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New Testament Teachings and 20th-Century Church Practice with Special Reference to Relations with Missions and Sister Churches

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The church in the second half of the 20th century is caught up in the restless revolutionary forces sweeping over the face of the earth and inevitably is being shaken out of its complacency and self-satisfaction. In an age like this, everything is being sharply questioned and ruthlessly analyzed. This in itself is not bad. Under the blessing of God, much good should come to the church as a result of honest reevaluation, on the basis of God's Word, of the church's theology, its life in the world, and its mission.

This article will restrict itself to one phase of the church's interest and responsibility. We want to direct attention to the important area of relationship between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the mission churches and sister churches that have developed in recent years. It is interesting to note that because of various factors in our age there has been a definite trend for mission congregations in their respective areas in the world to organize themselves into church bodies. As a result our Synod through its mission department has to deal more and more with sister church bodies, not just with missionaries sent out to serve in mission fields. Though

these younger sister churches still require much help in their manpower and financial needs, they are truly organized church bodies and should be respected as such. This development necessitates a careful approach to our relations with them and possibly an adjustment in our thinking relative to the privileges and responsibilities given them by the Lord of the church. The theological principles taught in the New Testament can help us in this.

The first-century Christian church was not structured as a complex administrative organization or institution as our denominations are today. Nevertheless, the pattern of the sending church and its outreach through mission endeavor is evident in the New Testament. The congregation at Jerusalem, the headquarters of the apostles, served as the home church until the destruction of Jerusalem. We can learn a great deal from the Book of Acts and from the epistles about relationship responsibilities of churches where God has planted them.

It is easy to document from the Holy Scriptures that the business of the church is the same wherever Christian congregations are established, and this is true also of groups of congregations banded together in organized church bodies to do the work of the Lord. The church, God's people, has the responsibility to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

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Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:19,20)

This is the mission of the church. To meet this primary responsibility, the church is given many more detailed directives according to which it is to achieve its God-given purpose. All the council of God is to be proclaimed; God's Word is to be taught and preached without fear or favor under all circumstances; false teaching is to be rejected and those who cause divisions and difficulties in opposition to true doctrine are to be marked and avoided (Acts 20:27-31; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; Rom. 16:17,18). Christian love is to rule in the hearts of God's people, and under its influence they are to minister to one another, edifying the body of Christ, serving the least of His brethren, and by their good works they are to light up the dark world that men everywhere may come to glorify our Father in heaven (1 Cor. 13:1-13; Eph. 4:11-16; Matt. 25:31-40; 5:13-16). Fellowship in the communion of saints is to be understood and acknowledged; unity in the church is to be sought and established; separations and barriers of hatred and prejudice among men, generated in sinful hearts, are to be eliminated in the household of God; the bond of faith and love among the members of the body of Christ is to be demonstrated before all men that the world may know that the Father has sent His Son, Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:1-6; 2:11-22; John 17:20-23)

We have outlined in broad and general terms the church's responsibilities and the general directives whereby it is to function in the world. More details could have been added, but enough has been indicated to

show that Christian churches, wherever they have been established by the Lord, need to look to the Word of God, especially the New Testament teachings, for instructions which must regulate their work and life.

Now it is important to note that the application of such directives in the practical life of the church has to be made where the church is, and the church is where God's people are gathered together in congregations using the means of grace. A study of the Book of Acts and of the epistles shows that in local situations where special emphasis and specific applications in the life of the church were necessary, decisions had to be made on the field where these congregations were functioning in the work of the Kingdom.

At the same time, it is clear from the New Testament that there was a proper fraternal concern between congregations and groups of congregations, especially in relation to the church in Jerusalem. When theological decisions on certain issues had to be made in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, a conference was held in Jerusalem on these matters involving representatives from the various churches, and the conclusions reached in the conference were forwarded to these congregations in a most fraternal spirit and were conveyed by Judas and Silas as special emissaries with Barnabas and Paul. Help was extended in theological questions and in practical matters as it was needed in various localities. (See, for instance, the Epistle to the Galatians and the Epistle to the Hebrews.) When severe persecutions caused great hardships in the congregation at Jerusalem, the mission churches put on a campaign for relief funds to help the mother church. It seems

that the brethren in Colossae and in Laodicea were confronted by similar problems and therefore Paul suggested that they exchange and read epistles addressed to both congregations. (Col. 4:16)

It is in this manner that the church today should attend to its responsibilities wherever it is doing the work of the Lord. This applies also to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and to the mission and sister churches in its fellowship. We must be concerned to keep a strong bond of fellowship among us. There must be much communication between our churches with exchange of theological studies and the seeking of advice and counsel as special needs arise. There should be frequent visits by representatives of the Synod to our sister churches and visits by their representatives to our Synod. In many ways we should minister to each other and strengthen each other in the faith and in the bonds of love.

By the same token, however, our younger churches should accept the responsibilities of applying the principles of the Word of God to their own church situation and of making necessary theological and practical decisions in the field where they are. It is important also that we of the sending church should grant them this evangelical freedom to meet their responsibilities as churches and have confidence in their theological competence to act responsibly and respect their conscientious actions in such matters. In this connection we must remember that they are confronted by situations and challenges quite different from our own and that it is not necessary or right to transplant certain patterns and problems of American Lutheran church life to the foreign fields. In other words, on

the basis of New Testament theological principles, let the people of God, where they are gathered as a church, meet their God-given responsibilities.

This approach in relationship to mission and sister churches is not authoritarian. As these churches reach decisions in their respective situations, we may find problems arising which we have not faced before.

A case in point is that some of our younger churches in foreign mission fields have entered into theological dialog with other Lutheran mission churches and are discovering a greater doctrinal unity among these churches than their sending churches in America and Europe seem to have achieved. There is a great yearning in the hearts of God's people in these churches to work out as soon as possible a God-pleasing unity which will make possible one national Lutheran Church in such territories through which they can proclaim with united hearts and voices the saving Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to a pagan public.

Another consideration that is burdening the hearts and minds of the people in our younger churches in the mission fields of the world is the problem of adequate education and training for a native ministry. The need is great and the time is short. Financial resources are inadequate. Questions are being asked. Is it possible, with proper safeguards, for various Lutheran mission churches in a foreign field to combine their resources and establish joint training schools and seminaries? In a day when rising nationalism and a resurgence of pagan religions are threatening the expansion of Christian missions, especially with the help of nonnative missionaries, does not good stewardship demand that the resources of Lutheran mission churches

be joined wherever possible to more adequately meet the needs of a native ministry?

Such concerns of the brethren in a number of our mission churches have been communicated to the responsible boards and officials of our Synod. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations was asked to give careful study to these matters. After spending much time and prayer, thought and research on the subject, the commission reached the conclusion, on the basis of New Testament teaching, that also our mission and sister churches must be granted the evangelical freedom to be God's church where they are and to act responsibly in making theological and practical decisions in the situations in which God has placed them.

In such matters, the sending church, our Synod, in a fraternal spirit would say to sister churches that we would lay no other burden upon them than that they remain faithful to the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments as the written Word of God and to the Lutheran Confessions as a true statement and exposition of the Word of God. We would request them to

keep us informed of developments and assure them of our prayers and offer them our encouragement and whatever counsel they might find helpful.

We believe also that the sending church, our Synod, should continue whatever financial and manpower assistance is needed even after such union endeavors by God's grace are consummated and new national Lutheran churches come into being with constituents from mission churches whose sending churches may not be in altar and pulpit fellowship. Whatever problems this might create for the sending churches and for returning missionaries will have to be faced honestly and courageously, possibly finding in such developments on the mission fields of the world incentive and direction for solution of problems in our churches at home.

We believe the time is at hand for our Synod to face these developments with spiritual maturity and on the basis of New Testament theological principles courageously to take positive action on these issues in the next synodical convention in Detroit.

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