



**Issues, Etc.**<sup>TM</sup>  
Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio

## TRANSCRIPT

*Rev. Todd Wilken, Host*

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### **2015 *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week "Challenges to Lutheranism: Missionalism"**

**Guest:**

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**WILKEN:** During this *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week, we've been talking about some of the challenges to Lutheranism, past and present. The one we're going to talk about during this hour of *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week is more present than it is past. We don't have to go that far back to see its origins – maybe, then, we can examine it a little more carefully.

We struggled with what to call this. About 40 years ago, there was a push for evangelization all across the American religious landscape. It's emerged as something called the missional church, or the missional movement. We're calling it "missionalism" as a challenge to Lutheranism, one of the more present

challenges to Lutheranism – indeed, what are those challenges?

Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. Thanks for tuning us in this Thursday afternoon, the 29<sup>th</sup> of October.

Joining us to talk about the challenge to Lutheranism in missionalism is Dr. Ken Schurb. He's a regular guest and Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He has a PhD in history from Ohio State University, formerly served as a theology professor at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and as an Assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Ken, welcome back.

**SCHURB:** Wonderful to talk to you on this beautiful afternoon, Todd.

**WILKEN:** We don't have to go too far back to get to the roots of this. And maybe we begin 40 years ago, mid-1970, somewhere in that neighborhood. Talk about that big drive for evangelization that was being pushed across the Christian spectrum of denominations and confessions of faith in this country.

**SCHURB:** Well, if you had to identify one *really* big thing that was gathering steam at the time – momentum, by the way, that would carry it through the 1980s and even into the 1990s, it was the self-proclaimed church growth movement. Now, the people who gave you church growth said that it was both a theological conviction and an applied science. The theological conviction was pretty easy to state: the church should grow in measurable, countable ways. And the science part of it had to do with tabulating and increasing the count. The church growth movement was, quite frankly, an approach to church life that was really based on the prevailing culture of the time. At that time, a well-known church growth leader drew attention to the surrounding culture and setting and he said, "You know, for Americans, success and failure are the

big things. And success and failure are measured by statistics." So he said, "I know of no good reason to deny that the church growth movement has built into its methodology many reflections of American cultural values, specifically Anglo-American cultural values."

**WILKEN:** Can you imagine, Ken, the church growth movement rising out of a different cultural setting?

**SCHURB:** Well, it would be difficult to imagine that, because this movement reflected its times so very well. When church growth was peaking as a movement, members of the "Baby Boom" generation were coming into their maturity. They'd reached a point of personal earning power, so that they – I should say we, because I'm a baby boomer too – were enormously influential in the country. Retailers were catering to us baby boomers. We were in that prime demographic of 18-49 years old. They wanted to sell us things, these retailers, and we wanted to buy from them. We were that prime demographic. Sociologists studied us, we were being lured by big events, by entertainment. Baby boomers were into entertainment, into pop culture, in perhaps a bigger way than previous generations had been. Now, I'm speaking pretty broadly here, Todd, obviously. But it should not be surprising that church analysts determined that a good way to draw baby boomers into churches was some of the same ways that they were being attracted to retail stores, or to various concerts. Church growth got behind the axiom that said, "Find a need and fill it." That was your recipe for success. So, for example, it was said if you can serve up a diet of positive sermons focused on the real, felt needs of people, then you will be preaching for growth. The decisive thing there that was supposed to build the church, grow the church was not Gospel proclamation through which the Holy Spirit creates faith, but rather love that would be

expressed through the utilization of various putative spiritual gifts in small groups.

**WILKEN:** So it sounds like even though the church growth movement said that it represented the theological conviction that the church ought to grow, it really didn't have very deep theological roots. It didn't delve deeply into matters truly theological.

**SCHURB:** No, it didn't. And that was really by design. People in the church growth movement said, "We are keeping these church growth principles as *a*-theological as possible. And really, the assumption was you could fit them into any prevailing theology. The question, of course, is whether church growth's preferred practices were *really* that neutral. I'm sure you've heard the adage, Todd, "Not to decide is to decide." Well, when you say off the top that you're not going to commit yourself, not going to take a firm position, as church growth did, on things like Baptism, the Lord's Supper, whether conversion is totally worked by God or depends upon the decision of the person, then yeah, you're going to be theologically shallow, and in not taking up a position on those things, you're really taking a position. So the question can be asked, what kind of Gospel are you then proclaiming here in the church growth movement? What is it that the church is supposed to grow on? And even the friends of church growth said it's theologically fuzzy. For example, churches that implemented church growth programs would sometimes have a one-day adult instruction class, or maybe an all-day seminar on a Saturday. But that's all the theology you needed. There were more and other things to talk about.

**WILKEN:** Okay, the term "pragmatism" – I've even read of church growth gurus who have said, "Yeah, this is really the essence of the church growth movement." It is intensely, intentionally, and in many ways,

exclusively pragmatic. What does that mean and why is that a problem?

**SCHURB:** Well, yeah, they said it. They said, "We need to do things pragmatically that will give us a countable church." Can the church be counted? Well, if it's God who's doing the counting, yeah, the church can be counted. But for us, as Luther observed, *concealed* is the church. The saints are hidden. Now, of course, we take people at their word when they confess Christ, but we can't see the faith in their heart that makes them Christians, that makes them members of the Church. What we *can* say with certainty is not *who* the various people in the church are, but *where* the church is – namely, where the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed and His Sacraments are administered. Because it's through these means of grace that God creates and sustains faith, and so builds the church.

**WILKEN:** Did the church growth movement highly regard what you just mentioned there – those means of grace – in that way?

**SCHURB:** Well, no. In 1995, in fact, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, in its convention, adopted a resolution that critiqued church growth. And the very first thing that this resolution pointed out was that the movement denied the effectiveness of the means of grace, instead relying on principles and practices from the behavioral sciences. Now, there were other things mentioned in the resolution, like the claim that the church's numerical growth depends upon the discovery and employment of so-called spiritual gifts, or the way church growth confused the priesthood of all believers with the office of the ministry, the use of worship forms and practices that focused on feelings and experiences, not Word and Sacraments – you could go on adding items. But this particular list began, and really ended, with the way church growth denied or downplayed the means of grace.

**WILKEN:** Okay, you said, what, mid-90s, 1995, that resolution came – was it too late? What was happening in the church growth world by that time? Because we're talking about, now, 25 years after it began.

**SCHURB:** Yeah, this is interesting. By the time a lot of churches, including the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, really got to the point of commenting on this officially, there was a lot of water under the bridge. Or, to change the image to a roller coaster, you might say that the movement had peaked already by 1995. It was in 1991 that one of the big names in the church growth movement, C. Peter Wagner, said, "There's nothing really wrong with these church growth principles we've developed. But they don't work. They just don't seem to work." And that's an enormous admission from somebody who was, frankly, pragmatic, who said, "We're doing [these] things because they're gonna work." Well, when the things that are supposed to work don't work, then that's a bitter pill to swallow. Wagner himself said the answer for this is now "power evangelism," he called it: signs, wonders, prophecies, miraculous healings. Not everybody in the church growth movement was willing to go with him down that path. So the movement kind of fragmented at that point. And besides, by the early 90s, a lot of people were getting the sense that this is pretty theologically arid. We need some more theological juice here. So they said the main church growth issues for the 90s are gonna be theological, methodological. Well, a theological set of issues was emerging by that time, and it would snap into clearer focus by the end of the 90s. But it didn't come from the people who gave you church growth. Nonetheless, it had the same fundamental problem of denying or downplaying the meaning of grace, though.

**WILKEN:** We'll talk about that on the other side of the break. We're talking about the challenges to Lutheranism during this

*Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. On this Thursday, October the 29<sup>th</sup>, the challenge we're talking about is missionalism. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest, Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He has a PhD in history from Ohio State University, formerly served as a Theology Professor at Concordia University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and as an Assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. It's *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week, and on this Thursday afternoon, the challenge to Lutheranism that we're discussing with Dr. Ken Schurb is missionalism.

In that term "missionalism," Ken, is the word "missional," often described as "missional church." I don't recall hearing this term until maybe ten years ago. Have I been missing something?

**SCHURB:** No, I don't think you've been missing much, actually. The term "missional church" and the kind of thinking that is signified by it broke in a big way in 1998 with the book called *Missional Church*. Now, the missional church movement, I want to make this clear, is *not* to be confused with the church growth movement that we were talking about before the break, that was big back in the 70s, 80s, and early 90s. In fact, the missional movement can be downright critical of the church growth movement and its practices. They'll say church growth was pragmatic, technique-driven, theologically shallow. Make no mistake, missional church thinking characterizes itself as very different. It says "We are thoroughly theological." This thinking insists that its practices do not grow haphazardly, like lichens on a tree trunk. Unlike church growth, missional church thinking wants practices that grow from deep theological roots. Now the question, Todd, is which theology? Since none of the people who

wrote that 1998 book, *Missional Church*, were Lutheran, it might not surprise us that the book lacked Lutheran insight and that missional church theology basically is not Lutheran.

**WILKEN:** Now, at that point, some of our listeners might be saying, “But I’ve heard Lutherans using the term ‘missional.’”

**SCHURB:** Yeah, and let me be clear here, Todd. I’m not trying to quibble over a word. I’m not out to say somebody’s a crook for using the word missional. The fact is, this word has been used in a variety of ways. In fact, I once asked the American church historian and church observer Leonard Sweet what the word missional means. His first response was to say, “Well, lots of luck figuring that out!” He said, “Well, I know what I mean when I use the word,” but see, he wasn’t making any claim for anybody else. It’s probably important there that our listeners, if they are having questions about this, ask the questions of people when they use the word “missional.” Ask them what they mean. Because even though this term has been gaining currency for the last ten, maybe fifteen years, it still means a lot of different things to a lot of different people.

**WILKEN:** Give us an example. How is it sometimes used?

**SCHURB:** Well, the most innocuous way it can be used by people is basically simply for them to try to communicate that they’re in favor of missions, or that they promote missions. For them, it’s almost the same as saying that they’re, as people used to call it, “mission-minded.” But I find that way of speaking, that way of using the term missional, to be *amazingly* unreflective.

**WILKEN:** What do you mean by that, amazingly unreflective?

**SCHURB:** Well, it amounts to putting your head in the sand and ignoring scads of literature on missional church. Because

there is a mainstream of missional thinking. There are lots of rough edges to it and a fringe on the main movement. But there is a mainstream that insists on something quite different from just being “mission-minded,” or being “in favor of missions.” Really, the desire of the mainstream missional movement is to reorient the Church completely for a new day. And I submit that if Lutheran churches are not careful, this mainstream missional movement could prove sufficiently attractive to us, precisely because we are concerned with the Lord’s mission, and we say, “Oh, anything that promotes that ought to be good.” Missional church thinking could tempt us to compromise our confession of God’s working through the means of grace, in the Church and through the Church.

**WILKEN:** So is it in the teaching and practice of the Church, is that where the real life consequences of missional church theology that we’re discussing here come home to roost?

**SCHURB:** Well, most overtly so. There’s more beneath the surface that I think we’ll be talking about later on. But regarding the church – for example, the 1998 *Missional Church* book said very early on, and I’m quoting here, “The Church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the Gospel, but rather its instrument and witness.”

**WILKEN:** So I’m wondering what you have trouble with there – some would say, “Isn’t the Church God’s means to get the Gospel out into the world?”

**SCHURB:** Yeah, it is. But that’s not all the Church is. Don’t forget the Gospel’s role in *creating* the Church. Listen to what the book said: “The Church of Jesus Christ is *not* the purpose or goal of the Gospel, but *rather* its instrument and witness.” On a related note, sometimes you hear it said, and said pretty emphatically, “The Church does not exist for the benefit of its own members. It exists for other people.”

**WILKEN:** It doesn't sound too Lutheran to cast the Church strictly as an instrument of the Gospel, not recognizing the Church also as what God brings about through the Gospel.

**SCHURB:** Yeah, it doesn't sound too Lutheran because it's not! The Church *is* indeed created by the Gospel. Think of your catechism: "Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church, He forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers, precisely because God gives forgiveness through the Gospel, around which the church is gathered." So the Lutheran Confessions, and as I'm saying here, the Catechism, emphasized that the Church first receives forgiveness and life given by God, through His means of grace. The Church receives before she can give. So the Church is very much, if you will, a goal of the Gospel, as well as God's means for bringing the Gospel to the unchurched.

**WILKEN:** Could this, perhaps, be overcompensation on the part of the advocates of missionalism? What I mean is, do you find them really saying that the church has nothing to receive? That it only gives?

**SCHURB:** Well, let me respond to that question in two ways. First of all, I'll hold my ground here. Missional people most definitely do make the statement that the Church does *not* exist for its own members, but strictly for the unchurched. There's not a lot about the Church receiving God's means of grace there. In fact, some people characterize missional thinking – and I don't think it's an unfair characterization – as saying that in the missional church, everything ought to revolve around bringing the Gospel to the unchurched and not so much about bringing the Gospel to the people you already have. But now, second

– and try to be fair, here – I should note that in the years since 1998, since that *Missional Church* book was published, missional advocates have acknowledged that in their rush to talk about what the Church should *do*, they've not paid enough attention to what the Church *is*. So these days, you can find them saying, for instance, that the Church is a product *of* as well as a participant *in* God's mission. But Todd, what remains missing from this discussion is a theology of the means of grace as real means of grace. In other words, that the Lord actually imparts forgiveness of sins through Word and Sacrament. Missional sources will occasionally refer to baptism, refer to the Lord's Supper. But in a really revealing statement, leaders in the missional church movement a few years ago conceded that those who wrote that *Missional Church* book back in 1998 never really connected their ideas to a Word and Sacrament-oriented doctrine of the Church. And the work of making such connections, they said, remains largely undone.

**WILKEN:** Undone? I ask, is it *possible* to do such a thing?

**SCHURB:** Yeah, is it possible to connect missional thinking with means of grace theology? I don't think so. And certainly, that's not the way that mainstream missional thinking has been trending. For example, a fairly recent book pretty much equates "missional" with "joining God in the neighborhood." This book contends that the church has to discover what God is doing in the world by entering into the everyday life of the neighborhoods where we live. "For," the book says, "this is what the boundary-breaking Spirit is making clear to a growing number of people." And here the book provides us almost a perfect example of what the reformers called "enthusiasm." It have us listen for the saving voice of God other than in His Word. And just to give you a different example of the same thing – elsewhere, the same author recommends

that you have “listening teams” in churches that are poised to be missional. And these listening teams should ask questions and listen for people’s answers to questions like “What do you think are the most important life-giving characteristics of our church?” or “Describe a time in our church when God was most real and alive for you.” See, in our confessions, we Lutherans hold that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through, or with, the external Word, which comes before. Now, to be sure, the circumstances of life and your neighborhood and the world in general do reflect God’s Law. But looking for God’s grace and the new life He gives anywhere but in the Gospel, including consulting our own surmises, our own feelings, that constitutes a dead end at best. Of course, religious experience tends to form a substitute for the sacraments when people are depriving themselves of the sacraments. Missional advocates, I will say, Todd, miss the truth that God grants His grace through means. And at the same time, they don’t distinguish very well between Law and Gospel.

**WILKEN:** With about a minute here, summarize what we’ve said so far in our conversation before we move on after the break.

**SCHURB:** We’ve traced a couple of movements – one, the church growth movement that had its peak, say, in the 1980s, and the current missional movement, and it remains to be seen, frankly, if it has peaked or what’s going to happen to it from here on. And the common element in them both, although they do differ in a lot of ways – again, church growth was frankly pragmatic, and the missional church movement is very much theologically interested, very much theologically informed, sometimes very erudite about its theology – but they both deny or downplay the means of grace, that God actually grants the forgiveness of sins and life and

salvation through the Gospel and the Sacraments.

**WILKEN:** We’re going to take up a subject that Ken raised just a second ago, about the missional advocates not distinguishing very well between Law and Gospel, as we talk about missionalism as a challenge to Lutheranism, part of our *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week on this Thursday afternoon, October the 29<sup>th</sup>. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. He has a PhD in history from Ohio State University and he’s pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri.

**[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. We’re talking about the challenges to Lutheranism as part of *Issues Etc.* Reformation Week.

Ken, before the break, you said the missional advocates don’t do a very good job of distinguishing between Law and Gospel. Before we go on to some other concerns about not distinguishing things, what do you mean by that – not distinguishing between Law and Gospel?

**SCHURB:** You know, I was teaching this in catechism just the other night. Most basically, the Law is God’s Word that tells us how we are to be and what we are to do and not do. The Gospel is a completely different kind of word – still a word from God, but it tells us what God has done and still does for our salvation. We could contrast Law and Gospel at a number of other points. But that’s probably enough for our purposes right now. As I told the kids in class the other night, Law is always about what you do. Gospel is going to be about what God does for our salvation in Christ Jesus.

**WILKEN:** Now, does it also mean that they fail to distinguish between what we would call God’s right-hand rule and His left-hand rule? The right-hand rule being through

grace in the Church, through the means of grace, and His left hand rule in government, in society, and so forth?

**SCHURB:** Yeah, it's kind of an extension of the distinction between Law and Gospel. And missional church doesn't really make that distinction, either. A recent book claims that you've got to note that God is at work in the world beyond the Church, and to do effective, missional, if you will, ministry, you've got to discern that work of God that God is doing outside of the Church in the world. So the responsibility of the Church becomes discerning where and how this mission of God is unfolding so you can tag onto it. Now, that activity of God in the world that the Church is supposed to discern and get involved in may lie quite beyond the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Another missional writer calls attention to one church that just decides its next ministry chapter should be about building a better community, not building a better church.

**WILKEN:** Now, this gets at maybe what you meant about the mainline missional thinking not being Lutheran. What is the Lutheran confession concerning what the Church is supposed to be doing?

**SCHURB:** Well, "the power or command from God," the Augsburg Confession says, "to preach the Gospel, forgive and retain sins, and administer the Sacraments," is called there the "power of the keys" or "power of the bishops," and the power of the Church. That's what the Church should do.

**WILKEN:** So where does this notion that the Church should basically get involved in all manner of other projects apart from that in the neighborhood [come from]?

**SCHURB:** Well, missional church thinking weds this idea of the mission of God with the kingdom of God, understood as God's rule over the whole creation. This concept of the Church's mission is classically

Reformed, not Lutheran. It goes back to John Calvin, who, broadly speaking, figured that the kingdom of God was being expressed wherever, whenever the world was being provided with order. So in this thinking, the Church is supposed to fill the entire creation with God's kingdom, with Christ's rule over all things. So the Church reaches into the world, extends its rule into society, brings Christ's rule thereby into its social order. That rule of Christ, though, is basically Law. It's not Gospel.

**WILKEN:** So what does that have to do with what you were talking about earlier – that the missional movement doesn't see Word and Sacrament as the real means of grace, really and truly imparting to sinners Christ's forgiveness?

**SCHURB:** Yeah, if you're not expecting God to bring people salvation through the Gospel and the Sacraments, you can easily end up looking for Him to do His work in other ways. And any work that He might appear to be doing can seem to be the Gospel, in which the Church needs to be involved. So the Gospel becomes very broadly defined – Christ bringing good news to a bad situation, taking on any and every form of bad news, offering a new path and alternative future in a particular setting. One missional writer kind of clarified it. He said, "The classic church needs people who interpret the Biblical text. But the missional church needs journalists, people who can tell the story of what God is doing *today* so people start seeing various forms of service in the neighborhoods as the work of the Church – the work of the Church as the Church.

**WILKEN:** By way of parentheses here in our conversation, this is not unfamiliar territory. I think about the "social Gospel" movement, I think about churches that have so broadly defined the Gospel that now a soup kitchen is the Gospel. It's completely disconnected from the historic events of

Christ's life, suffering, death, and resurrection. What are your thoughts?

**SCHURB:** Well, it's kind of hard, at times, to see how this trend of the missional church differs from classic liberal Protestantism, yeah.

**WILKEN:** So Christians are, to make sure we're not misunderstood, they *are* called to get involved in the lives of their neighbors, loving acts of service, heartfelt service to their neighbor – [but] they're not the same thing as God's salvation, like the Gospel and the Sacraments, are they?

**SCHURB:** Yeah, and it comes as no shock, at least to me, that as the missional conception is played out, concern for the integrity of the Gospel and the Sacraments slips. So a parish might be considered as including several expressions of the Church, several different theological or confessional groupings all side by side. Or the need for the Church to gather around the means of grace comes into question. Some missional writers are frankly wondering whether churches need to get together and gather for church services on a weekly basis. Because, see, for them the real action is not in the forgiveness of sins as granted by God in the Gospel and Sacraments, but in whatever movement God is doing in the community. So you need to get more into the community. And when worship does take place, it's to celebrate what God is doing in the community. So worship becomes seen as an extension of normal, everyday activity, not something distinctly different from the rest of your week. And the missional picture does not necessarily include a place for pastors as those who administer God's gifts in the Gospel and Sacraments. Missional writers will say that there needs to be accountability, there needs to be admonition, learning, but they say you don't need a called and ordained pastor for that. Missional literature generally

downplays church positions, church offices. It'll even downplay having church *buildings*.

**WILKEN:** I was wondering what the missional attitudes might be toward this kind of imprecise term that is so often used: "leadership in the church"?

**SCHURB:** Yeah, it kind of runs in a couple of different ways. That's really interesting. You can see in a lot of missional literature – and I think this is kind of the main thrust of it – a sort of romantic view of the Apostolic Era church, kind of like it was a charismatic free-for-all, where leadership was very fluid, open to the ever-changing directions of the Spirit. Of course, what you *don't* see in this literature is what is quite evident in the book of Acts, namely, that there was in the Church, from the very start, an office of the ministry that had a mandate from the Lord that actually shaped the day-to-day activities of those who held it. Like the apostles say, "We shouldn't be waiting on tables like this; we've got to devote ourselves to the proclamation of the Word." At the same time, though, some missional writers look at a passage like Ephesians 4:11, insisting that the Church should have not only pastors and teachers today, but also apostles, prophets, evangelists. They say something's missing if you don't have all of those. In fact, they'll say a church that only has pastors and teachers is probably not so missional, because it's the apostles, prophets, and evangelists who are supposed to be the real "generative" forms of the ministry. Now, they get very vague about what exactly an "apostle" is supposed to be. How are you going to get apostles when there are no more eyewitnesses to the career and resurrection of Christ? They don't really say.

**WILKEN:** How much does frustration drive this whole missional view of the Church?

**SCHURB:** Quite a bit, Todd, and I think, in many ways, it is an understandable frustration. See, we live, indisputably, in a

post-Constantinian world – that is to say, the Church no longer has an informal, favored position in the society. You can't take Biblical literacy for granted; you can't take shared moral understandings for granted. People don't go out of their way to come to church. And all of those things are going to be of great concern to anybody who's concerned about evangelization. Now, the question is, what do you do with this frustration? As I've been saying, a big Achilles' heel of this missional thinking that sets a lot of the rest in context is the lack of recognition of the means of grace as actually delivering "the goods," actually providing forgiveness, life, and salvation. That shapes your whole view of the Church and her mission and her ministry and her message. No longer does the proclamation of the Gospel stand out as decisive as what brings people into the faith and so brings people into the Church. I think this blind spot can even affect the missional version of church history. I would guess that missional analysts would hear a phrase like "where the bishop is, there the church is" and they would think, "That's a relic of this now-outmoded period of Christendom. That's a Constantinian thing." Actually, of course, it comes from Ignatius of Antioch, two centuries before Constantine.

**WILKEN:** Let's take a break. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. We're talking about the challenge to Lutheranism that is missionalism during this *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week. Now, Lutherans are confessionally committed to the position that the church is where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered – real, live things happening there. Missional thinking, by the way, challenges that position quite explicitly. We'll talk about that on the other side of the break.

Dr. Ken Schurb is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. It's *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week.

### **[BREAK]**

**WILKEN:** Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. We're talking about the challenges to Lutheranism – today, missionalism; part of *Issues, Etc.* Reformation Week.

Ken, we began our conversation talking about the church growth movement kind of being a creature of the prevailing culture at the time – there's no doubt about that. What about the missional movement amidst Western churches here at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Is it yet another product of our time?

**SCHURB:** It is, and some missional writers point that out. I mean, it's different from church growth, unlike the consumption-driven 1980s. Missional writers point to now, these days, an increased spirit of altruism, giving, and that challenges the Church to get involved, not just to receive resources from the community, but plow things back into the community. Now, combine that with the pursuit of personal development, which is, in so many ways these days, facilitated by technology – from the internet to the various devices that enable you to access the internet. And people, as they want growth for themselves, tend to want it for others. They're not content with just institutional assurances of "Oh, give us some money, we'll do the right thing with it." They want to know where their money is going, or even to deliver it in a hands-on kind of way. All of that gives rise to churches directing their efforts, as well as their dollars, to the things that they can see right around them – the improvement of life in their communities. Toss in with that the fact that people all around us tend to be less concerned with "church," they say, than with "spirituality," and you get a growing surge that the Church, too, should be concerned with spirituality – not so much with "church." That's all fertile ground for this missional movement to grown on.

**WILKEN:** You've been saying that the missional church thinking presents a challenge to Lutheranism, and you've drawn that out theologically from this missional literature, noting differences – stark differences – with Lutheranism's teachings on the means of grace in the Church, the Church's mission and ministry, all those things. It runs afoul of all those things. But this is not strictly a matter of inference, is it? What I mean by that is missional church advocates directly and specifically challenge the Lutheran confessions, do they not?

**SCHURB:** Yeah. Lutherans should not overlook this challenge. Missional advocates sometimes will directly comment on the Augsburg Confession's definition of the Church in Article Seven as "the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the Sacraments are administered rightly." And however appropriate that formulation may have been in 1530, the claim is that it lies hopelessly mired in outmoded cultural assumptions from those Constantinian days when the Church had a privileged place in society. For example, David Bosch – who is not really part of the missional movement, but is sort of a grandfather of it – his thinking sort of proved generative for a lot of the missional thinking. He called attention to Augsburg Confession Article Seven. He kind of damned it with faint praise, like it was "good for its day, but..." But, see, I think that Bosch perhaps put too much stress as he read Augsburg Confession [Article] Seven on the Church as a *place*. That article does not actually describe the Church as a place. It says the Church is an "assembly." Now, it's true that Word and Sacrament are administered to people at particular places, locations. But these locations are as eminently movable as God's Word and Sacraments themselves are portable. In other words, there's nothing in the Augsburg Confession that precludes taking the Gospel to people where they are,

whether that's across the street or around the world.

**WILKEN:** Is that all the missional movement has to say by way of critique of Reformation Lutheranism?

**SCHURB:** No, the Spirit's "boundary breaking," according to at least one missional author, is – and I'm quoting him here, because this is important to get this straight – he says, "The Spirit's boundary breaking is also about the tradition of theologizing that came out of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformations in Europe. In a rapidly globalizing West," still quoting here, "now characterized by new and massive people movements from other parts of the world, this reformation boundary may also be one that the Spirit is breaking."

There's quite a statement, Todd, about the Holy Spirit breaking apart a whole tradition of theologizing. There's no further detail, at least in that book, about what the author means. You can pick up some hints from other missional authors; for example, one – again, in contrast with Article Seven of the Augsburg Confession, which says that for the true unity of the church, it's enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. This missional author says, "Oh, no, the Church's goal is *not* theological consensus, not agreement. Rather, the goal is Christians 'journeying' together." Or another missional advocate says, "The ones who get it" – the missional thing; that's his term, the "missional thing," "come from every tribe in the universe of Christianity. They have more in common with others who 'get it,' no matter what tribe or tradition they are from, than they have in common with those in their own tribe who *don't* get it. Now, here, Todd, the confession of the Gospel and the Sacraments becomes, not to overstate, a thing of the past – because it's a matter of one's own tribe or tradition, which is easily relegated to the background

by the “current missional thing.” And I just observe how differently people would speak if they regarded how the means of grace as our very conduits of life from God in the present.

**WILKEN:** So what can, or what should, Lutheran churches learn, if anything, from missional thinking?

**SCHURB:** Well, I’m glad you asked that question, because I think we can be well put in mind of a number of things by the missional movement. It is essential for us to reach out with the life-giving Gospel to people where they are. We should go to them, not necessarily always expect them to come to us. And it may take some more deliberate teamwork than we’re typically accustomed to to do that. And churches can get altogether wrapped up in themselves institutionally. And it is important for us as Christians, out of Christ’s love, as you said before, Todd, to become involved in the lives of people, and even leave our own preferred comfort zones to do so. And –this is one where I think we Lutherans need to sharpen up our language a bit – we need to articulate that Christians remain Christians, Christians remain *church* members, even when we’re not in church. When we’re on the job, when we’re at home, wherever the Lord has placed us in our callings. And in those situations, we do have the privilege and the responsibility of declaring the excellencies of the One who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. But, see, there’s the Gospel. Proclaiming the Gospel is the thing for which there can be no substitute. There’s just no substitute for God

imparting the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation through His means of grace. So, as in the past, the Church still in the future will need to gather around Word and Sacrament, then go out into the world with the saving Gospel and love for our neighbor, then gather once more and go out once more. It’s a continuous coming-in and going-out thing. The pastor who confirmed me used to say, “Here in the church, we bring them in, build them up, and send them out.” That’s constantly going on. One Lutheran missiologist, I think rightly, has observed that a Lutheran congregation needs to be a faith community that stands for something, and yet is able to provide wide entry points so that the lost might be included and healed. That’s different from what the missional people say.

**WILKEN:** With only twenty seconds here, can mainstream missional thinking be baptized into Lutheranism?

**SCHURB:** No. That leaves you 19 seconds. *[chuckles]*

**WILKEN:** Dr. Ken Schurb is Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He has a PhD in history from Ohio State University and formerly served as a Theology Professor at Concordia University Ann Arbor, Michigan, and as an Assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Ken, it is always a pleasure. Thank you very much.

I’m Todd Wilken. I’ll talk with you tomorrow. Thanks for listening to *Issues. Etc.*

