

Isn't the Church Big Enough For Both of Us?

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“Our Struggle” is the way the topic has been announced: “Our Struggle for Mission and Unity.” Well, one form this struggle has taken, that I think more and more of us have experienced, is the struggle to be able to put our finger on exactly what the issue is. And, if we are able to do that, a further struggle is to be able to put that issue into words that will speak to the entire length and breadth of the Church. One way of stating the issue, so it has appeared to more and more of us is as follows. It's a very simple question really. And it is to ask within the community of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod: “Is this church of ours big enough for both of us?” Or, maybe to ask it in such a way that the implied answer is very clearly, “Yes! Isn't this church of ours big enough for both of us?” Friends, I suggest that's the issue: “Isn't this church big enough for both of us?”

You can almost anticipate the negative answer you might get from some folks who would immediately imagine that this question suggests a kind of sloppy, spineless, sentimental, all-inclusive unity regardless of confessional standards. I think that's changing the subject. That's an evasion. When we say “both of us” – or however many sides there are by this time – certainly it's clear to everyone (and its even clearer sometimes to the people outside of our church than it is to those of us

inside) that, when we talk about “us” within this community, the “us” refers to people who, with one accord, subscribe to, believe, teach, and confess the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God and the symbolic books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a faithful and unadulterated statement and exposition of that Word. I know of no exceptions to that. Do you? Now, if under that common confessional umbrella we are all gathered, then I repeat the question. “Isn’t the issue really: Isn’t this church of ours big enough for us both?”

People all over, and perhaps more often outside the church, people from the press (the print and broadcast media in particular) continue to ask: “what really is the nub of the matter? If there are two sides, over what is it that the two sides are divided?” Now I know it’s the job of good newsmen to state this sort of thing as simply as they can for their reading public. And I don’t begrudge them that. And the way that issue is usually formulated in short order for the reading and listening public is to say, “It’s over Biblical interpretation. The one side says, ‘We are for literal interpretation of the Scripture’ and the other side says, ‘We are for figurative interpretation when that’s necessary’.” I don’t think that’s the issue. Do you?

Or, we use labels to try to get at the issue. We say, “There are those who are moderates doctrinally, and there are those who are conservatives doctrinally.” I don’t think that’s the issue. Do you? My guess is that we wouldn’t have to scratch very deeply beneath the skin of this audience this evening, and we would find lots of us – beginning with the man who’s speaking to you – who are really quite conservative doctrinally. And they may surprise the socks off of you if you heard what kind of Biblical interpretation they do hold. No, I don’t think that’s the issue.

I do think, though, what is the issue is a certain style of churchmanship – churchpersonship – I should say. And its style of churchmanship that eventuates in the question “Isn’t this church big enough for both of us?” If there are two sides – and let’s grant for the sake of argument that there are – then I see the two sides opposed to each other, not so much in terms of questions of Biblical interpretation as in the style of churchmanship. I have a colleague who’s back at 801 running what’s left of that Seminary who by no means is a literalist when it comes to Biblical interpretation. If there are two sides, I see them divided much more in terms of the question: “Isn’t this church big enough for both of us?”

And I find folks on the one side being the folks who say, “Are there theological differences within The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod?” Why, of course there are. And that’s not particularly new. Of course there are differences. What makes the difference is how you handle those differences once you’ve got them on your hands. What you do with them, if you are the Church of Jesus Christ, is that you sit down together and you talk the differences through and work them out. And that, my friends, is being “Church”. That is being “Church”. You may never work out your differences. Or, you may no more than work out this set of problems than you inherit another batch in the next decade. And another set after that. And finally the Parousia will come, and only then will all the differences be resolved. But, as you’re working them out, that is being the “Church”. That’s one side of the controversy: the people who take that side, that view toward working out our differences among us by talking together.

And on the other side, if I may speak for them, though I object to their style of churchmanship, would be the side that says, “Do we have theological differences? Indeed we do. And the differences are such that the only way really to deal with them

is to get rid of those people who differ. And not until we do that can we be 'Church'." Isn't this church of ours big enough for both of us?

I find that, as we address this question to more and more audiences of our Synod, lay as well as clergy, it's a meaningful way of putting the issue. And it evokes a response, an appreciative response, where maybe some of the earlier ways of stating the issue did not. I'd like to launch an "Operation Big Enough", where we'd fan out in a thousand forum discussions throughout the length and breadth of the Synod. Not just hold summit meetings behind locked doors between three or four prima donnas to whom we say, "Now, you've got to thrash this out between you because it's your problem. And when you're all finished, you let us know what you decide. Meanwhile, the rest of us will go back to business as usual." Nonsense! This is the problem of the Church. And let the whole Church be engaged in asking, "Isn't this church big enough for both of us?"

What if someone says, "I'm not sure that it is big enough until I hear what you believe, teach and confess?" Should I be threatened by his question? Indeed not! I should say to him, "Why, I thought you would never ask! That's exactly what I wanted you to ask. And I hope you will hear me out – hear what I do believe, teach and confess – and test me by the Word of God. And when I'm finished, I'd like to ask you, brother, what you believe, teach and confess. And I hope what you and I both are ready to say, when we've heard each other out is: "This church is big enough for us both."

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