

A Time for Confessing Is a Time for Liberating

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[Printed in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 14, No. 2 (April, 1987): 85-93. Reprinted with permission.]

The Crossings Community, St. Louis, Missouri

ABSTRACT

*Becoming a Liberation theologian through the Missouri Synod controversy of the 1970s, Bob Bertram brought his distinctive clarity about the sola fide into Seminex's give-and-take with Liberation theologians from around the world, especially from Asia and Africa. From this experience there emerged for Bertram his "times for confessing" which he understood to be those times in which the church was forced to assert its freedom to confront coercive authority run amok. Bertram saw that such confessing was full of the sola fide risk always done from the core of the justification sola fide Gospel. * If sola fide is at the center of Liberation theology today, then Martin Luther, usually dismissed because of his opposition to the Peasant's War, should be rightly considered a Liberation theologian, too, as Luther taught how Christians who possess all the benefits of Christ, including Christ's freedom, are eminently free for praxis in God's world. (Stephen C. Krueger)*

**Note: Published posthumously in 2008, Robert Bertram's A Time for Confessing (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, ed. Michael Hoy) is now available.*

Bob Bertram became a Liberation theologian in the course of the Missouri Synod controversy of the 70s. Yet neither he nor anyone else noticed that until some years later. Even today in 1987 the confessing movement in Missouri seems so pale in comparison with "real" Liberation theology movements in the Third World. Yet it is Third World Liberation theologians themselves in dialogue with Bob and his theological work—more of them from Africa and Asia than from Latin America—who corroborate the claim: The time for confessing in Missouri was our time for liberation. Bob's analysis—social and theological—during and after the apocalyptic events parallels their own, they say. Some have even gone so far as to say he has helped them understand and clarify their own. Bob's dialogue with them has been mutually fruitful. He learned from them and they from him. His distinctive gift: clarity for seeing and articulating the *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) as the bottom line for confessing and times for liberation.

Bertram Among the Liberationists

In the decade of systematic theology at the St. Louis Seminex, 1974-1983, confession and liberation moved into priority position in classroom instruction. Bob Bertram was the prime mover in this refocusing of the curriculum. The last of several curriculum revisions during those years required only two courses of students in "dogmatics." They were "Christian Confession: Classical" (the ecumenical creeds and the confessing at Augsburg) and "Christian Confession:

Contemporary” (20th century movements beginning with the *Kirchenkampf* in Hitler’s Germany, our own LCMS experience, and the confessing in Liberation theology movements of today).

The procedure was to extrapolate from the historic confessions those features which are “classic”: The Christology of the ecumenical creeds, the *sola fide* of the Reformation confessions. The second step was to use them, as the catalog stated, critically to appreciate today’s theological movements and appropriate them for our own theology.

By the time of Seminex’s departure from St. Louis, five or six features formed the matrix. Bob’s first presentation of them came in 1977 at a conference on the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord. Bob’s assignment was to “do something” with the adiaphora issue in Article Ten of the Formula of Concord and its relevance for today. That arcane article of the second generation of Lutheran confessors served to open the door to the insight that times for confessing are times for confronting coercive authority run amok within the church of Christ. And the best response is the Gospel’s own freedom grounded in the unenforceable authority of the cross and enacted *sola fide*, by faith alone.

In the matrix for “Christian Confessions: Contemporary” in the early 80s these features were spelled out as follows: Times for confessing when—God forbid—they should be given to us are: 1) Times for *martyria*: Christians thrust upon the witness stand in conflict situations, with martyrdom clearly at hand; 2) Times for protesting “gospel-plus”: saying no to imposed alien addenda that wilt the freshness of the genuine Good News; 3) Ecumenical appeal: appealing to the Gospel’s own goodness as sufficient grounds for the church’s oneness; 4) Redefining authority: protesting coercive authority within the church by speaking and living the Gospel’s own cruciform clout as “authority enough”; 5) Appealing to and for the oppressed: since all false gospels by definition reinstate oppression, every fresh confessing of the Good News unfolds in solidarity with the oppressed; 6) Ambiguous certitude: the confessors’ words and actions are never immune to the vexing doubt whether they said or did the right thing. *Sola fide* praxis is always full of risk, not only that the venture will succeed, but also that the venturer is right (= righteousness) in the venturesome act.

In classroom instruction the two required courses intersected to show that present-day defenders of the church’s classical confessions need help to see the liberation praxis flowing from the heart of classical Christology and Reformation *sola fide*. Conversely, Liberation theologies today often need help in their Christological and *sola fide* groundings. The axiom is: The best theologies—confessional and liberational—are those grounded on justification by faith alone.

Bob’s theological work for the last fifteen years has been a set of individual exercises on this axiom. His not-yet-finished book on *A Modern Time for Confessing* will, *deo volente*, make the case for this claim in a full-scale monograph. Until that blessed book-event arrives, we shall have to work at the connection with the essays and addresses he has already given us. This essay is such an attempt.

The time for confessing in Missouri was without a doubt the prime mover in linking confessing and liberation in Bertram’s theology. Another was the fortuitous appointments he received during these years to ecumenical positions. One put him in the U.S. Roman Catholic/Lutheran dialogue group, another put him on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of

Churches. With the former came the long years of hard work on the *sola fide*, the classical fork in the road between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. With the second came first-hand contact with Christian leaders in liberation movements around the world. In both assignments Bob did not stay in the back of the bus.

Another nudge came from Asian and African theologians who came to Seminex during the 80s. They not only brought their own experience to us, but also sharpened the Seminex community's vision for our own liberation movement. In fact, two Liberation theology seminaries confessed their solidarity in the names they chose for themselves, Korean Seminex in Seoul and Aoyama Seminex in Tokyo. Thus Bob (and others of the St. Louis Seminex as well) encountered first-hand and face-to-face Makato Midzuno, Hiroo Sekita, and Kenichi Kida of Aoyama Seminex, Suh Nam Dong, Ahn Byung Mu, and Stephen Moon of Korean Seminex, along with Kosuke Koyama (Thailand and Japan), Motlalepula Chabaku (South Africa), Patrick Kalilombe (Milawi), M. M. Thomas (India), Masao Takenaka (Japan), Kofi Appiah-Kubi (Ghana), Dom Helder Camara (Brazil), and Francisco Claver (Philippines).

Not surprising from this listing, it is Asian and African theologians who have played the largest role in Bob's recent work, more so than those from Latin America. He has undertaken research travel to both continents recently to pursue the dialogue with Christians there.

Bob Bertram's first public venture into Liberation theology was probably his 1970 essay presented, as he says in the foreword, "in Germany (to) a conference of students, including an impressive representation of Marxist-Leninists" who asked him to respond to their question: How free are the American churches? Note the date. Gustavo Gutierrez' classic manifesto, *A Theology of Liberation*, was written in 1971. The English translation appeared in 1973.

The locale, the context, the question, and above all, the answer Bob gives in this early essay are "quintessential Bertram." The locale: Bob hob-nobs around the world. Rome, Munich, Odessa, Bangalore, Strasbourg, Stavanger, Johannesburg, Windhoek, Geneva, Tokyo, Taipei, Seoul, Manila, Lima—to name just the ones I can remember—are where he has been for theological work in recent years. The context: Bob is in theological conversation with dialogue partners most of us never even meet: Buddhists, Jews, high-tech scientists, Marxists, philosophers, as well as the Christian ecumenical waterfront from Russian Orthodox to Mennonite, from liberationists to theological right-wingers. The question: Bob has antennae for the *Zeitgeist*. Liberation was "in the air," he says, in 1970 and he just happened to be some place where he was asked to make it his agenda. The answer: Bertram regularly changes every question he receives before he answers it. This time the change was from "How free are the American churches?" to the better question: "How are the American churches free if and when they are ever really free?"

In responding, Bertram takes Martin Luther King's classic *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and reads it for his hearers to show *how* churchly freedom happens, if and when it does. But in, with, and under the exegesis of King's letter is the Bertram fillip: as good as MLK's own liberation theology is, the freedom he is preaching and that he embodies is "even better than that." So Bertram amplifies here and there "as the author himself surely would have done, had he gotten around to it," by tracking MLK's theological resources back to their own primal source, the Liberating Christ of the New Testament confessors. When you get to the double entendre that regularly comes with the last line, you have in hand "a fresh preaching of the Gospel" (Bob's

own proposed translation for Melancthon's *evangelium pure docetur* in the Augsburg Confession). This fresh rewording makes the thesis quite credible: The churches of America are free—if and when they ever really are—*sola fide*. It elicits the reader's response, "I never heard it quite that way before."

Bob's most recent venture into Liberation theology, as of this writing, is his January 1987 presentation to the Society for Christian Ethics in Boston, entitled, "The *crux* of Philippine Liberation Theology." It is a *tour-de-force*: the locale, the context, the question, and above all his answer. The *crux* of Philippine liberation theology is, of course, the role that the Cross (of Christ) plays in it. A prime example for this is the Philippine Jesuit, Bishop Francisco Claver, little known in the West but a giant in the movement. How does the cross become the *crux* of Claver's Liberation theology? Answer: *sola fide*. What makes this Philippine Liberation theology distinct in comparison with other liberation voices today? Answer: the clarity of Claver's grounding in *sola fide*, which also removes blinders for his tracking and then crossing the unfinished liberation movement in his native land.

If *Sola Fide*, then Luther a Liberationist?

We could seek to construct from Bertram's essays and addresses the *sola fide* grounding that unites Christian confessing and liberating. But instead, we opt to draw on Luther. Bob, after all, borrowed heavily from Luther, who borrowed heavily from John and Paul, who borrowed heavily from their Lord and ours. For our reconstruction here, we will also borrow, this time from a 1986 doctoral dissertation by United Church of Christ pastor, Willard T. Pierce, one of Bertram's Semineer graduate students. Pierce's work carries the title, *The Value of Freedom in the Political Theology of Luther and its Promise for Contemporary Political Theology*.

That *sola fide* was the center of Luther's theology is a truism. It is also taken as a truism that Luther's *sola fide* has no possible connection to today's Liberation theology. If one were to say, as we shall, that Luther's *sola fide* not only grounds a theology of liberation, but did so already in the 16th century, one would not find many allies in the current guild of theologians, especially American theologians—even American Lutheran ones. The standard wisdom against this thesis regularly raises the flag of the Peasants' War that supposedly closes the case against Luther as a liberationist. So in academe today Jürgen Moltmann, as Pierce says, "speaks for many": Luther is OK on theology of the cross, not OK on political ethics, let alone Liberation theology. Luther, he claims, "unburdens" Christians from the praxis of freedom in the political arena.

Pierce makes a compelling case to show that this view does not do justice to the *sola fide* at the center of both. *Theologica crucis* works only when you trust it; i.e. *sola fide*, not *sola imitatio*. It is the *sola fide* that opens the door in Luther's theology for moving out liberatively into the public arena. It is *sola fide* that sustains a Christian liberation praxis.

The sequence is not hard to track in Luther. 1) Sinners (un-free under the law) trust the crucified Christ as God's last Word to them. 2) That Word is an offer of a "sweet swap": this crucified God-man in exchange for your sinner-self. 3) The swap works *sola fide*, only if you trust the offer ("Glaubst du, hast du; glaubst du nicht, hast du nicht"). 4) When you trust him, the offered one, you have him and all his benefits, and he has you and all your deficits. 5) When

you have made the swap, you are free from your deficits and possessor of, and possessed by Christ's freedom. 6) When you are free, your public person puts freedom into praxis.

In a sermon from 1534 Luther calls this offer of justification by faith/freedom by faith "eine seltsame, ja aergerlich Predigt," and odd, even aggravating proposal. "How can that count for our freedom when we contribute nothing and are set free by believing in a third party, who died on a cross as an accursed and condemned human being?" The secret, of course, lies in that Third party. What makes *sola fide* work is not the strength of the faith on the believer's part, but the strength of faith's object, the Christ who is the partner in the sweet swap. In Bertram's own doctoral dissertation he devotes an entire chapter to the mechanics of the sweet swap, how it works and why it works. That chapter has been printed separately (see bibliography) under the title: "How Our Sins Were Christ's." We shall not rehearse that here, but instead develop the freedom theme in *sola fide*.

When the Christ is trusted, a threefold resource for liberation unfolds. First there is liberation from the all-pervasive necessity to justify oneself. Second, there is liberation from the drive to carry out this justification at the expense of others, the iron-clad law that self-justifiers are compelled to follow. Third, there is liberation from anxiety about death, the grim nemesis that drives oppressors willy-nilly into inflicting unfreedom on others. Another one of Bertram's doctoral candidates, William Yancey, made this set of themes the focus of his recent dissertation.

What does Christic lived freedom look like?

1. It is freedom *from* the law, not freedom *for* the law as Kant maintains.
2. The locale for that freedom is in our relationship with God. Christian liberty is free access to God.
3. How does one live out a law-free life? Is it law-less? Libertine? No. But that danger can never be removed without returning to life "under" the law. The Pauline alternative to "being under the law" is "being led by the Spirit." All roads of the new creation lead to the open space that is law-free. Clearly no "rules" can be set down, therefore, for the praxis of this freedom. That is part of the eerie, "odd, yes aggravating" character of life in freedom *sola fide*. It can be lived out only in case-by-case praxis with the free person herself enacting it on location.
4. So it is, on the one hand, "believed freedom"—trusted even in the face of evidence to the contrary—and, on the other hand, "acted-out freedom." It asserts itself in specific and particular situations of unfreedom. This makes it powerful, for oppression is *the* place where Christian liberation arises. Its power is the personal presence of the Risen Christ in God's new creatures defying every kind of interference from the old world of law, sin, and death. It is radically subversive because it is actively at work to bring down all the structures of the old creation and replace them with the kingdom of God. The metaphors that Bertram likes to use of "underground infiltrators, guerilla warriors" are not out of place for describing the children of God and their liberation agenda. Their commission is cosmic.

Pierce's summary on Luther says it well: "Christian political ministry is the praxis of freedom. It is grounded in the gospel of justification by faith alone, framed within the dialectic of law and promise and worked out in both kingdoms of God's world."

If that is so, why did Luther fudge on the Peasants' revolution, the liberation movement of his day, complete with a Liberation theology supporting it? Admittedly, the players in that complex tragedy and the events themselves are one of church history's prime jigsaw puzzles. But this much needs hearing: Luther did not object to the Peasants' cause and the justness of it. What he rejected was the sort of Liberation theology they followed, inevitably leading to the same issue that is largely unresolved in today's Liberation theology, viz., violence. For Luther, faith in a crucified Christ could not result in crucifying someone else, even if the other person is your oppressor. His cry to the peasants, "Suffering, suffering, cross, cross" was his encouragement to them, not his program for what to inflict on the oppressors.

With such a motto, however, how would Luther's theology effect liberation? One source for answering this question is his correspondence, that voluminous collection of letters that he wrote (without a word processor!) in daily "political ministry" to all sorts and conditions of people.

The last thing you could say of these letters is that Luther "unburdens" Christians from a liberation praxis of their *sola fide*. On the contrary, in case after case he scores the oppressors and counsels the oppressed not only about their rights, but also about faith's grounding for their own courageous acts of resistance and opposition. He often calls for radical structural changes in the political economy, though he is, admittedly, not sanguine about their chances of success. His correspondents are urged to model not Superman, but the crucified God, in kenotic solidarity with their fellow oppressed. With all due respect for the structures, ordained of God and all, Luther first calls for action to make the structures conform to the rubrics of Romans 13—*for* justice and *for* the preservation of life. And he also pushes for occasional undermining even of the well-functioning structures of the old creation with some experimental infiltration, to subvert them by replacement with the new order of the new creation. But that newer one can never be coerced, for coercion is a trademark of the old. It can only be risked, *sola fide*, of course, as a third option in the face of any of the either/or's that the old age seems to lay before us (e.g., either resistance or servitude).

Luther's classic document on Christians in the political arena is his treatise, *On Secular Authority, How Far It Should Be Obeyed*. This document remains one of Lutheranism's best-kept secrets. It starts by giving the biblical grounding for both of God's kingdoms in this one world of ours. And the kingdom that needed the most help in Luther's (ours too?) was the secular one, that multiplex network of worldly work to which God calls each of us. That turf and its systems are not first of all demonic; they are a gift of God. The authority in praxis there, even when it goes to coercive means, is godly in origin. It is to be exercised in a way that secures justice and preserve life for all those encompassed in its particular realm. Since it comes with such credentials, the last thing *sola-fide* Christians can do is "unburden" themselves of their secular ministry there.

In the second section of the treatise Luther raises the question of the limits of this secular authority, how far it should be obeyed. To the surprise of most contemporary readers, Luther discusses the limits question with reference to the church, not to the secular world. In the church of the 16th century, supposedly Christ's new turf of freedom, coercion was *modus operandi*. Measured by the Gospel's *sola fide*, that was clearly illegitimate. There is *no* place in the internal governance of Christ's people where secular authority (the power of some "sword" to

enforce or coerce an action) is authorized. It is off limits in every case. *Sola fide* is, first of all, a praxis of the heart. The “sword” can reach the heart only to destroy it. So the first limiting of the extent of secular authority is to remove it completely from the church’s internal political praxis.

But what then are the limits in the old creation for the legitimate God-given “power of the sword?” That is Luther’s concern in the final part of the treatise. Here he personally addresses Duke John, heir apparent to the Saxon electoral throne, the one to whom he dedicated the writing. Luther reminds the prince that he is a steward, God’s caretaker of an office and a people who inhabit the land that John rules. Furthermore, it is the prince’s calling “in Christ” to be devoted to the well-being of his subjects. That means the political realm in which John operates does not exist for John’s benefit, but for the benefit of those he rules. With example and encouragement Luther draws out for John the twin threads of faith’s freedom and kenotic solidarity for the political ministry that John will soon assume. In short, Luther calls on the prince to lead the Liberation theology movement in his own realm, and as John does so, counsels Luther, the dear holy cross will not be far away from his own back.

The treatise *On Secular Authority* thus articulates a *sola fide* praxis of freedom in both church (Part II) and world (Part III). The Christ-trusters who are the church live simultaneously in both of God’s regimes—the new and the old. God’s own differentiated modes of operation in these two realms mark the difference for *sola fide* practice in each. In the old eon God manages affairs under the law of fairness. Justice means people get what they have coming to them. The divine assignment to the *sola fide* political minister is: practice justice; preserve life.

In God’s new eon management model, justice is replaced with mercy, fairness with forgiveness. As God does, so does the political minister—and the dear holy cross will not be far away.

The value of freedom in Luther’s theology vis-à-vis churchly oppression is a new resource for recent Roman Catholic theology. Especially Liberation theologians in that tradition now going public with their own fresh praxis of that “odd, yes aggravating” Gospel of freedom find Luther a winsome ally for liberation within the church. One such Roman theologian from Africa confided at last summer’s LWF Liberation theology seminar in Strasbourg that his just-published first book in English was “full of Luther.” Luther’s theology undergirds his cry that African Catholics be liberated from Rome’s oppression to assume *sola fide* responsibility for their own church life. But there is nary a footnote to Luther anywhere in the book because “I’m already suspect enough in my own community for the Gospel I’m proclaiming.”

But Luther’s theology as a resource for political liberation? That is a new horizon with not many looking for light to come from that direction. There are a few, however, in both the northern and southern hemispheres, some of them Bob’s colleagues, others his students, who—in Pierce’s words—see the “promise for contemporary political theology” coming from Luther’s theology of freedom. I paraphrase Pierce’s conclusions as my own to this essay:

- 1) Justifying faith is prerequisite for any Liberation theology.
- 2) The freedom given by faith leads the believer into political ministry.
- 3) The dialectic of law and promise provides the framework for political ministry’s analysis and action.

- 4) Justification by faith alone calls forth the new human community, the church, men and women directed by their Lord out into the world as little Christs.
- 5) Christians practicing such freedom in the world actualize Christ's new kingdom in and with but no longer under, the old creation.
- 6) Thus the best political theologies are those which commend political ministry in both church and world in such a way as not to lose *sola fide*, the freedom of God's cruciform promise.

One of the blessings of the person and work of Robert W. Bertram is the freshness with which he has sought to show us that "this is most certainly true."