

A Biblical, Lutheran Theology of Missions

by David J. Valleskey

The topic the committee¹ has asked me to consider briefly at this meeting is certainly pertinent—both to home missions and to world missions. There is no lack of literature, seminars, and workshops today on how to do mission work. The Church Growth Movement, begun on the world mission field by Donald McGavran and then introduced to the home front by such as C. Peter Wagner and Win Arn, has made tremendous inroads. Phrases such as “homogeneous units,” “felt needs,” “receptive people,” “people groups,” “church planting,” “discipling, not perfecting,” the “harvest principle,” etc.—all drawn from Church Growth Movement literature—have become almost household words and have found their way into many a denominational mission handbook.

The committee wisely determined that if one is to talk about missions, the first question to ask, before discussing experiences and methodology, is: “What can we learn from God’s Word of truth about mission work?” Hence the three-fold objectives of the committee (note the order):

1. To refresh ourselves with the scriptural mission principles underlying our outreach program.
2. To evaluate the changing domestic and international conditions by listening to and learning from veteran pastors and mission workers who have been on the leading edge of mission work.
3. To synthesize a series of principles, goals, and methods which will guide our congregations and the synod in 21st century mission work.

It is to the first of these three objectives that this essay is addressed. It is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment.² What follows is intended to provide a basis for discussion. The intent also is that it may furnish a scripture-based foundation for the discussion of the second and third objectives. It is presented in thesis form to facilitate discussion. These eight theses are both a distillation and an amplification of twenty-five theses I appended to an evaluation of the Church Growth Movement a few years ago. The theses were entitled, “Toward a Biblical, Lutheran Theology of Church Growth.”³

Thesis One: Since the fall of Adam and Eve, every human being is born in sin and by nature is destined for an eternity of separation from God in hell. Mankind’s greatest need, therefore, is the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

This is obvious, of course, and is not debated by any of us here this day. This likely will be true of each of the theses we will present, although there may well be debate on how to apply some of them properly.⁴ Nevertheless, we do well to think through the implications for mission work of the above thesis, and of each of the theses to follow.

The Scriptures don’t mince words about mankind’s state since the Fall. “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way *death came to all men, because all sinned*” (Ro 5:12). “In Adam *all die*” (1 Cor 15:22). There is no exception: “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Ro

¹ This essay was presented in substantially this form on November 17, 1995, in Orlando, Florida, at a regional meeting of the WELS ad hoc Seeking Our Neighbor Committee. This committee was called into existence by resolution of the 1995 WELS Synod Convention to take a careful look at the home and world mission endeavors of the WELS as we approach a new millennium.

² For a fuller treatment on the theology of missions on the part of this writer, cf. *We Believe—Therefore We Speak: The Theology and Practice of Evangelism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), especially pp 21-163. Portions of this essay are drawn from this book.

³ Cf. *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 88:2, Spring 1991, p 117f.

⁴ This is true especially of Theses Six and Seven below.

3:23) and “the wages of sin is *death*” (Ro 6:23). It was not just the Ephesians who were born “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:22). It was all of humanity. It was not just against the Romans that God’s wrath was revealed. “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Ro 1:18).

Hell is a reality. It is sin, rebellion against the Creator, that dooms every creature to something the human mind can hardly begin to grasp: “*eternal punishment*” (Mt 25:46).

Mankind’s greatest need, therefore, is the forgiveness of sins and, with forgiveness, reconciliation with God. A theology of missions that operates with a sub-scriptural understanding of mankind’s total depravity and lostness will fail to grasp the desperate situation of humanity and will inevitably end up with conclusions such as expressed by modern Roman Catholicism:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to his grace.⁵

The fact is, as Luther puts it so clearly in his Small Catechism, I, together with every other person who is born into this world, entered it as a “lost and condemned creature.” “Born once, die twice.” That applies to all, no matter how hard they “strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.” There is, therefore, nothing mankind needs more than the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

Thesis Two: Through Christ’s substitutionary life and death (vicarious atonement) God has reconciled the world to himself and declared the whole world not guilty (objective justification).

Here is where mission work actually begins: with the loving heart of God, the God who is “not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Pt 3:9), the God who searched out Adam and Eve in the Garden, the God who, after exposing the sinfulness of his fallen creatures, promised the woman’s Seed who would be the Crusher of the serpent.

Through Christ’s substitutionary life and death (vicarious atonement) God has reconciled the world to himself.

Christ lived our life. He was “born under law” (Ga 4:5) to render obedience to the law that “by the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Ro 5:19). And Christ died our death. He became a curse “for us,” in our place, St. Paul writes (Ga 3:13).

A scriptural theology of missions focuses on a God whose loving heart touches the sinful world in the person of his Son. He, God’s Son, for, in place of, instead of, on behalf of all. “God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Cor 5:19). “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 (Ro 3:23-24). As many as have sinned—*all*—so many has God justified, declared righteous, not guilty. “Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (Ro 5:18).

Through Christ’s substitutionary life and death God has declared the whole world not guilty. There cannot be any more positive, any more certain a message one can give to another person. In Christ, God did everything that had to be done so that he could call the sinner “not guilty.” The sinner’s prior or subsequent

⁵ Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, 16. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press. 1966), p 35.

lifestyle has nothing to do with his or her justification. Even faith is not a cause of the sinner's justification. Because of Christ—his substitutionary life and his substitutionary death—God has declared the entire world “not guilty.” It is also essential to note that this “not guilty” verdict is *only* because of and through Christ, the Christ of the Scriptures who was born, lived, suffered, died, rose, and ascended, who is now sitting at the right hand of the Father, who will one day come to judge the living and the dead. There is no other Savior. Christians who accept their Savior's statement that “no one comes to the Father except through me” cannot help but be deeply interested in the work of missions.

Thesis Three: Christ's universal reconciliation establishes the whole world as the church's field of witness. Hence, Christ has commissioned his church to “make disciples of all nations.”

This is biblical, and thus Lutheran, theology, the natural consequence of universal justification. If *all* have been declared “not guilty,” then *all* need to hear of that declaration. For, only

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved...[But] how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? (Ro 10:9,14,15)

So, Christ says, “Go into *all the world* and preach the good news to *all creation*” (Mk 16:15). “Make disciples of *all nations*” (Mt 28:19). “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Christ's] name to *all nations*, beginning at Jerusalem” (Lk 24:47). Make disciples of “every nation, tribe, language, and people.” There is no one on this planet whom Christ has not redeemed. There is no one to whom the message of justification does not apply. There is no one, therefore, who does not need to hear the message. For faith comes by hearing and he who is without faith is lost. “Whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16). That establishes the scope of our mission program: The field is the world.

Richard Balge reminds us:

The Bible knows nothing of “happy heathen” who live a carefree life and should be left alone. It does not know of religious people who please God by “following the light that is in them.” It knows only of human beings who are in darkness until the gospel light shines on them, who are Satan's slaves until the good news about Jesus sets them free to serve God. Gentiles in their lawlessness and Jews who imagined they were keeping God's law were all sinners in need of a Savior. There are “decent” people who seem to live decent lives without Christ, but they still need him and he still says, “Make disciples of them.” The people of other races and tongues may be content the way they are, but they will be miserable for eternity without Christ. He still says, “Make disciples of them.” God prepared his salvation in the sight of all people, even the kind of heathen you and I were when we were born and before we were baptized.⁶

The Calvinist, with his unscriptural doctrine of limited atonement, thereby limits the church's sphere of mission activity. Counselor Jay Adams, for example, in keeping with his Calvinistic mindset, writes: “As a Reformed Christian, the writer believes that counselors must not tell any unsaved counselee that Christ died for him, for they cannot say that. No man knows except Christ himself who are his elect for whom he died.”⁷ As we seek to “make disciples of all nations,” we do not have to qualify our message with such doubt-inducers as, “Perhaps you are among those whom God has declared ‘not guilty’ through Christ's redemptive work.” “Perhaps you are numbered among the ransomed of God.” “Perhaps God has reconciled you to himself in

⁶ Richard Balge, “Cross-Cultural and Multi-Cultural Ministry in the New Testament,” p 5, an essay presented to the Southeastern Wisconsin District—WELS, June 6, 1995.

⁷ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p 69.

Christ.” “Perhaps Christ’s atoning sacrifice counted for you.” All have been justified. All, therefore, can be—need to be—told that truth.

Some limit the scope of the church’s mission program by trying to find Christ in other religions and other sacred books. ELCA theologian Carl E. Braaten writes:

[Jesus’] true identity is still being disclosed in the encounter of the gospel with the world religions. The gospel does not meet the world religions on a one-way street, giving them the traditional symbols of christology and receiving nothing back. The dialogue will be a two-way street, in which the condition of openness to the other religions will be motivated by knowledge that they also somehow speak of Jesus Christ. . . . If the apostles and the church fathers could find anticipations of Christ in the Old Testament, we have a right to expect a similar thing in the texts and traditions of other religions.⁸

Others simply dismiss the absolute need for Jesus. They assert that it is *unlikely* that “only those calling upon Jesus as their personal Savior can be saved, the rest of humanity being assigned to eternal perdition.”⁹

Even some Evangelicals are no longer stating unequivocally that faith in Jesus is a *sine qua non* for salvation and hence are diluting the urgency of the mission commission to “make disciples of all nations.” An article in *Christianity Today* entitled “The Perennial Debate” brings out that, though the dominant view among Evangelicals is that “no unevangelized person will be saved,” some Evangelicals espouse the opinion that “if any unevangelized person repents and desires God’s mercy, he will be saved by the work of Christ even though ignorant of that work.”¹⁰ But Scripture says, “He that believeth not shall be damned” (Mk 16:16, KJV).

Christ has commissioned his church to “make disciples of all nations,” for all nations have been reconciled to God through Christ. This certainly has implications for us of WELS. Though we are not a large church body (400,000 people is a drop in the ocean of a 5.6 billion population world¹¹) the Great Commission still applies to us. Hence the need for both home and world mission work. We can hardly ignore mission work at home to concentrate solely on missions across the seas; nor can we ignore world mission work to concentrate on the masses without Christ right on our own doorstep. The field is the world—at home and abroad—the inner city, the suburb, the town, the village, the countryside; the North and South and East and West; the African-American, the Hispanic, the Oriental; the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Moslem, the Confucianist, the Taoist, the Shintoist, the Animist, as well as the person who worships Pocketbook or Intelligence; the down-and-outer and the up-and-comer, the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned.

The field is the world. But since our resources, both workers and finances, are finite, that means careful planning in a desire to exercise prudent stewardship of what God has given us to carry out Christ’s commission. Hence the value of boards for mission work, both here and around the world. Hence the value also of such groups as this one that ask, “How can we best guide our congregations and the synod in 21st century mission work?”

Thesis Four: The church is to carry out Christ’s commission by using the means of grace.

- **Through the law, God reveals to the world its sin and convicts it of its lostness.**
- **Through the gospel in Word and sacraments, God brings to the world the message of the finished work of Christ and saves lost and condemned people.**

The means of grace rightfully occupy a key place in the theology of missions. With the Scriptures, we confess the means of grace to be the way by which the Holy Spirit both offers and confers to people all the

⁸ *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, pp 567-568.

⁹ As stated in a study volume prepared for an assembly of the World Council of Churches (Reported in *Christianity Today*, April 20, 1984, p 12).

¹⁰ *Christianity Today*, May 14, 1990, p 21.

¹¹ Projected by the World Almanac to reach 7 billion by 2010.

blessings procured by Christ through his life and death. Through the means of grace, God the Holy Spirit conveys to people the gift of forgiveness of sins won by Christ and works faith in the heart to accept that forgiveness. The means of grace are the link between Christ's cross and a person's heart. Any theology of missions, to be true to the Scriptures, must focus on the means of grace.

The means of grace, we need to remember, is the *gospel* in Word and sacrament. The gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Ro 1:16). Yet we will not ignore the law, which fulfills the necessary function of diagnosis. "Through the law we become conscious of sin" (Ro 3:20). "I would not have known what sin was except through the law," writes the Apostle Paul (Ro 7:7). The law accuses. The law exposes. And the law condemns: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Ga 3:10).

The law's purpose is not simply to tell people that they have problems; it is to point them to the problem: sin and its consequences. Most people already know that they have problems. Many are weighed down with such negatives as unhappiness, anxiety, boredom, emptiness, restlessness, dissatisfaction, feelings of worthlessness, frustration. All of these, however, are merely symptomatic of the real problem. Promising that Jesus will take away all these problems and replace them with happiness, fulfillment, purpose, etc., will not bring people one step closer to what they really need: the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. People need to see that their deepest problem is spiritual. It is their estrangement from God. To make that clear is the law's intended, and necessary, purpose.

And yet, as C.F.W. Walther puts it, "the Law is merely an auxiliary doctrine; it is not the real doctrine of Christ."¹² The real doctrine is the gospel in Word and sacraments. Paul writes to Timothy: "Our Savior, Christ Jesus...has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light." And how do freedom from death as well as life and immortality become one's personal possession? "Through the gospel," Paul tells Timothy (2 Tm 1:10). He reminds the Corinthians of the gospel he had preached to them—the message of Christ crucified, buried, and risen, and then states, "By this gospel you are saved" (1 Cor 15:2).

Evangelical Lutherans will not want to forget that the power of the gospel is also found in the sacraments. We think especially of the value of baptism in mission work. "Be baptized...*for the forgiveness of your sins*" (Ac 2:38), Peter tells the multitude on the first Pentecost. He also writes in his first letter, "Baptism...*saves you*" (1 Pt 3:21). Paul calls it a "*washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*" (Ti 3:5).

Our Lutheran Confessions remind us:

The Word and the [sacrament] have the same effect, as Augustine said so well when he called the sacrament "the visible Word," for the rite is received by the eyes and is a sort of picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore both have the same effect.¹³

Do we appreciate the means of grace as we should? Do we use them boldly and confidently? We in the evangelical Lutheran Church have a rare treasure in our scriptural doctrine of the means of grace that others do not have. Roman Catholic theology sees the means of grace as doing no more than infusing some power into the individual who is still largely responsible for working out his own salvation.

Calvinistic, Reformed theology separates regeneration from the means of grace. It speaks of an immediate, direct operation of the Holy Spirit apart from means, a working that "precedes all mediate work of God in us...[consisting] of an infusing, implanting of new life."¹⁴ Thus there is really no urgent reason to bring the means of grace to the unbeliever. The Holy Spirit will deal with him directly, saving those he has predestined to salvation, condemning those he has predestined to damnation.

Arminianism assigns the responsibility of conversion, at least to a degree, to man himself who, upon hearing the message, must choose to become a believer. The gospel is reduced to an offer the person must decide either to accept or reject. The real power thus resides in the person who makes the decision rather than

¹² C.F.W. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, transl. by W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia), pp 404-405.

¹³ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, 5.

¹⁴ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), p 642.

the gospel. In effect, man's will rather than the gospel becomes the means of grace. Those who bring the gospel are thus no more than providers of information rather than dispensers of the one message that has the power to convert and save.

Lutheran Christians, on the other hand, in keeping with the Scriptures, will, as Paul Eickmann put it, "make their confession to the means of grace as God's own objective promises of peace and life. They will point to the sacraments as God's work, not ours. They will urge adults to be baptized and to bring their children to baptism. They will invite the lost to find comfort in the liturgy, with its words of absolution, and in sermons which proclaim Christ crucified and risen."¹⁵

The means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament, is the great treasure the Lord has entrusted to his church. Justification and faith to accept justification—that is entirely in God's hands. But the means of grace—that the Lord has placed into our hands, to use with confidence. A biblical, Lutheran theology of missions dare not in any way minimize the importance of the means of grace.

Thesis Five: As Christians use the means of grace to carry out Christ's commission, they will remember that while they can do nothing to add to the power inherent in the gospel, they can unconsciously put barriers in the way of the gospel, making it more difficult to communicate it to unbelievers.

We can do nothing to add to the power inherent in the gospel. This needs to be underscored. "The word of God is living and active" (He 4:12). "The gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Ro 1:16). "Our gospel came to you," Paul reminds the Thessalonians, "not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit" (1 Th 1:5). We do not need to reason people into Christianity with rational arguments. In fact, we cannot do so. And certainly our call is not to manipulate people into Christianity with psychology and emotion. With Paul, trusting in the power of the gospel, we, too, can say, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary," says Paul, "[we simply] set forth the truth plainly" (2 Cor 4:2).

We need only to get the Word out, to unleash its power. Knowing this helps to overcome timidity and feelings of inadequacy. The Word will produce its own results. The Word is the seed sown in the soil which springs up and sprouts of its own accord (Mk 4:26-29). It is the net cast into the sea by fishers of men (Lk 5:1:11). We are seed-sowers. We are net-casters. God makes the seed grow. God fills the net.

If it is true that the gospel and the gospel alone is the power of God for salvation, then it is also true that people need nothing more than the gospel. "They have Moses and the Prophets," Father Abraham told the Rich Man in hell who was worried about the unbelieving brothers he had left behind (Lk 16:29). That was all they needed. The Word is sufficient. People need nothing more than to hear the message of sin and grace, law and gospel. Our tool is not the Word plus something else. It is the Word alone. Nothing I do can add to the efficacy of the gospel.

Having said that, it also needs to be stated that Christians can get in the way of the gospel. *They can unconsciously put barriers in the way of the gospel, making it more difficult to communicate it to unbelievers.* Christians cannot in any way help the gospel to achieve its desired goal of conversion; but they can hinder it.

St. Paul writes: "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited" (2 Cor 6:3). That is why, for example, Paul took such care in the way he handled the offering for the church in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Cor 8:16-24). He did not handle it all by himself. Other church leaders of good reputation traveled with him to Jerusalem with the offering. "We want to avoid any criticism," he wrote, "of the way we administer this liberal gift" (2 Cor 8:20). For that would reflect poorly not only on Paul but, what is worse, on the gospel and the Lord he represented.

Godless behavior on the part of those who are publicly identified as believers is a stumbling block that can lead the unbeliever to mock the believer's God. Addressing David's sins of adultery and murder, Nathan

¹⁵ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 86:3, Summer 1989, p 191.

told the king, “By doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt” (2 Sm 12:14). Addressing Jews who didn’t practice what they professed, Paul says, “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Ro 2:24). Godless behavior on the part of a believer puts up a barrier between him and the unbeliever, tending to destroy the believer’s credibility in the mind of the unbeliever.

Why does Paul spend the better part of 1 Timothy 3 and several verses in Titus 1 listing qualifications required in a spiritual leader, most of which have to do with Christian character? Why does he say that he must be “above reproach” (1 Tm 3:2), that he must be “worthy of respect” (1 Tm 1:8), that he must “have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Tm 3:7)? Certainly not because his character can help to convert the unbeliever. The gospel alone converts. Paul does recognize, though, that one who does not exhibit such a life will have difficulty being a credible witness.

Regarding Timothy, whom Paul took along on his Second Missionary Journey, Luke considered it important to note that “the brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him” (Ac 16:2). Peter encourages believing women married to unbelieving men, “Be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without talk by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (1 Pt 3:1,2). Peter knew, of course, that people are born again only by the Holy Spirit’s working through the Word (cf. 1 Pt 1:23). But he also saw the importance of the positive testimony of a Christian’s life in order that there be no barrier to hinder communication of the Word. Isn’t that the same reason Peter, after exhorting, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,” adds, “but do this with gentleness and respect”? Why should we be concerned not only about *what* we say, but about *how* we say it? “So that those who speak maliciously against your behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (cf. 1 Pt 3:15-17). Again, the point is: Let nothing get in the way. Put up no barrier that might obstruct another person’s reception of the gospel.

Jesus put it positively: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). It’s not the light of my godly life that saves; but the darkness of an ungodly life might well rob me of opportunities to share the message of life with those who observe such a life.

It is not only blatantly *godless* behavior, however, that can be a barrier to the communication of the gospel. It can also be insensitive behavior. Think of the negative impact the “Ugly American Syndrome” has had on people in many parts of the world, when tourists from the United States look with disdain upon anything that doesn’t fit in with what they perceive to be a superior American way of doing things. The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, was far removed from being the “Ugly Israelite” as he sought to win the lost for Christ. Note how sensitive he was to the two different cultures he encountered, that of the Jew and of the Greek:

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)

Commenting on this passage, Richard Balge writes:

Paul would put himself at anyone’s service, adjust to anyone’s culture, accommodate himself to anyone’s lifestyle (excluding, of course, what was sinful), if it might help to win that person to eternal life. Though his stomach may not have rejoiced at Gentile cuisine he was willing to become like the Gentiles in diet...He would do that “so as to win those not having the law.” Strong in his understanding of Christian liberty, he put himself in the sandals of those who were still weak in understanding, “to win the weak.” Giving up his exercise of freedom in certain

matters, he adapted his conduct to the sensitive consciences of those who needed to hear the message of salvation.¹⁶

Paul's cultural sensitivity, we remind ourselves again, did not save anyone. Its opposite, however, culturally insensitive behavior, may well have "turned people off" with the result that Paul would have had no opportunity to proclaim the gospel where he exhibited such behavior.

Balge's brief survey of the New Testament, in which he was looking for how the church carried out cross-cultural and multi-cultural work, led him to conclude:

The attitude and actions of the first-century believers made them attractive to some, at least, of the unbelievers. The manner and conduct of the Christians often served for what we today call "pre-evangelism." In Jerusalem the first congregation is described as "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Ac 2:47). The sentence which immediately follows is significant, showing the importance of the mindset of those who believe and proclaim the gospel: "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Ac 2:47b). Even those who were not in the fellowship of believers had to like and respect those Jerusalem Christians.

In our day, too, it ought to be possible for unbelievers to say of us: "Christians are helpful neighbors and good citizens." Our lives cannot make believers out of them, but the way we live might at least remove some obstacles to their hearing the gospel.

"Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (Php 2:14-16). We have a responsibility to the family of God to let the family resemblance show. Children of God take after their Father and imitate their Brother. Shine in the darkness of a crooked and depraved generation.¹⁷

Whether it be by a godless lifestyle or by cultural insensitivity, Christians can put external barriers in the way of the gospel, making it more difficult to communicate it to unbelievers. Conversely, a godly lifestyle and cultural sensitivity can help keep the path free of such barriers and thus facilitate and enhance the Christian's opportunity to communicate the gospel. The next two theses are built upon this assumption.

Thesis Six: Acts of Christian love, e.g., helping people in a time of need, offering medical, technological, and/or educational assistance, may assist Christians in carrying out Christ's commission by providing a point of contact with non-Christians. Such humanitarian efforts are a significant way by which Christians, both individually and corporately, can let the light of their faith shine before men that they may see their good deeds and praise their Father in heaven.

Demonstrating love in a concrete way to those less well-off materially is clearly in keeping with God's will. There is no dearth of passages in the Scriptures on this subject. In Old Testament times, for example, there was the law of gleaning. "When you reap the harvest of your land," the Lord said, "do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien" (Lev 19:10-11). Note that the recipients of this charity were not restricted only to fellow Israelites.

To those who appeared to be more interested in outward show than the practice of true religion, the Lord says, "Is [true fasting] not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him?...If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs

¹⁶ Balge, *op. cit.*, p 12.

¹⁷ Balge, *op. cit.*, p 14. For more on this same subject, cf. "'All Things to All Men': Where is the Limit?", an essay by Richard A. Krause, in the Spring 1996 issue of the *WLQ*.

of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday” (Is 58:7,10).

Some 750 years later James wrote essentially the same thing: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (Ja 1:27). On the other hand, James had strong words for the rich who hoard their riches or use them to satisfy a self-indulgent lifestyle: “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded [because of non-use]. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days” (Ja 5:1-3).

Rather than hoarding riches or using them in pursuit of hedonistic pleasure, our Lord Jesus urges us, “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys” (Lk 12:33).

Paul instructs Timothy on the proper use of wealth: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share” (1 Tm 6:17-18). Generosity, a willingness to share with the less well-off, is one of the ways by which the first-fruit of the Spirit manifests itself in a Christian’s life. Often this generosity will be directed toward fellow Christians,¹⁸ but nowhere are Christians told to restrict their acts of charity only to believers. “As we have opportunity, let us do good to *all* people” (Ga 6:10).

What connection, if any, do such acts of love have with mission work? There is a lot of fuzzy thinking on this subject. Charles Arn, for example, writes:

People today who respond to the Christian faith...are those who respond to the love and caring of Christ’s people, not to a set of ideas or theological statements. People are not talked into the kingdom. They are loved in. Reflecting God’s unconditional love is the essence of the Christian gospel. And love is experienced, not verbalized.¹⁹

The truth, of course, is that people are “talked into the kingdom.” The Holy Spirit does the work. He does it, though, not through acts of love Christians display, but through the Word they speak.

At the same time, it is not difficult to discern a connection between acts of love and verbalizing the gospel. Acts of love can be a way in, a bridge to a person over which one can then walk with the gospel. Acts of love might well lead the recipient to inquire about “what makes the believer tick” and thus provide an opportunity for the believer to “give an answer” (1 Pt 3:15) that points to Christ. Demonstrating acts of love, then, is a form of “pre-evangelism” that may provide opportunity for actual evangelism, which is telling a person the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is not difficult to see how this can work out on a personal level. But does it apply also on a corporate, e.g., congregational or church body level? Can we rightfully speak of a social aspect of a congregation’s or church body’s ministry? There appear to be no scriptural reasons to deny that possibility.

Confessional Lutherans tend to become nervous, and rightfully so, when the word “social” is attached to “gospel.” The idea of the social gospel is that the church’s mission is to alleviate societal problems with the purpose of making this world a better place in which to live. Some, stretching this idea to its limit, advocate so-called liberation theology, which encourages the “oppressed” to rise up in arms, if necessary, to free themselves from economic, political, or social oppression.

It goes without saying that when we speak of a social aspect of a congregation’s or church body’s ministry, we are not talking about the social gospel. Advocates of the social gospel define the church’s mission

¹⁸ Cf., for example, “brother” in James 2:17 and 1 John 3:17 and the offering for the poor in the Jerusalem church in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

¹⁹ Charles Arn, *Church Growth: State of the Art*, C. Peter Wagner, ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), pp 66,67.

in materialistic terms. The Scriptures define the church's mission in spiritual terms. The church is to preach repentance and remission of sins, law and gospel. Its primary concern will always be for people's souls.

On the other hand, Christians, individually or corporately, will not want to turn a blind eye or deaf ear to people's physical needs. When Jesus sent out the Twelve, he not only gave them authority to drive out evil spirits with the powerful Word, a *spiritual* mission, but also "to heal every disease and sickness" (Mt 10:1), a *social* mission. With this commission, Jesus demonstrated the same concern for soul and body he himself had exhibited in his own ministry.

The medical mission carried on since 1961 by WELS in Central Africa, first in Zambia and then also in Malawi, is a contemporary example of the social aspect of ministry functioning on a corporate level. Over the years thousands of people have been helped through this humanitarian ministry of mercy. In the recently published history of WELS world missions, the writer asserts about the medical mission:

The program stands in its own right as a ministry of mercy and compassion. An older African one day told one of our nurses, "If you were not here, we would be dying like flies." As an arm of the mission the medical program has shown the love of Christ to the people and in this way has helped break down some barriers to the gospel.²⁰

The intent of the medical mission is to show mercy to people in their physical need and at the same time to serve as a point of contact through which healing for the soul can be administered:

Not to be forgotten is the direct gospel ministry carried on at the clinics through the daily devotions in God's word..., the spiritual counsel for the ailing and their families, as well as the emergency baptisms of many babies at the clinics...The angels of heaven have been given good reason to rejoice at the healing of souls as well as of bodies that has occurred through the years in the medical mission program.²¹

Perhaps this kind of work might be expanded on the world mission field, where work is so often carried out in the midst of much poverty and little health care.

Making contact with people by meeting them at their point of physical need also has application to mission work on the home front. A congregation may, for example, establish a food pantry or a soup kitchen, both to help people in their bodily need and to provide an opening for sharing the means of grace. On the church body level, WELS has done something similar through the para-church organization, Lutherans for Life. Counselors seek to help pregnant women see the value of the life that has taken form in them; and also, as the opportunity presents itself, they use the situation to talk about the Savior.

Two things, then, will lead Christians, both individually and corporately, to concern themselves not just with the spiritual, but also with the physical needs of people. First, we know that it is God's will that we do not neglect the needs of the poor and suffering. Secondly, we recognize that humanitarian deeds of Christian love might build a bridge for bringing the gospel to people. We have mentioned a few of the ways we are already doing this on the home and world front. There may well be other legitimate avenues of humanitarian efforts the church can employ as a way of letting the light of our faith shine before men that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven.

Thesis Seven: The social sciences, which make observations about people and societies in God's creation, may assist Christians in carrying out Christ's commission, especially by alerting them to possible external barriers which may keep people from being willing to listen to a Christian's testimony and by apprising them of possible points of contact

²⁰ Theodore A. Sauer, project director, Harold R. Johne, and Ernst H. Wendland, ed., *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), p 198.

²¹ *Ibid.*

with the unchurched. Thus the social sciences can help the Christian in his quest to become all things to all people so that by all possible means he might win some.

This is one of the more heatedly debated topics of our time. Leaders of the Church Growth Movement draw freely upon the findings of the social sciences, e.g., sociology, anthropology, and psychology, in their attempts to come up with ways to help churches grow. Our purpose here is not to evaluate the Church Growth Movement and its many principles. Nor is it to speak directly to some of the current buzzwords in the field of missions, e.g., contextualization, multi-culturalism, cross-culturalism, ethnocentrism, world view, dynamic equivalence. We will not be discussing the pros and cons of making demographic and diagnostic studies, of preparing congregational growth graphs, of developing a congregational mission statement and philosophy of ministry, of goal-setting. We are not going to deal directly with such terminology as was mentioned at the outset of this paper, e.g., homogeneous units, felt needs, people groups, harvest principle. Rather, our intent is to answer the question: Is it ever valid for the church to utilize material, ideas, etc., which may have sprung from heterodox or secular soil? The answer to that question must, in principle, be “yes.”

A heterodox church still retains some, often much, of the truth. That is why we do not aggressively seek to turn all Baptists, Methodists, even Roman Catholics, into Lutherans. At the time of the Reformation, Luther wrote: “We still call the church of Rome holy and all its sees holy, even though they have been undermined and their ministries are ungodly.” How could he say that? Because the marks of the church were still present in the Roman Church, even though they were much overlaid with superstition and outright false teachings.

Though Luther was quick and often vehement in his opposition to error, he was also grateful for the truth, wherever it was found. He often spoke in glowing terms of the church father Augustine. And yet Augustine was far from clear in his understanding of such key doctrines as justification and election. Luther was also quick to take his Wittenberg colleague Karlstadt to task for trying to destroy every vestige of Roman Catholicism. Some elements of the truth can be found also among the heterodox.

The recognition that also the heterodox possess some of God’s truth underlies the eclectic nature of the new hymnal of the WELS, *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. The hymnal utilizes a three-year cycle of Scripture lessons developed largely by the Roman Catholic Church. Many of the hymns, the liturgical elements, and the prayers come from sources other than WELS Lutherans. One of the hymns in the Holy Communion section is written by someone from the Reformed camp. You will search in vain in the hymn for a clear confession to the Real Presence; yet it is included in the hymnal because the writer so beautifully portrays the fellowship aspect of the Holy Supper. Charles Wesley, Phillips Brooks, Isaac Watts, John Newton—we could go on with a long list—all are listed as composers in *Christian Worship*. None are Lutherans. A Roman Catholic pope, Gregory I, composed the first hymn of the service of Morning Praise, “Father, We Praise You.” Yet Schubert’s “Ave Maria” is not in *Christian Worship*, for obvious reasons. The key is to pick that which is good and in harmony with the Scriptures and to discard the rest.

The majority of Bible commentaries and other helping tools for the biblical scholar, e.g., grammars, lexicons, Bible dictionaries, are not the product of Lutheran, much less WELS Lutheran, pens. This does not automatically disqualify them, however; for the heterodox also possess some of God’s truth. Commentaries written by Reformed scholars need to be read with care, of course, since along with the truth will be some heterodox statements. A discerning person, however, who knows well the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions (which we accept because they clearly confess the teachings of the Scriptures), will be able to make use of the wheat in these biblical helps while discarding the chaff.

It is valid for the church to utilize materials, ideas, etc., that spring from heterodox soil. But what about those that spring from purely secular soil? Even unbelieving man, through the use of God-given reason, as flawed by sin as it may be, can make certain discoveries about God’s creation. Luther, in his explanation to the First Article of the Creed, confesses what Scripture teaches: “I believe that God made me with *all* creatures, giving...reason and all my senses.” Historians, philosophers, linguists, educators, scientists, medical doctors, technologists, psychologists, psychiatrists—whether or not they are Christians—can all by observation and experimentation teach us certain things.

In education classes at the Seminary our students hear about such things as cognitive and affective learning. They become acquainted with a “taxonomy of questions.” Neither of these terms are drawn from the Scriptures but are the product of secular educational research. In counseling classes our students learn how to diagnose a case, how to listen, how to ask the right questions. This is largely the contribution of secular psychology and psychiatry. In church administration classes, students learn about establishing purposes, objectives, and goals, about long- and short-range planning, about parliamentary procedure, and other principles of administration—much of which is drawn from the secular world of business.

Again, the principle is: Take what’s good, what’s wholesome, what will serve the preaching and teaching of the gospel and ignore the rest. Christians do not have a monopoly on what can be discerned by human reason. God gives that ability also to the unbeliever. That is why we state in this thesis:

The social sciences, which make observations about people and societies in God’s creation, may assist Christians in carrying out Christ’s commission, especially by alerting them to possible external barriers which may keep people from being willing to listen to a Christian’s testimony and by apprising them of possible points of contact with the unchurched. Thus the social sciences can help the Christian in his quest to become all things to all people so that by all possible means he might win some.

Through their observation of people, the social and behavioral sciences might help Christians become aware of such things as

- how unbelievers think
- what draws an unbeliever to a church in the first place
- what people are looking for in a church
- what things about churches tend to “turn people off”
- what people consider to be their primary needs
- when people will tend to be most willing to listen²²

All of this is in the realm, not of evangelism, but pre-evangelism. We should not, however, underestimate the importance of pre-evangelism. Understanding how people think and feel may provide an opening, a way in, so we can bring God’s saving message to them. The Scriptures make it amply clear that no one will come to faith apart from the gospel. For that to happen, Christians, who have the gospel, need to come into contact with non-Christians, who do not have the gospel. However, the Scriptures do not prescribe how this contact should be made. That is left up to the believer’s sanctified judgment.

Does this mean we can feel free to use whatever missiological techniques we might come upon, whether through the writings of the Church Growth Movement or other books, workshops, etc.? It should be obvious that the answer to that question is “no.” Not all methods and techniques are compatible with the gospel. And not all methods and techniques can be separated from the theology from which they spring.

We should also add that not all terminology means what we might think it means. Take as an example a term used quite regularly in world missions: contextualization. Ernst H. Wendland writes:

Contextualization, by definition, is the process whereby the message of the Word of God is related to the cultural context of the society to which it is proclaimed. When, for example, an American is doing mission work in Africa, he should be aware that he is working among people who think in differing patterns, speak in a different language, and express themselves in other ways. People coming to Christ should not be made to feel that he is a “foreign” Christ...We will

²² Not to the gospel, of course, since all unbelievers, born dead in sin and enemies of God, are equally unreceptive to the gospel, but there may be times when they are more receptive to a conversation about spiritual matters than others.

want to let other nations express their faith and joy in the Lord in ways which reflect their own identity. We will want to guard against giving the impression that our Western culture is of itself superior. We will avoid showing a domineering spirit when working in cross-cultural relationships.²³

So far, so good. But not everyone who talks about “contextualizing the gospel” means only what is expressed above. After reminding us that “we will not want to ‘contextualize’ the gospel in the sense of making it more palatable,”²⁴ Wendland then lists some African customs that go directly contrary to the Scriptures. When the missionary confronts such customs, Wendland writes, “We’ll not be afraid to proclaim the truth no matter how disturbing this might be to cultural sensitivities.”²⁵ But not all agree with this:

There are those contextualization enthusiasts who feel that somehow all these customs based upon heathen traditions ought to be “Christianized” [rather than eliminated]...There are even those people who claim we must dispense with all confessional statements because they come out of foreign cultures.²⁶

To such people contextualization means dispensing with anything—even the truth—if it runs counter to a particular people’s culture. We need to be very careful we are understanding terms correctly. Otherwise, to use the above example, by championing the concept of contextualization we might unwittingly be embracing something different from what we think we are embracing. It would be better not to use the term at all, if it means one thing to one group and something else to another. Otherwise, the result is confusion, a trumpet that is not sounding a clear tone.

It is not our purpose in this paper to examine all of the missiological methods that may be derived, in part at least, from the social sciences. We have endeavored to bring out that a person need not summarily dismiss them out of hand. We need to exercise careful discernment, however, to sort, to sift, to use only that which does not militate against the truth of the Word. As Richard Krause rightly puts it, “The question in methodology must be not only ‘Does this work?’ but ‘Is this faithful?’”²⁷

Thesis Eight: Since God causes his church to grow only through the means of grace, use of humanitarian efforts and the social sciences must, therefore, always be subservient to the use of the means of grace.

God causes his church to grow only through the means of grace. We will not say much on this thesis since it has already been said in Thesis Four. We felt, however, that since this is of primary importance it needs to be reiterated. All of the acts of love in the world, all the relief work, all the humanitarian efforts, whatever form they may take, will not bring a person one step closer to Jesus Christ. Humanitarian activity doesn’t save; the gospel does. That is undoubtedly why the WELS historically has kept activities not directly related to preaching the gospel, e.g., the Relief Committee, the African Medical Mission, outside of the budget.

Must all humanitarian activities that accompany home or world mission work be extra-budgetary in nature? It is a good way of stressing the ministerial, that is, serving, nature of such activities. It keeps the spotlight on the preaching of the gospel. Yet whether or not to include such activities within the program budget of a board or committee is a matter not dictated by the Scriptures. Clearly, the church’s commission is to “make disciples of all nations” by employing the means of grace (Mt 28:19), to “preach the good news to all creation” (Mk 16:15), to “preach repentance and forgiveness of sins...to all nations” (Lk 24:47). Yet, as brought out in

²³ Ernst H. Wendland, “An Evaluation of Current Missiology,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 79:3, Summer 1982, pp 182-183.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Krause, *op. cit.*

Thesis Six, churches will not want to turn a blind eye or deaf ear to people's physical needs. And such activities can serve as a bridge to people who need the gospel. All in all, though, it might be best to continue the practice of funding humanitarian work with non-budgetary funds. This helps to maintain the scriptural distinction between the church's primary mission of proclaiming the gospel of salvation and its auxiliary role of demonstrating concern for people's physical needs.

Use of the social sciences, too, must always be subservient to the gospel. Not all of those who advocate the use of the social sciences are content with them serving a ministerial role. Church Growth Movement leader C. Peter Wagner, for example, writes:

The classical approach judges the validity of any experience on the basis of previously established theological principles. In contrast, Church Growth leans toward a phenomenological approach which holds theological conclusions somewhat more tentatively and is open to revising them when necessary in the light of what is learned through experience.²⁸

With such a statement Wagner actually puts the social sciences *above* the Scriptures. Whatever works, i.e., whatever makes churches grow, must be right. Adjust your theology accordingly. Should we say it one more time? *God causes his church to grow only through the means of grace.* The Lutheran Confessions echo the Scriptures when they insist:

It is God's will to call men to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, convert them, beget them anew, and sanctify them through this means and in no other way—namely, through the holy Word (when one hears it preached or reads it) and the sacraments (when they are used according to his Word)...All who would be saved must hear this preaching.²⁹

Everything else is secondary. Therefore,

Lord, let your Word have speedy course,
Through every land be glorified.
Till all the heathen know its force
And fill your churches far and wide.
Oh, spread the conquest of your Word
And let your kingdom come, dear Lord!

²⁸ C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1987), p 38.

²⁹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. II, 50,52.