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Confessing in the Public Square

Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Already at this retreat we have heard it stated unequivocally that there is “tension and deep division in our Synod.”¹ In other forums, some have gone so far as to say that the “very existence of our synodical union” is at stake. It is certainly true that we face significant challenges. It may also be the case that the Synod as we have known it may not survive the current crisis, but nobody really wants this to happen. But the fact remains that we do face significant challenges within our fellowship. Nobody denies this. Within this context I have been asked to speak on the topic “Positives and Risks when Confessing in the Public Square.”

“Positives and Risks” – an intriguing title. Since the gospel is always a skandalon, every confession of Christ is a risk, a stumbling block to unbelievers. We cannot push this stumbling block to the side of the road. Yet at the same time, such risky business is always attended by the promise that the word of God does what He intends it to do. So we are left with a Lutheran paradox – the positive risks of faithful confession and practice.

What lies at the root of our differences? Is there a fundamental rift of doctrine? Practice? Or is it simply a matter of how we deal with one another? President Herbert Mueller has rightly called us to brotherly conversation, but admitted that he was not quite sure how to do this. I am bound to agree. What I hope to bring to our discussions is a bit of historical context. Consider, for example, the following strong statement.

Things are going from bad to worse. One of our students declined to accept a vicarage assignment in the East, because he knows what is going on there and told me that he could not with a clear conscience work under pastors who are no longer conservative Lutherans. *The Lutheran Witness* consistently ignores those things which make union with other Lutheran bodies impossible, but almost every issue contains items which must make our laymen

¹This paper was delivered at a Joint Meeting of the Council of Presidents and the seminary faculties on March 1, 2002, in Saint Louis, Missouri.

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believe that there is nothing in the way of union. I am very happy that I am as old as I am, but I do feel terrible when I think of my children and grandchildren.²

Now there is evidence of difference, divergence, and division—yet it sounds remarkably contemporary. Perhaps we have heard or have even stated similar sentiments. Strikingly, the words were uttered more than fifty years ago in 1948. What we continue to experience in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in the early twenty-first century are the unresolved tensions of the last half of the twentieth century. Perhaps they really began at the start of that century. No church is ever without tension. Before we can come to a brotherly resolution, we will have to admit that our differences have been around for a long time. Indeed, the lifelong experience of some of us has been that of a divided Synod.

The Public Square and Today's Missouri

How do we take the positive risk of faithful public confession? We have heard about the nature of the culture in which we speak the gospel from Dr. Dwayne Mau. A recent e-mail from President Gerald Kieschnick noted how Christians have been overcome by the relativism of our times.

As shepherds of God's people (and as shepherds in waiting of those yet to join your flocks), you have to stay strong, for your work has been cut out for you. The other day I was reading parts of a new study by George Barna, the noted analyst of cultural trends and the Christian church. Barna, scanning the horizon of American society, does not see a rosy picture out there, especially for pastors striving to convince people of the absolute truth and moral rightness of Jesus Christ and His teachings.

"According to George Barna," President Kieschnick continues, "three out of four Americans believe that moral truth is relative (the figure runs even higher among teenagers)." Even among Evangelical teenagers the number is distressingly high. Gene Edward Veith notes that somewhere around two-thirds of Evangelical teens believe that truth is relative. Dr. Kieschnick continues:

²G. Chr. Barth to Harold Romoser, June 4, 1948, archives of Concordia Theological Seminary, Barth Papers, The Statement of the 44, 1948.

These days, people “are much more likely to allow their feelings to guide their moral decision-making than the Bible or external moral codes.” The consequence of this is that many Christians believe that such things as abortion, homosexual sex, cohabitation without marriage and pornography are morally acceptable. In the absence of absolutes, says Barna, the watchword of the day remains, increasingly, “If it feels good, do it.” Needless to say, this is a difficult mentality with which you as pastors must deal.²

In the United States, generally, there is a wide divergence of doctrine and practice among Lutherans that makes a unified public witness impossible at present. Again, in his February 2002 letter to pastors, President Kieschnick, commenting on discussions between the WELS, ELCA, and LCMS, noted the following:

This obvious lack of fellowship among our church bodies pointed out the need for ongoing conversations among us. Working toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies is, as you know, a paramount objective of Article III of our Synodical Constitution. As your president, I look forward to engaging in such conversations in the future as opportunities allow. In any such talks, our church body’s position of course shall remain that fellowship must be based on complete agreement in doctrine and practice, which we certainly have not reached as yet with either ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church] or the WELS [Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod].³

Significant differences in doctrine and practice continue to divide the LCMS, the ELCA, and the WELS, making union unlikely in the near future, though continued discussion is appropriate. However, those discussions will likely bear little fruit until the differences are understood historically. Ignorance about our past confounds our witness in the public square at present. So we ask, “Quo vadis Missouri? Where are we going? Who is Missouri and where can she be found? Who speaks for us?”

Some claim that the doctrinal unanimity of the LCMS is jealously eyed by many in the broader denominational setting. Such sentiments,

²Gerald B. Kieschnick, “Letter to Pastors, no. 3,” February 27, 2002. <http://www.lcms.org/president/Newsletters/2002/February2002.asp>

³Gerald B. Kieschnick, “Letter to Pastors, no. 3.”

however, minimize or even overlook the very real differences that have interwoven themselves into our synodical life. Further, they tend to marginalize those who seek to maintain the vigorous public confession and practice of the founders. Finally, they ignore the dynamic character of the LCMS's history and the observable breakdown of doctrinal and practical unity within the last half century. We may not want to face the fact that we are a different church than we were one hundred years ago, but, if we do not, what made us distinctive will be forgotten in less than the next one hundred years.

Consider the powerful public confession offered by the founders of the LCMS. It is all too common today to abstract the founders of the LCMS from their context. This has frequently neutered the powerful apologetic that undergirded their reasons for founding the Synod. Without knowledge of this history some have misunderstood their purpose for having a Missouri Synod in the first place. Easy and unproven truisms take the place of what our fathers really thought. For example, the founders saw the Synod as an advisory body. However, what they meant by this is used for purposes they never intended. The founders of Missouri firmly believed that the Synod would succeed as an advisory body chiefly because there was a shared commitment to doctrine *and* practice, and that this doctrine and practice had a very concrete form. Advisory did not mean an open license in regard to practice, as the first constitution makes this clear.

Conditions under which a congregation may join Synod and remain a member: 1) Acceptance of Holy Scripture, both the Old and the New Testament, as the written word of God and as the only rule and norm of faith and life; 2) Acceptance of all the symbolical books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (these are the three Ecumenical Symbols, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Large and the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord) as the pure and unadulterated explanation and presentation of the word of God; 3) Separation from all commixture of church or faith, as, for example, serving of mixed congregations by a servant of the church; taking part in the service and sacraments of heretical or mixed congregations; taking part in any heretical tract distribution and mission projects, etc.

The constitution was not offering suggestions, but laying down how Lutherans who joined the Synod related to one another.

But now things get even more interesting. Members of the synod had to agree to certain liturgies and hymnals.

4) The exclusive use of doctrinally pure church books and schoolbooks. (Agenda, hymnals, readers, etc.) If it is impossible in some congregations to replace immediately the unorthodox hymnals and the like with orthodox ones, then the pastor of such a congregation can become a member of Synod only if he promises to use the unorthodox hymnal only under open protest and to strive in all seriousness for the introduction of an orthodox hymnal.

And finally, "5) Proper (not temporary) calling of the pastors..." Pastors were to have permanent calls and not serve at the whims of their congregations. There are more, but that should suffice for now.

One of the myths surrounding the founding of the Missouri Synod is that it was a thoroughly German church body that was out of touch with American Christianity and culture. Nothing could be farther from the truth. One need only read Wyneken to see his profound concern over the lax doctrine and practice of the old Lutheran Synod of the West specifically and the General Synod generally. One of the ways that he generated support for his mission of establishing orthodox Lutheran churches was to point to the bankruptcy of the revivalism that had caught on with Lutherans who were already in America. He was so effective that August Crämer and Wilhelm Sihler left their synods (Michigan and Ohio, respectively) because Reformed doctrines and practices had made a firm foothold in their synods. The experiences of these founders made their way into the Synod's first constitution. Wyneken, Crämer, and Sihler knew exactly what was happening in the other Lutherans synods and they wanted no part of it. They had a clear understanding of the situation facing Lutheranism in the United States. And where was the rub in 1847? It was not specifically doctrine, but doctrine practiced liturgically. In the face of the General Synod's use of Finney's "New Measures" (the "contemporary worship" of nineteenth-century America) the framers of Missouri expressed a position that saw the intimate connection between doctrine and practice. The Synod was aware that Article VII of the Augsburg Confession does not demand absolute liturgical uniformity, still the Synod deemed "such a uniformity wholesome and useful." They offered two reasons for liturgical uniformity: 1) "because a total difference in outward ceremonies would cause those who are weak in the unity of doctrine to stumble"; and

2) "because in dropping heretofore preserved usages the Church is to avoid the appearance of and desire for innovations." What was at stake in all of this? To engage in practices that did not mirror the Synod's doctrinal position would confuse its witness in the public square. Missiological atrophy would be the result. Synod's mission was driven by a clearly articulated doctrinal position, which was immediately recognized in how it worshiped. What the Synod believed was seen in what the Synod practiced. The message rightly practiced drove the mission. Uniformity of doctrine and practice was the critical reason for the formation of the Missouri Synod in the first place – a reason I pray we can recapture soon for the sake of our mission. "Furthermore Synod deems it necessary for the purification of the Lutheran Church in America, that the emptiness and the poverty in the externals of the service be opposed, which, having been introduced here by the false spirit of the Reformed, is now rampant." The conclusion is striking. The constitution states:

All pastors and congregations that wish to be recognized as orthodox by Synod are prohibited from adopting or retaining any ceremony which might weaken the confession of the truth or condone or strengthen a heresy, especially if heretics insist upon the continuation or the abolishing of such ceremonies. . . . Synod as a whole is to supervise how each individual pastor cares for the souls in his charge. Synod, therefore, has the right of inquiry and judgment. Especially is Synod to investigate whether its pastors have permitted themselves to be misled into applying the so-called "New Measures" which have become prevalent here, or whether they care for their souls according to the sound Scriptural manner of the orthodox Church.⁴

Synod's practice was a public profession of its doctrinal commitments. But these doctrinal and practical commitments were not at odds with the Synod's mission – they were the engine that drove it.

Let us be clear that it was those who were most concerned over the intrusions of Reformed practice who were also most vigorous in their missionary activities. The oft-cited divide between pure doctrine and missions simply does not stand in the face of the early Missourians. Nor

⁴All constitution quotations are from "Our First Synodical Constitution," translated by Roy Suelflow, *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16 (April 1943): 1-18.

does it today, as the vigorous missionary activities of the Fort Wayne Seminary throughout the world clearly attest.

Mission zeal was not an excuse for doctrinal indifference. Walther strongly stated his opinion on the matter, perhaps in terms we find stunning or arrogant today: "The Lutheran church is therefore not only a real but the true visible church of God on earth."⁵ For Walther, the Lutheran church is the church catholic. Any mixture of the unqualified church with the qualified visible church will necessarily compromise the catholicity of the pure church. The implications for church fellowship are clear in his mind. "An orthodox Christian should and must therefore earnestly flee associations and rather never receive Communion or rather die than partake of a Zwinglian Communion."⁶

ELCA Meltdown

In the face of the ELCA's recent fellowship agreements, Walther's strong statement takes on a new urgency. Simply put, it is now the opportunity for all and the reality for many in the ELCA to be participants in Reformed and Zwinglian communions. ELCA critics are fully aware of how their church has compromised its Lutheran confession. Rev. Dr. Michael McDaniel, a former ELCA bishop, has written: "The year 1997 was especially tumultuous. It was in that year that the Philadelphia Convention of the ELCA sold our birthright for a mess of pottage by entering into unbelievably shocking relationships with Calvinistic and Zwinglian organizations."⁷ Another ELCA pastor, Dr. Louis Smith, stated the matter just as bluntly:

The issue of the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar concerns nothing less than the Incarnation and the movement of the Gospel. When, at Marburg, in response to Luther's insistence on the Word of Institution, Oecolampadius called Luther to turn away from the humanity of Christ and lift his eyes to the divinity, Luther's rejoinder was that the only God he knew was the Incarnate God. And he wanted to know no other, since only the

⁵C. F. W. Walther, "Communion Fellowship," in *Essays for the Church*, 2 volumes (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1:203-204.

⁶Walther, "Communion Fellowship," 211.

⁷Michael C. D. McDaniel, "ELCA Journeys: Personal Reflections on the Last Forty Years," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 65 (April 2001): 105.

Incarnate God could save. . . . Lutherans owe it to the whole Church to confess publicly and not to try figure out an acceptable language that will allow the offense of Christ's crucified for us Flesh and Blood to be overcome by a linguistic trick rather than by faith alone.⁸

Newspaper columnist Uwe Simon-Netto has wondered whether we are on the verge of a "Protestant Collapse."⁹ His report makes use of Dr. Paul Hinlicky's commentary on a survey by the Barna Group. In what is perhaps the understatement of the new millennium, it states that there is "very considerable diversity within the Christian community regarding core beliefs." Continuing, it claimed that "a mere 21 percent of America's Lutherans, 20 percent of the Episcopalians, 18 percent of Methodists, and 22 percent of Presbyterians affirm the basic Protestant tenet that by good works man does not earn his way to heaven." Hinlicky's conclusion? "If this figure holds up it signals a complete breakdown of catechetical instruction." This much is most certainly true.

Further, the report noted that "only 33 percent of the Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists, and only 28 percent of the Episcopalians, agreed with the statement that Christ was without sin." He said that these numbers indicate "an epochal change in popular theology. This would suggest a loss of faith in the Divinity of Christ." Hinlicky's colleague, Episcopalian Gerald McDermott, added, "Christ would then be no more than the Dalai Lama, an admirable kind of a guy."

At the January 2001 confessional symposium at Concordia Theological Seminary Bishop McDaniel spoke on the transformation of his church and its predecessor bodies over the years. His reflections are a clarion call to all confessional Lutherans:

You are surely aware that the ELCA has been taken over by the very people our parents warned us not to play with when we were little. It is only now that the majority of our members are beginning, slowly and reluctantly, to realize that the persons writing our literature and directing our programs are hijackers, and that this church, once so dear, so wonderful, so shining with grace and glory,

⁸Louis A. Smith, "Can the ELCA Represent Lutheranism? Flirting with Rome, Geneva, Canterbury and Herrnhut," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66 (April 2002): 113.

⁹<http://www.holytrinitynewrochelle.org/barna.html>.

is way off course. As more and more people awaken to this fact, there are increasing distresses and demands that the leaders faithfully lead.

The reopening of fundamental moral questions, especially in areas of sexuality, constitutes a direct attack on Christian morality and invalidates the efforts of Christian people faithfully to keep the Commandments of God. . . . The capitulation of church leadership to the relativism of the late twentieth century has scandalized the church.

To put human sexual gratification above the commandments of God and the clear teaching of Scripture is simply unthinkable; yet, without an ELCA leader to say a clear "no," there is a continuing push for the ordination of homosexuals and the blessings of homosexual liaisons as if they were marriages. Furthermore, as long the ELCA health insurance program covers abortions, a percentage of each Sunday's offering presented before the altar of the Lord is going to finance murder.

Brothers and sisters of Missouri, thank you for your faithfulness to the word. In the January 2001 issue of the *Lutheran Witness*, President Barry wrote, "one of the fantastic blessings God has given to our church body is faithfulness to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions." May that always be true of the LCMS, and may it come true in all this lost and weary world.¹⁰

Rev. Smith spoke to the 2002 symposium on the topic of whether the ELCA can faithfully represent the Lutheran Confession in its present form. He thought it could, but the real question was whether it would. Specifically commenting on whether the ELCA can represent the Lutheran Confession of the biblical faith of the church catholic, Smith admitted "the outlook is bleak." It is not due to a lack of resources, he argues, but a lack of will. "It is not at all clear that the synodical or Churchwide leadership wants to do the job." What is at the root of this lack of will? Smith answers:

We have determined the commonalities and identified the disjunctions. The wrestling match on those points needs to be undertaken. I think that there is a reluctance to enter that match

¹⁰McDaniel, "ELCA Journeys," 105, 107-108.

because after the epoch of "consensus ecumenism," we are afraid that to disagree is to quarrel. But as G. K. Chesterton once said, "we quarrel because we have forgotten how to argue." But we could learn again; to test differences against commonly agreed upon standards and call one another to scratch on that basis.¹¹

But perhaps this is exactly Missouri's problem, both in terms of its entering into dialogue within itself and with others. Are we ready to turn to "commonly agreed upon standards"? If so, what would they be? Scripture and the Confessions? Of course, but what else? What about the catholic texts of the church, most specifically the Lutheran theological tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? What about Walther's *Kirche und Amt*, the Thirteen Theses, the *Brief Statement*, *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*? Is a synodical resolution enough? In 2001 the Synod in convention affirmed *Kirche und Amt* as its doctrinal position — and the next day it compromised that document by extending the 1989 Wichita resolution on lay ministry. This is the unresolved issue that remains before us.

LCMS Meltdown?

A myriad of labels abound to describe one's theological and practical posture in today's Missouri.¹² One hears, for example, of "bronze agers," "hyper-Euro-Lutherans," "confessionalists," "moderates," "liberals," "Taliban," "dissenters" and other such unhelpful designations. They offer nothing substantively to the pressing theological issues that confront us at present. However, they do show the ongoing question of what it means to be a Lutheran.

A century and a half ago, Philip Schaff offered a typology for American Lutheranism. In his *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character* he bluntly stated that it was "no easy matter to describe the character and internal condition of the Lutheran confession." Schaff identified three general streams of Lutheranism in the United States: the New, the Old, and the Moderate. The New Lutherans, noted Schaff,

¹¹Smith, "Can the ELCA Represent Lutheranism?" 119.

¹²Lawrence R. Rast Jr., "Catholicity in Missouri Orthodoxy," *Lutheran Catholicity: The Pieper Lectures, Volume 5*, edited by John A. Maxfield (Saint Louis: Concordia Historical Institute and The Luther Academy, 2001), 58-61. This section is summarized from that document.

comprise "an amalgamation of Lutheranism with American Puritanic and Methodist elements," whose liturgical practice mirrors their doctrinal perspective, for in worship they "incline to the Puritanic system of free prayer . . . neglect of the church festivals, and of all symbolical rites and ceremonies; or they allow at most only a restricted use of liturgies."¹³

At the other end of the spectrum are the Old Lutherans, who, noted Schaff, are "exclusive, and narrow-minded, and unable or unwilling to appreciate properly other churches and nationalities than their own," in large part because of their adherence to the Formula of Concord. Liturgically, the Old Lutherans "have a more or less complete liturgical altar-service, even with the crucifixes and candles burning in day-time."¹⁴ Of course, he speaks primarily of the Missouri Synod at this point.

Finally, there is a mediating group Schaff calls the Moderates. These Moderates strike "a middle course" between the extremes of New and Old Lutheranism. They hold the substance of the Lutheran confession, while allowing sufficient freedom for adaptation to and meaningful engagement of America's unique culture and circumstances. The task of these Lutherans, believed Schaff, is "to mediate" between the extremes of New and Old Lutheranism, as well as between America and Germany, "and thus to facilitate a consolidation of the Lutheran Church in America."

Schaff's three types of Lutherans exist within the LCMS today. New Lutherans argue for a thoroughly accommodated Lutheranism. Old Lutherans—often easily dismissed as exclusivistic and tradition bound—see the Formula of Concord as the legitimate exposition of the Augsburg Confession. Many, perhaps most, reside in the place of Schaff's mediating group, sometimes leaning toward the Old, sometimes toward the New.

Everyone's hope is that we will be able to find the unity that will energize our mission. Repeatedly passing resolutions at synodical conventions has not achieved that unity. Political solutions will not bring about the desired unity, so how we will do this remains unclear. What we need is time-consuming study and careful thought on the issues—but

¹³Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 150, 153, 158.

¹⁴Schaff, *America*, 150, 152, 158.

it must be well informed. We must sit at the feet of our founders. Critical studies of the history of Synod are an absolute necessity. Naturally we interpret the past in the terms of our present, but our interpretations prove in some cases to be absolutely wrong. Facile commonplaces about the "what the Synod has always thought" will not suffice. To be useful, however, such histories will also have to seek as much as possible to present the fullness of Missouri's story. Narrow histories, driven by theological and political agendas, will not answer the pressing need.

What I think we will find, however, as we consider and embrace the perspective of the founders of Missouri is that they were fully committed to faithful and authentic confession of the biblical witness. Faithfully confessing in the public sphere was at the forefront of their purpose. But it was to be done in such a way as to leave no question in the minds of the hearers over the exclusive claims of the Christian faith rightly confessed by the Lutheran Church, namely that salvation is to be found in Jesus Christ and Him alone. What we must understand is that doctrine and mission were inseparably linked in the periods of Missouri's greatest growth. Only when Synod became uncertain about its message did its mission falter.

The fallacy that has found increasing verbalization is that doctrine and mission are two different things, at times juxtaposed against one another. Nothing could have been further from the minds of the founders. The history of Missouri shows that the founding Missourians realized that their doctrinal and practical unity was the basis for their mission. *Because* they believed these things, they spoke of them. This is the basic lesson we need to relearn in the present. Their doctrinal and practical consensus was the engine that powered their remarkable mission efforts.