

FORUM LETTER

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To awaken Christ



“When you have to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind. When your anger is roused, you are being tossed by the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperiled, your heart is taking a battering. On hearing yourself insulted, you long to retaliate; but the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune — shipwreck. Why is this? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him, then; remember him, let him keep watch within you, pay heed to him . . . A temptation arises: it is the wind. It disturbs you: it is the surging of the sea. This is the moment to awaken Christ and let him remind you of those words: ‘Who can this be? Even the winds and the sea obey him.’” — Augustine, Sermons 63.1-3

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End of the war?



The Missouri War, that is — the on-going struggle in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod between theological “moderates” and theological “conservatives.”

This of course is a view ventured by a total outsider, me. Understand, when I write about the Missouri Synod it is to explain the LCMS to our majority readership. Two-thirds or better of our readers are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. There’s always the chance — well, okay, more than a chance, if my mail from Missourians is any indication — I’ll get it wrong. So those of you LCMS folks on the inside should take my assessment with a bit of salt. However, assuming I have rounded up a representative assortment of my “usual suspects” in the LCMS, this shouldn’t be too far off, even for ELCA readers. We’ll see.

One more caveat. For fear of a making a premature declaration on the cessation of major combat operations, I will refrain from declaring a victor.

I will say the “moderates” clearly have an upper hand and I cannot in the moment see any loosening of their grip. This is due to two factors — Gerald Kieschnick and Gerald Kieschnick. I’ll explain as I go along.

Broadly noted

- So, in broad outline, here is my sense of things Missourian:
- The “conservatives” still have bite but considerably less than they did.
 - The “moderates” are in control of the Missouri Synod and they are

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positioned to gain firmer control.

All this is due entirely to the two Kieschnick factors.

The growing ascendancy of the moderates (we'll drop the quotation marks for both, okay?) began with the untimely death of LCMS President A.L. Barry in March 2001. For most of a decade, Dr. Barry led the LCMS. He was elected in 1992 over Dr. Ralph Bohlman (president 1981-1992). The whys and wherefores of that stretch back to the presidency of Jacob Preus and the Seminex walkout. But the short of it is, Bohlman was successor to Preus, but he was no Preus. Barry was a stalwart conservative, elected in large part because Bohlman was regarded as a weak conservative. In a denomination where conservatives ruled, Barry was perceived as a more ardent one.

For all of his tenure, Barry enforced Missouriian peculiarities over "unionism" and "close" communion and the like with dedicated firmness. To the former, when one of Missouri's district presidents — David Benke of the Atlantic District, of whom more momentarily — participated in a New York City inter-Christian prayer service for the poor, Barry summarily summoned him to St. Louis and gave him a stark choice between issuing an apology or tendering his resignation. Of close — meaning closed — communion, Barry was all for it, period.

Kieschnick factor one — the "Benke thing"

Barry's death, though, left Missouri conservatives without a nominee in 2001. Conservatives split themselves several ways in the absence of Dr. Barry, and Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick entered the power vacuum. It seemed likely at the time that Kieschnick, who is now in his second term, was destined to be a one-term president. It would be only a matter of time before the conservative factions united around a consensus

nominee, the thinking went. But they never did.

And even if they had, the "Benke thing" might have scotched their effort in any event.

The "Benke thing," of course, was the prayer David Benke uttered at the post-9/11 Yankee Stadium prayer service. He participated in an event that featured Christians, non-Christians and Oprah Winfrey (a category, we note, all by herself). Unlike the episode with Barry, Benke specifically sought and received the permission of President Kieschnick.

This so thoroughly aroused some LCMS conservative elements, ever alert to "unionistic" and "syncretistic" sins, that Benke was temporarily suspended from office and faced possible expulsion from the LCMS clergy roster. The business ate up most of Kieschnick's first term. It was resolved ultimately in Benke's favor and thus to Kieschnick's in the months just prior to the 2004 convention that re-elected Kieschnick.

The lay response to Benke in Yankee Stadium was overwhelmingly favorable. The hostile conservative reaction Benke prompted was a puzzlement to them. The 2004 convention response was such that two conservative vice-presidents, most outspoken as critics of Benke and Kieschnick, were unceremoniously un-elected.

Observers credit Kieschnick for his calmness in all the turmoil. His willingness simply to follow the process through was a mark of maturity. His leadership style, we're told, is naturally cautious and so he refused to confront his ultra-right opponents directly. During the "Benke thing," Kieschnick frequently issued the dictum, "Let charity prevail." In the end, he looked reasonable while his and Benke's detractors looked shrill and, a phrase frequently repeated to us as much by conservatives as by moderates, "over-the-top."

People who know Kieschnick are quick to say, his approach during the "Benke thing" wasn't

***Lutheran Forum* editor resigns**

To our surprise and regret we have learned that Pr. Ron Bagnall has tendered his resignation to the ALPB board of directors as editor of *Lutheran Forum*, effective July 31. Announcement of his resignation deserves more than a note in *Omnium gatherum*, hence its placement here. No doubt we shall find reason to say more on the subject at an appropriate time. At the moment we shall say only that we will miss Ron's hand at *Lutheran Forum*. The board of directors will soon solicit a successor when formal announcement of the opening is made. Watch this space and the ALPB web site <www.alpb.org>.

a tactic calculated for appearances — it's who the guy really is and they would not have expected any other sort of reaction out of him.

Tactic or not, it was exactly what the LCMS 2004 convention delegates were seeking. Election results were overwhelmingly "moderate" in outcome. Not completely so, for in Missouri nothing is ever altogether complete. The composition of the LCMS board of directors, for instance, is still a sore point with many moderates. Nonetheless, as convention victories go, the conservatives didn't get one in 2004, and in the moderate view that's what counts.

That's the first of the two Kieschnick factors, his handling of Yankee Stadium.

Kieschnick factor two — the lawsuit

The second Kieschnick factor is like unto the first — Kieschnick's approach to the lawsuit brought by ultra-conservative elements seeking to overturn the 2004 convention results, and oust him from office. He is accused in a class action lawsuit of overtly manipulating convention rules on delegates in order to pack the voting assembly with his supporters.

Here, again, his charity is prevailing, and prevailing to an extent that liberal critics — who would be considered liberal only by LCMS standards — are unhappy that he has taken such a soft approach. They regard it as naive. Again, from people who know him, it is not naiveté. It is charity, genuine and unfeigned.

The lawsuit itself, by the way, appears stalled. If I understand it right, the plaintiffs are said to be looking for a "settlement," whatever that might mean. In any case, it has not become any sort of rallying cry for anti-moderate LCMS forces. Instead, it is seen as another "over-the-top" instance of conservatives over-reaching.

Non-Kieschnick factors

In the meantime, the varied LCMS conservative groups seem to be in serious disarray, verging on dysfunctional. There are several groups competing for dominance of the "right wing." There is no agreement on a conservative nominee for synodical president next time around. There is disagreement on a doctrine of church and ministry, just like everywhere else within American

Lutheranism, but as much as conservatives would like it otherwise, the question doesn't break along the usual moderate vs. conservative lines. Most interestingly, the "foamy-mouthed" conservatives are chattering about leaving the Missouri Synod — and there is much moderate and moderate-conservative enthusiasm for them doing so — but there is deep disagreement over when and how and even if.

Most limiting of all for the conservatives is their apparent inability to identify an issue that has any traction with the laity. They have created for themselves instead an image of being "against" instead of "for" the LCMS. (ELCA traditionalists, take a note.)

Even the once-influential *Christian News* sounds somewhat dull and muted these days. The conservative independent newspaper put *everything* into electing Dr. Kurt Marquart from the St. Louis seminary as LCMS president in 2004. Marquart received 70-plus votes for the effort and *Christian News* lost a lot of conservative support as a consequence. In an opinion shared by more than one prominent LCMS conservative, *Christian News* is waning. "Better late than never," was one catty jibe.

Another recent development — widely regarded as a conservative loss — was the venture by Concordia Publishing House (CPH) in publishing a reader's edition of the *Book of Concord*. An LCMS doctrinal review commission recently forced the publishing house to revise a CPH translation of Martin Luther that amounted to an ideologically-motivated paraphrase, so the sternest critics say. The CPH version seemed to support Benke detractors and, more to the point, appeared expressly designed for that purpose and that purpose only.

Paul McCain, Concordia's CEO, flatly denied doing any such thing, and knowing Paul McCain, I take him at his word. No matter. The doctrinal commission judged the reader's edition theologically and doctrinally weak on the Luther translation and upon several other points as well. A number of moderates regard this as a pretty stunning rebuke to the Missouri right.

Ablaze!

All this is rather reactive — conservative

reaction, Kieschnick's reaction, and everybody else's reaction. But the whole picture cannot be seen without noting the one pro-active feature which Kieschnick launched that is genuinely speaking to the laity: *Ablaze!*

Forum Letter has published LCMS authors who tend to look sideways at the LCMS evangelistic initiative. Frankly, I tend to share some of their view. Parts of it are, well, hokey. The *Ablaze!* web page features a population counter above a counter reporting "unreached or uncommitted people with whom the Gospel has been shared," presumably by LCMS folks. The score, by the way, is 6.5 billion to 1.6 million — that changes daily, naturally, but the first is rapidly out pacing the second.

Still, like we said, most of *Ablaze!* speaks to the laity. Just for starters, one can understand the vocabulary of evangelism. In contrast, over on the ELCA side of things, one bumps into words that aren't even words, like "missional." This will stir people up to share Christ? Additionally, a good deal of *Ablaze!* is parish developed, parish directed, parish tested.

Point is, for perhaps the first time since the 1970s, when the Missouri War broke out in earnest, LCMS laity have something that is not being consumed in an endless round of doctrinal conflict. Whether it reverses the drifting membership loss the LCMS has experienced remains to be seen, but

if we really are witnessing a cessation of hostilities, it sure won't hurt.

What's left of the right

One LCMS centrist (which may be a better term these days for those once called "moderates") thinks the conservatives have simply devolved into an elitist, clerical group, speaking only to themselves but having no real followers. In pushing 9/11 and the lawsuit, they have fallen over an edge. If so, they have done it to themselves by making Yankee Stadium a confessional issue and by playing poor sports in trying to get Kieschnick ousted. The damage from both may be irreparable. As a result, the narrowness that once marked the LCMS political and theological center is becoming necessarily broader as less "conservative" conservatives defect from the "radical" agenda.

Mind you now, if you are an ELCA reader, an LCMS moderate makes an ELCA traditionalist look downright liberal. President Kieschnick will continue, for instance, to press the ELCA on theological and confessional issues, and possibly do it with quite as much ardor as his predecessor. Nonetheless, internal church politics as we have known them in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod for the past several decades may be in the process of permanent realignment. — *by the editor*

Blatant, vile anti-Catholic bigotry



Dan Brown's bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* is now being served warmed over as a blockbuster movie, and that means that many people in our culture are again asking questions about the allegations and claims made by this very silly story.

Suppressed truth

If you are one of the two or three dozen people who haven't seen it, read it, or at least read about it, the story revolves around a Harvard "symbolologist" called in to help solve the murder of a curator at the Louvre. As the tale unfolds, we

learn about a secret organization which has kept alive the real truth about Christianity, a truth long suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church.

The truth revolves around the marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and their resulting progeny, and the continued effort by Rome to keep these secrets from coming out.

Leonardo DaVinci — yeah, the painter dude — was one of the leaders of the secret organization, and put all kinds of clever clues into his paintings. It's all tied in to the Holy Grail, Opus Dei, the Dead Sea Scrolls. I'm not making this up.

The book has little to recommend it — it's

not even much of a mystery, at least not if you like your mysteries to have some sophistication — though it squatted on the best-seller lists for dozens and dozens of weeks. One expects the movie will be a success as well, even if people go out only to see Tom Hanks' strange hair job.

Mediocre popularity

Of all the questions one might ask about it, the most pertinent one is, Why is this mediocre mystery story so damn popular?

Three reasons, seems to me. First, and simplest, everyone loves a conspiracy. If you can posit a conspiracy that's been kept going for 2,000 years, then you've really got something for people to admire. And of course, like all conspiracies, this one cannot be disproved, which is just the next thing to saying it may well be true. After all, any evidence to the contrary was obviously manufactured by the conspirators.

Second, the story claims to be about "true Christianity." In that respect, it is very much like the loudly touted *Gospel of Judas* which got all that press right around Holy Week. Of course, also like that apocryphal work, Brown's version of truth is not Christianity at all. It's a sort of confused Gnosticism which fits right into contemporary religious impulses. It's the old "I'm more spiritual than religious" kind of thing — a mix of feminist musings and New Age yearnings which has nothing much in common with the faith expressed in the creeds and confessions of the church.

Third, and perhaps most important, the book taps into the rich vein of anti-Catholicism, still lurking quietly and sometimes not so quietly in American life.

Two of the same cloth

Brown's story sees the Catholic Church as evil, oppressive, sinister, misogynistic. It thus takes its place as the latest piece of literature in a line that stretches back at least to *The Awful Disclosures* of Maria Monk of the 1840's — an anti-Catholic screed which alleged to be the story of a nice girl who had been held prisoner in a Montreal convent. You can actually still find copies of Monk's "memoir" in some fundamentalist book stores. *The DaVinci Code* won't be showing up there, of course, because it disses not only the Catholic Church, but the Bible too. But the two books are really cut from the same cloth.

It is not an accident that *The DaVinci Code* flew to the top of the best-seller list right about the time of the pedophilia scandals of the Roman Catholic Church. That horrible episode convinced many people that the Church of Rome is an enemy, and thus any criticism of Roman teaching, practice and organization finds a ready audience, no matter how strange or historically fallacious the criticism might be. And, as historian Philip Jenkins has argued quite persuasively in his book *The New Anti-Catholicism*, the Catholic Church has become the favored boogeyman of the day — the enemy, not just of wacky fundamentalists, but of secularists, liberals, radical feminists, and all those who follow in their train.

Christians who know better ought to be exposing all this for what it is: blatant, vile anti-Catholic bigotry. And really, if you scratch the surface, it is a bigotry that looks askance at the rest of the Christian family as well. — by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor

Ex Libra Forum



I've always figured reading is part of the work a pastor ought to be doing. Ever helpful, let me add these to your summer workload, but, since all work and no play makes Jack and Jill dull pastors, there's a couple here just for fun.

■ *A Handbook for Christian Life in the 21st Century* by Eric W. Gritsch (ALPB Books, 2005).

If the ALPB has a best-seller (after *For All the Saints*) this is it. This is a catechism, but not like most, and it's for grown-ups (though I think it would find profitable use with upper high school and college level youth, as well). Gritsch (of Gritsch and Jenson fame) developed this book out of two concerns: an underestimation of evil and a diminution of the joy that should mark everyday life. The chapters in the *Handbook* thus begin with

“Evil” and end with “Music.” In between are “Justice,” “Baptism,” “Church,” “The Lord’s Supper,” and “Prayer.” Were I to make a comparative judgment, this *Handbook* is the best of a lot of recent handbooks. It is really an imaginative approach to the basics of our faith.

■ *I Want to Know About: The Holy Spirit* and *I Want to Know About: The Church* (Zondervan Publishing, 1998).

These two small books are part of an illustrated four-book series for children designed to cover the basics — and only the very basics — of church, church history, and church doctrine (generic but with a distinct Evangelical flavor). The books are well-illustrated, generally informative and I can envision their use in a first communion preparation class. The other two in the series focus on the Bible and the person of Jesus.

■ *Pulpit Science Fiction* by George L. Murphy (CSS Publishing, 2005).

Very entertaining book and, more, very engaging. The title is a play on “pulp science fiction.” Murphy is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pastor on staff at St. Paul’s Episcopal parish in Akron, OH. He has taught part time at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and makes occasional contributions (though not nearly enough of them) to *Forum Letter*. In this little book he indulges two of his penchants — story sermon and science fiction. In blending the two, these sermonic vignettes serve to introduce Christianity to science fiction and science fiction to Christianity. All these sermons, by the way, save two, possess the virtue of having been pew-tested. Whether they were pew-approved is another matter — every preacher hears “nice sermon” or sometimes “interesting sermon” without ever knowing anything more than that. But I bet these are remembered sermons. Especially interesting is the instance where the aliens (that would be us earthlings as Murphy flips things around) arrive and find the Aquilans already converted to Christianity — having received the Word of God through the interception of television broadcast signals going out 100 million light years from the earth from Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen’s 1950’s-era program, *Life is Worth Living*. (We can be grateful

that in Murphy’s hands the Aquilans were able to distinguish Sheen’s broadcasts from Milton Berle’s.)

■ *Ghosts of Columbia* by L.E. Modesitt, Jr.

The action is in the nation of Columbia, an alternative to the America and its history that we know. (Honest, I love this stuff.) One difference in the world of Columbia is shaped by the fact that ghosts are real. They are not mere superstition but possess a physical and scientifically measurable reality — and they carry social and political implications, because your crimes can haunt you, as well as your wars, and the ghosts are visible to others. The nation that finds a technology to rid the battlefield of the unnerving and morale-busting presence of dead soldier-ghosts is a nation with an army ready to march. So the story is actually a spy thriller of sorts, though not so thrilling as it might be, frankly. But Modesitt’s few asides on the religious implications of real ghosts are intriguing — most churches, we learn, oppose “de-ghosting” technology. I would have liked more on the “Anglo-Baptist” church, but the Mormons who show up are pretty much like Mormons — only tougher, bigger, stronger, and this time they have their own country.

■ *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Doris Kearns Goodwin (2006).

How Lincoln took his chief political rivals for the presidency into his cabinet, shaped them into allies, and ultimately gained their ardent admiration and respect turns out to be very stirring history. If you think you know everything you need to know about Lincoln, you don’t.

■ *Turning Around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church* by Thomas C. Oden (Baker Books, 2006).

Well, there’s schism, and then there was the Great Schism, and coming soon, the Even Greater Schism. That will happen when protestant revisionist denominations cease to be “ecumenical,” in the broadest doctrinal sense of that term. Those are not Oden’s terms, but, tucked away between the lines of this book, that’s what he sees. Unless. Unless renewal movements manage to tug their denominations back to the ecumenical center of

church life, practice and doctrinal fidelity. This book is a fair summary of what is happening among mainline churches, some of it quite encouraging. There's not much of the ELCA Lutheran reform movement within these pages. That, I suspect, is due to its late awakening.

■ *Jacob I have Loved* by Katherine Paterson (HarperCollins Children's Books, 1980)

"Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."

There are serious biblical themes to explore in this children's novel written for 5th grade through middle school. In the story, Louise knows that she, like the biblical Esau, is the neglected elder twin. She seeks the happiness that has always come so easily to her twin sister, Caroline. So, sure, this is about Louise finding out "who she is" by coming out from under Caroline's shadow. But it is also about who Louise is under the shadow of God, told subtly. The book won several awards in children's literature. If you have a youth book club in the congregation, put this one on the list.

■ *Kings and Queens for God* by Carol Greene (Illustrated by Lydia Halverson) (Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

Well, chalk one up for Augsburg Fortress Publishers, the ELCA publishing house. This is a very nice book, and darned if I can say why it took me so long to stumble across it. Here are fifteen stories of Christian kings and queens spanning more than 1300 years. There are questions, suggestions for activities, and a prayer follows each historical account. This is part of AF's Family

Read-Aloud Collection, four volumes in all, each by different authors, that also includes *Explorers for God*, *Early Saints of God*, and *Heroes of God*. Unfortunately, I'm not certain these are still in print and available through AF. If not, there's a pity.

■ *Remembering C.S. Lewis: Recollections of Those Who Knew Him*, edited by James T. Como (Ignatius Press, 2005).

Really, now. How much C.S. Lewis do we need? Quite a lot of him to judge by this book, a third edition to go along with previous editions from 1979 and 1992. Twenty-four friends, colleagues, and students of Lewis lay out their memories of the man and of his ideas.

■ *A Formula for Parish Practice: Using the Formula of Concord in Congregations* by Timothy J. Wengert (Lutheran Quarterly Books published by Eerdmans, 2006).

Wengert filters the *Formula of Concord* through parish life. Or is it the other way 'round, parish life through the *Formula*? No matter; whichever direction it ends up going turns out to be a genuinely satisfying trip. Wengert's writing style shows a light hand. It is a very pleasant read and he is quite able to take a complex question — even some of the more arcane questions the *Formula* attempts to answer — and break it down to where it is no less complex, but thoroughly intriguing. His handling of the Third Use of the Law probably ought to be assigned reading. The book is designed for parish discussion groups. You really should snap this one up.

Omnium gatherum



Eighty-three and voluntarily intense ● I have been flattered by the number of readers who took

a moment or two to share some of their experiences in catechism class, after reading my whimsy from March, "A Night at Catechism." "I laughed out loud" was a pleasantly recurring phrase. I was especially gratified by the note from Jean E. Harris, a Sunday school teacher from Boonton, NJ with years and years of experience under her belt. I was

impressed because 1) Ms. Harris, during her pastor's absence, apparently took up the catechism job voluntarily and 2) she tells me she is 83 years old. "Going back [to catechism] has been a 'refreshing(?)' experience, but I do think that it made my enjoyment of your article even more intense."

Now, don't you wish she was in your congregation?

Sunday school ● On the subject of parish education, tell you what we did. Last fall we moved Sunday morning instruction to Wednesday nights, beginning with a light supper. It has not gone entirely to my satisfaction, but, nonetheless, we immediately boosted attendance, and also attracted more guests. Catechism is held that night, and on Sunday mornings (kids get two hours a week). I do doctrine and another teacher does, well, “life.” For Sunday mornings, it’s “musical Sunday school” for our vocal and instrumental youth choirs. The program needs some fine-tuning — needs Ms. Harris, I think — but the change in time and schedule did prove more amenable to family schedules.

Like a cell phone ● And on first communion instruction, this from a pastor: “I have a crop of fourth graders who are receiving instruction as a group, but then there’s Mitchell, who’s in junior high and couldn’t be lumped in with the ‘little kids.’ So I’ve been meeting with him one-on-one once a week after school. Mitchell has no problem understanding how Christ’s body and blood could be everywhere (ubiquity). But then I asked him how, given Christ is everywhere, the sacrament might be special. He thought about it for a while, and then said: ‘cell phone number.’ He went on to explain how his mother could be anywhere, which is about the same thing as being everywhere, but he couldn’t get hold of her without her cell phone number, which is kind of like how Christ gets hold of us in the sacrament. Brilliant, if you ask me.”

Pope makes headline ● “Pope celebrates

Easter, urges people to turn away from sin” said the headline in the diocesan newspaper. The next headline will have Benedict telling people to come in from out of the rain.

Postal rate increases ● I’ve compared this to herpes. That’s the subscription rate increases the ALPB board of directors was compelled to make following the latest round of USPS postal rate increases. They give it to us; we give it to you.

How bad can it be? ● I have this new driver’s license photo ID. It is horrible. I had to show it the other day and the lady who looked at it sort of went “eww.” Well, she didn’t sort of, she did. How bad can it be? Honest, it’s the second of two photographs. The DMV clerk looked at the first one, tore it up, and had me pose for a “better” one.

If you have to ask ● Word is the recently concluded assembly of the ELCA’s New Jersey Synod adopted resolutions more or less identical to the Metropolitan New York Synod’s resolutions on discipline of actively homosexual clergy. The ELCA church council has ruled the MNYS resolutions “out of compliance,” sort of, with the ELCA constitution and such. When the NJ resolutions came up for debate, the ELCA’s vice president and several other folks, including the resolutions committee, made note of that. The NJ synod adopted them anyway. This was a “parliamentary moment.” The presiding officer — the bishop — should have ruled the resolutions out of order. Period. Now, why didn’t he? Well, if you have to ask, don’t you already know the answer?

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