

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***

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# God's (and the Church's) Mission: Is It a Matter of Pleasing Consumers?

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**Abstract:** God's mission to save the world through Jesus Christ involves the Church as the instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel. For the accomplishment of the task, people have to be targeted in a meaningful way. Such has been the preoccupation of the Lutheran Church, also in Brazil. However, a new religious movement begun in the second half of the twentieth century, known as "Neopentecostalism," tends to work as a market offering religious products to the people, treated as consumers. This article assesses the strategies of a Brazilian denomination, the "International Church of God's Grace" as representative of such an approach.

## Introduction

That God loves people is one of the simplest and most direct truths revealed in His written Word and in the life and work of the Lord Jesus. His mission targets people who need life in the midst of a reality of death resulting from the original flight from the Creator's communion. Holy Scripture is the letter of love from a Father who wants to gather children for His eternal home. The reality of God's love for people is manifested in the existence of His Church, men and women who live the eschatological communion with the Father promoted by the Holy Spirit. God's mission is His dynamic action coming through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit to touch the world, to create His Church, in order to bring them in the Spirit through the Son back to the Father. That is God's mission, where the Son and the Holy Spirit work, in the words of Irenaeus, as the two hands of the Father in action in the world to save those who are lost.<sup>1</sup>

God's mission towards the world includes His Church as the instrument. Therefore, people, real-life people, are what really matters to the Church. That is



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sometimes described as the “mission of the Church,” which is actually God’s mission through His Son in the Spirit, acting in the life of His people. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil (hereafter designed by its Portuguese acronym, IELB), as many other Lutheran and non-Lutheran denominations, has developed through its history a vision that intends to be molded by God’s mission to save people. Since the second half of the twentieth century, IELB has promoted a general theme that intentionally conducts its national and local programs: “Christ for All” (*Cristo para Todos*). Every four years the IELB has been developing plans with that general theme, promoting actions in Christian education, worship, evangelism, and service to the needy. For some time the target of each planning was numerical growth, which was even expressed in the form of numbers planned to be reached in the years ahead. Now, already for some years, the four-year planning aims to guide congregations and national institutions towards seeding the Word, trusting the work of the Holy Spirit to produce fruit, including numerical growth, when and how it pleases Him.

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Given the situation briefly described above, every national board, and local leadership as well, has always tried to find better ways to achieve the purpose of proclaiming the saving Gospel to the largest possible number of people. This mission stance tends to make people in the church open to discover creative ways to bring “Christ for all.” In the Brazilian reality, numerous examples can be observed, and perhaps imitated, from what other Christian groups are doing. In this article, I intend to describe what could be considered a strategy (or a mindset) that can be identified in some denominations that tries to target the largest number of people with a message.

As happens so many times in the history of the Church, good intentions sometimes open the door to situations that offer a danger to the integrity of the proclamation of the Gospel. In this case that I intend to present, what can be seen as a good intention runs the risk of considering people as consumers that have to be pleased with a “religious good.” This study is based on (and reproduces parts of) a dissertation recently presented,<sup>2</sup> which focused on a Christian denomination in Brazil (The International Church of God’s Grace, hereafter, ICGG) that is part of a larger movement known as “Neopentecostalism.”<sup>3</sup> It is important to observe that I will not describe some possible contributions that the strategies employed by the ICGG could offer to the Lutheran Church. The intention of this article is to depict characteristics of that religious movement, which could be tempting for Lutherans. Therefore, the article aims to alert against possible deviations that may result from such an approach compared to a Scripture-guided view of mission and church life.

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Some studies on Neopentecostalism call attention to the problem of the church's being attracted to seeing herself as a business that has to please consumers.<sup>4</sup> From the study on the ICGG, some characteristics may be identified, which intend to provide growth for the church but that run the risk of considering people as consumers of religious commodities. Some of those characteristics will be now described.

## **Mission Strategies as Characteristics of Brazilian Neopentecostalism**

### **1. A strong leadership centered on an individual, to the point that the whole denomination would be identified with him**

Neopentecostal denominations in Brazil have their identity deeply rooted in the life and deeds of their leaders. The place of the founder and leader is central to the particular church he leads. If one examines written and visual material produced by the church body, he or she will probably agree that it is only possible to understand the ICGG by recognizing the centrality of its leader. Such characteristic may be also observed in Neopentecostalism in general.<sup>5</sup>

The key role of the leader in Neopentecostal churches has been noted by several scholars. Karla Patriota, who studied the Neopentecostal movement from the standpoint of sociology, developed a thesis<sup>6</sup> using the concept of the society of the spectacle. Using that typology, she shows how the religious leader assumes a role compared to a star in a TV show. The founders of each Neopentecostal church body (who, in the case of the three largest Neopentecostal churches in Brazil are still the leaders today) are always exposed through all possible means, so that they may be seen as an identifying mark of the church. Patriota points out how the high exposure of R. R. Soares not only gives identity to that denomination, but also preserves the unity of the ICGG. All other pastors work to promote the leader. The "star" concept helps to explain other two aspects of the way the leader is seen in Neopentecostalism: "as an unquestionable and incontestable leader and as a show-man."<sup>7</sup>

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### **2. A deficient eschatology that locates Christian hope here and now**

Classical Pentecostalism began as an evangelistic and eschatological movement. It is possible to note that such original emphasis receives less emphasis in Neopentecostalism. Its teaching and preaching is much more interested in addressing current problems that people face in their daily lives (especially in terms of health and finances).

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Ricardo Bitun, a sociologist and author of several studies in Pentecostalism and Neopentecostalism, proposes that the irruption and rapid growth of Neopentecostalism in Brazil should be understood in connection with the transition from a traditional society to the modern society, with emphasis on the competitiveness of the marketplace.<sup>8</sup> Neopentecostal churches developed a theology that could assess and respond to challenges that people face in their daily lives in terms of health, employment, family harmony, poverty, etc. Two theological positions, Prosperity Theology and the concept of spiritual warfare, were (and are) key for the worldview that Neopentecostalism assumes. Bitun affirms that for Neopentecostalism, at least in practical terms, there was an anticipation of the Christian *parousia*. He argues that the traditional future focus in the eschatology of classical Pentecostalism (and Protestantism as a whole) gave way to the expectation of prosperity and victory against evil forces and its consequences here and now.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Teaching concentrated on divine blessings focused on people's needs here and now**

The ICGG daily TV program, “*Show da Fé*” (Show of Faith), has a section—“*Novela da Vida Real*” (A Real-Life Soap Opera)—that introduces people who experienced a radical change in their life when they became active participants of the church and its projects. It focuses on a person or a family who was facing some difficulty related to employment, finances, health, drugs, or even relationships inside the family. The story always has a good ending, presenting a new reality after the person has taken seriously the message of the church, which implies also becoming an active donor for the projects of the ICGG.

The interpretation of what happens to the person or family in the “*Novela da Vida Real*” is a practical example of how Prosperity Theology works. Edir Macedo, founder and leader of the largest Neopentecostal Brazilian Church (IURD) and R. R. Soares’ brother-in-law, is one of the most explicit preachers of prosperity in Brazil. He uses the language of debt that God has to those who faithfully tithe. In his book, *Vida em Abundância* (Abundant Life), he challenges the believers to tithe and then to charge God to fulfill His promises: “To tithe is to become a candidate to receive unmeasured blessings. . . . When we pay the tithe to God, He becomes obligated (because He promised this) to fulfill His word, rebuking the devouring spirits.”<sup>10</sup> Macedo attributes to those spirits every disgrace in human life, including diseases, accidents, vices, social degradation, and any suffering that afflicts the person in his daily life.<sup>11</sup> R. R. Soares’ preaching on prosperity may be considered a milder way of dealing with blessings, if compared to Macedo, even though he can also be a legitimate representative of Prosperity Theology.

In his television program, “*Show da Fé*” broadcast on January 28, 2014, Soares was encouraging people not to be satisfied with the current situation in which they

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were living, but they should seek God's blessings. He then spoke against an attitude of someone who says, "I'm poor and was born this way, and I have no success in life." Soares argued that since God shows no partiality; every believer may claim (not "ask for," but "claim") blessings. In that same program, Soares presented the reason why a believer does not enjoy the promised blessings. Any doubt in faith, say Soares, prevents a person from being blessed. He was explaining Colossians 1:9–10, specifically the phrase, "that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will." If a person hears God's Word and feels God's action in his life, he should not stop, but go forward, seeking more and more of God's blessings. There are some people, concluded Soares, who stop there and do not enjoy what they have as their right.

#### **4. Offering of varied programs (the "show") to attract people—"consumers" of spiritual goods in the religious market**

Karla Patriota, already quoted above, based her study of the ICGG using the concept of the "spectacle society," developed by French writer Guy Debord.<sup>12</sup> Her fundamental thesis is that "this new kind of organization of Neopentecostal religious activity turns the theological discourse into carefully packaged merchandise which is offered through TV spectacles."<sup>13</sup> She maintains that such a discourse packed in the form of a spectacle loses its effect in daily life when the spectacular element is lacking. Such disenchantment needs to be compensated by new enchantment, i.e., the continuity of the spectacle, which happens in the form of new religious products. Patriota observes that religious discourse appeals to the senses, especially vision, generating in the religious context desires for entertainment and anxiety in the religious consumer:

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It appears to us that the concept of religious "mission" is being left aside in order to achieve better results in terms of numbers. . . . [T]here is a cult of the person, since the religious leaders that occupy time of *mass media* have their discourses legitimized by media, though their contents suffer a significant marketing suitability. The concept of the society of spectacle . . . promoted and sustained the transformation of several churches, classified as Christian churches, into huge communication companies.<sup>14</sup>

Patriota argues that new religious movements represent a flight from traditional religiosity and a new definition of what it is to be a member of a church body.

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Neopentecostalism learned very well how to deal with secularization in the religious environment. There was a time when the religious institutions were the cement that united cultural and social aspects of a people in a communitarian life. Autonomy is a value that no longer allows the religious institutions to have a monopoly on the thoughts and actions of society. Patriota claims that Neopentecostal denominations successfully participate in this process of religion in our society. The individual makes choices. He is a “religious consumer” who wants to choose freely what the best religious “product” is for him. Religion is a matter of private life, and the “consumer” wants to have his desires met also in this field of his life.<sup>15</sup> As an inevitable consequence, she says, there is “the revival of a spectacular religiosity in every field of human activities.”<sup>16</sup> The ICGG knows very well how to use this to its favor. The way Soares presents his message and the way the ICGG packages its content are well fitted to elements of entertainment and mass communication, as can be seen in the principal “product,” the “Show of Faith” TV program, broadcasted in popular TV channels in prime time.<sup>17</sup>

## **Final Remarks**

The church of God lives as the result of God’s mission and also as the instrument in this mission to the world. The Holy Spirit, who had a key role in the manifestation of God’s kingdom through the coming, ministry and messianic work of Jesus, continues to be in action in the world through the Means of Grace. In Absolution, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and in the proclamation of the Word that brings Christ, the kingdom is coming by the Holy Spirit.

One could point some useful aspects of Neopentecostal strategies in reaching people with the message of Christ. However, Lutheran theology based on the New Testament teaching is critical against any anthropocentric approach to mission, which unfortunately underlies much of the Neopentecostal approach.

The strategies used by Neopentecostal leaders dealing with people as consumers should be seen by Lutherans as a threat to the Gospel message. Calling the attention so much to the leader himself and to the possibilities people have when they act with boldness determining blessings from God put the focus on the person and not in God’s proper way to deal with sinners. In this way, such approach becomes a legalistic way of proposing the message and blurs the people’s vision of the real Gospel.

A triumphalist view of faith constitutes much of what prosperity theology proposes. In Neopentecostal preaching, real faith means success understood as improvement in life. Christ’s sacrifice, death and resurrection, become the guarantee not only of reconciliation with God, but of victory against problems in finances, in family life, and in health issues. For Martin Luther, however, being in Christ involves experiencing inner conflict, which is the Spirit’s work to show how the

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individual is naturally turned away from God. As Regin Prenter observes, by his frequent use of Romans 8:26 (“The Spirit assists us in our weakness”), Luther confirms that God is really present in the person’s life, in the midst of groaning of the anxious soul that feels seized by death and hell.<sup>18</sup> This use by Luther is particularly significant for the purposes of this article, since it is also a frequently quoted text in the ICGG preaching, but with a different reading, with the plural “weaknesses.” These are taken as references to evils that disturb daily life even in Christian people, and which are the result of demonic forces. In such an application of the text, the role of the Holy Spirit is to assist the believer to be freed from those weaknesses that come from outside of them and to hinder his right to receive blessings.<sup>19</sup>

For Luther the Holy Spirit is the true God present in our affliction and anguish. Such realism is also a good contribution to assess the way Neopentecostalism deals with conflicts that are present in the life of the believer.

All those critical assessments about Neopentecostal strategies should not mean a lack of boldness in Lutherans as they engage in God’s mission. The Lord’s love and sacrifice for the world, along with His sending of the Holy Spirit to convince people of sin, justice, and judgment (John 16), testifies to the urgency and importance of the proclamation of the Gospel. People matter! However, in God’s mission, people should not be treated as consumers in a religious marketplace. They, as everyone of us, are sinners with the most extreme and urgent need of the gifts already achieved through the sacrificial work of Christ, i.e., forgiveness and eternal communion with the Father. God’s most “spectacular” action in the world, acting through His Church, is the dynamic work of the Spirit, by the clear and direct announcement of Christ through the Means of Grace.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kilian McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God—The Holy Spirit as the Universal Touch and Goal* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Gerson L. Linden, “Eschatological Pneumatology as a Theological Framework for Evaluating the Pneumatology of the International Church of God’s Grace in Brazil” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2017). Special thanks to the Rev. Dr. Robert Kolb, supervisor of the project, and to the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to classical Pentecostalism, this movement has no emphasis on speaking in tongues as a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and has not kept the characteristic distance that the original movement had toward society in general. It needs to be noted that in the United States the term “Neopentecostalism” generally refers to the Charismatic movement that occurred in the main Protestant denominations. In this article I’m using the term for what in the United States is similar to the “Prosperity Theology” groups or, more popularly, “Health and wealth theology.” The ICGG was founded by Missionary Romildo Ribeiro Soares (known nationally as R. R. Soares) in 1980. Soares continues to be the leader of the ICGG.

<sup>4</sup> A classical study in Portuguese, originally a doctoral dissertation, is the book by a Presbyterian theologian, Leonildo S. Campos, with a suggestive title, *Temple, Theater, and Market*, a study about the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the largest Brazilian Neopentecostal Church. (*Templo, Teatro e Mercado: Organização e Marketing de um Empreendimento Neopentecostal*, 2nd ed. [Petrópolis: São Paulo, São Bernardo do Campo: Vozes, Simpósio, UMESSP, 1999]).

<sup>5</sup> It is common that those denominations are popularly identified by the name of their leaders. For instance, it causes no misunderstanding if one refers to “The Church of Edir Macedo,” referring to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (hereafter named by the Portuguese acronym, IURD), founded and led by the self-named “Bishop” Edir Macedo. That is also true in the case of the ICGG and in the World Church of God’s Power (popularly known as the Church “of Waldemiro Santiago,” the church founder and leader and self-named “Apostle Waldemiro”).

<sup>6</sup> Karla Patriota, “O Show da Fé: A Religião na Sociedade do espetáculo. Um Estudo sobre a Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus e o entretenimento religioso brasileiro na esfera midiática” (PhD diss., Federal University of Pernambuco, 2008). Patriota is Anglican and graduated in Communications and in Theology. She had a Master’s degree in Communications and doctorate in Sociology of Religion, with a post-doctorate in Cambridge. She is a full-time professor in the “Universidade Federal de Pernambuco” (National University of Pernambuco).

<sup>7</sup> Patriota, “Show da Fé,” 292–93.

<sup>8</sup> Ricardo Bitun, “Transformações no campo religioso pentecostal brasileiro: a antecipação da parúsia crista,” *Ciências da Religião: História e Sociedade* 6, no. 2 (2008), 203–28.

<sup>9</sup> Bitun, “Transformações no campo religioso,” 216–17.

<sup>10</sup> Ricardo Mariano, “Os Neopentecostais e a Teologia da Prosperidade,” *Novos Estudos* 44, no. 44 (1996), 35.

<sup>11</sup> Rodolfo Gaede Neto, “Teologia da Prosperidade e Diaconia,” *Ensaio e Monografias* 17 (1998): 5–20.

<sup>12</sup> Guy Debord (1931–1994) wrote his book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, in 1967. That book was republished several times since then.

<sup>13</sup> Patriota, “Show da Fé,” 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 75–82.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1953), 197.

<sup>19</sup> This use of that text by the ICGG preachers was witnessed by a former student of this writer. He who was a member of the ICGG for many years.