

*That They May Be One*

Steven Wilco  
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia '10

National Workshop on Christian Unity  
Essay Contest  
1 March 2009

Dry bones brought to life, dead sticks grown together – God does marvelous things! In the visions to Ezekiel in chapter 37, these images present a witness to God’s plan for God’s people in the midst of their disobedience. Apart from each other these dry bones and dead sticks lack meaning, lack promise, lack life. Yet brought together they witness to the transformative power of God. The image of the two sticks merging into one in Ezekiel’s hand to represent the eventual merging of Israel and Judah is a powerful image for ecumenical work. The powerful part of the image is not only the mysterious merging of two sticks, but even more so that God’s vision is not the destruction of one stick over the other. Surely Israel and Judah have each strayed from God, but just as surely each brings a unique witness to who God has been, is, and will be for their community. The full witness of both must be included in God’s kingdom.

Though there is one gospel for all, each denomination presents a unique witness to that one gospel. Lutherans have traditionally emphasized something the Christian faith holds in common: that we are saved by the grace of God through Christ. The particular Lutheran emphasis on grace witnesses as a corrective to the human tendency in all of us to want to earn our own salvation in this world and the world to come. And yet, in that important emphasis, often times Lutherans and others have shied away from talking about our role as active participants in God’s work. This was a problem from the very beginning of the Lutheran church. The antinomian controversy developed in the sixteenth century when Johann Agricola suggested that the law did not need to be proclaimed, only grace.<sup>1</sup> This antinomian tendency persists in the church today and has too often allowed the Lutheran witness to the gospel to ignore important ways that we are called to live out our Christian faith. Though Lutherans have a long tradition of social service as well as advocacy and social justice work, at least in the United States, there is a

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, ‘Introduction to One Hundred Thirty Common Questions,’ *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 13-14.

tendency to ignore this when talking about “the gospel.” Lutherans are too often afraid to ask anything from our church members in terms of time, talents, and money toward evangelism and outreach or to ministry in general.

Because we too often define ourselves in the negative (e.g. We are Lutheran because we do *not* believe what those other Christians believe about doing good works.), we have been hesitant to talk about our Christian faith in terms of how we act in the world. Christianity involves our whole beings and ought to impact the decisions we make throughout our daily lives. Yet when we fail to consider how our actions impact our relationship with God and with others, we fail to witness completely to the gospel of the Incarnate One. It is essential to talk about the gospel as God’s work in our midst, but Lutherans have worked too hard defining themselves against other denominations who speak of good works. Though the emphasis on God’s work alone in our salvation is crucial to the gospel, our witness to that gospel inevitably involves action.

The well-known parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) is an excellent reminder of the incarnational ways that the gospel is lived out. Though many interpretations of this passage have suggested that those who do not do adequate works of service are condemned eternally, that denies the power of the parable. Instead of focusing on who is in and who is out, instead of pointing fingers about who should be excluded, we ought to focus on the question, “Where is God in this parable?” We may quibble about who the sheep and the goats are, but it is abundantly clear where God is: incarnate in those in need. This passage not only draws us away from our theological divisions, but also points us toward the incarnate one in our midst. What better corrective to an overly-Lutheran interpretation of the gospel than to remind us that as we

hash out difficult and important doctrinal questions, ultimately God exists in our midst and we have the opportunity to serve one another!

By God's grace, the global church is already made one, but we are called to make that reality present in our congregations and in our lives. It is essential to teach young children that there are other Christians around the world who worship the same Lord, yet in different languages and styles. Lutherans and many other denominations have long had a history of catechetical teaching (commonly known as "confirmation") to middle-school-age students. While at least in the Lutheran church this has often been considered a time to "make good Lutherans" out of our young people, instead we need to use that opportunity to help young people engage their *Christian* faith mentally, emotionally, physically. This must include active engagement in works of service as well as interaction with other denominations. I recently had a confirmation student ask me, "I have a friend who is Christian, is that at all like being Lutheran?" I could hardly believe the question! Our young people do not always recognize that our Lutheran tradition is only one of many expressions of the Christian faith. The church needs to change its catechetical instruction to include experiences of other Christian denominations, ecumenical service work, and critical engagement of our own beliefs. We must continue to bring the unique theological contributions of our Lutheran understanding to young people and the church at large, but this is only a gift insofar as we recognize it as part of a larger witness beyond any words, ideas, or categories we humans can invent.

As individuals and as denominations, we must commit to acts of advocacy and charity on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed. This is best done ecumenically. Though there have been many local ecumenical initiatives to help those living in poverty, there are too many stories

of churches that refuse to join these efforts over theological and ecclesiological differences.<sup>2</sup>

Without a unified voice and the pooling of resources, the Christian witness to those in power and those in need is weakened. We must make the development of interdenominational and even interfaith social ministries a priority. The best way to break down walls between people is to allow them to work together, something that can only happen when leaders, both lay and ordained, recognize the need for people to be exposed to others with different ways of expressing their faith in God. When legislators in our country are scheduled to meet with Christian groups, they often expect to hear divisive comments about hot button issues. When on a rare occasion they meet with an ecumenical advocacy group, they often find the group asking instead for help for those in need – the hungry, the homeless, the vulnerable. In unity, we are reminded of the core of our gospel message.

Lutherans, along with many other denominations, confess weekly in our creeds a belief in the holy, catholic church. We must make every effort to live out that confession of faith, acting as though there are no boundaries between us. Just as the two sticks in Ezekiel's hand are made one, so has God made the Christian church one on earth. In acts of service and education, we are called to recognize this ourselves and help others to see the unity of all Christians around the Incarnate One, who despite our shortcomings, surely dwells in our midst.

---

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the Racine, Wisconsin, ecumenical program to shelter the homeless, some churches were excluded or refused to participate because they did not agree theologically on certain social issues with the other congregations. Laura R. Olson, "Homelessness, Ecumenism, and Politics in Racine, Wisconsin," *Religious Interests in Community Conflict*, ed. Paul A. Djupe and Laura R. Olson (Waco: Baylor, 2007), 137-140.