

President's Address  
48th District Convention of the Rocky Mountain District

Randall L. Golter

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**I Love the Church**

Greetings to the baptized in the Lord's saving name. I welcome you to the Rocky Mountain District's 48th District Convention. We as Missouri Synod Lutherans gather as heirs of Luther's teaching which the Spirit's guiding brought to light once again the foundational doctrine upon which the Church either is standing or falling, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Some may call us a sect because we follow Luther's teachings. A sect lets its leader be the ultimate judge of doctrine. That was not what Luther ever wanted, and neither do we. Luther protested when there were those who said it was *his* teaching. "For the teaching is not mine," Luther said (Herman Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*, p. 77).

The ultimate judge of our confession--as Luther believed and we boldly and gladly confess--is Holy Scripture. Because Holy Scripture urges Christ everywhere, we hold both the Old and the New Testaments--every particle of Scripture, and the whole--to be the very divine breath of the Lord (2 Tim. 3:16). It is through this infallible Word that the Spirit calls, gathers, and enlightens His whole church on earth. The Spirit prompts us Missourians to confess Christ and His doctrine, boldly, unabashedly, "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:16).

For a few moments let us focus on one particular doctrine, the doctrine of the Church: I love the Church. I love the Church. You love the Church. We all love the Church. I have labeled this address with those simple words: "I Love the Church!"

I cannot help but think of the third stanza of the hymn "I Love Your Kingdom, Lord."

I love Your Church, O God, Your saints in ev'ry land,  
Dear as the apple of Your eye And graven on Your hand (LSB 651).

The saints of God, those who are drenched in the baptismal flood of the Son's blood, who have been given faith and have been given the Holy Spirit as a deposit, a guarantee, and a seal, love the Church. Why do we love the Church so much?

## **Why Do We Love the Church?**

You and I love the Church because the Lord Jesus loves His Church. Written on every page of Holy Writ is God's crazy love for His creation. "For God so loved the world ..." is made visible on every page of Scripture beginning with creation itself. God, in the creation and preservation of the whole cosmos by the breath of His mouth, had and has nothing else in mind but His love for humanity. As parents prepare a room before bringing their newborn home, so did God create the whole world for Adam and Eve and their offspring.

Most explicitly, though, is God's love for His church exhibited on every page of Scripture. The decided weight of all Scripture is the selfless sacrifice of the Father's Lamb on the cross of Calvary. Again, the Sacred Text urges Christ everywhere. Immediately in Scripture the Father preaches of the Seed in Genesis 3:15, and Eve and Adam are given hope. God is driving the verbs all the way through the Old Testament until the completion of His Promise in the womb of the Virgin. Even then, the shadow of the cross looms large. For the Father must crush the serpent's head through the crushing of the Seed, all because of His love.

His love for the Church is made most tangible through His voice proclaimed through the mouths of His preachers into hearers' ears. His living voice causes dead bones to live and to continue to live. Bleached, dried, and desiccated bones rise by the riveting voice of the royal Redeemer wherever His Word is proclaimed, from pulpit to pew, and from the mouth of the baptized in their place of vocational sacrifice and praise.

His Body and Blood are real and what gets bloodied receives real communion--an organic connection--with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the rail. The longing soul comes home to the Father while being sent to be enslaved to the neighbor. The Church loses herself in her Lord as she also loses her life in witness for the harvest.

You and I love the Church because God--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit--loves the Church. Since we have had a second birth from above (John 3:5), a second genesis all over again (Titus 3:5), and now own the image of the Son by faith, we too love what He loves, the Church. That is just the way it is! It is a Spirit-wrought passion.

## **I Love the Missouri Synod?**

I love the Church. But can you and I really say that we love the Missouri Synod? This must be said: I do not equate The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod with the one holy

Christian and apostolic Church. First of all, the holy Christian Church is not defined by forms, institutional structures, or even the obedience of its members. The Confessions speak of the Church as “holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (SA, Art. XII, 3). And then Luther writes: “Its holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies of theirs which they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures, but it consists of the Word of God and true faith” (Ibid.). Oh, we love that Church!

Missourians used to say that they loved Missouri. Back in my high school years, I remember how my pastor said he loved Missouri, what it stood for, and what it does. Does anyone hear that today? Hardly. Usually we speak of the “corporate headquarters” of Synod at St. Louis. We speak of all the committees and boards and officers of the Synod. It is here, I believe, where we have fallen as a church.

### **Confessional Fellowship Versus Institutional Fellowship**

Missouri *used to be* viewed--first, foremost, and primarily--as a confessional fellowship. A confessional fellowship is a group of churches where each congregation has been called into existence by the living voice of Jesus through the Holy Scriptures. The Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, and enlightens” these Christians as He applies the very wounds of Christ through the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. The Word and nothing else is the foundation and core that binds congregations together.

Because of the Spirit’s shaping, sculpting, and binding through His Word, each congregation seeks to find other Christians and churches that confess the Scriptures as they do, that is, as the Scriptures confess themselves (2 Peter 1:20, “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.”). They seek to find other churches which do not displace the authority of the Scriptures away from the Scriptures to a community’s or an individual’s private interpretation. Churches seek to find other churches which listen solely to the voice of the Shepherd and that flee from false voices--false teachers--who are not consistent with the Shepherd’s voice (Matt. 7:15). As churches seek to find other churches that hear only the voice of the Shepherd, they also pull, drag, and persuade all others to come along their way. Jesus is the centering focus!

And so, the One who causes this centripetal movement to the center, bringing all His children home from wherever they are scattered, bringing individual sheep and whole flocks into *koinonia* at pulpit, font, and rail--Church Fellowship--is also the One who causes a centrifugal scattering, dispersing His own out into the world. He scatters His churches--the pastors and the baptized--into a world that He has declared justified through His saving work, a world justification. “In Christ, God was reconciling the world

to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). And the Psalmist scribes the Lord’s words in Psalm 117, “Praise the LORD, all heathen!” For God to use “heathen” there--as Luther translates it (LW 14:9)--means that God has become the heathen’s God, and that He expects and foresees their conversion by His Word through His Church.

But what you see here in Scripture--from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22--is the axis around which every congregation rotates. Our Triune God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--is the cosmic center of the whole universe. He is the One before whom angels prostrate fall singing the Thrice Holy. The Lamb slain before the foundations of the world is adored, revered, worshipped, praised, and proclaimed. The Church simply cannot take her eyes off the Lamb!

The Lord then directs all eyes and ears to where He speaks and empowers, that is, to His holy Word. The Father on the Mount of Transfiguration directs all to listen to Jesus (Matt. 17:5). We hear Jesus when we hear His apostles, whose word is His Word. Jesus says in John 17:14, “I have given them Your Word.”

Congregations are compelled by the Spirit through the reliable Word to be Word-centered churches. And congregations that gather with other congregations which are Word-centered churches make the Word central in all their work, conversation, conventions, and decisions. As a fish cannot exist without water, so a church--and the whole church--cannot exist without the Word. “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life,” Jesus tells His disciples in John 6:63. A confessional church does everything with a determined, defiant, and deliberate trust in the power and clarity of the Word of God!

Has The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod lost the Word, that is, confidence in the Word, even though we speak much about the “Word and the Sacraments?” Have we, as a whole, lost trust in the Word as the axis around which our church rotates? Has our churchly orbit around Christ and His Word with nearly total unawareness drifted toward a corporate center that lives by bylaws and resolutions? This may not be so, but there is a perception, is there not? And this orbit is most certainly asymmetrical.

Theologically, we understand the Lord as He reveals Himself in Scripture as having a proper and an alien nature. The Lord’s proper nature is to forgive sinners (the Gospel), and His alien or strange nature is to condemn sinners (the Law). Would it be proper to apply such terms to the Synod? Synod--a collection of churches which have the same confession of God’s Word and an organic unity in Christ--ought to be letting its primary persuasion and work be that of the Word, its proper nature. All the necessary structural and governing work is secondary; it surely should not be the life of the churches.

Over time--and I have never seen this written anywhere--it is my conjecture that the longer a church body remains in existence, the more the church acts, speaks, and conducts business as an institutional but not as a confessional church. No longer are circuit meetings and conventions dominated by the Word as applied to each other and beyond. Pure teaching is no longer loved and desired and considered as essential for life in the Church and her mission. Church officials are tempted to persuade apart from or without the Word. Churches see the bigger church not through what we gladly and boldly confess together but by the common products offered and received.

Churches then act with a silo mentality, operating as retail outlets with a loose and lifeless connection to a corporation. Competition is bred between the franchises for the greatest production. Corporate headquarters lauds those who are successful according to certain standards of production. Each church looks out for its own needs which take precedence over those of the church down the street. Success is viewed as moving up the corporate ladder. The enemy is the other, and it's all about me, myself, and I. And, the lost fall off the radar screen. Now, this is an extreme portrayal, but doesn't it have some truth in it?

Common in the church is a deep, deep distrust for the other. The first rule of interpretation for anything that happens in the church is suspicion, not trust born from brotherly love. "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Hum, I wonder what occasioned Peter's words? He was in the church militant and knew--saw!--how the church is tempted to live!

A church body that acts in such a way unknowingly makes the Law the focus of its operation and thus becomes lifeless; she becomes a fig tree full of leaves where the Savior can't find any fruit (Matt. 21:19). Outwardly the tree looks full of life but it is dead.

Churches--pastors and the priesthood of all believers--labor under the attacks of the devil and have no joy. They see the harvest as white but don't know how to engage the field of labor and a few may not even care. Jesus gets lost, the church becomes the lost as the Lord Himself makes the lost the church, just as He enticed the Jews to return home with the news of the Gentile conversions (Romans 11:14). Pour over the pages of Holy Writ yourself! Often times who is the biggest headache to God in both Old Testament and New? The Church! All the while the Gentiles, prostitutes, and sinners flock to the voice of the Shepherd and even run into town to tell everyone of the Messiah! God will bring home His elect with or without The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. But the privilege and invitation is there for us!

It can be dangerous to be a part of a church; it can be dangerous to join a Synod ... unless all repent and remain in repentance! The reformation of the church is a daily must!

The real problem in this church body is nothing else but unbelief, a fundamental distrust in the explicit *power* and *clarity* (perspicuity) of the Word of the living God. The Word is God's power; the Word is clear. We don't believe it. The problem lies right here in the heart. "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24) is the father's cry, and ours!

### **Back to the Basics!**

You have heard this Vince Lombardi story before but I must tell it here. The team had played a terrible first half, no blocking, no tackling, no fight! Coach Lombardi entered the locker room at half-time, staring only at the floor. As he raised his eyes, he brought from behind his back a football. And Coach said, "Gentlemen, this is a football!"

Brothers and sisters, this is the Word of God. The written and spoken Word draws its energy, power, and clarity from its author, God Himself. God does not speak with confusion. Therefore, we must get back to the Word. It is the Word that will cause us to *repent* of our sins and to cling to Him for all help, strength, forgiveness, life, and salvation. It is the Word that exposes sloppy theology and practice as well as stubborn and pride-filled hearts. It is the Word that demands--and causes--a whole new reality!

Repentance, isn't that where Luther started in the first of his *Ninety-Five Theses*? He only learned it from the Word where the Lord records words from His own lips in Matthew, Luke, Revelation, and everywhere. To the church in Ephesus which had been around about 50 years when Revelation was written--time enough to lose Jesus--Jesus Himself says, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Rev. 2:4-5).

The Lord Jesus may need to send a torrential flood of troubles upon The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod to drive her back to her first love. He may need to cause or allow a big stink over finances and structure. He may need to cause or allow backbiting and the pointing of fingers, and cause or allow all kinds of evil in order to work His good. He may need to expose the church's wayward ways of trusting in the right man or the right collection of people on a board to bring life to the church. He may need to send all kinds of trouble in order for each pastor and church to place the other's needs ahead of its own. He may need to cause or allow The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod to fail, fail completely. A broken church is God's best instrument for His work. For you must

understand, God works through opposites. He kills in order to make alive. He does so in order that the Church must never compromise with Babylon. She must remain a confessional church if she is to be and remain God's salt for His mission.

He may need to send a Noah-like flood upon this church body so that, like Noah alone in the boat with only seven others, our church clings only to the Word of promise even as she fears the wrath of God caving in the ship's walls.

Luther writes of Noah's struggle: "It is no idle chatter when the Holy Spirit says that God remembered Noah. It indicates that from the day when Noah entered the ark nothing was said to him, nothing was revealed to him, and he saw no ray of grace shining; but he clung only to the promise he had received, although meanwhile the waters and the waves were raging as though God had surely forgotten him. Even though the holy seed overcame these perils, through a rich measure of the Spirit, it did not overcome them without great affliction of the flesh, without tears and great fear" (LW 2:103-4).

### **Blow, Wind, Blow!**

I don't know what the Lord will do with each of you individually, with each church in the Rocky Mountain District, and with the whole Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod! I don't need to know. You don't either.

I do know that even while finances fall and the whole of the Missouri Synod seems to be a building being hit by a tsunami of eight magnitude, the Church will stand. The Church stands because the Lord Jesus stands, and nothing can destroy Jesus Christ. "The grass withers and the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Peter 1:24b-25). The greatest resource for any congregation, district, or synod is not finances but the crucified and resurrected Christ and His Word, the solid, certain, and unchangeable Word. The folly of the cross is all the Church has; it is all she needs.

You have elected me for another three years. I did not do that much. The staff, circuit counselors, vice presidents, the Board of Directors, Critical Target teams, and committees, oh, how they worked. Thank you for reelecting me for a third term, but really--and you know this—it is not about me. It is not about you. It is about the Lord--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--and His great and deep desire for us to keep and proclaim His Word. It's about each other, caring for each other with a deep, deep love. It's about the needs of the lost being put ahead of the church's needs. It is about congregations caring about congregations down the street, in the same circuit, district, and synod. It's about engaging the Mohammedans with the Word and love. It's about baptisms and communions and preachers preaching and the baptized being who they are, living sacrifices before the Lord (Romans 12:1). It is about each congregation sharing its God-

given gifts with other congregations so that each praises the Lord for His gifts scattered. It is about the Lord Jesus Himself pushing and prodding His Church to lift up her eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest!

It is about the joy of hearing of the Spirit's work: Say, did you hear about the work we are doing together in Utah, the new church called Light of the Valley Lutheran Church? Did you hear about the Biblical Orthodox Lutheran Mission's (BOLM) outreach to Muslims around the world? Say, did you hear that Ysletta Lutheran Mission is starting a worship service at Anapra across the border? Say, is it not amazing that every Sunday 185 pulpits proclaim Christ Jesus and Him crucified? Say, let us pray now for our brothers and sisters in South Africa. "O Lord, let Your Word have free course there as You work through Bishop Tswaedi, Dr. Weber, the professors, students, and the churches scattered throughout Africa. O Lord..." Did you hear there are 48 students attending! That is amazing!

I love the one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church! The Lord loves the Church.

And, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, yes, I love her, too, the clarity of Lutheran doctrine, her people, churches, leaders, workers, seminaries, professors, missionaries, even with all her problems, fractures, and foibles. And it just may be that the Lord will cause this church body--The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod--to rise up again to be what she is and should be, a confessional Lutheran Church, noble, strong, and alive, united in doctrine, engaged in the public square amidst a crumbling culture, and rubbing shoulders with sinners, persuading them to follow the Lamb. Rise up, you bones! Live!

There just might be--if the Lord wills--a wind that blows through this church body that will cause a whole new reformation by the power of God's Word. There just might be a mighty wind that causes a real and sincere love for unity in doctrine for mission that will blow your socks off. Only the Spirit can cause such a fire through the Word and repentance. Paul says in Romans 12:11, "Be hot by the Spirit!"

And so we plead and send these our petitions to the Lord of the Church as even now we work in the harvest field before night falls when no man can work. We plead to the Lord, "Blow, Wind, blow! Blow, Spirit, blow on this Your Church, O Lord!"

**Sing together LSB 498 "Come, Holy Ghost, Creator Blest" all 7 stanzas.**

