



## *Missiologia Crucis: Martin Luther's Missiology*

J. Tristan Hurley  
Adjunct Professor  
L.R. Scarborough College  
at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary  
thurley@covenantfw.org

Martin Luther is a widely studied individual; and for good reason. Luther continues to stand as the ever-intriguing character that theologically and literally separated from the Roman Church and began the Protestant Reformation.<sup>1</sup> There are scholars who devote themselves to specializing in Luther's understanding of Scripture, of justification, of the papacy and even his eschatology. Yet throughout such a vast array of research devoted to Martin Luther, there is not adequate research on the missiology of Martin Luther. For the most part, any discussion of Martin Luther and missions often reveal negative connotations; and for good reason. Throughout his theological career Luther never penned a work directly attributed to Christian missions. Therefore one may ask, "Why didn't Martin Luther direct a volume to missiology?" "Why did Luther not see fit to emphasize and begin a modern missionary movement?" Such questions do present plausible issues that should be discussed among scholars. This research will develop the missiology of Martin Luther by looking at Luther's theological understanding of missions and his scriptural understanding of missions.

First we will look briefly at several reasons as to why Luther is often disregarded in terms of Historical Missiology. Second will be an investigation into Luther's theological and biblical understanding of *missio* by looking at Luther's thoughts regarding key missiological Scripture passages. Finally we will conclude with the idea that Luther should not be disregarded when it comes to missiology, rather he should be emphasized as a man who deeply connected missions with the daily life of a professing Christian.

<sup>1</sup>David Bosch writes, "The Roman Catholic paradigm experienced a crisis in the late Middle Ages; in time the force of change would usher in a new era. The person who became the catalyst in introducing a new paradigm, was Martin Luther." David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 239.

### Objections to a Luther Missiology

Throughout the years a variety of scholars have painted an overall negative view of Luther regarding missions. The most notable of remarks was from Gustav Warneck in the early twentieth century. Warneck suggested that Luther, along with other individuals of the Reformation, had no interest with the outside world.<sup>2</sup> Not only did Luther lack any interest in the outside world but Warneck suggested that Luther lacked a vision for a continuing missional task.<sup>3</sup> Luther was accused of knowing the missional explorations of the past, but instead of continuing such he merely remained focused on Wittenberg. Along the same lines Luther is hardly mentioned in Stephen Neill's *A History of Christian Missions*. Neill disagrees with Warneck's accusations that Luther was not interested in the world outside Germany and that Luther never grasped a missional outlook. For instance Luther attributed several of his writings to situations concerning both the Jews and the Turks.<sup>4</sup> While Neill does disagree with Warneck's strict accusations, Neill still places negative connotation on Luther and missions. "It is clear that the idea of the steady progress of the preaching of the Gospel through the world is not foreign to his thought. Yet when everything favorable has been said ... it all amounts to exceedingly little."<sup>5</sup> Neill does not even take the time to discuss Luther's contributions to missions; rather, he sums up the Reformation thought of missions by merely suggesting a three page section in H.W. Gensichen's *Missionsgeschichte der neueren Zeit*.<sup>6</sup>

Another twentieth century scholar who wrote in a negative manner of Luther was Kenneth Scott Latourette. Latourette praises Luther for his stance against the Roman Church, but concludes that Luther lacked an organized missions movement due to a division within Protestant thought.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>A reason for Warneck's harsh attack on Luther's missiology is mostly due to a misunderstanding of what "missions" is. Gustav Warneck, *Abriss einer Geschichte der protestantischen Missionen von der Reformation bis auf die Gegenwart: mit einem Anhang über die katholischen Missionen* (Berlin: Martin Warneck, 1910).

<sup>3</sup>Warneck wrote, "The comprehension of a continuous missionary duty of the Church was limited among the Reformers and their successors by a narrow-minded dogmatism combined with a lack of historical sense." John Warwick Montgomery, "Luther and the Missionary Challenge," in *Defense of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1970), 159. See also, Ingemar Oberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 1.

<sup>4</sup>See Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1990), 189

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Christian World Mission in Our Day* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 28. See also Latourette's *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Vol. 3, Three Centuries of Advance 1500–1800 AD* (New York: Harper, 1971) for another negative criticism of Reformation missions, "In the sixteenth century, the heyday of Roman Catholic missionary activity, Protestants made almost no attempt to propagate the faith outside Europe" (Ibid., 42).

Why is it that scholars through the twentieth century were so critical of Luther's missiology?<sup>8</sup> It is true that Luther never dedicated a book to missions or organized a massive foreign mission expedition to the new world, but Luther did hold to a distinct understanding of missions and it is understandable as to why he headquartered himself in Wittenberg.

### The Outlawed Pastor

Overall there are two specific reasons as to why Luther was occupied in Germany throughout his career: (1) a temporal reasoning and (2) a theological reasoning. Concerning the temporal reasoning, Luther spent the majority of his career in Wittenberg not because of a rejection of foreign missions, but because Luther was literally both an outlaw and an enemy of the Roman Church. On the one hand Luther gained a great deal of positive attention for his writings. On the other hand, Luther made a large number of enemies in those loyal to the papacy. In June 1520 Luther was officially excommunicated by Pope Leo X in the bull *Exsurge Domine*. Luther was given sixty days to recant his position or he would be condemned a heretic and treated as such. With Luther being a convicted heretic he was under constant distress of being kidnapped, tortured, and murdered.

Not only was Luther a condemned heretic, the papacy was in constant contact with German nobility concerning the capture of Luther. However, Luther had many of the German princes on his side, particularly Frederick the Wise who convinced Charles V to arrange the Diet of Worms. Charles V faced a riot if he sent Luther to be killed and faced hostility from the Roman Church if he failed to deliver Luther. Nearly the whole German population was for and dedicated to Luther; he was the hero of Germany. "At the present all of Germany is in a decided uproar. Nine-tenths put up the battle cry, 'Luther!' and the other tenth, 'Death to the Roman curia!'"<sup>9</sup> Not only was Luther a condemned heretic, but in accordance with papal law Charles V officially declared Martin Luther an outlaw of the Roman Empire with the Edict of Worms. This meant that anyone could strike Luther down, for any reason and not be charged for murder; Luther was both excommunicated

<sup>8</sup>A big reason for the negative views concerning Luther's missiology can be attributed to a misunderstanding of what "missions" is. Warneck in particular is guilty of comparing Luther to the missional developments of the 19th and 20th centuries, the golden age of modern missions. David Bosch writes, "several scholars have argued that a judgment such as Warneck's implies summoning the Reformers before the tribunal of the modern missionary movement and finding them guilty for not having subscribed to a definition of mission which did not even exist in their own time." David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis), 244.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Kalkoff, ed., *Die Depeschen des Nuntius Alexander vom Wornere Reichstage 1521*, trans. James M. Kittleson in 1986 (Leipzig: 1886), 43, quoted in James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 158.

and declared an outlaw.<sup>10</sup> Based on this information it is not difficult to understand why Luther remained in Germany throughout his career. The German people and princes protected Luther from those loyal to the papacy; if Luther were to leave Germany on a grand missional expedition he possibly would have been captured and killed. Often times scholars overlook Luther's temporal restraints in regards to his missional movement.

It would seem like the reality of excommunication and public exile would be enough for stubborn missiologists and historians to excuse Luther from his absence of foreign missions but such is not the case. In terms of theological reasons as to why Luther remained in Germany throughout his career, there are two particular reasons which will be discussed. The first reason is due to Luther's view and understanding of the Roman Church and his part in reform. Quite simply, Luther's main intention with his career was not to be a foreign missionary, but to protect and lead the true church. It is true that Luther was aware of the past grand missiological expeditions of the Roman Church.<sup>11</sup> In response to Warneck's accusations against Luther's appearing blandness of missions, Werner Elert replied:

Poor Luther! Instead of founding a missionary society, accompanying Cortez to Mexico, or at least assuring for himself a professorship of missionary science, he devoted himself, of all things, to the reformation of the church! ... How could Luther, who expounded the Psalms, the Prophets, and Paul, have overlooked the universal purpose of the mission of Christ and of His Gospel?<sup>12</sup>

David Bosch notes, "In fact, he provided the church's missionary enterprise with clear and important guidelines and principles."<sup>13</sup>

Martin Luther was devoted to the reform of the church. Luther's goal was to return the church to a biblical reality from several distorted traditions that rose throughout the middle ages; it is quite clear that such a task took Luther's full attention. The question can be raised then, "Why did Luther

<sup>10</sup>James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 149–68. For other fine assessments of such situations pertaining to Martin Luther see also, Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon, 1993), Oskar Thulin, *A Life of Luther* (Fortress, 1958), Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Martin Luther: Hero of the Reformation* (New York: AMS, 1973) and John M. Todd, *Martin Luther: A Biographical Study* (Maryland: Newman, 1964).

<sup>11</sup>No one can deny that the Roman Church did perform such expeditions. Stephen Neill contributes standard historical work concerning the missional work of the Roman Church through the middle ages. While the intentions of the Roman Church in their missiological expeditions can be questioned, the reality can not be. Even Neill points out that much of the "evangelistic" expeditions of the middle ages were highly political rather than genuinely spiritual. Even in Luther's own time there were "missionary" monks, such as Francis Xavier and the Jesuits. Neill, *Christian Missions*, 120–50.

<sup>12</sup>John Montgomery, "Luther and the Missionary Challenge," in *Defense of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1970), 162.

<sup>13</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 244.

not organize a mission movement in his later career, after his dealings with the Roman Church?" Even in Luther's later career his attention remained devoted to the reform of the church, his concentration fixed on directing believers in proper scriptural, ecclesial and theological understanding.

The second theological reason as to why Luther remained in Germany throughout his life is due to his view of the pastoral ministry. Martin Luther held a strict understanding of pastoral ministry which largely played a part in his staying in Wittenberg throughout his career. Ulrich Asendorf suggests that based on Luther's sermons it is quite safe to say that he firmly believed that God, Jesus Christ, and the Trinity are most clearly revealed in a proper pastoral ministry.<sup>14</sup> While Martin Luther largely developed the idea of the priesthood of believers, he continued to hold to the idea that not every believer is called to preach. Every believer is called to serve and comfort, but the role of preaching/pastor is unique:

For Luther, the minister's calling is not only a matter of church order but a fundamental distinction between law and Gospel; that is, the minister is not called to reign in a kind of works righteousness but to be a servant to the Gospel. For that reason, Luther considers it the highest calling.<sup>15</sup>

Luther considered the role of the pastor to be of utmost importance. Both Theodore Tappert and Scott Hendrix suggest that the very thing that continued to drive and encourage Luther throughout his career was his pastoral heart. Tappert writes that Luther's career began and ended with pastoral concern.<sup>16</sup> Hendrix, in his *Luther and the Papacy*, clearly paints a portrait of Luther as a devoted pastor. Hendrix suggests that by 1517, even prior to the indulgence debates, Luther had developed a heart for the common believer and ultimately recognized that it was the church's responsibility to nourish the faith of the laity.<sup>17</sup> Hence Luther so adamantly opposed the Roman Church because the priests and ecclesial leaders were not nourishing the faith of the common man, rather they were taking advantage of common misconceptions about faith. Often times Luther is seen only as the Reformer

<sup>14</sup>Ulrich Asendorf, "Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten," *Luther Digest* 4 (1996): 177.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Tappert suggests that Luther's concern for his congregation over indulgences began his career as a reformer and that in January 1546 Luther reconciled through pastoral ministry the counts of Mansfield; Luther died the day after this reconciliation. "Between these two pastoral acts—the one that marked the beginning of the Reformation and the one that closed the Reformer's life—lay a rich lifetime of pastoral activity." Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 13.

<sup>17</sup>"It is enough to recognize that he did view the Christian life in terms of word and faith and regarded it as the responsibility of the church to nourish that faith by the preaching of the word." Scott Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 19.

or the political revolutionary, but at the heart of Luther rested a pastor. Hendrix suggests that all of Luther's major documents concerned the proper execution of pastoral duty. "Disappointment and anger at the perversion of the pastoral office spurred Luther to exercise 'the duty of a good pastor' to the end of his life."<sup>18</sup>

Luther's own writings reveal the utmost importance placed on the role of the pastor. Because Luther held such a high view of the pastor, he believed that a good pastor should never leave his flock in any circumstance. Through the particular outbreak of the plague in 1527 Luther remained in Wittenberg and continued his pastoral duties:

I am staying here, and it is necessary that I do so because of the terrible fear among the common people ... but Christ is present too, that we may not be alone, and he will triumph in us over that old serpent ... however much he may bruise Christ's heel.<sup>19</sup>

It seems that Luther's reasoning regarding pastoral ministry is drawn from John 10:11 with the imagery of the good shepherd giving his life for his sheep. Luther realized that in certain times of peril the people were in great need of comfort, which according to Luther comes through God's Word and the Sacraments. There are several other occasions throughout Luther's career in which he remained in Wittenberg through demanding happenings.<sup>20</sup> It seems obvious therefore as to why Luther physically never set out on a grand missionary expedition to the East Indies. Not only was Luther literally "bound" to Germany, but he was extremely dedicated to his congregation in Wittenberg as well as the growing Protestant church.

### **Luther's Theological Understanding of Missions**

Luther's missiology can be developed based on three pivotal ideas within his theological system: *sola scriptura*, the nature of the church, and his *theologia crucis*. Throughout Luther's career there is no doubting that he held to a strict confidence in the Word of God. This is clearly expressed in Luther's stance at the Diet of Worms in 1521, where he bases his decision on whether or not he could be disproved by the Scripture. For Luther the

<sup>18</sup>Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 159.

<sup>19</sup>Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 229.

<sup>20</sup>Similarly, in 1535 Luther remained in Wittenberg through a certain "pestilence." Also in 1538 Luther delivered a sermon concerning the believer remaining in the face of sickness. An interesting note, throughout Luther's letters and sermons it is quite clear that Luther equated the devil as being responsible for not only sickness, but famine and disease. This idea, along with Luther's view of the good shepherd is quite possibly the foundation for why Luther was so adamant about remaining in Wittenberg through numerous perils. Luther believed that because it was the devil that was largely responsible for calamity, the faithful believer would be protected by God in times of danger. This idea is prevalent throughout Luther's career, pre-Worms and post-Wartburg. *Ibid.*, 228-57.

*sacra pagina* came directly from God, it was about God and simultaneously it was for the pilgrim's journey to God.<sup>21</sup> Bosch points out that Luther based his entire "paradigm" for missions on Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Luther equates Romans 1:16 with other verses that not only mention "the power of God" but associates the power of God with works of the missionary. For instance in Acts 4:33 where the apostles give their testimony with great power, and in Acts 1:8 where the apostles will receive power to go out among the people.<sup>23</sup> Therefore the Word of God itself has a missionary character of being constantly in motion, constantly encouraging believers but is not limited to time and space.<sup>24</sup> Luther provides us with a well-known illustration concerning the Word of God: "it is driven farther through the preacher to and fro in the world, driven out and persecuted; nevertheless, it is always being made more widely known to those who have never heard it before."<sup>25</sup> This quotation provides us a glimpse into the confidence Luther had in the Word of God, which it was in several ways acting and living. Luther mentions his own knowledge of new lands being discovered and that they were without the gospel, however Luther had faith that the gospel would reach them in its natural expansive course.<sup>26</sup> Werner Elert refers to the missional notion of Luther's understanding of the Word of God as the *evangelischer Ansatz* (on-going impact of the Gospel) and reveals two important principles for Luther's missiology: (1) That Martin Luther had faith in the omnipotence and the universal teleology of the gospel and (2) that believers should commit themselves to proclaiming the Word of God.<sup>27</sup> It is clear that Luther's understanding of the living Word of God has stark implications on his missiology, primarily that the gospel is alive and moving and is furthered by the preaching of the Word, hence our hinge into Luther's next theological idea, the nature of the church.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Kenneth Hagen, "Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his 'Commentaries' on Galatians 1519–1538," *Luther Digest* 4 (1996): 51.

<sup>22</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 240. See also by Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980).

<sup>23</sup>Not only does Luther equate the idea of God's power and missionary activity, but he also equates it with Luke 1:35 and 24:49 in terms of God's power "overshadowing" individuals. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 79 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–2016), 25:148–49 (hereafter cited as *LW*).

<sup>24</sup>Wilhelm Maurer, "Reformation und Mission," in *Ihr werdet meine Zeugen sein: Festschrift Georg F. Vicedom zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Walter Ruf (Nurnberg: Bayerischen Missionskonferenz, 1963), 30.

<sup>25</sup>Martin Luther, *The Church Comes from All Nations*, ed. Volker Stolle, trans. Klaus Detlev Schulz (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 24–25.

<sup>26</sup>Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology for Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 49.

<sup>27</sup>Elert Werner, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 362.

<sup>28</sup>See Paul S. Chung, "A Theology of Justification and God's Mission," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34 (April 2007): 117–27.



As a connection from Luther's understanding of the Word and the nature of the church, Luther emphasizes throughout his career that God builds and gathers His church through the Word. This was the very idea that drove Luther to condemn the Roman Church, because they had distorted the pure and simple gospel into a works-based tradition.<sup>29</sup> Luther continually emphasized that the gospel must remain pure by constantly placing Christ in the center.<sup>30</sup> Therefore it should be understood that for Luther whenever the church sought to fulfill the great commission it was ultimately God building His church through human means. Luther saw the act of missions as ultimately the work of God through the church (*mission dei*). Consider what Luther wrote:

The sure mark by which the Christian congregation can be recognized is that the pure gospel is preached there ... Thus we are certain that there must be Christians wherever the gospel is ... Likewise, where the gospel is absent ... there no Christians live, but only pagans ... no matter how holy and upright their life may be.<sup>31</sup>

Not only is the church created and expanded by the Word, but Luther considered the people of God to be a tool for the expansion of the gospel.<sup>32</sup> This equates to the idea that all Christians be involved in missions through the proclamation of the good news. With the idea *communio sanctorum* or the priesthood of all believers, Luther equates a part of the expansion of the gospel to all believers; hence the nature of the people of God/the church is the proclamation of the gospel. It is true that Luther identified two distinct roles within the church: the ordained and the laity.<sup>33</sup> In fact Luther believed that one of the seven marks of a true church was that the congregation would call ministers to administer.<sup>34</sup> Luther held to the idea that only ordained ministers could administer the sacraments and preach a sermon, but that all believers had a responsibility to proclaim the gospel to their neighbors. Luther is clear that there are two major ways in which God calls, "either by means or without means. Today He calls all of us into the ministry of the Word by a mediated call, that is one that comes through means, namely, through a man."<sup>35</sup> Luther attributed a great deal of importance to the outward

<sup>29</sup>Oberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 81.

<sup>30</sup>"Thus throughout the dispersion of the Christian Church among all the peoples of the world, from the east to the west and from the north to the south, she must be firmly united in this, that she acknowledges Christ as her sole light and that she knows and preaches none other than Christ. Thanks God we are doing this, making all our instruction, writings, and sermons conform to it." *LW* 22:59–60.

<sup>31</sup>*LW* 39:305.

<sup>32</sup>See Kurt Hendel, "No Salvation Outside the Church' in Light of Luther's Dialectic of the Hidden and Revealed God," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35 (August 2008), 248–57.

<sup>33</sup>*LW* 41:152.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>35</sup>*LW* 26:17.

call of the congregation in regards to the ministry of proclamation and thus carried missiological dimensions. This leads us into the final theological idea of Luther that creates his missiology—a theology of the cross.

Luther used phrases to describe his overall theology, and in this case a certain phrase not only helps us to understand Luther the theologian but also Luther the missiologist: *theologia crucis* or the theology of the cross.<sup>36</sup> Simply stated, Luther's theology of the cross is the idea that God can only be found in suffering and the cross.<sup>37</sup> The most beautiful aspect of the gospel was the message of Christ crucified providing the redemption of the world through Christ's suffering. According to Robert Preus it is the *theologia crucis* that sums up the meaning and implications of Luther's *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia*.<sup>38</sup> It is Luther's *theologia crucis* that allowed him to reject so passionately the use of reason in biblical and theological study. Luther recognized knowledge as a hindrance to understanding God. Hence if someone claimed to know Christ, then they should understand His suffering. Luther accused scholasticism as pushing aside the truth of Christ crucified and replacing it with an anti-Christ message; the idea of "good works."<sup>39</sup> Luther attacked scholastic scholars because he believed that the beauty of redemption was most clearly seen in the collision of God's wrath and Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In the same manner Luther believed strongly that the message of the cross was overly simple and that scholars over-complicated it creating an incorrect view of God's love. Christ's crucifixion may seem like an oxymoron for some, but for Luther that was his *theologia crucis* and not only should believers realize the centrality of the cross but should become theologians of the cross.

Martin Luther took his understanding of the theology of the cross one step further when he declared, "He deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."<sup>40</sup> Hence the believer is to become a theologian of the cross. How does one become a theologian of the cross? By hearing the Word and proclaiming it. Just as God works through His Word, the believer must therefore also proclaim that Word, "We are nothing more than his mouth and tongue."<sup>41</sup> The believer is not only renewed by the Word but also has the responsibility to proclaim the message of Christ crucified to others. Based on the three aspects of Luther's theology it seems that Luther's idea of the Christian life is missional. The Word of God, the nature of the church, and

<sup>36</sup>For a study on the theology of the cross in the Pauline epistles, see Charles B. Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>37</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Reformation of Church and Dogma (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 155–56.

<sup>38</sup>Robert Preus, "The Theology of the Cross," *Luther Digest* 5 (1997): 121.

<sup>39</sup>For a study of Luther's Theology of the Cross in relation to the Heidelberg Disputation, see Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 23–48.

<sup>40</sup>Pelikan, *Reformation of Church*, 165.

<sup>41</sup>Preus, *Theology of the Cross*, 127.

the message of the cross are pivotal aspects that create Martin Luther's missiology. Now let us move onto an examination of Luther's personal remarks in regards to Scripture passages throughout the Bible that are specifically missional.

### Luther and Scripture

We will look at three sections of Scripture to identify Luther's personal thoughts on key missional passages—his Old Testament Commentaries, his Gospel Commentaries, and his Epistle Commentaries.<sup>42</sup> The first and one of the earliest missional passages in the Bible is Genesis 12:1-3.<sup>43</sup> Missiologists consider Genesis 12 to represent a new era in the history of salvation, one which is universal in scope.<sup>44</sup> In regards to Genesis 12:1, Luther sarcastically compares Abraham to a monk leaving his home for the monastery. "The monks consider it a matter of great praise that they forsake everything, although they find more in the monasteries than they left in the home of their parents."<sup>45</sup> While Luther jokes about the monk, he equates a genuine faith worthy of imitation to Abraham. Luther suggests that Abraham's move from his homeland to an unknown destination took great faith, "he sets out without knowing where he is going. He gives up a sure habitation and goes in pursuit of an uncertain one. In faith it was indeed a certain one, yet in appearance it was uncertain."<sup>46</sup> Luther generalizes the idea of the wayward traveler, those who follow God's word into exile and foreign lands characterize godly character even more than monks who leave their home for the monastery.<sup>47</sup> It seems as if Luther would have supported someone who went as a missionary to a foreign land.

Luther's comments concerning Genesis 12:3 also contain missional tones. In regards to the final phrase of the Abrahamic covenant, "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you," Luther regards this as offering great treasures. Luther understands the missional aspect of this covenant, "it declares that the blessing this people is to possess will be transferred from this people to the heathen, that is to those who are not circumcised and who

<sup>42</sup>For an informative article see, Winston Persuad, "Doctrine of Scripture in Lutheran Theology—It's Missional Thrust: A Response to Lamin Sanneh's Hein-Fry Lecture 2008," *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 49 (Summer 2010): 123–32.

<sup>43</sup>Passages that will be looked at and considered to be missional are derived from Stolle, *Church Comes from All Nations*; George W. Peters, *Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody, 1984); Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Biblical Foundations of Missions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); William J. Larkin Jr. and Joel F. Williams, eds., *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, American Society of Missiology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); and Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study with Special Reference to Luther's Bible Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007).

<sup>44</sup>Peters, *Biblical Theology of Missions*, 89.

<sup>45</sup>*LW* 2:252.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 253.

know nothing of Moses and his statutes.”<sup>48</sup> Luther recognized the missional transference of God’s blessing from God’s people to the heathen Gentile. Not only this, but Luther suggests that based on the promise to Abraham, each believer should be compelled to confess that Christ has come and brings with Him not only spiritual blessings but also eternal blessings.<sup>49</sup>

Psalm 19:1 reads, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Luther interprets Psalm 19:1 in quite a missional manner. Luther took Psalm 19:1 and understood it to mean that the gospel will be preached throughout the earth. “Wherever one finds the gospel ... there is His church, and in that place there are certainly living saints. There men praise Him, and He rules over them, even though they are but young people and children. Inevitably, however, there will be old people too.”<sup>50</sup> In this comment there is evidence that where one finds the gospel, not only will there be the church but there will be “living saints.” Hence this seems to suggest that which makes a believer a “living saint” is the proclamation of the gospel within ones area. Luther understands that the persistence of the gospel, baptism, and the Christian is demonstration of God’s power in heathen areas.<sup>51</sup> In another work Luther writes of the same Psalm, “it appears that Christ’s kingdom is weak and that Christendom will run aground and be ruined. But this psalm teaches that Christ and His gospel cannot be hindered any more than one can hinder the course of the sun.”<sup>52</sup> Luther understood the role of the “living saint” to be participating in spreading the gospel message as a part of ones everyday life, and not only as a part of a two-week trip.

Another psalm that finds specific missional comments from Luther is Psalm 147:15, “He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.” Luther takes this phrase to mean that the Word of God is not only for some parts of the earth, but is for all the earth and all the nations, “He sends His command to the earth and to all that is on the earth.”<sup>53</sup> Not only does Luther understand that the Word of God is for all nations, but the idea that God’s Word will run throughout the earth is a great encouragement for Luther:

But this is also said in order to comfort us. To arouse and strengthen our faith. For when we hear that we have a God who so easily creates and accomplishes all things ... then we should gladly and confidently trust and believe that He can and will give all things despite the gates of hell.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup>*LW* 2:260–61.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>50</sup>*LW* 14:13.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>*LW* 12:139.

<sup>53</sup>*LW* 14: 123.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 125.

Isaiah 60 stands out within Luther's commentaries for its missional application.<sup>55</sup> In his introductory notes concerning Isaiah 60 Luther equates his *theologia crucis* and the proclamation of the Word. He connects the two with the statement, "The Gospel is the Word of life and salvation, and it offers everything. One strength of this Word is the physical voice, another is the offense."<sup>56</sup> Here Luther discusses two strengths of the Word of God: the Word has a physical voice and the "offense" of the gospel. The "offense" of the gospel is that it does not necessarily apply to reason and logic, harkening to Romans 1:16-23. The second strength of the Word is the physical voice, the witness of the one who speaks the Word of God. While the world may see the missionary as an individual that rejects reason, leaving home and family for the sake of the gospel, for Luther this aspect is a great strength of the gospel and a proper connection between a *missio* and *theologia crucis*.

Luther equates the "light" mentioned in Isaiah 60:1 to the gospel, "This is the Gospel which sets you free from death and sin."<sup>57</sup> Not only does Luther compare "light" and the gospel but it is utterly clear that such a "light" is not only with the Jews but it was also in the midst of others. Here Luther makes an interesting comment associating the "light" with persecution. Luther clarifies that those who have the "light" should hold fast to the gospel in a perverse generation; literally that believers should be lights in a dark world. Throughout Luther's commentaries this is an extremely missional statement on two levels. First that Luther understands that believers will be persecuted on the basis of being light or in other words by proclaiming the gospel. Second that by being "light" is to identify oneself with the gospel not only in belief but even more so in action.

Consider Luther's comments on Isaiah 60:11, where a pivotal description of the church and missions is found, "Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night." It seems that such a phrase for Luther was describing both the nature of the church and the continual act of *missio*:

This is what it means to have open gates, that the church is always at its task of calling sinners to repentance, of preaching, training, teaching, comforting, and absolving. Men enter this church every day, just as they enter Wittenberg today and are brought into the body through the Word.<sup>58</sup>

Luther associates one of the duties of the church as calling sinners to repentance. How else is this done other than when believers proclaim the Word of God to their neighbors? Based on Luther's commentary of select Old Testament passages, Luther understood not only God to be missional in

<sup>55</sup>LW 17:311.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 312.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 319.

character, but also that individual believers have the duty of being a “light” to the nations.

The first New Testament passage we will examine is Matthew 22:9. This verse is usually not equated largely with missional studies, but Luther’s comments reveal that the duty of the Christian is still to preach the good news. While Luther does largely believe that the apostles have “invited” everyone to the banquet, Luther is clear that the job still remains. “It is still not finished. This time period continues in which the servants go the streets. The apostles began, and we call together to the present day.”<sup>59</sup> Rather than putting aside the task of individual preaching Luther pushes the believer to view themselves beside the apostles in proclaiming the gospel. Based on such a comment from Luther it seems that he believed that Christ would return when the task of preaching the gospel was completed, or in other words when all the earth had heard the gospel. Luther uses the term “finished” throughout his sermon on Matthew 22 indicating a time when the Word of God is finished in its proclamation, resulting in the coming of God’s Kingdom.<sup>60</sup>

Another passage within the Gospels that holds missional comments from Luther is Luke 24:46-47. For Luther this passage not only clarified what is the essential message of the gospel but that it should be preached to all nations. Luther’s comments on this passage also heavily connect and rely on the relationship between a theology of the cross and *missio*. Based on this passage Luther deduces two ideas regarding preaching. First that, “they should simply preach among all peoples and direct everyone to repent.”<sup>61</sup> Second, Luther calls for the forgiveness of sins to be preached. For Luther the gospel proclamation was comprised of a call to repentance, leaning heavily on God’s wrath and our sin, and an urge for the forgiveness of sins. It is interesting to note how similar the process in which Luther teaches of preaching and his own coming to grasp with the relationship of God’s wrath and love. “It is not Christ the Lord’s intention to preach repentance in a way so that one should cause the conscience to remain in terror, but that one ... stand upright ... who now recognize their sin and have contrite hearts.”<sup>62</sup> From this idea Luther advances to comment on how his *theologia crucis* aligns itself with missions. It is for the purpose of preaching that Christ rose from the dead, Luther saw a great deal of God’s revealed will in preaching and hearing the Word, “For this purpose, he rose from the dead, to begin such a kingdom through which such things must be preached, received, and believed.”<sup>63</sup>

Not only does Luther link his theology of the cross to missions, but Luther also connects missional work with prayer. This connection is seen in

<sup>59</sup>Luther, *Church Comes From All Nations*, 27.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

Luther's comments on John 14:14. This particular verse for Luther demonstrated that which constitutes true office and function of a Christian and the necessity of exercising such within Christendom. On one hand when an individual becomes a Christian their hearts are convinced and assured that God is compassionate. On the other hand it is such a revelation that causes the believer to help his neighbor attain such a confidence. It is through supplication that the believer can serve others and help them gain knowledge that God is compassionate.<sup>64</sup> It is the image of the compassionate Christ that Luther regarded as the greatest treasure of the believer. Such a treasure should not be bottled and stored, but Luther expresses an extremely missional activity in regards to having such knowledge of Christ:

Therefore he steps forth boldly, teaches and admonishes others, praises and confesses his treasure before everybody, prays and yearns that they, too, may obtain such mercy ... A Christian cannot be still or idle. He constantly strives and struggles with all his might ... to disseminate God's honor and glory among the people, that others may receive such a spirit of grace and through this spirit also help him pray.<sup>65</sup>

In much the same way Luther calls for a missional responsibility not based on mere knowledge but ultimately based on love. This idea is evident in his comments on 1 Peter 2:9. Luther is quite clear that each believer is bound to be a missionary on the basis of love. "For this reason, however, he lets us live that we may bring other people also to faith as he has done for us."<sup>66</sup> Based on this remark from the reformer the truth is plain, Luther does have a missiology and it revolves around the simple idea of loving one another via proclamation of the compassionate Christ. Luther continues to explain that it is the highest priestly office for a believer to proclaim the gospel to others. Not only does Luther support the act of proclamation but he suggests that believers also teach or instruct people as to how they can come to know God in the same way. "Where you see people that do not know this, you should instruct them and teach them how you learned, that is how one through the good work and might of God is saved and comes from darkness into light."<sup>67</sup>

There is no doubting that throughout Luther's commentaries and sermons there is an abounding amount of wisdom regarding the mission of the church and believers. At the end of this brief biblical survey it seems that Luther did have a perspective on missions. Luther expresses that the gospel must go to all nations. He identifies both pastor and layperson as being prompted to proclaim the gospel out of love and an overflowing joy. On one hand Luther accepts the idea that missions is primarily God's work, while

<sup>64</sup>LW 24:87.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>66</sup>Luther, *Church Comes From All Nations*, 20.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

on the other hand he realizes that the spreading of the gospel can not happen without an existing human factor.<sup>68</sup> For Luther, missions was a constant reality for the Christian until Christ returns.

### **Conclusion: Luther's Missional Perspective**

What can be said concerning Luther's missiology? It would be too basic merely to conclude that Luther did hold to a view of missions rather than deny a Luther missiology. We must go further and ask ourselves, "what does Luther's missiology look like and how can it be systematically expressed?" For Luther the idea of missions was not "missions" at all but rather as George Forell has expressed, it is simply "faith active in love."<sup>69</sup> It is the simplicity and the beauty of the cross that should naturally drive the believer to proclaim the saving message of the gospel. It is unfair that Gustev Warneck criticized Luther against the Modern Missionary Movement because Luther, nor anyone else in the 16th century, was familiar with such. The only missionary expeditions that Luther was aware of were the political infused expansion of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther laid the path of alteration which eventually progressed to the Modern Missionary Movement.

For Luther, missions was not about gathering a church group together for an annual mission trip, it was a continual daily part of the Christian life and character. Hence the sum of the Christian life is missions. Missional activity must flow from a personal, authentic relationship with Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life, and a total confidence that God's word will not return void. For Luther, missiology was not at all sociological or humanistic; it was a very real theological aspect of who God is. Men and women could join in the work that the missional God had been doing. God was no longer alone on a pedestal only to be addressed by the Pope, God became real for the people and the missionary activity of God was seen in the person of Christ.

It is true that Luther did not comprise a methodology of missions for the Lutheran church, or adopt a people group to send church leaders to every summer. For individuals like Warneck and Neill the absence of missional methodology therefore discredits Luther as being missional minded. There is much that can be learned from Luther in regards to missions. For instance, rather than thinking of missions in a time based manner, as in "I am going on a mission trip next fall" the believer should recognize the importance of proclaiming the gospel each and every day to those within a close proximity:

For no one can deny that every Christian possess the Word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest ... 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 ... Let

<sup>68</sup>Oberg, *Luther and World Missions*, 324.

<sup>69</sup>Montgomery, *Defense*, 165.



this passage be your sure foundation, because it gives such an overwhelming power to the Christian congregation to preach, to permit preaching, and to call.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup>*LW* 39:309, 311.