



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

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"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:2).

C. Peter Wagner is a long-time professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and one of the leading evangelical voices of our time. He is releasing a new book this summer and by some surreptitious means I have managed to get my hands on a couple of the chapters (don't tell anyone). The specific chapter that piqued my interest was the one entitled "We Are Moving From Denominational Government to Apostolic Government."

I could not quite figure out what he meant by Apostolic Government, so I will not explore that idea. But what he says about denominations is interesting and perhaps even helpful. I am also reminded of Lyle Schaller's assertion that "denominationalism died in 1955, we are just experiencing the death throes."

Wagner uses Jesus' language of old and new wineskins. During much of church history the state church was the prevailing organizational structure. Society presumed during the Holy Roman Empire that the church and the state were to be one. The religion of the prince or king or queen was naturally to be the religion of all of the citizens of that territory, and as such was often severely enforced.

The British Empire is a good example. Henry VIII, perhaps spurred on by Martin Luther's bold endeavors in Germany, broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and established the Church of England, with himself as head. Upon his death his pre-teen son Edward continued this pattern, but when Edward died a few years later his sister Mary became the queen. Mary, who was to become known as "Bloody Mary," changed the official religion to Roman Catholic, and slaughtered those who refused. When she died prematurely, Queen Elizabeth I began a very long and illustrious reign and reestablished the Protestant Church of England.

This also explains how Sweden was converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism virtually in one day by King Gustavus Vasa in 1527.

But inevitably state churches became old wineskins, and people of faith began casting about for a new wineskin. What emerged were denominations, especially among the new settlers in America. Some colonies tried to create a state church to dominate a certain territory, but

that didn't fit well with the American experience. So when our constitution was created, it specifically prohibited the government from imposing religion.

Denominations were the new wineskins, and God has poured new wine into them for more than 300 years. They were used in an extraordinary way to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. Even though Wagner claims that denominations have now become old wineskins and need to be replaced with something else, he wants to keep them in high respect, just as Jesus respected John the Baptist who represented the old wineskin at that time.

Wagner agrees with Schaller about the demise of denominations, he says that beginning in 1965 virtually every one of the Protestant denominations in the U.S. began losing members. The day of the denomination was fading. He says that Jesus teaches in Matthew 9 that God does not desire to pour new wine into old wineskins because they will not be able to hold it. So he says that in everyone of the denominations today there are an increasing number of people who no longer have any interest in denominational politics, in increasing hierarchy, and hugely expensive structures.

Lyle Schaller is a bit more acerbic when he says, "maybe denominations have to get back to doing what they do best, that is administering clergy pension funds."

Wagner quotes Martin Marty, the leading Lutheran theologian of our day and a strong denominational supporter, when he expresses his unhappiness with denominational meetings, especially the propensity we have to vote on everything. Marty's solution, don't let the people vote. Voting messes everything up.

Marty describes the typical denominational gathering. Participants usually arrive on Sunday evening full of joy, hugging each other. A triumphant opening ceremony follows. On Monday, people cheer at reports, however mixed the news. But on Tuesday, committees begin their reports and the clouds roll in. Wednesday, participants debate the committee's recommendations. Thursday, they vote. Friday, they all go home mad,

even the winners. No wonder Wagner and Schaller and others are trying to find new wineskins.

Schaller writes that of all of the Protestant congregations in the U.S. which average 1,000 in worship or more, fewer than one-fifth of these are affiliated with one of the major denominations. About half of these congregations are completely independent. In other words, more and more growing churches have chosen to be outside of a denomination. Also the average age in the independent congregations is much lower than in denominational congregations, most being born after 1970.

Schaller concludes that the reason why so few denominational congregations are growing can be summarized in two words, "intrad denominational quarrels." The lack of growth and vitality in denominational churches is attributed to "intrad denominational quarrels." (Having attended denominational meetings for 37 years, I have endured a plethora of such quarrels. And there is always a new one on the horizon.)

Schaller then goes on to highlight some of the areas in which members are being asked to choose up sides:

- How much control can and should the denominational leaders exercise over congregations, over regional judicatories, over missionaries and clergy? Do members of these congregations have to endorse and support the position chosen at a national denominational meeting?
- How strong a voice should be given to the laity? Should clergy have special status? Should laity be equally represented in denominational decision-making?
- In several denominations the differences of opinion about human sexuality and marriage have turned out to be highly divisive. Behind this lies a deeper quarrel over doctrine, creeds, biblical interpretation and belief systems. Who gets to decide?
- Another issue is the choice of the basic institutional building block for ecumenism. Most denominations believe this should be done as a denomination, thus the ELCA voted to affiliate with the Episcopalians. Many others today believe that the local congregation should be the basic building block in promoting ecumenism.
- Another issue revolves around who chooses the final destination for the charitable dollars placed in the offering plate each weekend. Should these decisions

be made by the denomination or the congregation, or even by the preference of the donor?

- Finally, the past three years have provided growing divisions within at least five of the mainline denominations over American foreign policy. Quite often denominational officials favor one policy and the majority of the members of the congregations favor another. Who gets to decide?

So what are the results of these intradenominational quarrels? One clear result is that a shrinking proportion of very large Protestant congregations are affiliated with one of the major denominations.

The good news, says Schaller, can be found in a small but growing number of regional judicatories, that have decided to abandon the recreational activity of intradenominational quarreling in favor of a focus on evangelism and mission. Unlike divisive issues, a focus on evangelism and mission can become a unifying rallying point. So says Lyle Schaller.

When Pastor Mike mentioned the possibility of a non-geographic synod being formed within the ELCA, the above description by Schaller is what is being envisioned. You cannot put the new wine of the Gospel into old wineskins, the skins will burst and the wine will be lost. The goal would be to end the eternal cycle of intradenominational quarreling and rediscover the biblical mandate for evangelism and mission. Pray for God's leading in this pivotal time of our history.