



Issues, Etc.TM
Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio

TRANSCRIPT

Rev. Todd Wilken, Host

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"President Gerald Kieschnick's Proposed Restructuring of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Part 1"

Guest:
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WILKEN: Welcome back to Issues, Etc. Dr. Ken Schurb joins us. The remainder of the program is dedicated—not the remainder of the entire program, the remainder of this first hour—is dedicated to a discussion of restructuring one of the last confessional Lutheran church bodies in the United States. You know, Lutherans have been in the United States since its very beginning. The east coast Lutherans, a lot of them, their legacy has not been so good. Early compromise on what the Lutheran

Reformation was all about. And then came several other waves of Lutheran immigrants to the United States, and as a result of one of those immigrations we have the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It's not the largest Lutheran church body in northern America, but it may be the largest confessional Lutheran church body.

But what about its future? There's a proposed restructuring and some people might say it's just moving deck chairs

around on the ship, but it may be more than that. We're going to discuss it with Dr. Ken Schurb here for the next forty-five minutes of Issues, Etc., and you should feel free to join the discussion as well. We're coming to you live this Thursday, August the twenty-eighth. Our toll-free number: 1-877-623-MY-IE. You can also email us right here in the studio: talkback@issuesetc.org.

Dr. Ken Schurb is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He formerly served as an assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Ken, welcome back.

SCHURB: Hi, Todd. We're commemorating St. Augustine today. And I don't mean to send some sort of a hidden message by pointing that out with regard to the structure of the Missouri Synod. It's just that we happen to be commemorating Augustine.

WILKEN: We'll be talking about him in about forty minutes here too.

SCHURB: There you go.

WILKEN: Why should the average layperson, really, why should the average layperson care one wit about the restructuring of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod?

SCHURB: Well, if you're a layperson in a congregation of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I guess you'd have the reason to care the most. You might be kind of an interested observer otherwise. But if you're a layperson in one of those congregations, I'd say the structure is going to make a difference in how the Gospel is proclaimed, even maybe how the Gospel is understood.

WILKEN: Explain that last part.

SCHURB: Well, the church is a passive receiver, first of all, of the grace and the gifts of Christ—forgiveness, life, and

salvation—as He delivers them in Word and Sacrament. And then the church responds to God by telling the Good News to people all around, close at hand and all the way around the world. How you think of the church as the receiver of God's gifts and as the agent for God's activity in the world can't help but reflect how you think on that Gospel message. And I don't think that matters of structure need necessarily be entirely neutral. In theory they could be. But I don't think these matters of structure are entirely neutral as regards all that.

WILKEN: Theologically neutral, you mean.

SCHURB: Yeah.

WILKEN: Okay, what is a "synod" and what should the Synod be doing? What is its basic *raison d'être*?

SCHURB: Well, that's actually a question that I would like to put to the Task Force. Our listeners, even those who aren't members of Missouri Synod churches may not be aware that this Task Force on Synod, Structure, and Governance put out a report about a week ago now. It is only six pages in length. It's kind of a bare bones presentation of certain possibilities and proposals for the future of the way the Synod is organized. And I think that that's a question that I would like to see more discussion from the Task Force about. What should the Synod be doing? I wonder, you know, for example, just looking this set of proposals, which comes with very little rationale accompanying it, in just six pages, if the idea is to support the same level of activity as we have going on at present. Or is the Task Force envisioning kind of cutting some things out and kind of going "leaner and meaner" with the organization of the Synod at the national level? Or are we talking about expanding and taking on more functions? It's just not clear what this structure is trying to do, how many balls this thing needs to keep in the air.

WILKEN: So is one of the potential problems here that these proposals for restructuring, such as they are, and they're kind of all over the map, but these proposals either gloss over or assume or fail to consider in the first place that fundamental question, which is: "What is a synod of congregations, and what does it exist for?"

SCHURB: Well, I don't want to speak for the Task Force. I simply point out that the Task Force really has not yet spoken for itself with regard to this question: "What's the level of activity we're trying to support here?"

WILKEN: Okay, then let's ask the question historically, because we're talking here about a church body that was founded with all sorts of rationale. I mean it was all rationale when it began. Why does it exist? Why should it exist?

SCHURB: Well, the Synod was formed in 1847, at a time when there were no real organized structures and no real potential for there to be any elaborate structure at that time. But this they knew: they wanted to cling to the confession of God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions, and so they wanted to support one another in the promotion of the unity of the true faith and a united defense against schism and sectarianism. That was the object for which the Synod was formed. Now very quickly after that was added: doing things together that could not be done so well by any single congregation acting alone or perhaps any small grouping. The obvious thing that came to the fore right away the training of pastors and almost from day one the Synod had two seminaries that it was owning and operating, one in St. Louis and one in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Still today the Synod has those same two seminaries.

As time went by the activities that the Synod carried on in behalf of its congregations grew, and they were mostly in the form of mission. And at one time, interestingly

enough, the Synod had both a board for World Missions, or Foreign Missions as it was called at the time, and a board for what was called Home Missions, that is, missions within the United States. And so mission activity was another thing that, very reasonably so, they deemed they could do better together than they could acting alone.

WILKEN: Okay, you just emphasized a little prepositional phrase that I'd like you, before our time runs out heading into our first break, to explain. You said service "in behalf of." As opposed to what, Ken?

SCHURB: Well, the thing that has come to fore more and more particularly in the twentieth century, and probably even more so still in the second half of the twentieth century, has been service "in support of" congregations. The Synod directly providing help to churches in the areas, say, of Christian education or stewardship or evangelism, youth ministry. The list can go on and on.

WILKEN: Programs.

SCHURB: Maybe programs. Very often they have been programs. They need not be. It could be just, you know, workshops that you come to and you learn more about something. But the Synod in its various manifestations, either at the national level or at the district level, trying to help congregations and in that sense work "in support of" congregations.

WILKEN: Why is the distinction—"service in behalf of," working together to do what we couldn't do individually, and working – what did you say – "in service of"?

SCHURB: "In support of."

WILKEN: "In support of." Why is that distinction important to make?

SCHURB: Well, it's a critical distinction as you look at this set of proposals, because

this set of proposals is very heavy on the service “in support of” congregations. In fact, by just sort of sheer weight in the number of mentions and things like that, this is the thing that seemingly this Task Force has been most concerned with and therefore relatively less concerned with the more traditional service “in behalf of” congregations. And not mentioned a great deal, although it’s not absent here, is the original purpose for the foundation of the Synod, which is the conservation of the unity of the true faith.

WILKEN: Does it – could it represent a reorientation of the fundamental reason for the Synod to exist, that is, away from unity, conserving and promoting the unity of doctrine, and along with that, of course, would come some kind of doctrinal supervision?

SCHURB: Time and resources are finite, and I think this is a question that the Synod has had to ask itself – probably a lot of church bodies have had to ask themselves this very same question in recent years – particularly as you have more and more opportunities that kind of arise to do things “in support of” congregations. Are you kind of moving from one original purpose more and more in the direction of another? And how many, as I said before, how many balls can you keep in the air effectively? At what point to you do so much of the new thing that you’re really not able to do much of the old thing?

WILKEN: Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. He’s pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He formerly served as an assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We’re talking about the Blue Ribbon Task Force on – its proposals on – the restructuring and governance of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the largest confessional Lutheran church body in the United States. When we come back we’ll continue our

conversation, and you should feel free to join it. We’re coming to you live this Thursday, August the twenty-eighth. 1-877-623-MY-IE. Or you can email us: talkback@issuesetc.org. After about half hour more of conversation with Dr. Ken Schurb, second hour of the program, we’ll talk about St. Augustine, fifth century bishop and theologian. Dr. Thomas von Hagel will be our guest. And we’ll also discuss the active and the passive obedience of our Savior Jesus Christ. Dr. John Saleska will be our guest.

Yeah, the military talks about something called “mission creep.” Starts out doing one thing; end up doing something completely different. You may even forget what you were there for in the first place.

[Break]

WILKEN: Welcome back to Issues, Etc. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. We’re talking about the Blue Ribbon Task Force on restructuring the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Another twenty-five minutes left in our conversation. Feel free to join it. 1-877-623-MY-IE, or talkback@issuesetc.org.

We were talking about the essential reason, that reason without which there’s no other reasons necessary for a synod, particularly the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, to exist, and that is to conserve and promote the unity of the faith, and along with it, of course, goes the necessary task of doctrinal supervision. Ken, how would you assess the current state of these two great tasks of a synod gathered together in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today? Is it in a state that the founders would have envisioned?

SCHURB: Well, the Synod is kind of troubled by the acids of modernity and now even post-modernity. It’s a national church body. There’s 2.4 or 5 million people in over 6000 congregations in every state in the

union, even some in Canada. And so maintaining doctrinal unity over that big a territory is going to be a challenge always. That was one of the reasons why the Synod first divided itself into districts. In fact, I think I'll make a stronger statement. That was *the* reason why the Synod divided itself into districts. A few years after it was founded, in 1854, what seven years after the Synod was formed, they created districts. And they created four districts at first – now there are thirty-five – in order to have four district presidents. There was nothing else going on at the district level, no other activities in behalf of congregations, in support of congregations except this: having district presidents who could assist the president of the national synod, the general body, in visiting congregations and helping them in their confession of the true faith.

WILKEN: So, why is it important to maintain doctrinal unity? Why is not just important, absolutely essential and necessary, even in 6000 congregations or 2.4 million, if that's the true number, people?

SCHURB: Every book in the New Testament save one, and I don't remember what the one exception is, says, Beware of false teaching, Guard the doctrine, Hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints, in the words of the epistle Jude. Or like St. Paul writing to the Ephesians: Don't be blown around by every wind of doctrine. Come to a maturity in Christ through being fed by His Word and being nurtured on God's own teaching. So it's got to be a priority for the church. Jesus gave the commission to make disciples by baptizing and teaching all things that I have commanded you. So it's got to be a priority for the church in any age. And, as we've been saying, it was one of the original reasons for the formation of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Now I'll tell you a little interesting historical anecdote. In the '50s, about fifty years ago

now, the Synod grew concerned that they had at that time thirty-two districts and they were afraid they'd get a bunch more and they didn't want to. They wanted to try to retard the seeming impulse toward creating a bunch of new districts. And the basic reason at the time that they were worried about that trend is they were wondering how do you, in fact, hold to this determination to maintain on a national scale unity of doctrine and continue that fight against schism and sectarianism if you've got a bunch of really small jurisdictions. And that's an issue that I think we need to give some thought to at least today. At the time the proposals in order to sort of resist a splintering further of districts into say having two where there was once one, or maybe having three where there was once one, was to strengthen the structure within the district, strengthen the circuits into which the district is divided, get more people involved, but also provide more services at the district level. And so there was a real expansion in the '50s and '60s of this provision of services in support of congregations at the district level.

WILKEN: Did we at that time already begin to see the main purpose for congregations gathering together into a synod being pushed down the list of priorities, not off the list, but down the list?

SCHURB: I think in 20-20 hindsight that's an excellent question to ask. You know, were we already then, ironically, in the name of maintaining unity of doctrine giving the priority on doctrine less and less of a spotlight? Because, again, there's only so much energy, there's only so much time, there's only so many resources. And, you know, you can't do everything at once.

WILKEN: Another of the proposals – and it has to do with representation, voting representation – from the Blue Ribbon Task Force seems to, at least in my mind, rub up against and perhaps even chip away at and

erode the notion that the individual congregation is “church” in its locality. It is the church in its locality, an essentially congregational understanding of what makes the church the church, namely, its marks, the preaching of Christ in its purity and the administration of the sacraments according to Christ’s institution. Do you see the same thing?

SCHURB: Yeah, well, as I continue to raise questions in my own mind about this task force report, I note that there’s kind of a theme here that we want to do things to make congregations better equipped for their mission, more effective in their mission, etc. And I think that’s always a question that could be asked. You know, is this in fact happening? Do these proposals, these particular proposals, do that? I mean that kind of is the self-proclaimed goal, as it were, of the task force. It would also be interesting to know, well, what alternatives are there? What kinds of things did the task force consider and reject? Why are these proposals being brought forth better than whatever else, either what exists now or what could exist? But getting back to your point there. Yes, there is a great stress on congregations here. The Task Force even says that it wants to underscore the essentially congregational character of the Synod. Now this really, what I’m about to say, Todd, connects back to the very first question that you asked, and that is why should people even care. I think these proposals for restructuring do raise some questions about what kind of an organization the Task Force is envisioning and what kinds of understandings, yes, even theological understandings, animate the thinking of the Task Force.

I’ll give you a concrete example here of a proposal that they’re making. At district conventions, and again the Synod today has thirty-five districts, most of which are defined geographically, and at district conventions right now each congregation,

however large or small, has two votes. One of those votes must be cast by the pastor of the congregation, or a pastor of the congregation if it’s got more than one. The other has to be cast by a lay member of the congregation. Now the proposal that the Task Force is bringing is that at district conventions, yeah, by and large congregations would have two votes. Although one of those votes could be cast by a rostered member of the Synod who is not a pastor, such as a Lutheran school teacher or a Deaconess or a Director of Christian Education, something like that. And if the congregation is really big, if it’s got over 750 members, then there’s the possibility that it could have still more delegates. If it’s got as many as, say, about 1100, then it would get an extra two delegates. And if it’s got as many as, say, 1500 communicant members, then there’d be an extra two delegates where that came from. And so forth.

Now what this does is it starts granting the franchise in the Synod at the district level to classes of church workers and maybe even more interestingly to individual people or at least bigger groups of individual people. The franchise is no longer being granted strictly on the premise of congregations.

Now again there is a theological rationale, if not a theologically binding command, from the Lord to structure this way. And that is no congregation has more or less of Christ than any other. Where His Word is proclaimed and where His Sacraments are administered, there is the Church and there is Christ in His forgiving fullness. And no church has more or less of Him, be it 50 members, 500 members, 5000 members, whatever you may have. This now is a fundamental change in the way congregations are represented, and I wonder if it’s not a fundamental change in the way the Synod is conceived.

WILKEN: So in theory, and I think your last point bears serious consideration, but in theory if there were for instance in a small district of maybe a hundred congregations a single congregation – let’s just call it Joel Osteen’s Lutheran Church [laughter from guest] – where he had....

SCHURB: That’s kind of an oxymoron, Todd.

WILKEN: Well, yes, of course it is. But where he could count, and this doesn’t exist, but in theory, where he could count 50,000 members, he would have enough votes at his district convention from his own congregation to out vote perhaps the rest of the entire district.

SCHURB: I don’t do math that well right in my head, but I...

WILKEN: Well, neither do I, but I’m saying that if one existed, one congregation could essentially run the vote on any particular issue at a district level there.

SCHURB: If it were big enough.

WILKEN: All right, when we come back, we’re going to talk for ten more minutes with Dr. Ken Schurb about the Blue Ribbon Task Force on the Structure and Governance of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I’m Todd Wilken. Stay tuned.

[Break]

WILKEN: Welcome back to Issues, Etc. I’m Todd Wilken. Dr. Ken Schurb is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri, formerly served as an assistant to the president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We’re talking about the proposals in the Blue Ribbon Task Force on the restructure and governance of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the largest confessional Lutheran church body in North America. You can join us for the next ten minutes before we begin hour two of the

program. 1-877-623-MYIE, or talkback@issuesetc.org.

All right, Ken, there’s another concern that I want to bring to you, and it has to do with I can’t find a better term than “consolidation of authority or of power or of decision-making ability. What are some of the proposals that the Blue Ribbon Task Force either overtly or subtly make regarding where power ought to be consolidated?

SCHURB: Well, Todd, I’m going to do something that I never have done with you before in one of these interviews, but I’m going to decline the question. Could I keep talking about what we were talking about before the break?

WILKEN: Well, as long as we get to come back to that question [laughter from guest], most certainly you can continue to answer previous questions.

SCHURB: I, you know, I was not quite finished, and I think it’s an important thing actually to add in here, especially for Lutherans. Because unlike other churches, Lutherans do not recognize any particular divinely mandated form of church polity. Unlike Roman Catholics, we don’t think you have to have a pope. Unlike Episcopalians, we don’t think you have to have bishops. Unlike certain Calvinists and those in the Calvinist stream of church history, we don’t think you have to be run by a presbytery. There’s all sorts of possibilities for church government. And somebody might well shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, okay, then, one is pretty much interchangeable with another.” In other words, it’s all *adiaphora*, which means neither commanded nor forbidden by God. And that is true if that’s the level at which the question is asked.

At the same time there are certain practices that are *adiaphorous*, that is to say, neither commanded nor forbidden by God that do not have any theological necessity attaching

to them or else they wouldn't be *adiaphorous*. However, they may have an underlying theological rhyme and reason anyway. My favorite example of this is the worship of Christians on Sunday. The Missouri Synod, along with a lot of other Lutherans in the nineteenth century, fought very hard to maintain the principle that no, you don't have to worship on Sunday; it's not a divinely instituted worship day, God never makes that incumbent upon His people in the New Testament. However, it would be just completely vain and ridiculous to say that there is no theological rhyme or reason for why Christians already in the first century started worshipping on Sundays, forsaking the Jewish worship on Saturday. There is a theological reason, of course. Christ rose from the dead on Easter.

Now let me try to connect that analogously to the point we were making before the break. No, there's no divine command that says, "Here's the way you have to be represented at a convention of the Missouri Synod or one of its districts." Obviously not. But there is a theological rhyme and reason to the way that the representation is currently determined at the district convention. That is to say each congregation has two votes; no congregation has more voting strength or less because of its relative size. And that theological rhyme and reason is, as I said, that no congregation has more or less of Christ and His forgiveness than any other. And so that's a point I think really needs to be underscored, and I haven't forgotten your other question here...

WILKEN: Well, let me add one thing before you answer the question I asked before. My principle has always been, when it comes to things like *adiaphora*, just because there's more than one right way to do something in Christian freedom doesn't mean there isn't a wrong way.

SCHURB: Well, and you see, the question I would have for the Task Force, and believe me a lot of I've got here are questions. They've given us six pages so far, and I'm sure after years of work they've got a lot more thinking that they've done. My question is, if you've got a system in place that does have some theological rhyme or reason, if you move away from it, what does that say about your commitment to that theological rhyme and reason? And what kind of new theological spin might there be to the new system that you are putting into place?

WILKEN: All right, now to my question about power.

SCHURB: Now I'm sorry. Can I hold it off one more minute? Because there's one more thing that they have said with regard to representation that I think needs to be borne in mind here.

WILKEN: Shoot.

SCHURB: We have a proposal that we've already talked about about how you represent congregations at the district convention. Now congregations get together in groupings called "circuits"—seven to twenty congregations, usually it's about ten or eleven—and choose two delegates, again a pastoral delegate and a lay delegate to a national synodical convention.

The new proposal has a very, very different thing. Now those delegates to the national convention would be chosen at the district convention. And again I think this is huge because it raises the question, "What does the Task Force have envisioned for the Missouri Synod?" Is it going to be a national church body that is divided into districts, or is it going to be more a confederation of districts that lump together and form a national church body?

All right, now I'll go anywhere you want me to go.

WILKEN: Okay, what about any particular proposals that may either consolidate or further consolidate power, either with the office of the president or with any other entity in the governance structure of the Synod?

SCHURB: Well, I'm still kind of puzzling over a lot of this. I do see a proposal that would eliminate, or at least morph into other forms potentially, the Synod's existing program boards, like Congregational Services, Missions, Human Care. And some of those boards might become advisory. And the executives, the top executives especially, who currently serve those boards would no longer be working so much for those boards. They would be reporting directly to the Synodical President according to this proposal. And I wonder, for example, does that mean – the proposal doesn't say explicitly one way or the other – that the members of the executive staff would also be appointed by the president in the first place?

Now here's one instance where this short report does offer a little bit of rationale. It says that's the way the Synod's districts are currently doing it. Their executive staff members are reporting to their District Presidents. Of course, there's fewer executive staff members in your districts than there are at the national synodical level. The question again that I've got is, you know, the Synod has worked with program boards, especially mission – as I told you at the beginning of our conversation, Synod had a board for both foreign missions and home missions, and they had executives working for them and that's been the case for a long time. And I would simply like to know, okay, why this change? If you're changing something that has been there for a really long time, why the change? And how is this going to be better? I think that that's an important overall question that needs to be put to this Task Force with everything it's saying. Why

is this change better? Give us some rationale.

WILKEN: Okay. We've got a final question and very little time for it, in fact, less than a minute. What are the questions that need to be continually asked, by the laity especially, of this Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod and Governance? What are the questions? One minute.

SCHURB: Well, I've stated one. Why are these particular proposals better? Show us your work. What else did you consider? Why did you say "No" to that and "Yes" to this? I guess I've mentioned a couple of others throughout the course of our conversation. What should the Synod be doing? What is the Task Force envisioning that the Synod should be doing, specifically? And if the premise is that the Synod needs to enable congregations to engage more effectively in their mission, how do these Task Force proposals actually contribute to such a goal? Do these changes really help us achieve this end?

WILKEN: Dr. Ken Schurb is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He served formerly as an assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. You'll find some great resources on President Gerald Kieschnick's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod and Structure and Governance under the "On-Demand" page of our website: www.issuesetc.org. Look for the "On-Demand" page. You'll find those resources right there. Ken, thanks for being our guest.

SCHURB: A final word from one of my seminary professors. "Perhaps powerful denominational machinery is alien to the American Lutheran spirit; certainly it is foreign to American Lutheran history." That's what he said. Are we seeing a new day?

WILKEN: Hey, he just did my close for me. Thank you very much, Ken.

SCHURB: Bye.

WILKEN: When we come back from this break, Dr. Thomas von Hagel is going to be our guest, from Concordia University, Chicago. We're going to talk about 5th century bishop and theologian – there are few greater, few whose stature exceeds – St. Augustine. His influence can never be overestimated in the life of the church, the Western Church, that is. We'll talk about him as the church remembers Augustine today. Then Dr. John Saleska will be our

guest. We'll talk about the active and the passive obedience of Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus actively keeps the law perfectly in your place. He also suffers everything necessary by the law's edicts and the justice it demands in payment for your sins. The active and the passive obedience of Jesus Christ. Dr. John Saleska of the Concordia Bible Institute will be our guest in about ten minutes here on Issues, Etc.

I'm Todd Wilken. Stay tuned for hour two of the program.

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