**Keeping our Lutheran Identity**

**—Pastor Domke**

Perhaps you have heard me speak about the importance of knowing the truth and knowing who that truth is and from where that truth comes. I have spoken extensively about the nature of scripture which is the place where the truth is found (John 17:17) and there in the Word of God the Holy Spirit points us to Christ who is the one and only true Savior, there is no other.

Within the context of truth and as Christians we believe in absolute truth which does not change with the passing of time nor by the whims of culture, within this context we’ve been faced with the doctrinal and moral differences between denominations. Some of these differences, like the heterodox teaching on the Lord’s Supper, do not necessarily make members of those denominations non-Christian. However, by their wrong confession they have placed themselves in the category of teaching false doctrine and being in error. By “being in error,” I mean believing, teaching and/or confessing a belief that is in contradiction with the Word of God.

Some people believe that any time a person points out another person’s or church’s error that we are being judgmental. Political correctness literally under cuts the truth by denying people the ability to say something is wrong. Jesus commands us to be judgmental about what is right when He said, “Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right?” (Luke 12:57).

Our Lutheran forefathers were challenged with false teachings about the Church, about salvation, grace, works, the law, the Bible, the second coming of Christ and many other doctrines that are uniquely biblical. When doctrine (teaching) is twisted from God’s intended meaning and sometimes ripped from the context of scripture they become false doctrine and dangerous to the soul. That is why it is important for all of us to be in continual study of the scriptures and to know what makes us uniquely Lutheran. Keep in mind that a person may say they believe in Christ, but in reality they do not when they believe wrongly about Jesus. So it is out of love that we speak the truth, speak what we confess and condemn what is false and dangerous to the soul.

What is our Lutheran identity? ***Scripture Alone, Faith Alone, and Grace Alone:*** *These**describe our identity but our identity goes much deeper and they are more than* clues to the answer. Within the bible, that is scripture alone we discover the ‘marks of the Church’. The marks of the church are: the preaching and teaching of the pure gospel and the biblical administration and teaching of the sacraments. Where these exist as God intended that is where the true church exists. These marks, mark those churches which are truly evangelical, Christian and biblical. Mueller said, “Occasionally Lutheran theologian’s to-day speak of *two* aspects of the Church, a visible aspect: the Word and the Sacraments, and an invisible one: the true members of the Church. But it is logically incorrect to describe the marks of the Church *(notae ecclesia)* as an essential part of the Church.

It is true the Gospel and the Sacraments are true *marks* of the Church; for the Church is never found where these are not in use. Moreover, the Gospel and the Sacraments are also the *means* by which the Church is established and preserved; for without the means of grace there can be no believers, Is. 55:10 ff; Rom. 10:17; Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15, 16. But to call the means of grace part of the Church or the Church itself is an absurdity.[[1]](#footnote-1) Where the Gospel and the Sacraments are preached and administered as taught in Holy Scripture there is the true Church.

The Christian Encyclopedia offers this comment on the ‘Marks of the Church’. “The Christian Encyclopedia says the Lutheran Symbols[[2]](#footnote-2) have developed the concept of the Gospel and the Sacraments as the marks of the church[[3]](#footnote-3). (A[[4]](#footnote-4)C V, VIII, XIII). Special ministers of the Word are significant for the church[[5]](#footnote-5). as they use Gospel and Sacraments and train Christians for their mutual ministry (Eph 4:7–13).[[6]](#footnote-6)

What we confess and teach means a great deal. It is what all of us at confirmation vowed to die for, if it ever came to that eventuality. That is why what is said in our constitution is so important. These words express what we believe and they express who we are as Lutherans. I suggest that you take a moment and consider the meaning of what you, by membership at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church, have agreed to abide by, confess, and proclaim. Further, the meaning of the following is more than just some kind of empty construct. It is the expression of the Christian faith; it is what makes us and the Church at large one in Christ. These words are what we believe, teach and confess as taught in the Word of God.

***From Mt. Calvary’s Articles of Incorporation:***

PREAMBLE

The Word of God requires that a Christian congregation shall conform to His Divine Word in doctrine and practice (Matt. 28:18-20; Gal. 1:6-8) and that all things be done decently and in order (I Cor. 14:40). Therefore we, the members of Mount Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod, Huron, in the County of Beadle, State of South Dakota, accept and subscribe to the following Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, in accordance with which all spiritual and material affairs of our congregation shall be governed.

The purpose of this congregation shall be to seek the honor and glory of God, to carry out His will, to manifest the unity of our faith in Jesus Christ as God and Savior, to spread the kingdom of God and to foster Christian fellowship and love, by the preaching of the Word of God, by the administration of the Sacraments, and by the religious instruction of all its members, according to the confessional standard of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Article II).

ARTICLE II - DOCTRINAL STANDARD

The congregation accepts and acknowledges all the books of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God; it also accepts the Symbolic Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in The Book of Concord; the three Ecumenical Creeds; the Unaltered Augsburg Confession; The Apology of the same; The Smalcald Articles; The Small and the Large Catechism of Dr. Luther; The Formula of Concord.

***Note the words in the phrase in the second paragraph of the preamble: purpose …and… unity.***

Where does unity come from? Human opinion? A collection of good ideas for a church? In essence I am asking from what authority do we appeal for purpose and unity? Where does genuine solid guidance come? Answer: “This congregation acknowledges and accepts all (Old Testament and New) as the inspired Word of God **…**” These words bind us to the whole Bible as first importance. The reality is most people have no idea what is in the Bible nor how to apply God’s word in the day-to-day life of the church or their families. They carry what they do know however into the church and make decisions on them, not on what scripture teaches.

Bible study, Catechesis, and Christian education are the only answers to such challenges related to biblical illiteracy. Teaching and learning is hard work, and it is hard to apply the Word in our lives, especially when our sinful nature fights against “judging what is right.”

I know firsthand how difficult it is to apply God’s word and to teach enough to meet the need people have with the many different circumstances that come into the pastor’s office. What those challenges should do is drive us deeper into the Word to find answers. Many people assume they know what is on the pages of scripture, but rarely read it and thus are easily deceived and have not developed the ability to apply biblical teaching into every day life or discern truth from error, so study, study, study the Word.

Then there are the Lutheran Confessions. We have agreed to commit to the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Lutheran Confessions with these words, “The congregation accepts and acknowledges…” the writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of the year 1580 to be the **true and genuine exposition of the doctrines of the Bible**. These Confessional Writings are: the three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian), Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg confession, the Smalcald Articles, Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord.”

The Lutheran Confessions express what we as Lutherans understand the scriptures to teach. They are vitally important for our **unity** within the Lutheran Church. Where there is **little or no unity** in the church it is because we do not agree on or accept first the authority of the Bible and/or then the Lutheran Confessions. Neither the Bible nor the Confessions are, at times, easy to understand because of the difficult doctrinal issues they address. The interesting thing I have found in reading the Confessions is that the very things discussed in them are the same issues we face in the church today.

While the Bible sometimes challenges us in its complexity, it is also very profoundly simple. The same can be said of the Confessions. For example, Luther’s “Large Catechism” is profoundly simple, while other places in the Confessions topics are addressed in a very high academic level e.g. the nature of the sacraments, the nature of Christ, grace, the Gospel, the proper use of the sacraments and the Law, etc. Lutherans around the world have found in the Confessions a shared faith that trusts in the Christ of the Bible, rejoices in the one true Gospel that alone saves, and gives witness to God’s work to save men, women and children from hell, death and the grave.

My concern in this article is about keeping our Lutheran identity intact. The root of the concern is to keep the true saving Gospel alive and proclaimed to the lost and the faithful, not merely to remain Lutheran. To be truly Lutheran, is to be a person who is committed to the scriptures completely, who live a life reflecting that of Christ and who knows Christ and trusts in Him and His Word alone for salvation.

Historically, being Lutheran means being faithful to the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions, properly discerning the Law and properly trusting in and proclaiming the Gospel. In some circles that is no longer the case. Liberalism (which teaches false doctrine) has undercut so much of what the church was that many places once known as centers of Christendom, are no longer Christian nor Lutheran. In these places they have eliminated the creator God and replaced Him with “Mother Nature” or that of evolution. When it comes to the God that has redeemed us from death and hell, well, He is substituted for one of the other gods who destroy mankind rather than destroying sin on the cross by sending His Son to become man’s substitute saving sinful mankind by forgiving his sin.

What is at stake in this issue of being Lutheran and faithful first to the Bible and then the Lutheran Confessions are souls. Let us then be encouraged in this: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1).

**The “Marks of the Church”**

**—Pastor Domke**

Are changed lives the “Marks of the Church”?

**No! Changed lives result from the “Marks of the Church” and only as they are confessed and proclaimed.**

What are the Marks of the Church?

Christians have defined the Church by noting its “marks,” those signs that characterize its nature. The adjectives *one, holy, catholic*, and *apostolic*, are used to describe the Church in the Nicene Creed, and have often been used to designate the essential elements of the Church, without which it does not exist. The Church is one; all believers are gathered into the hidden Church through their vertical relationship with the triune God. The Church is holy; the Holy Spirit has cleansed it through the re-creative Word, which forgives the sins of all its members. The Church is catholic; it has spread to the ends of the earth and has continued to exist in all periods of human history since Pentecost. The Church is apostolic; it is bound to the inspired Word of God in the apostolic writings, and from them it receives its life and its life-giving power.

Martin Luther informally suggested other lists of marks of the Church. In 1539 he composed a list stating that the Church always has the preaching of the Gospel, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Office of Keys or formal confession and absolution, called pastoral leadership, public prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Furthermore, the Church will always suffer under the cross of misfortune and persecution. Finally, although this does not distinguish it from upright groups of unbelievers, the Church is marked by its practice of love, in good works of all kinds. Two years later he constructed a similar list, this time enumerating Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, confession and absolution, the public ministry of preaching, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, respect for temporal political powers and for marriage and family life, suffering and persecution, and the rejection of physical force against its enemies. Other Christians have suggested that the Church cannot exist without the exercise of discipline, and of excommunication. Note: Lutherans have never accepted the practice of excommunication as a mark of the Church, apart from its proper exercise within the Office of the Keys.

The Lutheran Confessions stipulate that the Church is simply marked by God’s Word, in oral and sacramental forms. The Church exists where the Gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered, or the Church is holy believers, lambs who are listening to the voice of the Shepherd. However believers describe and delimit the Church, that much must be remembered. It is nothing other than Christ’s holy people, whose holiness depends on the continuing action of the re-creating Word among them.1

“Among all gifts the gift of the Word of God is the most valuable. For if you take this away, it is like taking the sun away from the earth” (Luther, in *What Luther Says,* Ed. E. Plass [St. Louis: Concordia, 1959] 1465).2

There are true Christians, or members of the invisible Church, also in those denominations which, besides teaching false doctrines, still adhere to the fundamental truths of the Gospel. Any Gospel text, if it really be Gospel, is potentially the whole Gospel, and, therefore, is capable of producing faith in the hearts of them that receive it. It is possible that in ignorance men err in some doctrines, while in their hearts they trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, and hope to be saved by His grace. The theology of the head does not always agree with the theology of the heart. But where the essentials of the Gospel, which alone works saving faith, are unknown or denied, there can be no members of the Christian Church. Where the Gospel is taught in its truth and purity, the marks of the Church stand out more distinctly.3

Occasionally Lutheran theologians today speak of *two* aspects of the Church, a visible aspect: the Word and the Sacraments, and an invisible one: the true members of the Church. But it is logically incorrect to describe the marks of the Church *(notae ecclesia)* as an essential part of the Church. It is true, the Gospel and the Sacraments are true *marks* of the Church; for the Church is never found where these are not in use. Moreover, the Gospel and the Sacraments are also the *means* by which the Church is established and preserved; for without the means of grace there can be no believers (Is. 55:10 ff; Rom. 10:17; Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15, 16).4

As the church is recognized through its marks so are the marks of faithfulness in Lutheran pastors recognized by their faithfulness to the Word and the Lutheran Confessions. Nothing else but the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions guide their teaching and preaching. Fear of people, or the desire for acceptance, must not deter such faithfulness. Their vows are rooted in two documents, the Bible being inspired by God and the Confessions containing the Word, but also being the true exposition of what the Bible teaches.

In the pastor’s vows of ordination he promises faithfulness to the whole Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Not in so far as we agree with them, but wholly and completely as they are written. We are bound to this vow so when the called ministers deal with us by Christ’s command, i.e., when they teach, admonish, and comfort us from the Word of God, then we must receive their instruction, admonition, and comfort as though God spoke to us Himself. “He that hears you, hears Me and he that despises you, despises Me and he that despises Me, despises Him that sent Me” (Luke 10:16). Whenever they truly teach the Word of God, they are God’s ambassadors to us, and as such must be respected and obeyed (2 Cor. 5:20).5

This commitment to faithfulness does not just apply to the Lutheran pastor; it applies also to the members of the congregation. When a person joins a LCMS congregation they must agree with and are to be one in faith with and are to share the same confession of faith with the one true church. In some congregational constitutions it rightly says, “whereas, according to the Word of God, it is the duty of Christians:

1. *To fellowship with those who confess the true faith (Acts 2:42; Hebrews l0: 24-25; 1 John 2:19; 1 Corinthians 1:10-11);*

*b. To endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace;*

*c. To administer the Office of the Keys as a body (Matthew 18:17; John 20:22-23);*

*d. To conduct all internal and external affairs of such body “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40).*

And further some constitutions say: This congregation acknowledges and accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the revealed Word of God, verbally inspired, and acknowledges and accepts all the Confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of the year 1580 to be the true and genuine exposition of the doctrines of the Bible. These Confessional Writings are: the three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian), Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg confession, the Smalcald Articles, Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord.

All this calls us to one faith that confesses the historic and biblical faith. When we do not follow or agree with this faith we oppose God and we oppose the truth that comes in Christ Jesus.

I share this article for the purpose of reminding us all that we have committed ourselves to be a Christ and cross-centered Lutheran congregation. There is no room for false doctrine. There is no room for teaching which allows the principles and philosophies of the world to over shadow and then overtake a clear biblical and Lutheran world view. Such things more than mask the marks of the true Church, they destroy them. In such situations the gospel is hidden and/or completely lost. The sacraments are diminished in importance to the point of invisibility and the law is not seen as righteous, but as evil.

May God work through the means of grace, to bring Mt. Calvary Lutheran to her full joyful understanding of God’s grace, the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of glory!

**Footnotes:**

1. Kolb, Robert, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House) 2000, c1993.

2. Eldon Weisheit, *Homiletic Help!*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House) 1998.

3. Koehler, Edward W.A.; D.D., *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House) 1999.

4. Mueller, John Theodore, *Christian Dogmatics (Mueller)*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House) 1999, c1934.

5. Koehler, Edward W.A.; D.D., *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House) 1999

1. Mueller, J. T. (1999). *Christian dogmatics* (electronic ed., p. 547). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **Symbolics.** Branch of theological knowledge dealing with creeds of the ch.. Comparative symbolics is the comparative study of creeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ch. church; chapter (usually abbr. chap.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. AC Augsburg Confession [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ch. church; chapter (usually abbr. chap.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lueker, E. L. (Ed.). (2000). In *Christian cyclopedia* (electronic ed.). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)