

A Letter in Response to a Call to Teach at Seminex

Robert W. Bertram

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ABSTRACT

The call to teach at Seminex from Seminex's board and the AELC represents a third time the Caller, the Spirit, has called. Despite New Orleans (Convention) efforts to retract the call to speak the Word of God without fear or favor, this call keeps coming back through the same wild, go-for-broke sisters and brothers, not letting us off the cruciform-appearing hook. (Stephen C. Krueger)

Introduction by Frank Leonard:

Robert Bertram, head of the systematics department at Seminex "just returned from a sabbatical year in Germany. While in Germany he received a call from the AELC to teach at Seminex. His response is marvelous. I thank him for permitting me to share it with you."

28 February 1977

Dr. Richard P. Jungkuntz, Chairman Board of Directors
Concordia Seminary In Exile

Dear Dick,

The call from Seminex's board inviting me to continue to teach there, this time with authorization from AELC as well, has been

forwarded to me here in Munich, bringing cheer. Each time I have accepted that call – this is now the third time – I have done so more enthusiastically than the time before.

The first time this call came, thirteen years ago, the place for me to exercise it was still called Concordia Seminary. But what my colleagues and I had been called to do there – to speak the Word of God without fear or favor, not only to our students but to the Synod as well – turned out to be more than the Synod had bargained for. So at New Orleans and ever since, it tried retracting our calls, though of course in vain. As if it were within the power of a synod to dictate the Gospel's free course, or within the faculty's power. Let's admit it, when we originally accepted our calls none of us knew either what all we were being called to. It was well we didn't. But our Caller, the Spirit, knew. That was enough.

In view of who The Caller was, and how determined, we should not have been surprised when our calls – the same calls – were almost immediately reasserted: first by a few ELIM congregations in 1974 and now by AELC's congregations as well. And what do you know, these are folks who sent the same call thirteen years ago. It was as though Someone knew how tempted we were to alibi, Jonah-like, that we were at last free of our original calls and could now start all over with a fresh and different public, one that was not so vulnerable and doom-prone as the old one. No way. This call that keeps coming back is still from the original public. Oh, there are not as many of them as before. Not yet. But they are the same wild, go-for-broke sisters and brothers still trusting us to train their seminarians for their same congregations in the same hazardous Way. Some of them are so old by now you'd think they would have learned. I wonder whether they realize now anymore than they did before what all they are calling us to say to them, or them to us. I wonder whether we realize.

But what they very obviously do say is that no would-be synodical repeal of our original calls ever did have their authorization, much less God's. With such vast connections going for them, it doesn't look like we're going to be left off the hook. But how cruciform the hook looks. But of course. Hasn't it always? And hasn't that been the fun of it? And isn't that what makes them, also the oldies, such fast company? So count me in. Again.

What's more, that same call by which I serve the dear folks now in AELC – I was an original member of the Great Rivers Synod – is the self-same call which holds me to serve their fellow-confessors still in the Missouri Synod. I mean those who still acknowledge their original call to my colleagues and me. How many of them there still are, or how long they can last, only God knows. What we do know is that they too still stand by the calls they once sent us, and not only financially. Financially, in fact, they are even helping to subsidize our AELC. More than that, many of them still come to us as seminarians, whom many others of them (though outlawed for that) find ways of calling back as pastors of their congregations. It was to these seminarians at Seminex, most of whom as pastors are now braving the hostility of that synod, that three years ago I made a promise in the name of our faculty, "We could no more abandon you than we would our own children." That is why – to share their jeopardy, to honor our call from those in that synod who themselves still honor it – that I for one am still trying to stand up and be counted on the clergy roster of that synod as well.

Of course the only way to do that anymore is in statu confessionis, that is to say, as "on a witness stand, as being on trial. On trial for what offense? For refusing to go away and renounce my call. Our ministry precisely as professors at Seminex does continue quite publicly among those in Missouri who

still call us there, and that is what makes us offensive to their leadership, all the moreso since we act so "called". But our presence, I hope, is not only offensive. It can also be the evangelical witness for which we have been called to that stand: to remind us all how uncowed and undeceitful the Gospel in fact still is.

For example, on the Missouri Synod's current roster some of us have now been reduced to mere "candidates for the reverend ministry," indicating that our current calls no longer have any standing there, though of course they do. At first glance, that "c.r.m." looks like a defeat. (How cruciform) But what a witness it is, without our even trying! That legalistic device dramatizes all over again how helplessly that poor synod is driven by its own man-made rules. Because of them it cannot, literally cannot, is not free to acknowledge a divine call which it itself issued and which is still very publicly in force in its own midst, among its own seminarians and pastors and congregations. How that phoney "c.r.m.", by contrast, calls attention to the very thing it is trying to deny right under its own nose: the free course of an un-bribeable Gospel. No, to suffer that kind of repudiation alongside our spunky former students and their congregations is really no shame. Anyway, as I remember, that was part of the call. And I thank the dear folks of AELC for supporting that side of our call as well.

So, good Richard, do I accept the call, the same whole call? I still do. God helping us and you interceding. Auf baldiges Wiedersehen!

Affectionately,

Robert W. Bertram

cc: President Tietjen

President Herman Scherer

President Herman Neunaber

President William Kohn

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