

President's Report to the Synod Convention

(*The following is a portion of the report delivered by WELS President Mark Schroeder on July 23, 2009*)

Slogans. They can be catchy. They can be clear and concise. They can be clever. Just as often, though, slogans can be vague or confusing. They can raise more questions than they answer. They can make promises that won't be kept. An airline may claim to be "The best care in the air." But tell that to me when I've just sat for three hours on a fully loaded plane that needs a new part. A fast food restaurant may urge you to "Have it your way!" But what if I want a sirloin steak done medium well? Will that really happen? A shoe company exhorts you, "Just do it!" When I hear that slogan, I have no idea what it is that I'm supposed to "just do" or how wearing that brand of shoe will help me to do it.

On the banner in the front of this convention hall are four words that may *look* like a slogan. "**Christ's Love, Our Calling.**" But it's not intended to be a mere slogan. It's more than a catchy phrase that appears on convention folders, comfy seat cushions, or church signs. Those four little words are intended to summarize the heart and center of what this convention is all about; they highlight the reason for your congregation's and our synod's existence; and they provide a clear affirmation of how you became a child of God and of how you will respond to God's amazing grace.

Christ's Love

Christ's love. It was Christ's love for a world of sinners that compelled him to step down from his heavenly throne, to enter our world, and to become one of us. It was that love that moved him to find us, even as he saw our weaknesses, our failures, and our willful rebellion. Christ's love led him to do all that we could not do—to live in perfect and complete harmony with the will of our holy Creator. Christ's love moved him to suffer what we deserved—bearing the brunt of God's righteous justice, dying the death we rightly deserved, and experiencing the pains of hell itself. In that love Christ came to this world to save us, to redeem us, and to set us free.

Christ's love is not limited to what he did for us during his life on this earth. His love extends eternally—into the past, now in the present, and forward into the future.

Even before time began, God's love in Christ put his name on us. "He chose us in Christ," Paul says, "before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." (Eph 1:4-6)

Not only did he choose us in love from eternity. His love surrounds us now and every day we live in this world. It was Christ's love which covered and adopted us in baptism. It was Christ's love which has brought the message of his saving work to our ears and which generated saving faith in our hearts. Paul continues, "And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure . . . And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." (Eph 1:13) It's a love that says to each of us in Word proclaimed and in sacrament administered, "My son, my daughter, be filled with joy, your sins are forgiven!" It's a love that reaches out to us and says, "I have summoned you by name; you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) When we look at a sinful world with tear-filled eyes that so often do not see or understand, it is the assuring love of Christ that enables us to say with confidence, "We know that in all things—all things—God works for the good of those who love him." (Rom 8:28)

It's a love that extends his promises to the future, to all of our days in this world and beyond, reminding us with solid comfort and assurance, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Heb 13:5) It's a love that directs our eyes beyond this life and reminds us of our eternal destination: "I am going there to prepare a place for you . . . that you also may be where I am." (John 14:3)

It is this love of Christ—eternal, constant, undeserved, unfathomable, unbounded—that was demonstrated on the cross and proclaimed by the empty tomb. It is Christ's love which has established our relationship with God as his adopted children. It is this love which has brought us together as a Christian family, as spiritual brothers and sisters, in congregations large and small, and in a synod we love so dearly.

Our Calling

There are two more words on that banner in front of you. "Our calling." Christ's love is not just an abstract concept. It touches us. It is active in us. It has an effect on us. It changes us. And it compels us to respond.

This is not the compulsion of someone who feels a guilt-ridden sense of obligation. This is not the compulsion of a debtor who feels a grudging duty to repay his debt. Rather, this is the Spirit-worked compulsion of a child of God who says with eagerness and joy, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free." (Ps 119:32) This is the compulsion of someone who has been the object of Christ's love, who has been brought to believe his promises, and who responds with the apostles, "For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20) This is the compulsion of people who gladly recognize their responsibility to defend and articulate God's revealed truth. This is the compulsion of people who have known the love of God in Christ and who embrace the God-given purpose for their lives—joyfully "declar[ing] the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9)

Christ's love, our calling. It's so much more than a slogan. Rather, it's a clear statement of timeless and wonderful truths: Christ's love had made us who we are; our calling is all that God has privileged us to do in response.

In these next few days, we will hear essays describing in detail Christ's love and our calling. We will review the numerous blessings that he daily showers on us as individuals and as a synod. We will survey fields ripe for the gospel's harvest and consider countless mission opportunities before us. We will wrestle with difficult issues and important decisions. As we do all of those things, may the words Christ's love, our calling—and all the truths those words summarize—be our joy, our guide, and our theme.

Called to Proclaim

Listen for a moment and tell me what I am describing:

- A world that is hostile to God and to all that he stands for;

- A world which seems to be sinking deeper into the control and sway of satanic influences;
- A world obsessed with all things sexual, and in which unspeakable perversions are not only tolerated but glorified;
- A society and a culture which is focused on materialism and the all-consuming desire for pleasure;
- A culture in which traditional moral values are eroding, where families are disintegrating, where human life is devalued and where violence is rampant;
- A society that embraces a belief system which denies absolute truth and which rejects any distinction between right and wrong, good and evil;
- A culture in which people increasingly reject traditional religion in favor of their own self-generated concept of spirituality;
- A culture in which the Christian church appears to be in retreat and decline, with congregations losing members and with younger generations abandoning the faith of their parents;
- A world in which Christian beliefs and teachings are attacked and ridiculed and even persecuted;
- A religious scene in which false teachers and false doctrines are enticing increasing numbers of people with their deceptions and lies.

What was I describing? If you thought that this sounds like the world and the culture we live in, you would certainly not be wrong. But, in fact, I was describing the world at the end of the first century—the very world in which God placed his first New Testament believers and into which he sent his church to carry out its God-given mission.

It's tempting to look around us and conclude that the world we live in is far more wicked and sinful than ever before and that the challenges of reaching an unbelieving culture today are greater than ever before. But in reality things today are no different from the Roman world and pagan culture into which the Christians of the first century were sent with their world-changing message. Our world and culture is hostile now. It was hostile then. Our society's values and philosophies and beliefs are godless now. They were godless then. The message of the cross was foolishness to those who are perishing today just as it was when the apostles first proclaimed that message.

But consider what God did in that world of the first century.

It was only a handful of disciples that gathered around their risen Savior on a hill outside Jerusalem just before he ascended. Jesus was about to send that little group into a hostile world on what must have seemed like an impossible mission. But armed with the power of God's Word and with the unbreakable promises that Jesus had given them, those first believers did not retreat from that challenge. When Jesus told them to go, they went. They went with joy to their families and friends. They took the good news from town to town. They carried that message with them when they crossed mountains and seas. They proclaimed law and gospel to believers to strengthen their faith, and they shared that life-giving message with unbelievers to bring them to faith.

And God blessed their witness. The book of Acts tells us repeatedly that, as God's people proclaimed the gospel, "the Word of the Lord grew." As the Holy Spirit worked, the Word grew in the hearts of people. It grew to fill the empire. It grew to span the centuries. It grew and spread to the point where, through the faithful witness of generations of God's people, it came to you and to me.

What we do conclude from that? First, we are reminded wherein the success of our mission lies. If we were left to our own strength, our own wisdom, our own resources, the task would be daunting. We would surely either be compelled to retreat from that task or be doomed to failure. But the strength of our mission and our witness does not depend on us, on our own cleverness, our own will power, or on our abilities. Its effectiveness is not to be found in slick programs or in effective marketing strategies. The strength and success of our mission is found in one place: in the power and faithfulness and love of a God, whose Spirit works through the preaching of his Word and the administration of his sacraments. The success of our mission lies completely in the hands of the One who has promised us that his Word will not return to him empty and that the gates of hell itself will not be able to overcome his church.

The story of the early church not only shows us that God alone gives success to our mission. It is also very instructive as to how we can best carry out that mission. The New Testament model that guides our mission today is a combination of

public proclamation of God's truth as well as individual private witness. When it came to public proclamation, we think of the apostles testifying boldly and publicly on the day of Pentecost. We hear of believers in Antioch gathering regularly around Word and sacrament. We recall Paul preaching to gatherings of believers and skeptics alike in towns and cities on this mission travels. We listen as the apostles exposed false teaching and condemn those who depart from God's truth. Public proclamation of Law and Gospel and corporate worship was a central activity of the early church.

And we also see individual believers sharing the good news individually as God gave them the opportunities. We think of the woman of Samaria going back to tell the people of her village that she had found the Messiah. We recall Philip leading the Ethiopian to see the fulfillment of God's promises. We watch Aquila and Priscilla carefully instructing Apollos. We remember the apostle Paul, in chains and under house arrest, sharing Christ one-on-one with those assigned to guard him.

The early Christians certainly viewed the mission of the church as outwardly directed and mission-focused. But it was not *only* that. Once people were brought to faith in Jesus, the early Christians were clearly committed to serving the spiritual needs of every member and incorporating them fully into the life and work of the church. They recognized their spiritual leaders as shepherds protecting the flock and overseers guarding their souls. They instructed new members thoroughly. They identified and discussed false teachings that could lead believers astray. They taught their children faithfully. They encouraged one another personally in regular worship and fellowship gatherings. They shared the Lord's Supper frequently. They prayed zealously. They showed love to one another generously and sacrificially.

For the early Christians, the mission of the church was always centered on the gospel in Word and sacrament in those two ways—eagerly sharing the Word with the lost and using the same Means of Grace to edify and strengthen those inside God's family. This Word and sacrament-centered mission was not just a way of life for the early Christians. It was their life.

As our synod carries out its mission of sharing the gospel with the lost and caring for the souls

of the found, we dare never forget that our success will not be measured in terms of numbers or statistics. Ours is a theology not of glory—striving for mere outward achievement or measurable accomplishments for their own sake. Our success will be measured only by our faithfulness—to God, to his effective and powerful Word, and to the work he has called us to do.

Rather than a theology of glory, ours is a theology of the cross. Our theology centers on a message that came to us wholly and completely because of the love of Christ. It proclaims a message that calls sinners to repentance, directs them to the cross, and that assures them that in Christ and his love all of their sins find full forgiveness.

Admittedly, the theology of the cross is not attractive in our postmodern, self-gratifying world. Unlike the theology of glory, the theology of the cross makes no promises of instant relief for the ills of life in a sinful world. It does not beckon people with the lure of financial or personal or professional success. It does not seek validation of its success in terms of numbers. It does not offer a practical “how to” manual to achieve temporal happiness or to mine the depths of human potential. The message of the cross cannot be packaged to be palatable and cannot be soft-pedaled to be acceptable. It is a message that this world does not understand and does not desire.

In fact, our message—if we are faithful to it—will always be regarded as utter foolishness, just as Paul reminds us, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.” (1 Cor 1:18) The unbelieving people in our world look for things that make sense to their own way of thinking; they crave a message that reinforces their own self-centered view of life. They will not find that in the harsh preaching of God’s law. And unless God changes their hearts, they will not appreciate the sweet message of grace in the gospel. If we somehow make the message of the cross *attractive and reasonable* to those who are perishing, we will have changed the message—and will have failed in the mission God gave us. God help us always to say with Paul, “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those whom God

has called, Christ [is] the power of god and the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor 1:23)

Maintaining our Confessional Identity

WELS describes itself as a *confessional* Lutheran synod. That means that we subscribe unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions as contained in the Book of Concord of 1580 not insofar as (*quatenus*) they are a correct exposition of biblical teaching but because (*quia*) they are. It means that our synod boldly, and without qualification or hesitation, upholds the *doctrine* (what we believe and teach) as articulated in the Confessions and is committed to reflecting those doctrinal beliefs in our *practice* (how we express our faith and carry out our mission) Our unity in faith is *created* by the power of God’s revealed Word and shaped by the doctrines of Scripture; it is *expressed* in our common commitment to Lutheran Confessions as correct expositions and explanations of biblical truth. Since the time of the Reformation, Lutherans have recognized the importance of articulating not only what we believe as *Christians*, but what distinguishes *Lutheran* belief and practice from that of other Christian churches that have departed from scriptural truth.

It might surprise some here today that the Wisconsin Synod has not always been a solidly confessional Lutheran synod. There is no doubt that the early fathers of our synod were filled with a fervent zeal for mission work, but not all of them were fully committed to Lutheran doctrine and practice. They were sent to America by mission societies in Germany in which the distinction between Lutheran and Reformed teachings was blurred at best and virtually non-existent at worst. Their roots in pietism also resulted in a lack of commitment to sound Lutheran theology. True to those roots, they preferred to emphasize the importance of subjective feelings over the objective truth of God’s Word, sanctified living over justification, and the power of prayer over the efficacy of the Means of Grace. They emphasized the priesthood of all believers to the point where they downplayed the importance of the public ministry. John Muehlhaeuser, the first president of what would become the Wisconsin Synod, gave evidence of this doctrinal laxity when he said, “I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the

denominational fence.” Curiously, the first draft of the synod’s constitution pledged the synod to the Lutheran Confessions, but within weeks those words were crossed out and replaced with a pledge to a generic “pure Bible Christianity.”

By God’s grace that orientation soon changed. In 1861 John Bading was elected as the second president of the synod. In contrast to Muehlhaeuser, Bading regarded the Lutheran Confessions as a proclamation of God’s truth for every age and was committed to sound Lutheran doctrine and practice. In his first address as president, he encouraged the young synod to sacrifice “blood, life, and limb and suffer all rather than depart one hair’s breadth from the truth we have learned.” In the years that followed, we are grateful that through his leadership and through the beneficial influence of the Missouri Synod, God transformed our synod into one that was truly committed to the doctrines of Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions.

Striving to remain faithful to the Scriptures—and to maintain our confessional identity—does not involve a single battle fought and won. It is an ongoing struggle for the church militant. When the battle ends on one front today, Satan opens another front tomorrow. That’s why each generation needs to recognize this struggle as its own and engage in it zealously. Each generation, including ours, needs to resist the temptation to be led astray by false teachings, both blatant and subtle. Each generation, including ours, needs to be vigilant in resisting both doctrinal indifference and smugness. When orthodoxy is assumed or taken for granted, it is likely soon to be lost.

As Confessional Lutherans we are committed to holding on to the truth of God’s Word and to defending against all error. We do that, however, not merely to keep that Word for ourselves, but rather to share that message with the world now and for generations to come. It is a false antithesis to say that faithfulness to doctrine is somehow opposed to, or detracts from, a commitment to sharing the gospel. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The truth of Scripture, entrusted to us by God, is what gives us a message to proclaim. A truly correct understanding of biblical doctrine always produces a correct understanding of the mission of the church and recognizes the compelling need to share God’s truth with the world. I don’t believe it to be a coincidence that our synod’s period of most rapid mission growth and expansion occurred in the

1960’s and 1970’s, immediately after a decade of doctrinal struggles in which our synod displayed a bold commitment to upholding scriptural truth and to articulating our beliefs.

As Confessional Lutherans, we emphasize and agree that it is the gospel in Word and sacrament that is the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” (Rom 1:16) We proclaim Christ crucified. The message of the cross was not the message that itching ears wanted to hear in Paul’s day, and it is not a message that finds favor in the ears of today’s post-modern, self-gratifying, self-centered unbeliever. As Confessional Lutherans we will look for every opportunity to proclaim God’s law in all its harshness, and we will be zealous to share the sweet message of the gospel to every sinner convicted by God’s law. But we will never adjust or hide or downplay a single word of God’s truth in order to make it somehow more attractive. To do that is to empty the gospel of its power and to lose the gospel itself.

Confessional Lutherans also recognize that Christ has set us free from the law and its demands. The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, regulating all areas of life for Old Testament believers, have been fulfilled and removed. In Christ, all things not decided by the Word of God are, as Paul says, “permissible.” (1 Cor 10:23)

But confessional Lutherans are also well aware that just because something is *may* be done does not mean that it *should* be done. Immediately after asserting that all things are permissible, Paul went on to say, “But not everything is beneficial . . . not everything is constructive.” (1 Cor 10:23) In other words, when something is determined to be an *adiaphoron*, that’s not where the discussion *ends*; that is when discussion among Christians *begins*. It’s a discussion which asks important questions: “This may be permissible. But how does this particular practice affect my fellow Christians—both inside and outside of our fellowship? Does this practice reflect clearly what we believe, or does it send an unclear or blurred message? What impact does this have on the church today, and what long term ramifications might this have? Is there the potential of offense or misunderstanding? Does a practice sacrifice a connection with the church of the ages for the sake of mere innovation? Will such a practice build up and express our unity or will it fracture and diffuse it?”

It's interesting to note that in almost all cases when the New Testament addresses the matter of Christian freedom, the focus is *not* on the Christian's *right to exercise* that freedom. More often the New Testament talks about the importance of *refraining from exercising* my Christian freedom if doing so will potentially cause harm to others or to the mission of the church.

In asserting their right to act in Christian freedom especially in a desire to reach the lost, people often cite these words of Paul: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." (1 Cor 9:22) But the context of those words clearly indicates that Paul is not making the case for an "anything goes" approach to mission work and worship practices. On the contrary, Paul prefaced those words with this statement: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible." In other words, even though he may have every right to exercise his freedom, for the sake of the gospel and Christian love he does not do that. He refrains from using his freedom for the *sake of the message and for the sake of those who hear his message*. Professor John Brug of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary put it this way: "Paul's way of being all things to all people was preaching the same clear gospel to all, not trying to tailor a message that would be offensive to none." (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, v. 106, #3, p. 220)

Faithfulness to God's Word and to the Lutheran Confessions is the responsibility of every called worker and lay member of our synod. We have also given to the Conference of Presidents (COP) the responsibility of overseeing supervising doctrine and practice in our synod. Mindful of that solemn duty, the COP states in its report to this convention: "The COP has also discussed issues relating to forms and practices in the areas of worship, outreach, and congregational organization. The COP maintains that our practice in all of these areas should always be consistent with our doctrine and should reflect a unified understanding of scriptural principles." The COP then resolved to initiate scriptural studies and brotherly discussions of these matters throughout the synod.

The COP recognizes that doctrine shapes practice in worship, outreach methodology, and congregational organization. Likewise, the COP is aware from the lessons of church history that practice can influence doctrinal beliefs—often unintentionally. Doctrine

and practice are intimately related to each other. Therefore, it's essential that we be wary of methods and practices that have their roots in evangelical and reformed theology and that may inherently reflect that theology. For example, these "theological underpinnings" can show themselves in worship and outreach methods that emphasizes subjective feelings over the proclamation of God's objective gospel truth; or that gives the impression that prayer is a means of grace; or that emphasizes the role of praise over against the centrality of the Word proclaimed and the sacraments administered.

It is equally important for us as Confessional Lutherans is to guard against formalism or empty traditionalism. We will be careful not to say, "This is what God says," when he has not spoken. To do so would restrict and deny the wonderful Christian freedom that God has given us.

All of this has serious implications for our approach to our God-given mission. Will we look for all possible ways to communicate that message to an unbelieving world? Absolutely. Will we strive to understand the thinking and the world view of the culture in which we live? Undoubtedly. Will we communicate God's truths in a way that people can understand? Certainly. Will we have a burning love to reach the lost with the precious news of a Savior from sin? Without question. But in doing all of those things, we will want to insure that we do not back away in the slightest from a faithful and full proclamation of Law and Gospel. We will be careful not to hide our identity as a Confessional Lutheran church in favor of a more appealing, and less "intimidating" brand of Christianity. We will not model ourselves after outwardly popular and successful non-denominational or pan-denominational churches in which adherence to clear biblical doctrine gives way to a generic, feel-good, popular Christianity that seeks to remove barriers by setting aside the offense of the cross. We will value the time-tested heritage passed down to us through the generations, while recognizing that God has not established a New Testament ceremonial law. We will ask God for the zeal to apply law and gospel to the heart of hearers and to trust in the power of the Word and the working of the Holy Spirit to do what we could never do: to change a heart.

Ever since the Reformation, Lutherans have not hesitated to agree that certain practices, even though not necessarily determined by the Word of

God, are good to be followed or avoided in a unified way. In order to improve the quality and consistency of worship practices among Lutherans, Martin Luther produced the German Mass. Lutherans have consistently agreed that baptism would typically be performed among us by sprinkling or pouring, as a clear witness against those who claim that immersion is the only proper method. In our own synod, we have adopted constitutions and bylaws, which are nothing more than agreements freely made to follow certain procedures and practices. We have agreed on practical procedures for issuing calls assigning ministerial graduates. We have produced hymnals and catechisms to unify our worship and instruction. Among our WELS family, we have a history of brotherly discussion of what things are truly beneficial and constructive and have achieved a remarkable consistency in practice from congregation to congregation. We have also displayed a willingness to listen to loving words of concern, caution, and admonition.

This is the nature of the discussion that the Conference of Presidents has in mind. The intent of the COP is not to approach these matters legalistically or with a desire to place undue restrictions on the freedom that we have in Christ. There is a desire to foster a greater unity in our approach to mission and ministry among us. The intent is that these discussions will be based on a discussion of biblical truths and principles, in a spirit of brotherly love, and with a desire to maintain the blessing of Confessional unity among us.

I would expect that every member of the synod will applaud the COP's desire to have these issues discussed among us. We will also continue to pray that God will strengthen our unity in doctrine and practice, our ability to articulate our beliefs clearly, and our commitment to proclaiming the timeless truths that God has entrusted to us.

Soli Deo Gloria!

President Mark Schroeder
July 23, 2009