

THE FIRST REV. DR. YONAS DERESSA LECTURE SERIES

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Mekane Yesus Seminary, the largest and oldest Lutheran Seminary in Ethiopia, has recently established a research center to further its mission and promote academic excellence. The center serves as a hub for interaction among faculties, scholars, graduate students, and churches, fostering research opportunities and facilitating analysis of theological and doctrinal controversies. Operating in alignment with sound biblical teaching and solid Lutheran theology and confession, the research center aims to generate and disseminate knowledge.

In addition to research, the center organizes academic seminars, lecture series, conferences, training, and workshops for faculty, graduate students, and research scholars. Looking ahead, the center plans to establish a publication center to showcase outstanding research findings through journal articles, magazines, books, book chapters, and monographs. This multifaceted approach ensures that the Mekane Yesus Seminary remains at the forefront of academic exploration and contribution to the field of theology.

In line with its annual operation plan, Mekane Yesus Seminary recently organized a three-day academic seminar from April 26-29, 2023. The seminar focused on the theme "Some would be Apostles" (Eph 4:11) and featured Dr. Mark Schuler as the guest speaker. Dr. Schuler, professor emeritus at Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota, delivered insightful lectures during the event. It is worth noting that the seminar held special significance as it was dedicated to the memory of the late Rev. Dr. Yonas Deressa, former President of Mekane Yesus Seminary.

We are grateful to Rev. Dr. Samuel Y. Deressa, son of the late Dr. Yonas Deressa, for generously funding the seminar, and his initiative to publish the lecture series in the new *Global South Theological Journal*, where he serves as the editor. This event truly exemplifies the seminary's commitment to academic discourse and research in theology.

In the first session led by Dr. Schuler, titled "The First Apostles," the focus was on exploring the biblical foundation of the term ἀπόστολος (apostolos) and how it has been used by biblical authors. Dr. Schuler highlighted the varying usage of the term by different authors, with a specific emphasis on the perspectives of Paul and Luke. Paul used ἀπόστολος to refer to his own calling and ministry to the Gentiles, as well as to others like Silvanus, Timothy, and Sosthenes. On the other hand, Luke primarily confined the term to the twelve apostles who witnessed Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. However, Luke also used it in a generic sense, similar to the term 'prophets.' Overall, Dr. Schuler concluded that the New Testament writers' usage of ἀπόστολος was inconsistent, reflecting the specific contexts and situations they addressed.

Day Two of the lecture series with Dr. Schuler focused on the usage of the term ἀπόστολος (apostolos) in the post-apostolic period, which he referred to as "After the Apostles." Dr. Schuler noted that while the self-designation of ἀπόστολος disappeared during this period, its generic use became more prominent. He highlighted how early Church writers such as 1 Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and others employed the term in their writings. Some used it to refer to the twelve apostles, while others included Paul and additional figures. However, Dr. Schuler observed that none of these writers used the term as a self-designation with authoritative claims. Instead, they shifted the focus to the concept of "apostolic succession," which emphasized the transmission of spiritual authority from the apostles to subsequent bishops and priests. This idea of apostolic succession provided the foundation for the unity and correct teaching of the orthodox church throughout history. Dr. Schuler also discussed the gradual process of canonization of the

New Testament, which played a crucial role in preserving and protecting the teachings of the apostles and their successors, the bishops and priests. Thus, the articulated dogmas formulated by these early Church leaders were instrumental in safeguarding the Church against false teachings and heresies.

On the last day of the presentation, we delved into the highly anticipated topic of "Apostles Today." This issue has sparked ongoing controversy within the Church in Africa. As an African evangelical Lutheran church, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus recognizes the need to respond to self-proclaimed apostolic claims by individuals and emerging churches. Dr. Schuler, respecting the importance of apostolicity in the African Church's mission, urged African theologians to critically analyze and articulate their views on this matter.

Drawing upon his solid Lutheran background, Dr. Schuler presented several principles for evaluating self-designated apostolic authority in today's context. Firstly, he emphasized the ministry of Jeremiah in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament, both cautioning God's people to be vigilant against false prophets (Jer. 28:9, Matt. 7:15-16). Secondly, he stressed the significance of testing the content of their message, asserting that content matters.

Additionally, Dr. Schuler highlighted the importance of Christology, urging listeners to assess whether these self-proclaimed apostles direct their audience toward Christ and our salvation. The fourth principle he emphasized was to avoid quenching the Spirit by challenging excessive doubt and limiting the work of the Holy Spirit among believers. However, he emphasized that even new experiences should be evaluated through the lens of God's Word.

Furthermore, Dr. Schuler encouraged the indigenization of Christianity within people's cultural and linguistic contexts, considering the needs of the weaker members within the faith community. Ultimately, he concluded his lecture series by exhorting the audience to make *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Solus Christus*, and *Soli Deo Gloria* the core principles of their Christian faith and practice, firmly rooted in Lutheran teaching.

We express our sincere appreciation to Dr. Schuler for delivering a remarkable and eloquent presentation at the Mekane Yesus Seminary. The research center is deeply grateful for his valuable insights, which have garnered overwhelmingly positive feedback from both the faculty and the wider audience.

By publishing these essays here, we aim to provide the reader with valuable insights into apostleship in our modern age, with a particular focus on its significance in the African context. The issue of apostleship has become a source of controversy in numerous churches, making it increasingly vital to gain fresh perspectives and knowledge about this topic. We hope that by delving into Dr. Schuler's presentation, you will gain a deeper understanding and new insights that will contribute to your understanding of apostleship in the current era.

We extend our heartfelt blessings to Dr. Schuler, his family, and his ministry for their invaluable contributions. May God continue to guide and bless them abundantly. Amen!