

## Bishop's Road Show – July 17, 2010

### The Season of Pentecost

Dear Friends:

As I send on to you the fourth in this series of “**Why Stay?**”, I also want to notify you that the 2011 Pastoral Compensation Package is now posted in this synod's home page. Synod Council struggle with the 2011 package knowing the difficulties we are all having with this economy. A compromise package is now on the main page ([www.wv-wmd.org](http://www.wv-wmd.org)) under the title of “**What's New.**”

Today's “**Why Stay?**” article is written by Pastor Jerry Kliner. It appears below.

God's blessings, + Ralph

Dear Bishop Dunkin;

The question “**Why stay (in the ELCA)**” is a complicated one that cannot be answered easily. The question of “*Why stay?*” is at least as complicated as the reciprocal question “*Why leave?*” And there can be no single, “one-size-fits-all” answer for either question, since the issues involved in both “*staying*” and “*departing*” are wrapped up in matters of conscience, which means that the answers to both questions will be highly personal to each individual circumstance—though no one should ever confuse conscience with “personal opinion.” But you have asked the question of me, so I will endeavor to answer it to the best of my ability.

Before I can address the more systematic issues, I want to address some of the practical aspects of the dilemma. These practical aspects should not over-ride the systematic issues, but they do need to be dealt with.

---Perhaps the first practical question needs to be “**Where would I/we go?**” Seriously. If I am in conflict with the ELCA and her direction, then I have to know where I am going and what would be different in my destination. Leaving, just for the sake of leaving, is a dangerous and imprudent action. And looking for the “greener grass” on the other side of the proverbial fence isn't going to work either. The “grass” is never “greener” on the other side of the fence, and to depart from one denomination to seek a “more perfect” denomination is to inevitably discover new disappointments, new conflicts, and new issues. Such a movement tends to destroy faith and optimism and tends to end up in a perpetual search for what never can be...a human-actuated righteousness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (of Blessed Memory) was quite right, in his masterwork *Life Together*, to observe that such a fantasy will inevitably be disappointed. All this is to say that the decision to “leave” or “depart” must be proactive (versus reactive) and the weight must fall on “staying” until the answer of “Where would I/we go?” can be answered positively.

---A second practical question is “**Why exactly am I/we leaving?**” Again, this sounds silly, but the reasons for change must be clearly understood and be able to be stated clearly. Otherwise, we can fall victim to the tendency so prevalent in our society to avoid conflict and pain by escapism. If we are seeking to merely escape conflict or to “do something” as a reaction to feeling powerless, we will find ourselves ultimately frustrated. If, on the other hand, we can state clearly the reasons why communion and community are no longer possible, then at least we become proactive in our approach.

---A third practical question that must be asked is *“Has God has called me/us for precisely this reason, to stay in the ELCA?”* Or to word it differently, *“Maybe the reason I/we am here at this moment, is because God intends me to be here in this time of conflict?”* Maybe the very fact that I am in conflict with the ELCA is actually indicative that I should **REMAIN**, and not depart, because God intends to use me for something. We are all keyed up on discerning God's call in times of comfort, but is it not a theology of the Cross that calls us to seek God's call for us in times of suffering and trial, just as Jesus suffered himself to be tried and suffer for the sake of redeeming the world?

---A fourth practical question is, *“If not me, then who will struggle faithfully?”* Call it the "Bonhoeffer" question, if you will. If I will not stand and work charitably for the good of the ELCA, then who will??? If the traditionalists, confessionalists, and orthodox Lutherans depart the denomination, then who will be left to speak? If the faithful depart the denomination, then who will struggle and work to make things better? When faced with the question of whether to remain in the US or return home to Germany, Bonhoeffer felt called to return home rather than ride out the struggle in relative safety and comfort because if he would not work for the welfare of his Church, then who would?

Having tried to speak to some of the “practical” questions involved in the debate, let me now turn my attention to your more systematic proposal. I will attempt to answer the question you asked. I will take the progression in a typically Lutheran fashion, starting with the Holy Scriptures.

### **Biblical:**

A number of passages come to mind here. First and foremost, our Lord's words in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake....” But I think for my main thrust, I will turn to Paul's Pastoral Letters, especially 2 Timothy:

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: **proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.** (2 Timothy 4:1-4)*

Most people will put the emphasis on the "great apostasy" in the middle of the passage, but I think the letter puts the emphasis on **Timothy**. That there will be "itching ears" is not to bother Timothy, rather he is to "be persistent" in his work, whether the times and conditions are favorable or appear to be unfavorable. Immediately following this passage, Paul (and yes, I think that 2 Timothy is genuinely Pauline) notes that he himself is headed for death, and yet that is not a measure of his faithfulness or success. The question for orthodox/traditionalist/confessional Lutherans is not what "*they*" (others) will do, but what "**YOU**" will do, not whether "the times are favorable or unfavorable" but whether **you** will continue to proclaim the message, not whether we will see success or not, but whether **you** will "...always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, and carry out your ministry fully." In other words, the question of faithfulness does not reside in external circumstances, but internally.

## **Theological:**

I would hearken to two key Lutheran concepts: *A Theology of the Cross* and *The Visible and Invisible Church*.

A *Theology of the Cross* names sin for what it is and calls the faithful to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and faithfully follow Jesus. As I understand it, one of the implications of a Theology of the Cross will forever call us to see the Triumph of our Lord in his suffering and dying on the cross, the Body of Christ as being forever "broken and shed... for the forgiveness of sin," and never to trust in our own righteousness, but in Christ's righteousness alone. (Rough sketch here, Matthew Riegel can correct me where I am undoubtedly astray.) How this bears upon our current situation is that we should not be particularly surprised when the Church—the Body of Christ—is wounded and suffering, when righteousness is in question, and when death seems to press in upon us. Not that a Theology of the Cross, is a theology of denial. Lord forbid such a thing! A Theology of the Cross does not allow us to ignore the suffering of the Church or be indifferent to it. But for orthodox/confessional/traditionalist Lutherans, we can see this current trial as part of Christ's redeeming triumph through his Passion and Death, that we can remain in a Church that is broken and bleeding because that is the Christ we encounter in the Sacrament, and that we can trust in Christ's righteousness above our own or the ELCA's. Indeed, a Theology of the Cross might help us to see this current struggle as sanctifying as opposed to corrupting, so long as we allow this current time to drive us deeper into the cardinal virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love.

As for the issue of the *Visible and Invisible Church*, I would argue as Luther did, that in the field the "wheat" and the "tares" grow up together and we cannot tell the difference between them. Often the Church visibly shows forth her Lord in works of Charity and faithfulness. Much more frequently, however, the work of the Holy Spirit is less visible to our naked eyes. So it is that we must heed our Lord's admonition to "let them grow up together" and that he will send his angels into the fields at the end of the growing season to reap both the wheat and the tares, so as not to uproot the wheat. The orthodox/confessional/traditionalist Lutherans must sometimes realize that we cannot distinguish between the "wheat" and the "tares," the "Visible" and the "Invisible" Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, Ananias is skeptical of going to a wounded Saul (Paul), who could have guessed what Saul would turn out to be? Or the young Saint Francis? Maybe, just maybe, there are those among our brothers and sisters that we cannot yet recognize that will grow up into great Saints. So it is that we can rejoice when we see holiness and faithfulness in the Church, but we must also heed our Lord's admonition that he will gather in the just and the unjust at the time of the harvest.

## **Ecclesial:**

Here I would raise Luther's *Marks of the Church: Possession of the Holy Word of God, The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, The Sacrament of Holy Communion, The Office of the Keys, Ordination, Prayer, Public Praise, and Thanksgiving to God*, and *Possession of the Holy and Sacred Cross*. These seven (7) marks are the external, distinguishing signs the Luther said could reliably show where God's People are. Of these Seven Marks, only one (1) seems to be in serious question here: *Possession of the Holy Word of God*, vis-a-vis a real question of what is that "Word of God" and competing hermeneutical methodologies.

But I would stress that we are often ready to find common cause with Christians who have more serious deficiencies in these marks. For example, we routinely find common cause with "Baptists" who lack the

Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, the Office of the Keys, and sometimes Ordination. Few seem take umbrage with the loss of those three or four marks. (I would and do...) The ELCA office of "Ecumenical and Inter-religious Relations" routinely stresses the importance of finding concord with those who lack ALL of these marks (ie Jews and Muslims and Mormons etc...), and we have not found reason for dissolution over that.

In short, I would say that, while we certainly have a grievous and serious dispute, the Marks of the Church call and pull us back into fellowship with the Church, even where there is stress and disagreement, because we can see the visible presence of God's people even though we are in conflict. The Marks of the Church do not function in a reductionistic fashion, reducing the Christian life and task, rather they function expansively, broadening the Christian vision to include our understanding of the Church to include those who are not in "lock-step" with us. Likewise, the "*Satis Est...*" clause in AC VII is not reductionistic either; rather, along with the Marks of the Church, the "*Satis Est...*" sets the limen (the threshold), which welcomes us into the presence of the People of God. As long as the ELCA continues to embody these Marks of the Church, we can be assured that we are in the presence of God's people. Agreement and concord are welcome additions to our corporate life, but are not necessary conditions for the faithful to remain in the ELCA, and to remain in good conscience. We can confidently remain because the outward Marks confirm the inward reality of the Church.

I know these are not "short" or good "soundbyte" reasons or answers. Part and parcel of this whole mess is that we have defaulted to "simplicistic" arguments over and against a complex world and reality that demands our best and brightest. But I digress.... I hope that this paper helps clarify the questions, and, at the least, contributes positively to our Synod.

Pax Christi;

Pr. Jerry Kliner, STS