

Six Steps—Give or Take One

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Problem: a courageous congregation calls a Seminex graduate to be its pastor but, when threatened with expulsion from the Synod, hesitates to ordain him; what is worse, in the process the congregation is frightened off by manmade bylaws and so is kept from speaking out on the real issues in the Synod.

That is the latest device our synodical officials have invented for silencing the Word of God. They know very well why the young man went into "exile" in the first place and why this brave congregation chose such a man as its pastor: to make a public witness for the freedom of the Gospel, against the horrible oppression which is smothering our Synod. So in order to silence the young man's witness, and the congregation's, the synodical officials deftly change the subject. They remind the congregation instead that its new pastor has not been "certified" by a "synodically recognized seminary." Of course he hasn't, but why hasn't he? That "synodically recognized seminary"—namely, the one at 801 DeMun Avenue in Saint Louis—is the very seminary whose certification he has himself chosen to forego. He must have had a reason, he and all those others. He would not even submit to "801's" interviews or, if he did, he did so under conscientious protest. But the question is. Why?

That question the synodical officials refuse to face. Instead they insinuate that, because this candidate has not been properly "certified," the congregation cannot have him as its pastor. Or if it does, it cannot continue in the Synod. What a travesty of the Gospel that is, and of the Synod's own Constitution! But that approach is effective. Even the strongest congregation can be intimidated into believing that its pastor's

ordination somehow depends on synodical bylaws and that its own membership in the Synod can be lost because he came from Seminex. If only a way could be found, a Christian way, to call the bluff on those two hoaxes, and to help synodical officials face the issue at hand. But how?

Solution: five steps and, only if necessary, a sixth.

STEP ONE. The congregation extends a call to the Seminex graduate, and does so without even needing his “certification” from a “synodically recognized seminary.” (Of course he will already have been certified by Concordia Seminary In Exile, which after all is very much in the Missouri Synod.) For this the congregation has undeniable authority simply as a local assembly of Christians, authority which it has never relinquished to the Synod and never can. There is no one in the Synod who could possibly dispute the congregation’s biblical, God-given authority to send that call. And why does the congregation call a candidate from Seminex? Because he is well qualified, doctrinally and otherwise. But also because he is trying to make the same public witness the congregation wants to make. A witness for what? For putting the Synod back on a Gospel footing. So the congregation, authorized by Christ Himself and motivated by the same purpose which prompted the Synod’s founding fathers, calls the candidate from Seminex as its pastor.

STEP TWO. The candidate, in accepting the call, presents the congregation with a potential letter of resignation—undated. He hopes the letter will never have to be used. What the letter says is: if and when my graduation from Seminex should ever cause you as a congregation to be expelled from the Synod, then you should feel free at that time to date this letter, thus

putting my resignation as your pastor into effect and thus preventing your expulsion from the Synod which you and I both love. Of course, the congregation might prefer to tear up the letter. But the letter would be a sincere offer.

STEP THREE. The congregation proceeds to ordain its new pastor into the ministry— the only ministry anyone can be ordained into, the ministry of the Christian Church. The congregation does not pretend to be ordaining him into the ministry of the Missouri Synod. Why not? Because there is no such thing as ordination into the ministry of the Missouri Synod, even though there is at least one district president who is giving that misimpression. Just as no one is baptized into the Missouri Synod but is baptized only into the Church of Jesus Christ, likewise it is into Christ's own ministry of Word and Sacraments—nothing less— that this pastor is being ordained.

If after that this pastor also wants to belong to the ministerium, the clergy association, of the Synod, fine. But his membership in that organization in no ways affects his eligibility for ordination. Even if the congregation would later agree to his resignation from this particular pastorate, his original ordination would still be valid. And surely no one denies that this congregation he will be serving has the churchly authority to ordain him. Be assured, there will be enough sympathetic pastors on hand to assist in the ordaining ceremony. If the district president chooses to abstain for fear that he might be giving synodical sanction by participating, so be it. After all, the ordination is not meant to be "synodical"—no ordination is—only Christian.

As our Lutheran Confessions remind us, "when the regular bishops . . . are unwilling to administer ordination, the churches retain the right to ordain for themselves. For wherever the church exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists.

Wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing and ordaining ministers.” (Treatise on the Power, etc. 66-67) And so, as we said, this congregation does just that, it ordains its own pastor.

STEP FOUR. The congregation at this point should expect to be “admonished” by synodical officials and should openly welcome their admonition. For the accusation will surely be made that, though the congregation is still a member of the Synod, its new pastor is not a member. Granted, it may be true that he is not a clergy member of the Synod, at least not yet. But notice, no one can any longer deny that he is now a fully called and ordained servant of the Word in the Christian ministry, validly serving a Christian congregation. The only possible objection could be that he does not yet hold membership in that human organization to which his congregation belongs, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Yet for the synodical officials that may already be objection enough. They would hardly relish having a growing movement of member-congregations with non-member-pastors, especially if that called attention to the real issues in the Synod—which of course it would. Because of that, the synodical officials may even threaten the congregation with expulsion from the Synod and they will undoubtedly quote a synodical bylaw to that effect: “Congregations which . . . persist in such violation shall after due admonition forfeit their membership in the Synod.” (4.01) To which the congregation should reply, “Yes, but notice that even that questionable bylaw insists that there must first be ‘due admonition’; so we urge you, please, to come and admonish us.”

STEP FIVE. But what the congregation would also tell the synodical officials is this: we welcome not only your admonition of us but also the opportunity which that gives us for admonishing you. We shall do that respectfully as your Christian

brothers and sisters, but admonition it will be. In fact, it is just such face-to-face conversation over the real issues that we have been longing for. What is it that we wish to admonish you about? Just this, that you keep changing the subject to side issues like bylaws and membership requirements and our pastor's "certification" and all the while you evade and play down the real problem which is destroying our Synod: the silencing of God's Word.

We want to talk with you about why it is that hundreds of young men like our pastor joined Concordia Seminary In Exile in the first place. We want you to understand why a peace-loving congregation like ours, which has always played by the rules and has supported synodical leadership, has now resorted to calling a pastor from Seminex. We want to discuss just why it is that more and more congregations and pastors are protesting the legalism of our synodical leadership and, in return for their Christian protest, are being oppressed and threatened by that leadership. We want you to understand the point we are trying to make, for the sake of the Synod which we love too. Let the admonitions be mutual.

And who knows, such mutual conversations might even find a way to recognize—to "certify"—the congregation's new pastor, not for ordination (that he already has) but merely for clergy membership in the Synod, not in spite of the witness he is making but because of it, and not at the hands of a certification agency against which he has to protest but an agency rather which has learned something from the mutual admonition. That may take awhile, but where there's a Will there's a Way.

STEP SIX. However, if after this "due admonition" in both directions the synodical officials still insist upon moving against the congregation to expel it from the Synod, then what?

Well, the congregation would have several alternatives.

For example, if it chose, the congregation could simply and frankly announce, "You leave us no choice but to make our case in the only way you seem to understand, a court of law." If the matter did have to go that far, restraining the officials by means of a court order, they would have a difficult time defending their case. For the bylaw which they quote has no basis in the Synod's Constitution. Nowhere does our Constitution (which is separate from its bylaws and stands over them) require that congregations may keep their membership only if their pastors are "certified" by certain "recognized" seminaries. The bylaw is unconstitutional, as a growing number of Missouri Synod attorneys are volunteering to prove. The one time in history the bylaw was invoked, it could not hold up. For that reason it is doubtful that the synodical officials would even try to press their case. If they would, then this would be one way for the congregation to go as a last resort: litigation. And of course it would take only one case to establish the precedent and to put an end finally to the false threats.

However, the congregation would also have other alternatives. Even if it would resort to the courts, it would do that, I am sure, only to make a point. That would be the same point which, in his own way, the Seminex pastor was making in offering the congregation his resignation. And after all, the congregation could still accept his resignation. That would be another possibility. But chances are (Christian hope being what it is) the congregation would never have to move beyond Step Five, if it moved that far with real Christian boldness and confidence. And if it did, I for one would gladly offer that congregation whatever help I could muster. So would thousands of others. What is more important, so would our Lord.

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