

**Putting Missouri Back on Track  
by Dr. Kurt Marquart**

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on C.F. W. Walther  
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Dear brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ: Thank you for the great honor of your invitation. In accepting the assigned topic, "Putting Missouri Back on Track," I wish to make it very clear that I have neither the wisdom nor the resources to cure all that ails our dear Synod. We are beyond human help—only God Himself can deliver us! The best we can do is to try to understand our needs in the light of God's revealed Word, and then to pray and work accordingly.

Some years ago, during one of the many attempts to "restructure" our long-suffering Synod, the "task force" in charge coined a phrase about the Synod being a "servant structure." That sounds attractively modest—until you recall that the very papacy calls itself ever so humbly "servant of the servants of Christ"! Well—intentioned as the task—force's phrase no doubt was, it betokened a deep misunderstanding of what the Synod is. To define the Synod as "servant structure" is to understand it basically as a bureaucratic organization, governed and held together by constitution and bylaws! No, dear friends, the Synod is not its bureaucracy. Rather, the Synod, in its essence, is simply its member-congregations, acting together in the Lord's mission! The Synod is all its local churches bound together by faith and love!

The bureaucratic organization is strictly secondary, and does not belong to or determine the nature and essence of the Synod. The outward structure is there to serve the Synod's confessional purposes, and must be changed or even abolished if it gets in the way of the confession of the evangelical truth. Joint confession of the divine truth is the purpose that shapes and defines the Synod—and all constitutions, bylaws, and structures must either serve and support that, or else get out of the way and make room for a genuine and faithful implementation of Synod's confession.

That has from the beginning been our Synod's self-understanding. According to the original constitution the very first obligation of the Synod was "To stand guard over the purity and unity of doctrine within the synodical circle, and to oppose false doctrine." The whole point was "that the confessing and teaching church might devote herself to the enabling and promoting of every particular churchly purpose. . . [the Confession must exercise] an ordering and shaping influence on the whole constitution and on the church's entire mode of action',<sup>2</sup> In other words, the Confession alone shapes, defines, and determines the constitution, not the other way round!

As Francis Pieper put it in his 1880 Iowa District theses on Law and

Gospel:

Our Lutheran Church has no special church constitution which might hold her together. Only Law and Gospel are her bond of unity. The external constitution of the church is after all not prescribed in Holy Scripture; therefore there exist in the Lutheran Church quite different constitutions in different countries. There are Lutherans under an episcopal polity [*Verfassung*, constitution], under a presbyteral polity, etc., that comes from the light which shines in the Lutheran Church. To true unity in the church there belong, as our Confession says, only the pure Word and the right administration of the sacraments. That the sects make so much of external forms is due to the fact that they do not maintain the difference between Law and Gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Pieper appeals here to the famous Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession. This incidentally was the first dogmatic definition of the church, and the Roman Catholic and the Calvinist confessions later defined their understandings or misunderstandings of the church in response to the clear definition of the Augsburg Confession. In the Middle Ages the church had come to be distorted into a sacred bureaucracy, a chain of command, with the laity at the bottom, the papacy at the top, and the bishops and clergy in-between! The Augsburg Confession rejected this caricature and returned to the biblical understanding of the church not as a bureaucratic command structure, but as the glorious Bride of Christ, consisting of all believers in Christ, the sacred royal priesthood!

And if the church is the believers, then the one thing that matters is the Gospel, for only by the Gospel can people become and remain believers! The purely preached Gospel and the rightly administered sacraments, these, says the Augsburg Confession, are enough for the true unity of the church. It is not necessary that human customs and ceremonies and traditions in rituals or church structure be everywhere the same. Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy, and of course Anglicanism, demand conformity to an episcopal so-called “apostolic succession,” and so on. This also got into the Ecumenical Movement, in the form of “Faith and Order”. And once these are linked together, the human order begins to trump the divine faith, as the “Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry” document of 1982 clearly shows.

Contrary to all traditionalism and insistence on human regulations, the Lutheran ecumenical principle is “the life-giving evangelical Truth alone”! Only one thing is needful in the church, and that is the liberating message of Him Whose words are spirit and life (St. John 6:63). The pure Gospel and sacraments, these and these alone are the true marks or signposts of the church, and absolutely everything in the church’s life and structure must be subject to them and be judged by them!

Our tragedy is that this absolute priority of the divine truth has become displaced in our Synodical life. By what? By organizational, bureaucratic

concerns. Our disease is, you might say, ‘bureaucratitis.’ When theology is done bureaucratically, it simply dies and turns into a caricature of itself. Please note that when I talk here about “bureaucracy” and “bureaucratic” attitudes, I have in mind not those dear people of God who labor in various capacities in our Synod and its Districts, but rather a certain pathological attitude of mind.

Let me begin with the clearest, crassest example of this bureaucratic malady. That surely is none other than that recent ruling of the Commission on Constitutional Matters, which held that the prior advice of one’s “ecclesiastical supervisor” trumps any substantive arguments to the contrary. In this way the issue of truth posed by the syncretistic service in New York, was totally bypassed in favour of purely organizational, bureaucratic trivia. This was the most dramatic triumph in our Synod of what Hermann Sasse called “the institutional lie.” He wrote:

Alongside the pious and dogmatic lies, there stands the *institutional* lie. By this we mean a lie which works itself out in the institutions of the church, in her government and her organization. It is so dangerous because it legalizes the other lies in the church and makes them impossible to remove.<sup>4</sup>

All the argumentation from Holy Scripture and the Church’s Confessions was simply set aside on the grounds that the relevant “ecclesiastical supervisor” had given his opinion, advice, and interpretation of a Synodical resolution! That is nothing but papal pretences all over again! The Lord says: “But in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (St. Mt. 15:9)! Nothing should be more self-evident in the Church of “sola scriptura,” Scripture alone! The Reformation threw out all shameful slavery to human opinions and regulations, and restored to us the liberty of the children of God under His alone-saving Word. As the Formula of Concord (X,21) quotes from the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*. “No one shall burden the church with traditions or allow the authority of any person to count for more than the Word”!

In this connection I cannot sufficiently thank God for the clear witness to this very point borne by the St. Louis Faculty Statement and especially by the detailed analysis of Professors David Berger and James Voelz in the October, 2003 issue of the *Concordia Journal*. That both theological faculties are on record against the public whitewash of a notorious case of syncretism surely bodes well for the future of our Synod. May the Lord of the Church richly bless that testimony!

Another piece of bureaucratic trickery is the pretence that certain public actions or pronouncements may not be discussed until the “proper authorities” have finished their sometimes longwinded consideration of the matter. At times the Eighth Commandment is enlisted to prevent public rebuke of public evil. But remember our official Lutheran Confession, Luther’s *Large Catechism*:

But where the sin is so public that the judge and everyone else are aware

of it, you can without sin shun and avoid those who have brought disgrace upon themselves, and you may also testify publicly against them. For when something is exposed to the light of day, there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness. For example, we now censure the pope and his teaching, which is publicly set forth in books and shouted throughout the world. Where the sin is public, appropriate public punishment should follow so that everyone may know how to guard against it.<sup>5</sup>

Especially where the truth of the Gospel is at stake, there can be no diplomatic silence or false scruples about upsetting bureaucratic apple-carts. When St. Peter compromised the truth of the Gospel by withdrawing from the Gentile Christians, did St. Paul reproach him gingerly at night and in private? No, he at once “opposed him to his face, because he was in the wrong” (Gal. 2:11). When St. Paul “saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel,” he spoke to Peter “in front of them all” (v. 14).

It is shameful to hide behind human regulations and “proprieties” when the Gospel is being falsified. Nothing in the church may take precedence over the truth of the Gospel and the need to confess it faithfully. If our Synod cannot recover this absolute, overriding priority of truth and confession over all sorts of organizational considerations, it will cease to be a Lutheran church and become just another bureaucratic sect. And the trend from truth to bureaucracy is very much in the air. Here is how a perceptive Presbyterian summed up the tragic experience of his church:

Following the dominant patterns of American life, there was an increasing tendency to think of the Church as a kind of business corporation chartered to do the Lord’s work. The subordination of questions of truth—though only of those regarded as “unessential”—to efficiency of operation carries a recognizable suggestion of pragmatism...

The problem of power and freedom has thus been solved to date by simultaneously increasing administrative centralization and decreasing theological centralization; . . . increasingly prominent. . . was a pragmatic conception of the Church which, in the interests of avoiding divisions that would injure the Church’s work, has substituted broad church inclusion of opposing theological views for theological answers to them. To adapt Santayana’s figure, the Church’s theology has been living in a modest colonial house, more and more overshadowed by the skyscraper of the Church’s active work.<sup>6</sup>

Can anyone honestly deny that this is the very plague that is now killing our beloved Synod? And while the disease is raging within our own church-body, it is also affecting those with whom we are in fellowship. I cannot but mention a specific example close to my heart: the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Haiti, with which we declared church fellowship at our last Synodical Convention.

Had I not previously committed myself to our Walther Conference here in St. Louis, I should today be in Indianapolis, where an urgent effort is underway to rebuild a network of support for our fast-growing sister church in Haiti. It was a bureaucratic preoccupation with the formalities of “protocol documents” and insistence on rigid details of channeling funds—instead of love and respect for a dear sister church in dire need—that led to the collapse of necessary support. Can you imagine the emergency created by the sudden cessation of the agreed support of \$ 40,000 per month?

I thank God for courageous men like Pastors Kevin Kolander of California and John Fiene and David Mommens of Indiana, who are now taking energetic steps to secure continued support for our sister-church’s vital work, in full cooperation, I understand, with our Synod’s mission department. And I beg anyone here in a position to do so to direct any support for Haiti through those men and the new support-group being formed this very weekend.

Apart from the cases already mentioned, what then are the vital issues of truth that urgently require clear confession rather than bureaucratic evasion on the part of our Synod? It is my firm conviction that the chief issues of doctrine confronting our Synod are the following:

In the first place, it is essential to discontinue any joint church or chaplaincy work with the ELCA. I would of course warmly support cooperation with genuine Lutherans in the ELCA, who are in a public state of confession against their church’s public departures from the Word of God. But we cannot practise any form of church-fellowship with the pseudo-Lutheran ELCA as such. Yet it appears that, in addition to joint chaplaincies, there are actually still parishes maintaining membership both in the ELCA and in the LC-MS. That cannot be harmonized with the truth of the Gospel.

Secondly, the Synod needs to reassert effective doctrinal discipline within its Concordia University System. It appears that the old Seminex theology has its defenders here and there— including open pro-evolutionism, together with a historical-critical debunking of Genesis! Such things cannot go unchallenged without risking a total loss of the Word of God, as has happened in other American churches.

Thirdly, the continued existence of neo-Pentecostalism in our Synod is an open scandal. The pro-Charismatic “Renewal In Missouri” should have been decisively dealt with long ago. As former President Robert Kuhn put it in his Presidential Report in 2001: “There are some who may hope to ‘Lutheranise’ charismatic theology, but finally it is not possible” (2001 LC-MS *Proceedings*, p. 69). The distressing news now is that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations has advised President Kieschnick that a few agreed statements with “Renewal in Missouri” have sufficiently settled the matter, and that there is no need for further official meetings! The fact remains, as President Kuhn clearly saw, that one cannot be both neoPentecostal/Charismatic and Lutheran! That

issue cries out for honest resolution.

Fourthly, the Synod needs to regain the firm biblical, Reformation “middle ground” on the nature of the Gospel ministry. On the one hand there are those who, contrary to Augsburg Confession XIV, advocate, for instance, “lay ministry” of Word and Sacrament. And the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in its recent report on the Divine Call has abandoned the historic Lutheran opposition in principle to “temporary calls”. On the other hand some prefer Loehe’s exaggerated clericalism to the plain Reformation doctrine of Luther and Walther. The Synod needs to restore full confessional unanimity on this score. The public reaffirmation of Walther’s theses on Church and Ministry at the 2001 Convention was a step in the right direction, but needs to be followed up.

Finally, Missouri’s trumpets need to give a clear sound when it comes to global ecumenical relations. For example, it was unfortunate that a representative of the Missouri Synod told the Lutheran World Federation assembly in Winnipeg last summer, that we have “much in common,” namely, the Lutheran name and the Confessions! That was profoundly misleading. As one of my students remarked, that’s rather like saying that the police and the criminals have a lot in common, namely the law!

What must be clearly understood is that the so-called “Lutheran” World Federation is the chief engine for the destruction of the Lutheran Confession in today’s world. In the shameful “Augsburg Concession” to the Vatican on Justification, and in the widespread acceptance of the Leuenberg Concord with Calvinist churches, the LWF has surrendered both major focal points of our Confession: Justification, and the Real Presence of the Lord’s body and blood in the Holy Supper. In both cases the basis was the historical-critical destruction of biblical authority. And in its ecumenical recipe of “Reconciled Diversity” the LWF has expanded the Prussian Union by the inclusion of Rome and other confessions. That view advocates full church fellowship among the various Christian confessions, while the differences remain unresolved! That is a total surrender of the Lutheran confession.

Given the disarray of “world Lutheranism,” it is important to provide for a joint global witness on the part of all the truly confessional Lutheran churches of the world. But that would mean giving up bureaucratic games with church fellowship, such that we can accept full church fellowship with churches which maintain fellowship with churches to which we must refuse fellowship! “Communion, or fellowship, is one,” says a maxim of the ancient church. And that is certainly biblical. A church is either faithful to the apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42) or it isn’t.

We need to pray for the divine gift of a global Lutheran confession, which need not be long, and which would do for the Book of Concord what the Formula of Concord once did for the Augsburg Confession: settle its true meaning once and for all. Then there would be a clearly understood global difference between a

nominal pseudo-“Lutheranism,” paying lip-service to the Confessions, and the worldwide confessional Lutheran Church actually taking the Book of Concord seriously.

Some of our sister churches, e.g. the Lithuanian and the Belorussian, have indicated at least four points on which there must be clarity: they have stated that since fellowship must be based on doctrinal, confessional unity, they cannot accept church fellowship with churches which deny or compromise the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, or surrender or compromise the central article of Justification, or surrender or compromise the truth of the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament, or yield on the twin issues of female clergy and approval of homosexual behavior.

If these doctrinal challenges are to be faced honestly, we need to return at every level of our Synodical life, to the overriding importance of the divinely revealed truth—including the God-pleasing separation from those who refuse to teach and practise in accord with the Word of God as rightly confessed in the Book of Concord. But that would mean the conscious rejection of bureaucratic thinking, according to which what is being said is less important than who says it.

Henry Jacoby, in his *The Bureaucratization of the World* (1976), wrote: “Because of the increasing number of individuals who ‘build a career’ in the bureaucratic system (or would like to do so), there must be a corresponding growth in the number of people who ought to keep silent” (p. 155). And Ralph Hummel, in *The Bureaucratic Experience* (1987), said: “Culturally, the basic values of bureaucracy tend to be those that can be reduced to numbers; quantity not quality rules” (p. 251).

It may be a salutary shock to our present organization-mindedness to look at actual examples of how confessional Lutherans used to think before the bureaucratic obsession with rules and regulations set in. Let me cite two examples. In 1874 the LC-MS Convention held that since “the entire churchly authority of the congregations is represented in the Synod when the latter holds its sessions,” the Synodical assembly must therefore “be conceded the right in case of necessity to bypass the electoral procedure prescribed as the rule in the constitution,” and to elect teachers for Synod’s institutions directly (1874 *Proceedings*, p. 59, my translation)! The concern here is for churchly, confessional integrity—and the human regulations are strictly subsidiary!

Here is another example, from Francis Pieper’s great *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3: The normal, agreed upon order of course prevails ordinarily. “Nevertheless,” writes Pieper, “every Christian has the right to call a meeting of the congregation, synod, council, etc., if he is convinced that conditions demand a meeting and that the officials are lax in doing their duty” (p. 433)! This sounds positively quaint today—yet it represents the great truth that “love is empress in ceremonies” (Luther), and that emergencies take precedence over normal human regulations. It also upholds the priestly dignity of each Christian believer, in being able to hold “ecclesiastical supervisors” accountable for their

stewardship! I doubt that the present Commission on Constitutional Matters would uphold Pieper at this point. Well, so much the worse for that Commission—but Pieper was right!

I tried to warn against the potential mischief of an infallible constitutional oracle already in the days of Dr. Barry's presidency: "That Commission now has well-nigh total and absolute power to turn any issue involving the practical application of the Confession into a constitutional one, and to decide it with unappealable finality."<sup>7</sup> And now we have seen just how that is done. I must say that I am deeply grateful that a number of District Conventions have understood the peril, and asked the next Synodical Convention to set aside the shameful ruling which let's the opinion and advice of an "ecclesiastical supervisor" trump all biblical and confessional arguments by mere ordinary people.

We have reached the point when coercion has replaced advice, and at that point Luther insisted: "We must tear the consistories to pieces, for we do not by any means want to have the pope and the lawyers in them." Walther often quotes that, for instance in his *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, p. 11. There is no room in an evangelical church for infallible oracles in the name of human constitutions. Let the opinions of the Constitutions Commission be advisory, like those of the CTCR. Dr. Walther warned in his first presidential address:

Also our synodical body has the same prospects of salutary influence if it does not attempt to operate through any other means than through the power of the Word of God. Even then we must expect battles, but they will not be the mean, depressing battles for obedience to human laws, but the holy battles for God's Word, for God's honor and kingdom. . . [Otherwise] Our chief battle would soon center about the execution of manufactured, external human ordinances and institutions and would swallow up the true blessed battle for the real treasure of the church, for purity and unity of doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Forgive the length of this diagnosis. But unless we see the depth of the malady, our proposed cures are likely to be superficial.

Even the world can, in its own sphere, see the destructiveness of the bureaucratic spirit. Among the finest spoofs of it are the British comedy series *Yes, Minister*, and *Yes, Prime Minister*. The latter has an episode called "bishop's gambit." A vacancy has occurred among the Anglican bishops, and the Prime Minister must recommend a suitable person to the Queen. Sir Humphrey Appelby, the Permanent Under-Secretary, comes up with a candidate, but the Prime Minister is disturbed by the man's liberal or nonexistent theology. "But Prime Minister," says Sir Humphrey, "don't you realize that theology is simply a device to enable unbelievers to remain in the church?" Even the people of this world can see the bankruptcy of that approach!

Yet that essential malady, putting organizational, statistical success ahead



of truth, infects so much of our Synodical life. The impassioned pleas for “mission” apart from doctrine are like calls for harvesting without sowing or planting, or like invitations to eat without food! Akin to this is the low value placed on an adequate theological education for certain “ethnic ministries”—as though immediate action were more important than responsible pastoral preparation.

We Lutherans, who with Luther stress preaching the Gospel as the toughest and most important task of the Gospel minister, cannot skimp in the proper preparation of such preachers. There is none of that popular mission hysteria in the New Testament. Our Lord, upon first meeting Peter, Matthew, and the rest, did not send them out in haste with a few basic cliches, but He trained them for three intensive years before sending them out into the world. Can we do any less?

The September, 2003, issue of what, in deference to the Second Commandment, I shall call “Jerry First,” has an article about a picture of Jesus knocking at the door of the United Nations Organization in New York. The picture is said to need a frame. Then this: “Doctrine in our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, our theology, is like that frame,” etc. No, dear friends, the doctrine of the Gospel, that is, the articles of faith as distinct from the Commandments of the Law, are not simply a suitable frame: they convey Jesus Himself. He comes in His Gospel and Sacraments, and in no other way! And that is precisely our evangelical, confessional doctrine—it is not frame but content!

If the evangelical truth is to regain top priority again in our Synod, we shall need quite deliberately to combat the bureaucratic spirit, which can never put truth first. This will require some short-term and some long-term planning and action. In the short term two things are urgent: First, the Constitutions Committee needs to become advisory, rather than dictatorial.

Secondly, the Dispute Resolutions system needs to return to a proper adjudication and appeals system interested in pursuing and asserting the divine truth, rather than simply sorting out personal conflicts by means of mediation, arbitration, and compromise, important as that can be at times. But the chief aim of an adjudication system is to safeguard the pure doctrine of God’s Word in teaching and practice. Our Book of Concord says:

Thus the pope exercises a double tyranny: he defends his errors with violence and murder, and he forbids judicial inquiry. The latter does more harm than any cruel act. For when the church has been deprived of valid judicial process, it is not possible to remove ungodly teachings and impious forms of worship, and they destroy countless souls generation upon generation.<sup>9</sup>

In the long term we need to reverse the unaffordable trend of growing Synodical and District bureaucracies. Already we have had to recall missionaries, and we can no longer afford Synodical support for our seminaries. If that trend is allowed to continue, we shall finally be able to afford only Synodical and District

office buildings and staff. Supporting missionaries and training pastors, teachers, and deaconesses, were the prime activities for which local churches first banded together as a Synod.

It is not in the Synodical interest to force the seminaries to be, as they now are, basically self-supporting, without Synodical subsidy. Seminaries deprived of the institutional support of their churches, may in the end be tempted also to thumb their noses at their churches' doctrine, and to become independent theologically as well as institutionally. American higher education is full of prominent examples of this very secularizing trend, for instance, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton!

Also we need to consider the office of District president. According to the Lutheran understanding, there is only one kind of Gospel minister, although ministers may work in highly specialized areas, e.g. chaplains, seminary professors, foreign missionaries, etc. By divine right there is no difference between bishop or district president and pastor. A bishop is simply first among equals.

Until relatively recently our District presidents were also pastors of parishes, although of course they were given assistants for their increased work loads. Perhaps our Districts need to be reduced in size, and to be served by parish pastors once again. Ditto for the Synodical presidency. In that way the abuse of "temporary calls" is avoided, and a churchly mentality encouraged—contrary to the Gilbert and Sullivan advice in *H. M. S. Pinafore*: "Stay close to your desk and never go to sea, And you all may be rulers of the Queen's navy!"

It is not a question of spiting anyone, but of restoring the truth of the Gospel to its rightful place in the church. It is my fervent hope and prayer that the Lord of the Church in His mercy will restore to our dear Synod once more the utterly undeserved gift of truth and unity in His holy and life-giving Gospel. May He have mercy on us all.

Kurt Marquart

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Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, vol. XVI, no. 1 (April, 1943), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Veiftissung der deutschen evangelisch-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio, und anderen Staaren, nebst etner Einleitung und erlaeuternden Bemerkungen* (St. Louis, 1846), pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> "Thcsen Vom Unterschied des Gesetzes und Evangeliums," Iowa District *Proceedings*, I 880, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> R.R. Feuerhahn, M. C. Harrison, and P. T. McCain, eds., *Christ and His Church: Essays by Hermann Sasse, Vol. I: Union and Confession* (St. Louis: Office of the President, LC-MS, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kolb and T. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 424.

<sup>6</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), pp. 59, 93.

<sup>7</sup> J. Fehrmann and D. Preus, eds., *Church Polity and Politics: Papers presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, Itasca, Illinois, April 3-5, 1997* (Luther Academy and Association of Confessional Lutherans, 1997), p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> *Concordia Journal*, vol. 2, no. 5 (September, 1976), p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 51. Kolb & Wengert, *Book of Concord*.