

Re-WORDing the Localist, Anti-bureaucratic Movement into an Intentional, Confessional Movement

(Address at the Annual Ecumenical Theological Symposium, Center for Parish Development, Naperville, Illinois, July, 1979)

Thesis One. In order for the actual, ambiguous praxis of church people to become intentionally Christian – or may I say, confessional? – the theologian must play their praxis back to them as reconstrued by the Word of God, yes, but ultimately the people themselves must take responsibility for adopting that re-Wording as their own confession of faith and life. (No comment)

Thesis Two. The antibureaucratic, localist movement in American denominations, though it is still far from articulate as Christian theology, certainly does demand attention. (Comment, pp. 1- 14)

Thesis Three. Our theological vocation then is to care about this current movement – antibureaucratic, localist – and to try so to re-Word it as to help it become an intentionally confessional movement. (No comment)

Thesis Four. The intention, however, is not to polarize Christians against Christians – which is already happening (for instance, local congregations against denominational management, “antibureaucrats” against “bureaucrats”) – but precisely to

avert that conflict between “flesh and blood” and to transpose it instead into a transpersonal struggle between contending systems of authority, between bureaucracy-turned-principality-and-power and the authority of the gospel. (No comment)

Thesis Five. 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. (No comment)

Thesis Six. 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, whether national or multinational or local or at whatever level. (No comment)

Thesis Seven. But these confessors must then confess instead that other, strange and vulnerable authority of Jesus the Christ, whose only clout within this age is the inherent winsomeness of his one gospel-and-sacraments (by definition unenforceable) but who also, beyond this age, is the only one to confess us, his church, before the Father. (No comment)

Thesis Eight. 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. (Comment, pp. 14-15)

Thesis Nine. This movement which calls for re-Worded is driven by powerful ethical demands, ethically more demanding than any localists or anyone else could ever live up to; but even its

ethical concern is not yet enough to make this movement a confessionally Christian one. (Comment, pp. 15-1)

Thesis Ten. Those thoughtful programs for dealing with anti-bureaucratic localism by channeling it into “new forms” of participatory decision-making (“System 4”, MBOR, etc.) are certainly a welcome improvement over earlier alternatives, although even these new organizational forms may need further radicalizing, not only theologically but even ethically. (No comment)

Thesis Eleven. 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 traditional theology called a “necessity” – as necessary as if it had been commanded by Christ, thus compromising the liberation he brings, (Comment, pp. 16-18)

Thesis Twelve. Moreover, church “bureaucracy” must be re-worded into a confessional adversary when it becomes so “necessary” alongside Christ that Christians depend upon it to relieve them of responsibility which only he, by his cross, can bear for them. (Comment, p. 19)

Thesis Thirteen. What finally would constitute this grassroots movement in current church praxis as a confessional movement our trusting that as we by that praxis confess Christ we likewise are confessed by him before his Father, and are enabled by that encouragement alone to shoulder the huge local and ecumenical responsibilities which we now, in our localities, are inviting unto ourselves, (Comment, pp. 19-21)

Thesis Fourteen. ‘But how can we know whether the church people who are engaged in this new anti-bureaucratic, grassroots ecumenism do in fact qualify as a genuinely, confessional

movement? There is only one way to find out: Ask them.
(Comment, pp.21-22. . .)

For: A CENTER SYMPOSIUM: "TOWARD INTENTIONAL CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS" 13-14 July, 1979 Naperville, Illinois

Thesis Two. The anti-bureaucratic, localist movement in American denominations, though it is still far from articulate as Christian theology, certainly does demand attention.

Comment. 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 her or his denomination, some of them more critically than others, However, for all their diversity in other respects, one denomination after another reflects a common complaint with such frequency that it can hardly be coincidental, though it is ominous. Clearly there is widespread reaction, especially in mainline bodies, against the denominations"bureaucracy,"as it is called. Concomitantly there is a move to relocate the initiative closer to the "grassroots."

The reasons for which denominational bureaucracy is criticized 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, and to say so theologically, as I hope to explain later. Not that that is the responsibility of the

Century reporters, to provide their constituents' protests with theological rationale. For that matter, a few of them do hint at such a rationale, thus making our own theological job – the job of re-Wording churchly praxis—a bit easier. However, this much at least the following samples from the series should show: if current objections to church bureaucracy do lack a theology, that is not because they lack intensity.

Jameson Jones, who reports on the United Methodist Church, differs markedly from some other authors in the series in that he sympathizes with the antibureaucratic protest not at all. (XCV, 29, pp. 850-854) He seems particularly reluctant to credit this phenomenon in his denomination with any Christian significance. If anything, he finds it to be just the opposite. But of course his negative approach, too, is an important step and maybe the prior step in re-Wording church people's praxis: not merely legitimating what they do but rather subjecting it first of all to the Word of criticism. Remember how Gutierrez defines liberation theology: "...a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word." (ATOL,13) While Jones' anti-anti-bureaucracy may not invoke the Word, he very pointedly blames this current mood—"an up-with-the-grass-roots-and-down-with centralized-bureaucracies mood"—for obstructing United Methodism's vitality as a church. "Wherever[U.M.C.'s] agencies are ineffective, one factor is the nationwide revolt against bureaucracy and centralized authority of any kind." (854, 853)

But not only does Jones criticize, he also pretty well disallows that the current anti-bureaucracy within Methodism might have any churchly motivation, or even potential for churchly redemption. Instead these seem to reduce this mood, also within the churches, to just one more instance of the country's bad temper generally. Somewhat resignedly he asks, "But that's the current mood of most major denominations and of the country itself,

isn't it?" (854) "Firing salvos at bureaucracies is currently the nation's favorite pastime." (853)

If that indeed is all it is, an arbitrary and rambunctious mindset overpowering the church from outside, then no wonder church leaders themselves might feel resigned simply to make the most of this irrationalism and perhaps even to manipulate it in order to get the church's work done. Jones by no means advises such cynicism, but he does recall the 1976 General Conference, where the life tenure of bishops was under attack. "Interesting," he observes, was one of the arguments which had to be resorted to in order finally to salvage the bishops' tenure. "Limiting the term of bishops," so the delegates were warned, "would only increase the power of general church secretaries and agency executives"—so "whom do you like less, bishops or bureaucrats?" (850) Aside from the fact that such a ploy only encourages anti-bureaucracy to be anti-bureaucrat (which is quite something else), it ignores moreover what latent possibilities there may be within this anti-bureaucracy as a genuinely Christian witness and resource—precisely for deflecting the personal sorts of antagonism between bureaucrats and anti-bureaucrats.

Paul G. Kemper, writing about the United Church of Christ (XCV 19, 561-565), can be quite as critical as Jones is about the "anti-bureaucratic mentality" within his denomination. But unlike Jones, Kemper suggests a way, theologically suggestive, by which local Christians' anti-bureaucratic insistence upon autonomy might yet be turned to good as one side of a larger Christian "balance," the other side of which is emphatically not bureaucracy but "the covenant relationship." True, "without that corrective balance" of a covenantal counterforce, "autonomy degenerates into a self-serving libertarianism"—for instance, a phoney "participatory democracy in the form of management by objectives." (565, 563) Considering how "the local churches have

a built-in anti-bureaucratic mentality, ... it is a wonder that anything at all gets done by the denomination!" Then "the heroes of the United Church of Christ may be its bureaucrats," after all. (564-5)

Yet when local autonomy is balanced (not however by bureaucracy but) by a covenantal "common allegiance in the Lordship of Christ," then for Kemper even the reaction against bureaucracy is usable, "...There are under currents of resentment about the ever-encroaching bigness of the institutions of organized-society, The bureaucratization of life may force people to seek smaller, more manageable enclaves where their thoughts, needs and faith are shared with others..." (565) Just why "the bureaucratization of life" needs to be countered—why, not only sociologically but theologically—may require further re-Wording. But some clues begin to appear. For instance, Kemper's reference to "the Lordship of Christ" raises the christological question whether Christians, in their opposition to "bureaucracy," may not be struggling to choose between competing lordships, sometimes right within the church,.

Up against a similar trend among Episcopalians (XCV 2, 41-47) - "relatively less emphasis on staff and programs, more on locally based initiatives"—Earl H, Brill is less critical of this trend than the two previous writers are, and in fact is guardedly optimistic. Not only has there been a "wholesale dismantling of national staff and a vacuum in national leadership" but, as a positive undertow to that, "the real action is in the local congregation." (44) "The local church is, indeed, where most of the church's vitality is now being expressed." (47) Like Jameson Jones, however, Brill refrains from interpreting this trend theologically, though he does take it seriously as an act of the church. And that subtle difference seems to suggest, at least for Brill, that this de facto trend against bureaucracy and toward local initiative, because it is an inner-church trend,

must therefore command a kind of de jure credibility, almost a theological justification.

It, is true, on the negative side, that “the new egalitarian, participatory character of church life does not encourage the growth of giant-sized church leaders,” and that this new “free-swinging style of conflict management has had much to do with the recent excursions into outright schism,” and that “church institutions other than the parish can anticipate lean years,” and that “future church leaders would be well advised to take heed of this development,” if only “because they will have to live with it.” (46, 44)

But that—that negative brute fact—is not the only reason “to take heed.” The other side of the story is that. the former “authoritarian style of leadership is being replaced by a more collaborative style.”(45) “Ecumenism seems most vigorous at the local level, and the ordination of women does not seem to have had much negative effect there,” (47) “Christian education programs are being developed locally, without reliance on mass-produced national curricula.” (45) “On the whole, the parishes seem to be doing rather well.” (45) In short, here—in the local congregation—“the Episcopal Church is showing significant signs of vitality.” (44) Is the implication that this trend away from bureaucratic hierarchy to local responsibility not only reflects a de facto power shift but, because of its churchly prospects, reflects also some real justification, some ultimate authorization for that shift? If so, that could have meaning theologically for the church’s distinctive kind of authority.

According to Janet H. Penfield, the Presbyterians—that is, UPCUSA and PCUS (XCV 5, 158-164)—are now trying to cope with the recent “dismal reorganizations” of their national staffs and, more seriously, with the fallout from that reorganization, namely a further loss of confidence in those staffs on the part

of church members. It is Penfield's emphasis is upon this "crisis of confidence" and how the recent reorganization only exacerbated it which I find theologically arresting. For distrust and trust are axiomatic for any Christian theology. And "distrust of national staffs and national programs" might just signal that there is something still worse and more untrustworthy, really not staffs and programs at all, which inspires Christians to distrust. (160)

The sorry irony, according to Penfield, is that the Presbyterians' very process of restructuring—"what some refer to as 'destructure'—rather than mitigate previous bureaucratic deficiencies seems instead to have exacerbated them. The old" structures were admittedly unwieldy and out of date," she agrees, but what came next was worse yet. Now "enchantment with business-model forms of operating resulted in a new national church organization so complex and confusing hardly anyone could understand it." (160) Simultaneously there was a worsening of the distrust as well, which was destructive enough to begin with. "The point to making the changes in the first place—at least part of the point—is to dehorn the creative thinkers and leaders who are getting too far ahead of the troops." The trouble is, "this was accomplished in the late, dismal reorganizations to the point that nobody could decide much of anything." (163)

So "local confidence in the national machinery, already at a low ebb, declined .still further," (160) Question: if what the church's "machinery" must warrant is "confidence"—read: faith—then what must that machinery be like? Or better, whom must it be like?

Although Janet Penfield does not of course defend the distrusters, neither does she believe that the way to meet their distrust is by "enchantment with business-model forms of

operating.” That particular reproach against denominational bureaucracy, namely, its “adoption of the corporation model as a pattern for church life and decision-making,” looms large in E. Glenn Hinson’s report on Southern Baptists, (XCV 21, 610-615) Notice, just as Jameson Jones has disparaged Methodists’ antibureaucracy as an aping of the world, so now at the other end of the rating scale Hinson seems to object to the opposite, to Baptists’ bureaucracy, for much the same reason of worldliness: their annual convention now resembles a stockholders’ meeting. But why shouldn’t a church convention operate like a stockholders’ meeting, or a church body like a business corporation? Ah, but Hinson is too much of a theologian not to have thought of that question.

“When some 20,000 ‘messengers’ of the churches gather for the annual convention, ... they, representing the stockholders, can do little besides rubber-stamp what their skilled force of executives, managers and other experts has decided after prolonged consideration.” (613) This raises question, first of all, of the churches’ veracity: “Given the dominance of the corporation model, can Southern Baptists retain any semblance of democratic decision-making beyond the congregational level? Or should they just drop the charade and admit that they are concerned chiefly with efficiency?” (614)

Yet the graver theological objection to running a church body on a “corporate model,” graver than the self-deception which that generates, is that it fosters a corresponding “corporation ethics” of means and ends—“how far ... before the means subvert the end?”—and worse even than that, it compromises the authority of the Holy Spirit. “In the corporate model... does the Spirit automatically approve whatever is found to work (an assumption not uncommon among Southern Baptists)?” (614) Conversely, we might add, suppose that what the Spirit does approve—losing one’s life, for instance, not only personally but

denominationally—is not “found to work,” institutionally. Can the “corporate model” tolerate such a Spirit?

Writing about the American Baptist Churches, the “northern” Baptists, (XCV, 12 354- 360) is Paul M. Harrison, a notable among analysts of religious organizations. However, as he explains in this article, he has since given up the study of “religious bureaucracy” for “moral reasons” – instead “I’m studying theological ethics”—and because he “can’t unravel infinity.” (354) Nevertheless, Harrison’s capacity for excoriating denominational bureaucracies does not seem to be seriously diminished. What he is still very sure about is where the churches’ responsibility begins, namely, “at the local level” (emphasis his). (375) Especially so, with respect to that fundamental responsibility: missions. Such responsibility, I gather, is never finally delegatable, though unfortunately it is capable of being shunted to church bureaus—and thus shirked.

That, according to Harrison, is the problem. There is “an increasing discontent at the grass-roots level that most national leaders appear to ignore.” However, “it is a perverse waste of time to blame the ‘bureaucrats’ for this state of affairs,” though Harrison is not incapable of doing that, too. But more important: “‘We the people’ have wittingly or unwittingly handed over the reins of authority, power and responsibility to others,” “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.” (357)

If the trouble is that grass-roots responsibility has been abdicated to state and national bureaucracies, the positive counter to that is easy to guess. Harrison’s basic “assumption” is “that missions, like everything else in the Baptist denominations, should be initiated and organized at the local

level.” (357) That is where responsibility originates, for society generally but certainly for the churches. This need not mean “that the locus of authority in the ABC resides in 6,300 ‘autonomous’ congregations.” That, according to Harrison, is a “carefully nurtured fiction,” and he calls instead for reviving local associations of congregations, as “mediating institutions,” “partially to offset the state and local powers.” (356, 359, 357)

In any case “the local churches may not exempt themselves from missions by engaging in the indirectly.” Conversely, “when the denominational leaders fail to encourage local missions, they are leaving out the basic component and initiatory stimulus for all mission programs.” Harrison scores “the romanticism and moral irresponsibility of defining missions as service to people in far-away places,” “as something that specialists do ‘out there’.” This is a particularly significant theological distortion in a denomination that emphasizes the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, wherein mediating priests are an anathema”—except in mission activities”! (358)

Speaking of “mediating priests” provides a transition to the article on Roman Catholicism by Richard P. McBrien. (XCVI 2, 42-45) The following sentence is thematic for his entire essay, “Catholicism is committed to the principle of mediation,” (42) Here, however, mediation does not mean what Harrison had meant when he used the term disparagingly: some humango-between claiming to absolve us from our responsibilities to God. The mediation McBrien has in mind flows not from humans to God but vice versa, God communicating his “presence” to usward through such creaturely media as Christ and the sacraments and indeed through one another, the church. “The love, mercy and justice of God and Christ are mediated through the love, mercy and justice

of the church in mission.” (42)

Accordingly the phenomenon we have been sampling, that localist and anti-bureaucratic movement within America's mainline churches, is likewise assessed by McBrien in light of this theological principle of mediation. The inference would be, I suppose, that a church which is so bureaucratically organized that it displaces its members' own local initiative and responsibility is a church which to that extent does not mediate the divine love in Christ. Then what kind of church organization does mediate it? Appealing to Vatican II and its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, McBrien says “the Catholic Church perceives itself primarily as a people rather than as a hierarchical organization.” (43) Playing off the “people of God” against “hierarchical organization”, with the latter coming off distinctly second best, already implies some modest “anti-bureaucratic” sympathy. For, as Max Weber taught us, even though not all hierarchies are bureaucratic, all bureaucracies are hierarchical. So that much at least about a “bureaucratic” church, its being in principle hierarchical, would seem to prejudice its chances as a fit sacramental medium for Christ.

This embarrassment about hierarchy, or at least the subordinating of it, finds its positive antithesis in McBrien's blessed word, “co-responsibility,” a feature which evidently does communicate to the world what it is to be the people of God. “Co-responsibility is now in process of becoming fully operative at every level of the church's ecclesiastical life and government.” (43) That sounds like an affirmation of local responsibility. McBrien is hopeful that Pope John Paul II, who championed “the collegial principle” at Vatican II will continue to do so.

On the other hand the fact that there is simultaneously a “corresponding pull in the opposite direction,” away from co-

responsibility and back -toward hierarchicalism, McBrien documents with unsparing openness,.

Where parish councils exist, they are often without decision-making authority...

Few dioceses even have a pastoral council... Vatican bureaucracies try to play by

the“old rules”... Autocratic style of leadership still obtain in [numerous]

dioceses, parishes and religious communities... Bishops, meanwhile, are still

selected by a process that is at once secret and restricted... (44)

Yet although McBrien does not say so, he could: his very candor in exposing these obstacles in high places is itself an act of co-responsibility and serves to reopen the mediation of the Christly “presence.”

After this round-up of other church-bodies whose reporters have gone out on a limb with their denominational self-honesty—some of whom have also incurred stiff rejoinders in subsequent issues of the Century —it would be unsporting of me to exempt from the roll-call my own group, the Lutherans. The fact is, they too have been reported on, and well, by Richard E. Koenig. (XVC34,1009-1013) However, his account—as some other articles in the series also do not— does not mention that movement we have been referring to as anti-bureaucratic and localist, except in this subtlest of allusions: “churches, like individuals are not saved or motivated by the latest managerial techniques or group dynamics—or even by episcopal figures!” (1013)

So as not to use Koenig ‘s silence on the issue at hand as an excuse to spare my own communion, let me instead draw upon another recent Lutheran source, one which is admittedly not as reportorial as the preceding: samples but is, if possible even

more frank.

In a book which quickly has gained wide use in Lutheran seminaries and colleges, Erik Gritsch's and Robert Jenson's Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings, these authors, too, complain about bureaucracy in today's Lutheran churches and at least imply an alternative direction.

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 thereby merely accepted that bondage to the world's example from which the gospel is supposed to free us." (205)

The aspersion about "the world's example" sounds familiar, doesn't it? What is it about this "efficiency"-oriented "sort of organization" which is so worldly? The authors seem, at first, only to repeat themselves.

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

But why, we ask again, are "the 'managerial' methods of bureaucratized capitalism" so uncongenial to the gospel?

The clue seems to lie in the favorite term “gospel”, and in the distinctive “authority” which that gospel entails by contrast with a bureaucratic “model of authority.” “Our ‘bishops’ and ‘presidents’, 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 other concerns soon makes 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) The issue here is between two kinds of authority, only one of which—the “gospel’s”—legitimizes the church.

Thesis Eight. 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,

Comment. Re-Worded current church praxis into a Christian confession always 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 (saeculum). 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 the, 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 Christian

Thesis Nine. This movement which calls for re-Wording is driven by powerful ethical demands, ethically more demanding perhaps than any localists or anyone else could ever live up to; but even its ethical concern is not yet enough to make the movement a confessionally Christian one.

Comment. What almost no one any longer denies is that the antibureaucratic 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 antibureaucratic 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 whether they can bear the consequences, is itself part of the right-to-be-held-responsible. However, although the antibureaucratic protest has much to be said for it on ethical grounds, that is still not enough to make the protest confessional.

Thesis Eleven. 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 traditional theologies call a "necessity"—as necessary as if it had been commanded by Christ, thus reversing his liberation.

Comment. 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 (whether of the left or of the right) into the ruination of the church rather than its reform, 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-intentioned 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 naiveté but simply forgiving these Christian people the benefit of Christian doubt—and the option at least of taking

their stand upon grounds that are explicitly Christian.

All of which raises 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 the Reformers 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, the 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 was the net effect of their praxis, at least as Paul re-Worded it.

Similarly the Reformers 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 or marginalized, 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 opened 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." (FC X, SD, 12-14) And what the Reformers here meant 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.

Thesis Twelve. 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.

Comment. 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 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).

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

Comment. If to be an intentionally Christian 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 affirmative is in the efforts which church people are now mounting at local and regional levels, but together across denominational lines, taking a second look at those tasks which previously they had abdicated to the church's professionals but now are assuming as new first-hand responsibility of their own —and together.

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, trans-

denominational, pan-Christian—there such back-breaking, cross-bearing courage of Christ would indeed sound the confessional Yes.

In order to nourish that local courage from place to place and to provide it too with the right Word, the old, now de-bureaucratized denominations could find a new vocation for themselves in networking and partnering these local Christian communities with one another—according to their respective Christian traditions, to be sure, but for the purpose of mutual care and mission in the places where they interact.

Thesis Fourteen. 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.

Comment: True, by putting words into church-people's 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 help to 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 church's classic 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 has been the pivotal passage for many a confessional movement. It is 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 ordinary Christians may be doing within this world, even through such an otherwise ambiguous and feisty operation as the current localist and anti-bureaucratic movement within our churches—that same Christ giving us and them the right Word for it all.

Robert W. Bertram
Naperville. Illinois
13 July, 1979

[Re-WORDing \(PDF\)](#)