

Politics and Polemics in the Church

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Introduction

The title of this essay, "*Politics and Polemics in the Church*," might just as well be the subtitle for any course that I teach - and that's not just because one of my friends has accused me of being the James Carville of the Missouri Synod - but instead, it is because I teach church history, and the story of the church at every time and in every period is filled with politics and polemics. But that's hardly surprising - it's true of every human organization - from the United Nations to a newly married couple - wherever there are people there are also differences of opinion, discussions, arguments, debates, and efforts to move the organization in one direction or the other.

And the church is no exception. However much it may be a divine institution, it is also a community of human beings, who must work together to accomplish the purposes of the group. As they do so, they will talk about what the community stands for and what it does not stand for (*that's polemics*) and they will arrive at decisions for carrying out their purposes (and that *process is politics*). One cannot really escape either the conversation or the process in any group of people, not even the church.

Of course, we are all tempted to bewail the existence of politics and polemics in the church. But if one listens closely to such complaints whenever they are actually uttered, one finds that they are not usually about politics *per se* but emanate either from those who are losing the political battles, or else from those who object to certain *tactics* being employed by the other side. In the first case, while it is understandable that those who suffer defeat should bemoan their fate, their complaints about politics ring hollow, since, if they have lost a political battle, it is clear that they were willing to participate in a political process to some degree or other in the first place. On the other hand, those who complain about tactics may very well have a point, since not all forms of political activity are appropriate in the church. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is to suggest ways in which "concerned Lutherans" like ourselves - of, if you prefer, "bronze-agers" like ourselves - may conduct politics and polemics in the church and ways in which we should not.

But first of all, a disclaimer. Although I am very much pleased to be here, and I certainly hope that my remarks this morning will be of assistance in accomplishing the worthwhile goals of this organization, in particular the cause of promoting biblical Christianity and authentic Lutheranism in our church and world, nevertheless, I do not pretend to have all the answers on the topic of how we ought to go about the task, nor is my word the definitive word regarding politics and polemics in the church. I am speaking today as an interested observer, one who has read a great deal on the subject, especially in church history; but I am also an eager learner, so that in our discussion time at the end of the presentation, I hope that all of you will feel comfortable in reacting to anything that I say - to question, to debate, or even to correct my remarks this morning.

Part One : the Politics of Truth

But now, what about it? How do we carry out political activity or engage in polemics in the church? I'm sure there are standards for such activities in every organization, no matter how

secular, but there are peculiar obligations imposed upon politics in the church because of its divine origins. Of course, I am using "church" very broadly here to refer not only to the divinely-instituted congregation but also to those other organizations created by churches to carry out the church's work, like the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. When the congregations of the synod act together in the synod, they do not lose their churchly character. They are still the church; and any ethical obligations regarding politics in the church that arise from the character of the church as God's institution apply to the synod as well as to the congregation.

We cannot adopt a laissez-faire, "anything goes" attitude toward Synodical politics, not when as members of the synod we both pledge ourselves to the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions and agree together to do the work of the church. Our synod is not an employment bureau or an insurance agency but a community of churches carrying out together the work that God has committed to the church. And so, for example, the constitution of synod indicates some of the objectives of synod in these words: "*The Synod . . . shall . . . conserve and promote the unity of the true faith..., work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism, and heresy; (and) strengthen congregations and their members in giving bold witness by word and deed to the love and work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and extend that Gospel witness into all the world.*" All of these tasks are God's work, not man's, and only the church can carry them out.

On the basis, then, of who belongs to it - congregations and clergy - and of what it does, the mission of God, the synod is rightly called a church; and therefore, its politics need to be appropriate to the church. But what can we say about such politics? What does the ecclesiastical character of the synod imply about the ways in which we take steps to give direction and to make decisions in the synod?

First and foremost, let's all remember that what makes the church the church are the marks of the church, the Word of God and the sacraments. These are the divinely instituted means by which God creates and sustains faith, creates and sustains the church. Looked at from another, slightly different, point of view, we ought also to recognize that the means of grace are also the mandate and task of the church. In other words, what brings us together in the church (and synod) are the Word and the sacraments - these are our visible bond of unity. But why do we come together? Essentially, to make sure that Word and sacraments continue in our midst for the spiritual well-being of ourselves and others. Or, to put it even more simply: our work together in the synod revolves about proclaiming the Word - calling missionaries, training church workers, supervising doctrine, producing liturgical and educational materials, giving witness to the power of the Word in ministries of Christian care - all of these tasks have at their heart a commitment to teaching the Word of God in its truth and purity.

But the centrality of the Word in turn also gives definition to our politics. For politics in the church is appropriate only when it has as its goal the proclamation of the Word of God, God's truth. It goes without saying then that other goals - whether they are personal ambition or institutional self-interest, survival, or growth - need to be subservient to this particular standard, the Word of God.

Now, I'm sure that this is hardly a controversial statement; nevertheless, it is necessary to be explicit about it, because we live in an age committed not to the truth but to "tolerance." At the time of the Reformation, Luther and the great humanist, Desiderius Erasmus, squared off against each other in a great literary debate over precisely this question - truth or tolerance - as it related to the issue dividing them, the freedom of the will. For Erasmus, it was an uncertain matter, suitable perhaps for discussion in the schools but not for the public, and certainly one about which Luther should not be so dogmatic. "*But in any case,*" argued Erasmus, "*since the matter cannot be resolved till the day of Judgment, why not suspend judgment?*" To which Luther responded, "*The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and the things He has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions but assertions - surer and more certain than sense and life itself!*"¹

For Luther, true Christianity consisted of assertions of saving truth revealed by God. One could be flexible about a host of matters but not about the truth, "*Do not make articles of faith of your own thoughts . . . lest your faith perchance turn out to be a dream. Stick to Scripture and God's Word. There is the truth; there you will be safe; there are reliability and faithfulness, completely, purely, sufficiently, and constantly.*"²

For all too many in this day and age, the way of Erasmus is more appealing than the way of Luther. Avoid dogmatism, reduce doctrinal content to a bare minimum, agree to disagree, work for peace and not for truth. The result, of course, is ecclesiastical mush - churches that stand for little or for nothing at all. Churches whose message reduces to "*There is a god - I think; and he (or she) loves me - I hope.*" Churches that refuse to call anything a sin - even when sin is invading their pulpits - except the "*sin*" of intolerance. Indeed, the situation is such that not even Erasmus could tolerate what is tolerated today. No, God's Church must stand for God's truth - all of it!

However, for most of us, the Erasmian option is not our particular temptation. We are Missourians precisely because we appreciate the stand of our synod for the truth of God's Word throughout history - even when that stance has proved unpopular. For us, then, the situation of our times poses a different sort of temptation and that is to turn every matter into a question of the truth. We need to guard against identifying every issue in the church with God's truth. Before we say, Thus saith the Lord, we need to make sure that the Lord has really spoken.

In this connection, it is probably worth noting the obvious; and that is that in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod today, two different tendencies in our church body emerge clearly whenever we try to give a collective answer to any particular question. When identifying these tendencies, some of us talk about liberals and conservatives, others about moderates and reactionaries. One of my colleagues has suggested that we revive the terminology, *Gnesio-Lutherans* and *Philippists*. But whatever we call them, I think we all recognize their existence.

Some, of course, want to explain Missouri's factionalism simply in terms of human imperfections - personalities, political power fights, etc. Fair enough, but it is also true that substantive issues divide the Missouri Synod, perhaps even mentalities or ways of thinking. And what we see in our synod is true in other church bodies as well. In fact, one contemporary secular historian has identified the same bifurcation in European political history around the turn of the century when the continent was experiencing the full impact of the forces being unleashed by the Industrial

Revolution. He has called these opposing tendencies in a modernizing society the forces of movement and the forces of order. And I would like to suggest that an American church body like the LCMS also has its own forces of movement and forces of order.

In the first group, the forces of movement, are those who try to ride the crest of social change - who understand that our society is fast moving and who believe that our synod has to change with the society in order to remain relevant to the man on the street in that society. Pastors need to be innovative and responsive, flexible and tolerant in order to reach as many people as possible with the gospel. And in terms of our church, this last point is most significant, for the forces of movement are convinced that welcoming and promoting change is of critical importance in winning souls for Christ. They want to be gospel-centered, evangelical in the best sense of the term. For the forces of movement, then, to be Lutheran in America today is to be as conformable to American society as possible for the sake of preaching Christ.

But regarding all this the forces of order are rather skeptical. Change is not a friend but an enemy, because most 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 and ethical claims of the Christian religion to a bare minimum, a minimum not readily discernible or defined.

In answer to the question, What does it mean to be Lutheran in America today, the forces of order emphasize the necessity of being distinctively and comprehensively Lutheran - in doctrine, in morals, in worship - and minimally American, because they see contemporary society as increasingly hostile to authentic and biblical Christianity. Although the forces of order understand themselves primarily as being faithful to the Scriptures and the Confessions, to the forces of movement they appear fundamentalistic and biblicist, hopelessly antiquated and in danger of substituting Lutheran traditions for the Gospel of Christ.

But now, and this is my point, especially for those enrolled in the forces of order: God has not really called us to be "conservative" or "traditionalist" (and I say this as one who is **both**) but to be faithful to His Word. We cannot just react or follow our instincts when some issue arises. Now, I like to think that the conservative instinct is the correct one most of the time. But that's not the point. There are conservatives in all churches - conservative Catholics follow the Council of Trent and conservative Presbyterians swear by the Westminster Confession - so it is obvious that conservatism per se does not entail biblical faithfulness. God's truth must remain the sole standard for ecclesiastical politics.

Therefore, even as preparations for the Synodical convention this summer start to heat up, anyone of us who intends to take part in political action needs to ask this question first, Does what I intend to do really and truly advance the cause of God's truth in His Church - not my personal interest, not the interest of my faction, not even the cause of conservatism - but God's truth? We need to ask this question deliberately and honestly, and if the answer is negative or even doubtful, then we really should not go forward with the action.

Let me suggest moreover that this year's convention offers an especially good example for our consideration and that is the report of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Synodical structure which,

if adopted, will change the way synod operates. Of course, there are many questions that one can raise either about the present system or the proposed changes - questions of efficiency, location of responsibility, or who are the winners and losers in the Synodical system. But the bottom-line question for a church has to be: do these changes help or hinder the proclamation of God's Word? Anything else is secondary.

Of course, it is not always obvious or certain how some issues in the church actually affect the proclamation of the Word; and again, structural questions are a good example. C.F.W. Walther, for example, in his Synodical address of 1848, freely admitted that the Lutheran Church had prospered in times past under a variety of forms of government, "*Perhaps,*" Walther writes, "*there are times and conditions when it is profitable for the church to place the supreme deciding and regulating power into the hands of representatives. Who, for instance, would deny that at one time the consistories in our German fatherland were an inestimable blessing Which person acquainted a bit with history would deny that the Swedish church grew splendidly under its episcopal constitution?*" So far Walther's comments; but I would like to add that it is characteristic of the Reformed to make church government an article of faith - theirs are the churches that call themselves Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Congregationalist. Lutherans do not.

Fundamentally, in the Lutheran Church, how we structure our Synodical relationship is not a doctrinal question in itself, it is not a question of "*Thus saith the Lord.*" Of course, that does not mean that it is an unimportant question or that some answers may not be better than others. In that same address, for example, Walther went on to argue very vigorously for a Synodical structure of the sort put in place in the Missouri Synod - "*If . . . we glance at the conditions in which the church finds itself here* (i.e., the United States in the 1840's), *we can hardly consider any other constitution as the most salutary except one under which the congregations are free to govern themselves but enter into a Synodical organization such as the one existing among us with the help of God.*"³

Walther was confident in his day about how the structural question related to the church's task of proclaiming the Word; but what if, in our day, we are not so confident or, as is more likely, fellow church members are equally confident but about different answers? What do we do then?

First of all, as I have previously suggested, we must make the argument for one answer or another on the basis of how this affects the work of the Church to proclaim the Word of God. Truth remains the ultimate standard even when the truth itself is not in question.

However, there is an important corollary to our commitment to the truth that Lutherans especially must be careful to follow and that is Christian liberty. Never can we give the impression that one *must agree* with our answer if God Himself has not so spoken. To burden consciences with human ordinances - no matter how well thought out or intended - is practically the worst thing that we could ever do, for it is a violation of the Truth - truth with a capital T - that in Christ we are free. The result then is that as we make our arguments regarding Synodical structure and the report of the Blue Ribbon committee this summer, we must be careful not to confuse these issues with the truth or to give the impression that those who do not agree with us are guilty of false doctrine and of denying the truth.

God's Word is too important for us to confuse it with our notions of structure and government, no matter how well intended. So let me be very clear about this. "Concerned Lutherans" have every right to be concerned about the procedures and ways that synod carries out its business; but in expressing those very legitimate concerns, we must never make something a matter of conscience by the standard of God's Word when it is not. Adding to God's Word is just as bad as subtracting from it.

Part Two: The Tactics of Truth

My first main point then in this presentation is that church politics and polemics must have as their content and standard God's truth. But if we agree upon this, then we must also embrace what is my second main point, the tactics of truth. A commitment to truth in church politics means not only striving after the goal of the Word rightly preached and taught but also using that truth in order to reach that goal.

Now, I am sure that all of us would agree that outright lying and deceit, slander and defamation, have no place in church politics, that one can hardly expect God's blessing if one breaks God's law to achieve his goal. However, there are a number of tactics common in secular politics that are short of lying but which in the church are inconsistent with a commitment to truth. One of these is exaggeration.

We see this all the time in Washington. Advocates of legislation describe it as the millennium, but opponents see it as Armageddon; and in fact, it is something much less than either of these. So too in the church. To exaggerate in such a way about the impact or results of proposed decisions is simply a gentler form of falsehood. Issues must be appraised honestly. For example, someone who favors Synodical restructuring must explain why in frank and measured terms; likewise, the one who is opposed. As the debate continues, each side must be willing not only to acknowledge the legitimate concerns of the other but also to learn from the other - indeed, even to switch sides as a result of the debate - and not to exaggerate the outcome.

Polemics of this sort will necessitate careful thought before speaking or writing, and the all-pervasive sound-bite from the secular world should find little room in the church. But do we even have sound-bites in church politics? After all, there is hardly that much in the way of media attention. However, if the purpose of a sound-bite is to leave an impression rather than to convey content, to abbreviate the debate rather than make fine distinctions, our equivalent in church politics to the sound-bite is labeling rather than analyzing an opponent's position. And so, as we wage war for the truth, we are tempted simply to dismiss those who oppose us by calling them Liberal, or Reformed, or Pietist, or something of that sort without really dealing with the substance of their position and actually showing how it contradicts or undermines the truth of God's Word.

Of course, it's easier to use a label than actually to analyze a position. Labels do not require much thought or rationale and if you use the right one, a label brings along with it a host of unpleasant associations which in turn may adhere to your opponent and hurt his cause without your having to demonstrate the truth of these associations - and in fact, they may not even be true. Certainly if a position really is Liberal or Reformed in comparison to Confessional Lutheran, it is by all means proper to make the argument, to lay out the proof, to substantiate the

charge; but even in such a case, it is more appropriate to label the position and not the person who, in fact, may not realize the implications of the position and certainly has no intention of embracing theological Liberalism or the Reformed faith.

Now, I am not suggesting that we should sugarcoat the truth. When we are actually talking about truth in the church we are dealing with God's truth, not our own, and this is the truth that has eternal consequences, so we must never diminish it or disregard it. Instead, we should realize that one of the most powerful weapons in our polemical arsenal is to demonstrate how a particular position either advances or inhibits the Gospel. So, for example, in the battle for the Bible of the 1970's, it was important to argue that the historical character of the events recorded in the Scriptures was intimately connected with the reality of our Lord's death and resurrection in time and space to save us. Likewise, in today's social climate, although we may find it embarrassing or even dangerous to reiterate the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality, nevertheless that truth is absolutely necessary to apprise sinners of their sin in order that they may listen to the Gospel. So church politics does not mean soft-pedaling error or white-washing the truth; but it also does not mean exaggerating the truth or over-simplifying it by means of a label.

Closely connected with the issue of labeling our opponents is our commitment to the 8th Commandment, in which we are enjoined to "*put the best construction on everything.*" This is probably the most difficult of all the precepts to follow in church politics. For one thing, it is difficult to motivate people - ourselves included - to exert the effort needed in politics unless they are convinced that the stakes are great and the situation is dire. So once we are engaged in the political task it becomes the most natural thing in the world for us to attribute the worst of motives to those who oppose us, for what else would explain their failure to see the issues as we do? They must be ambitious, greedy, power-hungry, subverters of the truth, 5th columnists, indifferent to God's Word, and not really Christians at all, at least not Confessional Lutherans.

All of which may be absolutely true. But how do we know? And it is not our task to render such judgments about what is going on inside a person's mind and heart. That is God's business. Our responsibility, as Luther puts it in the ***Large Catechism***, is "*to use our tongues to speak only good of everyone, to cover the sins and infirmities of our neighbor, to overlook them and to adorn him with due honor .*"⁴

Once again, the point of this admonition is not to inhibit a discussion of the issues, to permit error to thrive or to mute the truth. And in discussing the 8th Commandment in the ***Large Catechism***, Luther states explicitly that civil authorities, pastors, and parents have the responsibility for publicly reproofing evil. But even when we have such responsibilities we must still avoid judgments upon the heart. If someone has publicly advocated or defended error, we need to respond for the truth with the truth; but that does not mean that we must go further and attribute to him all sorts of wicked motives.

It also seems beyond the pale of the 8th Commandment to introduce additional and extraneous character flaws into our polemics. Suppose, for example, that we are debating something as serious as the inerrancy of the Scriptures. How relevant to that question would it be to point out that our opponent has been divorced, or that as an undergraduate at one of the Concordias he was disciplined for drinking, or that as an administrator, some of those who work for him think he is

lazy and disorganized. What is the point of bringing up accusations like these except to discredit the person - not the arguments, the person - of the one who is opposing us.

Once again, charges like these may very well be true. In fact, a moment's reflection will lead us to the conclusion that charges of this sort will always be true so long as men conduct the church's business rather than angels. But that is also true of us, isn't it? We hardly come to the debate with clean hands, i.e., without their being washed in the blood of the Lamb. But this is also true of those who disagree with us. They too have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. And if our heavenly Father is willing to put their trespasses away as far as the east is from the west, who are we to introduce them into an ecclesiastical debate of even the greatest significance!

In politics, one can perhaps win by "going negative"; and, of course, there are varying degrees and definitions to that expression anyway. But our commitment to God's truth means that in church politics we will not employ tactics that undermine a person's reputation. We will stick to the issues, theological and ecclesiastical, not the personalities and certainly not the character flaws, of which there are plenty to go around on all sides.

In fact, let me go even further and contend that an essential element of putting the best construction on our political opponents in the church is to assume that they are Christian. This can be extremely difficult because, as we do battle for the truth, we see those who disagree with us as opposing the truth of God's Word! How then can we assume that they are Christians? Well, for one thing, there is the confession that they make about themselves just as we do about ourselves - a confession that binds us together in the same synod. Even more importantly, we must remember that their salvation - like ours - is based on Jesus Christ and not on orthodoxy.

Now, don't misunderstand me on this point. Correct doctrine is absolutely important, for doctrine is the divinely appointed means for mediating to us the message, power, and reality of Jesus Christ. False doctrine cannot do that, and, in fact, it can lead us away from Christ. So do not think for a moment that I intend to minimize the consequences of false doctrine.

However, what I am arguing is that God's grace in Christ is greater than our comprehension of His truth, so that if we make a mistake or adhere to an error of the type that does not absolutely subvert the gospel, God can still work faith in our hearts, forgive our sins, and keep us a part of His Church. But if God can do this for us, He can also do it for our opponents; and our operating assumption in any church polemics ought to be that we are arguing with Christians, that they like us are committed to God's Word and want to be faithful in their teaching and preaching.

So let's use that Word to make the case. After all, the Spirit resides in the Word and He has the power to convince even when we do not. But if we get away from the Word and rely upon other means either because we do not trust the Word or else we imagine that our opponents are so corrupt that they cannot be moved by it, then what we are really saying is that we are no longer the church anyway since the power of God is powerless in our midst, a conclusion which I trust none of us is willing to draw about our synod. The Word of God works, and we need to use it.

Finally, however, let me offer one more word of advice about the tactics of truth in church politics, and that is the reminder that in addition to the truth, our Lord Christ has very clearly

stated that love is the mark of a Christian, "*By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another*" (John 13:35). In the Church truth and love go together; and that must be true in church politics as well. Of course, Christian love is not that mere sentimentalism that often masquerades as love in our times, nor is it another name for that pernicious tolerance of error that troubles our age.

What Christian love does require, however, is an authentic commitment to others, even when we are doing battle in the church. After all, we do not really need anything for ourselves even in these battles. In Christ, we have it all, including a sure hope of resurrection and glory. Therefore, God has placed us here not for ourselves but for others to whom He binds us by love, especially love for our fellow Christians. But as we engage in church politics, we sometimes forget this, and selfishness tends to set in - we want to be proved right, we want the vindication of victory, we want to set policy, make decisions, and determine the course of the synod. And when things do not go our way, then selfishness engenders bitterness, resentment, and hate. Ostensibly pursuing the truth, we open the door to enmity and hatred and by our words and actions, end up discrediting the cause for which we do battle and our Lord who has charged us to love.

Conclusion

Now by this time it's obvious that I have relatively little to say about some of the more common but also sometimes controversial means by which we engage in politics in the church these days. I suppose we all long for the "good old days" when political activity was more private and personal - when someone just told his friend who to vote for and when there was an almost automatic respect for the advice and counsel of officials, boards, and committees, about who to support and how to vote. But those days are long gone and now we employ lists of recommended candidates, unofficial publications to promote causes and people, on-line discussion groups, video tapes and mailings to delegates, and who knows what all the next weeks and months will bring.

What I am urging this morning, however, is that whatever the means, those who engage in church politics remember the goal and employ tactics that fit that goal. That goal is not winning, at least not a political victory, although of course we do not participate in order to lose either. Instead, politics and polemics in the church have as their goal the faithful proclamation of God's Word. However, when we employ that Word in our politics, when we use the truth to promote the truth, when we avoid lying about, hurting, and defaming those who disagree with us, and when we commit ourselves to love as well as truth as the mark of the Christian, then we know we are winners even before the decisions are made.

Endnotes

1. Erasmus quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (London: Collins, 1970), p.234; Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (n.p.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), p. 70.
2. *What does Luther Say?* 4487.
3. *Moving Frontiers*, p.174.
4. *Luther's Large Catechism* trans. J. N. Lenker (Minneapolis, MN), p.66.