

# **Our Reasons for Leaving the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod**

## ***By Rev. Brock Abbott***

Luther loved Aesop's Fables . . . The Boy Bathing:

A boy was bathing in a river and got out of his depth, and was in great danger of being drowned. A man who was passing along a road hard by heard his cries for help, and went to the riverside and began to scold him for being so careless as to get into deep water, but made no attempt to help him. "Oh, sir," cried the boy, "please help me first and scold me afterwards." (D. L. Ashliman, *Aesop's Fables*, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003, pg. 73)

It is my prayer that you will in no way perceive that my presentation is an attempt to stand by the river and scold. The spirit of my presentation is to help. Having gone through trouble ourselves, having dealt with our own weaknesses and questions, we earnestly seek to "comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God," as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. We share our account, and we offer ourselves to you as servants with the hope that we can console and encourage. We speak the truth in love.

There were many reasons for our leaving the Missouri Synod in 2004. Some of them have been mentioned by Alan. I suppose that I could attempt to list all of them and say a few words. Instead, I would prefer to boil them all down. Behind all of our reasons for leaving the Missouri Synod, we saw and we still see an unrepentant assault on the Word of God and God's honor that has not been abated, but has only increased. Francis Pieper writes:

God's *Word* revealed in Scripture is God's *honor*. As God in His Word has revealed Himself to us human beings, so He wants to be honored and worshiped by us human beings. As men take their stand toward God's *Word*, so they take their stand towards *God*. This we dare not forget . . . But, right here the leaders of heterodox church bodies assure us, that they place God's honor above everything and seek to honor God in all things . . . But if they continue to misconstrue God's Word, to twist God's Word, and cast it away, then they, in spite of their assurances to the contrary, should not be allowed to talk us into believing that they honor God. (*The Difference Between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches*, pgs. 33-34)

It is easy to forget in the heat of battle that we are dealing with God's honor and our personal relationship to Him. You need to know that the Pastors of Pilgrim wrestled with this intensely. In the heat of battle it often seems that it is all about winning and saving the buildings, clandestine meetings, positions of power, the right strategy, it's always the next convention that will somehow solve our problems, or it gets real personal as we worry about Concordia plans, retirement, or our flock that might get upset and make our life miserable or even unjustly remove us from office. And, if that is not enough distraction, we asked ourselves: "What will life be like if we leave the synod?" We are taught in our culture that if you are not a part of a large institution, then you are virtually a nonentity. Yes, we wrestled with all of this for many years prior to our

departure, but these are not really the issue. The issue is the Word of God - God's honor, and when God's honor is at stake in us so is our salvation and our mission to preserve the remnant and to reach out to the lost.

I have already said it once, and I'll say it again, "behind all of our reasons for leaving the Missouri Synod, we saw and we still see an unrepentant assault on the Word of God and God's honor that has not been abated, but has only increased." The Missouri Synod's (2005) edition of the *Small Catechism* cites overwhelming support from Scripture and reminds us in a short and simple way that "we should avoid false teachers, false churches, and all organizations that promote a religion that is contrary to God's Word." (pg. 163) As Pastors of Pilgrim, we thought about that a lot before we left. We are to "avoid" for good reason.

Those who do not ultimately do this are in constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely. Paul says that godless chatter is like gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17). In other words, the proclamation of false doctrine is a terrible infection that spreads rapidly, bringing spiritual death. This we did not want for Pilgrim. We saw and we see the gangrene everywhere, and we noted that it was making its way into our own congregation. As shepherds of a flock, our concern was twofold. First of all, we are accountable before God and we are to fear him and no man. His honor is paramount and he has entrusted his people to us. Secondly, in love toward those entrusted to us, we realized that there was nothing more important than the salvation of God's flock and our witness to a dying world. All of this was being threatened in many ways. Knowing Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of eternal life, we could not stand the thought of being blind watchmen, mute dogs that cannot bark, who lie around and dream and love to sleep as the prophet Isaiah writes (56:10). The lion was in the brush, watching our flock, even running after us and our sheep, and so we believed that the flock had to be protected. Our congregation also saw the lion. It broke our hearts to know that the lion was in the form of laity and pastors from other Missouri Synod congregations trying to convince our laity to leave Pilgrim, and both district and synodical officials finding unique ways to punish us for our stand.

Even with this, leaving the synod was not an easy thing to do. It is hard to be a part of something for many years, only to leave it behind. But, I hope you will understand this: ***Life Without A Synod*** has not been nor will it ever be a life without God. Whether in a synod or out, we are not alone. We have the means of grace, we have Christ, and that is all that finally matters. These are the marks of the church. We left the synod because all unchecked false doctrine ultimately destroys what we have in Jesus our Savior. My dad (Pastor William K. Abbott), in a paper he delivered in Texas in 2007, put it in this way:

I could never describe removing yourselves from the Missouri Synod as defeat. I would describe it as an opportunity to give witness to the truth of God's Word and a response to Scripture's admonition: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths (Prov. 3:5-6)."

For those of you who are struggling as we had to struggle, we really do understand. But, you must understand that you are not defeated as long as you have Christ; only take care not to lose your treasure. Hold onto the Word of God which is God's honor. Faithful Lutheran Christians cannot indefinitely remain in a synodical body where the word of false doctrine is tolerated and grows.

In *The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, Luther writes against the great errors of the kingdom of the Pope and his tyranny when he states, ". . . errors must be rejected and the true doctrine embraced for the glory of God and the salvation of souls." (*Concordia Triglotta*, pg. 519) Five paragraphs later in the same section, he goes on to say, "and it is clear that it is God's command that we flee idolatry, godless doctrine, and unjust cruelty." (*Concordia Triglotta*, pg. 521)

### **The Steps We took and How We Prepared Our Members**

Every now and then, we are asked by pastors and people, "how were you able to convince your laity to leave the Missouri Synod?" The bottom line is that the sheep listen to the voice of the good shepherd. As Jesus says, ". . . they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice (John 10:5)." When our laity was properly informed, we could not have stopped them from leaving. How did this happen at Pilgrim?

Pilgrim called my father and me to be shepherds under the chief shepherd, who is Christ. It is our privilege and duty to set before the flock the voice of Jesus in the Bible. Many times we would explain to our people that they have attached themselves to a man-made institution - a synod - to walk together in fellowship with those of like mind in order to do certain work more effectively. We told our congregation that, when attached to a synod or any organization, they need to know what the synod stands for and the work that the synod is doing, and that they need to see these things in light of the Word of God. We also told them that their pastors and laity needed to be active in the synod to support it and correct it when necessary. Both Pilgrim pastors and laity served on circuit, district, and synodical levels. Pilgrim financially supported the synod up to \$120,000 a year at one time.

So, in short, we would take the affairs of the synod to our congregation and look at them in light of Scripture. By doing this, it became apparent that the public theology of the synod was not in keeping with the Word of God. The synod had left us. We did what we could do to fight, but to no avail. We began to realize that we were supporting a synod that was opposed to us. We could not in good conscience watch our mission dollars being used to establish local congregations that did not believe what we believed. We saw that the constitution and bylaws had become more important than the Bible. Synodical officials were becoming so powerful that they could remove pastors from congregations and intrude in the affairs of the laity at will. The Church Growth Movement and Contemporary Worship became the new means of grace, and I am only scratching the surface. Like many people, we thought that with the election of President

Barry, there was a chance.

After the 2004 convention, my father and I could see "the writing on the wall" as it says in Daniel. It appeared to us that God had numbered the days, things had been weighed on the scales but found wanting, the kingdom is divided. And the sides were hardened (still are), false doctrine was increasing (still is), our Pilgrim congregation was feeling the hot breath of the lion from all sides.

In the first elders meeting following the convention, without the pastors saying a word, the elders said that it was time to leave the Missouri Synod. My father and I thought it would be at least another year before this step. The elders approached the council and the council was in agreement. It was unanimous. The lay leaders were informed and strong. Alan has already described the mechanics, but as those mechanics unfolded, it became apparent that our congregation was also ready to go - informed and strong. On October 19, 2004, we left the synod. We lost roughly 40 members over the departure, but God was merciful to us that year and we added to our flock roughly the same.

And what did we learn from this experience? Whether the laity or pastors "get the ball rolling" so to speak, it takes informed laity and pastors who have together been touched by the Word of God - who are concerned with God's honor to finally have the audacity to leave a synod. I guess we already knew this deep down inside, but to see it in action only solidified it all the more so that it would further lead to the forming of the United Lutheran Mission Association with its strong emphasis on lay involvement.

Together, Sheep and Shepherds must know the true doctrine and be steadfast in it. If the sheep will have nothing to do with it, the shepherd must nevertheless speak the Word of Christ even though he might be unjustly removed. And if shepherds will have nothing to do with it, the sheep must rise up and judge their shepherds for the truth, even if their shepherds are nice guys. Luther is clear on the matter when he remarks that the sheep have the warnings, teaching them to "avoid the doctrines of men . . . at the peril of their souls . . . thus they [the hearers] not only have the right and power to judge everything that is taught but also must do this at the peril of the wrath of the divine Majesty." (*Reason and Cause from Scripture that a Christian Communion or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Doctrine*, 1523. X, 1797-1800; SL X, 1538 ff.)