

## **Should the Synod have a centralized and hierarchical governing power over its members?**

### **What is a “synod” anyway?**

In the early Christian church, a “synod” was a regional assembly of church leaders, gathered to confer with one another and make decisions about church business. The “business” might involve something as important as addressing a doctrinal problem, or as mundane as the dispersal of church funds. In recent years, the Lutheran churches in America have understood “synods” to be church bodies united by their confession of faith. While some synods in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America maintained that only pastors should make decisions for the members of the synod, Missouri was unique. From its founding in 1847, the Missouri Synod was structured to allow both pastors and lay representatives to vote at Synod conventions. This polity, or governing structure, reflected the Synod’s understanding of the doctrine of the church—based on the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers. It also ensured that the rights of individual members of the Synod—congregations and church workers—would be preserved. Thus, the Synod was an association of congregations seeking a confessional fellowship. It was the confession of faith that they professed, based on the Word of God and centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which bound them together as church. The sole authority they followed was the Word of God.

The way a church body organizes itself is not commanded in God’s Word, but rather is a matter of Christian freedom. Accordingly, the Lutheran Confessions do not prescribe a particular form of church government, although, they do make clear that the purpose and responsibility of any church organization is to facilitate the preaching of the Gospel. The founders of the Missouri Synod settled on the synod polity because they found it to be the best form of government to preserve their understanding of the doctrine of the church. It also gave their new church organization a useful way to accomplish its goals and meet the needs of its members.

In his 1848 presidential address, C. F. W. Walther pointed out that Lutheran churches had organized themselves in various ways throughout history. For example, he noted that “there are times and conditions when it is profitable for the church to place supreme deciding and regulating power into the hands of the representatives.”<sup>1</sup> He observed that there were times in the past when the consistories (administrative boards comprised of clergy) in the German lands had been “an inestimable blessing” to the churches, and he affirmed that the Swedish Lutheran church had grown “splendidly under its episcopal constitution.”<sup>2</sup> However, Walther continued,

---

<sup>1</sup> C. F. W. Walther, “The Synod Has No Power But the Word of God: 1848 Synodical Address,” in *At Home in the House of My Fathers*. By Matthew C. Harrison. Lutheran Legacy, 2009, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

the context of the Lutheran churches in America called for a different approach, adding: “We can hardly consider any other constitution as the most salutary except one under which the congregations are free to govern themselves but enter into a synodical organization such as the one existing among us with the help of God, for enjoying fraternal consultation, supervision, and aid to spread the kingdom of God jointly and to make possible and accomplish the aims of the church in general.”<sup>3</sup> This organization, Walther explained, was strictly advisory in nature—having only the power of the Word of God and of Christians convincing one another—and required nothing unconditionally from its members except that they submit themselves to the Word of God. He states clearly, “In our Evangelical Lutheran Church... we must preach to our congregations that the choice of the form of government for a church is an inalienable part of their Christian liberty and that Christians as members of the church are subject to no power in the world except the clear Word of the living God.”<sup>4</sup>

The founders of the Missouri Synod entered into a confessional fellowship with other Lutherans in order to work together to meet common goals, as outlined by the Synod constitution. For example, joining together they would accomplish the work of the church, and conserve and promote the unity of the confession of faith. Through the sharing of gifts, they would meet the needs of congregations and accomplish the greater work of the church: mission efforts, the establishment and maintenance of educational institutions for the training of pastors and teachers, as well as elementary and high schools. Working together they would ensure that the church would have published materials, such as Bibles, worship materials, hymnals, catechisms, and school textbooks. The Synod also would protect and maintain the rights and duties of pastors and congregations, as well as establish uniformity in church government.

At its founding, the polity of the Synod was simple. Over time, it was tried and tested. The structure grew as the Synod’s work increased. This growth brought great benefits to the Synod, but the accompanying changes strained the relationship between the Synod and congregations, which sought to safeguard their rights and the free exercise of them. At the same time, the congregations are obliged to recognize that each individual member of the Synod is accountable to the whole. If the Synod is to be unified, if its members will walk along the road together as church, they need to work together in furthering and building that unity.

## **The Relationship of the Synod to its Members**

Congregations make up the basic units of the Synod, however, joined together they form the Synod and relate to one another through the Synod. As the Synod constitution states, “in relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation’s right of self-government it is but an advisory body.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time with membership in Synod come conditions and expectations, for example, adherence to Synod’s confessional position. Members of the Synod

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>5</sup> LCMS Constitution, Article VII.1

are subject to the supervision of the district presidents, who oversee the doctrine, life and administration of the pastors and teachers, and other church workers of their districts. District presidents also visit congregations and assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities.

While the question of the relationship of the Synod to its members is clear, so also is the question of authority in the church. The Holy Christian Church is divinely instituted with Christ as its Head. The local congregation, too, is divinely instituted and is the assembly of believers in Christ among whom the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments administered rightly (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). Yet, the Synod organization—with all its officers and agencies, boards, committees, commissions, and synod-wide corporate entities—is a human institution. Congregations have the right—but also the duty—to have external fellowship with one another. Still, Synod itself is a human institution with no God-given power to be exercised over its members. Synod can establish rules which its members are expected to follow, and it can exercise discipline, however, it has no control over its congregations in so far as they are the local church. Members of the Synod as such are obligated to hold to the confessional basis of the Synod, and to honor and support their fellow members as they work to fulfill the Synod's objectives. However, that fidelity is always tempered by a greater faithfulness to Christ and to His church. Members of the Synod have the right to criticize its resolutions in light of God's Word. Loyalty in the Synod must never diminish congregations' ability to fulfill their mission of preaching the Word of God to the world.

## **Centralization and Hierarchicalization in the Synod**

The trend toward centralization and hierarchicalization in the Synod organization is troubling because it threatens to disrupt the balance in the relationships within the Synod. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is of utmost importance with regard to polity and the problem of the centralization of power and authority in the life of congregations and Synod.

Centralization is the placing of concentrated power and authority in the central organization of the Synod, for example, in the officers, agencies, boards, and commissions of the Synod, and especially in the office of Synod president. Some would like to reinterpret the Constitution and Bylaws to introduce this kind of authority into the Synod's official structure. Hierarchicalization, in this context, is the governing of the Synod by pastors who conduct themselves as if they were of higher or better status, and who have power and authority over other Christians. They assert authority which is not in accord with the Word of God and which the Synod has not granted, often in disregard to positions of authority that Synod has established. They aim to enforce their authority and to discipline those in the Synod who do not conform to their expectations. They wish to instill fear in members of the Synod by accusing some of not practicing in accord with the Word of God, even if they are following doctrinal resolutions that Synod has adopted.

In his writings on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, Luther clearly recognized the true authority in the church. This authority was not one established by human decree or arrangement, but by God Himself. The authority in the church is the Word of God, and is given to the church by Christ Himself. Christians must guard against human claims of authority which

disregard the authority of Christ. As Luther asserts, “I say that neither the pope nor a bishop nor any other person has the authority to prescribe to a Christian even a syllable unless he consents to it. Whatever is done otherwise stems from a tyrannical spirit.”<sup>6</sup> Christians have been entrusted with the preaching of the Word of God and must not allow human authorities to interfere with the faithful carrying out of that task: “But how, if [priests and bishops] were compelled to admit that we all, as many of us as are baptized, are likewise priests, as we indeed are, and we have entrusted to them the preaching office alone, but with our consent, therefore they must also acknowledge that they have neither the right nor the authority to command us, except as we ourselves permit them of our own goodwill.”<sup>7</sup>

The question of authority in the church was central to Luther’s efforts at reform. The church had departed from its foundation, the Gospel of Christ, and was faltering dangerously on the unsound and treacherous claims of human authority. The *Sola Scriptura*, Luther’s recalling the church to the one, sure authority of God’s Word as the basis for faith and life, impacted the way Christians understood their relationships with others in the church, and their relationship with God Himself:

*“There is among Christians no master except Christ Himself alone. What kind of government can there be if all are equal and have one and the same right, power, possession, and honor, and if, in addition, no [Christian] desires to be the master of the other, but everyone wants to be the servant of the other? Among such persons it is impossible to establish a government, even if some really wanted to, because neither their disposition nor their nature allows them to have masters since no one wants to or can be a master.*

*What, then, are priests and bishops? Answer: Their rule is neither a government nor a power, but a service and office; for they are neither higher nor better than are other Christians. Hence they also should not put any law or command on others unless these consent and permit. Their office [Regieren] is nothing else than to promote God’s Word so that they lead Christians and overcome heretics. For, as said before, Christians can be ruled by no other means than by God’s Word alone. Christians must be ruled by faith and not by outward works. But faith cannot come by any word of man, rather only by God’s Word, as St. Paul says in Romans 10:17: ‘Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ’.”<sup>8</sup>*

---

<sup>6</sup> Luther, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520, quoted in C.F.W. Walther, *The Church & The Office of The Ministry*. Translated by J.T. Mueller, revised and edited by Matthew C. Harrison. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012, 312.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 313.

What was true in the church of Luther's evangelical Reformation is true today. The authority in the Missouri Synod is the Word of God. The confessional basis of the Synod states this clearly:

The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:

The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice;

All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God...

This confessional basis of the Scriptures as the only rule and norm of the Synod's teaching and practice, and the Lutheran Confessions as true statements and expositions of the Scriptures, is the Synod's statement of the one authority it follows. It is the foundation for its understanding itself as a church, and the basis for everything that it does as a church.

The Word of God is the sole authority in the Synod. What binds the members of Synod together is the faith which they confess, it is the Word of God. The authority of the central governing power of the Synod—the arrangement of officials, boards, and commissions—does not hold the Synod together. As Walther stated in his 1848 presidential address: "Christ not only declares that He alone has the power in His church and exercises it by His Word, but He also expressly denies to all others any other power, any other rule, any other authority to command in His church."<sup>9</sup> Yet to those who are in positions of leadership in the church, there is one power. Walther adds, "The holy apostles grant only *one* power to those who serve the church as rulers, namely, the power of the Word."<sup>10</sup> Where the Word of God is silent on a question, there the local congregation must decide the matter. Walther asserted this clearly to the Synod convention attendees in 1848:

*Accordingly, there can be no doubt, venerable brethren in office and respected delegates, that we are not renouncing any right belonging to us if we as servants of the church and as members of an ecclesiastical synod claim no other power than the power of the Word. For in the Church where Christ alone rules, there dare and can be no other power to which all must submit. To be sure, there are matters which the Word of God does not regulate, but which must be arranged in the Church. But all such matters are not to be arranged by any power above the congregation, but the congregation, that is, pastors and hearers, arranges them, free of every compulsion, as it is necessary and appears salutary.<sup>11</sup>*

---

<sup>9</sup> C. F. W. Walther, "The Synod Has No Power But the Word of God: 1848 Synodical Address," in *At Home in the House of My Fathers*. By Matthew C. Harrison. Lutheran Legacy, 2009, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

With the same emphasis on the Word as the sole authority in the church, Walther warns against those who assert a power for themselves in the church, over against the power of God's Word. The key problem with them is that they deprive Christians of their liberty and they degrade and undermine the church:

*What, then, are men doing who claim a power in the Church beside the power of the Word? They are robbing the Church of Christ of the liberty which He has purchased with a price, with His divine blood, and are degrading this free Jerusalem, in which there are only kings, priests, and prophets, this kingdom of God, this heavenly kingdom of truth to an organization under strict police rule in which everybody is compelled to be obedient to every human ordinance. They are seeking the royal crown of Christ, the only true King, and are making themselves kings over His kingdom; they are deposing Christ, the only true Master, from His chair and are setting themselves up as masters in His church; they are striving to separate Christ, the only true Head, from His church and are presumptuously trying to be heads of His spiritual body. They exalt themselves above the holy apostles and claim a power which God's Word plainly denies them and which has been granted by God to no man, no creature, not even an angel or archangel.<sup>12</sup>*

While Walther was addressing a time and a context different from our own, nevertheless, the dangers of establishing authorities in the church above the Word of God are clear, and need to be guarded against even in our own time.

## **Preserving Christian Freedom in the Church**

Members of the Synod—congregations and church workers—must stand up against anything that threatens to undermine the doctrine of the church, and their rights as members. Against anything that leads us away from the Word of God as the sole authority in the church, we must guard ourselves.

What are the effects of the increasing tendency toward centralization and hierarchicalization in the Synod? Fear of one group gaining control over the entire Synod and determining the doctrine and practice—the faith and life—of the local congregation. Fear of the imposition of a church-political agenda which silences or even crushes any voices of constructive criticism in light of God's Word. Most important, centralization and hierarchicalization in the Synod fosters fear that the true mission of the church—to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to the world—is being thwarted and obscured in order to secure power for a key group of Synod officials who hope to bring the Synod to their own understanding of what it means to be a church body.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6.

## ***Freedom from Fear***

Members of Synod—congregations and church workers—must be free from all fear within the Synod relationship. They must be free from negative, loveless, and unconstructive criticism from other members, from the pressuring of Synod officials, and from the fear of unjust disciplining actions.

## ***Freedom from church-political agendas***

Synod officials, boards, and commissions may plan, recommend, and apply policies at the direction of the Synod, however, they may never assume undue authority or tell members of the Synod what they must do or not do in so far as they are members of the church of Christ. If members of the Synod are working in accord with the Word of God, Synod officials have no right to determine what they do, or interfere with the carrying out of their tasks in the church. In the same way, the approval of Synod officials does not validate the work of its members as church.

## ***Freedom to be the church***

Often assertions of power are made under the guise of preserving the official doctrine and practice of the Synod. While these assertions may be well intended, they threaten the delicate balance in the relationship between Synod and its members. The role of Synod officials is not to control members, but rather to advise, serve, and help them. Synod officials are the servants of the members of the Synod, not their masters. They should encourage members in their work to strengthen and build up the church. Synod officials must deal with the members of the Synod as they are, not as they wish them to be.

The advisory nature of the Synod and the concern to protect the Synod relationships from centralized or hierarchical forms of church polity need to be emphasized in our Synod circles today. As we move forward together, increasingly authoritative and powerful administrative officials, boards, and commissions in the Synod may gain more control over congregations and church workers. If the Synod is to remain true to its historical, Lutheran doctrines of church and ministry, this trend must be reversed. Only by returning to the foundations of the Synod as set down in its Constitution will the true, advisory nature of the Synod be maintained. The proper relationship between the Synod and its members is key to the future of our church and to the accomplishing of its mission.