

Dear Friends in Christ,

On April 26, 1847, clergy and laity from 14 congregations gathered in Chicago to sign the constitution of *Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten*. It took 100 years, but eventually the official church name would change to English and be known as the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS).

So late last month, the LCMS turned 175 years old. That's quite a milestone and is worth celebrating. In this article, I'd like to do a couple things - first, I'd like to point out why you should be proud to be a member of a Missouri Synod congregation. Second, I'd like to warn us of the challenges we have faced and will continue to face in the future.

First, you should be proud to be a member of a Missouri Synod congregation. When I say proud, I mean in the positive sense, not as in the vice that comes before the fall. I was at a gas station a couple months ago in my clerical collar, and the clerk asked what church I served. I told him, and he asked what synod, and I said Missouri. He replied, "Oh, you're hardcore!" That brought a smile to my face.

Now usually people will throw the word "strict" at the Missouri Synod to slander us. What they really mean is "biblical." The world loves to mock us for being the church that doesn't ordain women, doesn't support abortion, doesn't support critical theory, and doesn't support the rainbow agenda. We can't support those things because they're anti-biblical; now maybe you think, "Well why do we always have to be against things?" The answer is that by being for something, you will naturally be against something. By confessing that there is only one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are also saying that all other gods are false. By saying that Jesus is Lord, we are saying that Caesar is not.

I'm a Missouri Synod pastor because the Bible is the sole source of our doctrine, and we read the Bible through the lens of the Lutheran Confessions (Book of Concord) because the Lutheran Confessions are a correct exposition of the Word of God. Maybe you think that's backwards, thinking we should read the Book of Concord through the lens of the Bible; the problem with that is you'd be making the Book of Concord the greater document.

When I say "the Missouri Synod teaches," what I'm really saying is (by the grace of God) that "this is what the Bible teaches." So we must always be on guard, making sure that everything we teach and confess is biblical. We've got nothing if we don't have Jesus' Word. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). We're "sticklers" about what the Bible says because it is the Word of God, and without the Word of God, there is no life.

Second, a warning. The two dangers the Missouri Synod has faced historically are triumphalism and institutionalism. I think the latter is the greatest threat to our faithfulness today.

Triumphalism is the attitude that “because we do it, it must be the right thing.” It’s a sinfully optimistic attitude; the sinful optimist will justify *anything* simply because it exists or happened. So just because the Synod or someone in the Synod did or does something, doesn’t necessarily make it right. Everything must always be examined on the basis of God’s Word. Historically, this triumphal attitude really came out in the 1940s, and then it exploded in the 1970s when 45 out of 50 members of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis walked out and left to form a different seminary and church body that wouldn’t be founded on the Word of God as the infallible source of doctrine. If you want more details on our history, I’d be happy to share; just ask me. This article would become too long.

The second danger we face is institutionalism. I don’t think this is a uniquely LCMS problem; it’s a human problem. What I mean by institutionalism is the attitude that we’ll do anything and everything to keep our man-made organizations, schools, etc. going, and by anything I mean giving up the Word of God.

The LCMS has impressive institutions, although many are falling. We have the Concordia University System (although the schools in Selma, Portland, and New York have recently shut down). Our two seminaries in St. Louis and Fort Wayne appear to be financially strong; the biggest challenge they face is finding men to become pastors.

We like institutions because they make us feel strong. They give us security. They provide financial stability. They give us something to be proud of. And they are a gift from God; they help us build His kingdom. But we are not called to put our faith in institutions. All these buildings will one day fall, and too often we’ve compromised on doctrinal matters so that our schools would be prestigious in the eyes of the world. Shame on us for that. It will be uncomfortable for us to make a clear Christian confession (Google Concordia University Chicago and see the protests going on). But we can’t cave in because the world makes us feel uncomfortable. Pick God’s Word over institutions. We can pray that it won’t come to picking between one or the other, but we must always be prepared to give up everything to follow Jesus.

Always remember the words of Jesus - “In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). May God bless the Missouri Synod for another 175 years. Now quit reading this - we’ve got work to do in the vineyard!

In Christ,
Pastor