

LCMS POLITY: TOP-DOWN OR BOTTOM-UP?

The Big Questions are Important

Should the laity have authority over the clergy? Should the clergy have authority over the laity? Should a “bishop” have authority over the congregations? Questions like those formed the chaotic beginning of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod! Top-down or bottom-up? What is right-side up?

The Saxon immigrants to the United States in the beginning chose a top-down polity, as reflected in the establishing of Martin Stephan as the “bishop” (*complete obedience in all matters, secular as well as spiritual*). That didn’t last long.

“Acting on the basis of charges of sexual immorality, the group [these same Saxon immigrants], on May 30, 1839, only a little over three months after their arrival, deposed their leader, Martin Stephan, from his office as bishop. They excommunicated him from the church, and banished him from their settlement. This unexpected turn of events threw the newly arrived colonists into a state of near chaos.”¹

Under the leadership of Dr. C.F.W. Walther, who would become the first President of the Synod in 1847, the Lutheran Saxon colonists were influenced to turn the polity upside down. Already in 1845, Walther said, *“The Synod should be not so much a plenipotentiary judicial body but much rather an advisory body to which a congregation in need of advice might have recourse.”²* During the same time, the influential Dr. Wilhelm Sihler,³ proposed a top-down organization, which would “direct, watch over, and administer the church.” Its task would be to “regulate, direct, and administer all matters pertaining to the doctrine, life, worship, and discipline of the Church.”⁴

The Synod had to decide which way to turn: top-down or bottom-up?

So What Did C.F.W. Walther Say?

Walther’s view prevailed in the founding of the Synod in 1847. The bottom-up polity adopted by the Synod was articulated by Walther in his 1848 Presidential address:

¹ “What Is a Synod?” 2004 LW article by Dr. Sam Nafzger

² August 21, 1845 letter to Pastor J.A. Ernst, in C.S. Meyer, editor, *Moving Frontiers* (CPH 1964), p.143.

³ Became synodical vice-president and president of the Ft. Wayne Seminary

⁴ Editorial note by Prof. W. G. Polack in C. S. Mundinger, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (CPH 1947), p. 175.

*“I mean the thought that, according to the constitution under which our Synodical union exists, we have merely the power to **advise** one another, **that we have only the power of the Word, and of convincing**. According to our constitution, we have no right to formulate decrees, to pass laws and regulations and to make a judicial decision, to which our congregations would have to submit unconditionally, in any matter involving the imposing of something upon them. Our constitution by no means makes us a consistory, by no means a supreme court of our congregations. It rather grants them the most perfect liberty in everything excepting nothing but the Word of God, faith, and charity. **According to our constitution we are not above our congregations, but in them and at their side.**” (Emphasis added)*

In describing our bottom-up organization, Walther also said:

*“If, however, we glance at the conditions in which the Church finds itself here, we can hardly consider any other constitution as the most salutary but 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 and to spread the kingdom of God jointly** and to make possible and accomplish the aims of the Church in general...**we ask nothing unconditionally of our congregations except submission to the Word.**” (Emphasis added)*

Our Current Governing Documents Give Answers, Too

So what does the LCMS Constitution say? Who has the authority? The Constitution states unequivocally:

Article VII. Relation of the Synod to Its Members

1. *In its 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**. Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned. (Emphasis added)*
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An advisory Synod gives advice!

As an advisory servant, Synod has only the capacity to advise, encourage, teach, and support the congregations. Synod, **just as a pastor of a congregation**, has no controlling authority over its members. C.F.W. Walther clarified this matter further in his essay he gave in 1879 to the Iowa District Convention concerning the relationship of the Synod to the congregations. While not using the terms, the essay explains “top-down” and “bottom-up” and authority not only in the Synod but in reference to a congregation-pastor relationship as well.⁵

The congregations, who are above Synod and the basic unit of the Synod,⁶ band together for mutual sharing, and to help and to support each other with the various distributed gifts (1 Cor. 12) that God has given His Church, especially the gift of the Holy Spirit, who works in us through the Word. **Local congregations, believing Christians, which possess the keys, are regarded as divinely instituted by our Lord through the Holy Spirit and therefore as possessing spiritual authority originally.** (See *The Congregation's Right to Choose Its Pastor* by C.F.W. Walther, *Der Lutheraner* Articles 1860-1861, translated by Fred Kraemer, edited by Wilbert Rosin, Concordia Seminary Publications, 1997)

⁵ EXCERPTS FROM WALTHER'S 1879 IOWA DISTRICT CONVENTION ESSAY "DUTIES OF AN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD"

[The three excerpts below are from the essay translated by Everette W. Meier and published in CFW Walther's, Essays for the Church, II, CPH, 1992].

A synodical convention is therefore a representative of the church. Should it not therefore be empowered to make demands of a congregation, make rules for it that it must obey for the Lord's sake? **No**. Just as little as a pastor can make rules and regulations for a congregation, so little can a whole assembly of pastors together with as many laymen do that. For also the church has no power to make a rule that would bind the conscience of individual Christians or even of whole congregations. For in the kingdom of God we are all equal. [p. 29] (Emphasis added)

Notice that with respect to the individual congregation's self-government the Synod is but an advisory body, i.e. the Synod can impose nothing on the congregation. In its self-government the congregation is free to do anything that it can defend before God, and the Synod has no say in the matter. But the Synod has the duty to give advice when asked. Therefore the Synod can establish no rules, no ceremonies, nor any kind of regulations; it cannot impose taxes, not even a penny. [p. 31]

According to our Constitution, no resolution is binding on the individual congregation. No resolution. Mark that well! What we resolve here in convention the pastors and lay delegates must report to the home congregations and say, "This is what the convention resolved." But they cannot say, "Now you must also observe this." No; on the contrary the congregation can say, "As soon as it is a matter that has been left free for us as Christians, we can disregard the resolution of the convention," and the Synod can say nothing against that." [pp. 31-32].

⁶ Bylaw 1.3.1 Individual Christians are joined together in a worshiping and serving community, the congregation. Congregations, **the basic units of the Synod**, have joined together to form the Synod and relate to one another through it. (Emphasis added)

The Word Is God's Ultimate Top-Down Power and Authority Among Us

Thus, above all, what in fact is top-down, **is the Word of God, its power and authority**. The members of the Synod are committed to the **Scriptures as the final authority (top-down)**. The Missouri Synod founders developed a structure which does not depend on voting power, Synod legislation or official coercion to achieve its objectives. *"All matters of doctrine and conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God. All other matters shall be decided by a majority vote"* (Constitution, Article VIII, C).

Let's Keep Things Right-Side Up

The genius of LCMS ecclesiastical polity is that which is normally called top-down, is bottom-up and bottom-up is top-down. It is turned upside down and down side up. **The congregation in the human institution of the LCMS is supreme and self-governing**. Synod, with respect to its members, does not exercise legislative or coercive powers (Article VII) but convinces and persuades by the power and authority of God's Word. Since God's Word alone has binding force, no Synod legislation and no resolution in and of itself, no control, no domination, no force, no fiat or coercion can bind us. Synod is only advisory (Article VII). However, congregations are indeed bound by the Word of God, **the top-down power and authority**.

We Must Be Vigilant for Our Synod's Sake

The term "synod" means "going the same way" or "walking together." Under the impact of the top-down Word of God, can we be a bottom-up Synod "walking together?"

We must continually examine, discern and reject the top-down and centralized behavior, actions, and duties of the conventions, the administration and officers of the Synod (and yes, in the congregations too)!

Centralization of power? Right-side up? Top-down or bottom-up? **The historic, Scriptural and Confessional answer is clear. Our congregational polity means a bottom-up polity – and only the top-down authority of the Word of God!**

It's True. **Congregations Matter**©