

DO YOU CHANGE SYNODS?

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Church History Paper

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It was not a hasty decision. The situation actually had taken years to develop. Yet, I can well imagine that it still surprised quite a few. After all, it is not every day that a large well-established congregation breaks the relationship it had with the synod that had founded it and supported its growth for a full 70 years.

Yet the facts were all there. The alternatives and costs of the decision were all spelled out as best as anyone could foretell. The costs were going to be great no matter what they decided. On the one hand, the Conservative Committee to Keep Bethlehem in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod had explained in an open letter dated September 9, 1971:

If you vote to leave the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod Christians, then you must face the following facts: We will give up all chances of helping our Synod to rid itself of liberal teachings.

It also explained that no pastor or teacher could be called from the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. The congregation would no longer be supporting the world wide mission program of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod which was bringing the message of Christ's saving Word to all nations. "We will no longer be a 'Church of the Lutheran Hour' bringing Christ to the nation." All church materials and help from the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod would cease.

There were also costs that no one could calculate beforehand. Who would know the grief, the confusion, and the agonizing that such a decision would cause? Who could foretell how many families this would split up or how many older folks simply would not understand?

Yet, despite all this it had to be done. Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Oshkosh had to break all its ties with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. It did this on September 12, 1971 at a special meeting of the Voters' Assembly when Bethlehem Lutheran Church voted 101 to 29 to withdraw from Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.² This paper intends to explain why.

Although that simple statement summarizes well the end result, there was much more upon which that decision was based. Earlier in 1961 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod had severed fellowship with Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod because of its growing unionism and toleration of liberal theology. Why Bethlehem Lutheran Church did not sever fellowship then is not an area of concern in this paper. At that time the members thought they would still be able to correct these problems. But this is cited here to show that these problems did exist at that time in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. By 1969 Bethlehem Lutheran Church had taken the giant step of declaring itself in a state of confessional protest. By this action it was boldly testifying against the errors of Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

At their synod convention in Denver, Colorado, in July, 1969 the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod declared itself in fellowship with TALC by a narrow 522 to 438 vote margin.³ That same month on July 23 Bethlehem Lutheran Church entered a state of confessional protest. It resolved, "that we...declare ourselves not in fellowship with TALC, and thus refrain from practicing altar and pulpit fellowship." They explained that this was in violation of the constitution of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod which required member congregations to renounce "unionism and syncretism of every description" (Article VI, Point 2) and the Brief Statement (p. 13, No. 28) which said that there must be full agreement in doctrine and practice before declaring fellowship.

Specifically, the Brief Statement says,

All Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matthew 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Romans 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Romans 16:17, II John 9:10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, II Timothy 2:17-21.⁴

There was not full agreement in doctrine and practice between the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod and The American Lutheran Church. The American Lutheran Church did not hold the same belief in the doctrine of the the inerrancy of Scripture. Dr. Frederik A. Schiotz, the American Lutheran Church President wrote in his June 9, 1966 essay, "The Church's Confessional Stand Relative to

the Scriptures": "The American Lutheran Church holds that the inerrancy referred to here (American Lutheran Church constitution) does not apply to the text but to the truths revealed for our faith, doctrine and life." In THE BIBLE; BOOK OF FAITH, which was officially approved by the American Lutheran Church Second General Convention in 1964, note how it explains the infallibility of the Bible. "The infallibility of the Scriptures is the infallibility of Jesus Christ and not the infallibility of the written text." (p. 148, 1964)⁵

The American Lutheran Church did not hold the same belief with regards to the authorship of several of the books of the Bible as the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. The American Lutheran Church questioned whether Paul wrote the books of I & II Timothy, Titus; whether Peter wrote II Peter; whether Isaiah wrote Is. 40-66; and whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch; The historical factualness of the first 11 chapters of Genesis is also doubted and thus evolution was being taught in some American Lutheran Church churches in preference to creation.⁶ In this way the American Lutheran Church was casting doubt on the faithfulness of God's Word.

The American Lutheran Church also allowed lodge members to join their churches with the provision that the pastors would make a real effort to convince the new member to leave his lodge after he has joined the church. The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod did not permit a

lodge member to join the church without first leaving the lodge.7

By being in fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, Bethlehem Lutheran Church as well as the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod would become involved in the unscriptural fellowship commitments of The American Lutheran Church such as the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. and the Lutheran Church in America. Everyone of these bodies differed in their beliefs from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Therefore, Bethlehem Lutheran Church said,

We object to altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church also because of TALC's membership in the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. Both the LWF and WCC are unionistic organizations of mixed confession.8

Furthermore, when The American Lutheran Church declared fellowship with Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod it also declared fellowship with Lutheran Church in America the most liberal of the Lutheran church bodies. Membership in the Lutheran Council in U.S.A. involved among other things cooperative mission work, campus work and work in the armed services.

Fellowship with such organizations goes against the clear word of Scripture in Romans 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." Because of these

things Bethlehem Lutheran Church decided to enter a "state of confession" with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

But despite this serious step, things did not improve much at all. In fact they got worse. In 1970 The American Lutheran Church San Antonio Convention changed their constitution to allow women to be ordained into the holy ministry. This was a clear violation of what the Bible teaches in I Cor. 14:34-35:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

and also in I Tim. 2:11-14:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

Therefore Bethlehem Lutheran Church resolved by October of 1970,

that if the 1971 Milwaukee Convention of the LC-MS does not rescind or suspend the Denver declaration of fellowship with The American Lutheran Church (Denver Res. 3-15), and does not vote to withdraw from the LCUSA, Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Oshkosh, Inc., will call a special meeting of its Voters Assembly within sixty days following the end of the Milwaukee Convention to determine the course of action...and be it further resolved that we as a congregation shall apply for membership in a Lutheran church body which adheres to the Biblical and Confessional standards of historic Lutheran Christianity.9

At the Milwaukee Convention in July of 1971 the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod voted to continue fellowship with American Lutheran Church but with several grave reservations. Actually they voted to "defer new implementation of fellowship with the American Lutheran

Church" but that meant the status quo would remain. The resolution was "approved overwhelmingly" despite efforts by more conservative members. Another reservation was with regards to women being ordained into the preaching ministry in American Lutheran Church. They expressed "strong regret" and asked the American Lutheran Church to reconsider it.¹⁰ During their own consideration of the issue they banned women ordinations by a vote of 674 to 194 primarily on the Scriptural basis of I Cor. 14:34 and I Tim. 2:12-14 mentioned before.¹¹

The convention also had some disappointing results for those who were hoping for improvement in the area of doctrinal discipline. Over the preceding years there was a growing lack of discipline. Some of the professors at Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Louis were known to be not teaching in line with synodically adopted statements and they were allowed to continue. As a result liberal theology was allowed to grow and become ever more pervasive in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.

At the convention there was a proposal supported by the conservatives and the synod president Rev. Preus which would have declared doctrinal resolutions adopted by the synod's governing body binding on all pastors, teachers and congregations of the synod. But this was defeated.¹² As a result it looked as if the liberal theology was going to continue. This was further indicated by the new Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod "Mission: Life"

curriculum in parish education which encouraged liberal theology.

Because Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod "did not suspend or rescind the American Lutheran Church fellowship and did not take action to terminate the Synod's membership in LCUSA" and "took several other actions which make it quite clear that the liberal theology goes on in the Synod, and the power to exercise effective doctrinal discipline has been lost to Missouri,"¹³ Bethlehem Lutheran Church called the special Voters Assembly Meeting for Sept. 12, 1971. At that meeting the congregation voted 101 to 29 to withdraw from the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. They felt that to continue in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod would only bring more confusion, internal dissension and discouragement. Furthermore, they could no longer justify going against the clear words of Scripture mentioned throughout. Bethlehem finally had to sever its ties with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. Christian News reported the following:

Bethlehem's pastor, the Rev. Walter Moll, cited the reasons for the break with the Synod: 1) the continuing doctrinal deterioration of the Synod; 2) the Synod's decision to continue fellowship with the American Lutheran Church in spite of basic doctrinal disagreements; 3) the Synod's continuing membership in the LCUSA which has involved the Synod in unionism and internal dissension; and 4) the general breakdown in doctrinal discipline as evidenced within the Synod in recent years.¹⁴

Subsequently Bethlehem Lutheran Church joined the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod after considering the

Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Federation of American
Lutheranism. Bethlehem Lutheran Church remains a member
of Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to this day.

E N D N O T E S

1. Conservative Committee To Keep Bethlehem In The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. Untitled Open Letter. September 9, 1971.
2. "Oshkosh Church Leaves Synod" Christian News, Vol. 4, No. 34, September 27, 1971, p. 1.
3. "Resolution" Bethlehem Lutheran Church Council. Unpublished manuscript. April, 1971.
4. "Documentation Of Our Position" Unpublished manuscript.
5. "The Real Issues Between The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod and The American Lutheran Church" Unpublished manuscript. p. 1.
6. Ibid., p. 1.
7. Ibid., p. 1.
8. "Documentation," op. cit., p.3.
9. "Resolution" Bethlehem Lutheran Church Council. Unpublished manuscript. October, 1970.
10. "Synod To Continue ALC Fellowship" The Milwaukee Sentinel. Undated clipping.
11. "Synod Reaffirms Old Ban on Women Pastors" The Milwaukee Sentinel. Undated clipping.
12. "Synod to Continue," op. cit.,
13. Moll, Walter H. and Dennis T. Crowe. "Notice To All Voters Of Bethlehem Lutheran Church" Open letter. August 11, 1971.
14. "Oshkosh," op. cit.,