

# Articles

## Fresh Wineskins for Christ's Mission

Robert Newton

*No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved (Matthew 9).*

**Abstract:** Congregations and leaders in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have been called into a new era of ministry, a missionary era. As a church rooted deeply in Northern Europe it enjoyed, until recently, the favor of America's dominant "White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant" culture and structured its ministries accordingly. Those days are gone, that favor has waned, and many Christians find themselves underequipped and inadequately structured to proclaim the Gospel in their once churched America, now turned mission field. Along those lines, Jesus drew attention to the church's "wineskin" and its capacity to hold effectively the "new wine" of His missionary Gospel. This article encourages us to examine our church's wineskin in light of His missionary calling.

I have the privilege of writing this article from two distinct but symbiotic positions: (1) district president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) (what other church bodies refer to as a "bishop," and (2) a Lutheran missiologist. Most of us share a rudimentary understanding of the word Bishop with its responsibilities of watching over the theology and practice of the churches and church workers in a given geographic or linguistic arena.

However, having often been met with blank stares at the mention of the word "missiologist," I've come to realize that "missiology" does not enjoy the same universal understanding as other disciplines in the church. Instead, it occupies a very particular and perhaps peculiar place in the life and faith of the Christ's church on earth. Lutheran missiologists would argue that given our Lord's self-proclaimed—

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“to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10)—His mission should occupy the center stage of the church’s life and work, and, therefore, missiology should play an essential role in shaping our theological understandings and applications.

Yet, the question persists among us, “Since missiology is so *particular* in the church that it commands the attention of only a few, should it play an essential role in influencing the *whole* of theology?” That question lies at the heart of one of the great distractions in my church body today: The separation of and competition between so-called “Confessional Lutheran theology” and “Lutheran Missiology.”

## **Missiology and Christology**

We would protest with every fiber of our being if a wedge were being driven between Confessional Lutheran theology and Christology. How can one separate the two? Isn’t the crucified and risen Christ the heart and soul of the faith we confess? Isn’t His person and work (AC, III) the core of the central teaching of Confessional Lutherans—justification by grace through faith alone (AC, IV)? That said, I would suggest that the same vigorous protest be raised over the wedge being driven between Confessional theology and missiology.

Why? Simple. It is impossible to separate the essential missionary character of our Lord Jesus Christ from our faithful study of His person and work and our confession of Him as Lord of all (Christology). The entire confession of our faith in “Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord,” centers in His missiological intention “to seek and to save the lost.” Any attempt by the Church or its theologians to distinguish or separate Jesus the Christ from His mission will end up rejecting the very Christ it claims to confess (Lk 4:28–30). Missiology—that is, the careful study of and application of Christ’s mission to the world—is inseparable from and essential to Biblical Christology. As such, missiology must thoroughly inform our Confessional Lutheran theology and practice if it is to be truly Christological.

While missiology, by its Christological nature and intention, must pervade all Lutheran theology, missiologists themselves would (should) admit that their discipline is, in large measure, a study in personal limitations. Thus, the great missionary St. Paul confessed, “We see through a glass darkly” (1 Cor 13:12). Any honest missionary will tell you that our ignorance is reinforced on a daily basis by life and work on the mission field. Ask the Kankanaey Christians who patiently taught and retaught me about their world as I lived and served among them for six years in the Philippines. Or ask the church leaders in the Gutnius Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea why this missiologist with all of his expertise spent the better part of a day in a municipal jail. Or, closer to home, ask my present staff that joins me daily in wrestling with the challenges in mission faced by the congregations in our district today. If being a missiologist implies that one is an expert in Christ’s mission to the world, then count me out. If, on the other hand, missiological

expertise (if there is such a thing at all) is measured more in its ability to ask questions than by offering answers, then count me in.

## **Missiology and the Business of Asking Questions**

Missiology must constantly address new (and old) questions that arise from unchurched people as the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus penetrates their world. That's what makes it so interesting. That's also what often makes it unsettling for those of us who are already part of the established church here and abroad. The established church carries the responsibility to "follow the pattern of the sound words" and to "guard the good deposit entrusted to [us]" (2 Tim 1:14). Our Lord exhorted us to the same with His words, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (αὐτός δέ εἶπεν μενοῦν μακάριοι οἱ ἀκούοντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ φυλάσσοντες) (Lk 11:28). The Greek verb φυλάσσω carries the meaning "to guard, defend, keep safe, preserve." Such concern naturally tends toward the need for churches to set boundaries theologically and institutionally in order to preserve what we understand as the true faith and to "nail things down" as exactly as we can in every aspect of our theology and practice.

Missionaries, because they regularly encounter new phenomena (at least new to them and their established churches), are required to ask questions of themselves and the churches they serve. These questions often bump up against what the churches have already determined as settled issues and, in so doing, seem to soften theological boundaries. And that unsettles things for the churches. Consider some of the missiological questions raised by Gentiles receiving the Gospel and the challenges these questions presented to the established church in Jerusalem. "Can Jews enter Gentile homes and eat with them?" "Must Gentile men be circumcised in order to be Christian?" These questions seem almost insignificant to us, but they rocked the New Testament Church down to its foundation.

While these missionary questions unsettled the Church, they also enabled it to reexamine its established theological understandings of God's Kingdom (Kingdom of grace, not law) and how He is spreading His Kingdom throughout the world (Acts 15:6–12). Both in the light of God's Holy Word (the inspired record of God's work in the Old Testament) and the witness of missionaries (Paul and Barnabas) to what God was presently doing, the Church grew in its understanding of God's will and adjusted its thinking and behaviors to align with the mind and will of Christ.

## **The Issue of Wineskins**

Our Lord Jesus Christ, in speaking about the Kingdom of God, referred to two kinds of wineskins: old and new. In Matthew 9, He noted, "Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins and so both are preserved."

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What kind of wineskin is our Lutheran theology intended to be: “old” or, as Jesus said, “fresh”? Along with our theology, what kinds of wineskins are our structured patterns of local congregation, our understanding of the ministry of the Gospel, theological education, or mission outreach supposed to be? Good wineskins, whether fresh or old, have the same purpose: They keep out destructive contaminants while the wine ferments and then is stored. We want our confession and derived patterns of mission and ministry to keep us centered on our Savior and to protect us from “every wind of teaching” caused “by the cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming.” Our singular focus on Jesus and avoidance of all false doctrine is the business of a sound wineskin. The question, then, is not whether we need a wineskin (we most certainly do), but what kind should it be, fresh or old. Has our theological wineskin grown old, that is, having brought to completion the expansion (development) of our Confessional doctrine, it exists for the primary purpose of keeping and preserving this pure wine for all to enjoy? Or would our Lord desire that our Confessional wineskin remain fresh, that is, expandable? While it continues to preserve the pure wine of the Gospel, it also maintains the theological elasticity needed for continued expansion of the Gospel into a world very different from our own.

In the end, the question is really not about our understanding regarding our theological wineskin—whether it is fresh or old—but rather about the nature of our theology. Is our theology complete, with no more room to grow, no new things to learn from other peoples and cultures as they receive the Gospel? Or is our theology still fermenting among us? The mission enterprise, by its very nature, continually adds new and wholesome yeast to the wine. As the Gospel of Jesus Christ crosses new boundaries, new peoples, like fresh yeast, are added and theological fermentation continues.

The church’s wineskin therefore is forced either to expand or to explode, depending on the condition of the wineskin—whether it’s fresh or old. And it’s in this understanding that the LCMS must wrestle with what it means to be a Confessional church body. Were our Confessions intended to be a theological container with intentionally fixed boundaries, unaffected by changing contexts or new people groups that encounter the Gospel? Or were they intended to be a launching pad—hermeneutically, theologically, and missiologically—that equips and assists us in reaching human contexts exotic from our own with the Gospel? Do our Confessions intend to provide all the answers for all time, or do they give us the Gospel-centered ability and confidence to ask new and necessary questions in the Name of and for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ?

## **The Mission Field among Us**

This business of asking questions is perhaps more critical today than ever before

in our life as the people of God, in general, but particularly for those engaged in mission work in the United States and abroad. The LCMS has awakened to an epochal shift that is taking place in the world (at least in the Western world) regarding the role and significance of the Church. In many areas of the Western Hemisphere, society has concluded that it has outgrown Christianity or at least Christendom. I have referred to this phenomenon in other writings as the post-church era of missions. I've suggested that we might distinguish three different eras of mission work: pre-churched, churched, and post-churched:

*Pre-churched* mission work takes place among people groups where the Gospel has not been proclaimed, and, therefore, local churches have not been established. As the Gospel advances, the church grows not only in size but in influence within the larger society. This growth signals the shift from a pre-churched to a churched context for missions.

Missions within the *churched* context is quite different, in that the church now holds the pole position in the larger society. It enjoys cultural, social, political, and economic prestige within the community. People come to the church seeking answers for life's questions and seeking the church's guidance in making decisions regarding ethics and morality.

Just as the waxing of the church's influence signals a shift from a pre-churched to a churched mission context, its waning indicates a shift from a churched to a *post-churched* context. As the church's position and influence diminish, the society begins to reflect the cultural characteristics of a "pre-churched" world once again. Knowing which era or phase of church we find ourselves is critical to knowing how to proceed in mission.

Four questions are essential to the task of mission, that is, to speaking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have not yet heard. *Who* is considered credible to weigh in on life issues and, therefore, be a purveyor of the Good News? *Where* do conversations regarding the Gospel take place? *When* do those conversations take place? And perhaps the most significant question of all, *what* is the starting place for these conversations?<sup>1</sup> The "who, where, when, and what" starting place of a conversation about our Lord Jesus Christ is determined by the people who are culturally in charge. Therefore, knowing who is culturally in charge greatly informs our approach to mission. Are we in an era where the church is culturally in charge and therefore is responsible for answering the "who, where, when, and what"? Or are the unchurched people in charge, so that they ultimately determine who speaks, where and when those conversations take place, as well as what is the starting place of conversations that the missionary uses to point to the person and work of Jesus Christ?

Missionaries understand that they are not in charge. In fact, a practical definition of missions is simply the proclamation of the Gospel in contexts in which the church

is not in charge. That's a radical shift for most Western missionaries who grew up in a church environment, an environment in which the church mattered and its values were shared by the larger community.

Take Good Friday, for example. I remember as a young boy growing up in Napa, California, that many of the shops on the main streets of our town posted signs in their windows announcing their closure from the hours of 12:00–3:00 p.m. in respect for the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. There was also a crèche on the town square at Christmas. That isn't the world that many of us live in now. Our world much more reflects the pre-churched culture in which the organized church has no priority whatsoever. We've experienced a radical loss of the power and prestige that we once depended upon to proclaim the Gospel. Who are we Christians in relation to the world in which God has placed us and to which we proclaim the saving message of Jesus? We've experienced a radical dislocation of our place in the context in which we are called to minister.

This dislocation is as radical for us as it was for God's Old Testament saints when they woke up one morning not in their beloved Jerusalem or Judea but in the distant and cruel nation of Babylon. Gone was their sacred Temple. Gone was their theocentric government and shared social and moral values as followers of Moses. Gone was everything that they understood as norm, anchor, and home—spiritually, socially, culturally, politically. Consider the lament of these Old Testament brothers and sisters as they were exiled in Babylon.

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1–4)

Many Christians in North America today share those deep feelings. The seemingly sudden loss of the significance of our churches in their culture and communities has caused us to lose our balance as Christians. We feel exiled, pushed to the periphery, socially and politically forced to forfeit our place as decision makers in the society. While our lament is not nearly the same as that of the Old Testament saints, our questions are similar. How do we relate with people who do not know Christ and don't value the church? How do we learn to live now as strangers and foreigners in a country that once was our own, where we were viewed as important leaders?

One of the great culture shocks to a new missionary is his or her loss of role, understanding, and personal and professional expectations. Who am I in relation to this new people among whom I live and work? What is my role in this community? The same shock can be experienced at the corporate level. Consider the LCMS. The shift from a church to post-church mission context<sup>2</sup> has rocked the Synod's

identity. Until recently, we understood our role as a Confessional lighthouse within Christendom, the voice of biblical truth among other Christian churches. We expected other Christians to see our light and be attracted to it. As if to Solomon's Jerusalem or Constantine's Christendom, the nations would be drawn like night bugs to the light of our Gospel-centered theology.

Many LCMS congregations struggle over the profound loss of significance that the Christian churches are experiencing in America. We don't live in a contemporary version of "Solomon's Jerusalem"; rather, we live in a contemporary version of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. What does it mean to be a Confessional lighthouse in this context? The great shift in our place in the culture has a profound impact on how we go about our business.

Biblically speaking, when the children of Israel were exiled and dispersed in Babylon, it was perhaps the very best thing that could have happened to them. In exile, Israel returned to its roots as God's people, elect and set apart for the nations (Exodus 19). In so many words it returned to its vocation as a missionary people. I would suggest that more nations came into contact with the saving Name and reputation of Yahweh while God's people were scattered in Babylon than when they were united around Solomon's Jerusalem and Israel was the leading political, economic, and perhaps cultural force among the nations (1 Kings 10).

### **The Recovery of God's Missionary People**

The dispersion of God's people in Babylon was known as the diaspora; they were primarily a scattered laypeople. They looked at their condition as a curse not a blessing. But it was in and by their experience in Babylon that God re-birthed His missionary people. Thus, St. Peter referenced the audience of his first epistle to the "elect exiles of the diaspora" (1 Pt 1:1). From God's vantage point, the diaspora was not an unfortunate accident. It was His will, the will of a missionary God. Our Lord Jesus Christ made specific reference to the diaspora in His parable regarding the wheat and the tares. In His explanation of the parable to His disciples, He stated,

Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with the fire so it will be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. He who has ears let him hear. (Mt 13:40-43)

The disciples would have recognized that Jesus was paraphrasing His own words, first spoken in the last chapter of Daniel: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will wake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the

sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan 12:2–3).

God spoke these words to Daniel while he and his friends were exiles in Babylon, bearing witness to the good news of their faith in a context in which they were not in charge. In referencing His words from Daniel 12, Jesus was teaching His disciples that being exiled and being a Christian minority (the wheat) in the midst of those who do not know or care to know the living God (the tares) is by His deliberate design. Through the testimony of exiled laypeople, even a pagan king such as Nebuchadnezzar came to embrace the true faith.

Jesus revealed the divine purpose of the diaspora: God loves the nations and, because of His love for the nations, He plants His people among them where they grow as His people and let their light shine in that place so people might see their good works and glorify the Father who is in heaven. Our Lord drove the point home when, during Holy Week (in response to the Greeks who were seeking an audience with Him), He declared,

Truly, truly I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him . . . And I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself (Jn 12:24–27, 32).

In His crucifixion, resurrection, and the pouring out of His Holy Spirit on the Christian Church, our Lord Jesus Christ launched His mission of drawing of all peoples to Himself.

During the forty days following His resurrection, the disciples asked a key question: “Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Recognizing that the resurrected Lord was indeed the promised Messiah, David’s greater Son, it was only natural for them to ask Him about the consummation of God’s Kingdom (His Divine rule) and Israel’s place in it. However, they did not yet understand the extent of that restoration, globally or ethnically. They envisioned God’s restored Kingdom to be something like Solomon’s Jerusalem with the nations streaming to meet the resurrected Lord. In response to their question, Jesus explained that Jerusalem would no longer be the “come to” place for the nations. Rather, it would be the “go from” place, and the Kingdom would come as they gave witness to Him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and, finally, the ends of the earth. Christ’s Kingdom would come to every place they traveled, and their witness of His death and resurrection would invite peoples of every nation to join it.

The Lord envisioned a holy diaspora, or scattering, of His people among the nations so that all the nations would receive Him as Lord. That scattering took place



in earnest when St. Stephen was martyred for proclaiming the true faith (Acts 8:1). Jesus' church was scattered as life-giving Seed sown by God Himself in all the world. As Luke recorded, "There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. And those who were scattered went about proclaiming the good news" (Acts 8:1, 4). He continued later in his account, "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" (Acts 11:19). God's church had become His elect diaspora among the nations once again.

It seems that the Lord is doing the same to and for His own here in the United States. America is an increasingly unchurched society, and, as such, the church is becoming socially and culturally estranged, (exiled) within its own borders. What does it mean to be God's people living in an unchurched society? What does it mean for God's people to be living as exiles in their own country?

For centuries we Lutherans defined ourselves as a Confessional movement within Christianity. What does it mean to be a confessional movement now outside of Christianity? How do we communicate the Gospel when we no longer hold a credible voice in the society? These are missionary questions, and we Lutheran Christians are being required to ask them. We must learn the grace and humility of being able to ask such questions, believing that God answers faithfully in His Word. The Word of God that so faithfully led us before springs to even greater life in this new and exotic (missionary) context. We bow our heads in humility and thanksgiving that the Lord in His mercy has brought us to this day.

## **Fresh Wineskins for the Mission of Christ**

What kind of *theological and ministry* wineskins, then, are needed for the missional contexts in which we find ourselves here in America and abroad? How do we learn to live as "strangers and exiles" in a society in which we were once appreciated as cultural insiders, even cultural designers? How do Lutherans confess the Gospel outside of the Christendom it was called by God to reform? The missional contexts in which we find ourselves raise profound questions. Missionary questions unsettled the Early Church, enabling it to grow in its understanding of God's Word and to make fresh, faithful applications for its participation in Christ's mission. How might contemporary questions assist us to do the same in the twenty-first century? In particular, what missionary questions must we ask both regarding our understanding and practice of the ministry of the Gospel—"the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" (AC V)—and regarding how we organize or structure that ministry according to Christ's missionary intent?

In my roles both as a district president and a former evangelistic missionary, I have had the privilege of observing (and participating in) the ministry of the Gospel

organized in different ways, each striving to be faithful to God's Word and our Lutheran Confessions. The differences in ministries stemmed from a variation in contexts, not Confession. As district president, I presently oversee the Gospel ministry as it has developed within a "churched"-dominated context, organized almost exclusively around established congregations with the ministry of called and ordained pastors at the center. As an evangelistic missionary, I oversaw the Gospel ministry as it developed in a pre-churched or missional context—organized around the non-Christian communities, with the ministry of the baptized as central. Both ministry structures maintain a symbiotic relationship between the baptized and the pastors, but are arranged almost oppositely. The *churched* model (or structure) focuses primarily on the baptized, who support the Gospel ministry as carried out by the pastor; the *mission* model focuses on the pastor or missionary, who proclaims the Gospel to the unchurched, while equipping and supporting the baptized to do the same.

Structures or models of Gospel ministry are God's gifts for serving both the Church and the world, proclaiming the Gospel to all creatures and faithfully keeping and passing the faith on to future generations. These structures remain effective as long as they (1) remember that they, like wineskins, "house" the ministry of the Gospel but are not the ministry itself, and (2) accurately reflect the context for that ministry. They must remain supple as long as the new wine of Christ's Kingdom is in the making. Our Lutheran fathers grasped this dynamic understanding of the Gospel ministry when they confessed,

The Ministry of the church

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel (AC V).

As Dr. Robert Preus noted in his article "The Confessions and the Mission of the Church," Melancthon made no mention here of the pastoral office.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he spoke of the Gospel ministry as a function or activity by which the Holy Spirit creates faith in the hearts of those who hear. The Holy Spirit, then, in partnership with His Church, develops the necessary and appropriate structures for the Gospel ministry to proceed into the world.

## **Gospel Ministry in the New Testament**

The earliest "structure" for Gospel proclamation is the Lord Jesus Himself, "the Word made flesh and tabernacled among us." In His case, the structure (His Person) and the Gospel ministry of the Holy Spirit are One. He is the Gospel preached and the Sacraments administered. He proclaimed the Gospel to His disciples following His resurrection and made note in teaching them that, in fulfillment of the Scriptures,

He would continue to proclaim the Gospel to all nations through their witness (Lk 24:44–46). St. Paul stated the same most clearly in his testimony before King Agrippa:

Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and *that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles* (Acts 26:19–23, italics added).

Following our Lord’s ascension, His Gospel ministry continued through the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles, whose preaching and teaching of Christ laid the foundation upon which the Church is built and all Gospel ministry proceeds (Eph 2:19–21). Their participation in His ministry began in Jerusalem on the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them and the other disciples gathered there (Acts 2:4). Their preaching targeted those who had not yet heard or believed that Jesus was the Christ or that God had raised Him from the dead for their salvation. Thousands came to believe and were added to Christ’s Church. The next few chapters describe the continuing ministry of the Apostles as they faithfully disciplined the new believers and daily went up to the Temple to proclaim the Gospel to those who had not yet heard, or in hearing, had not yet believed.

At the same time, the baptized believers participated in this ministry in their various spheres of influence. St. Luke records,

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . 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 2:42–46).

St. Peter attested to the reality that all believers by virtue of their Baptisms into Christ would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37). This “promise of the Father” (ἐπαγγελίαν τοῦ πατρὸς) was sent by Jesus to equip them to proclaim the Gospel (Lk 24:49, Acts 1:4–5; 2:33). Peter noted that this promise is not particular to the Apostles or to any other group within the Church. Rather it was (is) a gift poured out on all believers: “For the *promise* is for you and for your children and for all who

are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself' (Acts 2:38, italics added).

By Acts 6, the church had grown to a point where ministry to its members (the daily distribution to widows) was beginning to eclipse the apostolic preaching. Recognizing the dilemma, the Apostles and church set aside seven men to oversee the growing ministry to the saints. They developed a structure to serve specific needs of the church and at the same time guarantee that Gospel proclamation to those inside and outside the church would not be hindered. Important to note is that this ministry of serving the saints was additional to the ministry of the Gospel in which these seven also participated, at least in the cases of two of them: Stephen and Philip. Luke records that these men publicly proclaimed the Gospel and baptized (Acts 6:8–10; 7:2–53; Acts 8:5–12, 35–40).

Persecution soon broke out against the church in Jerusalem and scattered the Christians across Judea, Samaria (Acts 8) and beyond (Acts 11). These unnamed believers proclaimed the Gospel (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν λόγον) wherever they traveled and new churches came into being. No specific structure for this missionary movement is identified. It appears that the missionary expansion was spontaneous and unorganized (by human standards), not bound to a specific institutional office. Baptized men and women simply proclaimed the Good News, people believed and were baptized, and churches were formed.

Just as the Spirit descended upon the first Jewish disciples, equipping them to proclaim the Gospel, so He repeated His action each time the Gospel crossed a cultural boundary to be received by non-Jewish nations, Samaritans (in Acts 8) and Gentiles (in Acts 10). In each case it seems that the Holy Spirit impressed upon the Church His intention that all nations would both receive the Gospel and in receiving it participate fully in its ministry. Peter testified to this reality when challenged by certain members of the Jerusalem church for “[going] to uncircumcised men and [eating] with them” (Acts 11:3). He recognized that the Spirit was calling all peoples, circumcised or not, to full participation in His Kingdom. He noted,

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. *And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”* If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way (Acts 11:15–17, italics added).

Through these experiences, the established church (and leaders) deepened their understanding of Christ’s mission and realigned their Gospel ministry to match Christ’s will, which embraced all peoples. After their experience with the conversion of the Samaritans and the pouring out of the Spirit upon them, Peter and John preached the Gospel in many Samaritan villages (Acts 8:25). Likewise, Peter’s testimony about the Spirit’s coming to Cornelius and his entire household silenced all

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criticisms and caused the church instead to glorify God for the fact that the Gentiles had come to faith.

The next step in the story of Christ's mission was again directed by the Spirit Himself. Luke reported,

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*"

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. *So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus* (Acts 13:2–4, italics added.)

This action by the Holy Spirit inaugurated a "missionary cohort," a seemingly loose structure made up of baptized men and women specifically dedicated to Christ's missionary enterprise. It functioned for the next several years under the leadership of St. Paul (Acts 13–28). Luke employed four key verbs in recording the Holy Spirit's instructions and the consequent action by Him and the church leaders in Antioch.

While the spiritual leaders of the church in Antioch were worshiping, the Holy Spirit ordered that they "*Set apart*" (ἀφορίσατε) for [Him] Barnabas and Saul for the work to which [He] was calling them." (The verb means literally to rail off, or separate.) The Holy Spirit wanted Barnabas and Saul to be *set apart* from the ministry of the Word taking place in the congregation in Antioch. This separation needed to take place so that they could respond to a specific assignment to which the Holy Spirit was *calling* (προσκέκλημαι) them (literally, appointing them). Barnabas and Saul, along with the other disciples in Antioch, understood this request as a direct order from the Spirit Himself to proclaim the Gospel in regions beyond the established church. (See also Acts 16:10).

In response to God's personal request the church's leaders fasted and prayed, laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and "*sent them off*" (ἀπέλυσαν). (Literally, the verb means to release from responsibility, to divorce, to send away, to loose from a burden or obligation). Significant to note is the fact that the church of Antioch, through the laying on of hands by the leaders, affirmed the Spirit's call of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:3) and commended them to the grace of God for this new work (Acts 14:26). However, the church did not send them out under its direction or authority. Luke recorded that the church at Antioch simply *released* these men from all ministry responsibilities and obligations to it in order for them to be free to take up the missionary responsibilities to which the Spirit was calling them.

It was the Spirit who sent them out: "So, being "*sent out*" (ἐκπεμφθέντες) by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. This deliberate "sending out" by the Holy Spirit launched the first of a number of missionary journeys made by St. Paul and his companions. In fact, the book of Acts from this point on (except for chapter 15) is dedicated entirely to the missionary outreach of St. Paul and his missionary cohort.

While distinct from the twelve Apostles and St. Paul (who were eye witnesses of the Resurrected Lord and bore apostolic authority among the churches), a number of St. Paul's companions are identified as apostles. Luke named Barnabas in Acts 14. Paul named Titus, along with others, in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 8:23), Silvanus and Timothy<sup>4</sup> in 1 Thessalonians (1 Thes 2:7), and Epaphroditus as an apostle sent specifically from the church at Philippi to assist him while in prison (Phil 2:25). A most interesting reference, and one that has sparked a great deal of debate,<sup>5</sup> is St. Paul's reference to Andronicus and Junia as "outstanding among the apostles" (ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις) (Rom 16:7). Fathers of the Early Church understood this passage to mean that this man and woman (husband and wife?) were esteemed members of St. Paul's apostolic (missionary) cohort.<sup>6</sup>

These apostles served to establish and strengthen congregations in specific locations, appoint elders (pastoral overseers) in each place, and then move on to other locales where the Gospel had not been proclaimed. While connected symbiotically with already established congregations, such as those at Antioch or Philippi in both reporting (Acts 14:27) and mutual support (Phil 1:3), these missionaries seemed to function autonomously from the local churches, taking their orders from the Holy Spirit. The "apostles" are listed among other gifts given by Christ for the proclamation of the Gospel, including prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers (Eph 4:11). They served as yet one more ministry expression or structure within the larger ministry of the Gospel.

This snapshot of Gospel ministry in the New Testament, while very brief and non-technical, suggests that the Holy Spirit moved through structured and non-structured means to create faith through the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments. The unbroken thread throughout the story of Christ's mission in Acts is the ongoing ministry of the Gospel by those who heard and believed it, were baptized, and divinely equipped through their Baptism to speak the Gospel. Specific offices were raised up by the Spirit for ministry to both the churches and those beyond their earshot (Acts 20:28–32; Acts 13:2–4). These offices, however, did not replace or eclipse the ministry of the Gospel as exercised by the entire church.

## **Gospel Ministry in the LCMS**

Two thousand years later (seventeen hundred of them lived under the banner of Christendom), it should not surprise us that we find a very different picture as regards Gospel ministry today. We must immediately recognize that in contrast to the New Testament context, which was thoroughly "pre-churched" (missional), Gospel ministry in the LCMS was framed almost exclusively by the ministry worldview and priorities operating in a "churched" culture for centuries. Given that the church enjoyed institutional position and favor within the larger society, it stands

to reason that the ministry of the Gospel would take on institutional trappings as well—relocating the ministry of the Gospel from the entire church to that of a specific structure, the Office of the Holy Ministry.

Lutheran theology upholds the divine origin of this office, attributing its institution to the very words of our Lord Jesus. The Agenda to the Lutheran Service Book professes,

Hear what Holy Scripture says concerning the institution of the Office of the Holy Ministry

Jesus came and spoke to them saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be to you! As the Father sent Me, I also send 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 retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21–23)<sup>7</sup>

Our Lord indeed instituted the ministry of the Gospel, as these Scriptures attest. A missionary question arises, however, regarding our understanding of the scope of this ministry. Did our Lord with these verses institute the pastoral office particularly (as identified in AC XIV) or the activity of “teaching the Gospel and administration the sacraments” by which the Holy Spirit creates faith (AC V)—a ministry in which the entire church participates? Our LCMS practice suggests the former, the New Testament suggests the latter.

This question is critical for the LCMS as its congregations, leaders, and members steer a course into the missional waters of the “pre- and post-churched” populations of America. It is an equally critical question for those in the Synod who are charged with shaping our missionary strategy abroad in partnership with other Lutheran churches. A restrictive view of the Gospel ministry—one that binds it specifically to the ministry of the ordained clergy—disastrously affects the ministry of the Gospel, especially in missional contexts.

The Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver serves as the LCMS director of Regional Operations for the Office of International Mission and, as such, is the chief mission strategist for the LCMS world mission endeavor. In a recently published essay, he carefully laid out what he believes is a true articulation of Lutheran missionary practice.<sup>8</sup> His mission strategy explicitly places the ministry of the Gospel within the arena of the local church, and more specifically around the ministry of the called and ordained pastor.

The first assessment examines if a church has enough pastors to provide for the altars and pulpits in the church. The proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Sacraments are at the heart of salvation and the heart of the church. . . . The first dimension of this assessment is to explore whether or not the church has enough men available to preach. It evaluates if the church is using missionaries or pastors from other church bodies to serve at their pulpits and altars. It next evaluates if there are enough pastors to provide pastoral care in a responsible manner. For instance, if a congregation or preaching station only receives Communion once every six weeks because there are not enough pastors available to provide it, this would be reflected in the assessment.<sup>9</sup>

The model he espouses assumes the presence of churches on the mission field equipped with their altars, pulpits, and pastors. Sound mission strategy, however, must begin with the understanding that missional proclamation of the Gospel, by definition, takes place beyond the walls of the church, beyond its altars and pulpits. It also takes into account the power and mobility of the Word distinct from and far beyond those altars and pulpits. This understanding of the Word and, therefore, the ministry of the Gospel, is deeply rooted in our LCMS history and theology and needs to re-inform our current missional thinking. It is built on the truth that the church (and all believers) have been entrusted with the Keys and, therefore, the ministry of the Gospel. An ordained priest or pastor does not precede the church or give it life; the Gospel alone does that. All believers possess the Gospel, and from that possession they have Christ's authority to proclaim the Gospel and to call pastors to oversee that Gospel ministry in the congregation and community.

As a missionary I labored to teach this Lutheran reality to the congregations and preaching stations I served in the Philippines. Given the significant Roman Catholic influence in the Philippines, the Christians in my station believed that the Gospel belonged to me the missionary (the ordained shepherd), and so the operation of Word and Sacrament belonged to me not to all of us. Baptisms could not be performed by any other person than me, and congregations could not celebrate the Lord's Supper without me present to consecrate the elements. That created real and unnecessary hardships for the saints, as I was responsible to serve ten churches and four preaching stations. When the people understood that they actually possessed the Gospel treasure themselves (as church) and, with that treasure, the authority to "appoint elders" and organize the ministry of the Gospel in their place, they truly rejoiced; and the ministry of the Gospel exploded. All of the saints—lay and elders—proclaimed the Gospel to other people and other villages. Even non-Christians were instrumental in carrying the Gospel to new places where we did not yet have churches.



## Churched-focused Ministry

Returning again to our Lord's institution of the Gospel ministry, we find other missionary questions that need to be addressed by/for LCMS congregations and leaders in order to serve faithfully in this missionary era. Of particular note, "What (who) were the intended populations for whom our Lord instituted the ministry of the Gospel?" In the Matthew 28 passage above, Jesus specifically referenced "*the nations*," that is, the unreached peoples of the world. Jesus made no specific reference to population in the John 20 passage. However, He clearly indicated the universal focus of the ministry: "*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you*," (καθώς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ πατήρ, πέμπω ὑμᾶς). Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus identified the scope of the mission upon which His Father sent Him, "For God did not send his Son into the world (οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεός τόν υἱόν εἰς τόν κόσμον) to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). It would be totally proper then to read His words in John 20 as "*As the Father has sent me into the world, even so I am sending you.*"

The recipients for whom He instituted the Gospel ministry raise significant questions regarding the purpose and scope of that ministry. Jesus instituted it for the whole world, including all of its people groups (nations). Explicit in His words are the *unsaved peoples* of the world. Do we understand or apply the ministry in the same way? That is, do we view the Gospel ministry as a ministry *for the world*, particularly, *the unsaved*? We would not hesitate to say, "Absolutely."

However, our practical understanding of this ministry is framed for the most part by ministry to baptized Christians of local congregations. Our practice testifies that we believe it was instituted primarily for those *inside* rather than those *outside* the institutional church. Consider the brief list of duties listed in the Rite of Ordination, which the pastoral candidate promises to perform:

Will you faithfully instruct both young and old in the chief articles of Christian doctrine, will you forgive the sins of those who repent, and will you promise never to divulge the sins confessed to you? Will you minister faithfully to the sick and dying, and will you demonstrate to the church a constant and ready ministry centered in the Gospel? Will you admonish and encourage the people to a lively confidence in Christ and in holy living?<sup>10</sup>

The list focuses on pastoral responsibilities carried out within the context of the local congregation.

Where in the rite do candidates commit to proclaiming the Gospel to those outside the church, that is, the lost and erring? One might respond that the list is not meant to be exhaustive. Furthermore, that Christ's mission to those outside the church is implicit within the duties identified. That granted, we must acknowledge the problem raised by that very point—His mission "to seek and to save the lost" is at best *implied* in our ordination rite; it is not *explicitly identified*. Duties specifically

identified in the rite of ordination indicate ministry emphases, if not priorities. How does our stated set of ministry emphases compare with Christ's understanding and purpose of the ministry that He instituted? Given that the scope of the pastoral office shapes the ministry for all of the Church, what are we teaching our people regarding the mission of Christ? Gospel ministry as our Lord taught and practiced it intentionally focused on two populations: those inside His church and those outside, with particular emphasis placed on the latter (Luke 15; 19). The Lord would not have either one of these foci eclipsed.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has developed a strong and comprehensive structure (wineskin) for the provision and oversight of the Gospel ministry to those within the local congregation. It has developed excellent programs and facilities for the preparation of its pastors. It has set in place a system for the pastoral (theological and practical) oversight of both the congregations and their pastors. The appeal being made in this essay is that the LCMS develop just as strong and comprehensive structure for the other focus: Gospel ministry to the lost.

As we find ourselves, like the Early Church, immersed in a rapidly growing mission field—both in its pre- and post-churched dimensions—we need to ask missionary questions. Does the wineskin of our present Gospel ministry—developed for the most part from a churched rather than missional context—need to change? Is it sufficient and supple enough to manage the unique challenges that come with missionary expansion? Gospel ministry on a mission field is borne primarily by the baptized. What new roles do our pastors and laity need to learn in order to recover this missionary dynamic? The Book of Acts reports that the Lord of the Church attended to both the *propagation* of the Gospel and the *preservation* of the faith as the Holy Spirit equipped His baptized to proclaim the Good News and sent them into all the world. He established offices for specific missionary service (Acts 13) and for pastoral oversight of the ministry in and through local congregations (Acts 20). The wineskin of the Early Church's ministry proved supple enough for the global Gospel expansion that the Holy Spirit intended. It behooves us as faithful disciples of our risen Lord to examine our ministry wineskin and to seek the Lord of the Harvest graciously to make us an apt vessel for His missionary purpose.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Note. The ending place of a Gospel conversation is not in question. The Word of God has provided that answer. It centers in our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from the dead for all people.

<sup>2</sup> Not every population in North America fits neatly into the “post-churched” context. For example, people groups having ethnic and linguistic roots in Latin America maintain a much stronger affinity with their church (Roman Catholic) than people groups with Anglo roots. (See “*Nones*” on the Rise: *One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*. Research Study from the Pew Research Center Released October 9, 2012.)

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Preus, “The Confessions and Mission of the Church,” *The Springfielder* 39, no. 1 (June 1975): 23–24.

<sup>4</sup> Silvanus and Timothy are not mentioned by name in Paul’s reference, “Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as *apostles of Christ*” (italics added). However these men are identified as co-authors of his missionary letter to the Thessalonians. Both Silvanus and Timothy played critical roles in the founding of the congregation. Silvanus (Silas), along with St. Paul, was the first to proclaim the Gospel in Thessalonica (Acts 17). The missionary work that St. Paul and Silas conducted in Thessalonica was cut short by persecution, so St. Paul later dispatched Timothy to continue that ministry—“to establish and exhort [them] in [their] faith” in the face of ongoing affliction (1 Thes 3:2).

<sup>5</sup> Commentators divide on two issues regarding the reference to Junia (Ἰουνιά): (1) Whether or not the name refers to a man “Junias” or to a woman “Junia”; and (2) whether this person is numbered among and highly esteemed within the circle of apostles (in the less technical sense of the word as referencing the Twelve) or outstanding in the eyes of the apostles.

<sup>6</sup> “The possibility, from a purely lexical point of view, that this is a woman’s name: Ἰουνία, ας, *Junia* (Mlt-H. 155); ancient commentators took Andronicus and Junia as a married couple.” BAG; the most cited reference is from John Chrysostom (347–407): “Oh! [How] great is the devotion (φίλοσοφία) of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!” But here he does not stop, but adds another encomium besides and says, “Who were in Christ before me.” *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 11*. American Edition, Philip Schaff, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 555.

<sup>7</sup> The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 162.

<sup>8</sup> Albert B. Collver, “Ecclesiology, Mission and Partner Relations: What it Means that Lutheran Mission Plants Lutheran churches” in *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 1, no.1 (March 2014): 20–27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda*, 166.