

A CONFLICT IN COMBINING
CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANISM AND POLITICAL CONSERVATISM
AT KING OF KINGS EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH,
GARDEN GROVE, CALIFORNIA

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In beginning this approach of the early history of King of Kings congregation I will quote some members of the church whom I asked to give their impressions of this time in the church's history. I will leave most of the quotes throughout the paper anonymous so as not to offend either the person spoken about, or the person speaking them, this is particularly true with some of the character sketches that are drawn. The first quote speaks about the first resident pastor, Joel C. Gerlach, who is now a professor at our seminary. It also gives some general flavor of what the setting for the early growth of the congregation was.

"I have often said to people that Pastor Gerlach was the right person in the right place at the right time. People were drawn to King of Kings because there was much religious/political unrest here in Orange County during the 1960's. At that time King of Kings ran an ad in the paper which carried the line: Not affiliated with the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches. People who saw the NCC and WCC as liberal organizations and resented their church's involvement or association with them, were intrigued by a church that disavowed membership. They came, liked what they heard and stayed...he (Pastor G.) soon found out that political conservatism and religious conservatism are not one and the same. That became evident to me as time went on. For, a goodly number of the families who came here for political reasons eventually left for churches of a more liberal stance. It was almost as if it were the fashionable thing at one time to have been able to say you left a liberal church for a conservative one. I found out that people don't really know that religious conservatism is really loyalty to God's Word."

Another member wrote this to me.

"It was coincidental that when King of Kings was formed that the (John) Birch Society was running at high tide and the synodical split was in process. Needless to say, there were a lot of confused, politically conservative, Lutherans looking for a church home. At the same time there were Lutherans and other Christians that were deeply concerned about the non-scriptural positions of their churches but were not political conservatives. Some of both types joined King of Kings."

Pastor Gerlach faced several problems in this area of combining

conservative politics with conservative religion. Basically, I guess, it's a mixture of church and state, but there are several other dangers which we will bring out throughout the course of the paper. Pastor Gerlach addressed the problem he faced in a paper dated January 18, 1966, (three years after he arrived on the scene in Garden Grove), entitled, "Is There a Relationship Between Confessional Lutheranism and Political Conservatism?" He began the paper with a Luther quote, which I include here,

"It takes great skill to distinguish clearly between these to kingdoms and very few strike it right. As a rule temporal rulers want to direct the church and the clergy wants to rule in city hall."

Throughout the paper he explained similarities and differences between religious and political conservatism and concluded this:

"Is there a relationship between confessional Lutheranism and political conservatism? The answer has to be an emphatic 'No.' Confessional Lutheranism is based upon a source of absolute truth. Political conservatism is based upon conclusions men reach on the basis of their experience and their study of the past. Political conservatism concerns itself exclusively with man's temporal welfare, confessional Lutheranism's concern is for man's eternal security. Whatever of a religious element is a part of conservative political philosophy is traceable to the natural knowledge of God. One may be a political conservative without being a Christian, (...here he gave examples that California people would be familiar with) and one may also be a Christian without being a political conservative... There are parallels, but we hesitate to say that these parallels establish a relationship."

This lesson, of course, could be learned from other periods of church history. We think for example of the Geneva Experiment led by John Calvin. I quote an editorial by Pastor Winfred Schaller in "The Lutheran Spokesman," Vol. 7, No. 1, June, 1964.

"In order to compel all citizens to live to the glory of God, Calvin introduced a strict system of church discipline. These ordinances were made the civil law for Geneva. The Church was viewed as the conscience of the State. The secular and spiritual authorities were viewed as the two arms working jointly to establish Christ's lordship in every area of life. The Church established the standard of ethics, and the State was there to force the Genevans to conform to this standard. They did, too. In two years 58 persons were condemned to death for infractions of the Ecclesiastical Ordinances; 34 women were burned at the stake for sorcery, 400 people were punished for laughing during the sermon or for dancing."

This is only one of many examples that could be used to show that,

in the past there has consistently been a tendency to link what people think are likes, a conservative theological position with a conservative view of how society should be structured. I will now demonstrate that this is the same kind of problem that cropped up at King of Kings in Garden Grove.

Garden Grove is a city in Orange County, California. There were some peculiarities of this county which add to the picture surrounding the formation of King of Kings congregation. Orange county was chiefly settled by Germans and Japanese, first by the Germans. The city of Orange was a predominantly German town, and there was a solid block of Germans which settled throughout the county offering it a conservative influence. The Germans operated the orange groves and the citrus groves. Then the Japanese came in and started operating truck-farms in the area. With irrigation, the warm climate provided excellent farming conditions, and this benefited both the Japanese and the Germans in the area. So, there is a hard-working work ethic attitude of the Japanese coupled with the staunchness, the staidness, of the German element in the county.

Orange County also had a conservative Newspaper. The Santa Ana Register was one of the papers in the Freedom Newspaper chain. The owner of that immense chain of newspapers was a resident of Santa Ana, a city right next door to Garden Grove.

Conservatism was especially evident in the politics of the county. During the early years of King of Kings there were two members of the United States Congress from California who were members of the John Birch Society, one of whom was from Santa Ana. The other was John Schmidt, a presidential candidate on the American Freedom Party ticket several years ago. He was one of the top Birch Society people in the whole state. The Goldwater campaign also had its beginnings in Orange County. So you can see some of the peculiarity of Orange County politics. A solid block of political conservatives that carried a lot of weight were concentrated in this one area.

Some people who learned about the establishment of the congregation, and heard that it was a conservative Lutheran Church, were Lutherans themselves and felt, "here's a place that will provide a platform for me and provide encouragement for me to do what I want in the realm of politics." Two of those people were George Smith

and Adolph Neumann. George Smith officially joined the congregation but I will spend most of my time characterizing Adolph Neumann and the problems that developed as a result of his actions and influence. Both were members of the John Birch Society.

A second group of people who were active early in the congregational history were the Meintsma's and the Evans. Although they are somewhat different in their views, I have lumped them together because they were both involved in the California Republican Assembly, which was conservative republicanism but not as conservative as the John Birch Society. Meintsma's were also active in the Birch Society. Both of these families mentioned their association with King of Kings to others whom they knew were Lutherans and some of them became curious about the church because of that contact.

The time period this paper covers begins in February of 1963. That's when the first resident pastor, Joel C. Gerlach, arrived on the scene. Exploratory services were held in the area by neighboring pastors since October of 1960. Regular worship services began in February of 1963 at Donald's Hut Mortuary. The events spoken of in this paper began already at the time when they were worshipping at the mortuary and continued on past October of 1964 when the church building at the corner of Newhope and Trask Streets was dedicated, and on into the first few years their grade school was in operation. The school opened its doors to eight grades with two teachers in the fall of 1965. The church had already become self supporting in January of 1965.

In addition to the two groups of people I listed above there were several other families coming to worship at King of Kings. About the time the church was dedicated there was a group that came from an A.L.C. Church in Tustin, (another neighboring town in Orange County.) There were some retired military people and others who disagreed with the new vicar who was spouting off all these historical critical mouthings. This group included the Partins, the Reins, the Frames, the Timmermanns, and the Bartholemews. Another family, the Hintons, came from the Missouri Synod church in Orange. Most of these were involved with the John Birch Society but they never really pushed their views in the congregation.

This was the core of people that marked the beginning of the Birch influence once the congregation was in its present church

building. Before there was a church building it was chiefly Adolph Neumann. They wanted a church that was faithful to their whole philosophy of life. They didn't feel that they could be conservative in their politics and advance conservative, republicanism, or Birchism, and then belong to a church that was liberal. They saw link between liberal theology and the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches which they felt were infiltrated with communists. There was some warrant for this because of documentation linking the NCC and the WCC to communism.

The Evans family kept their politics out of the church and saw a clear distinction between church and state functions. This is evidenced by a comment from Mrs. Evans about Mrs. Meintsma, "She always wanted me to go to the John Birch meetings but never seemed to have time to come with me to choir." A further characterization of the Evans family will follow later in the paper after I deal with this group associated with the Birch Society. I just want you to keep in mind that there are people like the Evans who are also members at the same time as those who were mixing their politics with religion.

Those who mixed the two did so because of reaction, I suppose. It was partly a reaction against what was happening in government, (Kennedy and Johnson era), and partly a reaction against what was happening in the church, particularly the conviction that the NCC and the WCC promoted socialistic objectives. The ad. King of Kings ran in the paper was a perfect calling card for this kind of people. "Not affiliated with the NCC or the WCC." In defending this ad, Pastor Gerlach said, "We wanted to make it clear that King of Kings was Lutheran, but we wanted to make it clear that we weren't Lutheran like all the Lutherans who were linked up with the eccumenical groups."

We will now see what happens when you have a core of people who are interested in using the congregation for a propaganda platform to push their point of view. The person who was the biggest pusher, the person who browbeat everybody, was Adolph Neumann. Until coming to King of Kings, he had a life long association with the Mo. Synod. He had a son who was a M. Synod Pastor and a son-in-law who was a Mo. Synod principal. He was drawn into the battle in Mo. for conservatism and came to realize that from his point of view, the battle there was lost. He decided to get out and go elsewhere, namely King

of Kings which had its membership in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Once he got to King of Kings he let his feelings be known.

Like most Birch people, he saw a big conspiracy afoot. He saw Satan behind everything. Communism was the big enemy and Satan was using communism to undermine Christianity. His message was the same over and over again. "Satan works in the church and through the church because the devil has taken over the WCC and the NCC. You and I have to warn other Christians so that they aren't deceived by this great deceit that's being perpetrated by the devil using the agencies of communism. Anything that's socialistic is communistic. This whole conspiracy has infiltrated the government of the United States and there is still a chance of salvaging this free nation of ours if we all get into the Birch Society and try to turn things around." He had a "Boogie Man" mentality and his objective, his mission in life as a Christian was, to preserve the church by preserving the nation.

In those early days at Donald's Hut Mortuary, a typical conversation, monopolized by Neumann in the parking lot after church, may have gone like this, (perhaps this is a bit harsh but it will give you some idea of his thinking).

"Hi, I'm Adolph Neumann. I'm sure glad we're Christians. There are so many people in this world that aren't, you know. Those commies are getting at everyone. Those atheists should be stopped, don't you agree."

"Yes, I suppose they should."

"The best way I know is to join the John Birch Society. They are out to get the communists and so am I. We have to get the communists because they're atheists. We really have to get them because they're infiltrating our government. I'm only sure about two things. You're not a communist and I'm not a communist, (and I'm not too sure about you.)"

"That's fine but..."

"Now, you are not a good Christian unless you become a part of the crusade, because if you don't become part of the crusade, then you're an apathetic person, and apathy destroys the church, so here's my literature, now take this home and read it. If you show a reluctance to read my literature to become informed, then you are

going to be an easy victim when they unleash their attack, and when they attempt to take over the whole country and annihilate the churches, but if you get in on the crusade now there is still a chance, a small chance, that we can turn things around and save the country."

Another thing we might want to bring to mind here is that this is the period of history when the United States is getting more and more involved with the Viet Nam war. The members of the Birch society were hawks. This was also the decade of revolution. The youth on the college campuses were revolting against the establishment and many of them opposed the war. As a result of this Birch people often accused "long-haired hippie" freaks of being communist too. Something that was wholesome and would save the country was not associated with youth. This was something you associated with good, solid, middle class, middle-aged Americans. This also was something that was reflected in Neumann.

Neuman was a rabid, anti-communist propagandizer, against everything that was "commie" tainted, and everything was, except the organizations that he endorsed. He distributed literature after worship services which antagonized members. He would even put things under windshield-wipers on automobiles in the parking lot of the congregation. He button-holed people and pressured them, and this was a disturbing influence within the congregation.

Along with other people, he wanted anti-communist literature placed in the school library. My Weekly Reader, a long-time, respectable, current events report for grade school children, was a sore spot with some of these people. They were adamant against the use of this in the school. They protested against the use of this by the students because, "it was communist dominated, it reported the news from a communist slant, and the socialists were advocating socialism in it."

There were protests and meetings at which these people presented their case to the Board of Education. They insisted that if the congregation was to continue to receive their support then the school would have to stop distributing this material to the students in the classroom. Members of the Board of Education resigned because of some of the problems that were created by these people.

Grade school text books were protested because of the publisher

without necessarily having gone through the content of the books. They used the argument, "Laidlaw publishes communist influenced literature so we don't want to use any Laidlaw textbooks in our school." Already at the time of the starting of the school (Fall of 1965), when curriculum decisions were being made, these people tried to get the board of Education to acquiesce to their will with regard to the use of books. "We can't go modern math because it's the communists trying to confuse us." They objected to a non-phonetic reading program, and to the Scholastic Book Club. "Scott-Forsmann is the only publisher you can read now that is good, solid, American stuff. The rest of it is subversive." It just happened that the faculty chose the Scott-Forsmann reading text but as a former member commented, "I think the Birch element felt they had won a victory because the faculty had chosen the reading program that they were recommending."

All of these incidents show us some of the tensions that built up in the early life of the congregation. Many of the people who were not extremists resisted the pressure with common sense. Although he was concerned about the problem, and although he did take some definite steps to curb it, Pastor Gerlach faced the situation like this.

"It never really bothered me much. I just went about my business of recruiting unchurched people for the church, and didn't really become preoccupied with that nonsense, just thinking the answer to it is to get a congregation growing and established, then these people will be shoved to the sidelines by people who have their heads screwed on right."

In order to color the picture a little more completely, I will now give character sketches of three of the families who were charter members of King of Kings, but did not let their politics interfere with their church membership.

Mr. and Mrs. Don Wulf are typical examples of the thinking of people who were the real core of the congregation. They were disillusioned with the Mo. Synod, looking for a church that would be solid and conservative and faithful to the Scriptures. Of course it affected them when in came this element that wanted the same thing, but felt that a Christian "has got to express his commitment to that conservative theology in a political activity."

The Wulfs, like many other people, were concerned citizens in a more proper way. They were not so much the pro-Birch type of people but were concerned with what was going on in the university system in California, although they too had a limited connection with the Birch Society. Their concern was for what was happening to the country, but they kept a solid scriptural base. They had devotions in their home and didn't run over at the mouth on all these causes. They were a devout religious family and this kept them from going over the deep end in this situation. Their religious move to the WELS definitely outweighed the political move. Politics were not a prominent thing with them, religion was. They were concerned but were not swept away by the extremes of the Birch philosophy. To offer proof of this, here is a portion of a letter they wrote to a newspaper,

October 5, 1964

"Dear Editor:

Re: Editorial "Churches join Politicians"

You have told the truth; the churches today are devoting much of their time to temporal matters and neglecting spiritual truth! They are teaching it is more important for man to gain social justice than to come into a right relationship to God! The pulpits today in many churches are cluttered with politicians in clerical robes!...Now in Orange County, there is a refuge for sin-sick souls to turn away to--a place where God's Word is preached in all It's Truth and purity. Our church, King of Kings Lutheran, at the Corner of Newhope and Trask, Garden Grove, opened its doors yesterday to receive sinners who thirst after God's righteousness, not social justice...

Respectfully,
The Don Wulf Family"

Another family that clearly saw the purpose of King of Kings congregation was the Robert Schutz family. Mr. Schutz was always a person who scorned the political involvement of the members in or at the congregation. He had his own point of view. He didn't think that everything was being undermined by a conspiracy. He was a part of the congregation because of what it offered as far as theology was concerned. Since he was more liberal in his political outlook, he particularly scorned the attitude of the ultra-conservatives who voiced themselves at congregational functions. He even expressed some disappointment over molding of men who were coming out of our seminary, because they tend to be too conservative

politically. He would never push his views on anyone else though.

His religious background was AELC. He had belonged to St. Pauls in Linwood, California. His father made all the furniture in King of Kings church. Their pastor in Linwood was a Pastor Nordby, a conservative A.L.C. pastor. Mr. Schutz's wife was not Lutheran when they were married but was confirmed later. They are both still solid members at King of Kings.

The other family I want to characterize is one that has been mentioned briefly earlier in the paper, the Robert Evans family. When King of Kings was started, Mr. Evans was a Mason and not a member of the church but he attended services with his wife quite frequently. Mr. Evans and Mr. Meintzma (mentioned earlier also) took instructions at the same time, and when the class was over, neither of them joined. ^{the church.} Mr. Meintzma didn't agree with our position on prayer fellowship and Mr. Evans didn't want to give up his lodge membership. Eventually both became members.

Mrs. Evans gives us an example of a dedicated, hard working, self sacrificing person who is willing to do anything for her church. Both of them were staunch conservatives but they were people who never let their political interests dominate or influence their activity in the congregation. They were active in politics on the side. They were people who were interested in politics but they didn't push it onto other people and they didn't drag it into the church with them. They worked very hard for political causes but worked a lot harder for their church, especially Mrs. Evans.

Now let's consider some of the effects that the "Birch element" had on the congregation. First of all it unsettled people. It had a divisive influence on the congregation. There was a tendency of members to speak the same way the members of Paul's congregation at Corinth once spoke. "I am of Adolph... I am of ..." whoever it might be opposing him. Mr. Liedermann, one of the first of many chairmen in the congregation understood exactly what the mission of King of Kings was. Under the topic of new business Mr. Neumann once brought up this question at a congregational meeting, "What are you doing to combat communism?" With little more than the bat of an eyelash Mr. Liedermann replied, "I teach Sunday School." For people like that, who understood what the mission of the church is, it had an unsettling effect, because they saw this as an attempt to steer

the church in a particular direction and add to what they understood the mission of the church to be.

Another effect that this "Birch element" had on the members was this. There were people who saw this as an attempt to get them politically involved, and they weren't interested in being politically involved. Perhaps they weren't as well informed about the mission of the church as Mr. Liederman was when he put Neumann down, but they took a right posture over against it for their own reasons.

One of the most positive effects that this problem had on the congregation was the strengthening quality that all problems carry with them. In this case it helped the people see more clearly just what the mission of King of Kings congregation in Garden Grove, California was. The congregation had a firmer grasp and a clearer understanding of what God is calling it to do.

This is one of the effects that Pastor Gerlach hoped to obtain. When I specifically asked him how he dealt with the problem, this is what he said,

"When I developed an awareness of the negative things that were happening and saw that they were hampering the things that we were trying to do, I felt, 'I have to help these people who have their hearts in the right place to appreciate the fact that their emphasis on political conservatism is not something that they should bring into the church.' If they want to be politically conservative that's fine, but don't bring it into the church. How can I help them to appreciate that?...I tried to get them to see that the John Birch Society was not all that they thought that it was. They saw truth in a distorted sense and I tried to help them appreciate Truth in a right sense...In the case of the Birchers, if I could demonstrate to them that the John Birch philosophy was not the be all and end all in terms of a solution to the political problem they saw in the country it would help them. Or if I could get them to see that the John Birch Society might not be "the good" with which to fight "the evil," and that maybe we have a better "Good" with which to do battle against "The evil," namely the power that's inherent in God's Word, and since that power is not involved in the message of Robert Welch, then maybe they would see the John Birch Society as it really was, simply another humanistic organization."

One of the most positive results was this. What probably started the action to establish a daughter congregation in Whittier, which is now Christ the Lord, in La Habra, California, was the awareness on the part of Neumann that he wasn't going to get anywhere with his mission at King of Kings. "He may not have been inclined to get this group together and say 'let's start a church in Whittier',

if he had been having his way in Garden Grove." "I think he felt if he started a new group in La Habra, he would be in a position to dominate." As time went on, that church was started and things didn't pan out for him the way he wanted there either. One of his friends he took with him, a Mr. Zishka, is still in La Habra, carrying out his work as a faithful Christian, and that church still belongs to the WELS.

As the growth of King of Kings materialized, this "Birch element" was outnumbered and their influence waned. Many came to the realization that their organization wasn't accomplishing what they thought it might or what they originally thought it should. A core of people saw that this organization was something apart from their church life. They saw it as purely a political organization. This realization happened sooner at King of Kings than some expected, but all are agreed that it is gone for now. If the lesson was not well learned the first time, it will be learned again and again as history repeats itself in forms like the Moral Majority and the Third World Theology which are so prevalent today. The church must never lose sight of the mission Christ gave it, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Mt 28:19,20)

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Although I did not always quote him directly, much of the information contained in this paper was gleaned from several lengthy discussions with Professor Gerlach, Feb.-Apr.1981

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