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THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

DOCTRINE, ETHICS AND WORSHIP COMMITTEE

Discussion Paper

A theological consideration of the 'Covenant Relationship', so called, between the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and Ministers ordained by (and in full connexion with) the MCSA to the Ministries of Word and Sacraments and Word and Service.

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Biblical background:

“Covenant” is a fundamental Biblical concept, denoting a special relationship between God and people. It defines both the Old and New Testaments, which, indeed, in the use of the Latin term for “Covenant”, “testamentum”, are declared by the Church to be the Spirit inspired written record of the Covenant between God and people.

The Old Testament:

The Covenant with humanity:

The Apocryphal Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 17:1-20 (following the intention of Genesis 1-3) describes the relationship between God and human beings as a covenant (*berith*). Having created humanity “out of earth” and ordaining that they return to it after their allotted number of days, God endows them with strength “like his own” and “makes them in his own image”, gives them dominion over beasts and birds, discretion, knowledge, understanding, a sense of good and evil, awe-filled awareness of God and self-awareness (“The Law of Life”).

In answer to God’s initiative in creating humanity and granting to humanity self-conscious awareness of their existence before God and in relationship with God, humanity’s part in the covenant is to praise God, “proclaim the grandeur of his works” and observe God’s commandment given to each of them “concerning the neighbour.” The remainder of Sirach 17 then speaks of the way God continues to show mercy (*hesed*) within the covenant with humanity, how God is always faithful to it, and calls on human beings to return to self-conscious faithfulness to the covenant when they forget it. The covenant with humanity to which Sirach refers is renewed in Noah (Genesis 9)

The Covenant with Israel:

Sirach’s description of the covenant provides a neat schema of the structure, purpose and dynamics of covenant. Most subsequent significant references to the Covenant between God and Israel in the Old Testament follow this pattern, each one signifying a God-initiated return to the original: Abraham (Genesis 15); Moses (The Horeb-Sinai Covenant. Exodus 19 *inter alia*). Subsequent references to the covenant in the prophets

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consistently refer back to the Horeb-Sinai Covenant, in which the *Berith* between God and Israel becomes archetypal of God's covenant with humanity, and is "a light to the nations."

The structure, purpose and dynamic of the Covenant:

Structure:

"Covenant" is not a relationship of equals. It is structured as a relationship between a dominant, initiating party (God) and a submissive, responding party (humanity). It is a relationship that is self-consciously entered into by both parties and signified with appropriate signs, usually involving the shedding and sprinkling of blood.

Purpose:

The purpose of the dominant party in initiating the Covenant is to give life, restore life and engage the submissive party in the creative and re-creative work that reflects God's creative and re-creative purpose. The submissive party then has two obligations: first, to worship God, recognizing God's mastery and majesty both in God's self and in God's creative work and, secondly, to obey God's commands, especially with regard to the conduct of relationships with other people and in the care of them and of creation.

Dynamic:

Covenant making is a creative act on the part of the dominant party, constitutive of the submissive party's identity and life's work and seeks to restore the submissive party to fullness of life and glad participation in the Covenant and its creative and redemptive purpose, in the event of the submissive party's unfaithfulness to the Covenant. The dominant party is never unfaithful or delinquent with regard to the Covenant.

The New Testament:

The New Testament ("New Covenant") reflects almost exactly the structure, purpose and dynamics of the Old. However, 1 Corinthians 11: 25 indicates a revision and revitalization of the Covenant. No one takes Jesus' life from him, but he who is God incarnate takes the initiative and lays it down of his own accord in order that all people may have life in all its fullness and be enabled to perform the good works which God chose beforehand that they should do.

Its sign is the blood of Jesus Christ, represented in Christian Sacraments in both the water of Baptism (although blood is not the only thing signified by water at Baptism) and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. The blood shedding and sacrifice of the physical body (death) of Jesus Christ and his resurrection from death open the way for "a new creation" and the re-creation of human beings both individually and collectively, creating a new, reconciled humanity. Hence the creative and restorative purpose of the Covenant is retained and re-invigorated.

The life giving and restorative work of the Covenant is furthered by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who both transforms people and empowers them for obedience and observance of the purpose of the Covenant. The community of the New

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Covenant (The Church) is specifically appointed to be “a kingdom of priests” who represent (i.e. intercede for) all humanity to God and declare God’s re-creative purpose to all humanity.

Summary:

The Covenant and “Covenant Relationships”, when referred to against the background of the Old and New Testaments, must include the following principles:

1. The Covenant is initiated, sustained and renewed by a dominant party
2. The purpose of the dominant party is to give life, to sustain it and renew it
3. The submissive party obeys the dominant party and finds life in that obedience
4. The submissive party, in turn, acts as a mediator of the creative, restorative work of the dominant party.
5. The purpose of the Covenant is to bring a new creation into being in human society and in the relationship between human beings and non-human creation and human beings and God.

The “Covenantal Relationship” between Ordained Ministers and the Church:

A Covenantal analogy:

In referring to the relationship between Ordained Ministers and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) as “Covenantal”, as has been the practice in recent years in the MCSA, it is assumed that the “Covenantal relationship” referred to draws its structure, purpose and dynamics from the Old and New Testaments.

It must be observed, however, that the relationship between the MCSA and Ordained Ministers is “Covenantal” by analogy only. This is because the MCSA is not God. In this sense, it can, at best be said that the relationship between the MCSA and its Ordained Ministers is “like” the Covenant between God and all humanity, God and Israel and God, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the New Humanity.

An effective analogy:

However, the analogy carries significant power. The Church does not “create” ministers in the primary sense, but in a secondary sense, in that in consenting to ordain ministers the Church is instrumental, with God, in redefining the identity and purpose of the persons ordained, thereby “making” ministers. This creates a vital, in the sense of “life giving”, bond between ministers and the Church.

Ordination and the Covenantal relationship between Church and Ministers as submissive parties to the analogous Covenantal relationship with the Church:

The Covenantal bond between the Church and Ordained Ministers created by ordination belongs as much to the Church as it does to the ordained minister, in the same way that God binds God’s self to humanity and humanity to God in Covenant making. It is a bond that God chooses not to dishonour or break, no matter what the submissive party does.

Just as God chooses to share God’s creative and restorative work with humanity, the Church chooses to share its creative and restorative work, under the Covenant with God, with ordained ministers. Ordination, then belongs both to the one ordained, and to

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the whole church as well. The Ordained Minister is bound to obedience and service to and on behalf of the Church. In the same way, the ordained minister who is delinquent with regard to the bond created at ordination violates his/her new identity, or is untrue to him/herself and can be restored only through repentance and restoration to the bond. Without such restoration, the minister remains untrue to him/herself and estranged from the Covenant both with God and the Church.

Covenantal relationship and the acts and commitments of the dominant party and the Church:

The purpose of the dominant party in the Covenant (God) is to give life, to restore, reconcile and make new, enabling the submissive party to “have life in all its fullness.” By effective analogy, the purpose of the MCSA is (should be) to give its ministers life, to restore them, to reconcile them, to make them new and enable them to “have life in all its fullness.”

The extent to which the submissive parties in the Covenant with God are able to obey God and to share in God’s work of creation, re-creation, restoration and reconciliation is in direct proportion to the extent to which they have themselves been created, re-created, restored and reconciled. Again, by effective analogy, the extent to which Ordained Ministers are able to share effectively in the creative, re-creative, restorative and reconciling covenantally derived work of the Church is in direct proportion to the extent to which the Church has been instrumental in their creation, re-creation, restoration and reconciliation.

The analogous Covenantal relationship between the MCSA and its Ordained Ministers:

The provisions of the Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in its widely available edition (10th edition) do not contain any clear provisions for the re-creation, restoration or reconciliation of Ordained Ministers. Indeed the Laws and Discipline explicitly excludes the right of Ordained Ministers to expect even a stipend as his or her right. This appears to me to be an explicit abrogation on the part of the Church of a very basic element of the nature of the relationship between the dominant and the submissive parties in a Covenantal relationship.

No Statutory provisions for the care of Ordained Ministers:

There are no statutory provisions for the housing, welfare, nurture or healing of Ordained Ministers. To be sure there are mechanisms, some regulations and procedures in place to provide for many needs of ministers, but they are not enshrined in the MCSA’s definition of itself in its Laws and Discipline. The closest the MCSA comes to formal provision for its Ordained Ministers is in some formulations of Orders of Service for the Induction of Ministers in their pastoral charges, where the people undertake to pray for and support their minister.

Presently, Ordained Ministers are “freelance workers” or “Franchisees” – not submissive Covenantal parties:

In the absence of such formal, statutory provisions and in the light of the MCSA’s statutory abrogation of its duties as dominant party in the analogous Covenant

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relationship, it is inevitable that Ordained Ministers will look to their local pastoral charges for their sustenance and health. After all, it is only they who have given any such undertaking in this regard. It is at this point that the analogy of a “Covenant Relationship” between the MCSA and its Ordained Ministers breaks down.

Conclusion:

There are many implications to be drawn from the breakdown of the Covenantal relationship between the MCSA and its ministers. The first and greatest is that it seems to be a fiction, employed only when it is convenient in secular courts of Law. Another is that the MCSA must carefully review its formal legislation with regard to the creation, re-creation, sustenance, restoration and reconciliation of its ministers. If God chooses, freely and mercifully, to bind himself to faithful and merciful observance of the Covenant God himself has made with humanity, the MCSA can do not less in its relationship with its Ordained Ministers.

Tim Attwell
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