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ECCLESIOLOGY, MISSION AND PARTNER RELATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS THAT LUTHERAN MISSION PLANTS LUTHERAN CHURCHES

by Albert B. Collver

Introduction: Tension between Mission and the Church/Ecclesiology

HERMAN SASSE, IN HIS 1947 ESSAY, “The Question of the Church’s Unity on the Mission Field,” writes, “Since the days of the apostles, the mission field has always been the place where church and that which is not church, divine truth and demonic lies, encounter each other and separate. It is also the place where the deepest questions of the Christian faith first arise and where the last judgments in the history of the church are rendered.”¹ Ever since Gentiles heard the Gospel, came to faith and joined the Church, a tension has existed between “mission” and the “established church.” In Galatians 2, Saint Paul writes about how Titus was not forced to be circumcised. This created tension within the established Church, which still met in Jewish synagogues and also in private homes. Saint Paul writes in Gal. 2:4-5, “Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in — who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery — to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you.”

Apparently, some Judaizing Christians thought that Saint Paul went too far by no longer requiring circumcision. The Scriptures indicate that Saint Peter struggled with eating unclean foods (Acts 10:9-16) introduced by the Gentile Christians—indeed, many a missionary has struggled with strange foods. In both of these cases, error entered the Church when a matter of freedom became a

¹ Hermann Sasse. *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, Volume 2, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941-1976), Kindler Locations, 4951-4953.

The Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver provides a historical overview of mission work and the planting of Lutheran churches, including an explanation of how confessional Lutherans may assess mission work, plant faithful Lutheran churches and encourage and support partner churches.

new law imposed upon Christians. What initially was a matter of indifference became a doctrinal problem when the Gospel was hindered. In the decades that followed, itinerant preachers who traveled from city to city and from settlements of one group of Christians to another became a matter of concern for the Early Church. These itinerant preachers frequently went into areas where a congregation already had a local pastor, sometimes stirring up dissension, schism and even heresy. Eventually, the office of itinerant preachers faded, although it was

Ever since Gentiles heard the Gospel, came to faith and joined the church, a tension has existed between “mission” and the “established church.”

not entirely eliminated, as the Lord raised up more pastors through the Church. The point of this is not to review the history of missions throughout the Christian Church, but to illustrate Herman Sasse’s point that “the deepest questions of the Christian faith arise” where faith meets unbelief, and this creates a tension between “mission” and the “established church.”

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part introduces the story of how the non-Roman Catholic Church (Protestants) as an institution left behind the task of mission to mission-societies and other parachurch organizations. The second part of the paper proposes a way to evaluate the establishment of a responsible Lutheran church around the world, keeping the church firmly in the center of the mission endeavor.

Brief Overview of the History of Mission Societies

The development of mission societies is a relatively recent development in the history of the Church. “The half century from 1772 through 1822 can be singled out as the time when, hand in hand, the missionary and the Bible Society movements appear on the world scene

with a global concept of evangelism.”² To understand the development of these mission societies, we need to touch upon the developments of the Reformation. During the age of Constantine until the time of the Reformation, mission work largely consisted of addressing the migration of peoples and the dispersion of people groups, or was connected to the expansion of a so-called “Christian State.” During the age of exploration, the Christian church moved to the New World with the colonial powers. Spain and Portugal had ships while Germany did not, which explains in part why the Lutherans were not interested in global missions at the time of the Reformation.³ With the expansion of the British Empire and the development of commercial trade and shipping companies, Christian missionaries began to travel to distant lands. In the 16th and early 17th century, the spread of Christianity largely was connected to colonial endeavors. Quite simply, churches that existed in nations that did not have their own armadas and fleets did not send missionaries. No ships, no missionaries.

As mission societies began to emerge toward the end of the 18th century as part of the *zeitgeist*, a significant influence was William Carey’s *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.⁴ William Carey (Aug. 17, 1761–June

9, 1834), a Particular Baptist minister, published his groundbreaking book in 1792.⁵ Among Calvinists and many Calvinistic Baptists of this time, the belief was that the Lord would convert the heathen if He pleased to do so and that Christians did not have any responsibility to

spread the Gospel to the heathen; after all, if the Lord predestined the heathen to salvation, they would be saved whether or not the church proclaimed the Gospel to them or not (hyper-Calvinist view). Carey’s book emphasized the Christian obligation to take the Gospel to the heathen.

In a significant move in the history of exegesis, Carey re-interpreted Matt. 28:19-20 from “making disciples” by “baptizing and teaching” to “going” to foreign lands and proclaiming the Gospel. It should be noted that Matt. 28:19-20 in the Greek has one indicative or main verb,

“make disciples.” Christ commanded the Church to “make disciples” using the means of “baptizing” and “teaching” wherever the people of God reside. In most English Bibles, Matt. 28:19 begins with the imperative command to “Go!” However, in the Greek, the word “go” is, in fact, a participle (“going”). The major emphasis on Matt. 28:19 is not “Go” but rather “make disciples.” The modern missionary movement and missionary society began in part as a shift in emphasis from “making disciples” to “going.” Carey and his work were responsible in a significant way for this shift of thought.

Carey asks the question of “whether the Commission given by our Lord to his Disciples be not still binding on us.”⁶ Carey answers in the affirmative that the commission given in Matthew 28 is applicable to

all Christians today. He writes, “Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. This commission was as extensive as possible, and laid them under obligation to disperse themselves into every country of the habitable globe, and preach to all the inhabitants, without exception, or limitation.”⁷ Carey notes that the commission in Matthew 28 was never repealed by Christ and is, therefore, still binding on all Christians.⁸ Carey’s work addressed a particular form of quietism among Calvin-

The Church, while located in a particular geographical region or among a particular people group, is not bound to that place. The Church is worldwide; it is catholic (or universal), and it is the living body of Christ. Therefore, the Church is found where Christ is, and Christ is present in the preaching of His Word and in the bestowal of His Sacraments.

² Ulrich Fick. “The Bible Societies—Fruit and Tool of Mission.” *International Review of Mission* 70, no. 279 (1981): 119-129.

³ Gustav Adolf Warneck. *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time*, ed. George Robson (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901). “Notwithstanding the era of discovery in which the origin of the Protestant church fell, there was no missionary action on her part in the age of the Reformation.”

⁴ William Carey. *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792).

⁵ Particular Baptists are Baptists who followed the Reformed teachings of John Calvin, including the Calvinist teaching of predestination.

⁶ Carey, 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 10. “We cannot say that it is repealed, like the commands of the ceremonial law; nor can we plead that there are no objects for the command to be exercised upon. Alas! The far greater part of the world, as we shall see presently, are still covered with heathen darkness!”

istic Baptists who did not believe that the Church had a duty to proclaim the Gospel to the world. Carey's work helped, supported and led to the creation of the modern mission society movement. In fact, Carey became known as the "Founder of Modern Missions."⁹

Although Carey was entirely correct to say that Matt. 28:19-20 is still binding and applicable to the Church today, the problem he was solving was one rampant among the Reformed (Church of England, Baptists, et al.) and was not a problem directly applicable to the Lutherans in Germany. Lutherans did not hold to double predestination as the Calvinists did. Nor did Lutherans regard Matt. 28:19-20 as only binding upon the apostles and the Early Church. In fact, the Lutherans used Matt. 28:19-20 as a proof text both for the institution of Baptism and the institution of the Holy Ministry. It must be kept in mind that Carey's work was intended to correct an error among Particular Baptists, not among Lutherans. A direct application of Carey's solution to Lutherans in Germany would be a fallacy and would lead to an incorrect assessment of the situation among Lutherans. In fact, as we shall see later, C. F. W. Walther and the Missouri Synod will react against the mission societies that Carey helped to create.

Another factor that limited missionary activities of various Christian confessions, such as Lutherans, was the establishment of the state church. These churches received their funding through taxations. Areas and territories were divided up. Parishes and congregations were established. Imagine a superintendent or bishop who has a yearly budget to pay the salaries of his pastors, maintain the buildings, perhaps establish another congregation if the population increased and the like. The last thing on such a superintendent or bishop's mind was to spend his inadequate budget on sending a missionary to a people or a location outside of his territory. In fact, it might be illegal for him to do so. Ludwig Petri notes in 1841 the limitations of the German state church structure when he wrote, "The present arrangement of these authorities,

their circle of affairs, their system of affairs, and their relationship to the state and the congregation are not designed to evangelize the heathen."¹⁰ The state church structure simply was not equipped to bring the Gospel to foreign nations. Mission societies arose through the efforts of pious Christians to overcome the limitations of the state church. Petri notes, "In its present circumstances, the church most suitably carries out its commission to the

heathen not directly through its official authorities, but through the free activity of its believing members."¹¹

The rise of these mission societies in Germany, Scandinavia and England explains, in part, the article in the Missouri Synod's constitution that prohibits members of Synod from participating in "heterodox tract and mission societies." In order to increase their effectiveness (and funding) many of these mission societies did not pay a great deal of attention to confessional or denominational distinctions. A German mission society might send a Reformed pastor to the mission field as easily as it might send a

Lutheran pastor. The founders of the Missouri Synod had two primary intentions by this section of the constitution: (1) To preserve pure and orthodox doctrine and teaching, and (2) that mission itself be carried out primarily by the Church and not primarily by mission societies. As such are the goals of and approaches to mission by churches in comparison to mission societies. The next section of the paper provides a brief evaluation of how mission societies evaluated mission work, while proposing a way that churches might evaluate mission work.

Toward a Responsible Lutheran Church

Ever since Protestants began to engage seriously in mission work, there has been a question on how to measure the success of the work. Rome did not face the same difficulty, as success was the establishment of a Roman Catholic parish with local indigenous men receiving a seminary education. Success was the extension of Rome.

The evaluation of a particular church, located among a particular people at a particular geographical location, must begin with and be rooted in the confession of the Church as found in the Nicene Creed and in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII.

⁹ John Brown Myers. *William Carey: The Shoemaker who Became "the Father and Founder of Modern Missions"* (New York: Fleming Revell Company, 1887).

¹⁰ Ludwig Adolf Petri. *Mission and the Church: A letter to a friend (Die Mission und die Kirche: Schreiben an einen Freund)*, trans. David Buchs (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 2012), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Protestants faced a different challenge in determining success as there was no centralized authority or headquarters such as Rome. For many Protestants, the goal became the establishment of an indigenous church that no longer needed assistance from the missionaries. For more than 100 years the “three-self” formula has dominated discussion in Protestant mission circles as a means of determining success on the mission field.

Henry Venn (1796-1873), head of the Anglican Church Missionary Society, and Rufus Anderson (1796-1880), head of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, developed the “three-self” formula: self-propagating (the church proclaims the Gospel on its own and does mission work), self-supporting (the church is able to support itself financially) and self-governing (the church is capable of making its own decisions and does not need to check with another church or mission society for permission). Later, the category of self-theologizing (the church develops its own theology or theological expression appropriate for its context) was added.

Venn and Anderson developed their three-self formula in response to the “rice Christians,” that is, people who attended church as long as the missionaries provided food and material benefits. The three-self formula developed as a reaction against the paternalism and colonialism of the Western mission societies. It also had the goal of prompting rapid evangelization of the world and discouraging missionaries from being located in any one place for too long. The objective of the three-self formula was to determine when a church had become indigenous. Initially, the missionaries provided pastors, teachers, the Divine Service, buildings, financing and leadership while training local indigenous people to take over the work and become self-propagating, self-supporting and self-governing. Once this goal had been achieved, the missionaries could depart and move to another mission field. The three-self formula has dominated Protestant mission theory for more than a century.

The three-self formula provided the missionary society with a benchmark to know when a church became indigenous or mature. Proponents of the formula would

argue that once a church becomes indigenous, there is no role for non-indigenous people. A weakness of this idea is that there is scant scriptural support for such a formula and it bases the definition of the Church on human goals rather than finding or locating the Church around the Word and the Sacraments. It also promotes a disconnect between the indigenous church and foreign churches. As much of Protestant mission work was based upon the work of mission societies rather than upon churches, the three-self formula perhaps disconnected churches from each other in an even more intense way. It does not foster

the mutual responsibility church bodies have to one another to share, nurture and support each other in the body of Christ. It did provide a convenient way for missionaries to measure their success, and it provided a built-in exit strategy. Additionally, the three-self formula definition of an indigenous church offered a static definition of a church, rather than something more dynamic and living (hence, the rise of the *missio dei* movement to keep the sending/mission continuing).

Although the three-self formula provides a way of evaluating a mission start or foreign church, thereby providing an evaluation

or metric for the mission work, it is inadequate as an evaluation of partner churches most notably because its foundation is upon non-scriptural and non-Lutheran categories. For Lutherans, a better approach than the three-self formula is based upon the approach of Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf’s (1910-82) “The Lutheran Church Plants Lutheran Missions,” published in 1967. Hopf turns to Augsburg Confession, Article VII, which locates the Church where the Word is preached and the Sacrament is administered. The Church, while located in a particular geographical region or among a particular people group, is not bound to that place. The Church is worldwide; it is catholic (or universal), and it is the living body of Christ. Therefore, the Church is found where Christ is, and Christ is present in the preaching of His Word and in the bestowal of His Sacraments. Hopf writes, “The deeds of this very Christ in the preached and spoken Word of God, in Baptism carried out as mandated, and in the Sacrament of the Altar given out according to its

Admittedly, no metric is perfect and each has flaws but the assessment toward a Lutheran church is rooted first and foremost in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the administration of the Sacraments. Where this is occurring, there Christ’s Church is found.

institution, are the only, but also absolutely certain marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*.)” In this sense, the Church is never indigenous but always Christ’s Church that is one throughout the world. The one Church of Christ becomes a “particular” church when it is located in a particular place among a particular people.

The evaluation of a particular church, located among a particular people at a particular geographical location, must begin with and be rooted in the confession of the Church as found in the Nicene Creed and in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII. Because the three-self formula does not adequately take into account the true biblical and confessional nature of the Church, it will not fully define a mature or healthy church, nor help us completely identify a responsible Lutheran church. This kind of Lutheran church is responsible to the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is responsible for addressing its culture and its crosses theologically. It is responsible for the theological education of its clergy and the training of its people. It is responsible for raising up leaders to serve the Church. It is responsible for its own church affairs. And it is responsible for stewardship to support its workers, operations and mission work.

Assessment Toward a Responsible Lutheran Church

1. Does the church have altars and pulpits from which the Gospel is proclaimed?
 - a. What are its ecumenical and fellowship aspects?
2. Can the church address the crosses it faces and its culture theologically?
 - a. Is it engaged in mission?
3. Can the church educate and provide her own clergy and church workers?
4. Can the church raise up and produce leaders?
5. Is the church able to run its own affairs?
6. Is the church practicing stewardship?
 - a. What is its capacity to work outside of geographical borders?

R1. Proclamation (Matt. 28: 18-20; John 20:19-23; 1 Cor. 2:4-5; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 1:21; Titus 1:2-3).

The first assessment examines if a church has enough pastors to provide for the altars and pulpits in the church. The proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Sacraments are at the heart of salvation and the heart of the Church. Some churches have a goal of one pastor for each congregation. Other churches expect for one pastor to serve two or three. Other churches use a combination of pastors and evangelists. The first dimension of this assessment is to explore whether or not the church has enough men available to preach. It evaluates if the church is using missionaries or pastors from other church bodies to serve at their pulpits and altars. It next evaluates if there are enough pastors to provide pastoral care in a responsible manner. For instance, if a congregation or preaching station only receives Communion once every six weeks because there are not enough pastors available to provide it, this would be reflected in the assessment. The assessment assumes that “proclaiming the Gospel” means that the Gospel is preached purely and is doctrinally

The formation of a new partner church does not mean the end of the connection between it and the Lutheran church that originally sent the missionaries. Rather, it begins a new phase where each church encourages, helps and the supports the other to remain a responsible Lutheran church.

sound. The assessment can reflect whether or not there is a weakness in the doctrinal training of the pastors. It also includes catechesis of the people. For instance, a church body might have enough pastors to fill the pulpits and serve at the altars but there is doctrinal weakness perhaps even to the point where fellowship would not be possible. Connected to that is the sub-point of ecumenical and fellowship aspects. This might show a church that is engaged in triangulated ecumenical relations that are not all in doctrinal harmony and agreement. It might show a church that has a Lutheran identity but is not yet at a place where fellowship with the Missouri Synod is possible. It also might reflect how ecumenically engaged a church is.

R2. Theologizing

The ability of a church to address its culture and society in a theological manner is extremely important. Although people native to a culture understand their own culture

better than outsiders, at the same time they do not always have the training or theological acumen to address the intersection of their culture and Christianity in a Christian way. At other times, the church may have the theological acumen to address an issue but not the resources to produce materials.

Another component of a church's ability to address its culture and society is the way it engages in the missionary task. Is the church engaged in missionary outreach?

R3. Theological Education

Does the church have the capacity to train and produce pastors and church workers to supply the pulpits and altars of its congregations? How complete is the theological education? Does it produce evangelists but not pastors? Does it produce pastors but is not able to train the next generation of theological educators and church leaders? Is the theological education helping the church address the intersection of Christianity and its own culture and society? Is the theological education sustainable?

R4. Leadership

Is the church producing leaders for the church offices, schools and other institutions? Does it need to rely on expertise from outside the church? Are there gaps (some positions the church is able to fill while others rely on outside assistance)?

R5. Operational Ability

Does the church have a workable structure and governance appropriate for its situation? Is the structure and governance functioning? Smooth transitions between leaders? Internal dissension and lawsuits? Can the church manage its schools and institutions? Is the operation of the church afflicted by corruption and graft? Does the church have the institutional ability to manage projects and budgets?

R6. Stewardship

Does the church teach stewardship? How much of the church's budget is funded externally? Are the core and essential operations self-supported? Or would vital components of the church's life diminish or cease if external funding was no longer provided?

Stewardship could further be subdivided into capacity to work outside the geographical borders of the church. Admittedly, no metric is perfect and each has flaws, but the assessment toward a Lutheran church is rooted first and foremost in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the administration of the Sacraments. Where this is occurring, there Christ's Church is found. In the case of a new mission plant, the missionaries themselves will proclaim the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. This is the beginning of the Church in that place. As that church is established by the Word of God, the missionaries will address the crosses faced and the culture theologically. The missionaries will train the pastors and the

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church workers of this new church. The missionaries will provide leadership and help raise up leaders in the new church plant; eventually, the new leadership of that particular church will assume the services provided by the missionaries. Initially, the missionaries will run the affairs of the new church. However, as new leaders are raised up, they will run the affairs of the church. Initially, the stewardship or the support is provided by the Lutheran church that sent the missionaries. As stewardship is taught by the missionaries and the new local pastors, church workers and church leaders, the newly-formed church practices stewardship.

Once the newly-planted church has leaders and can administer its own affairs, it ceases to be a mission station or start and becomes a partner church. Unlike in the three-self model, the formation of a new partner church does not mean the end of the connection between it and the Lutheran church that originally sent the missionaries. Rather, it begins a new phase where each church encourages, helps and the supports the other to remain a responsible Lutheran church. One church body with more resources in a given area has a responsibility to help the other that is lacking. The relationship is mutual. Each church assists the other as it is requested and as the other is able. The formation of a separate partner church from the sending church continues with a true partnership. The body of Christ assists the body of Christ.

In a similar manner, two partner churches may not have been given the same amount or all of the necessary resources to remain a responsible Lutheran church. Here

is where church relations and the other aspect of mission work continue. Work is done to help each church grow in the six areas. This may even lead to new mission work done in partnership between the two churches. The relationship and partnership is dynamic and based on the mutual respect and love for the other as the body of Christ.

The assessment toward a responsible Lutheran church provides both an evaluation of a particular church and also an assessment of the church relations and mission work of another church that is engaged in partnership with a particular church. It provides a tangible measure both of a particular church and of the work done by another church with the partner. It is not bound to any one type of activity, but it is connected to the phase in which a church finds itself. Care must be taken to avoid cycles of dependency and unwitting colonial attitudes and approaches. The partners must always be examining the relationship to ensure that it remains a true partnership of equals in the body of Christ.

For instance, one church may provide pastors to preach in the pulpits of the other church for a time. Once that particular church has enough local pastors, the work of the other church can shift focus to another area of the assessment. In the establishment of the particular church, the missionaries will baptize, catechize, preach and teach. Once the church is established and has enough local pastors, the work of the missionary changes from the primary work of pulpit and altar to supporting and encouraging the particular church in that work, perhaps through theological education or through grants for projects and the like. The nature of the work done by missionaries changes based upon the need of the particular church. The type of work is determined by mutual conversation and agreement between the two partners. In a similar way, the particular church has opportunity to assist her partner in remaining a responsible Lutheran church.

Conclusion

The Lutheran Confessions locates the Church around the pure preaching of the Gospel and the correct administration of the Sacraments. Where the Word of God and the Sacraments are located, there is the Church. The mission of the Church of proclaiming the Gospel to the lost belongs to the Church and must be done by the Church. Petri writes, “The church has the indisputable right, grounded in its divine foundation, to oversee

mission. Mission has the strictest duty to stand by its responsibility to the church. Every evangelical activity within the church, every task which comes into contact with the doctrine and the life of the church must be subordinate to ecclesial oversight. This proposition is clear in itself, for it inheres so naturally in the matter that an ecclesial **separation** results immediately if one tries to pursue a new course outside the obligations and rights of the existing fellowship.”¹² Quite simply, the mission or evangelization of the world cannot be divorced from the Church. For us, this means that Lutheran mission leads to the planting of Lutheran churches. . Where a church already exists, our work must support, sustain and strengthen that church. Determining how to do this occurs in dialog with the partner.

The tension between the established church and the mission field can create the temptation to do mission work apart from or outside of the Church. This temptation should be resisted. Organizations such as mission societies, or entities more closely associated with the Synod such as RSOs, auxiliaries, districts and congregations, should work in coordination with the mission work of the Synod. It should work in a way that supports the Synod’s mission work where it is weak, lacks capacity or fulfills a special need. For example, a RSO such as Bethesda who works with disabled people can bring capacity to the mission work of the Church not otherwise easily obtainable.

There is a warning here for the established church as well. When the state church structure hindered the ability of the people of God to proclaim the Gospel to a people in need of Christ’s salvation, mission societies, tract and Bible societies arose. In the absence of mission work by the Church, the people of God fulfilled their vocation to share the Gospel with people, even though this occurred at times with a lack of order, a disruption to ecclesial structure and, more problematically, a lack of doctrinal oversight and quality.

For the well-being of the Church, it is best when the established church and mission efforts work together in a coordinated fashion. Working together, the established church, mission entities and partner churches can assist one another to support the body of Christ. The tension between the established church and the mission field will not leave us until Christ returns and establishes His everlasting kingdom. This tension exists because the

¹² Petri, 14.

mission field is the place where demonic lies and the truth of God's Word meet. May we work to proclaim the Gospel, support and enhance partner churches and pray to the Lord of the harvest that He send laborers, for the field is ripe for the harvest.

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