

Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 23

Article 33

6-1-1952

Inside Missouri Synod

James R. Blackwood

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blackwood, James R. (1952) "Inside Missouri Synod," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 23, Article 33.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol23/iss1/33>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Inside Missouri Synod

By JAMES R. BLACKWOOD

EDITORIAL PREFACE

This article appeared in the Spring issue of *Religion in Life*, and with the kind permission of the publishers we are able to present it in our journal. By and large the author's analysis is very much to the point. It is, of course, impossible for an "outsider" to catch the real "inside" of another church body. There are certain intangibles in every denomination which only the members of the denomination can understand and appreciate. After all, one must breathe the very air of a denomination if one wishes to evaluate it from all possible angles. We believe that such an intangible of the Missouri Synod is its solidarity, unity of purpose, loyalty to its traditions. The "outsider" probably cannot escape observing this characteristic, but to truly understand and fully appreciate it, one must experience it by actual participation, for example, in the recently completed "Conquest for Christ," one of the greatest demonstrations of Synod's inner cohesion in its long history. It is indeed difficult to explain what prompts nearly 5,000 congregations, each a champion of the principle of the sovereignty and autonomy of the local congregation, cheerfully to submerge their local interests for the sake of a Synod-wide undertaking. — But there is one Missourian characteristic in particular which appears enigmatic to the "outsider." The author of this article refers to what in his opinion is an irreconcilable clash between Missouri's doctrine of the *Una Sancta* and its practice in the area of outward fellowship. The "outsider" finds it difficult to understand how a Missourian can speak in such glowing terms of the ecumenical character of the *Una Sancta* and actually confess in the Augustana that this alone is the true Church, and at the same time remain aloof from all current ecumenical movements. In his bewilderment he will ask: Is the Missourian's praise of the *Una Sancta* only lip service? is his *Lebrgerechtigkeit* merely an evidence of spiritual pride and therefore just as damnable as *Werkgerechtigkeit*? Or is he obsessed with the idea that in an age of unionism the *raison d'être* of Missouri is an extreme form of separation and complete isolationism? In a characterization of his own Church the Episcopalian Bishop Angus Dun said that in the eyes of the Protestant Churches the Episcopalians appear to be like the household in which some members stand at the front door cordially inviting the guests to enter, while other members of the same household stand at the second-story window pouring ice-cold water on the guests. Does this apply to Missouri? A careful examination of Missouri's ecclesiology shows that there is positively no clash between Missouri's doctrinal position and its practice. Missouri exemplifies a theology which — in the words of a German observer — aptly unites "*Ängstlichkeit um die reine Lehre*" and "*weltumfassende Liebe*," a narrow conscience in matters of doctrine and a broad spirit in matters of love. Faith in the power of the Gospel and love toward every member of the *Una Sancta* throughout the wide, wide world prompt the Missourian to share the Gospel in a true *koinonia* with every Christian. This same faith and love prompt him to say with Luther: "Cursed be that union and fellowship by which the Gospel is endangered" ("*periclitatur*"). For every aberration in Christian doctrine may become a fatal snare for the brother whom Christ has bought with His precious blood. For the sake of God's truth — which never becomes ours to do with as we will — and for the sake of the fellow member in Christ — within or without our own denominational body — separation may become necessary. Reformed theology has an entirely different approach to the

doctrines of the Church and the means of grace, and its adherents are apt to interpret our separation as separatism; at any rate, our position appears to be enigmatic. Probably the article will serve the purpose that we Missourians ask ourselves whether we clearly understand our own position, whether we have always presented it convincingly, and, above all, whether we have always found the golden mean between a real concern for the purity of the Gospel and true love toward all members of the *Una Sancta*. F. E. M.

FROM what other people had told me, my mental picture of a Missouri Lutheran once took shape as a sort of scaly monster belching fire.

But I have changed my mind in the last five years, since I have set out in my first charge, a Presbyterian minister in the thick of Missouri Lutherans. One day early in my pastorate I wanted to look up a reference in a certain volume of theology. The public library of nearby St. Louis did not have a copy of the book. What about Concordia Seminary? Perhaps the Lutherans would let me use their library, perhaps not. It was worth trying. Although I did not find the book in question, I found something far more interesting. People. Friendly people. Missouri Lutherans.

A professor who saw me browsing introduced himself, and asked what had brought me to Concordia. Later on he said that the Seminary had recently opened its doors to men outside the Missouri Synod. I decided to go through that open door and look around.

Ever since then I have been looking and listening, and sometimes talking, one morning a week at Concordia. My work at the Seminary has dipped into various departments — Old Testament, New Testament, systematic and practical theology. If the teachers, pastors, and students whom I have met represent Missouri Synod Lutherans, present and future tenses, they have been strangely misjudged by men of other denominations who have talked with me about them. The classes have drawn together recent graduates of the Seminary, pastors of Lutheran churches in and around St. Louis, and a smattering of non-Lutherans like myself. Most of these other men face problems like my own. For their casual conversation, I find it hard to distinguish them from the ministers of my own wing of Protestant life. They smoke a lot, but they don't belch fire.

What's more, I have discovered that Missouri Lutheran students belong to a community of thought in their scholarship. Our reading lists have seemed to me anything but provincial. On a random sample, I think of assignments in the works of J. S. Stewart, John Baillie, H. R. Macintosh, Aulén and Nygren, Kraemer, Barth and Brunner, the Niebuhrs, Tillich, Latourette, Lewis Sherrill, and Santayana. The

Missouri Lutherans keep up with what others are writing. It is only an acquaintance on paper, to be sure, yet it is genuine. Consequently the young man from Concordia who takes graduate work at another seminary not only keeps pace with his class; whether it be at Union or Chicago or elsewhere, he often goes to the front in scholarship.

Whether or not they know it, these men often talk about four subjects that bear on what they think of other denominations, and what people in other denominations assume (and too frequently say) about Missouri Lutherans.

I

The first of these subjects is *education*. "The school," declared Luther, "must be the next thing to the church." A Missouri Lutheran congregation maintains a parochial school near the sanctuary wherever it can swing finances. They have invested heavily in their educational program. In the United States the synod has more than 1,200 parochial schools, with enrollment pushing 100,000; ten prep schools and junior colleges; two normal schools to feed into the parochial system; and two seminaries. Concordia Seminary, on a beautiful campus six miles from the heart of St. Louis, enrolls about six hundred students. It ranks among the largest Protestant seminaries in this country.

But notice what may happen with such a system of education. A boy may skip off to kindergarten, and finish his course years later, a slightly bald scholar holding the Doctor of Theology degree—without once having gone outside Lutheran schools for his instruction! True, the system pays huge dividends in leadership. Many of the students later go into the pastorate or parochial teaching, the mission field, publication or religious radio. One of my friends, who is by no means an exception, had decided at the age of twelve to enter the ministry. Learning the catechisms, singing Reformation chorales, studying German, Latin, and Greek, all pointed him toward the pulpit. When he came to seminary, he knew Martin Luther forward and backward. But he knew more of what Luther said about the Turks than what John Wesley said about God. He knew Calvin best at those points where Lutherans have attacked him. He knew the intimate life of other Christian bodies only from the outside and from a distance. The system of education helps to explain why a good many Missouri Lutherans have had very little contact with others who are "not of this fold." Quite simply, they had no place to get acquainted.

Furthermore, the system of religious education has depended rather heavily on the *memoriter* method. Partly for this reason younger Missouri Lutherans are likely to sound very much alike when they begin

to talk religion. When the student reaches seminary, he can tell you this or that doctrine without fumbling; except that he finds it next to impossible to tell you in his own words. When he begins to preach and wants to quote a text, he almost always fetches one of the proof-texts from the standards of his church. Homiletically, he is apt to follow the traditional pattern set by the doctrine of Law and Grace, without a glimmer of hope till near the middle of the sermon; and sometimes not even then. He is likely to use the stock illustration of his forebears: a sailing vessel at sea, wrenched by waves, lashed by wind—familiar and terrifying to his grandfather, or great-grandfather who ventured in faith across the sea, but considerably less vivid to farmers, merchants, laborers, and housewives of inland America today.

Lest anyone think that these words cut too sharply, let me explain that I am acting as a reporter, not as a critic. I have been quoting, indirectly, what a few thoughtful Missouri Lutherans have said about themselves and their ways of educating for the ministry. The seminary professor knows what obstacles he must overcome to bring the gospel alive to living men. Students seem eager for a vernacular expression of their problems and their faith. They discuss theological questions freely among themselves. One Lutheran student said to an outsider, "Tell us what you think; we may be wrong." Such frankness gives one clear sign of hope that things are changing, educationally and otherwise, inside Missouri Synod. Results may be long in coming, but they are on the way.

II

The second problem area centers in the question of *Church and State*. Almost every Missouri Lutheran pastor has had Romans 13:1 drilled into him since childhood. "The powers that be are ordained of God." When a pastor refers to the text, he usually gives only the number. Largely on the strength of "Romans 13," the synod has kept out of civil affairs. Yet many pastors are now raising uneasy queries. What are "the powers"? Where do you find them? In a structure of government? In chosen rulers? In the people? Are the powers a vague spiritual penumbra brooding over the council tables of the world? Why should a pastor cast a secret ballot, and yet shy away from other citizens who think as he does?

In a gathering of Missouri Lutheran pastors, such questions raise the temperature of the conversation by several degrees. But the word "relevant" has seeped into their vocabulary, and they cannot altogether deny the relevance of religious life to civic affairs. The two areas may not be concentric, but they do overlap.

Since the turn of the century members of the Missouri Synod have taken several hard jolts in their view of church and state. For one thing, Lutheran churches in America have always felt a close tie with corresponding parts of the Mother Church in Germany. At the time of World War I over-zealous Americans charged Lutherans here with belonging to "the Kaiser's church." How those words stung! Missouri Lutherans gave their allegiance to the government of the United States of America. They sent young men into the armed forces. They bought bonds. Not only so, but the shock of war changed a large segment of their church from a German-speaking into an English-speaking body.

In 1917 the men of synod revised their constitution. They took the old name, *Die Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Missouri, Ohio, und andern Staaten*, dropped *Deutsche*, and translated all they had left into the official name, The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. Originally the seminaries had insisted that "the German language be and remain the sole and only medium of instruction." Nowadays English claims first place. A professor still can get a laugh by telling a joke in German; but he does well to add a gloss in English. Up to the present day a good many pastors hold services in German; but they do so at an early hour, and generally to dwindling numbers. A shift in language did not come easily, yet if it caused old-timers to wag their heads, in the long view the change has meant an increased yield for the transplanted church.

Again in 1933 and following years, ties with German Lutheranism felt the strain of international events. Some Lutheran pastors in Germany agreed to a conspiracy of silence with National Socialism. They had a text for self-defense—"the powers that be"—and no one could very well deny that the Nazi power had come into being. Yet a few men, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called Hitler's bluff; and in so doing they gained the respect of freedom-loving people everywhere. They too had a text. "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Suppose a state threatens the church by gagging its ministers and persecuting its members; do churchmen then have the right to speak out, resist? Most Missouri Lutherans—not all, but most, I believe—now answer this question emphatically: YES.

A more immediate problem of church and state has to do with the Roman Catholics. For a long time congressmen in Washington have felt the pressure of a demand for federal aid to parochial schools. It is no secret who wants that aid. Most Lutheran educators have said, "We will get along without it." Although here and there in Europe Lutheranism remains a state-supported religion, in America the Mis-

souri Synod has traditionally stood for separation of church and state. Now what if Roman Catholics jockey for position with the government? Will no Lutheran protest? Will only Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, atheists, and crackpots make a noise? Roman Catholic maneuvers have hit Missouri Lutherans hard, with the result that the Lutherans are keeping sharp watch on what happens under the Capitol dome.

As a matter of fact, the synod has posted an unofficial observer in Washington. If pending legislation looks at all suspicious, this man spreads the word. On the issue of President Truman's nominating an ambassador to the Vatican, people within the Missouri Synod have spoken clearly and forcefully. They have attended mass meetings, sent messages to congressmen, sounded off, and in general behaved like healthy partisans. But even in a mass meeting they are careful to speak as "individual citizens" rather than as members of an ecclesiastical body. While they admit that they sometimes take action, Missouri Lutherans hesitate to modify the noun *action* with the adjective *political*.

As long ago as 1890 a Missouri Lutheran convention declared their church to be "in conscience bound" to fight legislation that might be used to hold back the work of "extending and perpetuating the Kingdom of God." They have learned how to stand fast against what they consider an outside threat; perhaps in time they will come to plan more closely with others in the creative task of shaping a Christian social order.

III

The Missouri Synod stands apart on a third point, *doctrine and worship*. In its very first year the synod plunged into a debate on the nature of the Church and the office of the Christian ministry. Then their debates widened in scope so as to drag out, call by name, and quash Arminians, Socinians, Calvinists and crypto-Calvinists, Donatists, Pelagians, semi-Pelagians, Pelagian-synergists, ordinary synergists, rationalists, and blasphemers. The list includes just about everyone except Missouri Lutherans.

Yet in my years at Concordia Seminary, I have never heard a student or professor, pastor or adherent, express bitterness toward any church or church leader outside Missouri Synod. That is a big statement, especially against such a background, but it is literally true. When these followers of Luther take issue with Calvin they somehow manage to smile. Lecturing one day on theology, a professor said: "Of course we believe in the sovereignty of God"—then looking my

way he added, "only not so much as Presbyterians." The class laughed. Whatever the attitude may have been in the past or continues to be in some parts of synod, the men who now teach at the seminary reason their judgments with charity. They talk doctrine without screaming. Their criticism rises above sarcasm. These men are kind.

Missouri Lutherans are taking new interest in the doctrine of the Body of Christ. The synod has never claimed to be God's only channel of blessing in America. Pastor Grabau of the Buffalo Synod once tried to convince the brethren from Missouri that "external fellowship with the visible orthodox (*i. e., Lutheran*) Church is necessary for salvation." The furor that he stirred up lasted from 1849 until about 1866. The Missouri Synod came to understand that in modern times many believers, like the seven thousand unknown to Elijah, have not bowed down to Baal. Though separated in creed they are united in faith. Moreover, anyone who wants to make communion with a visible church necessary for salvation at the same time denies the article on justification by faith alone.

Later on Dr. A. L. Graebner of Concordia Seminary defined the church as "the community of the regenerate, or of all those who believe in Christ and are justified by faith. . . ." Even a church contaminated by erroneous doctrine may take its place in the Body of Christ, said Graebner, so long as it sets in operation the essentials of the gospel.

Theologians of the Missouri Synod have said good strong words about the *Una Sancta*, the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church. Then why did the synod fail to send a representative to the 1948 assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam? For what possible reason did the synod keep its men at home when the National Council of Churches came to birth at Cleveland? Strange doings for those who believe in the *Una Sancta*!

One who sits on the sidelines has a hard time knowing exactly what goes on when the Missouri Lutherans huddle, but this fact comes out: they differ strongly over "unionism." The term "unionism" carries a sinister suggestion; it includes what outsiders call the ecumenical movement. Anti-unionists think it foolish to pretend that agreement exists where it does not exist, by holding conferences and hearing speeches and signing documents. They say that fellowship in worship becomes possible only among those who thoroughly agree in doctrine. Union must follow unity—not the other way around. Worshipers therefore can really share the bread and wine of communion—the

vital point—only as they agree on the meaning of the elements. In brief, that is the argument. Until fundamental agreement exists all the running back and forth to conferences doesn't amount to pigtracks in the Ozarks.

Those who advance this argument leave many non-Lutheran Protestants baffled. How will agreement ever come to those who never, never talk over their differences? Do Missouri Lutherans have anything to contribute by way of testimony or scholarship to the rest of us? Is our ignorance invincible? Is their purity of doctrine to be kept immaculate because we cannot be persuaded of its truth, or simply because, like Sainte-Beuve, these good people fear "the Anglo-Saxon contagion"? Are the Augsburg Confession and Luther's catechism infallible? If not, why act as if they were so?

Obviously a good share of the problem lies in the constitution of the Missouri Synod, adopted in 1847. At that time Lutheranism had fractured into some twenty corporate bodies in America; the forming of the *Synode von Missouri* brought a merger of separate groups and unattached congregations. Their doctrine focused in the Word of God as interpreted by the three Ecumenical Creeds, the unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Smaldcald Articles, the Large and the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord. The synod was emerging out of conflict; its members put up sturdy guards against error.

Thus the constitution disavows "unionism of every description." The ruling of 1847, still in force, specifically forbids a pastor to serve any congregation made up of members holding different confessions as such; forbids him to take part in any rite or service with a minister from another denomination; forbids him to join in any kind of religious instruction, mission work, or publication with members of heterodox bodies. Some of the Missouri Lutherans like that part of their constitution. Some do not. At any rate, all ordained men in the synod have pledged themselves to uphold the constitutional government of the church. Critics of Catholicism, they have strict press censorship and an *imprimatur* of their own. Disciples of liberty, they are hemmed in on every side.

Will new leaders shape a freer policy? (I do not mean looser doctrine.) Until they do, these people have the sense to keep their differences of opinion to themselves. The constitution half explains the well-known statement that "every major denomination except the Southern Baptist and Missouri Lutheran" was represented at the first session of the National Council of Churches in Cleveland. I sense a growing belief among men of the synod, however, that plain friend-

liness and straightforward discussion with outsiders need not mean heresy or weakening of principle. Since the Kingdom of God extends beyond the geographical and jurisdictional bounds of the Missouri Synod, earnest Christians should be able to meet and work together at a common task.

IV

The fourth point leads us to think of *evangelism*. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—has grown and is growing rapidly. It has spread far beyond the states that fostered its early life. At present the synod reaches into Maine, Florida, California—in fact, into every one of the forty-seven states outside of Missouri! Expansion has come by birth rate and nurture from within the church; by adding members from traditions other than the Lutheran; and by taking in people from the highways and hedges of secularism. Missouri Lutherans have dared to experiment with new techniques for attracting unchurched people to their congregations. The experiments have proved successful.

For example, radio has played a large part in evangelizing men and women ordinarily beyond the range of local churches. Whenever I see the tower of Station KFUD pointing high up from the Concordia campus, I ask myself where the rest of us Protestants have been dozing for the last few decades. We have nearly missed the opportunity of a century while these Lutherans have been broadcasting from their own station day by day since 1924. Then, too, they have built up a national network for their religious programs. Backed financially by a laymen's league, Missouri Lutherans have paid full professional rates for their time on the air. They have also strengthened the synod's missionary appeal in South America with regular broadcasts in Spanish and Portuguese.

This link with radio has become so strong that the Missouri Synod has tried to shake off its local name by advertising itself simply as "The Church of the Lutheran Hour." For sixteen and a half years the radio mission, "Bringing Christ to the Nations," presented a speaker heard by more people than George Whitefield, Charles G. Finney, J. Wilbur Chapman, and Billy Sunday taken together. The emphasis in radio has been vigorously evangelistic from the start; and it has brought results.

In much the same way, Missouri Lutherans are appealing to unchurched people through contemporary architecture. The modern trend shows up in the construction of schools. No more money for crockets and finials—the style functions! Similarly, more and more new church buildings break from the pseudo-Gothic vogue, and say something

with brick and steel and glass that belongs peculiarly to our day. After worshiping in a Missouri Lutheran church designed by the elder Saarinen, one man exclaimed: "It makes me want never to see a fake 'rose window' again." This building lets God's sunlight in!

Granted, a person who has worshiped all his life long in Gothic grandeur or in dim Byzantine abysses may find the new architecture bewildering, a little queer. But to one whose feelings have not been so conditioned the newer style looks inviting. In plain terms, a church that builds along contemporary lines may have a good tool for evangelism; it brings people there to see, and keeps them there to hear. As the synod took a chance on broadcasting twenty-eight years ago, more than one congregation is taking its long chance now on a dynamic architecture. In ways that suit modern needs, Missouri Lutherans are striving to "say Christ so that men understand." For the church itself is functional, interested in seeing gains.

V

The Missouri Synod has come a long way since 1847, when a number of Saxon immigrants formed a new religious body in America, wondering if they could rightly call that body a church. For the most part these folk settled in "islands of Lutheranism." C. F. W. Walther, Wilhelm Sihler, and others with them had left Germany for conscience' sake; they had turned from pietism and had revolted from rationalism. Desiring to reform the church, they bent every effort toward making confessional Lutheranism take root in American soil. They first organized their synod in protest against revivalism, unionism, and new methods.

Ironically, however, the synod has taken over most of the new methods that have become available to the church in the past century—Sunday school, visual aids, modern techniques in sound reproduction, and on and on. Missouri Lutherans have changed their language; they are drastically changing their ways in education; their experiments in architecture, just beginning, but striking close to the center in a new building on the Concordia Seminary campus, make nonconfessional mossbacks sit up and blink their eyes. In outlook and method the synod truly has come a long way during the past hundred years.

Of course some people say that the Missouri Synod still has a long way to go in relationship to other churches. None the less, their isolationism has been challenged. During World War II, 236 chaplains from the Missouri Synod ministered to all kinds of Protestants in the armed forces. (*Nihil obstat*: a battalion is not a congregation.) It

would be interesting to know whether or not any one of these chaplains served communion without cross-examining the communicants on the Augsburg Confession. Yes, or no, many a chaplain must have searched his own heart, asking this question: "Do I have the right to withhold the Body and Blood of Christ from a dying man? 'Who art thou that judgest?'"

There in extreme form is the Missouri Lutheran dilemma. The chaplains have faced it, and it has left its mark on them.

Numerous tokens of late reveal changing attitude among the Missouri Lutherans. After much discussion the synod has finally established "pulpit and altar fellowship" with the American Lutheran Church. [?] During and after the war, members of the synod have given money and clothing to Church World Service, an interdenominational agency. In November, 1951, Missouri Lutherans of the greater St. Louis area took part in the National Teaching Mission, an interdenominational religious census. Pastors and laymen are appearing at meetings they would scarcely have thought of attending a few years ago. Some of the men in key positions are looking for wider areas of co-operation, for as one of them has openly declared, "The island of Lutheranism in America has been destroyed." A new spirit has begun to move across the synod, and it is possible, rather probable, that the next fifty years will bring changes as significant as those that have come in the past century.

Since 1847 the Missouri Synod has grown from a few scattered congregations into a body reporting care over nearly two million souls; and it still is growing. Indeed, some leaders of the synod have begun to worry about its growth. Will new members cling to old ways? Will they remember former associations? Above all, will evangelistic zeal perhaps dangerously weaken the church by coaxing into its membership thousands of religious "floaters" who do not have their doctrinal roots in Lutheranism? Such a thing may happen. It seems more likely, however, that these men and women will offer a testimony that all Protestants need to hear in our time. Through them may come acquaintance and sympathy, and an easier yoke to bind us as laborers together under God.