

Strangers
in Our Father's House

The Dilemma of
Missouri's Confessional Remnant

Laurence L. White
January 28, 2000

I. Introduction

Missouri In A Post Confessional Era

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has quietly slipped into a what might be called her "Post Confessional Era." While many of our pastors and most of our laity remain comfortably ensconced in a state of complacent indifference, the character of our church has undergone a radical transformation. To be sure, we continue to pay lip service to the importance of doctrine. This is the Missouri Synod, after all, and appearances must be maintained. But all the rhetoric of orthodoxy notwithstanding, doctrine is no longer the decisive factor among us nor has it been for some time. The sleek institutional contours of the New Missouri bear little resemblance to the confessional synod we once were. My own Texas District's President's initiative to do away with the Synod's historic name and replace it with something more up to date and trendy may well be a good idea, for to call the church that we have become the Missouri Synod is false advertising at its worst.

The seamless robe of consistent unity in doctrine and practice which was once our cherished raiment has been replaced with a tattered patchwork coat of many colors as a host of factions and interest groups each vigorously pursues its own theological agenda. Charismatics seek renewal in Missouri with a plethora of Pentecostal signs and wonders. Feminists speak with different voices but share a common vision of a church where the girls can do anything the boys can. Church growth groupies have all the latest techniques to provide us with a Fuller ministry guaranteed to bring in the bodies and the bucks. Old line Elimites and born again Statementarians, who still see Missouri in perspective, are determined to help the Synod come alive, move forward, and put Jesus first. There is a niche for all of them within the New Missouri.

The roots of this transformation can be traced to issues which have been under debate among us for over fifty years, issues that remain unresolved to this day. It is by now quite clear that the political victories of conservatives in the "Great Lutheran Civil War" of the seventies served only to defer the long term impact of cultural and theological trends which have been at work within the Synod for decades. We have learned to our chagrin that nominal political control of denominational structures and fine sounding official positions are nothing more than a pretense of genuine confessionalism when diversity in doctrine and practice persists throughout the church. The Synod's most aggressive and articulate liberals have disappeared into the ELCA by way of the AELC. Nonetheless, with thousands of congregations and pastors swallowed up by the theological black hole of the church growth movement, there is still less doctrinal unity in the LCMS today than there was in 1969 when

J.A.O. Preus first came to power. The time has come to face reality and admit that the conservative crusade to reclaim “*unsere liebe Synode*” has failed.

The dilemma of Missouri’s confessional remnant can only be understood in the broader context of that which is taking place within Western culture. While we were fighting, and often winning, two generations of intramural denominational skirmishes, the doctrinal heritage for which we had been contending was being swept away by cultural trends which had captured our people’s hearts and minds. Missouri’s “John Q. Average Pew-sitter” didn’t know or care much about what was happening at the conventions. Instead, his theology, or lack thereof, was being shaped by the popular culture in which he lived every day. The newspapers and magazines he read, the radio he listened to, the movies he went to see, and above all, the TV before which he sat for hour after hour, all served up a steady diet of relativism, hedonism, and materialism. Slowly, gradually, our people have changed. During the “Battle for the Bible” in the 60’s and 70’s, we could safely assume that if the facts were accurately presented, typical Missouri Synod pastors and layman would respond in a manner consistent with the historic faith of our church. That is no longer true.

We confessionals lost sight of a key fact in this struggle. The playing field was never level. The liberals didn’t have to win many battles in order to prevail in this war. All they had to do was survive and wait us out. They had time and the spirit of the times on their hands. Liberals seemed to recognize from the beginning that if they could just hang in there long enough the tides of history would win the war for them. That’s because the world’s relentless pressure to compromise and conform will always prove irresistible in the end to a church body whose conscience is not completely captive to the Word of God. The church that is not willing to stand resolutely against the culture, enduring the scorn and rejection which is the inescapable cost of such a stand, must ultimately be transformed by the culture.

As commentator Joseph Sobran warns: “*Those who want, above all, to keep up with the times are likely to perish with the times because they are fooled by mere fashion; while those who are willing to appear behind the times are often honored by later generations because they had the undistracted discernment to see what was permanently true and valuable.*”

The Missouri Synod, as she once was, just doesn’t fit in in today’s world. The relativism of our post modern society, where tolerance is the only remaining virtue and judgementalism the only unforgivable sin, provides a congenial environment for theological liberals. They were never much into truth anyway. In today’s world, all truth is relative and only the opinions, inclinations, and emotions of the individual are sovereign. In such a world, a church that is committed to doctrine and defense (*Lehre und Wehre*) is an unacceptable anachronism, a dinosaur that refused to die, an obsolete throwback to a bygone era. Her assertion of absolute truth is perceived as outrageous arrogance; and her attempts at doctrinal discipline are spurned as unbearable offense.

At the same time, Missouri’s defenders failed to recognize, or at least significantly underestimated, the pernicious impact of ecclesiastical politics in the struggle for theological

truth. Politics is by definition the art of the possible. It is about power, and the effective use of power. It deals in compromise, accommodation, and the realistic assessment of that which can be achieved at any given moment. This perspective is inherently inimical to theology and the affirmation of Scriptural truth. This caveat is by no means the standard pietistic disavowal of politics as sordid and worldly, unworthy of the truly spiritual person. Such false dichotomies have no place in the world view of the Biblical Christian. However, those who wish to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints in the real world must recognize the nature of politics and the dynamic of the political process. While politics in the church is inescapable, the truth must always come first, without compromise or concession. The church or the churchman who is unwilling to pay the high political price that truth's priority requires may find that he has gained the whole world only to lose his own soul. Modern Missouri has learned that painful lesson the hard way.

At the same time, all too often, particularly in the politics of the church, an “end justifies the means” amorality comes to prevail. Church politics breed fanaticism and vicious nastiness. Personal integrity, honesty, and honor are cast aside in pursuit of our high and lofty goals. The politics of our church have degenerated into an ongoing minuet of mendacity. We do must be done to achieve and hold on to power, always for the most sanctified reasons, of course. But that quest for power tends to become an end in itself. Churchmen, unfortunately, are not immune from Lord Acton's axiom about power's inherent tendency to corrupt. Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee is often asked why he gave up his role as a Southern Baptist minister to run for political office. Huckabee's wistful response is, “Because I needed a rest from church politics! Secular politics,” he explains, “are as calm as a Sunday School picnic compared to the battles of the SBC.” It is no co-incidence that when Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson decided they were going to organize a grassroots movement take the Southern Baptist Convention back from the liberals, they journeyed to St. Louis to visit with Robert and JAO Preus to learn how it could be done. We in Missouri wrote the book on conservative church politics in the modern era.

II. The Historic Nature of Missouri

I serve as one of the editors of “*Concord*,” a confession publication in the Texas District. Some years ago “*Concord's*” Editorial Board was invited to the District Office in Austin for a meeting with the District's praesidium. The DP and his Vice-Presidents were hopeful that we would stop rocking their institutional boat, and co-operatively go out of business. In the course of that somewhat strained dialog we expressed our concerns about the absence of unity in doctrine and practice among our pastors and congregations. The Vice-Presidents, in turn, argued that such unity is an unobtainable ideal and that, in any case, even if it were theoretically possible, unity in doctrine and practice had never actually

existed within the Missouri Synod. While that may have been the case within the brief span of our lives, it has not always been true. There was indeed a time when doctrinal unity was the treasured hallmark of the LCMS, the defining characteristic of this church. To recall that time today, is not merely an exercise in self-indulgent nostalgia but a reaffirmation of what God would have us be. The prophet Isaiah once pleaded with the people of God to **“Remember the rock from which you were cut and the quarry from which you were hewn.”** (Isaiah 51:1) You see, God’s people in those days had forgotten who they were and what they could be. They had given up. They had given up on truth. They had given up on God. They were blending in and going along, compromising and yielding to the heathen culture all around them. God’s prophet sought to remind the Israelites of what the Lord had done before and what He could do again. **“Remember the rock from which you were cut and the quarry from which you were hewn.”** The prophet’s urgent plea reverberates down across the centuries to us. That which God did in the past He can do again. We don’t have to give up on the truth. We don’t have to settle for pale, anemic, generic Christianity. God can enable us to rise to the challenge of these days with the same fortitude and conviction that He gave to our forefathers.

The conviction of our Synod's founders that unity in doctrine and practice was not only possible but essential was based on their firm belief that the Bible was the inspired and inerrant Word of God; that its meaning was clear; and, that Scripture could be directly applied to present circumstances without hesitancy or doubt. Dr. C.F.W. Walther, Missouri's founding President, declared:

"The Bible, word for word is the changeless eternal Word of God in both Old and New Testaments from Genesis through the Revelation of St. John. Therefore, these Holy Scriptures of the prophets and the apostles are the only rule and norm of all faith; the only source of all saving knowledge; and the only judge of all Christian doctrine in conflict. This written revelation of the most high God, therefore, should not be interpreted either by the blinded reason or the perverted heart of man. It interprets itself. Nothing should be added to it or subtracted from it. No one should deviate either to the left or to the right from its literal meaning. Instead, the words should be accepted as they read with simple, humble, child-like faith." (Walther (1), p. 1)

Addressing the churches of the Synodical Conference in 1888 on the topic of *The Unity of Faith*, Dr. Franz Pieper, Walther's successor and heir, sounded exactly the same theme:

"It is an amazing phenomenon within Christendom that the possibility of agreement in all articles of doctrine is being questioned...It is claimed that we are pursuing a will-of-the-wisp in requiring unity of doctrine...We maintain

the opposite. We agree that unity would be impossible if we were dealing with unity in obscure human opinions or in difficult philosophical problems. By we are dealing here with agreement in the articles of doctrine which have been revealed by God Himself in Holy Scripture. How is this doctrine revealed? Not in an obscure or an unintelligible manner. It does not require a great deal of human skill to understand to understand the revealed truth. This requires only a simple faith in God's Word. He who believes the truth of Scripture has the truth. We are not faced with a situation in which there are only obscure hints and suggestions regarding the truths of faith in God's Word out of which we need to construct the actual articles of faith by means of our own wisdom and skill. It is not a matter of God in His revelation saying "A" and then leaving it up to human wisdom to say "B" and "C" and thus complete the alphabet of Christian doctrine. To the contrary, all articles of Christian doctrine stand revealed in Scripture in clear words. In Holy Scripture God has spelled out the entire A B C's of Christian doctrine. All that is required is an acceptance of what has been revealed, a repeating of what has been spelled out, a simple faith. Holy Scripture is clear and plain for all Christians...He who denies the possibility of oneness in faith must also deny that the Holy Scripture is clear. As surely as the entire Christian faith is clearly revealed in Scripture, so sure is the possibility of unity in the faith." (Pieper (1), p. 9-10)

Dr. Pieper re-iterates the point even more emphatically in a description of the distinctive doctrines of the Missouri Synod written in 1893:

"Christians should never agree to disagree on any article of faith, but earnestly endeavor to bring about an agreement on all doctrines revealed in Holy Scripture. Nothing but the revealed truth, the whole revealed truth - that is the platform which God has made for the Christian, and which every Christian is commanded to stand upon...But is perfect agreement concerning doctrine possible? We most emphatically answer; it is, as the Scriptures are perfectly clear on all articles of faith, every article of faith being revealed at least somewhere in the Scriptures in plain and proper words. God, by graciously giving His Word to men, did not propose to them a collection of riddles, but made His Word to be "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path" (Psalm 119:105), "a light that shineth in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19), "making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7). Erring concerning any article of faith is impossible as long as the words of Scripture are retained as the read. Ere falling into error is possible, the plain words of Scripture must either have been entirely set aside or twisted from their natural meaning according to human reason or feeling." (Pieper (2), 138)

These words may sound strangely naive in our modern sophisticated world where everything is ambivalent gray and nothing seems to be black and white anymore. "God said it. That settles it. And that's all there is to it." It was with this core belief that the unique church body which Missouri once was began.

The conviction that the Bible was the verbally inspired, inerrant Word of God was no mere theological abstraction for Missouri's founders. Because of their belief in inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, they further believed in the perspicuity and the applicability of the Biblical text. This insight is crucial - for if the Word cannot be directly applied to life in our modern world, then the Word cannot be our authority. A few specific examples may serve to illustrate the quantum shift which has occurred in our confidence about the direct applicability of Biblical texts to contemporary circumstances.

Consider, first of all, Romans 16:17-18 and its application to the question unionism, a topic of perennial concern in Missouri. In 1912, Dr. Franz Pieper delivered the opening sermon at the Twenty-fourth Convention of the Synodical Conference. Dr. Pieper's text was Romans 16:17-18. In his application of this controversial passage, Pieper demonstrated classic Missouri's confidence in the continuing relevance, not only of these verses, but of all of God's inspired Word:

*"But isn't the avoidance of all heterodox teachers an unattainable ideal? This is how men see it, but the apostle sees it differently. The apostle is not describing an unattainable ideal which remains somewhere up in the clouds, floating around in the air. He is describing a realistic practice which is to be implemented when he admonishes Christians to **"Mark those who cause divisions and offenses among you contrary to the doctrine that you have learned and avoid them!"** But some will still cry out: How can Christians, simple Christians, recognize heterodox teachers and distinguish between truth and error? But it is precisely simple Christians who are capable of doing this. Their Savior, who calls upon them to remain in His Word, has given them the means in hand to do so. The Holy Scriptures, the Word of the Prophets and the Apostles, is not a mere collection of advice for Christians. It is a lamp for their feet and a light for their path. Christians can only err in their thoughts, speech, or judgement if they hide the light of God's Word under the bushel. If only they will use that which is their light and their right - if they will hear the Word of the Lord and believe - they will know the Truth and the Truth will set them free from slavery to the doctrines of men." (Pieper,4, p.5)*

That same serene confidence in the ongoing relevance of God's holy Word is evidenced in a 1917 *Lutheran Witness* Editorial by F.W.C. Jesse, who bluntly asserts:

"These words of St. Paul thus rebuke, in one embracing sweep, all the

unionistic practices of modern weak-kneed Christianity. In the light of these words, no Christian minister who feels convinced that he and his church teach the Word of God in its truth and purity, can, without sin, permit a minister of another faith in his pulpit - for the Bible says: "Avoid them!" No member of one church who feels convinced that he and his church hold the right faith can, without sin, take active part in the worship, or - still worse - commune at the altar of a church of a different denomination - the Bible says: "Avoid them!" Union services among those who differ in belief are nothing more than a mutual agreement put into practice to violate the command "Avoid them!" And interdenominational organizations and societies and interdenominational or union Bible Classes are, in the light of these words, attempting to break down the wall of separation which according to God's command should remain. These are strong words, you say? Do not blame me, I did not write the Bible. I did not issue the command, "Avoid them!" The Lord has done that. Take your complaints to him." (Jesse, p. 13)

There is absolutely no reluctance here to take the plain admonition of the Biblical text and apply it directly to contemporary circumstances. The fathers were convinced that such direct application was not only possible but required because of the Bible's identity as the authoritative Word of God. That is precisely why God has given His people the Word, so that it can be "*a lamp for their feet and a light for their path.*"

The contrast between this robust confidence and the quavering voice of Modern Missouri could not be more striking. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations addresses the same text in its 1991 Study Document, "*Inter-Christian Relationships.*" The Commission cautions, hesitates, and equivocates:

"It needs to be recognized, however, that the Scriptures do not explicitly and directly address a number of contemporary questions and situations. Attempts to apply individual Bible passages to specific 20th century situations must be made with great care and with an awareness that such applications often cause considerable diversion of opinion. This is particularly the case with New Testament passages which say that Christians are to separate themselves from certain persons, teachings, and practices." (CTCR, 1 p.15)

The key "weasel words" here are "*explicitly*" and "*directly.*" Since the Biblical text does not make explicit or direct reference to the particular details of contemporary denominational structures, or utilize the precise terminology of current ecclesiastical jargon, the Commission finds it virtually impossible to apply the text to our situation. Their approach would appear to be somewhat similar to contending that the 5th Commandment does not prohibit shooting my neighbor with a 22 caliber rifle since that particular firearm is not "*explicitly*" and

“directly” referred to in the text of the commandment. The practical result of such equivocation is to sever modern life from the authority of the Word altogether. The Commission’s pious affirmation that *“all times and conditions, however much they change, remain under the norm of God’s Word”* is rendered meaningless by the immediate qualification: *“we must face the reality that numerous changes in the area of inter-Christian relationships have taken place in the 20th century, requiring that we constantly reapply the Biblical principles within the context of such changing circumstances and perceptions.”* (CTCR,1,p.16) The *“changing circumstances and perceptions”* of the 20th century (as if the changes of our century were somehow unique in the ever changing course of all man’s other centuries) replace the Word of God as the decisive factor in determining our policy. Thus do we become an authority unto ourselves.

A similar devolution from direct application to uncertain ambiguity can be observed in reference to 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12 and their application to the question of women suffrage in the church. In 1897, P.J.G. Hafner quotes these texts in an essay delivered to the Kansas District Convention to prove that only eligible male members should take part in the meetings of the congregation. He concludes his argument with these words:

“God goes on to say, clearly and decisively, that women should not have voice and vote in the meetings of the congregation...Truly Scripture has never spoken more clearly or unmistakably on any other point...We wish to remain with the Word of God, and, therefore say; Let the woman be silent in the church, voice and vote belong only to the man.” (Hafner, p. 90)

Der Lutheraner asserted the same direct application of the texts even more forcefully in a 1909 editorial:

“These words are as clear as day so that no church body need be in doubt over the will of God. And anyone, who, in spite of these words, wants to appoint women as pastors, or give them the right to vote although men are present to administer the congregation, is a person who wants to be wiser than God; who contradicts the Scripture; and who will receive His judgement.” (***Der Lutheraner***, p.287)

A few year later in 1916, St. Louis Professor W.H.T. Dau warned the church not to yield to cultural pressure in this matter and *“nullify”* the clear message of the Bible.

“Neither a certain kind of exegesis nor any amount of casuistic references will change that principle. Men may, of course, get rid of uncomfortable Scriptural texts by a hundred different devices. They have done that as long as there is a Bible in this world. But what have they gained by it?” (Dau, p.

3)

The clarity of those texts, however, evidently diminished over the next few decades. By 1968, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations would argue:

“None of the passages under study gives a clear answer to the question of woman suffrage and of occupying church offices. Any application of them must be made on the basis of inference...Since no doctrinal point can be established except on the basis of a clear passage, the church cannot, on the basis of the texts discussed, adopt any binding regulations on these matters.”
(CTCR 2, pp.9-10)

Once again, on a matter where historic Missouri stood firmly on the basis of a direct application of the Biblical text, Modern Missouri finds herself unable to discern a relevant Word from God. The texts did not change. We did. No startling exegetical breakthrough caused the clarity of those texts to be obscured. We simply decided that the Synod’s historic position was no longer culturally viable. And so, using a number of the “*hundred different devices*” against which Dr. Dau had warned, we got rid of those “*uncomfortable Scriptural texts.*”

If the Bible is the Word of God, verbally inspired and absolutely inerrant, and if that divine Word clearly reveals His Will to His people in every place and time, then unity in doctrine and practice is not only possible but essential within the church of Jesus Christ. Walther's classic 1848 Presidential address leaves no room for doubt as to the nature of the new synod's unity. Any reliance upon institutional identity or upon manmade rules and regulations to establish or maintain the unity of the church is emphatically rejected - in Missouri the Word of God alone shall reign!

“Let us above all and in all matters be concerned about this that the pure doctrine of our dear evangelical Lutheran Church may become known more and more completely among us, that it may be in vogue in all of our congregations, and that it may be preserved from all adulteration and held fast as the most precious treasure. Let us not surrender one iota of the demands of the Word. Let us bring about its complete rule in all of our congregations and set aside nothing of it, even though for this reason things may happen to us, as God wills. Here, let us be inflexible, here let us be adamant. If we do this we need not worry about the success of our labor. Even though it should seem to be in vain, for the Word does not return void but prospers in the things whereto the Lord sent it. By the Word alone, without any other power, the church was founded; by the Word alone all the other deeds recorded in church history were accomplished; by the Word alone

the church also will most assuredly stand also in these days of sore distress, to the end of days. Even the gates of hell will not prevail against it." (Walther (2), p. 176)

This was a straightforward matter of trusting God and obeying his Word. Walther was completely convinced that any church body which was willing to tolerate doctrinal diversity was doomed to division and destruction. In a letter to another of Missouri's founders he wrote:

"If a Lutheran Synod does not want to plant the seeds of dissolution in her very midst, its members must be bound, by provision of its basic law, to refrain from even the most subtle forms of syncretism...Let us faithfully confess the truth, and not attempt to help the kingdom of God by deviating from the instructions that God gave us." (Walther (3), p.121)

In Walther's view, Missouri's insistence upon pure doctrine was not the result of *"egoism, stiff-neckedness, or hatred of peace and unity;"* instead, it was the result of *"love for that true unity which alone pleases God and which rests upon one faith and one confession"* (Walther (4), p. 418) Dr. Walther condemned external union without true unity in the faith within a denomination or between denominations as *"an abomination before God"* which we must guard against like *"a venomous serpent with a shining glittering skin"* (Walther (4), p.418) Such unity may look good on the surface, but it will only bring death and damnation.

Twenty-five years later, at the jubilee celebration of the Synod's silver anniversary, Walther rejoiced that by God's grace, Missouri had become the preeminent witness to the truth of God's Word in America. This was a church in which doctrine came first; a church which was willing to pay the institutional price for the preservation of pure doctrine among our pastors and congregations and the proclamation of the pure doctrine throughout the world. Walther's list of those who battled against the doctrinal and confessional unity of the new church sounds remarkably contemporary:

"What happened when our synod began to testify to the clear truth? From that moment til now, it has had to be engaged in the heat of constant battle against all the enemies of our church, old and new, gathered together, as it were, from all parts of the world into one great army. Sometime the struggle was against the unbelief and mockery of our time which seeks utterly to destroy religion and morals, church and state, divine and human ordinances, under that battle cry of freedom and progress. Sometimes the struggle was against religious unionism which now pervades all Christendom like a pestilence, and which at the outset chokes and kills all love for the clear truth.

Sometimes it was against the arrogance of the antichristian papacy, which is rising up again with ever increasing insolence. Sometimes it was against neo-lutheranism, corrupted by rationalistic, unionistic, revivalistic, or Romanizing teachings, principles, rules, and practices. Yes often we had to contend against false spirits within our own midst. How did it happen that our synod, in the midst of these battles, in the face of unceasing bitter attacks and subtle temptations was not wrecked, like a small frail vessel, by howling windstorms and foaming ocean waves, but successfully, though with groaning and sighing kept her course and stayed with the old doctrines of the old true church for a quarter century?...God has also blessed us during these past twenty-five years, blessed us in overflowing measure above all our prayers, hopes and understanding...The sparks of our testimony for the truth and over against falsehood, for godliness and against all ungodly ways, have flared in countless places and have finally kindled a fire which now illumines this whole western country...He has made our Synod above others the bearer, preserver, and witness of His Word in this country for twenty-five years, and thereby has prepared for this western country a time of gracious visitation through our witness...It is God alone who has permitted us to know, believe, love, preach, and suffer for His pure Word. Therefore, not to our glory, but only to the glory of this our God, may our mouth today be filled with praise and mirth."
(Walther (5), p.103)

Whether the issue was church and ministry, the millennium, or predestination, Missouri prized doctrinal integrity more highly than the preservation of institutional unity. The Synod was willing to practice doctrinal discipline, to exclude those who teaching differed from that of historic Lutheranism, and to publicly condemn aberrant teaching and practice in other Lutheran churches.

Near the end of his life, Christian Hochstetter, chronicler of the synod's early history, reminded Missouri that a faithful church must remain militant, constantly on guard against those who would deny or compromise the truth. The historian had this to say about the church body he helped to form:

"Shall we look on complacently while sophisticated intellectuals attempt to place blind reason above God's Word and deprive the Word of its supreme authority? Shall we quietly acquiesce when we see false ecumenists surrendering the heavenly truth by allowing error to co-exist in the church? Shall we keep silence while innumerable souls are being made uncertain of the Doctrine of Grace? No, this we cannot do. This would dishonor God. The well being of the church requires doing battle against its enemies. Only by

incessant warfare against error and errorists can the church retain its treasure and crown. Those who think it best for the church to provide a peaceful appearance without strife and dissension are indulging in a delusion that is in accord with neither Scripture nor experience. How can the church consider itself to be in a happy, healthy condition when truth and error are living peaceably side by side and the wolves are allowed to decimate the flock?... As it is the church must fight; peace with errorists would be nothing but a graveyard peace...So it came about also in the Missouri Synod that false spirits arose in its midst. The temptation was great to tolerate these spirits. For in other synods it is common to tolerate deviations in particular doctrinal points and even to join in altar and pulpit fellowship with heterodox groups, as long as one is still Lutheran in name. However, it is certain that where there is no doctrinal discipline the gates have been opened to the very enemy who is undermining the walls of the church. There the church becomes the playground of such to whom Luther exclaimed in Marburg in 1529, "You have another spirit than we." The Missouri Synod could remain an orthodox and internally united church body only by following the command of God and withdrawing not only from fellowship with the sects who are outside of its own camp, but also from fellowship with the false spirits which arose in its own midst. Just as sincerely as the members of the Missouri Synod extended the hand of brotherhood to those who stood on the same doctrinal basis or endeavored to stand decisively upon it also in their church practice - just so mandatory was it for them to bear testimony by word and action to the fact that an external obligation to Scripture and the Confessions which existed in the official documents was not sufficient for church fellowship. For where a church body tolerates lax practices in matters of faith or even declares it to be desirable, it has either already collapsed internally or it has never attained to the status of a clearly proclaimed and practiced confession of the truth. Where false teaching and practice is not resisted there a formal acknowledgement of the orthodox doctrine cannot long survive...That is the Word, the faith in which the Missouri Synod has remained until now...No church body can be granted any greater grace than to be made by God the bearer of His pure doctrine. The more clearly we actually recognize the fact that it is not our meritorious achievement to be holding firm to the pure Gospel, but that it is the power of God's grace that holds us, the more earnestly we must watch and pray that no one and nothing rob us of our crown." (Hochstetter, p.20,21)

Note well Hochstetter's emphasis on the vital importance of doctrinal discipline. He argues that Missouri is what she is because the Synod has resisted the temptation of toleration. *"Where there is no doctrinal discipline the gates have been opened to the very*

enemy who would undermine the walls of the church.” Without that discipline the church is reduced to serving as a “playground” for those of a different spirit and “wolves are allowed to decimate the flock.” Genuine orthodoxy cannot long survive, he warns, without firm resistance to “false teaching and practice.” The church must remain ever militant, constantly at war with error. Missouri’s founders understood that “only by incessant warfare against error and errorists can the church retain its treasure and crown.” Our fathers refused to settle for external, institutional unity without complete agreement in Biblical doctrine and practice. The delusion of “a graveyard peace” might have been good enough for other denominations, but it was not good enough for Missouri. In this church the Word of God would reign supreme, no matter what the cost.

Dr. Pieper's description of the Missouri's historic unity says it well:

We stand in a fellowship which holds fast the entire Word of God, the entire revelation, a fellowship in which souls are properly cared for and in which God is given the honor that is due Him. What a blessing we share! We cannot sufficiently praise it. This blessing is granted to us through the free grace of God...It is God who has given us understanding so that we are not caused to vacillate by the unionistic talk about love and peace, but rather that we know that the first article of love to God and men is that we firmly hold to and confess the total Word of God... We dare not allow any other concept of unity to arise among us than the unity of faith which is in harmony with Scripture, the agreement in all articles of Christian doctrine...What value would there be in any external co-operation in church work if the boundaries of our faith were not correctly established according to God's Word and we did not remain one in all articles of doctrine established for us in God's Word? If we, in a unionistic fashion, wanted to surrender this or that doctrine of the Word of God: if, under the pretext of allowing love to hold sway, we were to allow false doctrines to have citizenship rights among us, then all of our outward standing together and working together would be a caricature of the God-desired unity. The unity of faith is most seriously threatened when indifference to false doctrine moves in. The unity of faith is immediately destroyed when one part adopts and holds fast false doctrine...Such a unity of faith as God has entrusted to us is indeed rare in the world. Therefore we should most earnestly foster it with all God-given means.” (Pieper (1), p.21-22)

For historic Missouri, unity in the faith was not merely a matter of formal commitment to official doctrinal statements but of that which was actually taught in the pulpits and classrooms of the church body. Responding to criticism from the General Council, an association of eastern synods which acknowledged the confessions but failed to

practice doctrinal discipline, Pieper emphasized the crucial importance of consistent doctrinal discipline and described the reality of doctrinal unity in the Missouri Synod in this way:

"So also the "Missourian" perspective is this; it is unfair and unjust to charge a church body with false doctrine if that fellowship practices doctrinal discipline and attempts, according to the Word of God, to put an end to the false doctrine which has arisen among its individual members. However, it is completely fair, proper, and required by God's Word to charge that church body with false doctrine if the fellowship has told its individual members and indeed its leaders, 'You may say whatever you want to.'" We Missourians only then hold a church body as such to be orthodox when the true doctrine sounds forth from all of its pulpits and professor's chairs and in all writings which are published within the church body, and every false doctrine, on the contrary, as soon as it makes its appearance, is eliminated in the way which God directs. According to this standard we judge others; according to this standard we also submit to be judged ourselves. We Missourians must and will be content to be judged according to the doctrine which is taught by our individual pastors whether in San Francisco or New York, St. Paul or New Orleans, or which is taught by our publications whether they be published officially or unofficially. If anyone should prove against us that even one pastor preached false doctrine, or even one periodical stood in the service of false doctrine, and we did not eliminate this false doctrine, we would thereby have ceased to be an orthodox synod and would have become a unionistic fellowship. In short, the mark of an orthodox church body is that throughout that church the true doctrine alone prevails, not only officially and formally but also in actual reality. (Pieper (3), p.262)

This is a concept with immense practical application for the life of the church. Dr. Pieper goes so far as to argue:

"The entire practice of our church rests upon this fact. For example, we unhesitatingly transfer members from our congregations in St. Louis to our sister congregations in San Francisco. But this only occurs because we know that the members who have been released will find the pure doctrine in all of its articles in that congregation. Under the same assumption, other congregations can release the members to the congregations in St. Louis. The unhesitating transfer of members to other congregations of our fellowship would be unconscionable if we could not assume that the pure doctrine sounds forth from every pulpit within the Synodical Conference. If we were to define an orthodox fellowship in any other way, if we would say it does not depend

on the doctrine which actually sounds forth but only on the officially recognized doctrine; or if we believed that it was sufficient for a majority of the pastors to teach the right doctrine, we would then have already given up the distinction between an orthodox church and a unionistic fellowship. We would then be deceiving orthodox Christians when we encouraged them to join any one of our congregations without misgivings. (Pieper (3), p. 262)

Most would scorn this concept of doctrinal unity as "*a utopian ideal*" and "*an impossibility*." However, Pieper contends, by the grace of God this impossibility has become reality in the Missouri Synod. The fathers labored under no illusions as to the difficulty of maintaining genuine unity in doctrine and practice. Every facet of the Synod's life was dedicated to preserving and protecting that precious unity. Every pastoral conference and every synodical convention diligently dealt with matters of doctrine and they were dealt with in such a way that all doubts and divergent opinions were removed on the basis of the Word of God. Walther pleaded with the pastors and congregations of the Synod to recognize the value of this God-given treasure and earnestly strive to preserve and protect it.

"If we wish to preserve this jewel of ours, then every one must work at it in his position and calling and all our church institutions must help toward that end. You fathers and mothers must already lay the foundation at home, and instill in your children early in life pure doctrine and understanding and an inner love for the same together with an aversion for all false doctrine. In your schools, you teachers must faithfully further this work begun at home, and where it has not been started, make a beginning thereof with a burning zeal so that you are not hindrances, but true helpers to the holy ministry. You pastors must not be satisfied just to give what you already have but rather to continue to read and study day and night in order that you may become richer in doctrine and understanding, stronger in refutation of error and more zealous in the work of the Lord. Think for a moment, to stand still here is to step backward; not to grow is to die. We professors in our institutions for the training of servants in school and church must unceasingly give thoughts to making our institutions genuine schools of the prophets and high beacon

lights for the land for which we would gladly see all else fail, if only the light of the pure doctrine of the apostles and the prophets continues to burn brightly. Even at our prep schools we must prepare for this with the highest earnestness.

Toward this goal we must always carefully and zealously make full use of our pastoral conferences and synodical conventions.

We must see to it that all of our publications and all of the printing means that are at our disposal are used with ever greater conscientiousness so that our readers are led to seek in our publications not interesting light religious reading, but rather nothing else than purity, basics and firmness in doctrine and defense - no whoring with the spirit of the times, no amorous ogling of false doctrine, no respect of persons. Our synodical guardians, our presidents, must be concerned not merely with being guardians of human regulations but rather guardians of the purity of doctrine and understanding."

(Quoted in Pieper, 1, p. 22-23)

Professor W.H.T. Dau issued a stirring summons to a new generation of Missourians in 1922, during the synod's 75th Anniversary celebration;

"Let the generation of Missourians into whose hands the future work of our synod will be committed remember that doctrinal and confessional fidelity and a church practice which strives honestly to measure up to the professed principles is the only reliable basis of our hope for future success, while the opposite course spells decay and ruin, slow it may be but sure...Let no one become dismayed at the criticism that the Missouri fathers were a stern, unloving set of fighters, who forgot the gentler aspects of Christianity over their devotion to rigorous discipline. None that raise this charge come into court with clean hands. The love that can see some one err and not tell him of it is no love. The mind that can yield to an equivocal peace in which plain truth is sacrificed is not truly liberal, but fatally narrow and bigoted because it exhibits all its generous qualities only to the side which opposes truth. With all their aggression and rigor and exclusiveness the men

who built up the Missouri Synod were true Christian gentlemen; for though they minced no words when they spoke on any issue of the day, they spoke the truth, and they spoke it in love. We shall take up their testimony and pass it on." (Ebenezer, p. 535)

At the 1923 (Fort Wayne) convention of the Synod, St. Louis Professor Frederick Bente also acknowledged our debt to the Synod's fathers and affirmed his own generation's resolve to be faithful to that great legacy:

*"Our fathers in the faith surrendered nothing; made no concessions; deviated not a hair's breadth from the old Lutheran position concerning the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. They delivered to us a fortress intact - nowhere a rock torn from the foundation, nowhere a breach, all walls strong and plumb. Results? Down to the present day not a solitary modernist has ever been heard on the floor of the Synod which our fathers founded. Nor has a liberalist ever occupied a chair in her colleges and seminaries or filled a pulpit of her congregations. Concordia Publishing House, also founded by our fathers, in its publications from the first issue of **Der Lutheraner** down to its latest book or pamphlet, there cannot be found a single sentence endorsing Darwinism, evolution, or any other liberal doctrine. The entire literature of our Synod does not contain a single statement which in any way denies the incarnation, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection or any other Christian miracle, nor even a single passage that charges the Bible with any kind of error - religious, historical, chronological, or astronomical. This large convention, together with all the pastors, professors, teachers, and laymen which it represents believes and confesses the old creeds of Christendom...entirely unanimously and without reservation, or without taking exception to a single clause. We all, with all our hearts still sing all our old Lutheran hymns. As for the old Lutheran liturgies and sacred forms for baptism, the Holy Eucharist, ordination, etc., there cannot be found among us a single*

pastor or congregation desiring to modify them doctrinally."
(Bischoff, p. 12)

Three years later, in 1926, Karl Kretzschmar explained the unique character of the Missouri Synod in this way at a convention of the Western District:

"Missourianism, we do not hesitate to say, is Lutheranism in its purest form. It subscribes with full assent and without reservation to all the confessional documents of Lutheranism as found in the Book of Concord of 1580...Missouri Lutheranism is the most outspoken voice in Christendom today for the verbal inspiration and literal truth of the Scriptures and for all other fundamental teachings of Christendom. There are in its midst no divided opinions on such fundamental questions as how the universe came into existence and whence man is. It does not treat with silence or with diplomatic evasions any plainly revealed doctrine of Holy Writ. It does not consider as open questions such matters as are clearly set forth in the Scriptures. It straddles no fundamental issues. Having weighed the religion of the lodge on the scales of divine truth and found it wanting, it does not hesitate to declare its conviction that no one can be a consistent Christian and a good lodge member at the same time. Missourianism is outspoken in its condemnation of Romanism, its opposition to sectarianism, and its renunciation of worldliness in any form. It refuses to enter into compromises with the enemies of the truth and will join in no unionistic agreements with those who teach doctrines contrary to the faith once delivered to the saints. Missourians do not claim that there are no laggards among them, that all things are as they ought to be in their midst. But Missourianism is what it is because it makes earnest and consistent efforts to practice what it preaches. It addresses itself more diligently and effectively to the activities committed to the Lutheran Church than any other division of that church in the world. Faithful to the charge of bringing up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, it

surpasses any other denomination in Protestantism. It does not indefinitely tolerate departure from the divine rule of faith and life. It bears with the weak, but it will not bear with the willful offender. Briefly stated, Missourianism is consistent Lutheranism in doctrine and practice, no more, no less...It is its much maligned narrow mindedness which had made Missouri strong; for while it has indeed been a thorn in the side of all false prophets and their disciples, of all advocates of dishonorable compromises between truth and error, of all champions of worldliness within and without the Church, it has found particular favor with God, as may be seen from the abundant success with which the work of Missouri has been blessed. However, Missouri has become what it is through no merit of its own. Possessing the whole collection of divine revelation in their full truth and purity is not a result of human achievement, but a gift of undeserved divine mercy. Nor is there any personal merit in the consistency with which Missouri has practiced what it preached. Synodical conceit and self-praise would be the first steps in a movement which must eventually lead to a complete loss of everything true Lutherans hold dear. Missouri Lutheranism is God's own handiwork and Missouri's consistency is a divinely bestowed gift. Only as we humbly confess our own unworthiness, gratefully acknowledge the mercy of Him by whose grace we live and are what we are, and faithfully administer what has been entrusted to us, will we Missourians continue to enjoy Lutheranism in its highest form." (Kretzschmar, p. 6-7)

As one reads between the lines in these fervent defenses of classic Missouri it is evident that a subtle process of change was already under way by the 1920's. The dynamic theological vitality of the first two generations was gradually being replaced by a sense of institutional conservatism. The leadership's defense of the Synod's fathers was, at least to some extent, now directed to critics within the Synod itself. Nonetheless, the Synod remained strongly committed to its identity as an undivided confessional church in which consistent unity in doctrine and practice prevailed. In 1923, commenting on the divisive

modernist/fundamentalist battles that were tearing other Protestant denominations apart, Missouri Synod President Frederick Photenhauer confidently asserted: *"To speak of a party split or divisions in the Missouri Synod, of a liberal and a conservative party among us, would be absurd."* (Graebner, p.188) Less than two decades later that which had seemed absurd was becoming reality. Ironically, Photenhauer himself would become the first casualty of Missouri's party split. The cumulative result of the changes to come over the next seventy-five years would be the loss of Missouri's most treasured possession, her unique identity as a confessional church, fully united in doctrine and practice. In his book *Uncertain Saints*, Dr. Alan Graebner, certainly no bronze age Missouri conservative, expressed this sense of loss by aptly choosing to entitle the chapter on the Synod's most recent history *"Humpty Dumpty and All the Kings Men."*

The New Missouri has wandered far from her historic home. Like foolish Esau she has exchanged her precious birthright for a worthless bowl of worldly porridge. Next we must turn to an assessment of how we have come to this sorry state.

III. The Statement of the Forty-four **A Crucial Turning Point**

The New Missouri has demonstrated a curious inability to resolve theological problems in a Biblical manner. Political expedience and the realities of institutional power have consistently taken precedence over theological integrity for both moderates and conservatives. Forthright doctrinal discussion has virtually disappeared among us, replaced by diplomatic double talk and discreet evasion as both sides vie for strategic advantage in the ongoing struggle for control of the denomination. The temptations of power have proven to be irresistible for conservatives and liberals alike.

Benjamin Franklin once lamented the disinclination of his countrymen to learn the lessons of history with the tart observation: *"Experience teaches a dear school, but fools will learn in none other."* We in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod have spent all too much time in the *"dear school"* of experience because of a lack of awareness of our own history. The high cost of our tuition in that school has been paid in bitter controversy and division. Unmindful of the past, we have failed to understand the present, and are unable to anticipate the future. While the Synod has lurched from one crisis to the next, the nature of our church

has slowly but inexorably changed. The historical roots of this pattern in which politics consistently takes precedence over theology can be traced back all the way to the opening salvos of the "Great Lutheran Civil War" in the 1940's and the battle over the *Statement of the Forty-four*.

With the coming of *A Statement's* fiftieth anniversary in 1995, nostalgic reminiscences of the document's pivotal significance could be heard throughout the Synod's moderate wing. In my own Texas District, the District President sent a copy of one of the accompanying documents from *A Statement* to every pastor in the District. He indicated that in his opinion, the basic threat confronting our church body today is that of legalism and urged us to study the document personally and in our pastoral conferences as a pertinent warning against the legalistic peril. Add to all this the disclosure that Dr. Bohlmann, our President Emeritus, has now revealed himself to be a born again Statementarian, and it is obvious that this particular struggle merits at least a few moments of our time.

The Statement Controversy is more than merely the initial skirmish in the "Great Lutheran Civil War." The fact that this battle ended in a truce rather than a victory for either side not only guaranteed a resumption of hostilities, but also established a crucial precedent. We see in this conflict and the manner in which it was suspended the emergence of what might almost be called the New Missouri's standard operating procedure in dealing with doctrinal disagreement. That procedure would prove to have profound implications for the identity of our church.

In 1974, during my last year at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, a group of the more conservative students on campus arranged for a series of informal gatherings with leading faculty members on Sunday evenings. Our first guest was Dr. Clarence Spiegel, already in his seventies, and a longtime veteran at the Seminary. Dr. Spiegel drove up in his massive Cadillac, smiled his impish smile under a halo of fuzzy white hair, and sat down in my living room with a bottle of beer. This was, of course, the year of the Seminex walkout at St. Louis, and our first question to the venerable professor was "How did we get into this mess?" His response took over two hours as he reviewed forty years of history. Let me attempt to cover some of the same ground a bit more rapidly.

Spiegel contended that the initial overt indication of the existence of two theological factions within the Synod was the appearance of Missouri's first organized political campaign at the 1935 Cleveland Convention. Dr. Frederick Pfoth, synodical president since 1911, was standing for re-election at Cleveland. The silver haired president, for whom English was a sometimes uncomfortable second language, was the stalwart epitome of Missouri's "old guard. The general assumption was that he would be re-elected without significant opposition. Missouri had never unseated an incumbent president. In this establishment oriented, conservative church body, the concept was almost unimaginable.

For such a thing to happen a great deal of organizational work would had to have been done well in advance. But it did happen, thus indicating that behind the scenes pockets of unrest and theological dissent had come to exist in Missouri long before the 1935 convention. Pfothenauer failed to gain a majority on the first ballot. The second runner up was J.W. Behnken, the Synod's 1st Vice President. Tension gripped the convention hall as it became obvious that something very unusual was about to happen.

Dr. Spiegel's memories of this dramatic moment were particularly vivid because he happened to be the pastor of the local congregation in Cleveland which hosted the 1935 convention. He recalled being summoned from the vestry of his church after the opening service by Vice President Lankenau who had come from the floor of the convention, dismayed at the organized attempt to oust Pfothenauer. Something had to be done, the Vice President declared. But by then it was already too late to stop the well organized campaign. Behnken repeatedly pleaded with Pfothenauer for permission to address the delegates in support of the incumbent. With the gentlemanly grace of a bygone era, the president refused, saying, "*You must not say anything. Let God decide the matter by the vote of the convention.*" On the next ballot Behnken was elected. Missouri's introduction to church politics was a resounding success - but it did not stop there.

The group that engineered Pfothenauer's ouster was emboldened by their success at Cleveland. That which they had been doing surreptitiously for a many years now moved confidently into the open. They continued to meet regularly in a series of "Roundtable Discussions" during subsequent years. With the former president, and the "old guard" which he personified, safely out of the way, the time had come to begin to openly nudge backward Missouri into the American Lutheran mainstream. In 1945, they issued the bitterly contested *Statement of the Forty-four*, along with an essay entitled *32 Theses Against Unevangelical Practice* by Pastor H.C. Schwan. Shortly thereafter, a companion volume of supporting articles, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, was published. The forty four signers of *A Statement*, styled by their opponents as the "Statementarians," included some of the most prominent pastors and professors in the LCMS - men like Richard Caemmerer, O.P and A.R. Kretzmann, Theodore Graebner, William Arndt, and Oswald Hoffmann.

A Statement's focus was inter-Lutheran relationships. It denounced the "ingrown legalism and traditionalism" which had crippled the Synod's theological vitality. It must be admitted that there was some truth to their charges. Our theological arteries had hardened a bit over the years. But more significantly, *A Statement's* twelve theses constituted what Kurt Marquart has aptly described as "a radical, revolutionary overturning of the Lutheran doctrine of the church." (Marquart, p.58)

One contemporary observer noted that the publication had "set Missouri aflame." While scathing denunciations poured forth from across the church, the Statementarians

actively lobbied throughout the church body for additional support and hundreds of other pastors added their names to those of the original Forty-four. Five of the St. Louis Seminary's best known professors were Statementarians, while the faculty of the Springfield Seminary formally rejected the document as false doctrine. The harsh words of condemnation with which the Springfield faculty deplored *A Statement* and its divisive potential are indicative of the intensity of this debate:

"It has been a real shock to us that such a loveless, unmotivated, and widely disseminated attack should be made on brethren in Synod by men in prominent positions, presidents of districts, leaders of youth or of the LLL, a university president, and worst of all, five members of a theological faculty in our Synod. Such an attack cannot but bias many young and inexperienced pastors to whom it has been mailed...The Statement leaves the impression that it is veiled propaganda for a liberal and loose Lutheranism...You are pouring water on the wrong fire. We certainly are not with you in this unhappy undertaking, brethren." (Robinson,p.268,269)

President Behnken protested the issuance of *A Statement* and made it very clear that he also believed it to contain false doctrine. A Committee of ten Statementarians was selected to meet with ten Synod representatives appointed by Behnken in an attempt to achieve reconciliation. The Committee of Ten and Ten met for a total of eleven days during 1946. The discussion focused on the application of Romans 16:17,18 and the synodical representatives were convinced that genuine progress was being made. But the committee's work was cut short.

On January 6, 1947, Behnken, the Synod's Vice-presidents, and Lawrence Meyer, a key presidential advisor and the Synod's Director of Public Relations, met with the "Continuation Committee" which represented the Forty-four in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The President demanded that the signers retract *A Statement*. The Continuation Committee flatly refused. Lawrence Meyer then offered a compromise solution under which *A Statement* would simply be withdrawn as a basis for discussion. After receiving assurances that their concerns would be discussed and that individual signers would not be subject to ongoing criticism or discipline, the Continuation Committee agreed. The document was not retracted. Its content was not rejected. Its authors were not reprimanded or disciplined. No one's position changed. The dissidents were guaranteed the right to go on advocating their views and agitating on behalf of them throughout the church body. *A Statement* was merely withdrawn, and the Synod's leaders went on their way as though this bit of procedural sleight of hand had made the problem disappear.

Evidently President Behnken feared that the growing controversy over *A Statement* would result in schism. With the Synod about to celebrate its 100th anniversary that could

not be allowed to happen. Institutional concerns took priority over theology. Historian J.T. Robinson offers this perceptive evaluation of the administration's perspective: "*With the centennial convention of the Synod less than six months away Dr. Behnken was fearful that the Synod, instead of celebrating a triumphant 100 years, would be torn apart...The agreement did serve as a device for synodical officials, especially the president, to maintain an artificial unity...*" (Robinson, p.304,306) The external unity of the church body was preserved but at what cost? The *venomous serpent with a shining glittering skin,* against which Dr. Walther had warned was now coiled around the heart of Missouri.

Both the President's own Committee of Ten and some of the leading Statementarians vehemently protested what they condemned as a "*Machiavellian*" turn of events. The President's committee went so far as to submit a formal protest to the 1947 Convention but their Memorial was brushed aside on procedural grounds and never considered. A political solution was implemented to resolve a theological problem.

It was plain to any informed observer that two opposing theological factions now existed within the Synod. Our doctrine was changing but rather than tell the church the uncomfortable truth, the Synod's leadership chose to maintain a reassuring fiction. Their soothing refrain was, "*The problem has been solved. All is well in Missouri. Our historic unity in doctrine and practice is fully intact.*" They swept the problem under the carpet and hoped that it would go away. But of course it didn't. Ignoring false doctrine doesn't make it disappear - it only allows it to grow and to spread.

Writing in 1947, Dr. E.W.A. Koehler of Concordia River Forest warned:

"As long as the Statement stands, it will continue to be a barrier between the signers and the rest of us. And its iniquitous leaven will work and continue to work; it will pass from professors to students and preachers to hearers. Also this leaven must be purged out. If the Statement is not retracted by the signers, it should be rejected by the Synod." (Koehler, p. 4)

Subsequent events have demonstrated the prophetic accuracy of Dr. Koehler's warning.

The Synod never did reject *A Statement* and over the next twenty-five years the principles which it advocated became the standard doctrine and practice of Missouri. As one of the signers later contended "*Yesterday's heresy became today's orthodoxy.*" (Peperkorn, p.71) One would be hard pressed to discover differences between *A Statement* and the CTCR's 1969 document *Theology of Fellowship*, written to validate a declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC. More recently, many of the fundamental difficulties in the current CTCR's *Inter-Christian Relationships*, and its flirtation with the levels of fellowship concept, can be traced to errors first publically expressed among us in the *Statement of the Forty-four*. The fateful consequences of our failure to honestly confront those issues

continues to haunt us fifty year later.

But the significance of this sequence of events is much more profound than the specific theological issues addressed in *A Statement*. Our journey down the twisting path that has led us to the Post Confessional Era in which we now find ourselves began at the point where we were content to settle for the semblance of orthodoxy rather than endure the struggles and face the institutional risks that contending for its reality would have entailed. Pastor H.D. Mensing, one of Dr. Behnken's negotiators on the Committee of Ten, bluntly assessed the long term implications of this failure for Missouri's future. Writing in 1947, shortly before he left the Synod in protest, Mensing declared:

"Two contradictory positions on the doctrine of church fellowship, that of the reaffirmed Brief Statement of 1932, and that of the withdrawn but not retracted Chicago Statement of 1945 cannot both stand in Synod without our Synod itself becoming a unionistic fellowship. The only Scriptural way to dispose of false doctrine which has been publicly taught and professed is to insist upon the renunciation and repudiation of the error by those who have espoused it (Galatians 5:9), or, after the failure of efforts to achieve this God-pleasing result, to sever church fellowship with such errorists, in accordance with the clear command of Romans 16:17,18 'avoid them.'" (Mensing p.7)

James Adams, Religion Editor of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, offered the same assessment from the opposite end of the theological spectrum in his 1977 book *Preus of Missouri*:

"If the much touted consensus on church policies was what held Missouri together, it in fact had been an ecclesiastical powder keg since at least 1945. That year forty four "liberal" pastors and professors circulated a document criticizing the "narrow legalism" of virtually all Missouri policy. This brazen manifesto was quickly challenged by synodical authorities, but the "forty-four" were persistent, holding out almost two years before agreeing to "withdraw" their statement. A facade of consensus was put up by 1950. Nothing was conceded either to the would be reformers or to the sizeable minority who wanted them disciplined or even ousted. Missouri at mid century was losing its innocence." (Adams, p. 23)

IV. The New Missouri **Maintaining the Facade**

The nature of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod changed in 1947 when a pragmatic decision was made to apply a political solution to a theological problem. From that time on, we have been a church body in official denial. We established and carefully maintained an institutional myth of unity while living with the reality of increasing diversity. To use James Adam's colorful image, we have indeed been a "powder keg" waiting to explode.

In the aftermath of the Statement Controversy the contours of the New Missouri were clearly revealed. The Synod's majority now belonged neither to the militants on the "confessional" right nor their counterparts on the "evangelical" left (using each factions label of preference). The numbers were in the center, traditional, inclined to support the status quo, and concerned about institutional integrity and continuity. Frederick Danker, who helped lead the St. Louis majority into exile at Seminex, writes:

"With its customary institutional serenity, the Synod in convention in 1950 heard both sides, assured itself that pure doctrine remained unimpered, and recommended matters for continued study by the members of the Synod. Out of it all came an uneasy armistice..This was no time to rock the boat. Mainstreamers, for the most part voting straight policy-making committee tickets, and wary of extremists on either side were relieved..." (Danker, p.27)

This basic configuration has remained unchanged ever since. The reality that the Center holds the power has determined the ambiguous course of the New Missouri. The Synod's modern era has seen four basic power shifts. In each case the transition represented the establishment of a new Center coalition with either the Left or the Right. The first was in 1935, when a Center/Left coalition succeeded in the ouster of the "Old Guard" administration of Frederick Photenhauer. The "Young Turks" convinced the Center that the time had come for Missouri to move beyond the confines of her German ghetto to become a truly American, mainstream denomination. The second pivotal transition came in 1969, as J.A.O. Preus forged a Center/Right coalition to defeat incumbent president Oliver Harms and move against the St. Louis faculty majority. In this instance the catalyst for change was the "Battle for the Bible," as the Center became restive over the push for ALC fellowship and theological innovations at the Seminary. Preus' much heralded "move toward the middle of the road" in the late 70's and the subsequent elections of Ralph Bohlmann by a Center/Left coalition constituted Modern Missouri's third basic power shift. It is to J.A.O. Preus' credit as a consummate church politician that he was able to mastermind two Center coalitions, one with the Right and one with the Left. In the midst of the Seminex ordination battle with rebellious District presidents, Dr. Preus correctly recognized that the Center had grown weary of the struggle and longed for a return to normalcy. The conservatives who had originally elected him were promptly dismissed as "crazies on the right" and a new coalition was formed. In many ways this crafty, enigmatic man is the personification of Modern

Missouri. The fourth and most recent transition came in 1992 as the Center, concerned that Ralph Bohlmann's bitter vendetta against Robert Preus could result in schism, joined with the Right to narrowly elect A.L. Barry. Since then, Barry's presidency has remained sufficiently non-controversial to maintain that shaky coalition. Consistent confessional leadership would have ruptured the coalition, driving the center back into the waiting arms of the left. Accordingly, the administration has been forced to content itself with a series of fine confessional publications, largely financed outside of synodical channels. Recalcitrant officials within the system have simply ignored the president's pronouncements and gone on their own way. Where discipline has been attempted, as in the cases of DP's Muller and Behnke, the outcomes have been ambiguous at best. Government by coalition militates against decisive action and necessitates compromise. When the coalition government in question is ecclesiastical, and the policies being determined pertain to that which the church is to teach and confess, the concessions necessary to achieve consensus will inevitably water down and ultimately undermine the Truth.

Until 1947, Missouri had always been willing to pay the price of confessional integrity. Dr. Walther was absolutely unequivocal on this point when he defined Missouri's attitude in 1868:

"No error, nothing that is contradictory to the Word of God, may be granted the right of existence in the orthodox church; no one in the orthodox church has any permission to depart from the Word of God even in the smallest point, whether he does so negatively or positively, directly or indirectly; every departure from the clear Word of God within the Lutheran Church, even though it should consist in nothing more than denying that Balaam's ass spoke, demands that steps be taken to correct such departure; finally, when all instruction, admonition, warning, threatening, and manifested patience are fruitless and ineffective and the respective person or communion refuses to renounce their contradiction of the clear Word of God, expulsion or schism will have to follow." (Walther, C.F.W. 7, p.123)

Everyone would agree that what was at stake in the battle over *A Statement* involved a great deal more than the vocal ability of Balaam's ass, but for the first time the Synod was not willing to pay the price of confessional integrity. Error was officially allowed to co-exist with the truth and at that moment the nature of our church changed.

We failed to recognize that change, or perhaps we simply could not bring ourselves to admit that a change had taken place. In the face of proliferating doctrinal diversity we have nurtured a fictional facade of theological consistency and unity. Behind the shelter of that facade, throughout the fifties and sixties, self-styled moderates labored to drag Missouri into the mainstream. Our doctrines of Holy Scripture and the church were undermined and

abandoned by key synodical administrators and a growing majority of the St. Louis faculty while the Synod was endlessly assured that nothing had changed. By the late sixties, the changes had progressed so far that it was no longer possible to maintain the crumbling facade. It finally collapsed amid recrimination and controversy made all the more bitter by a sense of betrayal.

Even after the restoration of conservatives to denominational dominance in the early seventies, however, the malignant pattern of applying political solutions to theological problems continued to prevail. By and large, the transition from moderate to conservative control was characterized not by forthright theological discussion but by political maneuvering and procedural wrangling on both sides, as each sought the support of the uncommitted majority in the middle.

Conservatives had come to power by building an effective political coalition with the center. They had convinced the mainstream that the liberals had gone too far and were destroying the authority of Scripture. But as soon as the battle for the Bible seemed to have been won, the center wanted peace and a return to normalcy. Thus, having come to power, conservative leaders were unable or unwilling to undo the profound changes which had occurred in the districts and congregations of the Synod during the years of moderate/liberal control. The political reality of the situation was that the mainstream did not want those changes undone. The District Presidents and the Council of Presidents had grown to new power and independence and it appeared that many had begun to view the Synod as a loose federation of quasi-independent districts, each free to determine its own policy and identity. Some districts openly flaunted synodical doctrine and practice and became havens for liberal refugees from the great war. Most of those who had supported the liberal cause did not depart to the AELC, but remained behind to quietly continue working in support of their theological and ecumenical goals. The majority of the graduates of Seminex itself ultimately entered the synod's ministerium through a streamlined colloquy process which did not require them to repudiate the theology of those whom they had followed into exile. The two most notable theological documents produced by the CTCR under the liberal regime, *The Theology of Fellowship* and *Woman Suffrage in the Church*, both approved in 1969, were never withdrawn or revised. They have, in fact, become the basis for many of the Commission's subsequent conclusions in these two crucial areas. A return to the theology and practice of classic Missouri would almost certainly have resulted in the break-up of the center/right coalition and schism and so, once again, pragmatic decisions were made as institutional integrity took precedence over its theological counterpart. The fictional facade of theological consistency and unity which those same conservative leaders had shattered in their rise to power was now carefully reconstructed. Missouri's restoration to orthodoxy was a comforting illusion and the people were endlessly assured that theirs was a faithful, confessional church once again.

Missouri's new masters seemed content to accept the status quo. The liberal trend was halted, but it was not reversed nor replaced by consistent confessionalism. Our predicament might be compared to that of a diver, who after springing gracefully from the board, decides in mid-air that he no longer wishes to enter the water. His options at that point are severely limited. He can frantically attempt to reverse course and clamber back onto the board, an attempt that will most certainly be painful and difficult. Or he can yield to the force of momentum and gravity by completing the dive into the water below. But he cannot remain suspended in mid-air. It would appear that the New Missouri has been attempting to do just that. We want to continue to think of ourselves as a confessional Lutheran church and that makes us hesitant to simply plunge ahead into the waters of liberalism. But we are unwilling to make the difficult decisions and take the institutional risks that consistent confessionalism requires. We don't want to make the attempt to clamber back on to the board. And so, we have deluded ourselves into believing that we can have it both ways - that we can remain suspended out there in mid-air. All the while the historical momentum of processes previously set in motion and decisions already made combined with the theological gravity of society's relentless pressure to compromise and conform are drawing us ever closer to the waiting water below. After thirty years of hanging out there in mid-air, Missouri has passed the point of no return. All that remains is for us to give up our delusions and take the plunge.

V. The Other Side of the Balance **A Bylaw Driven Church**

The historic genius of Missouri was an inseparable combination of steadfast commitment to the importance of doctrine as the decisive factor in the life of the Synod and a concomitant de-emphasis of denominational authority. The diminishing importance of doctrine and doctrinal unity among us since the late 1940's signaled the demise of one side of that delicate balance. As Biblical unity in the faith (Ephesians 4:13) continues to falter and fail, the nature of the bond that unites us as fellow members of the Synod is mutating into a grotesque caricature of what it once was. If we are no longer a confessional community of pastors and congregations united in our resolve to teach the historic doctrine of the Lutheran Church and consistently implement that doctrine in our practice then another unifying factor must be found. Thus, inevitably, as doctrinal unity decreases the need for human authority and organizational loyalty increases.

The evidence of this shift is overwhelming. Evangelical persuasion based on Scripture is gradually being supplanted by legalistic coercion based upon man made rules, bylaws, and procedures. In a church where the focus is on the organization, doctrinal

discussion is perceived to be a threat to unity rather than a means to unity. In such a church, doctrinal disagreements are to be minimized and ignored, lest they jeopardize the reassuring illusion of institutional solidarity. In such a church, those who are so indiscreet as to raise doctrinal concerns are to be consigned to irrelevance, scorned as "*Troublers of Israel*." The end result is a church where Leo X would be much more at home than Martin Luther.

As one might expect, that is precisely what has been happening among us throughout this period. The unfortunate reality of the New Missouri is that no matter who's in charge we have become an increasingly "*bylaw driven*" church. No longer secure in our confidence in the "*power of the Word of God and convincing*," we have resorted to human structures, man-made rules, and legal procedures. In his first presidential address Dr. Walther warned that a preoccupation with church structure and institutional authority is a self-reinforcing pattern that is inherently inimical to confessionalism: "*Our chief battle*," he declared, "*would soon center around 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 the purity and unity of doctrine*." (Walther (2), p.175) The tragedy of the New Missouri is that we have failed to heed our founder's prescient warning.

In our own defense, it should be pointed out that the changes which have taken place among us have been subtle, occurring so slowly that they have been almost imperceptible. Adjustments in perspective and practice have crept in over a period of decades as the *Handbook* has gradually taken on more prominence among us than the Good Book. There is no need to speculate that some sort of sinister conspiracy has been at work here. This is not a deliberate plot - at least not on a human level. Our predicament is the cumulative result of a great many decisions expediently made to meet the perceived need of the moment. We've been too busy devising practical solutions to immediate problems to ponder the long term spiritual implications of the path that we have chosen for ourselves.

Once again, there is enough blame here for liberals and conservatives alike. Throughout our conflicts, both sides have maintained that Missouri's wars were about theology and that ultimately the Gospel itself was at stake. But invariably, politics has come first. For moderates political necessity required constant vacillation between denying the theological basis of the conflict altogether, on the one hand, or denouncing conservatives as sub-Lutheran fundamentalists, on the other. Thus, in 1974, John Tietjen, writing in *Christianity Today*, dismissed conservative doctrinal concerns as a "*smokescreen*" for a blatant political power grab (Tietjen, p. 247). This scornful dismissal came only a few months after his own St. Louis Seminary faculty had condemned Jacob Preus' "*A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*" as "divisive" with "*a spirit alien to Lutheran confessional theology*." (Danker, p. 95). To maintain both of these positions required a somewhat delicate balancing act. In April of 1975, a Theological Convocation was held in

St. Louis, in a last ditch attempt to identify and resolve doctrinal differences before the Anaheim Convention that Summer. One of the Synod's leading liberals, a professor at Seminex, participated in that convocation and was later quoted in *Lutheran Forum* lamenting the ambivalence of moderates. *"I'm not sure from day to day what our approach is."* the professor complained. *"One day we're going to candidly state our differences and let the devil take the hindmost. The next we're trying to demonstrate that we believe the same thing 'Old Missouri' has always believed about inerrancy and all the rest."* (Forum, p.A-2) The tactical necessities of politics and forthright confession of the Truth are not easily combined. Unfortunately that lack of theological integrity has not been limited to liberals. James Adams reports a 1969 meeting between Herman Otten and newly elected Synod President Jacob Preus. Otten documented the false doctrine being taught at the St. Louis Seminary and pleaded for heresy trials to begin as *"a witness to solid Missouri doctrine"* before the entire world. Preus agreed that false doctrine was being taught, but disagreed as to the means for dealing with it. *"Something definitely would be done, Preus said, but not Otten's way. Did Otten realize the red tape involved in Missouri heresy trials? That would take two hundred years. He would do it his way, Preus said."* (Adams, p.168) And so the war was waged on the battlefields of politics and power, not Biblical truth.

We have consistently failed to deal with theological problems in a Biblical and evangelical manner. Fearful of institutional implications, we have tried to solve all of our difficulties by writing new rules. Those rules have often come back to haunt us later. Certification requirements written by liberals in response to the controversy over Trinity, New Haven's call of uncertified candidate Herman Otten were later used against uncertified graduates of Seminex. Procedures instituted by conservatives because of difficulties with St. Louis Seminary President John Tietjen were later instrumental in the removal of Fort Wayne Seminary President Robert Preus. It would seem that history has a somewhat ironic sense of humor as both liberals and conservatives have found themselves hoist with their own legalistic petard.

Meanwhile, a complex system of entities and organizations has evolved and is constantly being adjusted and restructured in keeping with the latest fad in management technique. Each organizational unit then develops its own set of rules, regulations, and procedures. The end result is that like the rabbis of old we have created a massive Talmud to explain and apply the Torah of the *Handbook*. A whole new class of administrators and executives has arisen among us who often seem to be the only ones who fully understand how to navigate their way through the bewildering labyrinth that they have fashioned. Our officials are fast becoming experts in the intricacies of canon law rather than humble spokesmen for the Word of God.

The frustration and futility that results from efforts to discuss doctrine in the New Missouri can be illustrated by a protracted exchange of letters between Texas District

President Jerry Kieschnick and the Board of Directors of Texas Balance from 1993 to 1995. The exchange was prompted by a November 2, 1993, “*Memorandum*” from the Board of Directors to the membership of Texas Balance urging the selection of “*confessional*” delegates and nomination of “*confessional*” candidates for the upcoming Texas District Convention. A slate of nominees for the presidium was proposed which did not include any of the current incumbents. In a sharply worded December 10, 1993, letter to the Board, President Kieschnick accused Texas Balance of having violated the Eighth Commandment by its “*insinuation*” that the current President and Vice-presidents were less than confessional. In a nine page response, dated February 6, 1994, the Board expressed its regret that Kieschnick had chosen to construe its Memorandum “*as a personal attack upon the current officers of the Texas District.*” They went on to assert: *We do not believe that the text of the memorandum supports that conclusion.*” The Board urged Kieschnick to focus on theological issues and refrain from casting aspersions on the motives of others. They assured the District President “*Our motive is not partisanship or a desire for power, but rather a sincere love for the saving truth of God’s Word and a desire to glorify Him in the proclamation of His Gospel and the extension of His Kingdom*” and proceeded to offer a detailed summary of their doctrinal concerns. Those concerns were grouped under the following headings: 1. Doctrine and Missions; 2. Unity in the Church; 3. the Centrality of the Means of Grace; 4. The Office of the Holy Ministry; 5. Church Fellowship; 6. Altar Fellowship; and, 7. Women in the Church. In each area the historic Scriptural doctrine and practice of the Missouri Synod was contrasted with contemporary aberrations and abuses. President Kieschnick responded on April 5, 1994. The doctrinal issues which Balance had raised were completely ignored. The District President was evidently not interested in discussing doctrine. Instead, he chose to focus on the Balance letter’s only personal reference to him, a brief quotation from a recent “*Lutheran Witness*” article. Kieschnick vigorously objected to the Board’s understanding of his words. The Board responded again on May 7, accepting the President’s clarification of his “*Lutheran Witness*” comments, and urging a substantive discussion of the theological issues raised in the TBI Vision Statement. The District President wrote back on May 24 offering further clarification and justification of his original quotation. There was no mention of the doctrinal concerns or the Board’s plea for a discussion of those concerns. Texas Balance tried again in an August 13, 1994, letter. They expressed their disappointment with the fact that “*no forthright discussion of the controverted issues on the basis of the Word of God*” had yet begun and that “*the series of letters that has passed between us in recent months has been preoccupied with peripheral questions of procedure and protocol.*” Once again they urgently requested that doctrinal discussion and specifically asked: “*Do you agree that our assessment of the doctrinal issues is consistent with the Word of God and the historic confession of our church? If not, where do you find that assessment to be in error?*” Nearly six months later, President Kieschnick had still not deigned to respond to their letter. On February 11, 1995, they wrote again with this plaintive plea:

“Our church is drowning in a sea of rules, regulations, and procedures, while doctrine is minimized and ignored. Our leaders are becoming experts in the intricacies of the Handbook rather than humble advocates of the Word of God. The inevitable, although unintentional, result of this trend is an oppressive legalism that focuses on coercive technical compliance with the letter of the law instead of evangelical persuasion based upon the Scripture. These challenging times call for Biblical leadership as together we “contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.” (Jude 9) In a world where anything goes and no one seems to care about the truth anymore we must “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks (I Peter 3:15). To that end, we must be willing “to speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) to one another and to all the world, putting aside priorities of personal preference and prestige. Our zeal must be directed toward defending the Word rather than defending ourselves. We dare never allow human handbooks, rules, or traditions to dominate our dialog. The Word of God, taught and proclaimed in all of its saving truth and purity must come first. We have conscientiously attempted to speak with “gentleness and respect” (I Peter 3:15) both in our letters to you and in our publications to the District. We intend, by God’s grace, to continue to do so. In that spirit we ask you once again, as our brother in Christ and the President of our District, for a substantive response to the doctrinal concerns that have been raised.”

President Kieschnick’s final letter, dated April 12, 1995, terminated the dialog with the curt assertion that as a District President he was simply too busy to engage in substantive doctrinal discussion. He accused Balance of using theological dialogue as a means of concealing their own sinister political agenda and noted that in any case, Texas Balance was not technically a member of the Synod, so therefore he did not owe them the answers they were requesting. The bitter irony of this response, after nearly two years of correspondence spent quibbling about a three line quotation, was apparently lost on this busy bureaucrat. Evidently *lese-majeste* is much more serious than false doctrine in Modern Missouri. President Kieschnick’s available time to attack those who have the effrontery to question anything he might have said or done was unlimited. He could haggle forever about the intricacies of the by-laws, but there was just no time left to talk about Biblical doctrine. The entire tragic exchange eloquently illustrates the sad dilemma of Modern Missouri’s confessional remnant.

Ominous indications of the same trend can be detected in both the style and the substance of our synodical conventions. There was a time when the earnest discussion of doctrine was the number one priority at every synodical gathering. The delivery of the doctrinal essay was the main event. Its content was carefully considered and in the end the delegates would actually vote as to whether or not they could unanimously accept the

presentation as a part of the Synod's public doctrine. Writing in 1879, Dr. Walther asserted:

"And here again the number one priority must be the promotion of a better understanding of God's Word. And even if a Synod proceeds in a free and easy manner, with no particular organized procedure, it is still a glorious Synod so long as there is an intensive study of God's Word. Then the Lord is in the midst of His synodical members, for there we are gathered in His Name and there His Word is taught in childlike faith." (Walther, 6, p.46)

Our first president had nothing but scorn for those who only wished to "play synod" and were thus preoccupied with "business," "proper procedure," and "how they could proceed in proper parliamentary fashion." Walther contemptuously dismissed such men as "empty headed," officious bureaucrats who have no interest in doctrine and accomplish nothing "while they refer the matter from Caiaphas to Annas." He prayed that such a dismal fate would never befall Missouri: "May we never allow ourselves to degenerate to the point where our conferences and conventions only pass rules and regulations about superficial and secondary matters." It would seem that in many ways his worst fears have been realized.

The conventions of the New Missouri are hamstrung by constant points of order and parliamentary delaying tactics. The most massive resolutions typically deal with changes to the bylaws, reorganization, and procedures. Administrators, executives, and management experts tend to dominate the proceedings. When questions of doctrine are deliberated, decisions are made by a simple majority vote without any attempt to achieve God pleasing unanimity. We appear to have forgotten Walther's earnest admonition:

"The only proper procedure is that you do not rest until you have achieved a clear and complete agreement. When you then go home, you go to your separate ways only in a physical sense, but spiritually you remain totally unified so that the devil cannot stir up any divisions." (Walther, 6, p.47)

Instead of diligently striving toward the achievement of God pleasing unity in the faith, that is unanimous agreement in the doctrine and all of its articles, we have come to rely on motivational hoopla and entertainment extravaganzas to impress the delegates and send them home feeling good about the organization. Can anyone honestly imagine Dr. Walther presiding over such a convention?

The consequences of the shift from confessional unity to institutional unity are pervasive, impacting virtually every aspect of our life together. Fraternal discussion of doctrinal concerns has nearly become a lost art. We have come to rely instead on our official theologians in the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. The CTCR has been

elevated to the status of a sort of theological supreme court. Our newly revised bylaws go so far as to declare that in disputes involving doctrine of doctrinal application its decisions "*must be followed.*" Confessional stalwart Pastor Paul Burgdorf, recently called home to glory, once offered the observation that the CTCR turns out theology much like a country butcher with a meat grinder turns out sausage - everything gets ground together and out it comes in an endless, ongoing string of interconnected links. Each of the commission's official opinions becomes a precedent upon which future official opinions can be based. In effect, we have established our own inadvertent magisterium which cannot be contradicted without impeaching our own vital sense of institutional infallibility. In those instances where we have, in fact, changed our doctrine, we maintain the reassuring illusion of complete consistency. Whether they are based on the banks of the Mississippi or the Tiber, church organizations have always found it very difficult to admit that they've ever been wrong.

In June of 1938, the Synod's national convention was held in St. Louis. The doctrinal essay was being delivered by St. Louis Professor J. T. Mueller. In the course of his presentation, Dr. Mueller referred to the Synod's stance against women suffrage in the church. One lay delegate "*rose to object mildly to the finality of the Synod's position.*" In response, presiding officer, G. Christian Barth stopped the proceedings of the national convention and appointed a special committee to counsel the wayward brother and report back before the convention adjourned. Shortly thereafter, the special committee reported that the delegate had retracted his objection and affirmed the doctrinal position of the Synod in this matter. James Adams incredulously cites this instance as an example of what he contemptuously dismisses as "*the Missouri Waltz,*" an obsession with unity in doctrine and practice. (Adams, p. 15) Such is the church that we once were before the evolution of Modern Missouri. Today, CTCR opinions routinely receive convention acceptance by simple majority vote. The fact that 30% or 40% or 49% of the delegates at a convention are voting against that doctrinal statement seems to concern no one. In recent years the Commission itself has been unable to achieve God pleasing unanimity within its own membership on a number of crucial theological questions. Theological pluralism is simply a fact of life in the New Missouri and our practice reflects that sad state of affairs.

As this trend persists, our doctrine has become a matter of compliance with convention resolutions and conformity to official positions in the minds of many rather than forthright confession of the truth of God's holy Word. Of course, convention resolutions, particularly those passed by narrow majorities, are readily reversible as the balance of political power between the various factions in the Synod constantly shifts. Hence if the Synod's theology is viewed as a matter of convention resolution and official position it will tend to become unstable and tentative while each faction probes and presses to test the legal limits of the current stance and seeks to transform that stance according to its own perspective.

Doctrine as compliance with resolutions and conformity with official positions is legalism. By its very nature legalism deals in minimums. While we've been haggling over casuistic distinctions over how far one can go before he has transgressed the *Handbook's* requirement to "*honor and uphold*" the Synod's doctrine our once prized doctrinal unity has been frittered away. Like the Pharisees of old, who strained out gnats and swallowed camels, we have become so enamored with legalistic minutia that we have failed to perceive what was happening all around us.

V. Conclusion

God has been remarkably gracious to our beloved Synod. The giants of our founding era and their immediate successors raised up a church body the like of which the world had never seen. But slowly, gradually, over the course of the next century, the vitality and power of Missouri's confessionalism gave way to a stubborn conservatism that proved to be no match for the liberal assault. As Kurt Marquart notes in his insightful "*Anatomy of An Explosion:*" "*There was just enough painful truth in the diagnosis of theological arthritis in the aging synodical bones, to make the new post World War II direction seem like a wholly legitimate, indeed, a much needed renewal.*" (Marquart, p.10) With the outbreak of "*The Great Lutheran Civil War*" in the late 60's it appeared for a time that Missouri might rise up to reclaim her greatness as a truly confessional church. But the institutional price was too high and the riptide of cultural pressure too strong to resist. We were unwilling to make the personal and institutional sacrifices that consistent confessionalism required. And so that God-given opportunity was lost. Hope rose again with the election of A.L. Barry as Synod President in 1992. However, in retrospect, it is now clear that Dr. Barry's election did not represent a widespread desire for confessional renewal in Missouri. Al Barry is a decent and pious man but the real power in our church today does not rest with him. The District Presidents and the Council of Presidents are the power-brokers of Modern Missouri. They have succeeded in frustrating every attempt by the Synodical President to reassert the confessional character of our church. The sad fact is that the non-theology of the typical District President is Missouri's mainstream. They represent what the majority of our pastors and laymen want for their church.

Nothing illustrates the dilemma of Modern Missouri's confessional remnant more clearly than our Synod's disgraceful treatment of Dr. Robert Preus. In my personal experience Robert Preus is the personification of Lutheran confessionalism. Dr. Preus demonstrated the meaning of confessionalism in his unshakeable commitment to the historic doctrine of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions and in a world-wide vision that spanned

continents and denominational boundaries with a unwavering resolve to confess the truth of God. When a question of doctrine or practice was posed to Dr. Preus, the answer never came in the form of legalistic hairsplitting or diplomatic doubletalk - the answer was always theology, pure, powerful, wonderful theology. He didn't care to know much about the *Handbook*, but his knowledge of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions was unparalleled in our generation. He loved the truth of God with a fervor and an intensity that I have never encountered in another man. Robert Preus was not content to retreat into the isolation of Missouri's institutional ghetto. He was involved in the great theological issues of our day, always looking for new ways to offer the good confession. I recently picked up a book entitled "*Here We Stand - A Call from Confessing Evangelicals*" published by Baker Book House. It is a profound critique of the theological emptiness of modern Evangelicalism by some of America's most important and influential Calvinist theologians. I don't suppose that I should have been surprised to find the book dedicated "*To Robert D. Preus - Defender of the Faith - in Memory of His Founding Role in the Formation of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.*" (Boice, p.5) "**Only in his own home town, among his relatives, in his own house is a prophet without honor.**" (Mark 6:4) During the years of liberal ascendancy at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, the price of theological integrity and confessional loyalty was isolation and persecution. Robert paid that price willingly. Later that same consistent confessionalism cost Dr. Preus his office as President of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne. The Bohlmann administration, intent on propping up Missouri's teetering facade of doctrinal unity, could not tolerate a Seminary President and faculty which would not be intimidated and which continued to prepare young men for the ministry who actually intended to implement Lutheran theology. So Preus had to go. Through underhanded machination, deception, and slander the full weight of the Synod's power was hurled against this one man. But again Robert was willing to pay the price. At a personal cost greater than any of us will ever know, Dr. Preus stood for the truth, firmly and faithfully. Our Synod's contemptible treatment of this great man of God - that which was done, and that which was tolerated by Synodical officials who professed to be his supporters and friends, is a profoundly tragic illustration of the perils of consistent confessionalism in the church that we have become.

The church that the Missouri Synod once was, where doctrine reigned supreme and consistent unity in doctrine and practice was the Synod's first and foremost priority, is no more. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is not an orthodox church today; nor has it been for some time; nor will it ever be again. The time has finally come for us to recognize that painful reality and act accordingly. Tortured redefinitions of what it means to be orthodox are of no use to us at this moment. They serve only to obscure the dilemma which confronts us. The question before us now is this: "What is our responsibility as confessional Lutherans in a church body that was once orthodox but is no longer?"

The position of Missouri's confessional remnant is becoming increasingly precarious.

In the space of a few short decades we have become strangers in our father's house - barely tolerated step-children, who are to be quickly hustled off to the attic when company comes lest we embarrass the family. In this By-law driven church body our confession of the truth is circumscribed to the point of strangulation by legalistic minutia. If we continue to simply conduct business as usual, disregarding what is happening all around us, and participating in the routine activities of the denomination as though all were well, we, and our congregations, will eventually and inevitably disappear into the quagmire of theological indifferentism that has swallowed up our church. To carry on Missouri's endless intramural wars must at this point be recognized as an exercise in futility. Again and again we have fought tooth and claw for the adoption of convention resolutions which affirm the historic doctrine of our church only to see those resolutions ignored or defied throughout the Synod. The time for resolutions is over. To fight on with no meaningful possibility that evangelical discipline and orthodoxy will be restored only because we have been fighting for as long as we can remember is a de facto recognition and acceptance of theological pluralism. We must finally acknowledge that this conflict has come to be more about control than conviction and should be abandoned. The exigencies of church politics have deprived us of both our personal and theological integrity. Let us reclaim our honor as men of God and of His Word. Let us speak the truth in love and be prepared to bear the cost.

I am not proposing a precipitous exit from this denomination, although I cannot rule out the possibility that at some point in the future our departure will become unavoidable. To struggle through the travail of formal withdrawal from the Synod at this moment is not worth the time or energy that it would surely consume. I have no desire to undercut Dr. Barry's administration or the efforts of those who are resolved to carry on a fight for which I have lost heart and hope. At the same time there are faithful men and women in all of our congregations who would be lost to us were we to leave now because they are not ready or do not understand. As their pastors, called by God, we will one day have to answer for their souls too. By its theological indifference and doctrinal disinterest our church body has rendered itself irrelevant to the life and ministry of confessional pastors and congregations. To the extent that we have been confessional, we are already carrying on without them. I would suggest that we should now consciously and deliberately proceed with the disengagement that has already been going on for some time. Deliberate disengagement means - no more business as usual; no more political power games; no more convention resolutions; no more battles for institutional control.

I am convinced that this must be a time of consolidation and preparation for each of us within our own churches and all of us together as confessional pastors and congregations. We must identify and implement ways to support one another and enable our congregations to identify with one another, in effect, replacing the role of District and Synod among us. The crisis of this moment must drive each of us back to Scripture and the Confessions. We can't just show up at occasional meetings with our buddies and fly by the seat of our pants.

Carping and complaining about what the liberals are up to is no longer an adequate response. We've got to do our homework. Genuine theological effort must be invested. First of all, we as confessional Lutherans must place our own house in order. There is substantial doctrinal disagreement within the conservative wing of the Synod. We must honestly address and resolve our own theological differences on issues like the role of women and church and ministry. Instead of spinning our wheels at official circuit and district conferences devoid of theological substance let us commit the time and energy that will be required to achieve God pleasing *concordia* among ourselves.

We have come to a "*casus confessionis*" a situation which demands confession. As we seek to assess the urgency of this matter and determine how much is at stake here, recall the words of *The Formula of Concord*:

"We believe, teach, and confess also that at a time of confession, when the enemies of God's Word desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the Holy Gospel, the entire congregation of God, yea, every Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word as the leaders of the congregation of God, are bound by God's Word to confess freely and openly the doctrine, and what belongs to the whole of religion not only in words but also in works and with deeds...It is a question in the first place concerning the eminent article of our Christian faith, as the apostle testifies, that the truth of the Gospel might continue."
(FCSD, X, 10,14)

It is my fervent prayer that God will endow us with the courage and conviction to do what must be done "*that the truth of the Gospel may continue.*"

Bibliography

_____. "Editorial," *Der Lutheraner*. No. 64 (8 September, 1908).

_____. "As Missouri Turns -Year Six, Episode 10," *Lutheran Forum Letter*: New York, May, 1975.

Adams, James. *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977.

Bischoff, William. "Harold W. Romoser Fought the Good Fight," *Christian News*, Vol 36, Number 13 (Monday, March 30, 1998).

Boice, James Montgomery. *Here We Stand - A Call from Confessing Evangelicals*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996.

Commission on Theology and Church Relations. (1) *Inter-Christian Relationships*. February, 1991.

Commission on Theology and Church Relations. (2) *Woman Suffrage in the Church*. 1968.

Danker, Frederick. *No Room in the Brotherhood - The Preus/Otten Purge of Missouri*. St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1977.

Dau, W.H.T. (1) *Ebenezer - Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod During Three Quarters of a Century*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922.

Dau, W.H.T. (2) *Woman Suffrage in the Church*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1923.

Graebner, Alan. *Uncertain Saints*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975.

Hafner, P.J.G. "Die Stellung Der Frau in der Christlichen Kirche," *The Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. IV, February, 1933.

Hochstetter, Christian. "Retrospect", *Sola Scriptura*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (May-June, 1973).

- Jesse, F.W.C. "Church Unity," *The Lutheran Witness*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 10 (May 15, 1917)
- Koehler, E.W.A. *An Analysis of A Statement*. n.p., 1946.
- Kretzschmar, Karl. *The Mission of Lutheranism*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1926.
- Marquart, Kurt. *Anatomy of An Explosion*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977.
- Mensing, H.D. *The Statement Controversy Up To Date*. Elizabeth, Illinois: The Confessional Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1949.
- Meyer, Carl S. (Editor), *Moving Frontiers - Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964.
- Peperkorn, Todd. "The 44 of '45 in '95." *Logia A Journal of Lutheran Theology*, Vol. IV, No.3 (July, 1995).
- Pieper, Franz. (1) *Unity of Faith*. (E.J. Otto, Translator), n.p. 1888.
- Pieper Franz. (2) "The Synodical Conference," *Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*. Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1893.
- Pieper, Franz. (3) "Die Missouri Synode und das General Council," *Lehre und Wehre*, Jahrgang 36, No. 8 (August, 1890)
- Pieper, Franz, (4) "Eroffnungspredigt," *Vorhandlungen der vierundzwanzigsten Versammlungen der Synodalkonferenz von Nordamerika, 1912*.
- Robinson, J.T. *The Spirit of Triumphalism in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: The Role of A Statement of 1945*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1972.
- Tietjen, John H. *Memoirs in Exile*. Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress Press, 1991.
- Walther, C.F.W. (1) "Vorwort des Redacteurs zum Vierten Jahrgang des Lutheraner," *Der Lutheraner*, IV, (September 8, 1847).
- Walther, C.F.W. (2) "1848 Presidential Address," *Moving Frontiers* (Carl S. Meyer, Editor). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964.

Walther, C.F.W. (3) "Why Missouri Stood Alone," by Theodore Engelder in *Ebenezer*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922.

Walther, C.F.W. (4) "*Standard Epistles*." (Translation by Donald E. Heck), Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1986.

Walther, C.F.W. (5) *The Word of His Grace - Sermon Selections*. (Translated and Edited by the Translation Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod). Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Company, 1978.

Walther, C.F.W. (6) "Duties of An Evangelical Lutheran Synod" Translated by Everette W. Meyer in *Essays For the Church, Volume II*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992.

Walther, C.F.W. (7) "Forward to Volume IV of *Lehre und Wehre*." Translated by Alex W. Guebert, *Concordia Journal*, Volume I, No. 3 (June, 1975).