

A book on Authority in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.

Colleagues,

This week's edition of ThTh is a book review. You'll see very quickly why I got it as soon as I heard it was out, viz., one-third of it is about my life. If that fact might deflect you from reading on any further, forget the fact, and read on anyway.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Mary Todd. AUTHORITY VESTED.

A STORY OF IDENTITY AND CHANGE IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH – MISSOURI SYNOD.

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.

"I think she's got it!" So said Henry Higgins [aka 'Enry 'Iggins] as Liza Doolittle deciphered the code to spoken English in *My Fair Lady*. Her test, you may remember, was "the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain."

Mary Todd 's book unravels the code of the Missouri Synod. I think she's got it. What makes Missouri tick, she shows, is how authority gets exercised and where that authority is "vested." Pun intended, I'm sure. One of her concluding theses is: "The Missouri Synod is a male church." In Missouri authority is always vested in the "vested" gender. It never comes "skirted."

Punning on Liza we might say: [Much of] the fury in Missouri comes from that all-male jury. But that's only one of Todd's findings in her monumental research on authority in Missouri's 150-year history.

Three other conclusions come with that "male church" finding. The Missouri Synod is "a clergy church . . . a biblical (more accurate, biblicistic) church. . . and a congregational church." All four of these descriptors—even though two contradict each other—are the context for authority and how it is vested in the LCMS.

These four theses will doubtless raise hackles among Missouri's present authority figures. They'll likely say that Todd held these opinions (prejudices?) before she even started, and that discredits her work. I think not. Some of these 4 theses may well have been her hunches, for she is a Missouri "insider." But all researchers have hunches. The scholarly project then is to verify or falsify the hunches. I think she's done it. It's brilliant—and witty too.

But Missouri's all-male jury isn't Todd's main point, although the evidence for that is overwhelming, and nowadays almost bizarre. For example, from the very outset the synod's various "commissions on women" never had skirted members. They were always suits.

So what is her main point? It's finally not even about where authority in the LCMS is vested, but what kind of authority Missouri's church authority is. Her parallel point is that the LCMS has never examined its own theology and practice of authority. Perhaps no church organization really has—or even can. But not having done so in Missouri has left an elephant in the living room. Everybody knows that the elephant is there right in front of them. But no one (yet) has directly addressed

that grey eminence in the parlor to decipher what it really is. Mary examines the elephant. And here's what she finds in the three 50-year segments of LCMS history.

In the first segment the Saxon immigrants had hardly gotten off the boat at St. Louis in 1839 when their authority structure fell apart. Martin Stephan, the bishop they had all followed—was he a Pied Piper?—from the old country to the new, was run out of town (actually rowed across the Mississippi) for sexual hanky-panky. And the ones who had to confront him—and eventually do the rowing—were the handful of young pastors together with some of the educated laity, whom Stephan had enlisted—or was it mesmerized?—to join him in building Zion on the Mississippi. The immigration had accepted Stephan's hierarchical episcopal authority as their vision for their new Zion and now it blew up in their face. Was it all a mistake? A con job? Who was in charge? Could they even call themselves church after this fiasco? If so, by what authority?

One of those crushed Stephanites was Pastor Carl F.W. Walther, still in his twenties. In coping with the shock he came up with an alternate model of church authority for the stranded Saxons. The frazzled community, pastors and laity, bought it. Walther reasoned: A de facto congregation of Christians (which they surely were, even as leaderless sheep in Missouri—maybe even sectarians, a dreadful term in Lutheran lingo) has God-given authority to have the ministry of word and sacrament done in their midst. That authority the congregations may transfer to one of their number, via a formal call, who then carries out that word-and-sacrament ministry in their midst. So church authority resides in the congregation. It is the authority for the Gospel to happen in preaching and sacraments so that Christ's sheep be fed. The constitution of the synodical organization formed a few years later made that perfectly clear.

Yes, but. . . . But the image of hierarchical episcopacy still resided in the minds (and maybe the hearts too) of many of those whom Stephan had recruited. In, with, and under Missouri's official congregationalism has been a 150-year history of the "Herr Pastor." Pastors are not just laity who have received an "authority-transfer" from a congregation. They have status (= authority) on their own as a class sui generis somehow or other alongside the congregation. When they go to synodical conventions they do not (by proxy) cast the congregation's vote. They cast their own "pastor's" vote, and the congregational delegates do likewise for their congregations.

Todd shows how the wires of authority get tangled here. In the first formative 50 years the LCMS never faced the snarl head on. Nor has it done so up until now a century and a half later. Result: the longer you ignore the elephant the messier things get in the living room.

Mary Todd traces the messiness through the next two 50-year chunks of LCMS history, i.e., the two halves of the 20th century. Most fascinating for this reviewer, of course, is the last fifty years. That's my history too. I got thrown out of Missouri for not obeying church authority. So did many others. Most often that action was linked to our alleged disrespect for the authority of the Bible. But for many of us exiles, that focus on biblical authority actually blurred the real authority issue: what is the church's own rightful authority, and consequently the legitimate authority of church leaders, especially in times of controversy?

It was that very issue that we never could get onto the agenda for serious discussion during the "Missouri wars" of the 1970s. E.g., we could never get the church's president to let his own authority in the church be the focus for discussion and debate, let alone get him to have his own theology put under scrutiny.

We were always dancing around this elephant. No wonder we sometimes looked clumsy—both to insiders and outsiders—and messiness multiplied.

Also in the 20th century's first fifty years—the middle segment of Todd's partitions—Missourians maneuvered around the grey eminence as they had since Stephan. One example, parochial school teachers. What is their authority? Are they clergy or congregational laity? When men are called up to go to war, do such teachers get clergy deferments or get drafted? And when women become parochial school teachers, and eventually the overwhelming majority of the teachers, what sort of authority do they exercise? And then what about woman-suffrage, first of all as it came to pass in American civil society, and then as that civilly legal egalitarianism stuck its nose into congregational voters assemblies? In this middle segment of its history Missouri muddled through on the authority issue. Never addressing it head on, but always adjusting “our teaching” to fit what just “had to be done.”

For the last 50-year segment of the century Todd addresses the ordination of women for pastoral ministry. It's the mountaintop of her masterwork—in two ways, at least. One is in historical research. As far as I can tell—and I was “there”—she has read all the primary documents, listened to oral histories from all the players, and done her own interviews of all the principals still living. The other is in making sense out of that history. I can't summarize it. You'll have to read it for yourself.

As a kind of epilogue she gives us 20 pages of theological analysis. The problem of authority in Missouri is interior to all of the major problems Missouri confronts today. She ticks off those problems: of ministry, of women, of scripture, of polity—showing how the unexamined elephant vexes them all. And in her last few paragraphs she does point the way. Which way?

Away from “the synod’s heteronomy—the authority it claims for itself—[to] an alternative authority, one based on the Gospel.” (275).

Some of us still think we were trying to do that in the Battle of Missouri 30 years ago. But it didn’t become Missouri’s own agenda then and has not up until now.

So now I’ll get personal, since I count Mary as a friend. If “they” don’t do it, Mary, you’ll have to do it for them. You are after all an insider, born into one of the clergy-clans of the LCMS. So you know what (even “whom”) you are talking about also from your own life in the synod. So how about this as your next book: A Gospel-Grounded Authority for the LCMS?

You’ve hinted at that more than once. E.g., your brief excursus on the Formula of Concord Article 10 where you show that the Lutheran Confessions, so highly touted in Missouri, are actually the critic of the kind of authority practiced in Missouri.

The Formulators of Concord got their bearings on this point, of course, from the Augsburg Confession, Article 28, of 50 years earlier. AC 28 contrasts the coercive authority of the sword (“You’ve GOTTA—or else.”) with the authority of the Gospel (“Because of Christ you GETTA do such and so...”). Along with that AC 28 describes how “a bishop according to the Gospel” exercises the latter, not the former, in Christ’s church.

All of this finally is rooted in Jesus’ own words in the Gospels as he straightens out the disciples in their authority confusion. Of “gentile authority” (authority “over” others), he says, “It shall not be so among you.” His alternative Christic authority is “authority under”—not being served, but serving—all the way to “giving his life a ransom for many.” Churchly authority is rightly practiced only when rooted in the theology of the cross.

When church authority in the LCMS—and the ELCA and the WELS and any church body—gets re-rooted in the Gospel, all related problems get easier. Even if easier does not yet mean “easy,” then this much is sure: they cease being elephantine. Even better—the strain of pain no longer reigns these plains. Mary Todd, like her ancient namesake, points to the one thing needful.

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