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The Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology on "Meta-Church"

The source-book for the term and concept of "meta-church" is Carl F. George's *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, which was published by Fleming H. Revell in 1991.¹ The analysis here of "meta-church" is based entirely on this original text and not on any later derivatives.

A. The Self-Understanding of "Meta-Church"

"Meta-Church" must be understood as part and parcel of the McGavran-Wagner "Church Growth Movement." C. Peter Wagner's foreword states that George's book "may well be the most significant step forward in church growth theory and practice since Donald McGavran wrote the basic textbook, *Understanding Church Growth*, in 1970" (George, 9). What is meant by the term meta-church? George explains: "This new label allows for greater numbers, but its deepest focus is on change: pastors changing their minds about how ministry is to be done, and churches changing their organizational form in order to be free from size constraints" (George, 51).

The most important change advocated by the theology of meta-church is that it "highlights the lay-led small group as the essential growth center. It is so important that everything else is to be considered secondary to its promotion and preservation" (George, 41). This change in turn rests on certain very definite concepts of what ministry is and ought to be. Ministry is understood fundamentally as meeting the needs of people. The assumption is criticized "that a pastor or skilled lay leader can provide adequate care for a group of 50-100. In reality, he or she [!] cannot" (George, 67). "Another harmful side effect" (of the traditional approach) "involves gift suppression." No matter how hard a person may try to involve others, "this basic concept remains: 'My full pitcher is pouring into your empty pitcher.' In terms of spiritual gifts, one person 'gives,' and the primary assignment of the other people, gifted though they may be, is to take" (George, 67-68).

The two poles of the organization of meta-church are "cell groups" of about ten participants and the "praise celebration of worship. . . . In fact, the bigger, the better! It is like a professional football game" (George, 60). In between there could be "sub-congregations" or "congregations" ("bigger than a cell but smaller than a celebration" [George, 61]). Unlike the conventional view,

which makes "cells" elective and "congregations" foundational, the theory of meta-church regards cell groups as foundational and "sub-congregations" as elective. While cells are foundational, "certain other adventures in faith do not occur easily among ten people. When believers come together in a huge crowd, for example, an extra festival-like dimension of excitement attaches itself to the singing of praise or the preaching of Scripture. Also a sense of significance emerges in the consciousness of the group, an apprehension that God is accomplishing something big enough to be worthy of their involvement and investment" (George, 61). Again, "church leaders wrongly assume that the same festival effect is possible in a congregation of 50-100 as in a crowd of hundreds or thousands" (George, 64). The "festival effect" of large crowds goes with "celebration."

The foundational units or cells are lay-led: "*Laypeople Do the Pastoring*. The leader of each nurturing group functions as a lay pastor to that ten-or-so-person flock . . . *Pastoring Supersedes Teaching* . . . The teaching gift cannot be valued above the pastoring function" (George, 97-99). The main leader's function is "vision casting," which "places the locus of ministry where it belongs: in the hands of lay pastors. It commissions and stimulates these leaders" (George, 139). Chapter 11, entitled "See Yourself as Manager and Communicator," likewise states (George, 183-185):

The Meta-Church rests on a bottom-up vision of ministry . . . The cell is truly the basic building block of the spiritual community . . . Similarly, in a Meta-Church, the CEO's greatest resource is the broadcast of vision at worship services, at staff meetings, and at VHS [Vision, Huddle, Skill] gatherings. The CEO will be concerned that the church's goal imaging is strategic, enabling, empowering, implementable, and sensible.

Traditional titles like bishops, pastors, elders, and deacons are deliberately avoided, in part because of this question: "don't certain texts (1 Timothy 2, 3; Titus 1-2; 1 Corinthians 12-14; and so on) imply age- and gender-based qualifications?" (George, 129). Instead, the theory of meta-church proposes an algebra of D, C, L, X, and the like, mainly indicating the numbers of people involved (500,

100, 50, and 10 respectively).

There is, finally, a deliberate anti-doctrinal bias in the theology of meta-church (George, 154-155):

Churches [of the future] will be known primarily as caring places rather than as teaching associations. These churches of the future realize that God measures His people more by their obedience than by their knowledge of Bible facts. Therefore, they've shifted their priorities from teaching to caring, from understanding to application.

B. Theological Analysis

Crucial, central, and constitutive for the entire life and existence of the church are the purely preached gospel and the rightly administered sacraments (Articles VII-VIII of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the Augsburg Confession). Dr. Martin Luther declares: "The whole life and substance of the church is in the word of God" ("tota vita et substantia ecclesiae est in verbo Dei").² For this life the right distinction between law and gospel is indispensable (Article V of the Formula of Concord). Preaching and sacraments, moreover, are not abstract functions, but concrete gospel-treasures for which the Lord has given His church a special stewardship (1 Corinthians 4:1), that is, a divinely instituted public ministry or office of the gospel (Articles V, XIV, and XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession), distinct from the self-offering spiritual priesthood which all Christians possess by virtue of baptism and faith (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2-3).

It is clear that the implications of this understanding of the church and her ministry clash profoundly with the prescriptions of "meta-church" and their underlying assumptions. If the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments are all-decisive and constitutive, then individual care-giving in small groups is not. In the New Testament the care for bodily needs is important, to be sure, but auxiliary and derivative (as in Acts 6), not primary or foundational. To exalt "care" at the expense of doctrine is to confuse law and gospel fundamentally.

The theology of meta-church, furthermore, recognizes no divinely

established ministry of the gospel, nor any means of grace, for that matter: "One of the strengths of Meta-Church theory is its biblical conviction that the Holy Spirit officially commissions *every* believer into a ministry of caring for one another" (George, 129). "In response [to 'the story of their religious experience'], the community extends tokens of acceptance (applause, friendship, membership, baptism, and so on), resulting in a sense of belonging for the newcomers" (George, 72).

For the same reasons, likewise, the whole understanding of the church at worship differs sharply in the theology of meta-church and in the theology of the Lutheran church. For Lutherans, God's self-giving in gospel and sacraments is primary and of the very essence of divine worship (Article XXIV of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the Augsburg Confession). In the theory of meta-church "celebration" depends basically on the cumulative "festival effect" of large numbers—a notion quite void of theological content. This primacy of sociology over theology has disastrous implications for the secularization of public worship, quite contrary to the apostolic exhortation to *transformation* away from rather than *conformity* to this world (Romans 12:2). The central place which in the Lutheran confession belongs to the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments is in the theory of meta-church assigned to so-called "spiritual gifts," as popularized by C. Peter Wagner. The thoroughly fallacious and untenable nature of this scheme is made very clear in the exegetical and theological analyses of the report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations entitled *Spiritual Gifts*.³

C. Conclusions

The theory of meta-church—taking its cue from "the Body Life movement of the 1970s" (George, 44)—sees the essence of the church and of its growth in the "care-giving" small groups or cells described above: "Only on the cell level can people's deeply felt care needs be met" (George, 60). In terms of the confession of Holy Scripture in the Book of Concord, the concept of meta-church is not a theologically neutral methodology, but a defective doctrine of the church and her ministry tinged with synergism and Pentecostalism—with negative consequences for the understanding of mission,

evangelism, and worship. The notion of a "CEO" intrudes worldly power into the church and puts in the place of the gospel-office gently tending the flock of the Good Shepherd, with His word and sacraments, something law-driven and law-driving.

It is true, of course, that beyond the divinely given arrangements for the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the holy sacraments (Articles V and VII of the Augustana), the church may in Christian liberty make use of all sorts of organizational forms, including small groups. The theology of meta-church, however, is not simply about small groups. It is, rather, a theology which confounds law and gospel and sees small groups as essential and decisive. The theory of meta-church, moreover, specifically warns people against combining its structure of small groups with traditional positions: "Otherwise, as soon as an organizational system correlates titles (pastor, elder, and deacon) with cell-group leadership, a lot of God-given talent will go unused" (George, 132). From such a vastly different system of belief one cannot simply "adapt" organizational details for Lutheran use without inviting theological havoc.

Good, well-instructed lay leaders are, of course, extremely important for the life of a Christian congregation. Practical arrangements here should arise, however, from sound theology, as found, for instance, in *The Form of a Christian Congregation* by Dr. C. F. W. Walther. This work, incidentally, reflects a sober realism about the unhappy experience of the church with the "small groups" or *ecclesiolae* of pietism.⁴

Endnotes

1. Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell [A Division of Baker Book House], 1991).
2. "Ad Librum Eximii Magistri Nostri Magistri Ambrosii Catharini Defensoris Silvestri Prieratis Acerrimi, Responsio Martini Lutheri. 1521," in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, volume 7 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1897), 721:12.

3. *Spiritual Gifts: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1995).
4. C. F. W. Walther, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 91.

[Post-Scriptum: In the course of its most recent convention the Northern Illinois District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod requested the assistance of the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary in the following terms: "to evaluate the metachurch concept and to provide guidance to the synod and its districts regarding its use" (Resolution 2-03). In recent decades the faculty here has had the standard procedure of referring theological questions of a major kind to one of its departments to provide a specific response with minimal delay. On 9 January 1995, therefore, the faculty asked its department of systematic theology to provide the assistance desired in this case as speedily yet precisely as possible. The department cited thereupon submitted the matters concerned to a careful study during the course of the following four months before adopting an opinion agreeable to all of its members in a meeting of 9 May 1995. The departmental action was then reported in remarks from the chair in a meeting of the faculty as a whole on 22 May 1995 and again in a memorandum dispatched to all members of the faculty by its secretary (whose initials are attached to this note); and no additional action by the faculty as a whole was proposed by the department of systematic theology or by any others in the meeting mentioned or subsequently. The secretary of the faculty, in consequence, has now informed the Northern Illinois District through its secretary of the various steps which have been taken to produce the evaluation requested as expeditiously as possible and has communicated, as well, the hope of the faculty to have rendered the assistance needed in this particular case and the continual readiness of the faculty to be of any such service to the church in the future. The secretary of the department of systematics, simultaneously, has conveyed to the district in the same way the evaluation which is, then, the unanimous opinion specifically of the department of systematic theology of the Concordia Theological Seminary. D.McC.L.J.]