

"Meta-Church" versus the Lutheran Ministry: Where is God?

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(Date unknown, some time in 1993 or 1994)

The latest fad of the Church Growth Movement is "Meta-Church." It has been embraced with enthusiasm by various "Church-Growth" entrepreneurs who market it as the provision of what is lacking in the "Mega-Church." It is promoted by Lutheran mission executives who are persuaded that the "traditional model" of the ministry cannot meet today's challenges. Its model for the Christian ministry is very enticing. It promises spiritual and numerical growth to those congregations that put its principles into practice. It offers a vision of congregational life in which every member of the body of Christ makes important contributions to the spiritual health of the church. It also chides arrogant, know-it-all pastors who would cling to the traditional model of the ministry for reasons of personal ego-gratification. Who could oppose such a model of the Christian ministry?

A Lutheran could. When we understand the underlying assumptions of "Meta-Church," we Lutherans must oppose it. We need much more than what "Meta-Church" can give. The sinner who thirsts for divine pardon needs more. The saint who desires to live a holy life needs more. Not only do we need more than what "Meta-Church" can give, we need what can only be given by that model of Christian ministry which "Meta-Church" seeks to destroy.

"Meta-Church" has been popularized by a Pentecostal minister named Carl F. George. The subtitle of his book, Preparing Your Church for the Future (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1992), sums up nicely the thought behind his concept: "Introducing the Meta-Church: Large enough to celebrate, small enough to care." The Greek preposition, **meta**, often denotes close personal association. Thus, the "Meta-Church" model for the church's ministry is

designed to provide spiritual care for Christians within a context of close personal association with other Christians. The primary spiritual nurture of the individual Christian occurs within a small group of about ten members. These small groups are called "cells" or something more attractive sounding such as "Tender Loving Care" groups. Each cell group has a leader who "pastors" the group by helping the other members of the cell to share their "spiritual gifts" in such a way that the whole cell finds spiritual nourishment and growth. The essential work of the church's ministry occurs as "gifted" Christians share their "gifts" with other Christians. The pastor ("professional minister," as George calls him) is responsible for commissioning "lay ministers" to supervise each cell group.

Naturally, the cell groups cannot do everything. The purpose of larger groups (congregations) is to give the people the opportunity to "celebrate" what they receive in the smaller groups. This "celebration" must not be confused with the traditional church service. George criticizes the view that "the most important weekly event [in the congregation] is a worship service in which a professional minister 'provides' and the laypeople 'take.'" The "celebration" is not receiving gifts from God. In fact, it is completely incompatible with the Lutheran belief that in the Divine Service God gives forgiveness of sins and eternal life to his people through his minister who faithfully preaches the Gospel and rightly administers the sacraments. The traditional liturgical distinction between the sacramental and the sacrificial is lost. Lost with it is any idea of the pastor speaking and acting in Christ's stead as he preaches, baptizes, absolves, and administers the Lord's Supper.

Essential to the "Meta-Church" model of the ministry is the notion that spiritual nurture and growth come from the "spiritual gifts" within every member of the church. Since the "best care forum" for putting these "gifts" to use is a "small-based group system," the pastor should not be reluctant to commission "lay ministers" to supervise the cell groups. If the pastor sees himself as the one who "gives" and the people as the ones who "take," he is guilty of "gift suppression." George's concept of the ministry does not allow the pastor to be a steward of God's mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1). Nor is there room for authoritative doctrinal preaching which flows from Jesus' promise: "He who hears you hears me." George, and with him "Meta-Church," cannot abide

the pastor speaking as the voice of the Holy Spirit to give what God gives only through the gospel and the sacraments. This would threaten George's faith in the all-sufficiency of the alleged "spiritual gifts" within each Christian.

How far removed this is from our Lutheran confession! When we Lutherans confess that the Holy Spirit "enlightens [us] with his gifts," we are not talking about gifts within ourselves. Our faith does not focus on what is inside of us. The gifts to which God directs our faith - indeed, the gifts by which our faith is created and nourished - are the Gospel and the Sacraments of Christ. Compare the current preoccupation with "spiritual gifts" within each Christian to **The Confessional Address** (LW p 308, TLH p 47) which includes this admonition to those preparing to receive Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament:

But if we thus examine ourselves, we shall find nothing in us but sin and death, from which we cannot set ourselves free. Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ has had mercy on us and has taken on himself our nature that he might fulfill for us the whole will and law of God and for us and for our deliverance suffer death and all that we by our sins have deserved. And that we should the more confidently believe this and be strengthened by our faith in cheerful obedience to his holy will, he has instituted the Holy Sacrament of his Supper, in which he feeds us with his body and gives us to drink of his blood.

The "Meta-Church" enthusiast looks for the Holy Spirit's power within himself. The Lutheran confesses that within himself is nothing but sin and death. The disciple of "Meta-Church" is looking for the solution where the problem is to be found.

A woman once related to me a conversation she had with a door-to-door evangelist. He was a rather pathetic looking young man, poorly groomed and tense with a combination of anxiety and excitement. He was driven by an eagerness that she experience what he had experienced. His "gospel" was simple: "Jesus has **changed** me." Looking at him, the woman could barely resist saying, "Well, if he did that to you, I certainly don't want him doing it to me!"

Yes, Jesus changes us. The Holy Spirit fills us. Almighty God makes his dwelling within our hearts. But may we wait, just for a moment, before we talk about what God does **in** us? May we set that aside until we have spoken of what our Lord has done **for** us and what he has given **to** us? These three prepositions: for, **to**, and **in**, must be kept in their proper order. This is vital if the gospel is to remain the gospel and if our faith is to remain faith.

Christ lived and died for us. The preposition "for" means that Christ's life and death were offered vicariously. We confess the vicarious or substitutionary heart of the gospel in the Nicene Creed with the words, "who for us men and for our salvation was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man." His righteous life and his holy death were offered to God in the place of our sinful lives. Everything he did and suffered he did and suffered as our substitute. In so doing, he redeemed us, justified us, and reconciled us to God. He saved us. This is what Jesus did for us. He "was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification." (Romans 4:25) This is what the 19th Century confessional Lutherans in America called "objective" or "general" justification. Francis Pieper stated it well: "The resurrection of Christ is, as Holy Writ teaches, the actual absolution of the whole world of sinners (Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II, p 348)."

Everything that Christ has done **for** us is now given **to** us. We cannot go back to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. But God brings it to us. We kneel at the Altar and hear the words, "given and shed **for** you," while the same body and blood of Jesus are given **to** us. When we hear theological terms like "means of grace" and "office of the ministry," we simply believe that Jesus gives **to** us, here and now in our lives, what he did **for** us, then and there, in his incarnation, obedience, suffering, death and resurrection.

Compare articles three, four and five of the Augsburg Confession. AC III confesses that Christ, true God and true man, has suffered for all of our sins and has propitiated God, that is, stilled his anger against us. It sums up who Jesus is and what he has done **for** us. AC IV confesses that we therefore receive forgiveness (that is, are justified) by faith alone in this gospel. One cannot receive what has not been given to receive. Therefore, AC V confesses that the Holy Spirit produces faith through the preaching of the gospel and the

administration of the sacraments, that is, through the giving of Christ **to** us. After we confess what Jesus has done **for** us and what he today gives **to** us, then, and only then, can we speak of our good works, that fruit of faith which is what God does **in** us. This is the topic of AC VI. **For, to, and in.** Any other order destroys the gospel and leads people to trust in something counterfeit.

"Meta-Church" makes counterfeit promises. It flows out of a thoroughly synergistic, anti-creedal and anti-sacramental theology whose lineage can be traced straight back to Wesley's "second blessing" Methodism via Pentecostalism and the holiness movement. "Meta-Church" refuses to find God only where God insists he must only be found. It's "spiritual gifts" are bogus -- a pious fraud. Just as historic Methodism and its theological descendents insist on severing the Holy Spirit from the pure preaching of Christ's gospel and the right administration of his sacraments, "Meta-Church" also rejects the ministry by which the Holy Spirit's true and saving work is accomplished. After disjoining the external word and sacraments from the Holy Spirit (see Smalcald Articles, III, VIII!) this false spirit urges the Christian to find the Holy Spirit in himself, that is, where there is nothing but sin and death.

"Meta-Church" is being promoted by the leading mission executives of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. Carl George is being paid tens of thousands of synodical dollars to teach "Meta-Church" principles to Missouri Synod Lutherans. Every foreign missionary of the Missouri Synod has received a copy of George's book (along with glowing reviews) from synodical headquarters. "Meta-Church" is already causing division and offense throughout the Missouri Synod.

"Meta-Church" is not about the obvious benefits of small group Bible studies. Nor is it a welcome correction to an out-dated model of ministry defended by egocentric pastors who are fixated on their authority. It is a wholesale rejection of the order of salvation - **for, to, and in** - established by the Lord of the Church. It underestimates the power of the flesh that adheres also to those born from above. It despises the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the pure gospel of Christ. It promotes precisely what it claims to oppose: pride. As it condemns pastors who are afraid, as George puts it, "that

they will lose the strokes that come from being the only chief," it condemns the ministry of Jesus. Our Lord did not establish his ministry to feed the egos of his undershepherds, but to feed his sheep. Getting "strokes" has nothing at all to do with Christ's ministry. Can it be that this alien theology is invading our churches simply because pastors are more concerned about proving their own humility than they are in preserving the institution of Jesus for the salvation of sinners?

"Meta-Church" directs its disciples away from the divine gifts which give eternal life. It directs its disciples to "gifts" which are not even promised by God. It gives the sinner no comfort. The sinner needs the external gift given to him, because what is inside of him destroys him. Nor does "Meta-Church" give anyone the confidence that he is a saint. We do not find our saintliness by looking inward for evidence of "spiritual gifts." We find our identity as saints in the proclamation of Jesus into our hearts. We see in our baptism our union with Christ's death and resurrection. Our ears hear in the absolution the voice of Jesus giving us forgiveness. In the Lord's Supper our mouths receive the same body that was nailed to the cross and the same blood that has been sprinkled on the mercy seat of God, turning away God's wrath forever. These are the gifts that give **to** us the Christ who suffered **for** us and thereby work **in** us that living faith which flows into love for our God and for one another. "Meta-Church" cannot give these gifts to us. It can only take them away. This is why we Lutherans must reject it, root and branch, and defend Christ's ministry among us. First among the defenders must be the pastors to whom this ministry has been entrusted.