

# OUR THEOLOGICAL SHAPE FIVE YEARS LATER OR A NEW MOVEMENT AND A WORD FOR IT

[Address, June 28, 1979]

## Part One. A New Movement....

1. "Our" confessional movement is now, five years later, phasing out.
2. That declining confessional movement, however, may just be reappearing as part of a larger Christian movement whose emphasis is local, anti-bureaucratic, and ecumenical.
3. This anti-bureaucratic, grass-roots ecumenism seems to be attracting in their localities not only AELC moderates but also LC-MS moderates, and both of these with one another (despite the break between their denominations) as well as with other Lutherans and other Christians in their area.
4. This dispersed, decentralized ecumenism might well be the next movement which those Lutherans who are experienced confessors can now help to articulate confessionally by giving it the right words, the liberating Word.
5. Any honest "Call to Lutheran Union" will have to include not only those Lutherans whose denominations consent but also those who, from whatever Lutheran denomination, are already confessing together locally through pan-Lutheran praxis and who for just that common confessing need a world Lutheranism which is less a denomination than a confessional movement.

6. For re-Wording this new movement in church praxis into a confessional movement even such holdover institutions from a previous confessional movement as AELC and Christ Seminary–Seminex (precisely as a “Seminex”) still have much to contribute—as Word-finders.

## **Part Two. ....And a Word for It**

7. Our theological vocation then is to care about this current movement in church praxis – anti-bureaucratic, regional ecumenical – and to try so to re-Word it as to make it an internationally confessional movement, yet not in order to polarize Christians against Christians – for instance, local congregations against denominational management – but precisely to avert that conflict and transpose it instead into Gospel versus “principalities and powers.”

8. That a confessional movement does move against something, that it is by definition a clash of authorities should not be minimized, but the clash is “confessional” only if it is the church’s unique authority from Christ – his one Gospel-and-sacraments – which is being subordinated.

a. A confessional movement arises within and against a situation of church oppression,

(1.) Where the oppressor is not merely other persons, not “flesh and blood but principalities and powers”, some superior secular authority, usually the secular authority of the church itself, and

(2.) Where the victim of oppression is not only other Christians but the very Gospel of Christ.

b. The way the Gospel in such circumstances is oppressed is that it is being augmented, reinforced, improved upon –

“safeguarded” –with additional conditions and expectations which Christ himself never imposed.

(1.) With the double result that Christ’s distinctive authority, now yoked with alien “secular” authorities, becomes instead a tool for enslavement rather than liberation, and

(2.) That we come to depend on additional mediators besides Christ, other systems to relieve us of our responsibilities, thus diminishing the need of his cross.

9.If such an upstaging of the Gospel does in fact occur, then of course Christians must take a stand together and publicly, if need be refusing submission to their own ecclesiastical authorities, and they must then invoke that other, strange and vulnerable authority of Christ, whose only clout within this age is the inherent winsomeness of his one Gospel–and–sacraments but who also, beyond this age, is the only one to confess us the church before his Father.

10. One of the favorite epithets in the current movement against denominational bureaucracy – almost as favorite as the epithet “bureaucracy” – is “secularism”. That misleading word will have to be re- Worded so as to insure Christian respect and care for this present age (saeculum) which, however “old” and aging it is, is still very much God’s and therefore sacred.

11. This movement which calls for re-Wording is driven by powerful ethical demands, more demanding probably than any localists or anyone else could ever live up to, but even its ethical concern is not enough to make this movement a confessional one.

12. A secular system like bureaucratic organization becomes not just ethically unfair but actually subversive of Christ’s authority in Gospel–and–sacraments when that bureaucratic system

becomes for the church what the Lutheran confessors call a “necessity” – as necessary as if commanded by Christ, thus reversing his liberation.

13. Moreover, “bureaucracy” is re-Wordable as a confessional antagonist when it becomes so “necessary” that Christians depend upon it to relieve them of responsibility which only Jesus the Christ, by his cross, can bear for them.

14. What finally would constitute this grass-roots movement in current church praxis as a confessional movement is our trusting that as we in the church confess Christ we are confessed by him, and are enabled by that encouragement alone to shoulder the huge local and ecumenical responsibilities we now are inviting.

Robert W. Bertram

28 June 1979

[expanded version follows]

# **OUR THEOLOGICAL SHAPE FIVE YEARS LATER OR A NEW MOVEMENT AND A WORD FOR IT**

## **Part One. A New Movement....**

1. “Our” confessional movement is now, five years later, phasing out.

The confessional movement to which I am referring is that movement which a few years ago organized within the Missouri Synod and against it, as a choice of last resort between the authority of the Gospel of Christ and the contrary authority of the synod. Meanwhile, however, that movement has scattered beyond the synod, although significant remnants still remain there. By now the movement has lost its confessional target, its momentum, its leadership, and its cohesion as a unitary force. Its offshoot body, the AELC, particularly in its readiness to die denominationally for the cause of greater confessional union, and Christ Seminary – Seminex, once the cruciform paradigm of the movement's confession, are today that confessional movement's two most visible survivors. Even their survival is in doubt, not as institutions – institutionally they could well survive indefinitely – but as witnesses which are any longer needed by a movement now in obvious decline.

2. That declining confessional movement, however, may just be reappearing as part of a larger Christian movement whose emphasis is local, anti-bureaucratic, and ecumenical.

Those doughty ELIM and AELC confessors, more and more isolated from their earlier movement are re-emerging here and there in their far-flung diaspora, scattered throughout a thousand localities but now in another, much larger grass-roots movement. This Christian movement is insistently local and regional. Although local, it is nevertheless trans-synodical and even trans-denominational. Trans-denominational, yes, and frequently anti-denominational. I am thinking of those mushrooming cooperatives all across the land among local Christian folk from different synods and denominations who are discovering new things in common.

Negatively, they share a common disillusionment with their

respective denominations' bureaucracy, as they call it. Their grievance is not against denomination as Christian identity, as a confessional fellowship for pacing one another in The Faith. Rather they are weary of their denominations' managerial authority structures, upon which they had allowed themselves to become excessively dependent. They may not be separating from their denominations, if only because they refuse any longer to concede denominational affiliation – either their present one or a new one – that much importance. But they are definitely neutralizing their denominations' local jurisdiction.

At the same time these hometown Christians are finding it necessary to search together – and this is their common affirmative – for less bureaucratic and more evangelical ways of resuming their mission to the world as their own firsthand responsibility but, all the moreso, pan-Lutheranly and pan-Christianly. Interference (if any) from denominational headquarters is less and less intimidating to the locals as they draw trans-denominational encouragement from one another. In many cases the denominations' headquarters staffs, now reduced in numbers and power, are adapting to new models of servanthood, with some of the staffers switching to free-lance assignments as consult-ants to congregations and regions, whither the action seems to be shifting.

3. This anti-bureaucratic, grass-roots ecumenism seems to be attracting in their localities not only AELC moderates but also LC-MS moderates, and both of these with one another (despite the break between their denominations) as well as with other Lutherans and other Christians in their area.

In fact, in some local cooperatives it is the moderates from Missouri who are most aggressive ecumenically, perhaps because they are the most likely to be excluded by their own

denomination and so may be compensating for their loneliness. They may even be criticized for that (as they are in one city) by their local colleagues in the AELC on the grounds that Missourians are not really entitled to such ecumenical liberties unless they first separate from Missouri. All of this to the dismay of the other Lutherans in town. But that sort of situation, I believe, is more and more exceptional. As AELC and LC-MS moderates outgrow their initial feelings of mutual abandonment, they seem to be rediscovering one another, though not through some revival of their old confessional movement but in new pan-Lutheran (at least) community efforts which are bigger than both of them.

4. This dispersed, decentralized ecumenism might well be the next movement which those Lutherans who are experienced confessors can now help to articulate confessionally by giving it the right words, the liberating Word.

The sort of grass-roots Christian movement which I have been describing can all too easily be dismissed as not being particularly Christian at all but merely one more symptom of these restless times, a rather nasty symptom at that. Those critics who prefer to believe that – and they are not all denominational officials – can explain away this whole churchly phenomenon as being nothing more than the same old populist, anti-authority, local self-centeredness which is afflicting our society as a whole. The worst thing about such a put-down is not only that it is half true, unfortunately, but that as a self-fulfilling prophecy it can exaggerate that cynical diagnosis into becoming true altogether.

Eventually church people themselves become resigned to the front-office's diagnosis of them, namely, that all they must be doing after all is grasping after their own selfish, parochial interests. Once we have been led to believe the

worst about ourselves, it is easy enough to live up to that.

What is needed rather is to test this new movement “whether it be of God.” And we begin not by hoping it falls on its face but by giving it the benefit of the doubt – by ascribing to it the right words from the Word. For example, when local Christians are indignant about what they call church “bureaucracy” or the “secularism” of church administration, might their indignation be saying something more than their own words literally say, something more Christian? Might it be that they see the church’s uniquely Christlike authority of Gospel–and–sacraments being upstaged, and for that they will not stand? Even if it had never occurred to them to be so theological – I mean, so explicitly Christian –we do, by re-Wording their protest for them, remind them of their Christian option. Whether they in turn opt for that re-Wording and affirm it as true must then become their own responsibility. But that option does take them seriously as Christian confessors in their own right.

Does this proposal – namely, to re-Word our current praxis so as to transform it into Christian confessing – resemble current “theologies of liberation”? I would be honored if it does, especially in this one important respect. This praxis-Wording function of theology is stated by Gustavo Gutierrez about as succinctly as can be: “...a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word.” (ATOL, 13) As he hastens to add, “This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.” (16) Although Gutierrez calls this “a new way to do theology” (16), he knows and says what ancient Christian precedent it has in biblical prophets, in Augustine’s City of God – and, I might add, in such Lutheran symbolical writings as the Augsburg Confession and its sequels. Recall, for instance, how Article X of the



Formula of Concord says there are circumstances (“times for confessing”) when the way for Christians to confess doctrine is precisely by their praxis, “not only by words but also by their deeds and actions, ....according to the Word of God.” (SD, 10) That praxis-wording “shape of our theology”, even five years later, need not have changed. What has changed, perhaps mercifully, is the particular churchly praxis in which such a theology might still take shape.

5. Any honest “Call to Lutheran Union” will have to include not only those Lutherans whose denominations consent but also those who, from whatever Lutheran denomination, are already confessing together locally through pan-Lutheran praxis and who for just that common confessing need a world Lutheranism which is less a denomination than a confessional movement.

Suppose that in response to “The Call to Lutheran Union” issued by my spunky little denomination, AELC, all that happened would be our merging with – perhaps more accurately, our disappearing into – LCA, and that ALC would abstain. If so, that denominational rearrangement would hardly reflect local Lutheran confessional realities. For although in that case ALC as a denomination would hold back, ALC congregations would surely not on that account suffer any loss of unity at the hands of fellow-Lutherans in their home communities. If they would, what a pity: to still make Lutheran union so depend upon alliances between denominations that it would undercut really confessional unity back home where it most counts. But more likely, in face of such a denominational reshuffle –AELC-LCA merger with ALC abstaining – the hometown Lutherans would continue in their present unity quite undisturbed, maybe militantly undisturbed.

Or suppose that ALC would join the union after all but that the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod of course would not.

Would it then follow that all those moderate Missouri congregations which are already making common confessional cause with other local Lutherans would suddenly be ineligible for this new union in their region? Would they, in order to stay in confessional partnership with their fellow Lutherans there, first have to get their congregations to disaffiliate with their denomination, the Missouri Synod? That would indeed be the implication if the new Lutheran union intended merely to replace present Lutheran denominations with some alternative denominational structure.

But that only perpetuates denominational membership, rather than common confessional praxis, as the basis of Lutheran unity. To demand of ecumenical Missourians that they first separate from Missouri is like demanding of present-day blacks in Atlanta that they must now choose between the Confederacy and the Union. Not that you may not succeed in getting whole black precincts to make that choice, and in splitting them over the issue. What you would also do, alas, is turn back the clock to an issue whose time has passed, thereby evading more burning issues at hand.

The movement I am describing in current church praxis – a praxis which is local, anti-bureaucratic, ecumenical – is a movement away from denominationalism, in some respects against denominationalism. The way to re-Word that movement is not to force it back into some denominational reorganization but to capitalize on it for what it well might be, in its very anti-denominationalism a whole new confessional movement.

6. For re-Worded this new movement in church praxis into a confessional movement even such holdover institutions from a previous confessional movement as AELC and Christ Seminary–Seminex (precisely as a “Seminex”) still have much to contribute—as Word-finders.

In mentioning AELC and Seminex I am not suggesting that for the coming confessional movement they provide organizational models. If that had been the question I probably would have chosen instead some specimen, say, like the Lutheran World Federation, and then only to ask: By what organizational miracle can such a huge operation continue to lodge all real churchly authority not in itself but (as it should) in its member churches yet at the same time succeed, as it did at its last assembly in Dar Es Salaam, in taking a united stand against apartheid not only on ethical grounds but on confessional ones – in statu confessionis? No, my reference to AELC rather is to the promise it shows as a group of high morale, go-for-broke Christians who are prepared for a denominational self-destruct in the interest of greater confessional union. I take this to mean not so much AELC's self-extinction as its replacing denominational paternalism wherever that still prevails, and doing so with a confessional Word. The presidents/bishops of AELC synods are already, by their pastoral style, signs of hope.

The same goes for Seminex insofar as it can still swing as a seminary in exile. By that I mean a seminary which does not insist upon a permanent home (for instance, denominational guarantees) but rather can keep on moving wherever its respective confessional movements are moving, to help verbalize them and their confessors with the fitting Word. I mean a "have-Word-will-travel" seminary which, even if it never moves from the same old building, can risk identifying with those uncertain shifts in church praxis which always need re-Wording to make them Christ's confession. Oh, I know that, according to some well-meaning but mistaken folks, the only "home" which Seminex was ever in exile from was "801 DeMun" or the Missouri Synod and, since that dubious home is gone, Seminex has to stop thinking of itself as exiled. What a dull,

reactionary view of Christian exile that is! By contrast, what Seminex has been delighted to rediscover is that the whole church of Christ our Lord is yet in exile, and that the home from which it is exiled is a home to which it has never yet been – a home up ahead, not behind. So who would want to settle for any home less than that and halt the homeward movement prematurely!

A recent communiqué from the World Council of Churches brought word that in Korea, where hundreds of Presbyterian professors and students have had their theological teaching and education stopped by that country's dictatorship, they have now defied their oppressors and regrouped under the cross as a seminary in exile – or, as they call it, the "Korean Seminex." What a profoundly humbling honor that is for this Seminex! What an incentive to get on with what Richard Neuhaus has called the "time toward home" – especially when there is today a whole new movement moving out and waiting to be boarded, and Worded!

## **Part Two. ....And a Word for It**

7. Our theological vocation then is to care about this current movement in church praxis – anti-bureaucratic, regional, ecumenical – and to try so to re-Word it as to make it an internationally confessional movement, yet not in order to polarize Christians against Christians – for instance, local congregations against denominational management – but precisely to avert that conflict and transpose it instead into Gospel versus "principalities and powers."

8. That a confessional movement does move against something, that it is by definition a clash of authorities should not be minimized, but the clash is "confessional" only if it is the church's unique authority from Christ – his one Gospel-and-sacraments – which is being subordinated.

a. A confessional movement arises within and against a situation of church oppression,

(1.) Where the oppressor is not merely other persons, not "flesh and blood but principalities and powers", some superior secular authority, usually the secular authority of the church itself, and

(2.) Where the victim of oppression is not only other Christians but the very Gospel of Christ.

b. The way the Gospel in such circumstances is oppressed is that it is being augmented, reinforced, improved upon – "safeguarded" –with additional conditions and expectations which Christ himself never imposed,

(1.)With the double result that Christ's distinctive authority, now yoked with alien "secular" authorities, becomes instead a tool for enslavement rather than liberation, and

(2.) That we come to depend on additional mediators besides Christ, other systems to relieve us of our responsibilities, thus diminishing the need of his cross.

9. If such an upstaging of the Gospel does in fact occur, then of course Christians must take a stand together and publicly, if need be refusing submission to their own ecclesiastical authorities, and they must then invoke instead that other, strange and vulnerable authority of Christ, whose only clout within this age is the inherent winsomeness of his one Gospel – and – sacraments but who also, beyond this age, is the only one to confess us the church before his Father.

10. One of the favorite epithets in the current movement against denominational bureaucracy – almost as favorite as the epithet "bureaucracy" – is "secularism". That misleading word will have to be re- Worded so as to insure Christian respect and care for

this present age (saeculum) which, however “old” and aging it is, is still very much God’s and therefore sacred.

Re-Wording current praxis into a confession includes subjecting that praxis to the Word of divine criticism and correction. One point at which the anti-bureaucratic movement I am describing needs theological correction, at least clarification, is in its all too easy complaint against church administrators’ “secularism.” There is no denying, of course, that the systems of bureaucratic management which Max Weber identified long ago as definitive of our modern world, socialist as well as capitalist, are indeed an influence upon the church from this present world. But that much must be said as well about the present, growing criticisms of bureaucracy, for instance, in their populist forms. They, too, are secular. But their secularity should not by itself be a condemnation of them, seeing how it is God –the same God – who creates and inspires this old age just as he does his new age in Christ even if in radically different ways. Ah, but the complaint we hear is that bureaucratic systems, even in the churches, have often become not only “secular” but “secularist” – too much of this age. But that, too, could be misunderstood. For it is exactly this “world” which God so loved that he gave his only Son and to which world he enables us, the other sons and daughters, to give ourselves as well. So the notion of “secularism,” of worldliness as anti- god, will need to be more crisply and Christianly spelled out if the movement at hand is to become confessionally articulate.

11. This movement which calls for re-Wording is driven by powerful ethical demands, more demanding probably than any localists or anyone else could ever live up to, but even its ethical concern is not enough to make this movement a confessional one.

What almost no one any longer denies is that the anti-bureaucratic uprising inside and outside the church might have a point, a very telling ethical point. And that is, the bureaucratizing of human organizations, indispensable as that is to human welfare in our time, does nevertheless discourage people from sharing in decisions which affect them vitally, decisions for which they still bear the consequences. The anti-bureaucratic protest, insofar as it is ethically justified, is a protest against being treated like children by experts who know what is best for us (as they often do), against experts who cannot trust us to make the right decisions (as often we do not). Simply in terms of human rights, bureaucracy abridges the profoundest right of all, the right to be held responsible. Whether people, once they are given a share in the decisions which affect them, can then accept their decisions' effects, both good and bad, may remain to be seen. But even that, the chance to find out, is part of the right to be held responsible. However, although the anti-bureaucratic protest has much to be said for it on ethical grounds, that is still not enough to make the protest confessional.

12. A secular system like bureaucratic organization becomes not just ethically unfair but actually subversive of Christ's authority in Gospel – and – sacraments when that bureaucratic system becomes for the church what the Lutheran confessors call a "necessity" – as necessary as if commanded by Christ, thus reversing his liberation.

What I am suggesting, really, is this: in, with and under the current grass-roots protest against church bureaucracy there is an intuitively Christian, even Christ-like indignation. Although these indignant Christians may often state their objections crudely, although they may be animated as much by pent-up frustration and sheer meanness as by zeal for the

Lord's house, although the most spirited of their complaints can be demonized by demagogues into the ruination of the church rather than its reforms, still the godly probability persists: they are somehow offended by a whole system of authority and decision-making which by its very thrust and organization (not so much by its well-intended practitioners) is sub-ethical, yes, but also far worse than that, sub-evangelical, a diminishing of Christ and of his unique authority. To credit such Christian motives to these folks in congregations and pastorates, especially when they themselves may not insist we should, may seem naive. The need obviously is not for naïveté but simply for giving these Christian people the benefit of Christian doubt – and the option at least of taking their stand upon grounds that are explicitly Christian.

The Christian Century has been running a series of articles entitled "The Churches: Where From Here?" In each article a different writer reports what the prospects are for his or her denomination. On one point at least the articles have shown a deeply depressing sameness. Without any prompting from the magazine's editors, I assume, yet with almost eerie unanimity, one article after the other has devoted major attention to a recurring problem in America 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 are often simply assumed as self-evident, as if ecclesiastical bureaucracy were so obviously unchurchly that there is no further need to say why. But there is a need to say why, a need to re-Word this movement into something confessionally Christian.



In the fine book by Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson entitled Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings, these authors, too, complain about bureaucracy in today's Lutheran churches, and they do come closer to identifying a confessional basis for that complaint.

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.

So, say the authors about Lutheranism, "we have merely accepted that bondage to the world's example from which the gospel is supposed to free us."

In America we have imitated the "managerial" methods of bureaucratized capitalism. A model more uncongenial to the work of the gospel is not conceivable.

"Our 'bishops' and 'presidents,'" Gritsch and Jenson continue, "with their multitudinous staffs, exercise a model of authority opposite to that of a 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 make them pastorally incompetent in any case.

"At which point," the authors conclude, "the legitimacy of

their authority is, by genuinely Lutheran standards, in grave doubt." (205)

This embarrassingly strong statement by Gritsch and Jenson, one of the strongest in their entire book, appears at that point where they are drawing implications for church life today from that Lutheran confessional document which I alluded to earlier, Article X of the Formula of Concord. Which, in turn, prompts me to raise the following question: When something which seems so doctrinally neutral as bureaucratic management changes, as it seems to have done in recent church history, from being the Gospel's servant to being the Gospel's partner to being the Gospel's rival to being the Gospel's undoing, just when in that subtle shift does the reversal occur? It occurs when that bureaucratic management becomes, in one word, a "necessity". That is the word which is employed by FC X as the signal, the trip-wire, for "a time for confessing." When some current church practice, though it might otherwise be unobjectionable or even constructive, assumes that much importance, the time has come to dissent, maybe even to disobey – when it assumes the importance, namely, of being "necessary."

But "necessary" for what? Why, necessary for "salvation". Still, not even the most secularist church bureaucrats would ever claim that much for even the most prized features of their management programs –say, their cost-benefit analysis or their "management by objectives" – namely, that such practices are necessary for church people's salvation." For that matter, I doubt that the Judaizers in Galatia ever said in so many words that, besides faith in Christ, also circumcision was necessary for "salvation". That explicit they probably were not. And maybe they did not even mean for circumcision to be a salvational prerequisite. But that fact was the net effect of their praxis, at least as Paul re- Worded it.

Similarly the confessors in FC X were not confining their vigilance to what ecclesiastical authorities merely say or do not say but rather to the consequences in praxis of what they do, and of what we all encourage them to do. If what they require in practice is the operational equivalent of saying, "Cooperation with our brand of authority is 'necessary for righteousness', necessary for your being truly acceptable in this church, or else"; and if the or-else is that objectors and critics are dismissed or penalized or snubbed, then regardless of the authorities' reassuring rhetoric the practice in question has been "forcibly imposed on the church as necessary and as though its omission were wrong and sinful." Then "the door has been open to idolatry, and ultimately the commandments of human beings will be put...not only on a par with God's commandments but even above them." (SD, 12-14). And what the confessors here mean by "God's commandments" is the Gospel-and-sacraments which is all the authority Christ ever gave the church for its wholeness, that being "enough" (satis). Anything more than that, once it becomes "necessary" for the church to be church, is enslavement.

13. Moreover, "bureaucracy" is re-Wordable as a confessional antagonist when it becomes so "necessary" that Christians depend upon it to relieve them of responsibility which only Jesus the Christ, by his cross, can bear for them.

The most serious hazard to the church in elevating something like bureaucratic authority to a salvational "necessity" is not just that it then competes in importance with something which God himself "commands", namely, the preaching of the Gospel and administering the sacraments. No, what is most damaging – as the Tenth Article of the Formula of Concord again drives home – is that this new church- practical "necessity" in fact displaces Christ himself. But he is our

only authorized responsibility-bearer. What if instead of him, our only go-between, there comes now another system of responsibility-bearing which intervenes in the form of those church agencies and bureaus which discharge all the really significant work in God's mission in our stead, pro nobis? And what if we then have the consolation of knowing that that is all being done far more expertly than we amateur Christians ever could do? And what if all we then needed to do was to support and implement the programs which this highly efficient system labors to make easy for us, easier by far no doubt than losing our lives for Christ's sake and the gospel's – a role which we consumers become only too accustomed to delegate to the church professionals? When that happens a whole soteriological, mediatorial system has moved in to usurp that glory which the Father has jealously reserved to his Son – he being quite “enough” (satis).

14. What finally would constitute this grass-roots movement in current church praxis as a confessional movement is our trusting that as we in the church confess Christ we are confessed by him, and are enabled by that encouragement alone to shoulder the huge local and ecumenical responsibilities we now are inviting.

If to be a confessional movement means not only to protest, to say the Christian No, but also to say Yes, then where amidst the current outcry against bureaucratic legalism in high places is there at the same time a grass-roots reaffirming of the Gospel's Yes? One promising place to look for that evangelical affirmation is in the efforts which church people are now mounting at local and regional levels, but together across synodical and even denominational lines, taking a second look at those tasks which they had palmed off onto the church's professionals and now assuming new first-hand responsibility for those tasks themselves.

Whether they can actually succeed – these “amateur” Christians – in shouldering such heretofore complex, expensive, technical responsibilities themselves without the ecclesiastical bureaus to do it for them does pose a monumental problem. For surely somebody will have to bear that yoke for them – Somebody – before they in turn can bear his. Still, wherever that does succeed in happening – in local and regional cooperatives, pan-Lutheran, pan-Christian – there such back-breaking, cross-bearing courage of Christ would indeed sound the confessional Yes.

To nourish that local courage from place to place and to provide it too with the right Word, also among the Lutherans in those places, the old, now de-bureaucratized denominations and synods could find a new vocation for themselves in networking and partnering these local Lutheran communities with one another – a global, confessionally inclusive communicatio et consolatio fratrum et sororum.

But how can we know whether the church people who are engaged in this new anti-bureaucratic, grass roots ecumenism do, in fact, qualify as a genuinely confessional movement?

There is one way to find out: Ask them. True, by putting words into their mouths, we do run the risk of merely dignifying with high-sounding Christian rhetoric some mass movement which in fact is anything but Christian. That is a risk, for Christian theology to serve merely as an ideologue, a legitimator, giving sinners hallowed reasons for doing what they want to do anyway.

On the other hand, if church people do rise to the challenge of this confessional question, they may indeed exclaim: “So that’s what we’ve been doing: confessing! Here all we had given ourselves credit for was griping.” In other words, this new encouraging, praxis-shaping Word may become a self-fulfilling

description. That way, even though it may be we who put the Word in people's mouths, it will be they and not merely some delegated authorities who are then free to take responsibility for their own confessional response.

I am grateful to David Tracy, Roman Catholic theologian at The University of Chicago, as he in turn is grateful to H. Richard Niebuhr, for reinstating into systematic theology that classical Christian category, "confessional theology." Which in Tracy's and Niebuhr's understanding means – as I think it does also in the Lutheran Confessions – that sort of theology which both witnesses Christianly to Christ and yet does so in a way that is publicly accountable to the world. It is our Lord himself who insists that any Christian witnessing, if it is to be acceptable to God, must first be made to the world. "Whoever confesses me before human beings I will confess before my Father in heaven." (Matthew 10:32) That is the pivotal passage also for FC-X. It is probably this same passage which several years ago prompted the East Asia Christian Conference, in its confessional statement, to assign to Jesus the bold new messianic title, "Christ the Confessor." It is Christ the Confessor who I dare to hope will relay to his Father the confessing which you and I are doing within this world, not only of five years ago but also of today and tomorrow.

Robert W. Bertram  
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[OURTHEOLOGICALSHAPE \(PDF\)](#)