

WHERE IS THE CONFSSIONAL MOVEMENT MOVING?

Robert W. Bertram

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Answer. "The confessional movement" in the above question refers to that movement which recently emerged within the Missouri Synod, and against it, but which meanwhile has scattered beyond the Synod (though significant remnants still remain there) and by now has largely lost its confessional target, momentum and cohesion as a unitary force. Its offshoot body, the AELC, particularly in its readiness to die denominationally for the cause of greater Lutheran unity, and Christ Seminary-Seminex, once the cruciform paradigm of the movement's confession, are today the confessional movement's two most visible survivors.

Still, the spirit of that confessional movement as well as its doughty confessors might just be re-emerging here and there in their far-flung diaspora, scattered throughout a thousand localities within another, much larger grass roots movement. This new Christian movement, however, is insistently local and regional and, at those levels, is trans-synodical and even trans-denominational – trans-denominational and only sometimes anti-denominational. I am thinking of those mushrooming clusters all across the land among local Christian folk, lay and clergy, from different synods and denominations, who are finding, negatively, that they share a common disillusionment with their respective denominations' "bureaucracies." Their grievance is not against denominations as such, as confessional fellowships and consciences for the tradition, but rather with their

denominations' managerial authority structures upon which congregations and clergy had become excessively dependent.

Without necessarily separating from their denominations but at least neutralizing their influence locally, these hometown Christians are now searching together – and this is their affirmative – for less bureaucratic and more evangelical ways of resuming their own churchly responsibility locally and regionally but, all the moreso, pan-Lutheranly and pan-Christianly. Interference (if any) from denominational headquarters is less and less intimidating to the locals, and in many cases the headquarters staffs, now much reduced in staff and power, are adapting to new models of servanthood.

This anti-bureaucratic, grassroots ecumenism seems to be attracting, in their localities, not only AELC moderates but also LCMS moderates, and both of these with one another (despite the break between their parent bodies) as well with other Lutherans and other Christians in their area.

This dispersed, decentralized ecumenism might well be the next movement which those Lutherans who are experienced confessors can now help to shape into a confessional movement by giving it the right words – of the Word. But for them to do that sort of on-site confessional verbalizing, which can be a lonely task, they themselves now more than ever shall need the encouragement not of transcendent bureaucracies but of a worldwide Lutheran confessional presence. This comprehensive confessional presence does not first need to be created. It is already in being, or at least in becoming, in thousands of local Lutheran cooperative ventures. What these local ventures do need, though, is to be put in touch with one another, yet not by some cookie-cutter organization from above. That could easily exclude many Lutherans just because of their present synodical labels – by now a fading priority also for themselves – who are already

confessionally and ecumenically active and even in the forefront in their own localities. No, this broad Lutheran “network of care” ought to be as inclusive as there are Lutherans who de facto are of the same confessional will and community.

The preceding paragraphs are really only a summary of a larger position which needs spelling out. It raises at least four sub-questions. Let me ask those four questions and then, also briefly, try to summarize their answers. Finally, I would like to return to one of the sub-questions (#2) and elaborate its answer at somewhat greater length –God granting us time.

Sub-question 1. What is a confessional movement anyway, this one or any other one?

Answer. A confessional movement arises within and against a situation of churchly oppression 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. What is being oppressed is not only other Christians but the very Gospel of Christ. The Gospel is being oppressed by being augmented, reinforced – “safeguarded” – with additional conditions and expectations which Christ never imposed, thus reducing His Gospel to a tool for enslavement, and augmented with substitute saviors for relieving us of our heaviest responsibilities, thus minimizing the need of the Cross. In face of such ruining of the Gospel, really the Gospel-and-Sacraments, Christians must take a stand together and publicly, defying if need be their own ecclesiastical authorities so as to expose that authority as a fake, and must invoke instead only that other, strange and vulnerable authority, Christ’s one Gospel-and- Sacraments, whose only clout is its own inherent winsomeness and by whose

confession alone Christians stand or fall in The Last Analysis. (See Matthew 10:32, 33; Galatians 2-5; AC VII; Apol. XXVIII, 20; FC 10).

Sub-question 2. The thing which church people are objecting to in their church leadership – perhaps the only thing, even at the denominational level – is that this leadership has become, as they say, “bureaucratic,” “secular.” But how is that (if it is at all) an oppressing of the Gospel?

Answer. The question really is a request to re-word the present anti-bureaucratic protest as a protest rather against unevangelical church authority, thus dignifying and churching the protest as confessional.

By using such put-down epithets as “secular” or “bureaucratic,” church people need not mean that secular authority – that law-like pressure by which God pushes along this world’s history, this old age (saeculum) – is necessarily bad, even in the church. What they might mean though, is that in actual practice the church has come to rely upon its secular authority – its administrative bureaus and staffs, its managerial efficiency, its programming expertise, its control over people’s careers and reputations, its purse strings, its “elitism of the informed” – more than it relies upon the authority of the Gospel. But it is only by this latter authority, Christ’s one Gospel-and-Sacraments, that God achieves his peculiarly New “efficiency”: gracing sinners, putting to death and making alive, churching the world. Once this Gospel-and- Sacraments is made to depend for its efficiency or for its authority or for its very survival upon the church’s managerial authority, then the Gospel has become instead a thing to be enforced, coercive, and therefore no longer the Gospel at all. And once church people’s responsibility to God is shifted to other go-betweens than Christ, then His Cross, if it remains at all, degenerates to a

cheap way out.

Then it is time to sound the confessional No, putting the anti-bureaucratic protest into the words of the Word, so that the truly evangelical point of its grievance is conveyed unambiguously in public speech and action.

Sub-question 3. 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?

Answer. 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 abdicated to 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 relieve them does pose a monumental problem. (Already one church bureaucrat has said cynically, “Lots of luck!”) 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.

Sub-question 4. 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?

Answer. 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 our confessional question, they may indeed exclaim: “So that’s what we’ve been doing: confessing! Here all we had given ourselves credit for was bitching.” In other words, our new encouraging Word may become a self-fulfilling description. That way, even though it may be we who put the Word in their mouths, it will be they and not merely the ecclesiastical leadership who are then free to take responsibility for their own response.

That, after all, is what it means to be a confessional movement: everyone in the movement shares responsibility, before the world and before God, for the confession which is there being made, and no one may preempt that confessional responsibility for others. That much freedom for every Christian the Gospel insures.

Of the four sub-questions, above, we have time to elaborate only one of them. The neediest perhaps is Number 2, in which we

emphasized that the current anti-bureaucratic protest, if it is going to be churched into a confessional movement, will need to be radically re-Worded as an evangelical protest primarily against one abuse, a "secularist" diminishing of the authority of the Gospel, as if the Gospel-and-Sacraments were not really "enough" (satis). Let's say more about that.

A.) What no one, I suppose, would dispute is that there is today in virtually every church body what one Christian Century writer calls "an up-with-the-grass-roots-and-down-with-centralized-bureaucracies mood." In that same magazine's current series, "The Churches: Where From Here," the one negative phenomenon which every major denomination so far has reported with almost scary unanimity is, as one of the reporters tells it, the grass roots "de-structure" of the denominations' bureaucratic structures. Witness also the Roman Catholic drive against "papalism", the Anglican bishops being scolded at the Lambeth Conference for having become "super-executives", the upset presidential election in the LCA in quest of a president who would be a "pastor", etc., etc.

There is a danger, at least the danger of a missed opportunity, if confessional movement Lutherans, fail to see how much this anti-bureaucratic phenomenon in other church bodies is part of the same phenomenon which they themselves have been coming through. They ought to recognize this not for reasons of Schadenfreude but in order to appreciate how vast a movement it actually is in which they have already begun to acquire some experience.

B.) And I suppose no one would dispute, either, that this churchly reaction against churchly bureaucracy directly reflects the same populist reaction, the faddish drive toward localism which is sweeping society as a whole. That is one more illustration of how secular power is exercised also in the

church, not only in its bureaucratic forms but also, by reaction, in its populist forms. In principle there is nothing wrong with that, at least nothing disastrously wrong.

C.) What almost no one, I suppose, would dispute is that this anti-bureaucracy is frequently, also in the churches, downright vindictive, a selfish alibi for provincial locals to shirk their larger, global duties, and sometimes an irrational repudiation of all legitimate authority – a perfect patsy for a new and worse kind of authoritarianism.

The previous sentence, incidentally, comes close to describing what happened in the recent take-over of the LC-MS. Some of us, who also by the way were synodical bureaucrats, were the victims of a populist outrage, and not altogether undeservedly. Ironically, though, we were ousted to make room for still other bureaucrats, seven times more authoritarian than the first. But they were the ones who had gotten to “the people” before we did. Even so, the populist newcomers were still operating out of the mistaken ambition, the wrong-headed assumption that synodical bureaus is where the church’s real power is “at.” They could scarcely have foreseen what surely they will be learning soon: as churchly ardor, even among conservative congregations and districts, cools toward the organizational centre, those centralists will be left holding the bag. All those electric typewriters!

D.) What few will dispute, though a few may, is that the anti-bureaucratic uprising inside and outside the church does have a point, a very telling ethical point. And that is, the bureaucratizing of human organizations, indispensable as that is to human welfare in our time, does nevertheless discourage people from sharing in decisions which affect them vitally, decisions for which they still bear the consequences. The anti-bureaucratic protest, insofar as it is ethically justified, is a

protest against being treated like children by experts who know what is best for us (as they probably do) and who will not trust us to make the right decisions (as well we may not). Bureaucracy abridges the profoundest human right of all, the right to be held responsible. So people who are willing to face responsibility, or at least hope they are, do right to object. But the ethical rightness of the protest is not enough to make it confessional.

E.) What only a few would dispute, though almost no one admits it either, is that bureaucracy is fostered not only by bureaucrats but by "the people" themselves, who until recently seemed only too relieved to "let staff do it" on the convenient assumption that basic Christian responsibility really can be delegated, especially if by doing so those responsibilities are discharged more professionally or more economically. If anti-bureaucrats are going to make their protest confessional, then, no matter how grass-rootsy they are, they will have to begin with a confession of their own pro-bureaucratic guilt, their own radical aversion to responsibility.

F.) However, what many would undoubtedly dispute but what I nevertheless am constrained to propose is this: in, with and under the current grass roots protest against church bureaucracy there is an intuitively Christian, even Christ-like indignation.

Although these indignant Christians may often state their objections crudely, although they may be animated as much by pent-up frustration and sheer meanness as by zeal for the Lord's house, although the most spirited of their complaints can be demonized by demagogues into the ruination of the Church rather than its 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 for naivete but simply for giving these Christian people the benefit of Christian doubt. That may be hard to do, coming as it does in our case from their very victims. Yet being freed to extend them that benefit is precisely one of the advantages of your and my new liberation.

G.) 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 be 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 Formula of Concord (Article X) as the signal for "a time for confessing." When some current church practice, even though it might otherwise be unobjectionable or even constructive, assumes that much importance— assumes the importance, namely, of being "necessary", the time has come to dissent and if necessary to disobey.

H.) But "necessary" for what? Why, necessary for "salvation". Still, not even the most secularist church bureaucrats would ever claim that 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's people's "salvation". Similarly, I doubt that the Judaizers in Galatia ever said in so many words that, besides faith in Christ, also circumcision was necessary for salvation.

But the confessors in Formula of Concord-10 were not confining their vigilance to what ecclesiastical authorities merely say or do not say but rather to what they 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." (FC X, 12-15). And what the confessors here mean by "God's commandments" is the Gospel-and-Sacraments which God initiated through Jesus.

I.) But the real hazard to the Gospel 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". No, what is most damaging is that this new necessity so displaces Christ Himself, who finally is our only responsibility-bearer, that he then becomes necessary only relatively –and then, really, no longer necessary at all. If instead of the Mediator Jesus there is now a different responsibility-bearer which intervenes in the form of those church bureaus which discharge all the really significant work in God's mission in our stead, pro nobis, so that we may now have the comfort of knowing it is all being done far more expertly than ever we could and that all that is left for us amateurs to do is to support and implement the programs which those distant toilers have labored 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 also seems to have been reserved to the

professionals – then when that happens a whole soteriological, mediatorial system has moved in to usurp that glory which the Father has jealously reserved to His Son. Then it is high time for everyone, from top to bottom, to call a halt.

J.) The way the halt is being called, though the call is garbled, is that church people throughout the land are struggling to extricate themselves from their traditional dependency upon their

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denominational management. To put the best – i.e., the evangelical – construction on their protest we are construing it as an at least latent protest for the sake of the gospel. Still, latent their protest dare not remain, else it hardly qualifies as a confession, which by definition entails clear public and forthright witness.

K.) I hardly need to remind you and you hardly need to remind me, given our recent experience in the movement, how atrociously difficult it can be to make our public witness clear, so clear that at least our friends and fellow-confessors (let alone our opponents) can hear the point of protest in our confessing.

That difficulty was brought painfully home to me in a letter I received yesterday, a sharply critical letter, filled as the writer himself admitted, with "harsh judgment," accusations of "duplicity" and questions about my unfitness ever to have been identified with the Exile or to be allowed to teach at Seminex. To that sort of letter you and I may be tempted to retort, "Shades of 801." Not so. What I want to underscore is that, even though the letter was not sent to me personally but to one of my superiors, it was nevertheless written by a friend, a fellow - pastor of mine in the AELC whose personal stand I deeply share and love – as I had cockily assumed my own public record (if

anyone's had) had made crystal clear. The point of this example is that I had sorely underestimated how hard it is to make a confessional witness which is consistently clear and unambiguous. So what was needed, obviously, was to take stock and begin again.

What was it that had triggered the brother's vehement complaint against me? A recent article in Missouri In Perspective promised that, at this assembly this afternoon, I would "challenge moderates to avoid the temptation to withdraw completely from the fellowship of the LC-MS." The fact is, that line was not a direct quotation from me, nor did it actually claim to be. Furthermore, the line was not something I would say if asked, nor will I be saying that this afternoon. Never mind the fact that the letter writer did not bother to check the source. That is not the issue. The issue, which now worsens, is that the folks who edit Perspective – and they, for sure, are my friends – must have had difficulty themselves in understanding what folks like me really stand for. Soon the grim realization comes home: my witness has been misleading. And if mine has been, who have had so many chances, how must it be with those thousands who get almost no chance? If these things be done in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?

L.) Stick with the example a bit longer. What it also illustrates is that confessional ambiguity is rooted not only in the inability of some of us to make ourselves clear but in the reality situation itself, in the facts of the matter. For instance, the letter writing brother evidently does want moderates "to withdraw completely from the fellowship of the LC-MS." I, too, want that if what that means is that moderates, including Missouri Synod moderates, ought to refuse to submit to that Synod's authority, seeing how utterly it has invalidated itself through a systematic, institutionalized legalism – not just legalism as a regretted now-and-then aberration but as an

ongoing and publicly defended policy. If that is what is meant by “withdrawing from the fellowship of the LC-MS” – refusing churchly obedience to Synod’s unchurchly authority – why then, yes, of course. But on that much it is relatively easy to be clear.

On the other hand, this same discredited synodical authority recently ordered some of us out of the Synod’s ministries (as though they really were the Synod’s in the first place) and signaled that expulsion by removing our names from the Synod’s clergy roster. Some of us have let it be known that, though we do of course serve also and enthusiastically in the AELC – as if that were the issue – and although on that ruse we have allegedly had our calls to Missouri Synod people terminated, the truth is, we are not leaving. We are not leaving those Missouri Synod people, not those who still honor their solemn calls to us. (Otherwise I, for instance, would have to desist from teaching my first-year seminarians, the large majority of whom are still from Missouri congregations.) Anyway, to have responded to our expulsions instead by accepting them could be construed, I suppose, as acquiescence in a synodical authority which otherwise we insist is spiritually defunct. And by continuing to minister to Missourians, especially those in my classroom and office, I am acting out (even though I seldom think about that anymore) how hollow the threats of that defunct synodical authority actually are. So in this respect I must refuse to withdraw [not from “the fellowship of the Missouri Synod” (whatever that means anymore)] but at least from the fellowship of Missouri Synod moderates, co-confessors. And I am sure that the letter writing pastor, knowing him for the Christian he is, does much the same.

M.) After this long excursus on how fraught with ambiguity is the confessional situation, what is the moral? Is it self-pity (“Lord knows how we suffer”)? Is it resignation in face of the

hopelessness of the communication task? Isn't it rather that folks like us who have been getting such first-rate training in making our confessions clear, often to be sure by trial and error, ought to have an advantage as now we move with the confessional Platzregen into a new and larger and even more unfamiliar scene? But the bigger advantage is that, as we try and err, we have the advance assurance – as my letter writing brother concluded – of mutual forgiveness. That covers a multitude of ambiguities.

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