Mission and Migration:
Reflections on the Missionary Concept of Wilhelm Löhe

FRIEDER LUDWIG

Wilhelm Löhe (1808–1872) is widely regarded as one of the primary German nineteenth-century protagonists of mission. Through his activities, a network was established between Europe and the New World, and Lutheranism became much more global. Both the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can claim him as one of their “founding fathers.” Today, Löhe’s missionary thinking is discussed in Germany, the USA, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, and he has been portrayed as one of the first representatives of world Lutheranism. He also developed concepts to spread the Christian message to people of other faiths, and his thoughts mark a transition from the evangelistic approaches of the Awakening to a more Lutheran confessional approach.


2Christian Weber, Missionstheologie bei Wilhelm Löhe: Aufbruch zur Kirche der Zukunft (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996) 15. The global dimension may be symbolized by the Löhe chair of Mission and World Christianity. This chair, which received its name from the Bavarian strategist, was established at Wartburg Seminary in the United States and until recently occupied by the Indian missiologist H. S. Wilson.

3Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, Kirche und Volk in der deutschen Missionswissenschaft (München: Chris-

The missionary work of Wilhelm Löhe exhibited both a sense of European cultural superiority and a commitment to evangelical outreach based in confessional theology. His vision of a global church characterized by dynamically expanding congregations remains remarkably relevant.
Löhe became interested in mission during his studies in Erlangen when he attended the lectures on mission history of Johann Christian Krafft (1784–1845) in 1826. In 1827, Löhe established a Mission Association to support the Basel mission, and between November 1829 and April 1830 this circle read the book of Heinrich Loskiel on the history of the Moravians’ mission to the Native Americans. In his diary, he reported about the meetings of the association from 1827 onwards, and his writings on mission then cover a period of roughly four decades.

Löhe did not write very systematically about mission, however, and only part of one of the twelve volumes of the collected works is devoted to the discussion of mission. Moreover, there are only three essays that explicitly deal with the topic “mission to the heathen.” His involvement in practical missionary work was strongest during the period from 1841 to 1854, when he was in direct contact with the German emigrants in North America. After the mission to the Native Americans had failed in 1864, the Bavarian missionary engagement among people of other faiths was discontinued until Johann Flierl started the mission in New Guinea in 1886 (a date sometimes regarded as the beginning of the Neuendettelsau mission).

MISSION AND COLONIAL CULTURE

In his approach to people of other cultures and other faiths Löhe reflected the mainline missionary thinking of his period. In contrast to the practice of previous centuries, when missionaries had studied other religions to some extent, the belief in the ultimate superiority of European culture prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, Löhe referred to adherents of African Traditional Religions as “heathens in the wilderness” and also opined that the missionaries who were sent to them would not necessarily have to be trained and educated up to the level of a preacher in Germany. Quoting from a booklet of the Basel mission, he described the “superstitions of the negroes,” who, it was stated, not only served the crocodiles and the snakes, but also the tigers—a species that is rather rare in...
In regard to the religion of the native Americans or “red Indians,” as he called them, he was somewhat more sympathetic. Although he regarded their “superstitions” as just as bad as those of other “heathens,” he also thought that they had a “religious sense” and a “definition of God and godly things” that were “much purer and closer to the truth than those of other heathens.”

Löhe was also influenced by the antislavery movement that had close ties to the Protestant missionary movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There was a common conviction that the Christian participation in the transatlantic slave trade had been wrong and that Europeans could make up for their guilt by helping the Africans to “advance from their degraded status.” Thus, a favorite missionary text of the time was the reference to the Macedonian man of Acts 17 with his plea “Come over and help us.” The slogan of the antislavery movement was “Commerce, Civilization, Christianity.”

This idea was particularly influential in England. Under the leadership of Henry Venn, the London-based Anglican Church Missionary Society (whose finances exceeded those of continental societies by far) aimed to establish an African middle class whose members should be able to take over leadership positions in business, politics, and in the church. The concept emphasized that in principle Africans had the same abilities as Europeans, but it also believed in the progress of civilization along European lines. The idea figured prominently in the 1842 pamphlet of the Basel mission, and from there it was taken up by Löhe.

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Later, Löhe applied this idea to the situation of the Native Americans in North America. He noted that they had been driven out from their traditional homelands and that in some places terrible atrocities had been perpetrated against them. He expressed the thought that even if Lutherans had not participated in these activities, they should still accept the responsibility for what their Protestant brethren had done. One could say, Löhe wrote, that “what Protestants had been responsible for, Protestants should correct and pay for. One could justify this sentence by saying: ‘Indeed, German Protestants have not taken that responsibility upon themselves, but all the churches which emerged out of the reformation none-

12About Henry Venn (1796–1873), who was lay secretary of the CMS from 1841 until his death, see Wilbur R. Shenk, Henry Venn: Missionary Statesman (Ibadan: Maryknoll, 1983).
theless have something in common.' One could acknowledge the responsibility of another as one’s own.” Like the Africans, the Native Americans had suffered from European expansion. In both cases, Löhe was convinced that Lutherans had to accept responsibility and had to act with and on behalf of other Protestants and spread the good news.

The idea that this motivation for mission could also be linked to economic and political interests did not occur to most missionary thinkers of the period. Nor did it to Löhe. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that Löhe could have conceived such an idea, since in Bavaria missionary activities were forbidden. In 1832, for instance, Löhe was attacked for his missionary style of preaching and his organization of missionary meetings, and his deacon was advised to supervise him closely.

In their mixture of historical guilt, evangelistic zeal, and an assumed and unreflecting acceptance of European cultural superiority, Löhe’s ideas were very much in line with the concepts developed in centers like London and Basel. He was also influenced by the idea that the newly established congregations should not be indefinitely dependent on the missionary headquarters but soon become self-propagating, self-administering, and self-financing. Indeed, he wrote that he looked at them from the perspective of “a father, whose children had grown above his head and who receives one reminder after another that it is time to regard them as independent.”

However, unlike Henry Venn, who tried to apply this principle to congregations of new converts, Löhe was not referring to missionary work among Native Americans. He was referring to the church of the German immigrants. Indeed, it can be argued that the immigrant church was the main focus of his work in North America and that this immigrant church formed the starting point of his missiology.

MISSION AND LUTHERAN CONFESSION

There was another difference. From the mid-1830s onwards, Löhe increasingly emphasized a distinctively confessional Lutheran concept of mission. While in the first three decades of the nineteenth century Protestant missionary societies had often closely cooperated (many of the early missionaries of the Church Missionary Society were Germans trained in Basel, and this missionary ecumenism had been also supported by Lutherans), in 1834 there was a split when two candidates of the Lutheran seminary in Grünberg refused to go to Switzerland and participate in the Reformed communion. In 1835 the Lutheran missionary Karl Ludwig Löhe, “Die Heidenmission in Nordamerika,” in GW 4:102, quoted and translated in Ratke, Confession and Mission, 148.

Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher (with Alice Denny), Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism (London: Macmillan, 1960), have coined the phrase “imperialism of free trade” for the period.

Weber, Missionstheologie, 97.


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Theophilus Ewald Rhenius (1790–1838), who had worked in India, was dismissed by the Church Missionary Society because he refused the demand that catechists had to be ordained by bishops and denounced the Anglican idea of apostolic succession. As a consequence, in 1836 the Evangelisch-Lutherische Missionsgesellschaft in Sachsen was established. It was first based in Dresden, then in Leipzig.18

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In Bavaria, Löhe was one of those responsible for directing the missionary movement into a more denominational and confessional direction, that is, into a church that was identifiable by confession and order. From January 1834, he supported the Lutherans in Silesia who resisted the Prussian Union of 1817 and were repressed by armed forces; and from September 1835 he came to regard the struggle as “blessed.” The Rhenius incident led him to the conviction that it was no longer possible for him to support Basel. He became more and more interested in supporting and sending Lutheran missionaries from Bavaria. Indeed, for some time he considered Rhenius a candidate for such a venture, but there was no enduring connection.19 In his writings, Löhe accused Basel of indifferentism. In Basel, he wrote, the doctrines are presented as shades of the truth but as of such minimal importance that a preacher among the heathen does not need to regard them and should only point out what is common in all denominations. Löhe strongly disapproved and emphasized the distinct doctrines of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.20

While it may seem strange today to call the evangelical Basel missionaries “indifferent”; and while the split of the Protestant missionary movement into more and more denominational societies was also problematic for the spread of the gospel and the perception of Christians in non-Western countries,21 with this new accentuation Löhe was able to form a close link between Lutheran mission and Lutheran church. To Löhe, the commandment of Mark 16:15 (“Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation”) is addressed not to a particular mission society but to the whole church. In “Die Mission und die Kirche” (1841) he asked, “Which among all the missionary societies is the one which the Lord has commanded to preach the Gospel among all the heathen...” and answers “The Church, the Communion of Saints, the largest of all societies....As it is the duty of the Church to care

21At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Indian Anglican bishop V. S. Azariah would state that the divisions within Christianity may be tolerated in the West, but that they are a stumbling block in a country like India where only two percent of the population are Christians.
under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for existing congregations with Pastors and teachers, so she is also obliged to give light and salt of the earth to the heathen. It is not enough that here and there some members of the church unite, that here and there missionary societies emerge; all parts of the church are, because they are parts of the church, participants in the mission to the heathen.”22

MISSION AND LOCAL OUTREACH

This leads to a new perspective: Mission is not the private initiative of a selected few; it is right at the center. The church needs mission and mission needs the church. Indeed, to Löhe “mission is nothing but the one church of God in motion” (Mission ist die Kirche in ihrer Bewegung). “Mission is the life of the catholic church.” Mission is not a function of the church, it is the church.23

Löhe also stressed that God is at the root of this movement, not human agencies. In this regard, he was far ahead of his time. “God does it alone, since if something good happens through us, it is only his good spirit that causes both, the will and the achievement.”24 Thus, a century before the world missionary conference of Willingen in 1952, in which the concept of “Missio Dei” was formulated, Löhe emphasized that mission is God’s mission; his understanding of this “Missio Dei” was strongly christological.25

Löhe’s understanding of mission led to a renewal of the congregations. As mentioned above, when he was a pastor in Bavaria, he established groups and associations to discuss and support missions. In his early period, he was particularly fascinated by the Moravians: “They started their mission only a century ago, but now they have missions in Greenland, Labrador, North and South America, West Indies, and South Africa.” The fact that they had run into debt of 30,633 Thaler in 1840 Löhe evaluated rather positively: it was a proof that these missionaries were creditable and that a large and solid success was expected.26

After he had read an appeal in which the German American Pastor Friedrich Wynecken described the suffering of the Lutheran emigrants in the United States, from December 1840 onwards the shape of Löhe’s ideas developed into a concrete and contextually conditioned concept. While so far his activities had been re-

stricted, now the door was wide open to support the emigrants to North America. Löhe alleged that not much had been done for them and contrasted this with the activities of the Roman Catholic Church:

Most of the German immigrants are members of the Lutheran Church. In the year 1824, there were 627; in 1838, 800 German Lutheran congregations in the middle and southern states of the US, and the many who live in the diaspora are not counted among them. Does the Evangelical Church in Germany not ask about her many children? The pope divided North America into districts [Sprengel] and sends his messengers to the sheep[fold], and the church in which God’s love is revealed in a richer way and which knows a fullness of grace of which the Catholic Church is not aware, should she not look after those who belong to her?

Löhe started to collect contributions, to formulate prayers for the exiles, and write articles about them. He regarded the situation as a challenge: “This is also a mission, and one which is worth all help.” The measures included sending a preacher or a teacher and supporting the emigrants financially. These emigrants were connected to the church in Germany as Lutherans and as Germans, and they were in danger from the lack of pastoral care and because of the activities of other denominations and “sects.”

Löhe linked this mission among the migrants to mission among the Native Americans. He planned to establish mission colonies of German Lutherans from which the natives could be evangelized. Löhe’s perspective was that the personal interaction with nearby Native Americans would witness to the Christian message of salvation. He was convinced that their settlements were rich mission fields waiting to be “harvested.” Those who lived in these mission colonies need do nothing more than be Christians. Therefore, the notion that mission began in the congregations was at the very center of Löhe’s mission theology and, in this, he referred to the historical models of the apostles and also the medieval mission in Germany.

Thus, the congregations founded in the Midwest, specifically in the Saginaw Valley of Michigan, were established with a double purpose: to give spiritual comfort to the German pioneers and to show the native Indians in the area “how good and beautiful it is to see Jesus” (Wie gut und schön es ist Jesus zu sehen). Along the Cass River, the colony Frankenmuth was founded. The thirteen colonists, mostly farmers from the area around Neuendettelsau (eight were from Rossthal) decided in their constitution of 1845 that Frankenmuth was to be an exclusively German-Lutheran community, and the colonists pledged to remain loyal to Germany and faithful to the German language. Soon after they had arrived and purchased 680 acres of Indian reservation land from the federal government for $1,700 in August

27Weber, Missionstheologie, 194.
28There are not many references in his writings to earlier Lutheran engagements like that of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711–1787) and to the history of Lutheranism in North America.
29Löhe, GW 4:17.
30Weber, Missionstheologie, 199.
31Ratke, Confession and Mission, 149f.
1845, their Pastor Cramer began to visit the Chippewa Indians in the area to interest them in a mission school for their children.32

Although the settlement did not always develop along the lines Löhe would have favored (there were conflicts about the ways in which the settlements were organized, and eventually also about the German language as a basis for instruction), it continued to grow and to prosper. In 1846 a second group of about ninety emigrants journeyed to Frankenmuth. Löhe complained about the large number, because he felt that many did not have the missionary cause at heart, but then three other colonies were founded in Michigan: Frankentrost, about six miles north of Frankenmuth, in 1847; Frankenlust, twenty-two miles north of Frankenmuth, in 1848; and Frankenhilf (called Richville today), about nine miles northeast of Frankenmuth. In 1852, an educational institution was founded in Saginaw. The following year the school was moved to Dubuque (Iowa), and in 1854 seminary education was begun. The aim of the institution, which eventually became Wartburg Theological Seminary, was to develop local pastoral and missionary leadership.

While the immigrant communities flourished, the mission to the Native Americans was not a success. As one may expect, there were some problems unanticipated by Löhe: The colonists knew nothing of the Native Americans’ appearance, behavior, culture, or language. Moreover, the Native Americans were already leaving the settlement areas in search of better hunting grounds away from the cleared lands of Europeans. Efforts to change their nomadic habits and to “Germanize” and “Lutheranize” them were not very successful. Thus, in Frankenmuth, for instance, only about thirty-five Native Americans were taught and baptized.33 Indeed, Löhe’s missionary concept with its insistence on German culture and language has been criticized as a typical outcome of German romanticism.34

In other ways, however, Löhe’s missionary theology was ahead of its time and contained elements that are still relevant today. Löhe was successful in highlighting the vision of a global church that was characterized by dynamically expanding congregations. He established a strong link between Lutheran migration and Lutheran mission, thereby emphasizing the principle of the priesthood of all believers. And although the mission to the Native Americans was not a success, the spirit of global engagement was kept alive.35


32“About Frankenmuth,” online at http://www.frankenmuth.org/about/history.html.
33Ibid.
34J. C. Hoekendijk, Kirche und Volk, 77f.