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# A Missionary Ecclesiology: Loehé's Contribution to Contemporary Discussions of the *missio Dei*

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## Introduction

Wilhelm Loehé's missiology preceded contemporary discussions of the *missio Dei*. In spite of this chronological problem, we do well to ask about his missionary ecclesiology and apply it to contemporary discussions of the *missio Dei*. This topic is timely and important. One reason for this is that since its inception in 1952, the *missio Dei* concept has become so diverse in meaning that missiologists have called it a Trojan horse, a shopping cart, or a container term. Some have even suggested that we discard it. Essays by Engelsviken and Richebächer, however, have pleaded that the term *missio Dei* be retained on the condition that it receives clarification and better content.<sup>1</sup> To that end, Wilhelm Loehé can be helpful if we are willing to listen to him—which I believe we should. Gustav Warneck once made the famous statement that people who through their work have established themselves in the annals of Christian history have their own divine right to be heard.<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Loehé's missiological legacy, both in theory and practice, is forever inscribed in the history of Christianity.

We shall approach Loehé with the following questions: How does Loehé understand the relationship of church and mission? Do they co-exist, albeit as two separate entities, where one part adopts the other, but remain divided, or do they fuse or merge into one unified entity so that one part cannot exist without the other? If we find the latter to be the case, then the church has mission as part of its nature and existence, and Loehé would indeed support a missionary ecclesiology. An additional question—and a more nuanced one—is: What role does the church play in the mission of God? Is it central or tangential and marginal? And how does the mission of God (*missio Dei*)—namely, God as the subject of mission—inform and affect the church's missionary apostolate?

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1. Tormod Engelsviken, "Missio Dei: The understanding and misunderstanding of a theological concept in European churches and missiology," *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (2003): 481-497; Wilhelm Richebächer, "Missio Dei: the Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?" *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (2003): 588-605.

2. Gustav Warneck, *Evangelische Missionslehre: Ein missionstheoretischer Versuch*, vol. 2 (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1897), 36.

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Before we come to these questions in Loehé's work, there are a few things to say about the provenance of the *missio Dei* and the discussions that took place regarding the place of the church in the *missio Dei*. After that, we can proceed to Loehé to see where he would have something to contribute to current discussions.

## The emergence of the concept *missio Dei*: The classic model

The *missio Dei* concept first emerged in mid-twentieth century at the 1952 World Missionary Conference in Willingen, a small town outside of Frankfurt, Germany. Though the term *missio Dei* did not appear verbatim at the conference itself, the minutes—recorded by none other than Lesslie Newbigin—state something to that effect.<sup>3</sup> The term "*missio Dei*" is attributed to Karl Hartenstein, a theologian and mission director of the Basel mission.<sup>4</sup> He was influenced by a number of theologians, such as Johann Bengel,

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3. "Mission has its source in the Triune God. Out of the depth of his love to us, the Father has sent forth his own beloved son to reconcile all things to himself that we and all men might through the Holy Spirit be made one in him with the Father in that perfect love which is the very nature." In the section of the minutes "The Missionary Calling of the Church," *International Review of Missions* 41 (1952), 562; see also Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 103-104.

4. Karl Hartenstein, "Botschafter an Christi Statt," in *Botschafter an Christi Statt: Von Wesen und Werk deutscher Missionsarbeit* (Güterloh: Bertelsmann, 1932), 5.

the Württemberg Pietist, who gives eschatology a prominent place,<sup>5</sup> by Oscar Cullman and his views on Heilsgeschichte,<sup>6</sup> and also by Barth's theocentric focus and dialectical approach, which claimed God as the terminus a quo and asserted the uniqueness of Christian revelation over all other religions. All these aspects shaped Hartenstein's understanding of the *missio Dei*: the Triune God as subject of mission, the church's sentness with an eschatological focus, and the interim period between Christ's ascension and return, in which the church gathers people from all nations and awaits the second coming of the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

To Hartenstein's side came theologians such as Walter Freytag, a missiologist from Hamburg who dealt with mission in essays such as "Mission im Blick aufs Ende" ("Mission in View of the End") and out of his Moravian background emphasized conversion, and Georg Vicedom, who with his book *Missio Dei* (1950) put the *missio Dei* concept on the map.<sup>8</sup> During and shortly after Willingen, this predominantly German contingent promotes what we will call the classic concept of the *missio Dei*. Vicedom's book

5. Bernd Brandl, "Mission in heilsgeschichtlich-endzeitlicher Perspektive: Erinnerung an Prälat Karl Hartenstein," *Evangelische Missiologie* 33, no. 2 (2017): 79.

6. Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit: Die urchristliche Zeit—und Geschichtsauffassung* (Zürich: Zollikon, 1946), 70ff. See also Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967).

7. Karl Hartenstein presented the *missio Dei* term on a number of occasions. He did so already in his 1933 dissertation, in which he emphasizes the central role of the church in the *missio Dei*: "Mission is the obedient witnessing service of the confessing church, insofar as it directs it to the heathen world, believing in the church and in the expectation of the kingdom of God." Karl Hartenstein, *Die Mission als theologisches Problem* (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1933), 13; see Brandl, 80.

On April 23, 1934, at the 17<sup>th</sup> Continental Missions Conference in Bremen, Hartenstein presented on the financial situation of missions and said that mission does not exist because of its financial situation, but because of the foundation of her mission: "That is why mission is called to examine itself in every way and always anew before God, to determine whether it is what it ought to be: *missio Dei*, sending of God, that is the sending which Christ the Lord commands to the Apostles: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'—and the response to the call passed along by the apostles to the church of all times on the basis of its Word: 'Go into all the world.'" Mission "stands and falls with the reality and truth of the living Christ, with his Word and his mission.... That is why mission today is called upon to constantly examine itself anew before God in all directions to see whether it is what it should be: *missio Dei*, the sending of God." Hartenstein, "Finanzlage der Mission," *Verhandlungen der 17. Kontinentalen Missions-Konferenz zu Bremen vom 3.-7. Mai 1934*, (Bremen: Kommissionsverlag der Norddeutschen Missionsgesellschaft, 1934), 30; see Elmar Spohn, "Die *Missio Dei* bei Karl Hartenstein," *Evangelische Missiologie* 33, no. 3 (2017): 163-171.

And then in his evaluation of Willingen, Hartenstein wrote: "From the '*Missio Dei*' alone comes the '*Missio ecclesiae*.'" This places mission in the widest conceivable framework of the history of salvation and God's plan of salvation." Karl Hartenstein, "Theologische Besinnung," in *Mission zwischen Gestern und Morgen*, ed. Walter Freytag (Stuttgart, 1952), 54, 62. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the German are by the author.

8. Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God. An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965).

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represents this model, in which the subject of mission is the Triune God, and the church takes central place serving as the instrument of God's mission.<sup>9</sup> The church's task in the interim period is "to call men to repentance and to transmit the saving faith. This she must do until the end of time and world."<sup>10</sup> Vicedom identifies the *missio Dei* with a sending motive committed to the *missio specialis* (not *generalis*), which is associated with soteriology based on the redemptive work of Christ and continued through the Holy Spirit. God is a missionary God, and the church cannot be seen apart from this missionary apostolate. The church is missionary by nature;<sup>11</sup> and though the apostolic office itself was unique, it is up to the church to continue the apostolate through all its ministries, especially through discipleship.<sup>12</sup>

Vicedom affirms the classic understanding of the *missio Dei*, in which a missionary ecclesiology takes central place. Vicedom's interpretation fits neatly into what Sundermeier calls the salvation-history model.<sup>13</sup>

### The emerging ecumenical paradigm for mission: The Geneva model

Immediately after the end of the Willingen Conference, a discussion ensued over the status of the church in the *missio Dei*. Some

9. "The mission, and with it the church, is God's very own work. We cannot speak of 'the mission of the church,' even less of 'our mission.' Both the church and the mission have their source in the loving will of God. Therefore, we can speak of church and mission always only with the understanding that they are not independent entities. Both are tools of God, instruments through which God carries out His mission." Vicedom, 5-6.

10. Vicedom, 65.

11. "The church and its missions cannot be conceived apart from God and can therefore be understood only from the viewpoint of the existence of God and His mission." Vicedom, 46-47.

12. "Through the apostolate the church in the time between the two comings of the Lord is called to the task of bringing to all men salvation in Jesus Christ. All ministries of the church are included in this task, and it is from this very task that they receive point and purpose. This would also be true, even if we had no express mission command." Vicedom, 65.

13. Theo Sundermeier, "Theology of Mission," in *Dictionary of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 432.

participants voiced their dissent from the church-centric view of the *missio Dei*. It was especially the Dutch theologian Johannes C. Hoekendijk, who in an essay prepared for the Willingen Conference, rejected the redemptive, eschatological approach to the *missio Dei*, which posited a mission in view of the end and an ecclesiology that made the church serve as God's instrument to the world.<sup>14</sup> He called such an ecclesiocentric view "Churchism," with which, according to him, all church members, theologians, and missiologists were obsessed. Instead, he thought of God's mission in the world as unmediated, occurring directly in this world and its history, apart and disconnected from the church.<sup>15</sup> Hoekendijk is rightly considered to have influenced the post-1970 paradigm shift in missionary thinking known as the Geneva or ecumenical paradigm for mission, or as Sundermeier calls it the "history as promise" model,<sup>16</sup> in which "shalom" rather than "church" is the keyword.<sup>17</sup>

Hoekendijk's position was soon adopted in larger circles,<sup>18</sup> at conferences such as at the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1968 at Uppsala, where the delegates declared their support for this new model of *missio Dei* with the concept of "humanization." The goal of soteriology was to alleviate human conflicts in the social, economic, and political realms.<sup>19</sup> A few years later in 1972/73 at Bangkok under the theme "Salvation Today," the assembly of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC adopted a holistic approach in which the spiritual as well as the socio-political aspects were given equal measure. David Bosch wryly observes of this conference: "The classical Catholic adage, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('outside the church no salvation') seemed to have been turned into its opposite—inside the church there is no salvation."<sup>20</sup>

### Continuation of the classic model

Not all delegates at Uppsala approved this paradigm shift towards the goals of "shalomization" and "humanization." They believed in an understanding of the *missio Dei* informed by a biblical eschatology that, in light of Christ's return, necessitates an urgent call for missionary proclamation.<sup>21</sup> Donald McGavran and Peter Beyerhaus were among the leading figures who in 1974

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spearheaded the formation of the Lausanne Movement, which consisted of conservative theologians and missiologists, mostly Evangelicals.<sup>22</sup> Within that movement, *missio Dei* received little attention as the concept and operative term describing the triune God as the source and subject of mission. Instead, church growth and personal piety—namely the individual's affiliation with Christ—were more important than interest in the central role of the church. That, however, changed with the missional church movement and the formation of The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) in 1987.<sup>23</sup> The roots of the movement reach back as far as the 1952 Willingen Conference and the 1960s, and it picks up where Georg Vicedom, Johannes Blauw, and Lesslie Newbigin left off.<sup>24</sup> Today, literature that speaks to the missional

22. Jason S. Sexton, "Introduction," in *Four Views on the Church's Mission*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 7. McGavran voiced his dissent with the following outburst: "What about the world's two billion who are dying without Christ? . . . Is eternal separation from God more disastrous than going to be hungry?" quoted in Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 122.

23. Its board consists of several exegetes, systematians and others who teach at major centers around the world, John Franke, Darrell Guder, George Hunsberger, Lois Barrett, Jim Brown, and Tony Sundermeier. Others such as Alan Hirsch, Ed Stetzer, Michael Goheen and Christopher Wright work closely with GOCN. After the secularization of the *missio Dei* framework in the WCC and the relativizing of the church that came with it, the GOCN is a renewed attempt to flesh out the structures of a missionary ecclesiology, specifically focused on a North American context. In addition to church and mission, GOCN has focused on context and culture, "the loss of Christendom and the desire to rethink ecclesiology in light of that reality." Tim M. Sheridan and Jurgens H. Hendriks, "The Missional Church Movement," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Theologische Tydskrif* 54, nos. 3-4 (2013), 319-344.

24. On Vicedom, see pp. 4-5 above. Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (London: Lutterworth, 2002). Newbigin, for example, often included in his writings a now famous quote from Emil Brunner: "The truth is that the church is not the church in any New Testament sense unless it is a mission. . . . I very much like the phrase of Emil Brunner 'the church exists by mission as the fire exists by burning' . . . By detaching mission from the church, we have grievously corrupted in practice the whole conception of what the Church is." Lesslie Newbigin, "The Evangelization of Eastern Asia," *International Review of Mission* 39 (1950): 142; quoted in Craig Ott, "Introduction," in *The Mission of the Church: Five*

14. Johannes C. Hoekendijk, "The Church in Missionary Thinking," *International Review of Missions* 41, no. 3 (July 1952): 324-336.

15. Hoekendijk, 332.

16. Sundermeier, "Theology of Mission," 434.

17. Berd Hoedemaker, "The Legacy of Hoekendijk," in *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 19, no. 4 (October 1995): 166.

18. See, for example, World Council of Churches, Department on Studies in Evangelism, Western European Working Group and North American Working Group. *The Church for Others, and the Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967).

19. James Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 119-121.

20. Bosch, David J., *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 384.

21. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom*, 114-121.

nature of the church abounds.<sup>25</sup>

Drawing upon the *missio Dei* concept, missiologists applied it vigorously to their understanding of God, Scripture,<sup>26</sup> theology<sup>27</sup> and the church.<sup>28</sup> God is understood as a missionary God, whose intention is completely dedicated to the salvation of the world. Ontological descriptions of God—who God is—are replaced with functional descriptions of what God does for the world. The understanding of the church is also informed by the *missio Dei*. The church mirrors God's intentions and activity. There is a parallelism between God and church. As God is missionary by nature, so too the church is missionary in essence and by nature. Mission is not accidental to either God or to the church. Mission is intrinsic to both. Thus, the church cannot make mission optional, because the church exists within God's mission and is shaped by it, apart from the church's own doing. The church is God's instrument not by its own choice but because God expects the church to be nothing else.<sup>29</sup>

In order to remain inclusive of the various Protestant traditions represented within it, the missional church movement comes across as deliberately vague. For this reason, important aspects that Loehe would want to include, such as the word of God and the sacraments as means of grace, and the distinction between ordained and laity are not to be found. Instead, the missional church movement operates with an inclusive definition of ministry where the distinction between ordained and lay ministry falls away and is replaced by the task of mobilizing the laity to take up anew the ministries listed in Ephesians 4:11.<sup>30</sup> In missional

*Views in Conversation*, ed. Craig Ott (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), xviii.

25. For example, see Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); Alan J. Roxburgh, M. Scott Boren, and Mark Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009); Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

26. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006); and Wright, "Truth with a Mission: Reading all Scripture Missiologically," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (2011), 4-15: "The whole Bible is itself a 'missional' phenomenon" (p. 5).

27. David Bosch advocated treating mission as intrinsic to theology and thus commended we move away from a theology of mission to a missionary theology; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 492. See also Wright, *Mission of God*, 10.

28. All focus is "on the community being sent into its mission field as Christ's witness." Guder, *Missional Church*, 234. "The concept of *missio Dei*, the mission of God, is recognition that God is a sending God, and the church is sent. ... Jesus Christ embodies that mission; the Holy Spirit empowers for that mission; the church is the instrument of that mission; and the culture is the context in which that mission occurs." Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches That Multiply* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 19.

29. John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 263.

30. Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Move-*

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church ecclesiology, the connection to the ordained ministry and the sacraments—which are among the marks of the church—still needs to be explored, as authors sympathetic to the missional church movement have themselves observed.<sup>31</sup> All activities of the church are included in the term "missional," even those that have little to do with traditional evangelism or church planting or the sending of individual missionaries.<sup>32</sup> Soteriology, too, is broadened and presented with words such as "comprehensive" and "integral." This raises the question about the spiritual aspect of soteriology: Is mission in the end pursuing the goal to save the soul or not? As we saw with Vicedom, who, with his specific reference to the *missio specialis* of Jesus Christ as the quintessence of the *missio Dei*, insisted on salvation as the spiritual restoration of the image of God lost through the fall.<sup>33</sup>

From my perspective as a Lutheran missiologist, the missional movement is to be commended for embracing a missionary ecclesiology informed by the *missio Dei*. At the same time, there is room for criticism since it leaves many aspects vague, intentionally or simply unknowingly. Here Wilhelm Loehe comes to our aid and provides valuable clarification.

### Loehe's contribution

It is somewhat surprising that Loehe's legacy was not invoked in the discussions of the emerging *missio Dei* concept. Georg Vicedom's treatment of the concept in his book *The Mission of God* contains no reference to Loehe, though one would expect it from him as one of Loehe's successors. Loehe's missiology, however, has been well studied; attempts have been made to systematize his missiology and to make connections to contemporary discussions of the *missio Dei*. One example is Christian Weber's comprehensive treatment of Loehe's theology of mission.<sup>34</sup> Rather than acknowl-

*ments* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 149-177.

31. "The authors [of *Missional Church*] did not explore how ... how does a Word and Sacrament ecclesiology (usually referred to as two marks of the church) relate to missional church? ... This work remains largely undone, even after a decade of missional church conversation." Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*, 62-63.

32. "It would be more accurate, biblically, to simply say: 'Since everything is mission (because we are God's people for God's mission), then yes, everything is mission (in terms of all the dimensions and intentions of the church's life and work.)' Wright, in *Four Views on The Mission of the Church*, 91.

33. Georg Vicedom, *Mission of God*, 15.

34. Christian Weber, *Missionstheologie bei Wilhelm Löhle*:

edging him only as a figure in the past, fallen into irrelevance, Weber praises Loehe as a Vordenker (pioneer) for the future of mission.<sup>35</sup> I echo that sentiment.

If we were to place Loehe in the circle of contemporary missiologists, he would belong among those who follow the classic understanding of the *missio Dei*, or what we are calling the salvation-history model. Loehe laid out his ecclesiology and a passionate defense of the Lutheran Church in *Three Books about the Church*, published in 1845.<sup>36</sup> We should note that Loehe was influenced by Olaf Petri of Hannover, another very important Lutheran, who in 1841 had written a book on mission and the church.<sup>37</sup> With Petri—and also with C. F. W. Walther—Loehe shared the conviction that the evangelical Lutheran Church embraces mission. In fact, the church is the true mission society.<sup>38</sup>

In Loehe's *Three Books*, God is the subject of mission. You will not find in Loehe a well-defined or detailed Trinitarian treatment of God as the subject of mission, but the connection is there nonetheless; it is presupposed: God sends the Son to redeem the world and the Holy Spirit continues that redemptive work through the means of grace. Loehe praises the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as the ground of the church's existence (57).<sup>39</sup> This church is gathered from all nations—from the Gentiles (58-59)—and God does the work of bringing them together. God creates the church through Word and sacrament. Thus, we must understand that the church comes about and exists from above; it is not created by human action.

The motive for God to enact God's mission comes from God's eternal love and salvific will. (50) The church is a creation of God's love (50). This church exists as “the fellowship created by God for eternity” (50). It is already connected to the church in eternity; the two already belong together. The distinction between them will fall away at the Lord's second coming. In the meantime, those who belong to the church are on a pilgrimage toward the heavenly and eternal church, the new Jerusalem on Mount Zion, where there is triumph and no struggle (53-54). In this interim

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*Aufbruch zur Kirche der Zukunft* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996). Other studies on Loehe's mission theology preceding or following Weber's study are: Johannes Aagaard, *Mission, Konfession, Kirche: Die Problematik ihrer Integration im 19. Jahrhundert in Deutschland*. 2 vols. (Lund: Gleerup, 1967); Volker Stolle, *Wer seine Hand an den Pflug legt* (Groß Oesingen: Verlag der Lutherischen Buchhandlung Heinrich Harms, 1992); and David C. Ratke, “The Church in Motion: Wilhelm Loehe, Mission, and the Church,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no. 2 (April 2006), 145-156.

35. Weber, *Missionstheologie bei Wilhelm Löhe*, 262-397.

36. Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969); Wilhelm Löhe, *Drei Bücher von der Kirche* (1845), in *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter GW), ed. Klaus Ganzert, 7 vols., (Neuendettelsau: Freimund-Verlag, 1951-1986), 5.1:85-179.

37. See Wilhelm Löhe, “Sie Mission und die Kirche” (1841), in GW 4:20.

38. C. F. W. Walther, “The Mission Society Established by God—Is. 43:21” in Walther, *The Word of His Grace. Occasional and Festival Sermons* (Lake Mills: Graphic Publishing Company, 1978), 17-26.

39. In this section, parenthetical citations refer to Loehe, *Three Books*.

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period, the church engages mission. Loehe states: “Mission is the life of the catholic church... The catholic church and mission—these two no one can separate without killing both, and that is impossible” (59). Toward the end of *Three Books*, Loehe observes that the church desires “nothing but the salvation of the nations” (163). A missionary ecclesiology, in which church and mission form an inseparable union (*wesenshafte Union*), together with an eschatological orientation, comes through loud and clear in Loehe's thought.

But what force unites this one church, Loehe asks. His answer is that the Word of the apostles unites and brings nations and people into the church: “The Word of the apostles has always been the uniting force of the church and will continue to be until the end of time” (62). That is why the church confesses to be apostolic, as Loehe says: “For it is true that it has chosen this name primarily for this reason, and ‘apostolic’ in this context means nothing else but ‘founded on the apostles’ teaching” (63). Any other interpretation of “apostolic” Loehe dismisses (63). Because the church possesses the apostolic Word, it will grow and remain forever (64): “The church is the child of God's Word and can never, never stand above the Word” (73).

Though God is the primary agent, who uses the church to spread God's Word throughout the world, Loehe also affirms human agency: the members of the church take part in the mission of God: “From the very beginning it has pleased God to extend his truth by means of men, to increase his church by means of the church, to make of it not just an assembly of believers but also a place of assembly from those who have come and will come to faith” (74). Loehe speaks here to the instrumentality of the church, and then to God's delivery system, God's Word, “in which the Lord himself comes to enlighten every man who comes into the world” (74-75). On some occasions, especially toward the end of *Three Books*, Loehe refers to human agency by affirming the kerygmatic motif of the Lutheran Church: “Although we are a small flock, the Lord will give us a host of evangelists who will go out into the highways and byways of the heathen and testify to them the universal grace of God in Christ Jesus” (162-163). It seems Loehe accepts a continuation of the apostolate church, though he was reluctant to see it happen through a distinct office of evangelist. It seems that the human agency in God's mission is given to every Christian. The priesthood of all believers brings

the unchurched into the body of Christ, at which point they are handed over to the instituted pastoral office.

As one reads Loehe, one senses his struggle to affirm the universal salvific call (*vocatio catholica* or *universalis*) since as a Lutheran he tries to come to terms with past interpretations, such as the claim that the call has already reached all parts of the world. As Loehe discusses the *vocatio catholica*, he navigates between two dangerous positions associated with the doctrine of predestination: the first denies the universal will of God for all people, the second submits salvation to human power, not to God. For Loehe, the universal call continues through the Word. He rejects a false understanding of predestination that all has already been accomplished by God, which undermines the universal call (81). Quoting 1 Timothy 2:4, "It is God's will that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (81-82), Loehe posits an ongoing universal call made possible by Christ's redemptive work. That call is enacted through God's delivery system, Word and sacrament: "The means by which we appropriate his atonement—Word and sacrament—must be made known to all men.... This is why the call of the Word must come to all men. Thus, the doctrine of the universal call of all men, both those who lived before Christ and those who come after him, is the inviolable doctrine of our fathers" (82; on baptism, 94) Loehe observes that even if some wish to claim that the *vocatio catholica* has already reached certain parts of the world (86), their assertion serves as evidence confirming that the universal call actually exists and continues. For how could people of various nations have received the call unless the Word had already been proclaimed to them? Thus, the doctrine of the universal call, "makes us zealous in calling the heathen, for God calls through the office of preaching" (83). To Loehe then, God's mission to save all nations is based on the doctrine of universal grace (84) and motivated by "God's loving will" (87). Of the many reasons Loehe has for supporting missions, universality is one of the most important.

Loehe turns next to the visible church. The church that is formed is the invisible church, but which also has a visible side. Hypocrites belong to it, as well as those who belong to the invisible church, whose faith is nourished by the visible Word and sacrament (88-89). "In short," Loehe says, "the visible church is the tabernacle of God among men, and outside it there is no salvation" (90). In this way, the Word creates both the visible and invisible church all over the world (91). Loehe quotes Nicolai's *De regno Christi* (*On the Kingdom of Christ*) because Nicolai's treatise shows God's Word at work everywhere to create the church through the visible word (92), through the preaching of repentance and the Gospel (95). The visible church becomes an institution of salvation (*Heilsanstalt*) and so, Loehe affirms the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* in the proper evangelical sense: where God's Word is heard, there salvation is found.

When Loehe speaks about the visible church, his confession-alism comes through as well. Proclaiming the pure Word, as the Confessions teach, becomes for Loehe a strong motive for the Lutheran Church to engage in mission. Belonging to the visible

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church matters a great deal to Loehe. Though he admits that churches professing "clouds of strange doctrine" nevertheless make it possible for God to bring salvation in those communions (95), Loehe gives preference to the evangelical Lutheran Church and its mission as the truest form of missionary expression. Loehe's ecumenical charity certainly exists, and he recognizes that the mission of each denomination expands the one church of Christ: "We will never disturb and destroy the good work other confessions do among the heathen, but on our part, we will always do whatever is possible to see that the purest doctrine may be seen and preserved in its saving power" (163). His charity, however, has its limits. Since so many visible churches exist and because salvation comes through the Word, the visible church is obliged to keep the teaching of God's Word pure. The confessional concern is soteriologically motivated; there is a dynamic to it. As Weber puts it, "the church not only has a teaching purpose, but also a gathering purpose."<sup>40</sup> For Loehe, the confessional concern has less to do with the preservation of doctrine or personal preference than supporting the dynamic missionary enterprise for the salvation of souls, the unbelieving world. "If much falsehood and many errors have the upper hand in a denomination, then the possibility that a man may be lost may well become a probability" (100). Loehe does not accept the fact that all denominations have the same possession of the truth (102). Some have in their possession some truth, but there is one church among all of them that has more truth than the others. It is the evangelical Lutheran church. This church has pure spring water in its possession whereas all others quench the thirst of people with brackish water (104-105; also, 115). Loehe proceeds to argue that this church has in her possession the Lutheran Confessions, which are an indication that it is in possession of the true apostolic Word and the sacraments: "Its

40. Weber, 262.

confession must therefore be its distinguishing mark" (106), that is, the mark of the true visible church. Since the Confessions flow out of the Scriptures, they serve to uphold the understanding of the Word and sacraments (107). Loehe affirms that the marks of the church are kept purest in the Lutheran Church because of its confession: "If the Lutheran Church has the pure Word and sacrament in a pure confession, it obviously has the highest treasures of the church unperverted. It thus has God's fullness and the living source from which all deficiencies may be supplied, and it can claim for itself all the advantages of which other denominations justly boast" (113). This church is called Lutheran but could just the same also be called apostolic (112).

With that claim, Loehe belongs in the ranks of those who support a confessional Lutheran mission paradigm, which emerged in mid-nineteenth century. Loehe's motive for mission—at least one of them—is to argue that a Lutheran approach to mission has a valid right to exist and a function in the ecumenical world. Through its mission, the evangelical Lutheran Church becomes "a blessing to the heathen" (162), even if "we know that all other confessions which preach to the heathen bring them the possibility of salvation" (162). It has to do with the preservation of the Word, through which the *missio Dei* happens, and the unadulterated clarity of the Word that reaches the ears of the unbeliever. "The Lutheran Church," Loehe claims, "knows that the Lord gives his Holy Spirit only through his Word and sacraments, and therefore it recognizes no other effective means than Word and Sacrament" (164). "Let us pray for the Word!...It is the source of all good things and the death of all vanities. Lord, keep us steadfast in thy Word" (139-140).

Here ends Loehe's treatment of ecclesiology in *Three Books*. Our overview demonstrates that Loehe indeed advocates a missionary ecclesiology within the mission of God. The classic themes are all present. One theme less prominent in Loehe's *Three Books* and his writings overall is the missionary apostolate as it appears among missiologists today, and especially the missional church movement. Loehe could have affirmed more strongly the "sentness" of the church. Out of respect for orthodoxy, however, he did not do so. Loehe struggled with the apostolate and limits it, as we saw, to the Word of the apostles, on which the church stands, and which the church preaches and preserves with its confession. The universal motive and the confessional motive to possess the true Word seem to be the factors motivating Loehe to engage with mission. These motives far outweigh the apostolate of "sentness," which seems to have given Loehe no motivation.

For Loehe, the continuation of the apostolate is located in the local congregation as it engages in outer mission. The congregation is strengthened through inner mission and then engages in outer mission to gain new members: "Whoever strengthens the church also strengthens it for mission."<sup>41</sup> That was how the apostles worked, first among the Jews (inner mission), then moving out

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from the Jews to the Gentiles. The line between inner and outer mission is drawn by baptism. As soon as those outside come to faith and are baptized, mission work switches from outer to inner mission, and outer mission begins anew.<sup>42</sup> Inner mission leads to outer mission. It emanates from the center of a congregation and returns back to it, to the preached Word and the sacrament of the altar. Thus, for Loehe the Gesellschaft for Innere Mission (Society of Inner Mission) in Neuendettelsau was not the true bearer of mission. It was the congregation at the border with the unbelieving world that was to carry out and direct mission.<sup>43</sup> No society model should control mission from a distance. Loehe's local congregation model was a far better option. For Loehe it was to be realized in the mission colonies in North America.<sup>44</sup>

In his key works on church and office, *Aphorisms* (1849) and *New Aphorisms* (1851), Loehe concluded from his exegetical study of Ephesians 4:11 that the particular offices of the apostles and evangelists were not handed on to the church. The pastoral office continued only in the office of elder (presbyter) and teacher.<sup>45</sup> In 1852, Loehe offered a similar exegetical conclusion, this time written in response to the Lutheran dogmatician Samuel Schelwig

42. Wilhelm Löhe, "Die Mission unter den Heiden" (1843), GW 4:51.

43. Löhe, "Heidenmission in Nordamerika," GW 4:109; and "Ein Versuch, auf die deutschen Auswanderer nach Nordamerika und auf die dortige Kolonisation kirchlich einzuwirken" (1848), GW 4:149; see Aagaard, *Mission, Konfession, Kirche*, 2:655-657.

44. The similarities with Ludwig Harms in Hermannsburg are striking; see Hartwig Harms, "Die Bedeutung der Gemeinde für die Mission bei Wilhelm Löhe und Ludwig Harms," in Georg Gremels, *Eschatologie und Gemeindeaufbau: Hermannsburger Missionsgeschichte im Umfeld lutherischer Erweckung* (Hermannsburg: Verlag Ludwig-Harms-Haus, 2004), 114-128.

45. Wilhelm Löhe, *Aphorisms on Church and Office, Old and New*, trans. John R. Stephenson (St. Catharines, Ontario: Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2022), 29 and 117-118; Wilhelm Löhe, *Aphorismen über die neutestamentlichen Ämter und ihr Verhältnis zur Gemeinde* (1849), GW 5.1:278; and *Kirche und Amr: Neue Aphorismen* (1851), GW 5.1:541. See also "Zum Schelwigschen Aufsatz in Nr. 12 der Mitteilungen von 1851" (1852), GW 4:195.

41. Wilhelm Löhe, "Die Heidenmission in Nordamerika" (1846), GW 4:111.

from the year 1602. Schelwig's arguments were in short: "There is no public teaching office without proper call (ordentlichen Beruf [=Vokation]). The church can only call shepherds and teachers, not apostles (or missionaries). Only Christ has sent missionaries to the heathens."<sup>46</sup> Thus, like Schelwig and many of his predecessors in Lutheran orthodoxy, Loehe was reluctant to raise up an ordained office of missionary that stood apart from the office of pastor. The church may only "send" shepherds and teachers; however, "that presupposes a properly established sphere of activity (Wirkungskreise) and Christian relationships to which they are called."<sup>47</sup> In an unpublished outline of his thoughts on church and mission, Loehe explains: "Even though the church has an apostle's honor, it cannot pass it on. This is also the case where she wishes to ordain, etc. It is no longer permissible to ordain to the apostolic calling; all ordinations are tied to a locality and a flock and not to the unlimited expanse of the world."<sup>48</sup> To do otherwise, as the Reformed churches were doing by ordaining and sending missionaries, was to Loehe not Lutheran.<sup>49</sup>

Loehe's mission oversees overcame that quandary by affirming the pastoral office as central to both the inner and external growth of the church: "Nothing that belongs to inner or outer mission is therefore freed from the office of ministry."<sup>50</sup> The inner ministry of the church serves the community of Christians,<sup>51</sup> who then participate in the outward orientation of the church as the priesthood of all believers by bringing the Word to an unbelieving world. Thus, the unity of inner and outer mission is not located in the one office of ministry instituted by God, but more so in the priesthood of all believers, in that the latter become the true catalyst for outer mission. The church exists as actual people, priests, who give outer mission the feet it needs to function as a Sammler (gatherer) of new members. What, asks Loehe, prevents them from going out to the world driven by the motive of love and compassion?<sup>52</sup> Mission

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is a "work of love which God has ordained for the salvation of the heathen."<sup>53</sup> For this mission, there is no "calling to a missionary office" but a priestly calling for all Christians, which is a "calling to serve through love" in the form of "free preaching love" (*freie predigende Liebe*).<sup>54</sup> Loehe proposed his concept of mission "from the center of the congregation outward."<sup>55</sup>

In a brief article by Loehe on mission and the church, we come upon a precious nugget of gold: "The church, the communion of saints, the greatest of all societies has the command and promise for mission from the Lord... It is not enough that a few members unite, that mission societies spring up here and there; all members are, by virtue of being members, rightly participants in the heathen mission."<sup>56</sup> The motive of love as the most holy, voluntary missionary obligation receives a command from the Lord. The missionary obligation receives a divine imprimatur, which means it is not a voluntary endeavor of believers, but one to which the church is bound.<sup>57</sup> Loehe, however, resisted a paternalistic conception of the pastoral office that lords over the affairs of the priesthood of all believers, including their participation in the *missio Dei*.<sup>58</sup>

With this explanation of the apostolate, Loehe was able to forge ahead with his outer mission to indigenous people in North America. He sent out whole colonies into a far-off land with pastors at the center and Christians who volunteered "freely out of love" to proclaim the good news. In so doing, the congregations became the instrument of God's hand as "gatherer."

## Conclusion

We have traced Wilhelm Loehe's missionary ecclesiology along a series of stages: from the one, universal church in its movement to the particular evangelical Lutheran Church which has preserved and administered the apostolic Word and sacraments according

46. Klaus Ganzert, "Erläuterungen," GW 4:651. For Loehe's response, see "Zum Schelwigschen Aufsatz" (1852), GW 4:196.

47. GW 4:195; see Aagaard, *Mission, Konfession, Kirche*, 2:675.

48. Wilhelm Löhe, "Kirche und Mission" (unpublished manuscript, 1844-1846?), reproduced in full in Ganzert, "Erläuterungen," GW 4:627.

49. A similar opinion was voiced earlier by Ludwig Petri in 1841; see Werner Raupp, *Mission in Quellentexten: Geschichte Der Deutschen Evangelischen Mission Von Der Reformation Bis Zur Weltmissionskonferenz Edinburgh 1910* (Erlangen: Verlag der Ev.-Lutherischen Mission and Bad Liebenzell; Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission, 1990), 270.

50. Wilhelm Löhe, "Innere Mission im allgemeinen" (1850), GW 4:183; see Aagaard, *Mission, Konfession, Kirche*, 2:661.

51. Wilhelm Löhe, "Predigt das Evangelium aller Kreatur" (1847), GW 4:120; "Innere Mission im allgemeinen," GW 4:178-188; and "Zum Schelwigschen Aufsatz," GW 4:198; see Aagaard, 2:676.

52. Löhe, "Zum Schelwigschen Aufsatz," GW 4:197. On this point, Loehe quotes Luther, who said: "If he (a Christian) is in a place where there are no Christians he needs no other call than to be a Christian, called and anointed by God from within. Here it is his duty to preach and to teach the gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians, because of the duty of brotherly love." Volker Stolle, *The Church Comes from All Nations: Luther Texts on Mission*, trans. Klaus Detlev Schulz and Daniel Thies (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 21.

53. Loehe, *Three Books*, 163; Löhe, *Drei Bücher*, GW 4:167.

54. Löhe, *Aphorisms*, 128; Löhe, *Kirche und Amt*, GW 5.1:548.

55. Löhe, "Heidenmission in Nordamerika," GW 4:109; see Ganzert, "Erläuterungen," GW 4:628.

56. Wilhelm Löhe, "Die Mission und die Kirche" (1841), GW 4:19. See also "Zum Schelwigschen Aufsatz," GW 4:197.

57. See also "Zum Schelwigschen Aufsatz," GW 4:197.

58. Löhe, "Innere Mission im allgemeinen," GW 4:183-184.

to the teachings of the Confessions, and finally to the practical realization of mission by local congregations in the combination of the pastoral office and the priesthood of all believers. Though mission applies to all these ecclesiological stages, Loehe made the proprium of his missionary ecclesiology the local congregation in mission (*Gemeindemission*). Contemporary supporters of the missional church movement would agree that it is at the level of the congregation where the *missio Dei* hits the road. In fact, Loehe could help modern missiologists to structure current theological and ecclesiological descriptions of the *missio Dei*. His concepts of *Gemeindemission* as the strategy to implement the *missio Dei* in the local context, *Sammelmission* (gathering mission), and planting new churches through colonization<sup>59</sup> are extremely relevant topics today. All those interested in pursuing the goal of creating missional communities and planting churches would greatly benefit from Loehe's missionary ecclesiology.

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59. "Colonization" in the context of church planting means something wholly different from what the term described in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was the conquest and settlement of Europeans in the newly discovered world. For an explanation of colonization in the church planting context, see Daniel R. Sanchez, "Strategies for Starting Churches," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, 2nd ed., ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 409-423.