

Luther and World Missions: A Review Pekka Huhtinen

Introduction

In 1881 a pietistic professor of missions at the University of Halle, Gustav Warneck, published the first edition of his influential *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time*. From the outset, Warneck criticizes Luther and his fellow reformers for their alleged failure to recognize any missionary obligation to the heathen and to set up mission institutions: “We miss in the Reformers not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions” (9). Luther, Warneck claims, was not “a man of missionary spirit in the sense of seeking the Christianising of the heathen” (10). The Reformer held that “Christianity had already fulfilled its universal calling” (12). While Warneck makes some allowances for the circumstances of the day—the Lutheran states lacked “immediate intercourse with heathen nations,” and were preoccupied with “the struggle . . . against papal and worldly power” (8)—the general tenor of his chapter on “The Age of the Reformation” is to damn the missiological efforts of Luther and his immediate successors with faint praise.¹ Warneck grants that some of Luther’s sayings suggest he was cognizant of the church’s missionary task “even in the present,” for example, its task of witnessing to Jews and Turks. But the reformers failed to setup any “systematic missionary enterprise” (14). The Swedish King Gustavus Vasa’s endeavor to incorporate the Lapps into the Evangelical Church is tarred with the same brush. Warneck deems it no “proper mission to the heathen, as it consisted only (!) in the sending of pastors and the establishment of parishes” (24).²

No less severe is Warneck’s second chapter, “The Age of Orthodoxy,” where the Lutheran dogmatician, Johann Gerhard, is taken as representative of “the negative attitude of orthodoxy. . . towards missions to the heathen” (28). Only in “The Age of Pietism” (chapter III), with its

1Melancthon, Bucer, Zwingli, and Calvin fall under the same condemnation as Luther (17-20).

*2*In citing this passage in Warneck, Elert adds the exclamation mark after the word “only”! See Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 397.

emphasis on a “living, personal, and practical Christianity,” did Protestant missions first strike deep roots and begin to bloom.

Undoubtedly one of the most able and spirited responses to Warneck’s picture of a “missionless Lutheranism” is Werner Elert’s chapter on “Missions” in his classic, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (385-402). Elert asks pointedly: “How could Luther, who expounded the Psalms, the Prophets, and Paul, have overlooked or doubted the universal purpose of the mission of Christ and of His Gospel?” (386). The Erlangen systematician demonstrates Luther’s awareness of “the boundless dynamic of the Gospel” (*evangelischer Ansatz*) which impelled the Reformation to reach out to “the Jews at home, the Turks in the Balkans, and the heathen Laplanders in Scandinavia” (394). In so doing, Luther, like Wilhelm Loehe after him, saw missions as “nothing but the one church of God in motion—the actualization of the one universal, catholic church.”³

If Elert’s essay has a deficiency, it is only that one would wish for more than he could say in eighteen pages. This “deficiency” has been remedied by a Swedish scholar, Ingemar Oberg, in his comprehensive *Luther och världsmissionen*.⁴ The following summary was supplied by the Reverend Pekka Huhtinen of Helsinki, Finland, who spent the 1996-1997 academic year doing missiological research at CTS.

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Preface

Generally speaking, missiological literature makes a negative assessment of Luther’s contribution to mission. After reading and researching many of Luther’s sermons and biblical lectures (Weimarausgaben) Oberg realized how misunderstood Luther has been.

Oberg’s book aims to clarify what is theologically most important to the Reformer in regard to mission, and what Luther says about the church’s duty to proclaim the gospel among non-Christian nations.

Luther did not use missiological terms (for example, “mission motive,”

³*Three Books about the Church*, translated by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 59; Elert, 390.

⁴(Abo and Turku, Finland: Abo Akademi, 1991), 670 pages.

“world mission” or “mission”) in the same technical sense as we use them today.⁵ But he uses such words as *senden* (send), *Sendung* (sending), in Latin *mittere/missio*, when he speaks about bringing the gospel to the nations.

Luther is, first of all, a Bible interpreter and reformer. Reading and working with the Bible made Luther the Reformer! The aim of this research is not to make Luther a mission strategist. Luther is approached more as a theologian of mission than as an exponent of mission practice.

1. Research Hypothesis and Method

This book aims to demonstrate the missiological aspect of Luther’s theology. The book responds to the thesis of modern theological research that Luther’s theology has little or nothing to do with missiology today. Oberg’s hypothesis is that we can find what he calls “mission universalism” in Luther’s theology (one may see Luther’s interpretations of Matthew 6:10; 13; 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24). He contends that Luther research up to this time has been too pragmatic (for example, G. Warneck and J. Richter).

Luther’s missiological viewpoint may be found in his theology, which focuses on God’s constructive work in the church through the word and sacraments. Organizational and technical points are secondary. Church and mission are integrated in Luther’s theology. To proclaim the gospel (we would use the word “mission” in this connection!) to the nations, both Jews and Gentiles, originates from the Bible. Mission is, first of all, the work of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, through the instruments of “word and sacraments.” Then comes the role of men (the office of the ministry and the priesthood of all believers).

To understand the limitations to which the reformers were subjected in their mission outreach, the historical context of the Reformation has to be considered. The Reformation was at the very beginning confined to Middle and Northern Europe for two important reasons: 1) the powerful Roman Catholic Church in the West, East, and South; and 2) the strong

⁵The terms “world mission” and “mission,” became more common about 200 years after Luther’s death.

⁶In modern missiology the expression “*missio Dei*” could be used in this connection.

wave of Islam (in Islamic areas mission propaganda was forbidden under penalty of death). In addition, until 1588 (the defeat of the Spanish Armada) only the Spanish and Portuguese were able to do seafaring. The religious policy of Europe (*cuius regio, eius religio*) did not favor an expansive mission (compare obstacles to mission work in China or Iran today).

Luther was primarily the Reformer and defender of the Christian faith. Therefore it is necessary to have a sufficient understanding of Luther's writings (sermons and biblical exposition). The false conclusion that Luther's theology lacked a missiological perspective stems from a superficial comprehension of Luther's material (for example, G. Warneck, L. Bergman, and their followers in modern Luther research).

Oberg's research method, on the other hand, is historical and systematic in nature. Luther's own texts and their theological motifs are in the center of this research.

2. Some Essential Theological Aspects of Luther's Missiological Thinking

Luther's theological thinking is trinitarian and at the same time Christ-centered. In his theological structure, God the Creator is the important starting point. The world and all people are His creatures. The Creator's hand, power, and care extend to the evil and the good, Gentiles, Jews, and Christians as well.

Man was created good by God, but Adam's fall was catastrophic for all mankind in every age. Since the Fall, human nature has been deeply corrupted by unbelief and sin (original sin). Man's behavior is ruled by unbelief, self-centeredness, and self-righteousness both in his relationship with God and with his neighbors. However, the "natural man" has some knowledge of God and God's law.

Luther's missiology has to be seen in the context mentioned above. God's plan of salvation and mission belong firmly together. The activities of churches and missions are important, but more important is what God has done. God does not reject man, but gives him his righteousness and salvation.

God is present in an active way as the Creator and Preserver of life among all nations. Thus we can say that God is present everywhere

already through His creation. His work and almighty power can be seen among all the nations, not merely as an indefinite law of nature, but as the power of the Creator. In Luther's theology the creation itself shows God's righteousness and love. However, the natural and fallen man cannot fully understand God's creative activity. Man can meet God in an objective way in creation, but only through God's word (law and gospel) can man understand God's activity in creation. God provides for His creation "purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." This is explained in Luther's Small Catechism (the first article, Creation). God's action through Christ for man's salvation has to be proclaimed in connection with God's action in creation.

In Luther's theology this world is a battlefield. There is a battle between God and satan, between God's kingdom and satan's kingdom (see *De Servo Arbitrio*). This dualism is important for the Reformer's missiology. Mission means fighting. Man can never be in a neutral position in this world. He is either in God's kingdom or satan's. Preaching the gospel (mission) is not possible without cross and suffering.

Man has a so-called "natural knowledge" (*cognitio naturalis*) or "natural presentiment" about God. It is not a negative thing in itself. According to Luther, this can be seen in Paul's teaching. However, this natural knowledge has to be seen in the light of man's fall, for man without Christ is blind and under satan, sin, and death. Natural theology and religion never lead to redemption from satan, sin, and death (see Romans 1:21 and following). Luther teaches that (a) man has an undefined, abstract knowledge (*notitia*) of God (for example, eternity, power, wisdom, righteousness, goodness) written on his heart (see Romans 1:19-20), but (b) when man begins to apply (*usus*) this intuitive knowledge to a certain god, he merely adds to his sin. The result is heresy and idolatry. In history we can see that the abstract natural knowledge of God led the Romans to worship Jupiter, Mars, and Venus. But we can meet the same kind of situation also in Judaism (law religion), heathenism, and even in western Christianity (*opera legis, legalis*, moralism). On the basis of human faith (*fides humana*) humans cannot understand God as the God of grace, but only as a tyrant or judge.

True knowledge about God (*cognitio evangelica*) is possible only through the word, the gospel. In the gospel we can meet the true God (*theologia*

crucis). This is the fundamental basis and motivation for mission, evangelization, and reformation. We know about God through Christ, and we meet Christ in the gospel. He is the incarnate Christ, not the cosmic Christ. We receive Christ by faith. Through faith we understand who God is, and who we are.⁷

In Luther's theology *cognitio naturalis* is identical with *cognitio legalis*. In practice, they both mean man's own way to reconciliation with God, contrary to *cognitio evangelica*, which means God's way to man through Christ.⁸ Luther's ecclesiology and missiology are Christ centered. Christ is the Lord and His kingdom truly comes through the word and sacraments. But God calls man to his ministry. Spreading the gospel (mission) is the duty of all Christians (the priesthood of all believers). The whole church has the responsibility to do mission work. Instead of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Luther emphasized the ecclesiastical unity (*communio sanctorum*) between laypeople and the office of the ministry. But this does not mean the two are the same. Laypeople (all Christians) are needed to witness and serve with their talents and gifts of grace, and the office of the ministry (the public ministry, *ministerium publicum*) is necessary for the distribution of the means of divine grace (word and sacraments).⁹ For the public ministry, both the internal and external call (*vocatio interna, vocatio externa*) are needed. Unlike the priesthood of all believers, the office of the ministry is limited in nature. On the basis of the Bible, a woman cannot be ordained and serve in the office of the ministry.¹⁰ Both the priesthood of all believers and the office of the ministry are established and given by God. They belong to God's order for His church's mission. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit do mission through the word and sacraments and the other marks of the church (notae ecclesiae¹¹).

⁷One may see Luther's commentary on John (Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 volumes [Weimar, 1883-],1:23-29). All subsequent references to the Weimar edition of Luther's works will be abbreviated as WA.

⁸The concept of *cognitio* is the burning issue in missiology today. Regarding the problem of knowledge, see Luther's commentaries: Romans (WA 56:177), Deuteronomy (WA 28:611), Galatians (WA 42:631; 44:84), and Isaiah (WA 31 II:235).

⁹Luther rejected the priest-centered ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁰Luther's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34 and following (WA 30 III:518-27, WA 12:309).

¹¹In his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther mentioned seven

3. The Missiological Perspective in Luther's Biblical Exposition and Sermons

The Old Testament

On the one hand, Luther points out that the Old and New Testaments are different, but on the other hand, he emphasizes the deep connection between them. This connection is based on salvation history: the promise (Old Testament) and the fulfilment (New Testament). Christ is a reality already in the Old Testament according to Luther. The focus of the Old Testament and New Testament is Christ. Luther's method of Old Testament interpretation can be called a "prophetic and christological" method. Faith is the same from the very beginning until the very end of the world. Therefore Genesis 3:15 is the so-called proto-gospel in Luther's interpretation of Genesis. Reconciliation through the Christ-seed (woman's seed, offspring) has been preached already from the days of Adam and his descendants. The essential missiological difference between the Old Testament and New Testament is that the old covenant considered only the Jews, but the new one in Christ is universal in nature. However, the promises given to Abraham were already promises of Christ. On the basis of texts from Genesis, Luther concludes that the church's mission is universal.¹²

The Psalter also includes the prophetic message about Christ. Actually, Luther considers most psalms to be messianic. He sees a clear centrifugal universalism (versus the Sinai covenant's particularism) in the Psalter: salvation has to be preached among all the nations under the sun. Christ's universal authority was proclaimed first in Jerusalem, but it should be proclaimed to all nations. Luther mentions that this proclamation was first made in the days of the apostles, and it continues until the end of the world. On the basis of Luther's interpretation of the Psalms¹³ it has been claimed (for example, L. Bergman) that Luther did not consider world mission necessary after the apostolic era, because he mentioned that the apostles fulfilled their mission. However, he also

characteristics of the church: God's word, holy baptism, sacrament of the altar, the office of the keys (absolution), the holy cross, the office of the ministry, and prayer (WA 50).

¹²See the Genesis commentaries (WA 14 and WA 24).

¹³WA 5:546, 8 and following.

emphasized that mission continues until Christ's parousia.¹⁴

The centrifugal aspect is emphasized also in the interpretation of Psalm 110. In 1535 Luther had preached long sermons on this psalm between Ascension Day and Pentecost, because he considered these events especially significant for the movement of world mission from Jerusalem to the ends of the world: the risen Christ on the right hand of the Father, and the Holy Spirit's empowering for mission.¹⁵

Luther taught that the prophets in the Old Testament spoke both for that historical time and for the coming Christian Church. Luther considered for example, Isaiah 9:2 and following (the Old Testament lesson for Christmas Day) a clear missiological text, which should be viewed in the light of Christ's incarnation.¹⁶ The same viewpoint can also be recognized in Luther's commentary on Zechariah.¹⁷

The New Testament

The synoptic Gospels make it clear that Jesus preached the gospel in a certain historical situation, among the historical people of Israel. But at the same time they make it clear that Christ's saving work is not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well. The gospel is universal and directed towards all people. The universal gospel with its centrifugal dynamic has to be preached to all nations. Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit are God's universal deeds of salvation.

The Lord's Prayer's "thy kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10) and the parables of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13) indicate that God Himself builds His kingdom through the word. God's kingdom is constantly fighting against satan's kingdom. Mission is possible only through the power and work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Christ Himself has given his church the mandate for mission. It is interesting that Luther did not deal often with the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:18-20. Instead we have many sermons from Luther on the other great mission texts (Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49; John 20:19-23). In his sermon on Matthew 28:18-20 (1525), Luther focuses more on

¹⁴See Psalms 19, WA 311: 580,1 and following.

¹⁵See WA 41:123.

¹⁶See also Isaiah 11:10 and following; 46:1, 6; 60:1-6,19/ WA 10:19 and 25.

¹⁷See WA 23.

baptism and the name of the Trinity than on mission work. However, he mentions that mission is not man's but God's work, and has to be done in His name. Mission work rests on Christ's almighty power and commission.

Luther's interpretation of Mark 16:15-16 (in his Ascension Day sermons) is full of missiological insights regarding world mission. Mission means both task and mandate. Mission has to be based on Christ, faith in Christ, and confession of Christ. Christ's sacrifice and resurrection are the foundation of mission.

The mission commission of John 20:19-23, as well as John 14-16, are important texts for Luther's missiology. In these passages he emphasizes the Holy Spirit's decisive importance to the church and its mission. The Holy Spirit makes mission possible through the word, sacraments, and pastoral care (the office of the keys). "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (20:21). In the parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10:12 and following), Luther identifies "other sheep" (verse 16) with the heathen to whom Jesus was sent as well.

In his exposition of Acts, Luther sees how Christ's resurrection and ascension meant a decisive change for world mission. The essential mission instruments were preaching and baptism. Mission is carried out under the direction of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All Christians are needed for mission. The priesthood of all believers and the office of the ministry work together in mission. The Reformer realizes also that the radical gospel leads to conflict with religions of law (natural religions).

On the basis of the epistles of the New Testament, Luther emphasizes the importance of *paranesis* and deeds of love. However, *paranesis* is based on Christ's self-sacrificing love. *Paranesis* cannot produce good deeds. The good deeds are effected by the Holy Spirit. Christian love and holy life open doors for mission.

Luther does not speak about "foreign mission" and "home mission," not even about mission fields. Mission means, first of all, spiritual fighting against satan, unbelief, and ungodliness everywhere in this world. He does not even give us any systematic missiology or missiological theories. Luther's view is often centered on Germany and Europe, but preaching the gospel to the heathen is a burning issue for him as well.

4. Luther and mission in practice

Luther and Jews

The issue of the Jewish people and their faith was important to the Reformer. Already in his first lectures on the Psalter (1513-1515) he dealt with this problem. Also, in his last sermon in 1546 (three days before his death), he spoke about this issue.

The general attitude toward Jews in Luther's day was quite negative and anti-Semitic. Jews were called parasites and bloodsuckers. Theologians were also influenced by this negative atmosphere and propaganda. What about Luther? Is there some difference in thinking between the young and the older Luther?

The lectures on the Psalter express Luther's criticism of the Jewish interpretation of the Scriptures, their legalism, stubbornness, and their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.¹⁸ He even calls the Jews the "worst enemies of the church." However, these statements are more gentle than in his later works.

His Romans lectures (1515-1516) express already a harsh criticism: Jews do not understand either the Old Testament's nor the New Testament's teaching about righteousness through faith. Jews are compared in this connection with pagans and self-righteous Christians. They all need grace and faith in Christ for salvation. A special problem seems to be Paul's comments on the final salvation of Israel in its entirety (*massa iudaeorum*, Romans 11:25-26). He finally comes in his interpretation to a *gans pro toto* position. In other words, he concludes that the final salvation includes the whole of Israel as the *massa sancta* (*nota bene*: the issue of predestination was an actual problem to Luther at that time). However, Luther feels a growing sympathy towards God's people Israel. He even warns Christians against adopting a superior attitude towards Jews.¹⁹ Instead of a negative and proud attitude he recommends Christian love.²⁰

His main criticism of Jews concerns their rejection of the Messiah. But at the same time Luther has a vision to bring them, as well as Gentiles, to Christ (the centrifugal mission concept). Not only Jews, but other people

¹⁸*Dictata super Psalterium*, WA 3.

¹⁹See his interpretation of Romans 11:22.

²⁰See WA 3, WA 6, and WA 56.

too, including Christians, are guilty of Christ's death. Jews have played a servant's role in God's plan of salvation. Luther's approach to the Jewish problem was gaining a stronger missiological motivation. This does not mean an organized mission but it means compassionate concern to bring the gospel to Jews in Germany and its neighbors. He really thought that Jews would accept the gospel, because for God everything was possible.²¹ The practical instruments for mission among Jews and Gentiles are the same: acts of Christian love, preaching, and prayer.²²

In the commentary on the Magnificat in 1521, Luther makes it very clear that God's promises to Israel are still valid.²³ The gospel was given first to Jews. We cannot behave unkindly towards them, but we have to preach the truth of the gospel to them. Then some of them will become Christians. Nobody can become Christian if one takes the attitude that was commonly taken towards Jews.²⁴ Stephen is mentioned as an example of the right attitude towards Jews.²⁵

An interesting document is Luther's booklet, *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei* to Bernhard Gipher in 1523.²⁶ Luther was convinced of the power of the gospel, and optimistic in regard to preaching the gospel to Jews and leading them to their true Messiah. In this booklet he deals with themes like Christ's virgin birth, and His two natures as God and man. He says that Jews should first get to know and love Christ as man. Then they will be able to accept Him also as God. The booklet is clearly missiological. But it is also christological. The purpose of the booklet was to encourage Christians to do mission work among Jews, leading them to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, whom the true Jewish believers of the Old Testament knew already. Luther did very intensive exegetical studies of the Old Testament and rabbinic scriptures in order to communicate with Jews and understand the Jewish interpretation of the Scriptures. Actually he had many discussions with Jewish scholars. In this booklet Luther also opposed the social discrimination against Jewish

²¹See WA 5: 428, 27 and following.

²²See WA 5:428, 39 and following.

²³Luke 1:46-55, WA 7.

²⁴See WA 7: 600, 26 and following.

²⁵WA 101:1, 265, 3 and following.

²⁶Bernhard Gipher was a Jew who studied in Wittenberg. He became a doctor in Hebrew studies, was influenced by Luther's teaching and preaching, and became a Christian.

people (missions two elements: teaching/preaching and life). In the letter to Bernhard, he expresses the hope that Bernhard could become an instrument (missionary?) among Jews in Germany: “Quem velim tuo exemplo et opere et apud alios Iudaeos vulgari, ut, qui preordinati sunt, vocentur et veruant ad David regum suum”²⁷ At that time Luther no longer considered Romans 11:25-26 problematic.

From the 1530s, Luther’s attitude toward Jews became more critical for many different reasons. In German society Jews were active and skillful in business. They charged high interest rates, which Luther did not appreciate. However, the more serious problem was theological: the Jews refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah. They were like Turks, Gentiles, and false Christians, who are all enemies of Christ and faith. Indeed, the Jews had become active in their propaganda, especially in Bohemia, Moravia, and Poland, and gained many converts among Christians. Luther was becoming quite skeptical regarding the salvation of the entire Jewish people. In spite of that he interpreted the salvation of the Jews according to Romans 11:5, that “there is a remnant chosen by grace.”²⁸ In those days Luther worked very hard to promote the OT’s christological understanding and the doctrine of the Trinity (for example, the Genesis lectures 1535-45). On the one hand, he even said that Jews do not have the privilege of being called “God’s people,” because the true Israel is those who believe in Jesus. But on the other hand he still hoped that a part of the Jewish people could be led to Christ.²⁹

Although Luther wrote the apologetic and very polemical article *Von den Juden and ihren Lugen* (“Concerning the Jews and Their Lies”) in 1543, he still had the vision of winning some of them to Christ. Luther realized that his good will towards them could be abused by the Jews, who used his kindness for their own propaganda. This was also politically problematic because of the official religious policy of *cuius regio eius religio*. In this article Luther, in a polemical manner, points out that the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament is false, and their faith also is false. According to Psalms 51:7, all people, including Jews, are by nature under God’s wrath.³⁰ The most basic problem with the Jews was always the

²⁷Compare Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:11; WA Br 3:102.

²⁸See WA Br 5:452.

²⁹See WA 30 II: 224, 225; WA Tr 1:161; WA Tr 6:363.

³⁰See WA 53:426.

issue of the Messiah (Christology). Jews even accused Christians of polytheism and used some blasphemous expressions (like “magician” and “harlot”) for Jesus and Mary.

In that situation Luther made some harsh proposals: Jews’ traveling in Germany should be limited, or they should even be driven away from Germany (which was considered a Christian nation) to their own country. Their propaganda (religious expansion) had to be hindered by burning the synagogues, Jewish prayer books and Talmud, and by prohibiting the teaching activities of rabbis. The synagogues were compared to heathen temples. Judaism was seen as a threat to *unum corpus Christianum* and to Germany as a part of it as well. Jews’ attacks on Christ and Christianity should not be tolerated by German Christians. Luther was no longer very hopeful about the Jews’ conversion to Christ, but he did not lose the hope that God’s word had the power to lead Jews to conversion. This fact can be seen also in *Von den Juden and ihren Lugen*, especially in its last twenty pages. Here Luther’s teaching sounds again like the Luther of 1523 (*Dass Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei*). Luther was conscious of his crude, sometimes even non-Christian manner of speaking about the Jews, but it was no different from the way he spoke about Christ’s other antagonists, including the Roman Catholic Church and the pope.³¹

Luther’s last sermon (February 1546) expresses hope and missionary concern for the Jews. He says that if Jews convert and accept Jesus, they are our brothers. He is still quite polemical, but not as severe as before. He again emphasizes Christian love and prayer as a means of leading Jews to their Messiah, Jesus Christ.³²

Luther and Muslims

In Luther’s approach to Muslims there is both an apologetic and a missiological dimension. Islam was both a political and a religious threat to Europe, because Islamic Turkey was at that time a powerful state with

³¹Oberg mentions that Nazis abused Luther’s harsh attitude toward Jews. However, Nazi Germany’s terrible deeds, like concentration camps and the holocaust, cannot be supported from Luther’s teaching. Oberg mentions that one should remember Luther’s advice regarding his teaching: those writings which are against the Scriptures should be buried 10 ells (6 meters) under the ground. See WA 53:522-551.

³²See WA 51:195, 96.

expansionistic goals. Thus, in this connection, the “Muslims” means, in practice, Turks.

Luther thought that, from an eschatological viewpoint, both the papal church and Turks represented the Antichrist, the papal church even more than the Turks! There are three writings by Luther that are especially important in regard to the problem of Islam. They are *Vom Kriege wider die Turken*, *Heerpredigt wider den Turken*, and *Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Turken*.³³ It is interesting that we do not have any writings, for example, from Zwingli or Calvin regarding the Islamic issue.

Nevertheless, Luther had something positive to say about Muslims (for example, their love for each other and their care of children). His fundamental view of the Islamic problem was that the Turks were God’s rod (*virga Dei*) and satan’s tool, sent because of sin and apostasy. However, God could use even Turks for leading Christians to conversion and Christ. The threat of Islam was not only political, but first of all a spiritual one. Therefore repentance and prayer are emphasized as true weapons in his writings. He makes clear the difference between the spiritual and secular realms. The Christian church has to take care of the spiritual realm. But it is the duty of caesars and princes to take care of the secular realm. This was his principle also regarding Muslims. When Vienna was threatened by Turks in 1529, he did not consider the war a religious war. Luther opposed all forms of violence in promoting mission (“sword mission”). Christ came to the world and sent His gospel to us for our eternal salvation from sin and hell.³⁴

Muslims have to be approached with spiritual weapons (repentance, apologetics, mission). However, Christians should also know the Koran. Then they could stand against Islam. By reading the Koran, Christians could understand Islamic faith and life, but also see the lies of the Muslims. Actually, Luther worked intensively to obtain the Koran in Latin. Only part of it was available. The first Latin version was published in 1530 in Venice, but the pope ordered that it be burned. However, in 1542 Luther got hold of the Koran in Latin. He added his own preface and critical remarks (confutation) to it. It was published

³³1528, WA 30 II; 1529, WA 30 II; and 1541, WA 51, respectively.

³⁴See WA 30 II, 108, 111.

under the name *Confutatio Alcorani*.³⁵ Thus Luther followed the human *ad fontes* principle in his missiological approach. He said that the Koran itself, with its scandalous stories, is the best weapon against the influence of Islam and the Turks. However, Luther considered Islam to be a demonic enemy which had to be taken seriously. He identified Allah with satan, whom the Muslims used for their political and religious expansion.

As with the Jews, so with the Muslims, Christology was the most important issue in Luther's argumentation. Because the Muslims did not believe in Christ as God's Son, true God, their soteriology was false. Islam was just legalism. Luther expressed many times his missionary concern for Turks. During the Reformer's last years we can find some quite pessimistic expressions about mission among Muslims, but this is only one side of the story. Until his very last years he hoped to see the "spring of the gospel," the time of God's coming (new visitation) also to the Muslims. He was looking forward to the time when the ascended Christ would do His mission also in Turkey. Mission would be uncompleted until Christ's parousia.³⁶

Epilogue

Luther was not a mission strategist in the modern pragmatic sense, but he had a strong mission motivation. His theology includes a clear missiological dimension, which sometimes comes to a very practical expression. Luther considered mission to be the universal proclamation of the gospel until the parousia.

Let us thank the Reformation for its contribution to mission (for example, the pure gospel, the Bible translation, the Small Catechism, and the reform of worship, among others)!

³⁵WA 53:272-396.

³⁶Lutheran pre-orthodoxy and orthodoxy (for example, Johann Gerhard) approved the theory that the gospel had been preached among all nations already in apostolic times, but this does not fit with Luther's teaching. It is based on an erroneous interpretation of Mark 16:20; Romans 10:18; Psalms 19:4 and following; and Colossians 1:23.