

Confessional Movements and Formula of Concord Article 10

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Question: When is the church a “confessional movement”? Answer: whenever it has to challenge secular authority, especially its own, in order to liberate its one unique authority, the Gospel and sacraments, which for the church is authority “enough”.

Seven Propositions

I.

Why the question? Two reasons: one churchly, the other secular.

A. In today's church we often decide for and against our confessional movements so automatically that we forget how momentous our decision is, namely, how these movements may jeopardize the church's very unity for the sake of that one thing which keeps it the church at all, the integrity of the Gospel. We tend to under-rate that churchly dilemma.

B. Because these movements are church movements, we often underestimate the challenge they imply to secular power as well, especially secular power in the church, namely, that when such power presumes to do what only the Gospel can, it undermines its own authority even in areas where it is otherwise competent. We tend to minimize that challenge to the secular.

C. Those modern confessional movements which have most deeply influenced our own churches all reflect this double-edged

message to the church and to secular society, although their message on both fronts has always also been garbled. Hence the need for re- asking what a confessional movement is.

1. Take those Lutheran and Reformed movements in 19th century Europe and America which are usually called “confessional.” They refused to be coerced into sub- Gospel commitments by secular authorities. (The term “secular” is mine, not necessarily theirs, by which I mean authority that is enforceable, coercive, legal.) The secular authorities they opposed in the name of the Gospel may have been, as in this country, merely the legal officials of their own denominations – with the Princeton Presbyterians, for instance, their General Assembly – or, as in Europe, officials of the state as well as of the church – for instance, the Venerable Company of the Canton of Geneva, of the king as summus episopus of the Prussian Union, or the Conventicle Law of the state church of Norway.

But would those confessional movements have objected if what the secular authorities enforced had been the genuine Gospel, or if the confessional movements themselves had gained control of secular authority, denominational or governmental – which eventually they almost all did in one form or another? The record is ambiguous. One movement, for example, which exiled itself from the Prussian Union, namely, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, did for a long time try to keep its two kinds of authority distinct, evangelical and parliamentary: “All matters of doctrine and conscience are to be decided only by the Word of God, all other matters . . . by majority vote.” But that distinction the synod is now obliterating along with its whole confessional movement.

2. The most prestigious confessional movement of our time and one with which all of christendom practically identifies was “The Confessing Church” (at first called the “confessional”

church) in National Socialist Germany. It arose – as the Missouri Synod did, originally within the Prussian church – as a combined Lutheran and Reformed protest against the pro-Nazi, state-favored “German Christians.” The latter have by now been mercifully outlived. But now that the common oppressor has been removed, it becomes increasingly clear what a mixed bag even those confessors were confessionally, and how internally discordant – particularly over the place of secular authority in the church. Their own differences complicate the confessional movements which have followed them.

3. Last July the Sixth General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation resolved emphatically against Apartheid and did so on explicitly confessional grounds. It declared “that the situation in southern Africa constitutes a status confessionis. This means that . . . the churches would publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system.” But notice why: “on the basis of faith and in order to manifest the unity of the church.” There is no question that the “faith”, the one Gospel-and-sacraments, is still the only “basis” needed for “the unity of the church” since “under normal circumstances Christians may have different opinions in political questions” and still be one church. Yet there come times when “political and social systems might become perverted and oppressive” to the point where what they violate is that very “faith”, the one “basis” of “the unity of the church.” For the church in such circumstances to be apathetic, William Lazareth told the Assembly, is not only “ethical disobedience” but “ultimately theological heresy.” Making that latter point clear, the confessional point, demanded the Assembly’s most strenuous efforts. Bishop Manas Buthelezi made the point this way: “Those who deliberately shun worshiping together cannot legitimately claim that they belong to one church.”

Confessionally the case is classic, and prone of course to all

the classic temptations.

The sorest temptation, no doubt, will be to shift the battle against Apartheid away from confessional grounds to primarily legal-ethical grounds, if only because these are so much more provable and enforceable. With something so obviously unjust as Apartheid, that will be the aspect of it, its sheer sinfulness, which will be most tempting to capitalize on. And all the appropriate means for combating such sin (economic pressure, public opinion, governmental influence) which are available to an organization as secularly powerful as the LWF and which it has no choice but to employ – these could easily become its major preoccupation, pitting it against the secular tyrannies on their own terms. But if that were all the LWF did against apartheid, or even almost all, its present confessional message would be muffed. The message would go out instead that the church must not be for sinners after all, at least not for very sinful sinners, and that it does indeed have some other basis for including the people it does than the one Gospel-and-sacraments. To keep testifying that Apartheid so strikes at the Gospel itself that that authority above all is the one to be invoked against it – that will take some doing by us all.

4. Inside the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, where legalism has effectively become synodical policy, an opposing movement has raised its voice. Members of this movement, too, refer to it as a “confessional movement,” deliberately invoking thereby a pledge once made by the Missouri Synod: “The Lutheran Church is not merely one denomination among others but is a confessional movement within the whole Body of Christ.” This sentence is from the former Missouri’s Mission Affirmations, whose chief author was Martin Kretzmann, then active in LWF mission offices. The sentence here quoted was suggested at the time (1965) by William Danker, another of Missouri’s world- mission experts. He in turn had been inspired by a recent article in The Christian Century,

“Lutheranism, Denomination or Confessional Movement?” by Missourian-at-Yale, Jaroslav Pelikan.

The present confessional movement arising out of that synod has taken form in such counter-organizations, all of them closely collaborative, as ELIM, Seminex, Partners In Mission and now, outside the Synod, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. When did this recent phase of the movement become strictly a confessional one, as least according to the definition in this paper? Not when Missouri faculty came under fire for their (very conservative) use of the historical-critical method or for their “Gospel Reductionism” – that might have been accommodated mutually – but rather when they and their students and thousands of others from a wide theological spectrum within the Synod refused their authorities the right to impose any other criterion for faithful ministry than the one Gospel-and-sacraments, which (according to the Augsburg Confession) is “enough” and anything more than which is less. Moreover, at least in my judgment, it was that confessional challenge to synodical authority more than any other theological differences which evoked from officials the wave of purges and other reprisals. But those reprisals, which were always subsequent, were not what made the movement confessional, though they did help.

This movement, too, suffers the characteristic ambiguities, necessitating a reminder of what a confessional movement is. For example, there is in the movement a constant undertow toward minimizing its confessional purpose in favor of moral protest. In view of the injustices that impulse can hardly be faulted. But that also reverses the movement’s unique priorities and could soon secularize it out of existence as church. Even the movement’s official newspaper, Missouri In Perspective, has on occasion made that slip.

Secondly, members of the movement sometimes complain they are “sick of fighting,” which – if that is truly what they were doing all along, fighting – is understandably sickening. Thirdly, others want to quit and “get back to the church’s real mission,” implying that that is separable from the church as confessing. All three examples characterize people who have left the Missouri synod as well as those who have not but who, in both cases, find their confessional movement “confusing” and therefore avoidable.

5. I have confined myself here to confessional movements which have publicly been described by that nomenclature. Not for a moment would I want to suggest, though, that similar movements are not occurring elsewhere in the Christian church with or without the designation “confessional”. I think, for instance, of movements afoot (at least as significant as those I have mentioned) inside the Roman Catholic church – from Vatican II to Cardinal LeFevre to last year’s Call To Action Conference in Detroit and NCCB’s response to it – or inside The Anglican Communion – its controversy over ordaining women being, I gather, penultimate to a deeper issue of authority – or inside the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and so on, to name only a few examples from within single denominations. There have been confessional overtones also in trans- denominational movements such as those described recently by the Strasbourg Institute for Ecumenical Research: the “charismatic”, the “action-centered” and the “evangelical” movements. As a case in point consider this country’s Battle for the Bible controversy in which both sides have identified, for instance, with their counterparts in the Missouri Synod. The whole vast ecumenical movement, moreover, sometimes precisely when it has subordinated particularist “confessions” has shown signs of being also a confessional movement. Perhaps the subtlest sort of confessional movement appears, though very elusively, in such apparently

secular movements as the American civil rights movement or in something like Amnesty International, not identifiable as such with the Christian church and yet not conceivable without it either.

But this amorphous conglomeration of movements only reemphasizes the need for basic clarity on what a confessional movement is. Surely it is not every Christian movement which is out to reform church and society or even which, in doing so, appeals to Christian standards. But neither, so far as I can tell, could a confessional movement not be such a movement as well. It must by its very nature involve a protest against abuses of authority, which, whatever else they are, are always also immoral. But the grounds on which a confessional movement ultimately protests are something else besides, something uniquely Christian, the very Gospel without which the church cannot – though secular society well might – operate. In fact, in the discussion which follows, based as it is in the so-called adiaphoristic controversy of sixteenth century German Lutheranism, the point will be made that the church may at times need to resist its secular authorities even if their impositions are not otherwise wrong so long as these would force the church to misrepresent its own Gospel and sacraments. But saying that only thickens the plot.

It goes without saying that in such cases the only weapon the church has for resisting, as church, is this one Gospel-and-sacraments itself, that being “enough.” But then, come to think of it, hasn’t that been one of the central dynamics of some of those other movements, too, which are usually described – under-described – as being merely “non-violent”? For instance, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did indeed speak of “the way of non-violent resistance,” tempting everyone to concentrate attention upon his adjective “non-violent” and to forget his noun, “the way.” But King knew better than most of us what Paul in I Corinthians means by “the more excellent way” and what John’s

Gospel means when it personifies “The Way” as Jesus our Lord. But then “the way” becomes something considerably more than merely non-violent. Mightn’t it even be confessional?

Just as ambiguous is the question of the rightness or wrongness of confessional movements. Not one of those to which I have alluded either was or pretended to be infallible. (Neither, I suppose, have they all been as humble as we might wish them to be, issuing at least some confession of repentance as well as of faith – the way the Confessing Church attempted to do in its October 1945 Stuttgart declaration of guilt.) But that very feature of confessional movements – “who are they to be pointing the finger!” – may be the one thing more than anything else which accounts for their ambiguity. Namely, people who themselves are demonstrable sinners, and are that precisely in the sinful way they criticize, must nevertheless bear the overwhelming burden – more overwhelming even than any loss of “goods, fame, child and wife” – of being for once in their lifetimes embarrassedly, mortifyingly right. My own observation is that most of us, and most of us for reasons of conscientious humility, find exactly that burden too crushing to shoulder: that known wrong-doers should be made a laughing-stock by having to stand up for what is absolutely right. But then doesn’t it become just that much more urgent to recall whose rightness it is they are called to represent, perhaps all the more impressively by contrast with their own ridiculous wrong?

So the question, when is the church a confessional movement, is anything but gratuitous, touching as it does issues of both churchly and secular authority where these are commonly underplayed.

II.

Movements are confessional partly because they identify with the church's historic "confessions" – as in this paper with Article X of the Formula of Concord – or more accurately identify with those historic confessors themselves. But this is done not so much for reasons of authority – i.e., for self-legitimation – as to keep on the witness-stand (in statu confessionis) before this world (saeculum) a common testimony in Gospel and sacraments, one catholic unison (concordia) of the church on trial.

A. How the confessional movements previously referred to identified with historic creeds and confessions.

B. How this identification with past authorities can easily degenerate into distancing "them" into a norm and "us" into the normed (whether to their credit or discredit) rather than bind them and us together into a common catholic "we".

C. However, we do want to use FC-10 in this paper as normative in the following way: its theological self-awareness of what goes on in a confessional situation provides a paradigm for similar situations which follow it and, at the same time provide us with a host of witnesses with whom, at our peril, we may side.

D. Motifs in FC-10 which accent the metaphor of the church as witnesses on trial together: "judge", "adversaries," "testimonies," "witness," "concordia," "dissonantia," etc.

III.

A "case of confession" (unlike, e.g., baptismal creeds or evangelistic testimonials) typically occurs in a situation of oppression, i.e., when subordinates are being pressured by superiors and therefore, as embattled defendants, are on trial.

IV.

However, confessional movements are directed not only against their more obvious adversaries", their secular oppressors, (in FC-10 the papal and imperial position) but at least as much and more immediately toward their fellow victims (Phillipist Lutherans) who are tempted to comply with the oppressor and thus compromise their witness.

V.

That there are such things as *adiaphora* – that is, otherwise neutral issues which do not require taking a stand – is important for Christian freedom, indeed for the very satis est of the church's authority. But the special vocation of a confessional movement, ironically, is to demonstrate that not even *adiaphora* are immune to becoming for the church matters of life and death, the very battleground for what is satis, the one Gospel-and-sacraments. In such a "time of confession" *adiaphora* cease to be *adiaphora* at all and become inseparable from the Gospel and sacraments. What necessitates this reminder is that other Christians who fear to stand up and be counted may cling to such *adiaphora* as alibis for their silence, having to deny historic reality to do so.

A. Perhaps most confessional situations do not involve *adiaphora* at all but rather such abuses of authority as are clearly forbidden by God, that is, as being contrary to his Gospel- and-sacraments.

B. But one thing confessional movements had better make quite clear is that they do affirm that there truly are such things as *adiaphora*, and why there must be. For confessional movements either are the church's satis-seekers or, if not, are frauds.

C. *Adiaphora* as being "neither commanded nor forbidden by the

Word of God” pose a hermeneutical problem. Here “the Word of God” cannot mean Scripture as such. (Three examples: circumcision, sabbath, women’s head-coverings.) Adiaphora, even though they may well have been commanded by God in the Scriptures, are still “precepts of men.” What does seem to be meant by “commanded by God” are those “ceremonies” which God has commanded through his Son, Jesus the Christ, as essential for saving sinners: Gospel and sacraments. Anything else (even in Scripture) is, soteriologically, an adiaphoron.

D. What finally is the basis upon which such ordinarily neutral matters cease to be neutral and instead come to implicate the very Gospel and sacraments. Test case: Paul’s stand on circumcision (Acts and Galatians).

VI.

The issue is one of authority: secular authority – that is, the sort of enforceable authority which characterizes and must characterize this present saeculum – usurps the unique function of that which for the church is satis and, in doing so, needs to be testified against both in words and in actions at all costs by all Christians, especially their leaders.

VII.

What finally makes such movements confessional – that is, what provides their sufficient basis – is the reminder of who their Judge-behind-the-judges ultimately is, and who their own Confessor is before that Judge.

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