

“Barking Dogs and a Three Legged Hog”

Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregation (ACELC)

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For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. Titus 1:9

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Romans 12:9-18

I remember the day quite well. Several years ago on a cold and snowy day in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, I sat down over a bowl of popcorn with a man I barely knew. Dick Bolland and I had been corresponding and lamenting the problems as we saw them in our beloved Synod. Finally a face to face meeting and a chance to flesh things out. Little did we know at that time, but our theological conversation that day was in many respects the birth of the ACELC. In summary, we discussed the specifics of what we saw as divisions in the church; pastors being driven out of their congregations, revivalistic worship practices, law driven mission efforts, open Communion, unionism, and a general disdain for pure doctrine. We reviewed many of the confessional efforts that had burst on the scene and then faded quickly; some of which we had been involved in. Then I made a comment that struck a chord with my new found friend. I simply stated, “It seems to me like we have lost our material principle; justification.” Dick’s eyes lit up. In a few weeks he had captured in written form much of what we had discussed that day, and people responded. A movement had begun.

Soon we had pastors and laymen from all over the Synod involved in the discussion. We were all confessional, but at times had a problem with making the bold confession. Prior efforts had been primarily clergy-only efforts and primarily political efforts. Now the ACELC was taking shape. A new group, if it was to form and last, would need to be more than confessional; it must be a confessing movement. Since the LCMS is congregational in nature, a new group could not be clergy only but clergy and laity working in concert, a true congregational effort. Most of all, people were sick and tired of the church politics. If this new movement was to happen, it had to be a theological, not political effort.¹

¹ I am not saying that there is not such a thing as “good” church politics. What I am referring to are efforts to manipulate the church’s order in ways that are contrary to the Word of God including but not limited to giving the appearance of evil.

Many, many months of hard work followed. Evidence of many errors in doctrine and practice were gathered. Documents were written, dissected, and then re-written. More and more people wanted to be involved, and each new person meant not only more help in the hard work, but another opinion on just how we ought to proceed. It was decided that this new group would be different in yet another aspect; 100% transparency. There would be no cloak and dagger activities, no secret this or that, everything would be done out in the open and in the light of day.

Roughly two years ago, we were ready. With a web site for communication and dissemination of information, many statements and documents to share, and a letter to announce our efforts, we made two major decisions. The letter, a “fraternal admonition” would be sent to every congregation in the LCMS. Also, we had discovered that many people were unaware of the extent that error had taken hold in our church and in fact, some found it difficult to believe. We knew that we could not speak of error in general, we had to be specific. This would be a difficult, but necessary task. In this we were following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who not only pointed out false teaching, who not only said beware of false teachers; He took teachers to task and called them by name. C.F.W. Walther states it this way,

With great earnestness He cries out: “Woe unto you, scribes!” If He were to appear in our midst today, and did not tell us that He is the Christ, He would be condemned as a disturber of the peace. They would crucify Him today, just as they crucify us in books. The apostles, too, are always dealing with enemies; they call them dogs, mutilators of the flesh, and other epithets. Therefore Christians should be very careful not to reject Christ when they reject pastors because of the judgmental Word they proclaim. And it won’t do any harm whether we are considered saints, or whether we are slandered, so long as God above considers us faithful; but Christian congregations should also support their pastors, when they discipline false teachers, lest they reject Christ, who has commanded all pastors to exercise discipline. That is why Paul writes to Timothy: “Do not be ashamed of me, who am a prisoner for Christ.” Even though pastors are not bound in chains today, they are nevertheless despised. They bear this disgrace for their congregations. Pastors could easily be pious people, sit back in a corner, take no one to task; but then they would be fat, sleeping watchdogs, who do not bark.²

A watchdog who doesn’t bark may be a good buddy and companion, but is worthless when it comes to alerting you to danger. A faithful watchdog must, at the proper time, bark. That brings us to the next major decision, one that still seemingly haunts the ACELC to this day; the timing of the letter. Some wanted to send the letter out immediately. Others, acutely aware of the political tensions in Synod, wanted to wait. I called a trusted friend and asked for advice. Our effort was totally and completely theological so how best to communicate our concerns in light of the fact that a synodical convention was roughly four months away? His suggestion resonated with me. To send the letter at this time would certainly be seen by some as a political move and as an attempt to sway the election. To wait too long after the convention would be seen by some as a veiled attempt to manipulate the workings of the Synod or as some secretly planned effort by elected officials. The best way to avoid this type of “playing politics” criticism would be to send the letter out during the convention. That is what we did and for any who haven’t heard and will listen, now you know why.

The Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations (ACELC) was still only a concept and we had no idea if and how our idea would resonate. We had expected a negative reaction from those whose doctrine and practice we had pointed out as being in error. What we did not expect was the immediate and severe reaction from many on the “conservative” or “confessional” side of our synod. Not only were we criticized for the timing of our letter, but we were called “radical” and “extreme.” “Now we have a confessional synodical president so keep quiet and let him fix the problems.” We were even accused of trying to set the newly elected president’s agenda; how silly. The criticisms then and now revolve mainly around the process, not theology. We were quite surprised when an email arrived from the new 1st Vice President of the LCMS inviting representa-

² C. F. W. Walther, *Essays For The Church*, Volume I, 1857-1879, (St. Louis: CPH), 1992, 124.

tives to talk. Three meetings ensued, involving Vice President Mueller, District Presidents Sommerfeld and Mirly, and three representatives of ACELC, Dick Bolland, Drew Newman, and Dan Bremer. The meetings were fraternal, I am told, and for the most part cordial. We were assured that our concerns were real and valid and that they would be addressed in the newly forming Koinonia Project. Eleven months ago we called for a “free conference” and invited anyone who was interested to attend. Theological papers were presented, doctrine and practice were studied and people found out first hand that we were serious about being theological and not political. At the end of our conference several congregations officially formed the ACELC. The idea had become reality.

Since our first official gathering last March in Kearney, Missouri, many things have happened. We have continued to write and to make our documents sharper and clearer. We have told our story to anyone who would listen and now we have twenty congregations officially a part of the ACELC with many, many associate members and friends. We have filed three official dissents with the CTCR, clearly demonstrating that we are serious about our concerns and willing to work within the synodical process where possible. We are very near completion of a request for a *Gütachten*, a theological opinion, from the four North American seminaries on the topic of the “divine deposal” of pastors from their call. Email blasts are sent out on a regular basis. Model overtures have been created to aid and assist congregations. A second letter was recently mailed to every congregation in synod. We have planned and held our second conference, here in Lincoln, and are already planning conference number three for next April in Austin, Texas. In short, we continue to bark,

A preacher must not only feed the sheep so as to instruct them how they are to be good Christians, but he must also keep the wolves from attacking the sheep and leading them astray with false doctrine and error; for the devil is never idle. Nowadays there are many people who are quite ready to tolerate our preaching of the Gospel as long as we do not cry out against the wolves and preach against the prelates.

But though I preach the truth, feed the sheep well, and give them good instruction, this is still not enough unless the sheep are also guarded and protected so that wolves do not come and carry them off. For what sort of building is it if I throw away stones and then watch another throw them back in? The wolf can readily tolerate a good pasture for the sheep, he likes them the better for their fatness. But what he cannot endure is the hostile bark of the dogs.³

Since I was elected Chairman of ACELC this past summer, I have tried to place that image before us, the image of a barking dog. Politically speaking we have no power or authority to do anything. We hold no elected office in the synod and are not anyone’s official ecclesiastical supervisor. All we can do is bark. When your neighbor’s dog is barking and you are trying to sleep, how do you react? We expect the criticism to continue as our barking annoys some and infuriates others. However, in another respect, we have behind us all power and authority in heaven and on earth because what we are barking is the clear and sure Word of God.

Soon it will be two years since the Fraternal Admonition was mailed and Matthew Harrison was elected President of the LCMS. We are very thankful for his election and support his efforts. His leadership and theological focus has been a breath of fresh air. For the first time in a long time we are approaching matters theologically; we are together in our “Witness, Mercy, and Life Together.” Yet at the same time, by the most recent convention actions regarding the restructuring of synod, he has been consumed with administration and structure. We long for the day when his focus will be more and more doctrine and practice and less and less structure and bylaws.

The problems in our beloved synod are theological and not political. Our problems will not be solved by conventions and overtures and elections. For a true reconciliation to take place God’s Word must have free

³ *What Luther Says*, Volume 2, (St. Louis: CPH), 1959, 1053. Quoted in *C. F. W. Walther: The American Luther, Essays in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of Carl Walther’s Death*, (Mankato, MN: Walther Press), 1987, 2-3.

course and work its powerful work among us. Look around. Faithful pastors continue to be persecuted and removed. Open Communion practices abound. In many places revivalistic worship practices are the norm. “Unity in Diversity” is often replacing confession and absolution and true reconciliation is lost. Congregations are encouraged to be transformed and revitalized as if the proper method, style, or business practice has more power than the Word of God. At times the Council of Presidents seems to resemble more a secret society or “College of Cardinals” than churchman working with the holy things of God. We are being told by some that Law and Gospel is outdated and antiquated and must be replaced by a new perspective on works and sanctification. It still seems, in many ways, that we have lost, or at least misplaced, our material principle of justification.

So what are we to do? Cling to Christ and His Word. Embrace the death and new life He gives in the waters of Holy Baptism. Feast on His body and blood in the Holy Supper where He gives what He promises, forgiveness, life, and salvation. We pray for our church and her leaders that God’s Word would rule the day. In love and humility we call attention to error, and for the sake of precious souls that are at stake, we call people to repent. We bark and bark and bark and then we bark some more. What do we bark about? Luther teaches us well,

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.⁴

But pointing out false teaching is not enough; there must be, for the sake of precious souls, proper church discipline. Imagine how your family would look if you taught the truth to your children, but never took time to correct, rebuke, or spank. Soon there would be chaos and anarchy. Walther teaches us the importance of this aspect of our life together,

“It is God who instituted the power to discipline.⁵ It is God’s command, regardless of what our emotions might say. Here we are faced with two dangers. On the one hand, God tells every pastor, ‘Punish!’ God’s Word is also useful for punishment/discipline, and according to the Greek, it means disciplining false teachers, not disciplining for sin, which is more properly called ‘correction.’⁶ On the other hand the world says, ‘Don’t punish, that is contrary to love.’ Now whom should we obey, the world or God? We must be more ready to endure temporal calumny than to suffer the eternal fire when we are rejected by God.”⁷

My friends, every day that error is tolerated among us, it gets more deeply entrenched. To tolerate error in doctrine and practice is not a loving action. We in the ACELC have no power and authority to punish or discipline, but we have a sacred duty to encourage and support our elected officials in the church to do what they have been elected to do. In other words, we bark and in our barking we have this encouragement from Walther,

Now someone might get the idea that, in that case, it would be better if there were no Lutheran church. Then we could let people in their simplicity and ignorance and they would still not lose their salvation. But thank God that we do have the Lutheran Church to which we can cling, because: (1) False doctrine always keeps on spreading, imbeds itself ever more deeply in the heart, and in the end can cause us to forfeit our salvation in that the error ensnares us more and more. False doctrine is a poison that gradually permeates the entire body of the person who does not

⁴ Luther's Works, Weimar Edition. Briefwechsel [Correspondence], vol. 3, pp. 81f.

⁵ Das Strafamt.

⁶ Besserung.

⁷ Walther, Essays I, 132

cleanse and purify himself of it. (2) How good it is that our Lutheran church stands there with its purity of doctrine, stubbornly abiding in the Word, and raising its voice like a trumpet! That intimidates the sects and enthusiasts, warning them not to go further with their erroneous ideas. Oh, how many Methodists will thank us Lutherans in heaven for always confronting their enthusiastic ideas with the Word of God and chiding them; thereby at least accomplishing this much, that we kept them from sinking deeper and deeper into them! Truly, next to gathering in the individual lost souls around the truth, the primary purpose of the Lutheran Church is to keep on raising the voice of its testimony. Whoever wishes to be a true disciple of Jesus must abide in His Word.⁸

There is an old story about a feed salesman who pulls into a farmer's place. As they talk the salesman catches a glimpse of a hog walking free about the farm, a hog with a wooden leg. Finally the salesman says, "That is the most amazing thing I have ever seen, a three legged hog with a wooden fourth leg!" The farmer beamed with pride. "That there is one amazing hog. Why just three months ago our house was on fire and me and my wife would have surely died, but that hog came crashing through the front door, woke us up and saved our lives." "Is that how he lost his leg?" the salesman asked. The farmer smiled and said no. "Another thing," he said, "last month I was working in the yard when a bolt of lightning struck that there tree, and before the tree came crashing down on my head, the hog came out of nowhere and pushed me aside and saved my life." "Amazing" said the salesman, "is that how he lost his leg?" The farmer said no. "And then just last week" the farmer bragged, "my little granddaughter was playing by that there pond and she slipped in. I don't swim and I didn't know what to do, but before I could even think, the hog jumped in and pulled her to safety." "Amazing, the salesman replied, is that how he lost his leg?" The farmer said no.

Frustrated the salesman said, "Now I'm confused, if the hog didn't lose his leg in the fire, or lightening storm or in the near drowning, how did the hog end up with a wooden leg?" Dumbfounded, the farmer smiled and said, "Well, you don't eat a valuable hog like that all at one time."

Friends, our efforts in the ACELC will not always be appreciated, but we are called to be and remain faithful to Christ and his Word. We desire healing and reconciliation in our church and we know that God loves healing and reconciliation; that's why He sent Jesus. We are bold to ask God to bless us in our efforts and especially to bless us in our barking. We must be more ready to endure temporal suffering than to suffer the eternal fire when we are rejected by God. Amen.

SDG

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⁸ Ibid., 133.