



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 2"

Guest:
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WILKEN: You know, the Bible doesn't tell us one way or the other how a church, a congregation, a church body ought to be structured. It simply gives us what the church is, and that's a very important thing, something we dare not forget when, say, a Christian congregation comes together and says, "How are we going to govern ourselves in a civil sense?" We always need to remember what the church is according to Scripture. That does not change. That is

a definition we're not at a liberty to rewrite, and sometimes the way churches structure themselves, the way church bodies structure themselves, they may forget that. They may inadvertently rewrite the definition of the church.

We're going to be talking here for this hour of Issues, Etc. about President Gerald Kieschnick's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod, Structure, and Governance. Dr. Ken Schurb will be our guest. It's Wednesday,

October the first. In the next hour we'll talk to Dr. Jeff Gibbs about the kingdom of heaven, or, as he likes to call it, "the kingdom of the heavens."

Dr. Ken Schurb is a regular guest. He's pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He formerly served as a theology professor at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and as an assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This makes him pretty qualified to talk about restructuring in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, its structure and its governance. Ken, welcome back to Issues, Etc.

SCHURB: Hey, Todd, happy October to you.

WILKEN: And to you as well. I want to jump into the middle of some thoughts that you have on restructuring in general. You write, "The more you structure for efficiency, the fewer checks and balances you will likely have." What do you mean by that?

SCHURB: The more you try to set everything up so that things can be done in an expeditious and easy a way as possible, the less you're probably going to have opportunity for people to sort of ask questions or exercise veto and say, "Well, no wait a second, that's not what we have. We want this over here."

We have this kind of argument all the time about our national government, Todd, and at least to an extent you can see the analogy. People get frustrated over gridlock in Washington. Part of the reason why there's gridlock in Washington, though, is because the governmental system is constructed in such a way as to have checks and balances. In other words, it's impossible for one individual or one relatively small group to kind of ram their agenda through the Federal Government of the United States. In order for there to be a

real coming together without some compromise involved, you've got to convince a huge number of people in the population at large who will elect representatives who elect a president so that they'll all agree on the same thing.

Checks and balances are part of the western constitutional heritage as much as anything else out of a bit of realism about human nature, that people tend sometimes not to act in the public interest. They can be sinful, selfish, etc. And so checks and balances have been a very valuable thing, not, I would argue, in our national government in the United States or in any other nation; they can be a valuable thing in church body structure. And the less you have checks and balances in the name of efficiency, the more you can find that everything is just running in the direction that one group wants it to run.

WILKEN: We talked some time back about the Blue Ribbon Committee – and the Task Force – on synodical structure and governance in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and at the time – and I think it probably bears repeating – you expressed some concern about rationale or when you make a proposal or a suggestion how important it is that you have a – you clearly state your rationale. Why is that?

SCHURB: Well, the usual rule in any kind of a civilized discussion is the person who asserts must prove. The person who comes forth with a proposal in a case like this really bears the burden of proof to demonstrate to everybody else why this is necessary and what's so good about it. What's kind of unusual about the proposals that have been put on the table by this Task Force is that they put a six-page document out about the middle of August, and this six-page document has very little – not "no," but very little – specific rationale for the specific proposals being made. And so it leaves begging questions like: Why are these the best things to do? Why not something else?

What else did the Task Force perhaps look at and not go with? Why does the Task Force think that these particular proposals are the best thing for this particular time? There's all kinds of questions that could be asked and there's no effort, really, in the main at all to answer those kinds of questions, and I just find it remarkable because he who asserts must prove.

I worked for a structure task force that made its report to the convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod ten years ago, 1998. At that time that group's work very nearly went down to defeat on the convention floor simply because of the mode of presentation. The chairman of the floor committee decided to be a little bit frugal with the Synod's money, and instead of rewriting the whole report after the last bit of fine tuning, or republishing the whole report I should say, he decided just to insert particular pages where changes were made and give those to the delegates and let them sort of put those in their convention workbooks at the appropriate points. And it became very clear very early on that the convention delegates didn't like that idea at all. One pastor got up and said, "Look, if I as a pastor were to bring something like this in this kind of slipshod state or presentation to my congregation, they would kind of laugh me out of the room, and they would say, "Well, no. You go back and you work on this. You give us something that, you know, is sensible, that we can easily follow, and we can see how it all holds together, and then we'll talk about it. But we're not going to talk about it—we're not even going to talk about it—until then." When that delegate spoke, a number of members of the committee said, "Okay, what we'll do, we'll volunteer to stay up all night, reformat the report, and get it out to you in a form that you can really read and follow and understand." Everybody agreed that that would be the best thing to happen, and then when the report came back the next day the delegates were very thankful, first of all, that they had it in a better form, and they

adopted like 90% of what the committee had proposed. But it was very nearly turned down just because of the form.

I guarantee you ten years ago nobody would have thought that you would bring major changes for restructuring of the Synod and not give rationale. That would have lasted less time on the floor than a poorly formatted report did.

WILKEN: You know, the average layperson listening to us might well say, "How could and how would any of these structure or governance changes affect me or my congregation? This sounds like something that's just going to effect synodical employees or district employees or people who are elected to office in our church body.

SCHURB: Well, without a statement of rationale, it's kind of hard to know how the people making the proposals do connect those dots. And I think that that's a perfectly appropriate question to ask. You can't begin to get answers to it, though, in the absence of a statement of rationale. The Task Force right now is saying that it wants input, it wants people to communicate about this, and I'm very thankful, Todd, that you're opening your microphones to such communication and such discussion. But I think the Task Force will get much better input from the people in the church body at large if it gives them its rationale so they can chew on that in addition to the proposals themselves.

WILKEN: Okay, let's talk a bit about representation. First of all, if you would briefly—there are churches that don't have a form of representation, at least not in its governance, and then there are those who have hybrids between something like a more episcopal form and then everybody gets a vote. Where does the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod traditionally fall with regard to how it views the voice of the average congregation, the average pastor, in its decision-making abilities?

SCHURB: Well, going back to the Synod's earliest days, it was pretty easy. Each congregation had two votes at a national convention and then when the Synod created districts also at a district convention, and those votes were cast, one by the pastor, or in a large congregation one of the pastors in a congregation, and the other vote had to be cast by a lay member of the congregation. Now as time went by and the Synod got bigger and it became really impossible to have any congregation in the Synod—no church building in the Synod was large enough to house a convention consisting of delegates of all the congregations—then they began to elect delegates representing groups of congregations called “circuits”...

WILKEN: About thirty seconds before our break.

SCHURB: ...to make that number a little more manageable. But the basic principle has continued to be each congregation, or at a national convention group of congregations, has two votes, one cast by the pastor, one cast by a layperson, in recognition of the fact, number one, that the church is pastors and people, and with equality of representation because no church has more of the forgiveness of sins in Christ than any other.

WILKEN: All right, when we come back, what is being proposed by President Gerry Kieschnick's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod, Structure, and Governance for the future of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with regard to convention representation? One of the things that I noticed when I was reading through the documentation was a suggestion that electoral circuits, that is, groups of congregations, that had been sending delegates before, that that electoral circuit model be abandoned. We'll find out why and what that would do after this break. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. I'm Todd Wilken.

[Break]

WILKEN: Welcome back to Issues, Etc. I'm Todd Wilken. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. We're talking about President Gerald Kieschnick's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod, Structure, and Governance. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, probably the largest confessional Lutheran church body, at least on paper, in the United States, is considering through this Task Force and through ongoing discussions a major restructuring. I think they had the instructions from President Kieschnick some years back to kind of start from the ground and reconsider everything. Well, back in October they gave some suggestions and proposals, and we're walking through some of the, see what they might mean for the future of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Dr. Ken Schurb is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He formerly served as a theology professor at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, and as an assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Ken, what is an “electoral circuit,” and how big a change would it be to, as the Task Force suggests, eliminate them?

SCHURB: Oh, it would be quite a huge change. The Synod has had these electoral circuits since 1874. An electoral circuit simply means that it's a group of congregations that together send two delegates to the convention, one pastor, one lay. Right now, the requirement for the size of an electoral circuit is that it has to be between two, I'm sorry, between seven and twenty congregations, with between 1500 and 10,000 communicant members in those congregations, and it has been at that size for a while. The size has fluctuated from time to time over the years. But again the reason for it was, back in 1874, what I said earlier. There was no church building in the Synod big enough to host a convention if every congregation in the Synod sent two delegates to the national convention. So

they started figuring, “Well, we’ve go to do this differently. Instead of having congregations directly represented, we’ll represent them more by these groups.” So now for what a hundred thirty some years the Synod has been working with electoral circuits.

The proposal of the Task Force now is for the synodical convention delegates, the national convention delegates, to be elected at the thirty-five district conventions. We talked last time we were on this subject, Todd, about how district conventions under the Task Force proposals would have greater voting strength for larger congregations, but now we’re talking about the national convention and the delegates to the national convention would get chosen as each district met.

Now this is a sea change, I think, in terms of how you conceive of the Synod. The Synod has always conceived of itself as a group of congregations, now numbering over 6000 nationwide, 6000 congregations that together form a national church body, which then divides itself for administrative and other purposes into districts. Giving districts as districts the power to choose convention delegates would, I think, have the effect of making districts voting blocs.

Right now we talk about, say, the Iowa District West delegation to the synodical convention. What that means in practice is that they may get together for a couple of meals and have their picture all taken together. It would come to mean something quite different if they are elected by the convention of the Iowa West District to be that district’s delegates, and now the districts would more and more become sort of power centers within the Synod, and the Synod would become more and more, I think, a federation of districts rather than a church body composed of congregations. And this recommendation comes from a Task Force that says it wants to reinforce and hold up the essentially congregational

nature of the Synod. I don’t understand that, and they haven’t given us the statement of rationale to explain it.

WILKEN: I’m wondering – for the last five years or so there’s been no small controversy within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod about certain exceptions made for electoral circuits, about exceptions granted, about whether or not that was done properly or whether it was done fairly. Do you think that has something to do with the Task Force suggestion, “Well, let’s just get rid of the electoral circuits altogether if they’re that much trouble”?

SCHURB: Well, the Task Force could say that. It has not said that. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s not at least on the back of somebody’s mind. Because there are in every – in every convention you get some requests for exceptions, where a circuit that is either too large or too small according to the rules wants to be able to send its two delegates anyway and have those two delegates seated. And I don’t quibble with the fact that there is a need exceptions. What has been of issue here lately is have too many exceptions been granted.

Well, in effect, what this proposal from the Task Force would do is to just sidestep that whole thing by saying, “Well, we’re not going to choose convention delegates, voting delegates, to the national convention at these circuit enclaves anyway. We’ll choose them at the district conventions. That is one potential way of trying to “solve the problem,” but I do point out, it’s not the only way.

The Board of Directors of the Missouri District, on which I sit, submitted an overture to the Synod’s last convention in 2007 that would have just done it a different way and required each district to keep on top of its circuits and make sure these circuits are all of the size that they’re supposed to be according to bylaw. And this overture that the Missouri District Board of Directors

presented to the Synod in 2007 would have said: If a district wants to request an exception for a circuit, they have to show that they have adopted a plan for circuit realignment at one of their last two district conventions. If they have not, the answer will be “No,” because they have it within their power to go back and redraw their circuit lines so their circuits do all meet the criteria.

Now again, that is another way of skinning this cat. That particular overture was referred by the Synod in 2007 to this Task Force. I have the question, well, why did the Task Force prefer this method that it's putting forth, of abolishing the electoral circuits, rather than what this overture called for, from the Missouri District Board of Directors, namely, having each district police its circuits better. Why is the one better than the other? And the Task Force has not said.

WILKEN: We talked at the beginning of our conversation about proper checks and balances in any system of structure or governance and how that kind of recognizes the fact that we are fallen people who are tempted toward things that are not always in our neighbor's best interest. I'm wondering about the district presidents, whether or not they actually gain a modicum more power by having national convention delegates elected at the district conventions that they largely control.

SCHURB: Well, it, it – every district president is obligated to be the chairman of his district convention, and, of course, district presidents enjoy great prestige within their districts. I think, however, that the question in my mind is more how much greater influence is this going to give the district conventions as opposed to the district presidents themselves. And it constitutes a different way of thinking about the way power and authority runs in the Synod.

WILKEN: There is also the suggestion from the Task Force on structure and governance that the total number of voting delegates to the national, that is, the synodical convention, held every three years, be lowered. Any rationale given here?

SCHURB: Yeah, this is a point where they do state some rationale. They basically say we could save some money. If we lowered the number of voting delegates to half, or maybe two-thirds, the size that it is now – it's about 1200 voting delegates now – then obviously you don't have to house and feed and pay for travel for all those delegates, and you can get by with some savings.

They also – the Task Force – also proposes the elimination of advisory delegates and most advisory representatives to the conventions.

WILKEN: Is there perhaps an unintended result at work here, or if many of these are adopted an unintended result in the future, that the voice of the pastor at the local level, the congregation at the local level, be muted and that really the corporate voice of district become louder, or perhaps with fewer voting delegates even the broadened representation be narrowed?

SCHURB: Well, yeah. I'll give you one case in point and that is Lutheran school teachers, Deaconesses, Directors of Christian Education, all of whom fall into the same category on the synodical roster of church workers. They're all called “commissioned” church workers. Now these commissioned church workers presently do have voice – not vote, but voice – at the synodical convention. Each district has one advisory delegate representing commissioned ministers of Gospel for every 60 or portion of 60 that there are in the district. So in a district like the Missouri District, where there's quite a lot of Lutheran schools and quite a lot of Lutheran school

teachers, we get quite a number of advisory delegate teachers.

Under the new proposal the only way for a Lutheran school teacher or, say, a Deaconess to get to be a delegate to the national convention would be first of all to be chosen as a delegate to the district convention, which means that they would cast one of the two congregation's votes, the vote that's not being cast by the pastor. They would have to be elected as delegate by their congregation to the district convention, and then they would have to be elected from the district convention to go to the national convention, because the proposal is that all of the national convention delegates will be chosen from among those district convention delegates. So now a teacher or a Deaconess or somebody like that is going to have two hurdles to clear. You've got to be chosen at your congregation level; you've got to be chosen at your district level. I fear, practically speaking, that this is going to reduce the number of voices of our teachers at our conventions.

WILKEN: All right, let's take a break here. When we come back, we'll talk more about restructuring the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

[Break]

WILKEN: Tomorrow on Issues, Etc.: Pastor's Roundtable on the Third Commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." That's tomorrow on the program.

I'm Todd Wilken. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. We're talking about President Gerald Kieschnick's Blue Ribbon Task Force on the structure and governance of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Ken, we've talked about this before, but I'd like to delve a little more deeply in particular into the idea that a more centralized, more consolidated system of power, authority or

decision-making, as you said before, kind of tends to lead to less and less checks and balances. One of the concerns that I have when I look over the documentation from the Blue Ribbon Task Force is that it would have the executive staff members at the national level – you're going to have to explain what that is – report directly to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod rather than to their boards, their elected boards, as they presently do.

SCHURB: The Synod right now has six program boards, probably the oldest of those reasonably enough is the Mission Board, but there's also a Board for Congregational Services, a Board for Communications, a Board for Human Care, you know, and others. So there are these program boards and – I guess now there's seven, if memory serves, because we created one a couple of conventions back. Anyway, each one of those boards has a staff and each one of those staffs is led by a top executive, an executive director. At present those executives are chosen by the respective boards with the mutual conversation and consent of the president of the Synod, but chosen by those boards, and they are evaluated by those boards, and they're basically responsible to those boards.

The Task Force, and here's a good case of what you're talking about, Todd, primarily in the name, I think, of efficiency of operation is saying, "You know, we just need to look again at the way our board structure goes at the national level. Maybe there are some functions that are better off being kicked over to the district level. We could probably do a portion of a program just on that question, you know, how much stuff can the districts reasonably assume at this point beyond what they have already assumed. But can you do some of this at the district level? Can you do some of it by not having a board? In other words, just create a task force that has one particular job and as soon as that job is done the task force

disbands, and you create a new task force if you have another task along those lines that needs to be done in the future.

But the idea here is to re-route a lot of the business that's being done by the program boards, in any case, to make the existing program boards more advisory committees, say, in the fields of mission or higher education or whatever it may be. And then the executives who currently serve those boards would be accountable directly to the synodical president. It doesn't say for sure one way or the other, but I imagine that could also mean that they could be selected by the synodical president.

Now, again, I find this hard to understand if the effort of the Task Force, again, has been to accentuate the essentially congregational nature of the Synod. Because, you see, it empowers congregations when through their representatives boards are chosen that are more than just advisory committees or *ad hoc* task forces, when you have boards being chosen that have a real impact on the Synod's work. And I might add, this has been the method of operating in the Synod for a long, long time. We don't have all the same boards today that we had yesterday, and the number of boards has grown and changed over the years. Again, the one that's been probably the most consistent has been a mission board. In fact, the Synod used to have two mission boards in years past, and there were executives serving these boards and were accountable to those boards. One question that immediately comes to mind, which begs for a statement of rationale, is: Why this change? And why this change right now?

Another thing that it would do, obviously, is to give greater responsibility and authority to the president of the Synod. Now the president of the Synod is in a position where he requires a lot of authority. In fact, I think that people sometimes don't understand on a day to day basis just how much authority

– and rightfully so; I'm not quibbling with this at all – the president of the Synod already has. But before you add any, you've got to ask yourself: Does the office of the president need this new level of authority. And side-by-side with that is the question: How do you assure accountability?

See, the system we've got right now, where you have boards with executives answerable to them all working together under the leadership of the president of the Synod, that gives you more avenues for accountability because there's more different people trying to assure it. If you put all your accountability eggs, as it were, in one basket, it's a little bit harder to know whether it's actually getting done.

WILKEN: Okay, if that proposal that, at the very least, the executive staff members at the national level report directly to the president of Synod, perhaps he even appoints these staff himself, if that were to be taken up and enacted, would this give the president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod unprecedented power, unlike anything in Synod's history up to this point?

SCHURB: Oh, to be sure. Now, now, the argument is made – and here's one other place where the Task Force does give us rationale for the proposals it has put on the table – they say this is what happens at the district level. They report – and I have not made the effort to survey the bylaws of all the thirty-five districts in the Synod to double-check and see if this is right; I'll take the Task Force's word for it – that this is what is going on in all of our districts, that the staff members are accountable to, if not chosen by, at least accountable to the president of their district.

Now what's interesting to me about this line of argumentation, Todd, is that a few years ago, 2001, if memory serves, the Synod actually took out of its bylaws at the national level what had been there for quite a while a

requirement that districts pattern their board and staff structure to be a kind of a mirror image at that more local or regional level of what the Synod had in its board or staff structure. And a task force that I had the privilege of working with came to the conclusion, and I think rightly so, that this was kind of trying to mix apples and oranges and make apples like oranges. In other words, make the district staffs like the national staff.

Now the argument, after the Synod wisely remitted the requirement of having district staff mirror the national staff structure, is in effect to have the national staff structure mirror the district staff structure.

WILKEN: Okay...

SCHURB: That's what the Synod did, you know, not making the national staff, I'm sorry, not making the district staff mirror the national staff. Now we have a proposal that seems like the obverse of that with no reason stated for why it's good, except that this is what the districts are doing.

WILKEN: Let's talk a little bit about doctrinal resolutions that would be passed by the Synod in convention, in its triennial general, or synodical, convention. First of all, given the structure of our church body up to this point, of what force, binding or otherwise, are doctrinal resolutions or doctrinal statements, or are we talking about two different things here?

SCHURB: Doctrinal statements are probably the more easy to answer about there. Doctrinal statements, according to a procedure we've had in place since 1977 formally, are supposed to come into being by being formally proposed by the Commission on Theology and then adopted at a synodical convention, by a super majority, a two-thirds majority, and then being subject to congregational ratification before they go into effect. It's very much like amending the synodical constitution in that

way. And those doctrinal statements are to be honored and upheld, which means you teach and act in accord with that doctrinal statement if you are a member of the Synod.

Now doctrinal resolutions are a little bit more difficult to pin down, because again the same language – “honor” and “uphold” – is used with reference to doctrinal resolutions. And obviously the Synod wants particularly its own agencies to follow these doctrinal resolutions. The place where it gets to be a little bit difficult, though, is that the Synod also says it wants its members to honor and uphold all of its resolutions. Well, see, you don't honor and uphold a doctrinal resolution, say on the Lord's Supper or something of that nature, the same way you would honor and uphold a resolution to fix the site of the next convention. It's just a little bit murky in that regard. But in general the answer to your question, whatever ambiguities there may be behind the language, is that both doctrinal statements and doctrinal resolutions are to be honored and upheld.

WILKEN: We've got a situation, Ken, here very obviously – we'll probably have to discuss this more on the other side of this break – where statements and resolutions go unhonored in the doctrinal area. I'm thinking about that particular area you just mentioned, the practice of the Lord's Supper, where it is quite common in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to find two different congregations practicing, while professing, while claiming to profess the same thing about the Lord's Supper, practicing two very, very different things about Communion fellowship, or who is to be admitted to the Lord's Supper. When we come back from this break, we'll talk about whether or not we can pass all the doctrinal resolutions and make all the statements you want, but if in practice we deny what we affirm in principle or on paper, then it sounds like a waste of time, either passing them or talking about how binding they must

be, if people will not observe the ones we already have.

We'll talk about that on the other side of the break. Dr. Ken Schurb is our guest. I'm Todd Wilken. We're discussing President Gerald Kieschnick's Blue Ribbon Task Force on structure and governance in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

In about ten minutes we'll be talking with Dr. Jeff Gibbs about the kingdom of heaven. Stay tuned. We'll conclude our conversation with Dr. Ken Schurb right after this.

[Break]

WILKEN: Welcome back to Issues, Etc. Ten more minutes with Dr. Ken Schurb, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He formerly served as a theology professor at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and as an assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We're talking about restructuring the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Ken, before the break I was opining about doctrinal resolutions. We have a regular guest on this program, the head of a conservative reform group in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Pastor Parker Williamson. He said several times here on this program that on paper the PCUSA is a confessional church body, but in practice it's a liberal church body. Let's talk about that with respect to doctrinal resolutions, whether or not they're of binding force, especially whether or not they're really, actually put into practice, as I think they're intended to be.

SCHURB: Well, of course they are, and I might just tag on to what you were saying before the break. While you will find some differences between congregations with respect to their practice and maybe even profession on the subjects of various doctrinal resolutions, it is interesting that ten years ago when you had a district that had set aside a whole slab of doctrinal

resolutions, the Synod said, "No, you can't do that; your actions are unconstitutional." Because the district, again, is a division, it's an agency, of the Synod. It's created by the Synod, and the Synod therefore can say, "You do this, you don't do this." And so with respect there to whether doctrinal resolutions had teeth, they most certainly did.

Now congregations are a bit different story, because congregations, like individual church workers on the roster of the Synod, are members of the Synod, and they are under the supervision of their respective district presidents. And really that becomes the question which we could probably do a whole program on in and of itself, and that is the exercise of doctrinal supervision within districts. But in our system, that's pretty much where it happens in the Missouri Synod. In other words, the president of the Synod or somebody else at national headquarters doesn't sit up there watching the actions of a pastor in Oregon or in Kentucky or something like that, but rather it happens at the level of those districts and their district presidents. Within the Synod's, for example, educational institutions, like the colleges and seminaries, then the doctrinal supervision is carried out by the presidents of those institutions.

But yeah, you have a good point, Todd, that your profession and your practice need to link up. Maybe I can extend the point just in one direction and that is to say that the Missouri Synod anyway, unlike some other Lutheran bodies in America, particularly in the nineteenth century, has always recognized the importance and always reserved to itself the right to restate and apply its theological position to the precise challenges before it at the time, rather than saying, "We will only reiterate the Lutheran position in the words, the specific words, of the Lutheran Confessions." We have said, "No, we want to be able to restate our confessional position for the issues of our day."

Now a clear-cut distinction between doctrinal statements and doctrinal resolutions was not made in the Synod until really the 1970s, and I mentioned a little while ago that in 1977 the Synod put forth a procedure for adopting a doctrinal statement. It also defined what a doctrinal resolution was supposed to do, and it said at that time, "Doctrinal resolutions shall reiterate the corporate position of the Synod." In other words, a doctrinal resolution was for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is restating what we've already said, again, maybe in terms that are a bit more clear or more direct as regards a particular challenge. But doctrinal resolutions were to reiterate.

What the Task Force is proposing is that doctrinal resolutions could initiate, modify, or repeal specific positions or practices of the Synod. It would require a two-thirds vote for adoption, as opposed to the current simple majority, but this is a huge difference in what you're expecting that a doctrinal resolution can do.

In 1977 – what, thirty years ago – we were talking about simply reiterating what the Synod had said. Now we're talking about initiating a brand new position or possibly modifying or outright repealing an old position.

WILKEN: Well, Ken, very briefly on that, as far as I'm concerned, regardless of what kind of authority a synodical structure might think it has, it has no authority to repeal the doctrines taught in Scripture and the Confessions. It can pass those resolutions, but it has no authority to do so.

SCHURB: Well, and in effect it has no authority even to sort of add any extra umph to what the Scriptures say by way of reaffirmation. But what the Synod can do is to confess its position. That position, in principle, could be wrong, you know, just like anything stated by human beings it could be wrong. And so then you have to go

back to Scripture again and say, "Well, in fact, is it correct?"

But we have a whole new frontier ahead of us here, Todd. And by the way there is a skip-step. I mentioned that in '77 the Synod was envisioning only reiterating by way of doctrinal resolutions, and the Task Force is now talking about this whole new frontier of initiating, modifying, or repealing positions via doctrinal resolutions. What we have right now is a relatively bland bylaw that was adopted in 1986, which simply says that the doctrinal resolutions of the Synod shall conform to the confessional position of the Synod.

So I really notice what might be called a progression, although I don't see it in any way as a step up from one to the next; I see it, if anything, as a step down. Whereas in 1977 we said, "What we're going to do by way of these resolutions, which again can be brought up on the floor and adopted relatively easily, is that we're going to reiterate what we've said in the past." If you want to go into any greater detail, if you want to really fundamentally re-examine some position that the Synod has taken, in '77 what we said the place to do that was in a doctrinal statement.

Now we have since 1986 a bland bylaw which simply says, "Well, our resolutions have to conform to the confessional position of the Synod," and what the Task Force is putting before us is the prospect that we could use the doctrinal resolutions, which again don't have to be done with any kind of particular big study – they just could be proposed by an individual congregation or a circuit or something like that, and if you can get now a simple majority under the Task Force's proposal of two-thirds, you could come up with a whole new doctrinal position we've never had before.

WILKEN: Okay, two quick final questions. Part of the reason that the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synod, Structure and

Governance is being put forward is because there is – well, let’s just deal with both at the same time – there is a now recognized lack of trust up and down the synodical ladder, so to speak, and there’s also a funding crisis. There’s no doubt about it. Can we restructure ourselves back to a position of trust or to better funding for the synodical structure?

SCHURB: Well, I’m sure you can do things in structure that would save you money, but the problem is not so much, I don’t think, in the distribution of our money. The problem is more in terms of whether congregations are supporting their districts with offerings, and districts supporting the national synod, and I don’t know if you really can solve that with structure.

I’m sure you don’t solve problems of trust with structure, and, just to get back to the drum I’ve been beating throughout our hour here, I don’t think you solve a trust problem by putting a bunch of proposals on the table without giving reasons for them.

WILKEN: Finally, what is at stake here? About a minute to respond.

SCHURB: Well, as we said last time we did an interview on this subject, the devil is both in the details of something like this and also there is the need to look at the picture in the large and not miss the forest for the individual trees. What we’re talking about is a structure that does have currently checks and balances in recognition of the sinful condition of mankind, and a structure which in many ways is designed to reflect anyway certain fundamental truths about the church, namely, that the local congregation is divinely instituted. Synods themselves are not. Synods can act in churchly ways, but if you really want to keep the spotlight on the individual congregation, even when it does

become a member of a synod, is this the best way to do it?

WILKEN: Dr. Ken Schurb is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Moberly, Missouri. He’s formerly served as a theology professor at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and as an assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. We’ve got some great resources available for you on the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Structure and Governance on the “On-Demand” page of our website, www.issuesetc.org. Look under “On-Demand.”

Ken, thank you for being our guest.

SCHURB: It’s always a pleasure, Todd, and I’m sure we’ll be talking about this some more.

WILKEN: I’m sure we will.

You see, it’s not an indifferent thing how a congregation or a church body governs itself. If you’re talking about human governance, a human contrivance, a human invention, then of course you can structure yourself any way you want to. Now some ways of structuring yourself will be ill advised, foolish, and others may be more wise and prudent. But we’re not talking about a human contrivance, and we’re not talking about a human invention. We’re talking about congregations of the church. We’re talking about churches where Christ is to be preached for the salvation of sinners and where trust is to be maintained upon the Word of God. You can’t restructure yourself back to trust. Only God’s Word can do that job for you.

When we come back, we’ll talk about the kingdom of heaven with Dr. Jeff Gibbs.

