

Preface

Sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Justice Louis D. Brandeis

In late summer 2004, my dear friend and coworker Jeff Walz and I set out on a twenty-church tour of Lutheran congregations in Milwaukee to debate the coming presidential election. Jeff, a Democrat who heads the Political Science Department at Concordia University Wisconsin, advocated for Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee. A Republican, I took incumbent president George W. Bush. We each made the case for our respective candidate, debated, and fielded questions from congregation and community members. Our objective was to foster a healthy and necessary political dialogue in area churches and to show our fellow Lutherans how we can agree in a civil and fraternal manner to disagree.

Our very first debate at a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregation set the tone for the next several weeks. Reporting the next day on the three-hour event that drew about a hundred participants, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reporter Tom Heinen likened Jeff to the biblical prophet Daniel, indicating that Jeff, like Daniel, now knew what it was like to have spent time in a lions' den.¹ I spent much of my time defending Jeff, who argued with an emotional and often disagreeing crowd that one could be both Christian and Democrat. The evening ended with a pastor telling Jeff of his genuine concern that Jeff was risking eternal damnation for supporting

a Democrat. At another LCMS church we polled those in attendance and found seventy-eight Republicans and two Democrats (one of whom was not a member of the church). The pastor reported that after the debate two people left the congregation. One was the only Democrat and the other was a conservative outraged that the congregation would let a Democrat like Jeff speak. We found slightly more balance in ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) congregations, but Jeff spent a good deal more time defending me in these more left-leaning congregations than I did him.

We inhabit an age of rigid partisanship that has transformed society and our churches. Today about eight in ten Missouri Synod Lutherans self-identify as “conservative” and vote Republican. ELCA clergy, conversely, tend to self-identify as “liberal” (while ELCA laity divide more evenly).² Our churches have become as politically polarized as our Congress.

But it wasn't always so. My LCMS grandfather was more likely to vote Democrat than Republican and perhaps support woman suffrage while belonging to one of the country's most traditional church bodies. Sprinkled across other Lutheran denominations was an equally mixed bag of social and political beliefs. Conservatism then didn't mean what it does today. Church members and church leaders shared essential beliefs but accepted a degree of ideological diversity often absent in today's churches. Where they disagreed, they often agreed to disagree.

The story I tell in this book describes a conflict that reshaped the landscape of American Lutheranism and fostered the polarization that characterizes today's Lutheran churches. But it's about more than just Lutheranism. The remaking of the Missouri Synod took place alongside conflicts elsewhere in American Christianity and the formation of the “Religious Right.” Since 1970, Americans have been increasingly switching religious denominations, selecting churches that share their theological *and political* attitudes. There may have been predominantly Republican or Democratic churches forty years ago. But what was then the exception is now the norm. This is the story of how it happened in one small corner of American Christendom.

Those of us who grew up Missouri Synod Lutheran during the 1970s knew little to nothing of the civil war that had torn the thriving church body apart earlier that decade. Thirty years later, those who endured it still

evinced the demeanor of divorced parents: one got the house and custody of the kids, but no one really won. Many today look back on the period with a mixture of embarrassment that things got so ugly and melancholy for what might have been.

So when I first began to examine the period Missouri Synod Lutherans refer to simply as “Seminex,” I found two things: the wounds of Missouri’s partition still fester and run deep, and few want to talk about it. This makes for at once a scholar’s dream and nightmare. It is rare that a researcher comes across a topic of such significance that has been left relatively untouched. But it also makes for difficult research, particularly when so many are so unwilling to talk, be it for personal or professional reasons.

Those who would talk were of tremendous help, among them some of the men I was warned to fear, often with good reason. Herman Otten not only granted me hours of interviews but allowed me unsupervised access to his files and copy machine for several days in July 2000. He endured several phone interviews and almost always answered even my most probing questions. Waldo Werning, one of Jack Preus’s closest confidants and arguably the leader of the organized conservative movement after 1965, also endured hours of interviews, provided documentary evidence, and read portions of my dissertation. Although he objected to the direction of my dissertation and is criticized in it at times, he was pastoral, if fervent, in his detailed evaluations and always accommodating. Ralph Bohlmann, one of the “Faithful Five” who remained at Concordia after the 1974 walkout and became Preus’s successor to the synod presidency in 1981, provided sage counsel during my research and volunteered hours of interviews.

The undersized staff at the Concordia Historical Institute (CHI) in St. Louis, on the campus of Concordia Seminary, was of tremendous assistance during and after the summer of 2000. Marvin Huggins, Associate Director for Archives & Library at CHI, worked miracles. He provided constant encouragement during my weeks of research, pointed me in directions I had not considered, granted me access to Jack Preus’s unprocessed files and interviews, and went on a successful scavenger hunt for Executive Office Records from the Harms administration, mislaid records that had been sitting for decades in a storage garage. He was subsequently prompt and

courteous in reply to dozens of my pestering e-mails. Mark Loest, Reference Director, also provided valuable support.

Finally, I was exceptionally blessed to have had a “dream team” of scholarly eyes review my manuscript. My graduate advisor at Northwestern University, Michael Sherry, provided sometimes frustrating but always sage guidance. Josef Barton and Nancy MacLean, also at Northwestern University, read early drafts and provided helpful direction. Martin E. Marty, himself a participant in and product of the Missouri Synod schism, advised me in my dissertation studies and has since encouraged me to publish. Rev. Fred Reklau meticulously edited early drafts. I am grateful to have so many hands helping me through this process.

My mother, Jan, who met my father for their first date, of all places, at a lecture by Herman Otten at her San Diego church, has been a lifelong source of inspiration and encouragement. So too has my wife, Susan, for over twenty years.

But this is for my children, Christian, Grace, and Lydia. Let your faith, not faction, guide and define you. *Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*