

LIGHTS! CAMERA! SEMINEX!
THE PRESS AND THE CONTROVERSY IN MISSOURI

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It was considered one of the top religious news stories of the early 1970's: the struggle between "moderate" and "conservative" factions of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. The situation was relatively rare for the twentieth century: a large religious body "turning back the clock" and rejecting neo-liberal theology for a more historic form of Lutheranism. It was bound to attract the attention of both the religious and the secular press.

The press is a fascinating study in and of itself. Alternately reviled as manipulative and manipulated, reflecting public opinion and molding it, the fifth estate is a powerful ally in any conflict. Politicians court its favors, special interest groups woo it, competitive advertisers spend million on it. This is because both charges are true to an extent. One can manipulate the press into presenting one's own view and denigrating one's opponent; at the same time, the public will very often agree with whatever they read in the newspapers.

A number of circumstances in the early 70's resulted in a press which was, by and large, sympathetic to the views of the liberal faction in the Missouri Synod. That faction, for its part, did what it could to foster such sympathy in the press and, through it, among the public at large. This effort, its background, pursuit, and results, will be studied and evaluated in the following pages.

I. THE CONTROVERSY

The real controversy at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, seemed to be peripheral, at best, to the media coverage. Nevertheless, it merits a short review here. Such a review will help not only to provide a background to the matter at hand, but also to give a counterpoint to

the interpretation given by the press in the early and later years of the controversy.

Missouri had found herself at something of a crossroads. Once the champion of strict confessionalism and orthodoxy, the LCMS was sliding inexorably into the neo-liberal camp. Much of this was due to the company she kept. Since her erroneous practices of church fellowship allowed her to rub elbows with the liberal denominations in the LCUSA, much of the liberal theology of these church bodies was infecting Missouri.

To tract the inroads which historical-critical methodology had made at Concordia in the 60's would require an essay, or better yet, a book, to itself. The synod's handling of the situation was not very effective. When Dr. Martin Scharlemann was "called on the carpet" for his use of the new hermeneutic, he apologized to the 1962 synodical convention in Cleveland for the unrest and tension he'd caused. He did not, however, disavow his teaching itself--not very clearly, at any rate. Nevertheless, he received a standing ovation and a resounding reaffirmation of his seminary professorship.¹

In the years that followed, the methodology became firmly entrenched at Concordia. By 1969 the faculty was almost completely composed of men who found it a necessary tool in their teaching. The synod's administration took little more action than to question professors and to suggest more orthodox wording for the statements which the faculty issued. Its lack of substantial concern about the problem became very apparent when, in May, 1969, it appointed Dr. John Tietjen president of the seminary.²

If Missouri was trying to enter the liberal camp once and for all, she could have made no better choice. Dr. Tietjen had earned S.T.M. and Th.D. degrees from Union Theological Seminary, New York. He was

LCUSA's executive secretary of public relations. He was, since 1959, the managing editor of the neo-liberal The American Lutheran.³ His election to so powerful a position in the synod marked a victory for the liberal faction.

Yet, less than two months later, the synod elected Dr. J.A.O. Preus as its president, giving the conservative theologian a virtual mandate to clean up the doctrinal mess at the St. Louis campus, and in other areas of the synod as well. The LCMS was waking up to the fact that things were not right at ~~Con~~cordia. There was a considerable amount of grass roots dissatisfaction about the new brand of theology. So Preus' election was meant to be a setback for the liberal camp.⁴

The controversy boiled down to the question of what Missouri's stand was to be on liberalism. The liberals felt that they had as much right to spread their teachings in the synod as the conservatives. The conservatives believed that Missouri should speak with only one voice, a voice which agreed with historic, orthodox Lutheranism.

II. THE LIBERALS' VIEW

In a few pages, the foregoing controversy will virtually disappear from view, to be replaced by a less theological interpretation. In the introduction to this essay it was stated that the liberals' viewpoint was by and large espoused by the press. It would be unfair to accuse the liberals of camouflaging the real issues. It is, therefore, necessary to attempt to retrace their line of thought which led them to believe that the strife was actually of a political nature.

The liberals could see no reason that a number of differing theological and hermeneutical philosophies could not exist in the same synod. Their acceptance of the historical-critical view of Scripture supported such thoughts. If the New Testament, for example, could contain the "opposing" theologies of Paul, James, John, and Peter,

then surely there was room in the Missouri Synod for both a Tietjen and a Preus.

Furthermore, Missouri's own fellowship principles had also helped to foster such notions. If a liberal ALC clergyman could preach from a LCMS pulpit, then the LCMS was giving tacit approval to his liberalism. Why, then, couldn't liberalism also be espoused by LCMS clergymen without fear of synodical reprisal?

And, at that time, liberal theology was the "going thing." It was a wide-spread opinion that no seminary could operate honestly without the historical-critical methodology as its foundation. Also, the principle of the freedom of the conscience in Lutheran hermeneutics had been expanded, in the large Lutheran bodies, into an "anything goes" proposition. If Missouri was to remain a leading force in the Lutheran Church, she would have to jump aboard the bandwagon.

Thus, the efforts of conservatives were views as narrow-minded and hopelessly parochial. Why wouldn't Jack Preus just let them be? The answer which they provided for this question was that he and his conservative faction were intolerant and theologically stiff-necked "bigots"---they were trying to re-create the LCMS in their own image..

So the liberals saw themselves as the imminent victims of a political purge, sort of a Preusian "Night of the Long Knives." Conservatives seemed to be rabid right-wingers, intent on having things their own way. The liberals' was a more moderate view of "live and let live."

What recourse was left to them? If the synodical administration was their enemy, using increasingly corrupt (in their opinion) measures to unseat them and to consolidate its own power, how could they expose and counteract its plots? The answer was to be found in the current national~~y~~ preoccupation with Haldemann, Ehrlichmann, Mitchell, plumbers,

secret tapes, and a big, ugly hotel in Washington, D.C.

III. THE NATIONAL SCENE

Watergate. Even today, a decade after the fact, the very name conjures up images of political shame and corruption on an almost undreamed-of scale. It was arguably the greatest political scandal in this country's history, and contributed greatly to American society's growing disenchantment with figures in authority.

Two aspects of the affair have special relevance to the controversy in Missouri. The first is the aforementioned spectre of corruption in high places and of the abuse of power. The Nixon White House seemed to be riddled with criminals, including a vice-president, an attorney general, and a number of top presidential aides. Popular opinion came to paint the president himself as the biggest crook of them all, because not only had he tolerated their crimes, but he had also seemingly had a hand in some of them.

The second facet of the Watergate business that had an influence in St. Louis was the role of the press. Woodward and Bernstein, with their dogged pursuit of the story, had given a new significance to the concept of the "watchdog press," monitoring officialdom and condemning those officials with too much dirt on their hands to wither, vampire-like, in the morning sunlight of public exposure. The incisive newsman became a national hero, a latter day Launcelot jousting with the dragon at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The image still lingers of a news conference in which Richard Nixon's entrance was greeted by perfunctory clapping, while Dan Rather, when called upon for his question, rose to hearty applause.

It is doubtful that the Missouri liberals could have missed the parallels between the nation's plight and their perception of their

own situation. A corrupt, power-driven administration? Jack Preus, they probably felt, could out-Nixon Nixon. The cleansing powers of the media? John Tietjen had been dealing with the press for years in his capacity as LCUSA's P.R. man.

And so, consciously or not, they took steps to acquaint the press with their own Lutheran "Watergate."⁶ Public demonstrations, press releases, and a host of journalistic weaponry were hauled out for this battle. And in both the short run and the long, this strategy met with some success.

Before leaving this section, comment should be made on another public event which was echoed in the affairs at Concordia: the end of the Vietnam War. "Peace with honor" was proclaimed in January, 1973, but most people realized that the United States was just giving up a war which had become repugnant to her. In other words, the student protesters of the late '60's had been right, if not in their lawless methods, at least in their political opinions.

Americans are overjoyed when students on American campuses are correct about such things, because it reaffirms many widely held myths about the innate purity of the young mind and the panacea of higher education. So when the students of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis took it upon themselves to protest the actions of their synod's administration, they had a public ready to give them the benefit of the doubt. Not only were they opposing corruption similar to that of the leaders in the Vietnam era, but they dressed more neatly and didn't use all the profanity of the students of the '60's.⁷

IV. THE PRESS RELEASED

Enough newsprint was dedicated to the chronicling of Missouri's woes to re-build a small forest. Within the synod itself the pages

of such publications as Christian News, Missouri In Perspective, The Lutheran Witness, and others were understandably preoccupied with the conflict. Many special publications appeared, such as the Concordia faculty's "Faithful" documents and Dr. Preus' fact-finding reports and presidential letters to the congregations of the synod. Besides these things, outreach efforts to the congregations were undertaken by both the faculty and student body of the seminary.

But our concern is not with these.⁸ It is rather with the perceptions fostered among the public at large. There were better forums for shaping public opinion than the LCMS' newsletters and magazines with their limited subscription.

Dr. Tietjen wasn't the only liberal in Missouri to realize how powerful an ally a sympathetic press could be. In October, 1970, a liberal layman, Robert Madigan, wrote the liberal Pastor Lueking about Dr. Preus' fact-finding committee. He wanted to call immediate attention to the committee's conservative make-up, "...and I mean both in the secular and church press."⁹ Such coverage, he felt, would "tend to soften public reaction to these punitive decisions we can expect from the committees."¹⁰

In a meeting with other district presidents in Nov., 1972, the head of the Indiana District noted the antagonistic attitude of many religious columnists towards Dr. Preus. He implied that some of the liberals were responsible for it:

How does it happen that James Adams (religious editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch) knows so much about what goes on both at the Seminary and within the Council, as well as elsewhere in the Church? How does it happen that he has access to privileged information, and even prints it, before it is made public, through the regular Public Relations channels of the church?¹¹

One example of such collusion with the press can be seen in the evolution of an article entitled "The Civil War in the Missouri Synod."

It was written by Kenneth L. Woodward, the religious news editor of Newsweek, and appeared in the January and February, 1971, issues of Christian Herald. One conservative pastor went through it and counted 80 examples of slurs, innuendos, ad hominems, and unverified or misleading judgments, along with 28 errors in fact. It was heavily pro-liberals and virulently anti-Preus.

And it seems to have evolved in this way. On October 23, 1970, Pastor Lueking spoke with Woodward in a lengthy phone conversation. On December 11, Robert Madigan knew enough about the article to want to arrange for special printing and distribution of it. And on the 20th, Pastor Lueking wrote a contact letter, urging recipients not to miss the article: "It has very significant potential."¹²

Any doubt about the allegiance of Newsweek's religion editor that may have lingered after this were dispelled in that magazine's issue of July 23, 1973. In an article intitled "The Lutheran Pope," a journalistic bias of libellous proportions is betrayed as the events of the New Orleans convention are chronicled. Members of the LCMS are "under the command" of a man with "virtually papal authority to determine their religious beliefs." At Preus' election to the presidency, "politics replaced piety in the Missouri Synod." Preus' opponents find their personal letters copied, their conversations recorded, their pictures taken by strange men with telephoto cameras. At the convention, their footsteps were dogged "by workers for the committee to re-elect the president" (a nice, Nixonian touch, that!).¹³

The liberals, or "moderates," are made out to be "latter day protestants," a group of bold Luthers to Preus' "Lutheran Pope." Their espousal of "modern Biblical criticism employed by orthodox scholars" is a sign of Missouri's maturation in the 1950's. Four hundred of these men marched to the podium to register their dissent with the convention's

actions, singing "The Church's One Foundation" "with choked voices." in every way, they are portrayed as innocent victims of a vengeful and heartless synodical president.¹⁴

After such an article, Time's report on the same convention seems very tame and level-headed and unbiased. Dr. Preus' scholarly qualifications and his motivation for insisting on biblical inerrancy receive what amounts to a rather fair hearing. Yet, in the very wording of the article, an editorial bias begins to become visible. Preus' fear that denial of parts of the Bible may lead to denial of the Resurrection is "a theological domino theory," certainly a loaded term in the year after the Vietnam War. Preus has been "waging a war of attrition" against the "progressive majority" at Concordia. The final word in the article goes to a dissenter at the convention: "'I thought,' he said bitterly, quoting Martin Luther himself, 'that neither Pope nor Council could bind our conscience.'"¹⁵

Time, too, leaned toward the liberal faction. This was even more apparent in an article entitled "Civil War in the Synod" in the Sept. 25, 1972, issue. There Dr. Preus is labelled as "aggressively orthodox." When his mailing of the fact-finding committee's report is brought up, it is called "a torrid 160 page attack" with which he "declared war on President Tietjen himself, along with a majority of his faculty."¹⁶

The charge of political domineering had come to supplant the fact that Missouri's struggle was, at heart, theological. In an editorial dated April 25, 1970, Lester Kinsolving, an Episcopalian priest, spoke of Dr. Preus "launching a major Inquisition." He quoted a Pastor Richard Neuhaus to the effect that Preus was "evading honest exchange about theological differences and using his office in a covert re-shuffling of the synodical power structure."¹⁷ The Associated Press later concurred with this interpretation, characterizing the 1973 dismissal of Dr. Tietjen

as "a classic conflict--between power and scholarship...denominational officialdom against leading teachers."¹⁸

Many influential voices in the public media had become, unwittingly or not, spokesmen for the Missouri liberals. But the liberals also lost no opportunity to air their views personally. At his arrival at Lambert Airport in St. Louis after the New Orleans convention, Dr. Tietjen was greeted by an ostentatious "hero's welcome," complete with another rendition of "The Church's One Foundation" and a number of signs and banners. One of them read, "WELCOME! JOHN THE BELOVED."¹⁹

Dr. Tietjen himself made the most of a press conference he called on January 22, 1974, on the occasion of his official dismissal. The charges against him, he said, were a "charade" of seeking to abide by the letter of the synodical bylaw while actually only pursuing Preus' vendetta against him.²⁰ He would endure the injustice of his accusers, who offered him "no possibility of a fair and impartial judgment."²¹ Preus deserved to be impeached, but unfortunately the LCMS had no such procedure.²² And, referring to the notorious "deal" whereby charges against him and his faculty would be dropped if he only would accept a call to a parish far from St. Louis, he stated:

In the face of such evil I cannot remain silent...The members of our Synod must become aware of the moral bankruptcy of the present leadership of our Synod and of the Seminary's Board of Control. Such evil, if allowed to continue, will bring the judgment of God's wrath on us all.*²³

It was at this time that Concordia's student body instigated their Outreach program. While their purpose was primarily to present their case to LCMS congregations, they didn't keep silent when approached by the press. The Eau Claire Leader-Telegram of January 29, 1974, included a story on the Outreach team which was visiting that city. One student said that the accusations against the seminary faculty without specific charges was unconstitutional--and he was referring to the Constitution

of the United States! Another echoed what was now becoming a familiar litany among the liberals: "There is no longer a doctrinal issue, but one of irresponsible use of power in the Church. In short, it has become a political issue."²⁴

It is in connection with student activities that we now turn our attention to another aspect of the media's involvement in the controversy: the seemingly ubiquitous television cameras. TV crews were invited to a number of rallies and other activities at Concordia. When a student spokesman delivered a resolution to acting President Martin Scharlemann on acceptable times for his meeting with the student body, TV cameramen accompanied him.²⁵ The cameras were rolling when students drove past the statue of Luther in the campus quadrangle to receive Dr. Tietjen's blessing for their Outreach (the editor of Christian News claimed that that activity was staged for the cameras by students riding back and forth in front of the statue).²⁶ And cameras meticulously recorded "the climax to the top religious news story of the past few years"--the walk-out on February 19, 1974.²⁷

The walk-out was a study in stagecraft for attracting the media. It did suffer a bit for having no rehearsals to smooth out the rough spots and perhaps eliminate some of the more melodramatic touches: draping a black crepe over Luther's statue and then singing "A Mighty Fortress," for example.²⁸ But this was television! This had to be visually and aurally stimulating to reach out and grab the audience watching the 5:00 o'clock news. So bells rang, crosses were planted in the quad to symbolize the death of Concordia, the Walther Arch was boarded up with the word "EXILED" painted on the boards. And students and faculty marched past the cameras and into "exile."²⁹

It worked, too. Not only newspaper photographers but also television cameramen were eager to cover so visually stimulating an event. It even

made the CBS Evening News, to be commented upon by no less than the dean of network journalists, Walter Cronkite himself.³⁰ The day may have been overcast, but the Missouri liberals had had their moment in the sun.

A final example of almost yellow journalism that bears examination is an article that appeared in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch a few weeks later. When the synod requested that the self-proclaimed exiles vacate the seminary housing, the paper reported it in this fashion: "25 faculty families, 15 with children ranging from age 2 to their late teens, have found themselves evicted from their homes...." The article went on to quote the wife of Dr. Werberig, one of the "exiles": "'You expect the love of the church to be shown, but this undermines everything I have ever taught my kids about the Christian ethic.'" In an emotionally loaded article, it was reported that Mrs. Werberig had been forced to use her birthday gift money for groceries, that her 19-year-old daughter had had to chip in \$5.00 of her savings, and that Dr. Voltz didn't know whether or not the synod's insurance plan would pay to have his nine-year-old daughter's cataracts removed. In contrast to these hardships were the loans from ELIM, and some friendly nuns who helped pack the families' china. The article concluded with a question from the youngest Werberig: "Why does God let the bad men win?"³¹

Not mentioned was the synod's extension of the amount of time the families could stay in their houses. Not mentioned was the fact that the professors had gone into "exile" voluntarily. Not mentioned was the fact that they had been living in the houses even during their moratorium on classes, when they weren't doing the work they had been called for. All that was left was the impression of a diabolical Missouri administration throwing women and partially-blind children onto the streets, innocent victims of an inexorable political juggernaut.

V. RESULTS

The immediate reaction to this "media blitz" was heartening for the liberals. Within the synod there were voices raised in protest of the administration's actions. One example is a letter of attorney Robert Duesenberg to the district presidents, dated August 31, 1973. He feels that Dr. Tietjen's dismissal is symptomatic of "the malevolent notion that seeks fulfillment without regard to law, without effort at reconciliation, without concern for the effect in the larger sense the relentless pursuit will have." Dr. Preus and the synod's leaders are guilty of "acts and practices of such gross impropriety" that they would divide the synod.³²

There were also results outside of the synod. Some were of more consequence than others. One Jewish realtor, incensed at Dr. Preus' "repressive tactics," had offered the faculty his services (and it was suggested, probably facetiously, that they vote him a "Christus Vivit" award, Concordia's medal of honor).³³ There was also the invaluable benefit of a place to house the newly established Seminec. Facilities were provided by Eden Seminary (UCC) and the St. Louis University Divinity School (Roman Catholic), who sympathized with the liberals' long and bitter struggle.³⁴

A long range effect of all the journalistic doings of those days can be seen in the strong sense of identity to be found in the liberals' breakaway group, the AELC. For nearly a decade it has survived, due at least in part to its well-known "roots" as romanticized in the press. It will be interesting to see whether, in the 1988 Lutheran merger, the AELC will be able to retain what they see as their heritage of hard-won respect and independence from bureaucratic authority.

VI. EVALUATION

It would seem, then, that the liberals got a satisfactory return on

their investments in the press and in media manipulation. They weren't able to bring all of Missouri to their way of thinking, but they were able to develop a strong and unifying sense of identity as martyrs to synodical oppression, and to muster much support within the media itself and among segments of the general population.

But it may be that in doing so they forfeited their integrity. The honorable thing for men in their situation would have been to acknowledge their differences with their opponents, and then to work silently on a solution. Finally, one side or the other would have left the synod on the grounds of theological incompatibility.

But the liberals didn't want that. As they saw the conservative spirit re-establishing itself in the LCMS, they fought against it with every means at their disposal--including the press. They felt it was their duty to "air Missouri's dirty laundry" and so to appeal to the judgment of the press and the public in the controversy. St. Paul would have been appalled: "Is it possible that there is no one among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?" (I Co. 6:5)

What went on in the Missouri Synod was, in fact, none of the public's business, except insofar as it affected her outreach among the public. To dress up a doctrinal dispute in the trappings of a political power struggle and then to present it to public view was an act of deceit and bad faith on the liberals' part. The fact that they themselves believed their own press releases cannot excuse their appeal to the court of public opinion.

Nevertheless, their use of the media could not be a complete and lasting success, due to a phenomenon known to everyone who has ever had his picture in the paper: the "Yesterday's News" syndrome. No matter how many people felt the theological world shaking on February 18, 1974, most of them had undoubtedly forgotten by March just what all the fuss

was about. Now, a decade and more after the fact, the man on the street, even if the street were in St. Louis itself, would neither know nor care about the strife-torn birth of Seminex and the AELC. Sic transit gloria.

(On the other hand, the man on the street will still have very strong feelings about Watergate; but then again, that affair had much more extensive coverage in the media.)

THE END

ENDNOTES

¹ Board of Control, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Exodus From Concordia, St. Louis, Concordia College, 1977, p. 5.

² Ibid., p. 8--16.

³ "Tietjen Elected President of St. Louis Seminary," Christian News 2:21, May 26, 1969, p. 1.

⁴ Exodus, p. 18.

⁵ They were following the usual pattern of errorists, asking first for tolerance, then for equality with the truth. The next step is intolerance for the truth.

⁶ The New Orleans convention of 1973, which led ultimately to Dr. Tietjen's dismissal, was even held at the Rivergate Hotel. Could many people have missed the irony in that name?

⁷ It must have been a satisfying role for the seminarians. During the war some of them might have felt uncomfortable protesting against a power "ordained by God." But J.A.O. Preus was something different: a bull in God's own china shop for them to help remove before he destroyed the place.

⁸ We will, however, focus upon one aspect of the student outreach: the press coverage of it.

⁹ Tom Baker, Watershed At the Rivergate, Sturgis, Mich., 1973, (printed by the author), p. 96.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 98--99.

¹² Ibid., p. 100-101.

¹³ "The Lutheran Pope," in Newsweek LXXXII, 4, July 23, 1973, p. 50.

¹⁴ Ibid. Even the photo with the story betrays an anti-Preus bias: a frowning Preus standing before a stained glass image of a frowning Christ, sword and royal orb in His hands.

¹⁵ "Battle of New Orleans," in Time 102:4, July 23, 1973, p. ? .

¹⁶ Baker, p. 97.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 97--98.

¹⁸ "Who Are the Scholars?" Christian News 7:4, Jan. 28, 1974, p. 5.

¹⁹ Frederick W. Danker, No Room in the Brotherhood: the Preus-Otten Purge of Missouri, St. Louis, Clayton Publishing House, Inc., 1977, p. 147 (a very annoying book, by the way, by one of the Seminex professors, combining the objectivity of Caesar's Civil War with the pretension of a Cecil B. deMille screenplay; to be taken in short doses with a grain of salt).

²⁰Ibid., p. 198.

²¹Andrew B. Wilson, "Uproar at Concordia," St. Louis Globe-Democrat, Jan. 22, 1974, p. 1; in Christian News 7:4, Jan. 28, 1974, p. 11.

²²Ibid.

²³Danker, p. 196. (The "deal" was a bad move on Dr. Preus' part, as he himself later admitted. His desire to settle the matter quietly only gave Dr. Tietjen more to make noise about.)

²⁴Ibid., p. 297.

²⁵Exodus, p. 102--103.

²⁶Danker, p. 269.

²⁷Exodus, p. 117.

²⁸It is not known why they sang this hymn instead of "The Church's One Foundation."

²⁹Exodus, p. 119--124. (Many of the "exiles" turned around at De Mun Park and returned to the campus for lunch!)

³⁰Ibid., p. 128.

³¹Gerald M. Boyd, "Concordia Controversy Leaves Families Partners In Adversity," St. Louis Post-Dispatch; in Christian News 7:10, Mar. 11, 1974, p. 14.

³²Danker, p. 171. (Danker refers to Preus' administration as "the lowest moral ebb period since the time of Martin Stefan"!)

³³Ibid., p. 310.

³⁴Exodus, p. 128.

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