. For one thing, as "relief" work in Europe was being supplanted by equally urgent opportunities on other continents, LWR's leadership at the outset of the 1960s decided that, in the interest of becoming as effective as possible, it would be best to concentrate the organization's resources on international emergencies and to let Lutheran and other church bodies and agencies, with few exceptions, deal with domestic disasters. In addition, these same leaders realized that the "relief" LWR was providing was only temporary and that more than a "hand-out" would be necessary if people were to get to the point of standing "on their own two feet." As a result, the new decade brought a shifting of more of LWR's resources to "development" work. Newer projects began to help furnish impoverished farmers with irrigation wells and water-retention dams, improved farm-to-market roads, schools and community centers, nutrition programs, and health-care services. This same emphasis on giving families in some of the poorest regions of the world a "hand-up" so that they, along with their communities, might have the hope of achieving self-sufficiency is what sets LWR apart from many other human-care organizations; and this emphasis continues to be a major stimulus for interest and support on the part of U.S. Lutherans. Furthermore, the 1960s brought a clearer recognition that partnerships forged with other non-government organizations were essential to the fulfillment of any of the life-changing projects that LWR might envision. Hence, the role that LWR still tends to assume in its overseas projects is "non-operational." Rather than actually carrying out these projects, staff members cooperate with local partners to see to it that the work is effectively accomplished.<sup>21</sup>

Commitment to the principle of “accompaniment” in the decades following the 1960s is another feature of its “relief” and “development” work that underscores LWR’s faithfulness in mission. “Accompaniment” implies walking and working together on a project, and it means that LWR does not see itself as performing the paternalistic role of offering assistance for what it deems to be the good of the people in need. On the contrary, it seeks to come alongside such people, enlisting their ideas and their participation in every phase of a project. Obvious benefits of this kind of investment include ownership of the project on the part of the people who are served by it, the identification and development of leaders who are likely to make the project a more enduring success, and the empowering of their communities to leverage their influence in dealing the political and social systems of their region or nation.<sup>22</sup>

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Not to be overlooked is the “stewardship” that LWR has faithfully exercised in other aspects of its work. As this organization entered the 1980s, it began to establish regional offices in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This change in LWR’s operations, as some stakeholders feared, did not dilute the impact of its projects. On the contrary, it proved to be an additional source of efficiency and effectiveness. Since the regional offices were staffed with indigenous employees, LWR now had persons on the ground who spoke the local language, who had a better understanding of the culture and an ability to identify local partners with whom relationships might be established, and who, especially in times of disaster, tended to know where and how the “relief” they might offer to its victims could best be utilized. In addition, since the 1990s, “accountability” and “evaluation” have become paramount in all aspects of LWR’s operations. The home office in Baltimore and regional staff have, in fact, carefully monitored the work of project partners, and those who fall short of expectations are quickly replaced. For this same reason, LWR has scrupulously sought out local organizations and individuals who see to it that material resources, such as quilts and kits, get to their intended recipients. In general, management and fund-raising expenses also have been purposely kept to a minimum. “Evaluation” of all LWR projects, moreover, has become an ongoing process in which everyone who is in any way responsible for them participates.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the “stewardship” that Jesus lauds in His Matthew 25 parable is indeed what LWR has exercised with the gifts its

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supporters supply, and it remains one of the reasons this organization still possesses such a high degree of respect and trust among Lutherans and others, especially those who desire to be faithful in mission to their neighbors on a global scale.<sup>24</sup>

## **Twenty-First Century Faithfulness in Mission**

As the third decade of the twenty-first century is about to begin, Lutherans, along with other Christians, in North America have become more completely aware of the post-churched culture in which they are now living. All of their denominations are experiencing steep declines in total membership, and perennial revenue shortfalls suggest that the appetite for institutional expressions of the church is on the wane. Wearisome, as well as worrisome, are political divisions and reoccurring skirmishes within their ranks. For the most part, congregations and their leaders are no longer as influential in the community as they once were. Instead of a Sunday-morning monopoly, they must now compete for people's time with a host of other activities. In many cases, therefore, regular attendance at worship is ebbing, and once-robust Sunday School classes are only sparsely populated with children. Older and largely Anglo members drawn from "builder" remnants and early "boomer" generational segments of society are living longer, and they are often still willing and able to support church budgets and clergy salaries. But often noticeably absent on Sunday morning, especially in smaller congregations, are persons who are under fifty years of age and young couples with children. Hence, there is a growing sense that a congregation's days may be numbered.

In this same post-churched environment, LWR's faithfulness in mission offers a measure of hope for the Lutheran congregations of North America. For one thing, LWR in 2011, in the interest of steering clear of external and internal denominational conflicts, reaffirmed its independence as a nonprofit organization that is wholly committed to meeting the human needs of people in the greater world that lies beyond any institutional walls that church bodies might put up. Support for the work of LWR since then has continued to grow. In addition, while it has not as of yet been explored in any place, LWR's emphasis on "development" work for lifting families and communities out of poverty overseas might well be ventured in domestic urban neighborhoods that Lutherans

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have tended to abandon for the past half century. Projects designed to provide job training, housing assistance, and health services might become a first step toward restoring the credibility of congregations in this largely neglected setting. Finally, LWR is clearly doing the kind of ministry that so many members of today's younger generations, as well as numerous de-churched individuals, have found to be missing in churches. Surveys and studies have constantly revealed that, for them, most congregations seem to have no real interest in making a difference for the good of the world beyond themselves and that this is one of the reasons they do not wish to set foot in any church sanctuary.<sup>25</sup> In their view, "deeds" are clearly more of a motivation than lofty "words," and it is only when they see real evidence of such that they may be ready to listen to the church's message. LWR, on the other hand, is a Lutheran organization that is actively transforming the lives of millions of people in today's world; as such, it is setting an example not only to the contrary, but for struggling congregations in particular to emulate in the post-churched environment of the twenty-first century.

The year 2020 will indeed warrant a seventy-fifth anniversary celebration for Lutheran World Relief. Since the close of World War II, this organization has been faithful in carrying out the mission of Christ in the world and to the Lutheran tradition of human care. It has wisely invested and multiplied the God-given gifts with which it has been supplied. As a result, LWR is currently serving directly or indirectly 2,896,387 people with 133 different "relief" and "development" projects in 42 different countries.<sup>26</sup> In the process, it is outlining for North American Lutheran churches a more hopeful pathway toward revitalization.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See "Overtures," 2019 LCMS Convention Workbook.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Bachman, *Together in Hope: 50 Years of Lutheran World Relief* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1995), 14–20.

<sup>3</sup> All Scripture quotations referenced are from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>4</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 64–66.

<sup>5</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 178–180.

<sup>6</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 178–180.

<sup>7</sup> Based on author's LWR Board Monitoring Trip to Tanzania in January 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Internal LWR Report, January 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Kolb, “Luther’s Hermeneutics of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L’ubomir Batka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 168–169.

<sup>10</sup> See Joel Biermann, *Wholly Citizens: God’s Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 73–106.

<sup>11</sup> *Luther’s Works* 45, 169–194.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, “The Church’s Infancy,” in *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975), 71–75.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 196–197.

<sup>14</sup> Walter A. Baepler, *A Century of Grace* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 183–184.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Behnken, *This I Recall* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 94–95.

<sup>16</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 18–20.

<sup>17</sup> E. Clifford Nelson, “1930—The New Shape of Lutheranism,” in Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, 478.

<sup>18</sup> August R. Suelflow, ed., *Heritage in Motion: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1962–1995* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998), 323–324.

<sup>19</sup> Email exchange with LWR Staff Member Martha Piedrasanta, March 25, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 24–25.

<sup>21</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 52, 71–71, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 88–98, 137–139.

<sup>23</sup> Bachman, *Together in Hope*, 142–143, 152–153.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *Consumer Reports* magazine, recent ratings of nonprofit relief and development organizations. LWR is always in the top tier.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). Also David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> See “LWR By The Numbers,” [www.lwr.org](http://www.lwr.org) under Technical Resources.

# Lutheran Braille Workers: Seventy-Five Years of Faithful Service to the Blind

Patti Ross

**Abstract:** This piece is based on the address the author gave at the Lutheran Braille Workers's seventy-fifth anniversary celebration on October 20, 2018 in Yucaipa, California. Lutheran Braille Workers is the only Lutheran organization in the US that supplies Bibles and other Lutheran literature free of charge to people around the world who are blind or visually impaired. The work began seventy-five years ago when a young Lutheran woman, Helene Loeber, became involved in transcribing Braille Bibles for use in post-war Germany. She soon discovered that the needs were huge in the US as well as Germany, but she also recognized that God had provided an enormous resource in the Lutheran women who were willing to learn to transcribe and produce Braille literature. The article deals with the challenges faced and the solutions found over the decades as LBW became known worldwide for its service to people who are blind and visually impaired.

Six dots.

Six dots that make up a Braille cell

Let's imagine an illustration of the six dots and the Braille cell in which they reside. Let's say this cell represents the Lutheran Braille Workers organization, and the six dots represent what has made up the Lutheran Braille Workers over the past seventy-five years.

Our **first** dot will represent the inspiration for all that we do in Lutheran Braille Workers (LBW). The saving grace and loving mercy that God has for the blind and visually impaired and His desire that they know of that love and His salvation motivates everything. God wants and does what is best for us. In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, God says, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord,



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*Patti Ross, the current president of the LWML and a former board member of Lutheran Braille Workers, presented this brief history of the organization and its important work among people who are blind and visually impaired at LBW's seventy-fifth anniversary celebration in Yucaipa, California, October 20, 2018. The oral style of that presentation has been retained. Patti Ross can be contacted at [president@lwml.org](mailto:president@lwml.org).*

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plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer29:11).

The Gospels contain many references to Christ’s mercy and love in the healing encounters He had with the blind. Answering John’s disciples in Matthew 11, He uses this healing of the blind as one of the proofs of who He is. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them” (Mt 11:4–5). Thus, He shows how He has fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah heard in Isaiah, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (35:5). When teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus mentions His care for the blind when He says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind” (Lk 4:18).

We all know the story of the healing of the blind man when Jesus mixed His saliva with dirt, applied it to the man’s eyes, and healed him. Significant it is that He says that the man was not born blind because of any sin done by himself or his family. Blindness was not a punishment for sin (Jn 9:1ff.). On another occasion, on the way up to Jerusalem prior to Palm Sunday, Jesus came upon a blind man who called out to Him, and Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” With this question Jesus indicated His willingness to serve him, and He did just that by healing him (Mk 10:46ff.).

The first dot is the inspiration from Scripture. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, God’s people serve our Lord by reaching out as Jesus did, bringing the Words of Holy Scripture in a form that makes sense to people who are blind to guide them out of spiritual darkness with the Gospel message.

The **second** dot inside our Braille cell leads us to those people, God’s people, who act on this inspiration with vision and purpose.

For our second dot, we must go back to a college student who had been blinded in an industrial accident. Fred Graepp of Fresno, California, was studying for the ministry in 1941 when he lost his eyesight and was unable to continue toward his goal. I wonder how he felt about the Jeremiah 11 verse at that point. He learned Braille at the Fresno Salvation Army School and was teaching Braille by correspondence. Interested in the German language, he found that Bibles in German Braille had been destroyed in Germany before and during WWII, and he set about recruiting volunteers to help him transcribe the German Bible into Braille. How *his* plans had been changed!

Enter one of his student volunteers, Helene Loeber, who at the suggestion of her father, wrote to Mr. Graepp. After years of learning Braille patiently on her Braille

slate and making thousands of dots with her stylus, she also learned to read Braille. She became inspired to recruit others to help her, first turning to friends in the Ladies Aid Society of Trinity Lutheran Church in Whittier, California, who joined her in her work. Later, acting on another inspiration, she decided that it would be a good way to gain support for the work they were doing by attending the Lutheran Laymen's League convention in Hollywood in November 1946. Taking samples of their work, she was introduced to some people of vision, to Dr. Oswald Hoffmann of the Lutheran Hour and to Dr. Walter A. Maier, the Lutheran Hour Speaker. She came away with requests to transcribe the Lutheran Hour Bible correspondence course into Braille. This grew into a huge worldwide outreach. She realized that by adding English Braille transcription to their already heavy German transcription responsibilities, it would be impossible for the current volunteers to manage the additional task. She began looking ahead for ways to mass-produce the lessons. The birth of LBW Work Centers would soon follow.

The dedication to producing Christian Braille continued, and production and volunteer numbers grew. With that came the desire to incorporate as a nonprofit organization. Guiding the way forward through those formative years was the first President, Carl Loeber, Helene's father. He worked to solve development problems and interacted with Synod's boards and committees. Rev. G. H. Smukal, president of the Southern California District LCMS, also provided pastoral advice and guidance in those early years. A motto and a logo were chosen. "Bringing Christ to Those in Darkness" was chosen as the motto and the logo—the light shining down on the globe of the world—was done by Bob Loewe.

A motto and a logo  
were chosen.  
"Bringing Christ  
to Those in Darkness."

LBW's production of Large Print came about through Mrs. Verona Normington in San Francisco as a result of her mother's wanting Lutheran Hour sermons in Large Print. In 1959, LBW merged with this sight-saving, Large Print group. In 1960, the Normingtons' home garage became the first Large Print Work Center. Uppermost in their minds was to furnish the Word of God to that group of people between the seeing and the blind, the "no man's land" of the partially sighted.

LBW has looked ahead through the leadership of many dedicated leaders. Following Helene's resignation as executive director, the Lord provided leadership in the persons of Mr. LeRoy Delafosse, Mr. Lloyd Coppenger, Mrs. Jan Fisher, Rev. Dr. Phil Pledger, and Rev. Dennis Stueve.

Many other people were inspired by God's Word and led by His love to serve in all areas of LBW's work. Many had no idea this would be in their plans, but, as Jeremiah stated, God had plans to prosper them and give them a future. Answering

God's call, they advanced the ministry of LBW and touched more lives for Christ through Braille and sight-saving print.

For the **third** dot we look at the technological advances that have come about over the years. Starting with a slate and stylus used by the first workers, LBW has embraced new technology whenever possible, sometimes even inventing the technology themselves. From stylus we advanced to the Braille writer that resembled a typewriter with six keys.

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Then came one of the first innovations—shellacking the back of the paper pages to make them last longer when used multiple times. Apparently, the Van Nuys Walther Leaguers painted these pages in the church basement! We can imagine what that smelled like!

Embossing metal plates came next, and this enabled a single plate to print multiple copies. In the beginning, this had to be done at the Braille Institute in Los Angeles on its roller press. It involved a lot of travel and heavy loads back and forth. Enter Norman Loeber. He kept tinkering around in his garage, and with a set of wringers from an old Maytag washing machine, he was able to convert them into a Braille roller press. Norman kept working on improvements, consulting with engineers at IBM. When a stereotype machine was added in 1955, Norman was able to engineer changes and equip it with an automatic line spacer and power-driven carriage return.

Next came the Braille encoding keyboard which was an electric keyboard. Again, Norman worked with and got help from his employer, IBM. Large Print was started on an old hand-operated letter press that the Normingtons had found and started using. In 1960, a typewriter with a sight-saving font was purchased. Advances in Braille production continued. Norman designed a system in which punched cards encoded to Braille could be prepared on keypunch machines. Ken Loeber started building roller presses.

IBM, under the direction of Norman Loeber, experimented on and later donated an embossing magnetic card machine. And if you want to know how that works, I think Norman is in the audience tonight. I stopped understanding all of this after the wringer washing machine. One idea I found fascinating was taking the cover of a Braille book and vertically embossing the title so that the blind user can insert a finger between volumes on a shelf and read the name of the book without removing it from the shelf.

So many innovations, large and small, often by “coincidence” (and we know there are no coincidences with God), often in surprisingly timely fashion, have shown the plans God has had to prosper LBW and the people it serves.

At each step in this tech advancement, the Lord provided someone with an idea and further provided people generous enough to give of their time and resources to effect technological advancement. And He still does today.

**Fourth** dot. The Braille workers. After years in LWML, I can say that people in our church love having a “hands-on” part in ministry. They don’t want to watch someone else do something; they want to do it. LBW is truly a hands-on ministry. The Work Centers, or as they will be called, Ministry Centers, number around 110 across the United States, starting in California and extending to New York and Pennsylvania. There are more than three thousand people working in Braille and Large Print centers. Still more are serving as board members, devoted staff members in Yucaipa, and financial supporters. This organization, along with LWML, is currently the largest grass roots volunteer-run organization in our LCMS! In 2015, the estimated aggregate financial value for the LBW volunteer force, at California minimum wage rate, equaled \$5,760,000. Speaking as current head of another largely volunteer-run organization, I say, “Way to go, LBW!” Giving opportunities to your volunteers helps them grow in faith and service! God has faithfully provided a work force for seventy-five years for LBW.

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**Fifth** dot. LBW’s clients. Ninety-five percent of the people who are visually impaired are un-churched. Reaching out to that 95% has led us to have Braille, Large Print, audio in DTB (digital talking book format), as well as an audio Bible study and the ESV version of the Bible put into Braille. Over the seventy-five-year history, LBW, starting with German and English Braille, went on to supply materials to India, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Korea. In Central and South America, sight-saving print was welcomed. While the Iron Curtain was pulled across Europe and Asia, LBW was able to get Braille Gospels into Romania and Russia. In spite of Bible reading restrictions, Muslims requested copies of Braille materials; Jewish people loved the Psalms; Protestants and Catholics were happy to see both the Braille and sight-saving materials for their blind members. The need for books and education materials for the blind was an open door to bringing the Gospel into countries where missionaries were not allowed to work. God has worked through the

blind to take the message of salvation where even the printed or spoken Word was not allowed! Jesus said in John 9:3, speaking of the blind man, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

The **sixth** dot in our LBW Braille cell is what I would call partnerships. Over the past seventy-five years, this ministry and love and concern for the blind has benefited from the many partnerships LBW has entered. Early work was helped along by association with the Braille Institute of Los Angeles. In 1946 at an LLL convention in California, Helene met with Lutheran Hour (LHM) officials, and a partnership was formed that led to the first LHM Bible correspondence course produced in Braille. Other partnership can be

summarized: Norman Loeber’s collaboration with IBM; partnering with Concordia Seminary to produce written materials for theological study; with Orphan Grain Train to deliver Braille texts to Soviet-occupied countries; with the United Bible Societies to distribute materials worldwide; agreements with Concordia Publishing House for the right to produce Braille editions of anything published by CPH; working with the Synod’s Board of Missions and gaining RSO (Recognized Service Organization) status. Willingness to partner with other entities over the years to strengthen ministry to blind and visually impaired people has characterized LBW.

For financial support, LBW partnered with the Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL) and Lutheran Layman’s League for many years. And, as you may have figured out, this also leads me to mention LWML—Lutheran Women’s Missionary League’s work with LBW. If you count the Ladies Aid Society of Trinity Lutheran, Whittier, California, as LWML, then we have the first group of LWML women working at Braille from the very beginning of LBW. If you were to do a survey of the Braille Work Centers (or ministries), I would venture to say that half to two-thirds of the women working there are also active in LWML. My own work center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, has about a 75% rate of LWML participants.

LWML has involved LBW in producing Braille and Large Print materials at our national convention servant events for several of the last conventions, a great way to introduce the work of LBW to the women of our church body. We will again have that opportunity at our national convention in Mobile, Alabama, next June 20, and I invite all of you to come and enjoy. LBW produces many of our LWML resources in Large Print or Braille, such as our *Mustard Seed* devotions and our official publication, the *Lutheran Woman’s Quarterly*. They also produce our convention manuals in Large Print.

Ninety-five percent of the people who are visually impaired are un-churched. . . . Love and concern for the blind has benefited from the many partnerships LBW has entered.

Many of LBW board members and directors have included LWML women. That would include the current Board Chairman, Carol Zemke!

LWML has historically provided many grants to LBW for the work of helping people touch the words of Jesus. This year all forty LWML districts met in convention. As I look over the grants chosen by those districts, I see many for LBW. At our 2017 national convention, we adopted a grant of \$100,000 for the transcription of the ESV version of the Bible into Braille.

We adopted a grant of \$100,000 for the transcription of the ESV version of the Bible into Braille.

Our Braille cell is complete. For seventy-five years God has provided our inspiration from Scripture and from Jesus' life. He has given us leaders with inspiration and energy. He has provided technology and people who understand it. He has provided willing workers. He has given us people to serve and ways to serve them. And He has given us people to partner with to achieve the mission of LBW, which is "to provide the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to individuals who are blind or visually impaired throughout the world." He has done wonders with just six dots.

What God says is eternally true for LBW and for the visually impaired that we serve, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Happy anniversary, LBW. To God be the glory!

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# Common Ground with Muslims

**Farrukh M. Khan & Herbert Hoefler**

**Abstract:** Most Christians are quite unaware of how much we have in common with Muslims. Missionaries among them always begin with the beliefs, Scripture references, and practices that we have in common, for often Muslims also do not realize the commonalities. We become more comfortable to witness among Muslims and they more comfortable to hear our witness when we work from our commonalities. Then we also can make crystal clear our differences

Usually the best way to begin a meaningful relationship with anybody is to find some common ground. Many people have difficulty finding such common ground with Muslims. In fact, there is considerable common ground for LCMS people, often more than for other Christian groups. The information provided below is not for arguing with Muslims on these points. Our goal is that Christians appreciate the many points on which Muslims and LCMS Christians agree and can gain confidence to work and discuss respectfully together. For example, the People of the Book Lutheran

The best way to begin a meaningful relationship with anybody is to find some common ground.



*Rev. Farrukh M. Khan has served as the Associate Executive Director of People of the Book Lutheran Outreach (POBLO) since 1994. [farrukh@poblo.org](mailto:farrukh@poblo.org)*



*Rev. Dr. Herbert Hoefler served as an LCMS missionary to India for fifteen years and later as Area Director for fourteen years and as LCMS Board for Missions' director for work among Muslims. He has served on the POBLO Board of Directors for twelve years. In 2012 he retired as a Professor of Theology from Concordia University-Portland. [HHoefler@cu-portland.edu](mailto:HHoefler@cu-portland.edu)*

Outreach (POBLO) missionaries know and assume all the points below. Thereby, they are able to quickly establish a foundation for mutual trust and understanding in their witnessing.

Note: “We” = Muslims and LCMS Christians, “Q” = Quran, “Hadith” = collection of authoritative traditions containing actions and sayings of Muhammad

### **On Social Issues**

- We both oppose abortion. (Q 5:22, 17:33, Hadith—Abu Dawood 4555, Bukhari vol. 4, Book 55:509)
- We both do not have female clergy. (Hadith—Muslim 881)
- We both do not accept the homosexual lifestyle. (Q 4:11, 7:80–84, 27:54)
- We both oppose same-sex marriage. (Q 7:80)
- We both oppose sexual relationships outside of marriage. (Q 17:32, 4:15–16)
- We both oppose trans-sexual changes.
- We both approve of married clergy.
- We both oppose pornography. (Q 16:90, 7:33)

### **On Scriptural Issues**

- We both believe and honor a divinely inspired scripture as the basis for all faith and life. (Q 3:3, 2:2)
- We both recognize a six-day creation. (Q 7:54)
- We both acknowledge the Ten Commandments. (Q 47:19, 43:1–2, 2:224, 17:23, 5:38–39, 24:7, 2:283, 5:32, 17:32, 4:36, 62:9)
- We both recognized the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels as God-given (Q 4:163, 5:46–47a), though Muslims consider the Bible to have been corrupted. (Q 2:75, 79)
- We both recognize that God sent spokesmen for Himself, prophets (Q 28:45), in the Quran such as Noah (Q 71:1–28), Abraham (Q 2:124), Moses (Q 19:51–53), David (Q 27:15), John the Baptist (Q 3:39) but does so no more. (Q 33:40)
- We both recognize the scriptural practice of fasting (Q 2:183) and prayer. (Q 2:43, 5:6)
- We both affirm the Exodus. (Q 28:2–43)

## **On Theological Issues**

- We both acknowledge God as One (Q 112:1), though Muslims reject the Trinitarian nature of God. (Q 112:3)
- We both acknowledge the fall into sin through Adam and Eve. (Q 7:19–31)
- We both acknowledge the reality of sin, alienating us from a holy God. (Q 7:23)
- We both acknowledge the reality of angels. (Q 2:30–31, 34, 98, 112, 161, 171)
- We both acknowledge the reality of Satan. (Q 7:20, 2:208)
- We both acknowledge the reality of life after death and a Final Judgment. (Q 2:28, 83:4–6, 4:159, 5:69)
- We both acknowledge the realities of heaven (Q 2:29) and hell (Q 2:24, 5:37).

## **On Jesus**

- We both recognize that Jesus was sinless. (Q 3:35–36, Hadith—Bukhari vol 4, Book 55:641, Muslim 030:5837)
- We both recognize the miracles of Jesus. (Q 3:49)
- We both recognize Jesus’ virgin birth through Mary. (Q 3:47)
- We both recognize His twelve disciples. (Q 61:14, Hadith—Bukhari vol 5, Book 58:227)
- We both recognize that Jesus has ascended into heaven. (Q 4:157–58)
- We both recognize Jesus’ return at the end of time. (Q 4:159)
- We both recognize Jesus as the Messiah. (Q 3:45, 49)
- We both recognize that Jesus is to be honored in time and eternity. (Q 3:45)
- We both attribute to Jesus the titles of “Word of God” and “Spirit of God.” (Q 4:171, 3:39, 45)

All of these points are common ground for forming a positive relationship. As we have seen in the first category above, in our communities we can make common cause with Muslims on many social and political issues. We are comfortable with each other’s conservative values. Joint efforts in the public arena are often a great way to build up trust and respect, which are key to any lasting and deep relationship. Such involvement also will naturally lead to a discussion of our motivations and

goals in these activities. For example, Muslims will typically view these issues as matters of law and compulsion, whereas Christians will approach them in a spirit of love and compassion.

When we relate from this foundation of common ground, we gain mutual respect. A Muslim typically cannot speak of loving someone outside the fold of Islam. However, he can feel close and trusting. Such close relationships will necessarily be within one's gender, men with men and women with women.

We can open common ground on many theological issues as well, as we have seen above. Of course, there are serious differences, but there is much common ground to have discussions. A major issue will be the deity of Jesus, His atoning death on the cross, and His triumphant resurrection. Yet, we begin with a common ground of high respect for Jesus and His life and ministry.

The pious Muslim will certainly have the objective of converting the Christian to Islam, just as the sincere Christian will have the same desire. Both can be up front about this without destroying the relationship. If a person really believes and values his religion, of course he would want to share it and have others join. This contradictory relationship becomes a ground for mutual respect and genuineness.

Muslims are not to be feared or avoided. We have much in common with them, first of all just as human beings, but also with many shared values and beliefs. Love your neighbor Muslim. It's only when we have that relationship that the Holy Spirit and can live through us to work faith and salvation.

Joint efforts in the public arena are often a great way to build up trust and respect, which are key to any lasting and deep relationship. Such involvement also will naturally lead to a discussion of our motivations and goals in these activities.

## Reviews

EL LIBRO DE GÉNESIS: Reflexiones misiológicas y pastorales. By Rodolfo Blank. St. Louis: Editorial Concordia, 2017. 616 pp. Hardcover. \$34.99. Ebook. \$16.99 (from Amazon.com).

El escrito más reciente del ilustre Profesor y Doctor Rodolfo Blank, “Génesis”, es toda una cosmovisión que permite ver e interpretar el mundo en que vivimos, integrado por seres humanos y otras cosas creadas, creencias e ideas verdaderas, con una característica esencial inmersa en las Sagradas Escrituras: la “unidad desde Génesis hasta Apocalipsis en Jesucristo”, clave coherente de la palabra de Dios, extendida en el texto con gran misericordia hacia los pueblos latinoamericanos en cuyos sufrimientos, historias, y luchas se percibe el eco de las narraciones del libro de la Creación, como una visión innovadora de Blank que ningún otro escritor logró con tanta propiedad.

La cosmovisión cristiana de Blank tiene como punto de apoyo la fe en que Dios (Cristo Jesús) es la realidad última. “En el principio Dios” (Génesis 1:1), y “En el principio era el Verbo” (Juan 1:1). Tal es el punto de partida de todo lo que existe. Porque Dios existe, yo soy. “Sin él nada existe. En él vivimos, nos movemos y tenemos nuestro ser” (Hechos 17:28). En la perspectiva cristiana, Dios es el centro y punto de referencia de todo. Él es la causa y el diseñador de la vida en todas sus formas. Debemos anotar que en este análisis bíblico de la creación se llega a comprender mejor el sentido de la ecología y de la historia: puesto que Dios es el Creador, no hay intrínsecamente nada malo en la materia, ni nada sobrenatural en la naturaleza.

Génesis, según Blank, es el punto de partida de todos los libros canónicos de la Biblia Hebrea y del Nuevo Testamento, porque habla de cómo Dios en su providencia escogió y llamó a “una familia” para que sirviera de instrumento de bendición para todos los pueblos de la tierra y proclamara el perdón de pecados mediante el evangelio de Cristo. Afirma el autor que la “unidad” se evidencia en la similitud que tiene el comienzo de Mateo, con la estructura de Génesis dividida en 10 “*toledot*” (generaciones) con la narrativa de la Creación y la historia de los primeros patriarcas; además nota el autor que siempre hay una conexión: el propósito de Dios de salvar al género humano y la incorporación de todos los pueblos y naciones al reino de Dios a partir de un pueblo y de una casta sacerdotal escogida, que culminará con el gran sumo sacerdote: Cristo Jesús.

Blank considera que Génesis es el “comienzo” de la revelación de Dios, sentando así las bases epistemológicas y éticas de la cosmovisión cristiana. O sea que la Biblia, aunque no es una enciclopedia divina, sí da respuesta a los grandes interrogantes del hombre antiguo y postmoderno: ¿quién soy? ¿de dónde vengo?

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¿hacia dónde voy? ¿qué significado tiene la historia? ¿qué nos sucede al morir? ¿cómo se relaciona Dios conmigo? ¿cómo debo relacionarme con los otros seres humanos? ¿cuál es mi compromiso con el mundo natural? La Biblia responde a estas preguntas fundamentales, y la cosmovisión cristiana de Génesis incorpora esas respuestas en su estructura conceptual.

El comienzo de Génesis y el prólogo de Juan declaran que ninguna cosmovisión puede responder satisfactoriamente a las preguntas esenciales de la vida, a menos que de por medio esté Dios Creador y Redentor: Cristo.

Génesis también aborda la realidad del mal en el universo como un factor significativo en la construcción de una cosmovisión cristiana. Dice Blank que desde Génesis hasta Apocalipsis, la Biblia describe el perenne conflicto entre las fuerzas del mal encabezadas por el diablo, y las fuerzas del bien dirigidas por Dios. La Biblia nunca le resta importancia a la existencia de Satanás y a su siniestro papel en la historia de la humanidad. Por el contrario, describe el origen de su rebelión contra Dios en el cielo (Apocalipsis 12:7–10), su derrota y expulsión (Lucas 10:18), y su eventual aniquilamiento final (Apocalipsis 20:7–10).

Entonces, “Génesis”, de Blank, ancla la cosmovisión en Cristo tal como lo revelan las Escrituras y la historia, afirmando la existencia real de Dios, soberano sobre la creación y comunicado con sus criaturas; reconociendo el problema del pecado y la presencia del mal que presentan un desafío al carácter de Dios y al destino humano.

El escrito reconoce también que a lo largo de la historia y en la vida de cada individuo se libra una contienda entre el bien y el mal. Dios, que ha revelado el origen y la naturaleza de dicho conflicto, ha ofrecido a los seres humanos la posibilidad de salir vencedores en él, y encamina la historia hacia el triunfo definitivo del bien y a la restauración de todas las cosas. El método que Dios ha escogido para lograr sus objetivos es Cristo. Dios en Cristo se convierte así en el punto central de la cosmovisión cristiana, que funge en Génesis.

La experiencia de muchos cristianos cuando leen el Antiguo Testamento es similar a cuando uno, ya entrada la noche, busca una dirección en un sitio desconocido; casi siempre se afirma que fue adivinando como se pudo llegar. Ahora aparece “Génesis” de Blank, como un GPS para escudriñar tantas historias condensadas en esa relación de Dios que redime solo por amor al ser humano caído: Genealogías, extrañas leyes, *toledots*, la serpiente que habla, edificios que tocan el cielo, lluvias que todo lo inundan. El libro de Blank además de ser deliciosamente ameno, sirve como un GPS que conduce en la dirección correcta hacia Jesús, muerto sí, pero resucitado.

El autor afirma que la ruta del Antiguo Testamento apunta siempre a Jesús con el objetivo de producir para nosotros el encuentro con el Señor de la Creación y el

Salvador del mundo, para que creamos en él y tengamos vida en su nombre (Juan 5:39–40; 20:30–31). Extraordinario escrito que visualiza a Jesucristo en cada segmento de Génesis, frente a la miope visión casi universal de percibirlo solo como preanuncio en el capítulo 3, versículo 15.

Rev. Miguel D. Sanabria

EL LIBRO DE GÉNESIS: Reflexiones misiológicas y pastorales. By Rodolfo Blank. St. Louis: Editorial Concordia, 2017. 616 pp. Hardcover. \$34.99. Ebook. \$16.99 (from Amazon.com).

Rodolfo Blank's most recent book, *The Book of Genesis: Missiological and Pastoral Reflections*, presents a worldview that moves us to become immersed in the essential characteristic of Scripture: the unity from Genesis to Revelation in Jesus Christ.

Blank has once again shared his gifts with us in his seventh book, a commentary on Genesis (written in Spanish and not available in English). He takes us through Genesis with solid theological and confessional ease, enriching every step with pastoral and missiological discussions. In doing so, he uses the natural structure of the book, using the genealogies, the so-called *toledots* (generations).

The experience of many Christians when they read the Old Testament is similar to when one, late at night, seeks an address in an unknown place and has to guess where to go. Then Blank's book appears, like a GPS, weaving us through many stories of relationships with God that ultimately point us to His love for fallen human beings: *toledots*, the serpent that speaks, buildings that touch the sky, rains that flood. And this GPS leads us in the right direction, to Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead.

The author affirms the missiological route of the Old Testament, which points to Jesus in order to produce an ongoing meeting with the Lord of Creation and the Savior of the world, so that we may believe in Him and have life in His name (Jn 5:39–40; 20:30–31). This extraordinary writing visualizes Jesus Christ in each segment of Genesis, in contrast to the almost universal myopic vision of seeing Jesus only in Genesis 3:15.

Rev. Miguel D. Sanabria

iGEN: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood. By Jean M. Twenge. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017. 342 pages. Hardbound. \$27.00.

Where are the missing Millennials, when did they leave, and can we expect them to return? Those are the questions addressed by the LCMS Youth Ministry office in the recently released 2017 research on young adults. The study directs congregations and church leaders to give more attention to retention by emphasizing relationships, creating action plans to address transitional moments, incorporating young people into leadership positions, supporting parents in their modeling role, maintaining strong catechesis within an environment open to questions, and by simply keeping track of where young people are.<sup>1</sup>

Young adults need the attention—and the respect that attention gives—from our congregations. What does this say, however, about the generation that's following the Millennials? That's the issue addressed in the book under review. The generation following the Millennials is different, very different. These are the young people born during the years 1995 through 2012. Whether called “iGen,” as Jean Twenge does, or “Gen Z,” as Barna does, this generation is unlike any that have preceded. They now comprise the young people from elementary school age to those beginning to leave college.

According to Twenge, the tipping point that brings their unique qualities into sharp relief occurred in 2011. That's the year smartphones achieved the necessary critical mass to influence teen behavior across every variable imaginable. In graph after graph, slightly declining trends over the decades pitched sharply downward around 2011, or conversely, rose.

What went down?

Drug use

Teen pregnancy

Drinking alcohol

Number of teens obtaining their driver's license by age 17

Number of teens having sex

Amount of time engaged in face to face conversation

Involvement in religious institutions

Time spent reading

Sleeping

What went up?

Anxiety and fear

Mental health issues

Bullying

Teen suicide

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Hours per week spent on the internet  
 Concern over personal safety  
 Tolerance of individual differences  
 Worry over money  
 Positive attitudes toward LGBTQ issues  
 Length of time taken to enter adulthood

Keep in mind that these tendencies presented by Twenge are always percentages. Plenty of young people are just like the teens from every other generation. Nevertheless, these patterns are enough to color the perceptions of iGen about itself, as well as others' perceptions of iGen. Some of the changes, to be sure, are positive. But many of the changes drive teens toward unfortunate and unhealthy behaviors. Twenge doesn't disguise very well the feet at which she lays the blame.

In her chapter on insecurity, Twenge writes "experiments that randomly assign people to experience more or less screen time and those that track behavior over time have both found that more screen time causes more anxiety, depression, loneliness, and less emotional connection. It seems clear that at least some of the sudden and large increase in depression has been caused by teens spending more time with screens" (112) The same seems to apply to the other categories as well.

Twenge's final chapter, titled "Understanding—and Saving—iGen," provides several ways to respond. Each tends to focus on putting down the screens and looking at people up close, face-to-face. "Life Hacks for Smartphones" provides helpful advice. Likewise, her comments suggesting that teens develop thicker skins seems most appropriate. Not every disappointment, loss, or insult is worthy of the title "trauma." In real life, few "safe zones" really exist. Even so, her insight into bullying illustrates the problem of hyper-connectedness via social media. Bullying has always existed, but the bullied could always escape to some private place of solitude for respite, be it home, the bedroom, or out of town. If the smartphone is present, however, so is the bully!

The book may leave the reader with a profound sense of disconnect; especially if there are several generations between the reader and iGen. What are the implications for evangelism, catechesis, and youth ministry? There isn't a lot of time to work out a response. This generation already populates our education systems. What is known is that this generation needs Jesus as much as any that preceded it. Therein lies the path forward. Jesus talked about fields that were ready for harvest. iGen is ripe for good news!

John Oberdeck

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mark Kiessling and Julianna Shults, "The Search for Young People: 2017 Research of Millennials and the LCMS," *Concordia Journal* 44 (2018): 19–32.

## ***Lutheran Mission Matters* Call for Papers: Nov. 2019**

Greetings from the Lutheran Society for Missiology (LSFM)!

After many theme-focused issues, the Editorial Committee invites you to consider writing for our Nov. 2019 edition of what conversations need to be had, or what missiological topic is on your heart. The challenges of postmodernism, pluralism, immigration, and urbanization are not only producing new models and methods of mission and ministry, but they are also challenging the old paradigms and raising new questions.

As the world changes around us, the LSFM recognizes a real need to foster and promote conversations about Lutheran missiology that addresses these changes. The society shares a strong commitment to the historical faith, while also promoting cutting-edge approaches to the mission and ministry of Lutherans worldwide. The hard questions are intentionally engaged and shared so that members have an opportunity to learn from and critically reflect on these current challenges from a Lutheran perspective.

We welcome your interest in the Lutheran Society for Missiology, whose membership is drawn from people around the world who are convinced that the Lutheran expression of the Christian faith is something to be shared with the world. The articles featured in our journal, *Lutheran Mission Matters*, flow from the conviction that the Lutheran perspective on mission needs to be part of the wider conversation.

Please let us know of your interest in this publishing effort. *LMM* articles are generally about 3,000 words in length although longer and shorter articles will be considered. A variety of articles are featured in each issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters*, and there is space to report academic research as well as shorter articles that highlight a personal observation or story about missions.

Send your comments and questions to the editor of the journal, Dr. Victor Raj ([rajv@csli.edu](mailto:rajv@csli.edu)). Articles in *Lutheran Mission Matters* are indexed and are available online in the American Theological Library Association Serial (ATLAS) collection. Articles in the journal are peer reviewed. The deadline for submission is Sept. 1, 2019. Additional details about the article format can be found in the “A Note to Contributors” section at the end of each issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters* and online.

## *A Note to Contributors*

We welcome your participation in contributing to *Lutheran Mission Matters*. Please observe the following guidelines for submission of manuscripts.

*Lutheran Mission Matters* publishes studies of missiological issues under discussion in Christian circles across the world. Exegetical, biblical, theological, historical, and practical dimensions of the apostolic mission of the church are explored in these pages. (See the mission statement below.) While issues often focus on a theme, the editorial committee encourages and appreciates submissions of articles on any missiological topic.

Contributors can familiarize themselves with previous issues of *Missio Apostolica* and *Lutheran Mission Matters* at the Lutheran Society for Missiology's website (<https://lsfm.global>). Click on the Publications link to view PDFs of previous issues.

**Book reviews:** LSFM also welcomes book reviews. Submit reviews of no more than 500 words. E-mail Dr. Joel Okamoto ([lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com)) if interested in writing a review.

### **Mission Statement**

*Lutheran Mission Matters* serves as an international Lutheran forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ globally.

### **Formatting and Style**

Please consult and use *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition for endnotes. See basic examples below and/or consult the “Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide” ([http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)).

<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 243–255.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edwin Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 184–186.

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, et al., “Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement,” *Missiology, An International Review* 34 (2006): 431–450.

References to Luther's works must identify the original document and the year of its publication. Please use the following model.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Ninety-five Theses (1517)* in *Luther's Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31:17–34.

Quotations of or allusions to specific texts in the Lutheran Confessional writings must be documented. The use of modern translations of the *Book of Concord* is encouraged. Please use the following model.

<sup>5</sup> Augsburg Confession V (Concerning the Office of Preaching) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. R. Kolb, T. J. Wengert, C. P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 40.

Direct quotations exceeding four manuscript lines should be set off from the text in an indented paragraph, without quotation marks. Omissions in a quotation should be noted by ellipsis, with an additional period to end a sentence, as appropriate.

Spelling should follow the latest edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. Words in languages other than English should be italicized.

## Preparation and Submission

**Length:** Concise, clear articles are preferred. Manuscripts should not be more than 3,000–4,000 words although longer pieces may be arranged by the editor.

**Content:** *Lutheran Mission Matters* is committed to addressing the academic community as well as pastors and people throughout the church and involving them in the theology and practice of mission. Use of terms or phrases in languages other than the language of the article itself is discouraged. The use of complex and long sentences is discouraged. Attention should be paid to paragraphing so that the article is easy to follow and appears inviting on the page.

**Use of call-outs:** *Lutheran Mission Matters* frequently uses call-outs to break up blocks of text on a page and to emphasize important points being made in the article. The author is invited to use Word's Text Highlight Color to suggest words or phrase that may be included in a call-out. The final decision will be made by the editor.

**Format:** Please submit articles in single spaced Times New Roman 10-point font with 0.25" paragraph indents.

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**Review:** The editors submit every manuscript to the editorial committee for examination and critique. Decisions are reached by consensus within the committee. Authors may expect a decision normally within three months of submission. Before publication, articles are copy edited for style and clarity, as necessary. Major alterations will be made available to the author for review.

### Additional Submission Information

**Bio:** Authors should provide, along with their submissions, an autobiographical description. Please write 2–3 sentences introducing yourself. Please include your title(s) you would like LMM to use, the form of your name you want to be known as. Tell your present position and/or your education or experience that qualifies you to write the article. If you have a head-shot photo that you would like to provide, we will try to use it. Please provide the email address at which a respondent could reach you.

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**Address correspondence to:**

Victor Raj, Editor  
*Lutheran Mission Matters*  
14100 Sunland Dr.  
Florissant, MO 63034  
E-mail: [rajv@csl.edu](mailto:rajv@csl.edu)

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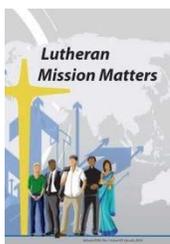
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