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Introduction: Accents of Our Confession Today

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Introduction: Accents of Our Confession Today

WHAT DOES A confession drafted two decades ago, and adopted in 1967 after church-wide debate, have to do with the church's disciplined theological witness in the world of the mid-1980s? More than casual observers might expect, if we can judge by the enthusiastic and attentive participation of over 200 Presbyterian theological professors and students, parish pastors, church educators, and ruling elders who experienced forward-looking theological dialogue during the Symposium on "The Confession of 1967: Contemporary Implications." This intensive two days of lectures, seminars, and worship services occurred 21-22 October 1982, at Princeton Theological Seminary. The event was actively supported by the United Presbyterian Program and Vocation Agencies, and co-sponsored by three General Assembly Councils—on Theological Seminaries, Church and Society, and Women and the Church.

The Symposium celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of this confessional statement¹ which is *contemporary* in both the chronological and experiential sense. Following is the stated purpose of the Symposium, on the basis of which the planning committee² commissioned papers, and presbyteries and seminaries sent representatives:

The Symposium explores some of the directions offered by all three Parts of the Confession of 1967 for the church's mission and ministry today. It also critically examines some of the Confession's assumptions after fifteen years of further social ferment and theological reflection. Of particular interest are questions of:

1. Biblical authority and interpretation.
2. A confessing posture in the local church.
3. How liberation and reconciliation relate in the church's praxis.

The Princeton Symposium papers achieved this purpose by helping all who read them to:

—Clarify the direction for witness offered by all parts of C-67.

- Attend to a livelier dialectic of liberation/reconciliation.
- Reexamine, in our social context, the Confession's assumptions about reconciliation, and the shape of a liberating social ethic.
- Delineate afresh the nature of biblical authority and interpretation.
- Point to a confessing posture in the local church today.

A. DIRECTION FOR WITNESS OFFERED BY THE CONFESSION OF 1967

The Confession [C-67], taken as whole, serves as a durable framework for theological reflection that builds on the strengths of New Reformation theologies and the Biblical Theology movement. Part I begins with a unique christological section and illumines the *direction* we are sent in our "present witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ" and in our "call . . . to that unity in confession and mission that is required of disciples today." (9.01,05)

Direction is a word newly chosen for the Confession of 1967. It is meant to help clarify sanctification, which is hopelessly outmoded and overloaded with conceptions of sanctimoniousness. "Sanctified," in the Bible, means "set apart for a divine purpose," or *commissioned to serve* (9.10) . . . When a person or a group moves toward a purpose or end in life, their life is given a direction. "Conversion" in both New and Old Testaments means "turning around." It agrees nicely with this figure of a new direction. Christian obedience also is the result of being called and forming life according to the will and purpose of God.³

The direction in which Christians are to go is given shape by person and work of Jesus Christ, the teaching of apostles and prophets (Scripture), and the Christian community. (9.24). Those three elements are taken up in sequence in the Confession of 1967.

The Princeton Symposium agenda followed the systematic order of the Confession by beginning with the person and work of Jesus Christ, and then making Trinitarian links with the love of God as Creator and the work of the Holy Spirit in forming the Church. The Spirit is the source which illumines Scripture's witness to Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Such is the movement of Part I, "God's Work of Reconciliation." Symposium papers by Daniel Migliore, Bruce Rigdon, Esther Stine, George Landes, and Edward Dowey give primary attention to paragraphs of Part I of the Confession.

Part II, "The Ministry of Reconciliation," treats the mission and equipment of the Church—the spirited community which maintains continuity with the scriptural witness by faithful obedience to Christ's call (9.31). Paragraphs of Part II, Section A. "The

Mission of the Church," are given primary attention in Symposium papers by Letty Russell, Beverly Harrison, Gayraud Wilmore, Joel Gajardo, and Ulrich Mauser. Paragraphs in Section B. "The Equipment of the Church," are the main subject of brief presentations by practical seminar leaders Wesley Woo, Theodore Gill, Wallace Alston, Dean Lewis, Freda Gardner, and Dan Wessler. Part III, "The Fulfillment of Reconciliation," was the subject of a sermon by Gayraud Wilmore. Part III makes contact with promisory and apocalyptic eschatologies.

Arnold Come's review of "The Occasion and Contribution of the Confession of 1967" shows how much is going on here to broaden the church's theological frame of mind, in opposition to narrow statements of "essential and necessary" articles of faith, and in response to new theological and social currents. The main agenda of the drafters of C-67 was to offer more pertinent theological constructs than are available in the 17th century *Westminster Confession*, and to affirm the prophetic task of the Church within a full ministry of reconciliation.⁴ The Confession offers a social ethic within the scope and expressive of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ. "The coming into existence of the community of faith, with the living Jesus Christ as its Head, and the mission of this community into all the world, are essential integral elements of the single revelational/soteriological act of God in Jesus Christ," concludes Come.

In discussing "Forms of a Confessing Church Today," Letty Russell notes that a predominantly white, middle-class church still has not read the social signs nor counted the cost of this ministry of reconciliation. She invites us to "rewrite the section on Reconciliation in Society" in light of further experience and to act out of a God-World-Church perspective in a ministry of partnership that abolishes hierarchical clergy-lay relationships. Russell also cautions that "the *who* and the *how* of confession are as important as the *what*. . . . If the Church is to offer confessional witness today, it will need to make common cause with communities of renewal, and with communities of liberation and struggle."

B. THE DIALECTIC OF LIBERATION AND RECONCILIATION

The Princeton Symposium explores the dynamic interaction between theologies of liberation (black, Latin American, feminist, and Asian) and the confessional theology of reconciliation (drafted by respected white male Presbyterian theologians). The exploration begins with christology. Daniel Migliore's paper on "Jesus Christ: Reconciling Liberator" highlights the intersection at several points of the affirmations of C-67 and the emphases of

liberation theologies. Both “understand history within the horizon of God’s [transforming] activity”; both conceive of “Jesus Christ in historical and relational terms”; both “proclaim a gospel which is political as well as personal”; and both “call for the de-ideologization of Christian faith.” Migliore shows how Liberation Theology helps us to understand better the intent of C-67, and how the Confession’s focus on God’s reconciling work and the Church’s reconciling ministry helps us to respond to Liberation Theology’s insistence upon “praxis as the matrix of faith and theology.”

Migliore is the first of several speakers at the Symposium to note that C-67 says little in its opening christological section about Jesus’ solidarity with the poor and outcast. Its depiction of the person and work of Jesus Christ may still reinforce Presbyterian tendencies to acquiesce to existing injustices and to be triumphalist about God’s victory over the principalities and powers. Paul Lehmann commented that “justice is the critical point of intersection between Reconciliation and Liberation,” and now we must act for justice in unheard of ways. “Reconciliation is the presupposition and purpose of Liberation; Liberation is the sign and criterion of Reconciliation,” said Lehmann. “Reconciliation without Liberation is empty; Liberation without Reconciliation is blind.”

Along those lines, Esther Stine discusses liberating life in communion with the Holy Spirit, taking her cues from the “prodding” of Latin American and feminist theologies. Her thesis is that we “receive the Spirit in the struggle with and for the neighbor,” the Outsider who mediates the Other. She concludes that life in the Spirit with the Outsider is characterized by metanoia that moves toward solidarity; conflict with unjust structures, and relationships which embody new life in communion. Neill Hamilton, responding to Stine, agrees that the Confession of 1967 does not adequately plumb the dynamics of new life in the Spirit. But Hamilton emphasizes that “the mandate for the liberation of the oppressed clearly assumes some prior experience of Spirit . . . the Spirit comes in solitary intimacy with God” as well as “in the presence of others.”

This friendly exchange underscores two questions that recur when established theologies encounter liberation theologies: 1) Should the Reconciliation/Liberation dialectic be *ameliorated* as in J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Westminster, 1971), or should the dialectic be *intensified* as in James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Seabury, 1975)? 2) How much weight do we give to historical human experiences of oppression? C-67 seeks to avoid a juxtaposition of revelation versus experience in the opening sentence of Part II: “To be reconciled

to God is to be sent into the world as the reconciling community." (9.31) The "is" denotes a simultaneity of divine *promissio* and human *missio*. Similarly, the first two sentences of the section on "Reconciliation in Society" introduce a *contextual* social ethic. "In each time and place there are particular problems and crises *through* which God calls the Church to act. The Church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations." (9.43) (See Dowey's paper on "The Confessional Documents as Reformed Hermeneutic," especially section III.)

C. THE SHAPE OF A VITAL SOCIAL ETHIC

Several papers develop social ethical insight by critically examining the Confession's assumptions about the meaning of reconciliation in the context of recent social ferment and theologies of liberation. They reflect a common concern to do Christian ethics contextually with the view from below that characterizes biblical justice and mercy toward the disregarded. They also recognize that the Confession's social ethic does offer some more or less adequate analogies of the prophetic ministry of Messiah Jesus, and more or less pertinent paradigms of reconciliation amidst deepening cultural-political crisis. They underscore the question: On what theological-ethical basis will the Church become more active against racism, militarism, classism, sexism, and cultural imperialism? Papers on each of these crucial social dynamics were given, respectively, by: Gayraud Wilmore, Ulrich Mauser, Joel Gajardo, Beverly Harrison, and (in commentary on other sections of the Confession, with a plea to listen to eastern theology and culture) by Bruce Rigdon and Wesley Woo. We can assume, in continuity with the Confession of 1967, that these are still priority concerns of the Church in society.

The authors agree that C-67 offers some constructive leads on all of these subjects, but church thought and behavior has not moved vigorously enough toward a *liberating* ethic of reconciliation. Wilmore, in pointed comments on 9.44, and Harrison in critiquing the categories of 9.47, conclude that reconciliation is not an adequate frame of reference for the Church's struggle against racism and sexism. They want to give more play to the biblical norm and ministry of justice. They ask the Church to accept the cost of working for liberation on the way to reconciliation.

God's liberating, reconciling activity draws us toward conflicted, alienated, suffering situations and calls us to a sacrificial response that signifies God's deed in Christ among people in our time. An adequate Christian social ethic today will discuss the

responsible use of power in mission which challenges repressive thought forms, social policies, and institutional practices. Each unit of the Church which undertakes costly work for justice and peace, consistent with the Lord Jesus Christ attested in Scripture, is "an ambassador of God's future for the world," as Ulrich Mauser puts it toward the end of his paper on peacemaking.

D. FRESH APPROACH TO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION

The Princeton Symposium is the latest in a series of Presbyterian gatherings and papers which explore biblical authority. The Symposium planners treated this subject in its systematic order in C-67 (*i.e.*, in the section on the Holy Spirit), and commissioned a paper on biblical authority and interpretation by a Presbyterian biblical scholar who was not a participant in any drafts of C-67 nor allied with Presbyterians United for Biblical Concerns, which resisted it. George Landes' paper on "The Confession of 1967 and the Issues of Biblical Authority and Interpretation" is an important sequel to the work of the Task Force on Biblical Authority and Interpretation which reported through the Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship to the 194th General Assembly (1982).⁵

Landes reminds us that

Authority resides . . . in the Spirit's witness through the Scriptures. . . . What is authoritative, then, is what the Spirit brings us to perceive through our interpretive work. By shifting the locus of authority away from the scriptural words *per se* to the witness of the Spirit through the scriptural words in our interpretations, the Confession of 1967 frees the Scriptures from any deadening literalism, and by the same token, allows them to function as Israel and the early church always understood them to function, *viz.* as "adaptable for life," in every new situation and context.

Therefore, more attention must be given to exploring the disciplines and art of liberating interpretation of Scripture. Lewis Mudge's response to Landes' paper develops this hermeneutical concern.

E. A CONFESSING POSTURE OF THE CONGREGATION TODAY

Any doubts about the continuing value of this Confession as a framework for contemporary theological dialogue were dispelled by the testimony of many local church leaders offered in small-group discussion during the Symposium or written in letters applying for partial subsidy of Symposium attendance. The Planning Committee met the costs of registration and room and board, but *not* travel, for one pastor or lay person from each of

fifty presbyteries who "have some experience in utilizing the Confession of 1967 in parish or presbytery life." Many participants gave specific examples; here I can only sample them.

1. *A Guide for Parish Ministry*. A number of pastors reported that the Confession of 1967 has functioned as their primary systematic theological guide, *i.e.*, "as the appropriate statement of a living church to the times and circumstances of our present experience and growth."⁶ Many experienced pastors helped their presbyteries to study the Confession and to approve the overture which made it part of *The Book of Confessions*. Younger pastors also value it highly for its "clarity, balance and focus on reconciling action," and "have utilized the Confession in confirmation classes, as a basis for sermons, and as a basis for discussion and action in peacemaking. . . ."⁷ Another young pastor reports, "I have included elements of C-67 in Sunday morning liturgies and have adapted the language to be more inclusive while keeping to the spirit of its basic thrust. I have found it to be an effective contemporary aid to Bible study. In my preaching it has given force and clarity to my understanding and communication . . . As chairperson of the Human Development and Justice Committee of the Presbytery of Des Moines, I developed a model workshop [designed] to enable clergy and laypersons in the synod to understand the biblical mandate for social justice."⁸

The official history of one larger congregation reads, in part: "New directions in the church's life and ministry began in the late sixties with the study of the Confession of 1967. The Session concurred with the adoption of this statement of faith by the General Assembly and set it as the basis for the mission of the congregation. The Board of Church and Society, formerly a subcommittee of the Board of Christian Education, was formed as a standing committee of the Session, and the church began to look closely at ways of ministering to the racially changing neighborhoods and to the social crises brought about by racism, the war in Southeast Asia and the generation gap."⁹

2. *A Resource for Worship and Preaching*. "During the past 15 years, we have used portions of the Confession as we make corporate expression of our faith in worship. It has thus become very familiar to this congregation through repeated usage."¹⁰ Another pastor reports, "In 1972, I printed copies of the Confession which were used in worship for eight weeks in conjunction with a sermon series on reconciliation. . . . In 1977, I preached three times in reference to the anniversary of the adoption of the Confession. In 1981, I adapted the Confession to non-sexist responsive readings which were used for ten weeks, related to scripture lessons, and expounded in sermons. The influence of the Confession of 1967 on my life and ministry has been immense."¹¹

"While serving in a 9-church parish, I was involved in preparing excerpts of C-67 for worship use, primarily as statements of faith. The end result was three such statements, one of which is a paraphrase, all of which are in sex-inclusive language—a principle implicit although not explicit in the Confession."¹² The paragraphs on the sacraments have also been utilized liturgically as well as instructionally. Paragraphs 12-14 have most frequently been adapted for inclusion in calls to confession of sin, and in prayers of confession.

The Confession of 1967, in the context of the *Book of Confessions*, is "a 'road map' for bringing together our biblical heritage and our contemporary experiences and concerns."¹³ One pastor wrote a Th.M. Thesis on "Contemporary Preaching and the Confession of 1967," and finds it "a good guide/support in dealing with both theological and social issues."¹⁴

3. *A framework for Teaching and Incorporation.* Many sessions of United Presbyterian congregations utilize the Confession as a guide to the subject matter of adult education and in the instruction of elders, deacons, and new members. "The officers must read it and be able to discuss it intelligently before they are ordained and installed. The communicants' class I teach spends time on the Confession of 1967. Since my installation as pastor here, the congregation has bought *The Book of Confessions* for use during worship. I have continually referred to the Confession of 1967 in sermons, in adult classes I teach, as part of devotions for the beginning of Session meetings, and in my teaching for Presbytery training events."¹⁵

"The outline of the Confession of 1967 is useful for classes of new members or for those to be commissioned. The themes and topics are springboards for further study and reflection. This use introduces people to the nature of a confessing church and to the confessions in general. With young people, the picture of the banner (part of a set by Richard Avery and Donald Marsh) is a helpful aid to teach the Confession and to introduce them to confessions as expressions of the mind of the church. The contemporary artwork is appealing to the young people and can be used to speak of the church in contemporary society."¹⁶

The chairperson of a west coast presbytery candidates' committee noted that a definite majority of candidates for ordination are focusing their theology through the Confession of 1967, a document that calls us to account for our mission.¹⁷ A professor of religion and philosophy in Idaho has conducted several courses for presbytery and synod on the structure and biblical foundation of the Confession.¹⁸ A pastor in New Jersey sent along his detailed outline of biblical passages that illumine the preface and Part I, Section A, of the Confession.¹⁹

4. *Direction for Mission in Society.* Because the Confession approaches key problems of contemporary society in the framework of reconciling mission, it becomes a point of reference for sermons and seminars on issues of public affairs. Its social ethic encourages congregations to deal with controversial matters requiring community action, and is useful "in finding direction as we grapple with issues in the church and society committee of presbytery."²⁰ When read within the context of the *Book of Confessions* and current events, the Confession is a guide for decision-making. "For instance, our decision *not* to display the American flag in the sanctuary was made after careful study of sections from Westminster, Barmen, and C-67."²¹

The Confession points in the direction of Christian fidelity in response to undeniable and enduring human-social needs. One can move from its theological ethic toward "a rich hermeneutic which includes peacemaking, reconciliation, liberation and justice . . . in an ethic of Shalom."²² Its theology and ethic of mission has led the Presbyterian Church at all judicatory levels to institutionalize new patterns of social policy witness.

5. *Impetus for Pastoral Counseling.* Local church leaders who have lived with the Confession often emphasize its deeply personal and thoroughly social qualities. "Reconciliation is the basis for practical living at all levels of relationship."²³ It is a pertinent frame of reference for pastoral care of people who: a) face personal crises, b) experience vocational dilemmas, or c) disagree with the church's public posture.

A therapist wrote, "I appreciate especially the special sense of personal catharsis that goes on when people learn not only that God has forgiven and reconciled, but that often all that remains is for the client to forgive him/her self or members of their family."²⁴ Another pastor has utilized the Confession's theme of reconciliation "in the resolving of conflicts between individuals and in helping persons deal with the church's position on these and related issues. This is very pertinent right now as I serve a congregation which is one-third military."²⁵ A seminary classmate of mine, who utilizes the Confession liturgically and in shared pastoral ministry that features community services as well as counseling, understands the Confession's call to mission as follows: "The nurture of those whose leadership carries a large burden of business, government, and community services challenges the belief system of C-67 to its limits and me with it. The revitalization of a land-locked church in a city/town of negative growth, the maintenance of a high quality day nursery school, the careful use of limited funds, the search for and implementation of ways to establish a sustainable peace, and the need for an authoritative message of hope from God are among my pastoral concerns."²⁶

CONCLUSION

Symposium participants did not go into detail about confessing forms of parish ministry. No doubt, they could have given more examples along the lines, indicated in Letty Russell, "Forms of a Confessing Church Today." Confessing structures of the Church that are in continual need of renewal, and will only develop as the barriers between clergy and laity are breached, include: the church as a *congregational family*, as a center of *permanently available services*, as a *disciplined, prophetic community* structure, and as initiator of *task forces* to act for justice and peace. After describing each of these forms, Russell concludes, "The churches need more than 'come and go structures.' They need structures such as those just described that actually develop the gifts of laity in mission and that support them in the midst of that mission."

Many informal comments offered by Symposium participants suggested C-67's importance in additional ways: in the work of United Presbyterian Women, in the Association of Presbyterian Christian Educators, in theological education. The Confession of 1967 was also studied by Presbyterian churches in other countries, which utilized its themes in developing their own confessions of faith (e.g., Cuba, Pakistan). May it continue to inform us in making a faithful witness today.

NOTES

¹ No Presbyterian agency planned a tenth anniversary celebration of the adoption of the *Confession of 1967*, and a twentieth anniversary celebration seems unlikely since the General Assembly of the reunited Presbyterian Church "shall at an early meeting appoint a committee representing diversities of points of view and of groups within the reunited Church to prepare a Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith for possible inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*. . . . During that interval, *A Brief Statement of Belief* [a study document of the 1962 General Assembly of the PCUS] shall be utilized with the Confessions of the Church in the instruction of Church members and officers, in the orientation and examination of ordinands prior to ordination, and of ministers seeking membership in Presbyteries by transfer from other Presbyteries or other Churches." (*The plan for Reunion to Form the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.*, 1981, Article 3.)

² Special thanks are due to the members of the Symposium Planning Committee: Edward A. Dowey, Jr., Dieter T. Hessel, Edward M. Huenemann, Cynthia A. Jarvis, James I. McCord, David B. McDowell, Esther C. Stine, Jack L. Stotts, and Ronald C. White; to the following Princeton Theological Seminary staff: Mr. William Lawder, Treasurer; Dr. Jack Cooper, Director of Continuing Education; Ms. Mary Jane Jones, Center for Continuing Education; Ms. Judy Kauffman, Housing Office; Ms. Donna Musso, Center for Continuing Education; and, Rev. Wayne R. Whitelock, Director of Instructional Media.

³ Edward A. Dowey, Jr. *A Commentary on the Confession of 1967 and An Introduction to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968),

p. 90. The *Confession of 1967* is the last of nine items printed in the *Book of Confessions* of the UPCUSA and thus its paragraphs are numbered 9.01-9.56.

⁴ David Willis, "Authority in a Confessing Church," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 55:2 (Summer, 1981), 100, makes a similar point.

⁵ Compare the claims of Jack B. Rogers, "Biblical Authority and Confessional Change," *ibid.*, pp. 135ff., with the response contained in the Princeton Symposium paper by Arnold Come, "The Occasion and Contribution of the Confession of 1967."

⁶ Letter from Jack H. Glenn, Pastor, First United Presbyterian Church, Mendota, IL.

⁷ Letter from Tony Wolfe, Associate Pastor, St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, CA.

⁸ Letter from Sandra H. Charles, Pastor, Winnebago Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO.

⁹ Letter from Ned W. Edwards, Pastor, Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian, Cleveland Heights, OH.

¹⁰ Letter from Robert A. McKenzie, Pastor, St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, CA.

¹¹ Letter from Dennis L. Maher, Pastor, Pilgrim Presbyterian Church, Trenton, NJ.

¹² Letter from William W. Humphreys, Pastor, Vanderburgh Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, MN.

¹³ Letter from William B. Plank, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Manitowoc, WI.

¹⁴ Letter from George S. Knierieman, Jr., Pastor, North Como Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, MN.

¹⁵ Letter from John F. Hegelson, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Shortsville, N.Y. Similar observations were made in a letter from Karen (Bear) Scott, Pastor, Community United Presbyterian Church, Pismo Beach, CA.

¹⁶ Letter from David P. Moore, Rehobeth Presbyterian Church, Rehobeth, MD.

¹⁷ Comments of Ron Allen, Ruling Elder, Fresno, CA.

¹⁸ Letter from William H. Chalker, The College of Idaho, Caldwell ID.

¹⁹ Outline from Paul Leggett, Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Montclair, NJ.

²⁰ Letter from Peter A. Sulyok, Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Binghamton, NY.

²¹ Letter from Joseph D. Small, 3rd, Pastor, First United Presbyterian Church, Westerville, OH.

²² Letter from Richard G. Thompson, First Presbyterian Church, Goshen, NY.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Letter from Lyle E. MacLaury, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Waverly, NY.

²⁵ Letter from William Vogel, Pastor, First United Presbyterian Church, Bellevue, NB.

²⁶ Letter from P. A. Castellano, Pastor, Calvary U. P. Church, South Pasadena, CA.

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