

Reception of Members by Confession of Faith

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You decide to go out to dinner at a fancy restaurant. You get the menu and order a nice steak, a baked potato with sour cream and butter, corn, and a side dish of mushrooms sautéed in butter sauce. After eating this delicious dinner, you head home, only to later head directly to the nearest hospital with pains in your stomach. The mushrooms were bad. They didn't kill you, but they certainly didn't help you either!

Receiving members by confession of faith is something that is done when people who are members of other Lutheran synods desire to become members of one of our congregations. It can be a most enjoyable experience. They may come to us for various reasons: we have the closest church to their home, they don't get along with people in their "present church - or with the pastor, they are unhappy with the way things are done in that other place, they no longer can take the un-Biblical teachings or practices which are present in that other church. But still, they come to us and want to be a part of our congregation.

Whatever the reason, our attitude towards them is the same - this congregation offers them the best God has to give them, with no "poison mushrooms." If I approach them with a defensive or apologizing attitude about our church, it really won't work well. Besides, it's an incorrect attitude. Our church position needs no apologies. God's Word is clear and that's what we teach, believe, and practice. As for them, they are the ones who wish to join our church and Synod. Now that's not only what I want, it's what they want. My discussions with them are for that very purpose. I will want to make five simple points with them.

1. Asking for a Confession of Faith doesn't necessarily question their Christianity or their Lutheran Confirmation.
2. They are to uphold the Bible's true teaching by re-affirming their Lutheran Confirmation.
3. They are not to be part of dangerous false teachings.
4. False teaching is present in other Lutheran bodies.
5. Membership in WELS does the most good.

1. Asking for a confession of faith doesn't necessarily question their Christianity or their Lutheran Confirmation

A man died and went to heaven. An angel gave him the grand tour when he arrived. There were a number of different houses spread all around. As he passed by each house, he noticed how much fun and laughter was evident. Towards the end of his tour, he noticed a little house set way back from the others. It was kind-of dark inside and very quiet. The man thought this was very strange, so he asked the angel about it. "Oh," said the angel, "those are WELS Lutherans. They think that they are the only ones up here. We just leave them alone and don't disturb them.

This little story is certainly not a biblical picture of heaven. It is, however, the way some people see our Synod. It is their problem, to be sure, but we don't need to add to their misconception about us by acting as if this is our attitude. The Bible is clear as to who will be in heaven. Jesus says: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not

believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16) All who have Jesus as their Savior also have heaven as theirs. Jesus then is that Way, Truth, and Life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him. All Christians, no matter what church they were members of, will be saved as long as Jesus Christ is their Savior from sin.

Now, we might expect a little hostility when people want to be members of our congregations. When we tell them that we have to sit them down first and talk to them about God and His Word, they might think it's unnecessary. They might even think that we are out of place to ask such a thing - a confession of faith be made by them. They are Christians. They are Lutherans. They, after all, have been confirmed already in the Lutheran faith. That should be proof enough that they are acceptable to us. We need to know exactly what we are asking them to do. Their confession of faith really is their opportunity to confess clearly this faith to us. Only God can look into their hearts and see their faith. We are not fudging their faith as being nonexistent. We are only asking that they declare this faith to our congregation, for their membership in our congregation is dust such a declaration. Their faith might dust not be there, but it is not necessary for us to assume it from the out.-set and set out to effect their conversion to the truth. We dust want to sit down with them and review the teachings of Scripture which their Lutheran Confirmation encompasses and establish with them and for our benefit that this truly is their belief.

2. They are to uphold the Bible's true teaching by re-affirming their Lutheran confirmation

So we sit down with them to review Bible teachings. We could bring our big Bibles (a '45 in their eyes maybe) and all kinds of courses of study and materials (our ammunition). We may feel we need a lot of things to conquer their false ideas and defend ourselves. A copy of This We Believe and a Bible is all we really need. We may fare better -to give them the benefit of the doubt and simply cover the doctrines in a brief but complete way. This will suffice to uncover any mayor problems which may exist. If there are any of those, they can be covered at more length at another time.

If we remember that the people before us are confirmed Lutherans, then we should remember that the possibility exists God has already given them a correct understanding of His truth through His Word. This may be a real possibility. This possibility may become less and less of a reality if the other Lutheran church bodies continue to deteriorate in sound Biblical teaching along their present path. At some point, we may find it necessary to abandon all confession of faiths in favor of a re.-confirmation in the Lutheran faith. I'm not so sure we can say that we are at this point as yet.

I vividly remember the first week after my ordination. After my intensive Seminary training, I was all ready to go out and convert the world. I suppose this is a common feeling. My dogmatics training acquainted me with the Bible's doctrines so that I was ready and determined to uphold these teaching and to pound into powder any false teaching wherever and whenever it reared its ugly head. I also was eager to share in an open wavy my ministry plan and methods to give nay church council some confidence in me. The next day after my ordination I sat down to my first church council meeting. In my report, I explained the courses of study I planned on using, I felt it would be good for them to know this. I'd use the catechism and "Growing Trees" for youth confirmation, "Wonderful Works of God" for adult confirmation, but for confession of faiths, it would be cut and dried a little differently. For LCMS people, I would use "This We

Believe." For all others, I would use my full 20-week adult confirmation course. Nothing was really wrong - so far, I had thought out everything very completely. The deterioration of the other Lutheran synods as documented fully for me at the Seminary, had made this last provision necessary.

What a surprise when the council, almost to the man - told me that I should first sign people up as members, and then teach them after I got them into the church. What do I do now? I do some long, hard thinking. Then I review with my council what membership in our congregation involves. When people become members, they make a specific confession of faith which is more than just saying they will be a part of our church. Even the simplest of constitutions includes this assumption.

ARTICLE II. ARTICLES OF FAITH

Section 1. This congregation accepts and confesses all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the verbally inspired Word of God and submits to this Word as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Section 2. This congregation accepts and confesses all the symbolical books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580 as true statements of Scriptural doctrine. They are:

- A. The three Ecumenical Creeds
 - 1) The Apostles'
 - 2) The Nicene
 - 3) The Athanasian
- B. The six Lutheran Confessions
 - 1) Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism
 - 2) Dr. Martin Luther's Large Catechism
 - 3) The Unaltered Augsburg Confession
 - 4) The Apology of the Augsburg
 - 5) The Smalcald Articles
 - 6) The Formula

Section 3. This congregation accepts and confesses these symbolical books without reservation, not insofar as, but because they are the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God and a summary of the faith held by the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Section 4. Hence, no doctrine shall be taught or tolerated in this congregation which is in any way at variance with these symbolical books and the Holy Scriptures.

Section 5. Likewise, all controversies which may arise in this congregation shall be decided and adjusted according to this norm of doctrine and practice.

ARTICLE IV. SYNODICAL AFFILIATION

This congregation shall affiliate itself only with a synod that holds to all the truths of God's Word in doctrine and practice and is bound to the confession of faith as set forth in Article II, if, and as long as, such a synod exists. This congregation shall be and remain members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, so

long as this Synod continues to preach and teach God's Word correctly in keeping with Article II.¹

Then I go on to explain that by their calling me, they have placed in my hands the responsibility of presenting people for membership who are in conformity with this confession. So, I'll go about my work and they go about theirs: my preparing and presenting, their reviewal and recommendation to accept such confessing fellow Christians.

The booklet "This We Believe" is sufficient to establish that this confession of faith exists. Encouragement (without pressure) can be made for confession of faith members to sit in on an adult confirmation class for their own benefit. This course can be included for all members in a Sunday adult Bible Class.

I used to also use our Synod's pamphlet "Your blessed fellowship in Christ" also. I no longer use this, finding it better to cover fellowship in more detail when it is covered in *This We Believe*, chapter VII: "The Church and its Ministry." Supplemental materials can be introduced at this point to help cover fellowship.

It will be necessary to mention Scouting and Lodges when fellowship is covered. It may not be all that necessary to quote extensively to show why these groups are rejected. It may suffice to point out what should clearly be evident - that they are not in harmony with Scripture. The simple truth is that Scouting promotes there is really only one God to be faithful to, no matter what religion you may be. A Lutheran, Catholic, Buddhist, Mormon can stand together and speak to the "same god." Scouting also teaches that one must be faithful to that God to earn His favor. "Try . . . good work while you are on earth. It is something to be good, but it is far better to do good."² "Doing good instead of just being good you do your duty to God . . . and help bring about His kingdom-on earth."³

Lodges can in the same way be shown to be wrong. There are many references to one "vague god" in the rites of the different lodges. (a supplement comparing lodges to Scripture in a way similar to the comparison of Scouting is available from Rev. Armin Keibel (WELS), Concord, CA)

The booklet "This We Believe" can be covered in two hours or it can be done in twenty hours. It all depends on discussion which may arise from statements made in the various chapters. I can't draw on as much experience and numbers of confession of faith members as some sitting here today, but I still can mention the following caution. It is sometimes tempting to rush through the material with certain people. I need to remind myself to completely cover the material, even though it may appear to be unnecessary. It also may go without saying, but any difficulties which cannot be resolved will necessitate a more detailed study - most likely an adult confirmation course,

3. They are not to be part of dangerous false teachings

Now they know what we teach and what they by their membership in our congregation will be asked to stand for. Our unity on the basis of Scripture is truly God pleasing. This unity involves standing for the Bible to the degree of breaking unity with groups that permit false teaching. Many passages can be used to show God's will as expressed in His Word. Here are a few:

¹ Constitution and By-Laws of St. Mark Ev. Lutheran Church, Leesburg, Florida, pp1,2.

² Paper: "Religion in Scouting" by Rev. Armin Keibel (WELS), p. 2

³ "Christian News," Vol 20, Nos. 31-35, p. 17

- Psalm 119:63 "I am a friend to all who fear You, to all who follow Your precepts."
- Acts 2:42 "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."
- 1 Cor. 1:10 "I appeal to you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."
- Phil. 7:27 "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel."
- Matt 28:20 "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you."
- Rom 16:17 "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."

The confession of faith'er may disagree with you a little bit. He may not feel a person is part of false teaching just by belonging to a religions group which allows it. To such a one, these passages should move them to re-consider that stand. Also - a member of a group does really stand for what that group espouses, whether or not he is in personal agreement with all that is taught and represented in the group. If you are a member of the KKK or the NAACP, you may not agree with everything the group represents, but you are part of it. You tell someone you belong to the KKK and right away they will think of all that this group teaches. You will be making a statement to them about your faith, even though your personal convictions may be different. You also, if you support that group financially, will be lending your support for the entire group.

You can parallel church membership to this yourself. If our membership in a church body makes a confession of faith to others, then membership in some church bodies should make us uncomfortable because it would make us stand for some things that are against God and His Word. God Himself is not pleased to be misrepresented.

3. False teaching is present in other Lutheran bodies

I hesitate slightly in presenting this portion: It's only because its not often necessary to elaborate on these false teachings. If point #2 above is covered well, then Gods true teachings for us will stand by themselves and evaporate the "other" teachings. We do need to be ready, though, to show and document false teaching. A number of publications could be subscribed to which would provide useful material for this purpose: LCUSA's News Bureau's Newsletter, *The Lutheran World Information*, *The Lutheran Standard*, *Lutheran Perspective*, and *Christian News*. Copies of LCA, ALC, and LCMS catechisms and adult instruction manuals will also be valuable.

Here are a few points:

A. Bible inerrancy

1. LCA Constitution, Article II -Confession of Faith:

Section 1. This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains the Church through the Gospel

and thereby unites believers with their Lord and with one another in the fellowship of faith.

Section 2. This church holds that the Gospel is the revelation of God's sovereign will and saving grace in Jesus Christ, In Him, the Word Incarnate, God imparts Himself to men.

Section 3. This church acknowledges the Holy Scriptures as the norm for the faith and life of the Church. The Holy Scriptures are the divinely inspired record of God's redemptive act in Christ, for which the Old Testament prepared the way and which the New Testament proclaims. In the continuation of this proclamation in the Church, God still speaks through the Holy Scriptures and realizes His redemptive purpose generation after generation.

2. Quotes from LCA sources

a. April, 1982; *The Lutheran*: "The difference is on the issue of inerrancy, the infallible verbal inspiration of the Bible - that the Bible is factually true and is totally accurate in every word and detail. We do disagree on this. I do not believe this of the Bible, nor do I believe it to be an idea in any way central to the Christian faith ...The Bible which so faithfully proclaims him (Christ), when inerrancy is imposed, can become that competitor - yes, an idol..."⁴

b. Dr. Robert Marshall's book *The Mighty Acts of God*:

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18

At the present time there is hardly a single professor in either the American Lutheran Church or Lutheran Church in America who still insists on the Genesis account of creation and the inerrancy of the Bible. As far as we have been able to determine, there is not one active ALC and LCA professor who is willing to take a stand against those in the ALC and LCA who deny the inerrancy of Holy Scripture and teach the evolutionary origin of man and the universe.⁵

3. ALC Constitution, Article II - Confession of Faith

Section 1. The Synod accepts the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life.

4. Quotes from ALC sources

a. ALC-LCMS Statement of Doctrinal Differences:

The ALC holds that the inerrancy referred to here (in the ALC constitution) does not apply to the text but to the truths revealed for our faith, doctrine, and life.

b. another quote from the same source:

The Constitution and the United Testimony of Faith and Life of the ALC use the term inerrant and infallible. It is generally agreed within the ALC that the term infallible means reliable. The terms refer to the message and power of Scripture, not to its text.

5. LCMS Constitution, Article 2:

The Synod and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:
S-1. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice;

6. Quotes from LCMS-sources

October 1960 issue of Concordia Theological Monthly:

The Scriptures express what God wants them to say and accomplish what God wants them to do. In this sense and in the fulfillment of this function they are inerrant, infallible, and wholly reliable."⁶

When Bible inerrancy is questioned, a whole myriad of false teachings will pop up,

CREATION --

LCA: (official publication Resource: "We should approach these creation stories as religious truth... At the same time we should realize that the stories are parables and not scientific accounts. They are conveying truth to us in a poetic form, using figures and symbols which are not to be literalized....We should never teach these stories to kindergarten, or primary children, as literally true."⁷

ALC: Confirmation book *His Kingdom Come*: "Genesis is a theological story, not scientific."...When we refer to Genesis Chapters 1 through 11 as a 'theological account of creation,' we mean that the account is the result of God's having made

⁵ Paper: "ALC-LCMS – Statement of Doctrinal Differences", October 1980, p. 8.

⁶ Pamphlet "Catechism of Differences" by Harold C. Wicke, Northwestern Publishing House, 1964

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 28

Himself known to a believing writer or writers. Perhaps no one can say for certain how these first chapters are to be understood.⁸

LCMS: December issue of *Cresset*: "The time is long past when the Church could afford petty squabbles over trifling questions of doctrine and practice... We think it is much too late in the day to be haggling over such interesting but incidental questions as to whether the early chapters of Genesis are to read literally or nonliterally."⁹

Sufficient quotes can be gathered to show false teaching in almost every area of doctrinal teaching. The doctrine of Christ is brought into question, abortion is supported and condoned, homosexuality is permissible, and so on. Even though many fine Scriptural statements can be found in each of the major Lutheran church bodies, the difficulty comes in when false teaching is permitted.

5. Membership in the WELS does the most good

The confession of faith which is asked for as evidence of belief still is difficult for some people to make. It's hard to separate from members of other Lutheran synods if the ties are close. But it is definitely best - for the sake of those we are separating from and for our own sakes.

We can do more by not joining with those whose church bodies allow false doctrine than we can by joining with them. At least it shows there is a difference and calls attention to the difference, rather than going along as if everything were fine. It is not that we enjoy admonishing. If we want to do the easiest thing, we would not take a stand against error. It's for the benefit of the people exposed to the error that we do it, contending for God's truth and holding it up as the only basis for agreement and unity of practice. Maybe God will bless us with a restoration of unity based on God's Word which will involve all Lutherans. But that unity will not be God-pleasing if His Word is compromised in the process.

We do the most good for ourselves when we hold on to all of God's Word. False teaching may not kill us, but it won't help us. All the Bible is there for our eternal good, given to us by a loving God. Why should we shortchange ourselves? 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Picture it this way: The teaching of Christ is the cornerstone of our faith. We believe in Him and are saved. All the other teachings support and add to the teaching of Christ. Those stones add to the structure, making it a larger building for our enjoyment.

We don't do ourselves any good by putting up with the bad with the good. God wants more for us than that.

In conclusion

As I look back on this paper, I wonder whether I am at times too simplistic and positive in my approach to people. But when you believe that all of Scripture is best for people and that's what you want for them, it's easy to be positive. It also makes it a lot easier if you allow some time before approaching visiting worshippers to become members by confession of faith. If they are allowed to appreciate what God's Word really has to offer them, then they will be the ones to want a part in such a fellowship. No more partially good meals from God's Word for them.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 26,27

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25