

The Motives and Qualifications of a Genuine Church Member

Words of Welcome to New Members

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By signing the constitution of our congregation, you have shown that you approve of it and have solemnly promised to abide in it. In the name of the congregation I welcome you as voting members. Permit me to add a few remarks.

Only that is a good deed which is promoted by proper motives and performed in a proper spirit. Alms, for example, are good deeds only when given out of love, not under pressure or merely to make people believe that you are a Christian. Diligence in our earthly calling is a good deed only when it issues from the desire to please God, who wills that we eat our daily bread in the sweat of the brow, and not because you wish to gain riches.

The same holds true with respect to joining a Christian congregation. That, too, is a good deed only if we do so because it is Christ's will that believers unite in proclaiming his Word, conducting public worship, and building and spreading his kingdom. The same step would be sinful if taken for the sake of earthly gain, as we read of Simon, the sorcerer, who joined the Christian congregation in Samaria to enrich himself in a material way (Acts 8).

What has been said holds true also in the case of those who unite with a truly Evangelical Lutheran congregation. And this step is a good deed only if they wish to join such a congregation in preference to a congregation of another denomination because they are convinced that only the Evangelical Lutheran Church teaches the pure, unadulterated doctrine of God's Word. Were someone, however, to seek voting membership in a Lutheran congregation simply because he was born and reared in its midst, or to please his parents, or because his friends are members of that congregation, or because the location of its church makes it convenient to attend its services, he would not perform a good deed, even though God may have led him into that church for the purpose of making him a true Lutheran, in other words, an orthodox Christian.

What has been said emphasizes three factors that are essential in the make-up of a genuine member of a Lutheran congregation:

1. A genuine member of a Lutheran congregation must have a thorough understanding of pure Lutheran doctrine or at least must desire to grow in the knowledge of it. Such a one will imitate the Bereans in searching the

Scriptures daily, he will not lay aside his Catechism when he has completed his elementary school training, but throughout his life continue to review it in order that he may understand it better and become more thoroughly grounded in it. He will read other good orthodox books and periodicals to become ever more firmly established in the pure doctrine. In Hebrews 5 those Christians who are neglectful in this point are censured. We read: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, yet you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. "

2. A member of a Lutheran congregation must be able to defend his faith and to prove its correctness from God's Word. St. Peter writes, 1 Peter 3:15: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear." A sad state of affairs is revealed when members of a Lutheran congregation, asked about their faith, say, "You will have to ask my pastor about that."
3. A member of a Lutheran congregation should be able to distinguish pure doctrine from false doctrines. Only spineless Lutherans can say: "What do I care about doctrinal controversies! They do not concern me in the least. I'll let those who are more learned than I am bother their heads about such matters." They may even be offended when they observe that religious leaders engage in doctrinal disputes. A genuine Lutheran will not forget that in the Epistle of Jude also lay Christians are admonished "earnestly to contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints." What is more, Christ warns all Christians: "Beware of false prophets." And St. John writes in his first epistle: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

It is a settled fact that whoever is indifferent to false doctrine is indifferent also to pure doctrine and his soul's salvation, and has no right to bear the name Lutheran and the name of Christ.