

DR. FREDERICK PFOTENHAUER:

A GOOD EXAMPLE OF LEADERSHIP IN CHURCH WORK

Professor Fredrich

Rodney R. Schwab
Senior Church History
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A Good Example of Leadership in Church Work

A significant development in recent church history is the change in position of the Missouri Synod which brought about the end of the Synodical Conference. When we examine what took place in the Missouri Synod we notice changes starting to take place during the time Dr. John William Behnken was president, from 1935-1962. It is beneficial both to learn from the errors of others and to study the work of men after whom we want to model ourselves for the benefit of Christ's church. The changes which took place during the terms of President Behnken make the administration of his predecessor, Dr. Frederick Pfothenhauer, stand out more clearly as an example of solid Lutheran confession-alism. Although we will look at problems in the Missouri Synod, the purpose is to emphasize how pertinent the warnings of Pfothenhauer were at his time and are for us.

The problem in the Missouri Synod can be summed up in its failure to remember what the church is and what it is to do. The church is really an invisible group of believers in Jesus Christ. Certainly it is also important to realize that it is completely by God's grace that we become members of the true invisible church. The means through which God bestows that grace is the Gospel of Jesus as proclaimed in word and sacrament. When we identify the means of Grace as the gospel, however, that doesn't allow us to discount any of the other words and teachings of the Bible. It is important to know what the church is and how it comes into being. In order to hold on to these truths of scripture we can do no better than to use the Lutheran confessions.

The work of the church is to worship God, study and remain faithful to the truths of the Bible, and to bring others to the knowledge of the Savior. Any group of Christians which comes together to do the work of the Church must remember that it is only part of the larger invisible church. if it wishes to promote the cause of the church it must focus its attention on the means of grace which alone is able to bring anyone into the church in the first place. When a body of believers tries to increase its number by any means other than the means of grace, it isn't building the church of Christ. Any departure from the true use of Scripture and the Sacraments takes away from the glory of Christ, from the best way to care for the eternal souls of men, and from our ability to remain in the saving faith of Jesus Christ.

Certainly the goal of a body of believers is to join with other bodies who worship. The joy we have because of the faith of others does not allow separation when there should be unity. On the other hand, when another body does not teach correctly God instructs us not to join with them. That holy word which is able to change and save a living soul is precious. We dare not corrupt that source through which God comes to us and saves us. When we depart from the teachings of the word we abandon what alone is able to make us one in Christ. When a body of believers, such as our Lutheran Synods, sees that another body is not taking full advantage of the grace offered to it in the Scriptures, it is their duty to tell them about their error and try to convince them of the truth.

In our everyday world the procedures for joining together and for separating are very formal. Much of the work in determining who should be joined and who should be separated was done during the time of the reformation. The first division was between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. Later Luther determined that he could not join with Zwingli, so after that time individuals and church bodies have been further categorized into Protestant and Lutheran. Perhaps we could say that it is not fair to judge a person or an individual church body, let's say a Baptist group, automatically in such an absolute way. On the other hand, what the group proclaims to the world by its name should be a good indication of what it teaches. In addition to the name, however, it is often also necessary to consider what the body says about itself in a confessional statement. This is especially true among Lutheran bodies, since many do not believe or teach as Luther did. We rely upon such documents because we are not able to read the heart or interview each member individually. In dealing with Christians we assume that members are being honest and really believe the teachings of the group they join.

When the German Saxon Lutherans came to Missouri, they published a paper, the Lutheraner, to proclaim to Christians and especially Lutherans in America what they believed. They had no intention of joining Lutheran bodies which did not teach the Bible correctly according to the Lutheran confessions, but by publishing their paper they were fulfilling their obligation to proclaim the truth. They were also seeking out the Christians

who believed as they did so they could strengthen and encourage one another. As a result they had the joy of being able to join with the Frankonians of Michigan and some Loehe men in the Ohio area. Again, in 1872, the Missouri Synod recognized doctrinal agreement with a number of Lutheran bodies and took part in forming the Synodical Conference. About twenty years later the Synodical Conference practised its obligation to separate from false teachers. At that time the Ohio Synod dropped out as a result of the Election Controversy. There were attempts, or at least one attempt and a number of discussions, to unite the Synodical conference into a single organic body. These attempts failed, but they showed a sincere effort to demonstrate to the world outward unity where there was already doctrinal unity. During the 1920's the Missouri Synod as part of the Synodical Conference fulfilled its obligation to proclaim the truth to the Ohio, Iowa, and buffalo Synods. During this time conferences were held to proclaim the truth in discussion and to establish unity with them. The Synodical Conference wanted these Synods to have the full and correct truths of the saving Word. The result of these meetings was the Intersynodical Theses. These were finally brought before the convention of the Missouri Synod in a revised form in 1929 and were rejected. Although much had been accomplished through the meetings, the Missouri Synod must be respected for examining these so critically in the interest of real unity. The following is what was presented to the convention.

After careful examination of the revised theses of

August, 1928, your Committee finds itself compelled to advise Synod to reject these theses as a possible basis for union with the synods of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo, since all chapters and a number of paragraphs are inadequate. At times they do not touch upon the point of controversy; at times they are so phrased that both parties can find in them their own opinion; at times they incline more to the position of our opponents than to our own.

The chief criticisms of your committee are that in the "Short Presentation," etc., and under "C" the Scriptural doctrine of the universal will of grace is not clearly separated from the doctrine of election by grace. One gains the impression that election is included in the universal will of grace and concerns persons only in so far as it decrees that those shall enter heaven who, according to the foreknowledge of God already believe. Everywhere one misses the clear statement that in Christ Jesus, God elected unto faith, unto saship, unto perseverance, and unto salvation certain persons who are known to Him alone.

Most of the paragraphs under "D" are inadequate. They do not remove, but keep silence about, the old differences. We nowhere find a clear statement of the fact that the doctrines of the Church, the Ministry, Sunday, Chiliasm, and AntiChrist are not open questions, but clear and welldefined doctrines of the Scriptures and our Confessions.¹

The actions of the Missouri Synod in connection with the Inter-synodical Theses reflect a proper attitude both in seeking unity, in that it participated in the conferences, and in seeking to retain separation. Instead of simply rejecting these theses, however, the Missouri Synod drew up its own document, the Brief Statement drawn up largely by Dr. Pieper, which was

¹ Missouri Synod Proceedings 1929, pp. 110 & 111.

adopted at the 1932 convention.

How long should a body seek unity with a body not in its fellowship? We should not stop testifying to the truth as long as the other body would listen. It is obvious that the members of the Synodical Conference were making special efforts to testify to and discuss with those bodies who were already closest to their own doctrine. Christian love would be slow to criticize any body for wasting time in a futile effort as it testified to the truth and strove for union. The biggest danger is that the body with the truth may be tempted to give up its position through its prolonged contact with the erring body. The efforts of the Missouri Synod to bring the Ohio Synod into line with Biblical doctrine in the 1930's certainly could be called futile. In 1930 the Ohio, Iowa and Buffalo Synods formed the ALC (American Lutheran Church). The ALC in turn took a step in the wrong direction and entered the more liberal American Lutheran Conference. The ALC then requested that efforts be made to establish altar and pulpit fellowship with the Missouri Synod. The Cleveland convention with the following action.

Whereas, our Synod has always recognized the duty and desirability of the conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and the united defense against schism and sectarianism (Handbook, p.1) ; and
 WHEREAS, God-pleasing Scriptural external union and co-operation is based upon internal unity, oneness in faith, confession, doctrine, and practice; therefore be it

Resolved, That we declare our willingness to confer with other Lutheran bodies on problems of Lutheran union with a view towards effecting true unity on the basis of the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions.

Resolved That a standing committee of five, to be known as the committee on Lutheran Church Union, be appointed by the Chair to conduct these conferences.

Resolved, that the terms of the members of this committee be three years, successors being appointed by the Chair on the expiration of each term, at least two members succeeding themselves.

Resolved, That this committee confer with the other members of the Synodical Conference and keep them informed in this matter.²

In the 1938 Convention the Committee on Lutheran Union reported the following troubling statements made by the ALC:

1. That it is neither possible nor necessary to agree in all nonfundamental doctrines.
2. That the American Lutheran Church will not give up its Membership in the American Lutheran Conference.
3. The phrase "in the light of," occurring in the sentence: "We believe that the Brief Statement viewed in the light of our Declaration is not in contradiction to the Minneapolis Theses."³

It wasn't until 1945 that the Missouri Synod gave evidence that they had sacrificed their proper understanding regarding what the church is and what it is to do. At that time the "Statement of 44" came out as an independent document of forty-four men in the Missouri Synod, showing their discontent with the strict way things had been run in the past. There was undoubtedly abuses in the way the fellowship doctrines were applied, but this means the doctrines need to be properly taught, not thrown out. The discontent was caused as much by a lack of union as by misapplication of doctrine. By 1948 Missouri entered into improper fellowship practice by establishing

² Walter A. Baeppler, A Century of Grace, p. 320.

³ Ibid. p. 323.

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fellowship with the state church in Germany. Missouri was also in fellowship with the Free Church of Germany, but they were not in fellowship with each other. By (1967) the liberals of the Missouri Synod were able to have the Synod enter into fellowship with the ALC. Clearly an alarming number of the Missouri Synod had forgotten that the church is invisible and that the business of the church is teaching pure doctrine.

There are many factors which contribute to the doctrinal strength or weakness of a synod. Certainly one factor is the leadership of the body supplied by the president. In the case of Behnken and the Missouri Synod, the president did not instigate the changes, but did not stand firm against them or was not aware of them. In contrast Pfoth was alert to the pitfalls of the age and warned against them. Pfoth's warnings were fitting. There was a movement to change things even while he was still in office.

An in sight into the origins and motives of this church-political manipulation of the Synod was given by another "insider," a prominent St. Louis seminary scholar (now at "Semines"), who stated in a graduate class in July 1968:

...that the "progressive" movement got started in a smoke filled pastor's office in New York City in 1930, when 3 LCMS pastors...decided, after Synod had turned down the Chicago Theses and had authorized the drafting of the Brief Statement, that they would start a movement to "Change Synod." Their goals were to prepare the LCMS for outreach into America by use of English (vs. German), and by moving Synod toward a more open doctrinal stance. To attain these goals they urge the election of Conservative leaders (e.g., Behnken) who would listen to their suggestions of names for seminary presidents, professors, and other officials. [The professor] said he joined the growing underground movement in 1940.⁴

⁴ Kurt E. Marquart, Anatomy of an Explosion, 1977, pp. 80 & 81.

Behnken was not the leader of this progressive movement, but the implication was clear that he was chosen as one who could be influenced more readily than Pfothenhauer. We cannot cite this movement as the cause for Pfothenhauer's defeat in the 1935 convention, for he was seventy-six years old. It is interesting that in his address to the convention in 1923 Pfothenhauer stated that the synod had so far been preserved from party spirit. That address on unity was a very timely, if unheeded, encouragement.⁵

A good summary of Pfothenhauer's training and work was reported in the Lutheran Witness after his death.

Dr. Pfothenhauer was born in Altenzelle, Hanover, Germany, on Good Friday, April 22, 1859. His father, Pastor Herman Pfothenhauer, who represented the ninth successive generation of Lutheran ministers, died when Frederick was fifteen years old. Soon after young Frederick enrolled at Pastor Brunn's school for ministers at Steended, then emigrated to America in 1875, and entered Concordia College at Fort Wayne, Ind., where he completed his course in 1877. In September of that year he began the study of theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis where he was greatly influenced by the leader of our Church, the Rev. Prof. C. F. W. Walther. Upon his graduation, in 1880, he became a traveling missionary in the Northwest, with headquarters at Odessa, Minn. Here he ministered to many scattered souls and families for seven years, when he accepted a call to Lewiston, Minn. From 1893 to 1911 he was pastor of the congregation in Hamburg, Minn. In 1891 he was elected President of the Minnesota-Dakota District, at that time embracing the States of Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Montana, and the entire territory of Central and Western Canada. From 1908 to 1911 he served Synod as First Vice-President and from 1911 to 1935 as its President, 24 years. The Cleveland convention in 1935 relieved him of his heavy duties and made him Honorary President of Synod. Since 1911 he lived in Chicago, where he also served as assistant pastor, first at St. Andrew's Church and later at Holy Cross Church. ⁵

⁵ Henry A. Grueber, "F. Pfothenhauer: The Man and the leader," Lutheran Witness, vol 53, Dec 26, 1939, p.442.

Pfotenhauer was recognized as a gifted, hardworking, and humble individual. Because of his ability and dedication he was able to keep tabs on the synod institutions and to run synod business smoothly.

Pfotenhauer's addresses to the conventions surprise us for the good advice he gives. In pointing out the dangers which stood before the Missouri Synod he was a prophet of what would happen in the future.

Now our Synod, by the unmerited grace of God, is in full possession of the treasures of the Reformation. Therefore it is meet and right that we in this Jubilee year bring a special thank-offering to God with hearts and hands and voices, and that we also have Jubilee service in connection with this Convention. Of course, our celebrations must be conducted in a proper manner. On the one hand, we may not in pride lift ourselves above others who have not been so highly favored as we. On the other hand we must not aim at making a show of big numbers and at gaining more recognition in the world, and to that end make common cause with those who are not inwardly united with us. We recall how it was the three-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, in 1817, which gave occasion for undermining the Lutheran Church in the German countries, when Frederick William III, King of Prussia, brought about a union of the Reformed and Lutheran Churches. Also in our land voices are heard saying that on the occasion of this Jubilee there should be union; at any rate all synods having the name Lutheran should cooperate fraternally, irrespective of existing differences. God grant that our whole Synod and our individual congregations steadfastly resist all such temptations, in order that our celebration may be a clear and ringing confession of the full and infallible truth of the divine Word, and that we be encouraged anew to retain undiminished the heritage of the fathers, to defend it against all attacks, and to deliver it intact to our children.... Alas, it cannot be denied that in some respects we are not as our fathers were, that there has been a let-up in confessional definiteness and earnestness, in the love to God's Word, in indoctrination, in the thorough instruction of the youth in the

Catechism, and in the life of godliness. Oh, that we as a synod might remain faithful and hold fast that which we have! Against us are the devil, the world, and our own evil flesh as also the history of the Church, which shows that the Gospel did not continue in any one place for more than a few generations. For us are the mercy and grace of God, through which He, without our merit or worthiness, desires to retain among us the treasures of the Reformation.⁶

Pfotenhauer mentioned unionism in a number of convention addresses. In 1923 he said:

May the faithful God restrain and ward off from us all doctrinal indifference which seeks to insinuate itself into our midst, so that we may confess with the fathers of our Synod: "Thy testimonies are my counsellors." Then we shall continue peacefully in one mind in spite of the fury of the devil, the world, and our flesh; we shall prove ourselves a salt in this unionistic age and be able to do the great work of the Church in a God-pleasing manner.⁷

Boldly it is proclaimed in them that doctrine should be a side-issue at such conventions; that prudence demands the shelving of disputed doctrines in order to prevent strife and establish unity. We pray the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, to preserve us in His grace from this deception practised by the satanic spirit of error.⁸

It is easy to look at the time when Pfotenhauer was president of the Missouri Synod as mediocre. The rate of growth during the decade 1910-1920 was 14%, the lowest in the synod's history until that time.⁹ What must not be overlooked is that the growth until that time was largely due to immigrating Germans. German immigration was practically stopped during the decade of the first World War. After the war quotas were set

⁶ Missouri Synod Proceedings, 1917, pp. 5 & 6.

⁷ Missouri Synod Proceedings, 1923, p. 5.

⁸ Missouri Synod Proceedings, 1935, p. 8.

up, which also reduced immigration. Even in an outward way numbers don't tell the whole story.

There were few new foreign mission endeavors, but Pfotenhauer was mission minded and these missions grew with his support. Only a couple small synod schools were started while he was president, one in Edmonton, Alberta. Almost all the schools, however, had some building project and grew during those years. The English Missouri Synod merged the German Synod in 1911. He was the administrator when the new constitution was adopted (1917) and a financial secretary was hired (1920). The Lutheran Laymen's League was organized in 1917. In 1920 the Walther League was recognized as a synodical program. The Sunday School was begun and flourished during those years. About 1930 the Missouri Synod made its first attempts at radio evangelism. The committee which worked on the hymnal published in 1941 was appointed by Pfotenhauer.

It is hard to explain our idea of being successful in the service of the church to people without a good understanding of what the church is and what its work is. Given the spiritual quality of the church, believers are successful in so far as they obey the Word of God. Dr. Pfotenhauer certainly was faithful. Just as in our age he saw much doctrinal indifference and unionism. In view of the Missouri Synod's later history, we appreciate his faithfulness in obeying God's commands both to separate and to join together.

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