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Get with the times



This is the reason the tempter is able to have power over us. This is how he attempted to get Jesus to at least modify His view of God's will. He placed him high upon the temple wall. The height was dizzying . . . There Satan proposed that Jesus leap down amidst the throng of people and show His miraculous power in front of everybody. Wouldn't that open their eyes? Then they would follow Him wherever He led. . . . The Baptist had preached repentance, but it didn't help. The Church has done the same for two thousand years and it still doesn't appear to have helped. It looks like other means are necessary to get people to listen. Shouldn't we show others that we can do something really impressive? That's a temptation that has pursued the Church throughout its history. Many times it's been tempting for the Church to be politically involved or intervene in society in an effort to make an impression, create good will, gain sympathy, and win support. . . . [But] God knows what He wants. He has His boundaries. There are things He keeps for Himself. . . . That's why Jesus abstained from doing a lot of things His disciples and His adversaries thought He should do. His friends weren't allowed to fight when He surrendered to His enemies. He commanded Peter to put his sword away. He didn't step down from the cross. He didn't ask His Father for legions of angels that would have gladly hurried to His rescue. Even Christ's Church has to continue to preach repentance and faith, although the world says it should take the completely different position that it's better to get with the times and engage all resources in a cause they say is closer to the hearts of the people than the salvation of their souls. — Bo Giertz, in *To Live with Christ: Devotions by Bo Giertz* (Concordia Publishing House, 2008), pp. 195-196.

The Missouri waltz



Things have been kind of quiet in the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod the past couple of years, or at least that's how it has seemed to outsiders. President Matthew Harrison, elected rather handily three years ago as a conservative challenger to then-president Gerald Kieschnick, has made an honest effort to quiet Missouri's often turbulent waters. His "Koinonia Project," launched in 2011, outlined a process that he hoped would "make us 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'" In the LCMS, that is not always an easy thing to do, but much of the synod has seemed willing to give it a go, and to get beyond the internecine warfare that has often rocked and racked Missouri. If tempers have not actually cooled, at least for the past couple of years folks have seemed willing to try to dance together.

The Missouri waltz, however, now seems on the verge of collapsing in a frenzy of missteps and disharmony. Life has a way of derailing things, and sometimes it isn't pretty.

A smoldering issue

The last major kerfuffle in Missouri was the furor over the participation of Atlantic District President David Benke in an interfaith service in New York following the infamous attack of September 11, 2001 [see "The LCMS vs. the LCMS," *FL* December, 2001]. There were those who were incensed that Benke would so publicly flout the synod's ban on pastors participating in "heterodox services." There were others who argued that this was more in the nature of a civic event than a service; and besides, the circumstances were extraordinary, and Benke was simply doing what a good and faithful pastor would do.

That controversy was formally resolved in Benke's favor, though among some in the Missouri right wing it continued to smolder and would flare up now and again. But things burst into serious flames in the wake of another tragedy, the school shooting in Newtown, CT.

More harm than a gunman

Pastor Rob Morris was in his first year as pastor of his first parish, Christ the King Lutheran Church in Newtown. One of the children murdered in the attack was a parishioner. Pr. Morris, like all the clergy of Newtown, had to figure out how to offer pastoral care in an extraordinarily tragic situation. Among the ways he did this was to offer the benediction at what was termed an "interfaith vigil," hosted by the Newtown Interfaith Clergy Association and attended by President Obama.

Unfortunately for Pr. Morris, the media coverage of the Sandy Hook tragedy included broadcasting the vigil on national television, and there, before God and everybody (and perhaps before all those gods of other religions), was a Missouri Synod pastor praying in the presence of the heterodox.

The reaction was swift from the hyper-orthodox in Missouri. There is a website, "Steadfast Lutherans," where many of these folks hold forth. In the first hours after Pr. Morris's involvement became public, one poster opined that Morris's participation "does more harm to the souls of the survivors

than any gunman could ever do." Pr. Tim Rossow, one of the proprietors of the site, observed that "the gunman killed the body which lasts for 70 or 80 years . . . False teaching and practice kills the soul which lives for eternity in heaven or hell."

Lower the heat, please

In response to all of this, President Harrison took an admirable first step. He asked those responsible for the website to take the comments down. He made a similar request, indirectly, to us who moderate "Forum Online," where there was a lively conversation going on between Morris's defenders and detractors. Dr. Harrison asked for a damper to be put on the public discussion as he worked pastorally with the situation. "Steadfast Lutherans" removed the thread; at Forum Online, we locked it to further comments.

Dr. Harrison, behind the scenes, was talking extensively with Pr. Morris and with Morris's district president. The content of these pastoral discussions were, of course, confidential, but the end result was a letter of apology from Pr. Morris, published on the LCMS web page. "I took the action that I took. I and no one else. In the end, I believed my participation to be, not an act of joint worship, but an act of . . . mercy and care to a community shocked and grieving an unspeakable horrific event. However, I recognize others in our church consider it to constitute joint worship and I understand why. I apologize where I have caused offense by pushing Christian freedom too far . . ."

Apology accepted

Dr. Harrison then wrote a letter to the Synod, commending Pr. Morris for his pastoral heart, but concluding that "the presence of prayers and religious readings, as well as the fact that other clergy were vested for their participation, led me to conclude that this was in fact joint worship with other religions (as previously defined by the Synod) . . . [and was] a step beyond the bounds of practice allowed by the Scriptures, our Lutheran Confessions, and the constitution of our Synod, which seeks to uphold both."

He went on to note that Pr. Morris had apologized for his offensive act, that he (Harrison) had accepted the apology, and he urged any who might be contemplating filing charges against Pr. Morris to

accept it as well and drop the matter. Dr. Harrison seemed to have misstated the actual content of Morris's letter; the Connecticut pastor apologized, not for his action, but for having caused offense. Those aren't quite the same thing. Dr. Harrison hoped that his response would help "to avoid deep and public contention in the Synod." But of course it had just the opposite effect.

Public astonishment

The story of the apology quickly became a news story in and of itself, with extensive coverage by the LCMS's "hometown paper," the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, but also by the *New York Times* and other national media. The reaction among many not schooled in the ethos of the LCMS was utter astonishment that Pr. Morris had been asked to apologize. For that matter, astonishment and even anger was the reaction of not a few LCMS members.

All of which led President Harrison to issue a statement to the Synod—both in writing and in video format—in which he admitted that he had botched it. He clarified that Pr. Morris had apologized "where offense was taken," but not for his participation. He went on, in what is surely an extraordinary statement from a denominational head, to admit his own "responsibility for this debacle. I handled it poorly, multiplying the challenges. I increased the pain of a hurting community. I humbly offer my apologies to the congregation, . . . to Pastor Morris and to the Newtown community. I also apologize to the membership of our great church body for embarrassment due to the media coverage."

Flak from all sides

An admirable statement by Dr. Harrison, I would say, and yet he is now taking it from all sides. Pr. Rossow has posted a response to accusations that he was out of line: "My old sinful self would love to apologize for those words to take

some of the heat off of this situation. My new self in Christ cannot apologize for these words because my new self is born of Christ's words, both law and gospel. I stand by the truth of the words but humbly acknowledge . . . that they were spoken in the wrong forum at the wrong time." Well, that's something, I guess.

Meanwhile, on what passes for the Missouri left, an editorial on the "Daystar Journal" web site opined that Dr. Harrison's actions "have made the LCMS a laughing-stock around the world." Forgiveness is one thing, suggested David Domsch, but there are consequences. "President Harrison should be impeached immediately. Failing that, he should be limited to a single term in office, replaced by an individual who has the competence, theological strength and pastoral understanding to lead the LCMS."

And lest you be casting about for a candidate, former president Kieschnick has a blog where in early February he made clear that as far as he's concerned, Pr. Morris is to be commended for his participation—that any pastor should seize on any opportunity to proclaim the gospel in any context. Responses to his blog, numbering, he said, in the hundreds, were overwhelmingly positive. Many wondered if he'd be willing to be nominated again for synod president. In a rather un-Shermanesque response, he noted that "the office should seek the man and not the man the office." But, by the way, the deadline for sending in nominations is only ten days away.

Forum Letter will have more to say about all of this in the coming months—both about the issues surrounding the Newtown service, and the political implications in Missouri. For the moment, those of us outside of Mother Mo just watch in astonishment. Watch and pray—not a bad Lenten discipline for all of us.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Lutherans and the March for Life

by Robert D. Benne



My wife and I marched—or perhaps more accurately, shuffled—in the March for Life in Washington on January 25. I would normally avoid such a march with its mas-

sive crowds and congested transportation, but I was invited to be a speaker at the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Life Ministries Conference that followed the march on January 26. Since we were in

Washington and I was speaking on a topic directly relevant to it, why not participate in the march?

We were exhilarated by the experience of joining roughly 500,000 people in a rally on the Mall and a march to the Supreme Court that promoted pro-life legislative initiatives. The rally included speeches by politicians and pro-life leaders, including a tweet from Pope Benedict XVI. The leaders of the movement emphasized youth involvement, and it looked like at least half the marchers were under 25. The massiveness of the crowd meant that the parade was slow. When the shuffling got tiresome amid the twenty-degree, windy and snowy weather, we broke ranks and walked along the side of the march and were able to assess its immensity and variety. What a sight!

Where were the mainline Protestants?

Most obvious was the heavy Roman Catholic participation, both among the speakers and the marchers. Hundreds of banners of Catholic parishes as well as of Catholic organizations of exotic nomenclature were evident. No doubt thousands of evangelicals were there, but it was hard to identify them, perhaps because organizations beyond the local congregation are not so numerous among them. And their ecclesiology makes it difficult to bring off a coordinated effort.

The LCMS had gathered several hundred with whom we marched. Lutherans for Life – an umbrella organization – provided an additional banner under which another couple hundred marched. However, a stunning realization came to me: I saw not one mainline Protestant banner or organized group. Of course I could have missed them amid the immensity of the march, but it is safe to say they were not there in any significant mass. That was true for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which more and more resembles mainline liberal Protestantism.

Moderately pro-life, in theory only

The absence of any trace of the ELCA was no surprise to me. Though it had issued a moderately pro-life social statement in 1991, it has never acted on its statement. It had never produced pro-life literature, joined any pro-life organizations, encouraged local congregations to observe the annual pro-life Sunday (this past year on January 20, right be-

fore the march), promoted participation in state or national marches, nor advocated for pro-life policies in any of its state or national advocacy offices. As far as the ELCA is concerned, there is dead silence on the matter. With that posture in place it is not hard to understand why so few from the ELCA participated in the march.

Moreover, the ELCA's health insurance coverage allows abortion to be covered without any conditions attached, a fact that has brought forth some protest among pro-life ELCA pastors and laypersons and added to the general discontent with the ELCA.

Though bashful about pro-life issues, the ELCA speaks copiously on a host of issues about which Christians of good will and intelligence generally disagree. Its pattern of support corresponds with the policies of the Democratic Party, but departs even from that liberal pattern on issues regarding Israel. It has a program called Peace Not Walls that outrageously lectures the Israelis on how they should defend themselves from suicide bombers. (Lutherans of all people should be quiet about these matters given their ambiguous history with the Jews.) Further, the ELCA's Presiding Bishop Hanson joined other liberal Protestants in asking Congress to scrutinize Israel's military practices and consider withholding military aid from them.

The Missouri difference

The Missouri Synod could not be more different. First, it rarely ventures into the public sphere as a church. Second, it wisely limits its public witness to two crucial issues: religious freedom and nascent life. Its most consistent public concern over the years has been the need to guard religious freedom. After all, its pioneers came to this country to escape the coerced union of Reformed and Lutheran congregations in Germany. Further, its schools were threatened by a Nativist movement – including the KKK – that attempted to shut down private schools.

Only recently it has won (by a unanimous decision) a case before the Supreme Court (*Hosanna vs. Tabor*) that preserved the right to continue to hire and fire its parochial school teachers on the basis of its own religious convictions without interference from the government. Its president has also testified against the coercive provisions of Obama-care being applied to church-related social service

organizations. This concern for the free exercise of religion also distinguishes it sharply from the ELCA, which has said nothing about these religious freedom issues either domestically or internationally.

Lutherans for Life

Before Missouri became more vigorously involved in pro-life issues, it spawned Lutherans for Life through the work of one of its committed laywomen, Jean Garton, who wrote the influential book, *Who Broke the Baby?* In 1984 it produced a strong pro-life social statement entitled "Abortion in Perspective," which ends with many practical suggestions to further the pro-life agenda in parishes and schools.

Encouraged by its central office, a large portion of its congregations observe Sanctity of Life Sunday, this year on January 20. It has organized an auxiliary called Life Ministries, which planned the conference at which I spoke and disseminates pro-life materials among Missouri Synod congregations. It brought top leadership—including President Matthew Harrison—to the conference and helped everyone who attended participate in the March for Life. Several hundred participated in the march and the conference.

There is little doubt where the LCMS stands on these issues. At the conference President Harrison announced plans to establish the church's own advocacy office in Washington, an advocacy office with a difference. The office would first offer pastoral care to the church's Washington politicians and staff. It would also provide information to them about the church's thinking on the two matters discussed above: religious freedom and the protection of nascent life. When offered the chance it would advocate directly for the church's stance on those two issues.

Why the differences?

What to make of this wide divergence between two churches who ostensibly proceed from the same basic interpretation of the Christian faith, the Lutheran Confessions? Both churches claim to be confessional Lutherans. Could it be that the differences can be accounted for by their starkly different political cultures, which then bend their theological-ethical stance according to their underlying cultures? Such an explanation would no doubt be part-

ly true. The leadership and clergy of the ELCA are liberal theologically and politically while their counterparts in the LCMS are conservative.

But it cannot account for everything. After all, the ELCA developed a fairly strong pro-life social statement. But it has never acted on it. Indeed, it is difficult to find it on the church's website. My hunch is that the "representational principles" adopted by the church at its very foundation doomed any prophetic action on this matter, as well as guaranteed that traditional Christian teaching on sexuality issues would sooner or later be vitiated. The foundation of the ELCA was powerfully conditioned by liberationist themes of the 60s flowing through a set of radicals who were part of the committee selected to set in motion the new church.

Fueled by suspicion of all inherited teachings, they quickly installed quotas so that "new voices" could challenge past teachings, as they were articulated and no doubt distorted by white, heterosexual males. Half of all lay representation on all the committees and boards had to be women, and women pastors—especially activist women pastors—were represented way out of proportion to their real numbers of the clergy. This of course interjected a strong feminist presence in the church, one that has perhaps made more difference in the life of the ELCA than any other factor in the new church. Aggressive feminism has changed theology and church practice. It has changed the language of the Bible and worship. It was instrumental in striking down the prohibitions against the blessing of gay unions and the ordination of partnered gays. It has helped to bend the ELCA toward liberal Protestantism. And it has vetoed any actions, programs, or efforts to implement a pro-life agenda in the ELCA. This accounts for the silence of ELCA.

Missouri politics

What about the LCMS? The traditionalists who prevailed in the great divisions of the late 60s and early 70s in the LCMS, chronicled dramatically by James Burkee in his *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod*, purged the LCMS of theological and political liberals. The purging was done on the basis of the "doctrinal position" of official Missouri, elaborated in 1932 in *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* and in 1973 in *A Statement on Scriptural and Confessional Principles*. These

statements affirm a literalist interpretation of the Bible (complete with seven-day creation), strict and narrow doctrinal requirements, and the prohibition of “unionism” with any church that does not concur with them. They deny Eucharistic fellowship to any who do not conform to these narrow limits. My wife and I were refused communion at the very conference at which I was invited to speak.

These doctrinal statements unfortunately can be used even now to intimidate anyone who might strain them by creative theological reflection. But they ensure that officials and leaders of the LCMS follow Scripture literally on issues concerning the protection of nascent life as well as those concerning sexuality in general. And Missouri’s history dictates its ongoing concern for religious freedom.

Left, right, middle

So we have an ELCA moving rapidly toward liberal Protestantism with its revisionism on all matters having to do with sexual ethics, including those relating to abortion. The only doctrinal pressure in the church is put on those who adamantly and publicly defend traditional teachings on these matters. A church devoted to inclusivity excludes those who hold to positions the church itself held only a decade ago. On the other hand, we have a church on the right side of these issues but which is gravely injured by a sectarian strand in its guiding documents, prompting it to exclude those who cannot abide by the narrow dictates of that strand.

Enter the third church in the tale of three Lutheran bodies. The new North American Lutheran Church, whose Bishop and ecumenical officer were introduced at the Life Ministries Conference, is a church that hopes to avoid the revisionism of the ELCA – with its attendant biased witness in the public sphere – as well as the narrowness of the Missouri Synod in doctrinal matters. The NALC organized soon after the 2009 decisions of the ELCA to jettison traditional Christian sexual ethics. It is trying to be a centrist Lutheran church, perhaps the last hope for such a church in North America.

Though it is building cordial relationships with the LCMS, there will be distinct limits as to how far they can proceed. But in the realm of public witness by the church and its laity and associations, the LCMS has it right. The NALC might well emulate its commitment to form its laity and witness publicly on two issues: the protection of nascent life and the exercise of religious freedom. Those are two issues that ought to occupy any serious Christian church.

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Omnium gatherum



Purgatory redux? • Last time I mentioned the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology annual Pro Ecclesia Conference, this year tackling “Heaven, Hell – and Purgatory?” but I didn’t have the dates. Now I do: June 10-12 at Loyola University in Baltimore. More information and registration at www.regonline.com/CCET2013.

More anxiety at Luther • Things financial are still looking bleak at Luther Seminary. Eight of the 44 faculty were up for decisions about reappointment,

tenure or promotion this spring, but now these decisions have been postponed until the fall; the board is looking at reducing the number of the faculty by up to a third and the staff by up to a quarter. On top of this, the acting president and the dean are recommending that the board eliminate Luther’s 25-year-old Ph.D. program because “the seminary can’t sustain the program’s costs.” Some very anxious times in St. Paul.

Campus unrest • Luther isn’t the only Minnesota Lutheran educational institution that is experienc-

ing some rough waters. At Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, there is growing sentiment among students, faculty and alumni that it's time for President Jack Ohle to go. A letter from the faculty senate claims that "We have reached a point where lack of trust and confidence in your leadership over the span of four years precludes the college from moving forward." Some faculty describe Ohle, who prior to coming to Gustavus in 2008 had served as President of Wartburg College, as a "dictator." The faculty is in what has been called by one professor "open rebellion," according to a report in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. The situation is serious enough that the Board of Trustees has sent a letter to GAC alumni, trying to do some damage control. The letter highlights recent "significant success" in various areas, particularly a big increase in financial support (without quite crediting that overtly to Ohle, though they are "excited about the progress of the institution under the President's leadership"). Beyond that, the letter is about what you would expect: "It is a natural process to openly engage in civil discourse about divergent opinions in the way in which an institution of higher education is governed. The Board of Trustees . . . has been seeking more input from faculty, staff, and students to make sure the appropriate conversations and discussions are held so that the institution will continue to move forward." Translation: "Don't worry, be happy."

Who do you say that I am? • We should probably start a regular feature in *FL* entitled something like "sundaysandseasons.com alert" — so often do things strange and horrid come across the computer screen of those who subscribe to the Augsburg Fortress online worship resource. The latest one is the suggested blessing for Lent: "God our Father bless you and shield you. Christ our Mother shelter you and carry you. God the Holy Spirit guide your journey, both now and forever." Let us grant that the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich uses this imagery, so it is not exactly unprecedented in the history of the church — though very rare indeed. But the sometimes bold and eccentric reflections of mystics don't generally belong in the liturgy. And in this particular context, the juxtaposition of "God our Father" and "Christ our Mother" is utter nonsense from the point of view of Trinitarian doctrine, and from just about any other point of view as well. As one puz-

zled pastor put it, "God is our Father and his Son is our Mother?" One explanation that has been offered for this oddity is the metaphor in Luke 13, the gospel lesson for Lent 2, where Jesus says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." I suppose we should be grateful the prescribed blessing didn't refer to "Christ our Chicken." (I'm almost hesitant to say that; don't want to give them any ideas.)

Vacating the God Box • Word comes that the National Council of Churches will be vacating their offices at the Interchurch Center, 475 Riverside Drive in New York, long known as the "God Box." The NCC will be moving to a single office in Washington, DC — probably a more appropriate location, given their almost total preoccupation with things political. (I'm not being snarky here; the NCC's own press release quotes Transitional General Secretary Peg Birk as saying "The critical NCC policy work can be coordinated from any location but to be the prophetic 'voice of the faithful' on the ground in the places of power, it is best served by establishing our operations in Washington.") The NCC once occupied three floors of the God Box, but staff reductions have apparently reached the point where a single office will do. Built in the late 1950s, the Interchurch Center was called by some the "Protestant Vatican." How things have changed. Much of the building is still occupied by church-related agencies of one sort or another, and the NCC hopes in some way to "maintain its historic presence" at the center (whatever that might mean). Ever looking to put the best construction on things, NCC President Kathryn Lohre explained that "This consolidation will free us from the infrastructure of a bygone era, enabling us to witness more boldly to our visible unity in Christ, and work for justice and peace in today's rapidly changing ecclesial, ecumenical and inter-religious world." Good to know.

Brother restored • In an article we published a couple of years back ("Restoring the brother?", *FL* Aug. 2011), we told the story of Bob Stuenkel, a retired LCMS pastor who got into trouble for communing with his wife at the ELCA congregation of which she is a member. The issue boils down to how one exegetes the phrase "taking part in," as in the LCMS *Handbook's* prohibition of a pastor "taking

part in the . . . sacramental rites of heterodox congregations." In 2010 Stuenkel was placed on "restricted status," which, after he appealed, led to a hearing in 2011. Now a notice has come from the president of the Rocky Mountain District, informing whomever may be concerned that "formal proceedings to resolve the matter of [Stuenkel's] suspended status . . . have been completed in his favor" and, effective immediately, "he again holds all rights of membership provided to ministers of religion" of the LCMS. So far as we've learned, no public statement has been made that would explain the reasoning of the hearing committee or offer anything in terms of exegeting the phrase in question, and this has raised the hackles of some of Stuenkel's accusers. Of course it is not unusual – indeed, it is fairly common – that the specifics of a disciplinary procedure be kept confidential. The critics should accept the decision with good grace and give it a rest. *FL* may offer further comment on the case if it seems warranted, but for now, best wishes to Pr. Stuenkel, and we hope his ordeal is at an end.

Keeping up with current movements • A reader writes accusing me of "straining at gnats" by criticizing a quartet of New York bishops who had said that "the central point of the Bible's birth stories of Jesus was to challenge Rome's propaganda and subvert the hierarchy of wealth and power" (Feb. *FL*) The reader allowed as to how calling that "the central point" might have been "a little overstated," but "a more happily nuanced phrase might have been "one of the central points of the Bible's birth stories of Jesus was to challenge Rome's propaganda. . . "

Nope, not buying it. I don't think "challenging Rome's propaganda" qualifies as anything more than a very, very peripheral point in the infancy narratives. The reader went on to express approval that some bishops "are at least awake to some current movements in theology." That's certainly putting the best construction on it, though I frankly think the problem is that so many bishops (Lutheran and others) are aware of nothing more time-tested than "current movements in theology."

Our readers write • Actually, every month I receive a handful of letters (emails mostly, these days, but sometimes actual letters), for which I am grateful. Some are appreciative, or not, of a particular piece; others are more general. One reader recently thanked me "for [the gift of *FL*] through the years. I find it excellent and stimulating reading by this 90 year old pastor. May our gracious Lord bless you together with the other confessional writers." To keep me from becoming proud, the same week brought an email cancelling the writer's subscription. He had read *FL* in seminary, but had not for some years and recently subscribed. He had just received his first issue and complained that "the Forum has turned into a place to bitch about the actions of the ELCA. . . . You are welcome to do so but I feel no desire to underwrite it." Needless to say, I liked the first email better. But you can't win them all, I guess. We'd like to win more of them; you can help by giving a gift subscription to somebody you know – preferably somebody who might have a somewhat higher bitching toleration than the second writer.

– roj

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