

Letter to Pastors from LCMS Bishop Matthew Harrison: “We speak the truth in love to all” on same-sex marriage

Dear brothers,

In the face of another radical cultural shift — a denial of God and His creation, a rejection of Christ, the Ten Commandments and God-given natural law (Romans 1) — a great Lutheran responded with truths that are also true for our times:

*The lie is the death of man, his temporal and his eternal death. The lie kills nations. The most powerful nations of the world have been laid waste because of their lies. History knows of no more unsettling sight than the judgment rendered upon the people of an advanced culture who have rejected the truth and are swallowed upon in a sea of lies. Where this happens, as in the case of declining pagan antiquity, religion and law, poetry and philosophy, life in marriage and family, in the state and society — in short, one sphere of life after another falls sacrifice to the power and curse of the lie. Where man can no longer bear the truth, he cannot live without the lie. Where man denies that he and others are dying, the terrible dissolution [of his culture] is held up as a glorious ascent, and decline is viewed as an advance, the likes of which has never been experienced. (Hermann Sasse, *Union and Confession*, 1936)*

In just a few weeks, the Supreme Court is expected to rule on the legality of same-sex marriage in America and roll out the implications of that ruling for individual states. I expect the ruling to create an alleged constitutional right to same-sex marriage, contrary to God’s created orders, natural law and the inerrant Scriptures. This will be the earnest beginning of a very long struggle for faithful Christians who will, more and more, be driven from participation in the culture. We shall come to know and understand parts of the Word of God like never before. “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20).

Brothers, the battle has already been won. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, has already defeated the foe. Satan surrendered at Golgotha. It is finished.

But what do we do? If the Supreme Court rules that same-sex marriage is legal in every state or must be recognized in every state, what is our response?

We stand fast (2 Thess. 2:15). We live in and by our Savior, who calls us to stay the course, to repent of our sin, to be in the Word of God and in prayer. We redouble our teaching on God’s gift of marriage. And we show love and mercy to those harmed by the dissolution of God’s ordering of marriage and family, intended for protection for all. We take legal action where absolutely necessary. “Public remedy, made through the office of the public official, is not condemned, but is commanded and is God’s work, according to Paul (Romans 13)” (Apology XVI 59).

The plan fits the nature of the Church: she is enduring and eternal. She speaks Christ’s forgiveness and peace to men and women struggling with same-sex attraction and heterosexual attraction alike, in and out of season. She doesn’t do flash-in-the-pan or drive-by ministry. She works in the world for the long haul. She doesn’t change her tune or stop her singing. She keeps telling real people about a real Jesus, from black-robed Supreme Court justices to the protestors on the steps of that building to the young people in college watching the ruling unfold to those of us who never imagined we would see this seismic shift in our lifetime. And she lives to demonstrate the mercy and love of Christ (1 John 3:15ff).

Most importantly, she speaks of the One who came for sinners — all sinners — and of the One who showed His love for us by dying for us. She simply stays the course.

That’s why you, dear brothers in the Office, will need our prayers in the days ahead. And you will have them. Legal marriage may be redefined, and outcomes we never imagined will occur. But these don’t surprise or alarm us. The crumbling culture merely proves that what began in the Garden of Eden is still prevalent today, that we are sinners among sinners, that we are all in need of Christ’s mercy and grace. This world is wending its way toward the end (Matthew 25). The story ends well (Revelation 7). That is what those in the pew and those disenchanted by the people in the pew need to hear, and will always need to hear, the most.

Beyond the theological consequences of this ruling, however, there are also practical implications, and I urge you to consider the following:

(1) The Synod’s legal team is carefully examining the potential ramifications of this case. It will likely be a messy ruling that will require time to unpack. We may discover that there is ultimately no constitutional protection for the Synod, its institutions, you or your congregation. We don’t know, but we will be reporting back to you with our findings.

(2) Your congregation should give serious thought to obtaining counsel from your own attorney. Also consider utilizing the Synod’s document on marriage policies for member congregations, which offers sample provisions limiting the use of church property to marriages that are consistent with LCMS beliefs. The day may come when

even this legal protection will not be enough, but it may assist you and your congregational leadership in forestalling issues as long as possible.

(3) Be prepared to discuss what marriage will look like in the future. Will LCMS pastors eventually be forced, as agents of the state, to perform same-sex marriages? If that happens, will we be prepared to let the state perform the legal marriage ceremony, while we as pastors provide a religious ceremony for those marriages that are in keeping with our confession of faith as Lutheran Christians? We must have these discussions as pastors and as a Synod, and we may even need to make decisions at the next Synod convention in the summer of 2016.

(4) Know that I, as Synod president, stand with you. What protections will the Synod or even the Constitution offer you? I don't know. But here is what I am personally sure of: The Gospel is enduring. It never changes. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. We as pastors are called to repent and to be faithful to Him —

and to His Gospel — alone. Will we be fined for not performing same-sex marriages? Potentially. Will we be thrown in jail? Maybe. A recently deceased Catholic bishop (Cardinal George) described what I believe we shall now begin to face: "I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the church has done so often in human history."

Make no mistake, the battle has been won. The devil has been defeated. The Victor reigns triumphant in mercy, love and truth. The Gospel knows no limits, but proclaims the gracious kingdom of our Lord to all, through Christ's Word and Sacraments.

The temptation will be to run out into the melee, to abandon the home front or to give up all together. But we are called instead to repent, to be ready, to move confidently into the future, come what may. We speak the truth in love to all. We share Christ's forgiveness with each person He sets in our path.

And the Lord will work all things for good, even these trying times. He is faithful, brothers. He will do it.

In Christ,
Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison
President, The Lutheran Church—
Missouri Synod

Supreme Court Set to Rule on Marriage

IN JUNE, THE SUPREME COURT IS EXPECTED TO RULE ON THE LEGALITY OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IN AMERICA. HOW CAN YOU PREPARE?

PRAY

"Our Lord Jesus, You are the same yesterday, today and forever. Give the pastors and people of Your Church strength to face these challenging times with courage and compassion. Keep our witness faithful to Your revealed truth and filled with divine hope. Protect us from the temptations of despair or capitulation to the ways of the world. We join in Your great prayer: Thy will be done. Hear us, for we pray in Your saving name. Amen."



 THE
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Missouri Synod



- ▶ Read President Matthew C. Harrison's pastoral letter lcms.org/president: "I expect the ruling to create an alleged constitutional right to same-sex marriage, contrary to God's created orders, natural law and the inerrant Scriptures. This will be the earnest beginning of a very long struggle for faithful Christians who will more and more be driven from participation in the culture. We shall come to know and understand parts of the Word of God like never before. "Our citizenship is in heaven as we eagerly await a Savior" (Phil. 3:20).
- ▶ Know that the Synod's legal team is carefully examining the potential ramifications of this case and will report back with more information.
- ▶ Consider seeking legal counsel for your congregation, as well as utilizing the Synod's document on marriage policies for member congregations.
- ▶ Prepare to discuss what marriage will look like in the future. Will LCMS pastors eventually be forced to, as agents of the state, perform same-sex marriages? And if so, what will their response be?

Visit lcms.org/freetobefaitful for more resources on marriage.