

Seminex Profs and the Downfall of LSTC and the ELCA

Colleagues,

On the Lutheran Forum website these days Crossings shows up in the conversation. The line is drawn back to Seminex, and that offbeat seminary, which closed shop in St. Louis way back in 1983, is portrayed as the villain that ruined the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 2009. I kid you not!

But it was not all of the Seminex community that did this. It was just ten of the professors, dismissed as false teachers by their mother church (Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod), who were then welcomed into the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago (LSTC). Welcomed as an attractive treasure—but really a Trojan horse. For once inside the guarded citadel, these teachers stepped out to fling open the gates to liberal theology, especially its virulent anti-nomianism (=disrespect for God's law), thereby eviscerating the "L" word in LSTC—and even more mind-boggling—decimating the entire ELCA! Once more, I kid you not.

What triggers this LF website extravaganza is the Fortress Press book by James Burkee: "Power, Politics and the Missouri Synod-A Conflict that Changed American Christianity." Burkee has unearthed documents that expose the seamy side of the "Wars of Missouri" back in the 1970s. He tells all.

Robert Benne (prof at the ELCA's Roanoke College, director of the Center for Religion and Society) was asked for a pre-publication blurb for the book, and that has led to what he's now put on the LF website. It is Benne's own version of what happened in Missouri in those days, culminating in the dire

consequences that conflict had for the ELCA, consequences coming from the seminary-in-exile (Seminex) that came out of that Missouri Synod conflict.

Benne claims (see the citations below) that these Seminex profs, “refugees” who migrated to the LSTC, are the ones who did it. Namely, wrecked the ELCA. Their Trojan horse strategy first infected LSTC with anti-nomianism and its libertine ethics. Their venom then spread far and wide throughout ELCA leadership folks. So wide in fact that it finally succeeded in conning the majority of the delegates at ELCA assembly 2009—hundreds and hundreds of them—to say Yes on the homosexual-hot-potato when they should have said No.

Carl Braaten has said the same thing in the several pages he devotes to Seminex in his recently published autobiography. Braaten too portrays the Seminex profs who came to LSTC as the ones who swept the ELCA into thumbing its nose at God’s law. They engineered the anti-nomian takeover of the denomination.

The Seminex profs who came to LSTC in 1983 were Mark Bangert (Music and Liturgy), Paul Bauermeister (Pastoral Care), Robert Bertram (Systematic Theology), Bob Conrad (Christian Education), Bill Danker (Missiology), Frederick Danker (New Testament), David Deppe (Practical Theology), Kurt Hendel (Reformation History), Ralph Klein (Old Testament), Edgar Krentz (New Testament). By now some have died. So I asked those who remain—all but one of them retired—about the Benne/Braaten claim. Is it true?

So far two have responded. I have their permission to pass their words on to you. But first I’ll copy below some of Benne’s statements.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Bob Benne's words on the Luth. Forum website:

when I survey the damage done to the ELCA by the Seminex/AELC [=Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, LCMS congregations also dismissed from the LCMS during those days] leadership that migrated from Missouri to the church bureaucracies and seminaries of the ELCA. it has made a "long march through ELCA institutions" that has given a significant push to the ELCA's journey to liberal Protestantism. the Missouri liberals lost one skirmish to powerful conservative insurgents in Missouri, but were crucial in winning another from powerless conservatives of the ELCA. Now they are free; they will have no more enemies from the right. The home-grown radicals of the LCA and ALC were joined by the Seminex/AELC contingent to overwhelm the staid old voices of the LCA and ALC. The latter didn't have a chance against the young radicals. The "march through the institutions" radiated from Chicago to many synods, agencies, colleges, and seminaries. Just as I was leaving the Lutheran School of Theology in 1982, an interesting conversation took place in Carl Braaten's Irving room. The question before the group was: in view of the demise of Seminex, how many of its professors should LSTC take? I argued that taking more than two or three would dramatically alter the seminary. LSTC wound up with over a half dozen, if not more. Before long they were the dominant faction.

the seminary's faculty-led democratic tradition soon became a top-down chain of command, fully attributable to the new faculty. Their liberalism gradually pervaded the seminary. not one of the deployed former Seminex faculty wound up on the side of the traditionalists in the run-up to the Churchwide Assembly to 2009. Except for Paul Hinlicky, I cannot think of one theologian from the Seminex/AELC stream that did not support the revisionist pressures working within the ELCA. there is something about those Seminex/AELC types who have taken leadership positions in the seminaries, colleges, bureaucracies, and synods of the ELCA that has bent them toward the revisionist side. Was it because their tormentors were from the right and they could recognize no dangers from the left? Was it that they had

become battle-hardened by earlier struggles and were very adept at maneuvering for power? Was it those German genes? Or was it because they were liberals from the very beginning. . . .?

HENDEL

Dear Ed, While I have had a series of email conversations with Carl Braaten about the ELCA's ministry decisions, I have never engaged him regarding the claim that he makes in his autobiography and which Benne is apparently repeating now.

I will not speak for my colleagues. They can obviously do that for themselves. In my teaching and preaching I have focused on the centrality of Christ and the gospel. While I have never espoused or promoted an antinomian position, I have stressed that the second use of the law is particularly crucial, both for the effective proclamation of the gospel and for our understanding the Lutheran heritage. I also explore the Formula of Concord's third use of the law. I am clearly not denying the efficacy or necessity of the first use of the law by focusing especially on its chief function. As I affirm the significance of the law and its necessary dialectical relationship to the go spel, I do emphasize that the gospel is God's ultimate good news to humanity. I have also stressed Luther's insistence that the gospel is the hermeneutical key to Scripture and, hence, also of the law. None of this indicates that I am either a gospel-reductionist or an antinomian. Rather, I believe that I am faithful to the Lutheran understanding of the purpose and efficacy of Scripture, to the Lutheran confessional heritage and to Luther's own faith convictions and theological method.

I really have no idea why Braaten ascribes so much influence to us in shaping the assumed heretical stances of LSTC or of the ELCA. We have, of course, taught at LSTC for a good number of years, and we have made our voices heard. We have also been active within the ELCA, but not in unusual or normative ways. I suspect, therefore, that leaders within the ELCA and our other colleagues at LSTC would describe our roles and impact in ways that differ significantly from Braaten's

assertions. I would hope, of course, that they would characterize our contributions in a much more positive way.

Bob Benne had, of course, already left LSTC by the time we arrived, and I do not think that he has engaged us or our theological perspective in any significant ways over the past quarter of a century. It may be, therefore, that his perspectives are shaped largely by Braaten's.

I doubt that a response to Braaten or Benne will have a positive impact or change their perspectives.

KLEIN

Dear Ed: Thanks, I think, for alerting me to Benne's piece on the Forum website. That led to Hinlicky's review, which I had seen before.

First, on the dissertation on LCMS to be published by Fortress. I read this piece several years ago since an electronic copy was making the rounds. It is a wondrous piece, but totally devoid of theology—by intention. Hence the absurd criticism by Benne that there was no theological defense by the moderates in Missouri is nonsense. This bloke teaches at Concordia Milwaukee and hence he had to avoid theology if he wanted to keep his job. The dirt he dug up and the connections to right wing political extremism are amazing.

Second, on how "we" took over LSTC. The ten of us have had an enormous impact on LSTC although we have not taken it over (and I promise not to take over the ELCA). I suspect that impartial observers would say that if anything the Seminex contingent was centrist at LSTC, at times even conservative. In the early 90s part of the faculty wanted to call Elizabeth Bettenhausen to the faculty and the other part wanted Reinhard Huetter. The issue was the Lutheranism of the two candidates, sadly lacking in the former, with Braaten strongly an advocate of Huetter, and I think all of the Seminex faculty voted with him. It was a long, drawn out battle, and the decision was finally to call Huetter on a non tenure track. Braaten was fed up with LSTC at that time and walked off in a huff.

Ironically, Seminex was his ally on this issue. Without Seminex Bettenhausen would surely have been called. Ironically, again, Huetter eventually left LSTC for Duke, where he became Roman Catholic! So much for his great Lutheranism.

Third, on the third use of the law [=ethical guidelines for the Christian life]. I still am affected by my Harvard mentors who saw the Decalogue at least as a guide to the redeemed. The top two professors were both Presbyterians. Of course 8 of the ten commandments name a specific thing you can't do, leaving much of life to "living righteously" loving God and the neighbor, or faith active in love. E.g. all the sixth commandment prohibits is the sleeping with another person's wife—hardly a comprehensive guide on sexuality. The only positive commands are the Third—rest on the Sabbath day, which none of us observes (however much we may honor preaching and the Word) and the 4th, which I think was addressed to adults and admonished them to care for the elderly—good news for our aged bad situations.

A classmate of mine recently attended a symposium at Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, and heard ELCA denounced for denying the third use in its sexuality decisions. The question before the ELCA house was what seven biblical passages meant back then and what help they might give us today in wrestling with homosexuality and other sexual issues. [Rejecting] Third use in the LCMS means—IMHO—that you don't buy our legalism.

When the Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) presidency was vacant a few years ago, I offered myself as a candidate with a promise to bring back the good old days. Somehow that plan fizzled.