Wilhelm Loehe and the Chippewa Outreach at Frankenmuth

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Abstract: Even though he was only the pastor of a small insignificant church in Germany, Wilhelm Loehe was an innovator in missions. This article will briefly examine Loehe's background in order to identify some of the influences that helped develop his unusual missionary motivation and that led to the founding of the Frankenmuth mission settlement as an outreach to the Chippewa Indians. It will also evaluate some of the missionary methodologies used in the outreach to the Chippewa in order to identify some of the factors that contributed to the ultimate failure of the settlement in achieving its mission.

Introduction

In 1845, thirteen German Lutherans left the small village of Neuendettelsau in Bavaria on a novel missionary enterprise. They traveled to North America to establish a settlement for the express purpose of sharing the Gospel with the Chippewa Indians in Michigan. This settlement, named Frankenmuth, was unique, since its designer envisioned that it would not only support the work of a missionary in reaching out to the Native Americans, but that the settlers themselves would be a witness to the Chippewa through the life of their Christian community.

Besides the original concept of the settlement, the venture was unusual in another way. The leadership of the Lutheran church in Germany was rationalistic at that time and not at all disposed towards missionary outreach. The initiator for both of these novelties was the pastor of a small Lutheran church in Neuendettelsau, Wilhelm Loehe.

How was it that the pastor of a small village church was able to go against the prevailing trend of the time? What was his motivation? What methods did he use, and how effective were they? This article will attempt to provide some answers to these questions.

Wilhelm Loehe's Background

Rev. Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe (known more simply as Wilhelm Loehe, or Wilhelm Löhe) was the inspiration and the driving force behind the establishment of

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the mission to the Native Americans at Frankenmuth. Loehe was a Lutheran pastor in a small village in Bavaria, but he was certainly not the typical German Lutheran pastor of his time.

Loehe was born in 1808 in Furth (near Nuremberg). Loehe had six siblings (five sisters and one brother) and his parents brought them up in a Christian home:

> His upbringing in Fürth was partly typical for a middle-class home at that time, but partly atypical. The faith and piety of the Löhe family was, in contrast to the prevailing Enlightenment faith, influenced by sixteenth-century Lutheran Orthodoxy as well as seventeenth-century pietism. Löhe's father died while he was still young, but Löhe's mother was firm in her conviction that he should have the opportunity to study theology.[1]

She sacrificed to make it possible for him to receive a good education and then to go on to theological training. After his graduation from secondary school, he began his theological study at Erlangen in 1826.

The prevailing theological movement of his day was rationalism. After the age of the Enlightenment, rationalism had spread through the Bavarian Landeskirche (territorial church). As a result, the Bible had come to be read according to the standards of human reason, so that Christianity was regarded as little more than valued moral teaching.[2]

Loehe did not embrace the prevailing rationalism. Instead, he was influenced by two of his professors to embrace an active Christian faith. Christian Krafft, a Reformed pastor, and Karl von Raumer, a natural scientist, were especially important for him. Both were members of the "revival movement," a counterpoint to rationalism.[3]

Loehe's interest in missions began "when he attended the lectures on mission history of Johann Christian Krafft (1784–1845) in 1826. In 1827, Löhe established a Mission Association to support the Basel Mission, and between November 1829 and April 1830 this circle read the book of Heinrich Loskiel on the history of the Moravians' mission to the Native Americans."[4] This exposure to mission work among Native Americans created an interest in him that did not die out and was influential in his later decision to reach out to them.

Loehe finished his theological studies in Erlangen and, in 1830, did very well on his exams. Church authorities praised his high marks with the comment, "Capable of high ecclesial offices." However, his trial sermon was not well received. It was evaluated as too "mystical" by the rationalist examiner, in spite of the fact that his exposition was based entirely upon the Lutheran doctrine of justification. Such an evaluation of his sermon meant for Loehe that from then on he would be judged as a "mystic and pietist," a serious setback for his career in the church. The church authorities never really trusted Loehe after that evaluation, and they did not want him to serve in an influential position, but rather in an obscure rural pastorate.[5]

After completing his five-year vicarage, Loehe was unable to find employment in any of the large urban churches to which he applied. Finally, in 1837, he accepted the position of pastor at Neuendettelsau. Geiger describes it as: "Neuendettelsau, located southwest of Nuremberg, was at that time an unknown and remote village."[6] Schwartz gives a more animated description: "It was so decrepit that he (Loehe) exclaimed during his first visit there, not knowing that it would be his home for 35 years until his death, 'Not dead I would want to be in that dump.'"[7]

Despite his early misgivings about the village, Loehe was an active and energetic pastor. He was a powerful preacher. He reformed the liturgy and changed other practices of the congregation in order to remove the influence of Rationalism and revive the congregation's spirit.[8]

> Alongside his congregational work in Neuendettelsau, Loehe undertook intensive theological study. The revival movement out of which he came concerned itself very little about confessional boundaries, and it now appeared to him [that] too much [was] determined by feeling[s]. Through his experience and through the study of Luther's works and the confessional writings of the Lutheran church, he arrived at the conviction that the faith must not rest solely upon feeling[s] but rather finds its strength in the "promises of God's Word," which stand "outside us." The Lutheran church and its confessions became increasingly important to [him].[9]

This was the setting for Loehe's launch into mission work and helps explain his growing interest in launching something that was distinctly Lutheran.

Loehe's Prior Involvement in Mission

Loehe's interest in mission, which had begun in seminary, continued. He

> continued to look for opportunities to be involved in mission, but was largely frustrated. In the mid-1830s, he considered traveling to the Middle East to survey mission opportunities there, but the plan fell through for financial reasons. Löhe was also prepared to support a missionary in the East Indies, but this plan was never realized because the instigator, Johann Merkel, died. During the 1830s, Löhe satisfied his desire to evangelize by being involved in at least a couple of tract societies.[10]

He supported the ecumenical Basel Mission until 1835, when the Church Missionary Society, an Anglican mission society that employed Lutheran seminary graduates, dismissed a Lutheran missionary in India over a doctrinal dispute. Loehe "became more and more interested in supporting and sending Lutheran missionaries from Bavaria."[11] As he reflected on his concept of mission, he came to the conclusion that "the commandment of Mark 16:15 ('Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation') is addressed not to a particular mission society but to the whole church."[12]

An outlet for Loehe's desire to be directly involved in missions materialized in 1840, when Friedrich Wyneken, a German pastor serving in America, wrote an appeal for workers to assist the German emigrants in America. Wyneken explained that the Lutheran church in North America was in desperate need of pastors and others willing to serve the German immigrants there.

Almost immediately, Loehe wrote an article that generated missionary enthusiasm beyond anything he had foreseen, the beginning of Loehe's missionary activity.[13] Although unintended by Loehe, the article brought in a flood of donations to help meet the need. The problem of how to use the funds was solved when two craftsmen volunteered to be trained to go and teach in America:

> Loehe housed both in Neuendettelsau and undertook their education as teachers and chaplains. Already in July 1842 they were ready to travel to North America. There arose for both the possibility of further preparation at the [Lutheran] seminary in Columbus, Ohio. The synod of Ohio was so enthused with both of these "emergency workers," as Loehe called them, that it requested fifty more students for their seminary, who would already have a similarly good preparation. Thus, Loehe built up from these beginnings a "Mission Preparation Institute." Support for this institute and many other activities was borne by the "Society for Inner Mission in the [Spirit] of the Lutheran Church" … founded by Loehe and his friends in 1849. Loehe called the work among the emigrants, who were baptized Christians, "inner mission" in contrast to "outer mission" among the "heathen."[14]

Loehe sent many more workers and these men were influential in the development of Lutheranism in America. Many of them helped to form The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the United States.

This involvement with what he called "inner mission" did not cause Loehe to forget about "outer mission." He was still concerned about Native Americans and felt a responsibility to reach out to them:

> He noted that they had been driven out from their traditional homelands and that in some places terrible atrocities had been perpetrated against them. He expressed the thought that even if Lutherans had not participated in these activities, they should still accept the responsibility for what their Protestant brethren had done. One could say, Löhe wrote, that "what Protestants had been responsible for, Protestants should correct and pay for. One could justify this sentence by saying: 'Indeed, German Protestants have not taken that responsibility upon themselves, but all the churches which emerged out of the reformation nonetheless have something in common.' One could acknowledge the responsibility of another as one's own."[15]

Loehe was motivated by compassion for the lost, but he did not see that as the ultimate reason for being involved in mission. He felt that the ultimate reason for carrying out mission was to be obedient to God's command. Ratke summarizes Loehe's views on the motivation for mission:

> It is good to have compassion for the heathen, and it is good to reach out and share the fellowship and community we experience with others. But these reasons are penultimate. The most important reason for Christians to be active in mission is because *God* commands it. God commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves. God commands that we reach out and draw into the household of God those who do not yet know about genuine community.[16]

The Frankenmuth Mission

In 1844, Loehe developed a plan that brought together his ideas of Christian community and outer mission. He proposed to send a group of Christians who would form a Christian community among or near the Native Americans. This community would support a missionary and also be a witness itself to the Native Americans through its conduct:

> In the instructions which Loehe drew up for [Georg Wilhelm Christoph] Hattstaedt (1811–1884) before the latter's departure for America (1844), it was evident that the former was thinking of the Indians and, more, that he was seeking a means of combining the activities of the Inner Mission among the Germans with those of missions among the North American aborigines. Would it not be possible, he asked, for a minister of a German Lutheran congregation to be likewise a missionary to the heathen? Could not Christian community life serve as a model to those ignorant of or unaffiliated with Christianity? Preaching and Christian practice could be made to function jointly, could they not?
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> Ever mindful of the hazardous plight of the Lutheran church incident to the German diaspora and eager to set up a Christian community which by conduct and life would show the Indians "how beautiful and good life with Jesus was," Loehe and his friends conceived the idea of founding a mission colony in North America either among or in the neighborhood of Indian tribes.[17]

While many Germans were emigrating to North America at that time in order to escape poverty and to make a better life for themselves, the group selected to form this new colony was different. They volunteered and were accepted because of their desire to help carry the Gospel to the Native Americans. Twelve local residents from Neuendettelsau and nearby Rosstal volunteered and were accepted:

> These colonists, young, vigorous, and unmarried, except for one couple, Loehe had known for years. Want and poverty did not drive them from their fatherland. In fact they clung with genuine love to their homes…. Spiritually and ecclesiastically they far surpassed the majority of emigrants. During the winter of 1844–1845 the members of this party met on Saturday evenings and Sundays at Neuendettelsau to discuss matters relative to the founding of the colony and to prepare to face the problems which were likely to confront them.[18]

Friedrich August Craemer, who had been teaching German at Oxford, heard of Loehe's plans and volunteered to be the pastor/missionary of the colony.

While working to select and train the colonists, Loehe also worked to find a suitable site for the mission colony. He corresponded with Friedrich Schmid of Ann Arbor, who led the Lutheran churches that had formed the Michigan Synod. Schmid made a trip to the Saginaw Valley and selected a site for the colony on the Cass River.

The group traveled to Michigan in 1845 and founded the town of Frankenmuth. Craemer functioned as their pastor and as the missionary. He opened a school in Frankenmuth to teach the children of the Native Americans and traveled widely in order to establish preaching stations in their villages.

In 1846, Loehe sent a second group of about ninety people to Frankenmuth. He complained about the large number in this group, since he felt that many of them were not properly motivated by the missionary cause. Later, three other colonies were also founded in the area: Frankentrost, about six miles north of Frankenmuth, in 1847; Frankenlust, twenty-two miles north of Frankenmuth, in 1848; and Frankenhilf (called Richville today), about nine miles northeast of Frankenmuth.[19]

These settlements were successful in that the German communities grew and survived. But they failed in their primary mission as an outreach to the Native Americans. Ludwig cites several reasons for their lack of success:

> While the immigrant communities flourished, the mission to the Native Americans was not a success. As one may expect, there were some problems unanticipated by Löhe: The colonists knew nothing of the Native Americans' appearance, behavior, culture, or language. Moreover, the Native Americans were already leaving the settlement areas in search of better hunting grounds away from the cleared lands of Europeans. Efforts to change their nomadic habits and to "Germanize" and "Lutheranize" them were not very successful. Thus, in Frankenmuth, for instance, only about thirty-five Native Americans were taught and baptized.[20]

Evaluation of the Missionary Methods

In this section, the missionary methods used by Loehe and the Frankenmuth colony will be evaluated in an attempt to learn from what was done. Both positive and negative methods, attitudes, and actions will be listed. The following are some of the positive factors in the Frankenmuth outreach:

1. Loehe connected mission with Christian community. This could be an important factor to consider in reaching out to cultures where community is valued much more highly than individualism, and the support of a community of believers is important. The use of a community is also useful in its function of providing encouragement and support for a missionary.
2. Loehe selected people with the proper motivation to carry out the mission. He looked for those motivated by the Gospel, not just by a desire for adventure or financial gain.
3. Before sending them, Loehe provided training to the group in theology and discussed how things would operate when they were "on the field."
4. Loehe coordinated his efforts with Christians already in the area. He used them to help select a suitable site and tried to connect his work with theirs.
5. Craemer met with local chiefs in order to explain the purpose of the mission and to gain their support and cooperation:

> Among the first contacts, one occurred which inspired the colonists with some hope for the success of the mission. It was the first visit of chief Thouas, a sober and intelligent man. With him was an interpreter from his own tribe, one who had learned English in a Methodist mission school at Fort Gratiot. The two had breakfast with the colonists and discussed the proposed Indian school which the latter were about to institute. In this school, Craemer said, the Indian children were to receive instruction in English and in religion through the mediation of an interpreter. On his part the chief promised that the children of his tribe would attend this school. [21]

Greenholt, reporting on a different visit, illustrates that these visits were also necessary to clear up misconceptions that the Native Americans may have had about the mission:

> When Craemer explained his purpose in coming, the chief manifested slight interest. The reason for this, Craemer said, was that when the chief once visited Frankenmuth to interview the pastor he received the erroneous notion that if he were to become a Christian he would have to sit at home all day and study. Such a life, asserted the chief, would kill him. The wife of the chief

> inquired about the report current that her children would be dragged away into strange lands if they went to Frankenmuth.[22]

6. Craemer remained dedicated to the mission in spite of only limited success:

> Gradually, as a result of pastor Craemer's many visits to the Indians, he succeeded in setting up three main preaching stations which he endeavored to serve at least once a month. One writer says that a trip to the Pine River Indians alone required a whole week.
>
> In order to learn the Indian language and to preach the gospel to the Indians Craemer did not shun heat or cold, rain or snow, dangers [in the wilderness] nor did he decline to live in the tents and huts of the Indians or to eat with them. Yet, he learned, as did the majority of the missionaries, that, while the Indians listened quite patiently to what was said, they refused to be perceptibly influenced by it. On the other hand, the Indian parents frequently did let their children attend the school in Frankenmuth.[23]

7. Craemer translated some Scripture and other materials into the Chippewa language:

> One of the first things he aimed to do was to provide reading materials in the native tongue. For this task the German had to be translated into English and then into the Chippewa forms. With the [help of an] interpreter Craemer produced an Indian translation of the Gospel of Matthew and a small hymn book which also contained the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, several collects from the Common Prayer Book and some good songs.[24]

There were also a number of negative factors which ultimately outweighed the positives and contributed to the failure of the mission:

1. The training which the colonists received did not include anything about other cultures. They therefore held to the prevailing beliefs of that time which said that European culture was both superior to the culture of the Native Americans and that it was closely tied to the Christian message—this was how Christians should live. Greenholt gives some of Craemer's views on this:

> Under such circumstances it seemed urgent that a church should be built just as soon as possible. With a church the missionary would have more opportunity to discipline the Indians and correct the habits of which they did not approve. He believed that it would be easier to insist that the men refrain from smoking, that they dress

> in the European fashion and that order be preserved, if there were a church.[25]

2. In operating the school, Craemer practiced extraction from Native American culture, instead of trying to indigenize the message:

> Craemer purposed opening a school at Frankenmuth to which the children of the tribes would be invited. He aimed to have more control over the lives of the Indian children than would have been afforded by having the children simply during the hours of instruction. He thought it would be harmful to have the children remain with their parents.[26]

3. The Native Americans were somewhat nomadic and were already leaving the area around Frankenmuth to find better hunting grounds away from the cleared land of the settlers. As a result, they did not have much contact with the mission community itself, and whole idea of using a fixed settlement as the model for outreach was not well-suited to their way of life.

4. Instead of cooperation, there was competition between the Lutheran outreach to the Native Americans and that being done by the Methodists. This often led to one side criticizing the other in the attempt to influence the Native Americans.

Since the Chippewa were leaving their area, in 1848 the Frankenmuthers helped to establish a mission station farther north, named Bethany. Here missionary Eduard Baierlein lived with his family, ministered to the Chippewa, and attempted to persuade them to settle on the mission station. This venture also failed, and Greenholt summarizes the reasons for the failure:

> The reasons why the Bethany mission failed after twelve years (1848–1860) of effort might be summarized thus: the difficult task of keeping in contact with the Indians due mainly to their roaming habits; the futility of all attempts to interest the men; the failure to make impressions by using meaningless theological concepts; the advent of the white settler; the machinations of the trader and vendor of "fire-water"; the competition of the Methodists; the desire of the Indian primarily for material benefits; the attachment to native customs; the evil influence of the white men's behavior; the Indian's feeling of the superiority of his race over all others; the almost continual need of an interpreter; and the establishment of a Chippewa Indian reservation in Isabella County.[27]

Conclusion

Wilhelm Loehe was a visionary who had a true heart for missions. His family was influential in developing his faith, which was the basis for his eventual

involvement in missions. His actual involvement was greatly influenced by the teaching and example of two of his university professors. He, in turn, motivated many others to be involved in mission and helped create ways for them to do so.

Although there were many positive aspects of Loehe's efforts and the Frankenmuth missionary settlement in their outreach to the Native Americans, it ultimately failed because of the lack of understanding of and respect for the Chippewa culture. This misunderstanding led them to use a fixed settlement to reach out to a nomadic people and to a policy of extracting the converts from that culture in order to "Christianize" them by teaching them European culture.

Endnotes

[1] David C. Ratke, "Wilhelm Löhe and his Significance for Mission and Ministry," *Word & World* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 137.
[2] Erika Geiger, "The Biography of Wilhelm Loehe: Insights Into his Life and Work," *Currents in Theology & Mission* 33, no. 2 (April 2006): 87.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Frieder Ludwig, "Mission and Migration: Reflections on the Missionary Concept of Wilhelm Löhe," *Word & World* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 158.
[5] Geiger, "Biography of Wilhelm Loehe."
[6] Ibid.
[7] Hans Schwarz, "Wilhelm Loehe in the Context of the Nineteenth Century," *Currents in Theology & Mission* 33, no. 2 (April 2006): 98.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Geiger, "Biography of Wilhelm Loehe."
[10] David C. Ratke, *Confession and Mission, Word and Sacrament: The Ecclesial Theology of Wilhelm Löhe* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 139.
[11] Ludwig, "Mission and Migration," 161.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ratke, "Wilhelm Loehe and his Significance," 138.
[14] Geiger, "Biography of Wilhelm Loehe."
[15] Ludwig, "Mission and Migration," 159–60.
[16] Ratke, *Confession and Mission*, 143.
[17] Homer Reginald Greenholt, "A Study of Wilhelm Loehe, his Colonies and the Lutheran Indian Missions in the Saginaw Valley of Michigan" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1937), 63.
[18] Ibid., 69.
[19] Ludwig, "Mission and Migration," 164.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Greenholt, "Study of Wilhelm Loehe," 163.
[22] Ibid., 171.
[23] Ibid., 173.
[24] Ibid., 178.
[25] Ibid., 207.
[26] Ibid., 103.
[27] Ibid., 204.