

6-1987

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Recommended Citation

Simpson, Gary M., "The Parish as a Confessing Community" (1987). *Faculty Publications*. 58.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/58

Published Citation

Simpson, Gary M. "The Parish as a Confessing Community." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 14, no. 3 (June 1987): 194–99.
<https://luthersem.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000974613&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

The Parish as a Confessing Community

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Over the past twenty-five years Robert W. Bertram has been in the forefront of a movement within American Lutheranism to reconstruct a classic mode of confessing identity. Such an identity will not be fettered in an ahistorical fixation on the past or insulated by a false parochialism or reduced to a pale privatism. Rather, this new mode of confessing identity presents itself as historically responsible to the contemporary life situation of the church, as ecumenically in dialogue with other faith traditions, and as publicly up front as a corporate reality in the world.¹

This new mode of confessing identity takes note that there have been, are, and will be certain “times” within the life of the church catholic when it is necessary for movements to arise within the church and to testify, often against the established authorities of the church, to the sufficiency of the one Gospel-and-Sacraments as the source and ongoing vitality of our very life together. Bertram has sought to articulate criteria which persistently surface in the writings of these, rather diversified, confessing movements.² Such “times for confessing” have included, for instance: the Synod of Nicea of 325, the Diet of Augsburg of 1530 and its aftermath, the Confessing Church under Na-

zism of the 1930s–40s, the Vatican Council of 1962–65, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s–60s, and the ongoing anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. These movements, both classical and contemporary, issue a summons to us as well to take our place publicly on the witness stand of history before God, the world, and the church in order to give voice to the faith-instilling freshness and sufficiency of the one Gospel-and-Sacraments.

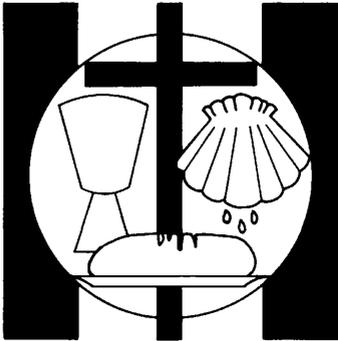
Bertram has compared these times for confessing to “sneezing” when the church for its own sake and for the sake of the one Gospel-and-Sacraments cleanses itself of teachings and/or practices alien to the body’s health and wholeness. Since sneezing

¹Robert W. Bertram, “Our Common Confession and Its Implications for Today,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 39 (November 1968):715–21.

²Bertram, “Augsburg: A Modern ‘Time for Confessing,’” unpublished manuscript, St. Louis, Missouri, Spring 1981; also, “Confessing the Faith of the Church,” in *The New Church Debate*, ed. Carl Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 123–37; also, “Confessing As Re-defining Authority,” in *The Debate on Status Confessionis: Studies in Christian Political Theology*, ed. Eckehart Lorenz (Geneva: Department of Studies, Lutheran World Federation, 1983), 95–104.

temporarily shuts down the body's other vital functions, he recommends that we pray with all earnestness, as a paraphrase of our Lord's Prayer, "Save us from the time of sneezing."³

In this tribute I have been asked to speak about "the parish as confessing community." How does the Lord of the church nurture the parish during those times when God is saving the church from a confessional trial so that when a "time of persecution" does summon the parish to take the witness stand, it will be prepared to do so with "confessable" faith?⁴



This essay will focus on the ecclesial dimension of faith formation as a key component of a parish's preparations for times for confessing. In this pursuit I will not rehearse Bertram's understanding of the "righteousness of faith" and its necessity for the freshness of the one Gospel-and-Sacraments, also in our time. Rather, I will assume his work and couple it with insights on the dynamics of faith put forth by Wolfhart Pannenberg and James Fowler. In a second part of this essay, I will borrow three insights advanced by the social theorist Jürgen Habermas in order to explore the connection between the ecclesial

solidarity effected by faith and the nurturing of a parish's confessing character.

Faith and Its Formation

Bertram's focus on the relation of faith and Christ arises due to

a special burden for current Lutheran theologies of justification to manage two apparently incompatible accents simultaneously. How to do justice to the Reformers' most embattled *sola* of all, *sola fide*, and at the same time do justice—not only compromise but maximize—*sola gratia propter Christum*? Indeed, how to accomplish the latter expressly by means of the former? How to emphasize the "wholly by faith" in such a way that God's gracious deed in Christ is not only not demoted thereby but is, as the Reformers would say, "necessitated" thereby?⁵

It is by shouldering this "special burden" that Lutherans propose to advance the radically new form of subjectivity offered by faith. Faith's radical newness resides in the surpassing value which Jesus ascribes to a person because of that person's faith in the one ascribing such value. The radical newness of faith's subjectivity, therefore, is precisely the

³Bertram, "Confessing the Faith of the Church," 123–28.

⁴Bertram, "Confessing the Faith of the Church," 123.

⁵Bertram, "Recent Lutheran Theologies on Justification by Faith: A Sampling," in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 252.

intersubjectivity with Christ and with Christ's body as a result of faith.⁶

Under certain circumstances, however, this proposal for a radically new form of identity has fallen prey to the machinations of a false privatism and individualism. This inclination toward privatism and individualism appears to be particularly alluring in our American context, as Robert Bellah and his colleagues have persuasively argued in *Habits of the Heart*.⁷ As Bertram has indicated, the counter movement against such an inclination is *precisely* the "wholly by faith" which places us "in the happy exchange," "outside and beyond ourselves" in Christ and in Christ's body, the church.⁸

Faith in Christ

simultaneously consti-
tutes ecclesial solidarity.

Wolfhart Pannenberg has articulated a theological anthropology with "being outside oneself" or "exocentricity" as one of its key components.⁹ With this notion he emphasizes the constitutive connection between human identity and "sociation." He explores and synthesizes the contributions that a number of contemporary disciplines such as philosophical anthropology, social psychology and identity psychology have made to this notion. He shows that the origin of the modern concept of exocentricity arises by way of Luther's understanding of the First Commandment and his description of faith as

trust wherein we abandon our identity to another. Not only are the contemporary secular disciplines not aware of the Reformation roots of their "modern" concept, they also are reticent to acknowledge the divine other, let alone divine Trinitarian other, into which their exocentricity places them. For Pannenberg, then, faith as trust is necessarily communal and ecclesial since the communion of the believer with Christ is always simultaneously a communion with Christ's body, "the solidarity of all Christians with one another."¹⁰ In this Bertram and Pannenberg converge: faith in Christ simultaneously constitutes ecclesial solidarity.

James Fowler's faith development perspective adds an important component to our sketch: faith in Christ presents itself over a lifetime in a variety of forms analogous to stages.¹¹ First, Fowler shares with Bertram and Pannenberg an understanding of faith as trust in and relationship to the transcendent, which simultaneously puts a person in relationship with others. Second, he notes, fol-

⁶Bertram, "'Faith Alone Justifies': Luther on *Iustitia Fidei*," in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 173-75.

⁷Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁸Bertram, "Faith Alone Justifies," 173-74; also, "Liberation by Faith, Confessing," unpublished manuscript, Texas Lutheran College, Seguin, Texas, 1984.

⁹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 37-73.

¹⁰Pannenberg, *Christianity Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 16; also, *The Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 35-40, 104.

¹¹James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

lowing the lead of Erik Erikson, that this triadic shape of faith passes through a predictable succession of life-cycle crises and their resolutions. Third, borrowing from Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, he holds that faith's triadic shape presents itself through a variety of distinctive structures or patterns. These different structures or patterns of faith, like the life-cycle crises, follow a sequence in which one pattern builds on the former and leads to the next. This sequencing process can and often does stop or fixate at one particular stage or another. Even though a person may fixate at a certain structural stage in his or her faith, that same person, nevertheless, will have to meet the life-cycle crises situations as they arise no matter in what stage that person's faith is.

For our purposes what is of particular interest in the structural-developmental model which Fowler proposes is the notion of "social perspective taking." It is this capacity to take another's perspective and in this way to be outside oneself which is of decisive importance as a person passes from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood and adulthood. As a person passes through the various stages, social perspective taking becomes a more complex process. Despite this increased complexity, Habermas demonstrates that the core phenomenon of social perspective taking is an interactional "communicative" event.¹² The thrust of these insights suggests that, as we in parishes expend considerable energy in forming people's "faith," we need to focus more specifically on the ecclesial dimension of faith formation.

Focusing on the ecclesial dimensions of faith formation will help individuals transcend the stage specific forms of ego-

centrality which are culturally exaggerated by our contemporary forms of individualism. This will also help them to relate with increased solidarity to others within their congregation as well as to other Christians throughout the world, particularly those least like themselves culturally, ethnically, materially, and nationally. Adults should be encouraged to pursue maturation in faith not only by more and better biblical, theological, ethical, and liturgical information, but also by establishing and nurturing relationships with others because of their Gospel-effected inclusion into Christ and Christ's body. Faith-effected ecclesial solidarity also will place those of us in Middle-Class America more in touch with the pervasive underside of life experienced most directly at the level of basic physical needs by Third World Christians and by the poor in the United States.

Ecclesial Solidarity and a Confessing Parish

A parish receives its identity as it is situated within the life process and story of a more encompassing ecclesial matrix. The parish as a confessing community will find itself to be embraced by a broad confessing movement and to be in collaboration with a vast cloud of witnesses to the one Gospel-and-Sacraments. Furthermore, as a confessing community, the parish will discover itself contributing to the momentum of the confessing movement and ultimately to the "confessability" of the faith to which it testifies.

¹²Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 69-94; also, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 86-101.

There appear to be rough parallels between Fowler's structural stages of faith development and certain structural features that a parish exhibits as a confessing community. Viewing the parish from the perspective of a developing confessing character would be a refreshing alternative to other more popular but more innocuous parish research, research which remains disconnected from a heritage rooted in a confessing identity. One of Habermas's accomplishments has been to take Piaget's and Kohlberg's structural models of individual development and to extend these models, though with several strong provisos, as a way to understand the development of whole communities, cultures, and societies.¹³

In Habermas's expansion of the structural-developmental model to communities at least three components surface which can be beneficial for our purposes. First, Habermas points to a developing capacity for "decentration" as a key for the evolution of a community. That is, communities, like individuals, mature as they embody increasingly complex forms of understanding the life circumstances, needs, histories, and identities of other communities, especially the most strange, alien, or even hostile. A community's capacity for a decentered perspective of itself and of others is a formative component in the development of a reflexive and self-critical stance by the community. For a parish this capacity can help to insure that the parish is not merely the embodiment of a narrow tradition. Such a capacity seems to be a necessary component of a "confessing" community which often must stand against the authorities of its own ecclesiastical tradition.

A second component drawn from Habermas is that a community's developing character is bound constitutively to modes of "communicative" interaction. In communicative interaction the parties to a discussion hold each other accountable to the normative standards which function in the life of a community and/or between communities. It is also conceivable that the very norms which operate within and between communities can be called into question and be probed for their sufficient grounds. The driving force of this process of testing the truth claims of a normative tradition is the search for a new or renewed consensus among the different parties. This type of communicative process is precisely what is occurring when the sufficiency of the one Gospel-and-Sacraments is the ecclesial issue of the moment. As a parish joins in such a process it receives its identity as a confessing community, an identity that does not forsake its tradition but allows it to be reformed and transformed, renewed and reconstructed. A parish's search for a renewed appropriation of the truth claims of its normative tradition simultaneously gives rise to relationships of reciprocal understanding, recognition, and solidarity with other communities.

Habermas's notion of communicative interaction echoes one of the criteria that Bertram has gleaned from "times for confessing": "confessing as appeal for/to the oppressed." He emphasizes:

¹³Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 95–129; also, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 22–101; also, "A Reply to My Critics," in *Habermas, Critical Debates*, eds. John B. Thompson and David Held (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982), 250–63.

The confessors' appeal is not merely an appeal *for* the oppressed . . . as oppressed objects, as helpless victims in whose behalf the confessors must intervene as third-party advocates. That could degenerate into a new and subtle form of patronizing. [Rather, their appeal is] also *to* them, thereby taking them seriously as responsible . . . [and] quite directly as participating agents . . . [because of their] faith in Christ.¹⁴

It is their faith that ennobles oppressed peoples and authorizes them to engage even their oppressors so that the oppressors too might ultimately be elevated beyond their oppressor status. In order, however, to use Habermas's understanding of communicative interaction for nurturing Christian confessing, we must penetrate more deeply into the phenomena of communicative interaction in order to establish: 1) the deep structure of sin and evil that exists within and between communities, 2) the divine grounding of critique embodied in the communicative structures of criticism and self-criticism that make repentance necessary, and 3) the christological foundation for reconciliation and solidarity that is necessitated by the deep structures of sin, evil, and critique.

Habermas also develops a third notion, that social movements are learning processes. Social movements arise as a result of communities communicatively reaching reciprocal recognition, understanding, and solidarity and, as they do, they become learning opportunities and avenues for other communities. From our perspective, confessing movements embody a witness factor, what Bertram calls "confessing as *martyria*." In confessing as *martyria* a summons

is issued to a parish to join with others confessing the sufficiency of the one Gospel-and-Sacraments, also for the church's own solidarity and life together *as* church. Bertram describes these martyrological times as "agonizingly short and not postponable" moments. Yet, these moments are "kairological" in that the whole church is being arraigned in a trial with a cosmic scope.¹⁵

A parish's identity as a confessing community also extends beyond the "time" for confessing to the degree that its confessing becomes incorporated into the development of its life story. The martyrological moments leave their imprint on a parish's subsequent history and life together. A parish can retain the character of a confessing community beyond its own time for confessing as it retains its ecclesial solidarity with confessing movements of previous times and those contemporaneous confessing communities of other locations. A parish which nurtures its ecclesial solidarity with the confessing tradition, both classical and contemporary, becomes a matrix for the formation of a faith that is at all times, if necessary, confessable, and for the formation of a people that is, if necessary, martyrological.

It has been one of our Lord's more promising gestures of ecclesial solidarity in our time and place to have nurtured his body, the church, through one Robert W. Bertram, teacher, confessor, and parishioner.

For this we give our Lord thanks and praise!

¹⁴Bertram, "Augsburg: A Modern 'Time for Confessing.'" "

¹⁵Bertram, "Confessing the Faith of the Church," 124, 129.



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