

How We Treat Each Other in the Church

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by Ted Kober

We preach it. We teach it. We expect our parishioners and students to believe it. But does the way we treat one another as leaders in Synod give witness to the forgiveness we proclaim?

A Bride Like No Other...

“The wedding guests have gathered in great anticipation; the ceremony to be performed today has long been awaited ... The bridegroom and his attendants gather in front of the chancel...

The sound of the organ rises, a joyous announcement that the bride is coming. Everyone stands and strains to get a proper glimpse of the beauty. Then a horrible gasp explodes from the congregation. This is a bride like no other.

In she stumbles. Something terrible has happened! One leg is twisted. She limps pronouncedly. The wedding garment is tattered and muddy; great rents in her dress leave her scarcely modest. Black bruises can be seen welting her bare arms; the bride’s nose is bloody. An eye is swollen, yellow and purple in its discoloration. Patches of hair look as if they had actually been pulled from her scalp.

Fumbling over the keys, the organist begins again after his shocked pause. The attendants cast their eyes down. The congregation mourns silently. Surely the Bridegroom deserved better than this. That handsome Prince who has kept himself faithful to his love should find consummation with the most beautiful of women—not this. His bride, the church, has been fighting again” (Mains, 1979).

Does this scenario describe any church you know? I submit that our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod sometimes resembles such a bride. How we as church leaders treat one another speaks loudly of whether or not we remember that our sins are forgiven.

My Unique Experience Led to Observations

Over the past few years, I trained a variety of LCMS church leaders in biblical peacemaking: District Presidents, Circuit Counselors, Reconcilers, university and seminary leaders, school administrators and teachers, and other professional church workers and laity. In addition, churches

and schools consulted with me, and I intervened in conflicted churches and schools, mediating disputes among Lutheran leaders.

Training thousands of Lutheran leaders provided me with a unique experience as a layman. I was considered an “insider,” because I have been a life-time member of an LCMS congregation. On the other hand, I was perceived as not being part of the “system,” since I am not a rostered church professional or a district executive.

During this time, many individuals shared personal concerns with me that they had not shared with district officials. Although not intentionally at first, I noted observations about our Synod and how we work together. As I identified themes and patterns, I began to probe to learn more about the reasons underlying the concerns.

Our Synod Is Blessed in Many Ways

Through my contacts, I appreciated more fully some of the ways in which Synod is blessed.

1. My first observation was reaffirmation: Our greatest strength is Jesus Christ, the Church’s head. As we continue to focus on Christ, we will remain faithful to God and be able to move forward in our Synod’s work.
2. I marveled at how God has richly blessed the Missouri Synod with gifted leaders in every district and area—pastors, ministers of religion, and laity. Our leaders love their Lord, study God’s Word, and dedicate their lives to serving Christ’s Church.
3. We benefit from substantial unity in doctrine. While there are some differences, I found far more unity in doctrine than diversity. Different practices of ministry delivery and worship exist—but we must be careful to distinguish unity from uniformity.
4. The LCMS is a world leader in Christianity in its mission work, its education systems, and its production of new Christian curricula and other materials.
5. The LCMS is a world leader in Christianity in its desire to equip church leaders in biblical peacemaking. Ken Sande, President of Peacemaker Ministries (a non-denominational Christian ministry), observes that no other denomination has invested more time and resources into training leaders in biblical peacemaking than the Missouri Synod. The LCMS Dispute Resolution System, although it continues to be

refined, provides a model system which other church bodies in America are studying for implementation.

Is Our Synod Less Effective than It Should Be?

I believe that our work together is less effective and productive than it should be. In 2 Peter, we read why that may be:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. (2 Peter 1:3-9)

God has given us, individually and corporately, everything we need to do the work he has assigned us to do (v. 3-4). We are encouraged to add godly characteristics to our faith and knowledge, so that we may be more productive and effective in our work for him (v. 4-8). Peter also indicates, however, that those who fail to add these things to their faith are less effective and productive than they should be because they have forgotten that their sins are forgiven.

The question I wrestle with is this: Is it possible that we in the Missouri Synod have sometimes forgotten that we have been cleansed from our past sins?

Five Areas of Concern

From my experiences, I have concluded that there are five areas of concern we need to address in the life of our Synod:

1. There is significant evidence of unresolved hurt, pain, bitterness, and unforgiveness among the leaders in our church. Does this suggest that those living in bitterness and unforgiveness have forgotten that their sins are forgiven?
2. There is an attitude of failing to recognize the sinfulness of some of our practices in the culture of our church body, which we have accepted as the norm and even justified:
 - Failure to speak well of each other and put the best construction on things.

- Labeling, gossip, slander.
- Justifying the publishing of accusations without first “Going and showing my brother his fault.”
- Church, district, and synodical leaders acting on second- and third-hand information to accuse and demand defense, without giving the accused an opportunity to freely explain before being charged guilty.
- Technology systems (Internet chat rooms, phone calls, e-mails, etc.) used to talk about others (gossip) rather than talk directly to others.

Do these sinful attitudes and activities among church leaders suggest that we have forgotten that our sins are forgiven?

3. Significant feelings of mistrust and suspicion exist among many of our professional church workers. Some indicated that they fear sharing their honest feelings within circuit and district meetings. Several church leaders reported a lack of personal accountability to lay leaders or pastors. Others disclosed that they do not have a personal confessor. Does our mistrust and suspicion grow out of our forgetting that our sins are forgiven?
4. How we treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is a critical issue. We often present disagreements in doctrine as our greatest synodical issues. I agree that we need to address our doctrinal differences. Nevertheless, I believe that underlying personal sin issues of how we treat one another pose a more serious threat to our unity but are rarely acknowledged. When we fail to deal with each other in love in our disagreements, does that suggest that we have forgotten that our sins are forgiven?
5. People outside of our synod, such as world partner churches and other American denominations, tell us that the Missouri Synod has earned a reputation of confessing a solid biblical doctrine. But synodical members and friends also identify its reputation for sometimes failing to put our faith into practice, especially as it relates to the way we treat one another. Does our reputation of failing to treat each other lovingly suggest that people in the Missouri Synod have sometimes forgotten the forgiveness that Christ won for them on the cross?

Is the culture in our Synod keeping us from being effective and productive in our knowledge of Jesus Christ and the mission He has given us? If so, then St. Peter says to us in verse 9 that we are near-sighted and blind and have forgotten that our sins are forgiven.

How Did I Arrive at My Conclusions?

Observations and Experiences

During breaks, at meal times, in late night talks, in phone calls, in letters and e-mails, church leaders came to me to share personal weaknesses, fears, concerns, and hurts. Some came to me to confess their sins.

And then there were the role play experiences. We trained Circuit Counselors and Reconcilers with participants role-playing actual cases. In a major role play case involving a dispute between a Lutheran pastor and a Lutheran school principal, we had to interrupt many of the role plays so that we could minister to hurting people. The students related too closely to the parties in the case study. In one role play, a pastor had not forgiven his dead father for 35 years. Another participant actually became angry at the person role-playing the pastor, because it reminded him of a pastor from his personal experience. Another related too closely to the principal and blew up at the pastor. In one of the role plays, the person playing the pastor confessed his sins to the reconciler. The reconciler announced God's grace, reminding him that his sins were forgiven. The student then fell out of his role, and with tears in his eyes, exclaimed, "No one has done that for me before. Thank you!"

While speaking, I sometimes heard sarcastic remarks about someone in leadership. I usually ignored the slurs or tried to diffuse them, encouraging people to focus on their own responsibilities. After refuting one such remark, I learned during a break that my correction had offended several people. I arranged to meet separately with a group of fourteen individuals at a meal break. I announced that I was aware that there were some deep hurts among the people in that room, and I wanted to give them an opportunity to talk about their hurts and apply some of the biblical peacemaking principles we had been talking about. I established one ground rule: no accusations against someone who was not present and therefore unable to respond. One individual said, "Ted, our pain is so deep we don't know if we even want to discuss it anymore. Would you give us a couple of minutes to think before we respond to your question?" I agreed.

Ten long minutes passed with no one saying a word. Finally, one person began to talk. And then another. And another. These people poured out their deep-seated hurts. Eventually, one older pastor concluded, "After what I have been through, I would never encourage any of my children or grandchildren to go into church ministry!" Another pastor agreed, "If one of my family insists on going into church work, I won't stop him. But I will not do anything to encourage anyone in my family to go into church work. Why would I want my kids or grand-kids to suffer what I

have from other leaders in Synod?" Most heads in the room nodded in agreement.

The pain and hurt among our church professionals is incredible. As I traveled across our Synod, I had heard many other church workers echo the same sentiment. We search for ways to encourage more people to go into full-time church work, but university and seminary recruiting won't solve this problem. Unless we begin to change the way we treat one another, we will continue to lose good church workers and fail to recruit new, quality candidates.

That night, I began to reflect on how serious this problem is. I become overcome with grief and wept for our Synod. I wondered whether I wanted to continue to work with LCMS leaders and learn more about the unspoken pain. I found comfort that evening by going into the chapel, spending a long time in prayer and Scripture, to seek strength from my Lord. My assistant sought me out and prayed with me. I prayed fervently that night, and many times since, that God will change the culture in our Synod so that the hurts in our church workers can be healed.

What underlies these long-term unresolved hurts? I started to probe.

When church workers came to confess their sins to me, I asked them why they were confessing to me. Was there no one else they could confess their sins to? What about the District President? "No, he's the ecclesiastical supervisor who holds the power to remove me from ministry." What about your circuit counselor? "No, he's an arm of the District office." Are there any pastors in your circuit that you can go to? "No way! I did that once (or twice or three times) and was stabbed in the back. I learned that you can't trust your brothers!" Isn't there a trusted elder or other lay leader in your church you can go to? As one pastor declared to me, "I tried that and I got hurt bad. It's been 18 years since I trusted a layman. I just don't think I can do that!"

Let me remind you that my primary contact with church leaders included experienced, mature church workers. These were not primarily new workers or those with major conflicts in their churches. They were the current leaders of our church body! I ask you, what is happening to the leadership in our church if many of its key church workers have no one to whom they can confess their sins or admit their weaknesses?

In 1 John 1:8, we read, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Are these leaders deceiving themselves or denying themselves the opportunity to confess their sin, and is the truth not in them?

In Galatians 6:2, we are admonished, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Have these leaders forgotten that their sins are forgiven? How can they remember if they do not hear the comforting words of forgiveness for their sins? Who is helping bear their burdens?

Supporting Evidence

In the June 1999 issue of Reporter, I found more corroborating evidence. Dr. Bruce Hartung’s article concluded a three-part series with the title, “The LCMS is losing good workers. The question is . . . WHY?” (p. 8-9) In his article, he quotes portions of written responses he received from the Synod’s professional church workers. For example:

“First of all, a comment on one of your comments. You wrote, ‘Herein is our challenge: Can we speak forthrightly about such things?’ Is it not Scripturally mandated that we should share things with each other in love? I know why you ask this question. It is because in our church (LCMS), open communication is not welcomed. We are taught and many live by the premise that we must put on outside facades and not live in reality.”

“Anyone who knows what is going on knows that they will be immediately labeled and never supported by the brothers.”

“One of my sons has lost a strong interest in the ministry in view of the present climate in the LCMS, and in view of the absence of support for me by LCMS leaders when I was under attack.”

“I reached out to my fellow pastors for encouragement, only to be lectured at instead of listened to—and, as it happened, to be stabbed in the back by one of the ‘brethren.’”

“The thing that affected me and my stress problems is that I had no confidant.”

LCMS church workers wrote these words of pain. Every week, these same leaders proclaim the good news about Jesus in our pulpits and classrooms. As a body of believers, have we created a culture in which insiders and outsiders can easily say: “There is a church body who knows that their sins have been forgiven. Look at the way they treat each other. I know they are Jesus’ disciples. I want to be part of that church body!”

The LCMS Board for Higher Education recently released a research project on the Clergy Shortage Study. Its purpose was to identify reasons for the growing shortage of pastors and propose solutions. The overwhelming theme throughout the report has shocked many, and several people are

denying or ignoring what the report identifies as a crucial issue in our Synod. Our church worker shortage is directly related to how we treat one another. The report reveals that how professional church workers treat each other and how lay people and church workers treat each other is having a significant impact on how church workers view their personal satisfaction in ministry. Great dissatisfaction, unresolved conflict, bitterness, depression—all these things among church workers and their spouses have led many not to encourage people to consider professional church work, and in some cases have led church workers to discourage others from considering a call to ministry.

A Doctrinal Issue: How We Live Out Our Faith

As a leader in my congregation, and as a lay leader in Synod, I confess that I have responded sinfully to some of these same things. I quickly learned how convenient labeling is, so I could feel comfortable associating with those who agreed with me. In my groups, it was easy to talk about people in the other groups and speculate on their motivations. I accepted preconceived ideas about the folks from that district and the people who live in that region of the country. I also got caught up in saying that we must do everything possible to defend the truth and get rid of all people who I perceive may be doing something that could lead to false doctrine.

Please do not misunderstand me. I strongly support our Synod’s doctrine and believe that we need to guard ourselves against all false teaching. We must strive together to maintain and build unity in doctrine. We do have important doctrinal issues which we need to discuss and study together.

Nevertheless, I believe that we have often deceived ourselves and justified sinful actions based on the ends of defending God’s truth, as if God needs us to use whatever sinful means are available to defend His truth.

We have accepted certain activities as norms of our LCMS culture, but which God calls sinful:

- labeling (judging) people or groups of people;
- speculating on others’ motives;
- talking about others instead of to them (gossip);
- accepting or acting on accusations of others without personally talking to the accused and giving them an opportunity to describe their side of the story before we ourselves accuse them of being guilty;
- failing to love one another as Christ loves us.

In his devotion book *Morning and Evening*, Charles H. Spurgeon warns Christians of justifying our little sins:

Beware of light thoughts of sin. At the time of conversion, the conscience is so tender, that we are afraid of the slightest sin. Young converts have a holy timidity, a godly fear lest they should offend against God. But alas! Very soon the fine bloom upon these first ripe fruits is removed by the rough handling of the surrounding world: the sensitive plant of young piety turns into a willow in after life, too pliant, too easily yielding. It is sadly true, that even a Christian may grow by degrees so callous, that the sins which once startled him do not alarm him in the least. By degrees men get familiar with sin. . . At first a little sin startles us; but soon we say, "Is it not a little one?" Then there comes another, larger, and then another, until by degrees we begin to regard sin as but a little ill; and then follows an unholy presumption: "We have not fallen into open sin. True, we tripped a little, but we stood upright in the main. We may have uttered an unholy word, but as for the most of our conversation, it has been consistent." (p. 142)

In my working across our beloved Synod, I have come to the conclusion that the biggest issue hurting our Synod and its effectiveness in ministry is the way in which we treat one another—in other words, it is an issue of how we live out our doctrine.

Tell the Good News about Jesus! We understand the importance of bringing the Good News to the lost—but what about to our own? Our effectiveness in our mission is often hurt by our poor treatment of each other. Jesus says: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35).

Loving one another does not mean we need to compromise doctrine for the sake of unity. Jesus loves everyone, but His love does not stop Him from speaking the truth and confronting sin. Jesus never compromises God's truth for the sake of getting along.

On the other hand, failing to love one another as we discuss our differences does compromise our doctrine. No matter how serious a concern may be for protecting pure doctrine, such concerns never justify sinful responses such as gossip, slander, or unsubstantiated accusations.

How can we build unity in doctrine when we fail to love one another? Paul wrote to the Galatians: "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Gal. 5:15).

As I reflect on how we sometimes treat each other, I have come to this conclusion: We have forgotten that our sins

have been forgiven. I believe we have become too fearful to confess, too righteous to forgive.

Are There Any Solutions? Good News!

Can we really change the culture of our beloved Synod? How do we address these sinful attitudes, words, and actions? Will it do any good to address them? Is it possible to amend our sinful ways? Is there any way that we could actually expect that our culture will improve in a sinful world?

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I have good news for you. Jesus Christ died for our sins. He shed his blood on the cross for you and me. God forgives our sins because Jesus paid the full price for our sins on the cross.

Let us remember that our sins are forgiven. In God's forgiveness, we have been given everything we need to do the work our Lord has assigned to us.

In the assurance of the Good News of the Gospel, I propose some ideas on how we can make positive changes in the culture of our Synod, especially in the way that we treat one another.

Recommendations to Synodical Leadership Helping Effect Godly Change in the Culture of our Synod

I have four specific recommendations for changing the way we treat one another in church leadership.

1. Confession and Forgiveness

God calls us to confess our sins, remembering that God through Christ forgives our sins. By consistently confessing our sins, we will be confessing our active, living faith in Christ.

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8-9)

In addition to confessing our sins to God, we need to confess our sins to each other as well. As individuals, we need to confess privately to those whom we have offended and pray for those with whom we have unresolved conflict.

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." (James 5:16)

As leaders, we should confess our public sins to those whom we have sinned against. Christian leaders who model confession of their own sins break the barriers of self-righteous attitudes that permeate conflicted groups. Whenever we work with a conflicted church or school, the public confession of a leader becomes a key event. What usually follows is a time of confession and forgiveness that is unrestricted and free-flowing. The confession of leaders leads to forgiveness, and people also respond with confessing their own sins.

If you are not aware of any need to confess, I encourage you to examine your heart carefully and seek godly counsel. Is it possible that you have become so righteous that you have no sins to confess? Perhaps you can no longer see your own sin.

What would happen if in all our District gatherings we planned a time in our busy agendas for corporate confession and forgiveness? We could take time to reflect on our corporate and individual sins, confess them, and hear again the good news of forgiveness.

What would happen if in those gatherings, following our corporate confession and forgiveness, we would schedule time when those present could seek out brothers and sisters with whom they are in unresolved conflict so that they could be reconciled through confession and forgiveness?

What would happen if we did the same thing in our Synodical Convention in 2001? Can we model for our people how confession and forgiveness can be part of our church work together rather than just reserved for the Divine Service?

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Col. 3:12-14)

Of course, with the confession, there needs to be the reassurance of the forgiveness of our God because of our Savior Jesus Christ.

2. Mutual Accountability

Loving one another and building trust also means holding one another accountable in love. Some people cry foul when someone asks them to be accountable. This seems to be especially true in the United States where we idolize individual freedom.

Accountability does not mean a lack of trust or love. In

fact, the lack of accountability demonstrates a lack of love (see Hebrews 12:4-11). The Christian leader welcomes accountability and provides it. With our freedom in the Gospel, we also recognize our responsibility to God and to one another.

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Col. 3:15-16)

“Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” (1 Thess. 5:12-13)

Holding one another accountable does not mean beating down into submission or using sinful means to shame our brother or sister into doing what’s right. Mutual accountability requires compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and active listening. But if we do fall into sin as we try to hold one another accountable, we can be reconciled through confession and forgiveness.

3. Gently Teach Peacemaking

We need to continue to teach our people to change our culture by making confession and forgiveness a way of life instead of reserving it for the Divine Service on Sunday. (See Col. 3:15-16 above.) We can continue to teach peacemaking through:

- Bible study;
- Preaching and teaching;
- District and synodical meetings, conferences, and conventions;
- Gently admonishing and encouraging one another, especially other leaders;
- Counseling with God’s Word, rightly dividing between Law and Gospel;
- Worship.

4. Model Biblical Peacemaking

As leaders, we should recognize opportunities to model biblical peacemaking and put our faith into our daily practice. *“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”* (Phil. 4:9)

With every conflict you become aware of, consider applying these four principles:

Glorify God: How can I glorify God and give witness to what Christ has done for me in the way I respond to this conflict?

Get the log out of your eye: How have I contributed to this conflict, and what must I do to get the log out of my eye?

Go and show your brother his fault: Instead of talking to others about my opponent, how can I lovingly and gently help my brother understand how he has contributed to the conflict?

Go and be reconciled: Peacemaking is not a passive activity—it requires action. How can I demonstrate the forgiveness that Christ has given me and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

(Adapted from Sande, 1997.)

Hope for Change

Can we actually effect healthy change in our Synod? Is it really possible to change the culture of our Synod, especially the way we treat one another?

I do not put my hope in our elected Synodical or District leaders or the Synod in convention. More resolutions and bylaws won't change our Synod's culture.

I do not put my hope in the pastors, ministers of religion, or the laity of this Synod.

I do not put my hope in new training programs, new Bible studies, or new materials.

My hope is in the One who created us, the One who made us righteous in His blood, and the One who sanctified us—the One who calls us His own children and made us members of the body of Christ.

To effect this change in the culture of our Synod, we need to focus on Christ and what he has done for us individually and corporately. As the author of Hebrews writes to us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

May the God of grace bless our church leaders and congregations as we walk together in the organization we call the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. May our practice proclaim the doctrine that we are so well known for. May the way we treat one another speak loudly of the remembrance of the forgiveness of our sins, so that our own people will be comforted and unbelievers will become believers.

May the world know that we are Jesus' disciples who not only Tell the Good News About Jesus, but live it!

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