

## *Praise for* **Rediscovering the Issues Surrounding the 1974 Concordia Seminary Walkout**

Some may think that the LCMS “Great War” in the mid-1970s was merely a contest between domineering but incompatible leaders, tragically put into play by the inescapable question of whether to accommodate secular shifts in wider society. But if we fail to acknowledge that the combat was really over truth, we miss the entire point of the fight. This book testifies that genuine Lutheran faith vigilantly holds itself accountable to truth as articulated in Scripture and the Confessions.

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With the fiftieth anniversary of Seminex on the horizon, these essays are a welcome reassessment of a controversy that rocked American Lutheranism. Seminex not only shaped the LCMS and ELCA, it also had a ripple effect throughout the former Synodical Conference churches and American Christianity in general. This book succeeds at making the controversy understandable for a broad audience without sacrificing doctrinal and historical analysis. It is sure to foster fruitful discussions about the origins, significance, and consequences of Seminex.

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A half century ago, friends of the former Lutheran Synodical Conference looked on with shock and dismay as turmoil plagued Concordia Seminary and culminated in the Walkout. *Rediscovering the Issues* provides a valuable contribution to the books and articles that recall those difficult days. It addresses the theological issues that had been brewing in the LCMS for decades before the event. Now we look on with hope.

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Professor Emeritus, Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee

# REDISCOVERING THE ISSUES SURROUNDING THE 1974 CONCORDIA SEMINARY WALKOUT

EDITED BY  
KEN SCHURB



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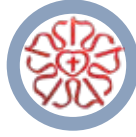
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Those who contributed chapters and other portions of this book have rendered a noteworthy service to the church at large, not only scholars and pastors but also other church workers and laypeople. Particular mention should be made of Dr. Scott Murray, who stepped in and wrote a second chapter when the need arose. Dr. John Wohlrabe originally conceived of this book. He and Dr. Daniel Harmelink have rendered exceptional service to this project. Mr. Mark Bliese of Concordia Historical Institute provided invaluable research and reference services. Mrs. Dawn Weinstock and her colleagues at Concordia Publishing House made major efforts to ensure that this book appeared in a timely fashion. As always, Mrs. Lāna Schurb was of great help to the undersigned.

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Ken Schurb  
Editor



# HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Matthew C. Harrison

In the spring of 1948, the distinguished Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse of Erlangen University in Germany wrote to Missouri Synod president John Behnken. LCMS representatives were about to travel to Germany to engage in discussions with “big-name” German Lutheran theologians at a place called Bad Boll. Sasse was concerned. Realistically, he warned: “No theological discussion can stop the development that has been moving forward for a quarter of a millennium in the sphere of German Protestant territorial churches, and whose logical end is general unionism.” In effect, Sasse observed dolefully, it had come to pass that in Germany, “*Lutheran* and *Reformed* are names for [mere] theological schools within the Protestant Church.” Ecclesiastical leaders were to blame:

For several centuries now, we theologians, bishops, members of consistories and, above all, professors, have learned the great art of hiding our true thoughts behind our words, practicing the same with ever-increasing virtuosity. In front of the congregation, one confesses with the tone of heartfelt conviction the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary . . . but privately one opposes it as mythology.

Therefore, Sasse emphasized,

we must fight for the dogmatic heritage of our Church, insofar as it is truly the teaching of the infallible, divine Word and not merely a human legacy, and not be content to concede equal rights in the Church to false doctrine, in the hope that one day, it will disappear of its own accord.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, Sasse’s warning was not well-heeded. German theologians from the state churches and universities who participated in the Bad Boll conferences would have an influence on LCMS participants, particularly attendees from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. At stake were such things as the true

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1 “Letter to J. W. Behnken from Hermann Sasse Regarding the Bad Boll Conferences—May 14, 1948,” trans. Albert B. Collver III with Charles P. Schaum, *CHIQ* 93 (Winter 2020): 33–34 (emphasis added).



teaching of the divine Word, the doctrine of the church, the integrity of the Lutheran confession, and the simple honesty of churchmen. The influence of Bad Boll became one of the factors that led to the disruption known as “the Walkout” at Concordia Seminary in 1974.

As the fiftieth anniversary of the Walkout approaches, we acknowledge that much has already been written about it.<sup>2</sup> However, we now have the advantage of a half century’s perspective as we examine the causes and issues involved in this event. Was it a battle for the Bible?<sup>3</sup> Or was it primarily a contest between two men, Jacob A. O. Preus and John H. Tietjen, revolving around the historical-critical method’s approach to biblical interpretation and the understanding of what constituted unionism?<sup>4</sup> Was it primarily a political institutional power struggle? Or was there more to it?<sup>5</sup>

The present book will not answer all these questions. Its purpose is to discuss, from a confessional Lutheran perspective, the important doctrinal issues at hand. This volume consists of chapters written by LCMS theologians, each addressing a different doctrinal issue. The book is directed toward church workers and laypeople, for use in Bible studies or discussion groups. There will be some overlap between chapters and issues, but the astute reader will note that much more was involved than a battle for the Bible and the political machinations between two church leaders.

The Concordia Seminary Walkout did not just happen out of thin air in 1974. Therefore a brief history of events leading up to it may be helpful.

In many ways, the agitation and protest that broke out within the LCMS during the 1970s had been building for more than fifty years. Initially, it arose as a German Lutheran church body faced growing anti-German sentiment during World War I (1914–18) and as it underwent Americanization in the following years. The need was felt to present Lutheranism in a more positive light. Already in 1914, members of the Missouri Synod’s English District—formerly an English-speaking church body that was a counterpart to the “German” Missouri Synod, but since 1911 assumed into this Synod as a nongeographic district—joined other eastern Missouri Synod Lutherans in

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2 See *Seminex in Print: A Comprehensive Bibliography of Published Material and Selected Archival Resources for Historical Research*, compiled by David O. Berger with Daniel N. Harmelink, Concordia Historical Institute Monograph Series 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021).

3 Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

4 Danker; see also James E. Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

5 *Memoirs*; see also James C. Burkee, *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod: A Conflict That Changed American Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

forming the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (ALPB).<sup>6</sup> By the end of 1917, the ALPB launched its own monthly periodical in English called *The American Lutheran*.

After the United States became involved in the war, the Missouri Synod began commissioning military chaplains and supporting camp pastors for U.S. troops preparing to embark for Europe. Still, the Synod was reluctant to work with other Lutheran church bodies with which it was not in fellowship in an organization called the National Lutheran Commission. Eastern Missouri Synod Lutherans, including many involved in the ALPB, protested this reluctance. They wanted closer cooperation with other Lutherans. The issue was resolved when the war ended and Missouri Synod military ministry disbanded.<sup>7</sup>

Unrest developed again, however. During the Great Depression, *The American Lutheran* published articles taking issue with various LCMS administrative policies. This led to politicking at the 1935 synodical convention, the defeat of incumbent president Friedrich Pfotenhauer, and the election of the Synod's first American-born president, John Behnken.<sup>8</sup>

Further discontent and outward protest came with the drafting and synodwide dissemination of what has been called the "Statement of the 44." It was signed by forty-four LCMS clergymen, five of whom were professors at Concordia Seminary. The initial meeting to draft the statement was called for by the ALPB Editorial Board, and it coincided with their meeting at the Stevens Hotel in Chicago on September 6–7, 1945. The "Statement of the 44" included twelve theses, each saying "We affirm . . ." and "We therefore deplore . . ." The theses deplored legalism, a lack of love, a misapplication of Romans 16:17 to all who do not hold the doctrinal positions of the Synod, and actions related to church fellowship.<sup>9</sup>

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6 See Richard O. Johnson, *Changing World, Changeless Christ: The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1914–2014* (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 2018), 1–3.

7 Alan Graebner, "World War I and Lutheran Union: Documents from the Army and Navy Board, 1917 and 1918," *CHIQ* 41 (February 1968): 49–57.

8 Johnson, *Changing World*, 59–74. See John C. Wohlrahe Jr., "The Missouri Synod's Unity Attempts during the Pfotenhauer Presidency, 1911–1935" (STM thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1982), 156–76, <https://scholar.csl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1058&context=stm>.

9 This portion of the present introduction is dependent on John C. Wohlrahe Jr., "The Role of the Seminaries in the LCMS, 1847–2001," *CTQ* 85 (July/October 2021): 215–39; reprinted by permission in *CHIQ* 94 (Fall 2021): 33–55. For the "Statement of the 44," see *Moving Frontiers*, 422–24; online at <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/etext/lcms/ST44/ST44.htm>; Carl S. Meyer, *Log Cabin to Luther Tower* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 247; *Speaking the*

Following World War II, the LCMS became involved in extensive disaster relief in Europe. In conjunction with that, it began a series of theological discussions with German Lutheran theologians, initially meeting in 1948 at a resort located in Bad Boll, Germany.<sup>10</sup> The discussions exposed LCMS attendees, including St. Louis faculty members, to modern German scholarship in Luther studies and historical criticism of the Bible.<sup>11</sup> This theology made a profound impact at Concordia Seminary.

Another theological emphasis growing within the LCMS, especially on the St. Louis seminary campus, was the push for union with American Lutheran church bodies with which the Missouri Synod was not in fellowship. Beginning in 1917, Missouri Synod representatives began meeting with representatives from various church bodies in what became known as the Intersynodical Movement. Although the Missouri Synod did not reach doctrinal agreement with these other synods, this movement led to the formation of a church body called the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in 1930. Discussions with the ALC throughout the middle part of the twentieth century involved several members of the St. Louis faculty. An interest in Lutheran unity pervaded the seminary campus.<sup>12</sup>

In 1958 Martin Scharlemann, director of Concordia Seminary's School for Graduate Studies, published exploratory essays concerning inspiration and revelation. The perceived rejection of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture elicited strong reactions.<sup>13</sup> Although Scharlemann apologized to the Synod at its 1962 convention,<sup>14</sup> the historical-critical method would be championed by others at Concordia Seminary.

Attempting to deal with growing controversies over both church fellowship and the inroads of historical criticism, the LCMS at its 1959 convention not only passed a "Statement on Scripture," but in Resolution 9 it also resolved

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*Truth in Love: Essays Related to A Statement, Chicago, 1945* (Chicago: The Willow Press, [1946?]), *passim*; several articles in *CHIQ* 43 (November 1970); Jack Treon Robinson, "The Spirit of Triumphalism in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: The Role of the 'A Statement' of 1945 in the Missouri Synod" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1972), 132–50.

10 See above, p. 1.

11 See Scott R. Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 67.

12 Meyer, *Log Cabin*, 229.

13 Beginning with the November 1959 issue, the Scharlemann controversy dominated the pages of an independent publication called *The Confessional Lutheran* until well after the Synod's 1962 convention. See 1962 *Convention Workbook*, 164–65.

14 1962 *Proceedings*, 106–7.

that “every doctrinal statement of a confessional nature adopted by Synod as a true exposition of the Holy Scriptures is to be regarded as public doctrine (*publica doctrina*) in Synod,” and “Synod’s pastors, teachers, and professors are held to teach and act in harmony with such statements.”<sup>15</sup> This would have included the Synod’s *Brief Statement* of 1932. However, the Synod’s Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) reported to the next (1962) synodical convention that Resolution 9 was unconstitutional, conflicting with Article II of the Synod’s constitution.<sup>16</sup> The Synod urged its pastors, teachers, and professors to teach according to doctrinal statements adopted by the Synod.<sup>17</sup> However, many faculty members of Concordia Seminary did not consider this a requirement for them in their teaching office.

To address matters relating to doctrinal unity and to advise and prepare special studies on theological matters, the Synod in 1962 established the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR).<sup>18</sup> Plenty of opportunity for theological clarification presented itself when the 1965 convention adopted the so-called “Mission Affirmations.” These “affirmations” expanded “mission” to include more than the proclamation of God’s Word and the administration of His Sacraments. They held that “mission” involved any and all acts of mercy that Christians do for others, even social and political action.<sup>19</sup> The Mission Affirmations were supported by many on the St. Louis faculty.

Many pastors, teachers, and laypeople within the Missouri Synod were expressing concern with what was being taught at Concordia Seminary. Shortly before the 1969 LCMS convention, seminary president Alfred Fuerbringer announced his retirement, preparing the way for John Tietjen’s election as president. Tietjen (1928–2004) had received a doctorate from Union Seminary, New York, with a dissertation on which he based his book *Which Way to Lutheran Unity?*<sup>20</sup> He came to St. Louis after serving as executive director of publicity for the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (LCUSA), a pan-Lutheran group organized in 1966. LCUSA sought to pave the way for a union between the ALC, the LCA, and the

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15 Resolution 9, Committee 3, 1959 *Proceedings*, 189, 191.

16 1962 *Proceedings*, 187.

17 Res. 3-17, 1962 *Proceedings*, 106.

18 Res. 6-03, 1962 *Proceedings*, 123–24.

19 Res. 1-01A to 1-01F, 1965 *Proceedings*, 79–81.

20 John H. Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity: A History of Efforts to Unite the Lutherans of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966).

LCMS. Lutheran union had been a special interest of Alfred Fuerbringer. John Tietjen would now keep it as a focus at Concordia Seminary.

The 1969 Missouri Synod convention soon thereafter elected J. A. O. Preus (1920–94) as president of the Synod. Preus came to the synodical presidency after serving as president of the Synod's seminary in Springfield, Illinois. Preus had received a doctorate in classics and was already involved in his life's work of translating writings by the sixteenth-century Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz. Preus took an orthodox approach to Lutheran theology. As president-elect, he recommended against altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC, but the 1969 convention declared it nonetheless.<sup>21</sup>

Not long after the Synod's 1969 convention, a few St. Louis faculty members expressed concerns about what was being taught at the seminary. Among them was Martin Scharlemann, who wrote President Preus on April 9, 1970, suggesting an official inquiry.<sup>22</sup> (It might be noted, however, that even after the Walkout, in 1975, Scharlemann wrote Hermann Sasse expressing his support for Sasse's *Letters to Lutheran Pastors* on Holy Scripture, particularly where Sasse rejected the position that Scripture is inerrant in every respect.<sup>23</sup> Although otherwise orthodox Lutherans like Sasse and Scharlemann could retain the dogmatic context of the faith without a strict doctrine of inerrancy, most cannot, and certainly not members of following generations.)

On April 20, 1970, Preus wrote the seminary Board of Control that he intended to appoint a Fact Finding Committee (FFC).<sup>24</sup> He appointed Karl Barth, LCMS South Wisconsin District president; Elmer Foelber, former editor at Concordia Publishing House; H. Armin Moellering, a parish pastor with a doctorate in classics; Paul Streufert, fourth vice president of the Synod; and, as chairman, Paul A. Zimmerman, president of Concordia Lutheran Junior College, Ann Arbor, Michigan. This panel interviewed Concordia Seminary professors between December 11, 1970, and March 6, 1971. Tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and each faculty member had the opportunity to make additions or corrections to his transcript. The FFC submitted its report, based largely on these interviews, to President Preus on June 15, 1971,<sup>25</sup> shortly before the Synod's 1971 convention in Milwaukee.

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21 1969 *Proceedings*, 22, 32.

22 *Exodus*, 22–23; see *Exodus*, 151–53, for Scharlemann's entire letter.

23 See Martin H. Scharlemann, St. Louis, to Hermann Sasse, North Adelaide, Australia, [July 1975], copy of typescript, CHI, Martin Henry Scharlemann, Series 1, General Correspondence, Folder 120.

24 *Exodus*, 23–24.

25 Zimmerman, 35, 41–43, 65. The entire FFC report is in Zimmerman, 155–96.

The convention directed Concordia Seminary's Board of Control to receive the FFC report from President Preus and take appropriate action. It also required Preus to report to the Synod on this matter within one year.<sup>26</sup>

Storm winds whipped up during that year. In February 1972, President Preus wrote President Tietjen regarding an Old Testament professor at the seminary, Arlis Ehlen, directing that he teach "no course in which he will have opportunity to advocate his higher critical views concerning biblical interpretation." In a roundabout response, President Tietjen told the student body and included in a seminary news release his declaration that it would be impossible for Dr. Ehlen or any other professor to teach at the seminary level without using the historical-critical method.<sup>27</sup> A few days earlier, Preus had sent the Synod a letter regarding the Ehlen case. He appended to it *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, a document that he had offered to the Board of Control to assist it in dealing with theological issues at the seminary.<sup>28</sup> The faculty responded a month later that *A Statement* had "a spirit alien to Lutheran confessional theology" and that it made "binding dogma out of mere theological opinion."<sup>29</sup>

On September 1, 1972, Preus reported to the Synod, as directed by the Milwaukee convention. The "Report of the Synodical President," called the "Blue Book" because of the color of its cover, ran to 160 pages in small type. It contained lengthy quotations from the transcripts of the FFC interviews with St. Louis faculty members, in which the various professors were identified not by name but by letters of the alphabet.<sup>30</sup> For example, though the Blue Book did not say so, President Tietjen was "Prof. I." One week after the appearance of the Blue Book, Tietjen released to the Synod a 35-page document, "Fact Finding or Fault Finding," in which he used the language of computer programming to characterize the work of the FFC as "garbage in, garbage out."<sup>31</sup>

Late in 1972, the Concordia Seminary faculty published a fuller statement of its position: *Faithful to Our Calling, Faithful to Our Lord: An Affirmation in Two Parts*. Part I was *A Witness to Our Faith: A Joint Statement*

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26 Res. 2-28, 1971 *Proceedings* (quoted in *Exodus*, 29).

27 Quoted in *Exodus*, 32-33. See *Memoirs*, 98.

28 *A Statement* appears below, pp. 265-77.

29 Quoted in *Exodus*, 31. See "Response of the Faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis," *LW*, April 30, 1972, 28-31.

30 The Blue Book is included in Zimmerman, 199-444. See *Exodus*, 34-36.

31 See *Exodus*, 36-38.



Photograph by Paul Ockrassa

Seminex students and professors gathered in DuBourg Hall on the campus of St. Louis University listen as Dr. John Tietjen reads the letter from Concordia Seminary's Board of Control informing him of his dismissal as president (October 1974).

*and Discussion of Issues.* Part II consisted of individual statements by almost all the seminary's professors.

The Synod's next convention, in New Orleans, Louisiana, came about a half-year later, in July 1973. It adopted three key resolutions:

- Res. 2-12, in which the Synod understood its constitution as permitting it to adopt doctrinal statements "as definitive of the Synod's position" and "binding upon all its members"<sup>32</sup>
- Res. 3-01, in which the Synod adopted *A Statement* as such a doctrinal statement<sup>33</sup>
- Res. 3-09, "To Declare Faculty Majority Position in Violation of Article II of the [Synod's] Constitution," that is, contrary to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions<sup>34</sup>

After the convention, the Concordia Seminary Board of Control, with conservatives now in the majority, had the responsibility of dealing with the faculty, starting with President Tietjen.<sup>35</sup> The board temporarily suspended him on January 20, 1974. The next morning, the majority of the seminary's

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32 1973 *Proceedings*, 115; see 1973 *Proceedings*, 111–15.

33 1973 *Proceedings*, 127–28.

34 1973 *Proceedings*, 133–39.

35 Res. 3-09 and Res. 3-12A, 1973 *Proceedings*, 139, 140.

students declared a moratorium on attending class. Later that day, a majority of faculty members announced that they identified with President Tietjen's position and considered themselves also suspended, so they refused to teach.<sup>36</sup> Students not attending classes in late January participated instead in Operation Outreach, fanning out across the Synod to rally support for the faculty.<sup>37</sup> At its February 17–18, 1974, meeting, the Board of Control determined that faculty members would be terminated if they did not resume teaching on February 19.<sup>38</sup>

On February 19, 1974, the majority of faculty and students literally walked out of Concordia Seminary—hence, the term “Walkout.”<sup>39</sup> They considered themselves to be Concordia *Seminary in Exile*, *Seminex*. The institution founded by those who walked out eventually became known as Christ Seminary—Seminex.

Reconciliation attempts followed the Walkout. The seminary Board of Control reached out to the former faculty and students.<sup>40</sup> Recognizing the need to address matters in the Synod more broadly, already in January 1974 President Preus had appointed an Advisory Committee on Doctrine and Conciliation (ACDC), which consisted of a chairman and fourteen members, a seven-member “conservative caucus” and a seven-member “moderate caucus.” Before the ACDC was finished, and before the next synodical convention, the Synod hosted a theological convocation in April 1975 that was attended by more than three hundred people. The convocation featured essays from representatives of both sides, as well as small-group discussion sessions, but no agreement was reached.<sup>41</sup>

Following the Walkout, the presidents of several LCMS Districts placed Seminex graduates to fill pastoral vacancies, then ordained them. The Synod's 1975 convention resolved that District presidents who would not comply with the Synod's bylaws on placement and ordination of pastors should resign or they would be removed.<sup>42</sup> Eventually, three District presidents resigned and four were removed from office.<sup>43</sup> This led in late 1976 to

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36 *Exodus*, 92–98, 100–101.

37 *Exodus*, 105–8. “Fact Sheets” used by students in Operation Outreach appear in *Exodus*, 177–83.

38 The board's resolution is in *Exodus*, 185–86.

39 *Exodus*, 115–19.

40 Zimmerman, 129–31.

41 *Memoirs*, 247.

42 Res. 5-02A, 1975 *Proceedings* (*Heritage*, 184–86; see *Heritage*, 186–87).

43 Zimmerman, 131–33.





Photograph by Paul Ockrassa

Dr. John Tietjen addresses students and the press at Seminex shortly after being removed from the presidency of Concordia Seminary (October 1974).

the formation of a new church body, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). It consisted of approximately 250 congregations that left the LCMS.<sup>44</sup> A bit more than a decade later, the AELC merged with the ALC and LCA to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

After the Walkout, and after the CTCR made a report in 1975 on *The Inspiration of Scripture*, the 1977 LCMS convention adopted a resolution that held the historical-critical method to be inappropriate in application to Holy Scripture as the inspired Word of God.<sup>45</sup> Also at that convention, the Synod declared a state of “fellowship in protest” with the ALC, a prelude to its 1981 declaration that fellowship with the ALC did not exist.<sup>46</sup>

In some ways, 1977 marked the end of an era. In the fall of that year, LCMS vice president Theodore Nickel announced that he had sustained charges filed against John Tietjen for allowing false doctrine and that Tietjen

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44 Zimmerman, 134–35.

45 *The Inspiration of Scripture* (St. Louis: LCMS, 1975); Res. 3-11, 1977 *Proceedings* (*Heritage*, 40–41).

46 Res. 3-02A, 1977 *Proceedings* (*Heritage*, 120–21); Res. 3-01, 1981 *Proceedings* (*Heritage*, 127–28).

was no longer a clergy member of the Synod.<sup>47</sup> LCMS conventions after 1977 ceased to be engulfed with issues urgently related to the Walkout.

### *Digging Deeper*

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Board of Control. *Exodus from Concordia: A Report on the 1974 Walkout*. St. Louis: Concordia College, 1977.

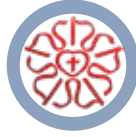
Marquart, Kurt E. *Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective*. Concordia Seminary Monograph Series 3. Edited by David P. Scaer and Douglas Judisch. Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977; 4th printing, 2017.

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Zimmerman, Paul A. *A Seminary in Crisis: The Inside Story of the Preus Fact Finding Committee*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007.

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<sup>47</sup> Zimmerman, 138–39.



## CHAPTER ONE

# GOSPEL AND SCRIPTURE

Ken Schurb

Instead of recognizing that the Bible is the only source and norm of the church's doctrine while the biblical Gospel of Christ forms the heart of the Christian faith, Concordia Seminary professors and others came to think of the Gospel as the norm of theology. They were even using the Gospel to allow ruling out certain contents of Scripture as historical, true, and authoritative. Such "Gospel reductionism" compromises Scripture and endangers both the Gospel message and the comfort it brings to sinners.

## Introduction

The Bible can make people uncomfortable. Such discomfort can come to Christians. Sooner or later you will find something in it, such as accounts of various miracles, that "no educated person" should believe. Or you encounter ethical teachings, such as on marriage and sexuality, that "no enlightened person" would follow. What do you do with these? Set them aside? If not, why not?

Why should people believe the Bible? Why *do* people believe the Bible? Are these two questions asking the same thing?

Let's approach this subject through a slice-of-life example: "I said so." Parents often say this to their children. Frequently they say it to support some rule: "Do this . . . because I said so." Sometimes they say "I said so" concerning a factual matter, probably after children have asked "Why?" for the twentieth time. Either way, with the words "I said so," parental authority is asserting itself.

Why do children accept this answer? Usually they have no alternative, so there can be frustration and anger on their part. Then why don't children conclude that their parents are rejecting them by saying "I said so"? Because the

parents have shown their love for their children by other words and actions. Wise parents know not to tell their children only “I said so.”

During the years leading up to the 1974 Walkout, something like this had been on the minds of Concordia Seminary faculty members and others in the LCMS, as well as others in American Lutheranism. They were thinking not about parents and children, but of God communicating with sinners. A Concordia Seminary professor wrote: “To say we must bow to what God has said, no matter what he has said, is to blur the distinction between Law and Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

Professors went further. They said in effect that as they studied Scripture, if they weren’t “hearing” God say that He loved them (the Gospel) in some aspect of the text, they need not heed other things the text said. This would be like a child hanging on every word when his or her parents say “I love you” but—at best—losing interest when they say other things. Except for the “I love you,” why should children care?

An example of this came when another St. Louis professor told LCMS president J. A. O. Preus’s Fact Finding Committee (FFC) that one need not insist that Adam and Eve were historical people and their fall into sin was a real historical event, for some have difficulty relating the biblical account of the fall to the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> Similar things were said or written by professors at Concordia Teachers College, River Forest, Illinois, and at Valparaiso University.<sup>3</sup> In Lutheran circles outside the Synod, but within earshot of Missouri representatives, it was even being claimed that it was *un-Lutheran* to hold that Adam and Eve were real historical people and that the fall really took place!<sup>4</sup>

A word about terms: the Latin word for a carpenter’s square used to draw right angles is *norma*. This word came to be used for any rule or standard. Following the Formula of Concord, classical Lutheran theology referred to Scripture as the *norma* (in English, *norm*) for doctrine. For example, President Preus’s September 1972 Blue Book report to the Synod employed this term: “The question is whether the Scriptures are the norm for our faith and life or

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1 Quoted in FFC report (Zimmerman, 177).

2 FFC report (Zimmerman, 177).

3 *Watershed*, 20. See Walter R. Bouman, “The Teaching of Religion: A Theological Analysis,” in *The Teaching of Religion: Twenty-Second Yearbook* (River Forest, IL: Lutheran Education Association, 1965), 43; and Walter E. Keller, “Necessary and Relevant to What?” *The Cresset* 36 (February 1973): 22.

4 Robert Preus, “Gospel Fundamentalism,” *Affirm* 2 (August 1972): 3.

whether the Gospel alone is that norm.”<sup>5</sup> Using the Gospel to reduce what is to be accepted in Scripture was referred to as *Gospel reductionism*.<sup>6</sup>

The 1973 LCMS convention defined Gospel reductionism:

The first and usual meaning is that where the “Gospel” is established as the “governing principle” instead of the Scriptural Word, then such “Gospelism” reduces to a minimum the content of Christian belief and discards whatever does not seem to serve it directly.

The Synod quoted a *Lutheran Witness* article from President Preus, that a limitation of the *normative* authority of Scripture to its Gospel content or function is what we call “Gospel reductionism.” By this we mean a reducing of all doctrine to the one doctrine of the Gospel and making the Gospel (often undefined) the only *norm* for all doctrine and life.<sup>7</sup>

More than a year before the convention, in May 1972, the Concordia Seminary faculty and President Preus had agreed that the relationship between Scripture and the Gospel stood out as the basic issue amid mounting tensions within the LCMS. Today this fact may surprise people who presume that the main concern at the time was historical criticism or the nature of Scripture. But Gospel reductionism gave historical criticism of Scripture “cover” within the Missouri Synod. It allowed such criticism of the biblical text to seem Lutheran. The question kept arising: Does the Gospel let a reader of Scripture make judgments as to which of its contents are historical, true, and authoritative?<sup>8</sup>

## Historical Background

The roots of this controversy go back into the 1800s. However, we will join the story in the first half of the twentieth century.

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5 “Preface” in Blue Book (Zimmerman, 203).

6 See John Warwick Montgomery, “Current Theological Trends in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” *Crisis* 1:120; see also Montgomery, “The Unbridgeable Chasm: Gospelism or the Scriptural Gospel?” *Crisis* 1:140–47.

7 Resolution 3-09, 1973 *Proceedings*, 136, quoting J. A. O. Preus, “From the President: Two Kinds of Biblical Authority,” *LW*, April 22, 1973, 29 (*italics* in Preus). See CTCR, *Gospel and Scripture* (St. Louis: LCMS, 1972), 4, 10; “A Summary of the Findings” in Blue Book (Zimmerman, 226); Scott R. Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 103–7.

8 Robert Preus, “Gospel Fundamentalism,” 3.

## *Karl Barth*

After World War I, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) ushered in a period of new (“neo-”) orthodoxy. He thought that Jesus is God’s only true revelation. Standing in the Reformed tradition of Calvin or Zwingli rather than that of Luther, Barth asserted that God had basically spoken not two words (Law and Gospel), but one. He wrote: “. . . the Law is nothing else than the necessary *form of the Gospel*, whose content is grace.”<sup>9</sup> The very fact that God speaks to limited human beings is grace, Barth said.

Going back to the sixteenth century and controversies with Lutherans over the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, the Reformed had held that the finite is incapable of the infinite. In that controversy, Reformed theologians had insisted that the finite body of Christ can be in only one place at a time. Similarly, on the assumption that the finite is incapable of the infinite, Barth held that the Word of God is not truth in the form of finite human speech—statements such as are found in the Bible. The Bible simply witnesses to Jesus as Word of God, Barth claimed; it is not itself the Word of God. It *becomes* the Word of God for people when the Holy Spirit does His work on them. And since the Word comes to people alongside of Scripture but not through it, the integrity of this Word stands independent from the historical reports in Scripture. However many faults the Bible may have, Barth comforted himself that none of them could harm the Word of God or Barth’s own faith.<sup>10</sup>

## *Werner Elert*

Against Barth’s ordering of “Gospel and Law,” the Lutheran theologian Werner Elert (1885–1954) of Erlangen, Germany, emphasized Law and Gospel, in that order. In fact, Elert wanted to make Law and Gospel the controlling theme of theology.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, in his determination to emphasize Law and Gospel, he ended up in one way like Barth. Elert was highly critical of the teaching of Luther and Lutheran orthodoxy that the Bible was verbally inspired by God. He did not want to see the Scriptures regarded as a set of laws, as if all their contents were the same. Also, he wanted to retain what one analyst called a “kernel of experience.” That is, he wanted people to recognize

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9 Karl Barth, “Gospel and Law,” trans. A. M. Hall, in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1960), 80 (italics original).

10 See Robert D. Preus, “The Word of God in the Theology of Karl Barth,” *CTM* 31 (February 1960): 105–15; Jack D. Kilcrease, “The Challenge of Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Word of God,” *CTQ* 84 (January–April 2020): 59–81.

11 See Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, trans. Edward H. Schroeder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

the Bible's authority through their experience. Although one does not have to reject the verbal inspiration of Scripture to satisfy Elert's basic concern for the Gospel, Elert himself did so.<sup>12</sup>

### *Bad Boll*

Representatives of the Missouri Synod met Elert and other noted German Lutheran theologians in annual theological discussions held at the Bad Boll resort in Germany after World War II. Elert was at these meetings in 1948 and 1949, as was Edmund Schlink of Heidelberg. In a book on the Lutheran Confessions, Schlink had written that Scripture is the norm because God saves through the message, the Gospel, that Scripture proclaims.<sup>13</sup> A question of what Scripture *is* was answered in terms of what it *does*.

Overall, "at Bad Boll no agreement was reached on the doctrine of Holy Scripture."<sup>14</sup> However, the Missouri Synod representatives returned home with much to think about.

### *American Lutheranism*

Missouri Synod representatives were not the only ones impressed by German Lutheran theologians. Most of American Lutheranism was too, including a great many in the ALC. The ALC had been involved with the Missouri Synod in church fellowship talks for most of the 1960s. Representatives of the two church bodies discussed, among other topics, "the authority of Scripture." An essay with that very title was delivered at Concordia Seminary in 1968 by Kent Knutson (1924–73), an ALC seminary professor who shortly thereafter became the president of the ALC. He said: "In the Scriptures God speaks to us in His judgmental and His redemptive word, and we hear Him speak. That is the power. That is the authority."<sup>15</sup> Here again, biblical authority was cast strictly in terms of what the Scriptures do.<sup>16</sup>

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- 12 See Lowell C. Green, "The Relationship of Werner Elert and America," *CHIQ* 70 (Summer 1997): 87 (quoting Karlmann Beyerschlag) and 93 n. 17.
  - 13 Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961; repr., St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [2003]), 10.
  - 14 Martin Hein, *An Evaluation of Bad Boll 1948 and 1949*, trans. J. T. Mueller (N.p.: LCMS, n.d.), 11.
  - 15 Kent S. Knutson, "The Authority of Scripture," *CTM* 40 (March 1969): 164.
  - 16 See also ALC theologian Gerhard Forde, "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," in *Theological Perspectives* (Decorah, IA: Luther College Press [1966]), 50–69.

## In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

### *Fact Finding Committee Report*

The FFC reported similar understandings among Concordia Seminary professors. One said that Scripture “is authoritative because of what it does to people.”<sup>17</sup>

The same thinking was expressed in other ways. A professor said he would allow the position that the flood of Noah was perhaps a local event, not world-encompassing, if the holder of this view “does not negate the divinely intended sense of the passage, which is to teach sin and grace.”<sup>18</sup> Another, answering how to determine whether to take some biblical point literally, replied: “You have to determine how does it relate to the Gospel.”<sup>19</sup> Still another, responding to a question about whether a clear biblical report of a miracle could be interpreted as a legend later added to the text, said he would ask the interpreter, “What does this do to the Gospel?” This professor did not want to set Scripture and Gospel at odds with each other, he said, yet he added that for himself as a Lutheran “the final, the ultimate step, the touchstone of anything is the Gospel.”<sup>20</sup>

The FFC summarized that various professors saw the Gospel as not only the heart of the faith but also as the yardstick for biblical interpretation. They did not feel a need to reject any interpretation of a text in Scripture unless they thought the interpretation harmed the Gospel. They would grant a great deal of latitude to read the text in a nonliteral or nonhistorical way as long as the Gospel remained unaffected, as with the fall or the flood. These accounts did not have to be taken as factual, so long as the interpretation retained the message of sin and grace.<sup>21</sup>

The FFC contrasted this view with the Synod’s position, which it summarized as follows: While “one approaches the Scriptures expecting to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and to relate all that he reads there to Him,” still, the Gospel “does not determine the meaning of the Biblical text. Whatever the text says is the meaning of the text.” That meaning “is to be accepted as such because it is the Word of God.” Whether a text should

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17 FFC report (Zimmerman, 174).

18 Prof. M [Walter Wegner], Blue Book (Zimmerman, 304).

19 FFC report (Zimmerman, 177).

20 Prof. O [Edgar Krentz], Blue Book (Zimmerman, 306).

21 See “Table of Divergent Positions Held by Various Members of the Faculty,” Blue Book (Zimmerman, 234).





Photograph by Paul Ockrassa

Dr. John Tietjen conducts a press conference at Seminex in the days following his dismissal as president of Concordia Seminary (October 1974).

be taken literally or in some other way is determined by the text itself—its grammar, context, etc.<sup>22</sup>

The FFC pointed out related issues:

1. *The church as potential determiner of doctrine.* Why should interpreters not question teachings of Scripture such as Christ's virgin birth or His resurrection? One professor said that these are safeguarded by the Lutheran Confessions. So, the FFC wondered, were the Confessions in effect displacing the Bible as the prime source of the Christian faith?<sup>23</sup> In the Blue Book, a professor was quoted concerning the virgin birth:

As I wrestle with this question, I am tremendously helped by the ancient tradition of the church, which has always

22 See "Table of Divergent Positions Held by Various Members of the Faculty," Blue Book (Zimmerman, 234). For elaboration, compare Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983). Contrast Edward H. Schroeder, "Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?" in *The Lively Function of the Gospel: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Caemmerer on Completion of 25 Years as Professor of Practical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, ed. Robert W. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 81–97.

23 FFC report (Zimmerman, 189). See *ACDC*, 65.