

Calov Conference
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Session Four: The Orthodox Synod and the Orthodox Confession

The orthodox confession is the confession of God's truth as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It is the confession of faith. The faith it confesses is wrought by God. It is a Christian confession. It confesses Christ. It confesses everything God teaches us in the Holy Scriptures. We identify our fellow Christians by their confession of faith. If it comports with God's word, we acknowledge that they are our brothers and we may express Christian fellowship with them. If their confession does not agree with God's word, we withhold the hand of fellowship.

A synod such as the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is a group of congregations and their pastors who have joined together in a common Christian confession of God's truth. Under objectives of the synod, the Missouri Synod constitution begins with the words:

The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall—

1. Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3–6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy.

The synod places itself under the authority of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. It is under the Scripture and the Confessions that the synod carries out the task of promoting fellowship with those who hold to the pure confession of God's truth and of defending its members from schism, sectarianism, and heresy. The synod appeals to a norm outside of herself. She appeals to the norm that norms, that is, the Holy Scriptures, and she appeals to the normed norm, the Lutheran Confessions. The synod does not claim to be the norm. The standard by which all teachings and teachers are to be judged is not and cannot be the synod itself, for this would place the synod above the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, rather than below them. This is a crucial point that is especially pertinent to our discussions of church fellowship.

The chief objection that we Lutherans have to papism, that is, Romanism, is that Rome rejects the central topic of the Christian faith and anathematizes anyone who confesses it. The second objection is that Rome makes herself the judge of her own doctrine. If you try to convince a papist of his error by appealing to the Bible, he'll have a ready answer for you from the authority of the Roman Catholic Church explaining that the Bible doesn't mean what you say it means. It means what Rome says it means. Rome makes no bones about rejecting the Scripture alone principle.

Let me illustrate how this works by telling you a story. I was a senior in high school. I became acquainted with a Roman Catholic girl who was best friends of my lab partner in

biology. Her name was Donna. She was a very pious girl. She attended a Roman Catholic high school in St. Louis, while I attended Lutheran High School North. We began dating. Naturally, on our dates we talked theology. On a date with Donna, we got into an argument about whether good works were necessary for salvation. I asked her what she thought of the words of Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God lest anyone should boast." She said she would have to ask her priest. So, the next weekend I asked Donna what her priest said about Ephesians 2:8-9. "He said it doesn't mean what you say it means." "But Donna," I replied, "I didn't say what it meant. I just quoted it to you." "Well, it doesn't mean that," Donna replied. This conversation has stayed with me for all these years because it so aptly describes Rome's teaching about the Bible. The Bible means what Rome says it means. Period.

It's far beyond the boundaries of our task this afternoon to delve into the reasons for the rise of the papacy and its increasingly exaggerated claims to total authority over the entire Christian Church on earth. The fall of eastern Christendom to Islam certainly diminished the influence of the eastern patriarchies. But I would argue that the main reason for Rome's rise was Rome's faithfulness. The bishop of Rome took the right position on every Christological and trinitarian controversy that arose. Being right repeatedly gives one a sense of authority. What began with Rome being right because she adhered to the apostolic teaching became Rome is right because she's Rome and has the authority to determine what the apostolic teaching is. When the church becomes her own authority, she has become a sect. This makes the Roman Catholic Church a sect, despise her great size and influence. She is her own authority. She cannot be corrected.

We Lutherans would never do such a thing as Rome did. We would not transfer the normative authority for our teaching from the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions to the synod itself. For that would be the papistic thing to do and we oppose papism in every form. Well, if within every pastor there is a little pope trying to get out, in every Lutheran synod there is a papistic spirit seeking to take control.

I spend time on Facebook visiting a page called Confessional Lutheran Fellowship. I know, I know, I should stay off Facebook. But a little harmless diversion isn't so bad, is it? And I learn stuff. I learn how people think. How they view the Missouri Synod. I have learned that it is not unusual, indeed, it is depressingly commonplace for people to base their beliefs on matters of Christian doctrine on what the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod teaches.

Here's the problem. We begin with the orthodox confession. So far, so good. From the orthodox confession we proceed to the establishment of a synod dedicated to that confession. Again, so far, so good. Since the synod is dedicated to the orthodox confession, we agree with and support the synod's doctrinal stance. Not so fast! Here we should change the word "since" to "insofar as." We subscribe to the Confessions because they agree with the Holy Scriptures. We subscribe to the doctrine of a synod only insofar as it agrees with the Holy Scriptures. After all, the Confessions have already been judged by the Scriptures to be biblically sound. They are not going to change, the Bible isn't going to change, so they will remain as normative tomorrow as they were yesterday.

A synod, on the other hand, does change. Within my own lifetime, the Missouri Synod has changed her doctrine and practice on several matters. Missouri's stance against unionism has weakened. Can you imagine the Missouri Synod of 1953 publishing an annotated catechism with contributions from men who deny the vicarious atonement? Missouri's position on the proper role of women in the church has departed from the teaching of clear Scripture to conform to the zeitgeist of popular American culture. The practice of featuring lady lectors is defended by prominent teachers in our synod. While we claim to affirm objective justification, men deny it with impunity. We have men poohpoohing the faithful defense of the vicarious atonement.

A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod, adopted by the synod in 1932, requires not only an orthodox confession, but also membership in an orthodox church body. Ironically, as Missouri publicly claimed to be an orthodox church body, the spirit of unionism had already seeped into her lifeblood, festering for a while, until she shattered her triumphalist claim by declaring fellowship with the clearly synergistic ALC in 1969, a declaration that did more to undermine Missouri's doctrine of fellowship than anything else.

Those devoted to an orthodox Lutheran foundation and practice for confessional fellowship will want an orthodox synod to go with it. What a great blessing it would be to have a church body comprised of congregations and pastors with day schools, high schools, colleges, and seminaries all united in a unanimous confession of the pure doctrine without any admixture of error. What a wonderful thing that would be! I believe in it! I believe in an orthodox synod. I really do. I quit the Missouri Synod in 1997 in search of an orthodox synod. I found that there is no such thing. I also learned why this is so. I would like to share what I learned with you today.

We Lutherans are not averse to bringing experience into a theological discussion. What we don't approve of is making experience a norm for doctrine or for someone else's experience. So, as I share with you my experience today, please don't assume that I am presenting it as normative. It is not. It's rather illustrative of what happens when orthodoxy is transferred from the orthodox confession to the orthodox synod.

Shortly after I joined the ELS in 1997, the leadership of the synod through its Doctrine Committee, kind of like Missouri's CTCR, promoted a statement on the ministry that would bring the ELS squarely into the Wisconsin orbit on the doctrine of the ministry. As you know, Missouri and Wisconsin have disagreed with each other for over one hundred years on the matter of the divinely established form of church and ministry. The Missouri Synod has taught that God instituted the local Christian congregation as the visible form of the church and the pastoral office as the visible form of the public ministry of the church. The Wisconsin Synod has taught that God instituted no particular form of either church or ministry. The ELS included men of both persuasions. When the ELS was founded as the little Norwegian Synod back in 1918, she was mostly Missourian in her understanding of the ministry. Then, in 1955 the little Norwegian Synod broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod, after which the Missourian influence waned while the Wisconsin influence

increased. How opinion was divided in 2005 was probably best expressed by an ELS pastor who said that a quarter of the synod took the Wisconsin position, a quarter took the Missouri position, and half were Norwegians who just wanted to get along. The synodical leadership strongly advocated for the adoption of the Wisconsin position. After their first proposed doctrinal statement failed by being tabled at a convention, the synod president appointed a committee that crafted a doctrinal statement that was in perfect harmony with the WELS teaching and disallowed the Missouri position on the divine institution of the pastoral office.

I disagreed with some of what the adopted statement said, so I wrote a paper that I published on my website criticizing the statement we had recently adopted. It was titled, "Clarifying the Issues in the ELS Ministry Debate." You can find this paper on christforus.org under the heading of papers. The president of the ELS told me to retract the paper. I told him that if he showed me where I had erred in doctrine or in fact, I would retract it. He would not do so. He argued that I was accusing the ELS of false doctrine. I responded that I had no intention of accusing the ELS of false doctrine. My intent was to criticize a bad piece of work that the ELS had adopted. I argued that my criticism of the doctrinal statement the synod adopted in 2005 was not tantamount to accusing the synod of false doctrine. The president of the synod disagreed with me. His argument was simple. Since I had accused the ELS of false doctrine and I could not belong to a synod that taught false doctrine I could not belong to the ELS. I must be expelled from the ELS because I accused her of false doctrine.

During this entire time, the synod president never tried to show me that I had written anything contrary to the Scriptures or the Lutheran Confessions. Rather, he argued that I had accused the synod of false doctrine. If I believe the ELS teaches false doctrine, I cannot be a member of the ELS. It isn't necessary to show whether what I wrote was true or not or whether it was biblical or not. My orthodoxy or heterodoxy wasn't the issue. The issue was the synod's orthodoxy. The ELS was the standard of orthodoxy. Not the Bible or the Lutheran Confessions.

The WELS and the ELS seek to protect orthodoxy and draw the boundaries too narrowly, excluding some of the truth. The LCMS draws the boundaries too broadly, permitting some error. So then, take your pick. Do you want to exclude the truth? Or do you want to permit error? Sectarianism and unionism are both evils that damage fellowship. We conservatives are usually quite attuned to the dangers of unionism. If you permit error, you place truth and error on the same level. That's right. You undermine the truth by giving error the same status. The dangers of sectarianism may not be so apparent to us but are at least as dangerous. The chief danger is that it places the church over the truth rather than placing the truth over the church. It is papistic. It is Romanizing. The Romanizers among us are not those who seek out allegedly more Catholic liturgical customs, vestments, symbols, and whatnot, but those who would reverse the relationship between God's Word and God's church. The church always submits to the Word. The Word never submits to the church.

The implications of this are obvious. When the North Dakota District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod says that congregations within their district will not feature lady

lectors because the Bible forbids it, they are not going to alter their stance after being informed by a functionary in St. Louis that the synod hasn't granted them the authority to do this. As if a synod's permission is required for us to confess the truth! Listen to these words from the Collect for the Church found on page 14 of The Lutheran Hymnal:

Grant, we beseech thee, almighty God, unto thy church thy Holy Spirit, and the wisdom which cometh down from above, that thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people.

No synod has the right to bind the truth to any degree for any reason. Confessional fellowship can be greatly helped and sustained by a church body that is united in the truth, but whenever that church body becomes the standard of the truth or the standard of fellowship with the truth, it must be opposed as an enemy of the truth. All roads lead to Rome. Romanism is always the greatest threat to the pure gospel. Granting human authority the same status as divine authority is a denial of divine authority and ultimately a denial of the truth. You cannot delegate to a synod your duty to confess. You cannot rely on a synod to protect you from false doctrine. When Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets," he was talking to Joe and Jane Layman.

This has tremendous practical considerations. Please don't misunderstand my intent. I have a good and faithful district president who is doing a fine job. I know several DPs who are sound theologians with pastoral hearts. I do not wish to denigrate those who work for the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in positions of leadership. I would hope that our synodical leaders would agree with what I am saying. My point is that we mustn't confuse what is of God with what is of man. The church and her fellowship are God's creation. Synods are manmade. Adia phorous, if you will. Confessional Lutherans do not decide what to do or not to do based on synodical authority.

If you attend a congregation of the LCMS and they feature lady lectors, you don't commune. In response to the argument that all of us in the Missouri Synod acknowledge that all others in the Missouri Synod are brothers and sisters, we say that we will gladly assume such a relationship absent evidence to the contrary, but if we see or hear heterodoxy we will not acquiesce to it just because it comes from a fellow member of the LCMS.

Some years ago, a seminarian's certification and call were delayed on account of a retired DP complaining about how he had not communed at pastors' conferences during his vicarage. The old man judged the young seminary graduate as having not gone to the Sacrament to protest the heterodoxy of members of the Oklahoma District. How would he know that? Perhaps the young man believed that it was most appropriate to receive the Lord's Supper at one's own church instead of at conferences, rallies, conventions, Winkels, and such. But if the retired DP was right, that the young man did not want to express fellowship with the heterodox pastors in the Oklahoma District, why should he fault him for that? Or is membership in a synod an automatic endorsement of the sound theology of every single member of it? If so, can somebody show me a synod that has ever existed anywhere at any time that had no heterodox teachers in it?

Pieper and the Brief Statement were quite right in their opposition to unionism, which is a poison that pollutes the church. We should hate false doctrine, not express fellowship with it! But where does the Bible say anything about synods, about belonging to synods, about obligations to synods, or about what you are saying when you belong to a synod? The orthodox synod myth must be exposed for what it is. A myth. There ain't no such thing. It exists only in the minds of theoreticians who connect this with that in the abstract and then insist that reality conform to their abstract conceptions. It doesn't work. Here's what happens instead. The preacher changes his doctrine to conform to synodical requirements with which he isn't really in heartfelt agreement. He has doubts about some things, but he must remain loyal to the tribe and so he submerges his doubts under devotion to the synod. After all, the synod is orthodox, and he won't be orthodox unless he belongs to an orthodox synod. I saw it happen during the ELS ministry controversy. It's amazing how persuasive an "orthodox" synod can be!

Orthodoxy is not a goal for which we strive. It is a gift that God grants. God says it and so it is. We believe, teach, and confess based on the clear testimony of the Holy Scriptures. But preachers and teachers are mere men and liable to all the failings of men. Error will creep in. It will. The Bible says so. 1 Corinthians 11:19, "For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." And it won't be entirely removed. Those in charge of oversight are limited in their ability, discernment, opportunity, time, and for many reasons cannot get rid of error and errorists. So, what can we do about this? Confess! Argue! Contend! Do what you're doing here at this conference.

During the ELS ministry debate, I was chosen as one of four men, two in support of adopting the WELS position and two opposed, who would get together to set out what we thought the points of controversy were so we could have an informed brotherly debate. I did my homework and was looking forward to getting together with my brothers. What happened? Out of the blue, somebody in the synodical leadership decided that we should reject the "debate and prevail" approach for the "working from consensus" approach. There would be no debate. And there wasn't. Not during the entire controversy was there any real debate except on private email lists and informal conversations.

This attitude is widespread in Missouri as well. Don't argue. Don't debate. Don't do what St. Paul said to do in Titus 1:9 where he told the bishops to hold "fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict." Arguing is good. Disputations are good. Confessing the faith is an argument. Preaching is an argument. To state the truth, contrast it with a lie, and refute the lie with the truth. That's a good way to preach and teach. It's engaging and persuasive.

What will touch your heart and give you courage to confess the truth? Is it, "Synod says so and so, so we should go along because we've covenanted together, blah, blah, blah." Or is it what St. Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:11-14,

But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to

which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing.

There is nothing that can harm you when you stand on the truth of God's Word. The fellowship you enjoy with God and with your fellow Christians is too precious to measure. It transcends this life here on earth and goes on into eternity. Listen to these words from the Formula of Concord:

Therefore, in the presence of God and of all Christendom among both our contemporaries and our posterity, we wish to have testified that the present explanation of all the foregoing controverted articles here explained, and none other, is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God's grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account. Nor shall we speak or write anything, privately or publicly, contrary to this confession, but we intend through God's grace to abide by it. In view of this we have advisedly, in the fear and invocation of God, subscribed our signatures with our own hands. (FC SD XII paragraph 40)

Do you want an orthodox synod? Make an orthodox confession. In season, out of season, boldly, clearly, and consistently. Remember that you are not the issue because the doctrine isn't yours. Don't get psyched out by criticism. If it's sound, adopt it. If not, ignore it. If you love your synod and want to serve her and contribute to her orthodox character, then preach, teach, and confess the truth on whatever the topic happens to be.

Let me give you a couple of examples of where a false synodical loyalty has diminished the clarity of our confession. The first is on the topic of birth control. It was not long before I attended the seminary that the Missouri Synod abandoned her teaching, with the church catholic, against birth control. She didn't retract it. She just stopped teaching it. When I was at the seminary the topic was treated with the words, "It all depends on your motive." And that was that. You'll find a strong condemnation of birth control in Walter A. Maier's book, For Better, Not for Worse, published in 1939, forty years before I graduated from the seminary. By the time I graduated, the conservatives had acknowledged defeat. I don't recall the Missouri Synod ever officially changing her position on birth control, though I recall our current synod president opining a couple of years ago that the Missouri Synod doesn't reject it. So, let's say that the Missouri Synod is just fine with family planning. After all this is the majority opinion, the default position of most of our parishioners, and my teachers at the seminary didn't think it was a battle worth fighting.

The result has been a capitulation to feminism that has done serious damage to our people. Birth control is essential to the feminist dogma. Feminism is opposed to patriarchy. Our Lord Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "Our Father." The denigration of the office of fulltime wife and mother, the trashing of fatherhood, the assaults on godly Christian patriarchy, the pushing of women into all sorts of positions in the church that conflict with what the Bible

teaches, all of this goes back to the debate about birth control. The Missouri Synod was not much help here. In fact, she was a hindrance. If you love the Missouri Synod, you'll address issues where she's dropped the ball. Do it in love and with patience. Maybe God will change some hearts and return us to a solidly pro-family position.

I am not advocating for an absolutist position against birth control. In my preaching I've emphasized that children are blessings from God and that God is the One who gives life. I disagree with Rome's position that favors birth control while condemning artificial means of contraception. What do you expect from Rome when treating a moral issue? She's predictably and insufferable legalistic. I have brought up this topic because it is an example of where the synod failed to teach the whole counsel of God. Pastors need to be bold confessors of God's truth, not synodical loyalists.

Another area of false loyalty to synod is on the matter of religious unionism. President Harrison has made the sound distinction that he and I learned from Professor Kurt Marquart between fellowship in sacred matters and cooperation in externals. Good for him. His aim was to cooperate in externals with representatives of other religions. But when he signed onto statements that mentioned God and that were signed also by Muslims and other representatives of false religions, his intent may have been cooperation in externals, but the very act of speaking jointly with non-Christians about God made it religious unionism. He didn't mean to do it. He likely thought that we would have more credibility speaking out for traditional marriage in union with those of other religions and since we weren't engaged in confessing the faith we could do so. He was wrong. Call it naïve. The problem, without in any way judging Matt Harrison, is Missouri's desire for respectability. We don't want to be alone. We don't want to be isolated. At my very first church I ran into this attitude. I'll never forget the time that one of my parishioners – probably about fifteen years older than I – blurted out: "Why do we always have to be different from everyone else?" Ah, she nailed it. Missouri wants to be orthodox. But she doesn't want to be excluded from polite religious society.

Synodical hubris affects us all. We want respectability. Well, we're not going to get it. Get used to it. The Missouri Synod should not issue joint statements with any heterodox church body about anything that impinges on the faith. We should not be afraid of being called separatistic. It's an accusation we cannot avoid. We should confess period and let the chips fall where they may. We should avoid all joint religious activity with the heterodox. Period.

Sometimes we think we're clever enough to finesse our way out of a unionistic episode by being so orthodox in what we say that we'll avoid the sin of unionism. Let me tell you a story. Call it a true confession. I share my error with you to teach you not to do as I did.

It was in the early eighties. I was a young pastor serving at Trinity Lutheran Church in Clear Lake, Minnesota. I had gotten the attention of the local Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life by writing some prolife letters to the St. Cloud Daily Times. So, I was invited to give the invocation at a rally in St. Cloud that would feature as the main speaker none other than the honorable Henry Hyde, a congressman from Illinois who was probably the most influential prolife politician in the country at the same. Now that was a big deal. But I was stuck with

the fact that I would be giving the invocation, and a Roman Catholic priest would be giving the benediction, so if I participated, I would be ignoring the pastoral advice I received from Dr. Henry Eggold at the seminary who said that the only time you pray publicly at an event is if you are the only one who will be doing so. Well, I figured out how to get by that. I wrote the most wonderful prolife prayer you have ever heard. I wish I had saved it. It was great. In that prayer I clearly confessed baptismal regeneration, justification by faith, the inerrancy of the Bible and a few other good things. So, I was covered. Until Representative Hyde spoke. He began his speech by noting that a Lutheran pastor and a Roman Catholic priest were sharing the same stage, and wasn't it great how we could set aside our petty religious differences and unite in our defense of life? He mentioned how Mormons, too, defended life. I wanted to shoot him. Instead, I resolved I would never do something like that again.

By refusing to participate in religious activities that are not orthodox we are confessing our love for him who loved us. We are not promoting our own rightness. We are not obeying the rules our synod has imposed on us and which we, for the sake of brotherly whatever, should obey. We are confessing our love for God. We know him through his Word. We know him through the Word made flesh who died for us to take away our sins and bring us into fellowship with God and one another. We know him through the Word of the gospel that we hear whenever we go to church. We know him through the written Word, which is the source and norm of all Christian teaching. By confessing the truth, not only by what we say, but by where we say it, we are offering a sacrifice to God. He accepts it for Christ's sake, for the same reason he accepts us. Knowing that God accepts our faithful confession of his truth makes it a joy to confess it, and a sacred obligation to reject whatever contradicts it. We who are Missouri Synod Lutherans do well to fight for the soul of Missouri. It would break our hearts to see her fall from the truth. But we will serve her best by subordinating our loyalty to her to the greater loyalty we owe to the pure teaching of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.