

What Is a Synod, Anyway?

The “Synod,” which is about to meet in convention, is a peculiar kind of organization—one that honors God’s Word as its final authority.

by Samuel H. Nafzger, reprinted from *The Lutheran Witness*, May 2004

“No hope remains for maintaining the Lutheran Church in our land.”

The land was Germany. The speaker was Pastor Martin Stephan, at a May 18, 1838, meeting of the “Immigration Society” he had helped to form. By November, five ships carrying 750 Saxon Lutherans set sail from Bremerhaven, Germany. Four of them—one was lost at sea—arrived nine weeks later in New Orleans.

From New Orleans the Saxons traveled up the Mississippi River. The *Missouri Argus* reported the Jan. 19, 1839, arrival of the first group in St. Louis this way:

“About two hundred and fifty German immigrants from the neighborhood of Dresden, kingdom of Saxony, arrived here on the 19th, on the Steamer Rienzi, from New Orleans. ... They advocate the Lutheran doctrine in its original purity. ... It is their intention to purchase land and settle in a body in this state. They expect soon to be joined in their new home by six hundred more of their countrymen of the same religious persuasion.”

The entire venture, however, almost came to an end before it could even get off the ground. Acting on charges of sexual immorality, the group on May 30, 1839, just over four months after their arrival, deposed their leader, Martin Stephan, from his office as bishop. They excommunicated him from the church and banished him from their settlement.

This disastrous turn of events threw the newly arrived colonists into a state of near chaos. Having lost their life’s savings, beset by the harsh climate and illnesses, they now experienced the disillusionment of having the leader on whom they had built their hopes for temporal—and eternal—happiness exposed as a deceiver and hypocrite. They even found themselves asking troublesome questions about their very existence as Christians and about the nature of the church itself.

Were they still “church” without their bishop? Should the laity have authority over the clergy? How should they organize themselves in the face of their present circumstances?

After almost two years of arguing such questions, the famous Altenburg debates of April 1841 brought some clarity. Several of the immigrants decided to return to Germany, but a young pastor by the name of C.F.W. Walther convinced the majority that the church was to be found wherever the Gospel was preached and the sacraments administered. Even though they had erred, despite the lack of a bishop, they were still church, and they could and should get on with the work of the church in this new land.

Six years later, in April 1847, these Saxon immigrants joined with a number of pastors sent to America by Wilhelm Loehe in Bavaria to organize “The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States.” They deleted “German” from the name in 1917, and in 1947, on its centennial, the Synod officially shortened its name to “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.”

A 'synod'?

Each of these names uses the term "synod," a word rarely used today. Derived from two Greek words meaning, "going the same way," the term usually denotes an assembly, a convention, or a meeting. "Synod" may refer to a meeting of the priests in a diocese (by the Roman Catholic Church), to an assembly of bishops and deputies (by the Episcopal Church), or to a conference of ministers and ruling elders (by the Presbyterian Church). According to the *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Lutherans in America have generally used the term "synod" to refer to "an entire body of territorially or linguistically, or theologically united congregations."



Dr. C.F.W. Walther

This is how the founders of the Missouri Synod understood the term. This becomes evident in the first presidential address of its first president, C.F.W. Walther, in 1848. He acknowledges that the way the church organizes itself is not a matter of doctrine. There are, he says, "times and conditions when it is profitable for the church to place supreme deciding and regulating power into the hands of representatives." He points to consistories (clergy dominated administrative boards) in Germany that were at one time "an inestimable blessing" to the church. Or, who would deny, he asks, that the Swedish church "grew splendidly under its episcopal constitution ...?"

But, says Walther, conditions in America call for a different kind of organization. He tells delegates to the Synod's first convention that "the choice of the form of government for a church is an inalienable part of their Christian liberty." What is needed in this new homeland, he continues, is "a form of government under which the congregations are free to govern themselves but enter into a synodical organization such as the one existing among us."

This newly established institution, which he calls "our organization," is strictly advisory in nature, says Walther. It asks for "nothing unconditionally of our congregations except submission to the Word."

Walther realized, to be sure, that even in an organization committed unconditionally to the Word, "we must expect battles." But these battles, viewed in the light of the Gospel-centered purpose of the Synod, "will not be the mean, depressing battles for obedience to human laws, but the holy battles for God's Word, for God's honor and kingdom."

Walther's understanding of an organization called a "synod" remains unchanged in the LCMS to this day. The Missouri Synod continues to be an association of congregations, together with full-time workers—pastors, teachers, directors of Christian education, directors of Christian outreach, directors of parish music, deaconesses, parish assistants and certified lay ministers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church—who have voluntarily signed the Synod's Constitution. They have come together in this organization, as Walther describes it, "for enjoying fraternal consultation, supervision, and aid to spread the kingdom of God jointly and to make possible and accomplish the aims of the church in general."

Only God's Word decides

In signing its constitution, the members of the LCMS have of their own free will pledged their unconditional acceptance of the Word of God. The Confessional article of the Synod's Constitution states:

"The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:

“1. The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice;

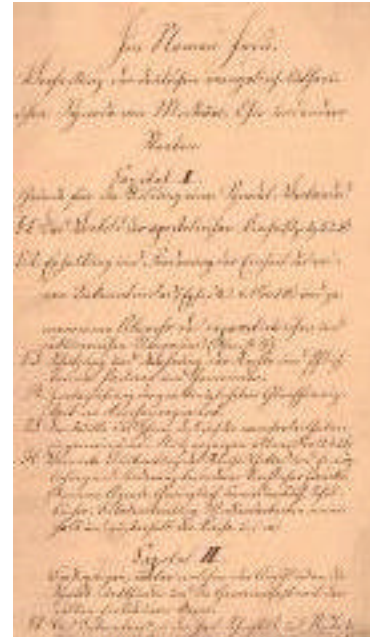
“2. All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God. ...”

In accordance with this confession, Article VIII of the Constitution expressly states that “all matters of doctrine and of conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God. All other matters shall be decided by a majority vote.”

All of the members of the Synod are on record as agreeing in writing that right teaching in the church can be determined only on the basis of the authority of God’s written Word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Every member of the Synod has stated his/her agreement that right doctrine can *never* be established by majority vote, not even if it is unanimous.

But this does *not* mean that the members of this Synod will never vote on doctrinal issues that may—and do—come up.

Questions will inevitably surface about what God’s Word teaches about matters of faith and life. When questions do arise among the Synod’s members about what God’s Word teaches on issues such as abortion, evolution, the ordination of women, woman suffrage, homosexual behavior, participation in civic events with non-Christian participants, etc., the members of a synod such as ours can, and indeed must, prepare doctrinal resolutions and statements and vote on them.



Synod's Constitution

But when our Synod in a national convention made up equally of pastors and lay people adopts doctrinal resolutions and statements, it is *not* “establishing doctrine”—this is something only the Word of God can do. Rather, it is determining what the majority of the members of the Synod believe that God’s Word, the Scriptures, teach about the issues under debate.

This is why the Bylaws of the LCMS specifically state that “the Synod, in seeking to clarify its witness or to settle doctrinal controversy ... shall have the right to adopt doctrinal resolutions and statements which are in harmony with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.” Such adopted doctrinal resolutions, the members of the Synod beseech one another, “shall be honored and upheld ... until such time as the Synod amends or appeals them” (Bylaw 1.09 c 7).

This is the commitment that all the members of the Synod make with one another when they join this organization and voluntarily place themselves under the Synod’s Constitution. To be faithful to this “covenant of love” when disagreements arise about what it is that God’s Word teaches about a controverted issue—that is, to honor the official doctrinal position of the Synod adopted in convention—is *not* to elevate “bylaws over the Bible.” To honor this commitment that they have made with their brothers and sisters in Christ in the Synod is *not* to slip into some bureaucratic mindset that denigrates the Word of God. Rather, it is to follow the mutually agreed upon way all members of the Synod have agreed to for carrying out the objectives of the Synod under the ultimate authority of God’s Word. Since all the members of the Synod are committed to God’s Word as the final authority, they will not, says Walther, consider such decisions to be “a foreign burden being imposed on them from without but as a gift of brotherly love, and will champion, defend, and preserve them as their own.”

If we disagree

Since all of the members of the Synod believe that the Word of God alone can determine right teaching and practice in the church, and that it alone is without error—synods can and do err—the LCMS has established procedures for expressing dissent to positions on doctrinal matters adopted by the Synod by majority vote. And, of course, all members of the Synod (congregations and ordained and commissioned ministers) are free to terminate their association with the Synod if they cannot for conscience reasons “honor and uphold” resolutions that they believe to be contrary to the Word of God.

Walther anticipated that some might conclude that joining a synod with “no power but the power of the Word” and which determines its corporate position on what God’s Word teaches by majority vote would be dangerous, in that it could result in the “democraticization” of the church or degenerate into “mob rule.” But, says Walther, there need be no “fear that the secular element of a political democracy will invade the church, that there from will arise a popular government, a papacy of the people, and that we, who are to be servants of Christ, will thereby become servants of men.”

Why not? Because in Walther’s understanding, this newly formed synod was not just any old synod. It was a synod made up of members who had unanimously committed themselves to the Scriptures “as the only rule and norm of faith and practice.” And this meant that it was an organization unreservedly committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who shed His precious blood for the forgiveness of the sins of the world, which is taught in the Scriptures.

‘Days of great joy’

Walther begins his first presidential address by saying: “In these last days of sore distress there have again come days of great joy, days of refreshment and strengthening for us members and servants of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of this country. God has granted us grace that we, who knew and know that we are united in our faith ... have been able to meet here to manifest our unity in the spirit publicly by deeds and jointly to strengthen this unity, to confess our most holy faith jointly and to be edified thereby, jointly to take upon ourselves the burden of the individual and to present it to God in joint prayer.” He contrasts the “joyful life” in this Synod with that of the believers in “our former fatherland” who were “restricted almost entirely to solitary sighing in the closet.”

It was being “united in our faith” that made membership in this Synod such a joy for Walther. This unity in the faith provides the glue that would hold this organization together. To be sure, the founders of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States saw this synod as “our organization,” not as the church itself. But it was not *merely* an organization. It was a “synod” of believers in Jesus Christ, “going the same way,” bound unconditionally to the same Scriptures, confessing the same creeds, believing one Gospel, offering praise to the one triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in one worshiping community, united in “pure doctrine.”

May God grant that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod continue as such an organization of congregations and professional church workers who have voluntarily committed themselves unconditionally to the Word. May God help all of us keep our “covenants of love” with one another in the Synod as we make our “common way together” through these troubled times—times of the unbelieving spirit of those who reject the historical foundation of the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (e.g., “the Jesus Seminar”), of the apostasy of ordaining practicing homosexuals as shepherds of God’s people, of those who substitute what

Walther calls “the purity and unity of doctrine” for agreement to disagree as to what the truth really is.

Walther concludes his first presidential address with these words: “Even though we possess no power but that of the Word, we nevertheless can and should carry out our work joyfully. Let us, therefore, esteemed sirs and brethren [and we would add “sisters”], *use* this power properly. Let us above all and in all matters be concerned about this, that the pure doctrine of our dear Evangelical Lutheran Church may become known more and more completely among us, that it may be in vogue in and of our congregations, and that it may be preserved from all adulteration and held fast as the most precious treasure.”

When this happens, we in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod give honor to our Lord and Savior. We give a winsome witness to His Gospel. We become joyful instruments in the hands of our loving God to set the world ablaze with the Good News about what Christ Jesus has done for us and for all people everywhere.

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