

Foreword

Did a subject of one of his poems, William Wordsworth asked, sing of “old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago” or of something else? “Something else” will never come up as an alternative in this book.

Begin with Wordsworth’s first word, “old.” The drama of *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod* sounds old, since it climaxes in a story from the middle of the previous century. Yet, as James Burkee tells it, the aftershocks and ripple effects of the trauma remain vivid in denominational culture wars today.

Secondly, as for “unhappy,” this mini-epic of a church battle certainly evokes that adjective. This story of conflict within one denomination has not a happy beginning, middle, or ending. Even those who claimed victory never sounded happy. But the unhappy character of the tale does not detract from the value of the book.

The poet wondered also about “far-off” things. To combatants in these battles and to their heirs, the plot may remain “too near” for comfort. To everyone else the story of a church body, a synod called “Missouri,” might appear to be insignificant, a distant matter of concern only to those involved. As he addresses the larger culture, Burkee is able to draw previously uninvolved readers to care about strategies, personalities, issues, and outcomes that find parallels beyond Missouri.

While the names of almost all the characters and the details of the events described in this book may be strange to most, there are good reasons for them to read on. The first reason has to do with the intrinsic value

of this type of human story. All kinds of publics read tales of drama in gypsy camps, Hasidic Jewish congregations, Shaker colonies in Kentucky, or the lives of Basque shepherds. There are far more Missouri Lutherans than there are participants in any of these just-mentioned communities, but all of their struggles can illuminate aspects of the human story. So here, readers patiently will learn the names of Lutheran characters, many of whom would be forgotten apart from their place in this story.

To sell it, the author has to write well and, to build confidence, has to demonstrate that his work is well grounded in research *and* that he can write well. The research is more than satisfying. While previous histories of this conflict were partisan documents, often based on personal experience, author Burkee doggedly pursued long-neglected, seldom-noticed, and even guarded communications. The best example of this is his attention to anti-hero Herman Otten Jr., a peeved and persistent irritant to all sides in the debates and intrigues. The characters Burkee calls “moderates,” their self-chosen name, tried to ignore Otten. They disdained him as a Holocaust-denier and plagiarist, someone who purloined and published copyrighted materials. Ethically, he was to them beneath contempt. Why dignify him, they reasoned, by admitting that they paid attention to him as he editorially gunned them down, or, for that matter, even by paying attention in the first place?

Why? In Burkee’s telling, by disdaining and avoiding Otten, the moderates misfired in their responses to “the other side,” while more credible leaders of “the other side” were playing along and using Mr. Otten to their presumed advantage, especially as he reached over the heads of leaders to reach the otherwise bypassed laypeople in the synod. To see those who had first been in surreptitious alliance with Otten later noisily breaking with him introduces an element of pathos in Burkee’s tragic story.

A third reason for reading *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod* is because it demonstrates how much effort a historian can put into being fair-minded when dealing with controversies like the one featured here. Until now, most of the narratives dealing with the Missouri breakup were written by partisans in both parties. Some of these authors display qualities that can be alluring, but their mixed tones of defensiveness and aggressiveness can

lead to a questioning of their legitimacy as historians. What about Professor Burkee? I met him first when I was an invitee to his dissertation examining committee at Northwestern University, joining a company of well-regarded historians who had been largely unfamiliar with this scene. They invited me in as an “expert witness.” (Burkee also invited me in later, as can be seen, to be glimpsed in a couple of cameo roles and as a bit player in several scenes.) If I was identified as a “moderate” observer, though having no personal stake as an employee of the synod or its congregations, Burkee himself might appear to some readers as having an investment in the camp of conservatives.

And why that? First, because he is conservative in his mien and manner and his commitments. Since “politics” is in the title of this book, readers may want to check out his own politics. He polished his credentials as a moderate conservative by running as an unsuccessful but educationally rich primary candidate for a Congressional seat from Wisconsin. As for his biography and the investment of his career and the risks involved, he is well thought of as a professor at two of the Missouri Synod schools. Tarnishing the denomination’s image would be neither his mission nor a strategically cunning move. As far as I can tell, he was guided by what he heard from the secretly taped conversations of the conservatives and from what he read in many documents that he helped discover.

What strikes the reader, or at least this reader, is how in the course of his hearing and reading, Burkee first evidenced a confidence-shaking suspicion and finally a firm rejection of the winning party. He did so as he came to view the demonstrably unethical actions of the synod president, Dr. J. A. O. “Jack” Preus, and so many others who were at his side or who were rivals in power-seeking acts against the moderates. If he found an admirable actor among the conservatives, he paid attention. Similarly, if he found something to criticize on the moderates’ side, he did not hold back. Admirers of Concordia Seminary president John Tietjen, the main foil and target of the Preus-Otten connection, cannot use this story as an enhancement of the moderate cause and course.

Professor Burkee did find some “admirable actors” among the moderates, but he spent little time on them, their theology, or their motives. They

saw themselves as witnesses to the Christian gospel over against legalists, but, since his book is mainly about the “Preus-Otten” connection—a link referred to in the title of his original dissertation—he concentrates on the theology, motives, and strategies of the conservative party. His range is wide, but what will be striking to the reader is how little gospel, good news, or anything positive shows up in the documentation on their side. I have asked some readers of the dissertation and asked myself with this book in hand, is there, even once, a paragraph or a couple of lines that could be described as “spiritual,” “evangelical,” or “positive”? Burkee had no motive or reason to exclude such lines. Their presence would have added color to his story. Instead, the nearest a reader comes to “doctrinal” discussion occurs in conservative references to their chosen front line, the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible as the Word of God and their interpretations of it as also being inerrant.

Their tactical choice was wise, since they were bidding to the largely off-stage (in this book) laity in a time when fear dominated participants in a changing culture and church. Moderates could proclaim the wonders of the gospel, but the militant conservatives could always minister to the fears by advertising the absoluteness of their position: “*They*, the moderates, are errant compromisers, while *we* can assure you of absolutely assured truth in biblical interpretation.” So they “won.”

Burkee’s plot suddenly shifts as he pays attention to the fate of those who had the votes and thus gained and then used the power. He shows what they wanted and gained—including the power to impose as binding truth even the most recently voted-on synodical doctrinal resolutions, plus presidential power in nominating members of all boards, a kind of autonomy the pope might envy. Yet he has to tell of the patent joylessness of their victory and subsequent of power. To the surprise of no one who follows plots like this in religion or politics, Burkee follows the parties and plotters *in statu nascendi* as they gain in power through unitive activity that almost instantly gives way to factions fighting over division of the spoils. It is not a happy story; there are side-glances at the divorces, alcoholism, perhaps abuse that colored the biography of significant participants, though Burkee does not exploit his knowledge of these.

Perhaps most devastating of his findings has to do with the decline of the denomination after its largely uncivil war. During the peak years of the controversy, a major book of sociology of religion appeared and was noticed: Dean M. Kelley's *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, which was useful to the Missouri conservatives. They used it as an advertising lure and strategic map. In effect, they were saying, with an envious glance at gainers like the Southern Baptist Convention, which had a concurrent upset of moderates and winner-take-all takeover by fundamentalists: "Look, fellow Missourians, as we purge the 'libs,' the moderates, and send them into exile, we will then be free to ride the church-growth bandwagon." So they cleaned house, said good-bye to much of the leadership, muffled the talent of most who stayed, and, to their surprise, saw drastic decline and devastations that paralleled the course of both in the "mainline" Protestant denominations.

Burkee leaves the second part of the story there, a story that finds Missouri's two parties still struggling for advantage, still engaged in the denominational "politicking" that they had abhorred before this conflict began. What use Missouri's parties and those beyond Missouri who side with either will make of the story is up to them. For now, be assured that reading the Burkee account of "old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago" will be a primer and a prompt for fresh thinking on urgent topics in churches and cultures.

—Martin E. Marty