

Michael D. Henson, Pastor
Trinity Lutheran Church
Herrin, IL

Introduction

Sometime around 10 years ago, I came upon a youth Bible study which clearly spoke about making a decision for Jesus. I initially thought that I would skip over that lesson, but later I determined to use it in my adult Bible class as an example of false teaching. When I told the class that this was false teaching, it sparked an intense discussion. The first part of the discussion was about whether “making a decision for Jesus,” was in fact false teaching. But more importantly, the second part of the discussion concerned the mere presence of false teaching within our Synod.

There were members that were quite distressed about this possibility. I can summarize the response with two questions. Looking at the back page of the study, they kept saying to me, “Are you telling me that even though it says CPH on the back, it still may be false teaching?” Whenever I said, “yes.” The second question was, “Then how will we know whether something is true or false?” To which I responded you compare it to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Both of my answers left the people more concerned than before the study.

I tell you this story because it opened my eyes to the source of the problems within our Synod. First of all, the lay members of our synod are not grounded in the teachings of the faith. And before I go on, let me say that the responsibility for this judgment falls upon the shoulders of the pastors. As a child, my family attended church every time the church doors were open. My mother was a Sunday school teacher and my father an elder. However, I never had to memorize or really even learn the Small Catechism. If the pastor had told my parents to teach me the catechism, they would have done it. If I was so poorly catechized—and I was an active member—than what do you think the understanding of the other three confirmands was, two of which were delinquents?

Second, the lay members of our synod trust in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. When asked what you believe, we have replaced the Roman saying, “I believe what the priest teaches” with “I believe what the Synod teaches.” We have made the Synod our god. We have repeatedly told people that our Synod teaches the truth and they believe it. They fear, love and trust in Synod. The letters “CPH”(and LCMS) are the imprimatur that assures us that everything is kosher.

After this little experiment, I made a determination to change my approach. No longer would I keep Synod’s dirty laundry away from my people and at the same time continue to proudly tell them that the Missouri Synod is true. In technical language, I will not allow the Synod to be the material principle and thus anything which Synod teaches the formal principle. In simple terms, we need to understand that for many, Synod is our people’s idol.

Synodical Myths

I was taught to be a good son of the Synod who birthed me. I called false teachers by the Synodically-correct term “liberal.” I believed officials when they said that they were working with pastors who weren’t following Synod’s teaching. I was told, “We didn’t get in this mess in just a couple of years and it’s going to take a long time to fix it.” I trusted the older and wiser men who told me that we were graduating more conservative men and the liberals were dying off. On the one hand, I was told that you didn’t get involved in Synodical politics, but trusted a system in which the good and right would eventually win out. On the other hand, with the Jewish fervor of “next year in Jerusalem,” I saw the next Synodical Convention as the upcoming victory.

Prior to the 2001 Convention, I read a Logia book review of a church growth book written by Kent Hunter. The book was rotten, but the review was a masterful Lutheran critique of Church Growth. What was fascinating was that this review included a paragraph of quoted laudatory remarks by many LCMS ecclesiastical supervisors who absolutely loved this book. One of the quotes was from a then Texas District President. I made copies of this review and passed it out, warning of what was to come. Little did I know it would come so soon after the 2001 Convention.

After Yankee Stadium, I worked as hard as anyone to prepare for the 2004 Convention. I wrote overtures. I enlisted and encouraged good delegates to go to Convention. I got out good information concerning the shenanigans that were occurring. In the end, I think we must say the outcome of the 2004 Convention was quite disastrous.

Two Confessional Groups

As a member of the Steering Committee which put together the October 2004 “Confession and Christ’s Mission,” in Chicago, I listened carefully to those who assembled for that free conference. We need to admit that even among ourselves we are not of one mind when it comes to our problems, our future direction, and our offered solutions to the false teachings and practices of our Synod. Based on my own observations I will make the general observation that most of us can be corralled into two groups.

One group thinks that the Synod is a mostly orthodox ship that is suffering under the leadership of insurgents. These insurgents have gained control and are changing the pure “official” doctrine of our Synod. The solution to this problem is to rally the troops with the goal of taking back the Synod. The means of accomplishing this take-back is by alerting the people of Synod to what it going on and mobilizing them in time for the 2007 Convention.

Another group, including myself, has come to the realization that the Synod is a mostly heterodox ship with some orthodox Lutherans still attached to her. The majority of Synod really does agree with the present leadership. Despite our Herculean efforts between 2001 and 2004 to correct false practices, the Synod in Convention approved false teaching (on paper) and encouraged false practices to continue. The solution to this problem is to bear witness to the truth in order to support the faithful and warn the disobedient. The goal is to gather as many real Lutherans as possible. The means used to gather the Lutheran remnant is the clear proclamation of truth and the separation from falsehood.

Despite the philosophical differences between these two groups, we need to continue to

hold to our common confession of the Lutheran Symbols and not take swipes at each other. There is much that we can do together. It may turn out like Paul and Barnabas' disagreement over whether to take John Mark with them. I am convinced that time will tell. Things are messy now, and they will probably get worse. However, when the dust settles, I pray that we are all together. I've heard someone say, "If you are right and Synod returns to pure doctrine, then we will once again embrace her. If we are right and Synod can not be turned, then you will have somewhere to go." Our differences were not our problem, nor are they a problem now.

Encouragement to Local Effort

If there is nothing else that you remember from my address today, remember this: the key to the success of the goal of either group—that is, to either save the Synod or to gather the Lutherans—is what I will call local effort. Let me say it again, the success of both goals is local effort.

When I was asked about participating in this conference, I explained that I hadn't really planned on attending. I explained to the caller that I thought the work which needed to be done was at the local level. I don't think that we need to meet again and again to curse the darkness, thinking that we have done something. I would liken it to the District rallies that I formerly exerted great effort to get my laymen to attend. After a two-hour travel both ways, maybe a night's lodging, and at least an afternoon of motivational speakers, we would come home. We enjoyed the speakers. We all felt good about having done our part and having made the sacrifice of our Saturday. And then we put our folders away and nothing really changed.

Getting back to my invitation to speak here today, the more I explained about what our congregation had done and was doing, I was asked if I would come and encourage the kind of local effort that Trinity Lutheran Church in Herrin was accomplishing. How could I say no to encouraging the very thing I saw was most important. From this point on I am going to speak about the particulars of my congregation.

Allow me to preface my remarks, with a few cautions. I hope to winsomely and persuasively tell you what we have done, are doing, and plan to do in the future at the local level. I will explain why we have chosen this particular path and why I think it is the correct path for Trinity Lutheran Church. I will also tell you how it is working out in practice and even caution you should you decide to take up this approach. Would I be pleased to have other congregations join me in a state of confession against the Synod? You bet. But having said that, my particular description of our approach is not intended to be a prescription of what you need to do. I don't know your situation. I don't know your congregation. I don't know the history of your congregation. I'm not the pastor of your congregation.

I will say, however, that I am convinced that if we continue to do things as we have always done in the Missouri Synod, then in time we will be responsible for removing the feeding tube from our faithful Lutheran members. Whether you wish to save Synod or not, there are faithful people who need to hear you speak the truth and condemn falsehood. No

longer can we refuse to act locally because we fear retaliation, a lack of respect, or our own job. The first place where our local effort must begin is in our own congregation, and then with other congregations near us.

In our Congregation, Little by Little

Your congregation may be weak and, in your opinion, will not be ready for any kind of action for some 10 years. Alright, but you cannot fail to tell them the truth. Public false teaching must be met with open and public rebuke. Pastor, you have a divine call to preach the truth in that congregation and to warn them of error so that they may flee from it (1 Tim 6:3f, Roman 16:17). If the practice of your members does not yet rise to the level of your teaching and preaching (doctrine), then keep it at, for as many years as they will hear you. However, you cannot use their ignorance or lack of orthodoxy as an excuse to keep silent. You must warn them again and again that the Scriptures tell us to avoid those who teach or tolerate falsehood.

Back in the days of my little experiment concerning my members idolatry of the Synod, I didn't have many who were convinced that God's Word condemned "decision theology." I didn't have many that believed God's Word was clear enough to judge whether something was true or false. I would hear comments like, "That's just your interpretation, Pastor." I didn't have any laymen with a thorough enough knowledge of God's Word to which they could compare a particular teaching or practice.

My congregational chairman tells me that I continued to bang on him for years. Little did I know that my consistent teachings were the means that God used to bring him to embrace Lutheranism. If he were here, he would explain that he was a member of two Lutheran congregations before mine, but had never been confronted with full-blast Lutheranism. At one of these congregations, the pastor left town on vacation and told him to preach the sermon, which he did. Now he shakes his head at what he did.

My dear confessional friends, we must get our own house in order. How do we think that we can manage the house of Synod, when we have not managed our own house? Start speaking up about these things and don't stop. Between September of 2001 and 2004, I spoke out against what was going on in our Synod. I continued to address the issue at special Bible studies, with newsletter articles, elder's meetings, and in our congregation's prayers. Following the 2004 Convention, I explained to my congregation that the official position of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had changed.

Because I had kept my congregation informed, it was easier for them to accept when I announced that we needed to enter a state of confession. Even with the teaching I had previously worked on, there was a tremendous interest and great concern. I had thought that we could get there by November (4 months away). It actually took us until January 9, 2005 and there were still a few that felt they needed more time. It is one thing to point out false teaching, it is quite another to refuse to commune with those who teach falsely or tolerate falsehood in their midst. Once again, it is local action that will get attention.

For the Sake of Others

The second place that local effort must be directed is to those individuals in

congregations close to you, in your Circuit and in your District. I was warned by others that if we went into a state of Confession that no one would listen to us. In reality, the exact opposite was true. Just the buzz of our congregation considering a state of confession, produced more interest and discussion in Synodical events than we had during the three years prior. Though myself and a few of my laymen had been speaking up and writing overtures and informing delegates, we had gotten the attention of relatively few people. Even when we did manage to get District resolutions passed, they accomplished very little. It was like banging your head against a wall.

Even the November 2004 Chicago conference, as helpful as it was for those who attended, had very little effect outside our circles. It was nice to be able to say that there were 500 people concerned about these things, but that is only comfort for those who are already moving in the right direction. We need to get beyond talking to ourselves. Those who will read a 20 page paper are either already on our side or they are firmly in the other camp. Most of what we are doing does nothing to reach Joe laymen in the next congregation.

We need a way to get inside the large number of congregations, whose pastors are holding them in a kind of Babylonian captivity. Many, many, many of these laymen, do not know what is going on concerning our Synod. A layman from a neighboring congregation, who came to one of my afternoon Bible studies on Synodical happenings, told me after the study, that he had never heard of this LC-MS crisis. He told me, "My pastor has never spoken about it. And I get the Reporter and visit Synod's Web site often." Interesting. This man is now a member of my congregation. Let me also say that I have some who likewise left my congregation.

I mention this new member of mine, because there are some Lutherans out there that will respond when they hear the truth. I am staying to fight in the LC-MS because of just that kind of person. Nevertheless, this new member of mine is not typical, but atypical. Simply broadcasting what is going on in Synod is not going to be enough to rouse the sleeping giant of the LC-MS. I maintain that in blowing the trumpet call for over three years, I have often found apathy instead of shock. Instead of people rising up to complain, I most often find yawns. My opening story about my confirmation with two delinquents and without a catechism, is probably better than most. I have found that it is extremely hard to call people back to the truth when they never had it in the first place. There are LCMS adults who have spent their entire congregational life without ever seeing a hymnal.

State of Confession

So why did our congregation enter into a state of Confession? There are two points.

First, all Christians are commanded to avoid those who teach or tolerate falsehood in their midst (Romans 16:17, 1 Timothy 6:3f). Our Lutheran Confessions speak to the requirement of full agreement in doctrine and practice. Although human traditions need not be the same, Augsburg Confession, article VII, makes it clear that "it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments." Our congregational constitution states, "Accordingly no doctrine which conflicts with or sets aside the foregoing norm of doctrine shall be taught or tolerated in this

congregation.”

Our congregation has identified six points in which the Missouri Synod is teaching and/or tolerating falsehood.

Widespread open communion practices are not disciplined.

Widespread use of revivalistic “Contemporary Worship” is not disciplined.

The “renunciation of unionism and syncretism” is no longer practiced or disciplined.

The unscriptural office of “lay minister” is not being removed, but recognized, affirmed, and encouraged.

The “order of creation” (1 Timothy 2:12), has been removed in order to allow women to serve as elder and congregational chairman.

Ecclesiastical Supervision and Dispute Resolution now allows human councils to overrule the Word of God.

These six points are not occasional errors that are in the process of being corrected. Either these false doctrines have been approved by our Synod in Convention and become the new “official teaching,” or on account of their widespread practice and corresponding lack of discipline, should be considered the de facto teaching of our Synod. We need to take seriously the public confession we make as a result of our association with or membership in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. As a result of our State of Confession, those who desire to have fellowship with us will of necessity need to disavow these new false teachings and not commune with those who hold to these new false teachings.

Do I realize the far-flung ramifications of this action? Yes, I do. My own father and mother who live 45 minutes away from me cannot commune at my congregation. Their pastor has stated that both sides in the Yankee Stadium are wrong; It’s just politics. Their congregation is experimenting with Contemporary Worship. My parents understand and agree with our congregation’s decision. You are my brothers in the ministry. I am not able to commune with many of you. Even though you are teaching the truth, you are guilty by association. We cannot continue to do things as before, as if nothing has changed.

At this point, I wish to address a misunderstanding that has either given us an excuse to do nothing or has paralyzed confessional Lutheran pastors from doing what we need to do. I maintain that there is a big difference between a pastor remaining at his divine call until the members will no longer hear the truth from him, and the voluntary joining of a non-profit corporation, registered in the state of Missouri.

A pastor must remain where he is called and must continue to preach and teach. However, we are not so beholden to our Synod. Once again, I am not so concerned whether your congregation enters into a State of Confession or not. I don’t like it that we can’t commune together for a time, but this thing is much bigger than that. Some pastors and congregations have already left Synod. That is their decision. We at Trinity Lutheran Church have decided to stay and fight, but from within a State of Confession. You need to decide whether you will allow your love for our Synod to become a roadblock to speaking the truth and separating from falsehood. Do not nullify the word of God for the sake of your Synod which has been handed down. Thus, let me say that I do not agree with those

who say that the Missouri Synod is to be equated with the holy Christian church so that we cannot leave her.

Second, our State of Confession has not only allowed us to retain our membership in the Missouri Synod with a clear conscience, but it has given us a platform upon which to stand. Prior to our State of Confession, most people followed the post-modern thinking of the day. They attributed our rejection of Contemporary Worship to be just a niche that we were carving out of the surrounding demographic of Lutherans. If you like the liturgy, then you come to our parish. The rejection of lay ministers was only Pastor Henson's hobby horse of teaching. You may teach anything you want as long as you don't correspondingly say, "this we condemn and reject."

As long as we complain and refuse to take action, our neighbors in the LCMS will go on thinking that these errors are not that serious. We need to put our actions, where our confession is. If we don't act, because we don't want to upset others, then we show that we love our social relationships more than we love God's Holy Word. We cannot go on as before and live in peace with falsehood. We must speak the truth trusting that God will give true unity by means of His Word.

As soon as Trinity Lutheran Church said that we were not going to commune with those who supported or tolerated these false teachings, pastors and members of other congregations paid close attention to what we had to say. I regularly receive phone calls and e-mails requesting information.

The topic of our State of Confession has come up at practically every extra congregational and District meeting that I have attended as the Second Vice-President of our District. My own circuit's winkel is going through our booklet on the six points of false teaching. Our District's Board of Spiritual Care, which is the gathering of all the Circuit Counselors, is beginning to do the same. Your invitation for me to speak today is another example of how we are using this local action to reach out with the truth to fellow Lutherans.

My chairman and elders gave a presentation at our Circuit Forum in February. We had 50 people present. Some pastors used this as an opportunity to begin to address these things in their congregations. We passed out packets of information concerning our listed six points of false teaching and our State of Confession. Some of the congregations within our Circuit are using the pamphlets on the six points to teach their members. I have had two invitations from others to have our elders come and present this material.

We have put together some pamphlets as well as some audio CDs, which I have available for you today. My members are taking packets with them whenever they go on vacation. They are sharing them with their family members and LCMS friends. The other day, I had to laugh. One of the ladies told me that she suggested that their LWML Zone Rally might want to consider our State of a Confession as a topic. I said, "You didn't." She smiled and said, "Oh yes I did." She smiled slyly and said, "But they didn't seem real interested."

Future

In the future Trinity Lutheran Church plans on reaching out directly to laymen in other congregations within our Circuit and District. There are many ways in which this can be done.

First, the most effective way is going to be one-on-one. The problem which this presents is that it is most difficult to reach this individual Lutheran. As I mentioned earlier, many pastors are keeping these things away from the members. Even “good” pastors have not informed their membership. The other ethical dilemma is that most of these discussions will need to be initiated by laymen, lest the confessional pastor be accused of meddling in another’s flock. Thus the local action of preparing and teaching the laymen in your own congregation is extremely important.

There are ways of getting the names of individual laymen from within your circuit and district. There are delegate lists and District directories for those who serve on District boards, auxiliary organizations, and recognized service organizations. Since these individuals are serving you by virtue of their position, there should be no problem with you desiring to inform them and explain your position to those who represent you. Furthermore, go to the District golf outing and talk to others about what is going on. Do not overlook the regular and already available channels. I have already mentioned how we have used the Circuit Forum. This summer would be a good time to make use of the Circuit Convocation. My circuit forum regularly has meetings four times a year; one is our Circuit Reformation service, but the other three are regular meetings. These forums allow laymen from different congregations to interact. By all means, don’t withdraw from these opportunities, but make use of every opportunity to speak the truth in love.

Second, in addition to the regular channels, we hope to create some other opportunities to reach out to individual Lutherans. The November free conference in Chicago was a good example of a new way to get the information out. However, many pastors did not bring any laymen with them, and thus missed the opportunity to use this conference to its fullest. Hopefully, our pastors have made use of the audio and video resources that were made available.

In the future, we hope to be able to have a confessional congregation host a meeting in which these things can be discussed, and invite the laymen of surrounding congregations to attend. Let me make the offer to you at this point, that both myself and my elders are willing to come to your meeting in order to present our State of

Confession and begin a discussion of our six points of false teaching.

Let me conclude by saying that there are many things which need to happen, but the most important is local action in your congregation and from there to other congregations close by. One by one we can reach out with the truth to the Lutherans who need to hear it. Thank you for allowing me to address you this day. I’m glad I came.

March 30, 2005