

Out With the Old

My grandfather has congestive heart failure. I hate to say it, but I probably won't see him this time next year. "Gramp," as I've called him since I can remember, taught me how to shoot and hunt, taught me how to change the oil, taught me how to drive a truck, taught me how to run a trot line and how to shake a catalpa tree for worms. He helped me buy a hotrod and a Fender strat. His daddy's gun sits by my bed, and I have paper money from Okinawa that he brought back from the War. For half of my life, we lived in the same house. I named a son (Carl) after him.

I sometimes wish he would have joined me in going over to the Lutheran church, but Gramp is a hardcore Baptist and just never was interested in learning why we do all of that standing up and sitting down, why we say some of the same words every week. ("The Lord be with you. / And with thy spirit.") On the other hand, had he joined me in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, I wonder what he would have made of LCMS President Gerald R. Kieschnick's signature slogan: "This is not your grandfather's church."

It was on the basis of that breathtaking statement that President Kieschnick launched Ablaze!™ in 2004—a "missions movement" designed to "share the Good News of Jesus with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by . . . 2017." From the get-go this business of counting "critical events," as Kieschnick puts it, seemed very un-Lutheran. Tallying up decisions for Christ makes sense after a Billy Graham Crusade, but it does not square with the Augsburg Confession—a document once known in a Church that respected Her grandfathers.

"When one person gives a clear presentation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to another person," says the Ablaze!™ website, "so that there is an opportunity for that person to respond, this activity 'counts' toward the 100 million goal." But how is one to know whether he has

participated in an activity that fits the bill? Here is some helpful guidance:

A congregation puts 1,500 flyers in the local paper. The 1,500 flyers *do not count*. But, any inquiries that came as a result of the flyers and opened the door for the congregation to share the Good News with an unreached or uncommitted person will count toward the 100 million goal.

Another thing that *did not count* was a long-running and surprisingly popular radio program called *Issues, Etc.*—"Talk radio for the thinking Christian." Every weekday from three to six in the afternoon, and for two hours during a nationally syndicated broadcast on Sunday evenings, the Rev. Todd Wilken talked about current events, politics (Srdja Trifkovic was often interviewed on foreign affairs), popular culture, and—above all else—Lutheran theology. As Lutheran theology has something to do with "the Good News"—Lutheran churches were first called "*evangelische*"—it should come as no surprise that, quite often during *Issues, Etc.*, the Gospel was "shared." And while it is really impossible to "count" the work of the Holy Spirit, it is safe to say that the program produced results. An ever-growing audience testified to this. Countless life-long Lutherans discovered their own Church's doctrine and learned why we say those same words every week. Unbelievers called in with questions, and many became catechumens in Lutheran congregations. *Issues, Etc.* live broadcasts from parish halls across the heartland reflected the excitement of the faithful who had a renewed sense of their own identity.

When David Strand, a layman and the chairman of the LCMS Board of Communication Services, fired the Rev. Wilken and his veteran producer, Jeff Schwarz, on March 18 (Holy Tues-



day), there was an immediate backlash. Over 7,500 signed a petition, and several districts (dioceses) issued formal complaints. President Clinton . . . er, Kieschnick was quick to declare that the decision "transpired with my awareness but neither by my order nor at my direction." Soon thereafter, fellow LCMSer Mollie Hemingway wrote critically of the "Holy Tuesday Treachery" in the *Wall Street Journal*, tying this "critical event" to the theological aberrations of Ablaze!™. (As a regular guest on *Issues, Etc.*, I was always cautioned never to speak ill of Ablaze!™ on the air.) President Kieschnick fired back a letter to the WSJ editor, explaining in carefully selected detail that this decision was all about money and denouncing Hemingway for suggesting that our synod is "deeply divided." (How ridiculous!)

Speaking of money, even as the plan to ax *Issues, Etc.* was entering President Kieschnick's "awareness," one new LCMS congregation was using \$25,000 in Ablaze!™ dollars to pay for billboards around suburban St. Louis that read, for example, "JeffersonHills Church sucks." As KSDK NewsChannel 5 in St. Louis reported, "Beneath those messages is a hyphen, followed by 'Satan,' as if it's a note from the biblical Prince of Darkness."

"I seen that thing and I about fell over," one passerby told KSDK. "I just thought maybe some atheist group might have put it up, or something," said another. "We're getting a lot of responses," said "Lead Pastor Steve Benke."

Actually, I think President Kieschnick is right. *This* is not my grandfather's church. ◊

What's Good for Rockford Acromatics

Dean Olson, the chairman of Rockford Acromatic Products, an after-market auto-parts manufacturer, is a longtime supporter of Republican candidates. Still, he is not optimistic about the November election: "Even though the Democrats are in full rout, we're not able to mount an effective challenge. I don't see the leadership there."

While Rockford voters lean Democratic, they might still be swayed in a presidential election by a Republican who took seriously the causes of the current recession: a costly and unnecessary war; the falling dollar; rising gas prices; overextended credit, both personal and mortgage; and the outsourcing of U.S. jobs.

John McCain is not that candidate. He has hitched his wagon to the Iraq war and expressed his desire to "bomb bomb bomb, bomb-bomb Iran"; he does not dare say much about the subprime mortgage debacle, lest his eventual Democratic opponent use the opportunity to bring up the Keating Five; he has told manufacturing workers across the country that their jobs are going overseas and are never coming back; and, like every other national politician of both parties, he knows that the falling dollar is about the only thing propping up what remains of the U.S. economy, so any remedy to fix the decline might well be worse than the disease. If that means even higher gas prices going into November, McCain will just have to take his chances.

The factory worker who has seen his job shipped overseas might (all other things being equal) turn to a Democratic candidate who, at least compared with McCain, talks tough on trade and outsourcing. (Of course, the fact that the Democratic nominee will be Barack Obama means that all other things are not equal.) But what about the factory owners—not the stockholders of multinational corporations but the businessmen at the helm of the small to medium-sized factories

that are the backbone of U.S. manufacturing?

Like Dean Olson, most factory owners here tend to favor Republican candidates. With the economy headed south and a Republican in the White House, that support might well erode, but in Rockford, all of the signs are pointing the other way. Is the prospect of Democratic control of the economy so terrifying that it makes four more years of war, high fuel prices, and recession look like the lesser of two evils?

Those concerns are not irrelevant, but the larger part of the electoral calculus may be that, for many small manufacturers, the softness of the economy will not be an issue this fall. The dollar has fallen so far that, even with the concomitant rise in fuel costs, American manufactured goods look cheap to customers in Europe. We are nowhere close to wiping out the recent trade deficit in manufactured goods, and manufacturers should be cautious about expecting the (relatively) good times to last, but if anyone can continue the Bush economic legacy, it is John McCain.

As Mr. Olson points out, "I'd rather be running a small business right now than Ford Motor Company, wondering how to compensate for the loss of truck sales because of gas prices."

The upshot is that, as in 2004, social issues might well play a larger role. The California Supreme Court's May ruling on homosexual "marriage"; the move toward "therapeutic cloning," including the creation of human-animal hybrids to grow organ tissue; and, of course, the decades-long battle over abortion—all are issues that John McCain, a political chameleon, might try to make his own. And socially conservative small businessmen, doing well enough at the moment, will feel more comfortable casting their vote for a cynical politician than for an ideologue who comes down on the wrong side of all of those issues.



Yet McCain is not likely to try to stop the spread of homosexual "marriage" or "therapeutic cloning" once elected; moreover, he supports embryonic stem-cell research and may even undo what little good Bush did.

The fact that manufacturing can recover while the economy is sliding into recession gives the lie to the idea that the American economy is a monolith. Multinational corporations have understood this for some time, and used it to their advantage—to the detriment of the American working class and small manufacturers. When the hard times hit, small manufacturers never get the consideration that the multinationals do. "When Rockford Acromatics starts to falter, I guarantee you there will be no federal bailout," Dean Olson wryly notes.

It is time to turn the tables—to leverage the weak dollar to bring in business from overseas that can finance new equipment and processes that can put American manufacturers not on par with other countries technologically, but significantly ahead.

Let McCain extol the virtues of outsourcing and retraining for the "information economy" and the "healthcare industry." The small manufacturers who once made America the economic envy of the world know that a country that does not make things has no real say in its economic future. By concentrating less on the American economy and focusing instead on planning for the future of their own businesses, they could do more to revive the economic fortunes of the United States than John McCain could ever dream of doing. 