

Loyal Opposition in the WELS

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[Metro-North Pastoral Conference, September 19, 1988]

Are you opposed to a new hymnal? Are you opposed to outside companies being used for church work? Are you opposed to the new position of project director for spiritual renewal? Are you an obstreperous son?

Questions such as those (and the title of this assignment) are like bombs waiting to go off – *LOADED*. Being asked such questions is like being asked, “Are you still beating your wife?”

Spouse abuse is not a topic to joke about because there is nothing funny about spouse abuse. Whether or not too many pastors in the WELS are loyal to synod is not a topic to joke about either. For that reason I have worked to keep any personal sarcasm or frivolity out of this presentation. Yet it does not seem inappropriate to ask that we retain our sense of humor and a willingness to smile at our own shortcomings as we consider the topic *Loyal Opposition in the WELS*.

Some may be asking themselves why we are even spending more time on this after Pastor Koeplin’s fine paper given last January in Manitowoc. After all, relatively speaking within our calling, this is not brain surgery. We all have more immediate and serious problems in our various fields of labor. Ferreting out the “company men” and the “misfits” shouldn’t have the top priority.

The program committee did feel that a follow-up presentation and discussion about a growing concern—synod loyalty and God-pleasing dissent—would be beneficial. I pray you feel it has been when our discussion is over.

My presentation is not to be construed as an opposing viewpoint to that which Pastor Koeplin gave in January. It is not intended to be that at all. That’s why this assignment given to me was not scheduled in the format of a debate. This paper is meant to be another look at the same concern from another angle. Pastor Koeplin and I, as all of you, have the same goal in mind—a body of believers who works together in the best interest of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the glory of God.

We need to understand and share a proper understanding of a couple of terms. Those terms are synod and opposition. Synod is you and I and all the believers who constitute our congregations and those who serve in the office of the public ministry in what we know as WELS. The term opposition can have several meanings. One definition given in Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary is this: *Hostile or contrary action or condition*. All too often we equate any questioning of something with contrariness and hostility.

The definition in Webster’s which appears just before the one above says: *An act of setting opposite or over against, The condition of being so set*. This more neutral sounding definition better serves our topic. Loyal opposition in the WELS as I understand it simply means to not go along with everything in (and I like that preposition better than against) the WELS. Who would expect every pastor, teacher, pastor’s wife or teacher’s wife or lay person to unquestioningly go along with everything WELS says or does without uttering a dissenting word? Or offering a different opinion? Or outlining some other plan of action?

What synod says and does! There is an interesting expression. The definition I offered for synod on the first page indicates that we should work hard to avoid the notion that the synod is some nebulous body of which I am not a working part. The “us” and “them” attitude may be more familiar terminology. When the WELS says or does something it is we who are doing it; we believers gathered around Word and Sacrament. Synod loyalty and loyal opposition in the WELS, if we use those terms, apply first and most to us as individuals. I am loyal to myself. I am a loyal opponent of myself. In other words, when I support WELS or when I do not agree with WELS, my own best interests are served in so far as I am a part of the body. To dissent for the sake of dissension would be counterproductive and I would be the one to suffer in the long run.

Loyal opposition in the WELS can take two basic forms. First, some action is decided, voted on, passed and put into motion. Just for example, the new hymnal project. I can stand up and say that I do not agree with

that decision. Maybe I voted against it at the convention. The second form would take place when it is felt something should be done and isn't. Just for example, changing the name of our church body. I can stand up and say that we need it. Maybe even vote for it at the district convention.

In both those cited questions I would be in opposition to the majority who decided by vote. I doubt that a person who merely goes against the majority opinion can rightfully be called unloyal at best, a crank and misfit at the worst. The person may be right after all or he may be wrong. What we need to do is put the best construction on his actions and believe that the person has the best interests of the entire body at heart. Also, most of us would agree, I'm sure, that once the decision has been made, further discussion may continue so long as it is not merely carping and complaining.

I have no intention of getting into personal judgments about specific actions WELS is doing or not doing. Nor is it my place to judge motives of those pastors who for conscience sake have chosen to make their objections known vocally, in print or by other action. I want instead to present some objective helps I have found practical in my own decision making. How can I better know when to remain silent or when to speak out? On what basis do I conclude I am right about a certain decision? What can temper my outrage or my approval so that I will not come off as an illogical zealot, but as a thinking man who has calmly looked at all the pros and cons and has taken a stand one way or the other?

As we always do, we turn first to God's Word. When I looked in there for an example of loyal opposition to the larger group, I came upon Joshua and Caleb. Everyone, besides them, believed they were right to say, "'Wouldn't it be better for us to back to Egypt?' And they said to each other, 'We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.'" (Numbers 14:3b-4)

Caleb's and Joshua's views were different. "Do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them." (Numbers 14:9b)

Caleb and Joshua understood one very, very important distinction. They knew the difference between obeying God's Word and loyalty to a group of people—no matter how well-meaning a group of people. I cannot and dare not disobey my God or His will as presented in His Holy Word. I can have no opposition, loyal or otherwise, to orthodox theology.

Loyal opposition to an institution, however, is quite a different question. I found a little book entitled *When to Take a Risk: A Guide to Pastoral Decision Making*, in which the author, Terry Muck, shows the difference. Muck, who is executive editor of *Christianity Today*, writes on page 60, "Correct theology supercedes even the wish of the majority." We are to obey God and not man.

On the bottom of page 64, Muck adds, "Strange things happen when we confuse institutional, interpersonal, and personal situations with theological ones and apply the motivation of obedience to them all." Most, if not all, of us have had the sad experience of getting those confused, would we not have to admit?

I do not disagree with author Muck who suggests using *obey* with God and the word *commitment* to the institution. Commitment is better than loyalty because I can be committed to an institution and yet seem disloyal when there is some uncertainty over where the right and wrong line up.

There has to be an appropriate approach to leadership which indicates that one is obedient to their authority but that obedience "should not be confused with the obedience we owe God." (*Risk*, pg. 65)

There needs to be as well a clear understanding of where parish pastors stand in relation to synodical leadership, i.e., officers and administrators. To divert back for a moment to the perception of "us" and "them," parish pastors and 2929, let us look at our ministries.

All of us have been called into the ministry. We are servants of God and His Word. Within this ministry we are equal as the priesthood of believers and co-workers in the Kingdom. One ministry is not greater than another. One ministry does not have the rule over another. Our ministries fit together, each a necessary piece in the total picture.

Pastor Koeplin states in his paper entitled "Synod Loyalty" on page 7, "As in the congregational setting, the synod has its God-appointed leaders. As in the congregational setting, not everyone is called by God to be a leader. As we ask our people to trust and follow based on the bedrock of the Word, their chief(s), so does the

synod have the right and legitimate expectation to ask the Indians, the parish pastors on their roster, to cheerfully give heed, cooperate, and follow with joy!”

With all due respect to Pastor Koeplin and the leaders at 2929, I do not consider myself and other parish pastors “Indians” and the synodical-called officers and administrators my “chiefs.” I do not see Scriptural proof that I am the chief of the Lord’s people in my congregation. The pastoral office is not the same position as CEO of a corporation, no matter what form that pastoral office takes.

I think I know what Pastor Koeplin means to say and I do not disagree. But terminology of that sort even said in light-hearted illustration can lead to continued tension within our midst. It can feed misunderstanding and suspicion.

Is there a tension between parish pastors and 2929? A failure to appreciate the point of reference each one is coming from? By personal experience, and I only speak for myself, I have found the WELS Administration Building a place where I can go when I have a question or comment and get it taken care of in a reasonable and satisfactory manner. Maybe you have had the same experience and feel as I do. I hope so.

Could it be that there are others who do not share my positive experience? In light of the fact there seems to be some tension we have to ask ourselves, am I one of the pastors in the parish who apparently look upon the occupants of 2929 Mayfair Rd. as so many Capt. Queegs who sit behind their desks, rolling steel ball bearings in their hands accusing everyone who questions them of eating the strawberries that were never there?

We have to ask this as well. From the other direction, how do the called workers at 2929 look out and see parish pastors? Do you see parish pastors as yellow, short-sighted mutineers who only really want to undermine your authority? Rampant paranoia in either quarter will do nothing to bring us closer together.

We called servants, Indians if you will, have one Chief. We serve Him in different ways in different arenas. I quote from a reaction by Rev. Erling Teigen of an essay entitled “Luther, Shepherd of Souls,” by Dr. George Kraus. The essay appears in the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, Vol. XXVI No. 4. I quote, “I suspect that were Luther to evaluate us today, he would observe that we sometimes do just about everything but absolve. Who can look at Pastor Bob in sneakers, levis and red vest with his ‘I’m ok, your ok’ theology and remember that this man stands in the place of God and forgives my sins, or at the most reverend Walter Street, whose first parish is in Lake Wobegone, Minnesota, shrewdly rushing around engaging contractors, designing buildings and stewardship programs and getting the best deal on mimeograph paper, the consummate money raiser and promoter, with a library low in homiletics, dogmatics and exegesis and high on church growth, and whose favorite periodical is *Your Church*—who can look at him and then see him as a representative of Christ in the sacristy, in the confessional, or at the communion rail?”

Pastor Teigen wanted to reemphasize that parish pastors above all else are to hold the concept that the pastoral office is that of dispensing the powerful means of grace, the voice of Christ’s own absolution.

Some of the things he mentioned (negative in his context, positive in mine) reminded me of many of the things we call others to do on a synodical level, very God pleasing things necessary in the church: contracting, building design, program development, promotion, getting good deals on supplies, etc. Parish pastors should not forget that those who do these things are serving the Lord within the context of their calling. Those who are in the position and do these things should not forget that they may not be as important to parish pastors who are working harder on being seen as absolvers of sin. We should not be at odds with one another over this but appreciate that each is working in conjunction with the others for the common good of the body of Christ.

Another distinction we need to make is the difference between tradition and traditionalism. Tradition is the objective good from the past we hold on to in the present and will retain so long as it remains good. Traditionalism is holding on to the past even when it is not good any more. Tradition is the thing held. Traditionalism is the holding on to. These are my own definitions of the two words.

I like the definition for traditionalism given by Charles Swindoll in his book, *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity: A Commitment to Excellence*. He writes on page 81, “By traditionalism we mean an attitude that resists change, adaptation or alteration. It clutches tradition so tightly that the blood supply to our spiritual brains is cut off, distorting vision and blurring the distinction between custom and commandment.

Traditionalism is suspicious and sensorious of the new, the innovative, the different. It substitutes a stuffy, legalistic system for the Spirit's freedom and freshness; law for liberty; rules for renovation; regulations for renewal."

Traditionalism will not help our church. It should be opposed and replaced with the better choice—change not for the sake of change but change that will be beneficial and given glory to God. Where would the church be without loyal opposition against traditionalism which is church loyalty? Israel would have gone back to Egypt with eternal consequences for us all. If Luther had been a sycophant we would still be saying the Mass in Latin and praying to Mary. If traditionalism flourishes, our WELS will swim in the pool of mediocrity with everyone going along no matter where things lead.

Swindoll quotes Plato and says on page 64 of the above-mentioned book, "The life which is unexamined is not worth living." He then adds, "Self-examination is painful enough let alone scrutiny by others." But just because such scrutiny is painful doesn't mean it should not be carried out. It is often painful to do what is right. It often takes pain to cure.

Where there is such examination there is going to be dissension and some disagreement. Even in the WELS. In *Leadership Magazine*, Vol. IX Number 3, Summer 1988, there is a review of the book entitled, *So You Disagree...* The heading of the book review itself is "Dissenting in Peace." I quote from that review on page 114: "Those who avoid church conflict at all costs, they say, discover the cost of avoidance is high. Evading conflict usually means pushing it to the shadowed edges of a church, where it will grow in virulence. The effective approach is not to avoid conflict but *to learn how to fight*. (Emphasis mine) An odd prescription, but the speakers persuasively contend that conflict can be an opportunity for increased understanding if it's confronted skillfully."

Another area of concern in this issue has to be how much do personality conflicts enter in. Is there confusion between institutional and interpersonal? Am I in opposition to a concern or to the person with the concern?

Synod loyalty and loyal opposition in the WELS are not the same thing as disputes between or among combative, self-interested or stubborn individuals. Such characteristics may spill over into an institutional concern but they are not to be confused as being one and the same. In *When to Take A Risk*, Muck writes on page 90, "Interpersonal disputes are solved neither by referring to an absolute standard of right and wrong nor by measuring the results against the effectiveness of the majority. When two people (or groups) are angry with one another in an interpersonal conflict, there is often no principle of right and wrong to follow.... The arbiter's role is to help the combatants see the value of making peace and then discover a mutually beneficial resolution.... It's the apostle Paul pleading with Euodia and Syntyche to 'agree with each other in the Lord' (Phil 4:2)" Muck goes on to suggest the principles he labels as the law of forgiveness and the law of mutual benefit. The law of forgiveness being a healing for damaged emotions. The law of mutual benefit being a win-win situation.

At this point I will comment on two specific items Pastor Koeplin presented "for your earnest consideration," in "Synod Loyalty," page 7. The first is letter g): "Begin all evaluations and judgments with the 'givens' that all of our God-appointed leaders are people of honor and integrity with hearts and motives as pure as our own."

I believe that all of our God-appointed leaders are people of honor and integrity. I would hope they believe the same about their fellow parish pastors. It is the second part of the statement that causes some pause. "With hearts and motives as pure as our own."

That is a pretty broad statement. As I apply it to myself, I would have to say there could be a problem. My motives are not always pure. There are many outside influences that can color my decision-making besides sin in my heart. A friend of my wife's and mine, also a pastor's wife, told me and her husband and another friend that we pastors worry too much about what other people think. Not only what members think but particularly other pastors. I am not agreeing or disagreeing. Just something to think about. Aren't we ever silent about something we feel strongly about because we believe we have to watch our backs, or be concerned about

what others might say? It may even come down to the reality that a pastor privately does not go along with most things but doesn't say too much in public because he doesn't want to get a bad reputation and be stuck and never get a call. Or, the pastor is not happy in ministry but keeps quiet and goes through the motions because he had no other abilities for the secular world. Granted, these are worst scenarios. But can they happen? Are they happening?

There has to be an open avenue for helping one another. A pastor, wherever his ministry is, needs to feel he can freely speak his mind (even if at the time it is only half-a-mind). He has to feel a willingness on the part of other pastors, both in other parishes and in the church at large, to listen and to help. At the same time, the pastor has to have a willingness himself: a willingness to take advice, to admit wrong if so, and to be man enough to change his mind and do it the correct way. Wouldn't you be more eager to speak up about your feelings if you saw open arms instead of the hot iron of a branding party ready to label you a maverick?

The second statement from "Synod Loyalty" is k): "Let us learn to repeat to ourselves at least three times a day: 'All together now, TEAM WELS!' Yes, we are the WELS. Yes, we are a team. We have been blessed by God for some reason more than others. We should be glad of whom we are by God's grace and share that gladness with each other. The more team spirit we have the better. How could anyone be opposed to that? I certainly am not opposed to it and I know you aren't either.

One last thought. Pastor Koeplin closed his paper in part by saying, "Our beloved 'Mother WELS' has her full share of problems.... What 'Mother' doesn't need are problems within the family from her obstreperous sons."

I suggest, in addition, "Mother" does not need the problems from within her family caused by her fawning momma's boys. These are the extremes. We all know extremes are bad. We need to find some common ground in the middle and stand together there.

I did not ask to write this paper but feel better for having done so. It gave me the chance to share with you some things I care about. I have to confess some concern about what the reaction to this paper might be. (Maybe she was right!) But trust has to start somewhere. So I offer these words for discussion and digestion. I trust they have been received in the same spirit of concern by which they were shared.