Book Reviews


Reviewed by Rev. Joel Gerlach

Readers who have reached the half century mark were seven years old when the two synods in this "Tale" came to a parting of the ways. Mere children, hardly old enough to remember, or to have cared what happened when the WELS severed fellowship ties with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1961. This reviewer lived through the tumultuous years before and after the break. Mark Braun did not. He was one of the seven year olds. For me it was a lived experience. For Mark Braun it is history. As a collector of facts and a chronicler of events, he could be objective and possibly dispassionate. It is doubtful that I or anyone else who experienced personally "the split between Wisconsin and Missouri" could be as objective as Braun is. That is one of the noteworthy and commendable features of this book.

The biographical blurb on the back cover of "A Tale" tells readers that Braun received his education from and now serves in the WELS. Obviously he is a member of the WELS. But if you didn’t know that up front, you would be hard pressed to know which side of the debate he takes. With few exceptions, he relates the myriad of facts of the case and lets readers come to their own conclusions.

The format of "A Tale" focuses on the several stages that precipitated Wisconsin's resolution to suspend fellowship with Missouri after three decades of controversy. The stages do not necessarily follow one another chronologically. They involve issues that overlapped and intensified until positions hardened and discussions between the synods reached an impasse.

Braun devotes the first chapter to an overview of how the two synods became sisters, but not twin sisters. Though they were united in their unequivocal commitment to the Scriptures as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, and to the Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord as a faithful exposition of the Scriptures, yet both synods "retained distinctive synodical personalities," Braun says. He might also have added that they also retained distinctive synodical idiosyncrasies which sometimes surfaced in the heat of debate and contributed to the complexity of the problems they were seeking to resolve. Braun does not identify the idiosyncrasies by name, but readers will readily discover what they are.

Succeeding chapters unfold the stages of the debate between the synods. The first stage involved several issues beginning with a disagreement about the doctrines of church and ministry. Following closely on the heels of that issue was a disagreement over Missouri's participation in the government military chaplaincy program. Shortly thereafter Missouri gave approval to participation of its members in Scouting programs injecting yet another issue into the debate - one that produced some rather emotional and acrimonious debate inside and outside the church, particularly at Princeton, Wisconsin. The first stage involved issues that were primarily practical. As the discussions continued and positions made clear, it became apparent that the controversy was not merely about the
application of Scriptural principles to practical matters. Doctrine was at stake, specifically the doctrine of fellowship, both church fellowship and prayer fellowship.

Discussions about the doctrine of fellowship mark the beginning of the second stage. During this period Missouri revised its teaching on fellowship without formally adopting the changes until after the split between the two synods. Though the changes did not become the public doctrine of Missouri until its adoption of "The Theology of Fellowship" document in 1965, Missouri had put the changes into practice long before, starting in the 1940s and culminating in the 1950s. During that time the controversy over fellowship became the burning issue between the two synods.

During the decade of the fifties, Wisconsin focused its efforts primarily on articulating clearly and upholding faithfully the Scriptural doctrine of fellowship as it had been formerly confessed and practiced by all of the members of the Synodical Conference, - ironically, a doctrine and practice that Wisconsin had learned under the tutelage of Missouri prior to the formation of the Conference. During that same decade another issue surfaced which, while it was never included in the specific reasons for Wisconsin's decision to terminate fellowship with Missouri, nevertheless complicated the intersynodical discussions and ultimately precluded the possibility of resolving the conflict on the basis of God's Word. That issue was the Word itself, specifically its inspiration and inerrancy, and the hermeneutics theologians employ to interpret Scripture rightly. This issue was never center stage in the controversy, but it was there in the wings making its presence felt.

A decade prior to the split, it was apparent that prominent seminary professors at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis were advocating theories on inspiration and inerrancy that reflected the neo-orthodox views of European theologians, and that contradicted the historic position of the Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference on the doctrine of the Word. Consistent with their revised view of Scripture, many of these same professors at St. Louis began to advocate the legitimacy of the historical-critical method of interpretation. Their theories precipitated an internal controversy within Missouri which was not resolved until the 1970s, - if then. Though it was not on the agendas for discussion in the intersynodical committee meetings, yet, as Braun says, "this issue nonetheless aggravated Wisconsin's misgivings about Missouri's theological position and contributed to the split."

"A Tale of Two Synods" concludes with a chronicle of observations offered by members of both synods in the aftermath of the split. Some are objective and helpful. Others are subjective and indicative of the emotional exhaustion experienced by those who had spent years in the forefront of the struggle to preserve the Synodical Conference, together with its biblical, confessional heritage. Because of his WELS connection, Braun also summarizes briefly how Wisconsin reacted to the split, picked up the pieces with a determination to move on, and then concentrated on proclaiming the gospel faithfully which it had fought so vigorously to preserve.

A key question in this tale of two synods is: who changed? Some might interpret that question to mean: who was at fault for the breakup of the Synodical Conference? The WELS and the ELS took the initiative to sever formal fellowship with Missouri and subsequently to withdraw from the Synodical Conference. But that doesn't really answer the question. The pertinent question is not who terminated fellowship and withdrew. The underlying question is still: who changed? In 1955 Missouri president, John Behnken, insisted that "the Missouri Synod has not changed its doctrinal position" (p.6). An unnamed editorialist in "American Lutheran" said that Missouri Synod members "resent and reject the charge that their synod has departed from the historical doctrinal position of
the Conference." And as late as 1964 President Behnken insisted that the differences between the synods lay "almost entirely in the area of practice rather than doctrine, in the application of Scriptural principles rather than in the principles themselves" (p.190). Twenty years later George Gude agreed with Behnken. In his Master's Thesis he wrote that the intersynodical dispute "was over application and practice rather than a denial of doctrine" (p.190).

Other Missouri spokesmen were more candid and objective in their assessments. Already in 1964 the synod's First Vice President, Roland Wiederanders admitted, "We have refused to state our changing theological position in open, honest, forthright, simple and clear words. Over and over again we have said that nothing was changing, but all the while we were aware of the changes taking place" (p.6). Ten years later LCA Gettysburg Seminary professor, Leigh Jordahl, a graduate of WELS's Northwestern College, wrote that whatever one may think of the doctrinal issues that divided the synods, it was "abundantly clear" that "Missouri had changed its position" (p.7). Concordia St. Louis Seminary professor, Arthur Repp, acknowledged the same thing in a Concordia Theological Monthly article titled "Changes in the Missouri Synod." (CTM, July-August, 1967).

We offer Braun's treatment of the question "who changed?" as an example of his intent to present all sides of a controverted point so that readers may come to their own conclusions (though we have purposely omitted a summary of Braun's coverage of Wisconsin's answer to the question of change). Braun succeeds admirably in treating all of the issues between the two synods in the same factual way. Nowhere in the book does the author exhibit a triumphalistic spirit. He refuses to be a cheerleader for the WELS. When criticism of the WELS is warranted, he offers it.

To assimilate, sort out, assess and then relate several decades of a complex series of events is a monumental task. Eighty pages of bibliography in "A Tale" is testimony to that. The bibliography contains seven and a half pages of Archival Material; ten pages of Books; five pages of Minutes, Proceedings and Reports; fifty six pages of Periodicals and Articles; three pages of Theses and Dissertations. In addition Braun had access to pastors' "files bulging with yellowed copies of conference papers, folders filled with personal and professional correspondence." He also received 87 responses to a questionnaire he sent to 105 WELS pastors. Thirty eight of these responses were referenced in footnotes in the book's concluding chapter. He conducted five personal interviews with pastors and professors (including one with this reviewer) who lived and served during the years of the controversy prior to the split. The 350 pages of text offer 1136 footnotes which not only testify to the extensiveness of Braun's research, but also add interest and insight into the events and personalities of those who occupied the stage during that era of American Lutheran church history.

One feature missing from the book is an index. If the book is reprinted at some future date, we hope the publishers will include an index of names and events for the benefit of future readers who use "A Tale" as a reference book. And while they are reediting the book, a number of typos need correcting, most of which involve misspelled names. The church owes Dr. Braun a debt of gratitude for his factual and objective retelling of an important chapter in the history and the travails of confessional Lutheranism.

Reviewed by Dr. John E. Bauer

Bookstore shelves seem to be filled with books about leadership. This is also true in many Christian bookstores. Most of these volumes, especially those dealing with leadership in the church, tend to be either recitations of fairly simplistic rules and guidelines or contrived triumphalistic exhortations from Scripture. It is a rarity to find high quality material which is both biblically and theoretically sound. This book is one of the exceptions.

Written prior to the author’s death in 1993, *Understanding Leadership* was reprinted in 2003 and remains a timely volume for serious church leaders. Although Mr. Marshall was for years a consultant to businesses and organizations in addition to churches, he solidly grounds his discussion of leadership in a New Testament model of servant leadership. This model not only integrates the customary constructs of vision, timing, and goal setting, it also recognizes the tantalizing temptations provided by power, status, and authority – three attributes most often accompanying a leadership role. Rather than examine these forces from a utilitarian perspective, Mr. Marshall spends a good portion of this book describing the possible sinful uses of power, status, and authority and the only means by which these two forces can be redeemed for godly use. Grounding his model of servant-leadership in the theology of the cross, he makes it abundantly clear that Christian leadership in any organization can be exercised only as a joyful response to the love God shows to sinners through the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus.

With this understanding of servant-leadership, the reader is then able to appreciate all the more Mr. Marshall’s chapters dealing with handling criticism, exercising loving authority, coping with stress, establishing meaningful relationships, and building trust among others. These are possible because the Christian leader knows that his calling as a leader is to honor God and to love others. The church is effectively led, the business is well run, and the organization is harmoniously directed when the leader strives to serve God and thank him for his mercy through his leadership role. This book is highly recommended for pastors and lay people who hold positions of leadership in the church. It also has much to say to Christians in business and public service. It demonstrates not only how the seductive side of leadership can avoided, but shows how leadership and its associated power, status, and authority can be redirected in loving service to God and others.

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Reviewed by Dr. John E. Bauer

George Barna is the founder and president of the Barna Research Group, a market research firm that has specialized in keeping a track of America’s religious vital signs. He is the author of over 30 books and lectures widely on the subject of Christian leadership. He and his colleagues have also developed an online instrument, the Christian Leader Profile, which allows users to evaluate their own leadership qualities on 13 different dimensions.

This book is the result of years of research into leader effectiveness, along with direct involvement with corporate and church leaders around the country. The book is organized in a
fashion that is similar to other Barna books. Each chapter begins with an anecdote – either real or imagined – which sets the stage for the content of the chapter.

To understand Mr. Barna’s perspectives on leadership, one must realize that there are several core beliefs which form the foundation of his thoughts. First, Christians must be called by God to be leaders. To be sure, there are many non-believing leaders in the world, but if Christians are to lead, they must believe they are called by God to lead. Second, those who are called into leadership must conform their goals and vision for the future of their organization to the vision God has for them. Mr. Barna’s Reformed roots emerge when he exhorts his readers to honor and serve God by becoming obedient to God’s will and his vision for their lives. Obedience to the Gospel tends to make it into a law, rather than a free response to God’s love. Nevertheless, discerning Christian readers can gain much from Mr. Barna’s book.

Unlike other authors on leadership, Barna holds to a more narrow definition of leadership. Unlike Maxwell (see review which follows) Barna does not agree that leadership is merely “influence” - not that effective leaders don’t have influence. Nor is leadership to be equated with management, control, power, or popularity. Barna defines leadership as:

... The process of motivating, mobilizing, resourcing, and directing people to passionately and strategically pursue a vision from God that a group jointly embraces. (p7)

This definition suits his purposes well, especially as he writes to those who hold or aspire to hold positions of leadership. In determining whether or not one has a divine call to leadership, Barna urges readers to determine their spiritual gifts, identify God’s vision for them, discern what they are passionate about, examine their life experiences that may be seen to have led them to a particular position of leadership, and ask those who know them best.

Probably the best contribution this book makes is its assertion that not every type of leader can be effective in any of an organization’s stages of organizational development. Although not scientifically derived, the four leadership styles are descriptive of general categories that illustrate how personality types can be applied to the leadership role. The four types are: the directing leader, the strategic leader, the team-building leader, and the operational leader. None of the types is better or worse than the others. Barna makes it clear that the ideal organizational setting is one in which the senior management team is balanced and has individuals with each of the types. He also paints fairly accurate picture of the needs each of the types must have met in order to be effective. Finally, not every type is appropriate for the different stages in an organization’s life cycle. The stages are: conception, infancy, expansion, balance, stagnation, and disability. For example, a directing leader might be very effective in a very young developing organization, but would face all kinds of frustration in one that is balanced or stagnant.

Another significant contribution of this book is its emphasis on Christian character as a prerequisite of leadership. In a manner similar to that of Tom Marshall, Barna cautions against the seductive side of leadership, namely, power, control, and status. He is correct in reminding Christian leaders that they are first and foremost Christians, that is, redeemed children of God who seek to remain in Christ. This happens only when believers regularly avail themselves of the means of grace in word and sacrament. Prayer, worship, devotional study, and earnest Bible study are the prerequisites. As Barna exclaims: “This then, is one of the paradoxes of Christian leadership: The excellence of your leadership depends more on the quality of your relationship
with God than on the application of the gifts and resources he has given to you for success in leading people” (p. 156).

Although not the most substantive treatment of the subject, Barna’s book is of considerable value for Christian leaders and provides a quick and easy read. Those who take the time to answer the questions posed at the end of each chapter will find an excellent opportunity to evaluate themselves as Christian leaders.


Reviewed by Dr. John E. Bauer

One of the most popular and widely read experts on leadership, John Maxwell speaks to hundreds of thousands of people each year in business, the military, churches and sports organizations. He is the author of more than thirty books including Developing the Leader Within You, and Developing the Leaders Around You. He is also the founder of several organizations, including Maximum Impact, dedicated to helping people reach their leadership potential. All this from someone who started out as a preacher in a small rural Indiana church. As with many entrepreneurially inclined individuals, Maxwell has been able to parlay his dynamic speaking style and his charismatic presentation of basic principles into a multifaceted business which includes not only huge book sales, but the development and marketing of leadership assessment tools, training materials, and a comprehensive curriculum – all built around the 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership.

As popular as his books and speeches may be, it should be pointed out that this book and others by Maxwell are more illustrative and motivational than they are instructive. Anyone who writes five books that include laundry lists in their titles (e.g., The 17 Essential Qualities of a Team Player, The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork, The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader, etc.) is someone who knows how to exploit a writing gimmick in order to get together enough material for a book. Never mind the fact that these lists of disparate principles, rules, laws, qualities, etc. may conflict or stand in no relation to the others. Never mind the fact that Mr. Maxwell can’t make them adhere into a coherent theory of leadership. Never mind the fact that his laws are built upon a questionable definition of leadership (The Law of Influence, Chapter 2) the true measure of which is “influence – nothing more, nothing less.” (p.11)

In spite of its superficiality, this book has been immensely popular, selling more than a million copies and having resided on the New York Times Business Week best seller lists. For business, military, non-profit, and church leaders, this is a quick and inspirational read. The average chapter is only twelve pages long and contains anecdotes and illustrations to support the “law” being described. This makes not only for easy reading, but provides a formula that permits Mr. Maxwell to crank out similar books in rapid succession. The reader should always be mindful that Mr. Maxwell is first and foremost in the business of selling leadership training. Were a book of this nature to be written by an academic scholar of leadership, it would never pass the scrutiny of peers. But because The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership appeals to those who believe our organizations and institutions are where they are because of either effective or ineffective leadership, its continued popularity is virtually assured.