

What Is “Jesus First”?

What is the group called “Jesus First”? Is it an organization that is “Gospel-centered, mission-driven, and future-oriented”¹ as its leaders claim; or is it something else? Is the frequent criticism of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod² that one hears from this group the truth; or is it something else? Is the constant message of “change”³ from “Jesus First” a return to the true Biblical faith; or is it something else?

What is “Jesus First”? On the formal level, it is a not-for-profit religious organization founded in April 1999, governed by a thirteen member board.⁴ It publishes a magazine titled “Jesus First.” It has circularized the synod with a formal statement titled “A Call to Affirm Jesus-First Leadership,” which as of July 2000 had acquired 522 endorsements.⁵ This statement harshly criticizes “major segments of church leadership”⁶ in the church. “Major segments” means that more than just former President Barry and the synod Vice-Presidents are under attack. It means that a

¹ From the sub-title from Jesus First (hereafter JF) 12:1 and following issues.

² E.g. JF 1:7; 3:1; 6:5; 7:1; 9:1; 14:8.

³ E.g. JF 9:1.

⁴ See sidebar in JF 16:2.

⁵ On June 28, 2000, the total number of endorsements was 522, consisting of 491 published names and 31 private names. The list of endorsers used to be available at the “Jesus First” website: www.jesusfirst.net. In February 2001 that list and the count was not available at the website, so a recent count is not cited.

⁶ See JF 14:7, first paragraph of preface.

significant number of synod leaders at all levels—circuit, district, and synod—are blamed for the synod’s alleged ills and are being targeted for replacement by the leaders of “Jesus First.” Through a flyer mailed to all pastors and congregations of the LC-MS, as well as recent issues of its magazine, “Jesus First” has circularized the Synod regarding its favorite choices of nominees for synod President and First Vice-President.⁷ With this early and aggressive push for nominations, it is to be expected that “Jesus First” will produce a voting list for the synodical convention and push it aggressively.

Who is behind “Jesus First” and what are their religious convictions? The premier issue of the “Jesus First” magazine purported to explain “Who We Are.”⁸ Although it claimed that the members of “Jesus First” are “conservative” and “confessional,” subsequent articles have seemed to belie that claim. Some investigation is thus needed beyond their own claims to find the true religious convictions of the “Jesus First” leaders and followers.

Let’s analyze the leadership first. Out of the thirteen member board of directors (a.k.a. the “Steering Committee”), eight hold an office or serve on a working committee for publications or elections. Of those eight, six have been associated in the past with dissenting groups in the synod: 1) Richard Lessmann has been a member of “Renewal in Missouri” (hereafter RIM), a

⁷ See flyer from Trinity Lutheran Church, Roselle, Illinois, dated Reformation Day, 2000, apparently authored by the Rev. Charles S. Mueller, Jr. of Trinity, Roselle; cf. JF15:3 and JF 16:1.

⁸ JF 1:1.

group of charismatic pastors and lay leaders advocating tolerance toward charismatic teaching and practice. Lessmann was also an author for the "Lutherans Alive" group,⁹ in their magazine "Forward!", which advocated a liberal agenda on issues of church relations, altar fellowship, and women's issues at the 1995 and 1998 conventions. 2) David Luecke has been an editor for "Worship Innovations," a glossy, full-color magazine produced by the "Fellowship Ministries." "Fellowship Ministries" advocates the use of Evangelical hymns and worship practices, under the guise of "contemporary" or "blended" worship. Luecke has authored several books defending this position, coining the phrase "Evangelical style and Lutheran substance." He also was a co-signer of the 1974 "Pastoral Letter" of the St. Louis clergy in support of John Tietjen and his allies. 3) Wayne Graumann is one of the officers of the "Pastoral Leadership Institute," (hereafter PLI) an organization dedicated to indoctrinating LC-MS pastors in the principles of the "Church Growth Movement." The fact that the synod's Board for Higher Education refused "Recognized Service Organization" status to the PLI indicates that a number of people have serious concerns about its theology. 4) Charles Mueller Jr. has been an editor for "Worship Innovations," was associated with "Fellowship Ministries", was an author for the "Lutherans Alive" magazine, and is a PLI officer. 5) Vernon Gundermann was a "Lutherans Alive" author and is a PLI officer. 6) August Mennicke, a former Vice-President of the synod, was an author for "Lutherans Alive". This listing of names and associations is not intended to pre-judge

⁹ "Lutherans Alive, Inc." has recently resolved to "support the efforts of Jesus First Leadership as that has been expressed in its official statements" (JF 14:2).

the merits of the respective organizations or their causes. It simply proves that "Jesus First" has a history in previous groups and that its leaders are connected to a diverse network of dissenting organizations.

The "followers" of the "Jesus First" organization are not "members," in the sense of having voting power or shares in the assets of the corporation. The "followers" are the 522 people who endorsed the statement titled "A Call to Affirm Jesus-First Leadership." The public list of these endorsers revealed some interesting facts:¹⁰ 1) 67% of the endorsers were LC-MS pastors, which includes working pastors, as well as those in retirement and on CRM (pastoral candidates); 2) 33% of the endorsers were laymen or laywomen; 3) pastors outnumber laymen in "Jesus First" two to one; 4) the LC-MS pastors who endorsed the statement constitute 18% of all LC-MS pastors on the synod roster, whether working, retired, or CRM.

Even more telling is the list of dissenting organizations to which the endorsers have belonged, including support for Seminex and John Tietjen. All numbers are bare minimums, based on limited research data. Each number represents the number of endorsers of the "Jesus First" statement which have been also involved with the following groups: 1) Signers of the July 1973 "A Declaration of Protest and Confession," which consisted of Concordia-St. Louis faculty and staff protesting the New Orleans' convention of the synod = 1; 2) Signers of the January 1974 "A Pastoral Letter Regarding the Seminary Controversy," which consisted of St. Louis area clergy in support of John Tietjen and the seminary faculty majority = 5; 3) Signers

¹⁰ This data is based on the Endorsees list published at the "Jesus First" website on June 28, 2000. The following statistics are based on the 491 published names.

of the statement in the March 1974 Badger Lutheran, which consisted of Milwaukee area clergy protesting the suspension of the Concordia-St. Louis professors who had "walked out" = 2; 4) "Evangelical Lutherans in Mission" (ELIM) District Chairmen = 2; 5) Seminex graduates = 8; 6) District Presidents ordaining Seminex graduates and disciplined by J.A.O. Preus = 1; 7) Frederick W. Danker's Honor Roll of the "Martyrs" who suffered for the cause of Seminex = 2; 8) "Lutherans Alive" Executive Committee = 1; 9) "Lutherans Alive" Authors = 14; 10) Members of the Committee for "A Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice," in favor of open communion = 9; 11) RIM members = 15; 12) "Fellowship Ministries" associates = 4; 13) Authors of "Different Voices/Shared Visions," advocating woman's ordination = 1; 14) PLI officers = 4. This is only the tip of the iceberg, as it is reasonable to conclude that the majority of the endorsers of "A Call to Affirm Jesus-First Leadership" have sympathized with one or more of these organizations or causes.

One other organizational connection needs to be mentioned. The "Jesus First" magazine encouraged its readers to attend the "DayStar" free conference in January 2000.¹¹ A second "DayStar" conference was held in October 2000. At least three of the speakers at the "DayStar" conferences were endorsers of "Jesus First." "DayStar" appears to have a more radical theological position than "Jesus First," and its associates seem especially concerned to advocate the ordination of women.

All that I have reported so far are simply the unvarnished facts surrounding the organization known as "Jesus First."

¹¹ See JF 1:6. "Day Star" also has a Website at: www.day-star.net, at which many of the essays from the conferences are available for downloading.

These facts are indisputable. The meaning and implications of these facts is necessarily more complex and open to debate. The following is my own interpretation of the facts, based on my study of church history.

I believe that "Jesus First" may best be described as a "coalition of dissenting organizations and movements." Chief among the dissenters are: 1) Seminex supporters, 2) Charismatics, 3) "Church Growth Movement," advocates 4) advocates of "contemporary worship," 5) advocates of woman's ordination, 6) advocates of open communion, and 7) advocates of ecumenical fellowship practices. In order to succeed politically, these divergent dissenters have been forced to work together for a common cause, i.e., the overthrow of traditional Lutheran theology and practice in the Missouri Synod.

We might further categorize the dissenters into three broad groups: Liberals (#s 1, 5, 6, 7 prior paragraph), Charismatics (#2 prior paragraph), and Evangelicals (#3, 4 prior paragraph). What is interesting about Liberals, Charismatics, and Evangelicals is that each represent movements that transcend denominational lines. Each movement self-consciously tries to "reform" those denominations it inhabits from within. In biological terms, this is a parasite-host relationship. Each movement also has a denominational counterpart. The Liberal movement is expressed in the Unitarian-Universalist denomination. The Charismatic movement is expressed in the Pentecostal denominations. The Evangelical movement was originally expressed in the Methodist denomination.¹² Of all these movements, the Evangelical movement has been the most successful in hiding its aims

¹² For this interpretation of the Evangelicals, see The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 2nd ed., p. 486, article on "Evangelicalism."

and true character, but theologically it is pure Wesleyan Methodism.

The categorization of "Church Growth" and "contemporary worship" advocates as "Evangelicals" requires some explanation. The fundamental theological principle of the "Church Growth" movement is that the true church is visible and can be measured. This principle is also a fundamental doctrine of the Evangelical movement and its Methodist counterparts, which profess a "believer's church."

This principle is directly opposed to articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession, which assert that the true church is invisible and therefore unmeasurable. In the Augustana, Lutherans profess that the visible church is a mixture of members of the true church, of hypocrites, and of evil men. "Church Growth" has never been able to answer the criticism that its methods increase the numbers of hypocrites and evil men in a congregation, while at the same time driving out members of the true church. Advocates of "contemporary worship" reveal their religious convictions by their overwhelming preference for worship music of the Evangelical movement. Finally, "Jesus First" has shown support for the book The Goal of the Gospel, which was withdrawn from publication due to theological errors.¹³ This book advocates an Evangelical-Wesleyan-Methodist doctrine of salvation and rejects the Lutheran view.

Each group—Liberal, Evangelical, Charismatic—has seen some success in "re-forming" certain denominations in their own image. The Liberals are the greatest success story, having conquered the Episcopalians, the United Presbyterians, the United Methodists, the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,

¹³ See JF 9:5.

the Church of the Brethren, the Reformed Church in America, and the Disciples of Christ. The Evangelicals have conquered most of the Baptist conventions, some of the orthodox Presbyterians, some of the Reformed, and others. The Charismatic movement seems to have conquered many of the African-American churches, and some of the smaller Protestant churches with Pietist traditions.

What is happening to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today? Three modern religious movements, which are normally antagonistic to each other, have joined hands in "Jesus First" to engineer the overthrow of Lutheranism in this denomination. It has happened before, in those denominations listed above. It can happen again in your synod—and to your home congregation!

I also think that "Jesus First" represents something new on the religious horizon. If "Jesus First" wins the presidency and most of the elections, the ousted "confessional Lutherans" will be sure to fight back, at least for awhile. This will force the three movements—Liberal, Charismatic, Evangelical—to tolerate all of their partners' errors, resulting in a new religious synthesis over the dead bones of C. F. W. Walther.

The **time** to stop "Jesus First" is **now**. If you are not a delegate, impress your concern upon your circuit delegates **now**, before it is too late! Finally, pray that God may have mercy upon his faithful children in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod for at least another generation!

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