

Why a Synod?

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The question is not how to save our synod, but whether or not the very idea of a synod, united in doctrine, is outdated and irrelevant. We in the LCMS have the proud legacy of a synod with an administration, a bureaucracy, a logo, a headquarters, and various institutions. But what does it mean for a congregation to be a member of such a synod? What does this public fact confess about Christ?

It is easy enough to say: “I have my congregation, what of others.” But the congregational principle of fellowship applies also to synod. There can be official members of the local church that do not attend, do not believe the doctrine preached there, and do not support God’s work at that location. Membership implies fellowship—a unity in Christ’s Word. It actually says something. When a member is clearly not in fellowship with the others, a contradiction exists. Membership cannot be a mere formality. Christianity is not a technicality. God’s Word is proclaimed to create faith in Christ, who saved mankind from sin and opens heaven to sinners. Baptism is a precious gift that leads to unity in beliefs, not an excuse to ignore Christ and revel in sin. Fellowship implies unity in the Gospel which saves sinners. This is true at the congregational level as well as at the synodical level.

Where unbelievers, purveyors of false doctrine, or public sinners manifest themselves at the congregational level, they must be corrected. If they refuse to listen to God’s word, they must be shown the door. Fellowship and God’s word demand it. It harms the rest of the body to let a hand or foot rot with gangrene and do nothing about it. The yeast of false doctrine spreads rapidly. Division, while unpleasant, brings healing and is often the result of a faithful profession

of Christ. “When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (I Cor. 11:18-19). Membership of congregations in a synod is the same. That claim and advertisement of synodical fellowship is just as meaningful as belonging to a congregation. And unity in preaching and practice is not outdated, because the object of our faith, Christ Himself, is not. “Church fellowship exists and must be recognized wherever orthodoxy [correct teaching] prevails” (Marquart, *The Church*, 61).

But why do we need a synod? We don't. You don't have to be married either, but if married, you are bound to honor God's institution and Word in marriage. An attitude of indifference towards doctrinal unity is at odds with membership in a synod. The letters “LCMS” stand for something before the world. They make a claim of fellowship and sameness in teaching. If we truly do not believe what those letters stand for—a real unity in God's Word and doctrine—we are dishonest and acting the part of a hypocrite. Why pledge allegiance to an organization one does not support? There will always be disagreements and false teachers and errors to combat, but to stop striving for unity and true fellowship wrought by Christ's Spirit within our church body is spiritual bankruptcy. It is dishonest to remain attached to any church's confession only for historical or practical reasons. Christ and His Word mean more than a dead legacy of tradition. While a synod is optional, the public confession of the very teachings which create faith and bring Christ is not. Pure doctrine leads to fellowship—a harmony in confessing Christ.

A healthy congregation does not permit members to live so far away they cannot participate. It makes no sense to allow their names to remain on a roster, when that confession or allegiance can mean nothing in practice. Also, public sin and error should not be left unchecked in a local church. “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?” (II Cor. 6:14-15; ESV). Differences in what Christ taught cannot be resolutioned away or hid under a basket. Acceptance of disunity in Christ is a spiritual disease that accepts error as readily as truth. It denies the very possibility of unequivocal truth.

The same principle applies at the level of synod. If congregations and pastors in the LCMS act and teach without concern for others in their fellowship, there is no real synod. Synodical membership is voluntary, but it does mean something. It implies actual unity in confessional statements and official doctrine, but also limited submission to the synod's rules. A synod is man-made and therefore not mandatory, unlike the local congregation. But the truth confessed by membership in any synod or para-church organization is not optional—Christ is at stake. Publicly declaring fellowship with other congregations and church bodies is an act of man, but the truth they purport to agree upon is divine. It is not man's to alter or ignore. Fellowship based a real unanimity in the Gospel and sacraments is sought by those in the one body of Christ.

Without discipline, a striving for true unity on the basis of God's Word, and clear doctrinal statements which are actually taught, the LCMS is a synod in name only. We do have a wide variety of differences in matters on which God has clearly spoken in Scripture. But we as a synod, by being a synod, have alleged agreement in the Gospel and its supporting articles. There is always error, but it should not be accepted as tolerable within a synod, lest in the name of fellowship we poison one another. Light and darkness do not coexist. "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (I Cor. 1:10).

The solution is not to delve into politics, a matter of force and law, but to confess. This means simply to speak the truth of Christ in all its positive and negative aspects. Truth does not accept error, but corrects and rebukes it. In a congregation it is possible to achieve doctrinal unity, even if it is painful and slow. At the synodical level it is more difficult but it must be attempted, if Christ's name and Word mean anything. To not even try is to sign your name to a debt you do not ever intend to pay.

I have been following closely the Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations (ACELC) and have joined personally as an associate member. I know, another confusing acronym. What is different about this organization is that they consist of congregations which collectively confess. But what do they confess? Only what our synod has always confessed and

what we theoretically still claim to: the true doctrine of God's Word which was in turn confessed rightly in the Lutheran confessions. The ACELC wants nothing new for our synod. Rather, it wants the LCMS to take seriously the biblical concept and import of fellowship. Of course, no organization itself is the answer. But an association can be a help, encouragement, resource, and tool for faithfully confessing Christ's truth. The LCMS has issues that need to be addressed and worked out in detail on the basis of Scripture and our historic confessions. A confession on the books that is not presently spoken is an artifact of a bygone era. A disinterest in achieving unity in doctrine is worse than simply disagreeing. At least in verbal disagreement the truth has an opportunity to shine and be victorious.

The ACELC has identified ten areas of disagreement, confusion, or error in the LCMS: pure doctrine, Lord's Supper, understanding of worship, unionism and syncretism, service of women in the Church, office of the holy ministry, unbiblical removal of pastors, mission and the evangelistic task, ecclesiastical supervision, and dispute resolution. This organization is a man-made way for congregations to confess and seek unity at the synodical level. It will not be easy. Confessing requires teaching, taking a firm stand, and pointing out real error which destroys unity in Christ. The alternative, though easier, is not confessing: to sit on one's hands and bemoan the sad state of "mother Missouri." But it will take more than complaints and laments to achieve consensus in the truth. The truth demands confession, that is, speaking out with a clear voice on behalf of Christ. There is no such thing as a private confession of the truth.

Synodical membership must be more than a historical relic, because Christ is not a travel trinket we can put on the shelf. At stake are matters of the soul, salvation, and eternal life—God's very Word. Churches must proclaim teaching, just as fellowship with other churches must give witness to some doctrinal stance. Christ is risen from the dead. His Word can never be useless or outdated. That is why fellowship is serious. It is as important as the matter in which congregations in fellowship claim to agree: the doctrine of the Lord.

The LCMS must be about more than support staff, seminaries and other schools, sending missionaries, health and retirement plans, and other external matters. The reason that we as a synod have dropped the ball on those matters is that those external things have become

central, instead of Christ and His precious doctrine. We have lost the reason to work together and sacrifice for the greater good—a unanimous confession of Christ’s Word, through which the Spirit of truth works faith. Without the basis of a common confession in all of Christ’s doctrine, synodical activities ring hollow. A church that is only technically orthodox is actually heterodox, that is, it does not confess God’s Word purely. No amount of window dressing in the form of man’s activities can make up for the lack of Christ’s voice ringing out in concert and on pitch.

Speaking the truth and disciplining are painful, but they are the only way to health. The LCMS can do greater worldly activities than a solitary congregation, but there must be more than human reasons to work together. The truth of Christ should bind us to something bigger than our own selfish congregational existence. Christ did not die to keep our particular local congregation open just for our tranquility. Like faith, confession is an ever-needed activity. To pretend that differences in doctrine do not matter is to say that God does not matter. To stop confessing and speaking out on behalf of the truth is a sign of unbelief. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:9-10).

We must ask ourselves: is the LCMS just a name and relic to us? Or does it mean a true fellowship in teaching and a common confession of Christ, risen from the dead for our sin? If it is just a name, then it is better to drop the charade of fellowship. If it means anything, it means working towards unity. Unity will divide to some extent, but where doctrine is secondary and not fought for, people will become “lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold” (Rev. 3:16). This is inexcusable for those baptized into Christ. Confession of the truth is hard work and death to the old Adam, who enjoys sitting in his dirty diaper of sin and disunity. But we have a reason to confess, because Christ gives a living hope. The one Gospel which sanctifies before the Father should be fully preached and defended in our altar and pulpit fellowship. We don’t know the effect of such speaking out now, but we do know that confessing the truth of Jesus at every opportunity has eternal consequences: “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will

also deny before My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33; NKJV). Amen.