

A Time for Confessing in the Missouri Synod

Colleagues,

The more things change, the more they stay the same. There is theological conflict, serious conflict, in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Yes, again. In some respects it looks like a re-run of the Seminex epic of the seventies, though this time the LCMS St. Louis seminary is not the focus. Instead, and on the “other side,” the LCMS seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, appears to be the home base for protagonists of Missouri orthodoxy, who support the synod president in identifying the leftover liberals from a generation ago and “throwing the rascals out.” A number of these current rascals were co-confessors with us Seminex folks during the wars of the 70s—when we rascals were thrown out.

The LCMS national convention in 1998 was for them a tripwire, as you will read below. A number of these co-confessors from earlier days went public identifying themselves (and their website!) under the banner “Daystar.” I like that name, an emblem of hope from the season of Advent. In some future ThTh we may say more about their movement, as we learn more about them. For today’s ThTh 96 we pass on to you one of the primal documents in their “confessing movement.” Its author, Stephen Krueger, is pastor at Zion Lutheran Church (LCMS) in Portland, Oregon. He’s a Seminex alum from the class of ’77. I took this from the Daystar website—and using it here with Steve’s permission. You’ll soon see why I like it—even if he hadn’t mentioned my name!

Peace & Joy!

Ed

The Promising Tradition For A Time To Confess

I. **History** We called it “The Promising Tradition” during my seminary days. It represented a thin tradition of confessing theology which boldly affirmed with Luther, and he was just borrowing the notion from St. Paul, that the Gospel is victorious (as it must be) over the Law. The Promising Tradition represents a theology which tries to capture the essence of the 16th century Lutheran confessional movement, although such a thing can never be captured, and reconfess all over again the truths of our Biblical faith for the sake of the Gospel within our contemporary setting.

The Promising Tradition is not the “official” court theology of any denomination. As a matter of fact, most Lutheran denominations I know of have tended to resist it and resist those who confess the theology of the Promising Tradition as their own. Confessing the Gospel is always dangerous business for denominations. Denominations still reflect the old order of things. They are godly, necessary to a degree (pension plans, organizational structure and the like), but decidedly nomological. Certainly they are bound to ethos under the Law, as Werner Elert put it. The Gospel deliciously, joyously, triumphantly threatens all that with its whole, new, victorious order, ruled by the crucified and risen One.

Nevertheless, as much as “the Church will be and remain forever” (AC VII’s opener), so will the Gospel and the theology of the Promising Tradition. Its confessing has spilled over into many churches through the Christ-connected men and women who confess the Gospel of the Promising Tradition. It even remains, however oppressed,

as a thin tradition in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

The Promising Tradition is associated with voices like those of Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder. I, with many others, have been a shameless borrower of many of the things they taught me. But, then, so were they, as they would be the first to say. It was Richard Caemmerer, "Doc," who opened their eyes and rescued them, as he did so many, from the staid and dead dogmatism and legalism which seem to ever dog Missouri. Caemmerer of course, from his sainted place in heaven where he will forever be proclaiming the Gospel, would point to others, contemporaries of his; O.P. Kretzmann, whose Valparaiso University was where the Promising Tradition was kept alive and flourished, comes readily to mind. They were borrowers, too, from the European voice of Werner Elert, who, often discredited, found many young LCMS pastors eager to hear a tradition of Lutheran Confessional theology that was actually consistent with the Gospel. In truth, Elert let the 16th century version of the Promising Tradition, first and foremost Luther's own voice, speak for itself, rather than be muted through the more moribund voices of 17th and 18th century Orthodoxy, which had formed so much of the Missouri Synod's consciousness. And, of course, they, those 16th century confessors, were shameless borrowers, too, as Epistles like Romans and Galatians grabbed their hearts and left them no choice but to confess the Gospel's victory over the whole ethos of the Law.

In Missouri today, we have no choice, either. It is long-past due to speak of what we know as the Promising Tradition. To some, who are so bound to the Law and its deadly power, it will sound like heresy all over again. They will rear up like Eck did against Luther or the

Judaizers did against St. Paul, to say nothing of the Pharisees against Our Lord himself. Yet, try as they will to suppress the Promising Tradition, they may destroy a denomination, true enough, [but] they will never suppress the Gospel. The Gospel's winsome power to forgive sinners their sins and offer a whole new chance at life, is simply too strong. The Gospel's wondrous gift of evangelical freedom is simply too right. The Gospel's triumph over the Law is simply too appropriate in our situation to ignore.

If ever there was a time in Missouri, this is it. Now is our time to confess.

II. **The Strange Morass That Is Missouri** Missouri is now in an ironic state of affairs. When I was a student at Concordia Seminary, entering in 1971, not only was I quickly engrossed in the theology of the Promising Tradition, I got a first-hand experiential taste of learning how to properly distinguish Law and Gospel. With Bertram as our guide, the whole affair of crisis and exile was interpreted through the lens of Lutheran Confessional theology. At Concordia Seminary in Exile, my alma mater, we saw ourselves as confessors of the theology of Wittenberg, countering a theology which was thoroughly sub-Lutheran.

Today in Missouri, it is the sub-Lutheran legalism, which has so thoroughly confused Law and Gospel, that now seeks to pass itself off as "confessional." How ironic! It is no more "confessional" than the Confutation, written by Eck in opposition to the Augsburg Confession. Nevertheless, the legalists today often see themselves as champions of a "confessionalism." Their target is frequently another party of very dear people who have found some source of evangelical freshness and life in the Church Growth Movement. The latter are often very bright and gifted

Christians, with a heart for the Gospel, who, hearing nothing but death and Law in the so-called "confessional" party, sought something, anything, which could give their witness to Christ life.

The Church Growth group of sisters and brothers are the first who need to hear about the Promising Tradition. They have never been given the opportunity to hear about a Lutheran Confessional option which validates, authorizes and strengthens their many wonderful concerns. They, too, ridiculed by the legalists, hunger for the victory of the Gospel. They need to know that the Lutheran Confessional tradition, as it truly is, is on their side more than they know.

Then there are those in the LCMS who simply do not trust the Gospel. They may call themselves "confessional" but they are as far from the Lutheran Confessional faith identity as one can get. To the extent that they fear the rule of the Gospel and oppose it through the rule of Law, is the extent to which they are in danger of losing their souls.

For their sake, we of the Promising Tradition must also confess. We long and ache for them, our brothers and sisters, to entrust their lives to the same Gospel as we. True, they "just don't get it," as they relentlessly impose their rigid and dead pathology onto the rest of us. Still, even for their sakes, we must confess. For their sakes as much as for our own we must not let them rule us. You can't build Christ's Church by fostering a climate of suspicion, mistrust, and constant accusation. You can't build the Church by the Law. Only the Gospel builds the Church of Jesus Christ. Only the Gospel can redeem them, as it does us all.

III. **The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel** At the core of the Promising Tradition lies the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The legalists thoroughly misunderstand this most precious theological tool of all. They treat Scripture as if God's Word were not the living voice of God, speaking God's accusing Law for the sake of God's victorious Word in the Gospel. To them, Scripture seems to be filled with eternal propositions of truth, all equally the same, all equally able to provide "proof texts" for doctrine.

For us, confessors of the Promising Tradition, "all Scripture should be divided into two chief doctrines, the law and the promises" (Ap. IV, 5). The Law reflects one reality, one rule, one ordering. The Gospel proclaims another, which must triumph over the Law's rule, or we poor sinners are lost forever. We confess that the Law is godly, to be sure. It speaks directly to our old identities, our Adamic natures, which we carry with us to the Law's final verdict, the grave. The Gospel, on the other hand, is God's new verdict on our lives in Christ. The Gospel breaks in with a whole new freeing identity, fashioned after Christ in us. The Gospel establishes a brand new "regime," Luther called it "the kingdom on the right," by which Christians begin a new life with God and with one another. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 28).

The legalists choke on the belief that the Gospel is the Christian's victory over the Law. They mute St. Paul's words which declare, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law" (Galatians 5: 18). They often have accused us of subverting the so-called "Third Use of the Law" which we do not. The Law, even after our

regeneration, continues to speak to our sinful natures. Only as we trust the Promise is the Law's accusing voice silenced.

The legalists, in fact, are the ones who err, by trying to silence the accusing voice of the Law. They do not understand how deadly the games they play with the Law are. Not trusting the new rule of Christ in their lives, they try in vain to seek a comfort zone in the old order where the Law rules. But that comfort is not there for them. It will never be. So they add more rules, seeking to impose their will on everyone else, hoping to find a comfort that will forever elude them.

There is no comfort in the Law. There is only criticism of the most divine kind in the Law. The comfort they seek, to silence the Law's accusations in them, can only come from outside the Law. It can only come in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

IV. **Justification by Faith Alone** Also key to the Promising Tradition is the chief doctrine of the Christian faith, Justification by faith alone.

The legalists claim to champion this central doctrine. They are doing it now. Yet, if they believed that Christ alone was the only justification necessary for all our lives before God, then why do they persist in imposing rule after rule, Synodical resolution after resolution on us all, as if the Gospel alone was not the sole sufficient norm for the Church? If Christ alone was the only justification necessary for all our lives before God, then why do the legalists persist in charge after charge against anyone who dares speak out differently than merely to puppet the "official position of Synod?"

The fact is, while knowing the doctrine of justification by faith alone in their heads, the legalists contradict that doctrine by their behavior and their lives.

The Promising Tradition understands the Gospel of Justification by faith alone in Christ alone to be the freeing doctrine that it is properly meant to be. Trusting that my life is justified by faith alone in Christ alone, I am free from the need to justify myself in any other lesser courtroom, including the ecclesiastical ones of men.

Why do the legalists turn around and demand of professors and pastors, "Justify yourself for the comment you made in public which was not consistent with this or that Synodical resolution?" They wouldn't do that if they truly believed that Christ alone is their brothers' or sisters' only necessary justification. Why do the legalists simplistically seek to rule over complex pastoral and theological issues, such as ecumenical worship, evangelical Eucharistic hospitality, and the ordination of women to the pastoral office, as if the Gospel of justification by faith alone could not be the adequate justification for these matters?

The legalists, in fact, do not seem to be in the least bit fazed by the core doctrine of the Christian faith held so dear by the Promising Tradition: the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. The Gospel's voice is silenced every time coercion, fear and force are used to rule in the Church.

V. **Christian Liberty** The Promising Tradition rejoices in a church that once could say, as if it meant it:

In its relation to its members the Synod is not an

ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government it is but an advisory body. Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned (Synodical Constitution, Article VII).

We ask, however, what has become of that church?

What truly is different now between our Synod, after its 1998 Convention, and the medieval papacy which forced the hand of the Lutheran Reformers? In the 16th century a pope ruled. In the 20th century an office of the Synodical President is virtually vested with a pope's power. In the 16th century church councils and sacred tradition were placed on equal authority with Scripture. In the 20th century Synodical Convention resolutions now rival the voice of the Word.

True enough, there are still signs from a better day, in part, reflected in Article VII of Synod's Constitution. Yet, how did our Christian freedom slip so quickly away?

The Promising Tradition cherishes the gift of Christian liberty. While the legalists do not trust the gift (perhaps it is they themselves they do not trust the most), Christian freedom is a gift that comes under the gentle rule of the Gospel. Christ has authorized us to have freedom to his glory. The legalists have no right to take it away.

The legalists have not understood the essence of Christian

freedom. They are worried that Christians who are free will abandon Biblical Christian doctrine. What they do not understand is that it is precisely that Christian doctrine which authorizes Christian freedom. The purpose of doctrine has never been to organize Biblical truths in this or that arrangement. The purpose of Christian doctrine is to keep the Good News of Jesus Christ good! That is the whole rationale behind the major statements of doctrine, like the Creeds, the Augsburg Confession and Apology, to name a few.

The Promising Tradition is about confessing Christian doctrine for the sake of the Gospel which makes and keeps God's people free for him.

VI. **A Time to Confess** There are times and occasions when men and women of God are called to take the witness stand and confess the Gospel as the sole-sufficient norm of Christ's Church. For us, in our little corner of the kingdom, confessors of the Promising Tradition recognize that now is such a time.

Confessing is serious and, from a human point of view, a dangerous business, as Luther and the Reformers found out in their time of *in statu confessionis* [=taking the witness stand]. The first danger of confessing is that confessors themselves are in imminent danger of losing their souls. Sin crouches as much at their door as it does anywhere else. They can become easily prone to self-righteousness, to hatred, to character assassination, the very things they recognize in their opponents. Confessing can only be done in profound humility before the Lord of the Church. It is done for the sake of the Gospel, that the sole sufficiency of the Gospel of Jesus Christ get the new and fresh hearing that it alone deserves in the life of the community of faith. It is done, also, for the sake

of the opponents. They are God's children, too, and confessors dare never forget that.

Confessors confess peacefully. It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who opened many of our eyes in our time to that. Of course he, a soul-mate to the Promising Tradition, stole most of his lines from one, Jesus of Nazareth. We will love our enemies and persecutors and we will never stop loving them no matter what they do. That's how to confess the Gospel. We will offer our humble, unworthy confessing up to the Lord, trusting that he will use it to open the eyes even of our enemies to the very Gospel we confess.

However our confessing takes earthly shape in the days and months ahead, it will have been, as Richard Caemmerer said a quarter of a century ago, when he was asked how he, the teacher of three generations of pastor-proclaimers, felt about being branded a heretic, "A privilege to suffer for the sake of the Gospel."

Let us take it up again in the name of Christ. Now is our time to confess. The Promising Tradition, as it always does, insists on taking the stand.

Stephen C. Krueger
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