

# **Solid Foundations: A Missiological Position Paper**

By Dr. Larry C. Merino

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*Summary: The solid theological foundations that can strengthen cross-cultural mission work are well within the grasp of the laity. Larry Merino uses a Lutheran perspective to show the person who has a "heart" for missions how to get the "head" for missions as well by recalling familiar teachings of the church.*

*Theology for missions is not something that is mysteriously hidden somewhere deep in a seminary library. Both pastors and lay-people who are eager to participate in God's mission can find important doctrinal foundations for mission work in familiar places.*

While touring in Israel, I was befriended by a Muslim cab driver who eagerly told me about his belief in Allah and was clearly very proud of his Muslim faith. After listening to him talk about his beliefs I asked if he was able to pray to his god about his needs. He replied, "I cannot pray to God about my needs because God is too great, too wonderful, and too loving to listen to someone like me." After hearing this I said, "It must be miserable not to be able to tell God what you need," and explained how we, as Christians, were able to pray to God about all of our needs. My new friend responded to my testimony by passionately defending his own beliefs.

The members of my tour group and I prayed specifically for another opportunity to reach this man. A few days later the cab driver found me at the hotel and in a very secretive

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manner told me that he had a bad heart condition and was worried about his health and even his life. He asked me to say a prayer for him. I made it clear that I would be praying to Jesus and he told me to go ahead and pray. So, I did.

## Prepared To Answer

I didn't have to grab my response for this man out of thin air or spend weeks and weeks in search of a deep answer for him. I had the response within me, by the power of the Holy Spirit, because of the theology I had come to know through the Lutheran church. I applied what I knew about God and how He hears our prayers. In other words, I applied theology, which, simply put, is our understanding of God as he is revealed in the Bible.

## Theology Will Be Tested

There are lots of things we can do to prepare to be good cross-cultural missionaries, such as learning about different cultures, studying other languages, and praying for the people we hope to reach. Unfortunately, one important part of preparation that is often overlooked is the fact that we need to prepare ourselves theologically. Yet over and over again I have seen how important this preparation is.

In my work as a missionary and as a consultant to missionaries throughout the world, I repeatedly hear of incidents where the missionary's theology is tested. For example, not long ago a Lutheran lay-missionary asked me if God heard the prayers of her Muslim friend, because her friend was asking questions about this and she wanted to have right thinking on prayer before discussing it further. I suggested she review her theology using *Luther's Small Catechism*. This reminded her of Luther's teaching that "only those who believe in Jesus

Christ may pray to God and expect to be heard,” which is based on John 14:13-14, “I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it.”<sup>2</sup>

How should you counsel your international friend who tells you she is interested in following Jesus but her husband wants to keep their Buddhist shrine in place? What will you tell your Chinese friend who has questions about continuing to pray to his ancestors out of his deep cultural respect for his elders? Believe me, if you are going to do mission work, you are going to face theological questions! Being clear about your theology is not a luxury; it is an essential part of mission preparation.

Having a clear theology means having a clear understanding of what the Bible reveals about God; it does not mean that Christians in other church bodies are not our brothers and sisters in Christ just because they have different rites and ceremonies. As Article VII of the Augsburg Confession notes:

Our churches teach that one holy Church is to remain forever. The Church is the congregation of saints (Psalm 149:1) in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered. For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should be the same everywhere. As Paul says, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:5-6).<sup>3</sup>

## Theological Comfort

It may seem as though working on theology is a tedious burden, but I propose instead that a solid theological foundation will actually provide you, the missionary, with comfort and strength. Rather than being a burden, knowing our theology helps to remove the fear from witness situations and helps us know that we can do this thing called mission. We can also

find comfort in knowing where to turn for guidance and direction when our cross-cultural friends raise challenging questions about matters of faith.

Actually, I suspect you will find that you already know a lot of mission theology – you just don't know that you know it. Learning theology can actually be a delightful refreshment of your own faith, as you prepare yourself to meet the mission challenges of your cross-cultural friends.

## A “Head” For Missions

Missionaries certainly need a heart for God's mission and a love for lost people. I also believe that missionaries need a “head” for missions. We need to prepare and think carefully about what we plan to do in missions, and the impact our work will have on people. This “head” for missions begins with our theological foundations.

Theological understanding isn't something we automatically receive the moment we become Christians; rather, it is something that comes through our lifelong study of God. Theology helps present what we know about God in a thoughtful and organized manner, but we can never fully or perfectly know God and His ways. From personal experience I can tell you that learning about God and applying His Word to our lives and to missions is an ongoing process, not a one-time program. The way I like to look at it is this: We won't ever master everything there is to know about theology and missions, but we can always follow the Master.

## Theological Foundations

Anyone who tries to do mission work without a solid foundation in theology will be like a builder who tries to build a house without a solid foundation—the work, however beautiful on the surface, will be weak and insecure underneath, and probably will not last.

Theology for missions is not something that is mysteriously hidden somewhere deep in a seminary library. Both pastors and lay-people who are eager to participate in God’s mission can find important doctrinal foundations for mission work in familiar places. In order to be a well-prepared missionary, you need to devote time and effort to studying theology, but the tools for such study are within your grasp, and the time and effort spent doing so will be more than worth it. Consider the fact that Jesus devoted three solid years to preparing his disciples for their work in building His church. There is no substitute for this kind of preparation.

The doctrines of justification and salvation, along with the concept of *missio Dei* are important organizing principles of Lutheran theology that deepen our understanding of God’s mission and help to guide our participation in His mission work. It is also fundamental for us to have a solid understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in God’s mission.

Let’s take a look at these important theological foundations.

### BY GRACE, FOR CHRIST’S SAKE – JUSTIFICATION

According to *Luther’s Small Catechism*, justification means that “God declares sinners righteous for Christ’s sake; that is, our sins have been imputed or charged to Christ, the Savior, and Christ’s righteousness has been imputed or credited to us.”<sup>4</sup> God’s Word speaks of justification in the following verses:

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:22-24).

And

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

The four key reasons why we must “firmly hold to this teaching of justification by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith,” include:

- ◆ It is the most important doctrine of the Christian religion;
- ◆ It distinguishes the Christian religion from false religions, all of which teach salvation by works;
- ◆ It gives enduring comfort to the penitent sinner;
- ◆ It gives all glory to God for His grace and mercy in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most beautiful statements we have in the church about justification is Article IV of *The Augsburg Confession*. Many have called this “the article by which the church stands or falls.” This article clearly puts the focus of our salvation on grace alone.

#### ARTICLE IV of the AUGSBURG CONFESSION

It is taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.

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#### THE MISSION IS GOD’S MISSION – MISSIO DEI

The concept of *missio Dei*, or “God’s mission,” is another important organizing principle in Lutheran thought. *Missio Dei* means, “The mission is work that belongs to God.”<sup>7</sup> This theological concept points us to the Triune God as the one who owns and orchestrates all

mission work. God’s mission is “motivated by His loving will for the entire world, grounded in the atoning work of Jesus Christ and carried out by the Holy Spirit of Christ through the means of grace.”<sup>8</sup>

Through the doctrine of justification we understand that everything God does, as far as we know from His revelation to us—the Bible—is done for our benefit, so that we might be saved. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to rescue lost and condemned people. This is the *missio Dei*. This is where mission work finds its center—in God’s desire to save all people.

Jesus left no doubt about the purpose of His mission when He told Zaccheus, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost”(Luke 19:10).

#### GOD’S PLAN AND ULTIMATE PURPOSE – SALVATION

Within Lutheran theology we always approach doctrine from the perspective of God’s plan and ultimate purpose, which is to save sinful man.<sup>9</sup> The *missio Dei* has always been a mission of salvation for mankind. Through the revelation of God’s Word we have the knowledge that He wants “all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4).

Applying the doctrine of salvation to our lives and to our mission continually reminds us that we ourselves have been rescued as a result of *missio Dei*, therefore all glory belongs to God, not to us.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

## Three Articles, Luther, And Mission

One familiar place where theological foundations for mission work can be found is the Apostle's Creed, which points out how we are complete in the Triune God – created, redeemed and sanctified.

### The Trinitarian Mission of God

#### THE FIRST ARTICLE: CREATION

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

#### THE SECOND ARTICLE: REDEMPTION

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

#### THE THIRD ARTICLE: SANCTIFICATION

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Luther beautifully summarizes the Trinitarian mission of God that is found in the Apostle's Creed:

Although the whole world has sought painstakingly to learn what God is and what he thinks and does, it has never succeeded in the least. But here you have everything in richest measure. In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit through whom he brings us to himself...we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

## Receiving The Treasure – Sanctification

God’s mission of salvation in Jesus Christ would remain a hidden treasure without the work of the Holy Spirit, as Luther notes:

Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Schultz calls the Holy Spirit “the dynamic force in the divine salvation plan,” and describes three aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit within the *missio Dei*:

- (1) He mediates the gift of salvation through the forgiveness of sins (justification);
- (2) He builds and gathers the church on earth; and
- (3) He equips her for the continual proclamation of the Word.<sup>12</sup>

Reciting Luther’s explanation to the Third Article is a useful tool to remind us that we need the Holy Spirit and His gracious work both to come to Jesus Christ ourselves and to draw others to the Savior:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.<sup>13</sup>

## The Church And Missions

The theology for missions described above is the same theology that guides every aspect of our church life; therefore it makes sense that God’s mission to the lost should be the prime focus and main point to all we do in the church.

Vicedom put Lutheran confessions into missiological perspective when he wrote:

Only when we have grasped the fact that the whole purpose of the bible is the rescue of mankind and therefore mission work, only then do theological thought and every type of church work receive their proper direction. (xi)<sup>14</sup>

When Jesus visited the disciples after His resurrection, he opened their minds so that they could see the central point of the Scriptures, which was that “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:45-47). Then, just before ascending to heaven, Jesus left no doubt about the mission He was giving to all believers through his church when He said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

St. Paul’s willingness to do anything for the salvation of others is a model for us of how to reflect God’s heart and will to save the lost.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

Theological foundations are an essential part of the church’s preparation for mission work.

Solid theology clearly points us to the mission field, equips us to face the challenges we find there, and helps us to be ready for questions about faith raised by our cross-cultural friends.

The doctrines of justification and salvation, along with the concept of *missio Dei* are not only important organizing principles for mission theology; they are also a beautiful message of God’s saving love for us all.

## Discussion Questions

1. Consider the doctrines of justification and salvation together with the concept of *missio Dei*, God's mission—how might these affect the approach a local church has to missions?
2. If Christians more clearly believed that they were already complete in the Triune God—created, redeemed and sanctified—how might that affect their approach to missions?
3. If churches were to agree that, “the whole purpose of the bible is the rescue of mankind and therefore mission work”—how might that affect their approach to mission?
4. If Christian missionaries more clearly understood the work of the Holy Spirit—how might that affect their approach to mission?

## Theological Application Scenario

A lay-missionary, June, has been witnessing her faith to her Muslim friend, Amia, for many months. From time to time June has been able to bring up and discuss spiritual matters, but she is eager to share more about her faith with Amia. One day, near Christmas, June is invited Amia's home. During the visit, Amia comments on all of the gift buying related to Christmas. June sees this as an open door to share the true meaning of Christmas. While Amia works in the kitchen, mixing and stirring and cooking food for her guest, June talks about the many Christian symbols related to Christmas, using them to talk about the true meaning of Christmas.

As she talks, June notices that Amia has a funny look on her face and has gotten rather quiet. She wonders if Amia is just listening carefully to what she is sharing or if something is bothering her, so she says, "Maybe I am saying something wrong to you. Have I said too much about Christmas?" Amia looks carefully at her friend, then says, "You don't understand. It always feels funny to me when you talk about religious and spiritual things when I am hurrying around, and my hands are dirty and I am sweaty, and my hair isn't clean. I feel like I should only talk to God, and only talk about God when I am clean. After I have washed. It's hard to think about such things when I feel so unclean."

1. What is the problem for June?
2. What are the options for June?
3. How would you respond to Amia if you were June?
4. What have you learned from this scenario?

## Endnotes

<sup>2</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1986, 170.

<sup>3</sup> *The Augsburg Confession*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2006, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*, 161.

<sup>5</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*, 163-164.

<sup>6</sup> Tappert, Theodore. *The Book of Concord*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959, 30:1-3.

<sup>7</sup> Vicedom, Georg. *The mission of God*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1965, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Schultz, Klaus Detlev. "Tension in the Pneumatology of the *Missio Dei* Concept," *Concordia Journal*, April 1997: Vol. 23 Issue 2, 102.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, F.E. *The Religious Bodies of America*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1961, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Tappert, 419:63-65.

<sup>11</sup> Tappert, 415:38.

<sup>12</sup> Schultz, 102.

<sup>13</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*, 144.

<sup>14</sup> Vicedom, xi.