

The Wars of Missouri that Led to Seminex. A Retrospective.

Colleagues,

For this week's posting a book review. And then only the first half.

Paul A. Zimmermann. A SEMINARY IN CRISIS. THE INSIDE STORY OF THE PREUS FACT FINDING COMMITTEE. St. Louis, CPH. 2007. 153 pp. (plus 290 pp of appendices) Hardcover \$50.

I myself get reviewed in Paul Zimmermann's book. So "caveat lector." Reader, beware. This reviewer is not a disinterested bystander to what's being reviewed. How so? This is PZ's "inside story" of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's "Fact-Finding Committee" of nearly 40 years ago. The facts about me get exposed here. And about lots of other folks too. Well, maybe.

The FFC was one of the major players in the "Wars of Missouri" in the early 1970s. LCMS President Jacob Preus appointed five men to "get the facts" on whether or not non-Missouri doctrine (aka false doctrine)—as was being alleged—was being taught at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. PZ chaired the committee.

The FFC called me in, along with everyone of my seminary colleagues, for a lengthy interview. "We're just trying to find the facts of what you actually teach and believe." It was my first year as prof at Concordia in 1971.

So you are hearing a partisan as you read my review of his review of me and the "faculty majority." For it wasn't the entire faculty that was suspect of false doctrine, it was only

the "faculty majority." That was some 45 of us. The "faculty minority," five colleagues who had coalesced already before I got to "the sem," were also interviewed, but they were considered kosher in advance.

These five had earlier given public voice to their suspicion about what the "faculty majority" were doing. One of the five, Martin Scharlemann, had actually triggered the FFC into existence by a letter to LCMS President Preus (April 9, 1970) informing him of ten (10) aberrations "prevalent" at the seminary. He concluded "May I be so presumptuous, therefore, as to suggest that a competent committee of inquiry be created to look into the matters that threaten to deface the Lutheran character of the life and instruction going on at Concordia Seminary?"

Martin Scharlemann was my brother-in-law. His wife Dorothy and my wife Marie were sisters. More about Martin below.

PZ offers his inside story of a seminary in crisis, viewing that past history and his own involvement in it with what he thinks are untinted eyeglasses. But through my lenses his cantus firmus is good guys vs. bad guys.

Good guys were Preus, Scharlemann, PZ's own FFC, the faculty minority, Marquart, Klug, and other "sound" Missouri theologians, plus synodical convention delegates (loyal to the Bible and to what Missouri had always taught) who delivered the narrow majorities needed to bring in the guilty verdict on the accused.

Bad guys were the liberals in Missouri (who deceptively called themselves "moderates"), all those seminary profs using the "historical-critical method" when they taught the Bible, Concordia president Tietjen who didn't discipline such profs, Caemmerer, Bertram, Lueking, Frey, plus the 8 disloyal district

presidents who accepted Seminex graduates into their own Missouri Synod districts, and convention delegates already led astray by such pastors and teachers.

The citations below from the closing paragraphs give the melody of the cantus firmus of the entire volume:

Bad Guys: "Once again the liberals resorted in (sic) judgmental and abusive language rather than present reasoned arguments for their positions." (p134) Good guy, super good guy: "Looking back over those difficult days, it is evident that President Preus followed a course that demonstrated Christian love and patience, coupled with a firm resolve to preserve pure Scripture doctrine and practice." (p133)

"The synodical president had a warm heart and a loving nature, but he had felt compelled for the good of the Synod and by fidelity to God and His Word to carry out his duties." (p133)

"As we once again thank God for the dedicated, wise, and Scripture-based leadership Dr. Preus gave the Synod." (p144)

Chapter after chapter offer variations on this good guy/bad guy melody—point and counterpoint—through the book's ten chapters.

And, no surprise, God showered his blessings and approval on the good guys.

From the foreword by the only other survivor of the FFC, Karl Barth:

"The activity of the FFC . . . under God's grace [was] a__blessing__to the LCMS."

PZ's own preface:

[This book is] " . . . a history of how the doctrinal problems slowly emerged and grew, how Dr. J.A.O.Preus was elected to the presidency of the Synod, and the steps he took that, under God's__blessing,__eventually led to a solution of the problems."

PZ 's final words:

"In those dark days when it seemed as if a solution to the Synod's problems could never be achieved, the Lord sustained His Church and His Spirit through His divine Word led the LCMS to a__blessed__outcome."(143).

A Couple of Items:

1. Historical Critical Method, was that THE Issue?The villain throughout PZ's "inside story" is the "historical-critical method" [HCM] applied to teaching the Bible—and ascribed by PZ not only to the profs in the OT and NT departments at Concordia, but most often to all 45 of us in the faculty majority, four-fifths of whom were in other teaching fields.

What is HCM? Here's what Wikipedia says:

"The historical-critical method is a broad term that includes numerous methodologies and strategies for understanding ancient manuscripts, especially the Bible. The historical critical method studies the biblical text in the same fashion as it would study any other ancient text and comments upon it as an expression of human discourse."

For pious ears in Missouri that sounds like reading the

Bible as (merely? mostly?) the word of man, and definitely NOT as 100% the Word of God, When HCM practitioners responded: "No, no, no. The Bible is both—Word of God AND word of man—like Jesus, fully divine and fully human," that sounded contrary to "what we've always said." If the "human side" of the book of Jonah signalled that it was a parable, Word of God in parable format, or again, if the "human side" of the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) showed four distinct and different retellings of God's work and word in primeval times, all woven into one—for many that was just too much. Before long you could hear the cry from the ramparts: "They're taking our Bible away from us!"

But I don't think HCM was what the fight was about. Though that was what PZ thinks—and lots of folks at that time did too. But Martin Scharlemann, good guy for PZ, brother-in-law for me (eventually my accuser and the seminary's acting president who signed my letter of dismissal), was more on target in that 1970 letter to Preus complaining about the faculty majority and calling Preus to set up the FFC. Martin said that we bad guys "threaten to deface the Lutheran character of the life and instruction going on at Concordia Seminary."

Martin had it right. That was THE battleground: What does it mean to be Lutheran in "life and instruction"—in ethics and doctrine?

Our critics repeatedly said: "Lutheran is 'what we've always said' in Missouri. You guys are saying something different, though you call it Lutheran. But any teaching different from 'what we've always said' is — by definition —not Lutheran. You guys fail the test." The majority of delegates at the Synod convention (New Orleans 1973)

agreed by a 574-to-451 vote. We bad guys were not Lutheran in ethics and doctrine. PZ's FFC had made that perfectly clear. The actual text of that resolution was even sterner than just "not Lutheran." We were "not to be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended." All 45 of us in one fell swoop.

PZ and many (most?) of the LCMS grass-roots, pastors and people—and the public media, both churchly and secular—thought the "something different" was coming from the folks in the Biblical departments. True enough. The HCM was helping them find "even more" goodies in the Bible than what Missouri had always taught.

But that itself does not YET make anything UN-Lutheran. The yardstick for what is/is not Lutheran is in the Lutheran Confessions. It wasn't the Bible profs who were teaching those courses. It was guys like me and Bertram and our 8 other colleagues in the department of Systematic Theology. Our calling was teaching doctrine, ethics, and the Lutheran Confessions. So it was in OUR department, not the Bible departments, that what Scharlemann pinpointed was the issue.

What constitutes the "Lutheran character" of anything? That was the real question. But most of us on the faculty, I think in retrospect, possibly even we systematic profs ourselves at first, didn't catch on. HCM was constantly in the spotlight. But the fundamental issue was elsewhere. The battle was about the heart of Reformation theology, Luther's "Aha!" about the Gospel, not about the historical-critical method.

It became much clearer, so I think, when the "faculty minority" coalesced and 4 of the 5 of them were from our

systematics department! The only Bible prof was Scharlemann.

2. So what was it like in our department of systematic theology? There were actually 3 different positions within the systematics dept among our colleagues, three different readings of the Lutheran Confessions, for answering what is "the Lutheran character of the life and instruction [that was to be] going on at Concordia Seminary." One way of describing them is to say "three different sets of lenses" for reading the Lutheran Confessions.

1. One set was that used by the 4 colleagues linked with Scharlemann in the faculty minority, R. Bohlmann, R. Klann, R. Preus and L. Wunderlich. Those colleagues used the lenses of Lutheran orthodoxy (17th/18th century theologians—Missouri's own heritage) to read the confessions. Lutheran orthodoxy had a doctrine of the authority of scripture, its verbal inspiration and inerrancy. Lutheran theologians of that 17th/18th century era, pressured by the continuing claims of Rome to have the Christ-appointed papacy as their authority, built their own contra-papal authority model on the Bible itself, and worked out the details that brought in the language of verbal inspiration, inerrancy, etc. Clearly an authority that was actually God's own Word superseded a "human" pope even if he did have apostolic succession for his credentials. So Lutherans had a better authority than the papists did. Lutheran doctrine was safe since it all came from God's own source and not some patently human pontiff. Lutheran orthodoxy professed its solid commitment to the Reformation heritage. So its spokesmen sought to show that you could find

such signals about Biblical authority (if not explicit statements) in the 16th century Lutheran confessions too. And in any case the Lutheran Confessions surely didn't deny such teaching about the Bible.

2. Second was using Luther's own theology as your lenses for the confessions. R.Bertram, H.Bouman, E.Lueker, E.Schroeder and A.Weyermann were of that persuasion. That perspective parsed the issue of Biblical authority—you guessed it—by running it through the law-and-gospel sieve. Law authority and gospel authority are different sorts of authority. Even Jesus says so. See Matthew 20:20ff, for evidence.

1. God's law comes with its own distinct authority module. It's top down—overling/underling in format. It's authority "over." Obey and get the benefits; disobey and reap the consequences. Even salvation, though surely by grace alone, got tangled up in this in Missouri. "IF you believe all that the Bible teaches (sure, with Jesus as the cornerstone, but all the other stuff as well), you will be saved. IF you fudge on some scriptural teachings (i.e., that whole laundry list that the FFC trotted out in our interviews: 6-day creation, Jonah, Mosaic authorship, OT prophecies, only 'one' Isaiah), then maybe not." Missouri's hangup on authority—both for the Bible and for LCMS church life—was its inability to get away from this law-grounded authority paradigm. [Mary Todd's book, Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the LCMS, spells out

the details. She says she's working on a sequel, the LCMS and Seminex.] President Preus put it this way: "Finally someone has to decide what is/is not true doctrine in the LCMS" and he called on convention delegates to carry out that task. Question: does this sound more like Rome or like Wittenberg?

2. A gospel-grounded paradigm for authority is the upside-down pyramid Jesus presents in Matt. 20. Authority from "under." Non-coercive. Where the authority figure does not impose his will, but "lays down his life as a ransom" for the underling. That Christic "promissory" authority coupled with the mercy "offer," not coercion, was just as embattled in Missouri at that time as it was in Jesus' own day—and as it is today even and especially in the churches. So for Biblical authority, the "pressure" to trust it does not come from its divine character (you've just GOTTA believe it) but from its winsome Gospel (here's something good and new that you GET TO believe). The Good News itself commends folks to trust it.
3. Third was the unique stance of dear A.C. Piepkorn. With a pax on both your houses to the rest of us in the systematics department, his was a third way. He knew Lutheran orthodoxy inside out, but also knew its slide away from the classic confessions. And, gentle soul that he was, he was always a little leary of Blessed Martin's occasional rambunctiousness—also in theology. When colleagues like Bob Bertram would refer to the law-gospel distinction "the Lutheran hermeneutic for

Scripture,” in department meetings, ACP would whisper, emphasizing the indefinite article, “A Lutheran hermeneutic.” Piepkorn’s third option was to read the confessions “canonically,” as the doctrinal canon of what Lutheranism is. Whatever the confessions say, that is what Lutherans “believe, teach and confess.” What they leave untouched cannot be “required” as Lutheran. Orthodox teaching on such untouched topics is to be mined from the patristic heritage insofar as it doesn’t contradict what the confessions do indeed say. Thus the Mother of Jesus is “always virgin.” The Lutheran confessions say so. For the business of “verbal-inspiration and scriptural inerrancy,” Missouri’s banner on the ramparts, he said: “Not Lutheran. It’s not in the confessions.”

4. With reference to the debate whether the Bible or the Gospel comes first in authority, the 4 colleagues of the faculty minority reasoned: In order to have a trustable Gospel, you have to be sure that the Bible that proclaims it is itself trustable (=inspired by God and inerrant). That was what we “always said” in Missouri. But that meant that trust in the Bible is a prior trust, a prerequisite, that you’ve just “gotta” have before you can trust the Bible’s Gospel. It makes perfect sense. However, such a prior trust is necessarily grounded on trusting something else than THE Gospel itself, something you got to trust (=law’s sort of authority) in order to be able to trust the Gospel. But prerequisites of any sort (which are always law, no matter how sweetly you perfume them) before you can trust the Gospel, is analogous to requiring circumcision before you can become a Christian,

isn't it? And the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 made it perfectly clear that THAT was a no-no. It's got to be the other way around with Bible and Gospel. Trusting the gospel comes first, honoring the Scriptures is subordinate.

That's what the other bunch of us said. Requiring a prior trust before you can trust the Gospel is fudging on the trust issue. And trust is faith. The proclaimed Gospel is in itself winsome and self-authorizing. Once trusting the Gospel you "search the scriptures, for in them you seek to hear [more] of the Gospel offer of eternal life." And you already know that that eternal life comes as these scriptures "testify of Christ."

5. That was Luther's claim of "Christum treiben" [whatever urges Christ] as his axiom for reading the Bible, spelled out in his Introduction to his new translation of the NT in 1522. He was not specifically dealing with the authority term here, but with its cognate, the term "apostolic." "Apostolic" (and therefore authoritative), he said, is anything that does "Christum treiben"—even, as Luther brashly put it, even if Pilate, Herod or Judas wrote the "Christum treiben" text.

I shan't expand on this any more. If you've been reading these Crossings posts for any length of time, you've seen this Gospel-first authority proposal spelled out week after week both in the Text Studies and the ThTh postings.

Conclusion:

It was a shibboleth in Missouri (this time, a good one from the other center of the ellipse of Missouri's schizophrenic heritage) that the Gospel of justification by faith alone, that

is, justification only by trusting the Gospel, is the “foundation stone on which the church stands or falls.” That mantra is but a variation on the “Christum treiben” axiom for Biblical authority. That’s what our segment of the systematics department was hustling among our colleagues and in our classroom teaching. So who really was threatening “the Lutheran character of the life and instruction at Concordia Seminary?” Who really was teaching “what Missouri has always taught”?

That simply cannot be answered by convention votes. Zimmermann with his “inside story” thinks it can. Even more so, he says, it came out as a blessing. But can that be true? A Christian community cherishing an authority model that is “under the law” is itself NOT under blessing, but “under the curse.” The apostle whose name Paul Zimmermann bears goes almost ballistic in trying to convince Galatian Christians that “under law” and “under curse” are Siamese twins. What was true in Galatia is true anywhere else in the world. Also in Missouri.

[To be continued. Next time: Item #3 – Scharlemann. Item #4 – New Orleans Resolution 3-09, Missouri’s Curse.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder