

ISSUES

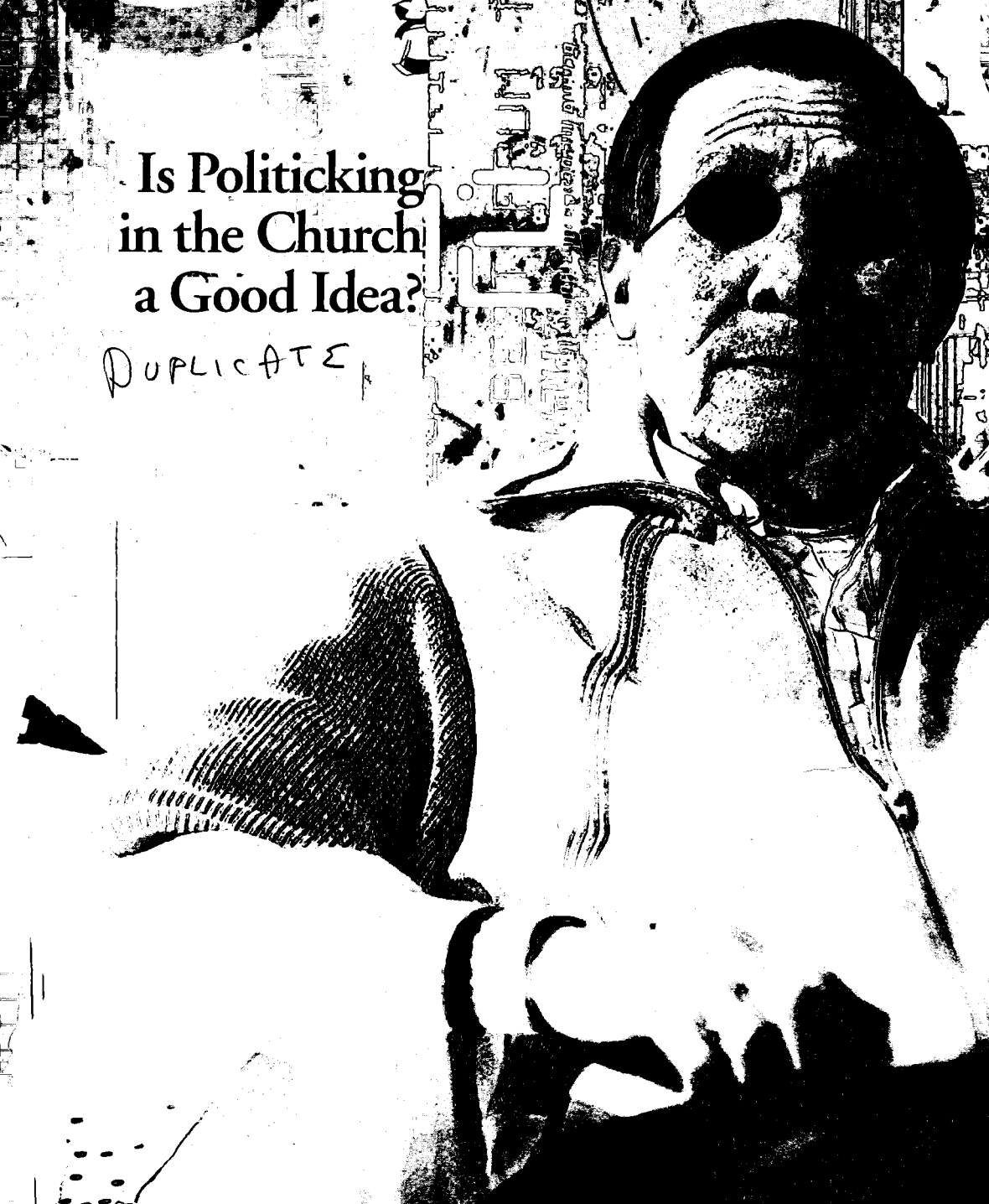
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Is Politicking
in the Church
a Good Idea?

DUPLICATE





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Decision Making in The Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod: Historical Perspectives

HERE WE GO AGAIN. Less than a year from now, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will be meeting in convention to hear reports, pass resolutions, and elect officers and members of boards and commissions, including the synodical president. What many members of Synod don't realize but which a few of them—at least those appointed as delegates to the convention—will soon learn is just how political Synod is. Both before and during the convention, delegates will be inundated with advocacy materials—letters, publications, e-mails, and video tapes—urging them to elect *this* candidate rather than *that* and to vote for *these* resolutions rather than *those*. What will surprise if not shock those who are new to the process—besides the sheer quantity of this material—is often its tone. Although much that the delegates receive will be informative and helpful, some will be as shrill and as negative as that which secular politics generates.

So how did Synod get to this point in its history? Or has it always been this way? Well, not quite.

Polarization: The Forces of Movement and the Forces of Order

ON THE ONE HAND, the basic process for making decisions and choosing leaders in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been in place for a very long time. At first (1847), every member congregation sent two delegates to the synodical convention (one lay and one clergy), but by 1872, the growth of Synod had led to the system we have today. Now, instead of every congregation, each circuit selects a lay

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representative and a pastor to attend the convention, but once there, the delegates elect leaders and vote on resolutions just as they have since the beginning.¹

On the other hand, the kind of political activity that surrounds the decision-making process has not always been present. It is a result of the polarization that is now characteristic of the LCMS. For almost 75 years, there have been two strong and opposing tendencies at work within the Synod, and it is in the interplay of these forces that Synod has made room for the kind of politics that marks our church today.

These tendencies go by different labels. Some like to talk about liberals and conservatives, others about evangelicals and legalists. But such labeling is an integral part of the church politics they are supposed to describe. For our purposes, then, we might find it more useful to employ terminology that does not reflect the viewpoint of either side. I suggest calling these opposing tendencies the forces of movement and the forces of order.

The forces of movement are those who try to ride the crest of social change—who believe that the Synod has to change with the times in order to serve today's society. The church needs to be innovative and responsive, flexible and tolerant in order to reach as many people as possible. The forces of movement are convinced that accepting change is of critical importance in remaining relevant to contemporary people. They want the church to be Gospel-centered and evangelical, not legalistic and reactionary. For the forces of movement, then, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod should conform to society as much as possible for the sake of preaching Christ in a meaningful way.

But regarding all this the forces of order are rather skeptical. Change is not a friend but an enemy, because change represents corruption not improvement, decay not growth. To the forces of order, the forces of movement do not seem evangelical but reductionist—willing to go along with anything by reducing the truth claims of the Christian faith to a bare minimum, a minimum not readily discernable or defined.

In contrast to the forces of movement, the forces of order emphasize the necessity of being distinctively and comprehensively Lutheran—in doctrine, in morals, in practice—and minimally

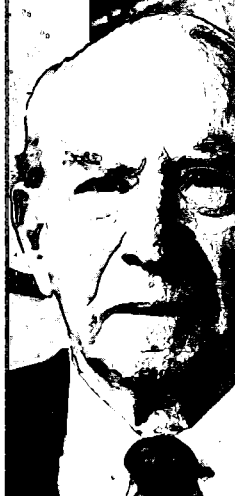
American, because they see contemporary society as hostile to authentic and biblical Christianity. Although the forces of order understand themselves as being faithful to the Scriptures and the Confessions, to the forces of movement they appear fundamentalist and biblicist, hopelessly antiquated and in danger of substituting man-made traditions and rules for the Gospel of Christ.

The strength of each of these forces in Synod has waxed and waned over the years, nor do they always involve the same people. After all, we are talking tendencies not parties. Through the years, Synod has moved this way and then that. Over time this relative balance of forces has led to more and more sophisticated politics in order to influence the synodical constituency and so achieve control over synodical institutions.

Polarization: The Ecumenical Movement

ONE OF THE ISSUES over which Synod has exhibited this polarization is the ecumenical movement. This movement has resulted in the organic merger of many smaller church bodies into larger ones. Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed churches have all experienced enormous consolidation during the 20th century. But so too the Lutherans. Separated by doctrinal differences, geography, and ethnicity into many different church bodies in the 19th century, American Lutherans in the 20th century began a process of merger and amalgamation that culminated in the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1987. But to what extent should the Missouri Synod be involved with this process? People differed.

In the years following World War I, the Missouri Synod—already in church fellowship with members of the Synodical Conference (founded in 1872)—worked also to establish fellowship with other American Lutherans. This would mean the routine acceptance of such Lutherans in the pulpits and at the altars of Missouri Synod churches. Efforts to create such fellowship came close to success in the 1920s and 1930s but then failed. Clearly, some in Synod wanted to move out from traditional relationships to embrace a larger revision of Lutheranism in America, but others



did not. But how to make the case to the synodical constituency? One answer was the development of "unofficial" publications in an attempt to influence synodical decisions one way or the other. *The American Lutheran*, begun in 1918, supported the fellowship efforts, but *The Confessional Lutheran*, begun in 1940, did not.

Then, in 1945 those on the so-far losing side of the fellowship battles—the forces of movement—took the unprecedented step of circularizing Synod with "A Statement" that attacked their opponents for "narrow legalism" and for misapplying biblical warnings against false doctrine to the situation of American Lutheranism. Although 44 prominent clergymen of the Missouri Synod had signed the Statement (including five seminary professors), many thought that it contained false doctrine. So what would be done?

As it turned out, not much. When meetings between representatives of the president and signers of the statement reached an impasse, the synodical president decided not to press the matter any further. Instead, they negotiated an agreement with the signers that they would withdraw their statement as a basis for discussion but not recant its contents. As a result, there would be no definitive agreement within the Synod about what the Word of God required for church fellowship.²

This was particularly significant because an original part of the decision-making process in the Synod was a distinction between matters requiring unanimity and those that did not, which affirmed that "All matters of doctrine and of conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God. All other matters shall be decided by a majority vote." This measure was a part of the first constitution and has remained so ever since. Since the founders conceived of Synod as a union of churches, they insisted on being united in their confession of God's Word. In other matters, there was no such requirement.³

So, for example, in the 1870s, when Synod experienced disagreement over what the Bible taught regarding predestination, the issue was debated vigorously. New periodicals appeared in order to advance one side or the other. Speeches were given; meetings were held. But finally the Missouri Synod acted decisively.

When the votes were taken in 1881, Synod not only adopted an official doctrinal statement but also decided to discipline dissenting members and to terminate fellowship with those who taught differently. Since the Word of God was at stake, Synod was willing to lose members—and it did. But it also remained united.⁴

By the 1940s, however, at least with respect to the issue of fellowship, Synod was willing to tolerate opposing views regarding the teachings of God's Word.

Polarization: The Doctrine of the Scriptures

IRONICALLY, SYNOD DEPARTED even more obviously from the principle of unity under the Word when synodical polarization manifested itself regarding still another issue, the doctrine of the Scriptures themselves.

Ever since the Enlightenment, Christians have wrestled with questions regarding the origins and nature of the Bible, filled as it is with accounts of the miraculous. Especially with the development of Darwinian evolution in the 19th century, many American church bodies adopted attitudes toward the Bible that sought to explain its contents from a more "scientific" viewpoint and so to reinterpret the Scriptures in ways that made them more palatable to modern man.

From the beginning and for most of its history, however, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod rejected efforts to diminish or to explain away the supernatural content of the Bible as attempts by sinful man to put his reason over God's Word. Since the Bible presented a six-day creation, a world-wide flood, a historical fall into sin, and a Jonah swallowed by a huge fish, Christians were obligated to believe those very things and more, no matter how difficult to accept from modern perspectives. God's Word was greater than human intellect.

But by the 1950s, forces (of movement) were at work within the Synod to break out of a very traditional way of approaching the Scriptures and to accept instead a more contemporary approach, usually called "higher criticism." Basically, this method seeks to explain the origins and content of the Bible by resorting to historical and literary factors rather than by referring to divine interventions

into space and time as presented in the scriptural accounts themselves.

So, for example, in 1958–59 a St. Louis seminary professor presented a series of essays advocating a new approach to biblical interpretation by arguing that the human authors of the Bible used the literary conventions of their time, including myth and legend, to write the Scriptures. One of his essays began with these words, "I propose to defend the paradox that the Book of God's truth contains error."⁵ But the official position of the Synod as summarized in its Brief Statement of 1932 was that "Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters." Not surprisingly, then, these essays provoked a great deal of discussion and debate in the Missouri Synod.

This particular episode came to a close at the 1962 convention when the professor apologized for contributing to the unrest in Synod and withdrew his essays. The Synod also reaffirmed its belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, but it did not insist that members of Synod abide by such resolutions, being content only to "beseech all its members to honor and uphold the doctrinal content [emphasis mine]" of such statements. Significantly, only three years before, Synod had passed a resolution, insisting that "Pastors and teachers and professors are held to teach and act in harmony with [emphasis mine]" the doctrinal statements of Synod. But by 1962, the Commission on Constitutional Matters had ruled that resolution unconstitutional, and the convention agreed to pass the milder version that seemed to leave the door open for other opinions.⁶

Rise of More Overtly Political Techniques

HOWEVER, by not fully resolving the issue, Synod invited further controversy, and the struggle over biblical interpretation persisted. Of course, both sides used theological argument to advance their cause; but first the forces of order and then the forces of movement also turned to more overtly political techniques for obtaining their desired outcome.⁷ Such

techniques included creating organizations to advance a point of view, holding meetings to publicize issues, distributing lists of preferred candidates for synodical office, planning for conventions, producing all sorts of publications, and engaging in political "theater"—demonstrations and rallies designed to attract the attention of the media.

From time to time, there were attempts to temper the politics. In 1962, for example, when the synodical president learned that delegates were being lobbied to vote for certain candidates, he rebuked such efforts publicly.⁸ At the start of the 1969 convention, Synod's executive director "called attention to serious breaches in the democratic processes and irregular procedures," and the man who would soon be elected synodical president told the convention that he "deplored politicking."⁹ Later, the Synod's Commission on Constitutional Matters issued a strong opinion against political activism in the church. While affirming the right of individuals to express themselves regarding synodical resolutions, the commission indicted activities like "organizing groups, . . . calling of meetings, secret or open, . . . attempted manipulation of existing groups, . . . circularizing activities, and . . . a wide scale of joint actions, all of which by their very nature tend to polarize or fragment the constituency of Synod and thus have the effect of disrupting the synodical unity." In 1971 the synodical convention formally endorsed the CCM opinion.¹⁰

Others disagreed, and there were voices who defended political activity in the church. One pastor published a book partly in response to the executive director's 1969 indictment. Admitting that his side organized and planned for the purpose of moving Synod in its direction, he also insisted that the other side did too and spent much of his work showing just that.¹¹ In one of the unofficial publications, a layman urged convention delegates to ignore the charge of politics. "There is nothing wrong with knowing the doctrinal position of the person for whom you are voting. . . . Politics is bad only when it becomes subversive, when false or derogatory information is published."¹²

In point of fact, as long as the Synod remained divided over an issue so basic as

biblical interpretation, political activity was unavoidable. The mechanisms for making decisions and choosing leaders to implement them were democratic in form. Congregations in circuits chose delegates by voting, and delegates in convention carried out their responsibilities by voting too. Inevitably partisans turned to the techniques of democratic politics to influence those votes.

The synodical war over the Bible came to a climax at the New Orleans convention of 1973, and the forces of order prevailed to the extent of passing a definitive statement regarding the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. But by this time, the Synod was so divided that the forces of movement responded by streaming to the podium to record their negative votes, all the while singing, "The Church's One Foundation."¹³

In the wake of this convention, the Missouri Synod suffered a major schism that included the walkout and subsequent firing of almost all the St. Louis seminary faculty. Another result was the exodus of several hundred congregations and clergy to form a new church body. Many others, however, who dissented from what the synodical administration was doing and what the synodical conventions were confessing remained within the Synod. Subsequent conventions affirmed the actions of the synodical administration (now firmly in the hands of the forces of order). Nonetheless, throughout this period, even though the issues were debated on the basis of God's Word, they were decided by majority votes, for Synod had lost its unity under the Word.

Polarization and Politics Persist

WITH THE "BATTLE FOR THE BIBLE" behind it, the Missouri Synod has gone on to other issues like fellowship (again), worship, and the role of women. But polarization—and politics—persist. The forces of movement and the forces of order remain strong, and both sides learned an important lesson from the conflict of the 1970s, viz., that politics works. The side that does the best job of framing the issues and getting out its vote can control the synodical mechanisms for choosing leaders and making decisions.

In a politicized church, however, it is also true that decisions once made are hardly ever

final, since the losing side perceives them as the result of the best politicking and not necessarily the best theology. They can leave one convention resolved to fight on in the hopes of doing better at the next. The result, then, is that every three years there is another struggle for the "soul" of Missouri.

So with the next convention only months away, delegates need to get ready. For in the Missouri Synod today, it's your vote that counts.

Notes

- 1 *Handbook of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (2001 Ed.), 32.
- 2 Although clearly sympathetic to only one side of the controversy, the most comprehensive account is Jack T. Robinson, "The Spirit of Triumphalism in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: The Role of the 'A Statement' of 1945 in the Missouri Synod" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1972). But for the other point of view, see A.T. Kretzmann, "The Statement of the 44, 1945–1979," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 55 (1982):69–81.
- 3 *Handbook of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (2001 Ed.), 9; and W.G. Polack, ed., "Our First Synodical Constitution," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16 (1943):4.
- 4 See Hans R. Haug, "The Predestination Controversy in the Lutheran Church in North America" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1968).
- 5 Martin H. Scharlemann, "The Inerrancy of Scripture" (paper presented to the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Feb. 25, 1958), photocopy in the collection of Walther Library, Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne.
- 6 *Proceedings of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 1959, 191–92; *Proceedings*, 1962, 104, 106–107, 123.
- 7 John C. Wohlrabe, "An Act of Unprecedented Intolerance in the LCMS," *Christian News* (June 9, 2003), 1, 6–7, lists some of the more significant political movements in the Missouri Synod during the 20th century. Perhaps one reason why the forces of order resorted to political activism in the 1960s was their conviction that the synodical "grass roots" were more supportive of their position than were synodical leaders. W. Theophil Janzow, "Secularization in an Orthodox Denomination" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1970) offers empirical evidence supporting this belief. Politics, then, became the process for converting "grass roots" support into synodical policies.
- 8 W. Theophil Janzow, who was present at the convention, interview by author, June 3, 2003.
- 9 *Proceedings*, 1969, 20.
- 10 *Proceedings*, 1971, 155–56; *Convention Workbook*, 1971, 243–44.
- 11 Tom Baker, *Watershed at the Rivergate* (Sturgis, Michigan: n.p., 1973), 34–37.
- 12 Richard G. Korthals, "In Your Hands" *Affirm* 3, no. 3 (June B [sic], 1973):5.
- 13 Board of Control, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, *Exodus from Concordia: A Report on the 1974 Walkout* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1977), 53.