

A Confessional Response to “Next Steps for LCMS Multiplication: Two Actions to Reignite a Gospel Movement”

In November 2019 the “Lutheran Mission Matters” published an article by Rev. Michael W. Newman, President of the Texas District of the LCMS, titled “Next Steps for LCMS Multiplication: Two Actions to Reignite a Gospel Movement.” While I applaud the passion and desire to plant new congregations, there are parts of the paper which are disturbing from a confessional perspective. It is my intention with this paper to highlight those parts which are not in sync with our Lutheran Confessions.

To begin, Newman is correct when he says that “Many factors contribute to a church’s decline, but one key factor in the deterioration of the LCMS over the past forty years has been the decrease in church multiplication. Not starting new faith communities has become a pervasive habit in the LCMS.” However, Newman misses the mark badly when in the fifth footnote on this matter he cites his own work. He writes:

- While blame for the decline of the LCMS has, at times, been placed on Church Growth trends and a capitulation of the church to the entertainment culture, the weakening of the LCMS is much more than an issue of shifts in worship style and programmatic methodology. Losses in the LCMS can be traced to distraction and fear. In a swirl of social change and theological challenge, the synod, to some degree, “abandoned [its] first love” (Rev 2:4). You can read more about how the LCMS balanced holding to the truth of God’s Word while at the same time propagating that Word of life in *Gospel DNA: Five Markers of a Flourishing Church* pages 105–118, 129–133, 207–212. The heroic accounts of mission sacrifice direct each of us in the LCMS today to “repent, and do the works [it] did at first” (Rev 2:5).¹

Newman leaves the definition of “abandoned [its] first love” in doubt while pushing the reader to a book he himself has written. This is not difficult to define. The first love of the confessional Lutheran Church is and always must be the article on which the church stands or falls, that is, Augsburg IV, Justification:

1] Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for **2]** Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. **3]** This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.²

As a cure to the numerical decline in the LCMS membership, Newman proposes two action items, first that “Twenty Percent of LCMS Congregations Team Up to Plant Churches.”

Why only twenty percent? Curious. Every congregation should be encouraged to partner in planting new congregations and schools. In fact, that is the point of the 2019 Resolution 1-02, “To Encourage Planting New Churches.” The resolves of the resolution state:

-*Resolved*, that the Synod in convention reaffirms its first mission priority to “plant, sustain, and revitalize Lutheran churches” (2013 Res. 3-06A); and be it further

-*Resolved*, that congregations and circuits be encouraged and supported by their respective districts to investigate and identify new mission plants; and be it further

-*Resolved*, that congregations, circuits, and district leaders be encouraged to think strategically and plan collaboratively when establishing these new mission plants; and be it

further

-Resolved, that congregations and circuits be encouraged to make use of [Office of National Mission (ONM)] resources in the establishment of these new mission plants; and be it further

-Resolved, that the ONM, in partnership with the districts, issue a report telling the stories of new mission plants prior to the 2022 Synod convention; and be it finally

-Resolved, that the congregations and workers of the Synod regularly pray that the Lord of the Harvest would bless these efforts and enlarge His Kingdom.³

That resolution merely restates what two of my more favorite Luther quotes say:

- We have no other reason for living on earth than to be of help to others...But He permits us to live here in order that we may bring others to faith, just as He brought us.⁴
- This is how you should explain all the passages of Scripture which talk about works. God wants us to let the righteousness that we have received in faith break forth, demonstrate itself, and benefit others, so that false faith becomes known and rooted out. God gives no one His grace so that it may lie down and be of no benefit, but so that it would give a good return, and through knowledge and outward public demonstration entice everyone to God. Christ says, “Let your light shine before people, so that they see your good works and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5 [:16]). Otherwise it would be like a hidden treasure and concealed wisdom, and what benefit are either of them?⁵

That is the responsibility of not merely an elite twenty percent, but rather of the whole Church. It is the responsibility of the priesthood of all believers as we live out the vocations God has given to each of us.

As much as outreach and mission are part of the Church, mission and outreach dare never become the new gospel. To claim otherwise is a denial of justification by grace through faith, and sheer folly. Accordingly, a flourishing church is not measured by numbers; but rather is one where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed and where the Sacraments are rightly administered according to Christ’s institution, and where God’s people gather to receive those blessed gifts.

Incredibly, part of the second action item Newman proposes is establishing a whole new church body—a new synod, if you will—that would exist alongside the LCMS and be mothered by the LCMS. Newman writes:

- Is it time to send missionaries to launch a new church body in the US? Is it the right season in history to give birth to a new biblical and confessional voice that can speak Christ-centered, grace-focused, sacramental-rejoicing, and Scripture-founded words into the spiritual conversation happening in America today?

I’m not talking about division; I’m talking about multiplication. Might the launch of a new movement, rooted in and founded upon Reformation theology, be just what is needed to reinvigorate the multiplication legacy of the LCMS—and the Lutheran Church in Western civilization?⁶

While on-the-job apprenticeships may work well for plumbers and electricians, the Bride of Christ deserves the best trained pastors and teachers that our church can supply.

This second action item that is proposed is quite disturbing on several levels. Allow me to clarify. Newman proposes the following.

- A younger, more diverse and nimble church in which Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession (“Order in the Church,” *rite vocatus*) is unencumbered by European educational structures and Western accreditation requirements. Envision a church that has the option to use the older models of pastoral formation and certification, but also has the ability to be faithful to the Confessions while making use of new technology and new systems that accomplish faithful pastoral formation and sending for greater Gospel outreach.⁷

An old Lutheran question comes to mind: What does this mean?

Thanks to our seminaries, our LCMS clergy are among the best trained and best prepared to preach and teach the Gospel in this world which has gone mad with sin. Augsburg XIV has not handcuffed the Church. Rather, Augsburg XIV defines how the Bride of Christ is to prepare and recognize her clergy. To ignore properly trained and ordained clergy will result in poorly fed congregations—congregations whose people would have little idea of what it means to be a confessional Lutheran in doctrine or in practice.

While on-the-job apprenticeships may work well for plumbers and electricians, the Bride of Christ deserves the best trained pastors and teachers that our church can supply. Thanks to our seminaries, our clergy spend their years at the seminary not merely in books, but in establishing relationships with the church at large and with each other. Together their studies and the relationships formed at the seminary fashion the backbone of a healthy confessional Lutheran clergy. Why stray from that time proven model? To stray now would be to weaken our clergy, at a time when the Church needs the best trained clergy she can receive.⁸

Next Newman proposes:

- A church that is able to practice Article VII of the Augsburg Confession (definition of the Church and true unity of the Church) outside of a Western, European, sixteenth-century overlay, free to use the best of what God has provided in external forms and ceremonies throughout the years, while at the same time incorporating other biblical paradigms that honor God and speak to an emerging generation.⁹

The Lutheran Confessions, including Augsburg VII, are more than mere historical overlays.¹⁰ To regard the Lutheran Confessions simply as historical overlays is to deny a *quia* subscription to the Confessions, and to put the church in jeopardy. Among others, Herman Sasse writes:

- The entire experience of modern church history shows that as soon as the authority of the confessions as the true interpretation of Scripture is weakened, the *norma normans* of the Holy Scriptures is also overthrown. Therefore in the Lutheran Church the authority of the confessions is nothing else than the authority of the Holy Scripture which is *sui ipsius interpres*. Here lies the basic reason why the Lutheran Church pledges its ministers upon the confession because [*quia*] “it has been taken from God’s Word and is founded firmly and well therein” (FC SD Comprehensive Summary III) and not only insofar as [*quatenus*] they agree with Scripture, as is customary in Reformed churches. The *quia* presupposes a firm faith in the Holy Scripture and its perspicuity.¹¹

...how is the LCMS failing to meet the “fallenness of today’s culture,” “without being afraid of the ‘new’ sins of this generation?”

Again, Herman Sasse:

- Only the *quia* establishes a real pledge to the confessions. The *quatenus* is in reality only a polite and mild form of the disintegration of doctrinal confession.¹²

Walther puts it this way:

- This is a *petitio principii*, a begging of the question; for loyal and resolute Lutherans are simply those who believe what the Lutheran Church believes in conformity with its confessions. The casting of doubt on certain points of doctrine in the Lutheran symbols by men who are alleged to be resolute Lutherans will not convert these points of doctrine into open questions; the casting of doubt on parts of the Lutheran Confessions rather makes it manifest that those allegedly resolute Lutherans are not what they are believed to be. Whoever allows such doctrines to be treated as open questions by alleged Lutherans thereby does nothing less than surrender the citadel of our church's confession.¹³

Regarding Newman's comment about being “free to use the best of what God has provided in external forms and ceremonies throughout the years, while at the same time incorporating other biblical paradigms that honor God and speak to an emerging generation,” it needs to be stated clearly and strongly that liturgical styles, viz., faithfulness to the historical liturgy, are not the cause of the decline in the LCMS. Our liturgical *ordo* is rather a bold confession of what we Lutherans believe, teach, and confess as we gather each week for the Divine Service. The historic liturgy is part of our Lutheran identity, differentiating our confessional Lutheran Church from the shallow non-denominational churches that surround us. If we are raising up Lutheran Christians, why train God's people to be shallow evangelicals or something worse?

Next Newman proposes:

- A church that can meet the chaotic fallenness of today's culture with sound proclamation of Law and Gospel, applying Article IV of the Augsburg Confession (Justification) without being afraid of the “new” sins of this generation.¹⁴

That begs the question: how is the LCMS failing to meet the “fallenness of today's culture,” “without being afraid of the ‘new’ sins of this generation?” Again, what does this mean?

If Newman is talking about abortion, same sex marriage, or the ordination of female and homosexual clergy, these are hardly new sins on the pages of church history. God's Word speaks clearly about the evil of such sins. They are not open questions to be debated. They are transgressions against the holy will of the Almighty God. In the midst of this perverse generation, our generation, it is our responsibility to follow the sound words of Holy Scripture:

- Ezekiel 33:7-9 – “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.”
- Philippians 2:14-16 – “Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.”

Sadly, this whole line of reasoning surrounding the establishment of a new synod in the United States smacks of sectarianism, a division in the church created by the will of man—and for what reason? A dissatisfaction with proper ecclesiastical oversight? Doctrinal? Or the whim of man? Why? What is wrong with the synod that we have? Why establish a second synod which may or may not be in fellowship with the LCMS?

All that flies in the face of the Constitution of the LCMS, Article III Objectives, which states:

- The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall—
 15. 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.¹⁵

So that we are all working with the same definition of schism and sectarianism.

- 7) Jerome distinguished between heresy and schism, the former being perversion of doctrine, the latter rebellion against authority (*In Epist. ad Titum, iii, 10*). Augustine of Hippo held that heretics wound faith, schismatics deviate from charity (*De fide et symbolo, x*). It is sometimes hard to distinguish between heresy and schism, since heresy leads to schism and schism presupposes heresy.¹⁶
- Sect (derived more probably from Lat. *sequi*, “to follow,” than from *secare*, “to cut”). The following of some leader. In a narrow sense, a group that has separated from an older group by following another leader; or a group within a group (in this sense the Pharisees and Sadducees are called sects within Judaism; *Acts 5:17; 26:5*). In a wide sense, all religious bodies are sometimes referred to as sects.¹⁷

Conclusion:

Please know that it is not my intent with this paper to violate the boundaries of the 8th Commandment. My comments have not been directed at the man but rather at what has been written by the man. My deep concern is of a confessional nature. Every pastor in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on the day of his ordination willingly makes a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions:

- Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? And do you believe that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord—as these are contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith? [*The answer: Yes, I make these Confessions my own because they are in accord with the Word of God.*]

Being a confessional church is part of our Lutheran DNA. It is not an optional smorgasbord where we pick what we like and leave the rest behind. Herman Sasse makes that point powerfully when he writes:

- Let us not be ashamed to be a confessional Lutheran Church. Let us not forfeit the great heritage of our fathers for this mess of pottage, the views that modern man may happen to have about Confession, concerning which he himself does not know how it will look a year or even a week from now. For us fidelity to the Confession means nothing else than to be true to the Word of God. To adhere to the Confession means nothing else with us than to adhere to the Word of God. And in this sense the poor, forlorn, despised, and derided Lutheran Church may apply this word to itself: “Stand by the Word, then you will stand where the Word stands.”¹⁸

In times like this it is exceptionally vital that the Church not only understand the *zeitgeist* but also take the words of Martin Luther to heart. In Volume 57 of his works Luther speaks of the temptations that the evil one uses against the Church in an effort to pull her away from Christ. Luther writes:

- Therefore, it is especially necessary that God help here through devout and faithful preachers or preserve His people through special gifts of the Holy Spirit; otherwise, there is neither help nor remedy. Nevertheless, Christendom survived and prevailed in that damaging and dangerous time, so that it has remained to the present day. Through both God’s Word and devout preachers, our faith has been preserved that Jesus Christ is true God from the Father in eternity and true man, born in time from the Virgin Mary.¹⁹

May our gracious Lord continue to bless His Bride the Church with faithful confessors! Lord have mercy!

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The Second Week of Lent, 2020

- 1 Newman, “Next Steps for LCMS Multiplication: Two Actions to Reignite a Gospel Movement” footnote #5. Page 278.
- 2 *Concordia Triglotta—English: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (1996). (electronic ed., page 45). Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House.
- 3 *Today’s Business*, Resolution 1-02, 1st ed. (2019), 48.
- 4 Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 30, p. 11). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.
- 5 Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works, Volume 78 (Church Postil IV)* page 323 Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition
- 6 *Ibid*, page 274.
- 7 *Ibid*, page 274.
- 8 Walther’s “Western District Convention, 1873” *Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther: Convention Essays*. Walther writes: “We attend church, not really to serve God but rather that He may serve us there; not to create righteousness but to receive it from God.”
- 9 *Ibid*, page 274.
- 10 Article VII: Of the Church. 1] Also they teach that *one holy Church* is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. 2] And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and 3] the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. 4] As Paul says: *One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all*, etc. Eph. 4, 5. 6. [*Concordia Triglotta—English: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (1996). (electronic ed., page 47). Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House.]
- 11 Sasse, Hermann. *Letters to Lutheran Pastors: Volume 1*, pages 30-31. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

- 12** Sasse, Hermann. *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters, Volume 1*, page 459. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.
- 13** Walther, C. F. W., "Confessional Subscription," *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: CPH, 1992), 26.
- 14** *Ibid*, page 274.
- 15** 2019 LCMS Constitution, Article III Objectives. Page 15.
- 16** Christian Encyclopedia. Schism. online. Concordia Publishing House.
- 17** *Ibid*. Sectarianism.
- 18** Sasse, Hermann. *Letters to Lutheran Pastors: Volume 1*, page 33. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.
- 19** Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works, Volume 57 (Sermons IV)*, page 265. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.