

"A HOUSE DIVIDED:"

THEOLOGICAL UNREST IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD WHICH LED TO THE
FORMATION OF THE ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCHES

Church History

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Since its beginning in 1847, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has always been vitally concerned with upholding the sound teachings of the Lutheran Confessions. Throughout its long history it has always held that those confessions expound the teachings of the Scriptures. The synod unswervingly confessed belief in an inerrant, verbally inspired Bible. Their Brief Statement of 1932 also upheld the traditional doctrines.

But as the decade of the 1940's approached inroads were beginning to be made in which false doctrine was introduced. In 1944 the position of the Missouri Synod regarding church fellowship changed. At the Saginaw convention of that year the LCMS accepted the following statement: "Joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for his guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of his Word, does not militate against the resolution" (Fellowship Then and Now, p.22). With this resolution the LCMS declared that joint prayer with those with whom they were not in fellowship could be practiced under certain conditions. Their view now became one in which there could be joint prayers which are not prayer fellowship and therefore not church fellowship. Such a view went contrary to their pure doctrinal heritage of the last century in which they firmly held to the correct, Scriptural "unit concept" of church fellowship.

Several other errors of doctrine began to be pronounced. Conferences of seminary students, faculty members, editors of church papers, and the like began to participate in meetings with Lutherans not in doctrinal fellowship with the Synodical Conference. Such meetings were often opened and closed with

joint devotions. Joint church work with those outside of their fellowship also became a reality in such areas as mission activity, prayers at civic functions, and the military chaplaincy.

For nearly two decades the admonitions of the sister synods in the Synodical Conference, the Wisconsin and Evangelical Lutheran Synods, were constant. But they also went unheeded. Missouri continued on its course in espousing false doctrine, and when it was felt that an impasse was reached, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, on the basis of Romans 16:17, broke fellowship with the LCMS in 1955. The Wisconsin Synod took the same course of action in 1961, and both officially withdrew from the Synodical Conference in 1963.

As this bedrock of conservative Lutheranism for nearly a century dissolved, the LCMS toboggan began to rapidly pick up steam in its downward course. The years from 1962-1974 show us that the LCMS literally became a house divided. The focal point of it all was the largest Lutheran seminary in the nation, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This paper will trace the developments of doctrinal turmoil at this school which in the end tore apart a seminary community and a church body. It was through the events of this unrest that a new Lutheran denomination, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, was formed in 1976.

The architects of the confessional Missouri position would have been greatly alarmed had they been able to witness what took place in their synod in the 1960's and early 1970's. The difficulty centered around the interpretation and authority of the Bible, and the use of the historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation. This approach sought to view Scripture

in its historical context, taking into account the different writers' world views and biases. It also approached the Bible "critically," downplaying the supernatural view of inspiration and instead approaching Holy Writ as any other piece of literature. This approach to Scripture was quickly gaining support in Missouri's leading theological circles and thus their historical stance concerning verbal inspiration and inerrancy was now called into question by many.

We pick up the action with a pivotal incident that had profound impact on what would come in future years. In the early months of 1959 esteemed St. Louis professor Dr. Martin Scharlemann was putting the finishing touches on a work that would shatter the peace of the LCMS. The paper was titled, "The Bible as Record, Witness, and Medium." It was read on April 3, 1959 to the Missouri Synod's council on Bible study and then in part on April 7 and 8 to a district pastors' conference in Northern Illinois. This essay was twenty-six pages single-spaced and was the product of more than six years of investigation and reflection. In it Scharlemann sought to introduce a different approach to the Bible than was commonly held in Missouri circles. He held that the word "inerrant," when referring to the Bible could be used in an appropriate way. He suggested that instead of referring to the Bible as "inerrant," "reliable" would be a more appropriate term. He spoke of Scripture as being an "infallible rule of faith and practice," but this is quite different from insisting that every piece of information given in the Bible is factually accurate in our contemporary sense. Rather than being primarily "a source book of information, a collection of divine truths," the Bible, he insisted, is "a record of and witness to God's redemptive acts" (Danker, p.6). Frederick Danker in his book No Room in the

Brotherhood strings together some Scharlemann quotes to summarize his approach well:

Man's ability to think makes it possible for the beneficiary of God's mighty acts to respond 'with his whole person to God's disclosure of Himself,' for wholeness of person includes the rational faculty. When God relates himself to man he also involves man's reason in the process, and thoughtful response to his revelatory act becomes a 'witness to God's redemptive acts.' Since the Bible ~~concentrates~~ concentrates on a meeting 'with God himself as he is revealed in his Son,' the 'capacity for absorbing right information' is secondary to understanding oneself in 'proper personal relationship to God.' 'What the sacred writers record and what they give their witness to is God's faithfulness in keeping his promises. They do so, moreover, from within their own personal limitations in terms of historical, geographical, or scientific information' (Danker, p.6).

The main bone of contention that conservative Missouri had with Scharlemann's proposals was that he was not approaching Scripture with the presupposition of complete inerrancy. He viewed the Bible as having the limitations of the men who wrote it. He did not clearly speak of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, the belief that God the Holy Spirit himself gave those men the very words they were to write. Scharlemann's view was more in line with what historical-critical scholars in prominent divinity schools around the world were espousing.

As word of Scharlemann's essay reached more ears in the synod it expectedly caused some turmoil. The doctrinal tension within the synod surfaced in a prominent way at the 1962 Cleveland synodical convention. Resolution 3-19 called for the removal of Dr. Martin Scharlemann from his office of seminary professor for having "publicly expressed teachings contrary to the clear doctrine of Scripture" and for failure to make a "clear-cut and decisive correction of these errors" (Exodus From Concordia, p.5). At the convention Dr. Scharlemann issued an apology before the assembly. He stated:

I deeply regret and am heartily sorry over the part that

I played in contributing to the present unrest in the synod...I ask of my fellow members in the synod that they forgive these actions of mine which have contributed to the tensions in the church (Exodus From Concordia, p.5).

In response to his apology the convention reaffirmed his teaching ministry by a standing vote of 650-20. The amazing thing was that Scharlemann never actually stated that his essays contained false doctrine, nor did he officially recant anything he had written.

Another essay by a St. Louis professor also caused concern in the synod. It was in regard to the symbolic interpretation given to Genesis 2 and 3 (the fall into sin narrative). In a 1963 essay Dr. Norman Habel defended the position "that it is legitimate to consider this narrative a literary form which may be described as a 'symbolical religious history" (Exodus From Concordia, p. 7). The synod's Council of Presidents, after talks with both the St. Louis and Springfield seminary faculties, expressed serious concerns over the exegetical and hermeneutical principles presented in the Habel essay. Determined that the theological faculties should not use or teach such principles, the presidents resolved: "We request that the president of synod transmit to President Fuerbringer of the St. Louis faculty our reactions, our concensus, and our concerns at this time" (Exodus From Concordia, p.7).

Several pastoral conferences also expressed their concerns about the Habel essay and other theological aberrations at St. Louis, but still no official disciplinary action was taken against St. Louis professors. Even though those who expressed views contrary to synodical doctrine did not recant their teachings, they remained as clergy in good standing on the LCMS roster. The seed of historical criticism was planted and without a united attack against it it would continue to grow and flourish for the next several years.

This was true largely because of the changes in the St. Louis faculty between 1964 and 1969. In the exegetical department the new faculty members increasingly exposed students to the historical-critical method. An example of this can be cited from an essay delivered by Dr. Everett Kalin, one of the new St. Louis professors, on November 13, 1967 at Webster College:

For we are seeing with increasing clarity today that the accounts about Jesus' words and activities as they are contained in the four gospels in the New Testament are in themselves the products of a long development...In the process of their oral use in the community prior to the composition of the gospels, these materials were modified, reinterpreted, and reshaped many times. In other words, a saying of Jesus as it is given in one of the gospels in the New Testament is the product of the church's tradition up to that time (Exodus From Concordia, p.13,14).

Course descriptions in the seminary catalog also showed that many changes were taking place. In 1964, a description of a course on I Peter read as follows:

EN-545. The First Epistle of Peter. This course consists of a study of I Peter on the basis of the original text, with a special view to its doctrinal content; specifically, the church, baptism, the descent into hell, and eschatology.

This same course is described in the 1970 catalog in a much different way. The inroads made by historical criticism are quite evident:

EN-304. I Peter. Detailed literary-philological study of I Peter, with emphasis on the probable sources and its contribution to the Christian community's self-understanding.

The theological crisis in the LCMS deepened immensely between the years 1963-1973. Altar and pulpit fellowship was declared with the more liberal American Lutheran Church in 1969. A conservative, Dr. J.A.O. Preus, was elected to the presidency of the synod. And Dr. John H. Tietjen was elected to the presidency of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The ensuing battle between liberals and conservatives in the LCMS would find its focus in these two men.

President Preus sought to remedy the situation at St. Louis. Many rumors regarding the doctrine taught there had been circulating for years. He wanted to get to the bottom of it all. So on April 20, 1970, he announced to the St. Louis Seminary Board of Control that he had decided to appoint a Fact-Finding Committee. Dr. Tietjen vigorously protested Preus' actions. In the July 14 seminary news release he voiced his displeasure with the impending investigation and criticized those who were critics of the seminary:

I regret that Dr. Preus has chosen to dignify the accusations against our seminary by conducting an investigation...it is not Lutheran to expect uniformity in interpretation of Scripture passages or agreement on the nature and authority of Biblical texts...Many of our critics are quite frankly more fundamentalistic than Lutheran in their approach to the Bible (Exodus From Concordia, p.24).

The Fact-Finding Committee conducted interviews with each professor. The faculty consented but did it "under protest." On July 13, 1971, the committee submitted its report to the synodical president, which included the hundreds of pages of transcripts of the interviews with professors, together with references to their writings. In addition, the committee prepared summaries on each professor's interview as well as a general summary of all interviews. It was found that all but five professors were among the "faculty majority," ie. those who espoused historical-critical methodology in Biblical interpretation. The five who held the traditional Missouri position included such professors as Dr. Ralph Bohlmann and Dr. Robert Preus.

The committee's findings that historical-criticism was running rampant on the St. Louis campus only made the battle more heated. Preus and his followers sought to take action against the "faculty majority." Tietjen and his followers maintained that historical-criticism was essential to operate a department of exegetical theology at a graduate school. As their views became more widely

in the synod, the "faculty majority" at St. Louis found themselves under fire from conservatives in the synod.

So on September 21, 1972, the Council of Presidents involved itself in the growing controversy with the request to the faculty for a concise statement of its position on certain doctrines. The "faculty majority" responded in the form of a document entitled Faithful To Our Calling--Faithful To Our Lord. The material contained in the two-part document consists of a joint faculty majority confession of faith, personal confessions of faith from each professor, and material to aid in the discussion of controversial issues. One glance at the document, however, shows that it did nothing to alleviate the controversy. Tietjen's own statement of faith declared:

Since the Scriptures were written by men in particular historical situations, the Scriptures can be studied and researched like other human writings. Though the ordinary Christian hears God speak through a simple reading of the Bible, those who are called to teach the Bible may use whatever tools of research are available to help ascertain the message of the Scriptures. Historical and critical research can be helpful to the Bible interpreter (Faithful To Our Calling, II, p.7).

The move by the conservatives to purge Missouri of liberal theologians came to a head at the New Orleans synodical convention in 1973. A resolution calling for the resignation of Dr. Tietjen from his position as president of Concordia Seminary appeared in the convention's agenda material. But Dr. Tietjen refused to resign. He maintained that he had been "grievously wronged" by the convention. He stated that his call to serve as president was from God and he would not resign. The "faculty majority" supported him and vigorously protested the New Orleans' resolution.

The students reaction to the difficulties at Concordia could be easily guessed. Their beloved professors had taught them day in and day out in the classroom. Historical-criticism was

their first in their theological studies.

ingrained in their theological approach. So when the hammer fell down on Tietjen 95% of the student body rallied to his side. They decried the "unlutheran" and "unchristian" actions of many in the synod. They joined in the protest.

But it was the actions of January 20, 1974, that really brought an explosion to the community of Concordia Seminary. On this day Dr. Tietjen was suspended from his office as president of Concordia Seminary by the Board of Control. The students immediately declared a moratorium on all classes. They organized a student outreach in which they would travel to LCMS churches around the nation to tell how they had been taught and to seek support for the faculty majority. The faculty majority declared a strike that same week. Dr. Martin Scharlemann was appointed acting president and because of all the difficulties he suspended the class schedule for January 22-25, 1974. But he asked everyone to be back in the classroom on Monday, January 28. On February 14, Dr. Scharlemann wrote to the board: "On that Monday morning some forty students showed up for various classes. The only faculty persons to appear were Dr. Robert Preus and myself" (Exodus From Concordia, p.108).

The moratorium and the student outreach continued. The faculty majority stated that they would return to the classroom if Tietjen would be reinstated as president and if they would be cleared of all charges of false doctrine. The Board of Control met on February 17-18, 1974, and immediately considered whether it would submit to the ultimatum of the faculty majority. It decided that it would not. Plans for a "seminary in exile," or Seminex as it was to be called, were finalized. The faculty and student majorities saw no other alternative but to leave Concordia and found their own seminary in which their theological leanings would find full

acceptance.

On Tuesday evening, February 19, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch bore the grim headline: "Concordia Students Vote To Join Seminary-in-Exile." On that morning the majority of faculty members and students made their exodus from Concordia and marched into a self-imposed exile. Dr. Carl Volz, a member of the faculty majority, gave this description of the walkout:

The students had arranged for each man to take a small wooden cross and write his name on it, and place it in the quad. The procession formed, with the faculty vested in academic garb to emphasize the fact that this was a peaceful and orderly protest, arranged by intellectual and reasonable men--not irresponsible radicals. The line moved up KFUCO lane, and it was long. It was led by a crucifer and banners. As we entered the quad, hundreds of crosses were placed in the turf. We gathered at the Luther statue for the rite of exodus. Prof. Jones read from Jeremiah, Caemmerer from Lamentations...The students boarded up Walther Arch and wrote "Exiled" across the entrance (Exodus From Concordia, p.120).

One interesting bit of trivia regarding the walkout: At 11:50 A.M. students and faculty marched off the Concordia campus into exile. At 12:10 P.M. the "exiled" students and faculty returned to campus to eat lunch at the Seminary cafeteria.

But Concordia Seminary in Exile, or Seminex, did become a reality. Eden Theological Seminary (United Church of Christ) gave classroom and housing space to former Concordia students. And even though reconciliation efforts were made during 1974 and 1975 they were not successful. Concordia Seminary, once the largest Lutheran theological seminary in the nation, had now just dwindled to 193 students. Meanwhile, the former Missouri dissenters pulled several congregations from the synod's districts with them when they left the synod (although not as many as they had hoped) and in 1976 a new Lutheran church body was formed, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

Today Concordia Seminary has grown to a size at least

somewhat comparable to what it was before the 1974 walkout. But the effects of liberal scholarship are still felt there. While it has made a noble turn in the direction of confessional Lutheranism it still has not completely returned to its days of glory as the bedrock of Biblical Lutheranism. On the other side of the coin, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches was an ignitor in the merging of the Lutheran Church in America, American Lutheran Church, and AELC into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988.

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