

## Why We Need the Synod

by Rev. Dr. Martin R. Noland

(As published in the *Lutheran Clarion*, May 2021)

### **Introduction**

One of the signs that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (hereafter LCMS) is succumbing to the attitudes of American Evangelical sectarianism are laymen and clergy who have no interest in associating with, supporting, or seeking the counsel and aid of the church-at-large. Although claiming to be Lutheran, they think that their congregation, big or small, is self-sufficient and that they have no need for the synod.

Among pastors, this attitude is found among those who:

- 1) don't like mutual accountability to fellow pastors, because—maybe—they have something to hide in their doctrine or behavior; or
- 2) who are building for themselves a little kingdom of obedient followers and “yes men” officers, and don't want outside interference; or
- 3) who administer such a large and prestigious congregation that they think they are superior to the common parish pastor, and see the synod as a waste of their time and their congregation's treasury; or
- 4) who simply have no concern for what will happen to their flock after they are gone.

Other reasons for such “anti-synod” attitudes among pastors can be cited. Among laymen, this is often found among folks who see the church as a mere social fellowship, not as a place where the Word of God is preached and taught, and the sacraments administered; or they were influenced by a pastor who had nothing good to say about the synod. I have seen cases of all the above, both clergy and lay.

This phenomenon is happening now because American religious culture changed significantly in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Where America used to be a nation of denominations,<sup>1</sup> today it is increasingly a nation of “non-denominational,” i.e., independent, congregations. Almost all the mega-churches that get all the attention in metropolitan areas are non-denominational. They seem to be the “wave of the future,” and the “mainline denomination” increasingly seems to be irrelevant to the religious needs of Americans. Pastors and lay leaders who want to be “hip” and “surfing the wave” of the future follow the trends, read the books, go to the conferences, and are moving toward the “non-denominational” way of doing church. But it really isn't new at all!

Robert Browne (1550s–1633) was the founder of the “Brownists,” a common designation for early Separatists from the Church of England before 1620. His most important works: *A Treatise of Reformation without Tarying for Anie*, in which he asserted the right of the church to effect necessary reforms without the authorization of the civil magistrate; and *A Booke which sheweth the life and manners of all True Christians* which set out the theory of congregational independence, were published at Middelburg in 1582.<sup>2</sup> Those who followed Browne's ideas became known as “Congregationalists.” Baptist theology and its notion of congregational independence originated with John Smyth (1554-1612), who became Puritan, then English Separatist, and then a Baptist Separatist. He began meeting in England with sixty to seventy English Separatists. The persecution of religious nonconformists in England led Smyth to go into exile

in Amsterdam with his congregation. <sup>3</sup>

Many of these Protestants, who didn't fit into the religious environment of the English church, ended up coming to North America. Congregationalism was the established church in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. Baptists were tolerated in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. After the Bill of Rights disestablished state religions, the "independents" grew in numbers and influence throughout all the states. The Restorationist churches known as the "Churches of Christ," established around 1849 out of the Second Great Awakening, were congregationalist in polity. In a similar mood of revival, the Pentecostal churches known as the "Church of God," established around 1901, were also congregationalist in polity. The recent rise of non-denominationalism came about due to the rise of American Evangelicalism in the 1950s, as most of the largest historic denominations succumbed to liberal theology and ecumenical fervor.

There is thus in Christendom a major division over the question of the status and role of the denomination. The oldest view simply assumes that the term "church" refers to the denomination, i.e., the corporation of congregations and ministers in its fellowship. This position is held by the Eastern non-Chalcedonians, the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the Anglican, the Presbyterian, and the Methodist churches. The "congregationalist" view is held by the churches described in the previous paragraph and by others.

Which is the correct view? Why do we need the denomination, which we call the "synod" in our circles? My thesis is that we should associate with, support, and seek the counsel and aid of the synod because such actions are Scriptural, Lutheran, and practical.

### ***Reasons We Need the Synod from Holy Scripture***

The first reason that we need the "church," i.e., the synod, is that Jesus established it. To Peter and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus said, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). Here Jesus introduced to his disciples the term and idea of the "church." He did not say, "on this rock I will build my churches" in the plural. He referred to his church in the singular. Thus, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds refer to Jesus' church in the singular. The Nicene Creed makes that specific with the phrase "one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church." Thus, the attribute of "association" is part of the nature and essence of the church, however it may be structured or governed.

Hermann Sasse wrote an excellent letter to Lutheran pastors on the topic "On the Relation of the Universal Church and the Individual Congregation in the New Testament." <sup>4</sup> In that essay, Sasse explained how the Greek word for church, "*ekklesia*," designates not only the "one, holy Christian, and apostolic church" but also the local congregation. <sup>5</sup> He also analyzed how that term "*ekklesia*" is used in the New Testament in five ways:

- 1) signifying the hidden church of all believers;
- 2) referring to the church of Jerusalem, the "mother of all churches";

- 3) indicating all Christians in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria;
- 4) pointing to a church at a local place, *e.g.*, the city of Philippi; and
- 5) describing a church in a particular building, usually a private house. <sup>6</sup>

The second reason that we need the synod is that the church requires someone to recruit, train, and send ministers of the Gospel. This is clear from Peter's words to the people at Pentecost when he said: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38-39).

It is possible that everyone in Jerusalem that day could have received baptism and the forgiveness of sins from the twelve apostles, but that apostolic ministry could go only so far. Peter proclaims that the promises are for "all who are far off." This is the universality of the call, *i.e.*, that the call of the Gospel is intended by God to go to all the nations, to the ends of the earth, and to the end of history. <sup>7</sup> But how can the nations be called, *i.e.*, "how can they hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:14-15). Therefore, there must be someone, or some institution, to recruit, train, and send ministers to the ends of earth until the end of time.

The third reason that we need the synod is that someone needs to call, ordain, and install pastors in every parish or congregation. Here we follow the example of the Apostle Paul, who at the end of his first missionary journey appointed pastors at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 14:21-23). He did not leave that to chance or to the local congregations' popularity contest. We also see this in Paul's work in Ephesus, where he appointed twelve pastors for the city and its suburbs (Acts 19:5-7, 20:17-38). We know what criteria Paul used in selecting pastors, because he gives those criteria in his Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9).

The fourth reason that we need the synod is that someone needs to support godly pastors when they face opposition. Paul warns the newly ordained pastors at Ephesus: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-29). Even so, no ethical and pious pastor can survive for long without the support, assistance, and counsel of the synod, both its officers and fellow pastors.

The fifth reason that we need the synod is for the settlement of disagreements among the ministers of the Gospel and their congregations. Here we follow the example of the apostolic church in its convening of the First Council of Jerusalem, ca. 50 A.D. (Acts 15:1-31). This is given as one "Reason for the Forming of a Synodical Union" in the Preamble of the LCMS Constitution. <sup>8</sup> The conciliar letter that went out from that council observed that "some people have . . . troubled you with words, unsettling your minds" (Acts 15:24). The purpose of the council was to SETTLE their minds, to SETTLE the arguments, NOT to prolong them. Luke reports that the result of this council was that "the churches were strengthened in the faith and they increased in numbers daily" (Acts

16:5). When we follow the apostolic example of convening councils or synods, we must also follow its example in their purpose, i.e., the settling of disagreements when and where they exist.

Finally, among the Scriptural reasons for the synod is that God has given a variety of gifts to his church and has appointed a variety of offices for it (1 Cor 12:4-31). This also is given as one “Reason for the Forming of a Synodical Union” in the Preamble to the LCMS Constitution.<sup>9</sup> No one pastor has all the skills necessary to train competent pastors or teachers for the future church. A faculty with diverse talents and experiences is needed. No one pastor has all the skills necessary to establish a mission field by himself. Even the Apostle Paul had Barnabas and John Mark on his first mission journey. Later Silas, Luke, and many others joined Paul. No one pastor has all the skills necessary to begin and administer a reform of a church. Even Martin Luther had Karlstadt and Melancthon at the beginning. Later Bugenhagen, Jonas, and many others joined Luther. No one pastor has all the skills necessary to oversee and care for a synod. Even President C.F.W. Walther had his colleagues Wilhelm Sihler (Vice-President), Theodore Brohm (Vice-President), and F.W. Husmann (Secretary) in the beginning, and many others later in his career.

### ***Reasons We Need the Synod from the Book of Concord***

The Lutheran reasons for having a synod are found in the Book of Concord. In many places, the texts simply assume that the churches are in association and fellowship with each other. How could the reformers have thought any differently? The Brownists did not appear in England until after the Book of Concord was published. The doctrine of the church found in the Book of Concord makes no sense when applied to non-associating congregations.

We will look at these reasons in chronological order, starting with Luther’s Small Catechism (1529). The Third Article explanation states that the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one, common, true faith” (SC II, 6).<sup>10</sup> Notice again the use of the singular when referring to the church. Then Luther writes: “Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins” (SC II, 6).<sup>11</sup> Notice that the Holy Spirit forgives sins “in this Christian church.” Forgiveness is not an isolated, individualistic experience. The church calls pastors to forgive sins, as the Small Catechism’s article on the Office of the Keys explains.

Next, we turn to the Large Catechism (1529). The Third Article explanation states:

The Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the communion of saints or Christian church. . . . That is, he first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church’s lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ. . . . In the first place, he has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit reveals and proclaims . . . . For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, apart from which no one can come to the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . All this, then, is the office and work of the Holy Spirit, to begin and daily increase holiness on earth through these two means: the Christian church and the forgiveness of sins

(LC II, 37-59).<sup>12</sup>

Notice that Luther considered the church, *i.e.*, where Christ and the Word of God is preached, to be a means of grace by which the Holy Spirit works. He also places the church immediately next to the forgiveness of sins as a means of grace.

Now we turn to the great *Magna Carta* of the Lutheran church, its Augsburg Confession (1530). In the German text of Article Seven, it states: “At all times there must be and remain one, holy Christian church” (AC VII, 1, German).<sup>13</sup> Notice again the use of the singular for “church” and the echo of the Nicene Creed. Then in Article Eight, it states: “The Christian church is, properly speaking, nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints” (AC VIII, 1, German).<sup>14</sup> Nothing could be more comprehensive than that, since it includes all the living believers and all the dead saints in one church. Then in Article Fourteen, it states: “No one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call” (AC, XIV, 1, German).<sup>15</sup> In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), Philip Melancthon defined what the term “proper [public] call” means when he says “we would willingly retain ecclesiastical and canonical order as long as the bishops desisted from their cruelty against our churches” (Ap XIV, 5).<sup>16</sup> Thus the Lutheran church recognizes the authority of bishops, or their equivalent, to ordain pastors and install them in parishes, as long as they do not use that authority to squelch the truth or to persecute faithful pastors.

The last article of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII, is titled “Concerning the Power of Bishops.” By using the term “bishop,” the Lutheran church thereby acknowledges the role of church associations and their leaders. What is the office of bishop? The Augsburg Confession defines the Lutheran position on this subject when it states:

According to divine right, it is the office of the bishop to preach the gospel, to forgive sin, to judge doctrine and reject doctrine that is contrary to the gospel, and to exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose ungodly life is manifest—not with human power but with God’s Word alone. That is why parishioners and churches owe obedience to bishops, according to this saying of Christ (Luke 10:16): “Whoever listens to you listens to me.” But whenever they teach, institute, or introduce something contrary to the gospel, we have God’s command in such a case not to be obedient (Matt 7:15): “Beware of false prophets” (AC XXVIII, 21-24, German).<sup>17</sup>

What about situations where the bishops establish rules and regulations for the churches? Do Lutherans permit that? Yes. The Augsburg Confession expresses the Lutheran position on this subject when it states:

Our people reply that bishops or pastors may make regulations for the sake of good order in the church, but not thereby to obtain God’s grace, to make satisfaction for sins, or to bind consciences, nor to regard such as a service to God or to consider it a sin when these rules are broken without giving offense. . . . Such regulation belongs rightfully in the Christian assembly for the sake of love and peace, to be obedient to bishops and pastors in such cases, and to keep such order to the extent that no one offends another—so that there may not be disorder or unruly conduct in the church (AC XXVIII, 53-56, German).<sup>18</sup>

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon clarified what Lutherans

understood the church to be. In Article VII/VIII, he wrote:

The church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ. Moreover, this church alone is called the body of Christ (Ap VII/VIII, 5).<sup>19</sup>

Nor indeed are we dreaming about some platonic republic, as some have slanderously alleged. Instead, we teach that this church truly exists, consisting of true believing and righteous people scattered throughout the entire world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments (Ap VII/VIII, 20).<sup>20</sup>

In the Apology, Melancthon also spoke more about the office of bishops in Article XXVIII,<sup>21</sup> which elucidates the same numbered article in the Augsburg Confession.

In the Smalcald Articles (1537), Third Part, section 10, Luther addresses the matter of bishops. He writes:

If the bishops wanted to be true bishops and to attend to the church and the gospel, then a person might—for the sake of love and unity but not out of necessity—give them leave to ordain and confirm us and our preachers, provided all the pretense and fraud of unchristian ceremony and pomp were set aside. However, they are not now and do not want to be true bishops. Rather they are political lords and princes who do not want to preach, teach, baptize, commune, or perform any proper work or office of the church. . . .Therefore, as the ancient examples of the church and the Fathers teach us, we should and will ordain suitable persons to this office [of bishop] ourselves.<sup>22</sup>

The final, settled position of the Book of Concord on the matter of popes, bishops, and other church leaders is described in the “Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope” (1537).<sup>23</sup>

### ***Reasons We Need the Synod from a Practical Perspective***

Carl F.W. Walther (1811-1887) was without a doubt a most gifted Lutheran theologian and church leader. He combined many talents, including an analytical mind for doctrine and a commonsense mind for practical church matters. He wanted the Missouri Synod to be the very best synod that it could be, for the benefit of congregations, church workers, and the outreach of the Gospel in this land and throughout the world. To that end, he delivered a classic essay titled “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod” (hereafter DELS) to the First Iowa District Convention held at Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church, Fort Dodge, Iowa, beginning August 20, 1879.<sup>24</sup> In this essay, Walther was telling the present and future leaders of the Missouri Synod what their essential duties were and what congregations, pastors, teachers, and other church workers should expect from

their synod. These duties explain, in a practical way, the reasons we need the synod. I hereby summarize and paraphrase Walther's essay, but encourage all our readers to obtain their own copy of Walther's lecture and read the entire issue.

- We need the synod so that congregations may acquire doctrinally sound, morally upright, and competent pastors, teachers, and church workers (DELS, Thesis II.b).
- We need the synod so that congregations may be protected from pastors who err in doctrine, follow an offensive lifestyle, or are domineering in office (DELS, Thesis II.c).
- We need the synod to give fraternal and friendly counsel to pastors, teachers, and other church workers (DELS, Thesis III.a).
- We need the synod to support pastors, teachers, and other church workers in the proper conduct of their office (DELS, Thesis III.b).
- We need the synod so that someone of authority defends pastors, teachers, and other church workers against unjust treatment (DELS, Thesis III.c).
- We need the synod to promote the growth of its members, i.e., both church workers and congregations, in the knowledge of the truth in every way possible (DELS, Thesis IV.a & b).
- We need the synod to promote the knowledge of the truth by making every effort to disseminate good literature (DELS, Thesis IV.c).
- We need the synod to strive for peace and unity in its midst, by seeing that all members are mutually submissive, that each bear the other's burdens in brotherly love, and that no unnecessary disputes arise and continue, whether in doctrine or practice (DELS, Thesis V).
- We need the synod to assist congregations and church workers in the work of the growth of God's kingdom, both within existing congregations through local evangelism, and by planting new congregations and overseas missions (DELS, Thesis VI).
- We need the synod, as its primary duty, to be faithful to the Lutheran Confessions in word and deed by confessing the Book of Concord without reservation, by accepting only church workers who are faithful to those confessions, by supervising the faithfulness of its members, and by practicing fellowship only with church bodies that are faithful to those confessions (DELS, Thesis I).

Thus, the Bible, the Book of Concord, C.F.W. Walther, and our Lutheran theologians all attest to the necessity of a synod.

**The Rev. Dr. Martin R. Noland**

Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, San Mateo, CA

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1. See, e.g., Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," *Church History* 23 no. 4 (Dec. 1954): 291-320.
  2. On Browne, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Browne\\_\(Brownist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Browne_(Brownist)) ; accessed 17 January 2021.
  3. On Smyth, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Smyth\\_\(Baptist\\_minister\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Smyth_(Baptist_minister)) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptists#English\\_separatist\\_view](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptists#English_separatist_view) ; accessed 17 January 2021.
  4. See Hermann Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, vol. 1, trans. Matthew Harrison, et al., edited Matthew Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013)*, 136-148.

5. Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, 1:139.
6. Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, 1:141-144.
7. On the universality of the call, see Johann Gerhard, *Theological commonplaces. On creation and angels, on providence, on election and reprobation, and on the image of God in man before the Fall*, tr. Richard Dinda, eds. Benjamin Mayes and Joshua Hayes (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 175-196 (Locus X, chap. vii).
8. See *Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation* (Saint Louis: LCMS, 2019), 11 (Preamble, 1) (hereafter 2019 Handbook). The Handbook may be accessed and downloaded for free here: <https://www.lcms.org/about/leadership/commission-on-handbook#handbook-editions> ; accessed 6 February 2021.
9. 2019 Handbook, 11 (Preamble, 2).
10. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 355-356 (hereafter Kolb-Wengert). *The Book of Concord*, with supporting documents and German originals, is available for online viewing for free here: <https://bookofconcord.org/> ; accessed 6 February 2021.
11. Kolb-Wengert, 356.
12. Kolb-Wengert, 435-439.
13. Kolb-Wengert, 42. An unsurpassed analysis of AC VII can be found in: Hermann Sasse, "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism," in Hermann Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, vol. 3, trans. Matthew Harrison, et.al., edited Matthew Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 249-279.
14. Kolb-Wengert, 42.
15. Kolb-Wengert, 46.
16. Kolb-Wengert, 223.
17. Kolb-Wengert, 94.
18. Kolb-Wengert, 98-100.
19. Kolb-Wengert, 174.
20. Kolb-Wengert, 177.
21. Kolb-Wengert, 289-294.
22. Kolb-Wengert, 323-324.
23. Kolb-Wengert, 330-344.
24. Carl F. W. Walther, "Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod," in Carl F. W. Walther, *Church Fellowship* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 237-336. The essay is available separately for a modest fee in electronic form as a PDF here: <https://www.cph.org/p-22043-duties-of-an-evangelical-lutheran-synod-downloadable.aspx> ; accessed 6 February 2021.