

Seminex Remembered – The Theology Department

written by Crossings | August 13, 1998

ThTh #9 concluded: “The consequences of these two focal points [Historical critical method (HCM) in the Biblical departments and the Law-Gospel hermeneutic (LGH) in systematics] for the ellipse of Seminex’s theology is a topic I’ll try to address next time.” Well, this “next” time is now four weeks later. And in these intervening weeks another of the saints of that era, Herman Neunaber, an LCMS district president deposed for his support of Seminex, has been laid to rest.

Twenty-five years ago another funeral changed our history—for a little while, at least. Concordia Seminary Professor Arthur Carl Piepkorn, my former teacher and then colleague in the systematics department, died on December 13, 1973 while waiting in the barber shop for a haircut. His funeral was Dec. 17. On that very day the seminary’s Board of Control was scheduled to meet and “finally” carry through on their earlier decision to remove John Tietjen from the presidency of the sem. That suspension resolution had already passed at a special meeting in August, right after the LCMS’s New Orleans convention.

The convention had given Synod President Preus a 6 to 5 majority on the seminary board, and at the August meeting that majority voted to suspend Tietjen. But the resolution was not implemented at that meeting because someone blew the whistle about due process in the whole business and the possibility of a civil suit against the board. In the subsequent monthly board meetings during the fall something always happened to postpone implementation. Given Piepkorn’s demise and the crowd that flew in for the funeral (one attendee said we were really burying the Missouri Synod) the board cancelled their meeting and postponed John’s dismissal to the next meeting on Jan. 20,

1974.

With Piepkorn gone, the systematics department at the seminary was 4 and 4. Four of our colleagues, Richard Klann, Robert Preus, Ralph Bohlmann and Lorenz Wunderlich, constituted 80% of the "faculty minority," the 5 loyalists who supported Preus in his cleansing program at the sem. The cleansing was not for them, of course, but for the rest of us in the "faculty majority." That included the other half of our department, Bob Bertram, Herb Bouman, Erv Lueker, and me. When Seminex happened the four of us became its systematics department. With 90% of the Concordia students joining us in exile, our department was badly understaffed for all that we were called to do. Before long Herb Bouman retired and that left three of us. In shifting and juggling our teaching, the courses in the Lutheran confessions became our Introduction to Theology vehicle, and Bob and I concentrated there. Lueker concentrated on other parts of the department's curriculum. Dogmatics and ethics were shared among all three of us. Each of us offered an elective every now and then both to exploit the resources of our own experience ["Theology of Confessing"] and to keep in touch with what was happening in our discipline elsewhere in the world:

- theology and the social sciences,
- third world theologies,
- theology and the arts.

A lot of good theology—some more, some less systematic—got done in the internal discussions (sometimes debates) as we charted our community's course for the 10 years we existed in St. Louis.

It may be a bit presumptuous to speak of two foci to the theology of Seminex. For besides HCM and LGH, there was a vibrant liturgical theology being taught and then practiced in our daily workship. Ditto for catechesis, preaching and pastoral care. And, of course, there were the Seminex sub-

cultures, some of which I'm sure I never heard about. The ones I did know about included the expanding number of gays and lesbians who came to Seminex, as well as the growing number of women students who enrolled. Both groups challenged the mindsets we'd brought along from "old Missouri" that pastors were men only and of course heteros only. Doubtless Seminex's dean and president were aware of more subcultures, as for example when they went to bat for one of our students down at the city jail. Seems he'd had the chutzpah to grow his marijuana on the window sill of his apartment in full view of passersby. One day the police passed by and noticed his garden. We all learned about that sub-culture in the morning newspaper.

Although Seminex was quasi-officially committed to HCM in Biblical studies, the same was not true for the LGH we were pursuing in systematics. That was true already while we were still at Concordia. Partly responsible for that could have been the three (yes, 3) styles of Lutheran confessional theology represented by the department. The four systematics profs who were loyal to Synod President Preus did their confessional theology with the theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy as their key to the confessions. ["Orthodoxy" is the name given to German Lutheran theology in the century following the death of Luther.] Bertram and I used Luther's own theology as our key to the confessions. Piepkorn took a third option, what I would call a "canonist" approach to the confessions. For him the confessions collected in The Book of Concord constituted the canon for Lutheran theology. Whatever the Lutheran confessions said on a given topic was what Lutheran theology was. Where the confessions were silent, a variety of options were possible. He relished tweaking Bertram and me by saying that the LGH was "one," but not "the," confessions' proposal for how to read the scriptures.

With Piepkorn's death shortly before Seminex happened, and with all the Orthodoxy-oriented systematians staying at

Concordia, only one of those three came into Seminex. So for us LGH was the posture not only for studying the confessions but for systematic theology as a whole. See the citation from Bertram back in ThTh9 "What is systematic theology?" Seminex's president and deans had been shaped more by Piepkorn's perspective—beginning with their own student days at Concordia—than by the other two. Orthodoxy's option was, to be sure, nobody's choice. Bob and I sometimes were labelled as "Elertians" with our LGH and thus seen as not ecumenical enough within the world of Lutheranism. "There are other equally valid Lutheran theologies that we're not getting from Bob and Ed" was the complaint. One year our LGH "narrowness" provoked a student initiative to "get different Lutheran voices into the systematics department." The students pressing for this had already chosen their candidate from a good teacher they'd had at the Ft. Wayne Sr. College. Our department—all three of us—officially went on record approving the idea, even the pre-selected candidate, but finances had the last word, and it never happened.

One of the students leading that movement, now a respected international theologian himself, still wonders if systematic theology at Seminex didn't really support the American religious establishment, and that what Bob and I have been doing since then, e.g., in Crossings, is but more of the same. Who knows? Among the Seminex faculty Bob was respected as a different-from-Piepkorn confessionalist, but he never made many converts in my judgment. I myself was the systematician from the farm, an image I doubtless fostered, and given my feisty ways, never very diplomatic, I too made no faculty converts. But with students Bertram and I did make a difference—Bob with the egg-heads and I with the students from Prairietown and Peoria.

My evidence for this is that Bob and I (and a couple of colleagues who sometimes voted with us) were the losers on every crucial vote [4 specific ones in Seminex's 10 years, by

my count] taken in the faculty where the theological basis for our actions was at stake. These were times, I still think, when the NT image of exile, that Doc Caemmerer had shown us, was up for grabs. At those times Seminex's ellipse with its two foci tilted toward becoming "2 Seminexes." Not one-after-the-other, as some folks thought when comparing Seminex at the beginning (1974) and Seminex farther down the road, but two side-by-side—from the outset—as the two midpoints of our theological ellipse tugged with each other.

The people representing these "2 Seminexes" in my scenario were

- A. the administrators—all of them, curiously enough, alums of the LCMS Bronxville NY prep school, and (therefore?) high-church, urbane, savvy, cultured Easterners—plus the exegetes on the faculty (and their student following) and
- B. the systematics dept. (and its student following). Because Bob and I were eventually 2/3 of the entire systematics department staff, our LGH confessional theology touched (some said "was inflicted" on) most all students.

Seminex had a tri-partite corporate governance structure. There were three classes of members: Faculty, students, and the board (representing our supporting constituency). When two of those three agreed on something it became policy. So the "student member class" of the Seminex corp. also deliberated and voted on all major Seminex decisions. I remember that at least on one of those 4 crucial issues, the majority of students voted with us on the "losing" side in the faculty.

Next time I intend to revisit those four crucial votes.

Peace & Joy
Ed Schroeder