

“³¹To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ ³³They answered Him, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can You say that we shall be set free?’ ³⁴Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’ ” (John 8:31-36—Holy Gospel, Reformation Day)

One of the main items decided upon at our Synod Convention this past July was the declaration of church fellowship with the AALC (American Association of Lutheran Churches). The AALC is a small group of Lutheran Churches that refused the merger that resulted in the formation of the E.L.C.A. and instead established their own synod in 1987. Their headquarters is in Minnesota and the synod currently comprises 78 U.S. congregations with 107 active pastors and 14,137 baptized members. It should be noted that the AALC has now become the 30th partner church of the LCMS and the only one that is based in the United States. This means that there is now full altar and pulpit fellowship between our two church bodies and pastors can be called from either one.

So why bring this all up? As Jesus said in our Reformation Day Gospel reading, “If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples.” The delegate approval was 846 to 345. That is a pretty significant number in favor of, but just because something gets the majority doesn’t automatically make it right by sheer weight of numbers.

One of the main things threatening the church today is the same thing that threatened the Christian Church during and after the Reformation right up to our present time. It is ecumenicalism. It’s the idea that differences in theological teachings among various church bodies should not affect or get in the way of outward church unity. That was the founding premise of the World Council of Churches formed in 1948, and it is the reason why the LCMS has never joined that organization. However, as ecumenicalism rears its head in every age, so it is appearing to do so again in our synod.

The Scriptural contradiction to ecumenicalism comes from Jesus, Himself. His most often repeated phrase in the Bible is “I tell you the truth”, and in John 17:17, He says of the Father, “Your Word is truth.” If God’s word is truth, His disciples are therefore compelled to speak and practice the same. There can be no compromising with the truth. There can be no watering down of church doctrine to please the rationalizations of sinful men.

I am not opposed to the fellowship made with the AALC as such. I was not at the convention to hear the pros and cons first hand, and it was approved at the synod convention, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have some concerns. The vote was roughly 60% for and 40% against. It was far from a majority vote,

and one would expect votes on this kind of question to be a 100% majority vote if all the prior work was done preceding the vote. This, however, does not seem to be the case with the AALC.

The article written on the convention proceedings in the August issue of the synod “Reporter” offers some clues as to why so many voted against the proposal. It says, “there were questions concerning the AALC’s subscription to the complete *Book of Concord* and about pastors removed from the roster of the Synod and now serving in AALC congregations.” What is, perhaps, more disturbing followed in the next paragraph where it quoted President Kieschnick assuring the delegates by saying, “all matters will be taken into consideration, as we continue to present a united witness”.

“All matters will be taken into consideration”? Wasn’t that supposed to be done by our doctrinal boards and seminary oversight committees before it went to the convention floor? Shouldn’t the president of the synod have tabled the vote until all the questions were answered instead of allowing the proceedings to go ahead and complete altar and pulpit fellowship granted? If there was just one area of disagreement or inferred disagreement, the matter should never have made it to the convention floor. The church cannot excommunicate a person unless it is by 100% vote. Should not our synod in convention adhere to that same standard before allowing another church body into altar and pulpit fellowship with us? Not subscribing to the complete Book of Concord and letting possible defrocked pastors come back into the synod through the back door, if you will, are not things in the best interests of our synod—at least if we want to stay confessional and true to the truth of God’s Word! The fact is there are no gray areas in the Bible. We call it Law and Gospel, and it must be rightly divided. The vote totals indicate that there were some serious questions about admitting the AALC into our fellowship that were not fully addressed.

So how could this happen? Perhaps President Kieschnick’s own words and the words of our first synodical president, C.F.W. Walther, can enlighten us on that. It actually is a matter revolving around church growth and human perceptions in connection with it. President Kieschnick made the following statement at the 2002 Synodical Convention of The Lutheran Church-Canada held June 6-10 of that year. “The church’ cannot afford to waste time on incessant internal purification at the expense of the lost in the world.” This was not a one time occurrence by our Synod President. He said basically the same thing at least three other times in 2002 alone (Model Theological Conference, Scottsdale, Arizona, August 7, 2002; Board for Communication Services LC-MS News #81, December 26, 2002; Jesus First article by Donald Bokenkamp in August issue.)

It’s interesting to see what our first president of synod might have said in response to our current president’s statements? C.F.W Walther spoke on the subject in 1872 in a paper entitled, “Our Common Task—the Saving of Souls”. He clearly shows that the same old ecumenicalism he dealt with is still with us.

“Many say, ‘Instead of disputing over doctrines so much, we should much rather be concerned with souls and with leading them to Christ.’ But all who speak in this way do not really know what they are saying or what they are doing. As foolish as it would be to scold a farmer for being concerned about sowing good seed and to demand of him simply to be concerned about a good harvest, so foolish it is to scold those who are concerned first and foremost with the

doctrine, and to demand of them that they should rather seek to rescue souls. For just as the farmer who wants a good crop must first of all be concerned about good seed, so the church must above all be concerned about right doctrine if it would save souls.”

I respect the office of the President of Synod. It is my duty under the fourth commandment to do so, but it is also my duty under the first commandment to obey God rather than men.

Our first synod president had it right. Along with Jesus, we are to speak the truth first, for if the word is not true, it's a false gospel that is being preached. And to say that someone's soul is more important than the truth is to make an assumption that can have grave eternal consequences. Besides, it is the Word and only the Word that saves and draws the lost to God (John 12:32)—not man's effort, not man's intelligence, and especially not man's reprioritizing God's truth.

It is The Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it in the one true faith (Small Catechism explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed). For us to think that we need to push aside pure teaching to save souls is the height of arrogance. It is assuming a prerogative that God has not given us. Jesus is the one who said no one can snatch anyone out of His or His Father's hand (John 10:28-30).

Why does this have to happen? Why can't the church be free of conflict and self-interest? First of all, it's a sinful world and as Christians we need to expect it. Secondly, and most important, it forces us to look at what we believe, teach, and confess. It helps us to stay in the true Word of God and speak the same, and by that, some may be saved according to His will. It is imperative that we remain connected to the Vine (John 15); that we continue to hear His preached Word and receive His gifts of grace in the Sacrament. Without those things, we cannot adhere to His Word in truth. Perhaps another statement made by our first synod president in the first sermon delivered at the opening of synod would be appropriate to close:

Whether our Synod gains friends or makes enemies, wins honor or invites disgrace, grows or declines in numbers, brings peace or incites enmity, all this must be unimportant to us—just so our Synod may keep the jewel of purity of doctrine and knowledge. However, should our Synod ever grow indifferent toward purity of doctrine, through ingratitude forget this prize, or betray or barter it away to the false church, then let our church body perish and the name “Missourian” decay in disgrace (Concordia Theological Quarterly, April-May, 1988, p.118-118 & footnote #46).