

Dysfunctional Authority—in Families and in Churches

Colleagues,

Today's posting comes from the hand of Jeffrey Anderson. Jeff was a senior student at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) during the first year I taught there in '71-'72. We've stayed in touch over the years. He and wife Judith carry out their callings—do their Crossings—in the secular workplace. Jeff's a computer system engineer and Judith teaches multiply handicapped children. They live in Ohio.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Dear Ed,

A few weeks ago I read your review of Mary Todd's book about Authority in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod [ThTh 93. March 23, 2000]. This topic is near to my heart. It is not just near to my heart because I have lived my life in the environs of the LCMS, but because it is an issue that I live with daily in the inner dialogue of my soul. I have internalized the LCMS style of "authority" (some might suggest that I was born with it), and it is at war with the voice of "freedom" that I first heard in my baptism.

I have long held that the LCMS displays the classic symptoms of a dysfunctional family. So I was fascinated to hear you use the metaphor of "the elephant in the living room", which is part of the lingo of contemporary recovery psychology. I have not read Mary's book, so I don't know whether she used the elephant imagery, or whether the elephant is your embellishment. But that does not matter. The elephant metaphor led me to do some

thinking about how a theology of the cross might apply Diagnosis and Prognosis to the authority issue in the LCMS using some of the language of contemporary recovery psychology. I thought you might enjoy my ruminations.

First of all, when we talk about the authority issue, we are dealing with two groups: the authorities and the obey-ers, the dominators and the dominated; or in “recovery” language, the abuser and the abused. A theology of glory might step into the fray to diagnose and fix one side or the other, either the abused or the abuser. “Recovery psychology” would call that triangulation. A theology of the cross would call that self-justification, since it would be the other guys that I would choose to diagnose. So, it seems we must do our Diagnosis and Prognosis twice. I did the section on the Authority figures; the “vested” males, in some detail. The notes on the victims, the minorities, the women, the excommunicated, the plain folk in the pews who have accepted the domination of the vested authorities, need further development.

THE VESTED AUTHORITIES: [Using the Crossings paradigm]

DIAGNOSIS

Step 1. Of course, authority is necessary, even good. Some authorities are “ordained by God”. So where does authority go wrong? That is easy. Authority has gone askew when it is no longer exercised “for the good of the governed,” but for the benefit of the authorities themselves. It happens all the time. We have a saying: “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Therefore we are not surprised to see government scandals in the news every day. People in power use the power

for themselves. It is such a common institutional booby trap that Jesus warns his followers against it: Do not lord it over one another like the gentiles do. In my youth we [LCMS] Lutherans said things like: do not elevate human authority to divine status like the pope and the catholics do. Abuse of authority was present at the birth of the LCMS in Martin Stephan, and emerged “naturally” in the cult of “Herr Pastor”, which used the German Bible’s appellation for Yahweh and the Lord Jesus to address the pastors of the synod. So, at first glance, we could say that the problem is that God-given authority is being abused in the LCMS. Perhaps we need some way to check the pride and arrogance of human leaders, some higher authority to keep them in line. Well, that would be nice, but the problem in a dysfunctional family is worse than that.

Step 2. Studies now show that fathers and mothers who abuse their children are acting out their own sense of powerlessness. They are themselves often abused children. When their children do anything outside a narrow, rigid range of acceptable behavior, it triggers their rage. And to regain a sense of inner control, they must beat their children into conformity, even if it kills the child. In theological terms we would say, they cannot see the Christ in their children, because they cannot see the Christ in themselves. They have not experienced the healing acceptance of Jesus for their own human imperfections. Such abusers of power may talk about Christ. They may even teach and preach about Christ. But they do not “have Christ” [Note: “habere Christum” was one of Luther’s favorite definitions for faith. He got it from the Gospel of John.] When authority gets controlling or manipulative or cruel, it is a Christ-less authority.

Step 3. The tools of an abusive authority do not have to be physical beatings or gas chambers. The tools can be words that engender guilt in their victims. It can be a look that speaks

shame toward their object. It can be highly rational arguments that show the “authority” to be righteous, and the other party to be wrong. It can be convention resolutions that define outlawed teachings or forbidden books. It can be a systematic theology that shows one race to be inferior, or one gender to be subservient. It can be an educational or worship environment that speaks and acts out the unworthiness of the sinner in the pew. But all of these techniques are merely a smoke screen. They are a distraction, like the accusatory raging of an alcoholic who points out everyone else’s faults. They are like the words of our parents in the primal garden: Don’t look at me, God. It was his fault. It was her fault. It is the behavior of one who is hiding in terror from the accusing authority of God.

PROGNOSIS

Step 4. What we see in contemporary therapy for dysfunctional families, where authority has turned abusive, is that some kind of outside intervention is necessary. How salient that God’s intervention for an authority system gone amuck is to offer a new kind of authority. A Lord in a manger. An authority who is addressed as “my Lord and my God” because he has holes in his hands from hanging on the cross. “Authority” is the rightful claim that an “author” has over her work, as its creator. And this “Herr Jesu”, the Word, who created the world, now is “the author(ity) and finisher of your faith”. He gives authorities an alternative to trusting in their own control over their underlings or their organization. Rather than holding down others to prove their own manliness or their own righteousness, they can now hold on to the authoritative words of Jesus who died at the hands of the authorities and still declared, “Father forgive them.” Yes, forgive the authorities.

Step 5. A person who comes from a dysfunctional family (most of us?) is never “recovered” but always “recovering”. This implies

a process of ongoing healing for a wounded soul. If abusers of authority are known to be abused children themselves, then it is plain to see that they need to be re-parented by a nurturing parent. Or to use the imagery which is so common in Scripture, they need a nurturing shepherd (which is what the Latin term “pastor” means). The Lord Jesus is just such a good shepherd. He leads and feeds his sheep, especially the lost and wounded ones. He calls them by name. He nourishes them with his own body and blood, almost like a mother nourishes her babe with her own milk. We see how necessary such divine nurturance is when we realize that many of the “vested authorities,” the LCMS clergy, were mere children when they were wrested away from their homes to go to “prep schools,” where hazing was the abusive authority structure in which they prepared for ministerial authority. [Note: for over 100 years the “pipeline” through which most LCMS pastors entered the ministry was a system of seven boarding schools around the country which students entered at age 14 for six years of education before entering the seminary.] So the healing needs to proceed day by day, one day at a time, under the watchful eye and the gentle hand of the good shepherd.

Step 6. Could it be any better than that? Yes, it could be. Yes, it is! It is the Good Shepherd himself who chooses formerly abused sheep, and commissions them to be authorities in his church: Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep. Peter got flashbacks of his own flawed discipleship when he heard those words. But three times he is invited to be a shepherd of his Lord’s flock. He experiences what it means for his old authoritative words, “I do not know the man,” to be completely erased, and replaced with the new authority to tend the master’s sheep. The New Testament word for this transformation of authority is freedom. The authority-bound, power-hungry, control-centered leader is now free to serve the sheep in his charge. As Luther says: A perfectly free Lord of all, subject to

none. And at the same time a perfectly obedient slave of all, subject to all. Just think, shepherds with the authority to die for the sheep, and not the other way around.

THE VICTIMS OF ABUSIVE AUTHORITY

Here are some diagnostic clues that may point to a salutary prognosis for the victims.

DIAGNOSIS

Step 1. Controlled. Manipulated by authorities. Powerless. Led like sheep to the slaughter.

Step 2. They come to believe themselves worthless. They trust the negative evaluation of their dysfunctional Herr Pastor rather than the promise of their Herr Jesu, the Good Pastor who said in baptism, You are my own dear child! The abused sheep abandon responsibility for their own faith and life, and submit to whatever the authority figures say. Live like robots, not as children of the Father. They would rather put up with abusive authority, than rock the boat. They view their abused condition as a way to bear the cross of Christ. They admire their abusers.

Step 3. They have chosen the victim mode. They experience the wrath of God, not as fire but as a life of religious rote and obedient ritual. They have chosen false authorities, false gods. They live in a hellish stupor and hardly know it is the wrath of God.

PROGNOSIS

Step 4. Intervention for these victims of pastoral authority comes in the form of a brother who stands up to the scribes and

pharisees and authorities. He heals the lame, instead of praying for the lame to bear their burden patiently. He identifies with prostitutes and acts out the worth of the sinner, while she is still a sinner. Instead of leaving the abused with their burden, he shoulders their burden, and dies with it.

Step 5. He begins to touch their lives with surprising blessings.

Step 6. He becomes the center of a new community of “the recovering”. And this community begins to reach out to other victims of authoritarian abuse.