

Great Things through Little Preachers¹

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Abstract: Martin Luther's high esteem for the pastoral office is well known, well documented, and well loved. Although Luther did not write extensively on the Acts of the Apostles, he does return again and again in a variety of contexts to the apparent contradiction of the "little preachers": Stephen, Philip, and Apollos. Luther's discussions of the way God used these men forces us to ask important questions about our understanding of the task laid upon the church today and the situation(s) of the church around the world. Luther's words also invite us to celebrate the great things God continues to do through His "little preachers."

Perhaps the only connection this article has with Eduard Arndt and his 1913 arrival in China is that the path my thoughts took to get to this place has been every bit as circuitous as Arndt's road to China. I have never regarded myself as a missiologist by any stretch of the imagination; on the contrary, I used to say I was the thing that missiologists studied. Now, I can't even claim that about myself. So what can a former missionary who now serves as a professor of exegetical theology at a seminary bring to the conversation?

In recent reading, I happened to come across some of Luther's reflections on the significance of Stephen and Philip in the Acts of the Apostles. I know of no systematic treatment of Acts by Luther, no series of lectures or sermons, and so I don't generally think to consult him on that book. It will most likely not raise esteem for Dr. Luther in missiological circles to learn that, when he opens the Book of Acts, he finds there not a great treatise on mission strategy, nor an inspiring Mission Sunday sermon, but rather a treatment, actually an incarnation, we might say, of the doctrine of justification. "Look at all the preaching of SS. Peter, Paul, Stephen, and Philip," Luther writes in his 1546 Preface to the book, "You will find that it all adds up to one thing: we must come into grace and be justified only through faith in Christ, without law and works."²

Therefore this book might well be called a commentary on the epistles of St. Paul. For what Paul teaches and insists upon with words and passages of Scripture, St. Luke here points out and proves with examples and instances to show that it has happened and must happen in the way St. Paul teaches,

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namely, that no law, no work justifies men, but only faith in Christ. Here, then, in this book you find a beautiful mirror in which you can see that this is true: *Sola fides justificat*, “faith alone justifies.” For all the examples and incidents contained in this book are sure and comforting testimonies to this doctrine; they neither deceive nor lie to you.³

This is not a very promising start for a paper on Martin Luther as a champion of global mission, but elsewhere in his writings Luther does say some things that I think have some relevance for the context of this article.

To begin with, Luther is very clear that God uses us men to accomplish His work. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther had written to Erasmus:

[God] does not work without us, because it is for this very thing he has recreated and preserves us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him. Thus it is through us he preaches, shows mercy to the poor, comforts the afflicted.⁴

Note that Luther is here speaking in the context of regeneration and preservation. The “us,” therefore is really all of us, and the description of the work is meant to be equally inclusive. God uses all of us to accomplish all of His work.

These thoughts are developed and made even more specific in his 1523 thesis entitled “That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture.” What follows is a fairly long quote, but it is important for understanding the point Luther is trying to make.

For no one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest, as Christ says, John 6[:45], “They shall all be taught by God,” and Psalm 45[:7], “God has anointed you with the oil of gladness on account of your fellows.” These fellows are the Christians, Christ’s brethren, who with him are consecrated priests, as Peter says too, 1 Peter 2[:9], “You are a royal priesthood so that you may declare the virtue of him who called you into his marvelous light.”

But if it is true that they have God’s word and are anointed by him, then it is their duty to confess, to teach, and to spread [his word], as Paul says, 1 Corinthians 4 [II Cor. 4:13], “Since we have the same spirit of faith, so we speak,” and the prophet says in Psalm 116[:10], “I came to believe, therefore I speak.” And in Psalm 51[:13], he [God] says of all Christians, “I will teach the ungodly your ways, and sinners will return to you.” Here again it is certain that a Christian not only has the right and power to teach God’s word but has the duty to do so on pain of losing his soul and of God’s disfavor.

If you say, “How can this be? If he is not called to do so he may indeed not preach, as you yourself have frequently taught,” I answer that here you should put the Christian into two places. First, if he is in a place where there are no Christians he needs no other call than to be a Christian, called and anointed by God from within. Here it is his duty to preach and to teach the gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians, because of the duty of brotherly love, even though no man calls him to do so. This is what Stephen did, Acts 6–7, even though he had not been ordered into any office by the apostles. Yet he still preached and did great signs among the people. Again, Philip, the deacon and Stephen’s comrade, Acts 8[:5], did the same thing even though the office of preaching was not commanded to him either. Again, Apollos did so too, Acts 18[:25]. In such a case a Christian looks with brotherly love at the need of the poor and perishing souls and does not wait until he is given a command or letter from a prince or bishop. For need breaks all laws and has none. Thus it is the duty of love to help if there is no one else who could or should help.⁵

*Denn nott bricht alle gesetz und hatt keyn gesetz.*⁶ “For need breaks all laws and has none.” That has the ring of a German proverb to it, but neither the Weimar nor the American editions of the text note any source for it.

These three, Stephen, Philip, and Apollos are regularly mentioned together as examples of men who don’t fit particularly well into sixteenth-century models of the preaching office, hence the objection at the beginning of the quote.

In his treatise entitled *Concerning the Ministry*, published in the same year, Luther brings these three preachers together again. You will note the similarities with the previous quote, but you will also observe a new thought or two.

If we ask for an example [to show that we have been born and called into such a ministry of the Word through baptism], there is one in Acts 18[:24ff.], where we read of Apollos who came to Ephesus without call or ordination, and taught fervently, powerfully confuting the Jews. By what right, I ask, did he exercise the ministry of the Word except by the general right common to all Christians, as described in I Cor. 14[:30], “If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent,” and in I Pet. 2[:9], “That you might declare his wonderful deeds”? This man was afterward even made an apostle without the formality of ordination, and not only functioned in the ministry of the Word but also proved himself useful in many ways to those who had already come to faith. In the same way any Christian should feel obligated to act, if he saw the need and was competent to fill it, even without a call from the community. How much more then should he do so if he is asked and called by the brethren who are his equals, or by the whole community?

Another example is provided by Stephen and Philip, who were ordained only to the service at the tables [Acts 6:5, 6]. Yet the one wrought signs and wonders among the people, disputed with members of the synagogue and refuted the council of the Jews with the word of the Spirit [Acts 6:8ff.], and the other converted Samaritans and travelled to Azotus and Caesarea [Acts 8:5ff., 40]. By what right and authority, I ask? Certainly they were not asked or called by anyone, but they did it on their own initiative and by reason of a common law, since the door was open to them, and they saw the need of a people who were ignorant and deprived of the Word. How much more readily they would have done it had they been asked or called by anyone or by the community! And the eunuch converted by Philip [Acts 8:36], whom we may reasonably believe remained a Christian, undoubtedly taught the Word of God to many, since he had the command to make known the wonderful deeds of God who called him from darkness into his marvelous light [I Pet. 2:9]. From his word resulted the faith of many, since the Word of God does not return in vain [Isa. 55:11]. From faith sprang a church, and the church through the Word received and exercised a ministry of baptizing and teaching, and of all the other functions enumerated above. All these things a eunuch accomplished through no other right than that inherent in baptism and faith, especially in places lacking any other ministers.⁷

Here Luther looks beyond the initial question of how these three uncalled men found themselves preaching and focuses our attention on the manner and outcome of their work. Apollos, the “lay apostle,” proved himself useful and competent. Stephen’s preaching was accompanied by signs and wonders. Philip’s work led to the establishment of an entire church body. One would not expect such things to accompany ministries that did not enjoy the blessing of God.

Finally, Luther compares the work of these “little preachers” to that of the apostles themselves. In his *circa* 1530 *Second Book of Isaiah*, Luther writes:

This is what happens to the apostles. Under the appearance of barrenness they bring forth many children. This is a comfort to us so that we may not despair. If there is no evidence of our descendants, they will come nevertheless, while we are unaware of it, and cities are converted day by day. So it happened to the apostles as they went about in the world that the Gospel would speed into an area before the apostles came there. So Philip converted Samaria, and the Ethiopian taught Samaria. “My Word shall not return to Me empty” (Is. 55:11). Today, too, we see God accomplishing great things through little preachers. It is a grammatical figure to say that he is with child who by God’s design every day strives to bring forth, as it really comes to pass. But the ungodly are like mountains in labor, but a mouse and a blade of straw are brought forth [which, apparently, is not very

much]. The godly, on the contrary, sit in hopelessness and do not think they will bring forth, and yet they are the ones that do. Summary: The Word of the Lord will run and fly when we do not expect it. This is a wonderful state of affairs: The daughter of Zion will bear children, not thinking that she will. So in our times everything about us seems barren with never any prospects of bearing children. It is not to be thought of. But when the time comes, there are countless children, so that we say, “Where do these children come from?”⁸

This is a beautiful passage, and any of several of the phrases Luther uses here could also stand as a summary of Acts: It is the testimony that, in spite of the appearance of barrenness, many children are born; it is the travelogue in which the Gospel speeds ahead of the apostles who race to catch up with it; it is the field where we see the Word of the Lord run and fly; it is the record of the Lord accomplishing great things through little preachers.

All of this is background, context, and introduction to the one place where Luther actually intends to comment on the story of Stephen: his sermon for St. Stephen’s Day from the Church Postil of 1522.⁹ The main body of the sermon is taken up with an exposition of “Stephen’s Example of Faith.” Interestingly, Luther focuses on the point that “building churches does not secure God’s favor,” a valid application of Stephen’s words about Solomon’s temple, but not one I was expecting to find in Luther. We are well into the message when Luther takes up the question that he must have thought was on the minds of many of his hearers: Should an ordinary layman be allowed to preach?¹⁰ I ask you to indulge me one last time in quoting Luther at length.

Though Stephen was not appointed to preach—the apostles, as stated, reserved that office to themselves—but to perform the duties of a steward, yet when he went to the market-place and mingled among the people, he immediately created a stir by performing signs and wonders, as the epistle says, and he even censured the rulers. Had the Pope and his followers been present, they certainly would have inquired as to his credentials—his Church passport and his ecclesiastical character; and had he been lacking a bald pate [head] and a prayer-book, undoubtedly he would have been committed to the flames as a heretic since he was not a priest or a clergyman. These titles, which the Scriptures accord all Christians, the Papists have appropriated to themselves alone, terming all other men “the laity,” and themselves “the Church,” as if the laity were not a part of the Church. At the same time these people of boasted refinement and nobility do not in a single instance fill the office or do the work of a priest, of a clergyman or of the Church. They but dupe the world with their human devices.

The precedent of Stephen holds good. His example gives all men authority to preach wherever they can find hearers, whether it be in a building or at the market-place. He does not confine the preaching of God's Word to bald pates and long gowns. At the same time he does not interfere with the preaching of the apostles. He attends to the duties of his own office and is readily silent where it is the place of the apostles to preach.¹¹

Now, unless you simply take delight in reading Luther, you're probably wondering what all of this is about. My primary reasons for sharing these words of Luther have more to do with questions raised by Luther's words than with the answers provided. On the one hand, I think it is very refreshing and encouraging to see Luther acknowledge the rich and the necessary variety in the way the Church has carried out her calling with regard to the world. I think Luther perhaps even felt himself to be among the "little preachers" that God uses. In commenting on Psalm 82, Luther wrote:

But perhaps you will say to me, "Why do you, by your books, teach throughout the world, when you are only preacher in Wittenberg?" I answer: I have never wanted to do it and do not want to do it now. I was forced and driven into this position in the first place, when I had to become Doctor of Holy Scripture against my will. Then, as a Doctor in a general free university, I began, at the command of pope and emperor, to do what such a doctor is sworn to do, expounding the Scriptures for all the world and teaching everybody. Once in this position, I have had to stay in it, and I cannot give it up or leave it yet with a good conscience, even though both pope and emperor were to put me under the ban for not doing so. For what I began as a Doctor, made and called at their command, I must truly confess to the end of my life.¹²

I don't want to misrepresent Luther; he is adamant about the central importance of the preaching office even in the evangelization of the world. He constantly reminds his readers of the need for order in every place and time of the Church's life. Still, he, as subservient to the Word, must acknowledge the presence and the wonder of these "little preachers," of the men and women who find themselves by necessity and by circumstance the voices of God for neighbor and world.

What most attracted my attention to Luther's writing, however, is the question it raises for us very directly of the way we view the situation we are in when speaking of Chinese mission in the twenty-first century. In the passage I quoted above from Luther's treatise on the Christian assembly, he tells the reader that he must decide in which of "two places" a person finds himself. Are there other Christians around or not? Is there a Church there or not? Is there an established ordained ministry there or not? From Luther's perspective, how a Christian behaves and the perception of the task confronting the church will be greatly affected by the answers provided to these questions. I suspect that much of the frustration we experience in the conversations

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among us concerning mission strategy, policy, and practice stems from the fact that we may have very different understandings of the situation in which we carry out our service and live out our lives—especially in the complex and ever-changing Chinese context.

Finally, in a statement that may leave him open to the charge of understatement, Ingemar Öberg has noted that “Luther is not much involved himself in the concrete problems of foreign mission.”¹³ You know even better than I do myself that this is also true of almost the whole of our dogmatic tradition. As we work together as a church to nurture a living and growing understanding of Lutheran work in the Chinese world, we will require both the contributions of our great theological heritage and the rich history of experience of which the past century of Chinese work is no small part. It is my prayer and hope that we will be able to keep alive the great Lutheran tradition of *table* talk and sit down together at tables around the world and work out in fear and trembling the way we can best continue to serve as God’s “little preachers.” And it is my hope and prayer that it won’t simply be *table talk*.

Endnotes

¹ This article is adapted from a paper delivered at a conference held in connection with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the arrival of Eduard Arndt, LCMS missionary in China. The theme of the conference was “Lutheran Mission Works to the Chinese People, Past, Present, and Future.” It was held at the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary, Kowloon, Hong Kong on October 26, 2013. The Lutheran Church—Hong Kong Synod (LCHKS) Literature Department granted permission to publish this article, as it along with photos was previously published in the *Lutheran Bimonthly* 521 (Dec. 2013).

² Martin Luther, “Preface to the Acts of the Apostles” (1546) in *Luther’s Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 364.

³ *Ibid.*.

⁴ Martin Luther, “Bondage of the Will” (1525) in American Edition *Luther’s Works, Vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 243.

⁵ Martin Luther, “That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture” (1523) in American Edition *Luther’s Works, Vol. 39: Church and Ministry I*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 309–310.

⁶ Martin Luther, “Das eyn Christliche versammlung odder gemeyne recht und macht habe, alle lere tzu urteylen und lerer tzu beruffen, eyn und abtsetzen, Grund und ursach aus der Schrift” (English: “That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture”) 1523 in *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 11* (Weimar: Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1900), 412.

⁷ Martin Luther, “Concerning the Ministry” (1523) in American Edition *Luther’s Works, Vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 37–38.

⁸ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Isaiah Chapters 40–66” (1529ff.) in American Edition *Luther’s Works, Vol. 17: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), Is 66:7.

⁹ Martin Luther, *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. 3.1–2*, ed. John Lenker; trans. John Lenker et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 194–211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 206–207.

¹² Martin Luther, “Commentary of Psalm 82” (1530) in American Edition *Luther’s Works, Vol. 13: Selected Psalms II*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), Ps 82:4.

¹³ Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, trans. Dean Apel (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 198.