

Joint Prayer Service [Newtown]

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You may remember the controversy in our church after the 9/11 prayer service in 2001. Unfortunately, after another sad tragedy, the Newtown school shooting, the LCMS is in the news again because of doctrinal disagreement. I realize that times like this are emotionally charged and you may have strong feelings one way or the other, but note that we, as followers of Christ, are not to get our beliefs from our own hearts, nor from the news, but Christ Himself who speaks in Scripture. Let's take a step back and consider what is actually the issue here and why there is disagreement.

Before we can see the source of disagreement, we must consider what actually happened. On December 16, just days after the shooting, there was a prayer service or vigil. Clergy representing Christian churches and non-Christian religions were present. It was organized and planned. President Obama gave a message. Rev. Rob Morris, the pastor at the LCMS church in Newtown, read Scripture and gave the closing benediction. That may not seem sinful to you, but what does our Lord say?

LCMS President Matthew Harrison wrote a letter saying that what Pastor Morris did was improper. It said, in part:

I asked Pastor Morris to apologize for taking part in this service. I did this for several reasons: I believe his participation violated the limits set by Scripture regarding joint worship, particularly with those who reject Jesus (Romans 16:17), and was thus a violation of Article VI of the LCMS Constitution. Pastor Morris's participation gave offense in the Synod, something we are to avoid, even if we are doing something we believe might be appropriate (1 Corinthians 8). I most sincerely desire to avoid

deep and public contention in the Synod. Our mission is too vital, our fellowship too fragile for a drawn out controversy.

What is interesting is the the news media did not get too worked up over our official teaching. Instead, they couldn't believe that Pastor Morris would dare apologize to those who were offended at his participation. Rev. Morris did apologize, but not for his participation, just insofar as it gave the wrong impression. Here is one media reaction:

Have we made so little progress? Do we still love faith traditions more than we love God? I know that in each tradition there are those who object to praying along with others. After all, to pray with someone is to suggest – horror of horrors – that their tradition too might have validity, that God might be multilingual. Well do I remember when Bailey Smith, then president of the Southern Baptists said, “God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews.” Of course if you have forgotten the name Bailey Smith, maybe God does hear our prayers after all. There is no reason to make God so small. Traditions do not all agree with one another. Surely there are false doctrines. But is there really only one path to the ultimate reality? (Washington Post - Rabbi David Wolpe)

Do you see why people are offended at our teaching? How dare we say that we have the truth, while those who deny Jesus and say He is only man or a myth, are under God's wrath for their sin and must repent. The issue is whether doctrine and the truth matter. Clergy participating in a joint service give the impression they agree and are addressing the same God. But do we have the same God as the Muslims and the Jews, who deny that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? No. While we can and should love them in our daily lives as neighbors, that is not what our church stands for and what we confess. When clergy lead worship and pray together publicly, it says the differences don't matter. That's exactly why the world is offended: How dare we say that Jesus is the only way to heaven and that we have the full truth of God that alone brings comfort. The world loves joint services which show unity and human love. By abstaining from services with false teachers, ministers confess the true God and the full saving truth as revealed in Scripture.

In a church service people naturally assume that they are praying to the same God and confessing the same doctrine about Him. Who would dare to think that we are confused about which God we worship? But this Newtown prayer service had clergy of the Muslim, Jewish and

Baha'i religions. Were they praying to the same God as Pastor Morris, who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord? No, but the average American does, and would have had that impression from the vigil. While it is good to pray and call upon God for help in our trouble and grief, ministers praying officially with leaders of false religions and churches who deny some of Christ's teaching, is misleading at best and denies Christ at the worst. We pray in Jesus' name and in faith. The Spirit intercedes for us. God has not promised to hear the prayers of those who do not believe and have not been accounted righteous in faith. It is not the beauty or sincerity of our prayers that cause God listen to us. It is that we are first forgiven of sin and God tells us He wants us to present our requests to Him because He loves us. Only those who are the Father's forgiven children by faith does He listen to in prayer.

Our reason for existence is at stake: Do we have the truth of Jesus, the only Gospel that comforts and forgives sins? Praying with people whom God does not hear and who deny Christ's sacrifice on the cross is not loving. Unfortunately, there is a lot of pressure from the world to follow along, "play nice" and be generically "religious," even if that religion is man-made and does not lead to heaven. Read Luke 13:1-5, where Jesus responds to a similar tragedy by saying: "Do you suppose that these Galileans [who were murdered] were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Jesus would not be allowed near a civil prayer service to speak the saving truth which makes unbelievers uncomfortable.

These joint services are not about comfort from God—that we are loved and forgiven in Christ and should repent of our sins—but about making everyone feel good. The world is more concerned with not offending anyone or telling them they are wrong, than the only name under heaven which saves: Jesus. The message (or sermon) that was spoken to comfort the grieving was by the same man who boldly supports the murder of children in the womb. Where was the true comfort that in is Jesus' murder? God knows our pain, because His holy Son died on the cross for us. Only the truth of the resurrection, that shows Jesus is true God, can help those stricken with grief and give certain hope of the life to come.

What is interesting is that in Rev. Morris' "apology" he did state that joint worship was

wrong and not possible, which is correct. But he made the claim that “In the end, I believed my participation to be, not an act of joint worship, but an act of community chaplaincy. Chaplains are expected to give faithful witness under circumstances which are less than ecclesiastically perfect, even as their fellow chaplains may proclaim a different witness.” It was not an informal setting in which a chaplain operates independently (like in the military or a hospital), but a formal and pre-arranged service. The news media accurately stated that it was a service to worship and pray to God. We are called to confess, but to give the formal impression by our actions that different religions and denominations believe the same, when they clearly don’t, is wrong.

Pastor Morris further said:

Thus, to those who believe that I have endorsed false teaching, I assure you that was not my intent, and I give you my unreserved apologies. If any of you know church members or friends or family who are now confused because of my participation, believing that the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod fully endorses the doctrine of anyone else who was on that stage, please correct this confusion lovingly, and I will personally be happy to help in any way that I can. Feel free to pass on my apologies for having given that impression.

Unfortunately, his intentions are not the issue, but his actions. It did give the wrong impression: that Jesus is not necessary for salvation and His righteousness is not required for God to hear prayer. LCMS members should know that other religions and false teachers should not be believed. But what about the majority of the TV audience? Who will correct them and tell them that Jesus is the only way to heaven and it matters what teachings we believe?

If a pastor of a local church is televised marching in a gay pride march, you should be offended. Maybe he was just going to the dry cleaners and he did not intend to show support for homosexuality, but one’s public actions speak louder than what is hidden in our hearts. That is why we must be careful to not give the impression that we approve of sin or false teaching, which destroy faith in Christ.

This issue is likely to dominate the discussion of our church for at least another decade. I wish we could agree and have unity in God’s Word. However, Jesus did not recognize error or tolerate unbelief. He is the one who said: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you

hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. ... You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town” (Matthew 23).

Jesus accurately predicted that the world (including its religious leaders), which hates God, would not accept His truth. That God’s love is only found in Jesus is offensive to those who are not saved. We cannot fix that or help them by denying what we believe. Only the truth of Christ can bring sinners to love God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This concern and care for Christ’s Word, matters more than what the world says. That is why Scriptures say clearly: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people” (Romans 16:17-18).