

# Thinking Clearly About God's Mission

By Larry C. Merino

---

*Summary: The solid theological foundations that can strengthen cross-cultural mission work are well within the grasp of the laity in our churches. 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.*

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.

As a missionary, you certainly need a *heart* for God's mission and a love for lost people. But I would suggest you develop a *head* for missions too

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 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.

---

Rev. Larry Merino, PhD, is the executive director of Harvest Mission International, Inc. (HMI), a cross-cultural mission education and consultancy group. Dr. Merino serves as a mission consultant to churches, mission organizations, and mission agencies throughout the United States and in Europe. Rev. Merino has a particular interest in developing strategies for reaching "resistant" people groups. Prior to developing the work of HMI he was a parish pastor at New Life Lutheran Church, Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

## A “Head” For Missions

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. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God was able to help me think clearly about His mission and my response. I applied theology, which, simply put, is our understanding of God as he is revealed in the Bible. Therefore, I was able to tell what I knew about God and how He hears our prayers.

As a missionary, you certainly need a *heart* for God's mission and a love for lost people. But I would suggest you develop a *head* for missions too, so you can think clearly about what you plan to do in missions and the impact your work will have on people. King Solomon wisely counseled, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.” (Proverbs 19:2)

A *head* for missions begins with our theological understanding. This understanding isn't something we automatically receive the moment we become a Christian; rather, it is something that comes through our lifelong study of God. Theology helps present what is known about God in a thoughtful and organized manner, though one 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 your 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.

## Theology will be tested

Over and over again I have seen how important it is to be prepared to think clearly about God's Mission. In my work as a missionary and as a consultant to missionaries throughout

Believe me, if you are going to do mission work, you are going to face theological questions!

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 Martin 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>1</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? What Biblical teachings can guide you if you are called to cross into the culture of the poor? If you are older, are you ready to cross cultures and answer tough questions raised by a lost twenty-year-old the Lord brings to your doorstep? 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.

## Theological Comfort

It may seem as though working on theology is a tedious burden, but I propose instead that a solid understanding of theological principles will actually provide you, the missionary,

with comfort and strength. Rather than being a burden, knowing your theology will help to remove the fear from witness situations and help you know that you can do this thing called missions. You can also find comfort in knowing where to turn for guidance and direction when your cross-cultural friends, like those mentioned above, raise challenging questions about matters of faith.

Actually, I suspect you will find that you already know a lot of mission theology but you may not be aware 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 reaching out to lost people from many nations or walks of life.

## Prepared To Think Clearly

Anyone who tries to do mission work without an understanding of theology will be like a builder who tries to build a house without a solid foundation—the work, however

The effort you make in gaining the knowledge you need to support your zeal for missions will be worth it.

beautiful on the surface, will be weak and insecure underneath, and probably will not last. But if you will devote the time and energy to studying some basic principles and preparing yourself to think

clearly about God's mission, your work as a missionary will have a strong and secure foundation. Consider the fact that Jesus devoted three solid years to preparing his disciples for their work in building His church. The effort you make in gaining the knowledge you need to support your zeal for missions will be worth it.

The tools for such study are within your grasp. 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, such as the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's

Prayer. The concept of *missio Dei* (Latin for: God’s Mission) along with the doctrines of justification and salvation, are important organizing principles of Lutheran theology that can deepen your understanding of God’s mission and help to guide your participation in His mission work. It is also fundamental for you 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.

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

The concept of *missio Dei*, or “God’s mission,” is an important organizing principle in Lutheran thought. *Missio Dei* means, “The mission is work that belongs to God.”<sup>2</sup> This theological concept points you 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>3</sup>

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. 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 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.

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

When someone believes in Christ as his or her Savior, God “cancels the guilt of the person’s sin and credits righteousness to him.”<sup>4</sup> This is justification, a legal declaration that is valid because Christ’s perfect life and His death are now credited to us, to pay for our sins. 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)

According to *Luther's Small Catechism*, justification means that “God declares sinners righteous for Christ’s sake.”<sup>5</sup>

The gift of forgiveness and life is received through faith as stated in Ephesians 2:8-9:

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.

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

- 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>6</sup>

One of the most beautiful statements we have in the church about justification is Article IV of *The Augsburg Confession*. It is also known as “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

## 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>8</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 have been rescued as a result of *missio Dei*. **God’s love for us motivates us to share the treasure of salvation with people from all nations.**

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)

### 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>9</sup>

Detlev 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>10</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 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>11</sup>

### Three Articles, Luther, And Mission

Whenever we recite the Apostles' Creed we actually speak clearly about mission work. The Apostles' Creed gives us a solid theological foundation as it points out how we and all believers are complete in the Triune God – created, redeemed and sanctified. This Trinitarian mission of God makes us complete so we don't have to worry about our salvation or whether God loves and accepts us. With this assurance, we can now look to the interest of others, not just our own. (Philippians 2:4). This frees us to care about others and to reach out to them and offer them the same comfort in Christ that we have received for all of our sins. (2 Cor. 1:3-7)

## **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 summarized 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>12</sup>

### **Important Organizing Principles To Help You Think Clearly About God's Mission**

- ***missio Dei***—The mission is God's Mission.
- **Justification**— God's mission is accomplished only through Jesus Christ. God declares sinners righteous for Christ's sake;
- **Salvation**— The purpose of God's mission has always been to save ALL people from the consequences of sin.
- **The Holy Spirit**— God's mission of salvation in Jesus Christ would remain a hidden treasure without the work of the Holy Spirit who works faith in us to believe that we are justified and thus saved.
- **The Church and Missions**— God's love for us motivates us to share the treasure of salvation with people from all nations.

## The Church and Missions

The organizing principles described above guide every aspect of church life and enable us to think clearly about God's mission and our partnership in that mission. God's saving love for us motivates us to make His mission to seek and save the lost the prime focus and main point to all we do in the church.

Georg Vicedom brought some clarity to Lutheran confessions 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.<sup>13</sup>

When Jesus visited the disciples after His resurrection, he helped them to think clearly by opening 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 you 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).

There are lots of things you can do to prepare to be an effective cross-cultural missionary, such as learning about different cultures, studying other languages, and praying for the people you hope to reach. Learning to think clearly about God’s mission is an essential part of your preparation. A solid understanding of theology clearly points you to the mission field, equips you to face the challenges you find there, and helps you to be ready for questions about faith raised by your cross-cultural friends. The concept of *missio Dei*, the doctrines of justification and salvation, and the work of the Holy Spirit are not only important organizing principles for 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?

**Personal Insight:** Make a note here of any personal insights you have gained from this article and the discussions that you might apply to your own life as a missionary.

## Theological Application Scenario

*The following scenario is based on an actual event, but the names have been change.*

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 to 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?

For additional insights regarding this scenario, turn to page \_\_\_\_\_

## References:

1. Luther's Small Catechism. (1986). St. Louis: Concordia, 170.
2. Vicedom, Georg. (1965). *The mission of God*. St. Louis: Concordia, 5.
3. Schultz, Klaus Detlev. (1997, April). Tension in the Pneumatology of the Missio Dei Concept. *Concordia Journal*, Vol. 23, Issue 2, 102.
4. Hoerber, Robert, G. (Ed.) (1986). *Concordia self-study Bible*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1721.
5. Luther's Small Catechism, 161.
6. Luther's Small Catechism, 163-164.
7. Tappert, Theodore. (1959). *The Book of Concord*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 30:1-3.
8. Meyer, F.E. (1961). *The Religious Bodies of America*. St. Louis: Concordia, 147.
9. Tappert, 415:38
10. Schultz, 102.
11. Luther's Small Catechism, 144.
12. Tappert, 419:63-65.
13. Vicedom, xi.