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Change and Reaction in the LCMS: 1938–1965

In 1964, John Stormer, chairman of the Missouri Federation of Young Republicans, published his best-selling *None Dare Call It Treason*, reopening charges of “subversion from within” leveled by McCarthyites with such effect a decade earlier. Published to coincide with Barry Goldwater’s presidential bid, Stormer’s book aimed to reawaken an indifferent nation to the expansion of communism abroad and at home, asserting that America’s battle in the Cold War was thus far a losing one. At the core of a movement of internal subversion, wrote Stormer, was a cadre of religious liberals bent on undermining America’s Christian traditions. Leading the charge were communist-front groups like the National Council of Churches (NCC), the editorial staff of *Christian Century*, and liberal seminary intellectuals bent on undermining the authority of the Bible. Through use of code words like peace, ecumenism, and tolerance, he claimed, many church liberals served as unsuspecting pawns in neutralizing clerical opposition to communism.¹ Stormer’s book was advertised on a grassroots level among conservatives of all stripes by groups like the John Birch Society. Within eight months, six million copies had been sold.²

Liberalism Ascendant

Across the religious spectrum, choir groups, quilting groups, youth groups, and groups for men and women proliferated as denominations grew in

the midst of a religious awakening in the 1950s. During the 1960s and early 1970s, parachurch organizations grew in membership at least one-third faster than denominations. The growth can be attributed in part to heightened degrees of professionalism in an America that was becoming increasingly white-collar, higher levels of education and affluence, and the availability of new technologies. But the growth also reflected the expansion of special interest groups in secular politics, a growth appreciated and imitated by activists within the church. Dragged along by a budding civil rights movement, liberal Christians struck first in the special interest wars. Natural competitors within these denominations then arose, again in imitation. And so liberal groups begat conservative foils, and vice versa.³

Liberalism, at least as we understand it today, seemed ascendant in the 1950s. Louis Hartz argued in 1955 that America has a dominant, liberal tradition rooted in a consensus (often unconscious) about values ranging from individual property rights to a social contract based in equal access and participation.⁴ We are all liberals, Hartz argued, and our disagreements are little more than family quarrels. Hartz's sentiments echoed those of Lionel Trilling, who argued in *The Liberal Imagination* that America's tradition is not conservative, but liberal. Liberals were dominant, if not arrogant: Trilling claimed in 1953, "There are currently no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation today."⁵

The perceived dominance and excesses of liberalism created a reactionary movement in the form of a revamped conservative ideology. In 1955, William F. Buckley launched his effort, a promise to "stand athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who do."⁶ Buckley resurrected and reshaped a conservatism that had been in the political minority since the New Deal. This conservatism was intensely anti-communist and a defense of localism in the face of intrusive government. Buckley took up arms in response to the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, creating a movement born in and sustained by reaction. But Buckley's was a secular conservatism. Other elements were yet to be added to the conservative formula.

The big distortion among some Christian conservatives was that ecumenism was the province of liberals. Conservative evangelicals in 1942–43

responded to the growth of liberal ecumenism and special interest groups in kind, founding the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) to rival the liberal activism of the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), later the National Council of Churches.⁷ The “revival of revivalism” in the 1950s, sparked by evangelist Billy Graham, gave Christian conservatives a new identity and confidence characterized by militant anti-communism and anti-modernism.⁸ This identity defied denominational boundaries. Intra-denominational journals, like *Christianity Today*, worked to draw conservative Christians together in opposition to a liberalism seemingly entrenched among denominational bureaucrats and seminary professors.⁹ Christian conservatives might not worship and pray together, but they now saw themselves as part of a movement, one created and defined more by what they stood against than by what they stood for.

Missouri’s Heyday

The years bracketing World War II had been glory days for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. A small church body founded over a century earlier by a few hundred Saxon Germans had grown up and was poised to take its place among America’s mainline Protestant churches. Between 1935 and 1960, membership in Missouri nearly tripled.¹⁰ This remarkable growth was the axis on which all revolved in the modern history of the LCMS. For with new blood came new ideas and new relations with the very culture Missouri had strived so long and hard to avoid, to be “in” but not “of.” No longer could it sidestep the ideological battle brewing in America. Missouri would embrace it and be consumed by it.

From World War II to 1969, as society moved to the left, the LCMS moved toward the ideological left, becoming more liberal during the “years of liberalism.”¹¹ Liberalism during those decades came to be defined less by those who wore the badge than by those who disparaged it. Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign helped circumscribe liberalism by defining his brand of conservatism as a populist and anti-intellectual “Dime Store New Deal.” Juxtaposed with Goldwater conservatism of limited government and nationalistic anti-communism was sixties liberalism, characterized by an

openness to change and an aggressive promotion of individual liberties and government-directed equal opportunity. Tolerance was the watchword of the liberal, tolerance for alternative worldviews and tolerance for challenges to long-standing norms.

The Missouri Synod, by 1964, had become more liberal.¹² It was more advocacy, more aggressive in the growth and use of its bureaucracy, and more tolerant of new social and theological ideas. Most Lutherans were happy with the direction of their country. In 1964, the Missouri laity voted overwhelmingly for Lyndon Johnson, but nearly half of LCMS clergy were more taken with Goldwater.¹³ The country and the synod had grown more liberal, and a significant minority of clergy were discontented.¹⁴

For Richard Koenig, onetime editor of *Lutheran Forum* and Missouri moderate, the roots of the schism were found in 1938 at the synod's triennial convention. It was there, in St. Louis, that delegates first bucked the church's isolationist legacy by voting on steps to bring about full altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC). Led in part by Walter A. Maier, a Charles Lindbergh supporter, leader in the America First movement, and rising star on radio's *Lutheran Hour*, delegates decided that minor divergences in interpretation should not be "regarded as a cause for division." It was, in effect, a directive to President John Behnken to bring the two churches together.¹⁵ Although the convention approved the measure, Behnken never implemented the order.

The 1938 move toward ecumenism gave birth to the granddaddy of modern Missouri conservatives, Paul Burgdorf. Burgdorf, a small-town preacher in Iowa, founded the *Confessional Lutheran*, a thin repository of conservative news and views that railed month after month against the "liberal" forces of "unionism" that threatened to strip the synod of its confessional identity. Burgdorf's paper was the first of its kind in Missouri, an extrasynodical venture to keep conservatives informed and active. Circulation, which was limited to subscriptions, remained small,¹⁶ but Burgdorf's paper helped create enough backlash to all but kill the ecumenical momentum by 1945.

Less than a month after the United States bombing of Nagasaki, a group of prominent moderate pastors and laymen dropped a bomb on Missouri

by publishing "A Statement," which criticized the church's traditional resistance to fellowship with other Christians and its exaggerated fear of "unionism."¹⁷ Bemoaning the "horrible theological climate" of "fault-finding [and] innuendo" created by Burgdorf's "unofficial, partisan, polemical periodical,"¹⁸ the "Forty-Four," as they soon became known, endeavored to halt the forces of authoritarian and parochial conservatism in Missouri. Condemning the "loveless attitude which is manifesting itself in Synod," the Forty-Four reasserted the 1938 convention's mandate to reach out in fellowship while deploring "the tendency to apply this non-Biblical term ["unionism"] to any and every contact between Christians of different denominations."¹⁹

Synod president John W. Behnken, a gentlemanly Texan with a plodding, southernized German baritone, would have none of it. Behnken, a "babe in Academe," was no admirer of the intellectual types, among them professors at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, who put their names to "A Statement" and caused him no end of grief.²⁰ In January 1947, Behnken convinced the Forty-Four to withdraw "A Statement" as a basis for discussion with vague promises that he as president would facilitate the dialogue with Missouri's pastors and congregations.²¹

Yet for all Behnken's success in suppressing the Forty-Four, something new had taken place in the LCMS. On both right and left, well-organized, if diminutive, extrasynodical special interest groups had arisen by 1945 to fight for Missouri's center. For all the "politics" that may have existed in the synod since its inception in 1847, this was new because it became a public battle. Burgdorf would become somewhat of a pariah in official circles, but he began to create a perception among vulnerable laymen and clergy that something was rotten in St. Louis. And he and the Forty-Four, through public challenges to synod leadership, set precedents that would be exploited to a greater degree by their progeny.

Mission and Money

The remarkable growth of the LCMS, by 1950, had generated an atmosphere of optimism and excitement in the church. The dry years of depression and war now yielded to a torrent of new construction and record expansion as

Missouri poised to capture new souls in America's burgeoning suburbs. New mission fields were established in the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Mission efforts were intensified in Asia and in the South Pacific.²²

America's postwar era was characterized by the rapid growth of bureaucracy in government and religious organizations. The expansion of government in the United States between 1940 and 1960 far outpaced population or even economic growth.²³ Yet growth of denominational bureaucracy in Missouri outstripped even the growth of secular government, bulging by over 550 percent between 1940 and 1960.²⁴ The mounting liberal consensus in America reached deep into the church, and new functions and agencies added new dimensions to Missouri polity. Each year brought requests from church activists for more funds for ministries to the deaf, to the mentally retarded, or for world poverty. In 1951, President John Behnken relocated from Oak Park, Illinois, into the synod's new headquarters in downtown St. Louis. From the "Lutheran Building," Behnken led a "Building for Christ" effort to raise funds for new ministries that netted some \$4.7 million dollars in 1955: the synod's budget increased by \$3.8 million between 1955 and 1956, to \$12.9 million.²⁵ Lutherans were happy with their church, and their offerings reflected it. In 1951, giving for synod's budget averaged \$3.62 per communicant; in 1961, it was \$10.93.²⁶ Like most, Behnken associated the growth of church budgets with the success of the church and of its missions.²⁷

The synod's new money and missions led to a flurry of proposals and steps to centralize organizational polity and authority. The challenge for pro-growth Lutherans was to build a powerful and efficient central structure based in St. Louis while preserving Missouri's tradition of congregational autonomy, a shaky and always-shifting equilibrium.²⁸ In 1953 at its Houston Convention, synod delegates approved a resolution augmenting the power of the bureaucracy, modifying its role as an advisory body by granting it official power to exercise authority.²⁹ Delegates also expanded the Church Extension Fund, "God's Bank" for the construction of new buildings.³⁰ A Department of Social Welfare was created in 1956, and a powerful "Commission to Survey the Organizational Structure and Administration of Synod" (Survey Commission) was established to review and revise organizational polity. The

Survey Commission's findings and proposals in 1959 led to the creation of new synodical boards, a centralized Council of Administrators, and a powerful executive secretary.³¹

Bureaucratic expansion translated into organizational professionalization in the LCMS. An atmosphere of "upward social mobility" existed in certain sectors of Missouri as in the country, where colleges and headquarters desperately needed professional staff.³² This was the perfect time for outsiders to join and influence the growing church, a time when the "Almighty Ph.D. was the passport to mobility."³³ In 1958, two young brothers named Jack and Robert Preus would exploit Missouri's great need. Both were professors from the tiny Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), but checking their passports at the door, they would take on new identities in the LCMS as professors at the synod's seminaries in Springfield and St. Louis.

But this growth and upward mobility meant a certain accommodation, even theological accommodation, with the secular world, particularly the secular academy. The synod's top theologians were now going outside the synod to complete their education. Bright young minds were pulled into the seminary from the ranks of prestigious but secular graduate schools: Yale, Harvard, and dozens of other secular institutions. Concordia professor Arthur Carl Piepkorn was making a name for himself and the institution in deliberations with the Roman Catholic Church. Concordia Seminary was blossoming, in the opinion of many, into a world-class institution. But not everyone was happy.

The Ecumenical Sixties

By the mid-1960s, the ecumenical movement in Protestant America was reaching its zenith. The explosive growth of denominational organizations and the concomitant boom in construction of home and foreign missions meant that increasingly church workers of all stripes from suburbia to Africa were crossing paths.³⁴ A stronger secularism brought people of faith closer together for mutual support and strengthened American "civil religion," identified by Martin Marty in 1959 as a new "relativist, pragmatist, common-creed religion-in-general."³⁵ Gravitational forces increased across the social

spectrum in America during World War II and remained strong during the early years of the Cold War.

These forces, with increasing levels of higher education and a rapid influx of new ethnicities during the church's period of expansion through 1960, combined to lessen denominational loyalty among Missouri Lutherans.³⁶ Increasingly, Lutherans were marrying outside traditional denominational boundaries. More and more church leaders, seminary and college professors, and even pastors were learning outside the traditional boundaries of the Missouri Synod's cradle-to-collar education system. While the impact of education and the liberalizing pressures of the civil rights movement did widen the gap between laity and clergy on social issues, a majority of Lutherans by 1969 did not see themselves as different from other Christians. Moreover, a significant minority of the laity favored a merger of all Lutheran groups in the United States into one organization.³⁷

As the LCMS became more modern, its theologians became more theologically modernist and politically liberal. Publicly, this took shape in a new openness of thought and action among professors at Concordia Seminary, who were growing more sympathetic to ecumenism and issues of social justice and action.³⁸ Privately, students took note of a more dramatic shift. German higher criticism, out of which confessional movements like the Missouri Synod were born in the nineteenth century, was making its way back into the church through its classrooms at Concordia Seminary. At issue in Missouri as in earlier modernist-fundamentalist battles, was the use of methods of historical criticism of the Bible. Increasingly, church scholars were using the tools of modern biblical scholarship, ending matters of biblical authority with question marks where there had been periods. Students and faculty openly challenged Franz Pieper's *Brief Statement*³⁹ and questioned "inerrancy."⁴⁰

Three essays symbolized the shifting winds at Concordia. In 1958, Martin Scharlemann, military chaplain and seminary professor, wrote an essay entitled "The Inerrancy of Scripture," which was intended to spark internal debate among faculty members by challenging static views of biblical interpretation. In his essay, Scharlemann, who had completed his postgraduate studies at Union Theological Seminary, proposed to "defend the paradox that the Book of God's Truth contains 'errors.'"⁴¹ In 1963, Norman Habel,

professor of biblical studies, argued that the “fall narrative” (the Genesis account of Adam and Eve) could be legitimately considered as a “symbolical religious history.”⁴² And in 1965, Arthur Carl Piepkorn challenged the synod’s growing infatuation with “inerrancy,” warning that belief in the Bible’s inerrancy could too easily become belief that the Missouri Synod is inerrant.⁴³ These were controversial proposals, but they were in keeping with similar discussions taking place in Missouri’s sister churches, the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and United Lutheran Church (ULC).

New ideas in Missouri manifested themselves in sympathy for ecumenicity and new efforts to reach across denominational lines. In 1953, LCMS pastor and civil rights activist Andrew Schulze founded the Lutheran Human Relations Association of America (LHRAA), a pan-Lutheran organization dedicated to integrating Lutheran churches.⁴⁴ In the years that followed, a growing chorus of liberal voices in Missouri called on the church to explore participation in budding ecumenical movements, from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to the World Council of Churches (WCC). By the time of President John Behnken’s retirement in 1962, plans were afoot to push for fellowship with the nation’s other dominant Lutheran bodies, the ULC and the ALC.

The civil rights movement accelerated these changes and empowered liberals inside and outside church doors. The Supreme Court’s *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954 opened floodgates for Missouri moderates, most visibly those on the Concordia-supervised editorial staff of the synod’s official organ, the *Lutheran Witness*.⁴⁵ The prospect of black students in the white public schools of Cleveland, Milwaukee, and St. Louis brought the civil rights movement home to Missouri. Andrew Schulze wasted no time in reminding his spiritual siblings of the historical missteps and responsibilities implicit in *Brown*. “The Church,” he wrote, “has trailed the conscience of the courts too long. Here is a chance to remedy the weakness of our witness.”⁴⁶ *Witness*, LCMS’s official newsletter, editors issued a “Plea for Patience,” an acknowledgment of the turbulence faced by many white Missourians confronting the prospect of racially integrated schools.⁴⁷

The *Brown* decision exemplified Missouri’s penchant for reconfiguring social and political beliefs into theological expression. Integration was now

the law of the land. Missouri liberals could now turn the tables on synod conservatives, using the church's historic doctrinal emphasis on unconditional obedience to government to further the cause of integration.⁴⁸ This gave some doctrine-minded conservatives fits and demonstrated how theology and politics were not so easily separated. At Concordia Seminary, Dr. Richard R. Caemmerer introduced "practical field-work experience" to the curriculum, a social-welfare emphasis that forced students out of the parochial confines of the Clayton campus for the first time.⁴⁹ Soon dozens of students were championing the "Caemmererian Gospel."⁵⁰ By the 1960s, many were heading to inner cities on an "urban plunge."⁵¹ Most of the synod's churches and schools still would not accept black members, but at its 1956 convention, the LCMS passed its first resolution in favor of integration. The decision left Andrew Schulze singing the church's praises for a decision on fellowship "which transcends all racial and ethnic barriers."⁵²

Loosed by the Supreme Court and their synod's own convention, Missouri moderates now looked back in regret to the inner cities the church was fleeing. The *Witness* published a series in 1956 called "The Church in a Changing Community," an assessment of the church's abandonment of urban centers and America's blacks. Author William Drews suggested that flight to the suburbs had altered the face of American Protestantism. He praised the small "minority" in the church who had "made heroic efforts to adapt their ministry to a changing environment and thus remained true to their divine charter and commission," condemning those who did not stay.⁵³ Drews had no kind words for Lutherans who restricted their interests to "our kind of people."⁵⁴

A Young Conservative Takes Shape

In the fall of 1952, as Dwight Eisenhower cruised into the White House and McCarthyism gripped the nation, a young upstart from the Bronx, New York, entered Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. Herman Otten, the son of German Lutheran immigrants, was excited about his first year at the seminary and quickly noted the "new spirit" on campus. He considered it a "healthy corrective for the dead orthodoxy and scholastic dogmatism" that he had

come to associate with the synod's past and that he regarded as dangerous to Missouri Lutheranism.⁵⁵ But Otten's early optimism and excitement did not last. "Before the ink was dry on his final exams," writes James Adams, "Otten was accusing professors of heresy."⁵⁶ Otten the student became Missouri's most vocal critic. But Otten, says his younger sister, Marie, was "the way he is long before he ever got to the seminary."⁵⁷ For Herman Otten was a product of both a moderating seminary faculty and a crusader mentality shaped by his perceptions of family and history.

Otten's grandfather, Herman, had been a pastor in the Lutheran Free Church of Germany, one of several conservative sects opposed to the state-supported Lutheran church, and had served as a chaplain in World War I. At gatherings of their extended family, the Ottens recounted with pride the tales of their German ancestors, of Grandfather Otten and his unique mixture of patriotism and orthodoxy, and of resilient Grandmother Oma Tibke, who, according to family legend, defiantly refused to say "Heil Hitler."⁵⁸ The Otten legacy of religious independence and patriotism was taken up by young Herman, who added to it his own perceptions of family ultraorthodoxy and self-righteousness.

His father, Herman Otten Sr., was a different story. From an early age, Herman Sr. was a "black sheep" in the Otten family. He married Louise Tibke, a Lutheran but of the wrong persuasion; she was from the state church in Germany. While his brother, Bill, spoke out against such vices as dancing and roller-skating, Herman Sr. believed that rules were "made to be broken."⁵⁹ He worked as a painter for his brother-in-law, Henry, a well-off property owner and manager. Once Herman Sr. shocked his brother-in-law by paying his young nephew and apprentice, Paul Behling, five dollars and a bottle of whiskey.⁶⁰ Herman Sr. was a complex man. He grew to hate Franklin Roosevelt and doubted the scale of the Nazi holocaust, but he was also interested in "social justice."⁶¹

Young Herman, already well versed in the family ideology, began early on to believe that his father was "slightly pink." The Otten family church, St. Matthew's Lutheran on the north end of Manhattan, regularly hosted vicars,⁶² seminarians who in their third year serve in churches to gain practical experience. St. Matthew's, where Herman Sr. served as congregational

president, was a revolving door for the best and the brightest of young, often liberal pastors-in-training, including future LCMS leaders Oswald Hoffmann, Ralph Klein, Walter Bouman, Art Simon, John Damm, and John Tietjen.⁶³ Herman Sr. enjoyed the company of these men, sharing with them, in his German accent, a love for people and an interest in social justice.⁶⁴ Bouman remembers him still as an “expansive, beer-drinking conversationalist and raconteur.”⁶⁵ One summer, he turned the family apartment over to Walter Bouman while the family was away in Europe.⁶⁶ Nearly every week one or more of these young men broke bread at the Otten dinner table. When Herman Jr. was away at seminary, they often took his place. And while he spent his summers upstate, sweating to earn money on a dairy farm, they sat in his cool home, drank his father’s beer, and talked of peace and justice.

Early on, Herman Jr. took his father’s conservatism and discarded the rest. At Concordia prep school in Bronxville, he developed a friendly but adversarial relationship with Professor Carl Weidmann. Herman spent many evenings at 2 Concordia Place arguing with his advisor about theology and politics. One night it might be Weidmann’s predilection for liturgy, the next, Otten’s contention that Roosevelt was responsible for World War II.⁶⁷ Before long, however, Weidmann began to receive confrontational letters, sent anonymously. He attributed them to Herman.⁶⁸ There is no question that Herman was capable of writing such letters—and worse. His sister, Marie, tells of a time when Herman’s younger brother, Walter—who, like Herman, was an athlete—got caught drinking beer at a postgame celebration. According to Marie, what Walter got from his father was nothing compared to the vitriol from his older brother.⁶⁹

Matriculation at Concordia Seminary in 1952 shaped Otten’s curiosity, his confidence, and, eventually, his confrontational temperament. This was an exciting time for the seminary. Most seminarians had come from the synod’s feeder schools,⁷⁰ where they were steeped in Missouri tradition and tutored with the same techniques. In St. Louis they encountered a massively different version of Lutheranism than they had known at the Concordia prep schools and colleges. Professors like F. E. Mayer and Jaroslav Pelikan pushed them into biblical texts and contexts and challenged

the long-standing assumption that Franz Pieper had accurately interpreted the Lutheran confessions in his *Brief Statement*.⁷¹ Some students became hard-core defenders of Pieper and of the traditional Missouri story. Others, feeling betrayed by LCMS, came to hate the old orthodoxy and stormed out of the synod. Still others, heavily influenced by a new breed of professors, began to believe that Bible texts had been taken out of context by the church. Among the supporters of the seminary's new direction was Walter Bouman. The upperclassman took young Otten under his wing, convinced that, with patience, he would catch up and join their ranks.⁷² But Bouman and his friends were sorely overconfident.⁷³

By 1953, Otten's curiosity upon coming to Concordia had changed to concern about the direction the seminary seemed to be heading. Having grown up hearing horror stories at family gatherings about the Forty-Four, an already cautious Otten chafed at faculty and student attacks on biblical "inerrancy," which Franz Pieper had introduced to the Missouri canon two decades before. As early as 1953, students were arguing with Otten over the traditional doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures, even questioning the Genesis creation account. Otten fumed.

In the spring of 1953, Herman returned home determined to tell all. The whole family was excited about his return as he was scheduled to give his first sermon at St. Matthew's. Herman chose as his text John 8:31-32: "Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'" At the first of three services, Herman climbed into the pulpit and immediately tore into the Concordia Seminary faculty. Alfred Trinklein, pastor at St. Matthew's, was in shock. After the service, he dragged Herman into his office and shouted, "Herman, you are going to revise that sermon, or you are not going to preach the next two services." Unwilling to risk humiliation in front of his father, who was attending a later service with his family, Otten yielded to Trinklein's threat.⁷⁴

Otten returned to the seminary and, in the fall of 1954, received backup for his position. One ally was Kurt Marquart, a scholarly young refugee from Estonia classically schooled in Austria whom Herman met through a college friend named David Scaer. While Marquart was a year younger than

Otten, he was light-years ahead of him in intellectual gifts.⁷⁵ A connection going back to his school years in Bronxville was more important, however, for Otten found a patron in Arnie Petterson, a wealthy conservative living just down the hill from Concordia in Tuckahoe.

Petterson fancied himself a player in church politics and rewarded the young men handsomely for the information they funneled him from St. Louis. One summer he purchased a bulky and expensive mimeograph and asked them to take it to St. Louis to copy evidence of seminary liberalism. Petterson would take the insider information provided him and fire off letters to the seminary's academic dean, Arthur Repp.⁷⁶ Herman's first public appearance as conservative crusader happened entirely by accident. In 1954, Petterson urged Otten to speak with church administrator Walter "Pat" Wolbrecht about liberalism in the church. Otten misunderstood Petterson's request and assumed that Wolbrecht was Petterson's friend and a conservative. Thirty seconds into his private tirade to Wolbrecht, Otten realized his mistake. The brief conversation exposed Herman's radical conservatism to Wolbrecht and others and set him on a path he would follow for the rest of his life.

That same year, Otten raced through a copy of E. Merrill Root's *Collectivism on the Campus*, a book widely circulated among conservatives. Root claimed that "professors have been increasingly dominated for two decades by militant collectivists, and even betrayed by a small but potent group of outright subversives." He praised the "intensely loyal small minority" of conservatives who were doing their best to stand up to "collectivist uniformity" in academia. Root's work was an elaborate conspiracy theory, conveying a tale of brave, conservative students and professors stamped out by "brutal, violent, and well organized" means.⁷⁷

Otten read with rapt attention Root's description of Robert Andelson, a seminarian at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Andelson had founded a conservative group called "Students for America," written numerous articles, and even testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities about "leftist" activities among the faculty at Chicago. He was attacked in print and expelled from campus clubs. Finally, despite having completed all required coursework, Andelson was denied advancement to

candidacy for his master's degree. The faculty committee felt that Andelson "had evidenced the kind of mind and outlook it could not condone or put its stamp of approval on" and proposed to award him a degree in exchange for an apology.⁷⁸ Andelson refused. He left the school, his conservative conscience intact, and worked elsewhere for the conservative "movement."⁷⁹

Herman was sold: principles first, above all other considerations. After all, this was the way of Luther, who put his convictions above his very life when he stood before Charles V in Worms and announced, "Here I stand, I can do no other." Yet Otten managed to secularize the conflict, imagining Luther as capitalist, Charles as Stalin—and himself as Joe McCarthy.

Taking Aim at the Faculty

In the winter of 1954, Otten and Marquart turned up the heat at Concordia. They began with written protests. The previous fall, Marquart had complained to Repp about liberalism in the student-run paper, *The Seminarian*.⁸⁰ Next, Otten and Marquart turned on William Schoedel, a fourth-year student. Marquart and Otten pulled Schoedel into Repp's office and confronted him: "Do you accept Adam and Eve as real historical persons? Do you accept the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture as it has been taught traditionally in the Christian Church?"⁸¹ Schoedel fudged. Knowing that he would be certified soon and on his way to teach at Concordia prep school and college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he had no interest in rocking the boat.⁸² Otten and Marquart complained again to Repp, who assured them that district authorities would handle the situation from that point forward. No one ever did.

Otten and Marquart, their confidence buoyed, went after bigger game. Otten ran into trouble first for criticizing faculty outside the classroom. Classroom teaching is private, they countered, so Otten did not have the right to reveal what was being taught.⁸³ Then in March 1957, Otten, Marquart, and others in their camp debated the inerrancy of Scripture, its verbal inspiration, and even theistic evolution with a contingent of students who didn't share their views.⁸⁴ Otten took notes.⁸⁵ Tempers flew. Letters followed. Paul Heyne wrote Otten in one, saying, "I accept the reliability of Scripture, but

I refuse to accept the inerrancy of Scripture, which is a philosophical deduction posing as a theological one.”⁸⁶ Soon, Otten, Marquart, Scaer, and five other allies filed formal charges of false doctrine against Heyne and eight others.⁸⁷

Academic dean Arthur Repp was distraught at receiving the accusation. “For heaven’s sake,” he chided Otten, “why did you put it in writing? That is the worst thing. . . . Now that you’ve put it in writing I have to do something.” The next morning, remembers Otten, Repp brought the accusation to the student body in chapel. Students sat on the edges of their seats in the packed chapel and listened to Repp speak. “A terrible thing has happened at our seminary,” he announced. “Eight men have charged eight others with false doctrine. And now we have to do something about this.”⁸⁸

Seminary president Alfred Fuerbringer took steps to remedy the increasingly untenable situation on campus. He appointed eight faculty members to handle the situation and invited some of the accusers and accused separately to his home. Then Otten and his group were brought before the faculty. Martin Scharlemann, dean of the Graduate School and a military chaplain, opened the meeting by pounding his fists on the table. “Otten,” he screamed, “what you need is love!” The faculty committee pressured the young fire-eaters to withdraw their statement, threatening to send them in for psychological evaluations. Otten’s friend David Scaer appeared shaken. Another succumbed to the pressure and collapsed in tears. But all held fast. None would retract. Scharlemann quickly dismissed the charges, and the controversy ended—for the moment.⁸⁹

Changing times and new blood upset more than just Otten’s cohort of seminarians. Passing quickly was an old guard at the Concordia Seminary, including John Baur, who had raised the funds to construct the seminary; Lewis Spitz, a historian “dragooned” into teaching systematic theology, who boasted that he had bested liberals at the University of Chicago, his alma mater;⁹⁰ and Alfred “Rip” Rehwinkel, who, with Walter A. Maier, had been a founding member of Charles Lindbergh’s isolationist America First movement.⁹¹ This aging breed had learned from the likes of Franz Pieper and had struggled to plug the leaking dam protecting Missouri from the encroaching mainstream. Rehwinkel had shared the stage with Lindbergh, and, like

Lindbergh suffered from an anti-Semitic bent. He had been a critic of Nazi persecution of the Jews but believed as well that “the Jews brought it upon themselves.” Rip protested that American Jews had enriched themselves “at the expense of the very lifeblood of the nation.”⁹² He despised Roosevelt, whom he believed a hypocrite for speaking against the bombing of civilians in 1939, only later to employ the tactic himself. He also thought that Roosevelt had sold out the nation to the communists at Yalta. Walter Bouman remembers that Rehwinkel was a popular teacher at Concordia, but as an almost “comic figure.”⁹³ In his last years, Rehwinkel defied publicly what he believed to be a growing liberal consensus at Concordia. In his retirement speech, he scolded the assembled faculty:

You younger fellows think you are the first ones to ever confront this new theology. Well, you are not. We fought these same battles long ago. And you older men, how can you sit idly by and say nothing when you of all people should know where this will lead us? You are misleading and giving offense and destroying the church for which generations before you have given their lives.⁹⁴

Finally, there was J. T. Mueller, who was described by one student as an eccentric, neurotic, even psychotic teacher.⁹⁵ Mueller was past retirement age, his contract now reviewed on an annual basis by Martin Scharlemann. “If I complain,” worried Mueller, “he’ll [seminary president Fuerbringer] say, ‘Dr. Mueller, your eyesight is getting bad. It’s best for your health if you don’t teach anymore.’” Politically weak among an increasingly youthful and modernist faculty, the septuagenarian was afraid to speak up for fear of being forcibly retired. In Herman Otten he believed he had found his protégé—or patsy. Early that fall, Mueller asked Otten to his office to discuss the growing controversy at Concordia. He then directed Otten to travel to Milwaukee for a visit with Mueller’s friend, synod vice president Henry Grueber.⁹⁶ Otten jumped at the opportunity.

A few weeks later, Otten sat in an office with Grueber and detailed what he believed to be liberalism run amok at Concordia. He provided Grueber with a written summary of problems at the seminary. Then Grueber pulled out the *Lutheran Annual*, a directory of all LCMS pastors, and ran down the list of professors’ names, asking Otten, one after another, “Where’s this guy?”

Liberal or conservative?” Beside each name he wrote “L” or “C,” indicating where Otten believed each professor to be.⁹⁷ The meeting concluded and Otten returned to the seminary knowing full well the bee’s nest he had just stirred.

A strange confluence of events now brought Otten to the attention of synod president John Behnken. First and foremost was Otten’s recent discussion with Grueber, who passed along Otten’s charges to Behnken. Next, Martin Taddy, Otten’s roommate, and Otten’s cousin Paul Behling conspired to play a practical joke on Herman. Taddy worked on the night janitorial staff at the Lutheran Building, home to President Behnken’s office. One night he made off with some of the president’s stationery. He and Behling used the stationery to forge a letter from Behnken to Otten that said, “I hear that you are familiar with problems with the professors at the seminary. I would like to hear about this.” Unaware that it was a fake, Otten was excited to receive the letter. Bumping a nickel from his cousin Behling, Otten called Behnken’s secretary and asked to speak with the president.⁹⁸

Weeks later President Behnken did visit Concordia to confront the issue after a public dialogue on Missouri membership in the LWF. Speaking in favor of membership was a bright young graduate of the seminary named Martin Marty. Behnken, who opposed membership, was no match for the quick-minded Marty, and doubtless felt embarrassed by the visible tide of opinion among seminarians that Marty had won the debate.⁹⁹ After the debate, David Scaer, seminary professor Richard Caemmerer’s nephew and seminary altar boy, approached Behnken and told him, “Some of us are concerned about what is going on here.” Still stinging, Behnken proved a receptive audience. The group soon met with Behnken, who asked the students if they would be willing to share their concerns with the entire faculty. Only Otten agreed.¹⁰⁰

In January 1958, Otten, Repp, Harms, and Behnken gathered before the seminary’s Board of Control. Otten spent an hour detailing what he perceived to be the rapid advance of liberalism at Concordia, specifically criticizing professor Horace Hummel.¹⁰¹ When he finished, Behnken asked Repp, “And what does the faculty have to say for itself?” Repp tore into Otten. “Who gave you the right to come down here like a bulldog?” he

asked. Behnken jumped in, saying, “Anyone has the right to come knock on my door and share his concern.” Repp then asked why Otten kept referring to himself as “we” in his written statements. In front of President Behnken, Otten modified his statement, changing “we” to “I,” and signed his name. Then he looked around only to discover that his allies—friends and mentors alike—were nowhere to be found.¹⁰² Otten was where he would remain—in front and often alone.

The Seminary Strikes Back

Herman Otten ushered in an ugly time at Concordia Seminary. Students took sides. They spied on each other and met in secret. Copies of personal faculty memoranda and letters turned up in public. Comments professors made in classrooms made their way in print to Behnken. Scharlemann’s essay on inerrancy, written solely to foment debate among faculty members, somehow found its way into Otten’s hands. Scharlemann confronted Otten and accused him of secretly taping conversations from outside his office window.¹⁰³ Otten claimed to have received the essay from a friend who “found it in Scharlemann’s trash can.”¹⁰⁴ But Paul Behling shed light on the dynamic of Otten’s Concordia cabal, which allegedly included Kurt Marquart. Behling, then a disciple of his older cousin, lent his typewriter to Otten’s group of friends, who, with the help of sympathetic students on the janitorial committee, raided faculty offices at night and typed copies of letters and essays.¹⁰⁵ Marquart disputed the story as a complete “fabrication.”¹⁰⁶ How personal correspondence fell into the hands of Otten and his friends remains in dispute. That it happened is not.

Arthur Repp brought Otten’s accusations to the faculty for review. Meetings were arranged between Otten and professors Piepkorn, Hummel, and Waetjen. In March, before the faculty took action, Otten filed formal charges with Repp against Herman Waetjen and included documents challenging Piepkorn.¹⁰⁷ When the seminary’s Board of Control met soon after and decided to dismiss Hummel by refusing to renew his contract, the faculty turned its guns on Otten. On May 15, he was called before the faculty’s Disciplinary Committee. The committee told Otten that he had

“violated the law of love” by making accusations based only on hearsay and by contravening Christ’s directive in Matthew 18 to meet individually with a brother who has wronged you before taking your charges public.¹⁰⁸ Otten’s advisor, Albert Merkens, helped him craft an evasive apology to the faculty, which expressed regret only for circumventing proper procedures.¹⁰⁹ At a subsequent meeting, Repp told Otten, “We assume that this means that you admit that your reports were inaccurate.” But Otten refused to retract his charges. Following his oral exams, Otten was awarded a master’s degree (S.T.M.). Then Scharlemann handed down his final ruling. Otten was deemed ineligible to continue studies toward a Th.D. and would not be certified by the seminary as a pastor.¹¹⁰ The faculty could not put its stamp on someone who could not “argue theology with an open mind.”¹¹¹

A series of appeals ensued, involving countless people and taking years to wend their way through the system. In late May, Otten asked the faculty in writing to reconsider the Disciplinary Committee’s decision. He proceeded to attack Scharlemann and to dispute grades given him by “liberal” professors.¹¹² Scharlemann responded with a letter entitled “This I Expect,” in which he demanded an apology. “The ability to distinguish between truth and fiction is a necessary qualification for anyone who wants to serve in the ministry,” Scharlemann stated. Scharlemann doubted Otten could.¹¹³ L. C. Wuerffel, dean of students, urged Otten to “repent and seek amends.”¹¹⁴ Otten refused.

Otten was rapidly developing a messiah complex, drawing parallels between himself and Andelson, McCarthy, and even Luther. When accused seminarians charged Otten with “McCarthyism” and leading a “witch hunt,” Otten wore the badge with honor and used the moment to defend McCarthyism, not himself.¹¹⁵ In his appeal materials, Otten compared himself to McCarthy, saying, “When you detect and start to expose a teacher with a Communist mind, you will be damned and smeared. You will be accused of endangering academic freedom.” He included Root’s account of the Andelson ordeal at Chicago as proof of academia’s “collectivism.” And he quoted William F. Buckley in *National Review* to prove the “Root thesis,” that he was not alone in suffering persecution at the hands of communist sympathizers.¹¹⁶

Otten moved on while pressing his charges and his appeal. He secured an income when he was embraced by Trinity Lutheran in New Haven, Missouri, a congregation he had served as a student. He exchanged letters with Behnken, who, perhaps unwittingly, gave Otten encouragement to continue his crusade.¹¹⁷ Otten traveled to San Francisco in 1959 to tell the synod's Committee on Doctrine about liberalism at the seminary. In early 1960, Behnken, too, abandoned Otten to his own devices. Telling Otten that he "would have been a witness" at the seminary and citing "administrative channels," Behnken, who had first brought Otten's charges so vigilantly to the Concordia faculty, now refused to serve as a witness in Otten's appeal.¹¹⁸ When the Concordia Board of Control dismissed Otten's appeal, he followed channels to the synod's Board of Appeals.

Otten's stubborn congregationalism hurt his appeals case. In January 1961, Trinity Lutheran Church in New Haven called him to be its pastor. In doing so, Trinity was making a populist statement: It is the congregation that ordains, not elites in the synod or seminary. Within weeks, officials of the Missouri District, with the backing of the seminary, implored the congregation to rescind its call. Trinity refused. In February, Otten was ordained. The district moved to expel Trinity.¹¹⁹ And John Behnken washed his hands of Otten. Responding to a final request from Otten for assistance, Behnken wrote, "There would not be any purpose in meeting you."¹²⁰

As his case faded en route to appeal, so now did his support. Few backed Otten publicly. Kurt Marquart, with Dr. S. W. Becker and Rev. H. W. Nielwald, represented Herman before the Board.¹²¹ Rehwinkel, too, testified for Otten.¹²² J. T. Mueller hid at a nearby motel, hoping to provide moral support for Otten without associating with him publicly. Before the Board, Otten again recounted his conspiracy case. He refused to concede that "the repetition of disturbing quotes at second hand is always and under all circumstances (per se) a sin against love," claiming that the "case against me rests on the assumption that seminary instruction is not public doctrine." He again defended McCarthy and fancied himself a J. Gresham Machen, the "champion of Presbyterian confessionalism." Otten reported to the Board that the faculty had accused him of having a "messianic complex" and threatened him with a psychiatric evaluation. Building his conspiracy case, he charged:

THE ENTIRE CASE AGAINST ME IS AN EFFORT TO PREVENT OR DELAY A THOROUGH INVESTIGATION OF THE ONLY REAL ISSUE, WHICH IS THE COMPLEX OF THEOLOGICAL, DOCTRINAL PROBLEMS AT THE ST. LOUIS SEMINARY.¹²³

The Board, temporarily short one member, ruled 5-5. Both sides called it a victory. No one would explain what the ruling meant. So the seminary's refusal to certify Otten stood.

Big Government in Missouri

The 1956 LCMS convention in St. Paul, Minnesota, marked a turning point in the development of LCMS polity. The surge of new missions and influx of new money in the postwar years had put a serious strain on Missouri's nineteenth-century bureaucracy. The Missouri Synod needed an overhaul. So delegates voted to form a commission to study a restructuring of the synod's administration. In the years that followed, the LCMS made "considerable alterations" to its constitution, ringing in a new era of efficiency and centralization for the rapidly mainstreaming church.¹²⁴ In Missouri, as in the secular political spectrum, moderates saw centralization as a sign of progress. But conservatives saw red flags. To them, centralization put money in the hands of wasteful and liberal bureaucrats and threatened to destroy the church's historic congregationalism. So it was that synodical centralization begat a "new era of party political action," which emerged to "counter the undesired aspects of centralization."¹²⁵

In early 1956, a Lutheran businessman from Painesville, Ohio, named Fred Rutz began sending letters to John Behnken, asking for permission to examine the church's financial records. He was convinced that Missouri, flush with funds, was wasting money. Rutz believed that he could help the synod run more efficiently.¹²⁶ Moreover, he believed that the church had no business keeping closed books. By the time of the convention, Rutz had stirred up enough concern on the right to earn an appointment to the Synodical Survey Commission, which was created to restructure the church and adopt the "best of modern administrative principles and practices" for the synod's administration.¹²⁷

Rutz was joined by an aging Missouri celebrity named John Baur. Baur had been a contemporary of Franz Pieper and was a master fundraiser who claimed credit for building much of Concordia Seminary in 1926.¹²⁸ He served briefly as president of Valparaiso University (a pan-Lutheran school supported by the LCMS) and fought alongside Roman Catholics in the 1920s to protect parochial schools from an encroaching public system. Where Rutz feared bureaucratic waste, Baur dreaded bureaucratic encroachment on Missouri congregationalism. Concerned by a move to replace parishes with electoral circuits in electing convention delegates, Baur, too, secured a seat on the Survey Commission.¹²⁹

Over the next three years, Rutz and Baur proceeded to give commission chairman Arnold Grumm fits. By early 1959, most of the commission was prepared to recommend sweeping changes in synod structure, including the creation of an executive director position. But Baur argued that the synod's bureaucracy was already too large and that any alterations would result in the creation of a "vertical" rather than "horizontal," or decentralized, synod polity.¹³⁰ The synod was not, as the commission majority argued, "devoid of organization," but functioned as it should, with autonomous congregations.¹³¹ Moreover, he warned, the commission's recommendations would lead to the creation of a "super-executive" who might someday trump congregational and district authority.¹³²

By April, it had become obvious to Grumm that Baur and Rutz would not sign on to the "majority report" of the commission. So he stopped inviting them to meetings. Baur complained to Grumm, then to Behnken.¹³³ Grumm dealt diplomatically with Baur at first, finally snapping in May with a terse exchange that freed him from an escalating cycle of letter-writing. Baur, said Grumm, was "a very difficult man to deal with," a paranoid person who saw "something ulterior in everything that is written."¹³⁴

Even as a minority of two, Baur and Rutz could not come to consensus. In June, they each submitted a separate minority report to the convention. Where Baur warned of centralization at the expense of congregational polity, Rutz found synodical spending spiraling out of control. Rutz noted that between 1947 and 1956, the synodical administration had grown six times as fast as synodical membership.¹³⁵ Worse yet, funding of synod missions had

fallen during that period.¹³⁶ Rutz criticized the church's new fondness for deficit spending and even condemned the Synodical Survey Commission as "non-productive and costly."¹³⁷ He recommended that the synod scrap the commission altogether and start from scratch with members who weren't on the synod's payroll. Pastors and administrators, he believed, were not to be trusted.

Otten Builds a Movement

From its nineteenth-century origins, the Synodical Conference had bound Missouri to the smaller churches on its right: the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the tiny Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). World War II tested the fraternity as the LCMS, ignoring the screams of its younger brothers, participated in the military chaplaincy. The bonds held until the mid-1950s, when Missouri's increasingly ecumenical vision led to protests and eventual desertion by WELS and ELS. In 1955, Jack and Robert Preus, then leaders in the ELS, talked their church into suspending fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Wisconsin soon followed suit. Behnken reacted "with shock and anger" to resolutions by ELS and WELS condemning Missouri liberalism, stating, "We do not admit the charges. On the contrary, we emphatically deny them."¹³⁸ For all his protestations, Missouri's brothers were right in one respect: the church was modernizing and leaving them in its wake. By 1963, the Synodical Conference was all but dead.

In response, Missouri conservatives began to organize. In late 1961, Behnken told a group of conservatives in Thiensville, Wisconsin, that he was growing worried about the situation in the synod. Maybe WELS was right, he speculated. Perhaps Missouri really had violated the principles of the Synodical Conference.¹³⁹ In May of the following year, hundreds of conservatives gathered in Milwaukee at the Hotel Schroeder to attend the first "State of the Church" (SOC) conference. At issue for SOC participants was the rising dominance of destructive "isms" in Missouri: Communism, ecumenism, and modernism. The SOC was a gathering place for Missouri's pious, discontent "dissidents and malcontents."¹⁴⁰ Nude statues in the conference room were draped to safeguard virgin Missouri eyes.¹⁴¹ Herman

Otten, fresh from his battle with the St. Louis seminary faculty and energized for battle, organized the conference while his younger sister, Marie, helped at the reception desk.¹⁴² Behnken sent a “personal envoy,” Dr. L. B. Meyer, to attend and produce an “evaluation.”¹⁴³ The *Confessional Lutheran’s* editor, Paul Burgdorf, and his son, Larry, were in attendance, as were Otten mentors William Beck and Louis Brighton. And a young Jack Preus, fresh from the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), attended the conference but refused to register. “We don’t want people to know I was here,” he said, hiding his nametag inside his jacket.¹⁴⁴ In the months leading up to the synod’s triennial convention, the conference produced a formal organization and placed Rev. Carl Hoffmeyer at the helm. Hoffmeyer and Otten worked over the next year to churn out publications attacking liberalism in the LCMS.¹⁴⁵

Yet Otten was the engine driving the SOC. Already in 1962, his personal and professional lives were beginning to merge, threatening to destroy relationships in both spheres. Following his wedding in August 1962, he took his new bride on a whirlwind tour of the country, a “honeymoon” in name only. Most nights were spent lecturing small groups at local churches, warning them of the inroads liberals had made in Missouri. At his sister, Marie’s, wedding reception (attended by her father-in-law, Adolph Meyer, editor of the *American Lutheran* and a frequent target of conservative attacks), Otten, never one for discretion, rose and read aloud greetings to the new couple from the officers of the SOC, leaving guests and a groom flush with anger and his sister humiliated.¹⁴⁶

His backbreaking schedule and staunchness made Otten a minor celebrity in conservative circles. Throughout 1962, Otten maintained his speaking schedule and continued to produce materials for the SOC while tending to his small congregation in New Haven. His publications were aimed squarely at the synodical administration and the seminary. His three-part series “What Is Troubling the Lutherans?” charged that a credibility gap existed between synod and congregations and that the church was not communicating honestly through its publications.¹⁴⁷

The hodgepodge group was geared up for the 1962 convention in Cleveland. Otten personally wrote nearly fifty memorials (statements to be voted

on by the convention) and had them signed and submitted by supporters. The SOC purchased a booth at the convention, for which it was charged ten times the going rate by Wolbrecht before its contract was rescinded altogether.¹⁴⁸ Before their expulsion from the convention, the SOC left little doubt that the growing civil rights movement and its emphasis on social activism were, in part, the spark that ignited this band of conservatives. Stretching across the back of the booth was a banner that advertised, “Saving Gospel Not Social Gospel.”¹⁴⁹

Still, allies in Cleveland struck a vindictive blow for Otten and his form of conservatism. It came against Martin Scharlemann, the professor who had denied Otten certification and so vehemently demanded of him an apology. Scharlemann’s 1958 essay “The Inerrancy of Scripture,” which Otten had somehow acquired and disseminated, had worked its way up the Missouri hierarchy to Behnken, who crafted a compromise. Scharlemann, humbled and humiliated, stood before the assembled convention, withdrew his essay, and apologized for the conflict it had caused.¹⁵⁰ Otten raced to the microphone and asked, “Does that mean that he recognizes that the essays contain false doctrine, and that he’s retracting the false doctrine in the essay?” Scharlemann had already left the podium.¹⁵¹ But the damage was done to both Scharlemann’s and the seminary’s public reputations in the LCMS.

Otten, already cross, was also driven to rage in Cleveland. With his case with the Board of Appeals on ice and Scharlemann gone, Otten refused to cede the microphone. George Loose, chair of the seminary’s Board of Control, objected with a point of order, and Behnken, still chairing the convention, ruled against Otten. Loose walked off the floor and visited the men’s room. In the hallway, he was confronted with a young, red-faced Herman Otten, who grabbed Loose by the lapels of his jacket and screamed, “You killed me! You killed me!” Loose responded, “Take your hands off me,” then added, “I didn’t kill you. You killed yourself.”¹⁵²

Tabloid Theology

Otten continued to hammer away at “liberalism” while making the SOC his own. Although he wrote several articles for Burgdorf’s *Confessional*

Lutheran, Otten believed its circulation was too small and its focus too narrow. “I just didn’t think that it was getting out to the people,” he later commented.¹⁵³ Burgdorf, his son remembers, was “not the easiest man to work with.”¹⁵⁴ The SOC entertained several bids on a newspaper of its own, but could not agree on the format or audience.¹⁵⁵ So Otten talked Hoffmeyer into funding a six-month venture edited by Otten entitled *Lutheran News* (henceforth referenced as *Christian News*), published first in December 1962. He charged a one-dollar subscription fee for six months and began with a small distribution to SOC members. Membership soon grew as word spread and like-minded conservatives fed Otten their mailing lists.¹⁵⁶ Week after week, Otten published photocopied conference essays, journal articles, and the text of lectures given by seminary professors.¹⁵⁷

The key to the success of *Christian News* was that it tackled much more than just theology. Burgdorf’s paper had adequately covered theological change in the church. *Christian News* gave Lutherans much more. Before long, Otten’s newsletter developed into a full-fledged church tabloid, complete with outrageous headlines designed to attract the eye. The pages of *Christian News* were an editor’s nightmare, containing unsigned editorials published without comment, broad generalizations, and text taken out of context. Otten would print the most “outlandish stuff” that liberals would send him, usually without his own comment. This was something that Burgdorf would not do.¹⁵⁸ Burgdorf gave readers theology, and Buckley’s *National Review* provided the politics. Otten combined the two. The motto for *Christian News* became “We Preach a Crucified Christ,” but in practice Otten preached also a militant anti-communism and social conservatism that smacked of John Birch Society extremism. Week after week, Otten blasted civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and activist Christians, regardless of denomination. King was painted as a communist and those who admired him as unwitting dupes. As he had before the Concordia disciplinary committee, Otten relentlessly referred to himself as “we” in crafting a farcical identity as journalist crusader and impartial reporter.

Yet there could be no mistake that Otten’s brand of conservatism identified heavily with the secular sons of McCarthy. For much of 1964, *Christian News* had written love letters to the Republican Party. For weeks Otten had

published articles sympathetic to Goldwater, making it clear just whom he supported.¹⁵⁹ But he made it a point to profess his impartiality after the 1964 presidential election:

Which candidate does CHRISTIAN NEWS endorse for president of the United States? None of them. We have repeatedly stated that this is a Christian newspaper and we intend to keep it that way. We do not publish with the intention of influencing the elections. We have our preferences, but this is a private matter which is not for publication. As an editorial in the October 19, 1964 LUTHERAN NEWS at the time of the Johnson-Goldwater election stated: "Even though we consider it important that one certain candidate be elected, it is more important that churches and religious organizations should stay out of politics."¹⁶⁰

Other pieces essential to the growing backlash fell into place by the end of 1962. For decades, the grand old man John Behnken had stood atop Missouri. Regardless of controversies or changes at the seminary, conservatives could find solace in that fact. Now Behnken was retiring, but not without firing a parting shot at liberals (and energizing conservatives). Shortly after his retirement, Behnken insisted that in his investigation of the St. Louis seminary, he had been misled by the faculty.¹⁶¹ Some conservatives were also troubled by the perceived ideological leanings of the synod's new executive director, Walter "Pat" Wolbrecht.¹⁶² Behnken's successor, Oliver Harms, was less well known. So with one exception, changes in the synodical administration in 1962 seemed to conservatives a total loss.

The Preus Way

That exception was J. A. O. "Jack" Preus. Preus, son of a Minnesota governor and a recruit from the ELS, had demonstrated his political skill by quickly working his way into the inner circle of Missouri's inbred hierarchy. His political instincts and malleability were exposed in an early skirmish over Scharlemann's essay on inerrancy. Behnken had convened a meeting in southern Illinois of "Ten and Ten," an ideologically balanced collection of Missouri elites, to find a middle ground on budget disputes and the issue of inerrancy. Scharlemann read his controversial paper and Preus countered

with a defense of inerrancy. Someone then suggested to the group that the synod should not make doctrine of concepts not clearly rooted in Scripture. A shocked John Behnken turned to theologian Martin Franzmann and said, “Cite the Scripture passages for inerrancy.” “There are none,” replied Franzmann. Unsure after the brief theological discussion that followed “whether it was still 10 to 10 or 18 to 2” (himself and Behnken being the two), Preus retreated. When Behnken called on him for help, Preus cowered, “I didn’t say I believed in what I read; my job was to give you Missouri’s official position.”¹⁶³

By late 1962, months into his new role as president of the synod’s smaller seminary in Springfield, Illinois, Preus’s friends at the SOC increasingly pressured him to take a more active leadership role. Otten, in what became a *modus operandi*, sent Springfield professor Curtis Huber, an Otten “liberal,” a simple questionnaire about his beliefs. Huber replied, “Drop dead.”¹⁶⁴ So before he could get comfortable behind his new desk, Preus was fielding letters from Carl Hoffmeyer, who demanded that Preus fire “liberal” professors like Richard Jungkuntz and Huber. Preus responded to Hoffmeyer that neither Jungkuntz nor Huber was teaching false doctrine. But when Otten threatened to publish Preus’s letter to Hoffmeyer in *Christian News*, Preus summoned Otten to Springfield. Preus first threatened to blackmail Otten by leaking Otten’s association with the anti-communist Church League of America. But when Otten called his bluff, Preus quickly backtracked.¹⁶⁵

Preus aimed for a middle ground: win over Jungkuntz while making it known that Huber’s contract would not be renewed. “Help me gut [St. Louis professor Norman] Habel,” Jungkuntz recalled Preus asking. When Jungkuntz refused, Preus employed a fail-safe method for eradicating rivals while keeping his hands clean, what Jim Adams called “doing it the Preus way.”¹⁶⁶ “I know how to get rid of these guys” from experience, he later told Otten. “You give them the last class to teach in the afternoon, the first one in the morning, you don’t invite them to faculty parties, you just make life miserable for them.”¹⁶⁷ Preus was the master of duplicity. Having forced Huber out of Springfield, Preus called him to dinner and “got weepy and sentimental as he lamented the loss of Huber to his team.”¹⁶⁸ When Jungkuntz’s contract was up for renewal before the seminary Board of Control,

Preus assured Jungkuntz that he would fight for him. But when the doors closed, he demanded Jungkuntz's head. The gifted politico then left the meeting, wrapped his arm around Jungkuntz, and assured him, "I did all I could."¹⁶⁹

The conservative circle was coming together, but not yet complete. Otten and Hoffmeyer, though not pleased with the methods, loved the results Preus rapidly produced in Springfield. Fred Rutz, now taking issue with the "monstrous" Missouri "hierarchy," showed Preus his appreciation by channeling funds from his Fred Rutz Foundation to the Springfield seminary.¹⁷⁰ By the time he was finished, Preus had forced six professors out of Springfield, men who left "the Preus way" because of the "heresy-hunting" atmosphere their new president had created among the faculty.¹⁷¹

By 1963, *Christian News* was providing conservatives with a public outlet for their frustrations and rapidly supplanting Burgdorf's paper in conservative circles. In March 1962, Richard John Neuhaus's brother, Frederick, complained to Behnken about the content of the *Lutheran Witness*, considering it work of "propagandists of the extreme left." Behnken could only reply that the *Lutheran Witness* was "very strong against communism."¹⁷² But that was as far as it went. So conservatives like Neuhaus published their complaints with abandon in *Christian News*, creating far more pressure from clergy and laity on the synodical administration. Rutz also published and distributed his own pamphlet, "A Businessman Looks at His Church," warning of "inherent dangers" in the church's "drifting toward intellectualism" and financial mismanagement.¹⁷³

This created headaches for the synod's leadership. In early 1963, Walter Bouman, who had interned under Otten's father, received a call to Concordia Teachers College in River Forest, Illinois. Otten quickly resurrected Bouman's seminary views to demonstrate rampant "liberalism" in the church.¹⁷⁴ Protest letters followed to St. Louis. Later, church leaders, Jack Preus included, traveled to Helsinki, Finland, to observe a meeting of the LWF. Otten secured funds for his wife, Grace, and Kurt Marquart to follow and protest Missouri involvement. Marquart's central concern was that the Lutheran churches of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were to be accepted into membership, churches he considered pawns of the communist

government. While Otten issued reports on the LWF in *Christian News*, his brother, Walter, embarked on a cross-country tour to stir the laity.¹⁷⁵

Moderates in Control

Editors at the *Lutheran Witness* promoted racial progress and ecumenism with increasing frequency after 1960. The first cover in the new decade was devoted to race, with a bold headline asking, “Is the Church Retarding INTEGRATION?” The cover photo was of white and black children standing mixed in chorus; a vision, they hoped, of things to come. News from the synod’s triennial convention the previous summer sounded taps to a church mired in social and theological isolation, auguring entry into the religious “mainline.” There, in black and white in the *Witness*, was a new party line from synod, acknowledging its “responsibility as a church to provide guidance for our members to work in the capacity of Christian citizens for the elimination of discrimination, wherever it may exist, in community, city, state, nation, and world” and officially instructing “the editors of the *Lutheran Witness* and other official publications and literature to give frequent expression to the stand which our church has taken on racial discrimination.”¹⁷⁶

At the 1962 Synodical Convention in Cleveland, Missouri, liberals flooded the church with proposals intended to develop a “synodwide mission approach to the American Negro.” Delegates allocated two hundred thousand dollars for the Alabama Lutheran Academy, LCMS’s only remaining black college. Several “inner-city responsibility” resolutions were fielded as well.¹⁷⁷ Finally, convention delegates passed a resolution stating that the church would officially take its share of “responsibility for injustices of the past,” and apologized that “we have not always addressed ourselves in our Christian witness against open discrimination and vicious brutality often practiced toward Christ’s brothers, our Negro members, and other minority groups.”¹⁷⁸

As Behnken’s retirement neared, the *Witness* became increasingly vocal, even confrontational, in its advocacy of civil rights, social justice, and ecumenism. Overconfident moderates challenged synod conservatives with an “in your face” style of journalism, often provoking a reaction from readers.

But moderates in the church steamrolled forward, determined to convert conservatives to their agenda or leave them behind. In response, the staff was inundated with complaints and cancellations. “Please Cancel,” read the lead article in the November 1961 issue. “If it revolts you to see whites and Negroes pictured together,” answered the staff, “you’ll just have to send in your cancellation notice as you say. . . . For there will be more pictures of whites and Negroes. It’s unavoidable. It’s life.” In an open challenge to conservatives in the church, editors pledged that “the *Witness* will not be bought off, intimidated, or cajoled.”¹⁷⁹

Yet views among Missouri moderates were less than uniform. In contrast to the vision of *Witness* editors, Rosa Young—matriarch of black missions for the LCMS in the American South, long a worker within the synod’s “black belt,” and staff member at segregated Alabama Lutheran Academy in Selma—offered surprising resistance to the liberal vision. “Alabama,” Young claimed, “is not ready for . . . integration.” Using the hackneyed claims of segregationists, Young pleaded that moderates could not “legislate integration,” even within the church.¹⁸⁰ In the next issue, the *Witness* was “jammed” by complaints from conservatives and moderates alike. Andrew Schulze, in a two-page letter to the editor, severely criticized what he saw as Young’s obstructive stance, while conservatives protested the activist agenda of the *Witness*.¹⁸¹ Moderates also were conflicted on the issue of interracial marriage. Marriage between people of the various races, asserted the *Witness*, is “not at all” unchristian. “On the other hand,” the editors hedged, many obstacles exist for the interracial couple—obstacles nearly impossible for even Christian couples to surmount. Moreover, “if interracial marriages are forbidden by legal statute, Christians will have to obey the law.” “It may be well to quote a sentence by Dr. Martin Luther King,” the editors later referenced, that “we ask only to be the white man’s brother, not his brother-in-law.”¹⁸² An ensuing article stated, “Miscegenation is almost as devastating socially as the nuclear bomb is physically,” using the assertion of Robert R. Moton, former president of Tuskegee Institute, that interracial marriage constituted “active disloyalty to the Negro Race.”¹⁸³ As with many whites of the time, interracial marriage was a step few Missouri Lutherans, even moderates, could yet stomach.

More intimidating yet to fearful conservatives was the strategy sponsored by young Martin Marty, purportedly urging church liberals to work “from within” their denominations “for constructive subversion, encirclement, and infiltration, until anti-ecumenical forces bow to the evangelical weight of reunion.”¹⁸⁴ Depicted later by *Christianity Today* as Marty’s theory of “ecclesiastical Machiavellianism,” the proposal smacked to some of a communist stratagem, prompting fears that Marty and other young liberals were “founding Jacobin clubs behind the scenes.”¹⁸⁵

In 1962, John Behnken was succeeded as president by Oliver Harms. Harms was openly ecumenical, an advocate of closer relations with the ALC and LCA. Harms’s ecumenical bent convinced many moderates that he was their ally. The kindly new president was anything but. Harms’s ideology defied the new boundaries shaping conservatives and liberals in the 1960s. In an age of increasing ideological polarization, he transcended boundaries by remaining both theologically orthodox and socially progressive. It was Harms who, in the summer of 1962 and against the advice of moderate friends, appointed Jack Preus as president of the synod’s seminary in Springfield.¹⁸⁶ Harms was worried even about the direction of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and told Preus privately, “I want that school [Springfield] held solidly for Synod.”¹⁸⁷ The last thing Harms needed was two seminaries to worry about.¹⁸⁸

Meanwhile, social moderates pressed forward with their new agenda. Issues of “race, urban renewal, poverty, hunger, and war were placed on the synodical agenda and the leadership was forced to face those issues.”¹⁸⁹ The Cleveland Convention voted into existence a new Commission on Social Action to define and apply the “social implications of the Gospel.”¹⁹⁰ Moderates at the *Witness*, promoting synodical centralization, stated, “If local Christian congregations would act in accordance with national pronouncements on the matter of racial justice and equality, there would be a vastly improved situation in the nation as a whole.”¹⁹¹

Civil Rights and the LCMS

As America advanced toward the long, hot summers of 1964–1968, moderates pressed their cause in the LCMS. No longer resting on traditional calls

to “obedience” to government, moderates boldly stated that “integration is morally right” and that it was “morally wrong for a Christian to oppose it or refuse to promote it on social or economic grounds.” The *Witness* continued to issue laudatory progress reports on the LHRAA, which took increasingly liberal and activist editorial positions. The LHRAA, based at Valparaiso University in Indiana, began in 1960 to endorse and participate in the civil rights movement’s nonviolent protests. That year, the *Witness* reported on the LHRAA’s endorsement of “Kneel-Ins.”¹⁹² Later, through the *Witness*, the association called on Lutherans to “participate in demonstrations and other non-violent means of protest against ‘segregation and discrimination wherever they may exist.’” For habitually obedient Missourians, calls to protest one’s government were not merely fresh or innovative but radical. And significantly, according to the *Witness*, active in the LHRAA were several professors from Concordia Seminary.¹⁹³

Pressed to take stands on controversial issues and increasingly confident by 1964, many Missouri moderates openly committed to the dominant liberal political agenda. Richard John Neuhaus, recent seminary graduate and moderate leader, urged Lutherans to continue supporting and participating in demonstrations “precisely in order to ‘antagonize’” conservatives in church and society.¹⁹⁴ In October, sixteen LCMS pastors participated in a “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.”¹⁹⁵ In February, as the nation discussed a Civil Rights Act facing a vote on passage in Washington, the *Witness* seemed to give sanction to “freedom marches,” sit-ins, and even anti-war protests. Calling demonstrations an “individual” choice, editors reminded Lutherans of their “responsibility as a church to try to change or remove the root causes of human misery, poverty, and strife.”¹⁹⁶ Finally, in April, the *Witness* came out fully in support of the pending Civil Rights Act:

Sorting through the arguments, thinking Christian Americans cannot easily blink aside that the ground which has swept the 55-page bill into the legislative process is—humanitarian. *The real subject of the bill is the dignity of man; it deals with God’s body-soul-spirit creature for whose redemption He gave His only Son* [italics original]. It seeks for the large and long-deprived segment of our American society the same human dignity, privileges, and opportunities which free citizens of a lighter hue have always taken for granted.

The teeth in the Congressional law may seem to be too sharp for some. But for those who choose to disregard God's higher law, also in this rights-and-freedom issue, that selfsame Word of God (Galatians 5:15) presents a shuddering alternative: "If you bite and devour one another, take heed that you are not consumed by one another."¹⁹⁷

When the Civil Rights Act passed, Missouri moderates again fused social views with theology, calling on Christians to obey their government:

Obedience to the Civil Rights Act . . . thereby becomes a moral as well as legal obligation, a matter of conscience for the Christian. . . . By going far beyond legal requirements in order to demonstrate Christian feelings and attitudes as well as legal obedience, those who are not Negroes can help make the American dream bright with promise for the future.¹⁹⁸

As racial tensions flared in the summer of 1964, moderates turned up the heat on Missouri conservatives. Responding to conservative objections to proliferating riots in America's inner cities, moderates found ways to rationalize black angst. In a mid-1964 article, the *Witness* urged Lutherans to understand the frustration that existed in America's "ghettos." Surely an offense to a significant minority of Missouri Lutherans who believed blacks responsible for their own problems, the *Witness* blamed white racism and called for "a better education and more job training for all Americans. A chance for Americans to live in respectable neighborhoods." America needed "a sincere acceptance of all Americans in political, industrial, community and church life."¹⁹⁹ Finally, in its first-ever look at campaign issues in a presidential election campaign, the *Witness* seemed to scorn Republicans, calling on Lutherans to recognize "false issues" and to avoid "emotional responses," a thinly veiled rejection of growing conservative reaction in America.²⁰⁰

Moderate supremacy seemed a *fait accompli* by the time of the synod's 1965 convention in Detroit. There, delegates gave official synod endorsement of six Mission Affirmations. The most significant of the Affirmations, and most troublesome to synod conservatives, flowed directly from moderate involvement in civil rights activism, establishing within the LCMS the "principle of an interchurch approach to mission." With the Affirmations, conservatives worried, the synod seemed to be embracing a modified form

of the modernist social gospel by affirming that “the church is Christ’s mission to the total man and to the total society.”²⁰¹

Moderates followed up on their victory with other new departures. The convention voted to seek membership in the new Lutheran Council of the United States of America (LC-USA), which augured more cooperation with other Lutheran bodies not then in fellowship with Missouri.²⁰² The “principle” that women should be allowed to vote was adopted, provided that women held no authority over men.²⁰³ Eighteen different social resolutions were also adopted, including one on race urging all congregations to “include in their missionary outreach all persons within their geographic area, without discrimination based on racial or ethnic grouping.”²⁰⁴ Finally, there was further movement in the direction of altar and pulpit fellowship with ALC.²⁰⁵

But moderate victories in 1965 exposed growing polarization in the church. Historian Bryan Hillis calls the Affirmations the “most damaging to the conservative cause” of all resolutions passed in 1965. The Affirmations, he states, affirmed that the LCMS is just a “confessional movement within the total body of Christ rather than a denomination emphasizing institutional barriers of separation.” Phrases like “common humanity” and “universal redemption” smacked of unionistic or universalistic leanings.²⁰⁶ These perceptions pushed delegates and even family members into opposing camps ideologically. Drama gripped the 1965 convention as Richard John Neuhaus publicly debated before the delegates his conservative father, a district vice president in LCMS Canada.²⁰⁷ Moderate confidence was only slightly tempered by an increasingly visible conservative reaction and politicization. Conservative complaints compelled President Harms to decry “public accusations,” “negative criticisms,” and “impatience, suspicion, fear, and dissention” in Detroit.²⁰⁸ Harms turned aside calls for an investigation of the seminary, promising that a newly established Committee on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) would study the issue.²⁰⁹ To some moderates in leadership, the best way to deal with conservatives was to simply ignore them.²¹⁰ Others were not so confident. Progressive churchmen meeting in New York voted in 1965 to adopt the word “moderate” to deflect conservative accusations they were liberals in a world where liberalism was fast

falling from favor. Richard John Neuhaus objected, warning his friends that any term but “conservative” or “orthodox” implied a nonconfessional ideology that laypeople would associate with “liberal.”²¹¹

Given license by their involvement in civil rights to enter the political “kingdom,” Missouri moderates pushed for further reform of both church and state. In 1953, the LCMS still rejected outright the notion of universal women’s suffrage. Less resolute was the synod’s official line on women in the church by 1965. In preface to the 1965 convention, several editorials appeared in the *Witness* promoting woman suffrage, as well as convention statements on racial reconciliation and further political involvement and dialogue with other Christians. Views protesting the nation’s involvement in Southeast Asia also surfaced. In June 1966, the *Witness* criticized the war in Vietnam. Americans were “taking casualties casually,” wrote one author, who called United States involvement in the war a “matter of regret.”²¹² In another article entitled “I Stand Opposed,” Lutheran Harvard scholar and LHRAA supporter Ralph Moellering took issue with the “domino theory,” calling America’s venture in Vietnam a “dubious battlefield.”²¹³

The Seminary Challenges Missouri Traditionalism

Missouri’s new social activism was a product of the new blood and new ideas pouring forth from Concordia Seminary. Between 1964 and 1967, eighteen new professors were added to the ranks, eight of them from Concordia College in Bronxville, New York, Missouri’s outpost of liberal thought.²¹⁴ At Concordia Seminary, social and cultural visions were translated into theological language, the result a new and heavy emphasis on Christian responsibility. In 1966, seminary professor Robert Werberig argued in the *Concordia Theological Monthly* that the LCMS must shed its parochial skin and enter the fray of politics. The church, he argued, is “a responsible political entity of . . . society” and should, therefore, work for the establishment of humane purposes and social justice.²¹⁵ Others, such as Norman Habel, were increasingly active in the civil rights movement.²¹⁶

Ralph Bohlmann, on sabbatical to complete his doctorate at Yale between 1966 and 1968, returned to find a new attitude at Concordia, one

that scared him.²¹⁷ He first had noticed changes at Concordia as a new professor in 1958. An aging John Behnken had walked Bohlmann around the seminary grounds and warned him that there were “serious problems” at the seminary, “dark clouds on the horizon.”²¹⁸ Then, Behnken said, challenges to Missouri tradition were muffled; now they were openly advanced. “Sometimes,” Bohlmann remembered, “the Missouri Synod was a word that was used derisively by professors. You were supposed to laugh when you heard the word ‘Missouri Synod.’”²¹⁹

Other new directions struck at the heart of synod doctrine and signaled moderate confidence and aggressiveness. Scharlemann’s 1958 essay challenging inerrancy had sparked outrage among conservatives, who demanded and received a retraction. But seminary theologians were again openly challenging the notion that the Bible is “inerrant.” Scharlemann’s colleague Arthur Carl Piepkorn argued in 1965 that use of the term “inerrancy” was dangerous in that it put the stamp of infallibility on any and all synod pronouncements.²²⁰ The following spring, Canadian representatives of the Missouri Synod teamed up with brothers in the ALC and LCA to clarify the inerrancy of the Bible on historical matters, stating that “a ‘discrepancy’ or an ‘error of fact’ can’t affect the inerrancy of the Bible.”²²¹

This was problematic for Oliver Harms, president of a conservative church living in turbulent political times. Conservative pressure forced Harms in the spring of 1966 to ask the seminary for a “clear rejection of liberal errors regarding biblical interpretation.” Alfred Fuerbringer, president of the seminary, evaded, arguing that factuality cannot be asserted where none exists, as in “any particular theory of the modality of creation.”²²² He argued, according to Bryan Hillis, that such a clear-cut response “could not be formulated quickly; the matters were difficult ones not clearly discussed in the Scriptures or the Confessions, the only two documents that can be used as sources for doctrinal matters.”²²³ But time and again Harms would come away from meetings with the Concordia faculty assured that these professors believed in the same “inerrant” Bible he did.²²⁴

Missouri’s presidents were consistently baffled by the Concordia faculty. In a dialogue in which theology became a matter of semantics and textual deconstruction, Harms, like Behnken before him, was poorly armed.

The silver-haired president was loved not for his theological acumen but for his pastoral, relational nature. His predecessor, John Behnken, had been equally ill at ease with Concordia's exegetes; he demanded little more from theology than an "unchanging constant, the clear-sounding 'Thus saith the Lord.'"²²⁵ Behnken had been worried by the sweeping changes taking hold at Concordia under Alfred Fuerbringer, as now was Harms. Concerned about the seminary and the budding conservative reaction, an aging Behnken met with a young conservative named Waldo Werning. Behnken asked Werning to keep the meeting secret, lest others also request his intervention.²²⁶ The old man told Werning that he had met repeatedly with the seminary faculty but was unsatisfied with their collective response, voiced through the seminary president. "Fuerbringer," he grouched, "lied to me."²²⁷

Countering *Christian News*

Throughout 1963, Otten used the pages of *Christian News* to try his own case and others. A favorite target was seminary graduate and editor of *Christian Century*, Martin E. Marty. Otten filed charges of false doctrine against Marty, complaining that Marty was serving a publication that promoted ecumenism and stood outside Missouri discipline, an ironic charge, since Otten arguably did the same with *Christian News*.²²⁸ Otten created enough pressure on Harms by March to force a meeting between Harms, Marty, and vice president Roland Wiederaenders, who assured Otten that the matter had been resolved.²²⁹ When in April the Missouri District of the synod responded by again trying to oust Otten's home church, Trinity, from the synod for retaining Otten as its pastor, Otten painted a portrait of persecution in the pages of *Christian News*.²³⁰

Losing the public relations war, Harms struggled over how to respond. Wiederaenders saw the problem as one of integrity:

Despite repeated efforts we have not dealt honestly with our pastors and people. We have refused to state our changing theological position in open, honest, forthright, simple and clear words. Over and over again we said that nothing was changing when all the while we were aware of changes taking place. Either we should have informed our pastors and people that

changes were taking place and, if possible, convinced them from Scripture that these changes were in full harmony with “Thus saith the Lord!” or we should have stopped playing games as we gave assurance that no changes were taking place.²³¹

Harms, struggling at first to respond as a gentleman to Otten’s deluge of letters, was losing patience. “Have you dealt with Martin Marty?” “Yes,” Harms replied. “Martin Scharlemann’s brother was just appointed to the University of Southern California. Is our church body paying his way?” “No,” Harms answered softly.²³² In December, John Behnken wrote Harms a three-page letter warning him about Otten and *Christian News*.²³³ Harms warned Otten in December that his tolerance was wearing thin: “Your last *Lutheran News* leaves me wondering what you are trying to do.”²³⁴ He then suggested that Otten might be throwing stones from a glass house and that the SOC, by incorporating non-LCMS supporters, was practicing the same “unionism” Otten denounced.

But Harms knew he was playing into Otten’s hands and that he would lose the battle unless he could find an answer to the growing power of *Christian News*.²³⁵ In April 1964, Harms, Wollbrecht, and *Witness* editor Martin Mueller acknowledged that influence and tried to combat it by printing a public condemnation of *Christian News*. Already reaching some ten thousand Lutherans, *Christian News*, they worried, “may make it appear that the publication speaks for ‘conservative officials’ of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.” Their condemnation emphasized that *Christian News* “is in no sense a synodical publication”; the editor “is not an ordained pastor” of the LCMS; Otten’s congregation “has been expelled from membership” in the LCMS; and Otten was violating the “spirit and letter” of LCMS law by sending *Christian News* “into congregations and homes unsolicited.”²³⁶