



Convention Proceedings

61st Regular Convention
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
St. Louis, MO • July 14–20, 2001

2. Church Fellowship and the Gospel

It was October 1529 and two of the great men of the Reformation were meeting in Marburg in Germany to consider the issues that separated them. Their names were Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich and Martin Luther, the great reformer himself. At stake in these discussions was, at the time, a military alliance for the protection of the Reformation from its foes. But ultimately, this meeting would determine whether there would be one united Protestant church or two—maybe even more.¹

The discussions between Luther and Zwingli and the other theologians present were intense but honest and thorough; and when after four days the talks were finished, they signed a document consisting of 15 doctrinal articles that treated the important issues of the day. On 14 and a half of the 15 articles, there was agreement, but not on the last part of the last article. They could not agree on the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli said no; but Luther insisted, "Yes!" for our Lord had spoken, "This is My body."²

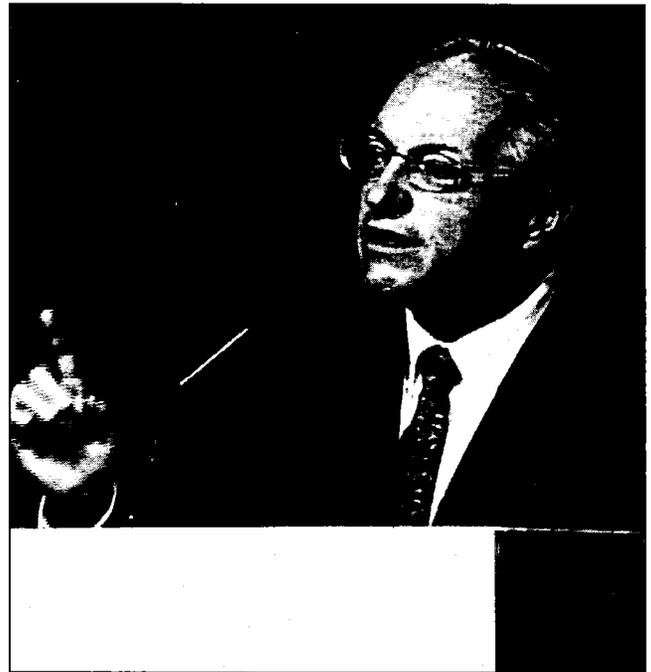
It was a momentous disagreement. The breach between the two men was permanent, as also between their churches. Lutheran and Reformed would proceed along different paths right down until the present. They would not preach the Gospel together. They would not celebrate the sacrament together. There would be no church fellowship.

But why? Especially when there was so much agreement? And why should we in The Lutheran Church Missouri—Synod today perpetuate the consequences of that Marburg meeting so many centuries later? And what's more, why do we insist on exhibiting the same attitude not only toward the Reformed but also the Catholics, the Methodists, and all the rest? These questions have become increasingly urgent in our own times, especially since many other branches of the Lutheran Church, both here and abroad, have decided to enter into fellowship with non-Lutheran groups like the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and the United Church of Christ.³ So what is going on here? And why does the LCMS take such a different approach?

The answer is actually not too difficult; and to put it as simply as possible: for us, it is a question of truth, biblical truth, scriptural truth. We believe that there is such a thing and that this truth matters.

In previous eras, such a statement would hardly be necessary. It went without saying that there was such a thing as the truth even and especially in religious matters. You could express the truth in words and people would either nod their heads and say, yes, that's right or else disagree and say, that's wrong, that's false, it is not the truth.

But that's not how it is today. Largely, I suppose, because we live in a pluralistic society with all kinds of religious beliefs and attitudes, we mute the idea of truth, preferring instead to talk about "opinion." That's your opinion, we say, and here's mine. And thereby we suggest that one's view of religion is just as good or true as another's; and even if in our heart of hearts, we still think that ours is the right one and the other fellow's wrong, well, it's still not



worth fighting about. Let's just live and let live instead of arguing about the truth.

So we live in a society where tolerance is a principal virtue, perhaps the only virtue left in America. And it is considered very bad form—bad manners, really—to insist that something is true and its opposite false or to maintain that this is right but that is wrong. Instead, there is no moral center—no absolute right or wrong, no real truth. So people who espouse strong beliefs make us uncomfortable, and we dismiss them as zealots and fanatics. For us in modern America today, religion and morality ought to be private and personal. Best keep them to yourself; don't talk about them; but if you do, be tolerant of the other person's point of view. For tolerance is more important than the truth.

Now, such an approach may be necessary for getting along in 21st-century America; but is it compatible with authentic Christianity? And can we make tolerance a substitute for commitment to truth in the Christian Church, whose founder once proclaimed, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6)?⁴ I don't think so; in fact, I know we can't, and you know it too.

Right from the beginning it was built into the definition of the term "Christian" to confess the truth—the truth about God, about sin, about the Savior, about Jesus. That's why our services include creeds, statements of what we believe. That's why confirmation is preceded by instruction classes and communicant membership is based on commitment to Luther's catechism.⁵ To be a Christian means to believe something—and not just in your heart, but also to speak it with your lips, to confess the truth. As St. Paul says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and

believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). Mouth and heart go together. No matter how uncomfortable our world may be with the concept of truth, Christians will confess it because it is in their hearts.

Now, of course, there are many truths in this world; but here we are speaking of just one, God's truth—the truth that really matters—because it is the truth that saves. As Christians, we really have no vested interest in numerous issues about which people can argue, like politics or sports, and no commitment to any number of truths that come out of human experience and investigation, like science and history. These things can be interesting, maybe even important. But for us in the church, our sole concern is for the truth that God has given us in the Scriptures. We call this truth "doctrine." We teach it, we preach it, we live it—and urge others to do so also—because it comes from God. It is His truth, not ours; and so we are not free to take it or leave it, but must value it, treasure it, and confess it. Doctrine belongs to God, not us.

Admittedly, it might be easier to get along today in modern America if we could reduce the truth requirements of our faith to just a few basic propositions on the basis of which we might join with others to combat the evils of the day and to win people for Jesus. This is one of the great temptations of our times—the temptation to say, "Let's unite on the basis of what we have in common and set to one side everything that divides us. The need is too great for us to remain apart on the basis of things that don't matter."

In one sense, of course, this is correct, as even our Lutheran Confessions maintain: we ought not be divided "by human traditions or rites and ceremonies instituted by men" (AC VII).⁶ So we can tolerate enormous variety and differences regarding what is ours. But not doctrine. Doctrine is something different, for doctrine is the truth that matters—matters much more than any other truth that we could ever know or communicate—matters because God uses this truth to save us and all others from our sins and to grant us salvation, as our Lord Himself has said, "If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32). And so too our Lord also, when He sent out the disciples and gave them the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations," He told them how to fulfill that commission—by baptizing and by "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). How much of it were they to teach and obey? Just some of it? Just the basics? Just the really important stuff? No, all of it! Every last word!

Which one of us here would dare to tell God that some of what He has revealed to us in the Bible doesn't matter and that we are going to ignore it for the sake of getting along with others, or that we are going to discard some of His truth for the sake of the mission of the church? Surely, we can all see that that's impossible. The mission is His, the church is His, the doctrine is His. We cannot discard any one of the three without putting the others in jeopardy. We preach the Word to fulfill the mission to bring people into the church.

Admittedly, correct doctrine is worthless if we do not use it—preach it and teach it—to hold forth before people their need and their hope, their sin and their Savior. There is no real point to insisting on a pure confession unless that confession is going to direct the way in which we present the Good News of salvation. People need to hear about Christ. That's why we're here—to make sure that they do.

But they need to hear *the truth* about Christ, not human speculation and opinion, not mistakes and errors, not false doctrine. Our Lord Himself warned us, "They worship Me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matt. 15:9). Therefore, we are not free to mix in a little falsehood with the truth, to teach correctly about one thing but not another. Our souls and the souls of our hearers are at stake when we do not preach God's truth.

Nor are we free to ignore the errors of others, for teaching the truth demands that we also condemn falsehood. Just think of how often St. Paul does this in his epistles, for example, warning the Colossians, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8), or the Romans, "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" (Rom. 16:17), or the Galatians, "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned" (Gal. 1:9).

Mixing truth with error only confuses the truth; and false doctrine cannot save anyone. It's that simple. Therefore, we in the Missouri Synod have bound ourselves to the truth and only the truth in carrying out the Great Commission. This is why—as the first and foremost condition of membership in the synod—we have pledged ourselves to the Scriptures as the "only rule and norm of faith and of practice" and to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as "a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God."⁷ Therefore, when pastors enter the pulpits of our churches, congregations have a right to hear this truth come out of their mouths and nothing else.

But this is also why we do not open our pulpits to those who are not in doctrinal agreement with us. Clearly, in a matter like this, the fact that the Synod is advisory to its member congregations has no relevance, for we are talking about faithfulness to the Word of God. All members of the Synod are supposed to agree with the Synod's public doctrine and to avoid those who teach otherwise—not because it is synodical policy but because it is biblically correct.⁸

True enough, in our day, we find it difficult to maintain such a strict approach. In an era that places a premium upon "tolerance," including tolerance of all sorts of immoral behavior and of false religious views and in an age that is all too skeptical of authority, especially in large institutions, members of the Synod often find it hard to accept the fellowship decisions of synodical conventions that come about on account of our commitment to God's truth. Nevertheless, we should accept them and follow them—not because the Synod says so but because God's Word says so. Unity is in the Word, not in the institution. And the Synod expresses that unity in the Word when it insists on faith-

fulness to the doctrine that God has given us in the Scriptures.

Moreover, we should realize that when we are faithful in our practice of fellowship and do not have joint worship services with the pastors and congregations of other church bodies, we have an opportunity to instruct people regarding doctrinal differences in Christendom that threaten the Gospel and to offer a witness to others about those matters in which they teach falsely.

Of course, it is extremely important that such instruction and witness not proceed from a spirit of arrogance but out of sincere concern for the spiritual well-being of people. But unfortunately, it is very hard, practically impossible, to avoid being labeled "arrogant" or "mean" or "unloving" in an age that has no use for the uncomfortable truths of religion. Attitude is everything today and truth is nothing. But as members of a church still committed to the Scriptures, we need to maintain the truth of the Scriptures and to support one another in that task, if we still believe, really and truly *believe*, that God has communicated doctrinal truth in His Word—and that that communication matters. If we do, then we will not want to confuse people by inviting into our pulpits representatives of churches that do not teach correctly.

In fact, out of concern for the church—which the Holy Spirit brings into being by the Word—we need to avoid all sorts of projects that involve proclaiming the Gospel when there is no agreement in the gospel, i.e., "in doctrine and in all its articles," as the Lutheran Confessions describe it (FC Ep. X.5). As a Synod, we are committed to working together to establish Christian schools, to publish religious materials (hymnals, Bible studies, and the like), and to carry out mission work of all sorts. These are essential to the task of the church to "preach the Word," and so we do them together in doctrinal unity. But when we engage in these sorts of activities with other churches, even at a local level, and there is no agreement in doctrine, we make it possible, indeed likely, for error to intrude into the proclamation of God's Word. This we cannot permit, for God saves people through the truth and not through false doctrine.

Besides the pure preaching of the Word, as Lutherans we have also committed ourselves to the right administration of the sacraments (AC VII)—a commitment that is the basis for our practice of close (or closed) Communion. In recent years, close Communion has become an issue for some in our Synod; so it is necessary for us to explore the connection between our Communion practices and our commitment to God's truth.

As many of you probably know, our Synod has a long history of dealing with this issue, for even in the early days of the Synod's history, there were many in America, including many American Lutherans outside the Missouri Synod, for whom close Communion represented the "epitome of an intolerant and unevangelical Christianity."⁹ For them, Communion was the application of God's forgiveness in Christ to the individual sinner and nothing more. There are still many people who think this is the case today; and therefore, the practice of close Communion makes no sense to them. Once again, it appears arrogant and loveless. But in point of fact, the Lord's Supper is something more than

application of the Gospel; it is also an outward sign of an inward fellowship. Let me explain.

Clearly, the Lord's Supper is a means of grace, a principal vehicle by which God conveys to sinners the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. This is its basic and chief purpose; but that does not mean that this is its only purpose. It has a secondary purpose, a result of the first purpose really, and that is to demonstrate the bond of fellowship that exists between those who commune together. In other words, going to Communion signifies both the relationship of God to the individual communicant and the relationship of the communicants to each other.

This is different from preaching the Word. The direction of preaching is entirely one way—a message from God to sinners about their sin and especially their salvation in Christ; and since we are all sinners, we make no distinctions among those who can hear the preaching in our churches. All are welcome, whatever church they belong to and even if they belong to no church at all.

But what does the Holy Spirit accomplish by that Word? He works faith in the heart by the Word, and in so doing, He establishes new relationships—not only between God and the sinner but also between the believers themselves. They are one with each other as well as with God in Christ. We are brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Like the Word, the Lord's Supper nurtures and sustains both of these relationships—between God and man and between each other. But unlike the Word, it also reveals the relationships. Hearing the Word is passive and invisible—we cannot see the Word enter the ear and convert the heart; but we can see people kneeling together to partake of the Lord's body and blood. The Lord's Supper is visible and external as well as invisible and internal. It marks us as belonging to God and to each other; it marks us as belonging to the church.

St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." Thus, when we Christians eat together the bread that is the body of Christ, we all become one body—and not just symbolically—but mystically, spiritually, really—the body of Christ. All of us are one in Christ and through Communion are bound more tightly together than are body and soul in one person. One God dwells in us; one Spirit rules in us; one Lord Jesus Christ is our Life.¹⁰

Of course, the question immediately arises that if the Lord's Supper is a bond between believers, that is, Christians, and not just Lutherans, how is it that we refuse to commune any except those in our fellowship? The answer lies in our earlier discussion regarding the importance of true doctrine as the basis for our Gospel proclamation, since to commune those who do *not* belong to our church is to confirm them in the errors of the churches to which they do belong, errors that threaten the very oneness that we have in Christ.

Now, of course, as soon as we say something like this, we immediately run afoul of contemporary attitudes again regarding truth and error in religion and whether, in particular, it is possible to identify one church as correct in its doctrine and another wrong. So let's be honest with one an-

other. The practice of close Communion is a consequence of believing that our church teaches the Word in its truth and purity and that other churches do not. If that is true, then non-Lutherans should be encouraged to think about these differences and not be lulled into believing that the differences do not matter. The alternative is misleading and dishonest, unless one really believes that the differences do not matter. Then by all means open the Communion table to a variety of beliefs and practices, but do not maintain that your church is any more Lutheran!

We can easily see that different churches teach different things about God, man, sin, morality, salvation, and the Savior. But are these differences important? Again, if your answer is no, they are not important, then obviously close Communion makes no sense. But if they are important and you are a Lutheran out of the conviction that the teachings of the Lutheran Church are in accordance with the Word of God, then the errors that other churches hold to are unacceptable to those who love the truth.

Now let's be very clear about this. On the one hand, we readily acknowledge that true Christians exist in all the churches where there is still some saving Gospel by which the Spirit creates faith, even if there are also a host of errors. We are not saved by true doctrine but by faith in Jesus. But we also insist that belonging to churches that teach or tolerate false doctrine is dangerous to salvation. It matters whether people hear that they are saved through faith in Jesus alone without the works of the Law; it matters whether they believe that God has clothed them with Christ in Baptism; it matters whether they are taught that the Bible is absolutely reliable in all that it teaches and says. Such things matter greatly; and people risk their salvation by adhering to churches that mingle errors with the truth.

But, some may protest: if we refuse routinely to commune the members of other churches who are visiting our own, doesn't this mean that we are withholding the consolations of the Gospel from them? Of course not, because they can still hear the preaching of Law and Gospel from our pulpits. Indeed, the practice of close Communion is actually an act of love, because it shows people that doctrine still matters, truth and error still matter. It may make us uncomfortable to point to the differences between churches; but it is hardly loveless when the differences arise on account of being faithful to the saving Word of God.

Furthermore, our concern in close Communion is not only for members of other churches but also for our own members, who may be disturbed in their faith by the practice of open Communion. How confusing it must be if, on the one hand, in our catechetical instruction we insist on correct doctrine and in confirmation we pledge our members to the Small Catechism, but in our Communion practice we welcome Christians of all denominations as if the doctrinal differences or aberrations from that same catechism do not matter. To confuse people about the importance of true doctrine is no more an act of love than it is loving to confirm people in false doctrine.

If we truly believe that doctrinal error is dangerous to one's salvation, then we want to take those steps that lead

one away from that error. Practicing close Communion is one of those steps.

Fellowship at the Lord's Table, like cooperation in proclaiming the Gospel, presumes unity in the Christian faith. We express that unity in many ways, not least of all by confessing the faith, namely, doctrine in all its articles. But this doctrine in turn comes from the Scriptures in which God has clearly spoken the truth in words we can understand.

These words have not changed in the centuries since God gave them, so the doctrine is still there. We can know it and confess it. I am convinced, however, that the problems in our church today regarding fellowship stem largely from the difficulties we have in modern society in acknowledging and confessing the truth, especially about religion. But every age has had its own peculiar challenges in following the command of Jesus, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies Me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33, NKJV). Luther had to confess the faith at Marburg against Zwingli and in the face of war; but by the grace of God he did so and in so doing preserved the saving Gospel in the Lord's Supper for the church that bears his name.

Today, the circumstances are far different but the challenge is the same: to remain faithful in the face of powerful temptations to yield our confession. But by the grace of God, we too, like Luther, will remain faithful to the truth, the truth that matters, the truth of God's Word, because it is the truth that saves.

Cameron A. MacKenzie
Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, IN

Notes

1. For the story of the Marburg Colloquy, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-1532* (Minn.: Fortress, 1990), 325-34.
2. For background and analysis of the debate over the real presence at Marburg, see James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minn.: Augsburg, 1986), 195-201, 206-08, 220-27; and Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977).
For the Marburg Articles as well as historical accounts of the proceedings, see Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Phil.: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86) 38:3-89.
3. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America entered into full fellowship with three Reformed church bodies in 1997 and with the Episcopalians and Moravians in 1999. See "Roller Coaster in Philadelphia," *The Lutheran*, October 1997, 8-12; and "Setting the Stage," *The Lutheran*, October 1999, 9-12.
4. Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from the New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

5. See "Confirmation" in *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), 206.
6. Citations from the Lutheran Confessions are from Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Phil.: Fortress, 1959).
7. *Handbook of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 1998 ed., 9.
8. Article VII of the Synod's Constitution describes the advisory character of the Synod in relationship to member congregations as having to do with a congregation's "right of self-government." It does not refer to the binding character of our agreement in the Word of God. *1998 Synodical Handbook*, 11.
9. "Introduction," to C. F. W. Walther, "Communion Fellowship," in *Essays for the Church*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992) 1:202. The basic argument of the present work comes from Walther's essay.
10. *Ibid.*