The Soteriological Mission of Theology: Robert W. Bertram

by Michael Hoy
Zion Lutheran Church Wausau, Wisconsin

with Response to Michael Hoy
by Robert W. Bertram

In an essay published a decade ago, Robert W. (Bob) Bertram comments on "How a Lutheran Does Theology." "Lutheran theology begins where all Christian theology does, namely with our risen Lord's commissioning his followers to go—not alone but with him—to baptize and teach all nations until he closes the age. Theology, over and over again, is for that one interim teaching mission."1 Bertram has himself been engaging in that "one interim teaching mission" for over forty years in seminaries, universities, and institutions, both domestic and overseas; but Bertram hardly sees theology as limited to the academic setting. He understands it to be in "mission out there, out in the world," "keeping the Word coming from headquarters to field-from Sender to sent … Theology, in that sense, is trans-mission."2

I. Doing Theology: Some Clues from Robert W. Bertram

For Bertram, theology has a decidedly, and weighty, soteriological task in bringing Christ and his gospel to the

world. The task of the theologian is to "necessitate Christ,"3 to keep the salvation for the world necessarily centered in Christ (and not some other would-be form of salvation). To carry this out, Bertram assigns theology the specific function of bridging the "Christ-gap" between the world and Christ. That "Christ-gap" has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension.

The horizontal dimension is a time gap between the kerygma of the first-century Christ and our contemporary situation. Bertram asks, "By what possible transmission can his message get from his ancient world to our very own different one without serious loss of meaning?"4 This question is the confessional challenge for every age. As an example, however, Bertram holds up the "confessional testimonies of the sixteenth century, [which] like the ecumenical creeds centuries before, faithfully crossed the horizontal gap between the bygone times of their Sender and the much later time of their own mission."5 Their confession, made in faith, was a bold and continuous (with the New Testament) kerygmatic proclamation of the gospel.6

The vertical dimension of the "Christ-gap" has to do with the credibility of the gospel. The *skandalon* of the gospel is not limited to historical time. "That gap was as prevalent in the days of our Sender and of his first century apostles as it is (and had better be) today."7 The gospel's scandal is not simply that our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection were historical events, but that they were *necessary* historical events. Bertram point out how the Roman Catholic Confutatores of the sixteenth century affirmed the history of Christ (*fides historica*), but nevertheless denied the necessity of that event.8 Instead, they promoted a false soteriology of justification by "good works," at the root of which was the Adamic *opinio legis*, the "illusion" that the law has "soteriological significance, the last word."9 The result is not only the diminishing of the need for Christ, but also the full force of the law—"a resulting combination of

law and promise which is downright unbiblical and, pastorally speaking, fatal."10 By contrast, the Augsburg confessor sought to restore the "God-intended balance" between *lex* and *promissio*: "Promise, dominant; law-subordinate. Law, penultimate; gospel, ultimate. Both of them divine absolutes, yet with the promise always having the final word."11 With this biblical ordering, the law can be faced "in all its original force," "in all its criticalness," because "in its assigned subordination, it is domesticated by the promise."12 The wrath and mercy of God upon sinners is "reconciled … in Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen and, ever since, interceding for us on the basis of his historic deed."13 Only through this necessary-historic event of the *promissio* is unbelief truly overcome, and the saving mission of Christ fostered.14

II. How Bertram Does Theology

Undoubtedly, two of Bertram's most dominant theological accents are his understanding of *confessio* and *sola fide*. Whether by accident or not, these two themes have a respective correlation in the horizontal and vertical dimensions we have seen in the previous section. An examination of them, therefore, will help us understand how Bertram himself has been bridging the "Christ-gap" (i.e., doing theology) for our own time.

Confessio: Doing Theology Horizontally

Bertram has been drawing significant connections between the Christ of the New Testament and the later historical confessions of the gospel in his theology of "confessional movements," or better, "confessing movements." Part of the reason for that development is traceable to Bertram's own "time of confessing" (and time of trial) in the exile of Concordia Seminary in 1974.15 Bertram traces the theology of "confessing" (*confessio*),

however, to the Lutheran Confessions, especially Article X of the Formula of Concord and Article VII of the Augsburg Confession.16 Through them, it can be traced further back to Christ and the New Testament (e.g., Eph 4. Matt 10).17

"Times for confessing" are succinctly defined by Bertram as "those singular occasions when Christians have had to disobey secular authority, including the church's own, in order to testify that for the integrity of the church of Jesus Christ his one gospel-and-sacraments is authority enough. Satis est."18 While such times for confessing are indeed rare, they are also "some of the most constructive moments in recent history."19 In particular, Bertram cites such recent events as "the *Kirchenkampf* in Nazi Germany, the Christian resistance against *Apartheid* or in South Korea, the 'authority crisis' in today's Roman Catholicism, the current grass-roots anti-bureaucracy in mainline denominations."20

There are six major features which Bertram has highlighted to help clarify and recognize the nature of such confessing. The first of these understands "confessing as *martyria*." "The dominant metaphor is forensic: the confessors are defendants on a witness stand (in *statu confessionis*), *martyres*, and their confession in that case is a martyrological act." There is a life-and-death risk involved in the act of confessing, not simply in terms of the socio-ethical persecution and oppression (though that is also present), but also in terms of much higher stakes involved—"either fidelity or apostasy, either divine acceptance or divine rejection." Before the cosmic tribunal (*coram Deo*), the confessional witnesses are called to be faithful in standing up for the gospel as alone sufficient for the unity of the church.21

The second feature understands "confessing as disencumbering the gospel," or as protesting "gospel-plus." "Confessors protest

whatever it is that (ecclesiastical) authorities have added to the gospel. It is a protest often against some *adiaphoron* of the church that has become universally necessary for the church's unity (and salvation), and thereby usurps the role of the one gospel-and-sacraments as alone sufficient for the church's unity.22

The third highlights "confessing as ecumenical," or as that which re-unifies the church. The ecumenism promoted is basic, crossing all denominational lines. Confessors make their appeal before the whole church in articulating that the gospel is the one and only true source of the church's (re-)union. Likewise, the whole church is thereby invited to join the confessors on the witness stand.23

The fourth feature understands "confessing as re-prioritizing authorities." Confessing means recognizing that "secular authority has trespassed upon another whole dimension of authority than its own, namely the Gospel's, where it is abjectly incompetent and ultimately damning." The response of the confessor, therefore, is (cruciformed) disobedience. Secular authority is disobeyed not because it is wrong in and of itself, but because it is out of place, and has "cruelly confused" the secular and evangelical authorities. The confessor keeps the authorities distinct, with ultimate priority going to the gospel.24

The fifth feature understands "confessing as appealing for and to the oppressed." Confessing means appealing *for* those who are oppressed by the superior secular authority and re-valuing them according to the standard of the gospel: "the righteousness of faith," which is also the righteousness of Christ. But confessing means also appealing *to* the oppressed to live in the freedom of the gospel as "responsible agents," with Christ as their own responsum.25

The sixth, and final, feature of confessing deals with the issue of the "ambiguous certitude" of the confessors themselves. The embarrassing (indeed, mortifying) reality for the confessors as they stand up for the gospel is that they, themselves, in their confessing are also sinners plagued by their own pride, doubt, unfaith, despair, etc. They do not lack critics who point this out, even though the confessors themselves are already sensitive to the truth of their sinnerhood. Nevertheless, despite the ambiguity of their situation, they dare not let that "undermine their higher confession, the gospel," which is their own source of comfort and forgiveness, even as it is for the world.26

The boldness of *confessio* today bridges the horizontal gap with the bold confession of the gospel evident in the New Testament.27 But all *confessio*, as the confessors themselves testify, depends on "faith"—and that leads us to consider Bertram's "vertical" theological accent.

Sola Fide: Doing Theology Vertically

If the horizontal gap of time is bridged through the faithful confessions of the gospel, then the vertical gap of credibility is bridged through faith in Christ—and faith alone (*sola fide*). Bertram is keen on pointing out that it was not "grace alone," nor even "Christ alone," but "faith alone" that was the chief issue at stake in the controversy on justification between the confessors of the Augustana and their Roman Catholic critics.28

By accenting the *sola fide*, Bertram does not take sides with either the fideists or the objectivists. Both make the same mistake in thinking that *sola fide* is reason for boasting in ourselves.29 Bertram affirms that *sola fide* is also *sola gratia propter Christum*; but on the other hand, Bertram does not juxtapose *sola fide* with *sola gratia propter Christum*, as if they were antagonists. "The centrality of *faith* … and the

centrality of Christ are not mutually exclusive but, on the contrary, mutually implicative."30

To exploit the fideist position, Bertram highlights Luther's seemingly fideist position: "As much as I grasp, that much I have" (*Quantum comprehendo tantum habeo*). While Luther intended the statement to be promissory, it becomes accusatory if one takes into consideration the actual measure of faith they have. What makes faith promising, however, is that Whom it trusts—Christ.31 In contrast to the objectivist position, Bertram follows Luther's point about the faith of Abraham. It was Abraham's *faith* (granted, with the promise as the object of that faith, but Abraham's faith nonetheless) which was accounted *righteous*. "Faith *is* the truth trusted."32

The theological problem which faith overcomes is a problem with God—that God is (legitimately, legally) wrathful toward sinners. Faith trusts that in Christ there is a "happy exchange" (Luther's phrase, and one of Bertram's favorites). Bertram masterfully spells out the meaning of that "happy exchange" through an examination of Luther's commentary on *Galatians* (1531).33 Luther emphasized that it was "soteriologically necessary" that "Christ was our sinner." "If he is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them."34 But our "most delightful comfort" is that Christ does indeed bear our sins as his own, and this in six explicit ways: by placing himself under the law with us; by associating with sinners; by taking responsibility for having committed the sins of the world; by becoming a curse for us; by bearing our sins bodily; and by his own choice and willingness to do this for us.35 By so completely taking our sin and making it his own, Christ enters into the deadly duel with God's own law; but in him, "divine righteousness, life, and blessing [for us!] … prevail over their lesser contraries, sin and death and the curse."36 Christ, therefore, takes what we have coming to us

(sin, death, curse) and gives to us what he has coming to him (righteousness, life, blessing).

III. Conclusion

There are other themes in the theology of Bertram which would be worthwhile pursuing: his understanding of God-language, with Christ as the dependent God the Child;[37] Bertram's qualifiedly-critical position with regard to "revelation"-centered theologies (Barth, Tillich, Thiemann);[38] his own ethics of responsibility (which is an advancement over that of H. Richard Niebuhr);[39] his decidedly liberationist emphasis.[40] All of these themes, however, are really spin- offs of the two major accents we have already discussed in this essay, all growing out of Bertram's encounter with new theological issues. They reinforce this central contention of this essay—that theology has the soteriological task of bringing Christ's Word of promise to bear on the plight of human beings under the oppressive weight of sin and the law. It is in this sense that Bertram can say (with Luther) that theology is about human beings—fallen, re-Worded, and fully renewed.[41] So we dare to confess. So we dare to believe.

Response to Michael Hoy
Robert W. Bertram

As if it weren't exposure enough to be included in this series, comes now the further exposure of being publicly identified with Michael Hoy. He is one of the sharpest of that new clandestine breed, the pastor-theologian. Like others in that underground movement, Hoy's gender and ethnicity have so far provided him the necessary camouflage for staying off of ELCA faculties and in the parish, where covertly church history is being made. (To

further foil the statisticians, the movement has rapidly been adding women and minorities.) I hope that this latest exposure won't blow Hoy's cover.

As Hoy hints, one of the strategies of this counter-insurgency is to use traditional churchy terminology, even such otherworldly sleepers as "salvation," but to use them now in such a sneaky way as to smuggle back into those out-worn terms their original earthy puns. Double *entendre* for double agents. It is wordplay for a theology of both kingdoms. Orthodox Judaism and Lutheranism have (sometimes) been good at that.

Take the word "salvation," Hoy's first example. At one level the term has become so ethereally escapist as to be harmless. Especially so since Bonhoeffer's warnings that Christianity dare not evaporate into a "religion of salvation," where people are "saved" *from* the world. Such disclaimers now serve to render the authorities unsuspecting when they do hear the old buzz- words reintroduced.

But as every Christian subversive knows, that need not exhaust the power of a word like "salvation." Simultaneously at more mundane levels "saving" is what every worldling is after. Aristotle's treatise "On the Parts of Animals" sums up his scientific method as "*saving* the phenomena," not letting any of the data go unused. Once during a pastoral call to a cancer patient who was tortured with pain, she confided to me Christ's hidden purpose in keeping her alive: "to keep the pain from going to waste."

If a datum so abject, so excruciating—remember *crux*—as pain can be salvaged or "necessitated," then so can what Hoy calls "the full force of the law" or "the wrath of God," which are conventionally the first data to be abandoned in establishment theologies. Of course the real Secret among the operatives, lay

as well as clergy, is a Christ who is sufficient to trump this law and wrath, that is, to overcome them without denying them. Hoy blabs the Secret by talking about "salvation for the world." He might as well have spilled all the beans and admitted, as he does in the arcane circle of his parishioners, that it is a "salvation *of* the world."

Of course, in this hazardous business there is every chance that you may be found out. If so, there is no alternative except to confess. But that, it turns out to the agent's own surprise, was the strategy from the beginning—Headquarters' strategy. Hoy learned that from experience. So did I.

References

1 Robert W. Bertram, "How a Lutheran Does Theology: Some clues from the Lutheran Confessions," in *Lutheran- Episcopal Dialogue: Report and Recommendations*, edited by William G. Weinhauer and Robert L. Wietelman (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1981) 73. This essay is an expanded edition of a 1971 essay entitled, "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission," and was later published in *The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law- Gospel Reconstructionist Theology*, second edition, edited by Edward H. Schroeder (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary in Exile, 1974) 41A-41F.
2 Bertram, "How a Lutheran Does Theology," 74.
3 Robert W. Bertram, "On the Nature of Systematic Theology," November 13, 1968, in *The Promising Tradition,* 1.
4 Bertram, "How a Lutheran Does Theology," 74.
5 Ibid., 75.
6 Ibid., 78. Bertram further affirms the value of the historical-critical method as a means to criticize "those anachronistic interpolations and accretions which later ages of

the church have since read back into Scripture" (Ibid., 80).

7 Ibid., 75.

8 Ibid., 84.

9 Ibid., 85. Cf. also Robert W. Bertram, "The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV," in *A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Richard Jungkuntz and published by The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969) 124-126.

10 Ibid., 86.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 86. The 1971 edition of the essay has the correct reading of the quote by saying that the facing of the law is now "possible" through the promise.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 86-87.

15 As far as I can determine, Bertram's first extant writing on the subject of "confessional movement" is a brief editorial entitled, "Still Needed: A Confessional Movement," *Missouri in Perspective* (August 2, 1976) 4. The concept of "confessional movement" is traced to a phrase from an LC-MS Mission Affirmation: "The Lutheran Church is not merely one denomination among others but is a confessional movement within the whole Body of Christ."

16 Robert W. Bertram, "Confessional Movements and FC-10," unpublished address delivered in Munich, Germany, July 1977.

17 See Robert W. Bertram, "Augsburg: A Modern Time for Confessing," address. Later published under the title, "Confessing as Re-Defining Authority: Ethical Implications of Augsburg's 'Time for Confessing,'" in *The Debate on Status Confessionis: Studies in Christian Political Theology*, edited by Eckhardt Lorenz (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, Department of Studies, 1983) 95-104.

18 Robert W. Bertram, "Confessing the Faith of the Church," in *The New Church Debate: Issues Facing American Lutheranism*,

edited by Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 124.

19 Robert W. Bertram, "Augsburg: A Modern Time for Confessing," unpublished address. 1.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 1-3.

22 Ibid., 4-7.

23 Ibid., 7-10.

24 Ibid., 11-18.

25 Ibid., 19-21.

26 Robert W. Bertram, "Confessing as Ambiguous Certitude," unpublished paper: Robert W. Bertram, "A Time for Confessing: When is the Church a Confessional Movement?" in *The Cresset: Confession and Congregation, Occasional Papers III*, edited by David G. Truemper (Valparaiso, Ind.: Valparaiso University Press, 1978) 84-85. See also Robert W. Bertram, "*Confessio*: Self Defense Becomes a Subversive," dialog 26, No. 3 (Summer, 1987) 201-208.

27 In a forth coming tome, Bertram will explore the promising tradition of *confessio* and its features in respective historical case studies of the sixteenth century confessing movement, the *Kirchenkampf*, the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King, Jr., the anti-apartheid movements, Vatican II Filipino Catholicism (Francis Claver), and Seminex.

28 Robert W. Bertram, "'Faith Alone Justifies' Luther on *Iustitia Fidei*," in *Justification By Faith*, edited by H. Anderson, T. Murphy, J. Burgess, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 172.

29 Ibid., 177; Robert W. Bertram, "Altogether By Faith," unpublished address, March 1989

30 Robert W. Bertram, "Recent Lutheran Theologies on *Justification by Faith*: A Sampling," in Justification by Faith, 249.

31 Bertram, "Faith Alone Justifies," 174.

32 Ibid., 175.

33 Robert W. Bertram, "How Our Sins Were Christ's: A Study in Luther's Galatians (1531)," in *The Promising Tradition*, second edition, edited by Edward Schroeder (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary-in-Exile. 1974) 7-21.

34 Ibid., 7.

35 Ibid., 9-15.

36 Ibid., 16.

37 Robert W. Bertram, "Putting the Nature of God Into Language: Naming the Trinity," in *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today*, edited by Carl E. Braaten, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 91- 110.

38 See Robert W. Bertram, "Luther by Way of Barth: The Human Subject as the Object of Theology," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, "The Divinity School, the University of Chicago (1963); 'Correlations and Crossings," The Cresset 51 (1987) 16-18; and Bertram's reviews of Ronald F. Thiemann's *Revelation and Theology* in *The Christian Century* 103, No. 3 (January 22, 1986) 74-75 and *dialog* 26, No. 1 (Winter, 1987) 69-71.

39 Robert W. Bertram, "Responsibility: A Confessional-Ethical Splice," unpublished address at the Society for Christian Ethics, New York (January 18, 1980); see also Bertram's "How to Be Technological Though Theological: An Answer for Fabricated Man," in *Fabricated Man II: in vitro fertilization* (St. Louis: ITEST, 1975) 1-30.

40 Robert W. Bertram, "How Free Are the American Churches? A Clue from Martin Luther King," in *Begegnung: Beiträge zu einer Hermeneutik des theologischen Gesprächs*, edited by Max Seckler, Otto H. Pesch, Johannes Brosseder, and Wolfhart Pannenbert (Wien: Verlag Styria, 1971) 765-777; "Liberation by Faith: Segundo and Luther in Mutual Criticism," *dialog* 27, No. 4 9Fall, 1988) 268-276; "The Crux of Philippine Liberation Theology," unpublished address at the Society for Christian Ethics, Boston, Massachusetts (January 17, 1987). See also Edward H. Schroeder,

"A Time for Confessing Is a Time for Liberating," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 14, No. 2 (April, 1987)85-93. This issue of *Currents*, and the one which followed were festschrift editions in honor of Robert W. Bertram.

41 Cf. Robert W. Bertram, "Luther by Way of Barth"; also "The Radical Dialectic Between Faith and Works in Luther's Lectures on Galatians (1535)." in *Luther for an Ecumenical Age*, edited by Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967) 221.

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