

Ed Schroeder on the Tim Frakes Documentary, “Seminex: Memories of a Church Divided”

Colleagues,

I sit down to write with the news of Wednesday night’s obscenity at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston hanging heavy in the air. It stinks. It oppresses. It calls in the present space for a bellow of angry protest—against whom, or what?—and after that for a stream of thoughtful words about God’s Law and God’s Gospel as they pertain to this particular instance of the greater stench that we’re choking to death in. I write and think slowly, so that stream of words hasn’t come together yet. Perhaps it will in coming days. If so, I’ll stick my neck out and share it with you. For now I’ll continue with the topic that was already in the works before the news broke. May the saints in Christ who lie so suddenly shot and slaughtered forgive me for that. So too for those who mourn them most nearly and deeply this morning. I mean them no disrespect by carrying on. God forbid such a thing!

This much I will offer, that when our own words fail, the Lord provides. Here are four: “Deliver us from evil.” May that be the Church’s chief prayer throughout America this week—in all the world, for that matter; and with Christ in view, may the praying be as confident as it is urgent.

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So today we send you a brief musing by Ed Schroeder about the controversy in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that produced the phenomenon called Seminex. Ed’s note was sparked by a new documentary on the subject that appeared this past February from [Tim Frakes Productions](#), Tim Frakes being the former

principal videographer of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Why this topic, and why now? For that we refer you to [Frakes's own words](#).

I haven't seen the documentary yet. I will soon, because it's suddenly on my "must buy" list. Saying that, let me also commend it to any of you who don't know the Seminex story. I know, it's reckless to tout something I haven't vetted for myself, but you may as well start somewhere, and the Seminex story is worth learning. It's a compelling tale on its own merits, and if you want to make sense of the configuration of U.S. Lutheranism in 2015, it's a story you've simply got to know.

And why did it happen? Ah, there's the rub, an issue that Ed takes up below. He's writing to Thelda Bertram, widow of Robert W. Bertram, who, on watching Frakes's film, wondered why her husband didn't appear in it anywhere. Good question. Those of us who were there in 1974 will recall that Bob was the principal spokesman for the faculty majority and a key architect of the theological rationale for the faculty's stance. So Frakes leaves him out? Odd indeed, as Ed points out. Still, no matter. You can go to YouTube these days to see video of Bob in action in '74. Search on "Seminex." Or see the link at the end of Ed's piece.

Finally, a bit of editor's candor. A couple of decades ago I argued in *Lutheran Forum* that issues of class and culture were the key drivers of that mid-70's LCMS rift. I'm still convinced of that. Apparently Frakes argues along similar lines. Ed isn't buying it, as you'll quickly see. Does this put me at odds with my old teacher? Not all that much, I think, and for reasons that have everything to do with Ed. Amid the tumult of those days, no one did more than he to help this particular student discern the stunning aroma of genuine Gospel; and once you've caught that, it becomes obvious how much theology does matter. Good theology, the kind that opens the bottle and allows Gospel to permeate the

world's stench (see above, re. Charleston) is always worth a hard, tough fight. A losing fight, even.

Have we forgotten that? I sometimes wonder.

Peace and joy regardless,
Jerry Burce

Ed Schroeder to Thelda Bertram, on the absence of her husband, Bob Bertram, from Tim Frakes's Seminex: [Memories of a Church Divided](#)—

Our guess is that Tim Frakes, the filmmaker, has his own picture of what Seminex was all about. This is *his* story of what it was. So he chose tapes from the past to paste together with his interviews of survivors (done last summer at LSTC at Seminex's 40th birthday party)—to tell *his* story. And *his* story is that it was a churchly sample of the overall turmoil in the US in the 1970s. Vietnam, women's rights, civil rights, etc. On the one side, old traditionalists trying to hold on to the past; on the other, new energy from "new" people unsatisfied with the past, with the way things have always been.

Frakes makes James C. Burkee, LCMS prof today at Concordia, Milwaukee, the major voice for such interpretation. It's sociological, cultural, political. "The times they are a-changing!" So, no surprise, there's conflict. In the church too.

Here's how Amazon describes Burkee's 2013 book, [Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod](#): "[Burkee] follows the rise of two Lutheran clergymen—Herman Otten and J. A. O. Preus—who led different wings of a conservative movement that seized control of a theologically conservative but socially and politically moderate church denomination (LCMS) and drove "moderates" from

the church in the 1970s. The schism within what was then one of the largest Protestant denominations in the United States ultimately reshaped the landscape of American Lutheranism and fostered the polarization that characterizes today's Lutheran churches."

This might well be the reason why Herman Otten is so prominent in the documentary. In Burkee's book there are pages and pages about Herman.

The voice which does (gently) focus on the theology (Blessed Bob's turf) is Jack Preus's grandson Gerhard Bode, now a history prof at Concordia Seminary. And he's basically "friendly" to Seminex in what he says. Isn't that something!

But Frakes doesn't give us any past taped footage of that facet of the story of Seminex, to show us what Bode is talking about. Here Bob Bertram's voice would have been the major one. Ev Kalin does make the cut in the documentary with his "It was about the Gospel. I really believe that." In my interview with Frakes I think I tried to make that point too, but Frakes didn't use that footage. And some of the former students—now all gray-haired—say gospel-focused things. But that's all we get in the 42 minutes.

Here's my hunch about that. The theology of the Seminex conflict is not easy to convey in any re-telling the story. Even in Burkee's book that gets scant attention. Remember how true that was also at the very time it all happened? This is a "time for confessing," Bob said. And many folks (even among us moderates, even within Seminex) at that time too said "Huh? What's that?" "Nah, it's just Power, Politics and the Missouri Synod." Dear [Pete Pero's](#) words from those days: "It's turf war. You guys blew it. You should've held on to the turf, the 801 campus!" Even the Tietjen segment in the flick: "Two different views of the church. Outward-looking, mission-minded vs. insular." True.

But that's not yet what Kalin says in his clip. Nor was it Bob's constant drumbeat.

To "show" people that it was a conflict in theology, a time for confessing, "about the Gospel," as Kalin says, was tough then, has always been tough throughout church history, and is still tough now. It takes a lot of time. It regularly means that you have to show folks, first of all, just what the gospel is. And that often means "violating" what they think Gospel is, their "Vorverständnis" (one of Bob's favored terms ["prior understanding"]). All of which takes time, regularly a loooooong time.

Frakes seeks to tell the whole story in 42 minutes. That's not enough time to "show" folks the conflict "about the Gospel" that was really at the center of that whole story. So there's still a "hole" in the whole story that Frakes gives us. Footage from Bob would have filled in some of that hole. [*Editor's note: [see YouTube](#).*]

Peace and joy!

Ed

Editor's post-script—

Back to Charleston. The words are gushing in torrents as they always do. For something as close to a word of God's Law as you'll find anywhere in the secular sphere, see, of all people, [Jon Stewart on Comedy Central](#).