

# Mission and the Reformation: Lessons from the Reformers and the Anabaptists

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## Summary

*Scholarly interaction has ranged from arguing that the Reformers were indifferent toward mission to asserting that both Luther and Calvin had theologies of mission embedded in their understanding of the gospels and emphasis on preaching the word of God. On the other hand, during the same time period, the Anabaptists emerged as a movement with a radical and deliberate mission praxis. How can strains of a new and emerging Protestantism, in similar socio-political contexts, develop such different mission praxis? This paper explores this discrepancy between these two movements and then offers implications and questions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church-in-mission.*

## Introduction

When Martin Luther posted his 95 theses in Wittenberg in 1517, this catalyzed a series of events and trajectories that permanently altered the textures of Christianity. Like any other significant shift in history, however, this did not take place in a historical vacuum, rather, it was part of a wider intellectual movement that can be traced several centuries before to the ‘humanists’ in Italy (Irvin & Sunquist 2012, 74). New events, inventions, and discoveries certainly influenced perception regarding the known world and those outside the known world. For example, colonial expansion spurred on by new shipbuilding technologies began with Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century—this encouraged a greater curiosity regarding other people and cultures. The printing press facilitated greater lite-

racy and wider reading of the Bible. New ideas of land, identity, and ownership influenced the church and the aristocracy's power and authority. A strengthened sense of national identities formed around monarchs. The relationship between spiritual and secular powers began shifting as the Holy Roman Empire was threatened by a Muslim Turkish invasion. These changes also contributed to a great social anxiety, manifesting in apocalyptic viewpoints and an eschatological urgency (Irvin & Sunquist 2012, 71-79).

These intellectual currents set within the socio-cultural context influenced the reactions, interactions, theological praxis of the Reformers' ideas and teachings, and volumes have been written analyzing and reanalyzing the Reformers' theology and socio-political impact. One of these much-analyzed themes is the Reformers' attitudes toward and praxis in mission. Although much can be said on either side of the debate, many scholars concur with the sentiment of Stephen Neill: "When everything favorable has been said that can be said, and when all possible evidences from the writings of the Reformers have been collected, it all amounts to exceedingly little" (1986, 189).

Simultaneously in the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists broke off from the Reformers to take things a step further—rather than to merely reform the church, they wanted to restore it to its pre-Constantine days. The movement that developed became radical in its efforts to evangelize and missionize throughout Europe. How can strains of a new and emerging Protestantism, in similar socio-political contexts, develop such different attitudes and actions regarding the mission of the church?

As this is a vast subject area, this paper's aims are modest in relation to this question. After a brief introduction to both the Reformers' and Anabaptists' concepts and praxis of mission, I will suggest several factors that contribute to this discrepancy. Looking at the interdependent and dynamic relationship between missiology, theology, and the socio-political context, I will then suggest missiological implications for the church-in-mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this paper, the concept of mission is rooted in *missio Dei*—God's active work to reconcile, redeem, and transform humans, cultures, and creation culminating in the final establishment of his kingdom. As the Father sent the Son, they are both sending the Spirit, and the three send the Church into the world to participate in this mission (Bosch 1991, 390).

## **Reformers and Mission**

### ***Luther and Mission***

Hans Kasdorf conducted a helpful literature review in which he places scholars into three basic camps, although only two will be mentioned here: The Warneck tradition, the positive view, and the neutral position. First, in the tradition

of Warneck (1834-1910), scholars argue that Luther and Calvin were basically indifferent to mission, believing that the Great Commission was fulfilled during the time of the apostles (Kasdorf 1980, 170; Latourette 1939, 25). In fact, Warneck claimed that the early Reformers, although rigorous in theology, “Lacked evangelistic vitality and missionary vision” (1980, 170). Rather than a drive to missionize the ‘pagan world,’ he claims that when Luther referred to the mission field, he meant a ‘re-Christianizing’ of Christendom.

Secondly, the positive view challenged these scholars as early as 1897 when Paul Drews (1897) argued that it was more an issue of methodology, as Luther believed the spread of the gospel would happen in a more spontaneous fashion (Kasdorf 1980, 170). Later views, such as Charles Chaney argued that not only did Luther have a positive outlook of mission, he perceived that mission was rooted in the gospels and therefore the very preaching of the gospels was a missionary act (1964, 170). Along these lines, scholars have argued that Luther is really more of a mission theologian than a mission strategist (Valčo 2016; Huhtinen 2001). His theology integrates church and mission and designates that mission originates with God, manifested through the “word and sacraments” (Huhtinen 2001, 17). To Luther, mission was the obligation of all believers, as one of his sermons illustrates: “The noblest and greatest work and the most important service we can perform for God on earth is bringing other people, and especially those who are entrusted to us, to the knowledge of God by the holy Gospel (qtd. In Jun 1994, 170, 171).

In Luther’s writings, one can find statements of “winning the heathen to faith in Christ,” although these were aimed within Christendom. He often mentions the Jews and Turks, the ‘others’ of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Christian world (Neill 1986, 189). In 1523, he wrote a booklet *Dass Jesus Chrischts eingeborner Jude sei* to encourage mission work among the Jews. However, as his career went on, he felt increasingly skeptical about their conversion and notoriously wrote some harsh and vitriolic indictments (Huhtinen 2001, 25). Regarding Muslims, Luther viewed them as “Satan’s tool” and “God’s rod to punish Christian nations.” However, he also hoped to witness the “spring of the gospel, the time of God’s coming (new visitation) also to the Muslims” and noted that if a Christian was taken captive by a Turk, he might succeed in evangelizing him (Huhtinen 2001, 29).

In fact, the scholars with the positive view argued that the problem is the act of interpreting Luther and Calvin’s view of mission through a nineteenth and twentieth century missional lens. For example, Luther uses the word ‘sending’ in conjunction with ‘mission’ when he speaks about bringing the gospel to the nations (Huhtinen 2001, 17). However, Valčo concludes:

Though mission in both aspects—the effort to deepen the faith of Christians through the Christianizing “inner mission,” and the struggle to reach out to

people beyond the confines of Christendom (Jews, Turks, newly discovered territories in the Americas)—is clearly a part of Luther’s understanding of the fruits of the *missio Dei* in “real Christians” lives, later Lutheran missionary efforts lagged behind those of the Moravians, Puritans, Methodists, other Protestants, or Roman Catholics (2016, 18).

### ***Calvin and Mission***

Scholars analyze Calvin’s mission impulse with a slightly more positive lens—ranging from Warneck’s assertion that Calvin also depended on the secular authority’s responsibility to introduce Christianity, to the more modern proposals that the modern missionary movement can be traced to Calvin’s theology (Chaney 1964; Zwemer 1950). In Calvin’s *Institutes*, he referenced the mission of the church several times and argued for the importance of the Great Commission, although scholars note his references to the missionary nature of the church are few and far between (Chaney 1964, 25). Chaney draws out four concepts in Calvin’s vast writings that point to his mission theology: calling of the Gentiles, the progress of the Kingdom, the Gathering of the Church, and personal Christian responsibility (1964, 25-29). Chaney then tries to ascertain why this theology did not lead to greater missionary praxis, settling on two factors: his doctrine of election, in which God would determine the right time and open the doors for nations to hear the gospel, and his eschatology, in which he believed there were three epochs existing between the time of the Apostles and the final kingdom (1964, 32-34).

In fact, however, like Luther, Calvin did in some way connect theology to evangelism and mission praxis, although largely within Christendom. In Geneva, the Venerable Company of Pastors was established, a weekly gathering where pastors were trained, mentored, and strategized about bringing reform to the rest of Europe. In the 1550’s, the Company began to send missionaries to Catholic areas and eventually to Italy, Germany, Scotland, England, and France (Olson 2004, 157). In 1556, the Company assigned two individuals to travel with a Protestant expedition to Brazil to be chaplains to both the settled French Protestants and the Indians. The expedition ended in disaster since the French admiral, Nicolaus Durand de Villegagnon, betrayed the Christians leading to four deaths (Kasdorf 1980, 172; *Christian History* 1986).

Calvin is recognized to have contributed both theological and practical principles to mission, in particular, his emphasis on the glory of God that became a later motivating impulse for mission in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Further, one can note the influence of Calvin’s writings on Gijsbert Voetius (1589-1676), the first Protestant to write an expansive theology of mission. Calvin’s mission activity could be a factor in Calvinism outpacing Lutheranism as the mark of Protestantism.

In summation, although scholars highlight the Reformers indirect influence on mission praxis in their emphasis of the gospel and the Bible, a condemnation

of the “crusading attitude toward the Turk,” and theology that would influence mission movements in the future, many scholars offer reasons regarding their muted approach to mission praxis during their time (Yoder 1971). For example, the battle between both the Protestants and the temporal authorities, and various branches of Protestantism, consumed much time and energy. There were geographical obstacles to thinking beyond Europe—Spain and Portugal controlled the sea routes, and there was a strong connection between imperialistic ventures and religion. There was an imminent threat from the Muslim Turks. The Reformers saw the civic and political authorities bearing the primary role in spreading Christianity, which would not extend outside the ruler’s domain. The Reformers understood The Great Commission to have been accomplished during the time of the apostles since the Church existed in the known world. Finally, some argued that Protestants lacked the mission structures or societies, such as were organized by the Roman Catholics, and lacked an ability to communicate theological ideas to larger masses of uneducated people in an understandable way (Neill 1986; Jun 1994; Valčo 2016).

These contributing contextual factors are certainly enough for a satisfactory conclusion on the question of the Reformers’ weak missionary praxis. However, the Anabaptist missional impulse during the same time period raises the issue to a new level of analytical questions. How did these radical Reformers glean such a different attitude toward mission in the same socio-political and religious context?

### ***The Anabaptists and Mission***

In 1520, associates of Ulrich Zwingli wanted more radical action than he and the Zurich city council felt was prudent—they wanted to abolish the city’s collection of tithe, military service, and have a self-governing church separated from the state. In 1525, after being prohibited to publicly espouse their views, the radicals baptized each other, thus earning the name Anabaptist, which means ‘re-baptizer.’ In fact, adult baptism became a key issue in the schism between the Reformers and the Anabaptists, and to re-baptize became an act punishable by death (Irvin & Sunquist 2012, 91). Just as different expressions of the Reformation emerged from Germany, Switzerland, and France but still maintained a common Protestant consciousness, so such diversity existed as the Anabaptists grew as a movement, while eventually refining a core of beliefs articulated in the Schleitheim Confession in 1527 (Shank 2010, 275). Unfortunately, some of the radicals on the fringes of the movement contributed to the condemnation and persecution carried out by both the Protestants and the Catholics.<sup>1</sup>

1 As a drastic example, in Münster in 1534, the Anabaptist temporarily rejected their non-violence stance, took up arms and claimed strange revelations from God (Christian History, 1990).

The Anabaptists taught a strict discipleship for every believer—living in the footsteps of their Master. Like the Reformers, they emphasized faith, but also equally holy living (Kasdorf 1975, 313). One must be prepared to follow Jesus in his life and death, which results in the transformation of life (Kasdorf 1975, 306). “Indeed, the Anabaptists were forging a form of disciplined life in the spirit that reflected the form of community known to monasticism in earlier Christian centuries” with the added impulse of carrying the gospel to the ‘common people’ as demonstrated by Third Order Franciscans (Irvin & Shank 2012, 93). Suffering was part and parcel of discipleship as an identification with Christ, as was a rejection of any kind of violence in relationship to the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (Shank 2010, 292).

This focus on discipleship played into their interpretation of the Great Commission. The Anabaptists directly linked their perspective of the Great Commission to Christian history—looking back pre-Constantine and the Acts church as the “Golden Age” of Christianity. Littell asserts that this theme, the “restitution of the early church” directly fed into their church and mission praxis (1947, p. 17). They also saw it as central to life, discipleship, and obedience to Jesus: “In right faith, the Great Commission is fundamental to individual confession and to a true ordering of the community of believers. The Master meant it to apply to all believers at all times” (Littell 1947, 19). In fact, references to it appeared constantly in Anabaptist sermons and writings. This understanding of the intertwining of church and mission led to a deep sense of call to the task of evangelism and discipleship (Graber 1957, 153; Kasdorf 1975, 305).

The Anabaptists rejected the idea of Christendom, and believed that every believer was also ‘sent’ by Christ and had an active role to play, empowered by the Holy Spirit: “...as the Believers’ Church is Christo-centric, so the mission of that Church is ecclesiocentric; as Christ sends the Church into the World, so the Church sends the missionary across social, cultural, and geographical boundaries” (Kasdorf 1975, 315). In keeping with their separation of church and state, they frowned on city councils collecting tithes for the church or Christians serving in the military (Irvin and Sunquist 2012, 91) They also had a strong anticlericalism, thinking that common people could read scripture, pick leaders, and be leaders themselves. That is, they believed in the efficacy of the Holy Spirit to interpret scriptures and speak words of prophecy (Irvin & Sunquist 2012, 92).

Kasdorf divides the Anabaptist mission approach from early spontaneous efforts beginning in 1525 to becoming carefully planned efforts from 1527 and onwards. In this first period, they were under persecution and many wandered as pilgrims, spreading the good news. Secondly, they held house meetings with the design to bring entire families to Christ. Third, there was an emphasis on Bible reading and lay evangelism, especially as the leaders of the movement were

frequently imprisoned. Finally, persecution and martyrdom played a role in witness as very few recanted their faith. Only a few of the 60 leaders who met at the Augsburg missionary conference in 1527—the first Protestant missionary conference which came to be known as the ‘Martyr Synod’—lived to the 5th year of the movement (1975, 308, 309).

After 1527, things began to systematize. Wandering preachers continued, but there was also a plan to begin sending missionaries. Bands of two or three ‘apostles’ were sent out for the specific purpose of evangelism and church planting. Because of the theology of the Anabaptist teaching, the lay activity and witness was strong through family ties, friends and neighbors, and employment contacts (Kasdorf 1975, 309, 310). Already in 1528, there were many Anabaptist churches in Austria. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Anabaptists were preaching in Germany, in Austria, Switzerland, Holland, France, Poland, Galicia, Hungary, and Italy. A few traveled as far north as Denmark and Sweden and as far south as Greece and Constantinople. There is even historical evidence of an Anabaptist conversation referencing the “Red Indians across the sea” (Moore, qtd. in Kasdorf 1975, 315).

In these early days, death and persecution were part and parcel of the missionary movement. Women were key activists in the early movement, holding secret meetings and providing safe places for itinerant preachers (Schaeufele 1962, 101; Irvin & Sunquist 2012, 92). Some estimates hold that 4,000-5,000 men, women and children were killed (Kasdorf 1975, 315). “Men and women left their homes to go on evangelistic tours. The established churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, were aghast at these ministers of both sexes insinuating themselves into town and farm” (Bainton 1985, 101).

In summary, Wolfgang Schaeufele writes:

In the Anabaptist Brotherhood, as is well known, there was no distinction between an academically educated ministerial class on the one hand and the laity on the other. Each member was potentially a preacher and a missionary, and each single member had equal opportunity for advancement according to his own competence, just as was the case in primitive Christianity. Luther’s “priesthood of all believers” became a practical reality in Anabaptism (1962, 100).

## **Discussion**

In a day and age of eschatological anxieties, and with a new emphasis on the Gospel, Word of God and justification by faith, why the radical difference in missiology and praxis? First, theological interpretation and application to current socio-political realities led to a discrepancy between how the Reformers and Anabaptists viewed the church’s relationship to society and mission. Littell argues that the disagreement between Protestantism and the Anabaptists was primarily

an understanding of church. They saw the Reformers aligning “an unbaptized conformity of the church to national and political destinies (1947, 16, 17; Shank 2010, 275). Their inclination toward the book of Acts as the Golden Age of Christianity caused them to criticize the Reformers with the same vein of dismissal in which they held the period of Constantine: “Church and state were amalgamated, empty formalism and spiritual slackness prevailed, infants were baptized into Christianity before their understanding was mature enough to give the association any content” (Littell 1947, 18). In contrast, the Reformers criticized those who caused upheaval in the family and social order by leaving families and communities to wander as pilgrims (Littell 1947, 20).

Secondly, their differing interpretations of the Great Commission, particularly set within this eschatological fervency influenced mission praxis. Luther and other mainstream Protestants held to the view that the Great Commission was less the role of the church and more the role of a Christian government (Kasdorf 1975, 304). The Anabaptists not only grasped onto the Great Commission as an essential part of discipleship, they also believed in the power of the laity, egalitarian communities of men and women to accomplish and carry out the task.

The understanding of God’s mission and the role of the individual in the mission relates to this. Shank observes three types of mission in the sixteenth century. First is the one understood by the Catholic and magisterial Protestantism. Whether the country was “Roman Catholic” or “Protestant” determined the faith of the subjects: “The population was Christianized, people believed the gospel, and the mission was fulfilled” (2010, 283). The Reformers believed that the Protestant state was a result of the Great Commission that had already been fulfilled by the apostles. Catholicism took this understanding of mission further into colonial expansion. Territories were claimed for the church and for the ruling monarch. The Great Commission transported the social, political, and cultural, and religious enterprise from the occupying power.

Secondly, Shank points to the Jesuit order in the 1540s—a missionary was sent into foreign lands not necessarily claimed by a foreign power, but usually having some prior relationship. The missionary efforts involved baptism of the masses — a missionary claimed that in 1536, between 4 and 9 million people were baptized in Mexico and Peru (Shank 2010, 283).

The third type was that which was understood by the Anabaptists—the Great Commission was mandated to all believers at all times, “it was a call to become freely subject to the Lord Christ within a disciplined congregation practicing fraternal community and peace” and it rejected the “ecclesiasticism that blessed the existing political, social, economic and cultural patterns” (Shank 2010, 284).



## Implications for Today

The differences of mission praxis between the Reformers and the Anabaptists raise important questions today in regards to the Church's missiology, theology, and interaction with the socio-cultural realities in which a particular church finds itself.

First, definitions of mission are extremely important. Luther's focus on the re-evangelism of Christendom was obviously critical, but one could argue that it was incomplete, and this incompleteness was based on his understanding of the Great Commission and how he understood those outside of Christendom. How one understands mission influences what that individual actually does in his or her life. Working backwards, one can study the behavior of a church in a particular context to understand the mission theology of a church. The Anabaptists' theology and missiology left no room for inactivity. Baptism, a crime punishable by death, meant that a believer was committed to the way of Christ even to the point of suffering and death in order to obey the Great Commission.

Secondly, if being 'sent' is part and parcel of mission, the question is, who is sent? For the Anabaptists, being 'sent' is intertwined with discipleship resulted in a concentrated and effective mission strategy in the face of persecution and martyrdom. The Anabaptist commitment to lay training and equipping for mission should give our modern evangelical churches pause—how much church work is considered to be the task of the leadership or the missionaries? What role does the laity play in everyday mission praxis in the church? In addition, the early Anabaptists empowered women in these active roles, which was critical in spreading the movement, as women are often more than fifty percent of the church. Are women considered equal disciples in a given context and allowed the social power to be obedient to Christ in matters of discipleship and mission?

Thirdly, what role should be the relationship between the church and society? The Reformers' assumption regarding the state and religion resulted in certain attitudes toward mission praxis, as opposed to the resistance found in the Anabaptist approach. It is important to note that although the Reformers were radical in terms of their renewal of the gospel, they accepted other realities as status quo, such as the authorities' role in spreading Christianity. Should this relationship be contextually determined as countries differ in their religious and political climates? Therefore, theologians and missiologists in every context have an important role to suggest ways in which a church should interact and/or challenge society in a given context. How does a church balance prophetic responsibility to bear witness of the gospel in society with being compliant with government laws and regulations? The Reformers and Anabaptists had vastly different views and approaches regarding this.

Fourth, the Anabaptists accepted suffering as part and parcel of discipleship and mission, an understanding that is grasped in many parts of the world but is largely absent in the Western world. Clearly, as in other times in history, the Anabaptists suffering and martyrdom only promulgated their message. How are suffering, discipleship, and mission understood in a particular context?

Finally, related to one's understanding of mission, it is important to put the Great Commission in perspective with the rest of the Bible and in the context of Christian history. As the early Anabaptists felt that an entire period of history had departed from an 'authentic Christianity,' this raises the question of ultimate responsibility. Who is responsible for fulfilling the Great Commission? This goes back to a concept in Moltmann's theology and one espoused by current missiologists—it is not that the Church has a mission; rather God's mission has a Church (1977, 64). Modern mission movements that lay out a strategy to 'finish the task' run the same error of judgment the Anabaptists made in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To claim church error over a whole epic of history or pretend that we can plan out how to 'finish the task' removes God as being the originator and sender of mission and puts human wisdom and capabilities at the helm instead. Ultimately, we must be obedient disciples to carry out the mandate of the Great Commission in the power of the Holy Spirit—but only God can accomplish his salvation and mission to the entire cosmos in his appointed time.

## Conclusion

There is much to learn, both from mistakes and inspirational practices from the Reformers and the Anabaptists. Most critical for 21<sup>st</sup> century mission, however, is to understand the connections between theology and missiology applied to a specific context. Such reflections can challenge the way a church is engaging with society in a particular context, how it is equipping its members for discipleship and mission, and its view of itself in relationship to God's mission.

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## **Misija i reformacija: Lekcije iz iskustva reformatora i anabaptista**

### Sažetak

Znanstvena interakcija kretala se od rasprave da su reformatori bili indiferentni prema misiji do tvrdnje da su Luther i Calvin imali misijsku teologiju ugrađenu u njihovo razumijevanje Evanđelja i davanje naglaska na propovijedanje Božje riječi. S druge strane, tijekom istoga vremenskog razdoblja anabaptisti su se pojavili kao pokret s radikalnom i promišljenom misijskom praksom. Kako strujanja novonastaloga protestantizma u sličnim socio-političkim kontekstima mogu razviti toliko različitu misijsku praksu? Ovaj članak istražuje taj raskorak između dva pokreta, a zatim nudi implikacije i pitanja relevantna za misijsku Crkvu 21. stoljeća.