Assesses Movement's Future Role

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The "moderate" confessional movement in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is not so much "disspirited" as "dispersed."

This is one central theme from an address to the 1978 Assembly of Evangelical Lutherans in Mission by the Rev. Dr. Robert Bertram, Oct 13.

The Christ Seminary professor suggested that the movement is reappearing in "hometown," no longer among Lutherans of a single synodical interest but rather in pan- Lutheran and even pan-Christian co-operative efforts.

This happens as Christians reduce their dependence of denominational bureaucracies and instead assume new responsibility themselves, locally yet ecumenically, he suggested.

New Challenge

While synods are losing their importance as managerial authorities, said Dr. Bertram, their new challenge lies in providing confessional support and "networking" among local Lutherans.

The greatest need, he added, if the current anti-bureaucratic grass-roots ecumenism is going to be channeled constructively as a "confessional movement" is for those who share a common

confession of faith to give it shape through the proclamation of the Gospel.

This, he noted, however, “can be a lonely task,” and there is a need to provide “encouragement” not from “transcendent bureaucracies” but from a “worldwide Lutheran confessional presence.”

Confessional movements arise, he said, whenever there is “churchly oppression” by the “secular authority of the church itself.”

Safeguarded Gospel?

But, he added, “What is being oppressed is not only other Christians but the very Gospel of Christ,” as authorities attempt to “safeguard” the Gospel “with additional conditions and expectations which Christ never imposed, thus reducing His Gospel to a tool for enslavement.”

When this happens, Christians need to resist a minimizing of the importance of the Cross and to take a stand together to defy the authorities.

What is dangerous is not secular authority in the church on its own, he said, but a reliance on that authority rather than on the Gospel.

God’s “efficiency” is a matter of proclaiming grace to sinners and “churching the world,” he argued.

Yoke-Bearing

But if anti-bureaucratic protest is a Christian “No,” he said, a confessional movement must also be able to say a Gospel “Yes,” which is that Christ is willing to bear “the yoke” for

Christians of the responsibility for new co-cooperative efforts on the local level, so that they can bear His.
He cautioned against missing the opportunity presented by the current anti-bureaucracy trend to see the common experience that members of ELIM share with Christians in other confessions.

At the same time, he cautioned that such “populism” can turn vindictive, noting that what had happened to “moderates” in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was itself part of an anti-bureaucratic outrage.

But, the assumption that synodical bureaus were “where the church’s real power was “at” was wrong-headed, he added.

Doctrinally Neutral

While bureaucratic management may seem to be “doctrinally neutral,” the Seminex professor suggested, it seems to have changed “from being the Gospel’s servant to being the Gospel’s partner to being the Gospel’s rival to being the Gospel’s undoing.”

This happens when cooperation in management systems becomes a “necessity” in the life of the Church for “being truly acceptable in this church, or else.”

And “when objectors or critics are dismissed or penalized or excluded, then regardless of the authorities’ reassuring rhetoric, the door has been opened to idolatry.”

Dr. Bertram also took issue with a statement in a recent issue in PERSPECTIVE to describe how difficult it is to make a clear confession—even to his friends.

That statement had suggested that his appearance would serve as a challenge to the idea that “moderates” should withdraw from

the fellowship of the LCMS.s

On the one hand, he said, he favors a complete withdrawal from the fellowship of the LCMS, if by that one means to refuse to submit to an authority “that has invalidated itself through a systematic legalism.”

On the other hand, he said, he would not advocate removing oneself from the fellowship of many people, including his students, who are still on the LCMS rolls.

But even in such cases of misunderstanding, he concluded, “mutual forgiveness” covers a multitude of ambiguities.

AssessesMovement (PDF)