



Luther, Lutheran Churches, and Mission



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Resumé

This paper deals with the Lutheran understanding of Mission, especially from a historical perspective. Three important aspects are given. First (and lastly), I try to identify Luther's personal position on what we today call Mission. We also touch upon some different positions on Mission, which over the centuries have been taken by Lutheran Churches and theologians. I also try to explain why the Lutherans were so late in starting a mission ministry, especially in comparison with Roman Catholics and Anglicans. It seems that this delay had both practical and theological reasons – and it was, at least partly, influenced by a misinterpretation of Luther's own position.

Keywords

Mission – Gospel – Lutherans – Martin Luther – Ingemar Öberg – Churches – Mission societies – Pietism – Herrnhut



Introduction

Today there are (nominally) some 80 million Lutheran Christians around the globe. Many of them belong to Churches with a recent mission background, and these Churches are, basically, the only Lutheran Churches which are growing today. What, then, is the *Lutheran position on Mission*? Or rather, breaking that question up into three separate questions:

- How can we describe *Luther's position* on Mission?
- What positions on Mission have historically been taken by different *Lutheran Churches*?
- How does it come that Lutherans *were so slow in starting a mission work*, much slower than Roman Catholics and Anglicans? Did this delay have practical or theological reasons? (Yes, and yes!)

Despite the vigorous Lutheran Mission work which started in the middle of the 19th century, the position taken by Luther himself was, to a large extent, either unknown or quite misrepresented until 1991, when a groundbreaking monograph on *Luther and World Mission* was published. That book will assist us in understanding the topic *Luther, Lutheran Churches and Mission*.

1. Luther's own position on mission – the basic problem

How did Luther see himself? Well, he did not see himself as reformer. God was the only one who, in Luther's eyes, could reform the Christian Church. Prof. Heiko Oberman has summarized the self-understanding of Luther in this way:

Luther never styled himself a “reformer.” He did not, however, shrink from being seen as a prophet; he wanted to spread the Gospel as an “evangelist.” He called himself preacher, doctor, or professor and was all of these. Yet he never presumed to be a reformer, nor did he ever claim his movement to be the “Reformation.”¹

For different reasons, some of them practical (and we will return to them), Luther never wrote anything specifically on what we traditionally label “mission”. Instead, he wrote on a number of other issues, and as a writer he was extremely productive. In the years 1517-1520, to give one example, he produced some 30 treatises which were printed by more than 20 printing houses and sold in appr. 300.000 copies. That happened *before* he was really famous!² Thus we can say that his thoughts on mission are hidden in some 80.000 pages. The *Weimar edition* of his writings, a project which started in 1883, took 120 years to finish, containing appr. 120 volumes. That means that in order to have a detailed understanding of his view of Mission you almost drown in words, and *very few scholars* have a capacity to give a well informed opinion on that issue. Note that I said “very few”. I will later introduce you to one scholar who went through almost all of the writings of Luther and in 1991 produced a famous book on Luther and Mission.³ We will come back to him!

¹ Heiko Oberman, *Luther. Man between God and the Devil*, Fontana (1993) 79.

² Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, HarperOne (2011) 318, 323.

³ Ingemar Öberg, *Luther och världsmissionen*, Åbo (1991); English translation by Dean Apel: *Luther and World Mission*, Concordia Publishing House (2007).



2. The Post-Reformation Lutheran view on Mission

The Post-Reformation Lutheran view on Mission – which means the 16th and 17th centuries – is very divided. It can, basically, be divided into three attitudes.⁴

1. For *practical reasons*, the issue of World Mission was important in Roman Catholic countries but initially almost without relevance in the Lutheran countries. We need to recognize that the German Emperor was a staunch Roman Catholic, and that countries like Spain, Portugal and France were strongly Roman Catholic. Furthermore, up to 1588, when the Spanish Armada was defeated by England, the seas were ruled by Spain and Portugal.⁵ We also need to remember that the only Lutheran states existing at all, by this time, were Denmark-Norway and Sweden (which included modern Finland) together with a number of principalities in Germany; most of these, like Saxony, were landlocked. While the Roman Catholic Church had reasons for and possibilities of being very active in Mission work, mainly through Spain and Portugal, very few Lutheran (and Calvinistic) territories had even a *practical possibility* to undertake Mission work in a broader sense.
2. We can also notice that when the practical possibilities allowed it, Lutheran countries and Churches recognized the *necessity of Mission* when they really faced it. At a very early stage, at least from 1559 but perhaps even earlier, the Swedish King introduced a (Lutheran) mission work among non-Christian tribes in Northern Sweden, the *Same* people (“Lapp Mission”). In a similar way, when Sweden created a colony in Northern America, pastors were sent there, and they did not only serve the Emigrants. In fact, some of the earliest mission enterprises among the Native Americans (“Indians”) were undertaken by these Swedish pastors as early as in the 1640’s. To the Swedish Lutherans it was self-evident that the Gospel should be preached to other peoples which had not been reached by the Gospel when meeting these peoples. And later, in 1706, when Denmark-Norway had established a colony in India (*Trankebar*), the Danish king immediately sent two missionaries to proclaim the Gospel and establish Christianity there.⁶
3. There is, however, a third fact which also needs to be recognized: In the 17th century there were a number of Lutherans, especially connected with the Orthodoxy, who stated that *the Mission period was over*. All nations had received the Christian message. Some had received it, others had repudiated the call from God, and they would have to live with the consequences. The Orthodox Lutheran Theological Faculty of Wittenberg is famous for having taken this stand, which means they did not support Global mission work of any kind, and so said also the theologian Johann Gerhard. So yes, it seems that some Lutherans did make a rejection of mission work in their time, although the famous scholar Robert Kolb states that the Lutheran

⁴ For more details, cf. Jan-Martin Berentsen, “Misjonstenkningen 1500-1900”, in: Jan-Martin Berentsen, Tormod Engelsviken & Knud Jørgensen (eds.), *Missiologi idag*, Universitetsforlaget (2001, 2. ed.), esp. 110-116.

⁵ Öberg states that it is an anachronistic blindness not to recognize that Protestant World Mission was hardly possible before 1588, Öberg (2007) 4-5.

⁶ Günther Gassmann, *Historical Dictionary of Lutheranism*, 2. ed., Scarecrow Press (2011) 291.



Orthodox position has been misrepresented.⁷ – It is evident that some Calvinistic groups, especially among those stressing the double predestination, clearly rejected World mission.⁸

3. The Lutheran Mission work starts

How does it come, then, that a Lutheran mission work started which became extremely vigorous in the 19th century? Let us return to Germany!⁹

In Germany, in the late 17th century, a revival movement started among the Lutherans which has been tremendously important for almost all Protestant mission work – i. e. *Pietism*. This movement, originating with Philip Spener and his publishing of a text called *Pia Desideria* (“pious desires”), inspired small groups of Christians to come together for Bible studies and prayer meetings. The movement grew rapidly among Lutherans, but also crossed the borders to other denominations. Pietism never organized itself as a Church, but it can be recognized both as revival groups within Lutheran Churches (especially in Germany and the Nordic countries), and as an active element within other denominations: Moravian Brothers, Methodism, different brands of Calvinism, Baptists, Evangelicals and others.

At an early stage, the theological *Faculty of Halle* under the leadership of Francke started to train missionaries, and the two Lutheran missionaries sent 1706 by the Danish King to the Danish colony in India were, in fact, two *German Pietists* trained in Halle. The Lutheran Churches were in the 18th century still hesitant in sending out missionaries, while the *Moravian movement (Herrnhut)*, a Lutheran fringe group, was extremely active. The Moravians have been the most active Christians (if you talk of numbers and percentage), ever, in sending out missionaries, and they influenced a number of Protestant groups to enter into world mission.¹⁰ At this time, with a clear connection to Pietism, we find an extremely important novelty in Christianity. While the *Churches* still were hesitant to enter into mission enterprises (and some theologians understood that mission enterprises were the prerogative of the King), the “*mission friends*”, pastors *and* laymen, organized themselves in a number of *Mission societies*. And now we are talking of numbers, very large numbers of Mission societies and extremely large numbers of missionaries!

Different Protestant groups and Churches organized themselves in a thousand different ways – Anglicans, Baptists, Reformed, Lutherans, and so on. Some had an official connection to a church body, some were ecumenical and some were Mission societies just loosely connected with a specific church.

⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 22. pr., Orbis Books (2006) 239-252; also J.-M. Berentsen (1994) 110-114. Robert Kolb states that the traditional interpretation is not correct. He gives Peter Heyling, who did early mission work in Ethiopia and died ca 1652 as a martyr (killed by the Turks), as an example of an early Lutheran mission interest. Robert Kolb, “Mission and Evangelism”, in: Timothy Wengert, i.a., (ed.): *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, Baker Academic (2017) 506-511.

⁸ Bosch (2006) 258.

⁹ Bosch (2006) 252-255. Cf. the heading “Missions” in F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (eds.), *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., Hendriksson (1997/2007) 1093-1096.

¹⁰ For Moravian influence in the Baltic area, cf. Robert Kolb, “Estonia”, in Wengert (2017) 233.



A number of Mission societies were created within the Lutheran Churches in the Nordic countries from 1829 onwards.¹¹ But the Russian emperor, who ruled Finland by that time, did not allow any Finnish Mission Society to be created until 1858. When the permission had been granted, it only took a few years for a Finnish mission work to start in Namibia – where there is a flourishing Lutheran Church today!

The German Lutheran situation was slightly different. A number of Lutheran mission societies were formed – e.g. Dresden (1836), Leipzig (1848), Hermannsburg (1849), Neuendettelsau (1841/49) and Breklum (1876)¹² – but a number of Lutheran missionaries had already been sent out before that, through other mission societies. Now we come to a strange fact: A majority of the *Anglican Christians* in the world today belong to Churches with a mission background – and several of these Churches have a *Lutheran* background! Roland Oliver has, in his classical book *The Missionary factor in East Africa*, described this strange situation which lasted for several decades:

... it is a significant fact that until 1874 the only men it [the English/Anglican *Church Missionary Society*, C.M.S.] could find to face the rigors of the climate were Lutherans trained at Basel.¹³

So the fact is this: From a rather slow beginning in 1706, we can see that thousands of Lutheran missionaries were sent, with a rapid expansion taking place in the 19th century and growing in the 20th century, with the decline coming in the 1980's and 1990's.

Just to give one example: When I was born in Zimbabwe in 1953 there were dozens of Swedish Lutheran missionaries working in the mission station of *Mnene*, and there were other stations in Zimbabwe, and the *Church of Sweden Mission* had some several other fields. In all, CSM had some 190 missionaries by that time – and today there are hardly 10, I would guess.

4. A historical comparison with the Roman Catholic mission development

This Protestant development can be compared with the one in the Roman Catholic Church. The RC mission was up to 1622 mainly undertaken through the *Patronato / Padroado*, the agreement in the 1490's between the Pope and the Kings of Spain and Portugal. In 1622 the Roman Catholic mission work was reorganized, taken from the Crowns and put into a special "Mission department". *Propaganda Fide* (the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) was established, and most of the Global mission was put in the hands of different monastic orders with monks, priests and nuns doing the main work. A few lay people were also sent out, e.g. doctors, but mission work was mainly undertaken through different orders.

Among the Protestants, the development was almost the reverse. A few of the missionaries were ordained pastors, but most of them were laymen. A great number of them were also married (at least from the 1850's), which means that African and Asian Christians could get an impression of Christian

¹¹ Kim Groop, "Något om de svenska och de finländska missionstidningarnas särdrag och betydelse", in: Kim Groop & Birgitta Sarelin, *Historiska perspektiv på kyrka och väckelse. Festskrift till Ingvar Dahlbacka på 60-årsdagen*, Åbo (2013) 287-289; cf. Carl-Erik Sahlberg, *Missionens historia genom 2000 år*, Libris (1999) 106-107.

¹² Gassmann (2011) 293.

¹³ Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa*, 2. ed., London (1965) 5.



family life in that way through the example of the missionaries. With a majority of celibates, the Roman Catholics had very few mission families, and consequently very few “missionary kids” who, themselves, could become second (or third!) generation missionaries.

We can, thus, say that the development of *Protestant mission societies*, and the extent of *missionary families*, are two reasons why the Protestant mission work in many areas could grow faster in the 19th and 20th century than the Roman Catholic one did.

5. What about Luther, then?

The modern discipline of *missiology* started, to a large extent, in Germany with Professor Gustav Warneck as a leading figure; he was born in 1834 and died 1910 as professor in Halle.

Warneck’s understanding of mission was influenced by the historical development, including the importance of mission societies. This his pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) made him draw the conclusion that Luther had been quite uninterested in mission work proper. This interpretation was common knowledge in the 20th century, but gradually the scholars started to understand that this interpretation was biased and, in fact, based on an anachronistic reading of Luther’s texts.

In 1991 Ingemar Öberg, a Swedish scholar who had been a Docent in Finland and then became professor of Mission studies in Norway, published a monograph on Luther and World Mission. It was a heavy monograph of some 500-600 pages,¹⁴ where Öberg sifted through a number of documents by Luther on a large number of topics and his verdict was clear:¹⁵

The assumption that Luther had "no positive views on mission" is false. For practical reasons (as we have seen), Luther did not have many chances to influence general mission work, but if his texts are read carefully, it is quite clear that he had a heart for mission and that the Great commission in Matt 28 was important to him. But in order to see that, you face a heavy work:

Instead of developing a theme logically, Luther often let his exegesis of the biblical text determine the direction of discussion. Suddenly in the middle of lectures, biblical exegesis, or sermons, Luther, the exegete, clarifies by means of questions. With his exegesis, he injects his own verbose comments on the issues of his day. He never discussed world mission at length. His tract *That Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523) and some letters do address the issue more directly. But as a rule, Luther’s comments about mission are dropped here and there into exegetical writing, Bible commentaries, and sermons.¹⁶

According to Prof. Öberg, many scholars have understood the concept of mission to deal with “mission projects and geographic movement” and others with an “evangelical or revivalistic orientation”, something which does not harmonize with Luther’s own way of thinking. Öberg also stresses that many movements have focused on elements which Luther dealt with in the Second and Third Articles of the Creed – not understanding how important the *First* one, also, was to Luther.

¹⁴ It exists in two versions, cf. note 3, above.

¹⁵ Some more details concerning Öberg’s interpretation of Luther are given in my Swedish paper “Luther, de lutherska kyrkorna och missionen”, in: Rune Imberg & Torbjörn Johansson (eds.), *Den mångfacetterade reformationen*, Församlingsförlaget (2019) 253-258.

¹⁶ Öberg (2007) 3.



How can we, then, understand the basis of Luther's mission theology? Öberg describes it in this way:

The reformer considered some of those same themes [conversion, faith, and life with Jesus] to be extremely important, but his understanding grew from a different base: creation theology, the inherent power of the Gospel, the doctrine of justification through faith, and that God personally builds his reign throughout the world.¹⁷

The study of Dr. Öberg is built up in three sections. The first one deals with *doctrinal issues*, "Doctrines and Theological Premises Important for Luther's Mission Theology". The second and biggest section analyses the mission perspective which is found in "Luther's Commentaries, Lectures, and Sermons on the Bible"; this section consists of some 225 pages in the English translation, almost half of the book. In the third section he deals with "Luther and Mission Praxis". Roughly 100 pages of this section, which in total consists of 175 pages, deal with Mission among the Jews and 60 pages with Islam. In this final section Öberg brings forward some very interesting mission statements by Luther without hiding some "horrid proposals" of how Luther wanted the Jews to be treated when they rejected the Gospel.¹⁸

6. Some final comments

First a general comment on Luther and Mission. Dr Öberg explains why the confusion has come concerning Luther, Lutheranism and Mission. One important reason is the fact that Luther's statements dealing with mission are not systematic, and in many cases hidden within a number of various documents:

Above all, Luther is a reformer of the Church in Western Europe, but he had more than a theoretical vision for the Christianization of all peoples. On the other hand, Luther showed a certain discontinuity or imbalance between his comprehensive mission vision and his more sporadic suggestions for mission practice. Only many years later did Lutheranism develop a missiology in which both theory and practice combined and in which both theory and practice could enrich and correct the other.¹⁹

Let me then refer to some of the results of Dr. Öberg concerning Luther and World Mission. First he deals with the Doctrines and Theological premises in Luther's writings:

All Christians have the responsibility to see that the Gospel is preached. At the same time, the ordained ministry of the Word is important. While evangelical mission movements of the last two centuries have primarily emphasized the personal inner call to service in God's reign, Luther ascribes more importance to the outer call of the congregation to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Later, in connection with the apostolic letters, Luther describes a plurality of ministries in the work of God's reign, but he does not describe a special mission ministry.²⁰

The chapter "Luther and World Mission" ends with a lengthy summary divided into ten brief sections. Dr. Öberg ends section No. 10 in the following way:

¹⁷ Öberg (2007) 7-8. Cf. also Bosch (2006) 243-248.

¹⁸ Öberg (2007) 332.

¹⁹ Öberg (2007) 12-13.

²⁰ Öberg (2007) 95.



10. At the end of this survey and analysis, it is clear that Luther's commentaries on the Epistles have a mission perspective. In many and various ways, the reformer expresses that the Gospel about God's salvation must go out to all peoples, both to the Jews and the heathens. He speaks of the importance of both pastors and laypeople in the concrete work of the spreading of the Gospel. [- - -] This world will continue to exist until the ascended Christ has been able to give God's salvation to all peoples, usually through repeated waves of revival. The reformer has directly contradicted the idea that texts such as Psalm 19:5; Mark 16:15; Colossians 1:23; and Titus 2:11 should indicate that Christ's Great Commission has been fulfilled already during the time of the apostles. For Luther, it is always the time of mission in the world until we see the Son of Man, the driving force of mission through the Word and the Spirit, come in the clouds of heaven.²¹

The summary of the final section, dealing with "Luther and Mission Praxis", is of special importance for our theme, "Luther, Lutheran Churches, and Mission". Dr. Öberg draws the conclusion that the Lutheran Mission work, which started on a more principal level in the 18th century, functioned as a kind of correction of mistakes which had been made by preorthodoxy and orthodoxy when they "squashed the mission involvement":

I have in this final major division of chapter 4 briefly shown how Luther inculcated the duty for mission in his own contemporaries and for those who became heirs to his theological and spiritual heritage, while at the same time creating a stable ground for evangelical Lutheran mission to the present day. The reformer's Bible translation, catechisms, and sermon collections all have had important roles to play in mission. It is even worth noting how Luther in his school curricula prioritizes teaching in foreign languages, partly for the sake of preparing children for foreign mission. The reformer through his hymns and prayers chose to sing and pray with a fire for mission in the evangelical churches.

Finally, I have pointed out how during the first two generations after Luther, Lutherans did in fact begin missions among the Slavs, the Turks, and the Sami (Lapps). But preorthodoxy and orthodoxy soon squashed mission involvement with the theory that all peoples had heard the Gospel already during the time of the apostles and that, therefore, the peoples themselves were responsible for how they received or did not receive the Gospel. In this way, Lutheran orthodoxy came to distance itself from what Luther taught: that the Gospel must be preached for all peoples until the return of Christ. Some peoples had never heard the Gospel, and others (for example the Turks) had lost it and needed a new period of evangelization.²²

It is really a fitting tribute, both to Luther and to Dr. Öberg himself, that this important book (originally published in 1991, with an English translation in 2007) ends with a statement stressing the importance of bringing the Gospel once more to – the Turks / Moslems!

This very fact proves, once more, the prophetic elements in Luther's theology.

It also proves that Luther himself, and his thinking and writing, often is one of the best correctives to a theology, be it old or "modern", which has deviated from the Biblical truths.

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²¹ Öberg (2007) 324.

²² Öberg (2007) 501.