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Beyond the One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Anniversary

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These comments form a sequel to an earlier editorial which was entitled "Why Missouri?" The issue remains the same. The future of Missouri, even as its reason for existence, depends on Missouri's readiness to be the church of the Gospel.

Missouri has a history. At this point in time this history stretches across 125 years since 12 congregations with their 4,000 members, 12 voting pastors, 9 advisory pastors, 1 professor, and 2 candidates decided to form a church body which is now known as The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.

From our vantage point in time we may readily forget the struggle for survival through which the forefathers of Missouri passed even before they took steps to form a church body. At that time the question was whether these immigrant people were even part of the church at all. This may sound incredible, for these immigrants had come to America to establish the authentic church of God. Only when the more fundamental question of church had been resolved were the forefathers prepared to begin to form a church body.

The fact that Missouri survived this crucial test in its early life is not as important as the way in which Missouri was then able to survive. Nothing less than the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions rescued Missouri's forefathers, for here they discovered again that the church is God's own creation, brought into being and sustained by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Missouri survived at that time because God was faithful to His gracious promises as He has always been throughout Biblical and church history.

The history of Missouri demonstrates how God sustains His people in spite of religious and social upheavals. A teen-ager when the Civil War broke out, Missouri has suffered the distress of two world wars and the military conflicts of recent decades. Economic and social changes have swept across Missouri's life. And since the predestinarian controversy rocked Lutheranism in America, Missouri has passed through theological troubles many times. By God's grace Missouri has survived and thrived. There has been a growing sensitivity to Missouri's evangelical heritage as a Lutheran church, matched by a willingness to witness to this confession in the church and to the world.

And so this is not the first time of troubles for Missouri, nor, in all likelihood, will it prove to be the last.

What are the issues that trouble Missouri? What significance is there either to these issues or to Missouri's future?

There are critics in this country and abroad who charge that Missouri is unfaithful to its original Scriptural and confessional position. There have been allegations of false teaching and heresy expressed vocally and in print. Those who teach and write, especially in the Synod's educational institutions and publications, have been accused of denying almost all the doctrines and acts of Jesus Christ except His death on the cross.

Missouri is paying a price for this internal warfare. Lutherans in and out of Missouri suffer anguish because supposedly Missouri is no longer the "old Missouri." Criticism and judgment have seriously harmed people, their reputations, their health and their welfare. Seeds of distrust have been sown, and the harvest has grown so rampantly that the theological and administrative leadership of the church has been almost unable to function. Fear is widespread because allegations over crumbling foundations have led members to conclude that their faith is being destroyed. Apathy and disgust have aggravated existing financial problems that the work of the church as a whole has suffered.

Underlying many of the allegations and the concern for the synod's doctrine is the issue of Biblical interpretation. New approaches to the understanding of the Holy Scriptures have produced the fear that the infallibility and inerrancy of Holy Scriptures is being undermined or even denied. The cry has gone up that God's Word is being taken away from people and their faith is being destroyed. Often the accusations have come from those who have not examined the facts or cared little to learn about the immeasurable heights and depths of the wisdom of God. Questions about the inerrancy of Holy Scripture have been promoted with such intensity that they have overshadowed the more important question of what the Holy Scriptures are all about, namely, to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Accusers have rarely asked what the impact of these new approaches and studies makes on the total doctrinal content of the Scriptures and the Confessions, whether they really discredit the trustworthiness of God and the reliability of His Gospel.

How a church body reacts to crises, especially in the field of doctrine, tells what that church body really is. Here is the test whether a church body is essentially different from other social institutions or whether it is truly church in the sense of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. This is what makes the struggle in Missouri such a significant issue for evangelical Christianity. Precisely because doctrine is important, a church body professes its confession by what it does as well as by what it says.

Missouri faces special difficulties because Biblical doctrines have played such a dominant role in the Synod's life. Until the last quarter century Missouri was more of an interested spectator than a participant in theological issues within ecumenical circles. Overwhelmed by changes in the church and in society, many members have become fearful and insecure. Accusations and misunderstanding have only heightened the difficulties.

A constant threat to Missouri is found in the temptation to resort to legalism of various kinds to keep its doctrinal platform and its house in order. This legalism takes

many forms, but it always betrays ultimately the fact that the church's trust is in something else than in a gracious and faithful God who still rules through His Word. Theological issues cannot be resolved by making the Scriptures say more or less than they say, or to mean something other than what they mean. To do this is to try to capture God rather than to be held captive by His Word. Theological issues are not resolved by power, whether exercised through votes of friends or by resolutions adopted in solemn assembly.

Fear and insecurity also tear at the bonds which hold the church's membership together. The nature of heresy is that it affects the body of Christ even as it affects the doctrine of Christ. Missouri has been blessed with an unusual kind of unity. But the unity of our common roots is not to be confused with the unity which we have in Christ. Nor is the gift of our unity in Christ to be tampered with. Legalistic discipline cannot accomplish what the Gospel alone produces in terms of unity. Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn in the December 1971 issue of this periodical has outlined so adequately the churchly approach which honors both the Gospel and Christian fraternity as it takes seriously the faith and the life of the church.

If the Missouri Synod is prepared now to take its stand merely as a social institution, then it has a right to use power to maintain the kind of membership it wants. But if Missouri wants to be church, then it must renounce hard-hat tactics, legalism, and separatism as it deals with its membership. Even Martin Luther agreed with St. Augustine in refusing to label erring Christians as heretics ("The Theology of Fellowship"). Missouri has articulated its purpose to be church by writing into the membership clause of its constitution only the condition that its members subscribe to "the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and life" (Article II, paragraph 1). As church, Missouri is no superior or purer kind of fellowship than that which the Holy Spirit brings about through faith in Christ Jesus. There is a kind of unholy arrogance in those who call themselves defenders of the faith and dare to usurp the Spirit's place in preserving truth and unity. Implicitly at least, Missouri's constitution and bylaws show a determination to be church by trusting the Word of God to produce correction, enlightenment, repentance, and fraternity. Missouri is on record that its life is in good hands when it trusts the dynamic of the Gospel to produce discipline and edification.

Finally, if Missouri is to survive as church, then the Synod must express its confidence in the Gospel by the way in which it deals with other church bodies and witnesses to the world. Such a stand on the Gospel may seem to be sheer risk and nonsense. But the church must recognize that it is only the earthen vessel in which God keeps and by which He transmits the treasure of His Gospel. How fragile this earthen vessel is can be seen in the scandal of the divided Christendom and of a world that has seen or heard or felt little of the voice and touch of God. If there is failure, it can be traced to man's lack of faith in the promises of God that He will accomplish His purposes in the church and in the world. The church is at her best when she is God's servant to the world,

confident that this ministry will like that of Christ bring men to their knees acknowledging Jesus to be Savior and Lord of all.

What lies beyond the 125th anniversary celebration? The answer to that question lies with God. He is still in charge of matters within the church and everywhere. He can be trusted, even when men bring themselves to a time and place of testing. He can be trusted enough to constrain churchmen to keep their hands off from meddling with the holy things and holy people of God. He can be trusted enough to persuade His timid, fearful people to surrender even their doubts as they take heart at His good Word of grace.

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