

A Time for Confessing in the Missouri Synod (continued)

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh 96, Steve Krueger's essay on the "The Promising Tradition – For A Time to Confess" in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, elicited considerable response. I pass on to you a few of them for ThTh 97. You may remember that Steve spoke of some of these LCMS confessors as the "Daystar" group. Steve himself describes Daystar thus: "About a year and a half ago a number of us decided to create a community of voices in order to confess the Gospel over and against our Synod's terrible legalism. Thus was born a conversation among over 500+ voices in the LCMS. . . . Daystar's website is: ."

Steve also mentioned other LCMS confessors rallying under the "Jesus First" banner, and tells about other voices in the movement. Of one of them he says: "There is a community of women in the LCMS who are working for change in a number of areas, including ordination of women. They are called Different Voices/Shared Vision (Voices/Vision). They have a subscriber egroup community and are some pretty neat people." Below some of the responses.

Easter Joy!

Ed

I. **THE PORTLAND FREE CONFERENCE [= Daystar get-together in Portland, Oregon, earlier this year]** In January I flew from my home on the Atlantic coast (Virginia Beach, Virginia) to Portland, Oregon. I want to tell you about my trip, because it was special. I attended the Portland Free Conference of Lutherans in the Lutheran Church–Missouri

Synod. Why would I do such a thing? Why would I leave the comforts of my post-Christmas home to travel across the country?

To tell you why, I need to go back to about the year 1969. You see, I have been a pastor of the Missouri Synod since 1945. That year of 1969 is a year I will never forget. That was the year J.A.O. Preus was elected president of the synod.

But that was not a simple election, an ordinary changing of the guard. That synodical convention and that election were held in the midst of great turmoil in the synod. Some of the faculty of the St. Louis seminary had been accused of false teaching. The convention decided that the accusation was correct, and the person the [majority of] convention delegates chose to "straighten out the mess" was J.A.O. Preus.

I remember that I was devastated with this action of the convention. Although I cannot give you a detailed account, I know that I had no quarrel with the faculty; in fact, several of the members of the faculty were friends of mine. I had, and still have, every confidence in their theological position.

The action of the convention brought about a significant change in the climate and policies of the Missouri Synod. I think it was the same convention [ironically] that had declared pulpit and altar fellowship with the American Lutheran Church! This had been, in my opinion, a great step forward in the maturation of the Missouri Synod, and an action which I considered in keeping with the will of God that His people should be in fellowship with one another.

But now we began to move backward into isolation. Under Dr. Preus' leadership, a spirit of legalism and isolation began to grow. It had always been there in the history of the synod, but now it began to grow and flourish. It waxed through the eighties and the nineties.

During these years, it became more and more difficult for me to hold up my head with pride about being a member of the Missouri Synod. I began to feel more and more like an outsider in the very church that I was serving as a pastor. There were several reasons for this. I have already mentioned two of those reasons: the growing legalism, and isolationism from other Christians.

The legalism has taken the form of operating with rules, rather than under the freedom of the Gospel. There has been a growing tendency to equate synodical resolutions with Scripture. Under this tendency, pastors have been expected to treat synodical resolutions as though they were the word of God. And now, under the present administration, there is a concerted effort to push this development further.

This has led to a push toward centralization. Under synod's constitution, the synod is advisory to congregations. But under Dr. Barry's administration, the national synod has already given the president of the national church the authority to remove presidents of districts from office. These presidents were elected by the local district in convention, but now they hold office only as long as they honor the party line of the national administration. So much for congregational authority!

Also, the president of synod recently accepted an accusation of false teaching levelled at a member of the

faculty of one of the campuses of Concordia University by an individual who complained to him. Dr. Barry communicated with the faculty member and asked him to defend himself. By doing this he lent credence to the charge, even though he had not followed the stipulations of synod's handbook, which states that charges against faculty must first be made to the chief administrative officer of his school, and the board of regents of the school.

Through the efforts of several members of the Daystar movement, the matter was referred to the Committee on Constitutional Matters. This group decided that Dr. Barry was, indeed, following an improper procedure. The matter is, therefore, as far as I know, in abeyance. Nevertheless, it is another chilling example of the developing centralization of power in our church.

Another facet of this centralization is that there is presently being developed a proposal for the next synodical convention which would, if adopted, change the position of circuit counselor [pastor to the pastors in a sub-section of one of the synod's 35 districts] so that the counselor would, in effect, be charged with the task of monitoring the teachings and practices of pastors and congregations in the circuit. Instead of being a counselor, as at present, the position would be that of a local "enforcer" of synodical rules, regulations and policies. This would, of course, be another blow to the advisory nature of synod.

It seems to me that the movement toward centralization, and accompanying legalism, are leading toward a basic change in our church structure. Instead of synod being advisory to congregations, congregations are becoming

servants of the synod. The cart is being turned upside down. Instead of congregations being the vital center of our church, the national apparatus is assuming that role.

Another issue which prompted my interest in attending the Free Conference was the question of the role of women in our church. During my lifetime as a pastor, women have moved from not having a voice or vote in meetings of the congregation, to having a voice but no vote, and finally having voice and vote in congregational meetings. But this is not universal throughout the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. I understand that there are still congregations which do not allow women to vote. As Mary Todd has pointed out in her book *Authority Vested*, [see Thursday Theology #93], the Missouri Synod is a “male church.” Missouri’s pastors (all men) have always told women what their position should be.

Predictably, that role looked much like the Germanic rubrics for women: Kirche, Kueche, Kinder (go to church, stay in the kitchen, raise children). For years I have wondered where were the women of Missouri who wanted to do more in the church than they were allowed to do. I wondered if Missouri’s women were in agreement with the official position of the church. I found out at Portland that such is not the case. I heard women making sophisticated theological presentations. I heard women teaching me and other men. And I was edified. I rejoiced. I am more than ever convinced that Missouri’s ban on ordaining women is an offense against God. It is based on faulty exegesis. How long before the voice of women is heard in our church on a par with the voice of men?

Through the past several decades, I have felt like part of a “loyal opposition” in the synod. Part of the difficulty

of such a position is that Missouri has no concept of a loyal opposition (as Mary Todd has pointed out in Authority Vested). We in Missouri labor under a concept of total agreement in doctrine as a prerequisite for church fellowship. The result of this is that criticism has usually been equated with disloyalty.

Another result is that we have demanded total agreement as a prerequisite for inter-church fellowship. The result? Missouri has not been able to develop any meaningful ties of fellowship with other Lutheran churches in North America. The only church-to-church fellowship we have is with relatively small groups of Lutherans in other parts of the world. Why is it that we are so isolated?

I said above that I am part of a loyal opposition. It is not easy to carry this stance in a church that is so heavily legalistic and so committed to control. I have had feelings of anger through the years against this situation. But that anger is connected to my love for the synod; if I had not loved her, I would have left her. (By making this statement, I am not suggesting that those persons who have left the synod because of these matters, or others, did not love her.)

I hope and pray that the 2001 convention of our synod faces up to these issues and that we become a more open, loving, trusting, and mission-driven church.

Arne P. Kristo

II. **A PAIR OF MESSAGES FORWARDED TO ME** A ThTh subscriber sent this from exchanges among Gay/Lesbian Christians on the Internet:

"Ed, thanks for the Promising Tradition post. Being a life-long Missouri Synod Lutheran, I found it very

interesting. What is "Seminex"? (I know I should probably know, being Lutheran.) Also, what is the address for the Daystar website? I'd like to read more of this document and anything else relating to changes in the LCMS. Any sites you could suggest for further reading, I'd appreciate! I had sort of given up on my beloved denomination ever changing its thinking on ordination of women, doctrine on homosexuals, etc. I love it anyway....it's my church, even if I can't participate openly as a lesbian in my congregation. I would like to keep up on any changes in doctrine/confessions, etc. Thanks! [Her name]"

That prompted a pastor named [x] to send her this paragraph:

"Seminex (Concordia SEMinary IN EXile) was the alternative Seminary in St. Louis which was formed in February of 1974 in response to the campaign being waged within the LCMS to purge itself of any theology which was less than the fundamentalist bent that Pres. Preus had instilled. 95% of faculty and students left their campus behind and set up shop on the grounds of St. Louis University and Eden Seminary. I was one of the student leaders then. Sadly, I doubt if the LCMS will ever change its positions on the ordination of women and homosexuality.

III. **FINALLY THIS ONE**Ed, thanks for the Krueger piece. Again lots of pain, and the thrill of seeing such an articulate spokesperson in a lonely crowd. I especially like his addressing all denominations. We are all tilted toward law, and the challenge that presents to each of us. What about the silence within with in ELCA regarding

quotas? I have no trouble with Affirmative Action within the US and state system, I advocate it, but in the church of Christ that lives (or struggles to live) beyond the law, in the freedom of the Gospel, where we are to be a sign of God's Kingdom breaking in – are quotas appropriate? How can folks supportive of Krueger's theological insights and the many other Promise-centered theologians keep silent on this issue? I've not read anything, to my knowledge, that takes up the quota issue from the theological perspective of law/gospel. Maybe I've missed something. I know this is an emotional issue in ELCA and therefore a most difficult one to discuss civilly. However, by now we ought to have obtained a maturity among us that would allow a civil discussion of the subject, one in which a theological analysis is not subject to charges of being anti-women or racist. In Christ we ought to be able to esteem each other even more highly than the law (quotas).

A similar issue: The ELCA set a highly unrealistic goal in 1987 to obtain a 10% growth among persons of color in the first decade. In my experiences during that decade, since the goal was in place, there seemed to be little need within the leadership for the challenge of the Gospel, that the love of Christ constrains us to reach out. Just do it and grow! We need now a critical review of that decade in this regard, asking outreach questions from a theological basis regarding Christian mission and Christian motivation for growth.

Paul F. Goetting