

Governing the body

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

The Honorable Jesse Ventura is the Lutheran governor of the country's most Lutheran state, Minnesota. Pamela Hill Nettleton wrote a short profile on him in the *Lutheran* (March). He "refuses to do interviews with any religious media." He says, "I have my beliefs." Do his beliefs include the Lutheran understanding of vocation, which can honor alike popes and wrestlers, bishops and talk show hosts, pastors and politicians? Only his confessor knows for sure.

What does Lutheran theology say about governors? Historian Carl S. Mundinger, in *Government in the Missouri Synod* (1947), says of that Synod's founding president, C. F. W. Walther: "He followed Luther most closely," including Luther's idiosyncratic translation of Romans 13:1, "Let every soul be subject to that government which has power over him." So Walther "merely substituted Abraham Lincoln for Charles V and Governor Jackson of Missouri for Frederick the Wise and then followed Luther in his political thinking."

Luther, his colleagues and their successors never figured out a polity for church order, so they usually turned ecclesiastical government over to princes--analogues to our governors. Martin Luther was an Equal Opportunity Invective Slinger who denounced pastors, popes, priests, bishops, superintendents, princes, "lay" priests and professors if he perceived them as working against the gospel. He was equally generous in praising them if they advanced the gospel.

Modes of governance were secondary matters to him. In the relative chaos of the 16th century, Lutherans tried out all kinds of governances, but gravitated to secular magistracy. James M. Estes, in the *Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, notes that doing so ran against Luther's differentiation between "secular" and "spiritual" realms. So Luther and company had to improvise rationales. It was "a formidable intellectual challenge," but they accepted it.

Estes reminds us that Luther's sidekick and successor, Philip Melanchthon, met the challenge with "the more or less definitive theological justification of religious reformation and church government under the authority of the Christian

magistrate." The magistrate was not simply an individual church member who could on occasion be the *Notbischof*, or "emergency bishop." He was rather "'the foremost member' (*praecipuum membrum*) of the church with a routine obligation to care for the church and to see to it that errors are removed and consciences are healed." The secular authority was to "establish and preserve discipline, good morals, and true religion." Estes remarks, "There is abundant evidence of the determining influence of Melanchthon's views on virtually all Lutheran theologians (even on Luther himself)."

We in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are not in a crisis that would require Ventura to be our *Notbischof*. But if we take our signals from our Lutheran founders, we will call on him (and any other governor) as "the foremost member" to govern our church. Minnesotans have a former wrestler to "preserve discipline."

During visits to Minnesota, I will test titles like "Bishop 'The Body' Ventura" or "The Reverend Governor Ventura." But then reality will break into my reveries. The *Lutheran* says that Ventura is not of the ELCA. So apparently the ELCA and other churches in Minnesota are being governed by--a *Missouri Synod Lutheran!*