

A Word to Sheepdogs

WITH THE DEMISE of the church's glory days, we have experienced a multitude of would-be salvage experts appearing sequentially in rapid succession. All of them promise the magic formula to resuscitate, revive and grow the church. But over the last fifty years we have seen most of these sure-fire solutions to the church's ailments rise to prominence, plateau and then fade into oblivion as yet another methodology takes its place.

Certainly God's people cannot sit idly by while the social structure beneath them radically collapses. Creeping "secularization" and expressive individualism result in more and more vacant pews populated primarily by people who grow grayer and grayer year by year. No wonder Christians are in a panic. "O my goodness!" is the cry. "This is serious; we've got to do something!" Inevitably some helpful soul pipes up: "Here's something: let's do it!" But no one bothers to see how the suggested approach squares with Scripture and the church's confession. No wonder, then, that for decades churches have been lurching from one failed formula for success to another, only to be bitterly disappointed yet once more.

Timothy Pauls has a radical idea: What if instead of climbing on failed bandwagons one after another, we looked to the Scriptures for a paradigm for mission that has served the church well over the centuries in both good times and bad? He suggests we simultaneously build both households and churches around God's own design: the family. Replete with practical implications for implementation, Pastor Pauls' paper will challenge you and your people to address ministry and outreach in our conflicted times with both courage and renewed dedication to the sacred means by which the Holy Spirit continues to call, gather, enlighten and sanctify the church until Jesus comes again: the holy gospel and sacraments.

Dr. H. L. Senkbeil



The Congregation as Family, Part 2: Form and Commission

Pastor Timothy J. Pauls

Two Families

THE NATURAL FAMILY AND THE CHURCH have abundant parallels and for good reason. Both are households instituted by God in Genesis 2. Each is blessed with a commission for the increase of life: husband and wife are to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28), while the church is to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20). Children are born into each: by the will of the flesh and the will of man in the family and by the will of God in the church (John 1:12–13). Both have a God-given structure: the natural family is to feature husband and wife, then children as God so blesses; and the church in any location is to have pastor (in the stead of Christ) and congregation (the bride of Christ in that place), composed of the children of God.¹

¹A version of this essay also appears in *Take Courage: Essays in Honor of Harold Senkbeil*. (Mark Pierson and Timothy Pauls, editors. Irvine: New Reformation, publishing pending.) It is Part 2, building upon its companion piece, “The Congregation as Family: A New Testament Survey” (*Seelsorger: A Journal for the Contemporary Cure of Souls*: 3, 2017, pages 5-23). In that essay, I argue that “family” is not merely a helpful metaphor and lens among many for examining congregational life; but that the church *is* the family of God, and the congregation is the family of God in a certain location. Were it not for the fall into sin, the biological family of Adam and his descendants and would be identical to the church, but the fall has caused the division. Thus a Christian is part of two families: one born of the flesh and one of the spirit; one by the will of man and one by the will of God. This scriptural revelation should have a profound influence in shaping pastoral care and congregational life.

It is further no coincidence that households in Scripture involve fatherly instruction (Eph 6:4) and meals, while the church's worship is centered upon the Lord's gifts of word and sacrament. In fact, both institutions are given by God to point to Christ. The church does so explicitly, endeavoring always to proclaim "Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2), whereas the marital relationship of love and subordination in the natural family (established in Genesis 2:24) is interpreted by Paul as a mystery that refers to "Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). This analogy is continued in the *Haupttafel* of Ephesians 6:1–9, which says fathers are to provide instruction to their children in lieu of wrath, and masters and slaves are to act in goodwill toward one another.²

Though not utilizing domestic nomenclature, the Augsburg Confession presents a consonant view of the church as family: "It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (AC V:1). That is where Christ and his bride are found together, where the Holy Spirit is at work in the means of grace to create and sustain the children of God. That is where the pastor stands in the stead and by the command of Christ, as surrogate husband and father to Christ's bride and her children.³

² For an extensive treatment of the *Haupttafel*, see the commentary of Thomas Wingler, *Ephesians* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), especially pages 598–696.

³ To illustrate the point, it is helpful to insert familial terminology into a summary of the Augsburg Confession: There is a God (AC I) from whom we are lost because of sin (AC II). That we might be brought into his family, the Son of God was born of Mary to reconcile us to the Father (AC III); and it is through the

The parallels between the church and the natural family continue outside of Scripture in our present day: both are in decline and under attack in American society. Political scientist Mary Eberstadt argues convincingly that the mutual decrease is inevitable: "family and faith are the invisible double helix of society — two spirals that when linked to one another can effectively reproduce, but whose strength and momentum depend on one another."⁴

work of Christ, the bridegroom, that we are forgiven, justified and restored as the children of God (AC IV). So that we might be his children, God has instituted the ministry of word and sacrament (AC V), through which the Holy Spirit works to make us alive so that we might do what living children do (AC VI). This gathering, this family, is the church (AC VII); and even if the word is preached and the sacraments administered by evil fathers, they still create and sustain life in the children of God (AC VIII).

What, in particular, are the means of grace which create and maintain children in the family of God? They are born in Holy Baptism (AC IX); thus born again, they are fed with the Lord's Supper (AC X) and taught that they are forgiven children (AC XI) in an ongoing manner. They sometimes disobey and are tempted to reject their Father and mother, but they are restored by repentance: a wayward child does not re-earn sonship by his works (AC XII) anymore than he earned re-birth into that family in the first place. Instead, life is given and maintained by the sacraments, received by faith (AC XIII).

In the stead and by the command of Christ, and thus as surrogate father to the congregation, the pastor teaches and administers the sacraments to the family of God (AC XIV). These are to be preserved if the church is to be the church, yet ceremonies and traditions may vary from place to place (AC XV).

⁴ Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God* (West Conshohocken: Templeton, 2013), 22. A somewhat expanded discussion of Eberstadt's thesis, as well as a greater exploration of the New Testament's description of the church as family, can be found in the precursive paper to this one, entitled, "The Congregation as Family: A New Testament Survey," in Seelsorger: A Journal of the Contemporary Cure of Souls, vol. 3, 2017.

As goes one household, so goes the other. Far from conceding the argument that creeping secularization is responsible for the church's demise, Eberstadt instead points to the weakening of the traditional family and vice versa. Her thesis ought not come as a surprise: rather than a double helix, the church and natural family were designed by God to be a single strand. This was the case, ever so briefly in the Garden of Eden, when all of humanity (Adam and Eve) was both one family and the church. Faith and family divided with the fall into sin: Adam transferred all of his descendants from the church to those dead in sin (Rom 5:12), thus destroying the family of God. Additionally, Adam did no favors to the natural family as he promptly threw his wife under the bus (Gen 3:12), later begetting the first murderer.

Both households are under attack, and both are suffering the same assaults of a shared enemy. Indeed, one of the reasons that pastoral ministry is so demanding, if not exhausting, is that the pastor finds himself on the front line of two separate (though inseparable) battles.

The Enemy

The enemy of both is expressive individualism, pervasive and parasitic. This amounts to a troublesome "chicken-and-egg" problem. On the one hand, disintegration of the family leads to this individualism: divorce teaches that even the most intimate relationships and promises can be broken, while cohabitation never makes promises in the first place. Those who suffer through a broken home, be they parents or children, easily learn to trust only themselves because exemplars prove untrustworthy. Children are left to develop

their own morality and faith, often caught in the crossfire of warring parents with opposing values. All of this encourages individualism and a reliance only on self.

In turn, expressive individualism leads to broken families. Adultery destroys a marriage because one spouse betrays the other out of selfish desire. Parents neglect or abandon families and responsibilities for vain personal dreams. Children from divorced families can have difficulty sustaining relationships and marriages of their own. Sex is reduced from an act of love between husband and wife for intimacy and procreation to an exercise in personal pleasure with no regard for the partner. Even in the locus of sexual intimacy, individualism argues that it is good for the man to be alone (as evidenced by recent headlines heralding the development of sex robots). Disdain for the unborn and the elderly reshapes the family along Darwinian lines, rather than it being a place of service to those most in need. Marriage and family, always sustained by mutual sacrifice and love, are destroyed by selfish pursuits of self-centered dreams and self-gratifying sins.

The disintegration of the natural family leads to decline in the congregation. The reduction in family size correlates closely to decreasing church membership. Those who favor sexual indulgence apart from marriage have little use for a church that still takes seriously the Sixth Commandment. Those who have suffered through divorce often feel marginalized, either by others' comments or their own sense of guilt. Tossed back and forth in joint-custody arrangements, many children only attend church half-time at best

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and resist a church's teaching that parents are subject to God's wrath unless they repent.

Unsurprisingly, decline in the congregation contributes to further family disintegration. Where the people of God stand firmly upon his Word, both law and gospel, the truth they confess conflicts sharply with the individualism of the day, so much so that they may well be branded for their alleged intolerance and lack of love; where this takes place, many will avoid the congregation because of its unpopularity with the world. Where the pressure of expressive individualism co-opts a church's confession of faith, the message will encourage people to measure a church not by doctrine, but by how much it suits their individuality; and to elevate their own interests above the interests of others, family included. It will not be long before that false belief begins to corrupt marriage and family; and such a message will likely encourage people to leave the church to pursue a personal spirituality, disrupting the shared faith within the household. As the church declines in influence, secular philosophies sway family members toward individualism at the expense of each other. Thus, the double helix of faith and family cycles downward.

Pastoral care takes place at the nexus where both battles collide, as pastors care for natural families in crisis while shepherding congregations that are often in concurrent decline. Their labors are complicated in a third way, however, for expressive individualism seeks to infiltrate and supplant Christian doctrine. One valuable analysis is the landmark study of Christian Smith who extensively interviewed youth across America and documented the devel-

opment of a belief system he calls "Moral Therapeutic Deism."⁵ This religious form of individualism has five common beliefs:

- ◇ There is a God who created and watches over the world.
- ◇ God wants people to be good and nice.
- ◇ The goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
- ◇ God does not need to be involved in one's life unless he is needed to resolve a problem.
- ◇ Good people go to heaven when they die.⁶

This deistic god is "something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist."⁷ He is on call in times of need; otherwise, it is left to the individual to be good, nice and happy according to his own designs. In the present discussion, two points from Smith are especially noteworthy. First, Smith observes that this is not a creation of youth, but that they have learned and developed it from the example of grownups. Indeed, individualism has increasingly dominated society since its blossoming in the 1960s, leaving few in the pew or pulpit who have not been subtly indoctrinated throughout their

⁵ These findings and their implications were originally published as the fifth chapter of Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of America's Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118–71. They have since been summarized by the author in "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, *De Facto* Religious Faith," which can be accessed online through Princeton Theological Seminary: https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Smith-Moralistic.pdf (accessed July 25, 2016).

⁶ Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162–63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

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lives. Second, expressive individualism is not just attacking Christianity from the outside, but from within. Smith warns that this “misbegotten step-cousin” of Christianity is working its way into the minds and hearts of individual believers and thus into Christian churches and organizations. “Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”⁸ Thus, while the natural family and the congregation struggle to bar the door under relentless assault, the battle is further complicated because the enemy is already inside.

The Question: Does the Church Need to Change?

There’s little disagreement about the nature of the battle, but how best to fight it is a current controversy within the church. In essence, the disagreements can be boiled down to how one responds to this crucial question: does the church need to adopt a new paradigm to survive and to evangelize? There can be no way forward in the fight without the correct answer. Yet there exists another element of conflict for pastors as well. Numerous so-called experts lecture and reprimand those who seek to remain faithful shepherds by contending that such pastors are actually *detrimental* to the future of the church. Commonly, these criticisms are accompanied by the opinion that current seminary training in the LCMS is outdated. To explore both the question and this harsh criticism, I will consider one of the most prevalent paradigms of today — the missional church. I will then examine related questions about the church’s

survival using the argument that the church is the family of God.

The Missional Church

It is somewhat difficult to describe missional thought because it is intentionally vague in definition. It is united by task, not form. Specifically, the Christian church exists primarily to fulfill the Great Commission. In the words of Ed Stetzer and David Putman,

[The church] is not about us! It is about Jesus saying, “As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you” to “Go and make disciples of all different kinds of people” with a message of “repentance and forgiveness of sin” as a people who have “received the Holy Spirit.” We are missionaries. Your church is intended to be God’s missionary church. The only question is this: Are we being good missionaries?⁹

They go on to declare:

The church is one of the few organizations in the world that does not exist for the benefit of its members. The church exists because God, in his infinite wisdom and infinite mercy, chose the church as his instrument to make known his manifold wisdom in the world.¹⁰

Elsewhere, they cite Reggie McNeal who says that “if we are not focusing on missiology then we are being disobedient to the Great Commission.”¹¹

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⁹ Ed Stetzer and David Putman. *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community.* (Nashville,; B&H Publishing, 2006), 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44; italics original.

¹¹ Quoted in Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

The Great Commission, therefore, is the material principle of missional church thought, the lens through which all doctrine and practice are viewed. A successful and faithful congregation is one that experiences numerical growth because its primary purpose is to make disciples.¹² Because the church makes disciples by going into the world, it is a bad thing when a congregation “settles” into a form that presumably results from members’ preferences, develops its own culture, and expects the world to come by attraction. In contrast, a mission-focused congregation is constantly adapting itself to the cultural context around it.

Part of the reason that congregations are to adapt to the local culture is for the sake of appeal to the unbeliever. But there is another reason: missional thought holds that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world apart from the means of grace, preparing converts apart from the word. In a sense, the Holy Spirit has set the pace, and it is up to the lagging church to catch up with him and solve the mystery of how he is working uniquely in a particular place. Because the Spirit works so enigmatically, deciphering his agenda takes guesswork, and so pastors and laity are left to imagina-

¹² Missional thought holds this emphasis in common with the Church Growth Movement (CGM) and with good reason: the former has evolved from the latter. Missional advocates praise CGM for its emphasis on statistics, measurements and business methods; however, they are critical of CGM for viewing the congregation as primarily “attractional.” In other words, the philosophy of CGM was to build a large campus with a variety of services that would draw the neighborhood in, while missional philosophy views the church as adapting to the neighborhood’s context and inserting itself into the neighborhood. One might put it this way: if a CGM congregation is styled as a mall of Christian teachings and services, a missional congregation is styled as a niche boutique.

tive innovation and risk. Allen Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren write enthusiastically that the Holy Spirit is at work “in the world”¹³ and “in the neighborhood,”¹⁴ as well as “in the midst of our questions,”¹⁵ “shaping a new imagination” in God’s people.¹⁶ They also maintain that we “imagine new ways of being Jesus’ people” through the uncertainty of “trial and error.”¹⁷ Stetzer and Putman echo this sentiment:

It is arrogant to assume that God is not already at work in most places. We need to ask, What is God doing? Where is he blessing? As we discover what he is doing, we must learn from others and join God in how he is already at work. Those who break the code join God in his activities.¹⁸

It is no surprise, then, that missional theology is not sacramental — not by the confessional Lutheran definition that finds the Lord present and delivering forgiveness in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. If the material principle is the Great Commission, the formal principle appears to be the Holy Spirit, who has been readily divorced from the means of grace and who works apart from the word.

Examined through the missional lens, Scripture takes on a different message. Through this prism, the first Christians in Acts provide a case study of the good and the bad. Positively, they spread the gospel widely because the church “recognized

¹³ Allen J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 83.

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that its primary mission was to ‘go and make disciples’ of all nations.”¹⁹ Negatively, however, when they began to “settle” in Acts 8, the Holy Spirit employed persecution to move them to “a missional imagination of being the church in the world.”²⁰ In fact, the error of Saul as persecutor was not his violent rejection and persecution of Jesus (Acts 9:4), but his need for “a radical transformation of his imagination – of the way he saw the world!”²¹

Similarly, key passages of Scripture are reinterpreted based on missional thought. The point of John 20:19–23 is not that the risen Jesus came to institute the Office of the Keys, but that “the disciples were behind closed doors, and many churches still are today”²² thus failing to engage the community. Matthew 28:18–20 becomes a warning against complacency: “After announcing his authority, though, [Jesus] did not say, ‘Make sure all of your needs are met’ or ‘Make sure all of your preferences are satisfied.’ What he said was, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.’”²³ Everything is interpreted through the lens of outreach as law, focused on what Christians ought

to be doing.²⁴ As Skye Jethani wryly notes, in missional theology “an individual is either *on* the mission, the *object* of the mission, an *obstacle* to the mission, an *aid* to the mission, or a ‘fat’ Christian who *should* be on the mission.”²⁵

In practice, missional thought has several common themes. To begin, it holds that the church is formless. Advocates of missional theology normally affirm that certain doctrines and practices are necessary for a congregation to remain Christian, but beyond “the gospel” (which is typically undefined), they are hesitant to clarify what those doctrines and practices are. Forms of worship and church are deemed culture-specific that grow outdated as the world evolves. For example, some claim the practices of the church in Acts were only for first-century Eurasia; today, however, “we are called by the

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¹⁹ Ibid., 120.

²⁰ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 16. Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 122, chime in that “God used persecution to move the early church beyond its comfort zone.” This accusation has no scriptural support, but it serves a double purpose: it discredits the church “model” of the earliest Christians (who were living *under direct supervision of the apostles*); and it facilitates the narrative that outreach is more important than the life of the congregation.

²¹ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 27.

²² Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 30.

²³ Ibid., 34.

²⁴ We should, in fact, take a moment to note a fallacy in the preceding quote, one that is by no means confined to missional advocates: it is the fallacy of the straw man that asserts that any opponent of the theology must therefore agree with the authors’ caricature of opposition. It is possible to disagree with Stettler and Putman’s interpretation of the Great Commission without supporting their particular straw man. Confessional Lutherans who are concerned by missional theology do not excise Matthew 28:18-20 from the Bible, nor are they opposed to making disciples, baptizing and teaching. Evangelism is part and parcel of Lutheran theology: complacency, selfishness and lack of love are all sins to be condemned. Such straw-man assertions are equivalent to a missional opponent claiming that missional theologians have no regard for doctrine – a claim that the author has sadly encountered. Such assertions on both sides do little to foster Christian conversation.

²⁵ Skye Jethani, “Has Mission Become Our Idol? (Cont.)” *Christianity Today*. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2011/july-online-only/has-mission-become-our-idol-cont.html> (accessed July 26, 2016), italics original.

Spirit to imagine and shape forms of being church that address our time and place.”²⁶ Traditional congregations are suspect because traditions are seen as barriers that only believers understand. In contrast, “Missional leaders [are to] bring the gospel into a context by asking, ‘What cultural containers—church, worship style, small group ministry, evangelism methods and approaches, discipleship processes, etc.—will be most effective in this context?’”²⁷ Thus, the form of a congregation is to be determined by the culture around it.

Missional theology also emphasizes the work of “ordinary people” because it has a low view of the pastoral office. Roxburgh and Boren argue that “the Spirit is not the province of ordained leaders or superspiritual people; instead the Spirit is in what we call ordinary people of a local church.”²⁸ Though such a statement is not without truth, it harbors the belief that all Christians are called as ministers and that it is wrong to reserve word and sacrament ministry for ordained pastors. Stetzer and Putman fret that pastors “tend to build monuments to themselves and monuments to their churches” rather than reach out, adopting a “refuge mentality” of “survival and preservation.”²⁹ In fact, a barrier to the imagination and risk that are necessary to a missional church is an “inappropriate clericalism” that “communicates that these professionals (clergy) are the only ones who have control and knowledge

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²⁶ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 33.

²⁷ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 55.

²⁸ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 122.

²⁹ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 70, 193.

over the mysteries of what God is up to in the church and in the world.”³⁰

With its separation of the Holy Spirit from the means of grace and the subsequent assertion that church and ministry are formless, missional theology bears the hallmarks of the theology of the Schwärmerei.³¹ Far from the transgression of “inappropriate clericalism,” a pastor might very well quash an “imaginative” idea for outreach not because he claims a superior imagination, but because he can demonstrate that the idea is contrary to Scripture. In the place of such pastors, missional theology looks for leaders who shun the status quo:

Leaders who break the code have a high level of courage in regard to making the tough decisions. They are almost rude about vision. They have the courage to protect the unity of the church. They hire and fire the right people. They are simply willing to make the tough calls to break through.³²

More alarmingly, they “aren’t afraid of deconstructing the existing church with all of its traditions, programs, methods, and preferences.”³³ To do so does not protect the unity of the church as claimed, but instead casts it adrift from all the saints who have gone before. It risks a congregational amnesia in which continuity is not based upon consistent doctrine and

³⁰ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 183.

³¹ Also known as “Enthusiasts,” these radical reformers of Luther’s time believed that they received special revelations of the Holy Spirit apart from God’s Word, expecting him to work salvifically apart from the means of grace.

³² Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 75.

³³ *Ibid.*, 203.

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Practically speaking, since every neighborhood will have unique characteristics and the Spirit is expected to act innovatively, it stands to reason that every missional congregation will differ to adapt to the neighborhood. How might this appear? In some cases, it may be as simple as a street fair in the church parking lot or a community center; in others, the missional paradigm has spawned congregations that present themselves to the world as coffee shops, beer pubs and health clubs.

Even among supporters of the missional church, there is concern about the emphasis on innovation, imagination, risk and statistical gains. Gordon MacDonald has labeled “missionalism” a disease, with which “the worth of one’s life is determined by the achievement of a grand objective” and “the passionate need to keep things growing and growing so that one proves his/her worth.”³⁴ Similarly, Skye Jethani writes that leaders who are mission-minded tend to replace a “vision of a life with Christ” with “a vision for ministry,”³⁵ with their own efforts becoming the focus. This yields predictable results for those who stress outreach as the basis of the church, since the law never ceases to be a taskmaster. Pastors burn out and leave the ministry or develop addictive behaviors. Indeed, the disease is contagious with lasting effects:

³⁴ Gordon MacDonald, “Dangers of Missionalism.” *Leadership Journal*. January 1, 2007. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2007/winter/16.38.html> (accessed April 4, 2016).

³⁵ Skye Jethani, “Has Mission Become Our Idol?” *Christianity Today*. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2011/july-online-only/has-mission-become-our-idol.html?start=2> (accessed July 26, 2016).

When church leaders function from this understanding of the Christian life, they invariably transfer their burden and fears to those in the pews. If a pastor’s sense of worth is linked to the impact of his or her ministry, guess what believers under that pastor’s care are told is most important? And so a new generation of people who believe their value is linked to their accomplishments is birthed. *If the cycle continues long enough, an institutional memory is created in which the value of achievement for God is no longer questioned.*³⁶

Such a congregation runs the risk of amnesia, focusing on its efforts and forgetting its identity as the family of God.

Clearly, missionalism is not merely a “disease” to be avoided. It is, in fact, the outcome of the law without the gospel, as the law’s unceasing demand for perfection drives the individual either to self-righteousness or despair. Those who fall prey to the former will double-down on missional theology because they mistakenly find their worth in their own achievement. Those who sink into the latter will consider themselves of little worth in God’s eyes because of their ineffectiveness. Either outcome leaves the individual’s conscience wide open to spiritual attack, because they no longer find their worth and meaning in Christ and his salvific work for them.

We now turn from our survey of missional thought to the important query posed above: how will congregations survive the assault of destructive individualism and the concern of declining numbers? Do they need to change by adopting a

³⁶ *Ibid.*, italics added.

This yields predictable results for those who stress outreach as the basis of the church, since the law never ceases to be a taskmaster.

missional or other outreach-focused paradigm?

Questions for Consideration

If marriage is given by God to tell the story of Christ and the church, then alternatives to marriage are going to tell a different story. For instance, if marriage vows illustrate the Lord's faithfulness, then divorce can exhibit the false teaching that God breaks his promises, and cohabitation may give the impression that God makes no promises in the first place.

In an age where marriage and family are under attack, the solution is not to change the natural family to fit the context of the surrounding culture but to strengthen it against the ongoing assault. The same concern must exist for the congregation. In an age where the family of God is under attack, the solution is to strengthen the church as family, not to change its form. The answer is surely *not* to change the paradigm in a way that weakens the congregation as family. Rather, an internal alarm should sound when we hear that the missional church is intentionally formless, because formlessness is exactly what the culture is imposing on the natural family. Likewise, the alarm should ring at the teaching that every congregation should individualize its practice apart from sister congregations, because individualism is precisely the societal threat against which the church currently defends itself. A formless paradigm is not what the Holy Spirit intends for the family of God; on the contrary, the de-formation of God's gifts (marriage, family, gender identity, etc.) is an unwitting concession to the expressive individualism of our

time, one that facilitates the pursuit of personal preference over faithfulness to the word of God.

Eberstadt quips that secularization is "the phenomenon through which Protestants, generally speaking, go godless and Catholics, generally speaking, go Protestant."³⁷ It appears also to be the process through which Lutherans go missional, and it is difficult to see how one can "Lutheranize" missional theology. In fact, one is more likely to end up missionalizing Lutheran theology until it is Lutheran no more. The context of this discussion, however, is that the congregation is the literal family of God in a place. It therefore behooves us in all things to work to strengthen both congregational and natural families, not to redefine them. I thus pose the following questions for discussion:

(1) *Does the insistence on the pre-eminence of the Great Commission help maintain a congregation as family?*

Imagine a natural family where a father tells his children, "You're all very important to me, but the rest of the kids in the neighborhood are more important."³⁸ This would devastate the family, yet it is precisely the consequence of outreach-first paradigms. If the needs of the unbeliever are primary, then those of the church family must not be. Consequently, worship and preaching will be designed for the comfort of po-

³⁷ Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God*, 53.

³⁸ This is, in fact, the description given me by a man who had left a missional congregation. Similar telltale statements from others in comparable situations include, "Coming to this [traditional] church is like *coming home*" and "My church doesn't feel like my church anymore . . . but I guess it's what you've got to do to reach people."

tential visitors (who may never visit!) rather than for the nurture of family members (who are regularly present). What is more, the pastor must focus on visiting non-members more than members, perhaps even those who are sick or homebound.

The emphasis on the Great Commission is a recent innovation in the church's history. It is generally traced back to William Carey, a missionary to India and the author of *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.³⁹ Understanding the context for Carey's efforts is vital. Over and against his fellow clergy who asserted that any overseas mission efforts rejected the doctrine of election, Carey argued that "the commission" of Matthew 28:19–20 and Mark 16:15 was not restricted only to the apostles and the apostolic age.⁴⁰ The church was therefore to continue sending missionaries to all nations.

Carey wrote to encourage churches to conduct foreign missions, not to persuade them to change form to accommodate their local culture. Over time, his argument for "the commission" has been remodeled into the Great Commission — so great in fact that, for some, other doctrine is subservient to it and subject to compromise. As Lucas Woodford notes, "It remains curious how a relatively recent and primarily evangelical development — one that did not have any specific New Testament, early, medieval or Reformation church tra-

³⁹ Lucas V. Woodford, *Great Commission, Great Confusion, or Great Confession?* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 55.

⁴⁰ William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, (Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792; reprint, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891), 8.

dition — came into regular practice by the majority of North American churches."⁴¹ Now it appears that the disease of missionalism has taken hold, and the Great Commission as material principle has become the institutional memory of those churches.⁴²

(2) *Is ongoing change a good thing for a family?*

The repetitive nature and ordinary practices of family life are a help and comfort. Parents know what a change in routine will do to children, and husbands and wives often adopt habits regarding household chores, financial responsibilities, even certain meals on certain days. Families establish traditions and then maintain them, which helps cement family identity. In contrast, as Eberstadt notes, our highly individualized culture has left the family in a state of permanent reinvention, leading to instability and confusion.⁴³ So it is within the family of God: coupled with the gifts and commands given by God for good and for order, tradition is a valuable part of family identity, so long as the tradition points to or serves Christ.

A family that is grounded in routine and tradition is a stable family, and a stable family is comfortable invit-

⁴¹ Woodford, *Great Commission*, 55.

⁴² Though the missional church may seem too young to establish institutional memory, it is simply a later iteration of the Church Growth Movement, which traces its doctrinal roots back to revivalism. See Klemet Preus, *The Fire and the Staff* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 313–330.

⁴³ Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God*, 162. One should also note Eberstadt's speculation that this unfocused, changing view of family makes it all the more difficult for individuals to understand the family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus (160), thus making the gospel all the more bewildering to would-be disciples.

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ing others to join them. In fact, this is the basis of evangelism. Within the family of God, the pastor feeds the Lord's children with the word; as they grow in faith, the children tell others what their Father is doing. They invite others to come to church and join the family for worship. This is the strength of vocational evangelism: as the children of God go about their callings in the world, they share the gospel with those whom they encounter.⁴⁴ Thus evangelism grows out of family, rather than apart from — or at the expense of — the family's identity.

When a family is constantly changing, no one knows quite who they are anymore. The household loses its story and self-understanding, existing only for the here and now. There is an inherent instability that easily communicates indecision to others: church might feel like an event, but not a family. Instability is a dangerous thing for the long term and unhelpful to evangelism.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ "They are lived out naturally, in tandem, and not at the expense of the other. Here we can, as Eugene Bunkowske invites, 'gossip the Gospel' and 'make and multiply disciples by positively and naturally introducing our good friend Jesus to other people in our everyday life.' In this way, homes, workplaces and neighborhoods become places of mission when, in the course of natural conversations and service to those around us, we have the opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, where, through the 'gathering' of the Holy Spirit, others are invited into the community of saints" (Woodford, *Great Commission*, 39).

⁴⁵ Within a synod, tradition is a blessed thing between sister congregations. Preus, in *The Fire and the Staff* (430–31), wrote: "Historically, congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod have valued the common practice shared between them. We followed the same church year, wore the same vestments, used the same hymnal, employed the same Divine Service, confirmed the young people at roughly the same age, held the same Communion practice,

(3) *Is it beneficial or wise for a family to measure success by statistical growth?*

How does one measure the success of a family? Is a large family more successful than a small one? What about a family with better finances, more vacation stories or healthier children? To the world, these may indeed be ways to gauge prosperity. Before God, however, all families are equally precious since each member is redeemed by the blood of Christ.

When the Lord instituted marriage in Genesis 2:24, his criterion for success was (and is) the union and lifelong commitment between one man and one woman who become one flesh. It is rather startling that God does not require children for a marriage to be a success, even though he inaugurated procreation with his blessing ("Be fruitful and multiply" [Gen 1:28]). Sometimes he blesses a couple with abundant children and sometimes he does not. Regardless of size, he requires fidelity and love among those in the household.

When it comes to the family of God, the Lord likewise does not measure success by quantifiable numbers. Instead, he places a premium on fidelity, holiness and love. Sometimes he blesses a congregation with an abundance of members, and sometimes he does not. What chiefly matters is that the word is preached and the sacraments are administered

expected the same education of pastors, expected the same from their pastors both during the service and elsewhere — basically tried to do things the same way. We were uniform in practice, not because the way we did things was always the best way, but because we recognized that uniformity is good. For the sake of one another and the unity they shared, individual pastors and congregations gave up their quest for uniqueness. Unity of practice reflected unity of doctrine in Christ."

according to the Lord's institution, for that is where Christ and his bride interact. It is where the Holy Spirit is at work to give life, where children of God are born and sustained, and where the Father evangelizes his children and nurtures them to tell others the good news.

Missional advocates will often point to swift statistical gains as proof of the Spirit's work, but even apart from doctrinal considerations, the numbers rarely reflect longevity. In reality, a smaller congregation that remains in a place for a century might easily reach more people with the gospel than a missional effort that lasts only a few years. For example, Roxburgh and Boren cite "The Landing" as "a center of life in Eagle [Idaho] and an outstanding example of the conviction that God is up to something in the local contexts in which we live."⁴⁶ Seven years after this praise was printed, no trace of "The Landing" can be found. A few miles away in Emmett, however, the liturgical Our Redeemer Lutheran Church continues to proclaim the gospel as it has for 95 years. Similarly, Stetzer and Putman point to Mars Hill Church in Seattle — which averaged 12,000 in weekly attendance across 15 campuses during its heyday — as a shining example.⁴⁷ Yet the entire enterprise dissolved in spectacular fashion on January 1, 2015. Meanwhile, nearby Messiah Lutheran Church is approaching its 70th anniversary of faithfully proclaiming the word and administering the sacraments. Against the insistence that we reach the lost now at all costs, the family of God also looks

to remain for children yet unborn (Ps 78:6).

There will be times when, despite the greatest intentions and efforts, a marriage is barren and the family line discontinues in a place. There will be times when families cannot make ends meet or are torn apart by conflict, and thus must give up their homes and take up residence with relatives. This will also be the case with congregations. It is not a welcome thing, but in a world so hostile to church and family, it is inevitable. Nevertheless, the Lord will have his people, and the gates of hell will not prevail against his church (Matt 16:18).

(4) Is a father's vocation to be measured by his ability to lead and implement change?

In 2015, *Business News Daily* asked business owners to define "leadership." Among the answers were these:

"Leadership is having a vision, sharing that vision and inspiring others to support your vision while creating their own."

"In my experience, leadership is about three things: To listen, to inspire and to empower."

"Leadership is stepping out of your comfort zone and taking risk to create reward."⁴⁸

Missional advocates adopt the same terminology and praise the same qualities in pastors. These are excellent and necessary qualities for an entrepreneur, but fatherhood is seldom praised for inspiring family

Against the insistence that we reach the lost now at all costs, the family of God also looks to remain for children yet unborn.

⁴⁶ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 53.

⁴⁷ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 17.

⁴⁸ Brittney Helmrich, "33 Ways to Define Leadership," *Business News Daily*, June 19, 2015. <http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/3647-leadership-definition.html> (accessed March 29, 2016).

members to embrace a new vision of family or empowering family members or risking the family's wellbeing to create a greater reward, whatever that might even mean. Fathers are rightly praised for maintaining stability in an adversarial world, holding families together, nurturing their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord and protecting them from ungodly influences. Their calling has little to do with statistical measures of success established by the world.

In the congregation, the pastor serves as surrogate father in the stead and by the command of Christ. He does not need a new vision because he is not called to envision anything new. He does not need to lead the congregation to a new place; even if they have strayed from the Lord's word, he is merely to lead them back home. He is not called to inspire or empower, but to feed and nurture with the means of grace. There is no reason to change the identity of the family to match the neighborhood better; there is already enough risk and discomfort in simply maintaining the family and in inviting members of the neighborhood into the family of God to be re-born.

(5) Is "everyone a father" an advisable philosophy for family life?

With the breakdown of the natural family in our present day, it is all too easy to envision a household in which a husband abdicates the responsibilities of his calling as father. This normally happens in a passive form, where other family members are left to fill the void and perform the tasks that the father ought to be doing. It might be a little harder, however, to imagine the following scenario: a family meets and decides that each member will now

be the father, that each is now to do whatever the father normally does in his role. Some of this seems entirely sensible when it comes to function: if the father normally mows the lawn, now several mowers are available. (It does, however, lead to the question, "Now, will *anybody* mow the lawn?") Other aspects, however, are far more controversial: is it given to a three-year-old girl to discipline her teenage brother for missing curfew? Is it given to the teenage boy to be a husband to his mother? Of course not. The office of father consists of far more than just the tasks he performs, but is rooted in the unique calling he is given by God.

Hand in hand with a low view of the pastoral ministry is the missional idea that everyone is a minister, for it seems sensible and pragmatic to expand the workforce by spreading the pastor's tasks around. However, just as a father is called by God to love his wife and nurture his children, so is a pastor called by God to guide the church by the proclamation of the Lord's word (2 Tim 4:1-5). This is not a matter of inappropriate clericalism or abuse of power, but rather how God has instituted the pastoral office for the sake of serving his people. To ignore this doctrine is to pose the question, "Does 'everyone a minister' in fact teach that no one is the father in the church family?"

As we have seen by considering the above questions, congregations are not in need of a missional church paradigm. To emphasize the Great Commission over the congregation as formed by God is akin to emphasizing "Be fruitful and multiply" over the institution of marriage. In each case, the commission is only proper when the form is first established and preserved. Outreach-preemi-

nent paradigms are designed with noble intent: they seek to reach unbelievers. They often do so, however, at the expense of the congregation as family. If Eberstadt's thesis holds, then weakening the church family will do nothing good for the natural family either.

It is appropriate to address briefly one other concern expressed by critics: are pastors properly and adequately trained in LCMS seminaries, or is the current curriculum outdated? Clearly, no amount of training is adequate for the pastoral ministry: it is an art learned in daily life, built upon a solid foundation of theological instruction. However, the training that pastors currently receive at LCMS seminaries establishes the proper foundation for nurturing the family of God. Exegetical theology prepares the pastor to tell God's children what the Lord has to say to them, while systematic theology pieces the message together. Historical theology provides a sense of family history, so that the children of God might know their ancestors and be strengthened in a sense of identity. Practical theology is a necessary aspect as well: just as the father of a newborn must learn the practical tasks of swaddling, diaper changing and installing car seats, the pastor must learn the nuts and bolts of caring for the children of God.

The Family into Winter

God's gifts are always under assault in a sinful world. In a time when pernicious individualism runs rampant, it is no surprise that his institution of family is suffering. Whereas the fall into sin divided the one family into two, individualism seeks to render them both formless in the pursuit of

personal fulfillment. But the church is not a formless thing that can be fitted into different templates depending on one's imagination, situation or cultural context. Rather, the church has a definite form — it is the family of God; it is the children of Christ and his bride. It is vital to maintain the church as family and not impose paradigms that weaken its identity as such. The church will not be nurtured by an emphasis on the Great Commission over the gospel or by incessant change. Congregations will not be blessed by the constant comparison of pastor and people against statistical expectations, nor will the bride of Christ be helped if her pastors are overwhelmed by inappropriate populism among her children.

This is not to say that the coming years will be easy. Expressive individualism has the momentum, which means that things will get worse before — *if* — they get better. The current decline may herald that the Last Day is near. Until the Lord returns, however, the congregation is his bride and her children gathered around his word and sacraments. The pastor remains the surrogate father who stands in the stead and by the command of Christ. The people are fed by the Lord's grace, go about their vocations and speak the gospel to those whom they encounter. This is not true because it is the favored paradigm of traditional Lutheran theology. It is true because the Lord declares it to be so in his word.

Like traditional natural families today, it is given to the church in her congregations to continue to be the family of God. It will not be an easy time. Hermann Sasse's encouragement to pastors seems as fitting today as it did in 1950:

The people are fed by the Lord's grace, go about their vocations and speak the gospel to those whom they encounter.

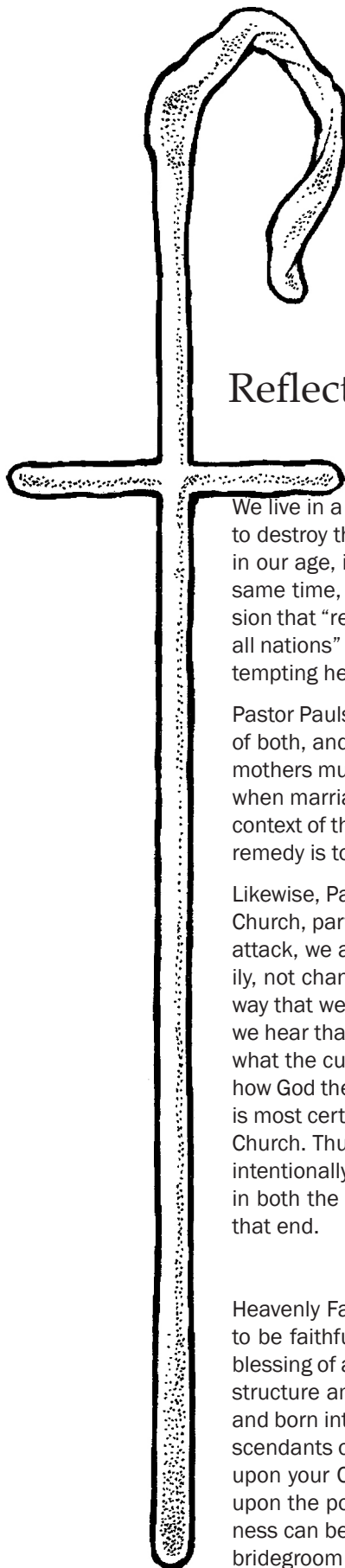
*The Lord
ordains
winter for his
purposes.*

With deep concern we are all thinking about the future of the Lutheran Church in all parts of the world. To us it is not given, as it was to the fathers of the previous century, to experience a spring-time of the church. But in the church it cannot always be spring. God also sends to his church the storms of autumn and the seeming death-sleep of winter. What he has allotted to us is simply that we faithfully administer his means of grace. It is certainly easier to preach in times when masses of men flock into the church than in times when only a handful of the faithful hold fast to the word of God. But the latter is at least equally important as the former. Even in the life of the Preacher of all preachers both occurred.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Hermann Sasse. *The Results of the Lutheran Awakening of the Nineteenth Century*; vol. 1, in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, *ibid.*, 301–330. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 329–330.

If the winter is upon us, it is still given to fathers to feed their children, though food may be harder to find when days grow cold; and it is given to pastors to care for the family of God in and out of season. They keep in mind that the Lord ordains winter for his purposes: the soil lies fallow to recover, and seeds lie dormant waiting for the spring. Spring follows winter, as sure as Lent always gives way to the Resurrection. Thus, pastors serve even now with joy: even in the midst of winter darkness, it is certain that the Bridegroom has purchased his children with his own blood, and he will not forsake them now. ❖

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Reflection

We live in a time when both the family and the Church are under attack. The Evil one seeks to destroy the Church, and so his constant and ever-present attempt to do that, particularly in our age, is to destroy the family and all the institutions associated with the family. At the same time, the devil looks to confuse and distract the Holy Christian Church from her mission that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed [in the name of Jesus] to all nations” (Luke 24:47). He does this by throwing all kinds of cultural distractions and fads, tempting her to embrace them in hopes of becoming a new and better form of the Church.

Pastor Pauls juxtaposes both attacks and masterfully diagnoses the corresponding ailments of both, and gives the rich encouragement and remedy of faithfulness, even as fathers and mothers must remain true to feeding their children in the midst of a difficult winter. At a time when marriage and family are under attack, the remedy is not to change the family to fit the context of the surrounding culture, as Pastor Pauls so wonderfully demonstrates. Rather, the remedy is to strengthen it against the age-old and continuing assaults of the Evil one.

Likewise, Pastor Pauls aptly notes that the same concern must remain for the Holy Christian Church, particularly as expressed in the local congregation. When the family of God is under attack, we are given the simple and yet profound solution to strengthen the church as family, not change its form. The answer, says Pauls, “is surely not to change the paradigm in a way that weakens the congregation as family. Rather, an internal alarm should sound when we hear that the missional church is intentionally formless, because formlessness is exactly what the culture is imposing on the natural family.” A formless pattern is most certainly not how God the Father created the natural family in the Garden of Eden, and a formless pattern is most certainly not what the Holy Spirit intended for the family of God as the Holy Christian Church. Thus, the answer, despite the winter we may be facing, is to ever and boldly remain intentionally faithful and active with the created and given forms the Lord has provided us in both the natural family and the family of God. Pastor Pauls delightfully champions us to that end.



Heavenly Father, in perfection you created Adam and Eve for one another and called them to be faithful to you and one another. We give you thanks for the gift of marriage and the blessing of all family estates, asking that you continue to sustain your divinely ordered family structure amid intense attacks. As you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to be born of a woman and born into a family, give to us the confidence of the redemption He has won for all the descendants of Adam and Eve. And in that confidence, we ask you to bestow your Fatherly love upon your Church family, giving to her pastors and people the courage and grace to stand upon the power of your Word and Sacraments, so that the truth of repentance and forgiveness can be preached faithfully to all nations, even as we rest in the eternal affection of our bridegroom Jesus Christ; through the same Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Pastor Lucas V. Woodford