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campus commentary



July, 1965

Dear Brother:

A few weeks ago I threatened some brethren who were attending the 46th regular convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod at Detroit that Theophilus and I would collaborate on a worm's eye view of the gathering. Here it is — just a series of footnotes that you can read when you have nothing else to do.

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My opening conversation with a nice lady at the Registration Desk set the tone for my entire stay at Detroit.

I: My name is O. P. Kretzmann. Please get the initials straight. There are hundreds of characters with the same last name, and some are not in fellowship with me.

Nice Lady: Are you a delegate?

I: No, ma'm.

N.L.: Are you an official guest?

I: No, ma'm.

N.L.: Are you a member in good standing?

I: There has been some debate about that, but my name is still in The Lutheran Annual on page 124.

The Nice Lady hurriedly consulted the file case before her. She said: "There is one man by your name from Chicago. There is another from India, and there is a third one from St. Louis — are you one of these?"

I: No, ma'm. They are distant relatives.

N.L.: Are they members in good standing?

I (happily): Oh yes. In fact, two of them have degrees from Concordia Seminary — honorary — this is, unearned.

N.L. (brightly): I know what you mean. Our pastor had one of these, too. He died shortly after they gave it to him. How are your relatives?

I: Very well, thank you.

N.L.: OK. The price of registration will be \$3.

And so I got a badge which entitled me to a seat in the outer darkness near Ann Arbor with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities thereunto appertaining. An added pleasure was that I sat right behind the observers from the Wisconsin Synod.

* * *

After my encounter with the Nice Lady, I wandered out of Cobo Hall (a magnificent joint in which the janitors ride around in little motor cars) to the bank of the river flowing gently to the sea.

Much time has now flown by since I attended my first synodical convention in 1923. I closed my eyes and tried to peer down the years to that day in June. The convention was held at our famous military college in Fort Wayne. I had just been reluctantly graduated from the Seminary, and my battered suitcase held three shirts, one pair of fancy knickerbockers and a Latin diploma tied with blue ribbon, which one of my more learned classmates had deciphered for me.

1923 was a curiously exciting time. World War I was still a vivid memory. The Roaring Twenties were well on their way. Prohibition had opened up a new world of speak-easies, bathtub gin, lying, robbing and murder. Theophilus' mother was at the convention dressed like a flapper. Versailles was becoming a shadow over Europe. An Austrian paperhanger by the name of Schicklgruber had been hanging paper (ten years later I was to hear his demonic screaming over my short-wave radio in Chicago). And The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod was still the "Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten."

Inside synod there were some new and startling developments in 1923. The violent hates of World War I had forced the synod out of its foreignness, the leaven of the English District had begun to leaven the whole lump, and Dallman had begun to write a staccato English all his own. Even Grandfather Hueschen, delegate from Perry County, was lobbying for more English in his confirmation classes. There was talk of a new seminary, located far away from the splendid old German saloons on the South side of St. Louis. The Concordia Triglotta had just appeared and the Seminary students had staged a protest march over the price of \$8.50. After the sainted Dr. Seuel had come across the street from CPH to explain the matter to us in a moving poverty-stricken speech, we were ready to take up a collection for the "Pibble House". Synod was opening new missions in the vast plains west of the Missouri. Warren G. Harding was a stately nonentity in the White House. And "Normalcy" was the watchword of the day, just as "The Great Society" is in ours.

There were giants in those days — Pieper with his glasses on a black ribbon to be used to emphasize a point — Pfothenauer, the absolute embodiment of a 19th century Landes-bischof — Romoser, Dallman, Hemmeter, from the English District — bold heralds of the new day — Bente with his razor-mind and his famous drawl — (whenever we had beaten St. Louis University in baseball he would say in class: "This, gentlemen, is the triumph of pure doctrine and the vindication of the Reformation."); and every seminarian walked more proudly because Goose Wambsganss had made an unassisted triple play in the World Series. Through the years now, as I looked across the river, these awesome doctors had become Ollie and Roland and Art and George and Ted — but I knew that these new leaders were nonetheless in the great tradition of Missouri.

* * *

All that was a long time ago, and the river was still moving to the sea. **Now forty-two years later** — the largest and greatest in all human history — **we were face-to-face with another new world.** Some of the men who were sitting with committees this morning would still be in the Church Militant when the wild bells greet the dawn of 2000 A.D. — unless God has other plans for this wayside and wayward planet. These men would have to carry the Bride of Christ across the threshold of the third millennium of her history. I could only say a brief petition for their strength, their sureness of mind and heart. They would see the results of the mysterious explosion in human knowledge, the population explosion, the cybernetic revolution, the space age, the atomic age, the looming Armageddon. And through all these they would carry nothing and everything — a Manger, a Cross, and a lovely and lonely voice: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." As the river moved toward the sea, I could not help wondering for a moment whether in the year 2000 A.D. I would envy them or they would envy me.

* * *

And so the convention began. This Cobo Hall could probably happen only in Chicago, Detroit or Tokyo. It is an arrogantly beautiful structure with tiers of floors and mazes of corridors. Even on the third day of the convention I lost my way four times between the front door and a committee room where my delayed advent was fortunately not being awaited with breathless anticipation.

One of the most astonishing moments of the convention came when the committee on Doctrinal Matters (a good outfit) proposed that the Commission on Theology be instructed to study the problem of hermeneutics. This was OK with everybody, but the question was raised: "What do we do with the results?" Some seemed to feel that the results should first be examined and approved by a Synodical Convention. This was really a novel idea. Imagine a professor at St. Louis or Springfield saying to an inquiring student: "Yes, I have studied these matters for many years, but I can't tell you anything until 1967 at the earliest. Perhaps it won't be until 1971. Meanwhile, I have orders to keep my big mouth shut."

As might have been expected, this discussion threw the convention into well-controlled confusion. At one time the patient president had a substitute word in an amendment to the motion on his hands. Like all good chairmen, he solved the problem by cutting through the Gordian knot. He said in essence: "Unless somebody hollers loud enough, I will accept the substitute word." I was under the impression that someone behind Microphone Seven was sputtering, but the chairman had put on his earmuffs and the discussion on the amendment to the amendment continued.

This is always a tough spot for any chairman. He has to keep the boys relevant even when they are heading for left field. I must admit (I hope he will forgive me) that at times he sounded like a broken record: "Are you speaking to the amendment to the amendment?"

Finally, by a standing vote of 357 to 300, we turned the whole business back to the committee which had no trouble at all in concealing its gratitude. Among the voters on both sides I noticed some laymen whose bewilderment was as clear as Mary's at the wedding feast at Cana. In fact, right in the middle of the heavy theological discussion one of them got behind Microphone Thirteen and asked plaintively: "What is this here hermeneutics? Won't somebody please tell me?"

* * *

I turned for a moment and looked at the great crucifix above the altar. Was there an affectionate smile on His face? "These are my beloved, faithful children. They want so hard to understand me. They want to be loyal to my Word, every word of it. Now again I will send them my Holy Spirit who will lead them into all truth. Of course, I know that they will always see in part and know in part, and that the final end of the Spirit's leading will come only when they can see me face-to-face. Meanwhile —

and it is a great meanwhile — they will keep on trying and I will love them for it and will keep their feet from stumbling and their mind from failing.”

* * *

Another astonishing moment. It came suddenly in a debate over the appearance of a certain singer at the Walther League convention this year.

Suddenly we were face to face with an amazing array of Scripture passages. They were dragged in with un-Lutheran abandon. It is a terrifying and frightening experience to see the Word of God handled this way.

I am sure that most of the brethren who did this were very sincere — but that does not change the basic problem. Before I quote the Holy Word for or against the appearance of certain singers at a Walther League Convention I must be very sure that this is what St. Paul was talking about 1900 years ago. **There are two ways in which we can reflect our humble respect for the Word — one is to quote it whenever it speaks to our condition — the other is to refrain from citing it when “thus saith the Lord” does not apply.** It may not mean anything, but there were about a thousand young people in the balconies at the beginning of the debate. After they had listened for about twenty minutes, all but a baker’s dozen left — presumably for lunch. Theophilus shook his head: “These kids swore to their theology on the day of their Confirmation — and it is better than ours.”

* * *

Which reminds me that we still have some brethren who believe in a “hot house” approach to Christian education. “Keep them away from all bad ideas! Do not expose them to the cold blasts of our winter of unbelief, materialism, positivism, nihilism, communism, and so forth.” Unfortunately all these “isms” hit the younger generation from all sides, incessantly, hour by hour, over all the media of mass communication, year in and year out, world without end. And our only chance to get into this welter is to introduce them to these strange and evil ideas under “controlled circumstances.” Let the heathen rage — then you can come with the still, small voice, the insistent rightness of the Gospel, the imperative figure of Jesus Christ. There He is, and there is no other.

* * *

I have been writing these worm’s eye notes in the early morning hours, and I must stop now. I am taking Theophilus to breakfast. He sent Mrs. Theophilus some flowers for Father’s Day congratulating her on her choice of a husband. Now he is broke.

* * *

Perhaps the best place to attend the convention was in the caverns where the press room boys dwelt. One was able to smoke there and still listen to the loud speaker high up on the wall. It was almost like Orwell’s in “1984”. These are the sharp boys, and their comments on various speeches and events should finally be published in a separate volume. When the chair would recognize Professor Schnabelklapp there would be a groan: “Not that guy again. He was born with a microphone in his mouth.” Their off-the-record report on the convention would certainly be relevant, warm and shattering. They spoke the truth in love with the greater emphasis on the truth. By the way, the press table kept a wary eye on the mysterious figure sitting far up in the balcony with a little black box. Apparently he was recording every single word. I was reminded of

As I was going up the stair
I saw a man who wasn’t there
He wasn’t there again today
I wish that he would stay away.

He was either an emissary from on high or a representative of Beelzebub.

* * *

Special Salute: To the five district presidents who headed the floor committees whose reports regularly stirred up things — and who handled the ensuing turmoil with grace, dignity and quietness. They should be immortalized here — Rakow of Indiana, Chairman of the Committee on Missions; Jacobs of Northern California, Chairman of the Committee on Doctrinal Matters; Paul of Northern Illinois, Chairman of the Committee on Church Relations; Kohn of the Southeastern District, Chairman of the Committee on Higher Education; Krieger of Michigan, Chairman of the Committee on Young People’s Work. Their willingness to explain the meaning of simple English words to the delegates was superb. The other chairmen were excellent, too, but these five were the stormy petrels.

* * *

Salute to President Harms — who proved himself able to ride out the wildest parliamentary storm without losing his balance. We were particularly pleased when he changed from calling on **Microphone** Four or One or Seven to **Station** Four or One or Seven. An observant brother remarked: “He began to realize that these were our own Missourian stations of the Cross.”

* * *

Salute to Theophilus — on the sixth day I found him perched far up in the highest reaches of the second balcony. He was peering intently at the scene below. “**Theophilus,**” I said, “**what in the world**

are you doing way up here? You should be down in the sweat and dust of the arena." Theophilus looked superior: "For once," he said, "I wanted to see a convention the way our Lord sees it — from up above. I know that I am not very far up, but I am sure that I am nearer heaven than you are down there at the press table."

"Well," I said, "how do things look from up here?"

He answered, "Not bad, at all. There are some real good guys down there."

* * *

A special salute to the brethren who said some kind things about these yellow sheets. Sample: "My wife and I always read your stuff the last thing at night. It is more effective and less habit-forming than barbituates."

Sample: "It is the only free thing I get which does not ask for money, at least not directly. Your approach is more sneaky in a nice Christian way."

Sample: "Single-handed, you have increased my interest in synodical censorship."

Sample: "The stuff is good. Do you really write it yourself?" — and so on.

The question most often asked of me: "Is Theophilus here?" Answer: "No, he was here, but he had to go home. Deacon Sauerbraten's father died at the age of 102, and Theophilus had to go home for the funeral. Deacon Sauerbraten's father drank a pint of whiskey every day of his adult life, and it finally got him."

* * *

Salute to the brethren who arranged the various services, particularly the opening Holy Communion. It was done in liturgically good taste and with a good deal of dignity and grace. Usually these public exhibitions of mass piety leave me cold; this, however, was well done. There was a particularly ingenious use of color. The altars were white, and the rugs between them were a bright red. From my place in the peanut gallery the entire service was most impressive. When 8,000 voices joined in the words of the Nicene Creed, an atmosphere of mystical power came over the entire assembly. **There were the deep undercurrents of the magnificent phrases of the Nicene Creed. "Very God of very God — whose Kingdom shall have no end."** A quietly spoken shout of eternal defiance.

As the service proceeded, however, I felt that even though we had a great crowd, we had to realize that the entire Missouri Synod comprises about one-tenth of one per cent of the world population — a dismaying and staggering fact. Outwardly we are only a remnant in the diaspora. How can we face the masses which are arrayed against us? Answer: "Chip away at the massive granite of unbelief, one by one, man by man, dollar by dollar, hour by hour. Only in this way can we hope to meet our destiny."

* * *

Scattered over the convention floor were veterans of the Cross whom Synod should never forget — **John W. Behnken**, who has not grown any older in the past ten years — **George Kuechle**, still erect and white-haired, now chaplain at the fabled East Ridge Senior Citizen Village in Florida — **John Meyer**, former president of the great Central District whose evangelical attitude twenty years ago I shall always remember. He told me, by the way, that he had just returned from the 60th anniversary reunion of the class of 1905 at the Seminary. Twelve are still living, but only two could come — **Fred W. Loose**, whose mind is as sharp and independent as ever. I shall remember him as an implacable enemy of all shame and fraud, doctrinal and moral, in the Church. If Diogenes were still wandering around he would extinguish his lantern when he came face to face with Loose — a completely honest man — **E. J. Friedrich**, whose inner light has grown brighter as his eyes have darkened — **W. F. Lichtsinn**, still the man who looks as a synodical vice-president should.

* * *

By the way, have you ever noticed that the age group above three score and ten very seldom includes any heresy hunters? They have lived long enough to see the thousand strange ways the hearts of men (and theologians) go crying down. They have witnessed the naturalness of sin and the miracle of grace. They have seen the long panorama of human weakness and divine strength; so that at sunset they seem to be on a transfigured mountaintop looking at the world behind and beneath them with the compassion of Jesus Christ. The world is no longer too much with them and the heat and burden of the day have fallen on younger shoulders. They neither shout anymore or doubt anymore; they walk toward the final gate with the grace and wonder of little children. Often I have heard someone say of an older person: "He is in his second childhood." This means that he has lost some of his faculties. There is, however, another second childhood, a spiritual childhood, which is very beautiful and very wise — the childhood which God gives to His children who have served Him well. His final "well done" beyond the gate is really anticlimactic. They have already heard it on this side of the veil, and the benediction of the Collect for Peace has come to them — they pass their time in rest and quietness.

* * *

Much debate, some of it relevant, was aroused by the recommendation of Committee Fifteen (which included some of the best financial brains in Synod) that we should raise \$40 million by Easter, 1967. These periodic "drives" pose some difficult questions. How many shots of this spiritual or organizational adrenalin can the synodical organism take? How much does it dislocate the work of the brethren in

the ministry who must finally carry the ball? These are the boys who must say: "Now concerning the collection," not only once as Saint Paul did but for six months in a row. How mad will Sauerbraten get? Since I cannot trust my own judgment in these matters, I turned as usual to Theophilus. He wrote as follows:

"Dear O.P.:

You ought to know by now that I have no mind for financial problems. They bore me. Even when I burned the mortgage on the parsonage two years ago I let Sauerbraten light the match — and Grandma Himmelhoch held the burning paper. I was watching a lily which was neither toiling nor spinning.

On the other hand, I think the Missouri Synod is ready for another strenuous effort. It's funny how fat pockets make for flabby, spiritual muscles. We need some exercise. And let me say too that I think that the Missouri Synod can do it. Despite all your misgivings about 210, we've got some wise birds down there to lead us. So let's you and me get on the band-wagon and help all we can.

Financially yours,
Theophilus

P.S. And don't forget that Valpo gets two-and-one-half percent. Or have you?

* * *

Ominous Note: A member of a very prominent committee tells me that in some instances his group changed the wording of their recommendations from "accept" to "receive". They were so afraid of trouble on the floor that they did not dare recommend "acceptance" of a report or a statement but merely asked that the convention "receive" it. They know, of course, that this was utterly meaningless. The convention could have "received" a report from Beezlebub himself "with thanks".

Perhaps somewhere around here is the deep root of our trouble. There were times when the Missouri Synod convention assembled in 1965 was almost paralyzed with fear. It marched not like a mighty army but like Napoleon's troops plodding back from Moscow, slow, defeated and beaten. They had jostled with the modern world and had decided to retreat into a vague but safe fundamentalism. **Of course, there were high moments, too** — moments of courage, of adventurousness, even of gaiety — as if we were battalions in the Army of God moving toward Armageddon and final victory. **But these moments — stirred by the president's opening address, the report of Committee One on Missions, and the report of the Committee on Church Relations — were few and far between.** By the way, when LCUSA was up for discussion I closed my eyes for a little moment and heard the voice of the recording angel on judgment day: "What in the world — or heaven — was LCUSA? It sounds like a Communist front." High moments, however, were too few and far between.

* * *

LCUSA — And so at 11:50 a.m. on June 23 the Missouri Synod voted to join LCUSA with less than 50 dissenting votes. When the matter was first presented, the air became electric. President Erwin Paul, chairman of the committee, presented the matter with a cool, objective introduction. I was somewhat distressed, I must confess, by the presentation of the seven outstanding theologians who represented Missouri in the consultations with other Lutheran bodies since 1962. There is always an immediate negative reaction when too many big wheels appear at the same time. Theophilus always dives under the table.

The discussion itself was marked by some strange inconsistencies. There was, for example, the brother who began by saying that there had not been sufficient time to study the constitution, and so on. Then he spoke for fifteen minutes, demonstrating clearly that he had studied it line by line and knew what it was all about.

Another curious factor in the discussion was the loud voice, about every three minutes: "We have two extremes in Synod, and we must now weed out both." I have long maintained that this is pure fiction. Who and where are the so-called leftists? The left in post-modern Christendom means "denial of the Incarnation, the Holy Trinity, the Authority of Holy Writ, the Resurrection and so forth." Now — where are these characters in the Missouri Synod? **In forty years of wandering around and sitting in parsonages late at night — the moments of complete truth — I have never seen one of these — no not one. Why do we work so hard to maintain a fiction?**

At 11:55 a.m. the welkin rang with Hallelujahs and anguished cries. One group maintained that the millennium had come; another said that Missouri was now on the broad road to hell. To the worried brethren I would say this: These men with whom we now join hands are our real friends. Such men as Fry, Schlotz, Fendt, Rogness, Empie, Preus, Schramm, Malmin and many others have been close to us in many parts of the life of the Church for a long time. They have been faithful and beloved brethren these many years and our vote at ten minutes to twelve (a significant hour) on June 23 will not change them now. So we are not working with former "opponents". We are joining hands with members of the Body of Christ — and this is very, very good. All we are really doing is what our Lord and the Emmaus disciples did toward evening — we are walking the Way together before night falls.

To the brethren who shouted "Hallelujah": Please don't take this as a green light to jump joyfully into the murky ways of much of modern Protestantism. What Missouri's action means is that we have another great chance to take part in the on-going dialogue with all Christians which will be the basic mark of the Church between now and 2000 A.D. Once more we have before us the long, hard task of theological study. We have faced this now by adding a few voices to a long faithful choir — though somewhat gingerly — to speak with other loyal Christians in the Lutheran tradition. And this also is very, very good.

* * *

Summa Summarum: On the last day I grabbed a taxi to head back to the hotel. The driver turned around: "How are you Lutherians doing? Especially, are you going to incorporate with other Lutherians?"

I: "Well, not exactly, but **we are going to cooperate all over the world.**"

Driver: "I sure like that. I think you gotta get under the same umbrella because there is a lot of rain coming before we die."

Perhaps that is the best summary of our problems and our imperatives — not from a theologian, or a clergyman, or a Lutheran, but from a man from the streets of Detroit or Chicago or New York or Tokyo or Hong Kong or St. Louis. One look at this world and we should know that "there is a lot of rain coming."

* * *

On the last morning of the convention I left the hall early and wandered back to the river again. Would there "really be a lot of rain"? That, I thought, would now be in other Hands much greater and stronger than mine — greater and stronger than the hands of the thousand brethren still toiling away in the hall. They would and could do many good things, **but they would not be able to avert the coming of the rain.**

* * *

So — What was now left after these two weeks of meetings, resolutions and speeches? Some of them certainly will sound to our children as if we had forgotten that even though it is a far cry from the Sea of Galilee to the Detroit River we acted as if our Lord were asleep in the boat. Perhaps nothing more will come but what our fathers in God looked forward to — the coming of the last day and the last evening — perhaps speedily — they made this warm expectancy a great part of their theology. So they were able, particularly in the 16th century, to do justice to the divine tension between the *Una Sancta* and the stumbling, empirical church back there in the hall. Here was their own reason for the homesickness which must ever remain a part of our Christian life and thought. The Church and we live "zwischen den Zeiten". We are forever becoming, not being; we live by faith which is the substance of things hoped for. The Church and we are pilgrims, strangers in a far country, citizens of two worlds, but at home only in one. Here, I thought, is the final key to some of our problems and difficulties — our living and thinking **Sub Specie Aeternatis** in the Christian sense of the phrase. The Christian Church by reason of her life in Christ stands forever poised between two worlds — the one physical, visible, transitory and imperfect — and the other eternal, spiritual, everlasting and perfect. We use the second to determine our attitude over against the first. But we work while it is day in and with the first, the imperfect and transitory. **The Church with which we had now worked for two weeks is still in the body, and by the Will of God must accept the limitations of the physical and temporal. This we must know again in our time — as we look for the coming of His nail-torn feet.**

* * *

And so I left the river and went back to the hotel to pack my belongings. I was pleased to note that they had now come to two black suits, two clerical collars and a pair of slippers — all in these forty-two years since the convention in 1923.

Be sure to have a peaceful and restful summer.

O. P. Kretzmann

P.S. I have a long Convention letter from Theophilus which must wait until next time.