Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.  

Mary Todd, associate professor of history at Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois sets out to narrate the history of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod adopting what George Marsden identifies as a "critical insider viewpoint" (15). Chapters 2-4 seek to tell the story of how the Missouri Synod's identity was formed under the leadership of C.F.W. Walther, extended by those who sought to continue Walther's legacy of Lutheran orthodoxy, and redefined by the process of Americanization in the twentieth century. Chapters 5-6 examine the struggle over women's suffrage and the Synod's continued insistence that women may not be ordained into the pastoral office from the perspective of the issue of authority in the life of the church.

There is really little that is new in Todd's study. Like F. Dean Lueking's Mission in the Making: The Missionary Enterprise Among Missouri Synod Lutherans, 1846-1963 (St. Louis, 1964), Todd works on the premise that the Synod's history is the story of a struggle between a rigid, sectarian orthodoxy and a more flexible, open evangelicalism. Inspite of Milton Rudnick's study, Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod: A Historical Study of Their Interaction and Mutual Influence (St. Louis, 1966), Todd goes on to link Missouri's high view of Scripture with American fundamentalism. For Todd, the heroes are those who championed the cause of Seminex and the villains are the current synodical administration and the majority of theologians teaching at LCMS seminaries.

The aim of Authority Vested is to demonstrate that the Synod's refusal to accept and implement the ordination of women is tied up with a legalistic understanding of the biblical text. In fact, one gets the impression from Todd, that the Missouri Synod invented the concepts of biblical inerrancy, orders of creation, and unconditional confessional subscription. The dogmatic history of these and other themes crucial to the identity of the Missouri Synod is left untouched as the author invites readers to consider the possibility of a more democratic and less dogmatic Synod that would give space for the inclusion of women in the pastoral office.

Todd asserts, but does not demonstrate, an inconsistency in Walther's own understanding of the office of the ministry that she maintains has haunted the LCMS throughout its history. Readers of Authority Vested would do well to consult "Demagoguery or Democracy? The Saxon Emigration and American Culture" by Lawrence R. Rast Jr. in Concordia Theological Quarterly (October 1999), 247-268 as Rast argues that the fault does not lie with Walther but rather a misinterpretation of Walther's understanding of polity.

Authority Vested is best understood not as historical treatment of the Missouri Synod's struggle to understand its Lutheran confessional identity in the context of American democracy but as an apologetic tract for an identity that the Synod has thus far declined.

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