

Seminex at Thirty. Random Ramblings for an Anniversary

Colleagues, Thirty years ago this week, on January 20, 1974, John Tietjen was sacked as president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. In the agonized history of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod it was a long time coming. But when it happened, Seminex started moving through the birth canal. That passage took 28 days. And then classes at “Concordia Seminary now in exile” started. Though the term “Seminex” was unknown on that Sunday evening as the news earthquaked through the campus: “The Seminary Board of Control (sic!) has just suspended John from his job. Martin Scharlemann is the new acting president.”

Some of you possibly know that John at this moment is coping with his third cancer. After lung and pancreas, it's now multiple lesions in the brain. Last Sunday he preached in Ft. Worth, Texas, what he thinks may be his last sermon. His text was the Gospel for the day: The Confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. How fitting for the 30th anniversary of his confessing and its consequences. I have his permission to pass that sermon on to you, but I don't have it yet. Later, I hope.

Ten of us Seminex goldie-oldies here in St. Louis gathered on Tuesday for lunch to celebrate the day at Casey and Marie Jones' home. Casey read as our table grace what he'd read to the community 30 yrs before when we actually did march off into exile: Lamentations 3:21-26. Go read.

Six months before that January 20, at the Missouri Synod's national convention (New Orleans 1973), the die had been cast in several resolutions—all of them with a 55 to 45 majority of the delegates—to discipline John for not disciplining us of the so-called “faculty majority” for our false teaching. There were

three false teachings: 1) using historical critical methods [HCR] in teaching the Bible and thus undermining the authority of Scripture. 2) Practicing “gospel reductionism” (a new term in Missouri created “just for us”), thus hyping the Gospel over the Bible as bottomline authority instead of vice versa. 3) Fudging on the proper teaching of the “third use of the law” according to the Lutheran Confessions.

Interesting in this is that in the public’s perception, both churchy and non-churchy folks—then and even now—the fight was seen as centered on #1, the folks teaching the Bible. The fancy word there is the exegetes. Yet two of the three specified heresies were actually focused on the department of systematic theology at Concordia where the Lutheran Confessions got taught. I wonder if these two ever got mentioned in class by the exegetes. And the two villains fingered for those two abominations, though never named, were Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder. They had brought such false teaching to the seminary from Valparaiso University. Nowadays Missouri hard-liners actually denounce it as “Valparaiso Theology.”

I thought about that last week while attending the conference of DAYSTAR folks, one of the groups within Missouri critical of the synod’s continuing legalism. On more than one occasion I was sitting but meters away from Ralph Bohlmann, now a DAYSTAR compatriot on the side of the angels.

Here’s the irony. Ralph was the one, 30-plus years ago, who identified these three heresies among his seminary colleagues, and wrote them up for the synod’s president. The synod prexy needed “false doctrine” to support his charge of malfeasance against Tietjen. And that malfeasance was John’s not disciplining us false teachers, which was his job. These three heresies then became the core of New Orleans Resolution 3-09. That resolution concludes with the condemnation, quoting from

the Lutheran confessions, that "these matters are in fact false doctrine . . . and for that reason 'cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.'" The resolution was adopted 574 to 451. The seminary's Board of Control got the mandate to carry it out.

Back to the 3 condemned teachings. Especially the last two, so it seems to me, Ralph knew about from insider-trading. He too was in our department of systematic theology where we argued about these issues in the Luth. Confessions.

Excursus: there were three options for teaching Lutheran confessions in that one department of nine profs. One was reading the confessions through the lenses of post-Reformation era Lutheran orthodoxy [=kosher in the LCMS], another was reading them through the lenses of Luther's own theology [guess who?], a third was viewing them as the "canon" for what is Lutheran and what isn't, so that where the confessions are silent, one is free to choose the best of the ancient Catholic heritage [insiders will know who].

The real division between the faculty-majority (37) and faculty-minority (5) was within the dept. of systematic theology. Signalled, at the time the explosion came, when 4 of the faculty minority who taught systematic theology—profs NOT condemned by New Orleans 3-09—stayed loyal to the synod president while the rest of us in the dept. were deposed. In the biblical department there was no such division. All profs used historical critical methods for their work. Even the one exegete who stayed loyal to the synod president, and then became Tietjen's successor, was the pioneer who had introduced HCM to the sem a generation earlier. Most of the profs in exegesis had learned it from him. He had sent them off to the nations's best grad schools to get their doctorates in Scripture, learning HCM from the super-pros. Alice in Wonderland was right: "things get curiouiser and

curiouser." Always.

More ramblings.

Sitting with the DAYSTAR folk last week and listening to the continuing jeremiad about Missouri's "mess" –a genuine deja vu–got me to thinking. And linking what Luther said in his War Against the Turks of 1529 to what I was silently observing. [Yes, mirabile dictu, I never said boo in two and a half days of sessions!]

Why does Missouri stay "cursed" with conflict 30 years after its house was cleaned to remove the villains? In 1529 Luther claimed that God himself was in the mix of the Holy Roman Empire's dilemma—and not happy at all—actually allied for the moment with Suleiman the Magnificent AGAINST Christian Europe. Granted, Suleiman was a villain of the most murderous sort, but for the moment God was using him as "the rod of my anger" against a faithless "Christian" empire. Is that Missouri's plight? Not the moderates, nor the fundies, but God?

More than onc DAYSTAR speaker referred to "our beloved synod," standard Missouri etiquette since time immemorial. Which got me to wondering. Would God use that adjective about the synod? Just suppose the hereticized faculty majority really were God's "called and ordained" teachers at the sem. Suppose that God really wanted us to be there doing our work "faithful to our Lord and faithful to our calling." What jeopardy did the synod put itself in when it then declared that these folks were "not to be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended"? And then deposed them all? From what I know of the Bible, "beloved" is not God's word for folks who do that. NT rhetoric for this is shaking dust from one's feet, millstones about the neck and woes for folks who murder the prophets. Beloved? Hardly. This is not sour grapes from a victim. It's in the Bible. Even more, all of the above harsh words come from

Jesus himself.

What to do? Repent. So Luther in 1529 for the embattled empire. But will a synod ever repent? Will Missouri ever say: "3-09 was itself heresy. We confess our own "false teaching" in 3-09 and repent and ask God's forgiveness." According to Jesus that could do it to get God off of Missouri's case. But, as Luther even allowed in his day, it's hard to imagine empires—or synods—repenting. Well then, so ML, let a remnant, a minority, a handful, do it. God is notoriously pleased by such acts of even a remnant, and sometimes (as he was willing to do for Sodom and Gomorrah) he draws back his rod for the whole mob when just a few are penitentially faithful. No longer to have God as your enemy is already a quantum leap forward for healing. Fact is, repentance makes God one's ally. How's that as a resource for missions!

The LCMS has a convention coming up in a few months. Could there be a repentance resolution for New Orleans 3-09? Remember, it doesn't need to get a majority vote. A remnant will do.

One more item of nostalgia.

Back on Jan. 20, 1974, I'm convinced, there was one thing the Bd of Control (and the synod machine behind the seminary purge), one thing they never thought of. The students. They apparently thought that they were just dealing with the false teaching profs. They thought that after Tietjen was gone and the acting president had fingered the ones who would indeed have to go (but only a few), it would settle down to business as usual. Ha! They thought the students would do what they were told to do. In reality it was the other way around.

Tietjen's sacking happened on a Sunday afternoon. Monday the student body assembly—with the faculty pulling no strings since we were not members of that assembly—psyched out the situation

as follows: the synod officials tell us that some of our teachers are heretics. They have not yet told us which ones. So even though they are ordering us back to class under the new president, they cannot be serious. They cannot want us to sit at the feet of heretics. So we will declare a moratorium on class attendance until they designate who the real heretics are. Then we will go back to class—but only to the classes of the orthodox teachers.

So they refused to go to class, and without any students in any classes, the seminary was closed down. The seminary board not even thinking of the students, I'm sure, got blind-sided. One day later the faculty, still reeling and not really as feisty or clever as the students, and possibly not as faith-filled, agreed to "join the students in their moratorium." Students triggered the birthing of Seminex. We faculty did the midwifery.

Four hectic weeks of life on campus followed—but none of it in the classrooms—four weeks of "the most intense theological education I ever had," as many later said. Constant meetings, unending conversations on campus. At the upper echelons official negotiations in many venues of the synod, all of which went nowhere.

Needless to say, the Board of Control did NOT identify for the students which of us were to be avoided. The chaos was far beyond that by then. The mantra of the acting president, a retired Air Force chaplain (Major General), for coping with the chaos was simple. We heard him say it: "The way to handle a rebellion is to crush it." He tried to do so. The stone fell on him.

When the Bd of Control gathered for their next monthly meeting 4 weeks later (also on a Sunday, Feb. 17) they instructed the acting president to give the faculty majority—all but the five

loyalists, of whom he was one—this ultimatum: be back in the classroom teaching, acknowledging my authority as president, by high-noon on Monday or you all are sacked for dereliction of duty. I still have the document saying that. But to have one of our prime accusers as our leader was, of course, unthinkable. How on earth could they seriously expect us to agree to that? So we all got sacked at high noon on Monday the 18th. The next day students and professors together decided on the contours of a new venture of seminary in exile. And THEN we had our celebrative parade walking off the campus.

It has become a Missouri shibboleth, both in the vocabulary of our critics and, even worse, of our friends, that we staged a “walkout.” Absolutely not. AFTER we were fired, we “walked OFF” campus. Yes, with some holy hoopla. At the end of the march we were welcomed by the deans of the two seminaries who offered us shelter, Eden (UCC) and the Jesuit School of Theology at St. Louis University. Note well: not until we were fired did we walk. And we HAD TO walk, for our letters of dismissal—remember, I still have mine—told us we were now trespassers where moments earlier we were professors. The timetable for vacating offices and faculty homes was spelled out.

It was insane. It was the worst of times, the best of times. But it happened. You had to have been there.

The march off campus was on February 19. My brother Ted was one of the students. Feb. 19 is Ted’s birthday. Did we have something to celebrate that night, or what?!

Of the 38 faculty folks who walked “off,” 14 have already walked on through the valley of the shadow of death. I list them here with “Seminox at 30” in memoriam. Herb Bouman, Bob Bertram, Doc Caemmerer, Bill Danker, Alfred Fuerbringer, Carl Graesser, Paul Lessmann, Erv Lueker, Art Repp, Al von Rohr Sauer, Gil Thiele,

Carl Volz, Walt Wegner, Andy Weyermann.

And their works do follow them.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Marie and I have accepted the invitation of the Lutheran Church of Singapore to work with them March 1 to May 31. I know of one person on the Crossings listserve who has "sg" in his e-address. Do we have other Singapore readers? If so, let us know. [Need a chuckle? The earlier name of the Lutheran Church there was Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore, the LCMS.]