

“A Fraternal Admonition: My Brother’s Keeper”

A Free Conference on Addressing Error in The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod

**March 1-3, 2011
Trinity Lutheran Church, Kearney Missouri**

Hosted by the Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations (ACELC)

Conference Introduction – Rev. James D. Gier

In Nomine ✠ Jesu

A ***Fraternal Admonition*** ... The very first sin recorded in Holy Scripture after the Fall is the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. When the Lord inquired of Cain as to where his brother was, Cain answered, **“I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”** (Gen. 4:9). The inference is that he is not. Cain did not heed the Lord’s warning and Word and instead became his brother’s murderer.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” YES! It is what it means to be brothers ... Christians, the body of Christ where **“If one member suffers; all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together”** (1 Cor. 12:26).

I am James Gier, pastor of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Excelsior Springs, MO ... your brother and your keeper, as you are mine - a fellow brother and fellow keeper of the brethren. Christian faith and love commends and commands it to be so. **“Brethren”** ... which is Scripture’s way of addressing the saints ... **Welcome!** - to the first Free Conference of the ACELC - a group founded in part on this very basis that **“I am my brother’s keeper, and he is mine.”**

This conference is unique in its purpose ... a free conference not simply to talk about synod issues, confined by synod sensitivities or constrained by bureaucratic tendencies toward compromise for the sake of peace ... but a truly free conference to openly and publicly and in true brotherly fashion - discuss errors in the fellowship of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod – for the salutary purpose of bringing them to proper Biblical resolution, as our Lord would have us do. It is written:

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 10:1).

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1).

“... If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matthew 18:15)

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, TEACHING and ADMONISHING [emphasis mine] one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:12-16).

“Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Corinthians 13:11).

This is the Word of the Lord!

There are many venues where concerns about the errors dividing our fellowship are being discussed. And wherever these discussions are taking place, there is a good and salutary thing happening. HOWEVER, these venues largely speak to the choir - and certainly there is need for that, and there is much good done there. But even more, and has now been done, the need for writing down in no uncertain terms the errors dividing our Synod and taking them beyond the blogosphere and cyberspace and placing them directly into the life and consciousness of the entire synod.

No comprehensive reform or restoration of orthodoxy can happen in confined spaces. It must take place in view of all for the sake of all. No meaningful reform and restoration can happen apart from the very Church itself ... the pastors and people - congregations – together! ***Brethren ... being brethren*** - Lutheran Church Missouri Synod congregations being the Church together – teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom ... that the Word of Christ may dwell among us richly.

The Synod is pastors and congregations. That is what makes up Synod membership. We are Synod together in this way. And we as pastors and congregations – that which is the Church in every locale - possess by divine right the right to judge doctrine – and to be our brother’s keeper – to TEACH and ADMONISH – in good-willed manner. Even in voluntary association in a Synod Confession do we continue to hold that right together. The Fourth President of the LCMS, Francis Pieper, wrote in his 1905 Synodical Address, under the title ***The Difficult Path of Holding Forth for the Truth***, the following:

We tolerate within the Synod no doctrine or practice that contradicts Scripture. The congregations that form the Synod supervise each other so that God’s Word rules in doctrine and life. Where departure occurs, we hold it as our duty, through doctrine, admonition, and punishment, to bring the erring out of their error. Where the Word of God will not be heard, there is exclusion from the Synod ... From the beginning to this very day, some few have separated from our

fellowship. Yet all along the Synod has enjoyed great unity. Those of us who are ourselves members of the Synod know the basis and cause of this unity. Our hearts and consciences are captive and held together by the Word of God. [At Home in the House of My Fathers, by Matthew C. Harrison, Lutheran Legacy, 2009, p.630]

Unfortunately, a growing acceptance of a counter-theology at work in our grandfather's Church, coupled with bureaucratic restraints and pressures to keep the peace, have hindered any meaningful discussion or resolution to the growing doctrinal and practical divisions happening among us today.

Recent emphasis on Synod structure and bylaws in a growing struggle to control the Synod, is a clear sign of ever increasing division. All because we have not truly and with sincerity and concern as *brethren* – dealt with our issues honestly, openly, and theologically. *We are a wavering Synod becoming ever more entangled in its human bureaucracy ... than enlightened by the Word of God.*

When Jesus came He found Israel entangled in all kinds of bureaucracy – of humanly contrived laws and regulations that in essence overwrote and choked out the truth of Scripture. The Scribes and the Pharisees made void the Word of God, says Jesus, by **“teaching as doctrines the commandments of men”** (Matt. 15:6-9) ... teaching and practicing error. False Doctrine.

As a result, Jesus said, they worshiped God in vain. Their hearts were far from Him. They were far from Him because they were far from His Word ... **“teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”** *Israel was no longer its grandfather Abraham's Church.* They did not recognize the Son of God when He came, because they no longer knew the God of their fathers. Jesus said of them, **“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God ... Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word”** (John 8:42-43).

There was an ongoing struggle in the Church ... Jesus and the Sanhedrin [the Church Council] ... The Word of God and the teachings of men ... the Gospel Word and Sacraments and Church Growth Methodology ... there is nothing new under the sun. The outcome? ... rejection of the Christ and the Gospel He taught. So they killed Him ... *their brother.*

It is written, **“We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous”** (1 John 3:12).

“And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:21)

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16).

False doctrine kills. It killed Christ – though they knew not what they were doing. And it works to kill the one who believes it – though they know not what they are doing - by taking Christ and His Gospel away. *All matters of doctrine are matters of Christ. May we never depart from Him, no, not even on one point. God help us!*

“Doctrine is life.” That is the title to a collection of distinguished writings of the sainted Robert Preus. We are blessed to have his son as one of our presenters at this conference – to speak on this very thing – PURE DOCTRINE. And to this should also be added concerning *“pure doctrine” ... that it is also our unity.* This point Walther clearly makes when he notes the following:

When we had our convention in New York two years ago, a renowned man from the synods of the General Council was present and observed how we studied doctrine. That led him to write in the *Lutheran Missionary*:

“Now I understand why the Missourians are so unified. The reason is that they always spend a great deal of time in the thorough study of doctrine. They don’t merely discuss it thoroughly, but they always get down to the basic principles and prove everything on the basis of Scripture. That is the secret of the Missourians. With that kind of approach, they cannot help being unified.”
So wrote that church official. [“Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod” in *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, by Matthew C. Harrison, Lutheran Legacy, 2009, p.299]

Just previous to this Walther wrote:

Here in America, we also use the arrangement of a synod [or council] to carry on the business of the Church; God forbid that we ever get to the point where we merely put on a big show and then have a convention in which we discuss all sorts of peripheral piffle about ceremonies, rules, and insignificant trifles [*armselige Lappalien*]. Instead of that, may we always concentrate on the study of doctrine. [“Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod” in *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, by Matthew C. Harrison, Lutheran Legacy, 2009, p.299]

Some today contend that this emphasis on DOCTRINE hinders missions and the numerical growth of the Church. It didn’t in Walther’s day. In fact it was the very opposite. He accounted in 1870, 23 years after the forming of the Synod, the following: **“What would have happened to the Lutheran Church in America without the orthodox Lutheran Synods? If 25 or 30 years ago a few Lutherans had sat in a corner with their faith there would hardly be an orthodox Lutheran Church in our land today. But there are now thousands of Lutherans here who have come to life in Christ, who circulate confessionally faithful church publications, and who have founded Lutheran Church institutions for education and charity which are now in full bloom. Our gracious God had accomplished all these through the faithful witness to and confession of the truth from the mouths of orthodox Lutheran Christians. And if this is already the fruit in so small an ecclesiastical circle such as ours, how richer could it be in the greater church at large.”** [Theses on Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently, 1870, Theses VIII pp. 33-34]

This is not to necessarily say that, "if the LCMS is faithful, numerical growth will follow." That is not what is intended. It simply answers the false proposition by some in our Synod that pure doctrine and practice, including the idea that Word and Sacrament alone are not enough, hinders numerical growth. Walther shows otherwise.

Brethren, the only hope for true unity and true growth in the Church is to restore that by which only unity and the Church can grow - the pure Gospel and Truth. *It is true* that the Church does grow where God's Word and Sacraments are, for these are the very and only means by which He makes Christians and holds them together in unity of faith. In this sense the true Church will grow in accord with the purposes and will of God ... not man.

For too long FOCUS on the divisions among us have plunged into the political trenches of "us" verses "them." To be sure there are "sides" and "positions." But first and foremost the FOCUS is not about "**WHO is right**" – pitting brother against brother – but "**WHAT is right**" - placing Christ and His Word back at the center of our life and ministry together.

It would be good then, *brethren*, to proclaim, exhort and hold this center again together – to kindle again that fire of love for doctrine in the churches of the LCMS. Christians are by regenerated nature theological people, doctrinal people, because they are Christ people. Disciples. To truly love Jesus is to truly love doctrine. Can't separate them. Doctrine is Truth. Jesus is Truth. And where this center is held – God's people are there – the Church.

We are the men of our age (male and female we are) ... the Christians of our time ... the children's children of our great grandfather's ... Walther, Luther, Paul, Peter, James and John, ... Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham who believed God, and is father of us all who share his faith (Romans 4:16), to be the grandfathers of our time and to the generations to come, to hold fast, guard, and pass along to our children's children, untainted, unleavened, the DOCTRINE of Christ and all that flows out of it into the life of the Church in faith, worship, and ministry – together.

It is Time. It is always time to confess as Scripture teaches ... "**in season and out of season**" (2 Timothy 4:2), for "**now is the day of salvation**" Not yesterday or tomorrow. But now - TODAY. God is Lord of His Church and He rules it through Christ and His Word. He is not bound by political maneuvering, nor helped or limited in any way by favorable or unfavorable election results. His will is always done – and this in accord with His Word. "Today" has always been the day to confess and stand and contend for the truth of Christ ... ***together as brethren!***

How blessed we are TODAY to see the quality of the Synod gathered here. People who care for our fellowship ... for Christ – His Church and His Doctrine. How blessed we are TODAY to have a Synod President who is theological and concerned for the harmful divisions hurting the Lord's people and hindering our ministry and mission together. How blessed we are TODAY for the renewed hope of unity and healing in

President Harrison’s three-fold emphasis – Witness, Mercy, and Life Together – born out of the very DOCTRINE of the Church.

And finally, how blessed we are TODAY to have some of the synod’s top theologians to talk DOCTRINE with us – **to be edified through the theological gifts and insights the Lord has graciously blessed these brothers with for the glory of His Church.**

As we move ahead to the speakers, and engage in the very life and stuff of the Church, her blessed doctrine and Gospel and the promises and power held therein to save and unify, may we remember these words of the Psalmist, **“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when BROTHERS dwell in UNITY”** (Ps. 133:1)

May it be so again!

LSB Hymn 766 (sts. 1-3, 6, 9)

Soli Deo Gloria

INTRODUCTION TO SPEAKERS

Since this is a Free Conference, it is to be noted that these papers and presentations are independent of the ACELC’s official activities and will remain the independent work and position of the presenter. Their presentations are not meant to be an “official endorsement” of the ACELC - but simply convey a mutual and fraternal care and concern about the topic matters and the need to address these matters in the Synod. We appreciate the opportunity to provide to the Synod the thoughts and insights of some of today’s most learned and capable theologians on the issues of our day.