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GOD’S MISSION HAS A CHURCH, BUT DOES GOD’S MISSION
HAVE A SCRIPTURE?

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Introduction

The Reformers believed that Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) provided the basis for both our knowledge of God’s saving action in Jesus Christ and the means by which God saves. This *sola* should not be separated from the other *solas*: *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola Christus* (Christ alone), and *sola fide* (faith alone). For Martin Luther, the center or heart of Scripture is found in the gospel of justification, which he found expressed most clearly in Paul’s Epistles to the Romans and Galatians: that believers are saved by God’s grace through faith on account of Christ, apart from works of the law. As Rom 1:16, one of the most frequently cited Scripture passages in the Lutheran Confessions, states: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

As heirs to the Reformation tradition in a post-Christendom context, it behooves Lutherans to go beyond the scriptural basis of the content of the gospel to explore a scriptural basis for the church’s mission to *share* that gospel. The question guiding this essay is this: What scriptural passages could—and should—ground the church’s understanding of *mission*? First, I address the charge that the Lutheran tradition historically has a “missionary deficiency.” Second, I review the concept of the *missio Dei* and its contribution to contemporary theology of mission in a post-Christendom context. Third, I evaluate the “classic” missionary text, the so-called “Great Commission” in Matt 28:18–20, and propose a different foundational text. Finally, I conclude with an

examination on the “commissioning” texts in the four New Testament Gospels in light of the previous inquiry.

The Missionary Deficiency of the Reformation?

Many missiologists critique Lutherans for their missionary deficiency, following the assessment of Gustav Warneck, often called the father of mission studies.¹ Warneck charged Martin Luther with a lack of missionary awareness or concern, as Luther did not support a “regular sending of messengers to non-Christian nations, with the view of Christianizing them.”² Subsequent scholarship has explored why this was the case. Some posited that the Reformers believed that the Great Commission to spread the gospel to “all nations” had already been fulfilled by the original apostles and therefore did not apply to later generations of Christians. Luther himself is inconsistent on this point; in some of his writings he indicates that the gospel has not yet reached the whole world, and in other writings he speaks as if it has.³ However, as Werner Elert points out, “When Luther sometimes speaks as though the Gospel has already fulfilled its mission in all nations—which has been cited again and again as proof of his lack of understanding of the idea of missions—for him this is the simply conclusion draw from the universal validity of the gospel.”⁴ It is true that the Reformers had no regular contact with non-Christian peoples, living under Christendom as they did. One scholar points out that Luther likely met two dozen unbaptized people his whole life.⁵

Other scholars have suggested it is unfair to judge Luther by nineteenth-century standards. According to Swedish missiologist Ingemar Oberg, many researchers display an “anachronistic blindness” in this regard. They do not realize how difficult it would have been for Luther and his followers to start a foreign mission. This was due not only to the expansion of Islam, which limited

1. Van Neste, “The Mangled Narrative,” 1–7.
2. Cited in Scherer, “Luther and Mission,” 1.
3. For examples of sermons where Luther makes reference to the gospel not yet reaching the whole world, see Van Neste, “The Mangled Narrative,” 11.
4. Elert, “Luther and ‘Mission,’” 26.
5. Kolb, “Foreword,” vii.

missions geographically, but also because Luther did not have the protection of the Protestant “empires” nor the benefit of laws providing religious freedom in mission lands.⁶ Warneck’s definition of mission was not only anachronistic; it was also narrow. It is simplistic to conclude that because Luther did not form missionary societies, he did not support the mission of the gospel.⁷ It is more accurate to point out that Luther’s “field” for missionary work was limited to Christendom. Indeed, his reform of the church centered on the proclamation of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ in that “mission field” because, as Reformation historian Scott H. Hendrix notes, “the Reformers saw themselves in a missionary situation in which the faith had to be taught to a populace they judged to be inadequately informed.”⁸ As James A. Scherer writes,

Since the Gospel had fallen into oblivion in Christendom—Luther’s Gentiles being those who had never heard the pure Word of God preached in Germany—missionary obedience could only mean preaching the gospel anew. And since the distortion of the Gospel message had led to the degeneration of mission into ecclesiastical propaganda, forced conversions, crusades, and non-evangelical methods, Luther’s obedience to the mission command meant re-establishing the church on its one true foundation of Jesus Christ and the Gospel.⁹

While the record of seventeenth-century Lutheran theologians regarding this question is mixed, the emergence of pietism in Germany and northern Europe spurred Lutherans to form and support missionary efforts.¹⁰ The deep interest in missionary outreach by the pietists, “which had been largely left out of account by the representative of the major communions during the seventeenth century,” compelled them to share the gospel to the whole world.¹¹ The Lutheran pietists were more willing to work outside of official church structures to spread the gospel to all people. By the

6. Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 5.

7. See Van Neste, “The Mangled Narrative,” 3–13.

8. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard*, 172.

9. Scherer, “Luther and Mission,” 1–8; Bunkowske, “Was Luther a Missionary?” 9–24; Elert, “Luther and ‘Mission,’” 25–42.

10. Kolb, “So Much Began in Halle,” 26–35.

11. Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 19.

eighteenth century, Lutheran missionaries were sent to various countries, both to spread Christianity (as in the case of Lutheran missions to India, Indonesia, Tanzania, and other lands) and provide pastoral ministry to Lutheran immigrant communities elsewhere (as in the case of the American colonies).

Halle University in Germany was one center of mission activity. August Hermann Francke expanded the activities of the Halle Foundations (which included, among other things, founding orphanages) beyond the borders of German lands to include the German diaspora in eastern Europe and the American colonies, and to parts of the world with little or no exposure to the Christian gospel.¹² In 1706, the first Lutheran (and, in fact, the first Protestant) missionaries to India, Bartholomäus Zeigenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, had received their training at Halle. Zeigenbalg both evangelized the Tamil people with the gospel and advocated for social justice. Tamil scholar Daniel Jeyaraj awarded Zeigenbalg the title, “The father of modern Protestant mission,” pointing out that the much better-known British Baptist missionary William Carey—who remains the towering figure in most mission history narratives—would not arrive in India for another hundred years.¹³

Later, in 1742, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg was sent by Halle University to the American colonies. Muhlenberg’s missionary enterprise to the colonies was less to evangelize non-believers than to “plant the church” among the German Lutheran immigrants who preceded him and who were so hungry and thirsty for the gospel that they became easy targets for clergy “pretenders.”¹⁴ He described his mission strategy in his second journal entry: “Had myself transported to a city in a boat, looked for German people, and found several who said that they had no lack of physical nourishment but that they were gravely in need of spiritual

12. Kolb and Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism*, 126–43.

13. Wilson, “The Missionary India Never Forgot,” n.p. See also Jeyaraj, “The First Lutheran Missionary Bartholomäus Zeigenbalg,” 379–400.

14. Muhlenberg’s journals offer reflections on the opportunity and challenge of evangelizing Native Americans, but his own focus was on serving those German Lutherans who were already believers. See for example, Tappert and Doberstein, eds., *The Notebook of a Colonial Clergyman*, 24–26. For examples of Muhlenberg’s dealings with clergy “pretenders,” see pp. 8–13.

nourishment, namely the Word of God and the holy sacraments in their language.”¹⁵ His missionary task was to preach God’s Word to them, offer them the sacraments, provide pastoral care, connect congregations, and train other pastors to serve the needs of the German immigrants. Mission in Muhlenberg’s context primarily meant serving those who were already baptized believers.

Lutherans historically have stressed their “evangelical” identity, meaning centered on the gospel—the “pure” gospel of justification by grace through faith—which is to be proclaimed to all people. While Lutheran theology has a missionary impulse, Lutheran ecclesiology has not always followed. Lutherans in North America, as in Europe, think of the church primarily as those gathered by the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament to receive and be comforted by the good news, and less as those who are sent out by the Holy Spirit to share their testimony of the good news with others. Craig Van Gelder and others have argued that defining the church by the Word and Sacraments in this way does not offer obvious resources for the church’s sending.¹⁶

North American Lutherans live in a context today that is quite different from that of Muhlenberg’s. In the 1990s, the Gospel and our Culture Network (GOCN) was founded by a group of primarily Reformed theologians inspired by Lesslie Newbigin’s challenge that North America think of itself as a “mission field.”¹⁷ The GOCN began to study the context and culture of North America as the first step for doing mission.¹⁸ Instead of asking, “How might we take the gospel into another culture?” as did traditional missionaries, they asked the question: What does it mean to be a missional church in “our” *North American* culture? What would it mean to be a missionary to one’s own cultural context, a context that is increasingly post-Christian and pluralistic, and increasingly desperate for hope and reconciliation? Furthermore, it is a context

15. Tappert and Doberstein, *The Notebook of a Colonial Clergyman*, 1.

16. See, for example, Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*.

17. For more on the GOCN, see: <https://gocn.org/>

18. While they use the singular “culture,” a study of “cultures” is more apt, since there are contextual differences not only between the US and Canada, but also between the many sub-cultures within each of these larger contexts.

in which the church has ceased to be a place of meaning and connection for those seeking the spiritual. The fastest growing religious affiliation in the United States today are the “Nones,” those who have no religious affiliation. The 2017 report on the findings of PRRI’s American Values Atlas states that “The religiously unaffiliated—those who identify as ‘atheist,’ ‘agnostic,’ or ‘nothing in particular’—now account for nearly one-quarter (24%) of Americans. Since the early 1990s, this group has roughly tripled in size.”¹⁹ While very few of the Nones refer to themselves as “religious,” many embrace the descriptor “spiritual but not religious,” indicating their unease with religious practices and institutions on the one hand, and their interest in exploring the question of something “more” or transcendent, on the other hand. Diana Butler Bass’s recent work suggests that there are those interested in exploring spirituality as a means to relationship with God and for making a difference in the world, in the lives of others, but have not found the church a conducive place for this exploration.²⁰ What does the mission of the church look like in such a context?

The Missio Dei and Missio Ecclesia

In order to answer this question, it is important first to consider an important distinction that reflects a shift in missiological thinking in the mid-twentieth century, between the *missio ecclesia* (the mission of the church) and the *missio Dei* (the mission of God). The term *mission* itself is rooted in classical trinitarian theology and historically was used exclusively in reference to the “missions” (“sendings”) of the Son and the Spirit within the Godhead until the end of the sixteenth century.²¹ This trinitarian foundation is important to emphasize, especially because the theological connection of mission to the Trinity was lost for much of the modern missionary movement. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mission was understood primarily in terms of the church; while mission was done for the sake of God’s kingdom, it was viewed primarily an activity of the church itself. The church sent

19. Cox and Jones, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” n.p.

20. Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 20–26.

21. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1.

missionaries into the world to spread the gospel, and care for those in need.

In the emerging ecclesiology, mission is not primarily an activity or even a purpose of the church. It is something God is doing into which the church is invited to participate. In this way, mission becomes central to the church's identity and nature because the church has been called into being by a "missional" God. As the great South African missiologist David Bosch once put it: "The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world."²² This makes mission "the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. 'Mission' means 'sending' and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's action in human history."²³ The church's being reflects that of the God who sends: the church is "essentially missionary," as Bosch states. "Here the church is not the sender but the one sent."²⁴ As the catchphrase, perhaps apocryphally, attributed to Rowan Williams stipulates, "It is not that the church has a mission. God's mission has a church."

This shift is often attributed to Karl Barth, who wrote in 1932 that the church's mission must be in response to the mission of God.²⁵ Twenty years later at the Willingen Conference on the International Missionary Council, Karl Hartenstein coined the phrase *missio Dei* in reference to the purposes and activities of God in and for the whole world, and not only the evangelization of the unreached nations. He wrote, "Mission is not just the conversion of the individual, nor just obedience to the word of the Lord, nor just the obligation to gather the church. It is the taking part in the sending of the Son, the *missio Dei*, with the holistic aim of establishing Christ's rule over all redeemed creation."²⁶

22. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

23. Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 4.

24. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 372.

25. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389–93; see also Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 15–40.

26. Cited by Engelsviken, "*Missio Dei*," 482n6.

The Willingen Conference also put a fresh emphasis on the trinitarian foundation of mission: “The missionary movement of which we are part has its source in the triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth His beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all [men] might, through the Spirit, be made one in Him with the Father, in that perfect love which is the very nature of God.”²⁷ In making God rather than the church the reference point for mission, the Willingen conference affirmed the Christocentric center and the primacy of the church’s agency for God’s mission in the world.²⁸

Since then, these shifts in understanding have continued to reshape missiology and the theology of mission. Both the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) have embraced the trinitarian foundation for mission and have connected the church’s mission explicitly to the *missio Dei*. While proclamation and evangelism still have central roles in the church’s mission, more holistic understandings of mission have emerged. For example, a 1988 LWF document defines mission as:

Proclamation of the gospel, calling people to believe in Jesus Christ and to become members of the new community in Christ, participation in the work of peace and justice and in the struggle against all enslaving and dehumanizing powers are therefore an integral part of the mission of the church. All such activities point to the reality of the Reign of God and to its final realization at the fulfilment of history.²⁹

Does God’s Mission have a Scripture?

In light of the preceding, I now come to the question at the heart of this essay: If mission is central to God’s being and identity, and if God’s mission has a church, “Does God’s mission also have a Scripture?” More specifically: What passage or passages in the Bible best help ground a theology of mission? Taking cues from the Reformation and the emerging theology of mission, any proposed scriptural texts must reflect God as the primary agent for mission, which is accomplished through the church. The

27. Engelsviken, “*Missio Dei*,” 482.

28. Engelsviken, “*Missio Dei*,” 486.

29. Lutheran World Federation, *Together in God’s Mission*, 9.

remainder of this essay will consider and evaluate some scriptural passages as a basis for a theology of mission in light of these shifts, and the current context for mission in North America.

When one thinks about scriptural bases for mission, the first text that comes to mind is Matt 28:18–20, commonly known as “The Great Commission.”³⁰ As David Bosch writes, “To many Protestants and more importantly to Evangelicals, the centrality or the Great Commission appears to be self-evident. It is even at times cited as the sole scriptural foundation for mission.”³¹ In spite of the fact that it was not until the late seventeenth century that it became a primary text for the church’s mission and its use has been primarily in Anglo-Saxon circles, Matt 28:18–20 remains the “Magna Carta” of mission for most Protestants. This is true not only for overseas mission, but also for the domestic church growth movement, as Bosch notes. For example, in the case of church growth consultant, Donald McGavran, the “Great Commission” provides not only the major biblical foundation for mission, but also significant guidelines and methods for missionary work.

I would have numbered myself among these until about 16 years ago. I was attending a missiology conference in Aarhus, Denmark, at which Phillip Baker called for a 10-year moratorium on the use of Matt 28:16–20 as the foundational text for mission. He also issued a call to missiologists, church leaders, and other concerned Christians to explore other biblical passages as foundational mission texts.³² He offered several reasons for his

30. The other leading contender is Acts 1:8, “You shall be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth,” which is a particular favorite among Pentecostal Christians, in part because it is followed by the promise of “power from on high,” that is the Holy Spirit, for this task. The language in Acts echoes that in the Lukan commission text. While there are passages in the Old Testament that have missional connotations, such as Isa 42:6–7, the witness of Israel lies its distinctive identity and practices. As David Bosch (*Transforming Mission*, 19) points out, “Israel would, however, not actually go out to the nations. Neither would Israel expressly call the nations to faith in Yahweh. So if there is ‘missionary’ in the Old Testament, it is God himself who will, as his eschatological deed par excellence, bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant people.” See also Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*.

31. Bosch, “Scope of Mission,” 18.

32. Baker, “Mission and the New Creation,” 39–52.

proposed moratorium. First, there is no internal evidence in Matthew's Gospel to warrant calling this the "great" commission. That is a later editorial addition that implies a value judgment not supported by the Gospel itself. Second, as noted above, this biblical text is "a late comer to the missiological scene."³³ Third, and perhaps most importantly, is the way that this text has been misused or interpreted out of context. Most Christians understand this text as referring to the "sending out" of disciples into the world to bring people to faith in Christ and into the churches. However, much of contemporary New Testament exegesis does not support this interpretation. By reading this passage in the context of the whole Gospel of Matthew, some New Testament scholars have argued that it has as much or more to do with people "inside the new community," as outside, or as Baker puts it, "the internal integrity of the church." He cites New Testament scholar David Smith, who argues that the purpose of Matt 28:16–20 is to create a community of disciples to live out its corporate life together with integrity.³⁴

A fourth reason not explored by Baker is the exegetical matter of the opening words of the so-called Great Commission, "Go ye therefore." These words have acquired particular importance in Western missionary thinking, with the stress that many eighteenth and nineteenth century missiologists have put on the imperative, "go." However, many biblical scholars have pointed out that the Greek verb "to go" is often used as an auxiliary in Matthew's Gospel (as an aorist participle), "reinforcing the action of the main verb." As New Testament scholar Peter O'Brien states, "In emphasizing the main verb, no idea of going need be present at all. The core of the command is the making of disciples, not the going. The idea of sending, being sent (i.e. from one place to another) is secondary and un-emphasized, and as a result some have suggested the word 'go' is better left untranslated."³⁵

For the purposes of this essay, the most obvious concern with using this text is that whether interpreted in terms of the church's call to discipleship or to being sent, Matt 28:16–20 focuses on what *the church* is called to do, and not on what God has done and

33. Baker, "Mission and the New Creation," 41.

34. Baker, "Mission and the New Creation," 42.

35. O'Brien, "The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20," 73.

is doing. The *missio Dei* is only implied in this text; the “Great Commission” does not articulate what God has accomplished through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what difference that makes for the world.

The text that Phillip Baker proposed in its place does exactly that, however. He proposed as an alternative scriptural foundation for mission 2 Cor 5:14–21:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

What is striking about this passage, as Baker himself points out, is that God is the primary agent in the “drama of the new creation.”³⁶ God is the one reconciling the world to God’s own self through Christ. Even in the act of proclamation, God is the primary actor. Note Paul’s language here: God makes an appeal “through us.” This scriptural passage teaches that God’s mission is one of new creation, and God accomplishes that through reconciliation in Christ. The church’s calling is to be ambassadors for Christ, to point to the reconciliation that God makes possible through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Robert Schreiter posits that the context of the world today calls for “special attention to the praxis of reconciliation as a newly emerging paradigm of mission.”³⁷ Reconciliation happens at the vertical (between God and human beings) as well as horizontal (between individual human beings and human groups) and cosmic (the whole creation) levels; the horizontal and cosmic dimensions are made possible by the vertical. Lutheran Raphael Malpica-Padilla likewise states, “God’s mission to the world is that of

36. Baker, “Mission and the New Creation,” 43.

37. Malpica-Padilla, “Accompaniment as an Alternative Model,” 92. See also Schreiter, “Reconciliation as a New Paradigm of Mission,” n.p.; see also Schreiter, *Reconciliation*.

restoring community, and *reconciliation* becomes a prominent theological dimension of that mission.”³⁸ This passage from 2 Cor 5 serves especially well as a biblical foundation for understanding the *missio Dei* for churches rooted in the Reformation, as it resonates with the Reformers’ focus on God’s reconciling action in Jesus Christ for us, and through us. Mission begins with what God has done for us and what God is doing through us, not on what we as the church do for God.

Following Baker, if one takes this text as the foundation for the *missio Dei*, then one can ask: What might the *church’s mission* look like in light of this text? For Schreiter, reconciliation is the process for engaging mission as well as the goal of mission. The church is called to participate in God’s reconciling work through a ministry of reconciliation. Schreiter’s biblical understanding of reconciliation is outlined in five points. First, God, not the church, is the author of reconciliation; we participate in God’s work as God’s ambassadors. Second, the healing of victims is God’s first concern in the process of reconciliation. Third, reconciliation encompasses healing for both victim and wrongdoer. The process of healing begins with truth-telling, uncovering what Schreiter calls “the narratives of the lie,” and the seeking of justice, which then can lead to the rebuilding of relationships. Fourth, for Christians, the way to address suffering is by placing it in Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection. In this way, Christians can escape its destructive power and have their hope sustained. Finally, reconciliation will only be complete when all things are fulfilled eschatologically in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:10); until that day, we only experience it in part, even as we live in hope of its fullness.³⁹ Building off of Schreiter’s framework, Malpica-Padilla breaks down the church’s ministry of reconciliation into three steps: repentance, restoration, and recreation.⁴⁰ Canadian ethicist Marilyn Legge agrees, stating that “negotiating mission for the 21st century starts by giving attention to the massive suffering that exists, as well as the yearning for healing, justice, and mutual relationship,” which in the Canadian context suggests attention to the historical

38. Malpica-Padilla, “Accompaniment as an Alternative Model,” 91.

39. Schreiter, “Reconciliation as a New Paradigm for Mission,” 2–3.

40. Malpica-Padilla, “Accompaniment as an Alternative Model,” 94–96.

legacy of the churches' mission with Aboriginal peoples through residential schools.⁴¹

The Church's Commission in Light of God's Mission

With this framework in mind, we can return to Matt 28:16–20—and the other “commissioning” texts in the Gospels—in order to unpack the mission of the church in light of this interpretation of the *missio Dei*.⁴² The “commission” in Matthew 28 is not “go,” but “make disciples.” Being a disciple in Matthew’s Gospel means living out the teaching of Jesus, and includes a life of love and justice. For Matthew this involves “making new believers sensitive to the needs of others, opening their eyes and hearts to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression and the plight of those who have fallen by the wayside.”⁴³

On the other hand, one can find an explicit commission to “Go to the world” in Mark 16:14–18, but Mark’s commission has been overshadowed by Matthew’s more famous version. There are likely two reasons for this. First, biblical scholars largely agree that this is not the original ending of Mark’s Gospel, but was added by a later editor to bring the conclusion of Mark’s Gospel more into line with the other Gospels. Second, it not only refers to signs and wonders with which most ecumenical Protestants are uncomfortable (i.e., healing, speaking in tongues, exorcisms), it also refers to signs and wonders with which most Pentecostals—apart from a very small sect of Appalachian holiness Christians—also are uncomfortable (i.e., the practice of snake-handling and poison drinking).

It is important to point out that the only thing Jesus commands his disciples in this Markan text is to go and proclaim the good news to creation. The rest are either promises (the one who

41. Legge, “Negotiating Mission,” 121. See also the essays in Vol. 31, issue 1 of *Consensus: A Canadian Journal of Public Theology* (2016), “Journeying Together Toward Truth and Reconciliation.”

42. As noted above, while Acts 1:8 is also a commissioning text, it will not be treated separately in this article due to the focus on the Gospels.

43. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 81.

believes and is baptized with be saved) or signs that accompany those who proclaim the gospel. Pentecostal and charismatic Christians often highlight “signs and wonders,” such as healing and other forms of deliverance, for manifesting the power of God. As signs, they always point to Jesus, to the in-breaking kingdom of God inaugurated in his life, death, and resurrection, which his disciples are to preach to the whole creation.

The last sign is introduced with the conditional conjunctive “if”—if the disciples drink anything deadly, it will not hurt them. Since there are no New Testament accounts of the disciples drinking poison or handling snakes, some scholars wonder whether the “if” may in fact apply to both. Either way, Jesus does not command his followers to do such things. They are included rather as examples of signs that may accompany the proclaiming of the gospel, examples of God’s providence if harm or danger comes to someone who is sharing the good news of Jesus, whether by accident (e.g., Acts 28:1–6)⁴⁴ or intentionally.⁴⁵

Although it is more commonly associated with Pentecostalism for the reasons just noted, Mark 16:16–18 is the New Testament “commissioning text” most frequently preached on by Martin Luther (much more than Matt 28)! The reason is found in v. 15: Jesus’ command to “go into all the world and proclaim the good news to all creation,” which Mark defines at the outset of his Gospel as the coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ. This, of course, is at the heart of Luther’s Reformation. The church’s specific calling is nothing other than proclaiming God’s reconciling love to the whole of creation. The church proclaims the good news through word and deed, so that all may know the promise of God’s

44. The one narrative account in the New Testament of a snakebite is one that occurs by accident, not as something sought after. A viper attacked Paul in Malta while he was tending a fire, but he shook it off and was not harmed (Acts 28:1–6).

45. For example, Ludwig Nommensen, a nineteenth-century German missionary to Sumatra (Indonesia) unwittingly consumed poison put in his food by the Batak people on at least three occasions, yet he remained unharmed. This not only baffled the Batak people, but also prompted one of his would-be killers to listen to his sermons, which then led him to be baptized. Nommensen came to be known as the Apostle to the Batak. Lehmann, *A Biographical Study of Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen (1834–1918)*, 136–38.

great love for them in Jesus and the benefits that entails, specifically: life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins.

The elements of discipleship and the proclamation of the gospel to all of creation, as found in the Matthean and Markan commissioning texts, are important aspects of the church's mission to be ambassadors of reconciliation, the *missio Dei*. However, the Lukan and Johannine commissioning texts, which will be explored below, are particularly helpful in unpacking the church's mission as rooted in 2 Cor 5, for two reasons. First, these texts offer more specific content to the "good news" which is to be proclaimed and given witness, that is, repentance and forgiveness of sins, which are key elements of God's reconciling work. Second, each clearly focuses on the cross and resurrection of Jesus as the foundation of the church's mission (whether explicitly, as in Luke, or implicitly as in John, as Jesus shows the disciples his wounded hands) and on the accompanying and empowering role of the Holy Spirit for their mission.

In Luke 24, Jesus' words commissioning the disciples come after the narrative of Jesus joining the two unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus states plainly that they "are witnesses of these things" (Luke 14:48), a commission that is echoed and strengthened in Acts 1:8 ("You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"). In the 2004 Lutheran World Federation document "Mission in Context," it is the Emmaus Road encounter—not the "commission" that follows it—that was highlighted as the basis for the church's mission. As the document states, the Emmaus model "speaks for and enlightens a hermeneutical spiral approach to mission, an approach that is reflective of the interaction between contexts, theology, and practice. It is also considered to be the best model, at this time, to convey the understanding of mission as accompaniment."⁴⁶ The document further elucidates,

The mission encounter begins as Jesus walks with the disciples on the Emmaus road, sharing in their pain by listening to them as they tell their story (verse 18). Jesus then interprets the scriptures and shares with the disciples a theological understanding of God's saving act in

46. Lutheran World Federation, *Mission in Context*, 7–8.

history and reveals to them in the breaking of the bread the presence of the resurrected one in their midst. With their eyes opened to the in-breaking reign of God, the disciples, transformed by the encounter and celebrating Christ's reconciling presence, go out, empowered to share this good news with their nurturing community and others.⁴⁷

Accompaniment also has emerged as the central hermeneutical key and methodological tool for engaging mission for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As Raphael Malpica-Padilla explains, "Accompaniment is walking together in solidarity which is characterized by mutuality and interdependence. The basis for this accompaniment, what the New Testament calls *koinonia*, is found in the God-human relationship in which God accompanies us in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁸ After the encounter on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, Jesus appears to his disciples and opens their minds to understand the Scriptures. Then, in more of a promise than a commission, he tells them that they shall be his witnesses (to show people Jesus!), and then promises to clothe them with power from on high, the Holy Spirit, to enable them to do this.

In John 20:19–23, the commission is more explicit ("As the Father sends me, so I send you"), and as Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit, and gives them the authority to forgive sins. Here we have in both Luke and John an intimate linking together of pneumatology and mission, which read in the larger context of John's Gospel, particularly chs. 14–16, offers additional resources for thinking about the church's mission as accompaniment. Drawing on John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit becomes the primary "accompanier" for the church (and the world)—the *paraclete*, literally the one who "walks alongside of one," or, the one who accompanies. As the *paraclete*, the Spirit not only enters into solidarity with us but abides in us (John 14:17). In the Johannine account, the Spirit's accompanying and abiding also brings conviction and truth-telling (16:8, 16:13), teaching and guidance (14:26, 16:13), testifying (15:26–27), and ultimately, the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation (20:22–23).

47. Lutheran World Federation, *Mission in Context*, 8.

48. Malpica-Padilla, "Accompaniment as an Alternative Model," 88.

Conclusion

The story of the decline of the “mainline” churches (which, as some have suggested, have become “sideline”) is all too well known these days. Even evangelical denominations are starting to see worship attendance and participation decrease. These shifts are causing many congregations in North America to wrestle with what their “mission” ought to be in the world. Elsewhere, I have written that the wrong question is “what do we do?” and the better, more faithful question for the church is, “Who is God calling us to be?”⁴⁹ The church is called to be a missional people because we believe in a missional God, who chose us to be sent into the world through the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit.

In this essay, I have suggested that it is important to frame our understanding of the church’s mission by first considering what God’s mission is in the world—a mission of reconciliation. The church is called to participate in this mission in an increasingly polarized context that includes an increasing number of people who, while they reject institutional religion, may be open to the reconciling, transforming message of the gospel. A foundational Scripture for understanding God’s mission in the world is 2 Cor 5:14–21. The “commissioning texts” in the four Gospels can further guide the churches in their mission to be “ambassadors of reconciliation,” through ministries of discipleship, proclamation, witness, and accompaniment.

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49. See Peterson, *Who is the Church?*

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