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The Splintering of Missouri: How Our American Context Gave Rise to Micro-Synods as a Solution to Theological Conflict

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Introduction

On January 3, 2020, the United Methodist Church (UMC) announced that it had reached an agreement with the more conservative elements in its church body to have an amicable separation, a "no-fault divorce," as it were, between the progressive wing with the money and the more conservative wing, mostly represented by delegates from Africa. This agreement stipulates that a new church body will be formed out of the ashes of the old, and that this new church body will have $25 million in startup money to begin anew. The issue for them is not biblical authority, nor is it women's ordination, the two issues that have defined many splits of the last century. No, this time the presenting issue is same-sex or gay marriage. The conservatives in Africa and a few adherents to a biblical view of marriage will get a new beginning. I wonder if they will have the spirit depicted as a phoenix as a part of their new emblem.

What makes this issue significant for us is that they are not trying to resolve their theological differences. They are irreconcilable, but do not want to go down the treacherous and sad road of calling one another heretics. This way, they can follow a different path, and congregations can each take whichever road they want.

But we do not have to go to other church bodies to find these ideas. In 2019, LCMS Texas District President Mike Newman wrote an article for *Lutheran Mission Matters*. In this article, President Newman proposed, among other things, that the LCMS plant a new church body in the United States that is diverse and nimble, able to keep Augustana XIV but "unencumbered by European educational structures and Western accreditation requirements."[1] The hope, according to Newman, is that this new church body would reach people in the United States in a way that our old structure simply does not allow and for which it is not designed. This missional

[1] Michael W. Newman, "Next Steps for LCMS Multiplication: Two Actions to Reignite a Gospel Movement," *Lutheran Mission Matters* XXVII, no. 2 (November 2019): 274.

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church body would focus on new church plants and reaching unbelievers of the next generation, and it would be able to operate in a much more responsive way.

What is interesting for our purposes is not so much Newman's proposal as the response. Some on both the confessional and the moderate wings of the Missouri Synod have taken Newman's paper as a call for an amicable divorce, where each party could go their own way.

In order for us to understand the impulse of American churches to divide, we have to take a step back from the headlines of today and go in to our own history. For most of the history of the LCMS, people have left the Missouri Synod for theological convictions, and there has been little or no talk about an amicable departure.

The Missouri Synod tends to have a strong theological center, thanks in a large part to its two seminaries, but on the edges there are always those who cannot stand the direction the whole synod appears to be taking. Lawrence R. Rast Jr. has demonstrated that the theological landscape was always shifting in Missouri, and that there was no golden era.[2] What I would like to do is look at those who had enough—those who saw the trends and challenges to Missouri's traditional positions on things and could not bear the change. We are going to look at three snapshots of groups who left Missouri in the fifties, the sixties, and the seventies: the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation, and the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism. After this, we will examine how these experiences demonstrate our own American desire for autonomy at the expense of everything else, and what this teaches us about our own ecclesiology. Finally, we will try to offer some questions that we need to be asking ourselves as we consider Missouri's own future.

The Religious Scene in 1950

In order to gain a bit of context for our splinter groups from Missouri, we have to take a snapshot of the religious scene in 1950 or so. It is the years after World War II, and America is on top of the world, although the Soviet Union is lurking in the shadows. The language of the age is prosperity, and everyone, everyone has children. The baby boom is in full swing. In many respects, things are looking up for religion in America. The good guys won for God and country, and there is no foreign power that will conquer in the era of Truman and Eisenhower. We are not going to talk about Korea. Nearly everyone who is in charge for the next generation will be veterans. It is just the way things are.

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[2] Lawrence R. Rast Jr., "Synod or Sects? The Emergence of Partisanship in the LCMS," Symposia on the Lutheran Confessions, January 22, 2020. Electronic recording.

The Protestant religious scene, however, is divided. A couple world wars had shaken the progressive movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the ecumenical movement is now in full swing. The National Council of Churches was formed in 1950, and it would become the voice of mainline Protestantism to this day. But the battles of modernism were far from over in America.

Out of the early twentieth-century fundamentalist movement, a new force had arisen, calling itself evangelicalism. The National Association of Evangelicals was formed in 1942, Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947, and the Billy Graham crusades were the talk of the airwaves. Unless, of course, you were Lutheran, then we talked about *The Lutheran Hour*. In 1956, Billy Graham founded *Christianity Today* (with Carl Henry as the first editor-in-chief), and it would serve as the voice of the new evangelicalism for generations.

Billy Graham himself is a study in the new age of evangelicalism. As Robert Wuthnow observes in his book *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Graham served as a bridge between the northern and southern evangelicals, and between those who were in mainline denominations and those in newer ones.[3] He himself was a Southern Baptist, but with a Presbyterian wife and strong ties to both business and the north, Graham cut across denominational lines and gathered people, it seemed, from everywhere.

These new conservatives were more optimistic than their fundamentalist forebearers. They did not hold with the modernist views on things like evolution, and seemed to cling to a religion that was closer to the nineteenth-century revivals than the social movements like the Salvation Army, the even more liberal impulses of Lyman Beecher, and others. Robert Ellwood, in his book *1950: Crossroads of American Religious Life*, observed that the really unique character of evangelicalism was that it was based on free enterprise, was entrepreneurial, and was deeply, deeply subjective.[4] Its institutions were based on congregationalism and charismatic leaders, rather than long-standing traditions. Evangelicalism was primed for the new, post-WWII world.

There were, however, cracks. Even though evangelicalism was the new thing, the mainline churches were growing by leaps and bounds. But nearly every mainline denomination had splinters in their ranks. Oftentimes these splinter groups would align more closely to the fundamentalists of the early twentieth century than to the evangelicals of the fifties and sixties. Every time there was a merger—whether we are

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[3] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 177.

[4] Robert S. Ellwood, *1950:* Crossroads *of American Religious Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 194.

talking Presbyterian or Baptist or Methodist or Lutheran—some groups moved closer together, but some split off. And The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) was no exception to this trend. It was possible fellowship with the old American Lutheran Church (ALC) that led to our first set of splinters.

Theodore Graebner (1876–1950)

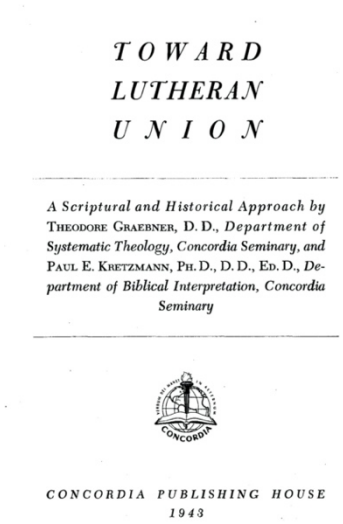
Paul E. Kretzmann, 1946

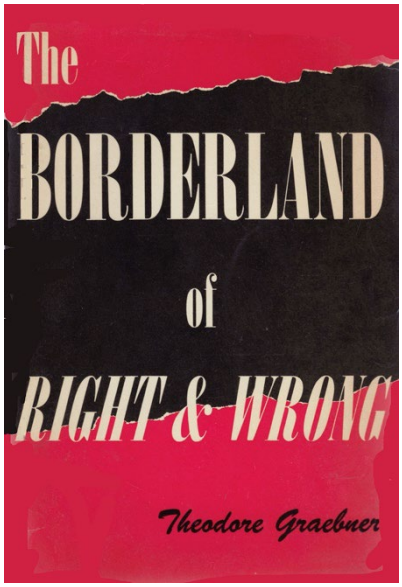
The Fifties and the Orthodox Lutheran Conference

The Lutheran part of our story begins with the formation of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference (OLC) in 1951. In many respects, this group was the first to take the action of leaving the LCMS as a result of their critiques of the direction Missouri was taking. The leading light for them was Dr. Paul E. Kretzmann (1883–1965), of *Popular Commentary* fame.[5] Kretzmann had been in a protracted fight with Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for many years. His primary antagonist was his onetime friend and colleague Dr. Theodore Graebner. Without going into the entire story of the thirties and forties, Kretzmann had accused Graebner of false doctrine by espousing unionism in a revision of Graebner's book, *The Borderland of Right and Wrong*.[6] It is frankly a quite confusing story, because Graebner had the habit of rewriting and

[5] Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921–1924).

[6] Theodore Graebner, *The Borderland of Right and Wrong: An Essay on the Adiaphora*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935).



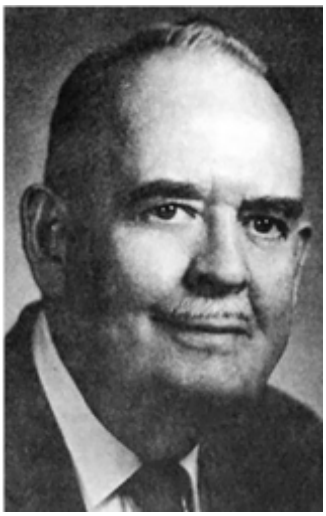


revising his book. It became the *Variata* of its time. The book began as a lecture given to a Texas pastors conference in 1934 as a corrective to what Graebner considered the "traditionalists" in the synod overreaching what he considered to be biblical. The book's first printing was in 1935, the year Texas District President John Behnken defeated Friedrich Pfotenhauer for the presidency of the Missouri Synod. By the mid-1940s, however, the book seemed to be espousing a much broader view of adiaphora and church union than what was there just a few years before.

And in the middle of all that, Graebner and Kretzmann in 1943 co-wrote a book against unionism titled *Toward Lutheran Union: A Scriptural and Historical Approach*.[7] Then Graebner became one of the signers of the "Statement of the Forty-Four," and let us just say their relationship soured very quickly.

In 1946, Kretzmann resigned his call as a professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, after it became clear that President Ludwig Fuerbringer was not going to consider Kretzmann's charges against Graebner. So from 1946 until the formation of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference in 1951, Kretzmann wrote letters, lots and lots of letters. From his home office in Cuba, Missouri, he wrote to pastors, synod officials, and anyone who would listen (and many who would not) about how things were changing at Concordia Seminary, and that Synod President John Behnken was a part of the problem.

[7] Theodore Graebner and Paul E. Kretzmann, *Toward Lutheran Union* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943).



Wallace McLaughlin (1902–1976)

Harold W. Romoser (1907–1998) Photo provided by Claire Fickenscher, granddaughter of Harold Romoser.

Kretzmann also had a disciple named Rev. Wallace McLaughlin. He was a convert from Presbyterianism who joined the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) and eventually the Missouri Synod. For two years during his colloquy, he studied under Francis Pieper and Kretzmann and Graebner. But Kretzmann found in McLaughlin a kindred spirit against modernism, and someone who seemed to be willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of the truth.

The third pastor who figures prominently in the history of the OLC is Rev. Harold Romoser. Romoser was one of the bright lights of the Missouri Synod in the 1940s. He was the secretary of the Synod's Centennial Committee in 1947, and most importantly for us, he was one of President Behnken's appointees to meet with the signers of the "Statement of the Forty-Four." He was in the middle of nearly everything going on in the LCMS when it came to Missouri's own internal discipline and how it would deal with change. At one point, he was even offered the presidency of the Springfield seminary. Serving as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Oak Park, Illinois, Romoser was in a perfect position to see what was going on, especially since President Behnken kept his own office as president in Chicago. He did not join the OLC, but was present for most all of it.

What were some of the issues that caused the formation of the OLC? The first issue was not unionism, the acceptance of the *Common Confession* with the old ALC, or any of the theological topics we would associate with the liberalism of the pre-Seminex era. All of those were in the laundry list of complaints. The first real complaint listed by the founders, though, had to do with engagement and marriage.

For many years, the practice of getting engaged before being married was in place, obviously. This was hardly a new thing. The question was whether breaking

off an engagement was considered the same thing as getting a divorce. While this is a non-issue for us today for the most part, in the early 1950s this was a protracted disagreement in the LCMS. On May 24, 1949, the Concordia Seminary faculty offered a theological "opinion" that the modern practice of engagement was not the same as the ancient practice of betrothal, and that one could break off an engagement without sin, as this was not the equivalent of divorce. This position was defended by the seminary president, Louis Sieck (1884–1952), and by most of the St. Louis faculty. In 1953, there was a joint seminary statement which, although a bit more cautious, essentially said the same thing.[8]

Shortly after this all came out in the fall of 1949, a group of laymen and a few pastors started what was called the St. Louis Study Club. This club was modeled after a similar, although more clergy-led, group called the Chicago Study Club, which met at Romoser's church and at Christ Lutheran Church in Oak Park. The St. Louis Study Club met monthly, and added to their list of complaints about the direction of Missouri time after time. Kretzmann would later say this about these meetings and the Chicago Study Club meetings: "One left the meetings glowing with fervor; but, with a hidden dissatisfaction, something ought to be DONE about it!"[9]

While engagement may seem a minor historical oddity today, at the time this was a big, big deal. For some, it was the beginning of the end of the orthodoxy of the LCMS. And it was the spark, along with the adoption of part one of the *Common Confession* with the ALC at the 1950 synodical convention, that really began the Orthodox Lutheran Conference.

The St. Louis Study Club drew up a document entitled the "Confession of Faith Professed and Practiced by All True Lutherans."[10] It was this document that served as the basis for the Orthodox Lutheran Conference. On September 25, 1951, at St. John's Lutheran Church in Okabena, Minnesota, the OLC was formed. This conference began with ten pastors (one of whom later withdrew) and six laymen. Kretzmann and McLaughlin were clearly the leading voices of the OLC, although there were several other pastors who would provide leadership for this group, including several pastors with the last name of Schupmann.

It would take about four years before there was a split in the OLC, with some of the members joining the Wisconsin Synod, others remaining independent, and still

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[8] Arthur C. Repp, "Changes in the Missouri Synod," *Concordia Theological Monthly 38* (1967): 263. It should also be noted that Paul E. Kretzmann wrote an article in *Theological Quarterly* in 1916 holding up the breaking off of engagement as tantamount to divorce. This was an issue that was brewing for some time.

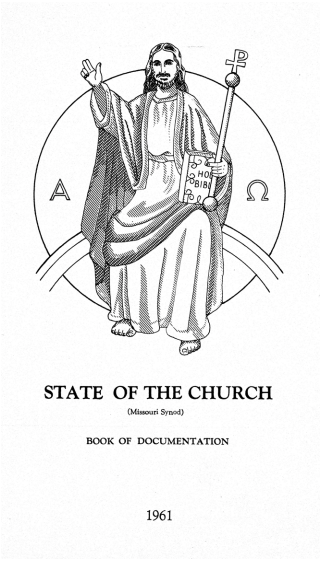
[9] Paul E. Kretzmann, "A Short History of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference," accessed January 22, 2020, http://www.concordialutheranconf.com/2010/02/22/a-short-history-of-the-orthodox-lutheran-conference/.

[10] Kretzmann, "A Short History of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference."

others forming the Concordia Lutheran Conference, which is in existence to this day.[11]

The Sixties and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation

Cameron A. MacKenzie Sr. Photo provided by Cameron A. MacKenzie Jr.



Our second splinter group is the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation, or LCR. The LCR was founded in 1964 as a direct result of what were called the State of the Church Conferences, which began after the 1959 convention in San Francisco. These conferences were essentially a who's who of conservative voices in the LCMS in the early 1960s. They looked at events happening as far back as the *Brief Statement* (1932), but were especially focused on changes happening at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The first State of the Church Conference included a book of documentation, prepared by Rev. Herman Otten (1933–2019) of *Lutheran News*, and pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in New Haven, Missouri.

Not surprisingly, some of the men who were instrumental in the OLC from ten years before became involved in the State of the Church, including Harold Romoser, Wallace McLaughlin, and P. E. Kretzmann. But there were new faces on the scene as well, such as Cameron A. MacKenzie Sr.

The documentation book was two hundred pages long and included everything controversial that had happened in the LCMS since 1950 or earlier. There were sections on Martin Scharlemann (1910–1982), Jaroslav Pelikan (1923–2006), Martin Marty (b. 1928), the *Common Confession*, and more and more topics centering around biblical authority and the inspiration of the Scriptures. It was clear by this time that changes were ramping up in the LCMS, and that the issues

[11] "Concordia Lutheran Conference (CLC)," accessed January 22, 2020, http://www.concordialutheranconf.com.

which brought about the OLC ten years before were all still there, and a lot more had been added.

On May 15 and 16, 1961, more than four hundred pastors and laymen met in Milwaukee for the State of the Church Conference and the issues disturbing Missouri. Special attention was paid to inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the doctrine of Scripture, and the *Brief Statement* of 1932. Hopes were high that progress would be made at the 1962 convention of the synod, but it was not to be so. The State of the Church was refused a booth at the convention, and there was no movement at the convention on any of the issues brought up at the 1961 conference.[12] As a direct result of this, MacKenzie's congregation, St. Matthew's in Detroit, terminated fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1963.

By 1964, it seemed as though things had come to a head. A group of pastors and congregations resolved to leave the LCMS and form what would become known as the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR). The meeting determining this happened at Trinity Lutheran Church in New Haven, Missouri, although Trinity and Otten did not join the LCR.[13] The formal beginning was April 28 and 29, 1964, at Emmaus Lutheran Church in Chicago. From this point forward, we see a split happening with the conservatives in Missouri: those who left, and those who remained. While there was crossover and conversation between the two groups, the communication and interworkings largely disappeared after the 1969 convention in Denver. At that convention, Dr. J. A. O. Preus II (1920–1994) was elected president of the synod, and the LCMS declared fellowship with the ALC.

But back to 1964. When the LCR formed, Cameron A. MacKenzie Sr. was elected the first administrator, and Harold Romoser the first coadjutor. A year after their beginning, they numbered seven congregations, with three more applying for membership and ten other independent congregations in fellowship. While there were attempts to enter into fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod, this never came to fruition, in large part due to differences on church and ministry, which had been brewing between Missouri and Wisconsin for many years.

The history of the LCR since the early seventies was consistent and plagued by splinters of the splinter. In 1972, St. Matthew's in Detroit withdrew from the LCR over what they considered to be intrusion on the part of the LCR into their internal affairs. The following year four other congregations were removed for siding with St. Matthew's. In 1976, Romoser and two other congregations left over this same issue. Thus in 1979, the Fellowship of Lutheran Congregations (FLC) was formed.

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[12] Fred Casmer, "The Trumpet with the Certain Sound: An Analysis of the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR) Viewed from Its Historical and Doctrinal Roots" (Unpublished paper, April 29, 1980), 9.

[13] Personal correspondence with Kenneth K. Miller, 1991.

This group of congregations eventually dissolved, but at least one in their midst ended up as an LCMS pastor, of all things. The issue between the LCR and the FLC was whether in a case of excommunication the person being excommunicated had to be present at the voters meeting when they were excommunicated.

The Lutheran Churches of the Reformation exist to this day.[14] There are twelve pastors and fourteen congregations. And in 2017, in honor of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, they published a series of essays outlining the differences between the LCR and the LCMS.[15]

The Seventies and the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism

While we could see the OLC and the LCR as a continuation of one to the other, the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism (FAL) was really an entity of its own. FAL was formed in 1971 as the merger of two regional conservative groups: the Conference for Authentic Lutheranism in California (CAL) and the Free Association for Authentic Lutheranism in the Midwest. On November 1–2, 1971, a group of more than two hundred people, mostly pastors, gathered in Libertyville, Illinois, to discuss the formation of a new federation to combat the apparent liberalism of the Missouri Synod. At the time of its formation, the belief was that there would be fifty to sixty congregations who would join FAL. Many felt that the political approach to problems that seemed to be J. A. O. Preus's "method of operation" was not satisfactory, and that a bolder and clearer stand must be taken. While that was the talk, this proved not to be the case.[16] In the end, only six congregations joined FAL.

Why were there so few? The interest was high in 1971, the battle lines had been drawn, and the conflict had really been going on since the 1950 synodical convention or before. At the same time, this was before the Internet. What was known by the pastors was not common knowledge to the laity. They did not have Facebook to make sure everyone knew everything all the time. In addition, FAL also suffered from a serious lack of leadership. Probably the leading light in the history of FAL was a layman from Libertyville, Illinois, named Lawrence R. Marquardt (1933–2001).

In 1973, this little group declared fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. That gives us a sense of where the Wisconsin Synod was in our own internal struggles at

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[14] "About the LCR," accessed January 22, 2020, http://lcrusa.org.

[15] "Here We Stand: A Collection of Essays on the Differences between the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR) and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS)," Annual Convention of the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR) (July 14–15, 2017).

[16] Robert Lehrkamp, "What Caused the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism to Break-Up" (Unpublished paper, April 1980), 3.

the time. But even with the support of the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), they did not last long.

The 1973 synodical convention in New Orleans, from a conservative point of view, was a great convention. While the moderates sang "The Church's One Foundation," Concordia Seminary's Board of Control went to people sympathetic to Dr. Preus's views on the controversy. Now, from the perspective of FAL, this was difficult, because it gave the conservatives remaining in the LCMS hope. They had hoped for fifty to sixty congregations joining in 1971, but ended up being six. They maxed out with around fourteen congregations. The federation disbanded in 1975, with a number of those congregations joining the Wisconsin Synod.

How Did Our American Context Affect the Creation and Outcome of the Three Splits?

Now that we have a sense of these three splits, we must step back for a moment and try to gain some perspective on them.

At one level, we can see all of them as a part of the larger movement of the Missouri Synod's ongoing identity crisis and struggle with modernity. They are the conservative corollary to Seminex and the formation of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). One part of this story is asking the question of how we think through theological conflict together and try to resolve it. What I want to highlight for us in these smaller groups that left the LCMS is the one thing that both the moderate wing and the conservative wing had in common: *autonomy*.

With each one of these three groups, there was a desire to uphold the autonomy of the local congregation as the only true expression of the church, and that any person or entity beyond it is advisory at best, and encroaching on the self-governance of the congregation at worst. It is no accident that we had the Orthodox Lutheran *Conference*, the Lutheran *Churches* of the Reformation, and the *Federation* for Authentic Lutheranism. All of these express an individuality that they felt was getting lost as the Missouri Synod became larger and larger. It should not surprise us that in the period when Missouri grew the fastest, there were some who saw that growth as coming at the expense of right doctrine and practice.

However, the "moderate" wing, for its part, held to the same standard. It is the *Association* of Evangelical Lutheran *Churches*. They wanted freedom to confess, or not confess, the Lutheran faith as they saw fit. No entity or office in St. Louis or anywhere else could tell them what to do. Whether you are talking about a "pick yourself up by your own bootstraps and do it yourself" individualism of the forties and fifties, or the hippy freedom of the sixties and seventies, the result is the same. I

do what I want, and if I do not like what you do or you don't like what I do, then I will take my things and go my own way.

While the "conservative" wing deplored the lax theology and moving frontiers of doctrinal standards that seemed apparent in Missouri, at least to them, what they did not want was an individual or synod officer telling them what to do. They wanted things the old way, whatever that old way might be.

This need for autonomy is evident in each of these federations. In the OLC, we see the following in their constituting documents:

> The ORTHODOX LUTHERAN CONFERENCE is committed to a strictly congregational polity, so that the organization, in all its meetings and activities, is strictly a service body, having disciplinary jurisdiction only over its officers. With respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government it is only an advisory body. According to Scriptural precept and example every congregation is independent, sovereign, autonomous with respect to all its affairs.[17]

The LCR, for its own part, followed closely the same principles as were set forth in the OLC. MacKenzie, McLaughlin, Romoser, and Kretzmann all held to the view that the congregation is the only divinely instituted church, and that any synod or federation or collection of churches is advisory at best. This is certainly why the LCR never made any headway with fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. While their view could be held in Francis Pieper and was quite common in Missouri, because the LCR was a new collection of churches, they had to make the argument for fellowship with Wisconsin anew. They never got very far, and efforts broke off by the mid-1970s.

This insistence upon autonomy gives us the key to understanding the impulse to split into different denominations. In the early twentieth century, right about the time the Missouri Synod was moving into English, the American churches were ramping up for the fight of the century. Mainstream Protestant churches were trying to wrest respectability back from the revivalists, and three movements began that fought against that bureaucratic and intellectual tendency at the time: fundamentalism, the Holiness movement, and Pentecostalism.[18] Each one of these movements, in their own way, highlighted the American impulse of resistance to authority, the desire for local control, and the distrust of institutions.

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[17] "Article VI—The Polity of the Conference," *Proceedings of the 2nd Convention of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference*, Minneapolis, Minnesota (August 22–25, 1952): 82–83.

[18] For a thorough examination of this, please see the epilogue in Nathan Hatch's monumental work *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

While I would hardly call these micro-synods fundamentalists, their desire for independence, distrust of institutions, and tendency to follow one charismatic leader all bear remarkable similarities to these other populist movements in twentieth-century North America.

But there was also a problem. On the one hand, you had the clarion call to bring discipline to pastors, teachers, schools, and institutions so that they would follow what old Missouri had taught and done. Every issue of *The Faithful Word* (the doctrinal journal of the LCR) would deplore the lack of discipline and integrity on the part of the elected leaders. But at the very same time is the claim that only the local congregation is, properly speaking, church. No hierarchy or institution above the local congregation could discipline or bring about correction. As the Bard would say, therein lies the rub.

Three Approaches

What we saw in the fifties, sixties, and seventies were three approaches to dealing with theological disagreement and controversy. The first approach is acculturation. The world is changing, and we as the church have to learn how to change with it. If we will learn how to adapt and change to the situation at hand better, we will be nimbler and more capable of moving into the future. This approach can be typified by what became the ELCA. There are to this day groups of individuals, pastors, and congregations who continue to struggle to confess the faith and denounce error in the ELCA. It is becoming a lonelier position with each passing year.

The second approach is politicization. The LCMS system of polity is designed, intentionally or unintentionally, to work within a system where you have elections and candidates, winners and losers. It does not matter if you are talking about a doctrinal declaration or passing a resolution thanking the quilters of the Northwest District for making quilts—everything, *everything* comes down to a vote. If I can get enough people to vote the way that I believe is right, then I win. It is that simple. This group is all those pastors and congregations during this period that did not leave the synod. They either learned to ignore the synod or worked to win in this game of politics. The first and most obvious time this happened in LCMS history was the election of John Behnken as president of the LCMS in 1935, but this election-oriented political reality has been a part of our history from the beginning.

The third approach is separation. When the programs and things you disagreed with got too egregious, too far gone, the only choice was to leave and form your own church, or perhaps to join one of the other existing ones. This is what the OLC, LCR, and FAL all attempted to do in their own way. They wanted to start over, build

something new that did not have the problems of the old system, with its hierarchy and desire to control at all costs. If you lose enough elections, and you are unwilling simply to accommodate the "other side," then there is no choice left but to leave and start anew. With the American fascination for the new, this may no longer be seen as a failure, but as an opportunity to go where no synod has gone before.

Now, what is hard for us to hear is that each one of these three approaches—acculturation, politicization, and separation—all fit only too well in our American context. Each one of us can see those impulses at work at the congregational level all the way up to the synodical level. Is going from German to English acculturation in a bad way or adapting to new opportunities for the gospel? Is serving as a delegate and voting for people whom you believe will be faithful and do good work dirty politics or good stewardship? Can there be such a thing as good politics in the church? Is there any other way to do it? Is leaving to form your own synod faithfulness to the truth, or divisiveness and a lack of charity?

All three of these approaches are right at home in an American context. We have been trying to baptize this reality since *Government in the Missouri Synod* by Carl S. Mundinger was published in 1947 as a part of the LCMS's one-hundredth anniversary. Perhaps it is our own desire for repristination back to a golden era of Lutheranism, but our own LCMS history has demonstrated that we are uncomfortable with the notion that the way we do things is somehow influenced by our context.

Conclusion

The history of Lutheranism in America is one where there is one side of the story told in the history books.[19] This is the story of an inevitable movement toward unity around the least common denominators. But in order for us to gain a more complete picture of our own history, we have to question that premise of the inevitable march toward unity. The history of Lutheranism in America does not all fit into the categories that Nelson and others present. Not everything can be agreed upon, and there is no predetermined institutional unity that must come about.[20]

What we learn from these three small church bodies' history is that people of conviction can disagree with how to approach problems and solutions. In every era of the church, there are people who endeavor faithfully to confess the truth of the gospel in difficult circumstances. In the cases of the ones we have looked at today, I

[19] This is typified by Clifford E. Nelson and others. See Clifford E. Nelson, *Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

[20] An excellent attempt at this is the following recent dissertation. See Adam S. Brasich, "A Mighty Fortress: American Religion and the Construction of Confessional Lutheranism" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2017).

am sympathetic to their concerns, perspective, and plight. How would you have confessed the faith given the same circumstances? How would I? It is impossible to answer without sounding like St. Peter speaking to our Lord, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away" (Matt 26:33).[21]

Division and separation are not to be taken lightly. It does not matter if we are talking about the United Methodist Church and their upcoming schism, a separation under the auspices of mission and evangelism, or our own historical divisions in the past. Christ our Lord calls us to be faithful in who and what we confess before him, urging us to be one, just as he is one with the Father (John 17). That does not happen by accident. It requires work, commitment to the truth, and commitment to one another.

Perhaps a part of what we need to do as a church body is simply recognize more clearly the context in which we live. We have a political structure that involves the election of people and passing resolutions. This bears a remarkable similarity to our American system of government. Can the gospel thrive under this form? Yes, but it comes with some significant challenges. It is only too easy to dismiss those with whom we disagree, especially if we have already "won" the vote.

At the same time, the only way we exist as a church is living under the forgiveness of sins and the gospel. Philip Melanchthon expressed it well in the Apology, Article V: "Harmony in the Church cannot last unless pastors and churches mutually overlook and pardon many things."[22]

So my final question is this: How will we live under the gospel together, calling one another to faithfulness in all things, while at the same time learning to overlook and pardon many things? Only time will tell.

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[22] Ap V 122. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, second edition, copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

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