

Moving our Congregations from Maintenance to Mission

Colleagues,

Last week Thursday, Sept. 10, Robert Bertram made the following presentation to the St. Louis area "Lutheran Professional Church Worker Conference." I thought you'd like to see it. If you've been reading earlier ThTh items, you'll know Bob from the stuff I've sent out about Crossings and about Seminex. Should you wish to review some of those earlier ThTh offerings, check the Crossings Webpage:

www.crossings.org

Peace & Joy!

Ed

BERTRAM'S LECTURE:

Moving our Congregations "from Maintenance to Mission":

Is the Jerusalem Congregation at Pentecost (Acts 2) a Model?

Answer: Could be, but only if we see that "model" congregation for what it was – and was not. In short, which way was it "moving?" Was it moving into obsolescence? Yes, in some ways it was. Was it also, conversely, moving from the old to the new? Yes, that too. Then which was which? As we try to answer that question about moving from old to new – notice, not from old to young but from old to new – we may get some clue about "moving congregations 'from maintenance to mission'."

1. There are some features of the Jerusalem congregation, even in its Pentecost heyday, which seemed to age fast, shrivel and die.
 - a. E.g., originally all the believers “were together and had all things in common . . .” (2:44-45; also 4:31, 34-37) But before long we hear that John Mark’s mother had her own home. (12:12) Eventually Paul had to gather a collection for “the poor saints in Jerusalem.” (Ro. 15:25,26)
 - b. E.g., on Pentecost what attracted outsiders was the believers’ speaking in tongues. (2:1-13) But soon that too came under suspicion and censure, except maybe as a bait-and-switch device for luring in outsiders. (1 Co. 12-14; 14:23-24)
 - c. E.g., right after Pentecost the believers still enjoyed “the goodwill of all the people” and probably owed much of their missionary success to just such public popularity. (2:47) But almost immediately goodwill soured into public resentment, arrests, even executions. Then conversions had to happen in spite of the congregation’s status in the community. (4:4)
 - d. E.g., on Pentecost Peter could still confine his preaching to an audience only of Jews – international Jews, yes, but still only Jews. (2:14,22) We all know how soon that ethno-religious exclusivism had to be repudiated and be replaced by the mission to Gentiles if there were to be any church at all. (Ac. 15)
 - e. True, it is thematic for Luke’s history that “the word of the Lord grew” (19:20; 12:24) and therefore the church grew with it. But that same church, even this very young Pentecostal church at Jerusalem in some of its most youthful features,

simultaneously “grew” toward obsolescence, became moribund and passed away.

f. I don’t enumerate these negatives in a spirit of Schadenfreude [glee at someone else’s misfortune] but only to warn against a subtle legalism in some current “church growth” circles, namely, touting the youthful innovations of the early church (notably the Pentecostal church of Jerusalem), especially innovations in its young “programs,” then compiling these into a checklist of ten or twelve “things to do,” like commandments. As if: “Do this and thou shalt live.” Live? What some of the best of these youthful innovations did was die, and quite early.

2. In the sort of “church growth” discussions I’m describing, what often goes unasked is this: granting the Jerusalem congregation’s programmatic innovations (classes with the apostles, fellowshiping, shared possessions, daily trips to the Temple, staggering numbers), none of which are listed until the end of Acts 2, how about the lion’s share of the chapter – forty verses’ worth! – which precede these achievements? In other words, how did the congregation get to these results in the first place? Answer: not by tackling the checklist head-on but by a very roundabout route, exasperatingly indirect and in ways which virtually defy human planning and predicting. Let me count the ways, at least three – one of them in monologue, the other two in the discussion which follows.

a. The entire Pentecost Event – that is, whatever made it “Pentecost” – came about solely at the initiative of the Holy Spirit. The congregation, so far as I can tell, had nothing to do with bringing that about. True, “they were all together in one place,” something they probably would have done anyway. And although the Holy Spirit seems never to appear

unless there's an audience, there's nothing to suggest that She felt at all obliged to attend this particular gathering. (v.2) If She did, why did She wait so long – at least several centuries since Joel? Nothing is said about the congregation's even praying for the Spirit. And yes, Peter preaches about the Spirit's coming, but only after the fact, as a way of explaining what had already happened. Then the only explanation he has, at least the only one which involves any human involvement, is that a long time ago the people had been promised the Spirit. Moreover, this Holying Spirit does not only indwell individuals – that, too – but creates a kind of out-in-the-open meteorological storm, a magnetic field, from which the individuals are empowered. This wrap-around Kraftfeld, this “power surround” is not evoked or manipulated by any human initiative, charismatic or pietistic, or by some regimen of “spirituality.” At least not in Acts 2. About the most you can say the congregation was “doing” was waiting on the promise, meanwhile going about their usual business.

So completely is this Pentecostal Spirit not at the bidding of the congregation that they don't even make so bold as to address Her, and barely talk about Her, certainly not with the brashness I've adopted in the pronouns I've used. Judging from Peter's sermon, this Spirit comes at the bidding only of the other two members of the Trinity, as a kind of graduation gift from the Father to the Son upon the latter's recent resurrection. Then does this “modesty” of the Holy Spirit, Her remoteness from congregational management, reduce Her to just a “bit player” in the trinitarian drama? Hardly. I'd

think of Her more like Robertson Davies' The Fifth Business.

For discussion as time permits:

- b. The only way anyone at Jerusalem could be "Pentecosted" into newness was a way which the congregation could hardly program, certainly not guarantee, namely, have whoever comes to church "repent for the forgiveness of sins." (Lk. 24:47; Ac. 2:38) Without that two-step from old to new, as the Lutheran Confessions keep repeating, nothing happens, no matter how many newcomers show up. But how to insure its happening?
- c. A third way – and in my reading of Acts 2 the most important way – a congregation moves "from maintenance to mission" yet with almost no chance for congregational supervision is this: for the congregation to attract newcomers it depends most on its contacts not inside the church but outside the church. There outsiders encounter, "each in her own language, the mighty works of God" – from the believers abroad in the world. The congregation cannot program those encounters out there though it might debrief them and reinforce them, the way a football huddle does between plays. Nevertheless, as the church learned increasingly after Pentecost, the congregation's real mission is exactly out there, beyond the congregation, out on the scrimmage line. The church is only in order to the Kingdom.

RWB

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