

# Luther The Missionary?

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The greatest of all missionaries was our Lord Jesus Christ. He came specifically to “seek and to save the lost.” When we think again about missionaries, our mind probably turns to the apostles, especially to Peter and Paul. Next we may think of men like Patrick, Boniface, Spener, and Franke. Then as we get closer to our own time we may turn to names like Carey, Taylor, Slessor, and Livingston. But what about Martin Luther? Was he or was he not a missionary?

A good number of books have been written saying that Luther was not a missionary. Gustav Warneck, in his *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time, with an Appendix Concerning Roman Catholic Missions*, contends that Luther was not a man of missions in our sense of the word.<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Magellan was Luther’s contemporary, yet Luther never accompanied him on a voyage to take the Gospel around the world. Rather, history makes it clear that Martin Luther stayed at home and devoted himself, of all things, to the reformation of the church. Certainly it goes without saying that Luther never founded a modern-day missionary society. And yet, I want us to take a look at Dr. Martin Luther and to ask honestly how God used him and to reevaluate this whole era with a view to recognizing that Luther was indeed a great missionary.

## Luther’s Formation

What was formative in Luther’s life? What was the sociological skin in which Luther grew up?

To get at this question, I would suggest that we need to think of the word formation—not just recognizing the label but very much keeping in mind the content or concept to which that label points. Formation in English basically has to do with what’s happening to you right here. You are being formed into ever more mature human beings at this school. Your world view is being stretched and formed as you go through the classes. Then there is physical formation.

Everyone of us grows up in a certain context, in a certain skin we might say, in a certain situation in this world. If you grow up in Africa today, in a tribal area, you will grow up in a context in which spiritual things are very important and central. If you grow up in the United States or Europe you will grow up in a context in which the physical and the material, the nonspiritual are very much the central focus and starting point for all other considerations. So formation is a given even when we are not conscious of it.

Then, two other words: re-formation and de-formation. Before there can be re-formation there has to be deformation. See what I mean? First de-formation (taking apart what has already been formed) and then re-formation. And that is what happened to Martin Luther.

Luther’s world-view package was filled up from his birth, formed, that is, in the life way of his parents, his church, and his world. He grew up in the same kind of world that had, more or less, existed ever since the time of Christ. A very spiritual world, a very religious kind of world for most of the people.

During the time of the Greeks, especially during the classical period of the Greeks, there was a kind of de-formation of this spiritual world view. During that period an agnostic, non-spiritual approach to reality became popular among some of the people. But it did not catch the imagination of all of the people. In fact, most people in the Graeco-Roman period still perceived of the world as filled with supernatural powers. So, by and large, Martin Luther grew up with a supernatural (spiritual) view of reality very much in place. I’m not saying a Christ-centered world view, but I’m saying a world view in which religious and spiritual things were very, very important to everyday existence.

Now we want to talk a little bit more about this formation before we talk about the de-formation that had to take place and then the re-formation that followed. Luther’s father was a copper miner. He is said to have been “pure in character and conduct.” His mother was a lady of prayer. She was known for her modesty and for her fear of God. Luther was brought up in a strict home. Already by the age of five he was sent away to school.

He learned the ten commandments, the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and particularly he learned, immediately, the Latin language. At Luther's time the Latin language was the only way you could ever become anything at all, at least in the intellectual sense.

Now then, the key thing, however, in this whole business is that Luther had in the midst of his view of reality an idea of God, particularly of Christ, that was a little bit different from your and my idea of Christ today. Let me ask you just at this moment; when I say the word Jesus, what do you think about? It is probably the idea of a loving and forgiving savior. Do you know what the word Jesus meant to Martin Luther? What word could I put on the board for Luther's formation in terms of Jesus? The central term in Luther's original understanding or formation of Jesus would be judge.

For Martin Luther the idea of Jesus was a judge sitting on top of the rainbow. There was a sword coming out of his ear. The sword of judgment. The sword with which Jesus could and normally would cut people down. In Luther's picture of Jesus as judge there was also the idea of death in which Satan and the evil angels pulled the people out of their graves by their hair to carry them into hell.

Luther also believed in a very narrow stairway controlled by the Mother Church that hopefully would make a way of escape for some few people from hell and purgatory. Purgatory was for Luther an in-between state before your feet really got burned in hell. Purgatory gave you time in which to work out an escape from hell by getting on the narrow stairway to heaven. It is very important for us to realize what Luther's view of reality, especially in connection with the idea of Jesus was. That was Luther's unconscious but exceedingly real formation. That is what everyone around him believed. That was their formation. That is what Luther grew up hearing. He imbibed it. There wasn't any question about it. It was just like the skin that he wore, like the clothes that he wore in winter time. He just accepted that view of reality. Hell was stoked. Purgatory was an intermediate place, not bad enough for you to go into hell and not good enough for you to go into heaven. And indulgences were there to relax the pressure and get you onto the narrow stairway that led away from the fires of hell.

Now to put it into proper perspective, think for a moment about income tax time. In Luther's day, the popular handbook of the day was not "How to Avoid Income Tax" or the IRS as we put it here in America, but "How to Escape from Hell." This distinction is pretty important, isn't it? We don't think much about hell and hardly ever hear about purgatory. We spend little time thinking about how to escape from hell. Rather we, in America, are often preoccupied with the idea of how to escape as much as possible from Income Tax. Two entirely different world views. Two totally different ways of understanding reality. The point here is that we are dealing with two entirely different basic formations.

So in the midst of Luther's basic formation he saw Jesus as a judge. It got so bad, in fact, that he was preoccupied with the idea of death and with the idea that when he died Satan and his henchmen would be there ready to take him by the hair and pull him into hell. All of this was heightened for Luther during a tremendous thunderstorm which occurred when he was walking back to school. He was knocked to the ground by lightning. At once Luther's mind turned to death, to his father and then automatically to his father's patron saint. And so he prayed, "Saint Anne, save me and I will become a monk." As we know, Luther did survive this storm and he immediately did become a monk.

For Luther, the whole idea was how do I deal with Jesus as a stern judge? How do I get right with this stern judge through the Mother Church? So he got into the monastery. He flagellated himself. He was not one hundred percent monk but one hundred and fifty percent monk in order to save himself. But it didn't help. He still continued to have much guilt.

### **De-formation and Re-Formation**

Now there was a man by the name of Staupitz. And here I want to divert for a moment. God often works through people. God worked in my wife's life through a woman, Mary Slessor of Calabar. Missionary Mary was a model for my wife, Bernice, of what vital reality is all about. In my life it was my father and some others, particularly professors at the Seminary. For Luther the man was Dr. Staupitz who was the head of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. Staupitz was a man who understood Luther, somehow, probably under

the direction of the Spirit of God. Staupitz thought, “That man doesn’t need to beat himself more. This man needs some productive work to do.” And so Staupitz said to Luther, “We’re going to put you into teaching at this new university here in Wittenberg.” Wittenberg University started in 1502. Luther was already lecturing there before it was ten years old. It was an absolutely new university and during Luther’s time it became one of the most popular universities in Europe, basically because of Luther’s lectures. And Staupitz also thought, “What this man needs is to get out and work with people. He needs to counsel people. He needs to teach in the university. He needs to teach Scripture.”

Luther started by teaching the Psalms. He taught Romans. He taught Galatians. And there he was forced to wrestle with Scripture, which for Luther was very unpleasant because there in the Scriptures he always ran across the phrase “the justice of God.” And that phrase brought the picture of Jesus sitting up there on the judgment seat demanding perfect righteousness from all people and especially from Martin Luther. This was especially a problem for Luther because he was so honest with himself. And he knew that he daily sinned and deserved nothing but punishment and so for him the Scriptures were terrible. They made him know his sins, know his sins, know his sins.

But as he prepared for his classes, the Spirit of God worked through the Word of God. As Luther wrestled with “the justice of God” in the book of Romans he started to realize that this justice is not only the perfect righteousness that God demands from every single human being but something else as well. Here we can see de-formation at work.

The breakthrough for Martin Luther started with Romans 3:28 “The just shall live by faith.” At first it didn’t make sense to him. He thought, “The just shall live by works. The just shall live by many indulgences. The just shall live by doing things according to the way that the Mother Church and the priest says.” And here it said, “The just shall live by faith.” It didn’t make sense. Finally, the more he read and meditated on this Scripture the more the Spirit of God enlightened his mind and caused the much needed de-formation.

De-formation had to take place first. Luther had to understand that “the justice or righteousness of God” did not only mean God’s demand for perfect living on the part of human beings but it also, and in many cases primarily, refers to God’s own righteousness which he (God), in fact, used to pay for all the unrighteousness of all human beings for all time. An undeserved righteousness which is received simply by recognizing that Jesus Christ has paid for all those sins on the cross. By recognizing that Jesus Christ was raised again to prove that the payment for all our sins was complete. With that breakthrough there was re-formation for Luther.

The point is that Luther was “transformed by the renewing of his mind.” He was re-formed by the Spirit of God. That is, the Spirit of God gave him the insight to see that it was not by works but by grace through trusting and accepting faith that he received what his Lord Jesus Christ had done for him on Calvary’s cross. It is then that Luther said, “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Therefore I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in great love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”<sup>ii</sup>

Once re-formed internally the dynamic Luther reacted externally. He could not keep this Good News just to himself. Immediately he became a witness, a confessor. He had to share this news with other people. In a word, he became an active missionary.

### **Reaction: Missionary Material<sup>iii</sup>**

I want to take a moment or two to give you a flavor of what it really meant for Martin Luther, for the re-formed one to become an active re-former. He needed to master the basics of the Bible for himself, not only in memorized form but in meaningful content, as a basis for Christian witness and confession. Soon he was writing down in easy-to-understand German the meaning of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, Apostles’ Creed, etc., first for himself and then as a help for others. Out of that grew the Small and Large Catechism which, by the way, were translated into dozens of languages and used almost immediately as a basic

evangelism and Christian nurture tool not only in Germany but throughout Europe and in the days after Luther's death in many countries in every continent of the world

With the Catechism, the jewel of the common school, as it was called, Luther introduced for the first time a thorough instruction in church and school in which, according to his words, "The heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, do, and leave undone according to the Christian faith." Certainly, as missionary writings, Luther's Large and Small Catechisms are paramount and remain effective tools in mission outreach right up to this moment.

Now to get a hands-on feel for what this really meant to Luther let us look for a moment at what he did in the meanings of the First and Second Articles. First the Second Article. Listen closely as you see what this article meant to Luther.

"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the virgin, Mary, is my Lord." (What that must have meant to Luther to read that.) "Who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sin, from death and from the power of the devil. Not with gold or silver but with his holy precious blood, and with his innocent suffering and death in order that I may be his own." (Just think of what it is to be in the child Luther's shoes with the idea of Jesus as the judge and now to sit with the re-formed Luther and see Jesus clearly in the Scriptures as the Savior.) "That I may be his own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve him in everlasting-righteousness, innocence and blessedness even as He has risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity." (For the re-formed Martin Luther the idea of serving His Savior eternally was built solidly on the idea of being a dynamic Christian witness for Jesus, of working for Jesus because Jesus had saved him.) "This is most certainly true."

I have chosen several of these key Catechism sections to show just what the re-formation that was happening in Luther was really all about. And how joyous that was for him so that he had to share it with one and all. For Westerners and especially for Americans I want to go back to the First Article, because I believe that this is the Article that we overlook most of all. Listen to what Luther said about God the Father, our Creator and Preserver.

"I believe that God has made me and all creatures."

(What happens when a man and a woman in the Western world have a baby today? Nowadays we say, "That's our choice. We are creating a child for our own good pleasure." Not for Luther. He saw himself as being involved with God in the act of God's creation.)

"I believe that God has made me and all creatures. That he has given me my body and soul, eyes and ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and that He still preserves them."

(What a powerful witness for the importance of the Creator God! Not something that has been evolved out of the ground or the ocean but something created by the Maker of heaven and earth.)

"In addition God gives me clothes and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle and all my goods; that He daily and richly provides me with all that I need to support this body and life; that He defends me from all danger, guards and protects me from all evil. And all this out of pure fatherly and divine goodness."

(You see the idea of grace coming through here. Not the judging God but a loving God.)

"Divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness in me for all which I owe it to Him to thank, praise Him, serve Him, and obey Him."

(That was it for Luther.)

“Thank Him, praise Him, serve Him, and obey Him.”

(That’s what life in this world was all about for Martin Luther.)

“And again, this is most certainly true.”

What a tremendous re-formation. Sometimes I think we also need to get back to basics, to look back at these so-called simple things in our Catechism. That is what Luther preached. That is what he taught to his students in the University at Wittenberg.

It is also important to note here that there were 16,000 students who studied at Wittenberg during Luther’s time and for the first years after Luther’s death, a period of 40 years from 1520-1560. Just think of it, 16,000 students! The interesting thing about it is that 5,000 of these students were not from Germany. They came from the surrounding countries. Many of these countries were very much mission fields. Many of these students, such as Tyndale of England, Agricola from Finland, and Palladius from Denmark went back to carry the Good News to their own people and to do the work of Bible translation and Christian literature production in the languages of their own peoples. The point is that students were coming from all over the European countries to study at Wittenberg under Luther and to get his model of missions. Just as my wife got the model of missions from Mary Slessor and my father was my model for missions. Those students got the model there from Martin Luther of what it meant to be a Christian who understood the grace of God, to be free, even free to stand against the non-Scriptural teachings of a church, to stand against the Emperor even when he was put under the ban by the Emperor, to be excommunicated by the Pope, yet free to continue to speak, to preach, to write, to continue to translate because Luther knew that this was what his life was all about. He had no fear because he knew that if he died he would go to Christ, which as St. Paul said, “is far better.”

In order to get the Word out Luther also prepared books of prayer and sermons which were regularly read by emergency preachers in various churches and which were used as devotional books in many Christian homes. Then there are also Luther’s many pamphlets which went out to families in cities and rural areas. They were eagerly read by young and old alike. They were also taken abroad by missionaries, especially by the students who came to study at Wittenberg during Luther’s time. These pamphlets also were translated into the languages of many lands.

### **Reaction: Missionary Methods**

Luther knew that the Word of God needed to be internalized. It needed to be memorized. He felt that everyone should memorize the basics of the Bible (*Small Catechism*). This meant home training. Luther saw this basic education as the work of the parents. He expected the father to take the lead and together with the mother to bring the children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord by teaching them the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed and on through at least the chief parts of the Bible. This attitude of Luther is made very plain until today in the Small Catechism where on the first page before each of the major articles you read, “The head of the house should teach this in a simple way to his household.”

Not only did Luther prepare the Small Catechism (often called the little Bible) as an evangelistic tool but he also went further. He was a pedagogue. He knew a simple and direct method for teaching was needed so he saw to the preparation of 40”x24” posters or placards which were fixed on the wall in the homes and schools. These posters contained The Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, Luther’s Morning and Evening Prayers, etc. These large posters and placards of the essentials of the Bible were utilized especially for memorization. It was expected that all household members should be able to recite these Chief Parts of the Christian faith at a very early age.

Now things have changed a lot. When I was young, my parents had me memorize one Scripture verse every day and one complete hymn every week. I learned how to do that quite easily at a very early age. That was the time of World War II. During the uncertainty of those days I thought a good deal about what my parents

were doing and I believe that they knew that some day I would be in a concentration camp, with no Bible, and that the only Word of God that I would have would be the one in my mind. Later on I was required to memorize the entire Catechism during confirmation instruction. This practice of memorizing the Catechism was standard in Lutheranism until very recent times. As I look back on the practices from the vantage point of today, I realize how good that was and still is.

We believe that the Spirit of God works through the Word of God. Unfortunately, for many people who have not memorized much of the Word of God the Spirit of God can't work too much. Only when you are reading it-or for someone who has it already in his mind or in his computer hardware—do you always have it available. Not just in the software that you put in once in awhile but always there available for the Spirit of God to utilize. Then the Spirit of God can wake you up in the middle of the night and begin to work through the Word of God in your mind. God often does that in my case, not only at night but also during the daytime. And so I want to encourage you in the memorizing of God's Word. Luther was very strong on that.

### **Reaction: Missionary Preaching and Teaching**

Luther was a missionary in his preaching, a totally new style of preaching. For a long time during the middle ages there wasn't any preaching at all in the Western church. Approximately two centuries before Luther preaching was reinstated in the Western church. This preaching was all done in Latin. It was mainly about the lives of the saints and the legends of the church.

Now you can imagine that Martin Luther could not continue with that system of preaching. He had been re-formed. It happened on the basis of the Scriptures. So for him, his preaching had to contain several important components. They are the following:

1. It had to be directly based on Scripture.
2. Not in Latin but in easy-to-understand German for his German-speaking audience.
3. Developed to communicate directly with the mind and heart.
4. Addressing the needs of the people by dealing directly with subjects such as astrology, witchcraft, saint worship, religious pilgrimages, omens, signs and charms.

Luther's preaching made an impact on people's emotions. It called one and all to become involved in the dynamic activity of living with Christ. Not just a mental receiving of the propositions about God but a life together with God in reaching out to others. Luther's preaching was strictly textual. He was an expository preacher. His sermons paid little attention to outward form. Sometimes he did not follow his notes. Luther's preaching was dynamic because he always felt he had a divine message to deliver.

Preaching opened up for Luther in Wittenberg at about the same time that he came to understand justification. by faith. Normally Luther preached four times every Sunday and three times during the week. This. was just on the side, we must remember, because his major work was teaching at the University and writing. He had to preach, however, because he just couldn't do otherwise. It kept bubbling up and over in him. You see, he had been re-formed. He had to re-act. It was a beautiful back-and-forth process. He got new insights while preparing his lectures for the University and then through his preaching shared them with all the people. In most cases there was not enough time for Luther to say all of what he felt that God had given him to say. He preached to the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Luther always held high the cross of Jesus Christ, but not a dead Christ. For him the cross included also the fact that this Jesus had risen and now lives and that now he (Luther) and every true believer live a dynamic life with God in Christ. Certainly for Luther preaching was Biblical and missionary.

### **Reaction: Education as Missionary Outreach and Nurture<sup>iv</sup>**

Luther was also an educator with a mission. As an educator he became the father of popular education for all. Up until his time the Jews had provided education for their own children. The Orientals had done education by the caste system, mostly for people in the highest castes which provided a superior advantage to

them as educated people. The Greeks and Romans educated for loyalty to the State. Luther believed that all people, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female were entitled to a Christian education. Luther urged the officials of the State as well as the church officials to provide for everyone's education. Luther contended that Christian schools were absolutely necessary for the welfare of the State since religious training was the foundation of all education and instruction and the "source of all Christian virtues and civic righteousness." Luther said, "Religion, true religion founded on the Scriptures alone is not only of supreme benefit to every individual, it is also the means of welding together society, a safeguard of morals and the most powerful incentive to perform one's duty. It is the foundation of the church and the state." Over and over again Luther said, "See to it, in the first place, that your children are instructed in spiritual things. Give them first to God, and then let them learn their secular duties." Again Luther said, "Above all, in schools of whatever description, the chief and most common lesson should be the Scriptures. Where the Holy Scriptures do not rule I advise no one to send his child. Everything must perish where God's Word is not studied increasingly."

Luther was also ahead of his time in the matter of education for girls. He said, "Would to God that each town had also a girls' school in which girls might be taught the Gospel."

### **Reaction: Missionary Writings**

Luther was concerned about the eternal destiny not only of the Germans. This is demonstrated by the 3,000 preserved letters which he wrote to people all over the globe and in his 350 published works. He wrote to high and low, to the common man and the rulers, to the housewife and the emperor. Consistently his writings were in defense of the Scripture as the only source and norm of true knowledge about God and in the cause of getting that Word of God into the minds and lives of people so that the Spirit of God could perform His own unique converting work as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies.

Luther urged, as we have already said, that electors, mayors and city officials together with the clerics get on with wholesome Christian education for the sake of individual, community, church, and state. In his published works he sought to bring about the conversion of Jews, Muslims and people from the "many islands which have been found even in our day where there are heathen to whom no one has preached." (North and South America and other parts as he called them in his own age of exploration and discovery.) Luther said, "It is the best work of all when the heathen are led out of idolatry to the knowledge of God." For further detailed documentation of the missionary nature of Luther's published writings see in my article: "Luther the Missionary" in the book *God's Mission in Action*.<sup>v</sup>

### **Reaction: Hymnody as Mission**

Martin Luther was a man who understood priorities. He understood what was central to any purpose and what was peripheral. He seemed to get immediately at the practical heart of every matter. For Luther the continual issuing forth of God's message (mission) was like "throwing a stone into the water which makes waves, circles, and streaks around itself, and the waves push each other further and further; one pushes the other until they reach the shore."<sup>vi</sup> Luther dropped the Gospel message into the lake of this world in a most effective way through his hymns.

Luther loved music. He played the lute. He loved to put the Word of God to music. He did not put it into the music of Israel or Egypt or Italy. He put it into the music of the Germans when communicating Christ to the Germans. He knew that the music of the Germans was the perfect vehicle to take the Gospel content to the German heart and so he used it freely and with vigor and joy.

In his hymns Luther encouraged people to worship God in a totally new way. He compelled them to worship not only in passive form but in mental content. This kind of active participation was unthinkable prior to the Reformation. In fact, it must be said that it was Luther's unique re-formation and his expressing that personal transformation in music that put the communal song next to the church choir and thereby "broke the preponderance of the standard liturgy" in a foreign tongue. This mission heart of Luther clearly shines out in his hymn entitled "May God Embrace Us With His Grace" where we sing, "Let Jesus' healing power be revealed

in richest measure, converting every nation” and “May people everywhere be won to love and praise you (Jesus) truly.”

Luther’s 35 hymns were the models. Then Luther encouraged his co-workers to write and adapt hymns and soon a host of hymn writers sprang up. Soon four different printing presses were publishing edition after edition. By the end of Luther’s life, no less than 47 collections had appeared. The result was a flowering of indigenous Christian hymnody in the hearts and minds of the people and into the workshops of many authors (high and low) until our time. Truly a rich missionary stream of hymnody has flowed from the example of Luther into the home, the school, and the church throughout the centuries. An inexhaustible spiritual well opened, up with Luther’s re-formation which is still flowing. Luther’s hymns proved to be a force with which emperors, bishops, and all the powers of darkness grappled in vain. There is truth in the assertion that Luther made more converts by his hymns than by his preaching.

“Luther’s hymnological work opened the way for the great music and hymns, including the mission hymns that we hold so dear today. Truly Luther in a real sense is the father of the vernacular Christian hymnody which now exists around the world.”<sup>vii</sup> Again, we see a man in mission, a man re-formed and used by God to carry out the spiritual work of re-forming many others, world-wide.

### **Reaction: Bible Translation as Mission**

Once Jesus was no longer primarily the judge for Luther but the loving and forgiving savior, Luther, now already very much a missionary, felt compelled to communicate this “comforting message” clearly and accurately. He was a man driven toward mission communication. First he had to clearly understand this wonderful word as fully as possible. Next it was necessary for him to move these Biblical concepts out of the Greek, out of the Hebrew. He knew the Greek well. He didn’t know the Hebrew all that well. But he had to move that meaning, those Biblical concepts out of those languages over into the German language. He had to do that when he was teaching his students the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians.

Because of the type of preaching he did he was doing oral translation all the time, right on the spot, as he preached and taught the Bible. This was necessary since he preached and taught in the German language. He had to move those Scriptural concepts over into the German language accurately and particularly in a way that the people could easily understand. So already in 1517 and even before that he was doing oral translation. He was perfecting his oral translation in his preaching and in his teaching.

By 1521 he had taken the time to write down eleven sections that he had translated orally. That is, Luther was moving the meaning of the original that he had captured so naturally in his class teaching and in his congregational preaching and in his teaching.

About that time God intervened so that between May 4, 1521, and March 1, 1522, (ten months) while in hiding at the Wartburg castle Luther had time to write out the translation of the entire New Testament from the original Greek into an accurate and easy-to-understand-and-read German translation. By 1534, with the help of his colleagues at the University in Wittenberg, the translation of the entire Bible in what later became known as classic high-German had been completed.

For Luther accurate and easy-to-understand-and-read Bible translation in the language of the person to whom you are trying to communicate the Good News was basic to all that Scriptural mission work was all about. You have got to have the Good News content first before you can communicate it. You have got to have it in a form that the people can easily and quickly hear for full understanding. If this is not in place there is little likelihood that the Holy Spirit will be able to carry out His conversion and edifying work of regeneration and sanctification. Thus, for Luther, and I would say for every truly Scriptural missiologist, an accurate and up-to-date translation is foundational to all Biblical mission communication.

One interesting thing about Luther and His German translation is that it was never done. He continued to revise it. It was never set in concrete. Luther recognized that language changes. He knew that people’s ways of using terms changed over time and he wanted the German translation to be up to date at all times. He realized also that his first work had not been accurate in every point and so he kept on till his death revising his translation and making it even more accurate according to the Greek and to the Hebrew. And also more

communicative, that is, easy to understand for the average person. It is said that Luther made 95 revisions of his translation.

In the case of vernacular Bible translation Luther was not satisfied when the German work was in progress or even when it was completed. Rather, he immediately, in the case of hymn writing, became the Barnabas who encouraged translation work to be started in as many other languages as possible.

It was Luther who encouraged Tyndale to do the work of Bible translation in English. When things were difficult in England Luther invited Tyndale to Wittenberg and he and Melancthon did much to help Tyndale get an accurate and easy-to-understand version of the New Testament out in English by 1526. Since, because of the Church of England's pressure, the publishing of this English New Testament could not be done in England, Luther made arrangements for the publishing to be done in Worms and for the New Testament to be smuggled into England in sacks of wheat. By 1539 English church authorities had dropped their opposition to the Bible in English and it was made available to the common people to read in every church.

Another case is Finnish. Michael Agricola came down from Finland to study at Wittenberg. He was one of the 5,000 non-Germans who studied under Luther and his colleagues between 1520 and 1560. After Luther got acquainted with Agricola and saw his ability he wrote a letter to the King of Sweden who at that time was sovereign of Sweden and Finland. Luther recommended that the King commission Agricola to do a translation of the sacred Scriptures into the Finnish language. The King of Sweden accepted the recommendation and the work began. Agricola used Luther's method and the new German translation as a model for his own translation work in Finnish. The first New Testament in the Finnish language was completed by Agricola and published in 1548. The first entire Bible in Finnish was published in 1642.<sup>viii</sup>

Here again we see that Dr. Martin Luther has played a most basic and foundational role in missions by doing and encouraging others to do vernacular Bible translations. This encouragement was not only effective in his own time but has been very formative throughout the world until today.

In concluding this section let me quote from my article "Luther, the Missionary" in *God's Mission in Action*, with an update on the translation figures. "Thanks to Luther's translation of the German Bible, the Apostle Paul's *longing, as* pointed out in II Thessalonians 3:1, 'That the Word of the Lord might spread quickly and become known in its splendor,' became a reality not only in Germany but also throughout Europe where Bible translation was made with reference to Luther's German translation. As one who worked with Bible translation in Africa for several decades, I would say that it is impossible to overstate the positive influence of Luther's activity in Bible translation and particularly his method of Bible translation, in which content took precedence over form. In truth, Martin Luther is the father of Bible translation in the vernacular languages throughout the world. At the time of the Reformation, only 33 languages of the world had any part of Scripture. Today some portion of Scripture is available in 1,884 languages; 301 languages have full Bibles, 638 additional languages have New Testaments, and 914 additional languages have a portion of Scripture."<sup>ix</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Now what can we say about all this? Was Luther a missionary or was he not? I believe we must conclude that Warneck in his *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time, with an Appendix Concerning Roman Catholic Missions* got it wrong. He and many others since his time have failed to see the real missiological significance of Dr. Martin Luther. In my opinion, Luther is not only a missionary but he is the doyen of modern missiology and mission strategy with his overwhelming emphasis on the foundations of Biblical mission and with his pace-setting understanding of the normal flow of Good News communication through the vernacular and traditional vehicles and channels of each set of people and their own unique life and ways of communicating naturally. Soli Deo Gloria!

### **Appendix A: Summary Thesis**

The following theses are at least a preliminary summary of my findings on Luther the Missionary in numbered outline.

1. God used Luther to re-establish the original basis for Biblical mission by reawakening the church to a Scripture-centered and therefore also to a gracious triune God-centered foundation for mission.
2. Luther re-introduced a Scriptural Christ-centered easy-to-understand Gospel communication in the everyday language of the people. His preaching and teaching was aimed at the heart as well as the head and dealt with the needs of the people in terms of both law and Gospel.
3. Luther saw Bible translation in the vernacular as basic to mission. He did it for the German-speaking people and set a pattern that made him the father of vernacular Bible translation world-wide.
4. Luther brought mission theory and practice, theology and application together. He not only spoke about what should be done in the areas of prayer, Scripture communication, Scripture memorization, indigenous witnessing, preaching, teaching, hymnology, writing and translation but he modeled it in his life and work.
5. Luther rediscovered and effectively utilized the natural and normal flow of Good News communication within the framework of his own language and culture group and very astutely encouraged people in other linguistic and cultural groups to use the communication model that God had revealed to him in their own circumstances (i.e., Tyndale, Agricola, Palladius, and many others).
6. Luther was not afraid to put his life on the line for what he believed. He was ready to surrender all in order that others might hear the Good News of the God who “seeks to save” the lost in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time, with an Appendix Concerning Roman Catholic Missions*, New York, Chicago, and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Co. 1906.

<sup>ii</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Menton Books, 1963, pp. 49-50; or Abingdon-Cokebury Press, 1950, p. 65).

<sup>iii</sup> M. Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism, A History of its Origin, Its Distribution, and Its Use*. (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1929, pp. 17-20 and

T.H. Graebner, *The Story of the Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928, pp. 94-110).

<sup>iv</sup> Prof. W.H.T. Dau, *Four Hundred Years* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917, pp. 207-219).

<sup>v</sup> Bunkowske and Nicol, *God's Mission in Action* (Ft. Wayne: Great Commission Resource Library, 1986, pp. 55-75).

<sup>vi</sup> Walch-St. Louis, XI: 951. see also WA X, Part 3:140, lines 1-16.

<sup>vii</sup> On the impact of Luther's hymns see the Bibliography found in Ulrich S. Leupold, "Introduction to Vol. 53," LW LIII: XX.

<sup>viii</sup> Sakari Korpinen, Personal communication, Helsinki, March 2 1989.

<sup>ix</sup> Bunkowske and Nicol, op. cit., pp. 68-69.