

What Degree of Doctrinal Agreement is Necessary for Membership in WELS?

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[Presented at the Southeast Michigan Fall Conference, Tecumseh, MI]

I. What Synod Itself Suggests

The title of this paper asks a question which the writer cannot answer arbitrarily on the basis of his own opinion. Since membership in WELS is involved, its own statements must be examined and presented. Probably the most official and authoritative are to be found in the Synod's model constitution for congregations. There it states (Article IV, Section 1B), "Communicant members are those baptized souls who confess the chief parts of Christian doctrine as written in Dr. Luther's *Small Catechism* and who have declared their adherence to all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, without qualification, as the only rule and norm of faith and life."

Since a congregation is a group of individual members, they are included also in the requirement of Article II, Section 2, that congregations accept and confess the three ecumenical creeds and the six Lutheran Confessions. Is the necessary doctrinal agreement, then, a full understanding of these documents in every area they touch on? Obviously, if that were the case, we would have to dismiss from membership a large share of our people. Yet, we cannot condone the *Köhlerglaube*'s blind acceptance of what the church teaches. There must be some definite understanding and acceptance.

II. The Difficulty in Pin-Pointing the Degree of Agreement

At a meeting of Mission Board members with people in Hartford, CT, a few years ago the discussion of doctrinal deviations in other Lutheran Church bodies was a primary topic. A man present wondered why the church couldn't "freeze" its doctrines into words which would remain forever the same. That would be about the same as binding the living Word of God in the original Hebrew and Greek, robbing it of its life and vitality for us who live in a different culture.

Similarly, we cannot say that there is a set degree of doctrinal agreement among all our members. There are many variable factors that must be considered. What answer would you give to the question, "How much food does a person need?" You would first want to know what his age and size are, what occupation he is engaged in, etc., and then you might volunteer an answer.

Spiritually, people are of all different kinds. The Bible makes this plain in many ways. Paul wrote to members of the congregation in Corinth (he called them "brothers") and pointed out their deficiency: "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not yet ready for it. You are still worldly" (1 Co 3:1-3a, NIV). The writer to the Hebrews has a similar complaint, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (He 5:12-13, NIV). Though these people did not yet come up to expectation in their understanding, their right to be considered members of the church is not denied.

Or, consider the people Paul first met when he came to Ephesus. We are told, "He found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that the Holy Spirit has been given (better: whether there is a Holy Spirit)'" (Ac 19:1a-2 NIV). They obviously were mere infants in their faith.

Even Peter, the disciple of Jesus, demonstrated his incomplete understanding. In words of ringing faith he could confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, yet a few moments later he could demonstrate total ignorance of the deceptive power of Satan and the treacherous weakness of his own heart. From this crucible of testing he emerged a wiser, stronger Christian, who warned others, “The devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour; whom resist steadfast in the faith” (1 Pe 5:8-9a, KJV)

These Biblical references support the statement that perfect agreement in faith and knowledge cannot realistically be expected. The young boy or girl just confirmed ordinarily is not going to be as spiritually mature as a man or woman who has grown in faith with the growth in years. Nor would a retarded person achieve the level of understanding that a normal person could, but his faith may, in a sense, be stronger by its simple, childlike acceptance.

There are parables of Christ that teach us that we cannot expect the same of all Christians, for spiritual growth will vary. In the parable of the silently growing seed he says that first there is the blade, then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear. In the parable of the soils he tells us this same seed brought forth thirty-, sixty-, and a hundred-fold increase when it took root in the good soil of a Christian heart. There is no pattern into which all will fall, whether it applies to Christian life or Christian faith.

III. Some Answers to the Question

Still, there has to be some standard of agreement. The question posed, “What degree of doctrinal agreement is necessary for membership in WELS?”, would pertain to minimum requirements more than maximum.

For a basic answer we can go back to Synod’s model constitution and its statement that “Communicant members are those baptized souls who confess the chief parts of Christian doctrine, as written in Dr. Luther’s *Small Catechism*.” It was part of Luther’s genius to distill the wealth of spiritual knowledge contained in the Bible into this compact exposition of the Christian faith. It serves well to guide the old, as well as the young.

There must be agreement on the fundamental doctrines of Law and Gospel. The Lutheran Church was born out of the confusion of these by the Roman Church. Subsequent church history only substantiates how easily this confusion reasserts itself as a very natural human failing. It saturates much of Protestantism of today, which regards itself as a social savior, and it feeds the ego of people who deceive themselves into believing that they are good enough for God. A clear understanding of these doctrines will undergird a wholesome respect for God Himself and for His Word. It will teach a reverence for Him, whose unlimited might and absolute justice are matched only by His love. And it will stifle the arrogant assumption that men have the right to accept or to reject what they please in regard to the Bible. The Ten Commandments will speak their judgment on a world gone berserk morally and will shine as a guiding light for those who in faith and love wish to walk in the path of righteousness. The Creed, with its focus on God’s grace in Christ, will offer the balm of forgiveness and the hope of life to the hearts that embrace its Gospel message.

“Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath...”, the hymn says, and therefore we have the right to expect our members to understand and use this privilege. The exposition of the Lord’s Prayer serves well to encourage proper prayer and to discourage abuse or neglect of this correlative line of communication with God. As He speaks to us in His Word, so we speak to Him in our prayers. Silence either way in our lives ultimately becomes the silence of spiritual death.

The Catechism devotes two of its chief parts to the sacraments. These also are lifelines of God—channels of His grace that either create or sustain spiritual life, or do both. To ignore what God lovingly commands is a denial of faith. Agreement is crucial in regard to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The Office of the Keys and Confession echoes the message of Law and Gospel as it asserts the judgment of sin and the release from that judgment by God’s forgiveness. But it also states the authority and responsibility of the church in this matter, as the agent of God. People who boast their right to go it alone, thereby expressing their contempt for the church, are in reality defying God.

Since agreement in all these doctrinal matters is necessary, it is imperative that we teach them to our members. Most instruction courses for our adults, as well as our youth, are based on the pattern of Luther's Catechism. The instruction, of course, must be more than superficial. It would be hard to justify the action of an ALC pastor, who dropped a copy of an adult manual between the doors of the home of a prospective member with a note that he look it through and present any questions when the pastor would return in a couple of weeks. At the same time, there is not always opportunity to present a full course of instruction. I recall a man who, after he had started attending church, developed cancer and failed rapidly. In instructing him prior to his baptism only the essentials could be touched on. He became so weak physically that plans to baptize him in church privately had to be cancelled, but his growth spiritually, even under limited instruction, was a joy to witness.

Alongside the Catechism as a guide for necessary doctrinal agreement, I feel that Synod's pamphlet, *This We Believe*, ranks close to the top. In a concise twenty-four pages it clearly presents the basis of the Christian faith and, to leave less room for misunderstanding, sets antithesis next to thesis. For our day and situation it can well serve as a norm for necessary doctrinal agreement.

On the basis of such documents we have the right to expect agreement among our members on matters that are currently in ferment among churches. The historical-critical method of bible study has caused much turmoil. In effect, its proponents pronounce their "*Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*" upon the Scriptures, saying that they have been weighed in the scales of man's knowledge and found wanting. Our people must be ready to confess unequivocally with Christ, "Thy word is truth" (Jn 17:17). Likewise, they need to understand that the mark of the church and the Christian is not found in the charismatic gifts that have become so popular, but rather in the Word and faith in that Word. In an age of rampant unionism they should realize that unity is not achieved by pronouncements that seek to glue together a collage of differing churches, but only by reaching a common understanding of God's Word. They must realize that the name "Lutheran" does not connote equal identity, but may be used by churches farther from truth than some sectarian churches.

The culture we live in generally pays more homage to the god of science than it does to the God who makes science possible. Evolution has become a formidable religion that seeks to crowd out God. Though our young people are indoctrinated with it from first grade through college, they must be taught to reject it as the imagination of man's perverted heart.

The whole area of morality has in recent years been labelled simply as one of alternate life styles, whereas it is intimately involved with the doctrine of sanctification. Declaring his freedom from all moral inhibitions, for example, modern man believes he has removed all sanctions against sexual license. To prevent pregnancy he has the pill and other methods of birth-control. If these somehow fail, he can resort to abortion. To counteract the threat of venereal diseases he has penicillin and similar miracle drug. To ease any pangs of conscience he has the assurance that there really is no such thing as sin. It's merely the figment of an unenlightened imagination. But in spite of this array of self-assurance, the walls and pillars of society are crumbling. The dream of happiness in "doing your own thing" is as far beyond the horizon as ever. We have the right to expect our people to listen to God in this area of living and do all they can to resist the pressures from the world about them, even though many churches give their "Amen" to such perversions of God's explicit will.

To sum up what has been presented, we repeat that there is no precise degree of doctrinal agreement necessary, or to be expected, since there are all sorts of varying factors involved. Nevertheless, there are basic teachings that are a prerequisite for Christian faith and membership in a Christian church such as WELS. And there are special areas where our members should be kept aware and informed, as dictated by the trends of the times. Beyond this, it should be our continuing goal to work as faithfully as we can under God's blessing to keep their faith growing and thus enlarge the area of agreement they share as members of His family.