DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

Structuring a Confessional Church for the Global Age: Admission to Communion by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

Paul Marschke

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Edited by

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman

Hartford Institute for Religion Research
Hartford Seminary
hirr@hartsem.edu

www.eerdmans.com

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Historically, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LC-MS) has restricted admission to Holy Communion to those who are either parishioners of the synod or members of a church body in formal fellowship with it, with some exceptions made for pastoral discretion in particular cases.[1] In 1997 the Florida-Georgia District of the synod affirmed "the right of its pastors and congregations to welcome to the Lord's Table those who, regardless of denominational affiliation, share our confession of Christ and our conviction of what He freely offers in the Eucharist."[2] This resolution expressed the spirit of a prior document circulated in the district, *A Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice,* namely: "Scripture imposes no denominational requirement on baptized Christians who accept the Real Presence and are able to examine themselves and desire to receive the Body and Blood of Christ offered in the Lord's Supper."[3]

The reasons for the action of the Florida-Georgia District are too com-

1. The Missouri Synod has patterned its policy after that of most historic Christian communions. See August R. Suelflow, ed., *Walther's Letters* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981), pp. 57-58, 68, and 125, for early treatments of the issue. Synodical convention minutes of 1967 (2-190), 1969 (3-18), 1981 (3-01), and 1995 (3-08) have reiterated the denomination's policy. The synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) released reports explaining the policy in *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper* (St. Louis: Office of the Secretary, 1983) and *Admission to the Lord's Supper* (St. Louis: Office of the Secretary, 2000).

2. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, *Convention Proceedings, 1998* (St. Louis: Office of the Secretary, 1998), pp. 115-16. See Resolution 3-05, "To Reaffirm Our Practice of Admission to the Lord's Supper."

3. Committee for a Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice, *A Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice* (Boca Raton, Fla.: Bishop and List Interests, 1996), p. 4.

plex to analyze at length here, but in the main supporters of the resolution were reacting to a whole set of demographic and cultural changes of the past generation which have affected the composition both of their membership and of their Sunday visitors, and which have made a strict application of close communion policy more difficult.

The Florida-Georgia resolution was perceived as a challenge to the doctrinal position of the denomination. Critics thought it asserted an "open communion" policy and threatened the doctrinal unity and integrity of the synod. The church body reacted. The 1998 convention of the LC-MS resolved that the district's resolution was null and void, adding that the *Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice* was "inadequate" for addressing the question of admission to the Lord's Supper.[4]

Never has the synod so explicitly declared the action of a district null and void. The action of the synod thereby reraises questions about the duality, if not the dualism, in the relationship between the synod and its thirty-five districts. Some worry about excessive centralization of authority at the denominational level. Others fear that decentralization, or at least the rights and freedoms of congregations, has gone beyond the original intent of the synod in its first constitution in 1847.[5] The close communion matter offers, then, a useful case study in applying confessional theology in a pluralistic society. Can a decentralized organization satisfy the need for pure doctrine? Will a persistent emphasis on purity eventually wear away the local initiative which religious analysts consider essential to the vitality of denominations in the new century? Will, in short, duality degenerate into a destructive dualism?

The two essays that follow call our attention to sociological, anthropological, and theological questions that lie beneath the surface of this controversy. David Carlson, in his organizational case study, asks to what extent ethnicity has led this German community to its historic communion policy. The synod has always been a staunch defender of the Lutheran Confessions, but German ethnicity, too, played a powerful role in shaping the synod and its position on fellowship with other denominations. The synod needs to accommodate changing social structural patterns associated with geographical distribution outside the Midwest and with the rise of an urbanized laity. Additionally, the church body needs to consider whether its categorical definition of fellowship

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4. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, *Convention Proceedings, 1998*, pp. 115-16.

5. August R. Suelflow, *Heritage in Motion* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1998), pp. 158-89, has the discussion of recent decades, especially the report of Task Force II to the 1981 synodical convention, which tried to resist the temptations to centralization. Lawrence Rast, Jr., cautions about decentralization in "Demagoguery or Democracy? The Saxon Emigration and American Culture," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 63 (October 1999): 247-68.

— limiting formal relationships to Christian bodies which are in agreement with the synod's doctrinal standards — will continue to be acceptable to clergy and parishioners in the current evangelical era, in which alliances within evangelical denominations work toward common objectives independently of the denominational structure. The synod has a heritage of congregational empowerment which should allow it to engage fruitfully in such debate, but the question is whether sufficient mutual trust remains in the denomination for a healthy discussion to take place. If the leadership tries to impose a solution, the consequences for the existence of the synod could be very serious, Carlson concludes. He believes that the national convention in 2001 may have taken a step toward reversing a recent emphasis upon centralization.

Eugene Bunkowske, drawing on twenty years of pastoral ministry in Africa, brings the perspective of transactional theology, or theology applied to the messy circumstances of life, to his theological essay. He notes that different persons had different and potentially divisive lenses through which they viewed the word "communion" at the 1998 LC-MS convention. Agreement was lacking on the meaning of such basic labels as "close communion" and "open communion." On the basis of his analysis of this convention, Bunkowske concludes that two communion cultures, or "silos," have been dividing the synod. One silo calls for purity of doctrine and separates the synod from other Christians, while the other welcomes to the communion table Christians from other denominations. A third communion culture nonetheless is offering hope for healing the divisions. The "holistic" communion theology values the Lord's Supper as a communal meal and nurtures mutual love and responsibility among members. To regain this holistic view of communion, according to Bunkowske, two models are available as alternative church structures for the twenty-first century. One adapts communal settings of the apostolic age to our own; the other is a vibrant transactional theology like that of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa.

The organizational case study and theological essay are intended to interject fresh historical, sociological, and theological questions into the ongoing debate in the synod about admission to the Lord's Supper. Since they make observations about ethnic and theological lenses and point up the challenges posed by unrecognized worldviews, let me here hazard the rather subjective venture of trying to identify worldviews.

Sixteenth-century Lutherans no doubt shared with many citizens of the age a simple trust that God is at the center of the universe and that each person has a designated place in the universal chain of being. In the hymns of the century, if nowhere else, one finds these bedrocks of faith. The late Reformation period added to these elements of worldview the zeal for confessional faith. Increasingly, the tone of these confessional statements was defensive and polemi-

cal, stemming in part from the violence and insecurity of life in the empire in the generation after Luther.[6]

German small towns may have added their particular ideology to basic Lutheran views of the world emerging from the Reformation. Mack Walker, in his study *In German Hometowns*, traces the exclusivity and quiet localism in these towns of 10,000-15,000 residents. The view was that towns beyond 10,000-15,000 residents would surely include more noncitizens as "tolerated residents" than town fathers thought desirable — illegitimate children, Jews, manual servants, or poor people. Towns were kept small to preserve their intimacy of relationships. Town leaders allowed no penetration of outsiders into their internal affairs, resenting in particular the intrusions of distant governments. Walker argues, in fact, that the German conception of freedom was rooted in the local variety and autonomy of the hometowns, rooted in centuries-old customs and history.[7] Their articles of government maintained the small-town climate. Statutes in Nördlingen, for example, included five main articles covering everything from moral and religious questions, through the prohibition of marriage to outsiders, to police and fire regulations. "Now everyone knows how he shall act," the statutes concluded.[8] In the nineteenth century the small-town spirit was used to fight industrialization and the growing bureaucratic structures in the German states. It became a worldview deeply ingrained in the inhabitants of these towns.[9]

The German emigrants who founded the Missouri Synod, consequently, were a tightly knit group. Their community was bonded by zeal for confessional purity, above all, which separated them from other Lutherans and other Christians. The 1854 synodical convention put it with customary Missourian frankness: "Strangers cannot become members of synod unless they can properly identify themselves in respect to doctrine and life."[10]

6. Robert Kolb has an excellent discussion of the confessing period of the sixteenth century in his *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991). See especially chaps. 4–5.

7. Mack Walker, *In German Hometowns: Community, State, and General Estate, 1648-1871* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 17-20. Johann Moser listed 139 towns with their customary rights against princes, taking three hundred pages to describe their rights.

8. Walker, *In German Hometowns*, p. 43.

9. The Biedermeier style left its imprint on the hometown. "Its unique quality among styles, though, was its provincial homeliness and quiet social familiarity. It was a style of withdrawal . . . from the massing of forces and the pervasiveness of change that marked public consciousness of the nineteenth century from its beginning" (Walker, *In German Hometowns*, p. 307). More concisely, Walker refers to the "hometown principle of enclosed familiarity." See chap. 10 for this discussion. For the statistics on the number of towns, see p. 32.

10. C. S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), p. 150.

More generally known than the influence of the German small town is the importance of pietism to the founding fathers of the Missouri Synod. German pietism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, taking a cue from Philipp Spener, emphasized the subjective, experiential dimensions of Christian life above the objective, doctrinal formulations of the church. The early nineteenth century experienced a revival of pietism across Germany. C. F. W. Walther, later to become the first president of the Missouri Synod, but unconverted in his university years, joined a circle of pietist students to pray and read the Bible. Walther acknowledged that the literature in the group was pietist and often legalistic. Wilhelm Sihler, the first vice president of the synod, and F. C. D. Wyneken, the second president, acknowledged close connections with pietism in the Old World.[11]

Pietism contributed to German romanticism. Romanticism in Germany appealed more to the community than to the individual, reinforcing the close community of small German towns. Of particular interest is the fact that German romantics in the early nineteenth century emphasized the fundamental value of the German language, which was more to them than a medium of communication. The German language plumbed the depths of the soul and expressed the deepest elements of human nature. "What is there more characteristic of man, or of greater importance to him," asked Friedrich Schlegel, "than language?"[12] Language was the expression of the psyche of a people and of their culture. It communicated their deepest emotions and traditions.

Not surprisingly, then, the emigrant leaders who later formed the Missouri Synod were adamant about preserving the German language, fearing that the Lutheran faith might not survive without its German doctrinal and liturgical sources. Article 14 of the constitution of Trinity Lutheran Congregation in St. Louis, Walther's parish, called for the sole use of German in worship. Walther fought unsuccessfully to have the article made irrevocable.[13]

Wilhelm Loehe, the Bavarian pastor who supplied the Missourians with German pastors for much of the nineteenth century, was, if anything, more passionate than Walther and his Saxons about the use of the German language. Giving instructions to emigrant clergy commissioned to America, Loehe described the ideal German candidate as one who "recognizes the full importance of the German language for the *German faith* if we, without being misunder-

11. Walter A. Baepler, *A Century of Grace: Missouri Synod, 1847-1947* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947), pp. 42, 54, 76.

12. Koppel Pinson, *Modern Germany*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 46.

13. Gerhard Mundinger, *Government in the Missouri Synod: The Genesis of Decentralized Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947), pp. 143-44.

stood, can call the faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church German. . . . Over there German language and customs are the vanguard of the Evangelical Lutheran faith."[14]

True, there were increasing numbers in the Missouri Synod, laity and clergy alike, who advocated the greater use of English. Walther himself devoted serious efforts to uniting American Lutheranism. Still, one would expect little enthusiasm from the membership for these efforts when ethnic differences remained vivid and the English language was thought to communicate both cultural and spiritual dangers for confessional truth.

By the early twentieth century, largely because of World War I, the tensions aroused by the language question became less overt. Still, the Missouri Synod remained something of a German island in an American sea, and the language accommodation was the tip of the iceberg as this German church struggled to make pure doctrine come alive in the changing, complex circumstances of ministry on local levels. Second- and third-generation German Lutherans on the front lines of mission and ministry had to figure out what was German and what was Lutheran about their witness and work.

The tensions in these matters could often be seen in the way the synod organized itself for its work. A duality of structure emerged, more by accident than by design: centralization in matters of doctrine, decentralization in other matters. When the synod, in 1854, created four districts and tried to explain the distribution of responsibilities between itself and its districts, it retained the role of guarding its doctrine and left to the districts and congregations the specific programs and ministries of the church.[15] Such a division of responsibilities was not explicit nor was it intended — the districts were intended to be extensions of the synod in their geographical areas, not autonomous units — but by the mid–twentieth century districts were quite sure that while the synod in St. Louis focused on doctrine, trained clergy and teachers, and undertook some mission endeavors or other activities that could not be handled well locally, the districts did "the real work" of the kingdom. And what was "the real work" of the church?

Over and over again districts and congregations, and sometimes other independent associations like the Lutheran Laymen's League, took the initiative in ministry, and the synod rather counted on them to do so. For example, Trinity Society in Buffalo, New York, invited youth from around the synod to attend an organizational meeting in 1891.[16] Thus was born in 1893, the Walther League.

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14. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers*, p. 99, emphasis mine.
15. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers*, pp. 159ff.
16. Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, p. 210.

The Lutheran Education Society and the Northern Illinois District joined forces to begin a teachers college in River Forest in 1912.[17]

This pattern of decentralization was no more evident than in mission work, both in the United States and overseas. Professor E. L. Arndt in 1912 could hardly contain his chagrin with the synod over the opening of a China mission. He wanted to initiate the work, but synod argued that it should take the lead. Arndt complained: "The history of our synod . . . glitters with enterprises which were first begun in smaller circles and then were taken over by synod. . . . Practically all progress we can record has first been planned and begun in smaller circles. . . . Why should we not rather permit even individual congregations to send out missionaries to the heathen?" Synodical officials gave in and, grudgingly, allowed Arndt to do his work in China.[18]

More often the synod seemed almost relieved to have local units, whether districts or congregations, take the initiative. Districts therefore became more closely associated in the popular mind with congregations than with the national level. The Synodical Survey Commission, created by the 1959 San Francisco convention of the Missouri Synod to study synod-district relations, observed that synod was in absolute control of doctrinal matters. In theological concerns the synod's relation to the districts was rigid; in all other matters it was tolerant. In financial affairs it seemed almost to "bargain" with the districts — it "petitioned" them or "recommended" to them.[19] Given this informal relationship between the national and local levels, the synod did not commit itself to a national bureaucracy until after World War II, some years after other Protestant bodies were organizing themselves on the model of corporate America.

One measure of the centralizing tendencies in the history of the LC-MS is the reliance on executive authority in times of difficulty. The founders of the synod, struggling to sustain their church on the American frontier, not the most congenial environment to doctrinal purity, anchored supervision of doctrine and life in the president's office. It did not hurt that Walther was that pres-

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17. Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, p. 224. Very helpful coverage of the centralization-decentralization issue up to 1960 is offered by a series of reports from the Synodical Survey Commission to the synodical convention. See August R. Suelflow, "The District Relations of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in Historical Perspective" (Reports A-C), hereafter cited as SSC. The author worked with a set of manuscript copies rather than printed and published versions. The commission was worried about loose controls of the synod over its districts, which seemed to be more in evidence as they wrote their reports, but on the other hand they did not advocate centralization in St. Louis, either. Their advice was cooperation between the two levels, also with the third administrative level, the circuits within the districts.

18. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers*, pp. 306-7, citing Arndt in his *Missionsbriefe I*, February 1912, pp. 19-23.

19. Suelflow, SSC, Unpublished Report 2B, pp. 53-54.

ident, for he was considered the champion of confessional Lutheran theology by his fellow emigrants. The revised constitution of 1854 again instructed President Wyneken "to see to it" that district presidents and other synodical leaders spoke and worked in accordance with the synodical constitution.[20]

In the second half of the twentieth century, the environment for ministry changed dramatically, and the structure of the church struggled to keep pace. Intertwined with issues of centralization and decentralization was a distinct question of the dual mentalities of preservation and mission outreach. The 1960s were the watershed in synodical history. This decade raised serious moral, social, and doctrinal questions for the synod. The Mission Affirmations (Detroit synodical convention, 1965) questioned the preservation mode of doing Christ's ministry. The mission of the congregation was to send its people out into the world — into that world of drugs and war and murder and civil rights, and above all into the workplace, that is, the places where lay Christians were to live out their Christian vocation.[21] The mentality of pure doctrine needed objective standards and clear assertions with which a closely knit band of Lutherans could sustain itself in a pluralistic society; the mentality of mission work, by way of distinction, was to make doctrine a living, active thing in the hope of rescuing desperate people from the excesses of the postmodern world.

In the 1960s and 1970s the two mentalities of preservation and outreach went to war with each other. President J. A. O. Preus II led the fight to uphold synod's doctrine of Scripture. Ready and willing to exercise his presidential power for the cause, he confronted the faculty of Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), which had been accused for at least fifteen years of being too open, too liberal, and too modern, particularly in its exegesis of Scripture. His blunt presidential style offended moderates in the synod but reassured his supporters. When at the New Orleans convention (1973) President Preus argued that "someone in this church ought to have authority to determine how we today interpret, confess our Lutheran faith," a delegate defended him against his angry critics: "If that's a popish statement, then let Missouri rejoice in such a pope! After all, we don't want any more questions, we want answers — and we're getting them."[22] The synod repudiated the leadership of its prize seminary and, directly or indirectly, limited the initiative of its other educational institutions as well.

Historically, then, one set of voices in the LC-MS has emphasized the pu-

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20. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers,* pp. 159ff.

21. The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, *Convention Workbook* (St. Louis: Office of the Secretary, 1965), pp. 113-40.

22. Suelflow, *Heritage in Motion,* p. 26.

rity of the gospel: only if doctrine is kept pure and sound will the gospel survive. Other voices in the church, particularly in the twentieth century, have given increasing attention to the mission of the gospel, such as the overseas mission, or the mission of mercy among the sick and poor, or evangelistic outreach and witness, or family life ministry. It is the thesis of this essay that the energies being devoted to mission and ministry on the district and congregational levels, and in other synod-wide corporate entities, have unwittingly posed a challenge to the traditional emphasis on doctrine, raising questions for the life and outreach of the church that the dogmas of the church are not designed to answer. This challenge has in turn skewed the debate on centralization and decentralization, as well as on the relationship of the clergy and laity in achieving the purposes of the synod. As they operated after 1965, these two mentalities of preservation of doctrine and gospel outreach — always in tension with each other but rarely in conflict — became more competitive than complementary. The conflict led to increasing debate about the need for greater centralization to control districts and congregations whose "transactional" theology seemed at variance with the goal of pure doctrine.

The heritage and precedent exist in the LC-MS to keep these two mentalities in balance — pure doctrine and mission energy. Both are needed to penetrate a changing culture, and both benefit from the balance between forces of centralization and forces of localism. Walther, in 1848, cautioned that if submission to all synodical orders were the prerequisite for membership in the synod, "the exercise of our power would have laid the foundation for constant dissatisfaction."[23] The trouble, as Walther perceived, is the ease with which duality can degenerate into a hard dualism. Already in 1862, H. C. Schwan, then president of the Central District, observed about the synod that "the greater danger is still in the direction of legalism."[24]

The Missouri Synod has adequate structures in place to carry on its religious work on national, district, and local levels, if it will use effectively and evangelically what it has. The challenge for the synod is to hold in healthy tension the dualities of preservation and growth, clerical and lay leadership, centralization and decentralization. These forces need to breathe into denominational order, if that is possible, a mutuality of spirit and a genuine commitment of members one to another — in short, they need to serve the community of saints. The case study and essay that follow, each in its own way, steer the

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23. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers*, contains the full text of the address.

24. Thesis 18 of a set of thirty-two theses which Schwan presented to the Central District of the Missouri Synod in 1862, cited in *Forward*, February 1998, pp. 4-5, under the title "Celebrating Synod's Sesquicentennial: Voices from Missouri's Past."

church's conversation about admission to Holy Communion toward the essential task of building community in the church. Luther could not have been more on target for this purpose: "The significance or purpose of this sacrament is the fellowship of the saints, whence it derives its common name, that is, *synaxis* or *communio,* that is, fellowship."[25]

25. Martin Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods" (1519), in *Luther's Works,* vol. 35, ed. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), p. 50.