

A Bertram Memorandum. Another Artifact from Seminex Days and the Wars of Missouri

Colleagues,

Bob Bertram's widow, Thelda, and Crossings volunteers Cathy Lessmann and Michael Hoy keep finding stuff – fantastic stuff – as they continue to sort through the reams and reams of papers in Bob's (I forget how many) filing cabinets. Bob died in March of 2003, but the glean-team isn't done yet. They have already gone through all the stuff stored in his computer – and found three book manuscripts there, no one of them ever quite "finished" in Bob's judgment for him to send off to a publisher. The gleaners, with Michael taking the lead, got one of them shipshape a while ago and sent it off to Eerdmans Publishing Co. With a nudge from Bob's one-time colleague at the Lutheran seminary in Chicago, Paul Rorem, it got into the Eerdmans pipeline. They already list it on their website—www.eerdmans.com—scheduled to appear yet this year. Title: A Time for Confessing. 248 pp. Paperback. "This book is about faithful witnesses – from the Reformation to South African apartheid to Bonhoeffer – to the promise of Jesus Christ. Even amid trials, these faithful followers have testified that the gospel is authority enough for the church's life and unity. This volume brings the light of publication to several important essays by the late Robert Bertram, perhaps the most unpublished Lutheran theologian of the 20th century." One chapter examines the Seminex era in the Missouri Synod as such a "Time for Confessing."

The item below is this week's find in the Bertram papers. The context is this: In the summer of 1973, Missouri Synod convention delegates declared the "faculty majority" of

Concordia Seminary (later to become the Seminex faculty) to be false teachers “not to be tolerated in the Church of God.” The newly-elected Seminary Board of Control was instructed by the convention to implement this resolution. The board’s first move was to declare the oldest five of this group, all over 65 years of age, “honorably retired or transferred to modified service.” If I remember aright these colleagues were H. Bouman, R. Caemmerer, A. Piepkorn, A. Repp, and L. Wuerffel.

When the news of this action hit the campus Bob Bertram went to his typewriter (no computers then) and sent this memo around to all the rest of us “intolerable” ones. The deep irony is that on that very day—I think it was a Friday—as Bob was composing this, one of those five, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, was walking up DeMun Avenue to the nearby barber-shop to get a haircut. He died of a coronary in the barber’s chair. After his death, his widow, Miriam, said: “They thought they could retire him. God took care of that.”

Bob himself was only fifty-two in 1973 and thus escaped the forced retirement purge. But already then he’d become the avuncular interpreter to us about what was really happening. You’ll see for yourself in what he says below.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Personal Memorandum

13 December 1973

To: My Brothers and Sister in the Faculty Majority and Staff

From: Robert Bertram

1. *The saddest thing about our present synodical administration is that it is silencing the Word of God.*
 2. *The way our synodical administration is silencing God's Word is by silencing those who teach that Word.*
 3. *These teachers have been speaking the Word to our synodical situation, and that is why their Word of God is being silenced.*
 4. *Not only in the Synod's classrooms is the Word of God being silenced, but also in the Synod's pulpits.*
 5. *But those who are doing the silencing prefer to conceal their motives, for fear that people might see what really is being silenced: not just preachers and teachers but the very Word of God.*
 6. *What is encouraging in all this is that with each new silencing of the Word, the Word seems to be getting a better hearing than ever before.*
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1. *The saddest thing about our present synodical administration is that it is silencing the Word of God. The saddest thing about this administration is not its political intrigue, its power-plays, its "speaking out of both sides of the mouth," or even its personal cruelties and persecutions, shameful as all these are. What is sadder still is the way the Word of God in our midst is more and more being put to silence. Less and less does the Word have free course for the joy and edifying of God's holy people.*
2. *The way our synodical administration is silencing God's Word is by silencing those who teach that Word. This happened again recently at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, when the Board of Control scheduled another group of professors for removal. But the same thing is happening on other synodical campuses as well, and will*

be happening more and more. Teachers of the Word are being silenced and, with them, so is the Word they speak.

- 3. These teachers have been speaking the Word to our synodical situation, and that is why their Word of God is being silenced. It is a shoe that fits. What is being silenced is not the Word of God in the abstract, the Word in some academic classroom lecture, the Word in technical theological discussions. No, the Word of God that is being muzzled is that Word of His which applies to our own synodical sins. God's Word of Law has been exposing the creeping legalism in high places. So that Word now gets condemned as "rebellion." And God's Word of Gospel has been trying to replace the legalism. So now that Word, too, must be discredited – by labels like "wishy-washy," "reductionism," "permissive." As soon as the Gospel is made relevant it is seen as meddling. What is being silenced in the Synod is not the Word of God in general but the Word which strikes close to home.*
- 4. Not only in the Synod's classrooms is the Word of God being silenced, but also in the Synod's pulpits. Many pastors are being inhibited from speaking out. For a pastor to speak a Word of prophetic criticism against oppression in his own church body has now become, for him too, a risky thing. For him to free his people to do something about that oppression, especially when some of the people themselves may support the oppression, requires unusually heroic Gospel preaching. As a result many a preacher's conscience is being tried, and his people are being deprived. One pastor reports how a delegation from his congregation asked, "Pastor, why haven't you shared these concerns with us – don't you trust that we can handle them?" Even the Word from our pulpits is being silenced.*
- 5. But those who are doing the silencing prefer to conceal*

their motives, for fear that people might see what really is being silenced: not just preachers and teachers but the very Word of God. That guilty secret is being disguised. Though more and more servants of the church are being silenced out of their pulpits and classrooms, the true reason for their removal – namely, the Word of God they have been speaking – is kept under wraps. Instead the pretext is that these men are simply not needed or that they are too old, or perhaps no reason at all is given. Those who are silencing them simply do not dare to accuse them openly of false doctrine. For such accusations would simply call attention all over again to the Word they speak. And that is what the Word-silencers fear most of all.

6. But what is encouraging in all this is that with each new silencing of the Word, the Word seems to be getting a better hearing than ever before. The very suppression of that Word emboldens those who speak it to speak it more openly, more relevantly, more pointedly to the situation at hand. The same way with the people. The more they are being kept in the dark, the more they are turning out for meetings and movements and media which provide them the whole truth and a full Word of God. No sooner is the Word silenced forcibly in one place and it erupts spontaneously in two other places. When in recent memory has there been so keen and widespread an interest in God's Word for our synodical situation, whether His Word of judgment or His Word of promise, as there is right now? And nothing has fanned the flames of that interest as much as the current oppression. Precisely as we reveal how the Word is being silenced, we reveal the Word itself. That way the current problems of our Synod, even if they may never be solved, can at least be kept from going to waste.

13 December 1973