

Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod: A Conflict That Changed American Christianity, by James C. Burkee, Fortress Press, 2011. Reviewed by Rev. Rolf D. Preus

Burkee's book contains a wealth of information, but if the reader is looking for an objective recounting of the events surrounding the "Battle for the Bible" in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod during the fifties through the seventies, he will be disappointed. Despite Martin Marty's suggestion in the forward that Burkee offers something different and more "fair-minded" than previous partisan efforts, Burkee's book presents two dimensional caricatures of such main actors as Jack Preus and Herman Otten and fails to demonstrate an understanding of how issues, personalities, and events interacted with each other during this most significant time in our recent history.

Burkee's thesis is that a relatively small clique of ideologically driven clergymen, with the help of a few wealthy rightwing laymen, pushed the Missouri Synod to the right as part of a larger cultural/political movement in the same direction. Burkee links and likens Herman Otten to Joseph McCarthy and Jack Preus to Richard Nixon. "Richard Nixon had his plumbers and so did Jack Preus." (p 117) This fanciful thesis is clumsily imposed throughout his book, making it an extended cheap shot directed at the men who during the nineteen sixties and seventies were most articulate in defending the historic teaching of the LCMS on the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures. Seeking a politico-cultural explanation of Missouri's civil war, Burkee largely ignores the theological sources of the debate.

The central weakness of his book, evident throughout, is Burkee's apparent ignorance of the theological issues underlying the synodical controversy. He will not acknowledge the grassroots uprising of the conservative laity of the Missouri Synod against the liberal theology emanating from the St. Louis seminary. The debate about the Bible was certainly not limited to the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. It was taking place throughout the synod. When young graduates of the St. Louis seminary went out into the parish calling into question such things as the historicity of Adam and Eve, they provoked a reaction. Herman Otten didn't create this reaction. He didn't even lead it. He was a part of it. He was an important part of it. But he was not, as Burkee claims, "the single most influential conservative in the synod before 1969." (page 7)

Imposing a thesis on the facts is not so hard to do, but it tends to distort the facts. Burkee begins by magnifying Otten's role in the controversy. Then he attributes to Missouri Synod conservatives at large the various political and cultural concerns Otten

expressed in his newspaper, *Lutheran News*, later *Christian News*. Otten's eclectic interests thus become part and parcel of the conservative movement in the Missouri Synod. Burkee writes of conservatives who were "frightened" by such things as the civil rights movement, riots, black radicalism, and the welfare state. This is the context within which he suggests we understand the Missouri Synod controversy.

Burkee refuses to confront honestly the grassroots lay reaction against the theological liberalism ascendant at the St. Louis seminary in the sixties and early seventies. He points to the fundraising difficulties of the conservative magazine *Affirm* as evidence of a lack of widespread support for *Affirm's* goals (page 180). If anything, those difficulties illustrate the lack of political sophistication on the part of those men to whom Burkee attributes just that!

Burkee accuses the conservatives of a "literalistic view of the Bible" (page 14). That is a false charge. But it has long been a favored trash-talking technique designed to discredit without serious argument. And Burkee engages in no serious theological argument. He can hardly deny that the vast majority of the LCMS was staunchly supportive of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. This is why the "moderates" did not usually reject biblical inerrancy outright but consistently changed the subject whenever the subject came up and argued that it's the wrong question to ask. Piepkorn's "What Does Inerrancy Mean?" (CTM, Vol. XXXVI, Sept. 1965) is a good example of this. After quibbling over the pedigree of the term "inerrancy" and amassing dozens of alleged errors in the Bible, Piepkorn concludes by arguing that seminary professors should neither confirm nor deny biblical inerrancy but rather explain to those who ask where they stand on it that the term is "inadequate" as a theological term. Burkee includes Piepkorn's essay in his bibliography and refers to it, saying: "Arthur Carl Piepkorn challenged the synod's growing infatuation with 'inerrancy'" (page 25). But there was no "growing infatuation with 'inerrancy'" within the LCMS. The LCMS had always been committed to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

No one in the LCMS during the Battle for the Bible made more of a scholarly contribution to the issue of biblical inspiration and inerrancy than Robert Preus. Burkee gives no indication that he read anything Robert Preus ever wrote on the subject. Robert Preus is not listed in his bibliography (though a couple of collections of essays to which he contributed are included). Burkee says relatively little about Robert Preus, limiting himself mostly to the repetition of malicious judgments against him. He quotes Ralph Bohlmann as remembering that Robert Preus was the chief politician in the synod. This is an amazing judgment and contrary to the consensus among mutual friends of both men that Robert Preus was first and last a theologian and motivated by theological concerns.

Errors of fact abound in this book. Since Robert Preus was my father I will address a few errors concerning him. Some errors are minor. Burkee identifies Robert Preus as a professor in the ELS (page 23) when he was called to teach at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He wasn't. He served in that synod as a pastor of congregations in North Dakota, Massachusetts (where I was born) and Minnesota, but never as a professor.

Burkee repeatedly asserts that Robert was Jack's older brother. One wonders where he got such an idea. Jack was over four years older than Robert.

Burkee reports as fact that Jack, who was one of four electors who voted to elect Robert Preus president of Concordia Theological Seminary, was frustrated by Robert's decision to accept the position. (page 162) Checking out his footnote one learns that his source for such a bizarre assertion is none other than Waldo Werning! This is the same Waldo Werning that Burkee claims "remained [Jack] Preus's close advisor" (page 106) after his election as president of the LCMS.

Such bald assertions reveal a naïveté that is simply breathtaking. No one who knew both Jack Preus and Waldo Werning would believe that Waldo was a "close advisor" to Jack after Jack became president of the LCMS. I'm quite sure that Waldo wanted to be Jack's advisor. I'm just as sure that Jack did not want to be advised by him. But neither did he want to antagonize him.

Burkee's reliance on Waldo Werning leads him into error. He reports correctly that Jack Preus was opposed to *Affirm* issuing a list of preferred candidates for synodical office in 1977. He incorrectly assumes that Robert was in charge of whether or not there would be a list of preferred candidates published by *Affirm* in 1977. Noting that Jack Preus was elected, he concludes: "The *Affirm* list went out, conservatives again dominated, and Jack was again elected. Jack was now in the uncomfortable position of being beholden to his brother." (page 164)

Had Burkee bothered to do his homework, he would have learned that *Affirm* did not endorse Jack Preus as president in 1977. It listed both Jack Preus and Walter A. Maier as candidates and did not recommend one over the other. Robert Preus personally favored his brother over Walter A. Maier. He thought he was better qualified. But his preference was not adopted by those who prepared the preferred candidates list.

Burkee accuses Robert Preus of "duplicity" (page 178) in connection with a confusion of two letters he wrote, one to Ralph Bohlmann and the other to Herman Otten. The letters were put into the wrong envelopes and Bohlmann received the letter intended for

Otten. Burkee never does explain what is duplicitous about an honest mistake. He writes as if providing information to a newspaper editor is wrong. Is it also wrong to provide information to a man writing a book about power politics in the LCMS? Having read Burkee's book and knowing my father, I am confident that the information Robert Preus provided to Herman Otten was more reliable than the information upon which Burkee bases much of his book.

Burkee's theological gaffes are at times somewhat shocking, as when, in reference to the Missouri Synod, he speaks of "the church's historic doctrinal emphasis on unconditional obedience to the government" (page 26). The LCMS has never taught unconditional obedience to the government. Such a teaching is not only in direct conflict with the Holy Scriptures, it is contradicted by officially adopted catechisms of the Synod. It is difficult to imagine any LCMS pastor teaching such a thing. Nevertheless, Burkee regards it as an "historic doctrinal emphasis."

Burkee's efforts to link the LCMS theological debate about the Bible to the social and political issues of the day frequently display his ignorance of basic theological issues that were under debate at the time. For example, conservatives did not criticize the social gospel because they did not believe that the love of Christ could be expressed by us in our actions. They criticized the claim that the gospel could be proclaimed by actions and not words. Burkee makes a mess of this. Addressing Herman Otten's criticism of the "Social Gospel," Burkee asserts: "To Otten and his followers, one could not demonstrate the love of Christ through actions; it had to be spoken (apparently, spoken only)." (page 59) That's not so. Of course the love of Christ can be demonstrated through actions and Herman Otten has never suggested otherwise. The gospel of Christ, however, which reveals his love for us (the love that we demonstrate by our actions) is a teaching. It is communicated in words that contain a cognitive message. It is the message of God's love for us in Christ who suffered and died and took away the sin of the world. This message cannot be proclaimed without words that speak of who Christ is and what he has done for us sinners. That was Otten's theological concern with the social gospel, and not his only, but the concern of the vast majority of the Missouri Synod. Neither social nor political action nor our individual acts of Christian charity constitute proclaiming the gospel. Burkee gives no indication that he understands this theological concern.

Burkee repeatedly asserts highly partisan opinions as fact. The status and role of synodically adopted doctrinal statements was a part of the debate of those days with both sides claiming the Lutheran high ground in their argument. Burkee asserts as fact Fred Danker's opinion that ". . . the 1959 San Francisco convention gave [The Brief Statement] 'status next to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.'" One needs to

look up the footnote to see that he is quoting Fred Danker's, No Room in the Brotherhood. Burkee is apparently unaware that he is passing off a partisan accusation of serious theological import as an uncontroversial observation.

Probably the most disappointing feature of the book is Burkee's utter disregard for the Eighth Commandment. In his introduction he says of Jack Preus: "That Preus was a master of duplicity is the one point on which nearly all those I interviewed (who were willing to talk) agreed." (page 9) Does it not occur to Burkee that when his sources are united in condemning a man as duplicitous he might possibly wish to acquire more sources? Perhaps men who defended, spoke well of, and put the best construction on everything Jack Preus did? There is a fine line between duplicity and diplomacy.

Furthermore, Burkee's decision to discard the norm of Christian charity and to embrace a shallow caricature of Jack Preus prevents him from understanding what he is writing about. He evidences not just theological ignorance, but political ignorance as well. Burkee imagines that the men who elected Jack Preus in 1969, by withdrawing their support in 1981, "dethroned" (page 10) him. Nonsense! Once the LCMS had reaffirmed her historic teaching on inerrancy and reclaimed her authority over the seminary in St. Louis, the church-political expression of the conservative movement in the LCMS became increasingly irrelevant. Jack Preus would have easily won reelection had he run for a fourth term. Burkee's argument to the contrary, based on interviews with score-settlers, flies in the face of the facts. The facts are that theology drove the controversy and politics followed theology. Once the "Battle for the Bible" had been won, the political power of both *Affirm* and *Christian News* diminished. They were deemed no longer necessary. Burkee has matters precisely backwards.

This brings us back to the central weakness of this book. I am not suggesting that only a seminary trained theologian can write a book of history that chronicles a theological debate. But a degree of familiarity with the theological debate is necessary. Understanding the strength of theological arguments is vital. Knowing the major characters as theologians is indispensable.

When I was sophomore at Concordia Lutheran Junior College in Ann Arbor, Michigan (1972-73), I read a book that Jack Preus had just written in 1971 entitled, It Is Written. It's a good book. It was well written and easy to understand. It clearly sets forth what the Lord Jesus says about the Bible. It was a book of theology, not politics, written by a Lutheran theologian who also happened to be the president of the LCMS at the time. I recommend the book. If it's out of print, CPH should republish it. It's not listed in Burkee's bibliography. Apparently, Burkee hasn't read it. He should.

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