

Fortress Press Interview with James C. Burkee
Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod

Fortress Press: Others have written about this conflict at various times over the last forty years. Why did you decide to write this book at this time? How is your book different from other books on the Missouri schism?

James Burkee: Just about everything written about the schism comes from people who were partisans in the conflict: Marquart, Danker, Tietjen, Baker, the Seminary Board of Control, and—most recently—Zimmerman. As a historian, I teach that there is no such thing as pure objectivity, but it is still something we can strive for. So we can't expect that the people who led one camp or another could provide anything resembling an objective account of the conflict.

I was an infant when Jack Preus took power in 1969, and barely into grade school by the time the conflict had ended. I knew none of the participants and have no personal stake in how the story is told. If anything—as a professor at a Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) university—it is in my self-interest to tell the same triumphalistic tale told by the victors.

The story I tell is anything but triumphalistic—if anything, it's tragic. But it needs to be told now. The LCMS has been in decline for almost forty years, and I don't know that American Lutheranism has been the same since. The victors in this conflict shaped today's LCMS, while those who were driven from it helped shape today's ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). On both sides of that Lutheran divide, we need to evaluate our past honestly if we're going to provide any real direction for the future.

FP: As you grew up in the Missouri Synod, what do you remember about how this conflict was discussed?

JB: Very little. The first time I heard the word “Seminex” may have been in college (I attended Concordia University Wisconsin, where I now teach). But I really knew nothing of the conflict until I first began to study modern American religion during graduate school at Northwestern University.

The fact that I knew nothing of the conflict suggests, as I argue in this book, that although this conflict reshaped the LCMS and gave birth to the ELCA, it was largely a battle fought by and among clergy. One thing I found time and again in my research was that the clergy who struggled for control of the synod were frustrated by the lack of interest they found among lay people. Pastors might be able to gather signatures on a petition, but the lay people just weren't animated by the conflict. Conservatives couldn't get lay people to care about their issues, and moderates couldn't get lay people to leave the synod when the conflict was over.

Why? Because lay people in 1970 wanted less conflict, not more. They wanted to see Lutherans more united, not less.

One guy—Herman Otten—understood this early on. He didn't send his tabloid, *Christian News*, to the laity. Instead he sent it, often free and unsolicited, to pastors (and a handful of lay

convention delegates). That was the key to his power and influence, and why conservatives were finally able to take control of the church in 1969, and eventually purge the synod of moderates.

FP: What does this book offer the church and what are your hopes for its reception and effect?

JB: I think the book offers the church an opportunity to talk honestly about its past—something it really hasn't done yet. I hope it will be received with enthusiasm, although I suspect that those who lived through the conflict will receive and interpret the book more personally and emotionally. My hope is that even those who lived through the period will be willing to consider that there is something unique about my interpretation, which was shaped by dozens of interviews and extensive research, and written by someone trained as a scholar—and not personally connected to the schism.

Finally, I hope that the book raises some eyebrows and gets people thinking about the political polarization that has consumed our churches. The conservatism of the Religious Right has overtaken the LCMS, just as politics of the left largely dominate ELCA clergy. Can you be an environmentalist, a Democrat, and a Missouri Lutheran? If not, it suggests that something has fundamentally changed since 1970 in American Lutheranism. Hopefully, people will begin to ask why and whether the changes have been positive or negative. (I think they've largely been negative.)

FP: What surprised you in your work on this book?

JB: Several things surprised me. The scars many still bear from the schism: Those who left still hurt and are nostalgic for what might have been. Those who won remain perpetually at war and are somehow triumphalistic, even faced with a church body in decline. The kind of secrecy involved—so many so unwilling to talk. The people who, out of genuine concern for me, warned me not to tell the story lest I wind up week after week on *Christian News* and subject to charges levied by people unhappy that I told the story.

Finally, and sadly, what has shocked me the most is the absence of repentance. I try to be as self-reflective as possible, as sure as can be of actions I take yet not always fully convinced that I am right. What I encountered in interview after interview, document after document, was people on both sides of the divide so sure of their rightness, so positive that the other side bears total culpability for the disastrous outcome. I suppose that's the nature of war—and this was a war. But unlike most conflicts, we've not seen honest self-reflection, repentance, and healing.

Perhaps my book can help start that process.