

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN JAPAN

Naoki Asano



The first Christian ever to arrive in Japan's history was Francisco Xavier, a Jesuit monk from Portugal, in 1549, only three years after Martin Luther's death. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Despite the tumult of the Reformation in Europe, the spirit of the Great Commission to far-off people did not fade away, but rather spurred a Roman Catholic to the unknown world of the Far East.

Despite the best efforts of Catholic evangelism, the first Japanese Christians had to go underground due to severe persecution and the prohibition of Christian faith when the Edo shogunate closed the country and ruled out any kind of influx from the West. The underground Christians, however, did survive by concealing their faith in a creative way or by pretending they were not Christians, and so lived on into the modern era.

Protestant evangelism began after Japan opened its door to the world in 1858 with the end of an exclusivism that had lasted more than two hundred years. The global missions of different denominations in Europe and North America began to rush in one after another. Anglican missionaries arrived first in 1859, followed by Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Baptists came in 1869, and the Methodist missionaries started work in 1873. It was twenty years after this that the first Lutheran missionaries arrived from Charleston, South Carolina, and held the first Lutheran worship service at Saga on Kyushu Island. For this historic celebration two pastors, James A. B. Scherer and Robert B. Peery, were commissioned for overseas mission to this island across the Pacific by the United Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the South.

Since then, the Japanese Evangelical Lutheran Church (JELC) has grown up to 127 congregations with a membership of 22,000 out of a grain of seed sown by those two Americans. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth

and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). I believe this is what has happened in the soil of this land over the last 110 years. We have been blessed with a variety of ministries going on now, serving people in need of both spiritual and physical care. God is using our church as a part of Christ's body to build his kingdom together with other churches in the world, to build God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The meaning of "much fruit" in this verse can vary depending on how you look at the number. It is a Christian "big bang" from nothing to 127 congregations and 22,000 members: a wonder of God's creation. But the expansion has been stagnating since the turn of the century. In reality, 22,000 is a very small number out of Japan's total population of 120 million people. It has been said for a long time now that Japanese Christians

are struggling to exceed one percent of the total population and still have never managed to do so. Lutherans are a minority even among other Christians, though we regard ourselves as belonging to the "mainline" in Japan.

#### *Japanese Christians among Indigenous Religions*

Before discussing Japanese Lutheranism, it helps to have an overview of the whole church in Japan; the scale is not comparable to anything the west. The Japanese church is small in size and short in history.

The two major religions of Japan, Buddhism and Shinto, are considered national religions, in which 99% of Japanese people are thought to believe and practice. In truth, a great majority of the people say they do not belong to any particular religious organization, at least not in the way Christians belong to their congregations. Neither Buddhism nor Shinto require regular attendance at worship of their believers. Therefore, the practice of Christians, Muslims, and Jews in attending weekly worship is quite unusual

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to the Japanese. They do go to temples or shrines, but only a few times a year, on special occasions like the New Year, a child's blessing, or prayers for particular needs.

The sense of belonging to a congregation is so strong, and weekly worship is so important to Christians, that these two aspects make it difficult for Japanese persons to commit themselves to the Christian faith. It is not so much the teaching or doctrine itself as the traditional cultural expression of faith that makes it difficult for us to reach out to the people in the community.

### *Why I Became a Lutheran*

Then why did I become a Lutheran? This question is helpful to see our spiritual mindset. You may be very curious about this question. I was asked by many American Lutherans when I served in ELCA congregations of the South Carolina Synod in 2005. My answer is quite simple: because the Lutheran church was the closest to my house when I started to look for a church. I would have been a Roman Catholic or a Baptist if there had been one of those churches within a stone's throw of my house. And we are free from any Christian traditions that a family is supposed to pass on to the next generations. Very few people seek a denominational faith before becoming a Christian, no matter where in the world they live. We want to become Christian, first of all, and only then begin to think about what kind of faith it ought to be.

The significance of Lutheranism in Japanese society only takes shape later, after you spend many years of your Christian life in worship and communion with people who share in the same congregational community. The theology of the cross, one of main points of Lutheran identity, becomes more real as you live your life in the Lutheran faith. It takes awhile to realize the meaning of the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith until you try to live your faith and find it

impossible to justify yourself in the presence of God. It very often happens in the congregation where I serve that Lutheranism is appreciated and valued much more highly by Christians from other denominations than by Lutheran-born Christians! These other Christians get tired of seeking to please God by their works and finally give it up and decide to join in the Lutheran faith. No matter how small our Lutheran church may be, Lutheranism plays a significant role among those who walk along together with Christ.

### *Lutheran Deficiencies*

Lutheran missionaries came to this land twenty to thirty years after the first Protestant groups began to engage in evangelism. It should be noted that Japan is not exceptional in this regard; it was the same in many other countries in Asia. Lutheran global mission didn't pioneer in any place in Asia. Lutheranism per se showed little interest in evangelism at the beginning of its movement, as can be seen in looking at the Augsburg Confession, since there are no articles referring to evangelism or global mission in this foundational Lutheran document.

Such late engagement of Lutheranism in global mission compared to other mainline Protestant churches eventually affected the growth rate of Lutheranism in this country. As men-

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tioned above, the first Protestant wave was in 1859 from three major mission bodies, the Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Anglican churches of the United States. Forty-seven missionary associations landed in Japan before Peery and Scherer came in 1892 from the United Synod of the South.

Japanese Christians proliferated in the first twenty years after the arrival of the first Protestant missionaries. According to the statistics of the Japanese Christian Almanac, there were only fifty-nine Japanese Protestants in total in 1873, after fourteen years of mission work. But the number grew up to 31,361 in 1891. A Christian analyst reports that this rapid growth can be ascribed to two major causes: the revival movement from 1882 to 1885 and the westernization policy of the Japanese government from 1885 to 1890. Missionaries believed this country would soon become part of "Christendom."<sup>1</sup> Lutherans missed this epoch-making by one year.

### *Theological Emphasis*

One of the characteristics of Lutheranism is its strong emphasis on the theological foundation of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* layered by Martin Luther through his voluminous writings. This theological heritage has been so clearly affirmed and passed on throughout our history. We justly take pride in teaching this core message of the gospel. When the gospel is proclaimed among different cultures to different people who are formed by different values and indigenous wisdom, it often happens that the pure gospel of Jesus gets distorted and given biased interpretations. As director of global mission in the JELC, however, given the opportunities to meet Lutherans in many other countries, I find that Japanese Lutherans do share this core gospel with other Lutherans all over the world. Unfortunately, this core gospel does not necessarily enable all the bodies of the Lutheran church across the world to be united, as often

seen in the disputes about ecclesiology in many places (particularly regarding the ordination of women and of homosexuals).

There aren't so many advantages to being such a small church, but sometimes it helps to maintain theological justification. Having been blessed with many Lutheran missionaries from different Western countries who came to evangelize our people, there are at least four major Lutheran Churches in Japan: the JELC, the Japan Lutheran Church (JLC), West Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Kinki Evangelical Lutheran Church, two based in Tokyo and the other two in Kobe. Mainly because of financial reasons we have only two seminaries for the four churches, which means the seminarians from different Lutheran churches study together, creating a situation here in Tokyo that does not often occur in the United States. The theological seminary in Tokyo is the forum for both the JELC, which is closely associated with ELCA, and the JLC, which was born out of the LCMS mission. They study their common Lutheran theology in the same classroom until graduation. This is a good proof that the two Japanese Lutheran churches stand on the same foundation and share the theological resources. The only difference is their origin.

#### *Lutheran mission*

The JELC is now working on trying to incorporate the whole polity of our ministry into one Lutheran identity. We have three different dimensions through which mission activities take place: evangelism, social services, and education, all under the name of "Lutheran." Each mission is taken care of under different juridical bodies. Due to the fact that both social services and educational organizations need to be subsidized and at the same time overseen by the government, direct evangelism or outreach lead-

ing to baptism is not possible to its full extent. They can certainly reach out to people through their services and teaching and provide worship opportunities at the chapel. But it is not clear how well their mission is linked to the church-centered life that comes through baptism and eucharist.

These ministries are making significant impact on the society, enough to receive some social recognition. What concerns us is that their reputation within the community is not necessarily tied to the Lutheran church. Our hope is that people will become aware that their social services and education are organized by Lutheran organizations and related to the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church, so that hopefully they will join in the worship life of the Lutheran church.

The ultimate rationale of each organization is to bring people to Christ. Although each organization serves faithfully in response to the great commission of Jesus with its own talents, a sense of oneness as the whole Japanese Lutheran body is missing. The Lutheran integrity of all our organizations will definitely strengthen our Lutheran mission to the community and as a result the church will also be better acknowledged in society, where at present Christianity is just one of many minority religions.

Recognition by the society through social work and teaching English were imperative in evangelism even at the beginning of the Lutheran mission by the two earliest missionaries from South Carolina. When Scherer launched his Lutheran mission in Kyushu, a southern island of Japan, he became an English teacher first in the middle school. "He believed, probably correctly, that this position would grant him an entry into the community and also secure his legal right as a foreigner to reside in Saga."<sup>2</sup>

Every year we have a few American lay English teachers sent from the ELCA as missionaries. We call them "J-3."

For fifty years now they have been coming to assist the JELC. They teach at the two Lutheran high schools and the English student center, as well as serving in the church. While the number of ordained missionaries that can serve for a lifetime is decreasing, the J-3 program is becoming very popular and does impressive youth ministry both at the school and at the church. These lay teachers are not missionary-minded at all first when they apply for this program, but they gradually change through orientation programs and a new experience of a different culture.

Another recent development is a pastor exchange program between our church and the South Carolina Synod of the ELCA. I served in South Carolina as pastor in 2005, and Robert Byrne of the same synod responded to our call last year in return. I learned while I was there that ELCA churches are also facing multireligious situations and secularism while struggling to get the message across to the community. Through this program we find ourselves closer to each other despite the ocean and cultural differences that lie between us. Global Lutheranism is a better term to describe who we are in the global village as Lutherans rather than "Japanese Lutheranism," "American Lutheranism," and so on. Lutherans share the same faith across the globe. LF

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#### *Notes*

1. Mark R. Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1998).

2. James A. Scherer, "A Pioneer Lutheran Missionary in Japan: James A. B. Scherer," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 19/5 (1992): 329.