

Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

LESSON 1 - WE ARE A DIVIDED SYNOD

(All citations of Holy Scripture are from the English Standard Version.)

INTRODUCTION

When our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to guide His Church into all truth (John 16:12-15). On Maundy Thursday of Holy Week, just prior to His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, our Lord gave us a clear picture of what His earthly Church should be like:

"**20** I do not ask for these [the apostles] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, **21** that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. **22** The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, **23** I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:20-23)

Notice that twice in this passage (vv. 21, 23) unity is to be a sign to this world that the Father has sent the Son and that they may believe in Him as the Savior of the world. Notice also, that Jesus' desire is for His Church to look like the Triune God, reflecting His nature of perfect unity.

QUESTIONS

1. Can a division of will, thought, or theology exist among the three Persons of the Holy Trinity? If so, then where does Holy Scripture give such an account?
2. Can the Holy Spirit reveal "all truth" in ways that would be at odds with the Father and the Son? If so, then where does Holy Scripture give such an account?
3. Can the truth into which the Holy Spirit was sent to guide the Church be a multiple choice truth, a subjective truth of personal choice that means one thing for one person and another thing for another person? If so, then where does Holy Scripture give such an account?
4. What divergence of doctrine would be exempt from "perfectly one"?
5. Is it possible for any article of faith to have a different meaning among the persons of the Holy Trinity? If so, where does Holy Scripture give such an account?

THE LCMS CONSTITUTION

The need and desire for the Church of Christ on earth to look like, and reflect the Triune God is also echoed in the Constitution of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in the first and primary objective of the Synod:



"The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall - 1. Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; I Cor. 1:10)...and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy." (2013 Handbook, Constitution, Bylaws, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Article III - Objectives, p. 13.)

DEFINITIONS

Heterodox: The antonym of orthodox which means "crooked thinking," and is synonymous with false doctrine/teaching.

Orthodox: From the Greek which literally means "straight thinking," and is synonymous with true or pure doctrine/teaching.

Orthopraxy: The biblical practice of pure (or orthodox) doctrine that reflects the full content and its appropriate application of the doctrine being practiced.

Schism: From the Greek word *schisma* which means to divide, cleave asunder, or tear; and is normally used to describe the work of false heresies effect on the church (I Cor. 1:10, 11:18, 12:25). The proclamation of truth does not cause schism in the Church, only falsehood can cause schism, as it is the role and purpose of truth to unite the Church.

Sectarianism: The following of the teachings of a group which does understand the basic knowledge of the Gospel of Christ (salvation by grace alone in Christ), yet also holds as truth one or more false teachings.

GOD'S WORD AND THE LCMS CONSTITUTION

Ephesians 4:3-6: "...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."



I Corinthians 1:10: "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."

Romans 16:17: "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them."

QUESTIONS

1. Can maintaining the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" mean that for the sake of peace, the truth revealed by the Holy Spirit (doctrine) can be compromised?
2. What does the phrase "one faith" mean?
3. Would anything other than the full body of Christian doctrine be implied by the connection being made between "one faith" and "one baptism" and "one God"?
4. What limitation, if any, is St. Paul placing on the Corinthian Christians respecting the demand that, "there be no divisions among you"?
5. What does it mean to be "united in the same mind and the same judgment"?
6. What is the result for a Christian congregation or church body in being inclusive of those who teach false doctrine?
7. What dangers to the Church are so important that St. Paul would warn the Roman congregation to "watch out" and "avoid" false teachers?
8. Does a doctrinally divided congregation or church body reflect the unity of the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

CHRISTIAN UNITY

Our Lutheran forefathers understood that it was agreement in doctrine that actually brought about true Christian unity. They wrote in the preface to the Augsburg Confession:

"After the removal and correction of things that either side has understood differently, these matters may be settled and brought back to one simple truth and Christian concord. Then we may embrace and maintain the future of one pure and true religion under one Christ, doing battle under Him [Psalm 24:8], living in unity and concord in the one Christian Church." (Augsburg Confession, Preface, 3, p. 27, *Concordia The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd Edition, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 2006)

QUESTIONS

1. Is it possible for the Church to have "one pure and true religion" while having differences in doctrine and practice?
2. Did the Lutheran Fathers consider resolving doctrinal differences a requirement for "living in unity and concord in the one Christian Church"?
3. How many articles of doctrine, if any, would be exempt from this unity?
4. If it is not possible to achieve complete unity in a sinful world, is the Church, therefore, exempt from the effort to achieve it?

WHAT SPECIFIC DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE ISSUES ARE DIVIDING OUR SYNOD?

1. Whether it is necessary to maintain Pure Doctrine and practice in all the congregations of our Synod, or if it is acceptable to have a variance of doctrine and practice in our congregations.
2. Whether it is necessary to practice closed communion or if it is acceptable for some congregations to practice open communion.
3. Whether it is necessary to strive for uniformity in our historic Divine Services and Liturgical Offices, or if it is acceptable for congregations of the Synod to worship in any way they please.
4. Whether it is necessary to refrain from public worship with non-Christians and those Christians with whom we do not have common doctrinal agreement, or if such joint worship can be done without compromise to the truth.
5. Whether it is necessary for men and women to retain their biblical roles in the life of the Church, or if women may assume roles that Scripture reserves for men.
6. Whether it is necessary to keep Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession (Order in the Church) which says that only ordained pastors shall publicly preach, teach, and administer the Sacraments. Can laymen or inadequately educated pastors serve the Synod in faithfulness to Scripture and our Confession?
7. Whether a divine call can be terminated for non-biblical reasons. Can a congregation terminate a pastor for personality characteristics or for lack of numerical or financial growth? Can a congregation terminate a pastor for keeping his ordination vows by instituting and/or maintaining liturgical worship and/or closed communion?]
8. Whether it is necessary for the congregations of the Synod to act biblically in carrying out their mission and evangelism efforts, or if they may compromise doctrine and Lutheran practice to achieve numerical growth.
9. Whether it is necessary for duly elected Synod officials to supervise doctrine and practice in accord with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions or whether we will tolerate error. Can we have diversity of doctrine and practice and still "walk together" as a Synod?
10. Whether it is necessary for Synod to use an adjudication system that examines and resolves theological issues according to Scripture and the Confessions or to base theological decisions on man-made Synodical Bylaws.



Each of these areas of concern will be examined in depth in the study guides that follow. The ACELC offers these lessons with the prayer that they will encourage and assist our Synod in a sincere and honest examination of the issues dividing our fellowship and hindering our ministry and life together.

May it be a first step in resolving each of these matters in true accord with Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions.

PRAYER

Lord of the Church and Prince of Peace, we confess that we, as a Synod, have not always been faithful to the truth of Your holy Word.

We confess that we have not always conducted our life together in ways that reflect Your perfect and gracious nature.

Help us to remember that it is Christian love that always rejoices in the truth and moves us to be our brother's keeper.

Have mercy on our Synod and grant our church body the peace and unity that only such Christian love and faithfulness can establish.

To You alone be all honor and glory.

In the name of Jesus! Amen.

