

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 13 p. 1

Volume 13 • Number 1 • January 1989

Evangelical Review of Theology



WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission p. 3

The Free or Gathered Church

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How do confessing churches, whose members have all made a profession of faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, justify their position?

First of all, on the conviction that Scripture is the only norm for Christian people, both for the constitution and the organization of the Church as well as for the salvation and the life of the individual.

According to the first Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, Luther rightly said: 'Primitive Christianity is alone the true Church.'¹ Zwingli and Calvin affirmed similarly: 'In perfect agreement with the Fathers of the Church, all the Reformation confessions proclaimed Scripture as the "supreme authority in matters of faith and life" after which "all things must be examined, regulated and reformed"'.²

That the model of the Church presented in the NT is that of a confessing church is seen:

1) *In the names that are given to members:* 'those who believed' ([Acts 2:44](#)), 'the disciples' ([6:29](#), [1, 26](#); [11:26](#) ...), 'the saints' ([2 Cor. 1:1](#); [13:12](#); [Eph. 4:12](#)), 'the faithful, the elect and the beloved of God' ([Col. 3:12](#); [2 Thess. 2:13](#); [Rom. 1:7](#); [2 Peter 3:1, 8](#)). These titles are in opposition to those such as 'children of wrath' ([Eph. 2:3](#)), 'sons of rebellion' ([Eph. 2:2](#); [5:6](#)), 'strangers and enemies' ([Col. 1:21](#)), characterizing those who are outside the church. These names are to be found in the addresses as well as in the contents of the letters.

2) *From the details that the epistles give us concerning the spiritual state of the churches to which they are addressed:* these are men and women who have experienced a decisive crisis which has separated their lives into two parts, *before* and *now*.

Before they were 'slaves of sin', 'dead by their trespasses and sins', 'without hope and without God in the world', 'strangers', 'disobedient', 'enemies [of God]', 'people from outside'.

Now they are 'delivered from sin' and 'having become slaves of God', 'brought to life with Christ', 'washed, justified, sanctified', 'brought near', 'saved', 'fellow-citizens with the saints', 'people of the household of God' ([Rom. 6:20-22](#); [Eph. 2:1-6, 13](#); [Col. 1:21-22](#); [2:13](#); [Titus 3:3-5](#)).

Their experience of conversion has separated them from those who are outside the church and to whom the apostles set them in [p. 24](#) opposition, namely the 'heathen, the unfaithful, those who are nonbelievers, strangers to the life of God who are perishing'; but members of the church are told, 'You must not walk like them', 'Do not have any part with them', 'Come out from among them and be separate' ([Eph. 4:17-20](#); [5:7](#), cf. [1 Thess. 4:5](#); [2 Thess. 1:8](#); [2 Cor. 6:14-17](#)). For all the members of these churches, the new birth is a thing of the past, salvation a present reality. That is why we do not find any appeal to conversion in the epistles, but rather exhortations to progress in the faith.

3) *From baptismal practice in the primitive Church.* All members of the churches were baptised ([Rom. 6:3, 11](#); [1 Cor. 1:13](#); [12:13](#); [Gal. 3:27](#); [Col. 2:11-12](#)); therefore baptism was only given to believers: 'those who accepted the word were baptised'; 'when they had

¹ Vom Papstum zu Rom, 1520.

² Confession of Faith of the Reformed Churches of France, 1559.

believed they were baptised' ([Acts 2:41](#); [8:12–13](#); [18:8](#)). Therefore the churches consisted only of members who had confessed their faith at the moment of their baptism.

4) *From the practice of Holy Communion in the primitive Church.* The apostle Paul writes: 'We who are many, we are one Body, for we all share in the same loaf' ([1 Cor. 10:17](#)). All the members of the Church share in the Lord's Supper ([1 Cor. 11:27–28](#)); they all belong to the Body of Christ.

5) *From the exercise of discipline in the primitive churches:* the believer who did not live in conformity with the teachings of Christ ([Matt. 18:15–17](#)); [2 Thess. 3:614–15](#)) or who did not persevere in the faith transmitted to the saints ([Rom. 16:17](#); [Gal. 1:8–9](#); [2 Tim. 3:6–9](#); [Titus 3:10–11](#); [2 John 7, 11](#)) was excluded from the Church. How much more reason is there not to accept as a member someone who has not yet accepted this doctrine or resolved to live according to the norms of the Christian life ([1 Cor. 1:10](#); [10:17](#); [Eph. 4:3](#); [Phil. 2:2](#); [3:15](#)).

6) *The appeals to unity* in the Church together with the exhortation to separate oneself from unbelievers and false believers ([1 Cor. 5:11–13](#), [15:13](#); [2 Cor. 6:14–18](#); [Eph. 5:5–7](#)) show that the Church was homogeneous in its composition.

THE PRIMITIVE CHURCHES

These six points give us a coherent picture of the primitive churches: their members had all passed through the *new birth*, by means of which they became *believers* and disciples of Christ, children of God. They bore witness to this by *baptism*, by means of which they became members of the local Body of Christ; which they express by [P. 25](#) participating in the *Lord's Supper* and by submitting themselves to the brotherly *discipline* of the Church. Thus they remain united to each other while at the same time being separated from the world.

Does that mean that there were never any false believers in these churches? Certainly there were ([Acts 8:13](#), [21](#)) but if this did happen it was by mistake and contrary to the norms that had been fixed. This is the great difference from the 'multitude churches' where believers and unbelievers are members by principle. In the same way this did not mean that church meetings were closed: [1 Cor. 14:23](#), [24](#) says clearly that 'an unbeliever or a man of the people' could come in to 'an assembly of the whole church' but he was clearly recognized, loved and addressed as such, without giving him the impression that he already was that which people hoped he would become.

This composition of the primitive Church is confirmed:

1) *By the name adopted for the Christian gatherings:* *ekklesia*, lit. 'called out group'; that is to say, in Greece, the assembly of citizens who separate themselves from the sum of the population (*ek*) at the summons of a herald (*klesia*, passive of *kaleo*, 'I call') in order to deal with the affairs of their city.

2) *By the titles used for the Church in the NT:* kingdom, flock, building, spouse, body—which show a certain identity of the members with each other as well as a living relationship with Christ.

3) *By the two occasions in the Gospels in which the Church is mentioned:* the first is linked with a profession of faith ('You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', [Matt. 16:18](#)), the second opposes the Church to the heathen and the publicans ([Matt. 18:17](#)). The Church is therefore the assembly of those who confess that Jesus is the Christ, and agree to submit their lives to brotherly discipline.

4) *By the importance of conversion and the new birth in the teaching of Jesus* and the disciples. This is the most important event in the life of each person, the beginning of the Christian life. If one can become a member of the Church, converted or not, it implies that

belonging to the church is more important than conversion. That is the teaching of the Church of Rome ('outside the Church there is no salvation') but Jesus said, 'If you are not born again you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven' ([John 3:3](#)). Conversion therefore must precede entry into the Church.

ADVANTAGES OF THE CONFESSING CHURCH

The confessing Church has a certain number of advantages over the multitudinist Church:
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a) It is in accordance with God's plan. Under the former covenant, God said to Moses: 'Make sure you build everything according to the pattern that was shown you' ([Heb. 8:5](#)), with regard to the tabernacle. He gave also a certain number of instructions concerning the 'house of God' ([1 Tim. 3:15](#)) of the new covenant, 'the pillar and foundation of the truth'. History has proved that this divine pattern was suitable for all time and for all places, that it has adapted itself to the most varied of situations, resisted persecution and offered the best possibilities of a fulfilled spiritual life.

From this basic advantage arise a certain number of others. The confessing Church enables the Church to realise her calling better than the multitudinist Church in regard to:

Worship. Those who have been redeemed in order to serve 'to the praise of the glory' of God and who have believed in Christ ([Eph. 1:12-14](#)) are alone desirous and capable of offering God worship that is pleasing to him. To worship him in 'spirit and in truth' ([John 4:23](#)) and to worship him 'by the spirit of God' ([Phil. 3:3](#)) one must be born of the Spirit ([John 3:6](#)).

The growth of Christians. The ministry of the Word may concentrate on teaching, edification and exhortation of believers; other ministries can be exercised 'for the perfection of the saints' ([Eph. 4:12](#)), 'so that they become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ' (v. [13](#)).

Fellowship. The exhortations to 'love one another', 'build each other up', 'instruct each other', 'console each other', 'watch over each other', 'take care of each other', identify *nature* and *aim*. A relationship as intimate as that indicated by the word 'Koinonia' is only possible between those who have 'participated in the divine nature' ([2 Peter 1:4](#)).

The priesthood of all believers can be better realised in the fellowship of believers. 'The priestly character of believers has its foundation in the new birth and in faith' (M. Jacob, *Die evangelische Lehre von der Kirche*, Lueneberg 1962, p. 430). Every believer has received a gift of the Spirit 'for the common good' ([1 Cor. 12:7](#), [Eph. 4:7](#)). The confessing Church functioning on the principle of the Body can validate these gifts by conferring a service upon each one of her members. Edmond de Pressense maintained that the multitudinist Church easily became a priestly and clerical Church, for it nullified the priesthood of all believers (*Discours Religieux*, 1859, p. 35); its consequent practice would render visible within the church the distinction between Christians and non-Christians. **p.**

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Evangelism and mission. These are placed in a better perspective in the confessing Church. Evangelicals in multitudinist churches often see their church as their mission field. But how do you evangelize those who already consider themselves Christians? How do you bring them together after their conversion without breaking the principle of unity in the Church? It is much simpler in the confessing Church. Those who belong to Christ want to share their faith and privileges with those who do not yet know them, whether the people are near to them (evangelization), or far away (mission). They expect that, just as in the first days, 'the Lord will add to the church those who are being saved' ([Acts. 2:47](#)).

The attitude to the state. During the centuries of Christendom, the church has aroused a number of equivocal situations. Her alliances with the state, and the abuses that have resulted, have turned away from her many sincere people and have fed many of her adversaries with their arguments against Christianity. The confessing churches have

always been free churches, independent of the state, as were the churches of the first three centuries.

b) Confessing churches remain evangelical more easily. The multitudinous churches, inheritors of the national churches, have maintained some of their characteristics: training of pastors in 'official faculties' where the professors are chosen basically with respect to their intellectual competence; nomination of pastors on the basis of their degrees' as well as social and political considerations, and consequently doctrinal vigilance with regard to church members is reduced or does not exist. Mature Christians here are in a minority. The consequence is an official 'pluralist' theology, in practice liberal, which has removed from the faith proclaimed in the church all belief in the supernatural, in revelation, in scriptural inerrancy and in the authenticity of the biblical writings,—sometimes even in the divinity, the resurrection and the return of Christ. A church composed of Christians who personally have confessed their faith in Jesus Christ can better watch over the maintenance of 'sound teaching' among her leaders and members. Most of the confessing churches of Europe are evangelical churches affirming the supreme authority of the Word of God.

c) The freedom to follow one's convictions is more effective. The official churches who wish to be pluralist in theology are very concerned for unity and continuity with the past with regard to their practice: sacraments, ministry, pastoral activity. Since the 16th. century Christians have rediscovered a certain number of aspects of [p. 28](#) the church-life of the first Christians: baptism of believers; holy communion restricted to those who confess a personal faith in Jesus Christ; free participation of all Christians in the Sunday worship according to their gifts. At the same time, they question a certain number of practices in the major churches: confirmation, religious marriage for non-Christians, monopoly of the clergy in religious matters, participation of non-Christians in church councils. The confessing churches enable each person to follow his own convictions in these areas.

d) The confessing churches can better realise Christian unity according to the Bible. The major historic churches concentrate the main part of their efforts on the realization of an organized unity between 'all baptised people' and between all denominations. The confessing churches believe in the unity of Christians as Jesus defined it ([John 17](#)) and as the apostles stressed it in their epistles: the unity of the true children of God. That is Why they are somewhat reticent with regard to ecumenical movements, and attempts at drawing near to Rome, where it is desired to organize unity between 'those who believe, those who do not yet believe and those who no longer believe'. The confessing churches are also divided, no doubt. But in these recent times, there are more and more common enterprises and occasions of working together, manifesting more clearly the essential unity of all the children of God. The confession of faith required of all members on the occasion of their entry into the church facilitates these approaches.

During the first three centuries, the churches remained confessing churches. They became multitudinist, in fact, only in the 4th. century, when Christianity became the religion of the Empire. The faithful churches in the Middle Ages (the Priscillians, Paulicians, Bogomils, Vaudois) were organized on the principle of confessing churches. The Reformers discerned the true character of the church (as for example the 'Deutsche Messe' of Luther) but the political circumstances of their time did not permit them to realize their vision at this point. Their successors, more concerned to keep their work intact than to 'pursue that which is lacking' (Calvin) have remained in the framework of the Constantinian 'corpus christianum'. Although it did not correspond to the original plan of God—like the kingdom in the old covenant—it has borne nevertheless, by the grace of

God, positive fruit in previous centuries. But today we are living in a post-Christian era, in a context that is more and more similar to that which was in the first century.

We do however note that there is everywhere a movement of the multitudinist churches towards the style of confessing churches which, [p. 29](#) at present represent 'numerically the largest group within Protestantism' (E. Brunner). Theology, the messenger and interpreter of the *logos theou* can hasten an evolution that is certainly in accordance with God's plan. [p. 30](#)

Bucer: National and Confessing Church

Neil Britton

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I do not think that most Evangelicals would support the idea of a national church where converts could not together pray and study the Bible, witness and serve the Lord in his Church and in the world. The question is rather whether a truly biblical faith can be lived out in a national church. In this regard, we can study with benefit the ecclesiology of one of the Reformers who sought during his ministry to combine the idea of a national *and* a confessing church; namely Martin Bucer of Strasbourg, whose ministry lasted there from 1521 to 1549 (he died in 1551).

His ecclesiology requires structures that are *at the same time* national and confessing. In Strasbourg, the Reformation had handed the Church over to the city from the hands of the bishop, while at the same time integrating the civil authorities into ecclesiastical responsibilities.

The national church came into being in Strasbourg. It is here that Bucer sought to put into practice his vision of the church, re-working the medieval concept of the 'corpus christianum', applying it first of all to the tangible, daily reality, capable of being observed in everyday life. It is also here that the ministry of the Church was realized, namely teaching, pastoring and the diaconate, from which the true church community takes root. It includes all those who are baptised (including children, because for Bucer their baptism is paralleled in the OT, with circumcision being the symbol of belonging to the people of God). Within this territory there is:

a) the school, promoting and consolidating the Reformation and organizing a renewed church, Bucer required each believer to have the possibility of learning during his youth Hebrew and Greek in order to read Scripture in its original tongue, to allow the Holy Spirit to speak rather than to promote the teaching of the ancient languages. The school was first of all a training in church life before being a training in the reading of literature, the study of science and the practice of art. It was not the Church but a training ground for membership in the Church. [p. 31](#)

b) The parish. This became under Bucer the community where the ministry of each individual believer was exercised, and the corner stone of the National Church structure. It was the normal cell in the 'multitudinist' system in which all the baptised were to be found. As every citizen was a member of a family or guild, so every baptised person was a member of a parish, where the teaching of doctrine, exhortation, discipline and the