

# A Trans-Pluralism Trend: Might It Become Confessional?

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## Conference Theme: “Confessional Ministry in a Pluralistic World”

### Part One. A Common Denominator Among Denominations

**Thesis One.** The theme of this conference, “Confessional Ministry in a Pluralistic World,” invites a question: in spite of the “pluralistic” splintering of American denominations, all of them preoccupied with their own concerns, might there not be some current concern which is common to them all? I think there is. If so, that might lessen the “pluralistic” factor in our assignment.

**Thesis Two.** Comes a further question, about “confessional ministry”: if there is for American churches such a common concern which occupies them all, is it a “confessional” concern, at least potentially? Is it a concern which, when re-Worded, might become a genuinely churchly concern for the Gospel? Yes, I believe it might.

**Thesis Three.** The common concern I have in mind which these days seems to be preoccupying every mainline denomination may be

characterized by three adjectives: local (or at least regional), antibureaucratic, ecumenical.

**Thesis Four.** Whether this grassroots, antibureaucratic ecumenism is in fact capable of being re- Worded, hence redeemed, into a constructively Christian, a “confessional” movement remains to be seen. But the phenomenon itself, as a social reality within the churches, is already plain to see. (Comment, pp.5-11)

## **Part Two. Relocating Our Own Confessional Movement**

**Thesis Five.** “Our” confessional movement is now, five years later, phasing out. (Comment, p.11)

**Thesis Six.** But that declining confessional movement of ours may just be reappearing as part of that larger trans-denominational phenomenon described above, which is antibureaucratic, grassroots, ecumenical. (Comment, pp.11-12)

**Thesis Seven.** This antibureaucratic, grassroots ecumenism seems to be attracting not only AELC moderates but also LC–MS moderates, and both of these with one another—despite the break between their respective denominations. (Comment, p.12)

**Thesis Eight.** So the “Call To Lutheran Union,” I believe, 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—whether or not they disaffiliate from their own stay-behind denominations. (Comment, pp.12-13)

**Thesis Nine.** 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. (Comment, pp.13-14)

## Part Three. When Is A Movement “Confessional”?

**Thesis Ten.** Our “confessional ministry”, then, is to care about this current trend in church praxis— antibureaucratic, grassroots ecumenism—and to try so to re-Word it as to make it an intentionally 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 to transpose it instead into an issue of the authority of the Gospel versus the rival authority of a transpersonal system, loosely called “bureaucracy.”

**Thesis Eleven.** That a confessional movement does move against some-thing, 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 threatened.

**Thesis Twelve.** A confessional movement arises within and against a situation of churchly oppression, a) 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 b) where the victim of oppression is not only other Christians but the very Gospel of Christ.

**Thesis Thirteen.** The way the Gospel in such circumstance is oppressed is that, with the help of some secular sort of authority, the Gospel is augmented, reinforced, improved upon—“safeguarded”—with additional incentives and controls which Christ himself never imposed.

**Thesis Fourteen.** The resulting damage to the church is at least two-fold; a) Christ’s distinctive authority, now yoked with

alien secular authorities, becomes instead a tool for enslavement rather than liberation; b) we come to depend on additional mediators besides Christ, other systems to relieve us of our responsibilities, thus diminishing the need of his cross.

**Thesis Fifteen.** 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. 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 Gospel-and-sacraments but who also, beyond this age, is the only one with authority to confess us, the church, before his Father.

**Thesis Sixteen.** Only that confidence, the confidence that we are confessed by Christ before his Father, can empower a confessional movement to meet its responsibilities now that it no longer has those other, alien powers to fall back upon.

## **Part Four. Re-Wording the New Movement Into A Confession**

**Thesis Seventeen.** One of the favorite epithets in the current reaction against denominational bureaucracy—almost as favorite as the epithet “bureaucracy”—is the “secularism.” That word is misleading and it will have to be re-Worded. For there is a kind of “secular” which still deserves profound Christian respect. This present age (*saeculum*), however “old” and “aging” it is, is still very much God’s and therefore sacred.

**Thesis Eighteen.** This grassroots movement which calls for re-Wording is driven by powerful ethical demands, more demanding probably than even the antibureaucrats themselves realize and could ever live up to. Even so, the movement’s ethical concerns are still not enough to make this movement a confessional one.

(Comment, p.14)

**Thesis Nineteen.** A secular system like bureaucratic organization becomes not just unethical 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 turning his liberation into bondage. (Comment, pp.15-16)

**Thesis Twenty.** Moreover, bureaucracy is re-Wordable as a confessional antagonist when it become 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, p. 16)

**Thesis Twenty-one.** What finally would constitute this grassroots movement in current church praxis 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 global and ecumenical responsibilities we now are inviting to ourselves at the grassroots. (Comment, pp.16-17)

**Thesis Twenty-two.** But how can we know whether the church people who are engaged in this new antibureaucratic, grassroots ecumenism do in fact qualify as a genuinely confessional movement? There is one way to find out: Ask them. (Comment, p.17)

## **Part Five. A Roman Catholic Contribution To This Movement**

**Thesis Twenty-three.** There is another denomination besides the Missouri Synod to which your and my little group once belonged and from which likewise we have long been separated, the Roman

Catholic Church. That church body also, as we noted earlier, is experiencing the same undertow of antibureaucratic, grassroots ecumenism.

**Thesis Twenty-four.** That same movement, but now within Roman Catholicism, still poses the same question: Does the Roman Catholic version of this movement similarly show promise of being re-Wordable into a confessional movement, especially a confessional movement which would welcome our cooperation with it? And the answer to this question is still much the same as our earlier answer, "There is one way to find out: ask them."

**Thesis Twenty-five.** However, there is at least one feature which has characterized many a confessional movement before but which does not seem to characterize this current movement within Roman Catholicism. That is, those antibureaucratic, grassroots ecumenists in the Roman church today, no matter how sharply they may oppose their own hierarchy, will probably never separate or be separated from their parent body.

**Thesis Twenty-six.** One of the Roman hierarchy's most eloquent critics, Father John McKenzie, calls attention to "one important difference between the crisis of the Roman church in the sixteenth century and its present crisis. This is the unwillingness of Catholics to renounce their membership, and in particular to establish other churches. The 'underground' church has come into existence; these groups are discontented and disaffected, but they are not dissident. They intend to remain Roman Catholic, and they nearly defy the official church to find a way to expel them." (EoA, p.54)

**Thesis Twenty-seven.** One of the dilemmas in which confessional movements have frequently found themselves is that, because they had to disavow an ecclesiastical authority which was bridling the Gospel, they soon found themselves outside the pale; but

outside the pale they no longer had occasion to continue their original witness and so, as a confessional movement, they disappeared.

**Thesis Twenty-eight.** But this very dilemma which has afflicted many another confessional movement might be avoided in contemporary Roman Catholicism. "In previous crises," says McKenzie, "the Roman authority could preserve itself by lopping off the trouble-makers." Now "everything points to a change in the direction of a more democratic...use of authority in the R. C. Church." And why? "If the discontented will not depart and refuse to be expelled, they will sooner or later be heard." (Ibid. p.55)

**Thesis Twenty-nine.** However, if even the most antibureaucratic grassroots Roman Catholics are determined to preserve their own communion's solidarity, they will to that extent have to suffer another dilemma, an ecumenical one: how far dare they move, without jeopardizing their own communion, as they now make common cause with the rest of us outside that communion, especially those of us who are known for our separateness? (Cf. John Paul II's lectures, last week, on Eucharistic fellowship.)

Thesis Thirty. Not only must we bear with them in that agonizing ambiguity—who should be able to understand that better than we?—but also we might learn from them, and thank them for the lesson how to be a confessional movement without separating from fellow-confessors—indeed, how to make their very tenacity of staying together be a fundamental part of our confession.

## COMMENT

**Thesis Two.** "...But the phenomenon itself, as a social reality within the churches, is already plain to see."

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 he seems' 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 rambunctuous 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, Kenper 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 undercurrents 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 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 unwieldly 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 a 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). (357) 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 national powers.” (356, 359, 357)

In any case “the local churches may not exempt themselves from missions by engaging in them 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 human go-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 antibureaucratic 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 "antibureaucratic" 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 styles 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. (XVC 34. 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 antibureaucratic 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 admittedly is 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 Five.** “‘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.

**Thesis Six.** “But that declining confessional movement of ours may just be reappearing as part of that larger trans-denominational phenomenon described above, which is antibureaucratic, grassroots, ecumenical.”

Those doughty ELM and AELC confessors, now more and more isolated from their earlier movement, seem to be re-emerging here and there in their far-flung diaspora, scattered throughout a thousand localities but now in this other, much larger grassroots movement. This movement, as we noted, is insistently local or regional. Although local, it is also, right at the local level, trans- synodical and even trans-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, I gather, is not against denomination as Christian identity, as a confessional fellowship for pacing one another in The Faith. Rather they seem 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—even that much importance. But they are

definitely neutralizing their denominations' jurisdiction locally.

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 more so, 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 consultants to congregations and regions, whither the action seems to be shifting.

### **Thesis Seven.**

“This antibureaucratic, grassroots 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 respective denominations.)”

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.

### **Thesis Eight.**

“So the ‘Call To Lutheran Union,’ I believe, 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—whether or not they disaffiliate from their own stay-behind denominations.”

Suppose that in response to “The Call To Lutheran Union” issued by our 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 finally 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.

### **Thesis Nine.**

“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 grassroots 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-Worded 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, at least in this one important respect. This praxis-Worded



function of theology was quoted before from 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 the 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.

### **Thesis Eighteen.**

"This grassroots movement which calls for re-Wording is driven by powerful ethical demands, more demanding probably than even the grassroots realize or could ever live up to. Even so, the movements ethical concerns are still not enough to make this movement a confessional one."

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, is 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 Nineteen.**

"A secular system like bureaucratic organization becomes not just unethical 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 turning his liberation into bondage."

What I am suggesting, really, is this: in, with and under the current grassroots 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 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 naeue. The need obviously is not for naevete 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.

Remember the statement, quoted earlier, from Gritsch and Jenson, one of the strongest in their entire book. It appears at that point where they are drawing implications for church life today from that Lutheran confessional document which I alluded to before, 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 affect 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 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.” (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.

**Thesis Twenty.** “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*).

### **Thesis Twenty-one.**

“What finally would constitute this grassroots movement in current church praxis 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 global and ecumenical responsibilities we now are inviting to ourselves at the grassroots.”

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 grassroots 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 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*.

### **Thesis Twenty-two.**

“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 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.

Robert W. Bertram  
Garrison, New York  
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[trans\\_pluralism \(PDF\)](#)