

Seminex Remembered—Seminex's own Theology

Both friends and foes—then and still now—talk about “the theology of Seminex.” Just what was that? It’s not easy to specify—even for us Seminexers. Critics from within the Missouri Synod painted our theology with the “liberal” brush. For some that meant “Bible-doubters.” I.e., we didn’t believe the six-day creation that the Bible teaches; we were skeptics about Jonah’s fishing trip. For others it was a “theology of rebellion against church authority.” The acting president who replaced John Tietjen saw it this way. “The only way to respond to rebellion is to crush it,” he said.

But since no one of us profs was ever granted the benefit (sic!) of a heresy trial before Seminex happened, “our theology” was never articulated before any tribunal whose proceedings you could then refer to. Even though the New Orleans convention (1973) affirmed by a 60/40 vote that our theology was “not to be tolerated in the Church of God, much less excused or defended,” just what made it so frightful was always fuzzy among our critics. Serious searchers had a tough time trying to pinpoint our specific heresy. On the field of world Lutheranism, “everybody” knew that the Seminex crowd was still clearly at the conservative end of the Lutheran spectrum. They knew that “Missouri” leopards don’t change their spots. Or if they ever do, it’s not very much.

In 1972, the year before the New Orleans convention, the Concordia Seminary “faculty majority” was asked by Missouri’s regional district presidents to tell the church what our theology really was. We did that with “An Affirmation in Two Parts: Faithful to our Calling, Faithful to Our Lord.” Part I

was a "Joint Statement and Discussion of Issues" signed by all 45 of us, and Part II a collection of "Personal Confessions" from each of us. That was the closest thing to a statement of what later could be called the "theology of Seminex." But the hopes of these district presidents for the peace-making and trust-building that this would bring in the controversy were dashed by Missouri's President Preus finessing it to irrelevance for the policy he was pursuing. Both parts are still very good stuff, I think, though I am not unbiased since I was one of the two colleagues assigned the job of composing the joint statement.

One product from the department of systematic theology just before Seminex was a "Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology." Its title: "The Promising Tradition." The key terms in those phrases signalled the publication's context and its center. One of our accusers had popularized the epithet "Gospel-reductionism" to label what he said was our heresy. For him that meant we acknowledged the authority of anything that was "Gospel" within the scriptures, but everything else in the Bible was fair game for historical-critical hanky-panky. The title we gave to our Reader (my concoction) sought to take our critic's term and re-vision it with the theology of the Lutheran Confessions. That meant a law-gospel hermeneutic for re-constructing our "Missouri" theology, and the Gospel's own promise as the center of it all.

This reader was used for only a term or two at Concordia before the explosion came, and then became our textbook, of sorts, for systematic theology at Seminex. In subsequent editions it grew to include 30 essays from 8 authors.

But for the general public—both churchy and secular—it was the teaching done by the profs in the Biblical fields that had gotten us into trouble in the Missouri Synod, and that later was

the hallmark for the theology of Seminex. The exegetes (teachers doing "exegesis" = interpreting the Bible) not the systematicians (we who were teaching doctrine, ethics, the Lutheran confessions) were the heroes (or villains, depending on your point of view) of Seminex's theology. That's not untrue, but not the whole truth. Already at Concordia, and constantly at Seminex, conversations (debates?) ensued about the "law-Gospel" hermeneutic being done in systematics and the "historical-critical method" in Biblical studies. At least once NT scholar Ed Krentz and I put together a semester-long seminar for Seminex students with the short-hand title: HCM and LGH (Historical-Critical Method and Law-Gospel Hermeneutics).

So I think the "theology of Seminex" was an ellipse with two centers—HCM and LGH. In my judgment we never succeeded to get them completely to coincide.

For more than a generation of students back at Concordia Seminary, "systematics" had had a bad press among the illuminati. By synodical tradition "dogmatics" (doctrine) was on the throne, and the task of Bible teachers was to supply the prooftexts to support what the doctrinal manuals taught. But after World War II many students disdained both that kind of dogmatics and that kind of exegesis. It was really "new" in my student years at Concordia (1950-55) when new professor Martin Scharlemann introduced—very very gently—historical-critical methodology in his NT teaching at the sem. He eventually caught flak for it and in a subsequent convention of the synod "apologized" for the turmoil he had brought. But he never really changed his HCM style of teaching, and shaped a generation of graduates with that sort of exegesis. The whiz-kids among his students went off to Harvard (and other schools) for graduate studies and in a few years were his colleagues in exegesis back at "the" sem.

Understandably Martin's "new look" for Biblical exegesis discombobulated his own colleagues in the Biblical department, but he was a gifted teacher and by the time his own "brightest and best" came back from grad school to join the faculty, HCM was standard procedure in the department. The irony (or is it mystery?) that no one can satisfactorily explain is that Martin later became the most vocal critic of the Biblical work done by these former students as the battle for the seminary developed. He identified himself with the other four of our colleagues in the "faculty minority," and wound up as the acting seminary president when Tietjen was finally suspended.

How LGH got to the seminary I have described in [ThTh #7 \(July 2\)](#). The way Bob Bertram articulated it within the department of Systematic Theology even before Seminex (13 November 1968) was this way:

*"What is most 'systematic' about systematic theology is, not merely that it arranges its material – say, the biblical data – in this or that orderly way, (that much is true of all the theological disciplines) but rather that it consciously and explicitly insists on asking 'Why.' It asks for The Sufficient Reason, The Adequate Basis, The *Fons*, never resting until it has found 'Reason Enough.' Why, for what reason finally, is this or that Christian claim made? By saying that the systematician *asks* for the 'why,' I am not suggesting that he does not know what it is. On the contrary, because he does know, at least in principle, what that sufficient reason is, his asking is meant chiefly to ask it into clarity, into the full prominence it deserves. He cannot even settle for the explanation, 'Why, because Scripture says so.' He still persists and asks again, 'And why, in turn, does Scripture say so?' His job is done only when he has traced the reason back to The Source: namely, God's reconciling the world unto himself in Christ Jesus – in other words, the gospel. The systematician's*

*task is to 'necessitate' Christ."His task is properly to distinguish law from promise. But this distinguishing is not an end in itself. Law and promise need distinguishing so that they can be restored to the original *relationship* in which they already operate within scripture. The trouble is that men come to that biblical law-promise relationship prejudiced by a perennial *Vorverstaendnis (opinio legis)*, and thus recombine law and promise unbiblically, with the resultant loss of both, law and promise. The systematician disentangles this mis-meshing, does his distinguishing, so that he can restore law and promise to their original biblical – i.e., evangelical – order."*

Not all (not even most of) our systematics colleagues agreed with that back in 1968 and there was no such consensus in systematics as there was in exegesis that we were all doing our work with a common focus. So it was no wonder that half of the systematics department (4 profs) joined Martin (the only one from the exegesis department) to become the "faculty minority," the five who were the core for the new Concordia faculty after the 45 of us were dismissed and began our work at Seminex.

The consequences of these two focal points for the ellipse of Seminex's theology is a topic I'll try to address next time.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder