

MISSIOLOGICAL LESSONS FROM MARTIN LUTHER: AN ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE

ABNER P. DIZON

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, PHILIPPINES

The fact that Martin Luther positively altered the course of Western history resulted in both 32 years of active ministry as well as the German translation of the Bible, hymn writing, and volumes of sermons and theological treatises. His influence is truly far-reaching. Luther is no stranger for Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen White, in her book *The Great Controversy*, introduced Luther as “foremost among those who were called to lead the church from the darkness of popery into the light of a purer faith.”¹ For Adventists who view themselves as “heirs of the great truths”² of the Reformation, the question remains: does Luther have anything to offer Adventists about world mission?

1. The Debate About Luther’s Missiology

Missions does not usually come to mind when discussing the Protestant Reformation. The literature on sixteenth-century Protestant missions points out that, except for the Anabaptists, there is little missionary vision or missionary spirit evident during the Reformation.³ Among the first to promote this notion was Gustav Warneck, the father of missiology. For him, not only was there no missionary action in the age of the Refor-

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2009), 111.

² Peter M. van Bemmelen, “Justification by Faith: An Adventist Understanding,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 20.1-2 (2009): 177.

³ Glenn S. Sunshine, “Protestant Missions in the Sixteenth Century,” in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, ed. Martin I. Klauber, Scott M. Manetsch, and Erwin W. Lutzer (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2008), 12.

mation, “even the idea of mission” was absent.⁴ Twentieth-century mission historians (including Kenneth S. Latourette, Stephen C. Neill, J. Herbert Kane, Ralph Winter, and Ruth Tucker) perpetuated this claim that the Reformers were indifferent to mission.

Yet, there is some evidence in Luther’s writings that challenges this negative assumption about mission on the part of Luther and other Reformers. For instance, in his commentary on Zech 10:9, Luther describes what missiologists call the centrifugal force of mission (i.e., the scattering of missionaries among unbelievers):⁵

They will be scattered among the nations ... they will be sent by God among the nations as preachers and thus draw many people to themselves and through themselves to Christ.... “They shall remember Me in far countries ... they shall preach and teach of Me, and thus they shall be increased and shall convert many others to Me.”⁶

In Luther’s metaphorical interpretation of Zech 12:6, he not only points to the global scope of mission but also to the power for its accomplishment: “The Christians shall also, through the Word, harvest much fruit among all the Gentiles and shall convert and save many.... The fire of the Holy Spirit ... shall devour the Gentiles ... and prepare a place everywhere for the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ.”⁷

Luther also had a grasp of the integration of ministry (internal) and mission (external). In his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer (1529), Luther writes,

We pray ... *that all this may be realized in us* and that God’s name may be praised through his holy Word and our Christian lives ... *that it may gain recognition and followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world.*

God’s kingdom comes to us ... through the Word and faith, and ... through the final revelation. Now, we pray for both of these, *that it may come to those who are not yet in it, and that it may come by daily growth here and in eternal life hereafter to us who have attained it.* All this is simply to say: “Dear Father, ... *give us thy Word, that the Gospel may be sincerely*

⁴ Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Mission from the Reformation to the Present Time*, ed. George Robson (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1901), 8, 9.

⁵ Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2007), 123.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets 3: Zechariah*, vol. 20 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 305, 306, quoted in Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 123 (emphasis added).

⁷ Luther, *Minor Prophets 3*, 20:326, quoted in Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 123.

preached throughout the world and that it may be received by faith and may work and live in us."⁸

Another evidence of Luther's missional vision is his recognition and attempt to interact with the Jews and the Muslim Turks. To reach the Jews, Luther published his book *That Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523). Luther did not believe in crusades against Muslims; instead, he suggested that evangelists were sent to reach them. Luther studied Islam and wrote apologetic tracts for Muslim Turks. He also encouraged the study of the Koran.⁹

Such evidence suggests that Luther recognized the missionary mandate of the church. So why do many scholars believe that Luther was not involved in mission?

2. A Definition of Mission

Scholars overlook the missional motif in Luther's writings because of a difference in defining the terms *mission*, *missionary*, and *mission field*. These words were not used during the time of the Reformation. The words *mission* and *missionary* were first used in English literature in 1598 and 1644 in describing the work of the Jesuits.¹⁰ The terms *world mission* and *mission* only became familiar in Protestant literature two centuries after Luther's death.¹¹ Apparently, Gustav Warneck and his successors were imposing late eighteenth-century terms on Luther and the other reformers. As Michael Parsons observes, Luther is judged "guilty" for not following a definition of mission that did not exist during his lifetime.¹² Foreign missionary activity did not have a tangible form among Protestants in the sixteenth century—even among the Anabaptists.¹³ The intention of mission historians to raise awareness about the importance and urgency of foreign missions is com-

⁸ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 132 (emphasis added).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 495-496.

¹⁰ Elias Medeiros, "The Reformers and 'Missions': Warneck, Latourette, Neill, Kane, Winter, and Tucker's Arguments—Part 1," *Fides Reformata* 18.1 (2013): 121.

¹¹ Pekka Huhtinen, "Luther and World Mission: A Review," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 65.1 (2001): 17.

¹² Michael Parsons, ed., *Text and Task: Scripture and Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 66.

¹³ Sunshine, "Protestant Missions," 12 (emphasis added).

mendable.¹⁴ However, as David J. Bosch notes, “Mission ... should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections.”¹⁵

Warneck advocated that *missions* should only be understood as the sending of missionaries to non-Christian nations. However, that view is no longer how *missions* is defined today. In fact, there is a consensus among missiologists that *missions* should be understood widely or holistically. Missiologists no longer see *missions* as the activity of the Church “overseas.” Instead, they recognize that the frontiers of mission are not only geographical. They can also be religious, ethnic, or cultural boundaries.

The understanding of mission has radically changed over the past century.¹⁶ The earliest change had to do with distinguishing between *mission* (singular) and *missions* (plural). Before the mid-1900s there was no distinction between the two. Contemporary missiologists now describe *mission* as *missio Dei*. This Latin phrase refers to God’s purposes and activities in and for the entire universe.¹⁷ The central idea of *missio Dei* is that “God is the One who initiates and sustains mission. At most, then, the church is God’s partner in what is God’s agenda ... mission is God-centered rather than human-centered, but without neglecting the important role that God has assigned to the church in that process.”¹⁸

Gailyn van Rheenen further defines mission as “the work of God in reconciling sinful humankind to himself.”¹⁹ *Mission* is not limited to the activities of the church because God has been actively ministering to the world. God initiated His mission through patriarchs, prophets, priests, and judges in OT times. In the NT, He reached out to the world through Jesus Christ and His disciples. Today, God continues His mission through the church. *Mission* refers to what the church is mandated to do—starting right where the church is located. Another definition of mission is “the task, obligation

¹⁴ A. Chadwick Mauldin, *Fullerism as Opposed to Calvinism: A Historical and Theological Comparison of the Missiology of Andrew Fuller and John Calvin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 35.

¹⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 9.

¹⁶ A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, “Missions in the Modern World,” in *Introducing World Mission: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 17.

¹⁷ J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 25.

¹⁸ Moreau, Corwin, and McGee, “Missions in the Modern World,” 18.

¹⁹ Gailyn van Rheenen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 20.

or commission, adopted by the Church to spread the Christian faith throughout the world.”²⁰

The idea of *missions* (plural) refers to activities in which the church participates in the *missio Dei*.²¹ It also refers to the plans of committed Christians to accomplish God’s mission.²² *Missions* is anchored in the mission of God and it is the implementation of the mission of God. With this corrective lens, we may now look at missiological lessons from Luther’s thought and practice.

3. Missiological Lessons for Adventist Mission

At least seven lessons can be learned from the Reformation for the Seventh-day Adventist Church today.

First, mission must be God-centered. Luther articulates three concepts as the starting point for mission: *missio Dei* (God’s mission), *missio Christi* (Christ’s mission), and *missio ecclesiae* (the church’s mission). He believed that the church and mission are all ultimately *missio Dei*.

As Ruthven Roy points out, Adventists must remember that Adventist mission is “God’s enterprise from beginning to end.”²³ It does not belong to the Adventist denomination—it is God’s mission. Adventists simply recognize and seek opportunities to participate in it. Adventists must not let human pride get in the way as if mission is about our plans and accomplishments. The success of mission does not merely depend on us nor is mission about statistics or missiometrics. Indeed, the “field is the world” (Matt 13:38)²⁴ and we are “God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor 3:9), but God is “the Lord of the Harvest”—not us (Matt 9:38). It is He who “will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness” (Rom 9:28, KJV).

Second, Adventists must understand their mission. Luther knew that his movement was a missionary movement.²⁵ He understood his mission but

²⁰ David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:29.

²¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

²² Van Rheenen, *Missions*, 20.

²³ Ruthven Roy, *A Challenge to the Remnant: Designing Our Mission Strategy to Impact the Real World* (Frederick, MD: Network Discipling Ministries Books, 2002), 19.

²⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are from the ESV.

²⁵ Parsons, *Text and Task*, 66.

not in the definition of nineteenth-century-mission historians. His mission was to re-Christianize Europe—a continent that, during his time, was no longer authentically Christian. Once Luther understood his lifelong mission, he never let go of it. Adventists believe they are a movement called out for a specific purpose. Adventist biblical scholar Jiří Moskala observes, “There is no election without a commission” because “God’s call presupposes a call for action.”²⁶ Adventists must understand what mission is because their answers to the many challenges of contemporary mission—such as the new forms of missions and strategies—depend on their understanding of their mission.²⁷

Third, Adventists must understand their message. Despite his criticisms, Warneck admits that the reformers helped the cause of missions by restoring the Gospel message. Indeed, mission is incomplete without the proclamation of that message. Luther understood his mission and he also understood his message. His theology, with its emphasis on God’s redemptive purpose, was ideally suited for mission. Adventists may differ from Luther on some doctrines, but one thing they have in common with him is the doctrine of justification by faith. The Adventist Church must proclaim that message. As Eric Webster observes, “Justification by faith is not a preamble to the third angel’s message; it is not introductory or preparatory; it is the very heart and core of the [Adventist] message.”²⁸ Understanding and proclaiming that message is crucial. Russell Burrill thus contends, “Adventists must not preach a new gospel. If we are to fulfil Revelation 14:6-12, then we must preach the eternal gospel of salvation by grace alone. We may do it in the setting of Christ’s soon return, but we must not, dare not, add anything as the basis of salvation, which is faith in Christ alone.”²⁹

Fourth, theology must lead to mission. One valid criticism against the reformers was that they did not engage in foreign missions. This lack of overseas missions is due to the many obstacles they faced.³⁰ The first obstacle is that most foreign countries were then under Roman Catholic monarchies. The second obstacle has to do with the reformers rejecting monasticism without developing their own missionary-sending structure.

²⁶ Jiří Moskala, “The Mission of God’s People in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 19.1–2 (2008): 40.

²⁷ Gottfried Oosterwal, *Mission: Possible; The Challenge of Mission Today* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1975), 12.

²⁸ Eric Webster, “The Third Angel’s Message in Verity,” *Ministry* 53.8 (1980): 4.

²⁹ Russell Burrill, *Radical Disciples for Revolutionary Churches* (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1996), 92.

³⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 250.

The third obstacle may be attributed to the fact that the churches of the Reformation were under siege and struggling just to survive. However, the most difficult obstacle was the internal conflicts that drained their energy and unintentionally impeded missionary outreach.³¹ Because of the endless theological disputes and dissensions, the reformers had little energy left to turn to those outside the Christian fold.³² They were too busy debating the “what is” and they lost sight of the “so what.” As Gordon Doss points out, “What good is excellent theology if it does not produce strong mission?”³³ The Adventist Church must not allow issues to result in energy-draining disputes. Instead, Adventists must develop a commitment to the mission of God among non-Christian peoples that goes beyond mere intellectual assent to impact their time, influence, and resources.

Fifth, eschatology must fuel Adventist mission. Contrary to what some scholars suggest, Luther’s eschatology did not hinder his missiology.³⁴ In the same way, Adventist eschatology is crucially linked to the missionary work of the church. At its core, Adventist theology is missional and belief in the parousia should be a major motive for Adventist mission. As Rick McEdward suggests, missions should be “eschatology with feet.”³⁵ Adventist eschatology should increase our motivation for mission because while Revelation shows a beast that has authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation, it also depicts the redemption of “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev 7:9, emphasis mine).

Sixth, Adventist message and mission must be relevant. God’s mission is the same throughout earth’s history. The mission task, however, depends on the time and place where churches and individuals live. Luther discerned his time, and he had a vision of the response required.³⁶ Understanding the context of his message and mission, he went about his task with zeal, planted a new faith, and denounced the obstacles that stood in his way. The Adventist message and mission must be contextualized to be relevant. Gottfried Oosterwal observes, “Each generation of believers must reassess

³¹ Abraham Kovacs, “Protestant Churches,” in *Encyclopedia of Missions and Missionaries*, ed. Jonathan Bonk (New York: Routledge, 2007), 356.

³² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 250.

³³ Gordon Doss, “Viewpoint: Reforming Christians or Converting Non-Christians?” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 6.2 (2010): 111.

³⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 246.

³⁵ Rick McEdward, “Adventist Mission Theology: Developing a Biblical Foundation,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 7.1 (2011): 75.

³⁶ Parsons, *Text and Task*, 67.

the task of presenting Christ to the world so that it can fulfil its mission in its own particular way.”³⁷ Hence, Jon L. Dybdahl suggests that theologians “learn to read not only historic theology but also their Bibles and their society and then take steps to create out of their matrix a theology that allows Jesus to be seen and understood clearly in their setting.”³⁸ Ellen White similarly notes, “There was a present truth in the days of Luther,—a truth at that time of special importance; there is a present truth for the church today.”³⁹ We must understand the time and be seized by the urgency to accomplish our God-given task.

Seventh, every member must embrace Adventist mission. Luther believed that every believer is an evangelist who should teach the gospel to others.⁴⁰ Luther taught that the function of the priesthood, which includes the proclamation of the gospel and concern for the salvation of others, belongs to every Christian.⁴¹ The danger is that churches buy into a “consumer” church model whereby pastors become performers or providers of a certain kind of service, while the people of God (the *laos*), as customers, sit back to be served.⁴² It is essential that the Adventist Church fully implements a sound theology of the priesthood of all believers so that every member will become involved in mission.⁴³ As Oosterwal points out, such a “rediscovery of the Biblical role of the laity is essential ... to the finishing of God’s mission on earth.”⁴⁴

³⁷ Oosterwal, *Mission*, 15.

³⁸ Jon L. Dybdahl, “Adventist Responses to Mission Challenges Through Theology and Contextualization,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 5.2 (2009): 31.

³⁹ White, *The Great Controversy*, 143.

⁴⁰ Information is taken from Luther’s exposition on the “herald of good tidings” (Isa 40:9). Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah Chapters 40–60*, vol. 17 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1972), 13-14, quoted in Parsons, *Text and Task*, 74. All believers “have the right and duty to confess, to teach, and to spread God’s Word.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 5–6*, vol. 27 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1964), 394.

⁴¹ Parsons, *Text and Task*, 75.

⁴² Monte Sahlin, foreword to *Revolution in the Church*, by Russell Burrill (Fallbrook, CA: Hart Research Center, 1993), v.

⁴³ Daniel Kewley and Sven Ostring, “Can Church Planting Movements Emerge in the West? Case Studies of Three Church Planting Strategies in Western Australia,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 8.1 (2012): 29.

⁴⁴ Oosterwal, *Mission*, 13.