

Basic Requirements for Receiving an Affirmation of Faith

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“Because of the different Lutheran Churches as well as the varying degrees of doctrinal integrity within each body, and because of great disparity of practice among the brothers in this respect, we would enjoy some basic guidelines together with explanation as to their relevance and importance”. With this paragraph of explanation our assignment committee asked that a brief paper be given on BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR RECEIVING AN AFFIRMATION OF FAITH.

What is affirmation of faith? For me it is the same as profession of faith. It is the ratification of that body of doctrine to which we have subscribed within our church body. It is a confirmation of that body of truth that already has been established. It becomes a personal assertion by an individual that he believes and will practice that which the congregation teaches. It is a profession of one's faith with the desire of making it clear that the faith clings to the same truths as does the public confession of the congregation where membership is sought.

The congregations of our Synod have four basic ways in which they receive people into membership: transfer, confirmation, baptism and affirmation or profession of faith. The latter has generally applied no those from Lutheran Church bodies that are not in fellowship with us.

Because of the great diversity among Lutheran Church bodies today, we can expect and do find a corresponding diversity among the individuals who make up those bodies. We find a diversity so great that it is impossible to lump them all in the same grouping, except perhaps with the broad paint brush of errorists. Some may reject the inerrancy of scripture; others the resurrection of Christ; most the doctrine of fellowship; some accept universalism; others some form of Pelagianism; some have a tremendous confession but a lousy practice. Requirements are needed. Some have been given.

It was our Commander who directed us, “... go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Mt. 28:19-20) We assume that those who come to us from other Lutheran Church bodies are believers, but we do recognize that, with very few exceptions, they also have error cluttering up the riverbed of their faith. To teach them to obey “everything I commanded you”, will be a never ending task, not only with those who come to us from outside our church body but also with those within.

Our Synod's model constitution has the following: “Communicant members are those baptized souls who confess the chief parts of Christian doctrine as written in Dr. Luther's Small Catechism and who have declared their adherence to all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, without qualification as the rule and norm of faith and life.” (Art. IV, Sec. 1B)

In the same constitution we are told the congregation is to accept and confess the three ecumenical creeds and the six Lutheran Confessions. Thus to be a member of such a congregation would also signify the acceptance of the same on the part of the member.

In, **THIS WE BELIEVE**, we state: “We believe that God bids us on our part to acknowledge oneness in faith among God's saints on earth only as they by word and deed reveal (confess) the faith of their hearts. Their unity becomes evident when they agree in their confession to the doctrine revealed in Scripture. We believe, furthermore, that the individual through his membership in a church body confesses himself to the doctrine and practice of that body,” (VII Church and Ministry, 6)

From the above it can readily be recognized that requirements were deemed advisable and indeed have been established. We would not want it any other way. Error is a cancer. It can destroy faith. As shepherds, under whom the Lord has placed many sheep, we don't want to lose any. We want each of them to be free of the ticks and burrs and worms of error, false doctrine and unbelief. Make a thorough examination for error. To the extent error is found, a determination is made whether to dip, de-worm, give special feed or all three. However, knowing the nature of the situation and the affinity for error to cling to the sheep, we may usually

assume that there will be need of some type of preventive and corrective assistance. May I suggest that when a Lutheran from a heterodox church body seeks membership ASSUME THEY WILL BE HOLDING TO SOME DOCTRINAL ERROR, even though they may be Christian. Rejoice if you don't find any! Be concerned and helpful when you do. Be happy that you have the whereto lead them out of error to the truth.

In this connection, I would like to observe that many individuals transferred within our own congregations likewise have doctrinal error; this is suspected and often indicated when the transferring pastor indicates in one way or the other that the person is "weak". In this situation the first meeting can be the very one where the most good can be done. They are more apt to listen. They are more prone to want to turn over a new leaf, as it were.

We have requirements. We assume there are errors. What shall we do? If you want to do something you have to find out what is the precise nature of the problem. If I want to cross over into another mountain valley, I'll have to explore the route and determine the problems. If you want to find out something in an unfamiliar and untraveled area, you explore. So, too, with those Lutherans that come to us seeking membership. Explore! Obviously there are many ways to do this. I have heard that some hand out a "test" or "examination" with many questions; questions, that to a large extent, can be answered with multiple choice, or True or False, with a few that demand an answer found totally within the realm of the person's knowledge. Others may hand the prospective member a constitution of the congregation, *This We Believe*, a handbook for members, ask them to come back in a week. If the person, when asked, "Do you find anything you can't accept?" answers, "No", he is taken in by profession of faith. Some automatically insist that each member go through the entire adult information class. Others may insist on a face to face meeting where some exploratory work is done down the doctrinal ladder of the Catechism through discussion. This may last an hour or two. It may be of shorter duration. The purpose is to do two things. One is to determine what the doctrinal situation is and secondly to teach and correct that situation. Where it becomes evident that a short period of time will not suffice, further arrangements are made. Perhaps the individual is requested to attend the regular adult information class for a review or additional meetings are scheduled until those errors that are extent can be cleared up in a God pleasing manner. IN EVERY CASE EXPLORE THE RELIGIOUS TERRAIN AND FIND OUT HOW MANY MOUNTAINS, GULCHES AND RIVERS OF ERROR THERE MAY BE. As one does this make a mental note as to the importance and difficulty of these errors. This may be of help in making the final determination as to what avenue to follow for the teaching of this particular sheep.

When one is entering into an unknown area you try to get some idea as to what it is like from others who may have gone before; by looking at a topographical map; by climbing to a high place where you can get an overlook or finally by following the ridges or other natural divisions within the area. There have been a lot of individuals who have gone before us into the area of other Lutheran Doctrine. We have topographical maps in the form of our Catechism and its various chapters. Our dogmatic and symbolic knowledge will be friendly staffs upon which to lean as we gain entrance to the valley of a man's heart, where the twin springs of understanding and faith begin. Our Lord has placed into our hands the touchstone of his Word. With it all can be tested. Each way can be examined. Every belief can be compared. To use it is to succeed in the exploration. But, with such a large body of doctrine and so much detail, where does one begin and to what extent is it advisable to teach?

USE OUR CATECHISM AS THE BASIS FOR THE EXPLORATION. There are some very important areas that need to be covered in such an exploration. We need to know where the person stands on the matter of the Bible. Does he totally believe God's Word is without error, or not. From many LCMS people and many of the ALC we have some very excellent confessions. From those within the LCA there is often a problem. I may ask questions that deal with creation, the flood, crossing the Red Sea, Jonah, the miracles of the Lord, and the position concerning the women in the church, etc.. In so doing I get a good sampling of what they mean concerning belief in the Bible. Obviously it also gives me a brief insight into some area of concern. It also gives a person a feeling as to the attitude of the person towards the whole matter of God's Word.

It is vital to determine exactly what the person believes concerning salvation. How was it effected? For whom is it? Who gets it? In this area I simply ask the general evangelism questions, "Where will you go if you

should die today?” “Why should the Lord let you into heaven as you stand there at the gate?” Through their answers one learns whether they understand the matter of salvation by through the meritorious works of Christ. You can determine in many instances what their attitude is concerning the Law of God and what it is to them. Is Law and Gospel understood correctly? With a brief question one can enter into the area of objection justification and or universalism. This whole area of salvation is the central part of Christianity, and yet, there is much unclarity, uncertainty and even error mixed with the kernel of saving truth. Our work will never be done.

Church and ministry is an area where there is much uncertainty. We know what the doctrine and practice of the LCMS is concerning the church, although, according to a recent article, there seems to be a slippage and the LCMS is accused of coming closer to the position that we have espoused. In the other church bodies one wonders if they really teach their people anything positive concerning the church, from their erroneous practice the negative is certainly taught.

Our doctrine of church fellowship is totally strange to many if not most Lutherans. Here we run into an area of sensitivity for many people. We can only approach this matter from the point of view that our Savior would not ask anything that is not good for us, for the church, letting His Word do the convincing as W. Franzmann’s article did in the Northwestern Lutheran. (5-21-72)

The attitude they have towards the Means of Grace is of vital interest to the caring pastor. We can enter into this area through a question that asks how do they come to faith. The question also gives, in some cases, an insight as to where they stand on the matter of the born again syndrome or the natural state of man. Depending on the answers, on branches into doctrines of the Sacraments and/or the work of the Holy Ghost.

I know there are many, many ways to do this exploring. The different ways are of no great concern. However, that exploration is done, is of concern. We do not serve the person, or our congregation, or the chief Shepherd well if we fail to explore the religious life of those who come to us and seek membership within our congregation. It is necessary for each pastor to determine how and in what order he is going to do this exploring. We have the catechism, which perhaps is known better than the Bible when it comes to outlining the various truths. Let’s use it! In your mind’s eye notice that the doctrine of scripture is first. Follow that with the doctrine of salvation which will incorporate both Law and Gospel. When dealing with the work of the triune God in man’s salvation it is easy to go from the work of the Holy Ghost into the truths surrounding the Means of Grace, Church and Ministry. I would suggest A SPECIFIC OUTLINE BE FOLLOWED USING KEY QUESTIONS SO THAT ONE WILL BE ABLE TO PROPERLY EXPLORE THE AREA OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF.

I believe that this outline should be committed to memory so full eye contact and attention can be given to the person before you. When you speak to the person directly you gain a lot of knowledge in regard to him, to his thinking, his faith, his weaknesses and attitudes; all things that are of great help when striving to serve the person later on. The following may be of some benefit. It is the general pattern that I often follow. Obviously it doesn’t include “everything” but it does cover what I feel is of vital importance for those who wish to be members of my congregation.

SCRIPTURE:

1. What is the Bible?
2. Do you believe what the Bible says in its first chapter about God creating the entire world in 6 days of 24 hours with the power of his Word?
3. Do you believe the Biblical accounts of the flood, Jonah, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, Jesus turning water into Wine, giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and raising the dead?
4. What does the statement “women are to be silent in the Church”, mean to you?

- If this doctrine of Scripture is not correctly understood and believed there may be problems With every other doctrine.

SALVATION:

1. If you were to die today, where would you go?
2. When standing at the gate of heaven and the Lord asks, “why should I let you in?” what would you say?
3. Can you keep God’s commands perfectly?
4. What do we all deserve?
5. How did God solve the problem of our sins and his demanded holiness?
6. Who was our substitute?
7. How does this salvation become ours?
8. Who brings and keeps us in faith?
9. Through what is this done?
10. For whom is baptism?
11. For whom is the Lord’s Supper?
12. What blessings does God want to give us in these Sacraments?
13. Of what is the Church made?
14. Where only will you find the Church? Why?
15. Why do you want to be a member of our congregation?

- Where this doctrine of salvation is in error we have the most serious of spiritual problems.

FELLOWSHIP: This is of importance because we are basically the only church body that upholds it. At this point I usually mention that one point of difference between our two church bodies is a doctrine that is called Church Fellowship. Then ask “Have you ever heard of it?” Depending on their answer I will find out what they know, or explain to them what scripture has to say about the doctrinal unity that is necessary and the results of it or what needs be done where there is no unity.

- This is an area that explains many practical differences between the Lutheran bodies.

SANTIFICATION:

1. As a Christian what is our purpose in life?
2. How do you believe we should use our God-given time, talents and treasures?
3. What motivates the Christian to good works?

-- Here we offer opportunity to give outlet for the faith God has given the individual.

However, no matter what you ask, no matter how careful you are, things don’t always turn out the way you want them too. I recall one time when a woman from the LCA wanted to be a part of our congregation together with her husband and two children. Both children were placed into Sunday School and the older into Confirmation Class. The husband was more than ready to join after I had gone through my usual exploration and discussion concerning the doctrinal differences. The woman had many questions, apprehensions and doubts. I met with her and we reviewed various things. I met with her three times for at least one hour each time over a period of four months. Both of us thought that we were in doctrinal agreement.. We set up a time suitable to take them in. We were talking about profession of faith and what it meant, when out of the blue she asked, “Do you believe that only those who believe in the Christian religion will be saved?” I pointed her to the Bible, which she had professed to be God’s Word, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. He that believeth not shall be damned.” Salvation could only come through the Gospel, as we had mentioned when speaking of

the work of the Holy Ghost. If the Gospel wasn't heard and thus not believed we knew of no way in which anyone could be saved. That was the end of the line. She simply would not accept the truth that only in and through Jesus was there salvation for her or anyone else. She didn't know of anything that would support her feeling on this matter except her natural logic that said God was not that kind of God who would damn those who never had a chance to hear of Jesus. If she hadn't spoken up at that moment she would have become a member of our congregation. This simply tells us that there are times when you will not get the whole story or really know what they believe regardless of the exploration you make. We can all think of those who went through a long and thorough instruction class only to fall away from the Savior very shortly after confirmation. The Holy Ghost will work as he pleases through the Word we present. **LET'S NOT BE CONCERNED WITH WHAT HE DOES WITH THE WORD, BUT RATHER WITH WHAT AND HOW WE PRESENT IT.**

I don't believe there has to be a precise set of requirements that have to be met before receiving someone into membership by affirmation of faith. I do believe that a thorough exploration should be undertaken. To the extent this is done and the corresponding teaching given, we can be assured that our work will be blessed, the congregation will be a blessing to the person and the person a blessing to the congregation. We will have to make decisions as to where the people are spiritually. People are of every degree of spirituality even with a Lutheran background. Paul had to give his Corinthian brothers milk, not solid food. (1 Cor. 3:1-3a) In the epistle to the Hebrews we find basically the same thing, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching. about righteousness". (Heb. 5:12-13) **TAKE THE TIME AND LEAD THEM TO A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S GRACE.** This we can do in one way or another through the Word, in every area of discussion. As it is done, the Holy Spirit will do his work; we, and those who come to us, will be blessed. And that, receiving God's blessing, is what it's all about!