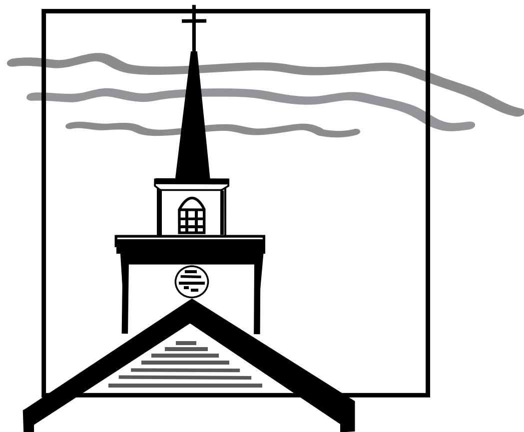

Democracy and Doctrine

Kathryn F. Wood

American denominations struggle with the extent to which their policies should accommodate the changing cultural scene. Currently the hot-button issue is homosexuality, particularly how the churches should treat gay clergy. Americans in general have become more open and accepting of homosexuality; the dilemma for the various church bodies is whether they should follow suit. This type of conflict is not new. Many of the debates in modern American denominations have been similar. Denominational "liberals" are accused of watering down doctrine in order to make concessions to cultural changes, while "conservatives" want to keep the culture at bay and retain traditional standards, on whatever the current issue happens to be.

With each new conflict, theologians, clergy, and laypeople on all sides shake their heads ruefully and note that "politics" has entered the realm of the church. They mean, of course, that leaders of the church are spending time, energy, and money vying for votes and influence in the decision-making process. There are winners and losers, battles and victories, a side that takes the lead, a side that fights back. The twentieth-century history of Lutherans, Baptists, and Presbyterians provides plenty of examples, and the ongoing discord in the Episcopal church provides another.

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What is seldom noticed, however, is that the conflict over "culture war" issues is itself a result of the churches' most significant concession to American culture: the democratic polity of the churches. The democratic nature of church polity is almost never discussed, because it is so very acceptable to Americans, but the fact is that secular ideas about the political process have determined the nature of theological debate in modern American denominations. All American churches, including the Roman Catholic church in its brush with "trusteeism" in the eighteenth century, have been influenced by American democratic ideals. Historian Nathan Hatch has argued that the revolutionary fervor that shaped this country's polity also gave rise to new attitudes about religious authority. After the War for Independence, traditional modes of worship and traditional structures of church authority went out of vogue, along with the British monarchy.[1]

The democratic character of American churches can be traced to the most fundamental tenet of American religion: the separation of church and state. While the state-church model typical of Europe combined political authority and church authority, the American federal constitution privileged no one religion. Thomas Jefferson was as proud of his Statute on Religious Freedom as he was of the Declaration of Independence; both reflected Jefferson's ideals of freedom and individualism. So it is an interesting irony that while church and state were separated in the secular world of government, secular ideals about political process were built right in to American ecclesiology and church life. As Hatch pointed out, for Americans, ideas about political authority and ideas about religious authority were intertwined, not separate: authority would be in the hands of the people, both for government and for religious life. The democratic impulse was alive and well in both spheres.

So democratic processes were built into American church life as denominations proliferated and grew. In the realm of practical matters, this can be an appropriate mode of operation, one that actually minimizes conflict. But when the democratic process is extended to matters of faith and doctrine, difficulties are sure to arise. Can we construct doctrine by majority vote? Should an assembly of untrained but thoughtful and well-meaning laypeople function as a magisterium? The Roman Catholic church rejected the efforts of its early American church leaders to be more democratic in polity, ensuring doctrinal orthodoxy but flying in the face of "American" principles. For those churches that have organized in a democratic way, the development of doctrinally-based positions presents a

knotty problem. Debate over proposed resolutions, under the constraints of Roberts' Rules of Order, passes for theological reflection. Limits on time at the microphone mean that theological ideas often by necessity take on the character of sound bites.

This dilemma is particularly problematic for creedal churches, for whom a doctrinal standard exists. The history of Lutheranism in America reflects the complexity of debates about confessional theology in the American context. Lutherans had the standards of the Augsburg Confession against which to measure their democratic decisions, but meshing theology and polity has never been simple. Democratic polity and doctrinal orthodoxy are difficult to mix. Even Baptists, who claim no formal creed and for whom the individual right to interpret matters of faith according to conscience is fundamental, have been beset in their conventions by political debates about what true Baptist faith and practice should be.

Part of the problem is that democratic polity can change the very nature of our understanding of orthodoxy. In a democratic context, orthodox theology might simply be theology most familiar to the majority: "old-time religion." Church leaders and theologians might disagree with laypeople about matters of scriptural interpretation or social issues. As early as 1967, in a nationwide survey, sociologist Jeffrey K. Hadden found a growing divide between the pulpit and the pew. Denominational clergy and staff were becoming more liberal in their thinking; parishioners were not.[2] In that context, democratic debate and creating theology by majority vote is one way that conservative laypeople can hold the line against liberal-leaning leaders. Of course, laypeople are not always conservative and clergy are not always liberal. The situation could well be reversed. The point is that when the standard by which orthodoxy is measured is the democratic vote, divisions and disagreements in the church are resolved by political debate, not by theological reflection. The history of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod provides an intriguing example of the ways in which these issues have played out in recent history.

The potential conflict between popular authority in the church and right doctrine has been exemplified by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod since its founding. The schism of the mid-1970s finally erupted because the tension between the LCMS commitment to both congregational polity and purity of doctrine became untenable. But that tension was present from the very early days of Saxon settlement in Missouri, when questions about appropriate authority in the church threw the settlers into turmoil.

The basic outlines of LCMS early history are familiar to many.[3] Beginning in 1817, the merging of the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Germany into one state church, sharing communion and a common service book, took shape in the mandated "Prussian Union." Many conservative Lutherans were horrified by what they considered to be doctrinal compromise. In 1838 and 1839, a small group of Saxons, determined to retain Lutheran worship in all its purity, emigrated from Germany and settled in St. Louis and Perry County, Missouri. During the journey to the United States, their leader, Pastor Martin Stephan, was made bishop of the group and given both temporal and doctrinal authority in the community. When he was later accused of both sexual misconduct and fiscal malfeasance, the community ousted him, but then found themselves in disarray.

Accounts of this period in Saxon history note that the settlers wondered whether they were in fact a church and worried that they were "no better than a sect."[4] That distinction between church and sect is a crucial one in this context. The Saxons were in general comfortable with the authority of the state church at home and were distrustful of the dissenting communities opposed to such authority. They believed that the state church had gone astray in forcing a union between the Lutheran and Reformed faith communities and that the "true church" was found under the leadership of Martin Stephan. But they did not see themselves as sectarians. They knew that the pure doctrine they prized required authoritative leadership. They had transferred the authority of the state into the hands of Martin Stephan; hence it is not surprising that his authority concerned both religious and secular matters. When Stephan's tenure proved a disaster, their confusion was understandable.

The leadership of C. F. W. Walther calmed the fears of the people and set them on a new path. At the Altenburg debates in 1841, he is credited with reassuring the settlers by arguing that they were in fact the true church, for the true church consists of the people of God. This was a theological argument, but it was also a pragmatic argument in the American context, with secular implications. As the fledgling church organized, Walther's sense of church as the people of God took on a distinctly political aspect: he understood that hierarchical structures would be unpopular in the United States. In his presidential address to the Missouri Synod in 1848, Walther noted the impracticality of instituting hierarchical structures in the environment of democratic America:

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> In a republic, as the United States of America is, where the feeling of being free and independent of man is nourished so strongly from childhood, the inevitable result would be that any restriction beyond the limits drawn by God Himself would be empty shells.[5]

The synod's organizational structure would not consist of "empty shells." The church was the people of God; in America, those with temporal authority over the church would also be the people of God. The stage was set for what Lutheran historian A. R. Wentz called the Missouri Synod's "distinct dread of hierarchy."[6] But the Missouri Synod would not be without authoritative leadership. Walther's logic was really quite clever. In Europe, church authority was vested in the state, and in America, where state authority was vested in the people, church authority would be vested there, too. The Synod itself would have democratic structures, with clergymen and laymen voting on matters before it. Congregations would be directed by the votes of male church members. Married women would participate by influencing their husbands' thinking. The divine call to a Missouri Synod pastor would be extended through a congregation that chose him.

The democratic polity created a potential problem for the synod's commitment to true Lutheran doctrine. The Missouri Synod has been proud of its congregational polity from its beginning, but it has been even prouder of its insistence on doctrinal unity and purity. Concern about heterodoxy has dominated the Synod's history, up to the present day. The Synod has made decisions about whom to associate with organizationally and whom to worship with on Sunday mornings, in order to stand guard against doctrinal impurity, unionism, and syncretism. An important question to consider is how the Missouri Synod maintained doctrinal integrity while at the same time embracing a democratic polity.

From its early years, the Missouri Synod solved the dilemma of how to combine democratic polity with insistence on pure doctrine in three ways. First, by constitution, matters of doctrine were to be decided by the Word of God. Since the Missourians were essentially biblical literalists, this was a relatively straightforward position to take. Secondly, the synod's clergymen were trained carefully, many of them in Missouri Synod schools from elementary levels through seminary. Finally, while within the synod authority was technically vested in the congregations, LCMS clergymen were prestigious and influential leaders, of the "Herr Pastor" model. The dominance of the clergy within the congregation preserved doctrine from the onslaught of laypeople who might have their own (unorthodox) ideas. Walther had recognized the perils of popular government in the church. He argued that the final authority of the Word of God, interpreted by the clergy, would protect the synod from what he called the "papacy of the people."[7]

So it is not surprising that the seminary was at the heart of the LCMS conflict in the 1970s. The LCMS seminaries produced the synod's magisterium, its elite and trusted arbiters of true doctrine. When the synod's premier seminary in St. Louis began to show European theological influences that in fact threatened the literal interpretation of Scripture with historical criticism, many members of the synod reacted with alarm. In 1973, under the leadership of J. A. O. Preus, but with the backing of a majority vote of the synod at the convention, the LCMS censured the faculty at the seminary in St. Louis. While a majority of the Concordia faculty and students "walked out" in protest and formed a "seminary in exile" (Seminex), a small group of committed faculty and students held down the Concordia fort. The turmoil of these years has been well documented.[8] Note that decisions on the part of the synod, as well as the dissenting faculty and students, were made by majority vote.

Interestingly, the event that finally led to the actual split of the synod was Preus's firing of several (democratically elected) district presidents. These men had ordained graduates of Seminex, against the wishes of the synod. The district presidents claimed that Preus had no right to fire them because the majority of people in their districts supported their actions. Preus argued that the presidents served only with the approval of the synod, and concern for pure doctrine required that they step down. The conflict between the maintenance of pure doctrine and the democratic ideals, both so fundamental for the Missouri Synod at its founding, finally came to a head.

The firing of the district presidents led to the formation of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, one of the predecessor church bodies of today's ELCA. For the ELCA, the question of how to maintain confessional integrity alongside a democratic polity continues to be a vexing one. The decision to create a split of 60% laypeople and 40% clergy in decision-making bodies and assemblies has had far-reaching impact. The Missouri Synod in its early days walked that difficult line holding true doctrine while enfranchising lay people in their congregations by emphasizing the importance of well-trained, prestigious clergy and the literal interpretation of Scripture. But the ELCA generally reads the Bible less literally and has designed a polity in which its clergy are a minority in decision-making. The assemblies of Lutheran people making decisions are thoughtful, well-meaning, committed Christians, but they are generally not trained in the intricacies of the Lutheran Confessions. It is not surprising that the ELCA faces allegations that it has lost its identity when those most trained in its theology can be outvoted in determining the direction of the church.

The consequences of democratic processes in the church can be illustrated also by the current situation The Episcopal Church. The organizational integrity of The Episcopal Church, one of the most hierarchical of American Protestant denominations, is currently at risk because of exactly this problem. The firestorm began at the 2003 General Council, when the bishops of the church voted to affirm the election of Gene Robinson, a homosexual man in an intimate relationship with another man, as

bishop of the diocese of New Hampshire. It is important to understand that the bishops did not affirm Gene Robinson as a gay man; they affirmed the right of the diocese of New Hampshire to elect its bishop.

That decision has created enormous difficulties for the American Episcopal church, and put at risk its standing in the Anglican Communion. But had the Episcopal bishops in 2003 declined to affirm Robinson's election, there would have been a furor of a different kind. The question would not have been the morality of homosexuality but the right of American Episcopalians to choose their own bishops. It is an important point that the parishes now dissenting from the centrist path of the American church have in their own very American way selected bishops to lead them from outside of their dioceses. They claim it is their right.

In short, as churches debate cultural accommodation, they need to consider their most fundamental concession to American culture: democratic polity in the church. I do not argue that democratic polity is a mistake. Instead I would suggest that in working through democratic structures, all churches need to learn from the Missouri Synod that tension between democracy and doctrine is inevitable. Adherence to doctrine requires authoritative leadership; democratic structures change the nature of theological debate and even the nature of orthodoxy. The standard against which decisions are measured is the majority vote. The most important issue facing American churches today is not homosexuality, abortion, or stem-cell research. The most important issue facing every American church is: who's in charge here? LF

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Notes

1. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
2. Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969).
3. See for example, Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi: The Settlement of the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri, 1839–1841* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953).
4. Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000): 59.
5. August R. Suelflow, "The Missouri Synod Organized," in *Moving Frontiers*, ed. Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964): 175.
6. Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).
7. Suelflow, 175.
8. See, among others, Mary Todd, *Authority Vested*; James E. Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); John Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

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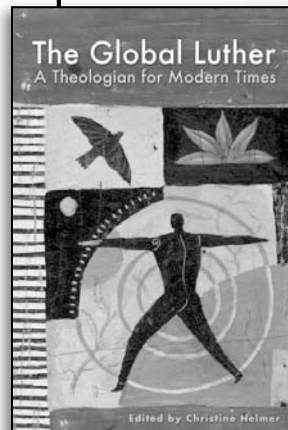

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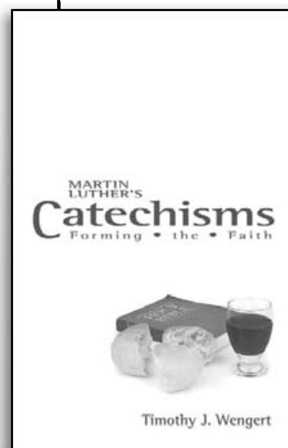

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