

“Reason for the Forming of a Synodical Union”

Introduction

“Why does The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod exist?” Your experience with this question is more likely to be with the more existentially framed query, “Why does our congregation belong to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod?” The constitution of the LCMS attempts to answer the question in its Preamble: “Reason for the Forming of a Synodical Union- 1. The example of the apostolic church. Acts 15:1-31. 2. Our Lord’s will that the diversities of gifts should be for the common profit. I Cor. 12:4-31.”

I suspect that I am not alone in finding this reasoning deficient on three counts. First, it does not explicitly declare that aiding congregations in the proclamation of the Gospel is a reason for the existence of a Synod. One might expect that congregations forming a synodical union would want to talk about Jesus. Second, following the example of the apostolic church is not required by the Word of God. Some things that the apostolic church did, the church today might not find a need to do. Furthermore, some of the examples of the apostolic church had unhappy results, (e.g. The commune’s demise in the death of Ananias and Sapphira). Third, the translation “profit” is confusing. In what terms is “common profit” to be understood; money, programs, power etc.?

Since this is the year of a Synodical convention, which might elicit some ruminations concerning the nature of the Synod, and since I, too, have the privilege of bringing my dissent before the company of my peers, I herewith offer an alternative answer as to why congregations might want to form a synodical union. I do so with the sincere intent of fostering discussion as to how best our beloved Synod might continue to function as clear voice holding fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.

I. Reasons for forming a Synodical Union

I will begin by suggesting that the singular “Reason” of the current constitution is somewhat confusing. I do not know how points one and two of the Preamble form a singular reason. Be that as it may, I submit that there are two core reasons why congregations may choose to form a synodical union. The first relates the nature of the synodical union to that of the congregation. 1. Congregations form a synodical union for the sake of assisting one another to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. The second is very practical and forms the parameters of what a Synod should and should not do. 2. Congregations form a synodical union in order to accomplish objectives that individual congregations cannot manage on their own.

At this point, a comment on the language of “Synodical Union” will be helpful in the development of the argument. The “Synod” is a union of congregations. In the title “Synodical Union” the word synodical functions as an adjective. What kind of union of congregations is this? It is a “synodical union”. In this use, the word “synodical” points to the confession of the union. This union of congregations is one that finds its unity not in a set of functions, or of essential goals, or of mutual benefit for continued existence. This union consists of a “synod,” that is “walking together” in a common confession. Simply put, a synodical union is a union of congregations bound together by a common confession of faith. There may be some benefit to using the language of “synodical union” where the noun emphasized is the union as opposed to speaking of “Synod” as if it is an entity to itself.

A. For the sake of proclaiming the Gospel

The congregation is a mouth. Notwithstanding the Office of the Public Ministry, which is a topic for another paper, God creates congregations, (that is, Pastor and people), to proclaim the Gospel. Through Word and Sacraments, within their various vocations, God’s people proclaim the Gospel to

believers and unbelievers alike. Through word and deed, God's Holy Spirit uses His people, often even in their ignorance, to proclaim the Gospel for the initiation and nourishment of faith in Jesus as Savior.

The sophistry, so prominent in the last two decades, of trying to drive a wedge between the maintenance of a pure confession and the proclamation of Gospel is a false division. The current constitution of the LCMS lists as one of its objectives, "Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith..." This objective cannot be set over against the proclamation of the true faith. If the true faith is not being proclaimed, then the proclamation of the Gospel is being hindered. This paper uses the proclamation of the Gospel as a reason for forming a synodical union because it is assumed that the true faith is to be conserved and promoted for the sake of the hearing of the Gospel. For the purposes of this paper conservation and proclamation are of one piece.

The concept of a "Synodical Union" assumes that the congregation is the foundational unit of the union. Once this premise is admitted, it forms the basis for answering many questions about the synodical union. For example, if congregations are to function as mouths for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, it would follow that congregations forming a synodical union would chose to do so for the sake of the Gospel. In other words, single congregations may take note of certain deficiencies due to size, isolation and limited diversity of gifts. Their desire to see to the effective proclamation of the Gospel may lead them to seek out other congregations, of the same confession, to promote such proclamation. In short, congregations form a union so that the Gospel can be proclaimed effectively.

The assertion that congregations are the basic unit of the synod should not be taken as an equation between synodical union and congregation. Though arguments in favor of the "trans-local" church are popular today, I am not convinced that synod is church. That the Church Universal exists cannot be denied, but the Church is visible where Word and Sacrament are offered among Pastor and people. The synodical union fosters the proclamation of the Gospel by the congregations of the union, but how, precisely, might the union proclaim the Gospel? How would the union administer the Sacraments? Again this is probably fodder for another discussion. It is sufficient at this point to say that a synodical union is similar in nature to the congregation in that it is primarily concerned with the proclamation of the Gospel within the pure confession of the faith.

B. A Synodical Union can accomplish what individual congregations cannot.

The second, or practical reason for the formation of a synodical union forms the parameters of its work. Congregations see to the proclamation of the Gospel through preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments. But there are other important functions supporting this work that individual congregations simply cannot do.

Congregations of the same confession may recognize the value of these functions and seek to form a union in order to accomplish them. The "common profit" in this case is not income, or attendance, or variety of programs. The common profit is the effective proclamation of the Gospel.

The synodical union exists to do those things benefitting the proclamation of the Gospel which individual congregations cannot do effectively on their own. From this premise flow two corollaries. First, it is proper to say that the synodical union should not seek to do those things which congregations can do on their own. Second, it is also proper to say that the synodical union should not do those things which are not directly related to fostering the proclamation of the Gospel by the congregations of the union.

II. A Synodical Union does what individual congregations cannot do with their separate resources.

The goal of establishing a list of functions of a synodical union is daunting. The temptation is to continually expand the list; a temptation which is fraught with dangers upon which I will elaborate later.

Desiring to maximize the work of congregations and minimize that of the union I will posit five functions for the union.

A. Educates Pastors and Teachers.

The Saxon saints who emigrated to Missouri in 1839 demonstrated their concern for the education of Pastors and Teachers by their immediate construction of schools. That heritage is still alive in the LCMS today. Individual congregations do not have the wherewithal or the expertise to build and maintain institutions of higher learning. But together they are able to provide the types of institutions that will see to the faithful education of their Pastors and Teachers.

A major, if not the major function of a synodical union is the education of Pastors and Teachers. This function serves the conservation of the true faith for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel. The congregations of such a union desire that a pure proclamation of the Gospel be heard from its pulpits and in its classrooms, so together they develop institutions to provide for this need.

B. Sends out Missionaries.

Congregations that were soon to become part of the synodical union were already involved in proclaiming the Gospel to various Native American people. That desire, to proclaim the Gospel in places where physical, cultural or ethnic barriers might hinder the proclamation of the Gospel, continues to this day. Individual congregations do not have the wherewithal or the expertise to send Missionaries on distant and expensive ventures. But together they are able to provide the types of institutions that will support the sending out of Missionaries.

A major function of a synodical union is the sending of Missionaries. This function serves the conservation of the true faith for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel. The congregations of such a union desire that a pure proclamation of the Gospel be heard from its Missionaries in venues where individual congregations cannot reach, so together they develop institutions to provide for this need.

C. Publishes Orthodox Theological Materials.

In a world where pluralism places the gospel at the mercy of countless false teachers who tweak the message with their personal spin, and where methods of communication allow false prophets to speak with as large, or even larger, a sphere of influence as that of true prophets, the need for orthodox theological materials is greater than ever. If the earliest congregations of the synodical union wanted a source of pure doctrine in the new world, how much more is it needed in the new world of the post-modern, post-church, prophetic blogosphere. Individual congregations do not have the wherewithal or the expertise to produce orthodox theological materials. But together they are able to provide the types of institutions that will support such publications.

A major function of a synodical union is the publication of orthodox theological materials. This function serves the conservation of the true faith for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel. The congregations of such a union desire that a pure proclamation of the Gospel be supported through orthodox materials, available to its members as well as to the general public, so together they develop institutions to provide for this need.

D. Coordinates Large Scale Works of Mercy.

This, most recent function, makes the list for three reasons. First, our Lord, Jesus Christ, demonstrated a deep concern for the physical needs of those whom He served. Second, today's communication capabilities make it possible for individual members of Christian congregations to watch as disasters develop at any location in the world, in real time, from the safety of their own living rooms.

Such timely closeness to disaster may lead believers to seek to follow their Lord's lead by helping in time of need. Third, the developing anti-Christian culture in the United States mocks proclamation without involvement. Consequently, demonstrating the love of Christ by caring for the needs of others may well open doors for the proclamation of the Gospel that would otherwise remain closed. Individual congregations do not have the wherewithal or the expertise to respond to large scale disasters. And relying on secular institutions not only provides no opportunity for proclamation, but also puts the donor at risk of being subject to fraud. So, together congregations of a union are able to provide the types of institutions that will support such works of mercy.

A major function of a synodical union is responding to large scale disasters in order to demonstrate the love of Christ. This function serves the conservation of the true faith for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel. The congregations of such a union desire that a pure proclamation of the Gospel be supported through large scale works of mercy to those who are hurting, so together they develop institutions to provide for this need.

E. Supervises the Doctrine and Life of Workers and Congregations.

The remaining function is unique of the other four because it is not aimed solely at the work of individual congregations. Congregations may very well have the expertise and the wherewithal to supervise the doctrine and life of its workers and themselves. That is to say, a congregation may be able to conserve the true faith for the sake of proclaiming the gospel without participating in a synodical union. However, once a synodical union has been formed the congregations may seek, as a union, to develop institutions to oversee not only the workers and themselves but also the four previous functions of the union. This function is also unique in that it must be performed as close to the congregational level as possible. A certain level of intimacy must exist with the workers and congregations for a supervisor to be able to function effectively. Thus, sub-units of the synodical union may be invented. In the LCMS these sub-units are known as districts.

A major function of a synodical union is providing for what is generally known in our midst as ecclesiastical supervision. This function serves the conservation of the true faith for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel. The congregations of such a union desire that a pure proclamation of the Gospel be supported through a system of supervision, lest workers, congregations, or institutions of the union, function or teach in such a way as to do harm to the proclamation of the Gospel. So, together they develop institutions to provide for this need.

III. A Synodical Union in Survival Mode

A synodical union is a human institution. Such a union is neither prescribed nor proscribed by the Scripture. So Christian congregations are free to invent, support, and amend such a union. However, history teaches that most human institutions follow a rather pitiful pattern of existence. Most human institutions spend a small percentage of their life actually pursuing the reason for their existence, and a much larger percentage of their life pursuing survival. This reality is as old as the entrance of sin, since it is built on the maxim that drove even our first parents, "Survival trumps faithfulness."

The same may be true for synodical unions. God promises the survival of His Church. He does not promise the survival of synodical unions. Consequently such unions may feel responsible for their own survival. When that point has been reached the union may very well cease to serve its congregations by fostering work that supports the proclamation of the Gospel and begin to justify the union itself as if it were a separate entity. In such a case some interesting symptoms may be observed. In ascending order of seriousness here are some signs to look for.

A. Keeps expanding the scope of its work.

Every human institution will seek to justify its existence by making itself essential to its constituents. Governments will become bigger, assuming more duties previously managed by others. A synodical union in survival mode will seek to justify its existence with a plethora of programs. Much like the public assistance programs of any government, the programs of a synodical union tend to foster dependence. And similarly, dependence fosters a reluctance to allow a program to die. Consequently, one sure-fire method of ensuring existence is to create programs that engender dependence.

This vicious cycle is dangerous for governments, but even more so for synodical unions. In the first place, such expansions of the scope of work may lead the union to attempt to function as a congregation, or at least to do the work that congregations should do. When the line between the union and the basic unit of the union is confused the union cannot long endure. What makes this a travesty is that the proclamation of the Gospel suffers. The union cannot actually do the Word and Sacrament ministry of a congregation, so the Gospel may not be heard.

B. Competes with salaries of business world.

As a synodical union in survival mode casts about for models to reinvigorate its purpose and function it may be tempted to look outside the Word of God, which should be its sole authority. One popular target today is the business world. How a business survives and thrives is a fashionable model for the Church today. One example of this is seen in salary structures. Something is dreadfully wrong when the Church ignores the Words, “Keep your life free from the love of money,” and “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evils,” and begins to make pronouncements like, “We have to offer salaries that compete with the business world or we won’t be able to attract the kind of candidates that we need.” I am not suggesting that Pastors and servants of the synodical union have to be paupers. However, if it is true that money is the only way to attract such workers, then the synodical union is truly in survival mode.

C. Mimics the business world in language and culture.

Similarly, when a synodical union uses the language and structure of the business world something is drastically wrong. The church is not a business, and the only reason for positing such an error is a lack of understanding that comes from the pressure of the fight to survive.

A few examples of language might suffice. Why would a synodical union choose to name those who have been called to positions of oversight, “presidents”? President, not a biblical term, means, “To hold a position of authority, to preside.” This does not sound like a position of service. It could be argued that such language is an attempt to legitimize the system in the eyes of the world. Why are such positions not called by what they do in a biblical sense, “overseers”, “supervisors”, or even “bishops”, (although the final term may carry baggage that makes it unusable).

When enough of the language of a synodical union comes from the business world something happens to the culture of the union. If a termination of a call can be justified as a “reduction in force” (RIF) and those who serve certain areas of ministry can be called “executives”, (and paid commensurately), and congregations can be revitalized through the use of the “Carver Business Model” or “Policy Based Governance”, and Pastors receive “meritorious pay” for getting a targeted number of people in the pews, it might be a sign that the union is depending on the example of the business world for its survival.

D. Allows the sub-units of the union to assume responsibilities of the union.

A synodical union is in trouble when the union is fractured into independently acting sub-units. If a synodical union creates sub-units for the ostensible purpose of supervision, those units ought to perform that duty alone. However, if the sub-unit, (District) feels its existence is threatened it may seek to assume duties that have not been given to it.

When the sub-units of a synodical union begin to assume the functions of educating Pastors and Teachers and sending out missionaries, the culture of “survivability” may be said to have deeply invaded the synodical union. In this case, the union’s sub-units become a threat to the union itself. Internecine conflict is not conducive to survival.

E. Restructures in ways that do not impact Gospel proclamation.

A basic marketing strategy says, “New is better.” Thus businesses often restructure themselves simply to present a “new” image to the world. Congregations of a synodical union might expect a higher good. If a synodical union restructures itself in ways that cannot be directly tied to the proclamation of the Gospel one might suspect a marketing strategy. Re-branding, re-coloring, the constant need for new themes, mottos, and mission statements, especially at the expense of faithful, effective historical affirmations, (How often do you hear the three “solas” used today?), is a similar symptom. In such a case survival mode is on the horizon.

F. Makes decisions on the basis of dollars instead of on the impact of the Gospel.

The difference between efficiency and effectiveness is lively and useful when considering the proclamation of the Gospel. A business must be concerned with efficiency. A syndical union may take effectiveness as its benchmark. God has not commanded efficiency. Nor has He demonstrated it in the life of the church. Think of the time and expense involved in the construction of the tabernacle or the temple. Likewise, we might dream of many more efficient methods of redemption than the cost of the Son of God. Of course, sometimes efficiency and effectiveness coincide, but in general, when “efficiency experts” are ordering the nature of a synodical union something is amiss.

For example, small congregations are not efficient. The smaller the number of members under one Pastor, the less “viable” a congregation is said to be. However, such congregations may be very effective in proclaiming the Gospel to their members and their communities. So, a synodical union that seeks to dissuade the development of small congregations and to close those that do not attain a specific threshold of efficiency could be said to be in trouble. The “Bigger is better” attitude is a sign of survival mode for a synodical union.

Often this attitude is glazed with an air of piety by saying something like, “We need to be good stewards.” Stewardship has nothing to do with saving money and everything to do with spending money so that the Gospel may be effective in the lives of its hearers. The proclamation of the Gospel is effective in and of itself because of the power of the Word of God. (See previous paper.)

G. An inability to conserve and promote the true faith.

Finally, perhaps the most devastating indication of a survival mode mentality is when a synodical union finds itself unable or unwilling to conserve and promote the true faith. This may be a result of a desire not to offend. When supervision of the life and behavior of workers and congregations results in the responsibility to remove workers or congregations a great deal of offense, (in a cultural not a biblical sense), occurs. Since offense is not compatible with survival, there is institutional pressure to limit it. The scene may play out in this way, “We cannot afford to remove those who teach evolution, (or female ordination, or homosexuality as god-pleasing). If we offend their followers the synodical union may not

survive.” Although such words may never actually be spoken, one wonders whether maintaining workers and congregations who publically hold to a confession other than that of the synodical union, has anything to do with the will for the institution to survive.

This is the most devastating sign because as stated earlier, conserving and promoting the true faith is of one piece with the proclamation of the Gospel. If a synodical union cannot conserve and promote the true faith, if it cannot hold fast the confession of the faith without wavering, then it cannot proclaim the Gospel. Thus, the primary reason for the existence of the union has been compromised.

IV. A Synodical Union in the Service of the Gospel

Is it possible for a synodical union to throw off a survival mode mentality and refocus its attention on the true faith that it confesses in its proclamation of the Gospel in order to serve the congregations of the union? God’s Word is very powerful. It kills and makes alive every day. If this paper is of any service at all, it will be to urge Pastors of the Montana District to do some thinking about why they are a part of a synodical union and how they might contribute to its spiritual health by focusing on the Word of God. What follows are three suggestions, completely dependent on the Word of God that would benefit any synodical union.

A. Holds the confession as central to everything it does.

First comes the confession. At the risk of suggesting a division that does not exist, it should be noted that in the oneness that consists of conserving the faith and proclaiming the Gospel, the confession comes first. Without the confession of the faith there is nothing to proclaim. Thus, a synodical union intent on substantive change that veers away from the survivability trap could only do so by focusing renewed energy on the Word of God in order to hold fast the confession of faith.

1. Promotes theological discussion- The “synodical” aspect of the union, the walking together in the same confession is easy to take for granted. After all, the church workers have been educated in the same institutions. This attitude does not take sin seriously. Satan is very much interested in perverting the confession of the church. He is at work, in the sinful inclinations of every Christian, especially the church’s leaders, to foster false behavior and false teaching.

God’s Word is the only answer. The culture of our nation militates against loving, patient, consistent and constant discussion of His Word. But the health of a synodical union is in direct correlation to the emphasis that it places on study and discussion of the Word of God, especially among its church workers.

2. Expects theological discipline- Anyone who is serious about proclaiming the Gospel in its truth and purity will receive theological discipline as a gift. This attitude can only be wrought by the Word of God. It is key to the destruction of the survival mode. The world says survival can be had through the avoidance of offense. The Word says life is found in the offense of the Gospel. A respected system of theological discipline, which holds all church workers to a high standard of integrity both in life and in teaching, bodes well for a synodical union desiring to hold fast the confession of the church.

B. Holds the proclamation as central to everything it does.

Second comes the proclamation. This is how the Spirit of God works. Once He gives a man the true faith, that believer, once dead, now alive, lives and speaks the Gospel. Furthermore, once the Spirit of God gathers believers into congregations, the congregations live and speak the Gospel. A synodical union developed by such congregations will hold the proclamation of the Gospel as central to its work.

1. Promotes theological discussion- Proclaiming the Gospel in the hostile

environment of the twenty-first century is filled with the vagaries of sin. It is not always apparent how best to go about the task. This is the work of true stewardship. This calls for constant communication among church workers. But this is not a matter of a discussion of best practices, as if efficiency is the answer. This must be a study of God's Word, for only the Word can direct how it is to be proclaimed. Once again the study of God's Word is the only power that promotes the health of a synodical union's proclamation of the Gospel.

2. Expects theological discipline- As with the confession so with the proclamation, discipline is key. Mistakes will be made. Sin will be committed. Inadequate, poorly timed, and sinfully placed proclamations will happen. Pride will insist on its own way. A synodical union intent on an effective proclamation of the Gospel will invest time, and money, and energy, and honor in developing a system of discipline to supervise that proclamation.

C. Recognizes congregations as the Biblical unit of the Union.

There is no union apart from the congregations of which it consists. The tendency in our common parlance to speak of the "Synod" as if it were some free standing entity, completely apart from the congregations which comprise the union, belies a misunderstanding, or perhaps, far worse, a foreign structure within the LCMS. The synodical union of which we speak is a union of congregations that walk together in the same confession. The union is to serve the congregations of the union in the two parts of the one reality that is the life of the church.

1. Frees congregations to hold fast the confession- The synodical union seeks to conserve and promote the true faith through its congregations. It protects, defends and supports the congregations in the true faith. In this way a synodical union can be a gift of God for congregations. Through the five functions outlined earlier, the union does what congregations cannot do on their own so that they can be free in holding fast the confession.

2. Frees congregations to proclaim the Gospel- The synodical union seeks to foster the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through its congregations. It protects, defends and supports Pastors and people, as congregations, in their proclamation of the Gospel. In this way a synodical union can be a gift of God for congregations. Through the five functions outlined earlier, the union does what congregations cannot do on their own so that they can be free to proclaim the Gospel.

Conclusion

Why does the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod exist? It exists to support the congregations of the union by doing what those congregations cannot do on their own, so that the congregations may be free to hold fast the confession and proclaim the Gospel in the communities where God has placed them.

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