

A Pastor's Accountability in Church Growth

Colleagues,

When we were in Indonesia last year, we visited Steve Haggmark and Nancy Johnson at the Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga on the island of Java. They're a husband-and-wife team on the theology faculty there. Their roots are in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Besides these full-time jobs, they have other callings.

Steve, for example, regularly flies over to Singapore to help out in the theological education of pastors in the Lutheran churches of Malaysia and Singapore. His course is called "Lutheran Distinctives," an item hard to find in the "generic Protestant" seminaries the students attend. Steve showed us two term papers from the 1999 class. We have permission to pass them on to you. You'll get one this week, and one next Thursday.

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder

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Using the Lutheran Hermeneutic on the Issue of A Pastor's Accountability in Church Growth

Introduction

The issue being addressed in this brief paper came up during the very recent Vision and Plans Sharing Meeting of the Lutheran Church in Singapore, held on 14 August 1999. At this meeting,

Bishop [so-and-so] presented a document outlining his vision for our church. In a nutshell, he proposed that over the next 5 years, the Lutheran Church in Singapore should grow to 6000 members (from the current 3000), have 40 co-workers (from the current 20), reach 10 congregations (from the current 7) and have 2 Social Work Centres (from the current 0).

In the course of the discussion, a lay leader asked: "Who would be accountable if the targets were not met?" He wanted to know what would happen if a church did not grow at the targeted rate from year to year. Would that pastor be called up and questioned? Would he be required to explain the situation and propose a solution? What would be done about the situation? This question raised the issue of a Pastor's accountability for church growth. Is the Pastor accountable for church growth? Should he be given 3 chances to succeed before being asked to leave, or before his year-end bonus is cut? This question set me thinking – how do I apply the Lutheran hermeneutic to this issue?

The person who asked the question is a highly regarded leader in his congregation, and is one of their lay preachers. He is also a professional in the financial field, and likely to be holding a senior position in his company. It was abundantly clear that his desire was for our church to grow. But I felt that his approach to the issue of church growth and pastoral accountability came more from a management rather than a ministry point of view. In this sense, this lay leader was representative of many of our lay leaders who have a tremendous passion for the church and for its growth, but view its success very much in modern management terms. Simplistically put, the orientation is very much towards the tasks and goals, and if targets are not met, then heads have to roll.

In my "gut" I knew that he was speaking law, and thus

unknowingly seeking a system that instills fear. Yet I know that the gospel frees us to serve in confidence and not fear. I wanted to correct such a view. Thus I began to formulate a reply based on the Lutheran hermeneutic, and to seek to present it as an encouragement rather than as criticism. This paper expands and documents my attempt.

The Lutheran Hermeneutic

Formulating such a reply needs to begin with an understanding of what the Lutheran way of interpreting Scripture and spiritual life is, that is, what is the Lutheran hermeneutic? It is essentially this: the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, apart from works of the law (Eph. 2:8-9). This is the central doctrine of the Lutheran Church, it is a gospel-centered doctrine, and we interpret all matters of faith and life based on this doctrine. This doctrine makes a clear and definite distinction between law and gospel. The gospel is free of charge, it is entirely by God's grace, and it is wholly God's action for us in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. The law requires our work, our obedience, and our will. The gospel frees us from our sin to live as God's children. The law only points to our sin, shows our bondage to sin, but cannot free us – its chief purpose is to drive us to Christ that we might live in the freedom He promises.

In interpreting Scripture, this hermeneutic directs us to discern between what describes God's action, and what prescribes our action. It also insists that we keep justification and sanctification separate, so that we do not allow anything in the realm of sanctification to be made a requirement or a sign of justification. Thus when we interpret Paul, for example, much of what he teaches in his epistles are exhortations to his audience on how to live as free children of God. And when we read the Gospel proclamations of Jesus, they are announcing the good news that people might believe (that is, trust and not doubt), and

not asking the people to make decisions about their faith and salvation.

In understanding ministry, this hermeneutic emphasizes our Christian freedom as people who are justified by faith in Christ, and who should therefore not be made to doubt the grace of God upon them because of the prescription of certain rules or laws that judge our faith or growth in faith. In other words, we would think in terms of how to free people from fear so that they serve in confidence (gospel), and not how to bind people with rules and/or signs upon which they will be judged, so that they serve out of fear (law). I kept this freedom-from-fear as God's children concept clear in the formulation of my reply.

The Lutheran View of the Church

I felt that an understanding of how this Lutheran hermeneutic affects our view of the church was very important to my reply, because the role of a Pastor is inseparably linked to how we view the church. Gritsch and Jensen in their book "Lutheranism," page 124, called the church "A creature of the gospel." This is an apt description – the Church is a creation of the gospel. If we see the gospel of justification by faith as our basic hermeneutic, then we will realize that if there is no gospel, there will be no Church. Indeed if the gospel is not preached and God is not trusted, there will be no Christian Church.

Therefore the Church, in Lutheran understanding, is the assembly of those who are justified by faith, and where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly administered according to the word of Christ. Essentially we define the Church by its function. The Church exists and grows because people continually come to believe in God through the preaching of the gospel. Its members live out their Christian freedom by willingly fulfilling the great commission, so that more may come to hear and believe. The Church continually seeks to build trust in God by its

proclamation of the gospel through word, sacraments and Christian living.

Based on this understanding that the Church exists because of the gospel, then church growth occurs also because of the gospel. God does the growing. The Christian is responsible for the preaching as a freed child of God, serving and obeying his or her Heavenly Father. The Christian is the instrument, not the cause, of church growth. The Pastor of a local church is therefore the one called by God to “feed the flock” with the faithful preaching and teaching of the word. He is the one called to the priestly office, and thereby to lead in the giving of God’s word and sacrament, and to lead in the worship life of the people. He is the one called to equip the saints through the word and sacrament, assuring them of God’s faithful presence according to His promises, and so to build up trust and maturity in the members’ walk with God. He is one called to remind the people to be faithful, and as they are faithful in the gospel, they are free to trust God for the growth of the church. He is the one called to remind the people that while the church is a worldly institution, it is created and judged by its gracious and holy God, and not by how the world judges its own institutions.

With this in mind, I drafted a chart comparing a church and a business. I chose this comparison because it addressed the mindset that tended to assess a church from a professional business point of view. They wanted the church to be successful and the Pastors to be accountable, but the understanding of success and accountability tended to be based on what could be measurable. The chart, which was an attempt to apply the Lutheran hermeneutic to this issue, is as follows:

	CHURCH Created by God	BUSINESS Created by man
Reason for Being	Great Commission	Profit, provide jobs
Growth	Given by God	Achieved by man
Message	Gospel, Word of God	Products, services
Leader	Shepherd, feeding, freeing	CEO, selling, controlling
Mode	Preaching, teaching, ministry	Rules, prescriptions, targets
Motivation	Freedom in Christ	Fear of failure
Evaluation	Faithfulness	Profits, sales, figures
Earthly reward	Support, trust, development	Incentives, disincentives
Eternal reward	Eternal life in heaven	None

Such a comparison helped me to see and garner a few vital points with which I could formulate a reply. The points are as follows:

The church's success is not found in how well it "sells" a product, but how it faithfully builds trust and confidence in Christ. This is because success in salvation is 100% God's work. Man can do nothing to save himself. But success in sanctification is the result of how we live out our Christian freedom. Thus, success for the church is faithfulness, not the number of conversions per annum. Once we are saved, we are then free to live our lives in a blessed relationship with God, and to enjoy life as intended and designed by God. The law that we live under [Ed: ooops!] as God's people is the law that preserves security, order and fullness of joy in community. This is true freedom, for freedom without limits is chaos. The gospel is not a product, but it is a message of God's grace. Thus we do not 'sell' the gospel and seek to get people to

decided to 'buy' it by making a 'prayer of faith.' Instead, we announce the good news, we proclaim it, so that doubts and ignorance about God are undone, and faith in God springs forth in response to the utter trustworthiness of Christ.

The Pastor's role is primarily in preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments. These are to show our freedom in Christ, and inspire us to faithfulness in the Lord, and to witness to Him. He is to feed, and not to lead campaigns. He is to lead people towards proclamation as God's free children, and not towards bondage to the tyranny of profit or results.

The evaluation of a church's success, and a Pastor's success, is therefore less measurable. It cannot be assessed based on dollars and cents, number of converts per year, or average attendance per month. But its assessment may be viewed more in terms of the availability of good teaching and preaching, the provision of ways for members to grow in fellowship and discernment according to God's word, the willingness of members to serve actively in various ministries, their excitement to share the gospel, their support for the Pastor in how they avail themselves to meet his needs, and so forth. I believe that as we are faithful, the Lord will give growth, as He did to Peter and the apostles in New Testament times.

Conclusion.

Thus I rose to speak when the opportunity came. My intention was encouragement. My context was the discussion on the topic of Christian Education for the Lutheran Church in Singapore. In essence, I called for the inclusion of Lutheran Distinctives in our content and approach to Christian Education. My explanation was that the Lutheran way of looking at things can help us make a great contribution to Christian life and witness in Singapore. My example was that with the blessing of the Lutheran way of

interpretation, we would learn that:

1. the church was not a business
2. the gospel was not a product
3. the Pastor was not a CEO or sales manager
4. the function of a church was not sales but proclamation
5. the numbers are not an instrument of judgment that bind us, but ways of guidance, evaluation and encouragement that free us
6. the motivation for Christians was not fear of failure or loss of reward, but Christian freedom
7. the success of a church was not profit (or even conversions), but faithfulness
8. My point was that if we have Lutheran Distinctives as part of our Christian Education, we would be blessed with a perspective that would free us to serve in the great confidence that we have in Christ our Lord.

May the Lord bless our beloved Lutheran Church in Singapore