

Seminaries are the problem, not the solution.

Thursday Theology #824

July 17, 2014

Topic: Seminaries are the problem, not the solution.

This week we're happy to send you another new piece by Ed Schroeder. In it, he ruminates on an alternate educational model for training pastors—an idea that struck him at the fortieth anniversary gathering for [Seminex](#) last month in Chicago.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

“Seminaries are the problem, not the solution for theological education today.” That was my quip from the audience at last month's fortieth birthday party of Seminex, where the topic was being discussed by a panel of Seminex alums.

Uttered at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. With the seminary president present! It elicited no response. So nothing happened.

But, as you can see, I haven't forgotten it. Though other things do often disappear, sometimes within seconds, from my memory bank nowadays.

[Many in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA] do agree that the eight seminaries in our denomination *are* a

problem. But for most of them it's the number of them that's the problem, not whether seminary-based education is a problem in itself. The acknowledged problem is that there are simply too many, too costly, too redundant for what's needed. And why can't that be fixed? Answer: the mantra of Fiddler on the Roof: "Tradition! Tradition!" Even though LSTC itself was a merger of four Lutheran seminaries way back when it began in 1962, apparently no one can conjure a formula today to go and do likewise.]

That birthday-party discussion took place in the chapel at LSTC. Through the wall-long window behind the panelists the audience looked out across 55th Street onto the campus of the University of Chicago. Which prompted a couple more sentences, added on to my own one-liner above. "U.S. seminaries are modeled after that school across the street. Learn the theory before you go out and practice the art. But is that what pastoral ministry is all about? Wouldn't it be worth reconsidering the old guild model of training for a profession? Apprentice students to folks on the panel in front of us, "Meisters" in the pastoral trade. Students move from novice to journeyman—actually journeying to stints with other Meisters—and finally to what the final Meister thinks is Meister status. Then a panel of Meisters, such as the ones sitting in front of us, examines the candidates. Yes, then it's pass/fail. As in *The Meistersingers of Nuremberg*. But it's unlikely to be "fail" since the Meister presenting the candidate wouldn't bring anyone before the examiners without being confident that that candidate was fully meister-haft.

I'm sure I didn't say all that at that time, but that's the picture. And a Crossings connection came to mind already then.

There is a pre-Seminex piece to the history of Crossings, an artifact from six weeks before Seminex came into being. It's a seven-page document.

Crossings, Inc. (St. Louis)

A Proposal

Robert W. Bertram.

Epiphany 1974

Background. Epiphany 1974 was (as usual) January 6. It was a Sunday. Two Sundays later, January 20, the Concordia Seminary Board of Control suspended John Tietjen from his presidential duties. If any on the faculty knew that was about to happen, I was not one of them.

On that Epiphany evening eight or ten of us on the faculty gathered for an evening meeting in the library. Basically the topic was, What shall we do if/when we are tossed out of the kingdom? When we *too* are tossed out. For “You’re out!” had already been spoken to several of our colleagues. Arlis Ehlen, the first victim. It seemed to be the plan of Missouri Synod president Preus that the “bad guys” at the seminary would be picked off one by one, possibly until Preus thought the seminary was “conservative enough” according to his own rubrics, or until he had satiated the alligators surrounding the seminary with enough bodies.

The bunch of us who gathered that Epiphany evening knew we were on the alligators’ list, so we reconnoitered. We began with each of us giving verbal input. When it was Bob’s turn, he presented his seven-page paper, his detailed covers-the-waterfront idea for what we could do if another half dozen or so of us got sacked.

[It’s on the Crossings website.](#) Check it out. A fantastic proposal. But quintessential Bertram. Every paragraph, even the wildest ones, with “zureichender Begründung,” sufficient reason, for attempting such unheard-of stuff in theological education.

For my purposes here, I draw on that part of the proposal that did eventually take flesh in the semester-long courses that Crossings, Inc., offered when it emerged ten years later. I want to relate this to the guild model of seminary education above.

If one should contend, "But they should *know* something first, shouldn't they, even before they start as novices?" then consider this Bertram bit:

In one of Bob's paradigms, a student would be enrolled in classes for the first year, accumulating thirty credit hours. In that year, ten three-credit classes. Each class with a Biblical study component (pericope texts parsed à la Crossings method), then samples of past and present history and theology linked to the theme of those texts, and then the "practical" element where the student, in a seminar paper, tracks some current reality in church or world, and crosses it with the theology studied in the first two segments of the course.

What does the student have by then? Ten credit hours in "Bible," ten in church history and theology, ten in practical theology. Okay, now out into the world as novice to a Meister. Then the journeyman stage, then the rite of passage before a panel of Meisters.

Is that so novel? Not really. Jesus' disciples were educated in exactly that mode, weren't they? When they call him "Master," they are not saying "Boss," but Meister, the one who's showing us how to do it. Encouraging us when we get it right, slapping our fingers when we don't, and in those cases saying, "Now watch me. Follow me. *This* is the way to do it."

Wimbledon and the World Cup are going on as I write. No one of those Meisters whom we see on the screen ever learned their trade in a classroom. It was all out there on location with a Meister showing the way, the "how to." And then there's the

famous response to the person asking for directions in New York City: "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?"—Practice, practice, practice.

Isn't the seminary model we have for theological education still basically "German"? Just too, too Teutonic? [And I speak as product thereof with my degree from the University of Hamburg.] The Humboldt University in Berlin is the Ur-text, I suspect. And with that the German *Aufklärung*, the enlightenment. First comes knowledge, head-knowledge, and after achieving that you can practice. Arts and sciences are the dynamic duo of the classic university. "Art" in its Latin/Greek meaning, a skill; and "scientia" too in its classical meaning, knowledge. But the working premise is that the knowledge must come first. The head then instructs the hand. But is real life really like that? First "scientia," then the "art," the skill, will follow? First go to the seminary, then you can be a pastor?

Is that some crypto-gnosticism—maybe not so crypto—in the mix? In how much of daily life, isn't it the reverse process, the hand teaches the head? You get the knowledge into your brain by first learning to master the skill.

Permit this bit of personal biography. As the first-born son of farmer Henry Schroeder, I learned a lot about how to farm before I even got to first grade in school. I followed dad around the farm, my filial calling. [I don't remember him saying, as Jesus did for his disciples, "Follow me," but that is what happened.] It was show and tell. "Watch me, and do what I just did." So by the time I was eight or nine I could harness horses, plow a furrow, milk cows, even drive the new tractor we got, and, ere long, drive the truck, long before I ever reached the age for a driver's license. But then on country roads traffic officers never showed up.

Isn't that dangerous? To let kids do grown-up stuff? Sometimes. I did at age eight have a "runaway" with our team of old mares, Queen and Nellie. Dad sent me home with Queen and Nell and the empty hayrack from a field a mile away. In pre-pubescent hybris, I rein-slapped them into a gallop on the country road. As we approached the farm home gate, I couldn't get them to slow down. I knew it was a runaway, but Dad had told me about his runaway when he was a kid (and he almost died). "Let 'em go until they just wear out." In my case it wasn't quite that simple. They did not keep racing down the road. Instead they crashed through the farm gate—they knew where home was. They did finally "wear out" as we roared around the farmhouse in the center of the barnyard, and we did all survive. It was a learning experience in both the art and science of farming with horses. I learned something I've never forgotten for now seventy-five years!

Summa

There are dangers in every educational paradigm. Also in theological education. No fool-proof, no fail-safe guarantees. Not only in the process, but also in the product. That snarky line about medical education applies to pastoral education too. "What do you call the person who finishes last in the class at med school?" Answer: "Doctor." Ditto for theological education: "Pastor." And the guild model isn't a sure thing either. Quality control is never 100 percent.

Even so, if the guild model was standard for the education of the first-ever Christian pastors, and not just the first set of twelve, but the next generations as well (Silas, Titus, Timothy, Phoebe, Priscilla, Aquila, Apollos, and maybe even Tecla too), why not give it a try again? I won't say "Jesus said so," but the precedents are there.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. The Seminex birthday bash last month. A cloud-nine homecoming event, as you might imagine. Holy hoopla, and some less so too. Eight of our alums are ELCA bishops. Another is the ELCA secretary. Seven of the nine showed up. Super pastors, super bishops. Six of the still-breathing eighteen faculty folks were there. Those eighteen are the remnant of the original forty-five. Four of the nine (according to my count) profs' widows who are still among the living. Scads of alums, don't know the number. Yes, spouses, children, and grandchildren too. Plus goldie-oldie allies from ancient days—William Leshner, Martin Marty, James Scherer, names I can now recall. The old Seminex stump, the original branch, now a veritable forest. A grove, at least. Better said biblically: a great cloud of witnesses.