

"MY SHEEP LISTEN TO MY VOICE"

BY ERIC ZIECKER

SENIOR CHURCH HISTORY

PROFESSOR WESTERHAUS

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MY SHEEP LISTEN TO MY VOICE.

I intend to tell the story of the birth of a small WELS congregation in upstate New York. The name of this new (1982) WELS congregation is Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The majority of the founders were people who have recently left, or were still in the process of leaving, Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church. This church was a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod congregation. The story I am about to tell is the account of their exodus from Salem and the subsequent establishment of a new WELS congregation.

Since the writer of this paper was personally involved in many of the events, it would be especially tempting and natural for him to write from an unavoidable bias. It would be extremely easy for him to paint a picture of the WELS and its representatives as the "good guys" in white hats, and conversely to make the LCMS pastor the "bad guy" in the black hat. For this very reason I am striving to maintain an objective viewpoint. As a check for my own subjectivity and emotional bias I requested an interview with the LCMS pastor who still serves (1992) the Salem congregation. It is only fair to represent both sides of the story. And I might add that the interview has deepened my understanding of people and the ministry.

I want to state from the very start of this paper that I hold no personal grievances against the Missouri synod pastor. It was, after all, he who confirmed me in the Christian faith. I have attempted to put the best construction on the events, as my Savior would want me to.

The pastor was very open during our interview which was held on April 23, 1992, from 8:30pm - 12:00am. At first I was hesitant to approach him on the subject. I did not know if he would perceive the interview as a challenge to him or if he would be overly

sensitive to the reopening of old wounds. Pastor Richard Rolf was very cooperative in answering my questions and welcomed the opportunity to tell his side of the story. I reassured him that certain parts of the interview would remain confidential if he wished. I intend to keep my promise. For this reason parts of the paper will be intentionally "vague," that is to say, certain names will be withheld. A partial reason for this is the afore stated promise. The other reason is that I do not wish to break the eighth commandment. Nor do I want a lawsuit of libel. The majority of the persons are still living and I do not wish to harm their reputations or give rise to unwarranted suspicions by those not directly involved.

Having said that, I still feel obligated to bring certain errors to light. It is not my intent to take "pot shots" at another man's ministry. I do not wish to damage anyone's reputation, but least of all my Savior's. The truth must be told and the situation needs to be evaluated in light of God's Word. Truth must hold the field against error. It would be very idealistic and optimistic of me to assume that the motives of all the members who left the LCMS to join the WELS were spotless and based on confessional doctrine. But we all know that life is rarely, if ever, that clear cut. Rarely are Christians' motives that pure and refined. The Old Adam refuses to go quietly. For this reason even pastors and their parishioners have occasional personality clashes. Accusations often fly and the truth is sometimes distorted. I will try to stick to the facts. When I do interject I will try to indicate where the facts stop and my opinion begins.

Finally, the intent of this paper is not to judge another man's ministry or another man's faith. Nor is it to take a moment by moment look at the infinite details or precise times and dates at which certain events took place. It is to look at the broad trends and pit-falls which led up to a painful dilemma.

As I indicated previously, the following material is based

largely on first-hand information. I acquired the majority of it by face to face inquiry. I used mail sent questionnaires to contact people I could not meet face to face or by telephone.

A SHORT HONEYMOON

The Savior's voice was clear and distinct when I was a child attending Sunday school at Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church. Week after week the sheep were well fed with the spoken and written Word of God. The pastor was a faithful watchman who presented and applied law and gospel consistently. He also had taken the time to instruct his flock of the many sins crouching at the door of the LCMS. This pastor, Rev. Daniel Knueppel, pointed out the dangers of the historical critical method of Bible interpretation which many of the young ministers of the synod were adopting. He had reviewed the seminex scenario and the epidemic proportions this plague had reached. I'm sure that this church was not unique. I'm sure that this same watchful atmosphere predominated in many Missouri churches in small towns. The congregation takes notice but feels insulated and isolated from such "big news." This particular church, Salem, was a church of good size. If memory serves correctly it had over 600 souls at that time. You could say things were "business as usual" in a good sense.

But then it happened. The year was 1976. Our faithful watchman received and accepted a call away from Salem. What followed was a long vacancy. People were becoming restless and anxious to receive a new pastor. After the call had been "turned down" by several men in the field, Pastor Richard Rolf finally accepted the call and had soon settled himself and family in their new parsonage. His family consisted of his wife, Joy, and their six, soon to be seven, children. The pastor had served a previous congregation and was by no means a "recent graduate." A short pastor/congregation honeymoon followed as the congregation warmly accepted their new pastor. The honeymoon however, was short.

A GROWING UNEASINESS

Hindsight is 20\20. During our interview, Pastor Rolf told me that he began implementing at Salem some of the more modern and "progressive" techniques which he had learned from the sem and his last call. He felt that the congregation "needed to be introduced to the 20th Century" for their own benefit. As well-intentioned and harmless as this sounds it made great waves. This particular congregation was not yet ready or willing to accept some of these new trends or methods. This rapid succession of events tended to put the congregation in a defensive posture. Hard feelings resulted which the pastor would only recognize much, much later.

Pastor Rolf shared with me the confusion he felt at that time. The pastor felt that he was following a strong, almost autocratic, leader. He revealed to me that he preferred a more diplomatic, democratic philosophy of ministry. And yet isn't it ironic that this was the very issue that made people presume he was too headstrong with his uninvited changes? Many members loved and applauded these worship innovations. Others detested them. What the pastor had managed to do was to polarize the congregation. It wasn't only in the arena of worship that such divisive things were happening.

This tension resulted from more than a mere difference in methodology for ministry. Many members felt that the pastor ignored or sidestepped the doctrinal gravity of certain issues. For instance, the surrounding LCMS churches were adopting "Mission: Life" materials which had been presented at the Erie County Sunday School teacher's meeting as a more modern approach to teach Bible doctrine. Rather than modern, it contained downright liberal or neo-orthodox thought. Memorization of the catechism and Bible verses was almost totally eliminated. The lessons became less and less Christ-centered. Sunday school teachers at Salem were dismayed and found even worse doctrinal error from other publishing houses. There was definitely tension in the air concerning synod

recommended materials.

There was even more local tension. People were developing an uneasy feeling about some of Pastor Rolf's Bible classes and Catechism instruction. Many felt that he was increasingly becoming vague in answering some of the very simple questions about Bible truths. This too, I attribute to the growing liberal and neo-orthodox thought in the Missouri Synod.

DOCTRINAL CONTROVERSY OR PERSONALITY CONFLICT?

When we hear of "transfers" from Missouri to WELS, some assume that these people are mere "church shoppers." If the pastor has done something to "offend" (either biblical definition or secular) a person, it's often thought that they leave solely on account of personality preferences. Was this the case here? Was this only a case of a well-intentioned pastor ruffling a few feathers? Pastor Rolf seemed to think so. He confided in me that he felt there were a few ring leaders who were upsetting the equilibrium of the congregation. At first he refused to admit that it could be him.

For example, pastor asked his wife, Joy, to sing a solo during the Christmas service the first year he was there. Common sense and proper protocol dictates that he might have asked the board of elders or worship committee for approval first. He didn't. He felt it was an insignificant act on his part. Although he had good intentions he upset certain individuals. He told me later that he didn't realize he had "dethroned the queen soloist at Salem." He felt that her deep seated resentment was a prime catalyst for some of the events which followed. Things continued to simmer and the congregational grapevine was growing.

By 1978, the atmosphere in the congregation was that of a pressure cooker. The fears and suspicions of the people were growing. Some members ready to accuse the pastor of false doctrine.

Unfortunately, the forum for the congregation's frustration was the Voter's Meeting. I might add that women had voting privileges and freedom to speak from the floor. From my understanding, the Voters' Meetings could be described as "chaotic" in nature. As described to me, these meetings sounded like a strict parliamentarian's nightmare. One could not have counted the violations of Robert's Rules of Order. During our interview the pastor confessed to me that his forte was not leading formal business meetings or using structure. He willingly admitted that he didn't have a basic grasp of the principles of group dynamics. He suffered miserably for his lack of this gift. These meetings were apparently the forum chosen to compliment or accuse the pastor.

In retrospect, some ex-members were willing to talk to me openly about his pastoral misconduct and unfaithfulness. I quote from one congregational member who said, "The wishes of the congregation meant nothing to him." He allegedly had disregard for the elders. He was accused of breaking confidences. He was negligent in conducting his sick and shut-in calls. He allowed his children and family pets to play in the balcony of the church. One member informed the pastor that the west side door of the church was standing open at 11:00pm. His response to that member was that this was no concern of his. The church treasurer faced many an enraged scene when he refused to pay personal bills submitted by the pastor (music lessons for his children, etc.).

Others were willing to discuss with me doctrinal problems. I again quote from an ex-Sunday School teacher, "He was unable to teach teachers, unable to discuss the scriptures, unable to answer scriptural questions and determined not to admit that he might have to look something up!" He preferred social gospel Sunday School projects (sending soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes, and other personal hygiene items and kits to African missions). He preferred Methodist Sunday School materials which clearly taught the use of bread and grape juice, not to mention symbolism in the Lord's Supper. These are to mention just a few. Another instance was the

omission of certain key doctrines during the first year of his catechism instruction classes. He failed to comment on the "way of salvation, the Holy Spirit or anything to do with eternal life." (Having sat in his classes myself, I personally do not recall this.) On another instance he flatly denied to the youth group that Christ was the seed of a woman. This was in the presence of other adults. Even the youth responded with Gen 3:15 as an answer. (Whether or not these words were taken out of context I do not know. I am simply relaying to you, the reader, what was told to me, the writer.)

Many felt that the pastor's homiletical "tactics" were outlandish. I myself witnessed such outbursts. On one occasion he arrived about one and one half minutes late for his sermon and broke through the rear doors of the church scaring many of the elderly almost out of their seats. You may not be able to attach the label "false doctrine" to this, but you can certainly label it "tactless" at best. Some members even took notes during his sermons to compare later to see if they had heard correctly. During a sermon on the wedding at Cana members remember the line, "Did you know you can drink more wine if you take Mylanta first?" (Again I wish I had the line in context.) Without going into any more of the sordid details, I merely wish to point out that there really was questionable teaching going on. I myself heard him deny the existence of hell on one occasion.

I have given such detailed examples to underscore the point that this was not just a group of "malcontents" or "dissidents" giving personal slams to an innocent man. There was truth and error involved. These "critics" were sincerely concerned for the Truth. From my theological perspective I would have to admit his teaching certainly was beginning to sound like that of Barth and Bultmann. It was very difficult to recognize this drift into liberalism at the time. Sharp laymen and laywomen knew that things were not quite kosher. The Shepherd's voice was losing volume.

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TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

How did the pastor respond to such allegations? Again, the forum for airing complaints seems to have been the quarterly Voters' Meeting. There seems to have been a lot of "give and take" at these meetings. But often in human relations, the real problem is cloaked in a long list of preliminary excuses. Often times the disguise must be removed before the true image is revealed. It was during these meetings that the congregation was at its darkest hour. Many had personal gripes against the pastor and decided to rally to see whom would join them. It seems that there was not a nook or cranny of the pastor's life that wasn't laid bare. I'm sure those members who had been in the wrong have long ago repented of their misbehavior. It was during these meetings that the pastor's wife was accused of alcoholism. It was during these meetings that the pastor's children were verbally attacked. It was during these meetings that the pastor's personal belongings; his automobiles, his camping equipment and recreational vehicles, were under unhealthy scrutiny.

As unsavory as these discussions were, they were understandable. Understandable from the point of view that Christians are both sinners and saints simultaneously. Unfortunately, at times, the Old Adam does get the upper hand. Instead of personal attacks, the congregations would have done well to stick to the issues. The pastor was publically accused of lying. Evidence was revealed to prove it. During our interview, as Pastor Rolf recalled the story, I briefly stopped him and asked how many of these accusations were true. He confessed that he may very well have "contradicted" himself. He blamed this on the fact that a certain group of women had conspired to verbally bombard and ambush him at the meeting. He admitted that they had succeeded in disabling him. They rendered him unable to answer any one question consistently. He shared with me that his emotional state at this time was not very stable. The prolonged stress of the situation was taking its toll.

The events that followed these Voters' Meetings only proved to worsen rather than correct the situation. It was a matter of too little, too late. What happened to correct the situation really only helped to solidify the thought that Missouri was in real trouble. The results of these unbridled Voters' Meetings led to even more disarray and hard feelings in the following months.

The sequence of the events which follow are a little jumbled, but here they are. A retired Missouri synod pastor lived nearby the town of Springville, in which Salem is located. It is believed that this disgruntled group of members was asking him for advice. Much to his own shame (as he admitted later), he gave them advice. Pastor Rolf's term for this was "coached." He felt this retired pastor was "coaching the problem group." His advice led them away from dealing with what we would call a "circuit pastor" to the next higher level of responsibility; the district level. The reason why this worked was the fact that the district headquarters was so close to the problem. Pastor Rolf attributed this breach in protocol to the fact that the district rep was new to his position and was overly concerned about his bureaucratic position. The Eastern District President was ordaining and installing graduates of Seminex in the area. This district rep suggested that an open meeting be held at the church, with the pastor and the congregation. He would attend these proceedings and make his judgment from the evidence.

Pastor Rolf admitted that he stooped to his lowest point with what followed. The district rep notified the church council president and the pastor of the informational meeting. The church council president inquired of the pastor what the nature of this meeting might be. The pastor claims that he would have nothing to do with an emergency meeting called by one outside the church. The mere comment suggested to the council president that he shouldn't either. So when the group assembled outside the church, with the district rep who had driven out from Buffalo, the church was locked and no church officials with a key were present. The group had been

locked out! The pastor would not answer his door but watched with a certain amount of glee from inside his home. I do not wish to judge whether such a meeting was right or wrong or whether or not it had broken the church's constitution. I do not know enough detail. Obviously the pastor felt that this was a wrongful gathering. Obviously, the district rep and the group felt that it was the quickest way to arrive at a resolution. At any rate, the pastor felt remorse for his own behavior later on.

An appeal went to Dr. Robert Sauer, 4th Vice President of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Meanwhile at the church level, the pastor had a bulletin insert warning the congregation that a group of "dissidents" was disrupting the church. The District rep urged that this not be printed in the public bulletin. The pastor not only ignored his advice, but labeled this group, "tools of the devil," from the pulpit on Sunday.

As I see it, the issue here was one of discipline. But the Missouri stance on the Doctrine of Church and Ministry prevented them from really taking on an active role in solving the problem. Matthew 18 could not be applied by the synod, since the synod is considered to be only an advisory body. This led to even more frustration. The synod representatives agreed with the minority "dissident group." They agreed that the pastor's actions and teachings were worthy of correction and discipline. But they really couldn't do anything. Dr. Sauer, after receiving a packet of evidence from the group, labeled the pastor, "Satan, an antichrist and the remaining elders as his satanic followers." Even the district representatives felt frustrated by the general apathy of the majority of the congregation and the "pastor can do no wrong" attitude which was prevalent. All of this contributed to the loss of Christian love, concern and truth. It is often difficult to deal with false teachers because they often are neither courageous enough nor honest enough to stand openly by their false teaching if it involves being disciplined.

At the next Voters' Assembly meeting, it was recommended that 8 people be excommunicated. When this was contested by one member, that member too received a notice four days later that she too had been excommunicated. There were no visits by the pastor or elders. The pastor claimed that "everything had been done that could have been done" to reconcile these nine members. No charges or evidence was given for their excommunication. Synodical officials agreed that these people should not have been excommunicated and that Salem's use and application of Matt 18 was incorrect. For nine months these excommunicated members insisted that either charges be brought or their right to commune be returned to them. They did not attend communion even though the synodical officials assured them that they were not in the wrong. The group refrained for fear of a disturbance during public worship.

After those nine tense months, even the Voters were desirous of peace. The Voters insisted that the pastor return their right to commune. One of the excommunicated members described what followed this way, "So the pastor invited us to commune, no more, no less."

It is truly a pity that the situation was allowed to digress to this point. But the combination of poor communication and hurt feelings allowed it to happen. The issues themselves were not even the real problem, but the inability of the synod to discipline. Those members who were hurt the most felt that the synod had let them down. What they did attempt to do was "too little, too late."

THE DOCTRINE OF CHURCH AND MINISTRY

From my observation, Missouri's incorrect view of the doctrine of church and ministry became the heart of the problem. This led to the most frustration. The church's and synod's hands were tied in the matter. For the correct understanding of this matter and pertinent Bible passages I refer the reader to Our Great Heritage pages 333-378. Let it suffice here to simply quote the summary of that article, page 377,

1. In the New Testament Scriptures the church is never anything else but the communion of saints;
2. To this church, as to holy people, the Lord has given the keys, not to an ecclesiastical institution as such;
3. The church can be recognized with certainty by its preaching of the gospel;
4. The synod has the essential marks of the church:
 - A. The name "synod" already indicates this,
 - B. Its constituting elements are the local congregations, represented first of all by Christians,
 - C. It preaches the gospel for its God-given purposes,
 - D. It originated not from human counsel, but through the work of the Holy Ghost.
5. If the synod is church in the true sense of the word, then it not only has the keys, but should and must also use them on its members.

Ex-members of Salem have kept strict notes from those days. But as one member told me, "It would take months to organize and put them into a form anyone not involved could understand." This particular member, one of the nine who was excommunicated, informed me that the events were still too recent and painful to recall. Anyone desiring greater detail would want to consult Our Savior's historian.

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE IS HEARD AGAIN!

This little flock now considered itself "shepherdless." Where to turn!? One of the members remembered visiting a WELS church in Pennsylvania during the late 1970s. From their relatives they obtained a list of WELS churches and pastors in our area. This same member made initial contact with a WELS pastor serving Prince of Peace congregation in Rochester, New York. It was an exploratory congregation at that time and received mission status later that same year (1982). That young pastor was Pastor Mark D. Gieschen.

This pastor received a telephone call in January of 1982,

requesting that he come to Springville and give some information about the teachings of the WELS. Mark, his wife Cindy, and toddler age son, Luke accompanied him to Springville on January 24, 1982. He met with over 30 adults in the basement of a member's home that evening. After driving three hours in a blizzard he finally arrived, only to hear the small group singing Lutheran chorales in the basement patiently awaiting his arrival. After presenting his material, the comment was heard, "That's what we learned and that's what we want to pass on to our children." Mark continued making the long drive from Rochester to Springville to conduct a Bible Information Course. The first service was held on February 7, 1982, at a VFW Hall in Springville with 47 people in attendance. On March 21, 39 charter members joined the WELS congregation and professed their faith in Jesus Christ. On April 25, the congregation chose the name *Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church* to represent them.

RATIONALISM, SOCIAL GOSPEL AND LIBERALISM

It is sometimes very difficult to ascertain the real problem in dysfunctional human relations. Human beings are so complex. And when you're considering the behavior of more than one, the variables multiply exponentially. If I was given the task of labeling the doctrinal position of Salem I would have to label the problem "liberalism." By liberalism I mean the elements which make up religious thought of the early 20th century. The movement which gave rise to the Fundamentalist response in the 1920s. By 1920 one half of all Protestant seminaries and publishing houses in the country was dominated by liberal theological thought. And one third of all Protestant pulpits. Years later the grains of doctrinal sand under the feet of the members at Salem was eroding as quickly as the sand under the feet of one encountering a rip-tide in the ocean. It was difficult to nail the situation down at the time. Permit me to highlight those elements of liberalism which were perceivable at Salem. 1. The immanence of God (verses the transcendence of God) 2. The idea that we can bring about God's

Kingdom in history through social action 3. The denial of certain miraculous events 4. Enthusiastic support to Unionistic Movement 5. Concern over this world replacing a concern for eternity.

From my perception, this is still the case at Salem. It is ironic that Pastor Rolf was late for our interview because he was detained at the local baptist church in town. He was reviewing the arrangements for having a candle processional from one church to another in support of the anti-abortion campaign launched from Buffalo area churches. He defended the point that "we must respect every denomination's traditions." I am still of the opinion that the above mentioned doctrinal aberrations exist at Salem today. The pastor also shared with me the fact that he was "disappointed" with the behavior of the first WELS contacts made with his wavering members. He brought up the charge of "proselytizing." I asked him, "What would you do if a group of people asked you to come and share information about the Missouri Synod with them?" He never really answered the question.

As I was leaving that evening from our interview, Pastor Rolf shared with me his doubts concerning his own ministry. In an almost despondent tone he remarked that he had perhaps saved a few marriages and prevented a few abortions during his ministry. But that's precisely what happens when we gauge our ministries according to the world's definition of success. That's what happens when we attempt to bring about change only in an individual's outward life through a social gospel message. It results in an empty feeling of non-accomplishment. As a parting comment I reassured him that if he concentrated on the eternal hope of heaven and the forgiveness of sins his work would be a success in his people. He holds no grudges about the past even though he was hurting for a long time. He voiced some regret that the synod had not tried harder to help him during those troubling years. he stated time and time again that those leaders lacked "savvy." He also wished they had taught him more about "group dynamics" and the handling of crowds at the seminary. He conceded that he had brought

about too many changes too soon at Salem.

I learned much from our interview for my own ministry. Most of all I learned that the Lord can turn what seems to be a troubling and disturbing situation into one that overflows with blessings. I wouldn't have been steered in the direction of the ministry had these problems not surfaced at such an impressionable time in my life. It forced me to review doctrine and God's Word. It forced me to search the scriptures for the Truth. The Holy Spirit then motivated me to want to share that Truth with the world. The Lord works in mysterious ways!

THE FLOCK CONTINUES TO GROW

I would like to leave behind the pain of Our Savior's split from Salem, and concentrate on the subsequent ten years of Grace at Our Savior's. Here is a brief time line of the blessings that followed the founding of Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

- February - July, 1982 Pastor Mark Gieschen continued conducting afternoon services at the VFW until we called our first resident pastor.
- July 11, 1982 Bruce Becker was ordained and installed as our first resident pastor.
- February 1983 Our Savior's constitution was approved by the Michigan District and Our Savior was granted mission status.
- September 1983 The certificate of incorporation for our church was signed and sealed.
- February 1984 Property was purchased on Waverly Street and a Building Committee was formed.
- April 1985 A Church Dedication Committee was formed and began making plans.
- June 2, 1985 A ground breaking service for the church building was held and work also began on the parsonage.

- Aug. 25, 1985 The foundation for the church building was poured.
- Nov. 10, 1985 The parsonage was dedicated. Pastor Becker, Linda, Ben and Chris Becker moved in from the rented parsonage on Dowd Road.
- Feb. 2, 1986 The church building was dedicated in a service led by Pastors Becker and Gieschen. Attendance for the afternoon service and dinner was 184. A "time stone" was placed in the altar to be opened on our 100th Anniversary.
- May 17, 1987 Pastor Becker preached his last service before leaving to serve a congregation in Brillion, Wisconsin.
- June 14, 1987 Pastor Charles Heup ordained and installed Brett Voigt as the new pastor. Pastor, Karen and Deborah Voigt settled into their new home.
- Over the Years 171 people have been members of Our Savior. Several have moved and transferred to other WELS churches, and many new members have been added to the family.

The congregation has enjoyed competent under-shepherding by well trained and tactful men over the years. May these pastors ever remain faithful and attuned to the Shepherd's voice! The Lord continues to have His presence felt and His voice heard at Our Savior's. May the Good Shepherd continue to lead His flock into the future and to the heavenly Jerusalem.