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The Pastor and Synod's Handbook

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WHAT a dreary and technical subject for an occasion like this, some might say, "The Pastor and Synod's *Handbook*." Why not "The Pastor and His Bible," or "The Pastor and His Sermon," or something else that has living value? What compelling interest can the *Handbook* of Synod have for a graduate of Concordia Seminary who, call in hand, is ready to enter the active ministry?

There are those that look upon the *Handbook* of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod with its Constitution and By-Laws as a tedious set of regulations that may be necessary as a guide for action for certain elected and appointed officials of Synod, but of no real lasting worth to anyone else. They say: "Most assuredly, you have to have some sort of regulations to govern procedure, but the less we have to do with them, the better off we are. Let the officers of Synod and of the Districts take these regulations to heart and remain within the limitations set by them, the rest of us will be free spirits governed only by the law of love." Then there may be those that are slaves of regulations and make of them laws that bind them in all things. They want everything covered by such regulations down to the minutest detail, and they are sticklers for exact procedure according to these regulations. For them these regulations have an overwhelming authority beyond what was intended for them.

The *Handbook* of Synod is of far greater importance than that which is conceded by the first group and nothing at all like what the second group pictures it to be. In this *Handbook* you will find embodied Scriptural principles that have helped give the proper God-pleasing form to our congregations and to our Synod and at the same time an effective control imposed by the Word of God itself. This *Handbook* can offer you an extremely helpful course in the fundamentals of a Scriptural church polity and in practical theology and can be very effective in helping you "know your Synod."

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I

One solid bit of advice you might glean from your *Handbook* is this: "*Don't ever try to by-pass or ignore the congregation.*" The congregation is God's own working unit. To it, by virtue of the believers in it, is given the power to preach and teach the Word, to baptize and to commune, to absolve from sins and to retain sins, to call pastors and teachers to perform these duties publicly in its name. The local congregation is self-governing. With it lies the power to make decisions in all matters pertaining to it and to its activities for Christ and His kingdom which are not regulated by God's Word. That is what your *Handbook* tells you repeatedly, for the authority and the self-government of the congregation is one of the two Scriptural principles which are basic in the church polity the *Handbook* recognizes.

Object 8 under Article III in the Constitution brings this to your attention at the very beginning of your study of the *Handbook*. One of the purposes of Synod, we are told there, is "the protection of . . . congregations in the performance of their duties and the maintenance of their rights." This means: if you as pastor have ridden roughshod over your congregation in promoting some activity in the Kingdom work, as, for instance, youth work, vacation Bible school, Sunday school, introduction of liturgical forms; if you have disregarded your congregation in these matters and have not sought a decision from this unit, the officers of Synod, if they were called in to decide between your actions and the rights of the congregation, would have to say: The pastor may have been right in seeking certain objectives, but was wrong in disregarding his congregation. The end does not justify the means. His means set aside the fundamental Scriptural and God-given principle concerning the rights and powers of the congregation. You may and should use persuasion, but never coercion, and you certainly should never ignore your congregation or by-pass it when planning and carrying out the activities you consider necessary and important for the purpose of advancing the Kingdom.

Article VII of the Constitution, which Trinity of St. Louis submitted as an amendment to the Constitution at the second day of the 1847 Convention, clearly safeguards the individual congregation's right of self-government. It rejects the use of coercive powers with respect to the individual congregation. It states very definitely that no resolution of Synod is of binding force upon the congregation . . . if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of the congregation is concerned. This amendment was written in 1847. In a section of our

Handbook, 1.09 b, written a hundred years later, in 1947, we find this statement: "Synod, being an advisory body, recognizes the right of the congregation to be the judge of the resolution as applied to its local condition." After one hundred years the *Handbook* remains faithful to the basic principle that the congregation, according to the Word of God, is self-governing and that none of its God-given rights are to be abridged.

Not so long ago a student at an accredited college asked me to help him in the writing of a thesis on church government in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I gave the young man my copy of the *Handbook* to use and showed him Article VII and section 1.09. I also called to his attention other sections in our Constitution and By-Laws that emphasize the basic principles in our church polity. Then we discussed church government in our Synod. After his paper was returned to him with a very fine grade, he said: "You'll get a ring from Dr. —. He was astonished at what I wrote. He demanded to see all the books I referred to. Then he told me that he could hardly believe that the congregations in the Missouri Synod had such authority and were granted such a wide range of self-government. He was sure that all of our churches took their orders from some central authority. He could not understand how it was possible for a Synod to function as a closely knit unit with congregations free to accept or reject the decisions of Synod. Yet there it was in the *Handbook*," said my young friend, "this right and power clearly stated. He couldn't get away from it."

Our founding fathers and the congregations in their charge learned the hard way that the idea of *ecclesia repraesentativa*, i. e., the Church as represented in the clergy, is unscriptural. Their Church was almost wrecked because of their reliance on a hierarchial form of church government. When therefore a study of the Confessions and of Luther led them to Scripture and a clear understanding of the functions, the rights, and the powers of a self-governing congregation, they wrote that principle into their congregations' constitutions and into the Constitution and By-Laws of the Missouri Synod. "A share of the credit for the success of the Missouri Synod in group perpetuation and group promotion must, no doubt, be attributed to congregational and synodical polity" (Mundinger, *Government in the Missouri Synod*, p. 218). Dr. G. H. Gerberding, in his introduction to M. L. Wagner's *The Chicago Synod and Its Antecedents*, agrees when he shows the lack of progress of other Lutheran groups in Indiana in the early days just

because there was no clarity in the matter of the rights and powers of the congregations.

Congregations are made up of fallible human beings, and as a result their decisions often seem to us to reflect attitudes that hinder and hamper the work of the Lord. Our founding fathers discovered that only too often. The synodical reports of the early years report various instances of trouble with balky congregations presuming too heavily upon their rights; but never once is there an effort on the part of Synod to ignore the congregation and its rights. Patient exhortation and persuasion are the methods recommended and used. Use that method, and God will be on your side if your purpose is His purpose, and He will see to it that His unit, the congregation, will in His time take the steps that need to be taken.

II

Another necessary and important suggestion your *Handbook* has to offer you is this: "*Train your people to recognize your ministry as the ministry of the Word and that this Word is the supreme authority in the Church.*" This supreme authority and rule of God's Word, connected as it is with the ministry in our midst, is the second Scriptural principle that is basic in our church polity.

For Lutheran pastors trained in our schools this principle seems so self-evident. The founding fathers weren't satisfied to consider it self-evident. They embedded this principle deeply as a foundation stone in our Synod's Constitution. You can hardly turn a page without finding a reference to it. You find it in Article II, where Synod, and that includes *every member* of Synod, accepts without reservation "the Holy Scripture . . . as the written Word of God as the **only** rule and norm of faith and of practice and the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God." As the authority of the Word lies in the hands of the called pastors and teachers, Article III specifies that these workers must be properly trained by Synod itself, they must be supervised with regard to the performance of their official duties, they must be protected in the performance of these duties and in the maintenance of their rights. There is a tight, unified control in all doctrinal matters that are clearly taught in God's Word and in our Confessions. No pastor or teacher can be ordained or installed if, coming from another church body not in doctrinal agreement with us, he has not been properly examined as to his position in doctrine and practice. (4.55—4.61 . . . 4.75—4.81.) A congregation of non-Lutheran faith making applica-

tion to Synod for pastors or teachers must unconditionally accept the Bible as the Word of God, permit its pastor to minister in accordance with the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, after due instruction declare its willingness to sever its connection with any heterodox body with which it may be affiliated (4.05). These are just a few examples of the place the Word of God has in our official regulations as authority supreme. Every pastor and teacher had better be conscious at all times in his exercise of this ministry of the Word of the responsibility and trust placed into his hands. Train your people in understanding the authority that the Word has in their lives, do this in a winsome manner, treat your congregation as a self-governing unit in all other matters, and you will have welded together the two principles God has given His Church as basic in setting up and operating the right kind of church government.

Do not permit yourself to put more authority into your ministry than that which it has received as the ministry of the Word. Pastors are often tempted to do that. Men, women, and children that have learned to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ will have learned to love and respect him who comes to them as His minister and pastor. As Cornelius said to Peter, they say to their pastor: "Now therefore are we here present before God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." There is a temptation to go beyond those things that are commanded of God and, getting into the field of liturgy or methods of doing work or raising money, to use the authority of your office summarily, and by your command to do away with everything that does not conform completely with what you consider the best and most efficient way to deal with such usages, methods, or forms. You can always get some sort of following if that is what you are looking for. But the danger for you and your people will be that as the human authority asserts itself over the congregation, the following will not be one that is hearing the voice of the divine Shepherd but of the human leader. That is going to be bad for you. You are getting away from the Rock on which the Church is built. For that you will have to answer to your Head Bishop. You are going to be tempted to get farther away and are in danger of becoming a legalist. That is going to be bad for your people and for every individual soul in your congregation, for nothing bewilders and leads souls away from Christ more readily than when His people are led to substitute the voice of men for the voice of God. This is going to be bad for your congregation, for it will finally break down the right kind of church govern-

ment. The rights of the congregation are going to be abridged, and in that measure the work of the Lord is going to be abridged.

We have spoken of Synod's solicitude for these rights and the provisions it has sought to make to safeguard them. Even against a pastor who usurps these rights Synod would like to help a congregation by making it possible to "supervise pastors and teachers with regard to the performance of their official duties" (III.7). It has arranged for regular official visits by chosen officials of Synod, who are to call the attention of congregations and pastors to the great objectives our churches must have (3.71). A careful reading of "Visitor and Pastor" (3.73) and "Visitor and Congregation" (3.75) will show you that Synod is interested in safeguarding the rights of all concerned, but is increasingly interested in this, that God's Word remains the one great Word of authority in the congregation.

Do not think it was easier for our founding fathers in their day than it is in ours to put into effect the principles of the self-government of the congregation and the supreme authority of the Word exercised primarily by the pastor as minister of that Word. Congregations had to be taken to task because they caused divisions and troubles in their refusal to bow before the Word. The 1848 report brings such an example. In 1849 Dr. Walther reports the suspension of a pastor because of repeated offense against the Word and an ungodly life. Pres. Wyneken complains of the many difficulties among the churches in respect to their attitude toward the Word; but he urges patience and winsomeness and instruction and prayer, yet never a letdown on either of the two basic principles of our church polity. With that sort of administration, God's blessing has rested upon your Church and mine these 103 years. It can continue to do so if you will continue to be guided by these principles, and you can find no better guide for their practical application than your own *Handbook*.

The professor who marveled at the fact that The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod gave such large powers to its congregations and yet marched on as one army did not realize the great unifying power of the Word. I called that to his attention. I sought to show him that the very people who had such great power of self-government had been led by the Holy Spirit through the Word from early youth to recognize the voice of their Shepherd whenever His Word was applied. Him they would follow implicitly. Our pastors were bound by a vow freely given to their one Master, Christ, to make use of the authority of this Word alone when guiding their people. Ours, then, was an inward

unity, which could be maintained only if pastor and people would continue to live in that Word and by that Word.

That is where you graduates come in. Your class is another group going out into the work in congregations of our Synod as ministers of the Word. You had better be certain that you have discovered and continue to discover for yourselves, with a conviction that comes only from God's Spirit out of the Word, the great truths of God that you are to offer your people and all that will hear you. You will discover as you get better acquainted with your *Handbook* that it is this sort of authority that it alone has in mind to perpetuate. Nowhere does it pretend to depend upon legal authority set up by men to force congregations in line. Its appeal is and remains an appeal to the Word, ever maintaining the self-government of the congregation in all other matters.

As you browse through your *Handbook*, you will note how marvelously this kind of church government has worked out. You will begin to be astonished at the large list of activities your Church is engaged in, how it has reached into every field of endeavor to preach Christ and to maintain congregations and pastors and teachers. You can compare the first regulations with those existing today. The elasticity of the regulations is astounding. The simple has become complex; the few activities have become many and manifold. Missions all over the world, educational programs for everyone from the cradle to the grave, minister- and teacher-training provisions, support and pensions, publications, public relations, radio and television, visual aids, the whole modern way of doing things on an increasing scale, all find their place in this expanded *Handbook*. Yet the fundamentals remain intact. The same basic principles, grounded solidly in God's Word, are the sound foundation stones for a church government in a Church which can number millions as they were for a Church which numbered thousands. You will also discover the one reason why under God all this expansion was blessed. It was because by His grace our Church today, as the *Handbook* shows, has kept the same basic principles of church polity intact. Do your part as minister of the Word to maintain these principles. Then God will continue to bless our Church because it exalts His Word and gives to His congregations the rights and privileges He has bestowed upon them.

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