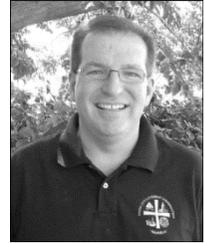


The Protestant Reformers and the Mission of the Church

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The Charges against the Reformers

When it comes to the mission task of the church the Protestant reformers have received strong criticism from both church historians and mission scholars. Among the latter is Stephen Neill who served as a Professor of Missions and Ecumenical Theology in the German University of Hamburg. In his well-known book *A History of Christian Missions* Neill writes:

Naturally the Reformers were not unaware of the non-Christian world around them. Luther has many things, and sometimes surprisingly, kind things, to say about both Jews and Turks. It is clear that the idea of the steady progress of the preaching of the Gospel through the world is not foreign to his thought. Yet, when everything favourable has been said and can be said, and when all possible evidences from the writings of the Reformers have been collected, it all amounts to exceedingly little.¹

Similarly, J. Herbert Kane, an evangelical scholar who taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, criticises the churches of the Reformation for a lack of missionary enterprise. He comments:

¹ S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 222.

One would naturally expect that the spiritual forces released by the Reformation would have prompted the Protestant churches of Europe to take the gospel to the ends of the earth during the period of world exploration and colonisation which began about 1500. But such was not the case. The Roman Catholic Church between 1500 and 1700 won more converts in the pagan world than it lost to Protestantism in Europe.²

Kane goes on to identify deficiencies in the reformers' theology as the main contributing factor.³ He argues that the reformers believed that the Great Commission had been achieved by the apostles by taking the good news to the ends of the world as it was known at that time. Consequently, there was no longer any need to send out missionaries to faraway countries. Kane also sees the reformers' views on predestination as a stumbling block.⁴ Their 'preoccupation' with the sovereignty of God, Kane believes, prevented them from promoting the spread of the gospel among pagan nations. Finally, he mentions the reformers' 'apocalypticism' with its negative view of the future as a hindrance to global mission.⁵

In his book *What in the World is God Doing?* C. Gordon Olson speaks of the Great Omission of which Luther, Calvin and their fellow reformers were guilty.⁶ The reason for their failure, Olson believes, was a spiritual one. The Reformation which they had started lacked deep spiritual roots. Olson goes on to explain what he means by that:

The Reformation was not a great revival in which tens of millions of people were born again. Probably there were only a minority of Protestants who really came to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The rest were swept along with the tide. With the territorial church arrangement of Europe it was not hard to be a Protestant without being born again. It is important to understand that the Reformers did not spell out a clear doctrine of regeneration or new birth. Much reliance was placed upon baptism and communion, which were seen as 'sacraments'...the more we learn about the spiritual state of the reformation churches, the more it seems like Christ's words to the Sardis church in Revelation 3:1, 'I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.' Be-

² J.H. Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1982), 73.

³ Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, 73.

⁴ Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, 74.

⁵ Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, 74.

⁶ C.G. Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publisher, 1998), 119.

fore there could be world evangelism, there had to be spiritual renewal. That was two centuries in coming.⁷

Such criticism of the Protestant reformers, which is shared by many other authors, is anything but new.⁸ In his work *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time* published in 1901 German missiologist Gustav Warneck has laid, as Schulz writes, the foundation for the widespread criticism of the reformers.⁹ If Neill's and Kane's criticism is harsh Warneck's judgement like that of Olson is devastating. Thus, he states:

We miss in the Reformers not only missionary action, but even the idea of mission, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this is not only because the newly discovered heathen world across the sea lay almost wholly beyond the range of their vision, though that reason had some weight, but because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction.¹⁰

The question one has to ask is whether such criticism of the Protestant reformers is justified. Were the reformers really indifferent to mission? Is there really a lack of mission emphasis in their theologies?

The Critics and their Flaws

Most of the critics of the Protestant reformers like Neill, Kane, Olson or Warneck share a view of mission which emphasises its global dimension. Warneck, for examples, defines mission as 'the regular sending of messengers of the Gospel to non-Christian nations, with the view of Christianizing them'¹¹. Olson's definition has a similar thrust. 'Mission', he writes 'is the whole task, endeavour, and program of the Church of Jesus Christ to reach out across geographical and/or cultural boundaries by sending missionaries to evangelize people who have never heard or who have little opportunity to

⁷ Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?*, 119.

⁸ E.g. P. Johnstone, *The Church is Bigger Than You Think: The Unfinished Work of World Evangelization* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998), 54-61; D. MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 427; N. Thomas, *Readings in World Mission* (London: SPCK, 1995), 32-33; J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 18.

⁹ K.D. Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 46.

¹⁰ G. Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time: A Contribution to Modern Church History* (New York: Flemming H. Revell, 1901), 10.

¹¹ G. Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time: A Contribution to Modern Church History*, 10.

hear the saving gospel'¹². If we understand mission first and foremost in such a way, i.e. as the enterprise of taking the gospel to places where there is no Christian presence, the charge against the Protestant reformers might be justified. Martin Luther, though he recognised the Turks' need of salvation in Christ,¹³ was not actively involved in the sending of missionaries to them or any other non-Christian nation. Calvin supported the sending of two preachers from Geneva to the Portuguese colony of Brazil in 1556.¹⁴ However, this was his only direct involvement with overseas mission work.

While on the surface the charges against Luther, Calvin and their followers seem to be warranted, a closer examination shows that they are problematic. Firstly, the critics seem to ignore the fact that there are several valid reasons why the Protestant reformers were not more focused on world mission. The reformers as the word indicates considered it their first task to reform the church, which was a time-consuming endeavour.¹⁵ Their regional churches were, as Bosch points out, 'involved in a battle of sheer survival; only after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) were they able to organize themselves properly'¹⁶. Furthermore, in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church in countries like Spain and Portugal which were maritime powers with colonies outside Europe, most Protestant churches in Germany or Switzerland did not have any direct links with overseas countries.¹⁷ It would have been difficult for the reformers to pursue overseas mission work as it was possible for Spanish and Portuguese Roman Catholic monks who could rely on the support from their monarchs and willing navigators.¹⁸ The reformers would have had to proceed without such sponsorship of their territorial rulers, raise sufficient funds, and find both missionaries and experienced seafarers, who were willing to take the former to other continents. Missionaries would have been particularly difficult to find as monasteries, which had served as mission centres for a thousand years, had been abolished in Protestant countries.¹⁹ Schulz concludes: 'Thus the lack of missionary intent and enterprise is mostly a case of historical circumstance, which many scholars – who often level scathing criticisms against the reformers – are loath to admit.'²⁰

¹² Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?*, 13.

¹³G. Miller, 'From Crusades to Homeland Defense', *Christian History* 21/2 (2002).

¹⁴ H.U. Reifler, *Handbuch der Missiologie: Missionarisches Handeln aus biblischer Perspektive* (Nürnberg: VTR, 2005), 164.

¹⁵ D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 245.

¹⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 245.

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 245.

¹⁸ K.J. Stewart, 'Calvinism and Missions: The Contested Relationship Revisited', *Themelios* 4/1 (2009): 67.

¹⁹ Stewart, 'Calvinism and Missions: The Contested Relationship Revisited', 67-68; Thomas, *Readings in World Mission*, 32.

²⁰ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, 45.

Secondly, it has to be said that the critics' view of mission tends to be rather narrow. While they are right in emphasising the centrality of the Great Commission and the global dimension of mission they seem to forget that the church is not exclusively sent 'to the ends of the earth'. The critics seem to overlook the fact that the church is also called to be involved in mission on a local and regional level. In the version of the Great Commission recorded by Luke in Acts 1:8, Jesus commissions his disciples to be his 'witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'. What we have here are three stages of witness. As Köstenberger and O'Brien point out, these stages have to be interpreted not only geographically but also theologically and ethnically.²¹ They continue:

The first stage is Jerusalem, where Jesus finished his work and where Israel was to be restored in the remnant of Jews who believed in him as Messiah. The second stage is Judea-Samaria...referring to the area of the ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel. This fulfils the ancient promises of the restoration of the whole house of Israel under one king... Finally, the apostolic witness will extend to 'the ends of earth', a key expression which... indicates that God intends his salvation should reach all peoples. Geographically, the phrase denotes the end of the world in a general sense. Ethnically, it refers to the Gentile world. If the gospel is for the Jews first, then it is also for the Gentiles...²²

In other words, the disciples would begin with their missionary work in Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish nation. From there, they would continue in the surrounding area of Judea. 'But then the Christian mission', as Stott comments, 'would radiate out from that centre..., first to despised Samaria, and then far beyond Palestine to the Gentile nations, indeed to the ends of the earth'²³. The message here for the church is clear: God's people are going out to others to be witnesses for Jesus. However, this mission usually starts at home. There is something wrong if Christians seek to reach faraway nations for Christ but show no interest in their own neighbours, both immediate and more distant, or as Hughes puts it: 'Followers of Christ yearn for the gospel to go to the ends of the earth and their own community. There can be no burden for distant unreached peoples without a burden for unreached neighbours.'²⁴ If we apply this broader interpretation of Jesus' Great Commission,

²¹ A.J. Köstenberger & T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Leicester: Apollos, 2001), 130.

²² Köstenberger & O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, 130-131.

²³ J. Stott, *The Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 42.

²⁴ R.K. Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996), 18.

we will see that the Protestant reformers were indeed actively involved in missionary outreach.

The Reformation Cities – Regional Mission Hubs

In manifold ways cities, such as Wittenberg, Geneva, Zurich, Basel and Strasbourg, served as the regional mission hubs of the Reformation movement.²⁵ Firstly, it was in these cities that the reformers developed their ideas and taught them to their followers. Secondly, it was in these cities that the reformers produced their writings and had them printed. Thirdly, it was from these cities that not only merchants and traders but also itinerant evangelical preachers and pamphleteers, as well as former students of the reformers, went out in all directions to spread the message of the Reformation.²⁶ Stewart, for example, stresses the central importance of these cities for the Calvinist Reformation when he writes:

From them streamed out many hundreds of persons who – often after finding a safe haven from persecution in a particular city of the Reformation – returned to their home regions with the theological and pastoral training required to fit them for work as pastors and evangelists. They went out in response to appeals from cells of evangelical believers in France, the Low Countries..., north Italy, and regions of the Alps. Particularly in France, there is evidence of a determination to build networks of congregations systematically across the kingdom. From Geneva alone (by no means the only “sending” center) more than two hundred preachers were sent out during the fifteen year period 1555-1570.²⁷

What Geneva, Basel and Zurich were for the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland, southern Germany, the Netherlands and France, Wittenberg was for the Reformation in northern Germany, north-east Europe and Scandinavia. Like these Swiss cities Wittenberg served as a mission hub from which the re-discovered message of salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone spread to other parts of Europe.

Olaus Petri – the Leading Swedish Reformer

The history of Swedish Lutheranism began when Olaus Petri²⁸ came to Germany in 1516.²⁹ From 1516 to 1518 he studied together with his brother

²⁵ Stewart, ‘Calvinism and Missions: The Contested Relationship Revisited’, 68-69.

²⁶ P.E. Pierson, ‘The Reformation and Mission’, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Missions*, eds. H. Netland and C. van Engen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books: 2000), 814; L.W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559* (New York: Harper & Row: 1985), 184.

²⁷ Stewart, ‘Calvinism and Missions: The Contested Relationship Revisited’, 68.

²⁸ Also known as Olavus Petri, Olof Persson or Olof Petersson.

Laurentius under Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon in Wittenberg. The two Swedish brothers were, as Heininen and Czaika write, strongly influenced by the teachings of the two German reformers.³⁰ While in Wittenberg Olaus Petri heard Martin Luther lecture on Hebrews and Galatians and became a firsthand witness of the controversy over the sale of indulgences by the Catholic Church through Johann Tetzel.³¹ When the Petri brothers returned to Sweden from Wittenberg in 1518 they started to preach against a seller of indulgences who had come into the country.³² They also managed to win Laurentius Andreae, who later became chancellor of the Swedish kingdom,³³ to the cause of the Reformation.³⁴

Enjoying the protection of the new Swedish king Gustav Vasa Olaus Petri and his brother began preaching against other Roman Catholic practices such as saint-worship and pilgrimages to healing shrines.³⁵ In 1526 Olaus Petri, who had been appointed secretary to the council of the city of Stockholm two years earlier,³⁶ published his book *Useful Instruction*, and a year later *Answers to Twelve Questions*, in which he insisted that it was the primary task of the church to preach the pure gospel.³⁷ Petri also contributed to the translation of the New Testament into Swedish.³⁸ Scott comments on Petri's writing ministry and its influence:

He wrote profusely and with a remarkable persuasiveness; he had a knack for establishing intimate contact with his reader. For ten years he almost enjoyed a monopoly of the printing press that had been introduced in Stockholm in 1526, and he produced a flood of translations and pamphlets. In his reforming zeal Master Olof wanted to arouse debate on the whole question of church reform, but the powerful Bishop Brask refused. Nevertheless the eager

²⁹ N. Blåder, *Lutheran Tradition as Heritage and Tool: An Empirical Study of Reflections on Confessional Identity in Five Lutheran Churches in Different Contexts* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

³⁰ S. Heininen and O. Czaika, 'Wittenberg Influences on the Reformation in Scandinavia', *European History Online 2012*. <http://iegego.eu/en/threads/crossroads/religious-and-confessional-spaces/simo-heininen-otfried-czaika-wittenberg-influences-on-the-reformation-in-scandinavia>; access: 20.08.2016.

³¹ T.R. Skarsten, 'Olaus, Petri (1493-1552)', in *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, vol. 1-4, ed. H.J. Hillerbrand (London: Routledge, 2004), 1746.

³² T. Lindsay, *The Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), 55.

³³ Lindsay, *The Reformation*, 55.

³⁴ Heininen and Czaika, 'Wittenberg Influences on the Reformation in Scandinavia'.

³⁵ Lindsay, *The Reformation*, 55.

³⁶ F.D. Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 128.

³⁷ R.T. Jones, *The Great Reformation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 106.

³⁸ Scott, *Sweden: The Nation's History*, 128.

young man found occasion to answer in print various objections of those who clung to Roman doctrines and practices.³⁹

Hans Tausen – the Danish Luther

In 1523, five years after Petri had graduated, the Danish monk Hans Tausen came to Wittenberg to study under Luther. Tausen, who later became the father of the Danish Reformation, belonged to the order of Knights Hospitallers at Antvorskov.⁴⁰ He had trained at the universities of Rostock, Copenhagen and Leuven. While in Wittenberg he started to embrace the ideas of the Protestant Reformation, so that his superiors called him back to Denmark in 1524. They feared that Tausen was too close to Luther. This fear was not unwarranted. Vind writes that ‘Tausen must have been immensely impressed by the proximity to Luther and his fellow theologians, since shortly after his return home, he began his evangelical preaching’⁴¹. Back in Antvorskov Tausen taught in a sermon on Maundy Thursday that people are saved through Christ alone.⁴² This kind of preaching was not without consequences. On the one hand, it triggered persecution by the Catholic Church, but on the other hand, he gained the support of the people. Inspired by Tausen’s preaching there was a growing enthusiasm for the teachings of Luther in Denmark.⁴³ Vind writes:

In 1525 he was sent away from the monastery in Antvorskov to the monastery of the Order of St John in Viborg, probably on account of irregular preaching. In Viborg he continued to preach, and presumably he became more and more critical of the existing church. We know that around 1526 he was expelled from his order. When the bishop sought to arrest him for heresy, he was defended by the citizens of Viborg, and they managed to get a letter of protection for him from King Frederik I.⁴⁴

In the following years Tausen translated the works of Luther from German into Danish and repeatedly called upon King Frederik I to introduce the Reformation in Denmark, which Tausen considered the duty of the king.⁴⁵

³⁹ Scott, *Sweden: The Nation’s History*, 128.

⁴⁰ R.H.C. Dreyer, ‘An Apologia for Luther: The Myth of the Danish Luther: Danish Reformer Hans Tausen and “A Short Answer” (1528/29)’, in *The Myth of the Reformation*, ed. P. Opitz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 213.

⁴¹ A. Vind, ‘Approaching 2017: The Influence of Luther in Denmark’, *Studia Theologica* 65 (2011): 123.

⁴² J.L. Larson, *Reforming the North: The Kingdom and Churches of Scandinavia, 1520-1545* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 202.

⁴³ Jones, *The Great Reformation*, 100.

⁴⁴ Vind, ‘Approaching 2017: The Influence of Luther in Denmark’, 123.

⁴⁵ M. Schwarz Lausten, ‘Luther nach 1530: Theologie, Kirche und Politik’, in *Lutherjahrbuch: Luther nach 1530: Theologie, Kirche und Politik*, ed. H. Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 18.

This, however, happened only in 1537 through King Christian III,⁴⁶ but there is no doubt that Tausen together with Jorgen Jensen Sadolin played a crucial role in the evangelical movement and the post-Reformation Danish Lutheran Church.⁴⁷ Gideon and Hilda Hagstoz summarise Tausen's role well when they write:

As a royal chaplain he drew immense crowds in Copenhagen. In 1530 he presented an independent confession of faith of forty-three articles, a counterpart of the Augsburg Confession. He stipulated the Bible alone as sufficient for salvation, the eucharist a commemoration of Christ's death, the Holy Spirit the third person of the Godhead; and purgatory, monastic life, indulgences, mass, and celibacy of priests he declared contrary to Scripture. He was named one of the seven superintendents of the realm; he shared in the construction of the ecclesiastical constitution; and he served for nearly twenty years as bishop of Ribe, until he died.⁴⁸

Mikael Agricola – Reformer and Father of Finnish Literature

In Finland, which had been part of Sweden since the middle of the 12th century,⁴⁹ the Protestant Reformation was mainly the work of theologians educated at Wittenberg by Luther and Melanchthon.⁵⁰ The reason why most Finnish reformers trained in Wittenberg was that in the 1530s a number of Swedish bishops began to grant scholarships to enable students to study at the birthplace of the Reformation.⁵¹ Among those who came to Wittenberg was Mikael Agricola. Like many others Agricola had been deeply impressed with the evangelical preaching of Petrus Särkilathi in the late 1520s.⁵² However, unlike many of his fellow students he did not receive a scholarship, though Luther had written a letter of recommendation in which he had asked

⁴⁶ M. Schwarz Lausten, *Die heilige Stadt Wittenberg: Die Beziehung des dänischen Königshauses zu Wittenberg in der Reformationszeit* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 92.

⁴⁷ M. Schwarz Lausten, 'The Early Reformation in Denmark and Norway, 1520-1559', in *The Scandinavian Reformation: from Evangelical Movement to Institutionalisation of Reform*, ed. O.P. Grell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.

⁴⁸ G.D. Hagstoz and H. Hagstoz, *Heroes of the Reformation* (Rapidan: Hartland, 1996), 300.

⁴⁹ J.E. Lavery, *The History of Finland* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 1.

⁵⁰ B. Vogler, 'The Spread of the Reformation in Germany and Scandinavia (1530-1620)', in *The Reformation*, ed. P. Chaunu (London: Guild Publishing, 1989), 195.

⁵¹ Heininen and Czaika, 'Wittenberg Influences on the Reformation in Scandinavia'.

⁵² E.I. Kouri, 'The Early Reformation in Sweden and Finland c. 1520-1560', in *The Scandinavian Reformation: From Evangelical Movement to Institutionalisation of Reform*, ed. O.P. Grell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 65.

the Swedish king for funding for Agricola.⁵³ Agricola left for Wittenberg in 1536 and returned home three years later.⁵⁴ Upon his return he was appointed rector of the cathedral school in Turku. Eighteen years later King Gustavus made him bishop of Turku and gave him the task to train the first Protestant pastors in Finland.⁵⁵ Just like Olaus Petri Mikael Agricola had an influential writing ministry which shaped the Reformation in Finland. Jones notes:

Agricola was an immensely productive author and scholar, the father of Finnish literature. He undertook the translation of the Bible and published his New Testament in 1543. In 1544 he published his manual for ministers, A Biblical Prayer Book and five years later his two service books for conducting the liturgy of the Mass. Agricola had a deep interest in promoting spirituality and although Lutheran in his theology, he had a real respect for late mediaeval devotion and never indulged in bitter polemics against Roman Catholic practices. His generous and pious spirit, with a warm concern for pastoral care of his flock and the promotion of practical Christian living left a lasting mark on the spiritual life of his country.⁵⁶

Jones' evaluation of Agricola's ministry is shared by other scholars. The Finnish Reformation is sometimes called the quiet Reformation as it was not actively supported by large segments of society (as it was the case in Denmark and Germany), but almost exclusively carried by members of the clergy.⁵⁷ This, however, does not mean that the work of Agricola and other Finnish reformers was in vain. On the contrary, they reminded the Finnish people of the nature of true, biblical faith. Andersen writes:

[W]hen the Roman superstructure of sacramental magic, justification by works and the worship of saints was done away with, the reformers were able to touch hands with the true religious life of the later middle ages, with its reverence for Christ, the mystery of the Passion and penance which in evangelical form provided the transition of the new age. The writings of Agricola show this clearly. The reformers were aiming at a personal faith...⁵⁸

⁵³ Lavery, *The History of Finland*, 40.

⁵⁴ Kouri, 'The Early Reformation in Sweden and Finland c. 1520-1560', 65.

⁵⁵ E. Vainio, *Reflections of Pastoral Significance* (Lulu.com. Publishing 2010), 85.

⁵⁶ Jones, *The Great Reformation*, 109.

⁵⁷ Vainio, *Reflections of Pastoral Significance*, 45; N.K. Andersen, 'The Reformation in Scandinavia and the Baltic', in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 2: *The Reformation 1520-1559*, ed. G.R. Elton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 164.

⁵⁸ Andersen, 'The Reformation in Scandinavia and the Baltic', 164.

In summary, we have seen that Wittenberg played a central role as a regional mission hub for the Reformation movement in northern Europe or as Heininen and Czaika put it: ‘An examination of the Reformation in Scandinavia shows that reforming influences emanating from Wittenberg were taken up in all parts of Scandinavia.’⁵⁹ Consequently, the allegation against Luther and his fellow reformers of lacking any missionary involvement is unjustified. But what are we to make of the accusation that their theologies were not missional at all?

Martin Luther – the Father of Evangelical Missions?

Quite to the contrary to what the critics claim, some scholars, such as Scherer and Pitt, have conferred the title of ‘Father of Evangelical Missions’ to Martin Luther.⁶⁰ While this title is probably too strong a term, it is true that the theologies of Luther, Calvin and other reformers with their focus on both the Word of God and the Church of Christ contain important mission principles. To fully appreciate the missional character of the reformers’ theologies one needs to look at the situation of the church on the eve of the Reformation.

On the eve of the Protestant Reformation religion played an important role in the lives of most Europeans but the message of the biblical Christian faith was hardly heard.⁶¹ The true gospel had almost vanished and the visible church had become a spiritually and morally corrupted institution. For hundreds of years the church had used a policy of assimilation as one of their main mission strategies: elements of pagan religions and cultures were not rejected but assimilated into the church.⁶² This strategy was very successful. The church expanded and became more and more influential.⁶³ However, over time the pagan elements started to have an impact on the practice and doctrine of the church. There was, for example, a strong belief in supernatural powers.⁶⁴ Only priests could say the words at Holy Communion which transformed wine into blood and bread into flesh, and only priests could bless buildings and animals and thus provide a kind of supernatural protection.⁶⁵ Supernatural power was also ascribed to the Bible and the church liturgy. Birkett notes:

[I]t was because of a belief in the inherent power of words that the church resisted translating the Bible from Latin into the common

⁵⁹ Heininen and Czaika, ‘Wittenberg Influences on the Reformation in Scandinavia’.

⁶⁰ D.J.Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 348.

⁶¹ K. Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2009), 11.

⁶² Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation*, 15.

⁶³ Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559*, 49.

⁶⁴ Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation*, 15.

⁶⁵ Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation*, 22.

tongue. The argument was that the words themselves, as recorded, had to be preserved... This attitude to the Bible could also be seen in church ceremony. Gospel texts were thought of to be powerful as the collection of particular letters, quite apart from their actual message. Books of the Gospels were kissed and venerated. Also the Latin liturgy was considered to be powerful in the same way as the Bible, ...conveying power to those who used them, even if their meaning was not understood.⁶⁶

The church was without doubt a powerful institution. With its mediating power it dominated people's everyday life. However, the most powerful person in the church was the pope in Rome. He had the authority to appoint bishops and clerics, and he benefited from this system financially: candidates had to pay their way into the office and while the post was vacant all the income went to Rome.⁶⁷ The church might have been highly influential but it was also an institution facing a severe crisis.⁶⁸ Chaunu describes this crisis well when he writes:

With the system of Indulgences, everything rested on the Church... The letters which the money changers dispatched to... Rome, and which in exchange for tinkling florins came back receipted with the pardon and the passport to heaven, bear witness to it. The Church had the key to Scripture which it alone knew and which it scarcely troubled itself about any more. It alone knew, it alone provided, it alone saved. That might have been comforting, but it was dangerous: you should never pull too hard on a single rope.⁶⁹

The time was clearly ripe for changes. It was ripe for the rediscovery of biblical truths and a fundamental reform of the church.

The Reformers and their Confidence in the Gospel

In his book *Evangelical Truth* John Stott writes about mission: 'The Christian Church is called to mission, but there can be no mission without message. So what is our message for the world?'⁷⁰ The answer that Stott gives is to the point: the Christian message for the world is the message of the cross, i.e. the gospel. The message of mission Stott writes 'centres on the cross, on the fantastic truth of a God who loves us, and who gave himself for

⁶⁶ Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation*, 23-24.

⁶⁷ Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation*, 27.

⁶⁸ T. Brandt, *Kirche im Wandel der Zeit, Teil 1: Von Paulus bis Luther* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1977), 221-222.

⁶⁹ P. Chaunu, "The Pre-reformation Climate," in *The Reformation*, ed. P. Chaunu (London: Guild Publishing, 1989), 56.

⁷⁰ J. Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 96.

us in Christ on the cross'⁷¹. This is the message Christians must proclaim.⁷² This is the message they must glory in: 'My thesis', Stott continues, 'has been that for our acceptance with God, for our daily discipleship, and for our mission and message to the world, we...should glory in nothing but the cross.'⁷³

Luther and Calvin would have wholeheartedly agreed with Stott. They lived in a time when the message of the cross was no longer at the centre of the life of the church.⁷⁴ They lived in an age when people were told that they could obtain spiritual blessings, including the forgiveness of sins, by paying certain sums of money to the church.⁷⁵ However, through the study of the Scriptures the reformers came to realise that the true gospel was very different from the gospel the church had taught them. They realised that while the Bible teaches the condemnation of sinful people, it also teaches that sinners are offered free forgiveness through Christ.⁷⁶ John Calvin summarises the heart of the gospel well when he writes:

Finally, God took pity upon this unfortunate and thoroughly unhappy man. Although the sentence which he passed upon him was correct, he nevertheless gave his only and much-loved Son as a sacrificial victim for such sins. By reason of this amazing and unexpected mercy [...], God commended his love towards us more greatly than if he had rescinded this sentence. Therefore Christ, the Son of God, was both conceived through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin. He was finally raised up on the cross, and through his own death delivered the human race from eternal death.⁷⁷

The Protestant reformers rediscovered the biblical gospel of justification.⁷⁸ They came to realise that people are justified by faith alone; that they cannot contribute anything to their salvation because on the cross Christ has

⁷¹ Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness*, 96.

⁷² Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness*, 97.

⁷³ Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness*, 98.

⁷⁴ Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559*, 51-52.

⁷⁵ T. Lindsay, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Started the Reformation* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2004), 47.

⁷⁶ Cf. Birkett, *The Essence of the Reformation*, 38.

⁷⁷ Quoted in AE. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 187.

⁷⁸ J. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1989), 182.

already achieved everything for them.⁷⁹ The reformers understood that justification is a gracious act of God by which a believer is declared righteous. Melancthon writes:

For what cause is justification attributed to faith alone? I answer that since we are justified by the mercy of God alone, and faith is clearly the recognition of that mercy by whatever promise you apprehend it, justification is attributed to faith alone... For to trust in divine mercy is to have no confidence in any of our own works. Anyone who denies that the saints are justified by faith insults the mercy of God. For since our justification is a work of divine mercy alone and is not a merit based on our own works,... justification must be attributed to faith alone.⁸⁰

The Reformers and the Proclamation of the Gospel

Luther and his fellow reformers not only came to embrace the biblical gospel, they also emphasized the necessity to proclaim it. In his *Large Catechism* Luther writes the following about the second petition in the Lord's Prayer:

For the coming of God's kingdom to us occurs in two ways; first, here in time through the Word and faith; and secondly, in eternity forever through revelation. Now we pray for both these things, that it may come to those who are not yet in it, and, by daily increase, to us who have received the same, and hereafter in eternal life. All this is nothing else than saying: Dear Father, we pray, give us first Thy Word, that the Gospel be preached properly throughout the world; and secondly, that it be received in faith, and work and live in us, so that through the Word and the power of the Holy Ghost Thy kingdom may prevail among us, and the kingdom of the devil be put down, that he may have no right or power over us, until at last it shall be utterly destroyed, and sin, death and hell shall be exterminated ...⁸¹

Luther recognises that the gospel needs to be preached both to those who already belong to Christ through faith and to those who are not yet part of the kingdom. We can see here, as Schulz writes, 'the missionary dimension to Luther's theology: God's mission takes place within the Church, and yet it

⁷⁹ Cf. M. Reeves and T. Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters* (London: IVP, 2016), 26.

⁸⁰ Quoted in McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 231.

⁸¹ M. Luther, 'The Large Catechism', in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Lutheran Church*. <http://bookofconcord.org/lc-5-ourfather.php>; access: 25.08.2016.

also extends beyond the Church to those still held in unbelief⁸². Interestingly, Luther stresses that the gospel has to be proclaimed ‘throughout the world’. By using this phrase, he acknowledges the global aspect of evangelism. The gospel has to be proclaimed to all unbelievers whether they live close by or far away so that they can come to a personal faith in Christ. Finally, Luther also recognises that the evangelising church is involved in a spiritual battle. The church in mission is always confronted with the devil and his powers. Mission, therefore, is never ‘done in a neutral zone’⁸³.

The obligation to proclaim the gospel to all nations is also acknowledged by Calvin. In his *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon* Calvin states the following in connection with 1 Timothy 2:4:

[T]he Apostle simply means, that there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception. Now the preaching of the gospel gives life; and hence he justly concludes that God invites all equally to partake salvation. But the present discourse relates to classes of men, and not to individual persons; for his sole object is, to include in this number princes and foreign nations. That God wishes the doctrine of salvation to be enjoyed by them as well as others, is evident...⁸⁴

It is striking that both Luther and Calvin stress the role that God plays in the missionary proclamation of the gospel. It is God who is responsible for the preaching of the gospel. It is his will that all nations hear the gospel. Yes, it is God himself who preaches the gospel and it is God who invites people to receive salvation. Put differently, mission is first and foremost God’s mission, or as Schulz notes: ‘God is the subject. Our activity must subordinate itself to God’s doing, and any success is due to Him.’⁸⁵

The Protestant reformers hold that whenever the Word of God is proclaimed properly God’s voice can be heard.⁸⁶ The voice and the words of the preacher, writes Luther ‘are not his own words and doctrine but those of our Lord and God.’⁸⁷ This notion is based on the reformers’ view of mission.⁸⁸ To them the missionary proclamation of the gospel is an essential part of

⁸² Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, 50.

⁸³ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, 50.

⁸⁴ J. Calvin, *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, undated), 40. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.pdf>; access: 29.08.2016.

⁸⁵ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, 50.

⁸⁶ Reeves and Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters*, 46.

⁸⁷ M. Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St John”, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 22, ed. J.J. Pelikan (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 526.

⁸⁸ Reeves and Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters*, 46.

God's salvation plan. While salvation is achieved through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection, it is distributed through the Word of God by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁹ Without this distribution through the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit who applies the gospel to sinners no one would be saved. In his work *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Manner of Images and Sacraments* Luther underlines the central role which the Word of God plays in the life of Christians:

Christ on the cross and all His suffering and His death do not avail, even if, as you teach, they are 'acknowledged and meditate upon' with the utmost 'passion, ardor, heartfeltness'. Something else must always be there. What is it? The Word, the Word. Listen, lying spirit, the Word avails. Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take it, take what is yours. If I now seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Carlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacraments or gospel, the Word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.⁹⁰

The Reformers and the Central Roles of the Holy Spirit and the Church in Mission

While for the last two hundred years mission in general and cross-cultural mission in particular have been dominated by mission agencies and other para-church organisations,⁹¹ the Protestant reformers clearly had a church-centred approach to mission. For the reformers, it is the church which 'serves as the catalyst and base for missionary outreach'⁹². It is the task of the church to preach the Word of God to both believers and unbelievers, to incorporate new believers through baptism into the church and to strengthen them through teaching and the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the faith.⁹³ All this happens on the local, congregational level.⁹⁴ Luther believed, as Kolb and Arand note, 'that God gathered his people into communities, into congregations gathered by and around his Word as it was proclaimed, read, and

⁸⁹ Reeves and Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters*, 47.

⁹⁰ Quoted in R.D. Preus, 'The Theology of the Cross', *Reformation and Revival* 8/1 (1999): 49.

⁹¹ Cf. P. Johnstone, *The Church is Bigger Than You Think: The Unfinished Work of World Evangelization* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998).

⁹² Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, 53.

⁹³ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, 52.

⁹⁴ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, 53.

shared in its sacramental form'.⁹⁵ This conviction stems from the reformers' understanding of the church. According to them the marks of the church are two: the Church of God is present wherever the gospel is properly preached and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper are properly administered. Calvin puts it this way: 'Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and listened to, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, it is in no way to be doubted that a church of God exists.'⁹⁶ Similarly, Luther writes that 'anywhere you hear or see such a word preached, believed, confessed and acted upon, do not doubt that the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*, a "holy Christian people" must be there, even though there are very few of them'⁹⁷. Luther did not like the idea of the church as an institution.⁹⁸ He rather saw it as the community or assembly of believers.

Luther also recognises the central role the Holy Spirit plays in the mission with which the church has been entrusted. Commenting on the third article of the Apostle's Creed Luther writes the following in his *Large Catechism*:

I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the beginning of entering it. For formerly, before we attained to this, we were altogether of the devil, knowing nothing of God and of Christ. Thus, until the last day, the Holy Ghost abides with the holy congregation or Christendom, by means of which He fetches us to Christ and which he employs to teach and preach to us the Word, causing it [this community] daily to grow and become strong in the faith.⁹⁹

Luther argues that it is the Holy Spirit who works in and through the church. It is the Spirit of God who through the church's preaching brings individuals to faith in Christ and into the church and thus sets them free from the influence of the devil. It is also God's Spirit who through the church's preaching strengthens the faith of believers and equips them to bear fruit.

⁹⁵ R. Kolb and C.P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 180.

⁹⁶ Quoted in McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 270.

⁹⁷ Quoted in McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 266.

⁹⁸ Reeves and Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters*, 135.

⁹⁹ Luther, 'The Large Catechism'.

In summary, we have seen that it would be wrong to speak of a lack of mission emphasis in the theologies of the Protestant reformers, in particular in Luther's and Calvin's theologies. On the contrary, the reformers formulate some important mission principles. First, they leave us with no doubt that mission is first of all God's mission. Second, they emphasise that the gospel is the message of mission which must be proclaimed both within and outside the church, and which must be believed by individuals. Third, they stress that mission is a church-based endeavour. It is local communities of believers which the Holy Spirit uses to expand the universal Church until the return of Christ. Fourth, the reformers also remind us that the evangelising church is always involved in a clash between truth and untruth, i.e. between the truths of God and the lies of the devil. Fifth and finally, in an age when mission has become a very broad and at times vague concept, the 16th century Protestant reformers remind us that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ forms the heart of what God is doing in and through His Church.