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## **Church Discipline in Early Missouri and Lutheran Identity**

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**LCA Editor's Note:** *This article is relevant to the July 2019 Convention in Tampa, FL, since it addresses conflicts that continue to plague the LCMS:*

1. Church unity.
2. Ecclesiastical supervision.
3. Evangelical church discipline on pastors and teachers.
4. Toleration of false doctrine in the LCMS.
5. New Measures (Church Growth Movement).
6. Unionism.
7. The exclusive use of doctrinally pure Agenda and Hymnbooks.
8. Our Lutheran identity.

Much discussion among Lutherans today is devoted to the subject of identity. In light of recent ecumenical decisions made by Lutherans in America, and the relatively recent adoption of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed by Rome and the Lutheran World Federation as well as many other Lutheran church bodies around the world, it is only natural that the question should arise: What does it mean to be a Lutheran? What has it meant historically to confessional Lutherans when they have said, "I am a Lutheran."? At what point did they feel constrained to say to others, "You are not Lutheran."? In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod such questions at times are connected with the issue of church discipline, particularly as it pertains to doctrine and the treatment of heresy. What is the place of church discipline in connection with a church body's understanding of its Lutheran identity? Why and at what point should people or congregations be removed or excluded from fellowship with us because they are not Lutheran? Or is church discipline an obsolete practice that has no place among us in today's enlightened ecumenical context?

As we consider what our current practice and attitude should be, it is always helpful to look at how we have done things in the past. Of particular value in considering the matter of church discipline is a careful look at the attitude and practice of the early Missouri Synod fathers. How was church discipline exercised among them? What did they

view as legitimate and godly dissent among brothers in the same Lutheran synod? At what point did dissent become heresy and require discipline? When did they in effect say, "This is enough. You have crossed the line. We can no longer be in fellowship with each other. Your practice and/or your doctrine is not Lutheran."?

It is not the intention of this study to present a chronological description of how church discipline has been dealt with from the time of the synod's inception until now. That would be a far more exhaustive task than we have room for within these pages. This study will focus on a relatively short time span. On the other hand, as it was the most formative period for the Missouri Synod, it is possible that as we define what were the parameters or boundaries of these leaders of early Missouri in establishing what it means to be Lutheran, we will then be in a position to make application to our church today. Emphasis will be placed on church discipline of pastors and teachers, particularly in the first forty years.

At first, the discipline of pastors and teachers was exercised by the synodical convention. Not too long after the founding of the synod, the initial steps in disciplining a pastor were undertaken by the district of which he was a member. Final disposition of the cases took place at the synodical convention. Already by the 1870s, however, in view of the limited time available at the synodical and district conventions, investigations were handled mostly by committees. The final ruling, however, continued to be made by the synodical convention. A brief summary of some early cases illustrates the way the synod dealt with such matters.

1. The Synodical Proceedings of 1848 refer to a Pastor Romanowski who was investigated following a charge of a willful neglect of duties. He resigned before the investigation was completed.<sup>1</sup>
2. In 1849 a Pastor Schneider, who for some time had been insisting on using only the old Lutheran ceremonies, joined the Roman Catholic Church. No action was taken at the synodical convention since he was considered to have excluded himself.<sup>2</sup>
3. The Western District Convention Proceedings of 1858 describe the events surrounding a Pastor Gruber, who was at odds with the synodical position on chiliasm or millennialism. He had presented certain theses for discussion at the St. Louis Pastoral Conference. The conference called his views dangerous and unscriptural. When it became apparent that the synod would not entertain his position, Gruber voluntarily excluded himself from

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the synod. A resolution passed by the Western District regarding Pastor Gruber reports:

Since Herr Pastor Gruber in a statement to the Synod in part explained his departure from the Synod and in part attempted to defend his chiliasm, the Synod decided to strike his name from the list, but not to deal any further with his chiliastic errors which have been sufficiently refuted elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

4. In 1860 Pastor N. Volkert resigned voluntarily after accusations of sins of indecency and was considered thereby excluded.<sup>4</sup>
5. In 1863 Teacher Kolb was relieved of duty for reasons unknown. He left the congregation and was seen thereby to have excluded himself.<sup>5</sup>
6. Pastor J. C. Schneider was convicted in civil court in 1867 of impregnating a schoolgirl. He “voluntarily resigned” from the Ministerium and was thus excluded.<sup>6</sup>

One discovers a rather surprising and interesting pattern. In all of the cases mentioned above, the synod does not appear to have removed anybody except as a sort of formal closure to the matter after he himself had resigned from the synod. What does this mean? The question is difficult to answer since in most cases very few details are included in the district or synodical proceedings describing the cases. There are other cases that describe removal of a teacher or pastor after he has “voluntarily resigned.” Not many details are made available to us concerning these cases. Apparently, the leaders of the early Missouri Synod had no desire to overly embarrass those who were accused of sin or wrongdoing. For the sake of the sinner and to encourage repentance and possible return to the church, details were kept to a minimum so that should repentance occur, restoration could take place without undue embarrassment on the part of the penitent.

***Early Missouri tolerated neither immorality nor false doctrine on the part of its pastors and teachers, and doctrinal purity was an extremely high priority.***

What is clear from all of these cases is that people were not really removed as much as they simply resigned. Is this evidence of an age in which sinners more readily recognized their wrongs, repented and did the right thing? Assuredly not. Rather, it is almost certain that in many of these cases, the one guilty of immorality or of false teaching simply “had things made clear to him.” The case of Stephan who was charged both with immorality and false doctrine was surely still vivid enough in the minds of the people that they understood how immorality and false doctrine were viewed and dealt with. In other words, those at odds with the synod understood they had a choice: resign voluntarily or be removed against your will. In either case the result would be the same. Early Missouri tolerated neither immorality nor false doctrine on the part of its pastors and teachers, and doctrinal purity was an extremely high priority.

Even a casual look at the synod’s first constitution makes this fact abundantly clear. As one of the reasons for forming a synod, the constitution states: “The preservation and furthering of the unity of pure confession (Eph 4:3–6; 1 Cor 1:10) and to provide common defense against separatism and sectarianism (Rom 16:17).”<sup>7</sup>

As a condition of congregational membership in the synod, the constitution naturally required “Acceptance of Holy Scripture . . . as the written word of God” and of the Lutheran Confessions “as the pure and unadulterated explanation and presentation of the Word of God.”<sup>8</sup> It also stipulated the following: “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.”<sup>9</sup> The synod also required of congregations,

The exclusive use of doctrinally pure church books (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.<sup>10</sup>

In the section dealing with the execution of synodical business, the constitution states:

If it should happen that the president reports a pastor who after having been reprimanded several times by the President, by the particular congregation, and by the ministerium, yet continues in wrong doctrine or in an offensive life, then Synod in its entirety shall make the last attempt to turn him from the error of his ways. If, having been thus reprimanded, he does not listen to Synod, he shall be expelled.<sup>11</sup>

The same section of the constitution gives the following description of the synod’s duties:

It is the duty of Synod to discuss and investigate in its annual convention which articles of church doctrine to emphasize or further especially, also against which heresies and weaknesses in life testimony is to be given and the manner in which this is to be done. In accordance with this, Synod is to pass judgment on the work of the editor of the synodical paper and to give him instructions

**The Lutheran Clarion—2019 Convention Issues**

We are in our 11th year of the *Clarion* as we strive to present and uphold the truth of God’s Holy Word. We hope to help delegates to the 2019 LCMS Convention in Tampa, FL, by providing them with information on the myriad of issues they will face as they vote. We could use your help.



If you can help with our costs, there’s an enclosed envelope so you can mail your check to Lutheran Concerns Association, 149 Glenview Drive, New Kensington, PA 15068-4921. Do it now. **Thank you!!**

for his future activity.<sup>12</sup>

It would be difficult in a journal article to thoroughly examine the attention to and insistence upon doctrinal purity found in the first constitution. But one more detailed example demonstrates clearly the desire for pure doctrine and it is particularly relevant to issues before the Missouri Synod today. In describing the business of the synod, the constitution states:

Synod holds in accordance with the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession that uniformity in ceremonies is not essential; yet on the other hand Synod deems such a uniformity wholesome and useful, namely for the following reasons:

- a. because a total difference in outward ceremonies would cause those who are weak in the unity of doctrine to stumble;
- b. because in dropping heretofore preserved usages the church is to avoid the appearance of and desire for innovation;

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. 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.

The desired uniformity in the ceremonies is to be brought about especially by the adoption of sound Lutheran agendas (church books).

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.<sup>13</sup>

It is noteworthy that the synod is not reluctant to identify the so-called “New Measures” as illustrative of unorthodox, unlutheran worship. In fact, they stick it in the constitution! As we consider our current context, it could be very profitable to compare the “New Measures” of their day to the practice and doctrine of what we today call the “Church Growth Movement.”

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### **Early Missouri not only dealt with false doctrine in its midst, but felt compelled to speak out about false doctrine outside its fellowship.**

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But the main point is that there was a strong consensus among the founders of the synod that the proclamation of pure doctrine was essential to the health and the life of the church. Nor were they embarrassed to say that there was such a thing as pure doctrine, which could be known and

therefore be proclaimed boldly. They were firmly convinced that the church lived, was nourished, and grew from the preaching and teaching of the pure Word of God. And they were not reluctant to say that they had this pure Word. In 1873 in fact, C.F.W. Walther delivered an essay at the Western District Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod entitled, *The Doctrine of the Lutheran Church Alone Gives All Glory to God, An Irrefutable Proof that Its Doctrine Alone Is True*.<sup>14</sup> His presentation then provided a number of theses supporting the theme of the essay. For the next thirteen conventions of the Western District, Walther continued his treatment of precisely the same theme until just a few months before his death. Of course, Walther was not saying that there was no truth in other Christian churches, nor was he saying, God forbid, that only Lutherans could possess truth and be saved. But he was saying that the teachings of the Lutheran Church are true, and that wherever the teachings of other church bodies conflict with those of the Lutheran Church, their teachings are false and that such false teachings damage and destroy the church and cannot be permitted within an orthodox Lutheran church body.

Today it is common to refer to oneself as a “Lutheran Christian” or a “Methodist Christian.” Accompanying such terms is the frequent assumption or statement that the different church bodies represent different faith traditions, all equally valid. In contrast to such a view, in 1866 Walther presented an essay to the Convention of the Missouri Synod entitled *The Evangelical Lutheran Church, the True Visible Church of God upon Earth*. In this presentation Walther certainly did not wish to teach that all Christians are members of the Lutheran Church or that every member of the Lutheran Church is a Christian. Such nonsense would never have occurred to him. But he did mean to teach that the church has marks by which it can be known and identified as the true church of Christ; these marks are the pure teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments rightly administered. The Evangelical Lutheran Church possesses these marks. Other churches do not, or they possess them only partially or impurely. Where this is the case, such infidelity must be pointed out and dealt with. Walther clearly meant to teach, in common with Luther and in opposition to Erasmus,<sup>15</sup> that God’s Word is clear, that it is not ambiguous, that doctrinal assertions can be made with the confidence that they are correct, that truth can be known and one can know that one has it. When it comes to doctrine, the line between truth and error is not vague or gray. Therefore, when we make a confession of the faith in our creeds and symbols, we do so not with some nebulous hope that what we say may contain a kernel of truth. Rather we confess in the same spirit as the signers of the *Formula of Concord* who wrote concerning the confession they had made, “[This] is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God’s grace we shall appear before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, early Missouri not only dealt with false doctrine in its midst, but felt compelled to speak out about false doctrine outside its fellowship—not out of a sense of pharisaical pride, but for the sake of the flock, which needed to be

warned against the wolves intent upon destruction. It is for this reason that Wilhelm Sihler so castigated the liberal General Synod in 1855:

The Eastern District of our Synod . . . will no doubt have to content itself with setting up the banner of uncompromised Lutheran confessionalism and of pure doctrine in the midst of the apostate, false brethren of the Reformed-methodistic, so called Lutheran General Synod. And neither, on account of the size and prestige of the General Synod, (will it) fail to testify as vigorously and as emphatically as necessary to any article of doctrine suppressed and falsified by this synod and to warn every Lutheran against this harmful leaven.<sup>17</sup>

These words sound harsh in today's ecumenical ears, but perhaps not as harsh as they did a few years ago before the ELCA established what amounts to full altar and pulpit fellowship with the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church, before the ELCA stated its intentions of exploring full fellowship with the United Methodist Church and before the ELCA committed itself to the *Joint Declaration on Justification*. What orthodox Lutheran can deny that a little more of the spirit of Sihler would be useful in the church today?

The Missouri Synod was not alone in warning its people against doctrinal laxity and error, nor was it the only Lutheran church body to know what it meant to be truly Lutheran. In 1867, Herman Amberg Preus, [the writer's great-great-grandfather] delivered a series of seven lectures in Kristiania (now Oslo), Norway, later printed in Gisle Johnson's *Luthersk Kirketidende*, to describe the conditions of the Norwegian Lutheran immigrants in America. At the time Herman Amberg Preus was the pastor of a Norwegian Lutheran church in Spring Prairie, Wisconsin, and the president of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (*Den norsk-evangelisk-lutherske Kirke i Amerika*) commonly known simply as the Norwegian Synod. In his lectures he attempted to show the living conditions of Norwegian immigrants, the religious context of America in which the Norwegian Lutheran churches had been planted, the confessional fidelity or the lack of it evident among the members of other Lutheran Scandinavian church bodies with which the Norwegians felt some kinship, and whatever else he thought might encourage the Lutherans in Norway to send desperately needed Lutheran pastors to America.

In spite of the fact that many in the Church of Norway considered the Norwegian Lutherans in America somewhat narrow-minded and argumentative, Preus did not hesitate to describe the doctrinal problems and controversies relevant to the American situation. In his sixth lecture Preus described the lack of doctrinal unity in the Augustana Synod:

Our conferences with them have shown us that they are not united in even basic doctrines, but that their apparent unity is based in part on pure ignorance and in part on indifference which allows them to keep silent while their brethren in the synod preach quite contradictory, false doctrine.<sup>18</sup>

In this same lecture Preus spoke of the careless and un-lutheran practice common in the Augustana Synod. For example, the Augustana Synod,

has allowed its pastors to use the Reformed formula for the Lord's Supper and the conditional form of absolution . . . It has allowed Methodist pastors to be teachers in its Sunday schools and a Congregationalist pastor to preach at the dedication of one of its churches. It has allowed prayer meetings and 'revivals' to be conducted Methodist-fashion in its congregations.<sup>19</sup>

After numerous other references to the unorthodox practices rampant in the Augustana Synod, Preus pointed to what he considered one of the most serious problems of all.

The synod and its pastoral conferences have not only refused forceful invitations on our part to meet jointly with us, but they have even declined to discuss disputed doctrinal points with those among their own pastors who are troubled in conscience and have therefore requested that they do so.

In my opinion all this sufficiently demonstrates the indifference reigning in this synod, how it is all for extending itself and winning respect, how it therefore seeks to avoid strife and controversy and prefers to allow errors and abuses and departures from both the doctrine of the church and good Lutheran ecclesiastical order. There has entered in here a genuinely American speculative spirit, a spirit that does not ask whether something is right, but whether it is clever or "expedient." Thus, in this synod, the Lutheran confession is in reality a display sign to decoy the naïve, since both its doctrine and its practice manifestly controvert this confession and God's Word.

That this spirit of indifference also holds sway in congregational life speaks for itself. It naturally happens that there is a reciprocal effect between congregations and the synod.<sup>20</sup>

Herman Amberg Preus, along with Ulrik Koren and others in the Norwegian Synod, was struggling to establish an immigrant church in America that would be truly Lutheran. The practices criticized by Preus above were not tolerated in the early Norwegian Synod. So it is clear that the Missouri fathers were not alone in their approach to doctrine and practice.

The early Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod carried out church discipline conscientiously in accord with principles laid out in scripture. Because their commitment to scripture was strong and their doctrinal position clear, those placed under church discipline frequently resigned "voluntarily" when guilty of immorality or when their doctrinal position was contrary to that of Missouri. There was little question as to what would happen if they did not resign.

One should not conclude, however, that the way early Missouri dealt with doctrinal issues was unevangelical or heartless. They were committed to retaining their pure doctrine, but they were also reasonable and patient in their approach. A few examples demonstrate this point.

The case of Pastor E. M. Bürger demonstrates clearly that there was a willingness to be patient and work through issues in a Christian manner. Bürger was among

those who immigrated to the United States and settled in Perry County in 1839. In the aftermath of the doctrinal confusion following Stephan's deposal, Bürger had come to the conclusion that the immigration had been wrong, and that the validity of his own call and ministry were in question. In this state of mind he decided to return to Germany. On his way, while he was still in America, a group of Buffalo, New York Lutherans, who had been excommunicated by Grabau, issued him a call. Bürger concluded that they had been unjustly excommunicated and accepted the call to be their pastor. He then petitioned the Missouri Synod to recognize and affirm the call. However, several members of his previous congregation in Perry County had accused him of false doctrine and of unjustly excommunicating them. Bürger admitted that he had not spoken and acted with enough Christian wisdom and that he may have given the impression that he was the highest court in the church, though publicly he had stated his conviction to the contrary. His accusers, on the other hand, admitted that they had acted contrary to the law of love and dropped their charges against him. The synod concluded in the very first synodical convention in 1847 that Bürger had not been guilty of false doctrine or willful sin or unfaithfulness in his office. They urged him to accept the call he had received from the people in Buffalo and resolved to accept him into voting membership in the synod.<sup>21</sup> All in all, a wonderful and God-pleasing resolution of what had been serious issues.

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The example of teacher Knoche demonstrates that the early synod leaders could certainly be reasonable. His conduct became a concern because, although he was a member of the synod, he taught in the school of a heterodox church body. The synod found in 1860 that Knoche had stipulated he taught only Lutheranism, he belonged to a congregation of the Missouri Synod and he partook of the sacrament only in his Missouri Synod congregation. There was, therefore, nothing amiss.<sup>22</sup>

The case of Pastor Georg Albert Schieferdecker is notable for a number of reasons. There is a great deal of documentation; it demonstrates the synod's insistence upon dealing with doctrinal issues; it shows the patient and charitable approach taken by the synod in dealing with those who were in disagreement with synod's doctrine.

Schieferdecker was the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Altenburg, Perry County, Missouri. Early in 1856 he preached a sermon in which he promoted chiliasm (millennialistic) views for which he was strongly criticized by members of his congregation. As a result of the criticism he had received, he asked the 1856 convention of the Western District, of which he was then president, to address the issue. After lengthy debate, the convention

"condemned chiliasm as unscriptural."<sup>23</sup> The convention also stated that chiliasm is not church dividing so long as the one who holds it neither teaches it nor spreads it. At the same time the District insisted that it had a duty to convince chiliasts in its midst that their position was unscriptural. Between then and the synodical convention the following year, President Wyneken tried to bring Schieferdecker back to a scriptural position both through correspondence and by meeting with him, but Schieferdecker remained firm in his position. In February 1857 Wyneken even invited Schieferdecker to a four-day consultation with himself, C.F.W. Walther and some of the other seminary professors. Schieferdecker accepted but was still not convinced he was in error.

At the synodical convention in 1857 Schieferdecker asked the synod to overturn the Western District's condemnation of chiliasm. The convention refused and held an investigation of Schieferdecker's views instead. In each aspect of his position about which he was questioned Schieferdecker was permitted to think through his answers overnight if he so desired. After a great deal of debate, the matter was turned over to a committee consisting of the four district presidents, the seminary professors, and one delegate from each district.<sup>24</sup> The committee concluded that "since Schieferdecker was casting aside articles of faith in favor of his chiliastic views, he was no longer on the same footing of faith with synod and that the synod therefore deemed it necessary to withdraw the hand of fellowship from him."<sup>25</sup> The convention then upheld the findings of the committee and expelled Schieferdecker from the synod.

Two final points regarding this case are worth noting. First, after the convention synodical officials visited Schieferdecker's congregation to see whether they approved of his expulsion. Two thirds of the congregation did; Schieferdecker was relieved of duty and left with his supporters to start a new congregation. Second, after he was expelled Schieferdecker asked whether the synod would consider reinstating him should he ever return to the doctrinal position of the synod in regard to chiliasm. The synod assured him that such would be the case and indeed, eighteen years later, he did recognize and admit his error and was readmitted to the synod in 1875.

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***Pastors and teachers found guilty of sinful behavior were repeatedly admonished, first privately and then in public.***

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At this point, a number of observations concerning church discipline in the early Missouri Synod are in order. First of all, every case suggesting the need for discipline was met with an investigation into the facts of the case and into theological issues raised by the case, and an abundant amount of evidence of heterodoxy or of wrongdoing was needed in order to remove someone from office and to exclude him from synod.

Second, pastors and teachers found guilty of sinful be-

havior were repeatedly admonished, first privately and then in public. Those who did not repent were excluded from the synod. Those who did repent typically resigned from office, and the synod simply left matters at that. Absolution, of course, took place.

Third, pastors and teachers found guilty of false teaching were also urged to repent of their error. Those who did not repent were excluded from synod; those who did repent were welcomed back with open arms.

It is apparent that Lutherans all over the world today are having an identity crisis. Why? Is it possible that we no longer know what it means to be Lutheran? I do not mean to say that no one in our churches knows what it means. But is it possible that the vast majority of Lutherans in all churches have such a fuzzy notion of what it means to be specifically Lutheran, that whenever the issue of Lutheran identity rises, the issue is deflected? We simply don't know how to deal with it. Since we no longer know how to define what Lutheranism is, we are incapable of determining whether a church body is genuinely Lutheran or not.

Hermann Sasse saw this clearly and expressed himself on the subject eloquently. Sasse had lived and been trained and ordained in the Prussian Union Church and was well acquainted with the destruction caused by a false union of two opposing confessions as had happened in the German territorial churches via the Prussian Union. In an essay entitled *Union and Confession* Sasse refers to what he calls the "pious lie."

Lies have been told in the church because of cowardice and weakness, vanity and avarice. But beyond all these there is in the church one particularly sweet piece of fruit on the broad canopy of the tree of lies. This is the pious lie. It is the hypocrisy by which a man lies to others and the intellectual self-deception by which he lies to himself . . . . The most fearful thing about the pious lie is that it will lie not only to men, but also to God in prayer, in confession, in the Holy Supper, in the sermon, and in theology.<sup>26</sup>

According to Sasse, the pious lie that devastated Lutheranism in Germany was a lie that for the sake of ecumenical ends permitted opposing confessions (in the form of the Lutheran and the Reformed, particularly in regard to the Lord's Supper) to stand side by side with equal validity within the same church. Sasse's observation is relevant to any church body whose pastors are permitted to practice open communion. But what is the result when a church officially adopts the "pious lie"?

Sasse laments the inability of the Prussian Union church to identify and fight doctrinal error, and he makes it clear where such lack of attention to error will finally lead.

That false doctrine must be fought, and that there could be no church fellowship where there was no unity on the basic understanding of the Gospel—that was indeed an understanding which had been learned from Luther, and which neither the Old Lutheran Church nor the Evangelical Lutheran Church of later times could have given up. Whoever does give it up—as the Enlightenment and Pietism did—abandons the Reformation.<sup>27</sup>

Has the ecumenistic, relativistic spirit of our postmodern time been so pervasive in its influence on Lutheranism that the Reformation itself is being lost in Lutheran churches? Unfortunately, yes. Churches that historically have been Lutheran are, except in name, no longer Lutheran. Hermann Sasse wrote regarding the Prussian Union of 1817,

The church which came into existence on 31 October in Potsdam was no longer the Old Lutheran Church of Brandenburg-Prussia of the time of Paul Gerhardt. Nor was it any longer the Reformed Church of the great elector. In reality, it was a new church, the Prussian territorial Church so long desired, the soul of the Prussian state which was rising in greatness and coming into global political significance.<sup>28</sup>

In 1998 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America established a new relationship with certain Reformed churches in North America. She was not forced to do so as was the case in Prussia. Rather, she embraced the ideology of the Prussian Union willingly, with open arms. Having done so, does she even know she is no longer the church she once was? She is no longer the church of the Lutheran Reformation. She has abandoned the Reformation.

Can there really be any doubt whatsoever about this fact when one considers what happened at Augsburg in October 2000? Representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and other Lutheran bodies and representatives of the church of Rome signed together the document entitled *Joint Declaration on Justification*, and thereby declared to all the world that the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics have reached consensus on the article of justification. In the dishonest and treasonous act of adopting this declaration, the Reformation is abandoned and the flock of Christ is viciously attacked by those who bear the name Lutheran. Never mind that the Roman church since the time of the Reformation has not changed its position on Purgatory, the sacrifice of the mass, the merits of the saints, works of supererogation; never mind that the dogma of the infallibility of the pope, adopted long after the Reformation, stands as strongly as ever and that the veneration of Mary is more vigorously promoted by Pope John Paul—who believes she is co-redemptrix—than by any other in recent memory; never mind that the present pope has offered new indulgences to the faithful; never mind that the Roman church still views grace as an infused quality that gives the Christian the ability to please God with his works rather than as God's gracious disposition of favor toward the completely undeserving sinner; never mind that none of the blasphemous anathemas of Trent has been retracted, anathemas that condemn to Hell the doctrine of justification central to our faith. These doctrinal matters are all ignored and sacrificed once again on the altar of ecumenical fervor and the "pious lie." Hermann Sasse correctly pointed out that in the enforcement of the Prussian Union, it was the Lutherans who lost everything. In the adoption of the *Joint Declaration on Justification* it is once again the Lutherans who lose everything.

For when truth meets falsehood in compromise only truth can be the loser.

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Lutherans all over the world are having an identity crisis. Nor is this crisis confined in our country to the ELCA. In other Lutheran congregations, pastors routinely give the Lord's Supper to those of heterodox church bodies and they are not disciplined in any way. Pastors conduct joint worship services with pastors of other heterodox church bodies and nothing happens. For the sake of what is called "church growth," many churches are opting for a worship experience that is anything but Lutheran. Hymns rich in Lutheran substance are being replaced by Baptist or charismatic songs or by theologically empty ditties. The historic creeds are replaced or rewritten, sermons have in many cases given place to inspirational speeches, and the confession and absolution are often omitted. Some congregations have abandoned the liturgy completely and the time together on Sunday morning that was once called worship would now more accurately be described as entertainment. On the other side are pastors who view ordination as sacramental and for whom Rome and Constantinople definitely hold an attraction.

Who knows what American Lutheranism will look like twenty years from now? One thing is certain: the church that loses its doctrine dies. Therefore, the primary battles of the church militant are always doctrinal. It is only as we strive to eliminate and condemn doctrinal error and preserve doctrinal purity that we demonstrate true love for Christ's church. And in this endeavor we have something to learn from Luther and the orthodox Lutheran theologians, and we have something to learn from the founders of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: their love for doctrine, their conviction that doctrine comes from God, that it is therefore precious, that it brings life and salvation to a dying world.

Listen to the voice of a few of these Lutherans. Listen to the voice of Georg Stöckhardt in 1888:

Today there are still such radical heretics, pernicious foes, who deliberately, with all the powers at their disposal, contend against the truth and campaign and propagandize for the lie. Of course, not all who spread abroad false doctrine are that evil and malicious. But without further ceremony we question the faith and Christianity of every teacher who deviates from the truth. In heterodox church bodies there certainly are many pastors who although ensnared in the errors of their sects, are very sincere, who themselves are misled and deluded rather than making it their business to mislead others, who blindly follow the church leaders since they really don't know what they are doing. Nevertheless, in every case false doctrine is a soul-corrupting poison, no matter from whose mouth it is spewed.<sup>29</sup>

Listen to an early member of the Norwegian Synod whose leaders had been called rabid because of their zeal

for pure doctrine:

I shall admit that especially in the beginning after we in the Norwegian Synod had become straight on the doctrine, there may have been something among us which, viewed superficially, appeared to be such a "rabies." . . . [But] I have no doubt that something has often been called "rabies" which in reality was nothing else than the zeal of a faithful theologian for the pure doctrine of God's word, but which may have been displayed in a somewhat ill-timed and annoying way. And finally, I prefer, especially in teachers of the church, even this glowing "rabies" to the ice-cold "indifferentia theologorum" which considers one thing as good as another and like Cain, asks: "Am I my brother's keeper?"<sup>30</sup>

Listen to F. Bente, who in 1923 delivered the essay for the Missouri Synod convention in Fort Wayne:

The "spirit of Missouri" has frequently been spoken of with aversion. But the truth is that the spirit of our fathers was in every respect none other than the sincere, serious, straightforward, and earnest spirit of our early confessors themselves, Luther included.

Indeed, our fathers were both faithful Bible Christians and genuine Lutherans, and the latter not in addition to, but because of, the former. Genuine Lutherans—for they adhered most faithfully to the doctrines set forth in our symbols. True Bible Christians—for they adopted these symbols only because they had found them to be drawn from the Word of God, which alone they recognized as the final and infallible norm of Christian truth.<sup>31</sup>

We who wish to be and remain children of the Reformation, can we not continue to speak with the voice of our fathers—a voice that is unashamed to call itself Lutheran? After all, we believe that Lutheran is Christian, that Lutheran is evangelical, that Lutheran is ecumenical in the true sense, for the Holy Spirit brings true unity to the church only by means of the pure word and sacraments.

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**The primary battles of the church militant are always doctrinal.**

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Such a Christian, evangelical, ecumenical approach will surely recognize the need for proper church discipline. Without church discipline to correct doctrinal error and false practice, no church body can long survive as a faithful bearer and transmitter of the gospel. As St. Paul says, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal 5:9). Two quotations, one quite short and one rather extensive, of Charles Porterfield Krauth serve to elaborate on the truth of Paul's statement. In his book, *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology*, Krauth states pithily, "Charity does not cover error; because error is the daughter of sin, and charity is the daughter of God."<sup>32</sup> More familiar are the following words of Krauth:

When error is admitted into the church, it will be found that the stages of its progress are always three. It begins by asking toleration. Its friends say to the majority: You need not be afraid of us; we are few, and weak; only let us alone; we shall not disturb the faith of others. The Church has her standards of doctrine; of course we shall never interfere with them; we only ask for ourselves to be

spared interference with our private opinions. Indulged in this for a time, error goes on to assert *equal rights*. Truth and error are two balancing forces. The Church shall do nothing which looks like deciding between them; that would be partiality. It is bigotry to assert any superior right for the truth. We are to agree to differ, and any favoring of the truth, because it is truth, is partisanship. What the friends of truth and error hold in common is fundamental. Anything on which they differ is *ipso facto* nonessential. Anybody who makes account of such a thing is a disturber of the peace of the church. Truth and error are two coordinate powers, and the great secret of church-statesmanship is to preserve the balance between them. From this point error soon goes on to its natural end, which is to assert *supremacy*. Truth started with *tolerating*; it comes to be merely tolerated, and that only for a time. Error claims a preference for its judgments on all disputed points. It puts men into positions, not as at first in spite of their departure from the Church's faith, but in consequence of it, and to make them skillful in combating it.<sup>33</sup>

The Lutheran Church today needs to take St. Paul's warning seriously and listen attentively once again to Krauth's perceptive analysis. In view of the loss of a sense of Lutheran identity endemic to many Lutheran church bodies today, those who truly value their Lutheran doctrinal heritage, not because they view it as a cultural or even historical treasure, but because it is the truth, cannot afford to ignore scripture's and history's warnings. Orthodox Lutheranism cannot survive the progression of error described by Krauth.

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***Discipline in the church is frequently described by errorists as an unloving attack by rigid and close-minded bigots.***

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The temptation in our irenic age to look the other way when doctrinal aberrations arise in the church is not a new one. It is always easier to avoid conflict than to engage in it. In addition, discipline in the church is frequently described by errorists as an unloving attack by rigid and close-minded bigots. And there is no question that at times church discipline has been carried out vindictively with no true love for either the one disciplined or for the church. But it need not be so, and the early history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is a powerful testimony to this fact.

In the discipline cases cited at the beginning of this article, the reader cannot miss the fact that the early leaders of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod were intent on being faithful to scripture in their exercise of church discipline of pastors and teachers. This commitment to scripture was accompanied by a true love for the church and a firm, yet evangelical, compassionate and patient approach in the application of discipline. All in all, the approach they took seems eminently reasonable, even by today's standards. The case of Romanowski demonstrates concern for congregations whose pastors do not do what they have been called to do. The case of Gruber demonstrates concern for purity of doctrine. The cases of

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Volkert and Schneider demonstrate the desire of the synod to avoid scandal in the eyes of the world and to require of its called servants a high standard of Christian conduct that they might be examples to the congregations they served. The case of Schieferdecker makes abundantly clear that the early leaders of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, when carrying out church discipline of pastors, did so not out of a vindictive spirit to exclude the opponent but out of love for the true doctrine and for the church, always willing to consider reconciliation when repentance occurred. The cases of Bürger and Knoche show early Missouri as reasonable, not inclined to rush to rash judgment. At the same time those who were guilty of immoral behavior or who held doctrinal positions contrary to that of the synod saw more clearly than many today the truth of Amos' rhetorical question, "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3).

If a Lutheran church body is to remain Lutheran, she will exercise church discipline, when necessary, upon the church's pastors and teachers. Is it possible to exercise such discipline evangelically? Yes. The practice of the early Missouri Synod illustrates that it is. But such evangelical discipline is not only possible; it is absolutely necessary if Lutheranism as a confessional movement is to survive. Through battles for the pure Gospel the church of Christ will only grow stronger but the toleration of false teaching or indifference to it will destroy her. Dear Father, guide us by Your Word and Spirit that we may remain your faithful children. Thy Kingdom come. Amen.

**Rev. Dr. Daniel Preus**

Fifth Vice-President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

1. Synodical Proceedings, 1848, 25.
2. Synodical Proceedings, 1849, 5.
3. Western District Proceedings, 1858, 35. The translation from the German is mine.



4. Synodical Proceedings, 1860, 28.
5. Synodical Proceedings, 1863, 27.
6. Central District Proceedings, 1867.
7. W.G. Polack, ed., "Our First Synodical Constitution," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, 16, no. 1 (April 1943): 2. The original constitution, of course, was in German. References to the constitution in this paper are from an English translation.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 6.
12. *Ibid.*, 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 11–13.
14. *Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther: Convention Essays*, trans. Aug. R. Suellflow (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 11.
15. See J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, *The Bondage of the Will*, (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957) or *Luther's Works*, E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), XXXIII.
16. Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 636 (SD XII.40).
17. Carl S. Meyer, Ed., *Moving Frontiers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 254.
18. Todd W. Nichol, ed., *Vivacious Daughter: Seven Lectures on the Religious Situation among Norwegians in America by Herman Amberg Preus* (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1990), 152.
19. *Ibid.*, 152.
20. *Ibid.*, 153.
21. Synodical Proceedings, 1847, pp. 11–13.
22. Synodical Proceedings, 1860, 78.
23. August Suellflow, *Georg Albert Schieferdecker and His Relation to Chiliasm in the Iowa Synod*, unpublished Bachelor of Divinity thesis, (Concordia Seminary: St. Louis, May 1946), 35.
24. *Ibid.*, 70.
25. *Ibid.*, 70–71.
26. Hermann Sasse, *Christ and His Church, Essays by Hermann Sasse* (St. Louis: Office of the President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1997) Vol. I, *Union and Confession*, 1–2.
27. *Ibid.*, 50–51.
28. *Ibid.*, 13.
29. Daniel Woodring, "Karl Georg Stöckhardt: His Life and Labor," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Spring 1999): 58.
30. George O. Lillegard, ed., *Faith of our Fathers* (Lutheran Synod Book Co. Mankato, Minnesota, 1953), 52–53. U. V. Koren quoting A.C. Preus.
31. F. Bente, *Following the Faith of our Fathers: Convention Essay, June 1923* (Holy Cross Press: St. Charles, MO, undated), 6.
32. Charles Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (J.B. Lippincott & Co.: Philadelphia, 1871), 143.
33. *Ibid.*, 195–196, italics in the original.

## 2019 Convention Overtures regarding the Concordia University System

It has now been twenty-seven years since the formation of the Concordia University System (CUS) out of the mixed-bag of teacher's colleges, graduate programs, and liberal arts colleges with ten campuses scattered throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup> After twenty-seven years, it's about time the Synod review what it is doing with the CUS and how it is governed.

The Convention Workbook is now available online.<sup>2</sup> In the report section, the "2016 7-02B Task Force" that was

given the job of strengthening the CUS bonds with the LCMS gives its initial findings.<sup>3</sup> The goal of that task force was "theological integrity and fiscal viability." The recommendation of the 7-02B Task Force is that the convention adopt overtures 7-01 and 7-02.<sup>4</sup> 7-01 would amend the bylaws of Synod to create a "CUS Advisory Council" composed of the presidents of each CUS university/college. The CUS Advisory Council would assist the CUS Board of Directors in long-range planning and developing standards, policies, criteria for viability and fidelity, search criteria for presidents, and giving counsel with regard to "consolidation, relocation, separation, divestiture, or closure of a college or university," while at the same time preserving the governing authority of the CUS Board of Directors. 7-02 proposes that a new CUS governance plan be developed and presented to the 2022 Convention.

Both overtures address the issues at hand and should be adopted by the convention. The "CUS Advisory Council" of Overture 7-01 is a move in the right direction. Overture 7-02 is long overdue.

Dovetailing with the 7-02B Task Force is the report from the "Blue Ribbon Committee on Lutheran Schools."<sup>5</sup> The most serious issue is the economic needs of our teachers and church-workers. The report states that the Synod should review the "viability and worth" of its seminary and university campuses with respect to church-worker programs, consider consolidating those programs, and urges the Synod to use "the most effective and financially viable ways to recruit and train church workers."<sup>6</sup> If the Synod does not address this issue, it will continue to see declines in the enrollment of church-workers in the CUS and its seminaries. Overture 7-02 should help prevent that dire scenario, if the proposed Task Force keeps the economic needs of our future teachers and church-workers as its top priority.

Four overtures in the "University Education" section of the Convention Workbook would be counter-productive, if adopted. Overtures 7-03, 7-04, 7-05, and 7-06 would make the CUS schools less responsive to the needs of the Synod and its church-worker programs, and are contrary to Overtures 7-01 and 7-02.<sup>7</sup> Other overtures have a lot of merit, including Overtures 7-07, 7-08, 7-09, 7-10, 7-11, 7-12, 7-13, 7-14, 7-15, 7-16, 7-18, 7-19, 7-20, 7-23, and 7-30.<sup>8</sup>

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1. For a brief report on the CUS, see President Harrison's *Joyfully Lutheran – 1 Thess 5:16-24: A message to the Church about the challenges we face and how to face them* (St. Louis: LCMS, 2018), 40-41. To view online, go to: <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=bDyqAd1Elw7oMSE23dBwTMLEDCusuKvG>
2. For online access to the *Convention Workbook, Reports and Overtures 2019, 67<sup>th</sup> Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Tampa, FL, July 20-25, 2019* (St. Louis: LCMS, 2019) (hereafter 2019 Workbook) - go to: <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=q3sr9s4o5Ou9WSVibBi0Hwv27NV8xv25>
3. See page 343 of 2019 Workbook.
4. See pages 460-463 of 2019 Workbook.
5. See pages 343-348 of 2019 Workbook.
6. See page 344 of 2019 Workbook.
7. See pages 464-466 of 2019 Workbook.
8. See pages 466-477 of 2019 Workbook.

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