

Missouri Synod / Seminex / Bethel Church In Crisis (Part I)

Colleagues,

Thirty years ago this week—July 6-13, 1973—at the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod’s national convention in New Orleans, the so-called “faculty majority” of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, some 40-plus of the professors teaching there, were declared “false teachers.” By a majority vote of 574 to 451 (56% to 44%) the LCMS delegates passed Resolution 3-09 “repudiating the attitude” of that faculty majority and declaring their teaching “false doctrine running counter to the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the synodical stance and for that reason ‘cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less excused and defended’” (Resolution 3-09). A final resolve “turned these matters over to the Board of Control of Concordia Seminary” to execute the synod’s decision. And execute they did. When it was all over, the majority was sacked—all of them—and Seminex (Concordia Seminary in Exile) was born. Three heresies were pinpointed in 3-09, though no individual heretics were ever mentioned by name. #1 was “subversion of the authority of the Bible” by using historical-critical methods for Bible study. #2 and #3 were really about the authority of the GOSPEL, and only secondarily about the Bible. Folks “in the know” could identify heresies #2 and #3 as the specific “false teaching” of Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder, profs not in the Bible department, but teaching doctrine and ethics at the seminary. False teaching #2 was their claiming the Gospel’s own authority as “authority enough” for Christian doctrine whereby, 3-09 claimed, “the authority of the Scriptures is reduced,” and #3 their claiming the Gospel as “authority enough” for Christian ethics, resulting in the heresy of

“denying the third use of the Law...as guide for the Christian in his life.”

This may come as news to some ThTh readers, that only one “heresy” in the fracas was about the authority of the BIBLE, while two were about the authority of the GOSPEL. And that Bob and Ed were major villains for the last two with their teaching—at that time and ever since—that the Gospel alone was “authority enough” both for Christian doctrine and for Christian ethics. Fifty-six percent of the voting delegates said not so. And with that “alea jacta est.” Remembering the New Orleans convention recently, one ThTh colleague (good guy) said: “Yes, I was there. Worst ten days of my life.” Others say simply: It was a helluva fight.

Today’s posting traces the consequences of New Orleans 3-09 for a local congregation in the Missouri Synod, namely, Bethel Lutheran Church in metro St. Louis. Its author is Arthur Beckman, a member of Bethel in those days. Arthur had a 46-year career in industrial and construction sales and marketing. Now retired, he is studying theology to get his credentials as a Parish Ministry Associate (PMA) in the Central States Synod of the ELCA. Today’s posting, and the one for next Thursday too, represent a research project Art did this spring term in the PMA program. His e-address is <babeckman@juno.com>

Peace & Joy!
The ThTh desk

Missouri Synod/Seminex/Bethel Church In Crisis

Arthur H. Beckman

Bethel Lutheran Church is located at Big Bend & Forsyth, University City, MO (a St. Louis suburb) just four blocks from Concordia Seminary. At least twenty-one Concordia staff members or professors and their families were members of Bethel Lutheran Church in 1974, when the professors left Concordia and formed Seminary in Exile (Seminex). As chairman of the Building Maintenance Committee I was a member of the Church Council and president of the congregation from June 1979 to June 1983 and deeply involved in what happened to these twenty-one families, our pastor, and the congregation in general. My research will explore the background leading up to the split (expulsion), the formation of ELIM, Seminex, and the AELC, and the effect on Bethel Church. I will include some thoughts from my memory, information from various books and interviews with some of the people involved.

The problem actually started some years before 1974, but most of us were unaware of what was going on between the Synod and the Seminary. Of course the professors knew, but they truly believed that they were teaching a Christ-centered pure doctrine. Various professors from time to time would preach at Bethel or present adult education classes and no one at Bethel ever indicated that they thought anything other than pure doctrine was being taught. I had been a member of Bethel since 1965, and during those nine years I certainly did not notice any change in doctrine.

In 1967 our new pastor, Al Buls, came very highly recommended by the Synod from a church in Illinois where he had been a District President. Certainly it seemed that during the mid to late 60's we were doing everything according to Missouri Synod church doctrine. Bethel was not a large church, probably 650

baptized members, but it was well known and respected in the Synod as a good steward of church causes. Our grade school had about 115 students and each year our eighth grade graduating class forwarded a good number of students to the local Lutheran High Schools.

The Missouri Synod seemed to be softening a bit on their firm doctrinal stance. As Fred Danker points out, "on Sept. 6, 1945 forty-two pastors and professors and one layman met in Chicago to discuss a method of 'getting the Missouri Synod into the twentieth century.' Forty-four men actually signed the document entitled 'A Statement' which developed out of the meeting." The 1950 Synod convention voted for "further study." The Missouri Synod official position, however, remained firmly in biblical inerrancy. The syllogism ran:

1. Major premise: the Bible is inerrant.
2. Minor premise: Missouri teaches according to the Bible.
3. Conclusion: Missouri is always right.

Martin Scharlemann was a member of Bethel in 1959 when he was espousing the historical critical method to interpret the Scriptures and congratulating the Catholic Church on their acceptance of this method. The historical critical method is interpreting biblical stories in relation to the time and circumstance of their writing. The Missouri Synod hierarchy did not receive his actions with favor, however, and at the 1962 convention, Scharlemann apologized "over the part I played in contributing to the present unrest within Synod." The convention voted for forgiveness, "not for challenging God, but for discomforting the corporate ego." (Danker's words) At the time, I suspect, this exchange was not of major significance in the life of Bethel Church. Also in 1962, Oliver Harms was elected President of the Missouri Synod and there began a seven-year period of softening on how firm the synod was on

interpretations of the Missouri doctrine. At the 1965 Missouri Synod Convention in Detroit Martin Kretzmann, a missionary to India, proposed and the convention adopted "a set of Mission Affirmations that represented a moderate, open attitude toward other churches and concern for ministry of the whole person." Supporters were not considered radicals or even theological liberals; rather their regard for the Lutheran Confessions was tempered by their concern for the gospel. They considered the Confessions more as a bridge connecting them to other Christians rather than as a fortress keeping out the less orthodox. The same convention moved the synod toward cooperation with the two other large Lutheran bodies through membership in the Lutheran Council in the USA.

When I joined Bethel in 1965 the sermons and Bible classes seemed much the same as when I had attended Carthage College, an American Lutheran Church school, in 1948-50. Some of the member professors occasionally utilized historical critical standards in their sermons and classes at Bethel, particularly as to the role of women, as described by Paul, (Ephesians 5:22,23) as "subordinated to their husbands." This utilization seemed reasonable, as in 1969 the Missouri Synod rescinded its long-standing rule and allowed women to vote [in congregational meetings] and Bethel quickly followed suit.

But also at the 1969 Synod convention other things were going on that should have foretold of changes to come. Jacob A. O. Preus was elected President of the Synod following, according to John Tietjen, "an uncharacteristic political campaign, which included campaign headquarters at a local hotel, slates of approved candidates and convention floor organization." Preus opposed the reelection of the current president [Harms] because of his efforts at fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. Already charges of heresy were being leveled against some faculty members of Concordia Seminary. Bethel and the

professors did not seem overly concerned at this time. Earlier in 1969 John Tietjen had been elected President of Concordia Seminary, replacing the retiring Al Fuerbringer, a member of Bethel Church. Martin Scharlemann perhaps thought he should have been given the position, but the Board of Control obviously thought differently. Bethel began to become concerned about the future of the seminary and the professors who were members in May of 1970 when Preus publicly announced intention to take action on "alleged departures from the Synod's doctrinal position." In April of that year Preus formed a "Fact Finding Committee to investigate the Concordia faculty."

In October of 1970 the faculty formed a Faculty Advisory Committee to serve as a channel for faculty opinion. This committee included two members of Bethel. In November all but five of the faculty signed a declaration concerning their confessional commitment as a way to counter the questions about faculty loyalty. Tietjen and the faculty majority never were able to determine just exactly what was the basis for the charges of false doctrine being leveled. They agreed to go along with the fact-finding interviews so that hopefully they could make their positions clear. In December interviews of the faculty began by Preus' fact-finding committee.

Also in 1970 Martin Scharlemann had complained about Everett Kalin's and Ralph Klein's (both members of Bethel) views on inspiration of scripture and asked for an investigation. In meetings with John Tietjen, it was determined that Scharlemann's problem with Kalin and Klein had more to do with their support of students who were protesting the Vietnam War. Dr. Scharlemann was a Chaplain and brigadier general in the Air Force Reserves and did not take kindly to protests of the Concordia students against the war. This disagreement did not appear to have any affect on Bethel Church.

The 1971 Synod convention reelected Preus to the office of President, but it did not give him everything he wanted. They rejected his "Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" as the confessional commitment of the Synod. The convention also directed the report on his Fact-Finding Commission to the Concordia Seminary Board rather than the convention floor as Preus had requested. Preus did not give up, however, on his quest to get rid of John Tietjen and at least three faculty members, two of whom were members at Bethel. Now Bethel and the professors were concerned, but Bethel felt no need for a defensive plan of action.

The seminary Board of Control met on December 13, 1971 with president Preus present to interview three of the seven faculty members whose contracts were up for renewal. Preus was concerned that these seven would ultimately receive tenure if reappointed to the faculty. The three to be interviewed were Arlis Ehlen, Ralph Klein (both members of Bethel) and Robert Smith. "Preus asked Smith about his views on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. He asked Klein his position on predictive prophecy. He asked Ehlen about the existence of angels and a personal devil and the historicity of the Genesis account of Adam and Eve." The board voted not to renew Arlis Ehlen's contract and "chose not to give a reason for its action."

In January of 1973 the Concordia Seminary Board of Control, after considerable study during October and November and finding no teaching of false doctrine, voted to commend all the faculty and approve Dr. Tietjen as President. The vote was close (6 to 5) on five faculty members, including four who were members at Bethel: Carl Graesser, Herb Mayer, Ralph Klein and Norm Habel. Bethel was apparently a hotbed of dissent, but we did not realize it. President Preus, however, did not give up, blasting the Board in his April 13 News Letter for finding

against the “weight of evidence presented by the Fact Finding Committee.” The Board and the Faculty Advisory Committee offered to provide information to the forthcoming convention floor committee but were turned down.

Prior to the 1973 Convention Herman Otten, editor of “Christian News” and “unofficial director of the Synod’s decision making process,” defined hard-core heresy as maintaining the following:

- Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible.
- Isaiah did not write chapters 40 to 66.
- ‘Almah’ in Isaiah 7:14 need not be translated ‘virgin’ and does not refer to the Virgin Mary.
- The Book of Jonah does not relate to historic fact.
- The sixth-century prophet Daniel did not write (the Book of) Daniel.”

No professor was ever specifically charged with these false teachings, only the vague and unsubstantiated charge of “teaching and dissemination of doctrine contrary to the Scripture and the Synod’s historic confessional stance.” The use of historical criticism (reading the Bible in relation to the time it was written) was the main problem, but this was never mentioned officially by name. Historical criticism came under attack in Preus’ news letter “Affirm” but was not mentioned by name in any of the official convention documents. The July 6-13, 1973 Synod convention in New Orleans was the beginning of the end for Tietjen and the majority of the Concordia faculty, and was to affect Bethel Church greatly as time went on. Al Buls, Bethel’s pastor, lost his bid for a seat on the Seminary board to a Preus-recommended candidate, giving the Preus people control of the board. Preus had published an “Election Guide” and 143 of 147 Preus-recommended candidates were elected to various offices and committees. The

Committees on Theology and Church Relations were “stacked” with Preus supporters. The convention voted 562-459 to accept Preus’ Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles as binding, after changing the rules on “calling the question” contrary to Roberts Rules of Order.

Resolution 3-09 declared that the “position defended by the faculty majority of Concordia Seminary, St Louis, Mo. is in fact false doctrine running counter to the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions and the synodical stance and for that reason can not be tolerated.” Tietjen responded that “the faculty of the St Louis seminary did not regard the descriptions of their position given in the resolution as accurate.” Three professors, Edgar Krentz (a Bethel member), Robert Bertram and John Damm, represented the faculty and explained from their perspective what actually went on at Concordia Seminary in terms of theological instruction. Eventually the resolution passed and was turned over to the (Preus-controlled) Seminary Board of Control [for implementation].

Resolution 3-12 calling for the “resignation of Dr. Tietjen” was changed to “To Deal With Dr. Tietjen Under the Provisions of Synod’s Handbook.” This meant turning the matter over to the Preus-controlled Seminary Board of Control, which was fine with the right-wing Preus majority. The moderates voiced their objections by following the example of Jesus Christ and remaining completely silent. The final vote was “513 against Tietjen and 394 for justice.” After the vote Tietjen said that he “had been grievously wronged by the publication of matters relating to overtures for his resignation” and he forgave the convention because it “did not know what it was doing.” Minority members gave him a five-minute standing ovation.

On July 24th the faculty majority published “A Declaration of

Protest and Confession,” protesting “the convention’s judgement that we teach false doctrine,” and the convention’s violation of the procedures for “evangelical discipline.” They “confessed” a longing for peace and unity in the church and acceptance of “the scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice.” They appealed to “our brothers and sisters to join in a common movement of protest and confession within the Synod.” 53 faculty and staff including 15 members of Bethel Church signed the declaration.

Reactions to the events at New Orleans came swiftly. On August 8, 1973 concerned members of the faculty of Concordia Teachers College, River Forest, Illinois sent out 25 invitations to a meeting to discuss an appropriate response. This followed an Aug. 1 letter from the former President of the English District and the Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church inviting 1000 clergy and laity to a “Conference on Evangelical Lutheranism” on August 28, 1973 in Des Plaines, IL. On August 28-29, 1973 a total of “812 concerned laity and clergy” met and formed EVANGELICAL LUTHERANS IN MISSION (ELIM). This “gathering in Chicago issued a statement that protested ‘errant actions’ of the New Orleans convention and pledged ‘spiritual concern, financial support and a share in the risks involved’ for any who found themselves in jeopardy because of their opposition to convention actions.” Bethel was an early supporter of ELIM.

Rev. Sam Roth of St. Louis, an “articulate spokesman for the moderate cause,” was elected President of ELIM, and Elwyn Ewald, a returning missionary from New Guinea was designated general manager. “The new board of ELIM recognized that communication was a top priority and authorized the publication of a newspaper.” Beginning in October 1973 “Missouri in Perspective”, a biweekly newspaper, began circulating throughout the Synod, informing its readers of the latest

actions of the Preus administration and presenting the opinions of the leaders of the "movement of protest and confession." The faculty majority was taking its case to the people of the Missouri Synod, hoping to arouse them to action.

On August 17-18, 1973 the Preus-controlled Board of Control of Concordia Seminary held a specially-called meeting to take up the matters referred to it by the New Orleans convention. After two prearranged and fruitless meetings between Tietjen and his accusers, the board voted to suspend Tietjen as president of the seminary. Acting on advice of legal counsel, Tietjen advised the board that their action was "illegal and ultra vires (beyond the scope of legal authority)." After additional private discussion the board voted to delay implementation of its suspension. The Synod Commission on Constitutional matters recommended that the board revert to the first step and allow Tietjen "reasonable" time to answer the charges. The board met on September 29 and proposed that Tietjen's accusers meet with him "no later than October 15, 1973" and, after considerable discussion, voted to vacate the suspension.

At the November 19th meeting, the board voted to change the seminary retirement age from 72 to 65, effective February 1974, thereby giving seven majority faculty members three months notice of retirement. In a surprise move, they voted not to renew the contract of Paul Goetting, a member of Bethel, whose trip to India [as guest professor to Lutherans there] had been approved a month earlier. And finally, they directed the chairman of the Board of Control "to attempt to deal, to the satisfaction of all concerned, with the matter of the charges against Dr. John H. Tietjen." Tietjen met with the board chairman and his accusers on November 28, 1973, but nothing came of the meeting. On December 5 the Concordia students met to reflect on the problems and appealed to the board to "reverse its actions concerning Goetting and the retirement

policy."

The next meeting of the board was scheduled for December 17, but was canceled because of the death, on the 13th, of Arthur Piepkorn, a highly respected member of the Concordia faculty. Piepkorn had written to the board that he would "not accept honorable retirement as long as the blot of the New Orleans convention resolution smeared his good name." Piepkorn's death had a profound impact on the Concordia Seminary community and on the subsequent course of events. The board met at a special meeting on January 7, 1974, but took no action. At the regular meeting on January 20-21, 1974 the Preus-majority board voted to suspend Dr. Tietjen as president and professor. Martin Scharlemann was named interim president.

(Part II, conclusion, follows, d.v., in the next posting of ThTh)