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# MARTIN LUTHER AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

CHARLES CHANEY*

The growing ecumenical concern of most of Protestantism during the twentieth century, and also the more recent ecumenical posture of the Roman Catholic communion, has been the creation of and, at the same time, the stimulation of a most intensive interest in the doctrine of the Church throughout the Christian world. That aspect of a plenary doctrine of the Church which has aroused most interest, which still demands clear and profound expression, and which in a large measure, gave birth to the renewed interest to this doctrine in its entirety is that referred to as the "mission of the Church."

There has been, especially since Edinburgh, 1910, a Gargantuan effort to relate properly the Church to its mission. So that now, in this eighth decade of the twentieth century, the once radical distinction or disjunction between the Church and its mission has been abolished. The Church must not be separated from its mission. To be the Church is to be missionary. To speak of the Church in the world is to speak of the Church sent to the world and for the world.

*Mission and the Reformers*

Protestant missiologists have, from the earliest efforts of serious investigation into the roots of the Protestant World Mission, explained with difficulty and distress the apparent hiatus in the thought and practice of the Reformers in regard to the Church's mission to the world. Luther and Calvin have been castigated by friend and foe alike as men with a "missionary vacuum," as men who raised "no lament" over the practical impossibility of the churches of the Reformation "discharging the missionary obligation" to the people of the newly discovered lands of the world.

One of the most severe "friendly" critics was Gustav Warneck, the great German missiologist. Warneck spoke of "the strange silence" of the Reformers in regard to missionary duty. This "silence" could be, he said,

> accounted for satisfactorily only by the fact that the recognition of the missionary obligation was itself absent. We miss in the Reformers not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this not only because the newly discovered heathen across the sea lay almost wholly beyond the range of their vision,...but because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction.[1]

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1. Gustav Warneck, *Outline of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time*, trans., and ed. by George Robson (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901), p. 9.

Warneck went into great detail to show that there was not the least concern or theological basis for mission work in the thought of Martin Luther. Luther's understanding of echatology and election prevented any such attitude or action.[2] It was Warneck's conviction that the missionary activity of Lutheranism through the last three centuries was principally the result of the influence of Pietism and had little or no reference to Luther and his thought. Warneck contended:

> It was in the age of Pietsm that missions struck their first deep roots, and it is the spirit of Pietism which...has brought them to their present bloom....But that which brought about the radical change lay in the nature of Pietism itself, which over against the dominant ecclesiastical doctrine exhibited the worth and power of a living, personal and practical Christianity. The energetic seeking of conversion, as well as a general zeal for fruitfulness in good works, begat an activity which as soon as it was directed toward the non-Christian world, could not but seek the conquest of the world for Christ.[3]

*A Question*

This charge raises a serious question for consideration today. Are modern-day Protestants to understand that their heritage of over three centuries of the Protestant World Mission has no vital or dynamic roots in the Reformers?

In a previous study I raised this question concerning Calvin. It is evident that at the rise of the Protestant World Mission men who counted themselves in the lineage of the Genevan reformer were at its forefront. I found a dynamic in his theology and understanding of history that became among the early leaders of the mission movement both the foundation and inspiration of their apostolate to the world.[4]

I now want to raise the same question concerning Martin Luther. Can an "idea of mission" be found in his thought? Should mid-twentieth century descendants of Luther confess that he was fundamentally lacking in this matter which is so essential to the Biblical understanding of the Church and its reason for being in the world? Was Luther really completely blind on this doctrine which modern theologians affirm is so integral to the essence and nature of the Church itself?[5]

It is the judgment of this author that such concessions are not necessary. The understanding of the relationship between Church and mission discovered by modern biblical research, a discovery at the same time

2. *Ibid.*, p. 15 ff.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
4. I did this study for Professor Beaver. It was published in ***The Reformed Review*** XVII (March, 1964), pp. 24-38.
5. See Herbert C. Jackson, "The Missionary Obligation of Theology," an address published in the *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library*, January, 1964, p. 1. I also disagree with Dr. Jackson on his contention that the "event-character of Christianity" was not to be found in the thought and practice of the Reformers, p. 3.

almost forced upon the Christian world by the fact that God had gathered his Church in all lands, is much nearer to Luther's understanding of the Church than to the impassioned justification of mission societies so common in the nineteenth century.

Warneck's reference to the "idea of mission, in the sense in which we understand them today," gives one clue to explaining this matter. Warneck gave only abstract concession that mission was the task of the church. Mission as such, he maintained, belonged to a fellowship within the Church. Indeed, it must be confessed that this idea of mission was not to be found in Luther's thought and that such a theory is of the nature of Pietism. However, neither is such a view to be found in the scriptures.[6]

Instead, an entirely different outlook is found in the thought of Luther. His theology is permeated with the concepts of a world without God, of a dynamic Gospel able and destined to speak deliverance to the ends of the earth, of a community of saints sojourning upon the earth in order to bear witness to God's act of gracious love in Christ and of a Kingdom in the process of growth, extending itself among all peoples and nations, until the day that God shall call all into judgment.

## I. A Hopeless and Helpless World

It is disputed today whether there can be an adequate basis and motivation for mission without being able to say positively that some men will be saved and some men will be damned.[7] But there was no equivocation on this matter in the thought of Luther. Mankind, as a result of its sin, stood under the sentence of death. God's wrath against sin was coming and would come. Without God's grace man could expect only doom. In themselves, men were both hopeless and helpless in the world.

### *The Image of God*

It is a refreshing experience to read Luther's exposition of the creation of man in the first two chapters of Genesis. In spite of his effort to set the exact time on the sixth day when man and, then, woman were created and on the seventh day the hour of man's sin, his treatment has the breath of truth about is, is amazing in its depth of insight, and fairly bristles with implications for all aspects of his thought. It is best grasped in Luther's own words.

It is Luther's contention that it is impossible for man-after-the-Fall to be able to understand man-before-the-Fall. Luther did not categorically reject the attempts of the church fathers to identify *imago dei* as man's memory, intellect, and will, nor their effort to relate these attri-

6. See J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. by David H. Freeman (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 58-59, for a more adequate discussion of this matter.
7. Daniel T. Niles, *Upon the Earth* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), pp. 92-98.

butes of man to the persons of the Trinity. He did, however, suggest that such expositions be read with extreme discretion. For the contention of some of the fathers that man-before-the-Fall had freewill, he sedulously denied. Adam, before he sinned, had an "upright" or "straight forward" will, but his will was not free in the sense that he co-operated as the "preceding and efficient cause of salvation."[8] Further, he observed that if memory, intellect and will constituted *imago dei*, then surely Satan also was made in God's image for he too had those endowments and to a far higher degree than man.[9]

*Imago dei*, Luther averred, was a "unique work of God." Perhaps one of Luther's most beautiful attempts at describing it was as follows:

> Therefore the image of God, according to which Adam was created was something far more distinguished and excellent (than merely memory, mind, and will), since obviously no leprosy of sin adhered either to his reason or to his will. Both his inner and outer sensations were of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straight forward —all in the most beautiful tranquility of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety. To these inner qualities of body and of all the limbs, qualities in which he surpassed all the remaining living creatures. I am fully convinced that before Adam's sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and the eagle. He was stronger than the lions and bears... and he handled them the way we handle puppies.[10]

Yet he assiduously maintained that after all was said and done it was impossible for sinful man to comprehend the full meaning of *imago dei*. He wrote:

> Therefore when we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so we hear nothing but bare words.
>
> .....
>
> Therefore that image of God was something most excellent, in which were included eternal life, everlasting freedom from fear, and everything that is good. However, through sin this image was so obscured and corrupted that we cannot grasp it even with our intellect.[11]

*Original Sin*

This inability of man's intellect to grasp or understand was only one aspect of man's Fall. Adam sinned. That sin affected not only Adam but the whole creation as well as all of Adam's posterity. Adam's rebellion

8. *Lectures on Genesis* (1535), A.E. I, pp. 61, 115.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 62, 65.

was passed on to the whole race. All of Adam's descendants came into the world under the sentence of death, the penalty of original sin.

Early in Luther's ministry he said this about original sin:

> ...it is not only the lack of a good quality in the will, the loss of man's righteousness and ability. It is rather the loss of all his powers of body and soul, of his whole outward and inward perfections. In addition to this it is his inclination to all that is evil, his aversion against that which is good works, or his seeking after that which is sinful....Actual sins essentially consist in that they come from out of us....But original sin enters into us; we do not commit it, but we suffer it. We are sinners because we are the sons of a sinner. A sinner can beget only a sinner, who is like him.[12]

In his lectures on the second chapter of Genesis many years later he delineated the same view. He said:

> ...Original sin really means that human nature has completely fallen; that the intellect has become darkened, so that we no longer know God and His will and no longer perceive the works of God; furthermore, that the will is extraordinarily depraved, so that we do not trust the mercy of God and do not fear God but are unconcerned, disregard the Word and will of God, and follow the desires and impulses of the flesh; likewise, that our conscience is no longer quiet but, when it thinks of God's judgment, despairs and adopts illicit defenses and remedies....Thus, as it always is with correlatives, original sin shows what original righteousness is, and vice versa; original sin is the loss of original righteousness, or the deprivation of it, just as blindness is the deprivation of sight.[13]

The effects of original sin are, of course, most severe and most varied. However, there were two effects which Luther considered most damaging. It was those two effects specifically that rendered man's plight in the world a hopeless and helpless condition. Luther observed in his explanation of Genesis 3:

> ...these words show how horrible the fall of Adam and Eve was; for through it we have lost a most beautifully enlightened reason and a will in agreement with the Word and will of God. We have also lost the glory of our bodies....The most serious loss consists in this, that not only were those benefits lost, but man's will turned away from God. As a result, man wants and does none of the things God wants and commands. Likewise, we have no knowledge about what God is, what grace is, what righteousness is, and finally what sin itself is. These are really terrible faults, and those who do not realize and see them are blinder than moles.[14]

It is, therefore, man's lost knowledge and his depraved will that

12. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1517), trans. by J. Theodore Meuller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), p. 79.
13. *Genesis* (1535), A.E. I, p. 114.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

make man-without-Christ a creature without hope and absolutely unable to aid himself.

*Ignorance of the true God.* Luther did not mean that man-after-the-Fall was without any knowledge of God whatever. He stated very plainly that man did have a general knowledge of God. Of Romans 3:19 he wrote:

> This statement tells us that from the beginning of the world the invisible things of God have always been recognized through the rational perception.... All men, in particular idolators, had a clear knowledge of God, especially of his Godhead and omnipotence. They proved this by calling the idols which they made, "gods," and even God, and they revered them as eternal and almighty, at least as strong enough to help them. This demonstrates that there was in their hearts a knowledge of a divine sovereign Being.[15]

In 1531, lecturing on Galatians 4:8-9 he said:

> There is a twofold knowledge of God: the general and the particular. All men have the general knowledge, namely, that God is, that He has created Heaven and earth, that he is just, that he punishes the wicked, etc. But what God thinks of us, what he wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us —which is the particular and true knowledge of God—this men do not know.[16]

It was this particular knowledge of God that was lost in the Fall. And without this "free knowledge" man had no hope. For the general knowledge is in no way to be considered a saving knowledge of God. In fact, this general knowledge of God becomes, to sinful man, a source of even greater sin. For it is the source of all false religion in the world.[17] Luther affirmed:

> From the acceptance of this major premise, "there is a God," there came all the idolatry of men which would have been unknown in the world without the knowledge of the Deity. But because man had this natural knowledge about God, they conceived vain and wicked thoughts about God apart from and contrary to the Word; they embraced these as the very truth, and on the basis of these they imagined God otherwise than he is by nature.[18]

For this reason mankind without Christ had no hope. For it was only through Christ that the true particular knowledge of God is possible. "Christ alone" was "the means, the life, and the mirror" through which God could be seen and his will be known.[19] Apart from Christ there was "nothing but sheer idolatry, an idol and a false fiction about God,"

15. *Romans* (1517), p. 27.
16. *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), A.E. XXVI, p. 399.
17. Calvin's contention that God put in every man the "seeds of religion" which sprout up in man's heart and become the source of all false religion is much like Luther's view here.
18. *Galatians*, A.E. XXVI, p. 400.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 396.

whether it was called "the Law of Moses or the Law of the pope or the Koran of the Turk."[20]

It was on this basis that Luther so bitterly attacked reason as the instrument of Satan. He repudiated the assertion that reason, the power of man's mind, could bring fallen man to God. Instead, he insisted that reason could only bring men to a false god, the mere figment of man's depraved imagination. He wrote:

> Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart, that is the right knowledge of the heart about God. But reason cannot think correctly about God; only faith can do so. A man thinks correctly about God when he believes God's word. But when he wants to measure and believe God...with his own reason, he does not have the truth about God in his heart...he does not have a true idea about God; he has an idea that is wicked and a lie.[21]

*The bound will.* Not only had man-after-the-Fall lost the true knowledge of God, and was thus, without the Gospel, without hope of ever coming to know the true God, but man also had lost his upright will.

In 1521, in *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles,* Luther did reluctantly concede that the term "free-will" might be applied to the "new created man...as was Adam in Paradise." But he wished that the term "had never been invented."[22] In *De Servo Arbitrio,* and as a constantly recurring theme in his sermons and commentaries, Luther affirmed that "free-will" was "a non-entity, a thing...consisting of a name only."[23] It was his asseveration that "free-will" could be ascribed to God alone. He delineated:

> It follows, therefore, that 'free-will' is obviously a term applicable only to the Divine Majesty....If 'free-will' is ascribed to men, it is ascribed with no more propriety than divinity itself would be—and no blasphemy could exceed that.[24]

Man, then, even before the Fall, did not have free-will. Adams' will was upright but imperfect.[25] When Adam sinned, this will that was "good and sound" and "in agreement with the Word and will of God" was lost.[26]

> Just as reason is overwhelmed by many kinds of ignorance, so the will has not only been confused but has been turned away from God and is an enemy of God.[27]

But this was not all that happened to man. Just as man's reason became hostile to God and the tool of Satan, so also man's will came under

20. *Ibid.,* p. 401.
21. *Ibid.,* p. 238.
22. *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* (1521), A.E. XXXII, p. 94.
23. Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525), trans. by J. L. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), p. 271.
24. *Ibid.,* p. 105.
25. *Genesis,* A.E. I, p. 115.
26. *Ibid.,* p. 141.
27. *Ibid.,* p. 142.

the Devil's tyranny. Luther's exposition and defense of the doctrine of man's bound will became his most important and renowned book. Man not only had no hope in ever coming to know the true God in his own strength and by the power of his own mind, but was himself completely unable to do anything about his salvation. Man became subject to the god of this world. He wrote:

> In a word: if we are under the god of this world, strangers to the work of God's Spirit, we are led captive by him at his will...so that we cannot will anything but what he wills.[28]

It was at this point that Luther introduced the analogy of the "beast standing between two riders." Satan had man so in bondage that man acquiesced to Satan's rule willingly and readily. Unless a "stronger" than Satan appeared to overcome Satan and make man's will captive to Him, man could do nothing but remain subject to the bondage of Satan.

> If God rides it, (man's will) it wills and goes where God wills.... If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it may run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it.[29]

Therefore, Luther said:

> Hence, it follows that 'free-will' without God's grace is not free at all, but is the permanent prisoner and bond slave of evil, since it cannot turn itself to good.[30]

Or, as he wrote in comment on Isaiah 6:9:

> What is this but to say that 'free-will' (or, the human heart) is so bound by the power of Satan that, unless, it be wondrously quickened by the Spirit of God, it cannot of itself see or hear things which strike upon ear and eye so manifestly that they could almost be touched by hand.[31]

*Election a Hindrance to Mission?*

It is perhaps well here to deal with the accusation so often heard that Luther's doctrine of election hindered any missionary thought and effort on his part. This discussion will in a measure anticipate the second section of this study. However, the matters of election and *servo arbritio* are so closely related that it perhaps deserves treatment here.

To assert that Luther's doctrine of election could or would have hindered his concept of mission is to grossly misread Luther and to interpret him through the eyes of his descendants in the age of orthodoxy. His discussion of the text from Ezekiel, "I desire not the death of the sinner" in *De Servo Arbitrio,* gives adequate proof.

Luther was always concerned to distinguish carefully between Law

28. *Will* (1525), p. 103.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

and Gospel. The man who could do this rightly and consistently, he affirmed, was indeed a theologian.[32] But not only were Law and Gospel to be distinguished they were also to be used rightly, and to use both rightly was to sharply differentiate between them. To interpret that verse from Ezekiel as a proof of free-will was to fail to distinguish between Law and Gospel. For, Luther averred, the passage was nothing but the sweetest Gospel promise to the person who had already come under the voice of the Law. He wrote:

> He (God) is raising up and comforting the sinner as he lies under this torment and despair, in order that he might...create for him a hope of pardon and salvation.
>
> .....
>
> Hence,...this word...is concerned only to proclaim and offer to the world the mercy of God. None receive it with joy and gratitude but those in whom the Law has already completed its work, that is, given the knowledge of sin.[33]

Ezekiel, Luther maintained, did not discuss the question in this passage of why some are touched by Law and receive grace and why some are not touched by Law and thus reject grace. Luther asserted:

> He speaks of the published offer of God's mercy, not of the dreadful hidden will of God, who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partake of the mercy preached and offered. This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty. He has kept it to himself and forbidden us to know it.[34]

Luther insisted that the Christian be careful to make a distinction between "God preached and God hidden." God indeed had an "inscrutable will" by which the choices of life and death were made. But it was not lawful for man to inquire into this will. The Christian was to be guided by the Word. His concern is with God preached and with offering the promise of the Gospel to whoever would receive it joyously.[35]

Thus, while Luther held tenaciously to the doctrine of God's sovereign choice in the election of his people, this in no way hindered him from proclaiming the Gospel of forgiveness to all men.

In fact, man was such as has been shown above, that without the Gospel, he was without hope and without strength. Men were, indeed, hopeless and helpless in the world.

## II. A Dynamic Gospel

This discussion introduces a second concept that is omnipresent in

32. *Galatians*, A.E. XXVI, p. 115.
33. *Will* (1525), pp. 168-169.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

all of Luther's works. The Gospel was a dynamic force, the very power of God. It was both able and destined to speak deliverance to the ends of the earth. No other aspect of Luther's thought more readily makes a pronounced impression on even a casual reader of Luther than his utter confidence in the dynamic power of the Word of God. One of the most picturesque illustrations of this confidence can be found in one of the eight sermons he preached on his return to Wittenburg from Wartburg. Luther stated:

> I will preach it (the Word of God), teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example . . . . I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenburg beer with my friends, Phillip and with Armsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy, that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.[36]

*The Power of God*

The Word of God, Luther affirmed, came to man in two forms, as Law and as Gospel. The Law could not produce life. It brought only death. "The human race...did not receive help and healing from the Law, but only an increase of its sickness."[37] The Law came only to reveal to man his sin, to humble him, to push him to despair, to prepare him for the coming of the Gospel. The true use of the Law was, Luther said,

> that I know by the Law I am being brought to an acknowledgment of sin and am being humbled, so that I may come to Christ and be justified by faith. . . . Therefore when you want to discuss the Law, you must accept the subject matter of the Law, namely, the sinner and wicked person. The law does not justify him; but it places his sin before his eyes, crushes him, leads him to a knowledge of himself, and shows him hell and the wrath and judgment of God. This is the proper function of the Law. . . . The Law was instituted by God so that by its accusation and crushing it might drive (man) to Christ, the Saviour and Comforter.[38]

The Gospel on the other hand was the power of God unto salvation. It was dynamic in its effect. It brought life instead of death. It created faith instead of fear. It offered hope for despair and comfort for distress. In a discussion of the two forms of the Word of God in one of his sermons, Luther proclaimed:

> The other Word is neither Law nor commandments, and demands nothing of us. But when that has been done by the first word, namely, the Law, and has worked deep despair and wretchedness in our hearts, then God comes and offers us his blessed and life-giving word and promises; he pledges and obligates himself to grant peace and help in order to deliver us from misery, not only

36. *The Eight Wittenburg Sermons* (1522), A.E. LI, p. 77.
37. *Romans* (1517), p. 82.
38. *Galatians* (1535), A.E. XXVI, p. 348.

> to pardon all our sins but even to blot them out, and in addition to this to create, in us love and delight in keeping his Law. Behold, this divine promise of grace and forgiveness of sin is rightly called the Gospel.[39]

Speaking in another place of the power of the Word of God, Luther said:

> They who hear and believe it belong to this Kingdom, and the Word then becomes so mighty that it provides all that man may need and bestows all the blessings that we may desire. For it is the power of God, and it can and will save all who believe it.[40]

*The Rolling Wave*

But Luther understood the dynamic character of the Gospel not only in terms of the transformation it wrought in the individual, but he also understood the Gospel to be dynamic in its extent.

The Gospel was offered to the whole world. Too often Luther has been charged with expounding the view that, since the Gospel had already been preached to all the world in the times of the apostles, the commision to preach the Gospel to all men was no longer relevant or binding. Luther did emphasize, time and time again, that the Gospel had been proclaimed to all the world in the time of the apostles, but his emphasis was always on the universal validity of the Gospel for all men.[41] Since the ascension of Christ, God had been forming his Church from men in all lands and of all tongues. The Gospel was offered to all men. Of John 10:16 Luther said:

> When the Gospel was first proclaimed, it was preached to the Jews; that nation was the sheepfold. . . . Here he declares that the Gospel is to be preached to the Gentiles also, so that they also might believe in Christ, that there might be one Christian communion, composed of Jews and Gentiles.[42]

In a sermon on Luke 24:36-47, he spoke along the same lines:

> Here you see that the Gospel is the preaching of repentance and remission of sins. And it should not be preached in a corner, but before all men.[43]

In another passage Luther reiterated:

> We have often said heretofore that the Gospel, properly speaking, is not something written in books, but an oral proclamation, which shall be heard in all the world and shall be cried out freely before all creatures, so that all would have to hear it if they had ears; that

39. L.E. X, p. 99.
40. L.E. XII, p. 20.
41. See Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, I, trans. by Walter Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Press House, 1962) for the best discussion I have read on Luther and missions, pp. 385 ff.
42. L.E. XII, p. 31.
43. L.E. XI, p. 314.

> is to say, it shall be preached so publicly that to preach it more publicly would be impossible. For the Law...was not cried out in all the world before all creatures, but it was preached by the Jews in their synagogues. But the Gospel shall not be thus confined; it shall be preached freely unto all the world.[44]

Luther's lectures and writings on the Psalms are especially rich in statements of this understanding of the universality of the Gospel. Commenting on Psalm 68:9 he said:

> Thus David says that Christ will distribute the rain over all the world, and not merely over Sinai and Jerusalem. This is to signify that the preaching of the New Testament since Christ's true exodus from this world, will far excel that of the Old Law. For while it rained sparingly there; it is to rain in abundance here; while it descended only on one spot there, here it will be diffused over all of the world; while it affected only one nation there, Israel, here a general shower will be dispersed over all, Gentile and Jew. The Gospel will not be confined to one country and one nation as the proclamation of the Law was.[45]

However, Luther did not by any means, believe that the Gospel had already reached every people on the face of the earth. In a well known passage on Mark 16:14-20 he raised just that issue:

> A question arises about this passage...as to how it is to be understood, since the apostles certainly did not visit all the world. No apostle came hither to us; and many a heathen island has since been discovered, where the Gospel has never been preached. Yet, the Scriptures say: 'Their sound went out into all the earth' (Romans 10:18). Answer: Their preaching went out into all the world. This going out has been begun and continues, although it is not yet complete, the Gospel, however, will be preached ever farther and wider, until the judgment day.[46]

Luther continued with what has become the classic quotation used by all those who wanted to "prove" that Luther believed in missions. He said:

> The preaching of this message may be likened to a stone thrown into the water, producing ripples which circle outward from it, the waves rolling always on and on, one driving the other, till they come to the shore. Although the center becomes quiet, the waves do not rest, but move forward. So it is with the preaching of the Word. It was begun by the apostles, and it constantly goes forward, is pushed on farther and farther by the preachers, driven hither and thither into the world, yet always being made known to those who never heard it before, although it be arrested in the midst of its course and is condemned as heresy. As we say, when one sends a message, the message has gone forth, although it has not yet

44. L.E. XII, p. 183-4.
45. *Exposition of Psalm 68* (1521), A.E. XIII, pp. 9-10.
46. L.E. XII, pp. 201, 202.

> arrived at its destination, but is still on its way; or as we say that the emperor's message is sent to Nuremberg, or to the Turk, although it has not yet arrived: so we are to understand the preaching of the apostles.[47]

This analogy of the Gospel to a rolling wave expresses but one aspect of his understanding of mission. The dynamic character of the Gospel is such that it is not only sent and offered to all men but it is always also in the process of coming into all the world.

In the same Postil Luther went on to say:

> But what is meant when the Lord says: 'Preach the Gospel to the whole creation'? Shall I preach also to trees and stones, mountains and waters?...The meaning is that the Gospel should be publicly and universally preached, given to all; it should hide in no corner, but be preached freely in all places....The beginning and going forth has been fulfilled by the apostles, but the work is not yet finished; the Gospel, has not yet reached its limit, for I know not whether Germany has ever heard the Gospel....[48]

*The Rod of Iron*

Not only was the Gospel offered to all the world but Luther was certain that the dynamic power of the Gospel was such that it would have fruit whenever and wherever it was preached. The Gospel was destined to overcome all enemies and bear fruit in all the world. Luther confidently affirmed:

> It cannot be otherwise that where the Gospel is preached that there will be some who shall accept it and believe...he (Christ) would say: 'Only go and preach, care not who they are that hear you. I will care for that. The world will be against you, but be not afraid, you will find such as will hear and follow you. You do not know them yet, but I know them, you preach and leave the rest to me.[49]

In spite of every obstacle and hindrance, in spite of its seemingly weak and anemic character, Luther was sure that the destiny of the Gospel was to reach the ends of the earth and to resound in all places and corners of the world.[50] His most vivid descriptions of this awesome power of the Gospel in overcoming its resistance and winning victory is found in his expositions of the Psalms. In his introduction to the general teaching of the nineteenth Psalm he explained:

> For it appears that Christ's kingdom is weak and that Christendom will run aground and be ruined. But this Psalm teaches that Christ and his Gospel cannot be hindered any more than one can hinder the course of the sun.

. . . . . .

47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
49. L.E. X, p. 47.
50. L.E. XII, p. 221.

> This Psalm teaches further that God's Word will be active and will work and accomplish great things.[51]

Expounding Psalm 68:11 Luther delineated:

> Therefore, although the psalmist uses the military term 'hosts,' he also calls them 'evangelists'; whose weapons are the Word and its proclamation. It is clear that the Gospel alone conquers the world for the faith.[52]

It is, however, in his comments on the second Psalm that he states his view with greatest clarity. He likens the Gospel to a rod of iron that breaks in pieces the potsherd world that stands in opposition to it. Commenting on Psalm 2:9 he asserted:

> He says: 'You will break them with a scepter, or rod, of iron.' This is: 'The world will be lined up against you, it will not allow the judgment against itself, it will use force and arms. But...they will finally be destroyed. For you have a rod...which they will not be able to bear.
>
> .....
>
> Neither the weakness of our being nor the power of His adversaries is so great as to prevent the eventual collapse and destruction of those who oppose Him....For even if...He has nothing with which to fight except the Word of the Gospel...nevertheless this very Word...will at last destroy all his enemies. It is truly...a rod of iron, whereas the world is a potter's vessel.[53]
>
> .....
>
> You will, therefore, carefully note this description, that the Gospel is called a rod of iron...(it) serves to point out the invincible power of the Word which cannot be seen with the eyes but is hidden.[54]

Luther was not in these passages maintaining that all men would finally accept the Gospel. He clearly held that the cross would always be present in the proclamation of the Gospel, a majority of men would shout an eternal "No" to its invitation. He made this clear in his sermons:

> Therefore though the Gospel is heard by all the world, yet it is not accepted but by the poor only. Moreover, it is to be preached and proclaimed to all the world, that it is a message only for the poor, and that the rich man cannot receive it.[55]

Luther had before explained that "the poor" referred to "the spiritually poor."

51. *Exposition of Psalm 19*, A.E. XII, p. 140.
52. *Psalm 68* (1521), A.E. XIII, p. 12.
53. *Exposition of Psalm 2* (1532), A.E. XII, pp. 62-63.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
55. L.E. X, pp. 101, 102.

In a sermon on John 10:16 he went into this matter very deliberately. He maintained:

> Some have explained this passage in such a way as to make it appear that it will be fulfilled shortly before the last day, when the Antichrist appears, and Elias and Enoch. This is not true, and it is the devil himself who is responsible for this belief of some, that the whole world will become Christian.... Therefore be on your guard; for this passage was verified and fulfilled shortly after Christ ascended into heaven, and is still in the process of fulfillment.... Hence, you must not understand this to mean that the whole world, and all men, will believe in Christ; for this holy cross will always be with us. They are in a majority who persecute Christ.[56]

What Luther was maintaining was that nothing could hinder the Gospel for bearing fruit in all the world. Christ did not die in vain. Man's salvation was not left to chance. God would call his people and form his Church and establish his Kingdom among men of every language and nation.

From what has been presented something of Luther's idea of mission should begin to emerge. The world was in darkness. Mankind was without hope of or ability to deliver itself from its sin and bondage to Satan. But the Gospel, with dynamic power, comes to man and brings deliverance. The Gospel's dynamic can be seen in the transforming power it exhibits when it is accepted by individual men, in that it is offered universally to all men and is continually coming to those who have not heard, and by the fact that the Gospel wherever it is proclaimed will indeed bear its fruit. Now this study must turn to the part the Church has, according to Luther, in bringing man's great need and God's gracious provision together.

## III. The Church Sent Into the World

A great deal has been written about Luther's doctrine of the Church during this century.[57] However, among the works in English that this writer has seen, two aspects of Luther's doctrine have seldom been discussed which are most pertinent to this study. Little reference has been made to the "sojourning" character of the Church or to its character as a "mouth-house." In other words, while, to be sure, Luther understood the Church as the Communion of the Saints, he also understood the Church to be sent into and through the world. Further, it is certainly true that in Luther's view the Gospel creates the Church, yet Luther also insisted that the Church must proclaim the Gospel.

### *A Pilgrim People*

The Church, according to Luther, is never to settle down upon the earth. The Church is a pilgrim people; their citizenship is in heaven. The

56. L.E. XII, p. 31.
57. See Edgar M. Carlson, *The Reinterpretation of Luther* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948), p. 128 ff.

time that the Church spends on earth is to be looked at as an overnight stay in a "strange inn." The reason the Church is traveling through the world is that it may bring many others with it to heaven. In his commentary on First Peter, and his sermons on the twentieth chapter of John, Luther emphasized this aspect of the nature of the Church over and over again. At one place he wrote:

> A Christian, if he truly believes possesses all the good things of God and is God's child. . . . But the time which he has yet to live is only a pilgrimage; for the spirit is already in heaven by faith, through which he is Lord over all things. The reason God permits him still to live in the flesh, and his body to remain on the earth, is that he may help others and bring them also to heaven. Therefore we are to use all things on earth in no other way than as a guest, who travels over the country and arrives at an inn where he must tarry overnight, and can receive nothing from his host but food and lodging. . . . So we must also proceed in regard to our temporal possessions, as though they were not ours, and we enjoy only so much of them as is needful to sustain the body, and with the rest help our neighbor. Thus the Christian life is only a night's sojourning.[58]

That he is speaking of the Church and not just to individual Christians is clear from another like passage written in comment on First Peter 2:11. Luther explained:

> Since you are one with Christ, from one household, and his goods are yours, your injury is his injury, and he takes as his own all that you possess; therefore you are to follow him, and conduct yourselves as those who are no longer citizens of the world; for your possessions be not upon the earth but in heaven. . . therefore. . . act as a stranger in an inn, who has not his possessions with him. . . .
>
> We are citizens of heaven, on earth we are pilgrims and guests.[59]

The reason the Church is left sojourning in the world, its purpose on the earth, is clear. Luther was sure that there was nothing to hinder the second advent of the Saviour and the day of judgment except God's own purpose to gather a few more into his kingdom. "God permits the world to stand yet longer," Luther wrote, "that his name may be more widely honored and praised."[60] The Church was to continue on the earth as an instrument of God's purpose. Luther asserted:

> The reason we Christians continue to live on the earth is that we, after becoming believers, should proclaim abroad the virtue of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light, that others might through us come to the same knowledge and faith, just as we received it through brethren. . . .[61]

58. *Lectures on First Peter* (1523), L.E. III, p. 71.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

In this respect the Church was not just "left" to sojourn through the world, but was indeed sent into the world. Further, the mission on which it was sent was identical to that for which Christ came. Commenting on John 20:21, he said:

> In this way the Lord desires to say: You have now received enough from me, peace and joy, and all you should have; for your person you need nothing more. Therefore labor now and follow my example, as I have done, so do ye. My Father sent me into the world only for your sake, that I might serve you, not for my own benefit. I have finished the work, have died for you and given you all that I am and have; remember and do ye also likewise, that henceforth ye may only serve and help everybody, otherwise ye would have nothing to do on earth. For by faith ye have enough of everything. Hence I send you into the world as my Father has sent me; namely, that every Christian should instruct and teach his neighbor, that he may also come to Christ. By this...all Christians are commanded to profess their faith publicly and also to lead others to believe.[62]

In a later sermon on the same text he repeated:

> Therefore he says: You have now seen what kind of an office I have filled upon the earth, for which I was sent by my Father, that I should establish a spiritual kingdom...and thereby to bring them that believe on me to eternal life....Therefore I send you also forth in like manner to be my messengers...to conduct the same office as I have thitherto filled, namely: to preach the Word you have heard and received from me.[63]

This quotation serves as a good introduction to the second aspect of Luther's doctrine of the Church that is relevant to this discussion. The Church is a stranger in the world, never at home, always seeking a city. The Church's pilgrimage through the world, however, is a pilgrimage of purpose. It is sent through the world by its Lord, to bear witness, to proclaim the Gospel, to serve and to intercede. The Church is a holy priesthood.

*A Holy Priesthood*

The priesthood of the Church, Luther maintained, was derived from and like the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Luther's views are best expressed in his own words:

> Now Christ is the eternal high priest, anointed by God himself, who offered his own body for us, also interceded in our behalf on the cross, and in the third place also preached the Gospel, and taught all men to know God and himself. And these three offices he has also given to us all; because since he was a priest and we are his brethren it follows that all Christians have the power and the command to preach and proclaim God's grace and power, etc., and

62. L.E. XI, p. 359.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

> appear before God to pray for one another, and offer himself to God.[64]

The highest office of a priest, Luther insisted, was the office of preaching. A lucid exposition of the nature of that office can be found in his comments on First Peter 2:5. Luther gave the following description:

> It belongs to the office of a priest to be a messenger of God and receive from God himself the command to preach his Word. The excellencies or praises, says Peter, that is, the wonderful work that God has performed in you, in bringing you out of darkness into light, you are to proclaim, which is the highest office of a priest. And the way you are to preach is by one brother proclaiming to another the powerful work of God; how ye have been ransomed from sin, death, hell, and all evil by him, and have been called to eternal life. Thus shall you also instruct others how to come to the same light. For your whole duty is discharged in this, that you confess what God has done for you; and then let it be your chief aim, to make this known publicly, and to call every one to the light, to which ye have been called. Where you see people who are ignorant, you are to direct and teach them as you have been taught, namely, how a man may be saved through the virtue and power of God, and pass from darkness to light.
>
> .....
>
> So we see that the first and most eminent office we as Christians are to discharge is, that we make known the praise of God.[65]

However, Luther was much concerned that "all things be done decently and in order." The Peasant's Revolt and the rise of the Anabaptists perhaps heightened his concern for order. Therefore it is necessary that this aspect of the priest character of the Church be discussed in particular detail.

It is important to understand that the official ministry of pastor and preacher in the churches, for Luther, was derived from the priestly office of the entire Church. Luther insisted that there was no essential distinction between the pastor and other Christians. There was "only an outward distinction for the sake of the office," in that one was called out of the congregation. Before God there was no distinction.[66] In his early tract, *The Right and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proved from Scripture.* (1523) Luther based the "right" of the congregation in the fact that "every Christian has God's word and is taught of God and anointed by Him to the priesthood."[67] A brief paragraph from that work will explain Luther's position. He said:

64. *First Peter* (1523), L.E. III, p. 260.
65. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
67. P.E. IV, p. 79.

> Now you will say: 'But, unless he has been called to do this (preach and teach God's Word), he dare not preach, as you yourself have repeatedly taught!" I reply: Here you must consider the Christian from a double point of view. On the one hand, when he is in a place where there are no Christians, he needs no other call than the fact that he is a Christian, inwardly called and appointed by God; he is bound by the duty of brotherly love to preach to the erring heathens or non-Chistians and to teach them the Gospel, even though no one calls him to this work.... In such circumstances the Christian looks, in brotherly love, upon the needs of the poor perishing soul.... For necessity breaks every law and knows no law; moreover, love is bound to help when there is no one else to help. But, on the other hand, when the Christian is in a place where there are Christians, who have the some power and right as he, he should not thrust himself forward, but should rather let himself be called and be drawn forth to preach and teach in the stead and by the commission of the rest.[68]

So, while Luther insisted that no one assay to teach or preach in a local congregation without being called to do so, he first understood that the command to preach the Gospel belonged to the Church. Luther asserted:

> The first and highest work of love a Christian ought to do when he has become a bieliever, is to bring others to believe in the way he himself came to believe. And here you notice Christ begins and institutes the office of the external Word in every Christian; for he himself came with this office and the external Word. Let us lay hold of this, for we must admit it was spoken to us.[69]

One of the most interesting appellations that Luther gave the Church in describing this aspect of the nature of the Church, is the term "mouth-house." Luther said:

> ...the Church is a mouth-house, not a pen-house, for since Christ's advent that Gospel is preached orally which before was hidden in written books.
>
> It is the way of the Gospel and of the New Testament that it is to be preached and discussed orally with a living voice. Christ himself wrote nothing, nor did he give command to write, but to preach orally. Thus the apostles were not sent out until Christ came to his mouth-house, that is, until the time had come to precah orally and to bring the Gospel from dead writing and pen-work to the living voice and mouth. From the time the Church is rightly called Bethphage, since she has and hears the living voice of the Gospel.[70]

Related closely to his concept of the ministry of the Word is Luther's concept of the keys. As with the rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper,

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.
69. L.E. XI, p. 359.
70. L.E. X, p. 26.

so, Luther insisted, with confession and absolution, the factor that determined efficacy for the individual was faith. Luther affirmed:

> Therefore we must rightly understand Christ when he says: 'Whose soever sin ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained;' that this does not establish the power of him who speaks but of those who believe. Now the power of him who speaks and of him who believes are so far apart as heaven and earth.[71]

As with preaching and teaching in the local congregation, so order should rule in this office too, Luther maintained.[72] However, the power to hear confessions and to pronounce forgiveness belonged first to all Christians. Luther explained the matter as follows:

> This power is here given to all Christians, although some have appropriated it to themselves alone....But, Christ here speaks neither of priests or of monks, but says: 'Receive ye the Holy Spirit.' Whoever has the Holy Spirit, power is given him, that is, to everyone that is a Christian. But who is a Christian? He that believes. Whoever believes has the Holy Spirit. Therefore every Christian has the power...to forgive sins or to retain them.[73]

Just what place Luther gave to this office he explained later:

> But his word, to forgive sins or to retain sins, concerns those who confess and receive more than those who are to impart the absolution. And thereby we serve our neighbor. For in all services the greatest is to release from sin, to deliver from the devil and hell. But how is this done? Through the Gospel, when I preach it to a person and tell him to appropriate the words to Christ and to believe firmly that Christ's righteousness is his own and his sins are Christ's. This I say, is the greatest service I can render to my neighbor.[74]

For Luther the matter of the witness and confession of the Church was not merely an option. It was the inevitable denouement of true faith working itself out in love. Explaining how the Christians were to fulfill their mission in the world as sent by Christ, Luther said:

> By faith you will accomplish all this. It will make you righteous before God and save you....But this faith you are to show in love, so that all your works may be directed to this end; not that you are to seek to merit anything by them; for all in heaven is yours beforehand; but that you serve your neighbor thereby. For if you do not give forth such proof of faith, it is certain that your faith is not right. Not that good works are commanded us by this Word; for where faith in the heart is right, there is no need of much commanding good works to be done; they follow of themselves. But the works of love are only an evidence of the existence of faith.[75]

71. L.E. XI, p. 362.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 375.
74. *Ibid.*, pp. 376-377.
75. *Ibid.*, pp. 374-375.

The Church must confess its Lord and bear witness, even if it brings danger and death. In fact the ministry of the Word had from the beginning traversed the world in blood.[76] In spite of this confession would be made. Luther asseverated:

> Faith...must express itself and triumph in the certainty that it is right before God and man, and before angels, devils, and the whole world. Just as a jewel is not to be concealed, and exhibited....
>
> Now, by confession I must take upon myself the load of Satan, hell, death and the whole world....By faith, everything falls that reason can or ever has devised for the salvation of the soul. It must chastise the apish tricks of the whole world, and its jewel alone must be praised. The world cannot endure this, therefore it rushes in, destroys, kills....Thus, the confession must break forth, that God alone is the Saviour; and the same confession brings us into danger of losing our lives.
>
> .....
>
> It is, indeed, hard to hold and confess that God is gracious to us and that we have a Saviour who opposes all the world, all its glitter and shine. But, let the struggle be as hard and sharp as it will, faith must express itself, even though we would like to have it otherwise.[77]

It is therefore the contention of this paper that Luther's theology was not deficient in the idea of mission as many have so readily charged and others have so reluctantly conceded. The world was without God, without hope and unable to bring about its own deliverance. God's Gospel was mighty to transform and save, and it was sent out and was continually going into all the world to speak deliverance. The Church which came into existence by the proclamation of the Gospel was also charged with the responsibility of making that Gospel known. In fact, God's gift of faith, which brought righteousness and salvation, was such that it was apodeictic that confession be made.

All these matters, in Luther's thought, were related to the Kingdom of Christ. Therefore this study must now turn briefly to Luther's concept of the Kingdom and the End.

## IV. A Growing Kingdom, Present Yet Coming

### *The Nature of the Kingdom of God*

*Dialectical Tension.* The Kingdom of God in Luther's thought had dialectical dimensions.[78] The most casual reader of Luther is made poignantly aware of this fact. In one paragraph Luther could speak of the reign of God in the human heart and life as the kingdom of God; in the next paragraph he could speak of the kingdom of God as "not yet," a

76. A.E. XIII, p. 24.
77. L.E. XII, pp. 246-247.
78. See T. F. Torrance, "The Eschatology of the Reformation," Eschatology (*Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers* No. 2; Edinburgh: Oliver and Body Ltd., [n.d.], pp. 41-52.

kingdom that would come. At one moment Luther spoke in terms that twentieth century Christianity would call "realized eschatology." At the next moment he seemed to speak as a futurist. These two seemingly antagonistic views are, as T. F. Torrance has suggested, characteristic of Luther's theology. The kingdom of God was present, reigning in the believers just as believers were actually righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet the kingdom of God was not yet fully come just as the Christian was not, and would never be, completely free from sin in this present world. The dialectical tension was always present. Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*:

> The kingdom of God comes to us in two different ways: first in time, through the Word and faith; secondly, it shall be revealed in eternity.[79]

*Spiritual Character.* The kingdom of God, Luther insisted, at every opportunity, was a spiritual kingdom. It was not a kingdom of this world. This Luther repeated and emphasized over and over again. The kingdom of God was not a new temporal government, nor was it the purpose of the kingdom of God to overthrow the existing governments of this world. The kingdom was the spiritual dominion of God in the hearts and lives of men. It did not take up arms. Its only weapon was the Word of God. Speaking of Psalm 117 Luther said:

> The Psalm also reveals a peculiarly great mystery, one little known at the time of the apostles and almost faded away under the papacy, namely, that the Kingdom of Christ is not a temporal, transitory, earthly kingdom, ruled with laws and regulations, but a spiritual, heavenly, and eternal kingdom ruled without and above all laws, regulations and outward means.[80]

Describing the ministry of Christ over his kingdom Luther said:

> Consequently He will not destroy the governments, He will not change civil laws. These will remain in the same condition they were before in the world. This King will not change or abolish the course or order of the world. For His kingdom is not of this world. But to all kingdoms, to all commonwealths, He will bring the new Word and new teaching about Himself that all who believe in and are baptized will have forgiveness of sins and life eternal. This is the Kingdom of this King, this is His dominion, this is His imperium.[81]

*A World-wide dominion.* The only weapon of the kingdom of God was the Word of God. As has been shown above, the Gospel was offered to the whole world and was destined to bear fruit in all the world. Therefore, Luther insisted assiduously that God's Kingdom extended over all the earth. The nations of the world had been given to the King. Commenting on Psalm 2:8, Luther contended:

79. *The Large Catechism* (1529), L.E. XXIV, p. 14.
80. *Exposition of Psalm 117* (1530), A.E. XIV, p. 14.
81. *Psalm 2* (1932), A.E. XII, pp. 56-57.

> This King is set upon the throne of His father David in Zion. There among the people of David He begins His kingdom—not with the Sword, like David, but only with the Word, for He is a preacher. But the kingdom begun in Zion...does not end there. Rather the borders of this are extended over all nations and to the ends of the earth. That is, the kingdom begun in Jerusalem...is spread abroad over the whole earth.
>
> .....
>
> We certainly know from the Psalm that the rule over all nations has been given to our King so that they are his possessions, that is, so that through him they are saved and receive the remission of sins and the Holy Spirit.
>
> .....
>
> But we should believe here that Christ asks for the rule over the nations and that it is given to him by the Father. Therefore the world may rage and Satan may make an uproar with all hell, yet they will not prevail. For Christ's kingdom is and will remain, and He shall rule in the midst of His enemies.[82]

This is not to say that all men will be submissive to his dominion. Luther was always insistent that the majority of men would angrily shout "No" to the King's invitation. He answered his contradiction:

> "How, then, is Christ the King of the nations," you will ask, "since they do not want Him and reject Him, indeed make uproars against Him?" I reply: If the heathen who reject Christ did so to their own advantage, then surely injury would result for Christ the King. But the heathen reject Christ as their own greatest peril and with most certain perdition. The kingdom of Christ, therefore, is not hurt for this reason....Therefore the sentence stands: The Lord Himself granted to Christ the King the rule over the nations, and so through His Gospel He calls all nations to faith. Those who hear and are obedient to the Gospel receive the forgiveness of sin and life eternal. Those who do not believe remain in their sins.[83]

No kingdom, Luther insisted, had ever been so powerful a kingdom, nor had ever exercised so great dominion as did the kingdom of Christ. This was true in spite of the rejection of the kingdom by the world. For, though it was widely rejected, it yet prospered. It prospered because Christ ruled the kingdom actively. Luther affirmed:

> You have heard that after his sufferings and death, Christ our Lord arose from the dead and entered upon, and was enthroned in, an immortal existence. Not that he might sit up there in heaven idly and find pleasure in himself, but that he might take charge of the kingdom....Therefore, we should think of him as being present and reigning among us continually, and never think of him as sitting

82. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-59.
83. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

> up there doing nothing, but rather that he from above fills and rules all things... and especially that he is taking care of his kingdom... and that his kingdom among us here on earth must prosper.[84]

In a sermon on Mark 16:14-20 Luther pointed out:

> 'Beginning in Jerusalem,' the kingdom touched the whole world. No other kingdom ever had such power. There never yet lived a ruler who achieved supremacy over even one-half of the world. How is it then, that from Jerusalem to the remotest corners of the earth all men know of this king who is called Christ: and all this was accomplished without a single word-thrust and without military power: simply through these poor beggars, whom Christ sent forth.[85]

*A kingdom at war.* Because of the fact of the rejection of God's kingdom by so many and also because of the world-wide triumph of the kingdom, it is evident that the kingdom is in conflict. Luther explained this in terms of two kingdoms. There were, he attested, two great kingdoms in the world: the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God.[86] All living men were in Satan's kingdom, but in different manners. The vast majority of men were in the satanic kingdom by their own approval, and they willingly surrendered themselves to his dominion.

The Christian man too was in Satan's kingdom. But he was in that kingdom contending against sin. For the satanic kingdom always sought to extend its dominion completely over everyone. Therefore the kingdom of God was waging a continual warfare with the kingdom of the devil. For there was no man who did not find something of the devil's kingdom within himself. For, Luther insisted, God's kingdom had its beginning and growth on the earth, but it would be consummated in the life beyond.

*A coming consummation.* Most of what has been said thus far about Luther's concept of the kingdom of God has had most direct reference to his understanding of the kingdom as present. But Luther always insisted that God would one day consummate his kingdom. That day would mark the end of the tension between the present and the "not yet." However, he insisted that the kingdom of God did not come and would not come as a result of man's prayer or activity.[87] It would come when God so willed and chose. Luther, indeed, felt that that day was very near.

For Luther the Kingdom of God was a spiritual reign of God, extending into every corner of this earth, always in conflict with the kingdom of Satan, and sure to be brought to perfect consummation in the very near future.

### *The Growth of the Kingdom of God*

That aspect of the kingdom of God in Luther's thought which is most

84. L.E. XII, pp. 19-20.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
86. See *The Lord's Prayer Explained* (1519), L.E. XXIV, pp. 266-271 for a complete discussion of the two kingdoms.
87. See *The Small Catechism* (1529), *Ibid.*, p. 25.

relevant to this discussion concerns his concept of the growth, development or advancement of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom was begun; God would bring it to consummation. Between these two extremities there was, in Luther's understanding, constant increase and growth. Quotations could be multiplied to show this. A few brief sentences from one of his Postils should show this:

> This work began at his ascension, and will be in course of fulfillment daily until the end of time.[88]
>
> This kingdom...is so constituted that we all must daily increase and grow in holiness, and it is not governed by any other power save the oral proclamation of the Gospel.[89]
>
> The kingdom of Christ is in process of growing and is not something that is completed.[90]

The kingdom of God, Luther averred, advanced in two ways: It advanced in the growth of individual Christian lives, and it advanced by more and more people coming under its dominion. When Christians prayed, "Thy kingdom come," it was just for growth in these two ways that they prayed. In the *Large Catechism* (1529) Luther explained:

> We pray here, then, that all this may be realized by us, and that we may so honor his name through his holy Word and our Christian life that we who have accepted it may abide and daily grow therein; that it may be accepted and followed among others and advance in power throughout the world; and that thus led by the Holy Spirit, many may enter the kingdom of grace and become partakers of the blessings of redemption, and thus we may all remain together forever in this one kingdom which has now made its appearance among us.[91]

It is precisely in these ways that the Church-sent-into-the-world was to participate in the kingdom of God. There was to be continual Christian qualitative growth in the submission of the members of the Church to Christ, and the Church was to share in the quantitative growth of the kingdom as it announced, through the Gospel, the kingdom of God. Therefore Luther could write in exposition of Psalm 19:2:

> This is to say that the Gospel will always be preached and that the Christian Church will stand and remain eternally.[92]

Two verses later Luther commented further on the essential participation of the Church in the Kingdom of God. He said:

> Therefore, he now mentions the prince of heaven, the sun, and indicates by this that His kingdom will extend under all of heaven. For

88. L.E. XII, p. 71.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
90. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
91. L.E. XXIV, pp. 141-142.
92. *Psalm 19*, A.E. XII, p. 140.

> he says...that Christ will reign and rule in all lands that will believe in Christ, and that the holy Christian Church will be as broad as the world.[93]

That this participation meant the active proclamation of the entire church is made abundantly clear in a brief paragraph from a sermon on John 15:26—16:4. Luther asserted:

> It is these two things that constitute our salvation, faith and the confession of faith. Faith rescues from sin, hell, Satan, death and all misfortunes. Now, when we have this we have enough. We then let God live here that we may reach a hand to our neighbor and help him. Besides, God desires to have his name praised and his kingdom developed and extended. Therefore, we must praise his name, confess faith and win others to do the same, so that God's kingdom may be extended and his name praised.[94]

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this paper has been evident throughout the entire presentation. It is the judgment of this writer that Luther was not without a concept of the mission of the Church, and that his understanding was not only firmly rooted in the Scriptures but is also much nearer to the understanding of the Church and its mission in this mid-twentieth century than many have dared to think and others cared to admit. It is exceedingly strange that today, after a most notable change in the understanding of the relationship between the Church and its mission in the world since the dawn of this century, Warneck's "reasons" for lack of missionary thought and activity in Luther and the other Reformers are still so glibly and often cited.[95]

It is true that Luther was mistaken about the presence of the Church in the greater part of the world. For he felt sure the Church was still in existence in the places where it had been brought into being by the preaching of the apostles.[96] This was a geographical blindness. But he was not blind to the duty of the Church, whoever it might be, to always be proclaiming the Gospel to those who had not accepted it and to those who had not heard it. Leaders of the Protestant World Mission throughout its history have certainly far surpassed Luther in their awareness of the areas of the world that were without a faithful witness of Jesus Christ. However, these leaders, in the main, when compared with Luther, had a far deficient concept of the task of witness as belonging to the whole Church.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
94. L.E. XII, p. 252.
95. See for example Kenneth S. Latourette, *Three Centuries of Advance*, vol. III of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), p. 25, Jackson, *art. cit.*, p. 3, and William R. Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1952), pp. 1, 2.
96. See A.E. XIII, p. 13; A.E. XIV, p. 334; and L.E. III, p. 38.

For Luther, the Church had the Gospel and was sent through the world to proclaim and bear witness to the power of that Gospel. To do this was not just the duty of the Church but of the very essence of the Church as a people of faith. This activity of the Church was in fact, a participation in the Kingdom of God. His understanding sounds like a statement from the recent meeting of the World Congress on Evangelism.

ABBREVIATIONS

In this study it was not possible to use only one edition of Luther's works in English. The three collections that I used are referred to in the footnotes as follows:

A.E. Martin Luther. *Luther's Works.* Gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1955.

P.E. Martin Luther. *The Works of Martin Luther.* Philadelphia: A. J. Holman and the Castle Press, 1931.

L.E. Martin Luther. *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther.* Ed. by John W. Lenker. Minneapolis, Minn.: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1903.