

# **Transfer of Church Authority to Church Administration?**

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## **Résumé**

Introduction: The growing objection to ecclesiastical bureaucracy is, at least implicitly, a confessional objection: as church authority is exercised more and more by church administrators, that authority (so the objection goes) becomes not only more hierarchical but what is worse, unevangelical and therefore no longer the unique authority of the church. This confessional objection I would concede. But I do not see it as inevitable, given the options still open to us in the Gospel.

- a. The assigned topic for this essay, “Transfer of Church Authority to Church Administration?”—even though the topic is put as a question—reflects a growing restiveness among church people, certainly in North America.
- b. On the other hand, the bureaucratization of church authority still has its powerful defenders. They base their defense not only upon considerations of managerial efficiency and economy but also upon theological considerations. For example, they still see church authority as being more God-like the more “parental” it is, requiring from the constituents a filial “trust” in their administrators, who in turn are to act in their constituents’ behalf.
- c. At what point does this parental view of the church authority become objectionable, if it does at all, on confessional grounds? Answer: the one thing which church authorities—no matter how parental and benign their intent—may not do in behalf of church people is to preempt the latters’ own confessing of Christ before the world and hence before God.

d. If they do, the churches not only may but must disclaim their authorities' right to do so. But the objection then is not only that the authorities are being undemocratic. That too may be an objection, a compelling one, though not necessarily a confessional one. The confessional objection rather would be that the witness (*confessio, responsum*) here being made in the name of the churches by their own authorities is not in fact the witness for which the churches themselves can accept responsibility before the world, much less before God.

e. The immediate documentary source of my argument is the Formula of Concord, Article 10, but that only as the commentary it claims to be on earlier Lutheran confessional writings (particularly the Augsburg Confession, its Apology and the Smalcald Articles) and the biblical source of them all, notably in this case Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Using Article 10 of the Formula of Concord is all the more fitting on this eve of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Book of Concord.

Part One: So what is the objection to bureaucratizing the church's authority? If that is truly a confessional objection, then it is not a question initially of where the authority is located or with whom—for example, with the church's bureaus or bishops or congregations or synods. Such questions of governance, at least for confessional purposes, are negotiable and discretionary, varying from one situation to the next (*adiaphora*).

No, the confessional question for any and all church authorities is a question rather of what: what *kind* of authority are they exercising? Is it the kind of authority which frees us to entrust all responsibility for ourselves to the divine mercy in Christ, that being enough (*satis*)? Or is it instead the kind of authority which demands something more, the Gospel plus something else (Christ plus circumcision, Christ plus our own authorities), in which case Christ refuses any longer to take responsibility for us?

Part Two: However, once the question of church authority is faced confessionally—Do we so govern ourselves as to trust Christ alone to respond for us, trusting his *confessio* of us as our own only *confessio* before the authorities?—what then? Why, then we are free to face the subsequent questions as well about praxis, church governance, how in our particular situations today church authority may need to be redistributed and organizations realigned. Still, it needs to be repeated

that any reorganizing of the churches must always be to the end of keeping the church's *responsum* churchly, that is, decisively evangelical.

In view of that Christly purpose the present bureaucratizing of church authority does, I believe, reveal a glaring need of revision and of a much broader sharing of church authority—better, a sharing of “responsibility”—with us all, the church's people. But that assumes something on our parts as well, namely, that it is precisely Christ's taking responsibility for us which liberates us, ironically, to bear greater responsibility ourselves and to suffer, if need be, our own loss for the world.

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**Is There a Shift from Ecclesial Authority to Church Administration?  
(Conversely, Is the Current Protest Against That Shift a Confession Protest?)**

Summary: The growing objection to ecclesiastical bureaucracy is, at least implicitly, a confessional objection: as church authority is exercised more and more by administrators, that authority (so the objection goes) becomes not only more hierarchical but what for the church is worse, unevangelical and therefore no longer the church's authority at all.

This confessional objection I would concede. What I would not concede is that the situation is hopeless or even that the objection itself is basically negative. For if the current protests against church bureaucracy proceed from a concern for the gospel of Christ, then that is already an initial reassertion of the church's true and only authority.

**Part One: The Current Protest Against Church Bureaucracy**

Summary: Is the objection merely that church authority has passed to the hands of the administrators? If so, why should that be so strenuously opposed, assuming that the authority these administrators exercise is still that of the gospel? Or is the objection rather that the church's authority is itself being replaced by church administration, is being “bureaucratized,” and in that very process losing its distinctively churchly authority as gospel? This latter danger, the displacing of the authority of the gospel itself, the critics are at least intimating and sometimes are naming outright.

The assigned topic for this essay reads, “Is There a Shift from Ecclesial Authority to Church Administration?” That topic, though it is put cautiously as a question, reflects a growing restiveness among church people, certainly in North America. The bureaucratic organization of American denominations, particularly as the national and multinational levels, has been incurring widespread disfavor, even theological criticism, and at the operational level drastic cutbacks in staffing, funding and programs. Leave aside for a moment what all may account for this churchly protest—inflation alone is one cause, so is the current social trend toward localism—or whether church people, in protesting a bureaucracy they themselves only recently preferred, aren’t suddenly turning fickle and hypocritical (they are) or whether their current objections aren’t predominately ethical rather than confessional—maybe they are, predominantly.

That still leaves an important question, however. Isn’t there, in the way Christians seem to be taking particular offense at the bureaucratizing of their churches, the implication that for them as church there is something more at stake than there is for people generally under secular bureaucracies? Yes, I think that is an implication, and sometimes a quite explicit one, namely, that the very authority which distinguishes the church as Christian—really, as Christ’s—is here in question.

Supposed, if only for the sake of argument, that the current bureaucratic management of the churches really were tolerable on all other grounds (ethical, fiscal, aesthetic, etc.) or, in other language, that it were an *adiaphoron*. That may be hard to imagine, but it is with trying in order to heighten the point of our question. Our question then reads: Even if church bureaucracy were otherwise adiaphoral—theologically optional, discretionary, open to honest differences among Christians—does such bureaucracy, in the way it often functions nowadays, subvert the gospel and thus become objectionable on *that* ground? The broad impression, I gather, is that it does. My chief interest throughout this paper is in that broad impression which churches generally are reflecting, even more than I am interested in whether their impression is factually true or not. For the current protest against church bureaucracy, whether or not, that protest is always fair, does presuppose, I hope, an alternative conviction about the church’s true authority, the gospel. It is that evangelical presupposition behind the current protest which I would like charitably to reconstruct and to render explicit.

We have been speaking of the complaints which the churches have been raising against their bureaucratic administrations. What follows is a sampling from the recent literature. *The Christian Century*, America's leading religious weekly, is currently publishing a series of articles on "The Churches: Where From Here?" In each article, there have been six so far, a different writer reports what the prospects are for his or her denomination(s). Without prompting and with almost eerie unanimity, one article after the other has devoted major attention to a recurring problem in American denominational life today: the growing reaction against the denominations' bureaucratic governance and the urgent need for alternatives if these denominations are to sustain their Christian vitality. The reasons for which denominational bureaucracy is blamed as a problem may vary from article to article or, what may be more significant, the reasons often are simply assumed as self-evident, as if ecclesiastical bureaucracy were so obviously un-churchly that there is no further need to say why. But there is a need to say why, and that need is urgent enough for us to hear out these denominational reports at some length and with an especially careful ear for their theological implications.

Earl H. Brill, writing for the Episcopalians, speaks about "the wholesale dismantling of national staff and a vacuum in national leadership," but he records this "wholesale dismantling" without any apparent regret. He explains that the former "authoritarian style of leadership is being replaced by a more collaborative style," a "free-swinging style of conflict management." He warns, "Future church leaders would be well advised to take heed of this development, because they will have to live with it." "The new egalitarian, participatory character of church life does not encourage the growth of giant-sized church leaders." Instead Church institutions, especially at the national and international level, "can anticipate lean years, however effective they may be." "Some people are already claiming that the Episcopal Church is more a confederation of semiautonomous dioceses than a unitive national church, and this may become even more evident in future years." Notice, what makes this development toward semiautonomous dioceses so "evident," so insistent, is that it is demanded not only by the times but by the church, the former situation—a closed elite of decision-makers—no longer being viable ecclesiastically. Brill's explanation of this antibureaucratic "development" is not a theological explanation in so many words, but it comes close.

Similar accents appear in Janet H. Penfield's report on the Presbyterians and their recent worries, one of the most grievous of which has been their attempt at reorganizing their national operation along current business models, with poor success. Granted, some effort at re-structure—"what some refer to as 'de-structure'"—of the national church organization was needed. The former "structures were admittedly unwieldy and out of date." But then why the new complaints from the church at large about the reorganization? The reason really, apart from "a shortage of money at the national level," was "a distrust of national staffs and national programs."

See how Penfield speaks of church-people's "distrust," of their loss of "confidence," terms which could have theological significance. Inadequate as the old structures had been, the new "enchantment with business model forms of operating resulted in a new national church organization so complex and confusing hardly anyone could understand it." It was the church's "crisis of confidence" in its administrative staffs which "has given the *coup de grace* to enterprises like UPCUSA's *Trends*, ...support for church-related colleges, inner-city experimentation—the list is nearly endless. The PCUSA's national staff is said to be half as large as it was ten years ago." In short, "local confidence in the national machinery, already at a low ebb, declined still further." Is the implication that "business-model forms of operating," whether or not they are suitable for church *administration*, simply cannot evoke that unique "confidence" which church *authority* must evoke, called faith?

Among Southern Baptists, the USA's largest Protestant denomination, one of the most "pressing issues," according to E. Glenn Hinson, is that denomination's "adoption of the corporation model as a pattern for church life and decision-making." Such a corporate model "poses serious questions about means and ends"—"how far may both the churches and the denominational organization go before the means subvert the end?"—also "numerous questions regarding authority, "authority and the Spirit." For example: "Does the Spirit automatically approve whatever is found to work?" ("Southern Baptists have frenzied concern for efficiency.") "Or should they just drop the charade and admit that they are concerned chiefly with efficiency?"

Witness also, says Hinson, "the replacement of 'charismatic' leaders with 'executive' leaders." "In the corporate model, power is wielded by the heads of various companies and departments (in this case boards, commissions and agencies) and only nominally by the stockholders."

“Southern Baptists, of course, like to imagine that they operate still on a democratic model, in which the local congregations determine what happens.” But actually they “can do little besides rubber-stamp what their skilled force of executives, managers and other experts has decided after prolonged consideration.” It is these executives, really, who “decide who gets how much money..., and in this affluent corporation the power of the purse is a mighty one.” Hinson’s complaint, in others words, is not only against what he disparagingly calls “corporation ethics” but also against the corporation model of “authority,” which he sees eroding the authority of “the Spirit.” That, wouldn’t you say, is a theological statement?

The problem with the United Church of Christ would seem, at first glance, to be not the threat of a top-heavy national bureaucracy, as was the case in the preceding denominations, but here quite the opposite, an excessive “passion for autonomous churches” at the local level. In such a localist circumstance, “appeals to higher authority fall on deaf ears when the congregation is the highest authority.” That does seem to be what the reporter in this case, Robert G. Kemper, is worried about, a local autonomy which, if uncorrected, “degenerates into a self-serving libertarianism”—for instance, a phoney “participatory democracy in the form of management by objectives.” By contrast, the “corrective balance” which Kemper yearns for within the UCC is what he calls a “covenant relationship.”

However, what Kemper means by a covenant relationship is not at all a super-church institution of denominational staffs and bureaus. On the contrary, one of the things he likes about the covenant relationship is that “that we cannot institutionalize.” The “higher authority” he would appeal to is definitely not a denominational bureaucracy. In fact, as he observes, it is exactly the aversion to bureaucracy which aggravates the local congregations’ withdrawal from their larger covenants. “The local churches have a built-in antibureaucratic mentality. ‘Who works for whom?’ is the favorite war cry when bureaucratic salaries are disclosed—or, sometimes, not disclosed.” “...There are undercurrents of resentment about the ever-encroaching bigness of the institutions or organized society.” Kemper even hopes that the very “bureaucratization of life may force people to seek” instead the sort of fellowship he has in mind by the covenantal relationship. So here is still another objection to church bureaucratization: it incites church people, by reaction, to fragmentation and selfishness—in short, anti-church.

The American Baptist Churches—the “Northern Baptists” in distinction from the Southern Baptists, described earlier—are the most recent denomination to be featured in *The Christian Century*’s series and, so far, the most preoccupied of all with the question before this seminar. In fact, the article, by Paul M. Harrison, is entitled, “American Baptists: Bureaucratic and Democratic.” Harrison, too, as his predecessors in the series did, reports a “growing discontent which is gradually giving rise to a variety of calls for reorganization *at the local level* (emphasis his) partially to offset the state and national powers...” But isn’t that a strange way to speak of the Church of Christ, as “state and national *powers*?”—and, what is worse, as state and national powers which need to be “offset”?

Harrison speaks that way by design. In fact, he does not enjoy speaking about church organizations at all anymore, even though he is an expert in the field. “I dropped analysis of religious organizations years ago for moral reasons.” Instead, he explains—and evidently because his previous “analysis of religious organizations” drove him to that—now “I’m studying theological ethics.” His disappointment shows. “The carefully nurtured fiction that the locus of authority in the ABC resides in the 6,300 ‘autonomous’ congregations has become increasingly difficult to maintain.” “At present the American Baptists are the victims of the invisible gulf that exists between their own national and state bureaucracies and the individual congregations.”

Several Christian traditions represented in this seminar, notably Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox traditions and Lutheranism, have not yet been reported on in the *Century*’s series, “The Churches: Where From Here?” But in view of what the previous paragraphs have already betrayed about other Christian churches in my country, particularly about the threat which bureaucracy poses to authentic church authority, I would be surprised if the coming articles on the Roman and Orthodox and Lutheran communions did not expose a similar lament. For that matter these church bodies hardly need to wait for these articles to appear in order to discover the same complaints about their own church bureaucracies. In fact, in the following widely read blast by a Roman Catholic theologian he seems to be dismayed that the same bureaucracy could beset other church bodies as beset his own: “The diplomatic strategists and ecclesiastical politicians, the ecclesiastical bureaucrats and managers, the administrators, inquisitors and court theologians who conform to the system, are not to be found only in the Vatican, not even only in the Catholic Church.”



As for Lutheranism, specifically in America, the following recent analysis by one of its own theologians, Robert W. Jenson, so closely confirms the same critique which we encountered of other denominations, above, that the resemblance can scarcely be coincidental.

[Jenson writes,] “Misled by our terminology, we have generally supposed that questions of polity were not to be argued by theological considerations, but by considerations of ‘efficiency.’ The result has regularly been that Lutheran polity has merely imitated—usually about fifteen years behind—the sort of organization currently dominant in society.” “We have thereby merely accepted that bondage to the world’s example from which the gospel is supposed to free us.”

“In America,” Jenson continues, “we have imitated the ‘managerial’ methods of bureaucratized capitalism. A model more uncongenial to the work of the gospel is not conceivable.” To be specific, “our ‘bishops’ and ‘presidents,’ with their multitudinous staffs, exercise a model of authority opposite to that of pastoral episcopacy.” “If they at all find time to preach, teach, baptize, and preside at eucharist, these acts lie on the periphery of their job descriptions; and immersion in their concerns soon makes them pastorally incompetent in any case.” “At which point,” Jenson concludes, “The legitimacy of their authority is, by genuinely Lutheran standards, in grave doubt.”

There you have the current objection stated about as confessionally as can be: The bureaucratizing of church authority erodes that authority itself—which, for Jenson, is the authority of the gospel. It is interesting that Jenson should mount this criticism in the course of his commenting upon Article Ten of The Formula of Concord, one of the Lutheran confessional writings. However, it is not for that reason that I have called his critique confessional. At least that is not one of his main reasons. What the main reasons are for speaking of the current protest as confessional, we turn to next.

### **Part Two: The Sins of Church Bureaucracy Are the Sins of Us All**

Summary: The temptation may be to restrict the critique of ecclesiastical bureaucracy to church bureaucrats alone and to ignore how “we the people” have ourselves handed over our responsibility to others. On the other hand, to acknowledge—as writers on the subject also are

doing—that we are all implicated in this mass irresponsibility is itself an essential part of the current protest as a “confessional” protest.

As we now press the question, how might the protest against church bureaucracy be construed as confessional and therefore as a reassertion of the church’s real authority, we might well begin with an admission of common guilt. That, too, is one meaning of confessing—the confessing of sin—as it ought to be. But that penitential feature may easily be slighted. In the series of denominational reports which we have been citing, it was clear that the complaint against church administration is not only broad-based but also, in some of its expressions, embarrassingly severe and even personal. There is no point in pretending the severity is merely rhetorical. What we might do, though, is share the blame.

The more thoughtful critics, perhaps the more penitent ones, do not confine their criticism of ecclesiastical bureaucracy to the bureaucrats themselves. After all, these administrators have at least until recently been responding to a demand from within denominations as a whole. The confessional situation here is not so much a matter of we-versus-them as it was seen to be in the Formula of Concord. But even there the target audience of that Article Ten was not really “the enemies of the holy Gospel” but rather “the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, and especially ministers of the Word as the leaders of the community of God,” particularly those among them—the fence-straddlers and compromisers and temporizers—who hesitated to stand up and be counted. The point is not that there is no more need of the *damnamus* but rather that those who must speak it nowadays, are themselves included among those it is spoken against. That evidently is why some of the writers we quoted wrote in the first-person-plural. It may still be true, as Hinson said of the Christians in his denomination, that they are bureaucracy’s “victims,” yet that need not mean that they bear no responsibility for their own victimization.

“It is a perverse waste of time,” Harrison reminds us, “to blame the ‘bureaucrats’ for this state of affairs. ‘We the people’ have willingly or unwillingly handed over the reins of authority, power and responsibility to others.” (In a moment I shall return to that point: we have “handed over...(our) responsibility to others.”) “We have done this,” Harrison explains, “for a variety of reasons, including ignorance, indifference, hypercompetitiveness at the local level, and a

persistent romanticizing of the American version of the laissez-faire dream applied to religious organizations. “As for our bureaucrats, they have often achieved their purposes as well as conditions have permitted.” In fact, Kemper even allows that “the heroes of the United Church of Christ may be its bureaucrats.” For, considering the local churches’ “built-in antibureaucratic mentality,” “it is a wonder that anything at all gets done by the denomination!”

“On the other hand,” says Harrison, “that executives and bureaucrats often act in a self-serving manner and with mixed motives needs no further empirical proof. But we in the grass-roots communities and churches do not have to continue to give our national officers the responsibility for solving everything and then condemn them for solving so little.” That extending of the condemnation, the *damnamus*, to ourselves as well as (to “the entire community of God”) is in this democratic age of the church an essential component in making the protest against church bureaucracy a confessional protest—that is, an appeal beyond us all to Christ himself, whose authority it is “upon earth to forgive sin.”

### **Part Three: The Response to Bureaucratic “Secularism” As a Response of the Gospel**

Summary: The recurring accusation that ecclesiastical bureaucracy is “secular” can hardly mean a derogation of secularity as such, much less of secular authority as God’s own action in this *saeculum*. The epithet, “secular,” must rather be a reminder to the bureaucratic administration of the churches that secular is all it dare be, soteriological it dare not be. So construed, the antibureaucratic movement in the churches recalls us to that proper handing over of our responsibility to no one else but Christ, so that we in turn can ourselves respond in kind to the world and to one another—thus reasserting the church’s distinctive authority, the gospel.

Throughout the previous catalogue of testimonies, one refrain, at least, has so persisted that it demands special notice: church bureaucracy is too much like the world, too “secular” to handle the church’s special kind of authority. Jenson spoke of “bondage to the world’s example,” “the sort of organization currently dominant in society,” an imitating of “the ‘managerial’ methods of bureaucratized capitalism.” The other writers, too, had intimated this same criticism of bureaucracy as a secular model not really transferable to the church: “enchantment with business model forms of operating,” “the corporation model,” “the ever-encroaching bigness of the institutions of society,” “corporation ethics.” Harrison rues the fact that “the local churches and

denominations in this land are clearly analogous to their secular counterparts.” Whatever else it may be about church bureaucracy which renders it incompatible with church authority, the worst of its faults presumably is its secularism. But what does that mean? How does the epithet “secular” translate into a Christian pejorative, an expression of confessional indignation?

If the indignation is genuinely confessional, then what bureaucratic secularism is opposed *to* is the gospel itself. The conflict is essentially between two authorities or, even worse, between two kinds of authority. Exactly what it is that characterizes the one kind, the bureaucratic, as “secular” we have not yet established, except to say that in recent years it seems to have collided with the very different authority of the Christian gospel. As the Lutherans among our previous writers said, bureaucracy is “a mode of authority opposite to that of a pastoral episcopacy.” The Baptist writers with their commitment to autonomous congregations would contrast bureaucratic authority not with “pastoral episcopacy” but with the “locus of authority” in the local church. But all the writers, I believe, could converge at Jenson’s basic equation: the ultimate authority of the church, whether implemented through episcopates or congregations or presbyteries or covenantal relations—or bureaucratic administrations?—is the authority of the gospel. But the question is, *can* bureaucratic administration any longer serve as a proper vehicle for the authority of the gospel?

The telltale word is the word “serve.” Has church bureaucracy lost its capacity for being the gospel’s servant and become instead a rival authority? Is that perhaps what Kemper’s “antibureaucratic” Christians mean when they complain, “Who works for whom?” In other words, which Master does ecclesiastical bureaucracy actually serve? Oh, of course, those complaining church people, as sinners, may mean nothing more than that church bureaucrats should be working for *us* since we pay the bills. But as Christians in the Spirit they might simultaneously mean, however vaguely, that church bureaucracy should be working for the church’s authority, that is, the *gospel*—but does not. That would be a properly confessional statement. Something like that could well be at issue nowadays in branding church administration as “secular.” That would be a way of putting it in its rightful place as the gospel’s servant rather than its competitor.

But that still does not explain why such church administration is thought to be in competition. Wherein does it compete? Surely the gospel is not threatened by the mere fact of bureaucracy's secularity or even by its authority, both of which by themselves can be great goods. The writers whom we have been citing perceive that, too. On the one hand, they fault church bureaucracy for being worldly. On the other hand, there are other things going on in the world quite as worldly which they respect. For instance, they all recognize that there is now afoot in society a counter-movement to bureaucracy, a deep-seated reaction against it, and that that phenomenon too is profoundly secular. The writers themselves, speaking as Christians, accord to this secular antibureaucratic trend impressive authority. Brill counsels future Episcopalian leaders to adapt to it; Kemper hoped the UCC will capitalize on it.

Isn't that also an important component in the Christian confession, appreciating the authority of the secular? By which I mean not secular as opposed to sacred, as if secular authority were not also God's authority. It, too, is God's. But what kind of authority? Isn't it that authority by which God operates the present *saeculum*, God's old eon, that history of God's which God is already in the process of upstaging in the church and rendering obsolete by means of God's radical new authority there of Christ's gospel and sacraments? All the same, *outside* the church God's secular authority is still the latest, most progressive thing God has going. Secular authority is God-being-fair. Granted, none of us can stand that much fairness, getting what we have coming to us. That is why the gospel, by contrast, is not a matter of fairness but of God's forgiveness. Moreover, God's secular authority is sooner or later always enforceable; God's gospel never is. But then isn't that why it takes the sheer winsomeness of the gospel's mercy, not some external enforcement, to get us to accept God's secular fairness, killing though that is, and in fact to affirm it—as “The dear holy cross?”

Therefore, to call ecclesiastical bureaucracy “secular,” if that implies a rebuke, can hardly be a rebuke of its secular authority as such. No, here that epithet, “secular,” must rather be a Christian way of restraining bureaucracy's ambitions to be *more* than secular. It is a way of reminding bureaucratic management especially in the church that secular is all it is, soteriological it is not. It is like the evangelists' reminder to their readers that John the Baptizer was a “prophet”: not that being a prophet was something paltry but rather that a prophet is still not Messiah. The danger evidently has been that modern church administration, all the more because it enjoys such

an authoritative precedent in corporate business, might suppose it has something to add to the church's inglorious kind of authority. Forgetting that in order for the church to be whole the one gospel-and-sacraments of Christ is authority "enough" (*satis*), we may imagine instead that that evangelical authority by itself is too vulnerable and inefficient and unrealistic and so set about to augment and reinforce it with bureaucratic sanctions and guarantees.

But such nervous efforts to improve upon the church's gospel-and-sacraments, such frenzied safeguards to ensure the church's new and risky authority by recourse to the tried and familiar authorities of the old *saeculum*—such efforts are referred to in the Formula of Concord's Article Ten not merely as "secular" but as "idolatry." Still, isn't the function of both epithets essentially the same? That is, what otherwise might have been quite acceptable or at least adiaphoral as media for the gospel—whether circumcision or celibacy or bureaucratic administration—have instead usurped what FC-10 calls the status of the absolutely "necessary." Practices which ordinarily might have been negotiable are now claimed as preconditions *necessary* for keeping the church together and, what comes to the same thing, "necessary for righteousness and salvation."

However, to augment the gospel by such other, non-gospel "necessities," as Paul told the Galatians, subverts the very "truth of the gospel." Gospel-plus is, alas, "another gospel" and really is no gospel at all. Next thing you know, these gospel-plus necessities will have to be enforced—whether "by coercion or by surreptitious methods," whether "by force or by chicanery"—thereby subjecting the church all over "again to a yoke of slavery."

The worst hazard of all in idolatrizing such adiaphora as church bureaucracy is that that encourages the disavowal of Christ. And we may read that phrase, the disavowal of Christ, both as objective genitive and as subjective genitive, both as our disavowing of him and his disavowing of us. "For everyone who acknowledges me before human beings," he assures us, "I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before human beings, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Mt. 10:32, 33) It is that two-edged promise from the Synoptics which haunts FC-10 and which may, indirectly and implicitly, be inspiring the current reaction of church people against the bureaucratizing of the gospel.

Jesus' message in this passage has to do with what earlier we referred to as "responsibility." What he here claims, as he does elsewhere in the gospels, is not only that he enjoys privileged status with God, being entitled to call God "Father." What is more, he offers to take full responsibility for us before this God. That, by every standard in God's secular authority, is a preposterous boast and contrary to all that is ordinarily right and fair. For one person to arrogate to himself the ultimate responsibility which others must bear for themselves would seem, to all appearances, to encourage in them the worst kind of irresponsibility. And that impression does indeed scandalize many a conscientious person, also within the church, who has to deal with this Christ and with his movement. The temptation is for us, particularly those among us in positions of religious leadership, to intervene and nervously to assume to ourselves those responsibilities which we fear church people are sure to neglect or to bungle. In doing so, not only do we infantilize these Christians and pauperize them as our dependents. What is worse, we then preempt the responsibility—taking what Christ insists is his prerogative alone. In that event, if we insist upon interfering in his responsibility-bearing so as to ensure ourselves that the responsibilities really will be met, then—we have his word for it—he will relieve himself of responsibility for us altogether and leave us to make our own *responsum* to God—as if we ever could.

Is that the danger which the churches are sensing in the bureaucratizing of church authority, namely, that that tends to relieve the non-professionals among them, the amateur Christians, of their own responsibility, the worst part of which is that Christ thereby is himself competed with and finally obviated? If it is that danger which the people of God, ever so obscurely and often crudely, are objecting to, then they do have a point. And the point is genuinely a confessional one. But their confessional protest is then not only a negation. It is itself an at least incipient reaffirming and reasserting of that very church authority, the authority of the gospel of Christ, which they sense to be at issue. It is our vocation as theologians, I believe, to at least read such an interpretation of their protest back to them and thus give them the opportunity to affirm or deny whether that in fact is what they mean to be saying and, more than that, to accord them the respect as the people of Christ who confess for themselves that prior *confessio* which he makes in their behalf.