

How Many Missouri Synods Are There? Two? Maybe even Three?

Colleagues,

According to the feature article on the religion page this past weekend in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch the answer is Two. Here were the opening lines of the article: “[Lutheran Church – Missouri] Synod conservatives send message in coming convention. Only 755 nominating votes are cast for incumbent president [Gerald Kieschnick]. 1,332 nominations received by Rev. Matthew Harrison.” Harrison’s “call” to assume leadership in the LCMS is “the mission of the Brothers of John the Steadfast,” unhappy campers in today’s LCMS. “Its leaders pushed congregations toward nominating Harrison.”

[The Brothers of John the Steadfast? Yes, that’s their self-chosen name—even though many women’s names show up at the website. Google it and learn more about the original John the Steadfast. He’s not listed in the catalog of the saints. Instead he’s “Johann der Bestaendige,” brother of Frederick the Wise, personal friend of Luther, and upon his brother’s demise, Duke of Saxony, Elector from 1525-1532. His is the first signature at the end of the Augsburg Confession. Better credentials than that for a Lutheran are unimaginable.]

So what’s wrong with Kieschnick? Is he not a conservative? 0 yes he is; no problem there. Does he deny verbal inspiration of the Bible? No, he’s 100% kosher there. Well, what then calls for his replacement? Answer: He’s not “bestaendig” when it comes to the Lutheran Confessions, starting right off the bat with the Augsburg Confession, signed by the very first Steadfast John. Even though Kieschnick’s own family tree has roots in Lutheran Saxony, his genuinely steadfast critics decry his “postmodern

approach to the church . . . a nondenominational, evangelical megachurch approach, and in the process [he] has diluted Martin Luther's theology."

The newspaper story quotes Timothy Rossow, the head of the Brothers Steadfast: "Kieschnick tends to reflect a broader, wider tent that can also suggest tolerance and openness. It's openness for the sake of being open, and that's where the Tea Party (sic!) groundswell against him may kick in." Harrison, the challenger, is also cited as saying: "There's a strong grass-roote movement . . . a strong sense of desire for a change of course."

What's coming from the Kieschnick side? They have just supplied a major statement—not vis-a-vis the Steadfast Brothers—but in response to the even more troublesome, more errant, "separated" brothers of the ELCA. Yes, it's about the hot potato of homosexuality and the ELCA's action last summer to be even more "tolerant and open" than the open door that Kieschnick and company consider kosher. Look at this news release from a fortnight ago. If you wish to see the entire 10-page original document, the internet Link is listed.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH Missouri Synod

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Statement discusses ELCA decision to ordain homosexuals

Titled "Theological Implications of the 2009 ELCA Decisions," the 10-page statement was prepared by a task force appointed by Synod President Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick. At its August 2009 assembly, the ELCA resolved to recognize "lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" and to authorize ordination into the pastoral ministry for individuals living in such relationships.

In an e-mail memo to pastors introducing the statement –

available at <http://www.lcms.org/?16740> – Kieschnick encouraged them to share it with congregation members and others, “given that two ‘Lutheran’ church bodies have taken such markedly different positions on a matter of great significance.”

The document first looks at the two church bodies’ differing views on THE AUTHORITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE (emphasis added) and the resulting difference in their understanding regarding human sexuality.

“Some believe that THE BIBLE’S RELEVANCE to contemporary moral questions is not decisive, arguing that what the Bible says is culturally bound, conditioned by the limited understanding of its human authors,” states the document. From this perspective, the biblical references that condemn homosexual acts as sinful “are of limited relevance today.”

According to the task force statement, the 2009 ELCA decisions are based on A VIEW OF SCRIPTURE that leads to the conclusion that “so long as differing moral perspectives on homosexual acts are held in good conscience, other Christians and the church ought to respect the validity of a variety of perspectives.”

In contrast, the MISSOURI SYNOD’S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE’S AUTHORITY holds that “God is their primary author and EVERY WORD OF SCRIPTURE IS HIS WORD.” It also holds the SCRIPTURES to be “understandable and truthful in their plain or simple meaning and that no other writing, understanding, or experience may call into question that meaning.”

This view, states the document, “leads us to affirm that where THE BIBLE SPEAKS CLEARLY regarding matters of human values, conduct, or behavior, such teachings may not be denied or qualified, but must have continuing relevance in every era of the Church.”

Human sexuality “must be understood in the context of what God, our Creator, has REVEALED IN THE SCRIPTURES about marriage. The BIBLE REMINDS US that God created man and woman for one another,” and being united in marriage, this union “may also result in the procreation of children.”

“Such a view of marital sexuality can only be heterosexual in nature,” states the document. “The LCMS believes and teaches that same-gender genital sexual activity – in every situation – violates the will of our Creator and must be recognized as sin.”

Yet, believing all have sinned (Rom. 3:23), the Missouri Synod has joined with the other 33 member churches of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) in affirming its concern for the “pastoral care of homosexuals.” In a statement unanimously adopted at its meeting last summer in Seoul, South Korea, the ILC stated that, “we declare our resolve to approach those with homosexual inclinations with the deepest possible Christian love and pastoral concern,” while recognizing that homosexual behavior violates God’s will and is sinful.

The task force statement discusses the potential for the ELCA’s decisions to affect “involvement in inter-Lutheran cooperative relationships and activities with the ELCA.” It calls for distinguishing “between joint participation in Word and Sacrament ministry” and “cooperation between churches in matters of physical need,” and then lists five questions to help LCMS congregations, districts, and other organizations determine whether to continue inter-Lutheran cooperative projects.

The third section of the document discusses “Lutheran identity” and what it means to be a Lutheran today. The report notes that the foundational document for the ELCA’s approval of same-gender sexual relationships describes itself as a “distinctly Lutheran approach” to human sexuality.

However, “any purported distinctiveness which MINIMIZES BIBLICAL AUTHORITY or isolates us from the church catholic’s consensus regarding homosexual activity is sectarian and a departure from what makes Lutheranism truly distinctive,” the statement reads.

“We pray that our brothers, sisters and friends in the ELCA, and any others who have departed from this biblical and Christian understanding, would reconsider – even now – their actions,” the statement concludes. and then come the signatures.

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Before moving on, I want to call attention to the Biblical authority notion in this document, and the (nonexistent) role of the Gospel’s authority in the text. Over and over again it’s all about Biblical authority. The term is hyped six times in the opening paragraphs of the original document. In those same paragraphs we get Missouri-specific rhetoric:

“We affirm the infallibility of the Scriptures . . . every word of Scripture.” “We are grounded in the Bible, God’s written and infallible word.” “The Bible . . . provides final assurance.”

Never mentioned is the authority of the Gospel, or being “grounded” there and getting “final assurance” from its Promise. “Gospel” appears 7 times in the text, but it never is USED as the foundation for any of the document’s claims. It’s all the Bible.

1. Gospel promises are for homosexuals too
2. Ultimate message of the Bible is the Gospel
3. Unless one hears this voice of the Gospel . . . the purpose of the Scriptures has been missed.
4. We dare not compromise the confession of the Gospel.
5. Given the Great Commission to preach the Gospel, what does it mean to be Lutheran today?
6. ELCA decision impacts the Gospel itself.
7. ” ” leads to a false Gospel.

This kind of systematic theology prominent (dominant?) in Missouri’s history is still the official center (or the center of the officials) of Missouri. Gospel is affirmed as the center, but the Bible and its infallibility is the FIRST thing you’ve got to believe in. There is (always has been?) a “thin tradition” within Missouri that claimed it was the other way around—Faith in the Gospel leads to understanding scripture’s authority. That was the issue a generation ago during the mayhem in Missouri tht led to Seminex. Many of them died in exile. But a new generation of thin-tradition folks is alive within Missouri, Even though also thin in numbers, they are a third option to the two major players discussed above. More about this below.

So aren’t there (at least) two Missouri Synods within Missouri these days? When even conservative verbal inspiration believers are suspect? Is it really a Lutheran Confessional dipstick that the Steadfast Brethren are using—as they claim—to measure the

current LCMS leadership? Putting the plumb line of the Lutheran Confessions alongside today's Lutheran churches is, I think, a good thing. But is that what's going on here? Is it something else? Or are there also two brands of Lutheran confessionalism behind this kerfuffle? Both of them biblicists? That's what I think. And here's why.

Scroll back to the previous millennium—namely, the wars of Missouri in the 1970s. All three of the specific charges against the “false teachers” in that Kirchenkampf were disagreements about the Lutheran Confessions. [LCMS New Orleans Convention (1974) Resolution 3-09.] One was about Biblical authority according to the Lutheran Confessions. One was on the Biblical hermeneutics in the Lutheran Confessions. One was on the explicit teaching of the Lutheran Confessions on how Law and Gospel impact Christian ethics.

On the authority issue it was this: Is it the Gospel that gives the Bible its authority, or the other way around? What do the Confessions actually say? The critics back then said: “FBA-GAF” “First (comes) Biblical Authority— Gospel's Authority Follows [from that].” The “false teachers” claimed the opposite. “FGA-BAF” – First comes the Gospel's authority; the Bible's authority follows [from that].

As you can see from the Kieschnick-signed document—and both of the LCMS seminary presidents have put their signatures there too—they are all affirming FBA-GAF theology. No change from New Orleans 3-09.

But when we go to the Steadfast Brothers website—even though I couldn't find a statement on authority there—we see that they are FBA-GAF folks too! Listen to these words from their leader, Tim Rossow: “authority in the synod is based on scripture” “we

study the Scriptures to discover the propositional truth therein." "we call on the members of synod churches and the delegates to the convention to wake up and restore Biblical purity to our denomination."

That sure sounds like the old tune on Biblical authority, the melody of FBA-GAF. And it reminds me of Luther's whimsical observations that although his two sets of opponents, Rome and the Enthusiasts, looked like two foxes running in opposite directions, when you looked more closely, you noticed that their tails were tied together. Today's two Missouri foxes running apparently in opposite directions have their tails tied to FBA-GAF. We see that even consensus on FBA-GAF isn't the blessed "tie that binds" enough to hold Missouri together. Is there any other option?

Back in the days of the old Missouri Kirchenkampf there was a minority voice then too proposing FGA-BAF. First comes the Gospel's authority, from it follows the Bible's authority. We all got sacked for that claim. It was tarred as "false doctrine not to be tolerated in the church of God" in that infamous New Orleans resolution. Those two different letter-sequences (FBA-GAF vs. FGA-BAF) are not a teamest in a teapot. They signal two different Gospels.

How so? Here's how. In ThTh546 (November 27, 2008) I passed on to you a section from Werner Elert's dogmatics about the disaster of placing Biblical inspiration first before faith in the gospel.

Elert examines the two classic NT texts that use the word—2 Timothy 3:16 (All scripture is inspired by God) and 2 Peter 1:21 (Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God). In these two texts it is only the Old Testament that existed at that time, so these texts refer only to that—and not at all to what we call

the New Testament. But NT apostles now and then claim their message to be the product of the Holy Spirit, and thus inspired too. There is no argument with such claims of inspiration.

However, when you deduce a “doctrine” of the Bible’s authority from the inspiration of the Scriptures, you undermine precisely what the apostles are claiming when they speak of scriptural inspiration—both for OT texts and for NT texts. The whole point of the apostles’ claim for the Holy Spirit active in scriptural texts—both in the OT and in the NT that these very apostles are creating as they do their writing—is that here too the Holy Spirit is at work doing the Spirit’s single-focused job assignment. And what is that? It is an assignment coming from Christ himself: “The Holy Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.” The Spirit’s “job” is not communicating divine doctrines—as both the Steadfast Brothers and the Task Force statement claim—doctrines for us to believe. It is instead “pushing Christ” [Christum treiben] for us to trust.

The fundamental flaw in the doctrine of inspiration is what it says about faith. Elert’s own words: “The inspiration doctrine adulterates and destroys faith in the NT sense. The compelling element that leads someone to faith in the Gospel is always and only the person of Christ. That was true for his first apostles. They needed no doctrine of inspiration to urge them to trust Christ. When in their writings we hear them say: ‘We appeal to you, be reconciled to God through Christ,’ they do not appeal to their own inspiration. Instead they urge us to trust Christ, not because they were inspired, but because they bear witness to Christ as they themselves heard and saw Him.

“Strictly speaking, this is the only way that WE today can connect with Christ. The apostles’ writings which we have today, just like their oral proclamation of long ago, are the medium—but not the foundation—for faith in Christ. The work of

the Holy Spirit in these apostolic writings—call it their inspiration—resides solely in the Christ-promise that they are urging upon their readers. If we try to get back behind this Gospel-center to ground our faith on some earlier inspiring act of God that then urges us to trust Christ, we are pulling the rug out from under faith itself.” So far Elert.

That’s the theological grounds, the Gospel-grounds, for the other mantra FGA-BAF. It is “sola gratia” (by grace alone) that there still exists in Missouri “still small voices” hustling that mantra, a third option (a third Missouri synod?) to the two major wrestling teams you’ll see in action at the upcoming LCMS summer convention. So long as both of these competing teams stick to FBA-GAF, these still small voices will continue to say no to both of them. And for the same reason. You’re “pulling the rug out from under faith itself.”

One of these voices comes from the DayStar crowd, up until now mostly an internet association of Gospel-firsters. <http://www.daystarnet.org/> Earlier this year they’ve gone back to Gutenberg and published a book, A DAYSTAR READER, 265 pages. If you want to get your own copy, consult editor Matthew L. Becker.

Matt recently sent me a copy for review. If things don’t get too encumbered in the next seven days—my wife Marie’s high-tech MitraClip heart operation scheduled for May 5 is top priority for the week—I may have that review ready next Thursday. Add her name to your intercessions roster, please.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder.

P.S. In case you didn’t know, there is another LCMS in the world, namely, in Asia. The Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore, therefore LCMS, is a member of the Lutheran World

Federation.