

Summer Conventions: Is it New Orleans all over again?

Next month the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod will hold its convention here in St. Louis. The gossip says it will be a hot one regardless of the local weather. One district president (i.e., a regional bishop) is on the carpet for practicing fellowship with the heterodox. He participated in the wedding of his niece in a service held in a congregation of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). The LCMS president and numerous overtures to the convention, as I hear from my distant vantage point, are demanding either his apology or his scalp. In a couple of weeks we'll know what they got.

Some of our friends in the LCMS sadly say: "It could be New Orleans all over again." "New Orleans," the LCMS convention of 1973, was exactly 25 years ago in July. There were many more villains at that time, however. Forty-five of us on the faculty of Concordia Seminary here in St. Louis, were on the carpet. We were bunched together in popular rhetoric as the "faculty majority." The five faculty colleagues who were our critics were the "faculty minority."

Like all church conflicts (and family fights too) there was a long pre-history to New Orleans '73. Some claimed that it went all the way back to arguments the Saxon immigrants had before they got off the boat in 1839: is scripture or scripture's Gospel the touchstone for Lutheran theology? In any case the actions taken at New Orleans were cataclysmic by everyone's judgment. They pushed the button that created Concordia Seminary in Exile (Seminox for short) six months later.

Although the entire faculty, all 50 of us, had individually undergone a 2-hour interview by the LCMS president's "fact

finding committee" prior to the convention, no one of the faculty majority had been directly charged with any specific false teaching. Yet by the time New Orleans was over we were hereticized by a 60/40 convention vote for teaching which "cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended," a phrase from the Lutheran Confessions. I was not in New Orleans for the convention, but back in St. Louis along with others teaching summer school ostensibly doing just that kind of teaching.

There was an attempt to give substance to what our intolerable teaching was in a document published before the convention. It was the LCMS president's "A Statement of Biblical and Confessional Principles." We later learned that one of the minority five had ghost-written it for the president. It specified 3 doctrines where the faculty majority had gone astray. The convention accepted that document (another 60/40 vote) as a valid statement of Missouri Synod teaching, and then measured us by that yardstick. Three of our senior colleagues, Bob Bertram, Ed Krentz, and John Damm, were given 12 minutes each to tell the assembly what we really taught in the classroom. Thereafter the convention voted, and once more, 60 to 40, we failed to pass.

The heresies ascribed to us were three:

1. Undermining the authority of the Bible in the way we used "historical critical methods" when teaching from the Bible,
2. Practicing "gospel-reductionism," a term invented by one of our critics (John Warwick Montgomery) to designate our alleged granting the Bible absolute authority in Gospel matters, but not in other aspects; and
3. being wishy-washy on our commitment to "the third use of the law," a intra-Lutheran hot potato from the time of the

Reformation. That 16th century debate asked whether, and if so, how, the new-born Christian uses God's law to pattern her new life in Christ.

Upon our failure to pass the test, the convention mandated the newly elected seminary Board of Control (sic!), where our critics now had the majority, to take appropriate action. Although the board regularly met each month, for a number of reasons, their timetable was stretched out until January of 1974. And in their meeting of that month, on Sunday evening January 20, they suspended seminary president John Tietjen for malfeasance in office. He had not exercised proper doctrinal discipline on the faculty while presiding over us. And little wonder, since he too was one of the faculty majority.

As Acting President, Martin Scharlemann, a leading voice in the faculty minority, was put in Tietjen's place. He was my brother-in-law. His wife and my wife are sisters. No one really knew what his mandate was from the board. But that hardly mattered, since the following day, Monday, there was no more "business as usual" at Concordia Seminary. Though Scharlemann was in office, he never presided over the seminary from which Tietjen was deposed. On that Monday the student body convened for day-long deliberations. Their final decision: a moratorium on any future class attendance until those professors be identified whose "teaching was not to be tolerated in the church of God." They knew how serious heresy was, and they wanted none of it! A day later the faculty majority, more stunned by Tietjen's suspension and less savvy, I'd say, than those students, agreed to join the students in their moratorium decision.

That didn't mean that teaching and learning stopped on campus. Students and staff were in non-stop theological conversation and action for the four weeks that followed before the next meeting of the seminary board. Many a student would later say that he

(we had hardly any she's) learned more theology during those four weeks than during four or more previous semesters. There was no end of meetings—both intramural in homes and lounges and extramural with LCMS leadership. Our critics saw the moratorium as clear evidence of our rebellious natures. Clearly we needed to be disciplined. The only message we heard from them, and from the synod president as well, was that we submit to Scharlemann's leadership and trust him to do what's right. It was an administrative matter, not a matter of the Gospel itself. The issue of our alleged heresy, which was a Gospel matter, would be addressed by Scharlemann and the board in due time—and as the accused we were not the time-keepers.

Even supporters—many of them—said we were making a big mistake. But what neither these friends nor our foes sufficiently realized was that “we” the faculty were not in charge. The students had “closed down the place” while we faculty were still numb and perplexed about our new situation. We had not led the students in making their decision. They ran their own meetings and came to their own conclusions. Later on, however, they did call us to “fess up” to our involvement in their action. How so? Our teaching, they said, had conveyed to them a clear enough fix on the Gospel to make their own theological analysis of the crisis and then to give them courage to do what they did. We could hardly have been more honored.

What all happened in those 4 weeks is a bit of a blur for me now. I should have kept a journal. Yet even with the memory blur, they were unforgettable! When the board next convened, Sunday evening Feb. 17, they authorized the acting president Scharlemann to give us the following notice: By noon of the next day (Feb. 18) we were to submit in writing our agreement to return to business as usual under his leadership. Otherwise we would be held in breach of contract and considered as having terminated our employment at the seminary. With such termination

we were to be out of our offices and seminary-owned housing by the end of the month, ten days later.

We found this resolution in our faculty mailboxes Monday morning, just hours before the high-noon deadline. By 10:30 that morning we assembled in Pritzlaff Hall, together with spouses, and came to the consensus that our only response would be no response. When the seminary bells tolled the noon hour we celebrated our dismissal by singing "The Church's One Foundation," a hymn that had become our banner since New Orleans. Someone opened the windows toward the quad where the students had gathered while we deliberated. They joined our singing. The next day (Feb 19) Seminex came into existence; the day thereafter we had our first classes. More next time.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder