

CLERGY COOPERATION AND SUPPORT IN THE EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH

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The purpose of this symposium, as I understand it, is to explore different possibilities for support, encouragement, and even organization among confessional clergymen of the Lutheran Church as it finds itself in America today, beset by a host of influences and trends which might best be assessed as simply pagan. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is adrift, and things have gotten so bad theologically that it's hard to see how it is ever going to get any better, even in the unlikely shifting of political and bureaucratic winds for the better. The problems we face are systemic; they have been for a long time. Let's say things had been different last summer. Let's say the massive Jerry-mandering of circuits had not taken place, and our men had won the elections. They certainly would not have won by much, and even so, Team Kieschnick, as they are fond of calling themselves, would not have disappeared. We still would have had a sizable amount of people in our midst who honestly don't understand what's wrong with setting up our God alongside the pantheon of other pagan deities. Here's their way of thinking, as I see it: we must do everything we can to appeal to people who don't believe in Jesus; our mission is urgent and must be *Ablaze!* So a compromise is effected: remove your insistence on the Church's exclusive claims on truth, and we'll give you some air time. The way it sells is that they won't make us say that Christianity is just one of many valid options, but then we can't say that it's the *only* valid option. The payoff of this compromise is more people reached with the good news. The trouble with this reasoning, as we know, is that when the Gospel is compromised in this way, the good news that reaches the people isn't quite so good anymore, and in the end all they hear is some nebulous words about Jesus. Imagine how high the numbers would have jumped on the Synod's online *Ablaze!* ticker if it had been in place before the Yankee Stadium event. Boom! In one fell swoop, thousands "reached," all because President Benke happened to mention "the precious name of Jesus." Behind this tragic self-delusion about the successfulness of missions lies an abysmal lack of clarity about who Jesus is, who He is *not*, what He has done, why He has done it, and how this mercy is appropriated.

Therefore what is needed, in my view, is a wholesale abandonment of the kind of thinking that supposes that getting the right people elected is somehow going to resolve our confessional crisis. We need to be thinking outside that box; indeed we should wonder whether we ever should have thought inside it in the first place. It is not votes that need to change, it is hearts. And that happens only by the Gospel as it is preached and administered rightly in our midst. And that happens only when preachers are free to preach it and administer it. And that happens only when they are not hindered by bureaucratic or diabolical impediments of one kind or another. And for that to happen, it is prudent and wise to seek to establish a means of support and aid for clergy such as this conference seeks to explore. I wish to offer my sincere compliments to the men who are responsible for these beginnings, Pastors Stanford, Frahm, Schaibley, and Hein among others, and I wish to offer encouragement for more coolheaded and reasoned thinking, in a day of much confessional hyperventilating. Let's sit down together and discuss carefully the possibilities for the future.

My assignment, as I understand it, is to seek to bring some rather distant history to bear on our current crisis, lest we suffer the fool's error of starting with a tabula rasa, an empty head, and thereupon embark on the fool's errand of building bricks with stubble.

The first thing we can learn from the history of Christendom is simply that we are facing nothing new. You will look in vain for a truly golden age of Christian history. We might have thought the first ecumenical council, in A.D. 325, to have settled the Arian threat to the Christological question once and for all, with the crafting of the Nicene Creed. On the contrary, soon afterwards the Christian faith itself was pushed to the edge of a precipice. Within ten years, Eusebius of Nicomedia managed to convince the emperor that the real scoundrel was not Arius the heretic but our champion Athanasius. So the emperor ordered him to restore Arius to his see at Alexandria. Now the Arian heresy is the reason, we will recall, for all the strong declarations of the divinity of Jesus in the Creed: “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father,” and then the real kicker, “By whom all things were made.” Reject this faith confessed in the Creed, as the Arians did, and you have rejected Christ. We don’t consider Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses to be Christians, do we? Neither should anyone be deceived about the lethal venom of the Arian heresy. Athanasius certainly wasn’t. So Athanasius refused to restore Arius to his see, of course, and for his refusal was banished to Gaul. This opened wide the way for the Arian poison to preside over the wholesale abandonment of the Nicene Creed. Nothing could stop it now. But on the very night before the ceremony in which Arius was to be restored, Arius died. And the next year Constantine died. So the Nicene Creed survived, but only barely, still teetering on the brink of ruin, with Arians still waxing strong. Eusebius was soon promoted to the archbishopric of Constantinople, and proceeded to drive Athanasius back into exile; now he found asylum in Rome. So the fierce struggle against the faith—against *our* faith—continued for fifty years. For fifty years the Arians practically carried the day in virtually every place in the empire except Rome. (Incidentally, anyone who harbors the illusion that Eastern Christianity is better because it was free from corruption evidently has not read the history of the fourth century: it was Rome, not Constantinople, that supported the Nicene faith in those days.) Finally in 379 God raised up a new emperor, Theodosius, to defend the faith and set the stage for the Constantinopolitan Council of 381.

So then a golden age commenced? Hardly. The fifth century saw the poisonous incursions of the followers first of Nestorius, and then of Eutyches, who by mid-century almost succeeded in snuffing out the Nicene faith—verily the Christian faith itself, as Cyril of Alexandria had rightly noted against Nestorius—all over again. Again the Nicene Christology was assailed, and almost successfully in 349, until the sinister plot of Dioscorus was exposed two years later, at the Council of Chalcedon, and a strong confession of the pure divinity, and the pure humanity, of the one person of Jesus Christ carried the day.

But not for long. Within thirty years, three of the five great sees of Christendom had been successfully usurped by Monophysites, heirs of Eutyches’ error, who blended the humanity and the divinity of Jesus into one nature, and so doing tarnished both natures. By 380 there were Monophysite patriarchs at Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch. And when the emperor called for a compromise, with his infamous and intentionally ambiguous *Henotikon* (literally, “plan of union”), even Constantinople’s patriarch Acacius agreed. Only Rome stood firm. Only Pope Felix knew that you don’t compromise or yield when it comes to the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. And this first schism between East and West lasted almost forty years.

Where is the golden age? When was the golden age? In short, there never was one, and the Christian faith has been attacked and placed under siege by the devil and his minions ever since the struggle between Peter and Paul, a struggle seen in every single century since. In every century the Church has been, as the hymn says it, “by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.” Our age is no different.

But how have the faithful carried on during times of greatest duress? How have the priests and bishops maintained their integrity when surrounded by heresies? Well, for one thing, they did not compromise. They chose exile over selling out. In Constantinople, for instance, the so-called *sleepless monks* maintained

their communion with Felix of Rome when Acacius accepted the *Henotikon*. For this their abbot was imprisoned.

In the mid-seventh century, Maximus the Confessor was a strong advocate for the catholic faith against Monothelism, a mutation of the Monophysite heresy. Maximus was called to Constantinople for interrogation. When his adversaries pointed out that already the whole Christian world recognized the legitimacy of Monothelism, and that he was the only one remaining in the whole world who did not recognize the Monothelite Patriarch of Constantinople, he replied, “If even the whole universe should begin to commune with the Patriarch, I will not commune with him. For I know from the writings of the holy Apostle Paul that the Holy Spirit will give over to anathema even the angels, if they should begin to preach any other gospel, introducing anything new.” For this they cut off his right hand and his tongue, so that he could not proclaim or defend the truth either by word or by pen, and he died in exile soon afterwards. It was only after this that he was vindicated, that Monothelism was recognized as heretical, and that he gained the title of Venerable Maximus; only after he died.

The death of every martyr is really another instance of a stalwart refusal to compromise the faith. The truly faithful of ages past did not compromise.

For another thing, they encouraged one another to remain steadfast. When Acacius caved in on the *Henotikon*, Pope Felix wrote to him at once to encourage him to reconsider this, and stay the course against compromising the Faith. Maximus the Confessor once stood toe-to-toe with Pyrrhus the Monothelite patriarch of Constantinople in a public debate, and the record indicates that his arguments in behalf of the Faith were so powerful that Pyrrhus was himself convinced, and renounced the heresy in 645. Let us never discount the value of the Truth. When we confess the Faith in its purity, with all boldness, we have the best hope of convincing its assailants.

And for yet another thing, none of the theological struggles was ever settled by the laity. Say all you want about the laymen who turned back the liberals of the Missouri Synod in the 1970s, it is nevertheless a matter of record that the Christological heresies of the early centuries of Christendom were always overcome by the bishops who took their stand. While it is true that the return of Athanasius from exile was met with great rejoicing by the people of Alexandria, for love of their bishop, their affection would not have amounted to much had he not first stood firm against heresy until the imperial sentence against him was reversed. Certainly much can be said about the voice of approbation and support which the Church’s hearers gave to her great preachers. Augustine was promoted to the bishopric by acclamation even against his will; Athanasius was met with great rejoicing on his return from exile; Gregory was so popular that his own frantic efforts to keep himself from the papacy proved futile because of the fierce determination of the people of Rome that he should be their bishop; and Martin Luther of course could never have accomplished the aims of the Reformation without the avid support of the people. All of this is most certainly true; what cannot be said, however, is that the people—the laity, that is—were the ones who ever actually carried the day for the Church. That simply wasn’t their duty. In the Early Church, the great heroes for the truth of the Gospel were virtually always bishops, priests, or deacons, whether in leading and moving the Church to prevail against heretics, or in holding their ground against antagonistic emperors, or in courageous and bold stubbornness for the Gospel against sometimes tremendous majorities of Arians or Monophysites or Monothelites or whatever variety of heresy happened to be in style.

But I believe that perhaps above all, the integrity of the Faith in times of trouble was preserved by something people might be inclined to consider last: the holy liturgy. It was the liturgy which defined for the world and for all the faithful the Faith of the Church. One clear example of this was the use of the diptychs, lists containing the names of various bishops to be mentioned by the celebrant in the Church’s general prayer. The mention of these names was itself a declaration of fellowship. If a bishop became convinced that another bishop was a heretic, his way of declaring himself to be out of fellowship with him

was generally to remove his name from his diptychs. Usually the spurned bishop would retaliate by removing the other bishop's name from *his* diptychs. More generally speaking, the liturgy of a region was manifestly a token of the unity of the Faith by its uniformity from church to church. The unity of all the churches in a see was identifiable most especially by identity of worship forms, a *liturgical* formula of concord, so to speak.

Thus, to sum up with broad strokes, when we look to the Church of the first millennium, we see no golden age, but continual struggles against heresy, and we see a Church which, for the preservation of her integrity, refused to compromise, encouraged men to stay the course, expected leadership by the bishops, and maintained a liturgical uniformity.

And these, therefore, are the very matters I would respectfully offer for us all to consider as we face the challenges of a splintering Lutheran Church in our day.

First, let no one say we have never been here before. We have *always* been here before. This is life in the Church Militant. Get used to it. And let no one deceive you.

Second, let none of us fall for the wiles of sinister compromises like the *Henotikon*, or like the infamous *Leipzig Interim* of a thousand years later, over which Philip Melancthon sold his soul, if as Lutherans you feel the need for a more familiar example. Let historians of a later day mark us as the ones who forded the stream, who held our ground, who refused surrender.

Third, let us seek to establish, perhaps by way of a ministerium, a regular avenue by which the pastors of the churches can routinely encourage and support each other. In an earlier age the Circuit *Winkels* may have served this purpose well, but we all know those days are over. Circuits are theologically bankrupt in most places, and if they are still supposed to provide the *best* local expressions of our synodical network, I'd hate to see what the others are like. Circuits everywhere have become the haunt of jackals, wilderness places where theology is scarce, and no place of refuge can be found for, say, a beleaguered pastor needing encouragement while dealing with rebellion in the parish. Indeed, sometimes the worst offenses come from the circuit pastors themselves. Believe me, I speak from experience. A new system of pastoral alliances, a new ministerium, is by no means of small practical necessity. The need for it is great indeed, if only to provide the means of support and encouragement that has tragically eroded away.

Fourth, let us consider the possibility that we might not need to think in terms of *synodical* relationships at all, but rather, and maybe even exclusively, in terms of the allegiances of the bishops, as it were. It's true that not many of us like that term for our Lutheran Churches today, and perhaps the bureaucratic baggage attached to the modern notion of a bishop is too much to overcome, in spite of the preferable biblical vocabulary. Surely we all know that it is *de iure divino*, by divine right, that *every* pastor is in a certain sense a bishop, in fact, in the most important of senses. Therefore let the *pastors* form allegiances, let the pastors do this, and let no one suppose that if we omit laymen from these allegiances we are somehow discriminating against them, or lording it over them, or whatever arguments of straw should be raised against the idea. In fact the laity themselves ought to insist that their pastors form such allegiances with their fellow pastors, since this promotes unity and good order in the Church, in addition to the benefits provided to the ministry of their pastors themselves. A healthy and proper ministerium can only be of benefit to the Church. I can envision a day when someone might well answer, when asked what denomination he's from, that he's a Missouri Synod Lutheran, and that his pastor belongs to the Peoria Ministerium, or the Chicago Ministerium, or the Fort Wayne Ministerium. Who knows? Maybe the day will come when the Ministerium means more than the Synod.

Finally, let's see if we can all decide on a form of liturgy and stick to it. I don't mean to criticize the LCMS hymnal committee; I believe there are many who have made brilliant contributions to the hymnal project. But I don't believe the liturgy of the Church ought to be subject to the whims of a group as unpredictable as the Synod in convention. Synod loyalists may see in the acts of conventions the work of

the Holy Spirit. I prefer to expect the work of the Spirit manifested in the holy liturgy, a sacred thing over which the assembled bishops of Christendom have long stood guard. And by “assembled bishops” I don’t mean Arians, or Monophysites (although even their ancient liturgies are marvelously superior to what passes for worship in the Synod these days), or Monothelites, or Pelagians, or the players of Team Kieschnick, whose worship style generally amounts to so much tomfoolery at best, and blasphemy at worst. We need to agree upon a faithful liturgy, and we would all be better off if it were such that we could all agree to use it as though willingly bound to it by canon law. If a ministerium helps in this regard, I’m all for it. We don’t have an archbishop or a pope telling us what it will be, and maybe we don’t want one, but knee-jerk reactions against the idea of canon law or episcopal decrees aren’t really helpful in the long run. The end result of our removals of canon law ought to have been predictable, and we are certainly seeing it today. We have arrived at liturgical chaos. It was bound to be. Just as in the realm of politics we have seen America’s erstwhile freedom of religion become freedom *from* religion, so have excessive abuses of the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession resulted in freedom from liturgy. It is not necessary to the unity of the Church that ceremonies instituted by men be everywhere alike, but the Apology, in its extended clarification on this point, encourages liturgical uniformity, saying, “it is pleasing to us that, for the sake of unity and good order, universal rites be observed, just as also in the churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord’s Day, and other more eminent festival days” (Ap 7 and 8, 33). It certainly cannot be said that all questions pertaining to the divine liturgy of the Faith are indifferent matters. On the contrary, confessional statements and documents, whether coming from Lockport or Keller or Chicago or Peoria, become nothing more than truly indifferent and insignificant matters if they have no effect upon or relationship to the liturgy of the Church. Our confessions must be reflected in our liturgical rites and ceremonies in some way.

I don’t claim to know exactly in what way, however, and for that matter I also don’t claim to have the answers or specific agendas needed for the putting of any of these guidelines to use. I can’t tell you what to expect out of these beginnings, either, and must candidly admit that I myself have many more questions than answers at this juncture. I think, frankly, that it would be best if we all looked at these matters in the same way: slowly, deliberately, carefully, and thoughtfully. And we ought to take heart. The answers will not and should not come quickly. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and good theology is never done in a hurry. But maybe this little conference is just the beginning we need. To put that another way, if you prefer to hear it in the terms of contemporary worship, I offer a line in an old “hymn” the Beatles used to croon: *I don’t have a car and it’s breakin’ my heart, but I’ve got a driver and that’s a start.*

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