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Missouri's New Direction - 1962 and 1973

Perhaps no other church body has undergone such change and inner turmoil as the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod has in the last five decades. Surely no other Lutheran body has struggled with doctrinal issues as the Missouri Synod has since 1932.

Prior to that time, Missouri had stood alongside her sister synods in the Synodical Conference as a bulward~~x~~ against the rising tide of unionism. Her early history was characterized by a "willingness to take a definite stand on the Scriptures and to reject all contrary teachings."¹ She held up the Scriptures as the inerrant, infallible Word of God.

But in the last five decades, a change has come over the LC--MS. She has gone in a new direction. Two key events, two conventions of the LC--MS, were pivotal in her new direction. The first was Cleveland in 1962. That convention "marked a distinct turning point" in the 138 year history of the Missouri Synod.² The second was New Orleans in 1973. That convention revealed just how far Missouri had gone, and gave evidence of a desire to return to her traditional position.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and evaluate the movement of the Missouri Synod since 1932. In doing this, it will focus primarily on the LC--MS conventions of 1962 and 1973.

In order to understand the problems and the solutions at

Cleveland in 1962, we must examine the events that preceded it. Prompted by a failure to arrive at doctrinal unity with the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo synods, Missouri in 1932, formulated and accepted as its doctrinal position the "Brief Statement". The purpose of the "Brief Statement" was to "formulate theses which, beginning with the status controversiae, present the doctrines of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions in the shortest and simplest manner."³

Among other things, the "Brief Statement" denied the assertion that there are details of doctrine which are not divisive of church fellowship though they conflict with the teaching of Scripture. It rejected the opinion that unionism does not take place unless those who worship with persistent errorists explicitly deny the truth or approve of error.⁴

• Not long after the appearance of the "Brief Statement", the LC--MS accepted an invitation from the ALC to discuss fellowship. Since the ALC could not accept all the doctrines of the "Brief Statement", they presented their own document, the "Declaration" and agreed to accept the "Brief Statement" in the light of the "Declaration". Despite the fact that this was obviously a compromise, the Missouri Synod, in its 1938 convention, resolved:

that the "Brief Statement" of the Missouri Synod, together with the "Declaration" of the representatives of the American Lutheran Church...be regarded as the doctrinal basis for future church--fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the ALC.⁵

Concerning this decision, D. F. Bitter, writing in the WLQ,

commented: "Even though for various reasons this union was not consummated, we cannot but feel that here the ecumenical camel got his nose in the tent."⁶

While efforts to find common ground for fellowship with the ALC continued, Missouri took another step in a new direction in 1944. In its convention of that year it resolved:

...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 of the Fort Wayne Convention (forbidding pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship with the ALC), provided that such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error...⁷

That a change was in fact taking place in the Missouri Synod became even more evident in the following year when 44 pastors and professors of the LC--MS signed the "Chicago Statement". It stated:

We affirm our conviction...that fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church...We...deplore the fact that Romans 16: 17,18, has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine. It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, that this text does not apply to the present situation in the LCA.⁸

Another step was taken towards fellowship between the ALC and Missouri in 1950, when both churches adopted the "Common Confession".⁹ It spoke clearly on those doctrines which were agreed upon by the Missouri Synod and the ALC, but it either ignored those doctrines which were disputed, or dealt with them in such an ambiguous terms that both sides could it.¹⁰

By deliberately omitting the articles on which they were not agree

By deliberately omitting the articles on which they were not agreed, the Missouri Synod was, in effect, seeking union with the ALC without agreement on all doctrines.

In 1951, another step was taken towards Cleveland when Missouri came to an agreement not only with the ALC, but with all the churches of the National Lutheran Council. According to this agreement, the members of the Missouri Synod and the members of the churches of the NLC, in the military service, were to be received for communion at each others altars, regardless of their synodical membership.¹¹ They wanted to be sure that no one who desired to partake of Holy Communion would be denied it because of his synodical membership.

In light of these events, someone might argue that the Cleveland Convention was not a turning point at all. The Missouri Synod had changed long before 1962. But Cleveland was a turning point in the sense that prior to '62 many within and without Missouri denied that she had really changed. Many contended that Missouri's move to the left was the result of a vocal minority and did not represent the majority of the Synod. After '62, no one could deny that Missouri had indeed turned a corner, and that the majority of the clergy supported this move.

That the '62 convention was a turning point is evidenced by the amount of ink it received in church periodicals. The Lutheran Witness wrote: "the 1962 convention of Synod marded

a distinct turning point in its 115-year history."¹² The American Standard called it a "Hallelujah Convention" and said it "quite obviously brought to a close a specific era in the history of the LC--MS."¹³ In July of '62 the Lutheran Standard reported that "Cleveland became the symbol of hope for those who long for an even greater degree of Lutheran unity in the future."¹⁴ And in an editorial in the August, '62, issue of the Lutheran Standard, Martin Marty wrote: "In the Cleveland Convention the LC--MS proved to itself that it is and can be both confessional and ecumenical...Missouri is changing and knows it."¹⁵

The Cleveland Convention was a turning point in Missouri's attitude towards doctrinal statements. One of the key issues facing the convention was a resolution passed by the previous convention in 1959, known as "Resolution 9". Resolution 9 stated that "pastors , teachers and professors are held to teach and act in harmony" with synodically adopted doctrinal statements.¹⁶ It was aimed at enforcing the "Brief Statement" and keeping members of the synod in agreement regarding the inerrancy of the Bible and matters of fellowship. This convention, however, declared Resolution 9 unconstitutional, and changed it from "are held to teach and act" to "that the Synod beseech all its members to" uphold synodically adopted statements.¹⁷ The reason for the change was expressed by Martin Marty:

Some of the documents in question would have proved to be insurmountable barriers to future inter-Lutheran theological unity... 18

Faced with the choice of holding to their confession in the Brief Statement or union with the members of the NLC, Missouri chose to pursue union with the other Lutheran bodies.

The '62 Convention was also a turning point in Missouri's official position towards other churches. When informed that its officials had been conducting meetings with other Lutheran church bodies and with the Reformed, and that these meetings were opened with joint prayer, the delegates resolved that "the Synod commend its President and the Committee on Doctrinal Unity for their action."¹⁹ They also voted to meet with representatives of other Lutheran bodies to pursue a Lutheran interchurch association.²⁰ Although these resolutions elicited a considerable amount of debate, when the final vote was called for, the convention voted overwhelmingly in favor of these resolutions.²¹ Definitely a turning point.

Cleveland was also a turning point in the sense that the conservatives were not put down by a minority liberal party, but by the mainstream of pastors and laymen. Referring to the conservatives, an editorial in the Lutheran Witness wrote:

Emphatically and in many ways the Cleveland convention repudiated the legalistic tactics of a tiny segment which had troubled Synod relentlessly for decades and the devious devices of splinter groups which had spawned irritation and festering discontent during the past triennium.²²

And Martin Marty evaluated the convention:

The Synod decisively repudiated its radical right wing... In the end, the votes usually ran about 650 - 20 against the vocal core. This repudiation is important to non-Missourians because the radical right opposed all forms of gesture toward other Lutherans.²³

Following the '62 convention, no one could deny that Missouri had moved in a new direction.

Several events occurred after Cleveland which confirmed Missouri's move to the left. In 1963, the Synod approved a "unified contact pastor program". Up to this time military posts had been served by two Lutheran chaplains--one from the NLC and the other from the Missouri Synod. Under this program, there was one Lutheran chaplain at a particular post who served both members of Missouri and the members of synods belonging to the NLC.²⁴ This agreement officially established pulpit and altar fellowship between the LCA, the ALC and the LC--MS at military posts.

In its convention of 1967, the Missouri Synod adopted the following:

Resolved, that the Synod recognize that the Scriptural and Confessional basis for altar and pulpit fellowship between the LC--MS and the ALC exists, and that the Synod proceed to take the necessary steps toward the full realization of altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC, and that the Synod invite the SELC to join with us in the same.

and

Resolved, that the President of the Synod, in conjunction with the Council of Presidents, make the appropriate recommendations to the 1969 convention.²⁵

It was 1969, then, that the LC--MS took the last step and declared fellowship with the ALC:

Resolved, that the Synod express gratitude to God for creating this unity among us, and we beseech Him to increase our awareness of this great gift; and be it further

Resolved, that with joy and praise to God the Synod herewith formerly declare itself to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC....²⁶

The 1962 convention demonstrated the since 1932, the Missouri Synod had moved in a new direction. In examining the many causes for the shift, two stand out. The first is the pressure that the ecumenical movement brought to bear on Missouri. Because she was larger than the WELS, there was more pressure on her from the other Lutheran bodies. As time went on, this pressure, from within and without, proved too much to bear. Pulled along by liberal leaders, she allowed herself to ignore clear statements of Scripture, statements which had previously been the norm of her teachings, and to get caught in the rising tide of ecumenism. She was swept into a movement which ignored the distinction between the visible and invisible church--a movement where the oneness of the Christian Church is "no longer a reality, an article of faith, but an ideal which must be realized by patient negotiation, ecclesiastical diplomacy, and compromise."²⁷

Another major factor which contributed to Missouri's shift was her failure to nip the problem in the bud when it first appeared. Long after the situation became obvious, Missouri officials were still denying a problem existed. John W. Behnken, Missouri President from to 1962, admitted that the situation had not been handled as it should have been. In 1960, at a conference in Thiensville, which tried to prevent the break-up of the Synodical Conference, he said that Synodical Conference principles had been violated in Missouri and that some of these men were not disciplined as firmly as they should

have been. He continued:

Our meetings...and this conclave have convinced me all the more that it is necessary to emphasize and put into practice firmer discipline...We realize that the independent action on the part of a few--who by some are called intellectuals--had caused misgivings in the minds and in the hearts of our brethren within the Synodical Conference.²⁸

If the convention of 1962 is considered a turning point in the history of the LC--MS, then the convention of 1973, in New Orleans must be considered another turning point. As it had in 1962, Missouri again shook up the entire Lutheran church by its actions in that year.

The events that came to a climax in 1973 really began in 1969. Despite the fact that the delegates at the 1969 convention voted fellowship with the ALC, many of the "old-line Missourians" were disturbed by the events of '38 to '67. They mounted a campaign to replace Oliver Harms, the president who had encouraged Missouri's move to the left, with a conservative president who would return Missouri to "her traditional moorings."²⁹ Thus in Denver, in 1969, the delegates elected Jacob A. O. Preus Jr. as their new president.

Jacob Preus, who had come out of the ELS,³⁰ was a champion of the doctrine which had characterized Missouri prior to 1932. Almost immediately his administration began an attempt to eliminate liberalism among synodical leaders and the faculty at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.³¹ Prominent officials were removed and an investigation was begun at St. Louis to determine the faculty's position on the Scriptures, in an attempt

to clean up the Synod.

In an interview with the New York Times, Jacob Preus' brother Robert, a member of the faculty at St. Louis, stated that no other major denomination "had managed to pull off what he and his brother were seeking".³² What they were seeking was to move the LC--MS in a new direction--to the right.

This effort by the Preus administration split the Synod into two factions--the conservative party led by Jacob Preus, and the liberal party led by John Tietjen, president of Concordia Seminary. Even before 1973, both Preus and Tietjen had remarked that the other must go.³³ The Preus party accused the other side of faulty approaches to Scripture and of denying the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible.³⁴ The Tietjen party, who did not deny these charges, accused the conservative party of "missing the whole point of the Gospel." They insisted that the doctrine of inerrancy and infallibility are man-made philosophys and a burden to the church. They espoused the historical-critical method as the way to discern the message of the Bible.³⁵

And so the sides were drawn for what came to be known as the "Second Battle of New Orleans". When the convantion met at the Rivergate Convention Center in New Orleans in 1973, the church was badly split. Not in the twentieth century, wrote Martin Marty, "has a large church been so savagely torn."³⁶

The first contest between the two sides was the elections.

The liberals hoped to unseat Preus, while the conservatives considered a Preus victory to be a mandate for his policies.³⁷ When the ballots were counted, Preus was reelected on the first ballot, 606 - 451.³⁸ The vote indicated what would happen with the other crucial decisions.

The second contest was Resolution 2-12, entitled: "To Understand Article II of the Synod's Constitution as Requiring the Formulation and Adoption of Synodical Doctrinal Statements". It sought to reverse the action of the '62 convention regarding doctrinal statements. It read: "...the Constitution permits, and at times requires, the formulation and adoption of doctrinal statements as definitive of the Synod's position relative to controversial issues."³⁹ After three hours of debate it was finally adopted, clearing the way for the next resolution.⁴⁰

This next important resolution was 3-01, "To Adopt 'A Statement'". The resolution recommended the adoption of "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" by Robert Preus. If adopted, it would hold the synod's pastors and teachers to teach according to the conservative's parties views on Scripture and on fellowship. After three and one-half hours of debate, the resolution was passed, 522 - 455. The liberals registered their negative votes as they paraded past the secretary's desk, singing: "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."⁴¹

The resolution that sparked the greatest debate was 3-09,

"To Declare Faculty Majority Position in Violation of Article II of the Constitution". The resolution read:

Resolved, that the Synod repudiate that attitude toward Holy Scripture, particularly as regards its authority and clarity, which reduces to theological opinion or exegetical questions matters which are in fact clearly taught in Scripture...and be it finally

Resolved, that the Synod recognize that the matters referred to (above) are in fact false doctrine running counter to the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the synodical stance, and for that reason cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.⁴²

The resolution was approved 574 - 451. This time the liberals registered their negative votes as they silently marched past the desk of the secretary.⁴³

On the following day a resolution was passed which turned the matter of dealing with Tietjen over to the the Seminary Board of Control. After the vote, Tietjen addressed the convention, claiming he had been "greviously wronged" and declaring that he would not resign. His supporters then gave him a standing ovation, distributed black arm-bands, and held a wordhip service in the lobby of the Rivergate Convention Center.

Thus the 1973 Convention at New Orleans demonstated that once again Missouri had changed. She gave evidence that she valued confessionalism more than a false unity, and that she would not tolerate error in her midst.

Following the convention, a number of events occured which revealed just how deep the split in Missouri was. In july of 1973, a majority of the professors at Concordia made known their support of Tietjen and declared that they would not con-

form to the conservative policies approved at New Orleans.⁴⁴

In August, the Board of Control of the Seminary met and decided to suspend Tietjen, but then delayed implementation of the suspension until certain constitutional measures were cleared up.⁴⁵ As a result, Concordia Seminary began classes in September, 1973, with Tietjen still in office as president and the faculty teaching their usual classes.

But on Sunday evening, January 20, 1974, The Board met again and voted once more to suspend Tietjen and to implement it immediately. Ten charges were made against him, with the first being that of "holding and defending, allowing and fostering false doctrine contrary to Article II of the constitution of the LC--MS."⁴⁶

After Tietjen's suspension, events occurred in rapid succession. On Monday morning, at 8 o'clock, the students met and declared a moratorium on classes until the Board cleared up the matter with the faculty. Acting President Schlareman was forced to cancel classes for the week. When the Seminary reopened on the following Monday, there were only a few students and professors in attendance.⁴⁷

On February 17th, the Board of Control delivered an ultimatum to the faculty majority, telling them to either resume their responsibilities or to vacate their offices and homes. The next morning the faculty majority met and agreed to terminate their service at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.⁴⁸

On the following day, February 19th, some of the students planted white wooden crosses in the seminary quadrangle, giving it the appearance of a graveyard. They boarded up the arched entrance to the quadrangle with plywood, painted it black, and wrote the letters EXILED across it in white. Finally, they draped the Luther statue in black.⁴⁹

That same day, 382 of the 450 on campus⁵⁰ held a meeting and declared that they "find it impossible in good conscience to continue their education" at the Seminary. They then marched out to the Luther statue, read selections from Hebrews and Lamentations, and then proceeded to march off campus. They marched to new facilities and set up Seminex--Concordia Seminary in Exile.⁵¹

So far, one would have to admire the courage of the Preus administration and the faculty minority. They had succeeded in getting "the Statement" passed in convention. Despite strong resistance, they stuck to their guns in carrying out the decisions of that convention. Unfortunately, they gave in to compromise when it came time to place the vicars and the graduates from Seminex.

The Council of Presidents decided in March of '74 to place the vicar candidates from Seminex on the basis of their five quarters at St. Louis. The 124 second year Seminex students, however, rejected this arrangement and insisted that they would only accept their recommendations by Semines and not

by St. Louis, as qualifying them for assignment.

In May, the Council of Presidents came to what they thought was a solution regarding the graduates of Seminex. They worked out a deal with the faculty of St. Louis, whereby, following an interview with the students, the St. Louis faculty would endorse them for eligibility for assignment. The Seminex graduates were then to receive their diploma and academic degree from Concordia, St. Louis. The Council of Presidents, anticipating that they would be endorsed in this way, assigned 109 of the Seminex graduates. ⁵²

The graduates, however, refused to participate in the interviews. Without a dissenting vote, they adopted a resolution, stating: "at this time we cannot in good conscience return to 801 De Mun or participate in a program of interviews which allows Concordia Seminary, 801 De Mun, to serve as a final judge of our qualifications for the ministry." ⁵³

President Preus attempted to block efforts of the Seminex graduates by sending a letter to the 38 district presidents and to the congregations which had been assigned a Seminex graduate or had a vacancy, urging them not to ordain or install Seminex graduates without endorsement from St. Louis. He writes:

I am confident that your sense of churchmanship and earnest desire to walk together will urge you to dissuade any congregation approached by a Seminex graduate who has not been certified by the Concordia Seminary faculty at St. Louis... ⁵⁴

Despite Preus' efforts, many of the Seminex graduates were placed. Some contacted the congregations directly, expressing their desire to serve. Others were ordained and installed by district presidents who were sympathetic to their cause.

In looking back at the '73 convention and the events that followed, it is evident that Missouri again moved in a new direction--this time to the right. In 1973, she retraced her steps and made significant changes. Resolutions 2-12 and 3-01 demonstrated the high esteem in which Missouri held the Word of God. Resolution 3-09 and the events leading up to Seminex indicated that Missouri does not wish to tolerate error in her midst. Missouri expressed a desire to return to her position of 1932.

And yet Missouri still has a long way to go. Despite the defection of the AELC, there still is a large liberal element in the LC--MS. It still contains men like Martin Marty, men who sympathize with the ecumenical movement and still hope Missouri will be drawn into it, men who question the inerrancy of the Bible. In 1961, Marty publicly urged "the prophets to work from within their denominations, for constructive subversion, encirclement, and infiltration, until antiecumenical forces bow to the evangelical weight of reunion."

In studying the two conventions, one thing has become clear--the struggle in Missouri is far from over. It still contains two parties vieing for control--the party that exerted its

will in '62, and the party that had its day in New Orleans in '73. Which party, if either, will win out, remains to be seen. Even if the conservatives win out, will they return Missouri all the way to her position prior to 1932?

Although we cannot foresee in what direction Missouri will move next, there is much that we can learn from Missouri's troubles. In order that we don't become smug in our attitude toward Missouri, it is good for us to remember that we stand today where Missouri stood in 1932. The same ecumenical pressures that moved her in a new direction is still present today, exerting itself on the church. We need to make a special effort not to give in to such pressure.

On the other hand, we must not be isolationists--unconcerned about those outside of the WELS. In an editorial in the Lutheran Standard in 1962, Martin Franzman writes:

By severe confessional restriction and by rigorous disciplinary exclusion men conscientiously seek to create a pure church. The danger and the temptation is that they create a caricature of a pure church--a church so "pure" that it no longer feels the need of repentance, a church no longer capable of praying for all sorts and conditions of men...a church which can exercise no ministry to the weak and erring outside its own organizational limits... because it avoids all confrontation with those outside its organizational fellowship. 65

Although we cannot agree with everything Franzman writes, there is a warning to be taken.

As a synod we will want to demonstrate our love and our concern for all men, and yet we must remember that love does not mean overlooking doctrinal differences or ignoring clear statements of Scripture. God grant it.

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