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The Occasion and Contribution of The Confession of 1967

THE MORE I STUDY THE EMERGENCE of the *Confession of 1967*, the more momentous becomes its occasion and the more amazing becomes its contribution.

I. OCCASION

To me as a Commissioner to the 1958 General Assembly, the occasion seemed simple enough. The United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) had adopted a "revised confessional statement" as its "official creed" in 1925 because, as the Preamble stated, the Church believed it to be "the right and duty of a living Church to restate its faith from time to time so as to display any additional attainments in truth it may have made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit." The "conservative" UPCNA had been more faithful to the basic principle of the Reformed tradition (*reformata semper reformanda*) than had the "liberal" Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) which had written but not adopted a brief statement in 1903. But by 1958 the PCUSA was ready, because a special committee appointed by the 1956 General Assembly (GA) to reword the *Shorter Catechism* recommended to the 1957 GA against such a project and in favor of a new brief statement of faith for the hoped-for united church that was to come into being in 1958. Certainly some "additional attainments in truth" had occurred since 1903 and 1925.

Behind that decision, however, was a long and agonizing history of conflict and division in the PCUSA concerning confessional revision and subscription for ordination. This conflict reflects and arose from a fundamental theological problem faced

by all Reformed churches since the time of the reformulation of Calvin's teachings in the seventeenth century rationalistic theological systems and confessions. The result of this reformulation was a split between those who understood faith as a matter of the head or as a matter of the heart.

At the beginning of his remarkable book, *The Broadening Church*, Lefferts Loetscher remarks that,

Calvinism is a rather fine balance between reason and feeling, between what is definable human knowledge and what is ineffable divine mystery, between formal and experiential elements. In the so-called Protestant 'scholasticism' of the seventeenth century the rational and formal elements of Calvinism . . . were over-emphasized at the expense of the more subjective part of the heritage—its almost mystical emphasis on the witnessing and working of God's Spirit in the human heart (pp.2 f.).

And near the end of his book Loetscher asserts that,

the American Presbyterian Church has been from the beginning a combination of diverging tendencies, maintained in fairly equal balance A case could be made for the contention that the real innovators were those who . . . had been seeking to force the church into an unprecedented unanimity in repudiating theological change. The main stream of the Church's life . . . had not been 'left wing' or 'right wing' but mediating (p. 131).

This basic theological conflict, which has plagued the American Presbyterian church throughout its history, is the real "occasion" that called forth the *Confession of 1967* (C-67), and the resolution of that conflict is the most significant "contribution" of C-67. This conflict, which is buried in the subconscious of all our church life, is so important for understanding C-67 that a brief account of the high points in its history must be given.

This dichotomy had its origins in the fact that the Presbyterian Church took shape in the colonies, first, from New England Puritans who formed congregations on Long Island in the 1640s, and, secondly, from the flood of Scots-Irish immigrants later in the century. The emphasis by the former on a religion of the heart was met head-on with the more creedal churchly religion of the head from Scottish Calvinism. After the founding of the first presbytery about 1706, the Scots-Irish began to demand that all ministers and candidates subscribe to the *Westminster Confession*. This move was vigorously opposed by the New Englanders, and a schism was avoided only by The Adopting Act of the Synod of 1729. That Act established that every minister and candidate must "adopt said Confession and Catechisms [of Westminster] as the Confession of our Faith." But it added,

In Case any Minister . . . or Candidate . . . shall have any Scruple with respect to any Article or Articles of sd. Confession or Catechisms, he shall . . . declare his Sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall,

notwithstanding admit him to ye Exercise of the Ministry within our Bounds and to Ministerial Communion if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not Essential and necessary in Doctrine, Worship or Government." (*Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788*, pp. 103f.)

Loetscher says that "the Adopting Act became a kind of Magna Carta in the church's theological history," because "the door was thrown open for a continually expanding breadth of interpretation, a breadth which could be authoritatively defined only by the judicatories of the Church themselves" (p. 2). Indeed, under the impact of Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening (1740-42), so-called "New Side" ministers began to disrupt the peace and order of presbyteries and Synod. So schism resulted in 1741 with a compromising reunion in 1758. But when the first General Assembly was formed in 1789, the church made subscription more specific by putting into the new *Constitution* two new questions to be addressed to candidates: (1) "Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?"; and (2) "Do you sincerely receive and adopt, the confession of faith of this church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?" These questions remained in force until 1967. But as a matter of fact, they were not capable of guaranteeing orthodoxy from the perspective of those who distrusted subjective feelings and who conceived of faith as common-sense rational assent to clear conceptual doctrines. So another schism broke out in 1837 between Old School and New School congregations, this time complicated by the antislavery stand of the latter. But when civil war broke out and the southern constituency of the Old School withdrew in 1861, reunion was effected in 1869. Theological issues were ignored rather than resolved. "System of doctrine" in the subscription question was regarded as a less rigid formula for "essential and necessary articles." What are these articles or system? Who is to define them? The attempt to answer these questions initiated a running conflict throughout the history of our church and evoked an ever-increasing effort to amend the doctrinal standards themselves.

Agitation for creedal revision began shortly after the reunion of 1869, as New School ministers resisted the attempts of Old Schoolers to use subscription to the *Westminster Confession* to bring heresy charges. The emergence of biblical criticism in the 1870s and 1880s increased dissatisfaction with the phrasing, "containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture." In 1889 fifteen presbyteries overtured GA for consideration of revision and of a new statement of faith. The twenty-eight proposals for revision that were recommended were rejected by presbyteries in 1893.

But the fact that eighteen of the proposals received a majority approval indicated a deep split in the church on the issue. So a new attempt was mounted in 1900 by 37 presbyteries overturing GA. The upshot was the adoption by the 1902 GA of a new *Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith* but not as a part of the *Constitution*, and the approval, in 1903 by the presbyteries, of the addition to the Confession of Chapter XXXIV "Of the Holy Spirit," Chapter XXXV "Of the Love of God and Missions," and a "Declaratory Statement" which rejects the doctrine of double-predestination in Chapter III. On the one hand, it was generally agreed that conservative forces had prevented any significant change in the doctrinal standards. On the other hand, the fact that revision and restatement had happened at all set a precedent in recognizing that theological change must find creedal expression.

The conflict about "essential articles" found expression in the deliverance of the 1892 GA in Portland in favor of the inerrancy of the Bible and in the departure of Charles A. Briggs, Henry P. Smith, and Arthur C. McGiffert from the Presbyterian ministry during the 1890s over this issue. The conflict came to a head in the debate about the licensing of graduates of Union Seminary (NY) after its withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church. The GA of 1910 undertook to define the "essential articles" as (1) inerrancy of Scripture, (2) Christ's virgin birth, (3) his sacrificial death, (4) his bodily resurrection and (5) his miracles. The Assembly ordered presbyteries to require agreement with these "essentials" by all candidates. This action was reaffirmed by the Assemblies of 1916 and 1923. But this action in no way succeeded in establishing "orthodoxy" or the "fundamentals" once and for all. On the contrary, it evoked a storm of controversy over this use of what was a principle of compromise in the Adopting Act for the purpose of reducing the complex and inclusive faith of the Reformed tradition to a set of narrowly stated doctrines, and then to use them as tests for ordination. More precisely, it raised the question as to *who* has the right to determine the "essentials." In May of 1924, 1274 clergy signed the *Auburn Affirmation* which declared belief in the "five essentials" but asserted that the General Assembly had adopted only one possible set of theories about the Bible, incarnation, atonement, resurrection and supernatural power of Jesus Christ. It claimed that the GA had acted unconstitutionally in amending, in effect, the doctrinal standards, which can be done only by the GA and the vote of two-thirds of the presbyteries.

All of this debate led finally in 1925 to the appointment of a special commission by the GA. In its report to the 1926 GA, The Commission (1) "categorically repudiated his [Machen's] view that there were within the Presbyterian Church two mutually ex-

clusive religions'' (Loetscher, p. 131), (2) asserted a tradition of theological diversity within the evangelical unity of the Church at large, (3) reminded the GA that it cannot amend the Constitution without approval by two-thirds of the presbyteries, and (4) drew the conclusion (in its 1927 Report) that only the *ordaining* body has the power to decide in a *specific* case whether a candidate's views contradict ''essential and necessary'' articles of faith and that therefore the GA has no right to decide ''as a general proposition, that certain articles, when considered abstractly and logically, are essential and necessary.'' So the five points set up by the GA of 1910 were struck down as unconstitutional (Loetscher, p. 134). In very quick order, the reductionists who wished to enforce their view of the ''fundamentals'' formed their own seminary in Philadelphia in 1929, established their own ''Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions'' in 1933, were judicially censured by GA in 1936, and withdrew from the denomination to form The (''Orthodox'') Presbyterian Church of America, from which a dissident group withdrew in 1937 to form The Bible Presbyterian Church.

Loetscher summarizes this whole historical period as follows:

The work of this Special Commission of 1925 was a turning point in the theological history of the Church since the reunion of 1869. It meant that moderate theological liberalism would have what it had unsuccessfully sought almost since the reunion, an acknowledged and assured place in the Church's life and thought. By assuring to local presbyteries greater autonomy and theological liberty . . . the Commission made important concessions that were necessary to preserve the Church's unity. . . . But in sweeping away . . . much of the previously exercised power of the General Assembly to define and thus to preserve the Church's doctrine, the Commission established a principle which has much broader implications than the Church has yet had occasion to draw from it. If the Church now has no means of authoritatively defining its faith short of the amending process—which could hardly function in the midst of sharp controversy—ecclesiastical power is seriously hindered for the future from preventing more radical theological innovations than those discussed in the ''five points''. . . . The Presbyterian Church is now depending on its group mind rather than on traditional Presbyterian authoritarianism, for the preservation of its theological heritage. (p. 135).

By 1927 the more moderate mediating policies which had always finally triumphed in the Church's crises, and which are to be regarded as manifesting the Church's truest theological character, once again prevailed. . . . And yet memories and scars of the old fundamentalist—modernist controversy still largely inhibit among Presbyterians the frank and realistic discussion of theological questions which the times and present opportunity call for. . . . The contemporary [i.e. 1940] social and cultural situation calls for fresh study of the inner meaning and practical application of Christian truth. Now that the Church officially and institutionally at least, has left behind the inadequate and sterile formulations of the fundamentalist-modernist

controversy, the way is open and the spirit of the age beckons to a more profound and constructive exploration of the Church's great evangelical heritage and the meaning of this for the present hour (pp. 155f.).

Thus a solid foundation had been set for a serious undertaking of confessional revision twenty years later. However, by the time the Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith completed its work in 1965, the entire Christian community in general and the PCUSA in particular had been powerfully influenced by transforming powers of both a theological and a socio-cultural nature, which powers had been increasing rapidly in complexity and force since the turn of the century. Because of space restrictions, they can be only listed here rather than described and evaluated.

The major theological forces were: (1) biblical criticism, (2) the Social Gospel, (3) so-called "neo-orthodoxy" in both its Barthian and Niebuhrian forms, (4) neo-Reformation theology based on a recovery of the original thought of Luther and Calvin, (5) the emergence of comprehensive biblical theologies, and (6) the ecumenical movements which spawned the World Council of Churches, numerous inter-communion dialogues, the Consultation on Church Union, and, in a way, Vatican II (1962-65).

The major socio-cultural forces were: (1) World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, (2) Freud, Darwin, and Marx, (3) the cultural pessimism of Nietzsche, Spengler and "existentialist" literature, (4) the movement for economic justice through labor unions and New Deal "socialism," (5) the social and cultural disestablishment of the church and the Christian religion, (6) the Jewish holocaust, (7) the emergence of world communism and the Third World, (8) the movement for racial equality in the USA, (9) radical departures in music, visual arts, and dance, (10) radio, motion pictures, and television, (11) automobiles, airplanes and space exploration, (12) the atomic bomb.

The Committee did not discuss these forces and their significance directly, but they were operative in its members as persons shaped by them. And it was clear to them that Presbyterians could no longer adequately confess their Christian faith by the use of the *Westminster Confession*, even as modified by the 1903 additions or as rewritten in the restatements of it by the PCUSA in 1903 and by the UPCNA in 1925. This view, however, was not unanimously held in the Church. Those who would prefer to maintain the *Westminster Confession* as our only doctrinal standard came to focus in two groups, Presbyterians United for Biblical Concerns (PUBC), and Presbyterian Laymen, Inc. The PUBC finally approved the Confession as revised for adoption in 1967, but the latter organization still considers C-67 to be a betrayal of the Re-

formed tradition and a yielding to subjectivistic "existentialism." And many members and friends of PUBC would like the General Assembly to readopt the five (or so) "fundamentals" and reassert them as tests of orthodoxy at the ordination of candidates.

II. CONTRIBUTION

What then are the unique characteristics and major contributions of the *Confession of 1967*? There are many, great and small, but I have isolated five major contributions. And I have chosen to describe four of them more briefly in order to have space to treat one of them (item D) more fully because it contains three other significant contributions.

A. Implementation of Reformed Principle

Our tradition is called "Reformed," as distinct from Lutheran, because the first synod of the French Protestant churches, meeting in Paris in 1559, chose that name in preference to "Calvinist." This choice reflected their conviction, that was stated in Article V of the Confession of Faith they adopted: "No authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to Holy Scriptures, but on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated and reformed (*réformées*) according to them." And they took the name, *Église Réformée de France*.

This conviction eventually found expression in what has been called the Reformed principle or motto: *reformata semper reformanda*, "reformed, always reforming." The writing of C-67, the adoption of the *Book of Confessions* as our doctrinal standards, and the adoption of a new set of subscription questions signify that our church has recaptured and secured this basic principle of the Reformed tradition. "Obedience to Jesus Christ . . . is the ground of the church's duty and freedom to reform itself in life and doctrine as new occasions, in God's providence, may demand" (§ 3).

James H. Nichols has said that C-67 is necessary because "the Westminster Standards are obsolescent." Hardly anyone could subscribe to them as "containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture" (*Christianity and Crisis*, 17 May 1965, p. 108). For this reason, Brian Gerrish has noted, "retention of the Westminster Confession has encouraged—not hindered—doctrinal laxity. If the Presbyterian Church should persist in retaining the Confession . . . as the sole confessional norm, it will cease altogether to be a confessional church" (*Christian Century*, 4 May to 1966, pp.

583f.). The adoption of the *Book of Confessions* reminds us that in contrast to the Lutherans, “the Reformed have never had a single pre-eminent statement of belief . . . nor a closed symbolic collection . . . [but] has always been ‘open’—subject . . . to a policy of continuous revision and addition” (Gerrish, *op. cit.*, p. 582). The Book also helps us to “break out of the provincialism of British Reformed tradition to the wider Reformed church . . . [and to] define common ground with Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches” (Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 109).

B. Inclusion of Diverse Theological Positions

C-67 succeeds in giving place and expression to diverse theological positions and interests from both the past and present and yet maintains a harmony and unity of perspective. At the same time, it clearly excludes the extreme forms of these positions. During the first few years of the drafting Committee's existence there were members who spoke for the so-called “conservative” and “evangelical” positions, but they chose to withdraw. If they had remained, as the other members desired, their positions would have been more adequately represented in the contents of the Confession as it was presented to the GA in 1965. However, their concerns were well represented by members of the Special Committee of Fifteen that guided the study and revision of the Confession during 1965-67. That committee reported to the GA of 1966 the eight areas of concern expressed to them during the previous year's study and debate. First, I would like to point out that all the changes made by the Committee of Fifteen were worked out in consultation with members of the original drafting Committee. Secondly, I would like to state categorically, and to have it recorded for history, that most of the members of the drafting Committee agree with Edward Dowey and me that the changes made, for the most part, strengthen the document and are in harmony with the original version. To speak of these as two different confessions or to imply that there are two unresolved conflicting strata in C-67 is to misrepresent the facts and to encourage an unnecessary theological conflict in our church which may endanger the possibilities for the composition of a new confessional statement by the union of UPCUSA and PCUS—that should happen in the next few years.

In the following description of the diverse theological interests represented in C-67 I deliberately avoid such terms as conservative, liberal, right, left, evangelical, neo-orthodox, etc. Rather I use terms that seek to indicate the major, but not always exclusive, theological concern of certain groups within our church. I personally consider these concerns to be not mutually

exclusive, but, on the contrary, to be mutually interdependent and necessary for a full and adequate grasp of the Christian faith and life. They are five in number: (a) C-67 embraces the *conceptualist's* concern for clear logical theological definition and organization based on the Bible. But it rejects a *rationalistic* definition of faith that reduces faith to intellectual assent to ideas and voids faith of mystery and transcendence. (b) C-67 embraces the *personalist's* concern for passionate personal experience of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. But it rejects an *individualistic* definition of faith that relegates neighbor and the communal to be secondary to one's own relation to God. (c) C-67 embraces the *ethicist's* concern to enact the Gospel in all aspects of human life, personal and social. But it rejects the *relativization* of faith in the dynamics of history wherein the uniqueness of Jesus as the Christ is lost. (d) C-67 embraces the *ecclesiastic's* concern for community and cultus centered on the biblical word of God as essential for the maintenance of the Christian experience and its power. But it rejects a *sectarian* narrowing of faith as the possession only of those who are "in," to the exclusion of others as "outside" the love and mercy of God. (e) C-67 embraces the *eschatologist's* concern for the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God that transcends all historical approximations, but it rejects the *apocalyptic* denial of faith's relevance for and crucial involvement in the historical process that leads to that end.

I do not pretend that C-67 includes all of these emphases and makes all of these distinctions with equal vigor and adequacy. Today, fifteen years after the adoption of C-67, I believe we could do a better job if the sharpening conflicts between those who look backward and those who look forward are not allowed to polarize our thinking into mutually exclusive categories. In the meantime, we should be thankful that C-67 was accomplished and put in place before the chaos of the late sixties and the early seventies.

It is also important, as we look ahead, to note that portions of C-67 offer points of contact with subsequent theological developments: liberation theology (9.44-46); process theology (9.12, 16, 17); interfaith dialogue (9.41-42).

C. Recapturing the Reformation Understanding of Faith

C-67 recaptures and intensifies the understanding of faith held by Luther and Calvin. Everything else in the Confession hangs on this one accomplishment. As a result of (a) the Protestant battle with the rationalistic Tridentine theology of the Roman Catholic Church, (b) the impact of the Renaissance's glorification of reason, and (c) what L. Loetscher calls the common sense

realism of Scottish Presbyterians, "faith" as explicated in the great seventeenth century Protestant theologies came to mean primarily belief in the infallible Bible and rational assent to the "system of doctrine" supposedly found in and derived from the Bible. This "message from God," with its full account of creation, sin and salvation, was the object of faith.

In the 1940s and '50s two things happened in theological scholarship to change this. First, biblical scholars went beyond critical studies to the production of biblical theologies. We call to mind the names of Bultmann, Cullman, and Alan Richardson, but more particularly I have in mind the series edited by G. E. Wright and F. Filson which included the works of Eichrodt and von Rad—all of this in the 1950s. Their new methods of understanding the biblical materials provided a variety of fresh ways of reading them and made it impossible to speak of Scripture as containing "a system of doctrine," even though some of these writers sought a unified biblical theology. Secondly, we had fresh studies of Luther and Calvin: e.g., W. Niesel, F. Wendel, J. T. McNeill and F. Battles, E. Dowey, T. H. L. Parker, R. Stauffer, and A. Bieler. These gave us totally new and dynamic views of the basic theological ideas of John Calvin in contrast to the rational systematic rigidities of the seventeenth century scholastics, e.g., Francis Turretin whose work became the framework and major content of Charles Hodge's three volumes. (Remember, Hodge's *Systematic Theology* was the primary textbook at Princeton Seminary until 1939.)

One of the main instigators and benefactors of these two theological forces was Karl Barth. He, more than any other twentieth century theologian, led us Presbyterians to a fresh understanding of the biblical and Reformation meaning of "faith." As Calvin clearly taught, the object of faith is not the church, or its saints, or the patriarchs and apostles of the Bible, or even the Bible itself. The object of faith is God, not as an idea or doctrine but as the living God in God's loving merciful act towards us in Jesus Christ (Calvin, *Institutes* 3:1:3, 4 and 3:2:1, Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4:3 p. 547). Furthermore, faith is not my act by which I grasp God and God's goodness. Faith is a relationship opened up by God's act of coming to me in Jesus Christ, in which God reveals my sin and offers forgiveness and new life by Holy Spirit, enabling me gratefully and humbly to accept God's mercy and grace (*Institutes* 3:2:33; *Church Dogmatics* 4:1 p. 755; 4:2 p. 795ff.). This understanding of faith finds clear expression in paragraphs 10 and 21-23 of the *Confession of 1967*. It has radical implications for understanding the relation between reconciliation with God and reconciliation among humans, which we will consider in the next section. But here I wish to note that this under-

standing of faith is also the basis for C-67's view of the authority of Scripture and is the reason the Bible is dealt with in the Section on "The Communion of the Holy Spirit," that is, in the context of the new life in Christ.

C-67 says that "the Holy Scriptures . . . are received and obeyed as the word of God written" (§ 27). Why? Edward Dowey has answered succinctly, "The case does not rest on a view of inspiration . . . but on *revelation*, not on how the books were written but how they continue to communicate the message of salvation" (*A Commentary on the C-67*, p. 101). So we know that Scriptures were "given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" (§ 29), and we depend on "the illumination of the Holy Spirit" when the Scriptures are preached and read (§ 30) because of one reason only: "The Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures" to "the one sufficient revelation of God (in) Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate" (§ 27). Jesus Christ alone is the Word of God in the primary sense because in Christ alone do we know not simply the message but also the reality of God's love in forgiveness and new life. So we know that the Scriptures are "the word of God written" because God "continue[s] to speak through the Scriptures" (§ 29) and thereby unites us to Christ in faith by the Holy Spirit. And thus, and thus only, we also know that this same Holy Spirit gave guidance to the writers of Scripture through their own faith-relationship with God. J.H. Nichols concludes, "In resting the authority of Scripture on Christ rather than vice-versa, the new Confession resembles the Reformers more than the theology of the 17th century." (*op. cit.* p. 109).

So God, for us God-in-Christ, is the only true object of faith. This biblical insight, this Christian experience and conviction, informs the whole of C-67. This intensification of the Reformation view of faith is sometimes accused of being overly Christocentric, echoing Barth's *Dogmatics*. But this *Christocentrism* is not *Christomonism*. C-67 asserts that creation reflects the majesty and mystery of its Creator (§ 16), and that "Christians . . . must approach all religions with openness and respect" because "God has used the insight of non-Christians," and God judges the Church in its "own human character as a religion" (§ 42, 41). Moreover, the Confession views God's kingdom or reign as transcending the Church in being "present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in humans and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption" (§ 54). A truly Christocentric faith enables us to see God as present and active in diverse ways in the entire universe, rather than reducing our vision of God to one narrow event in space and time.

*D. Inclusion of a Social Ethic Within God's Work
of Reconciliation*

We must now address what is the most original and distinctive contribution of C-67: it brings a social ethic *within* the scope of God's reconciling work in Christ. The Confession accomplishes this inclusion by taking particular theological positions in the fields of Christology and ecclesiology. These positions are not "new," but I believe it is new for them to find creedal or confessional expression and thus to be adopted as the official theology of a church. Before these positions are stated, their historical setting and origins must be described.

The conviction that Christians have the God-given duty, both individually and corporately, to assume responsibility for the conduct of the *civil* life, has its Presbyterian origins in John Calvin himself. Calvin believed that God's "reign" has a double expression, ecclesiastic and civil. Christians live in both "kingdoms" at once. The realm of the Church works for eternal salvation. The realm of the state works, under God, for the establishment of God's moral law and for the punishment of its offenders. But Calvin, unlike Luther, saw a "third use of the law," a positive one, namely, to establish peace and order so that justice and well-being may be insured to and enjoyed by all members of the body politic. It is little wonder that Calvinists have been active in business and politics in every country in which they have found themselves.

However, in the United States this activity has taken a unique form, because from the day of its origin, this nation separated Church and state and granted freedom of religion, at a time when European nations were struggling with established churches in monarchies whose kings were still trying to claim "divine rights." Christianity gained "establishment" in USA in quite a different way, *i.e.*, through the population's being increasingly "churched." This was accomplished through the diversification of Christianity into dozens of churchly and sectarian forms and informal movements (revivals, YM and YWCA, Sunday schools, etc.). For the first century and a half of American history, the Bible and the so-called Puritan work-ethic and morality had an unbelievably strong hold on the mind, imagination and language of the general populace and all of its institutions. It is not generally known that the percentage of church membership was extremely low during colonial days but increased steadily throughout the nineteenth century and reached its zenith in the 1950s. It was in that decade that Congress added "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance.

At the turn of the century, American Christianity shared in the boundless optimism of the American belief in unending

“progress.” It took two forms. On the one hand, some participants in the interdenominational missionary movement believed that within a generation (or two at the most) every human being on the earth would be converted to Christ, and God’s kingdom would come down from heaven. On the other hand, many promoters of the Social Gospel believed that the total Christianization of the social-political-economic order was just around the corner. World War I shattered these dreams in Europe and created a pessimism that served as fertile ground for the new Calvinist “orthodoxy” of Karl Barth. In his commentary on *Romans*, Barth blasted all human optimism, and in his *Church Dogmatics* increasingly pinned all hope on the act of God in Jesus Christ alone. Therefore, in my opinion, Barth never was able to give an adequate and convincing rationale for God’s granting a “churchly” time in history between Jesus’ resurrection and *parousia*.

In America this pessimism about the human condition did not arrive until the experience of the Great Depression. Its great prophet for the American church was Reinhold Niebuhr. Also drawing upon our Calvinist Reformed heritage, Niebuhr blasted the Social Gospel and Christian socialism for ignoring the realities of sin, both personal and social, and for understating the need for the grace of God in Christ as the basis for any hope. But in contrast to Barth, he was convinced, like Calvin, that Christians had a duty to do something for the starving and despairing masses of Detroit and elsewhere. So he developed the more dialectical Christian “ethic of the impossible-possibility” and helped to move many American Christians and churches to social-political action in the 1930s. His position was greatly strengthened by the appearance on the American scene of the person and writings of Paul Tillich during the 1930s.

The developments of this movement during the 1940s and ‘50s before C-67, and then throughout the 1970s and ‘80s, are too complex to describe here. The important point to make is that C-67, in its reflection of the ethical struggle, is *post-Barthian* and expresses a uniquely *American* Christian perspective. Karl Barth himself finally came to see the force of this point. In 1959-60 I heard him give his opening (and only) lectures for Vol. IV, Part 4, of the *Dogmatics* on the topic of the “ethics of reconciliation.” What was to be the subject matter of this very last volume of the *Dogmatics*? Prayer, and the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. Out of these was to come the only guidance Christians need for ethical action as reconciled human beings. Their only “mission” was to proclaim to all the world its reconciliation which *had already been* accomplished in the life-death-resurrection of Jesus Christ. After Karl Barth visited the USA in 1962-63, I asked Markus

Barth if his father was busy completing Vol. IV:4? He replied that his father had given up the project because, after his visit to America, he saw that his whole approach to the ethics of reconciliation was inadequate and that he would have to re-cast all that he had written. This may put to rest the canard that C-67 is a Barthian document written at the end of the Barthian era.

How then does C-67 handle this thorny issue of civil action by Christians? First, in the formulation of a particular christology. Much traditional theology first sought to establish the "person" of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son or Word of God. Then it described the saving "work" of Christ as secondary to and derivative of his person. C-67 puts the person and work of Christ together in an indissoluble unity. The revelation of God in Christ occurs *in* the act of salvation or reconciliation. And the act of reconciliation consists of *not only* the "objective" birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus *but also* the "subjective" inclusion of his disciples within Christ's life by faith *and also* their becoming "representatives of Jesus Christ and his gospel of reconciliation to all people" (§ 20 but also § 8-10, 21-24). 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. The mission of Christ's "body" includes being "emissaries of peace . . . [who] seek the good of humanity in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture and economics" and "have to fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human welfare" (§ 25).

This particular christology is, secondly, supported by a particular ecclesiology. Much of traditional theology dealt first with the "being" and nature" of the Church, as the New Israel, the elect people of God, the realm of salvation outside of whose "walls" there is no salvation. Then in a secondary and derivative way they developed the "mission" and "function" of the Church which often was limited to conversion and bringing of people within the "walls." C-67 rejects this separation of being and mission with a single blow: "to be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community" (§ 31). Edward Dowey rightly says, "The force of the entire Confession is in this short expression" (*op. cit.*, p. 112). He goes on to say, "in the Bible . . . patriarchs, prophets and apostles were chosen only to be given a mission . . . The church is a mission" (*Ibid.*). So the Confession says, "The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to God's call" (§ 31). We are called not simply to be "the reconciled" but to be the agent of God's reconciliation of the world. We are called not as an end but

as a means. We are called not to privilege but to service. In that one simple sentence that opens Part II, the *Confession of 1967* reinterprets the entire biblical teaching about election and predestination, as distinguished from that interpretation that runs from Augustine to Calvin and finds lodgment in the *Westminster Confession*. This is one of the significant fruits of our new biblical studies. And its point for our topic of the *social* mission of reconciliation is this: The church cannot fulfill its calling to be leaven unless it is plunged into the lump of life; it cannot be the seed of the kingdom unless it loses its life by being buried in the earth; it cannot be the light of God's righteousness if it is "hidden under a bushel" within the walls of the Church. (Cf. *Come Agents of Reconciliation* for an extended exposition of this ecclesiology as well as the following doctrine on the laity).

How, then, is the Church to fulfill this calling? The Confession asserts that Christians must act in the world both individually and corporately. In so doing, C-67 takes another significant theological step away from the past, even though in simple and unassuming language. Without even conscious discussion of the books being published on the subject, the drafting committee simply took for granted the "ministry of the laity." Thus, quietly, the terms "minister" and "ministry" could no longer be applied only to clergy or the ordained. C-67 says, "Each member is the church in the world, endowed by the Spirit with some gift of ministry A presbyterian polity recognizes the responsibility of all members for ministry" (§ 38, 40).

The Church must also address the world with the Gospel corporately. The section on "Reconciliation in Society" calls the Church to do so in four areas that are critical in world-wide human existence. Contrary to the judgment of J. H. Nichols that this section of C-67 "will date rapidly" (*op. cit.*), each of the areas is more critical and more difficult of solution today than in 1967. A signal lack of prophetic insight on the part of the drafting committee appears in its total failure even to be aware of the oppression of women, let alone to address it. The presence of only one woman on the drafting committee and only one on the Special Committee of Fifteen, and the blatantly sexist language of the Confession, are incontrovertible evidence as to where the mind of the Church was on this issue as late as 1967.

In spite of the strength of the Confession in its clear and forceful inclusion of a social dimension in its vision of God's reconciling work, a significant theoretical question in this field must also be recognized. B. A. Gerrish noted immediately (1966) that "there remains a certain obscurity about the transition from 'God's Work of Reconciliation' (Part I) to 'The Ministry of Reconciliation' (Part II), from incarnation to church" (*op. cit.*, p. 585).

Let it be noted also that the drafting committee was aware of this gap. Various members tried their hand at drafting some "middle axioms" to fill this gap but not to the satisfaction of the whole committee. The committee is not alone in this problem. Donald Meyer, in his book *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*, notes that there was widespread confusion among theologians in the 1950s (including Reinhold Niebuhr) about the social action role of the Church because of the postwar complexities of American and world affairs (pp. 412f.) One might also note that the New Deal social welfare system and the growing power of the labor unions no longer seemed equitable with the kingdom of God. Space does not allow an account of these complexities. Nor can we give a summary and evaluation of more recent theological forays in Christian social ethics, e.g., those of James Gustafson, the *koinonia* ethic and incarnational hermeneutic of Paul Lehmann, and the still proliferating liberation theologies. I would simply note that no one theologian has yet produced, to general approbation and acceptance, what Hugo Assmann calls "a historically mediating christology" that would inter-connect the abstract christologies of the creeds and those christologies that are nothing more than an "identification with specific movements or persons involved in the process of liberation" (*Theology of a Nomad Church*, pp. 103, 69). Presently, the entire search for such a mediating christology is being labeled as illusionary if not heretical by the new laissez-faire individualism of some self-styled "evangelicals," as well as by many of those who feel called to the "inward journey" of the new search for spirituality. And also the search is being called irrelevant by those who have rejected Jesus as the unique messiah of God and who are looking for a new revelation, or for a new synthesis of the world's religions.

The Church is hardly in the position to come to a confessional resolution of this question in face of the still-splintering diversity and conflict about christology and ethics that is going on presently in the fields of biblical and systematic theologies. However, my colleague, Benjamin A. Reist, suggests that C-67 was perfectly correct in its intuition *not* to supply ethical middle axioms. He asserts that this issue

is the central question for *theological* ethics, . . . [but] it is never answerable in anything but tentative terms . . . because of the normative role of *context* in the decisions at hand. There is no mediating christology if by that one means a once-for-all crystallization of the central guiding insights for the ethic which faith demands. . . . The demand for reconciliation presupposes concreteness. . . . A mediating Christology is the locus of the creativity that calls for ever new, and ever renewing, paradigms of concreteness. The issue is similar to the central problematic of preaching, which focuses the matter in such a way that *hermeneutics* claims its rightful place in the solution of the task at hand.

That is to say, all Christian action requires *interpretation* of the Christian faith in order to determine what God calls us to do in any particular concrete situation. No universally applicable rules can be formulated ahead of the event. So C-67 wisely asserts that the Church is called "to reform itself in life and doctrine as *new occasions*, in God's providence, may demand" (§ 3). We have on the one hand, the Bible illumined by the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and we have on the other hand, the "new occasions" of history, through which God calls the Church to act.

I would like to suggest, however, that C-67 itself does provide a set of hermeneutical or interpretive principles for those Christians who still see their life defined by the call of Christ to follow him in his own sense of calling as defined by those clear simple words of Isaiah 61:1-2 which were read by Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth (LK. 4:16-21): good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberty for the oppressed. The basic perspective provided by C-67 is that of *obedience* in doing the work of reconciliation (cf. § 3, 8, 19, 21, 24, 43). Here Barth's ethic of "command" is helpful (cf. *Dogmatics* 2:2 and 3:4).

As Dowey says, "This Confession begins and continues with a heavy stress on the . . . 'true humanity' (§ 8) of Jesus" (*op. cit.*, p. 43). This stress in no way mitigates the "true Deity" of Jesus which is clearly stated and everywhere assumed by C-67. But against every form of docetism, C-67 assures that the love of God comes "to all kinds of sinful humans" through the "complete obedience" of Jesus (§ 8). "His faith and obedience were the response of the perfect child of God. He was the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel, the beginning of the new creation, and the pioneer of the new humanity. He gave history its meaning and direction and called the Church to be his servant for the reconciliation of the world" (§ 19). As Christians are united in faith with this "perfect child of God," the Holy Spirit moves them "to respond in faith, repentance and *obedience*, and initiates the new life in Christ. . . . The new life finds its direction in the life of Jesus" (§ 21, 24). So participating in the "body" of Christ, in what Barth calls the "humanity of God," is the general ground and direction for our reconciling service in the world.

The key, however, to the meaning of all this very traditional—some would even say pietistic—language lies elsewhere. How does this description of the Christian ethic carry us beyond Barth's recommendation of prayer and sacraments? He is certainly right in insisting that Christians, individually and corporately, can not be united with Christ in faith, and thus practice "obedience," without continuous participation in the worship and sacraments of what Paul Lehmann calls the Christian "indicative" experi-

enced in the *koinonia* of the Church (and C-67 stresses this fact in ¶ 34-40, 48-52). The key lies, however, in the nature of "reconciliation." When properly understood it gives concreteness and specificity to "obedience," and thus provides for Christian faith a hermeneutical principle or middle axiom for both corporate and individual Christian social action.

In the Bible, and in C-67, reconciliation has a special character that distinguishes it from the commonplace meanings of "reunion," "agreement," or "harmony." E. Dowey has stated this special character sharply and succinctly in his *Commentary*. He distinguishes three primary characteristics: "First, the reconciliation found in the Bible is one-sided. God alone reconciles the world to God. The world has nothing to offer, no desire to be reconciled in this way, or even the capacity to imagine it. Secondly, reconciliation proceeds by conflict. It is not a straight line to peace, quiet, and harmony. At the center is Jesus on his cross, which the Bible presents as the zenith of human and cosmic enmity against God. Thirdly, the promise of reconciliation remains always a promise. It is an "end" event, a "last" thing, an ultimate truth that exerts its drawing power or pull upon the direction of human lives and history, but remains imperfect throughout our days" (*op. cit.*, p. 39).

Points one and three are both crucial and are fully made in the Confession. Point one is emphasized in ¶ 7, 20, 32, 53, 55; point three in ¶ 32, 45, 53-55. They both must be operative in a very profound and practical way in all Christian action in the world beyond the Church. Their significance cannot be exaggerated and must be spelled out. But within the limits of this presentation, I wish to concentrate on number two.

The New Testament certainly speaks of reconciliation as the *end product* of "peace" and unification of all things with God, but that end is achieved only through a *process* that is described as "by the death of his Son" (Ro. 5:10), "in the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13), "by the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). The Confession stresses that our being called to be "representatives" and "servants" of Christ's reconciliation involves us in "crisis," "conflict," "struggle," and "fight." These are inherent in our obedience (¶ 21, 23, 25). Karl Barth makes this point by reminding us that the root meaning of "reconciliation" in the Greek (*katallage*) is "exchange." The cross of Christ is the ultimate form and becomes the supreme Christian symbol of this exchange, and Barth uses II Cor. 8:9 as the perfect statement of this exchange: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."

dialectic of reconciliation. If we are to be obedient servants or agents of God's grace for reconciliation, we must go and stand in the places of conflict, in the dialectical crossfire that occurs wherever people are suffering poverty, imprisonment, blindness and oppression. We must stand there in order that the healing of God's grace and love may be known. Reconciliation, seen not as the end product, but as the process or means to that end, is the way of the cross. And what makes this way so difficult is that the impoverished, imprisoned, blinded and oppressed are to be found in every economic and social class, in every ethnic and racial group, in every form of sexuality. "None is righteous, no not one" (Ro. 3:10). "But now . . . Christ Jesus . . . has broken down the dividing wall . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity . . . and might reconcile us . . . to God in one body through the cross" (Eph. 2:13-16). Therefore, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Discerning the "places" in our culture where we are called to stand in this dialectic is at least possible if we exert our Christian sensitivity and imagination. C-67 specifies four of them and others have appeared with force since then. To have the courage to go into those "places" in actual fact, and to bear the suffering and sacrifice called for, will call upon all the spiritual resources provided by our participation in the life and worship of the Christian *koinonia*. To formulate practical actions and helpful insights that will truly bring God's love in a healing way in those "places" will often require wisdom and sometimes technical knowledge that have little to do with Christian faith. But if we, by faith, share profoundly enough in the true humanity of the Lord Jesus, then surely he will provide us with the Spirit of obedience that will sustain us in the storms of conflict that lead to reconciliation's goal.

It is the other two characteristics of reconciliation, however, that make the whole process problematic. We certainly know that reconciliation as perfect goal always remains beyond our reach. The dire imperfections and at times abject failures of our best attempts often come close to robbing us of our faith subjectively held. It is only our faith and trust in God and God's promises that sustains our hope in reconciliation as an eschatological goal. This "middle axiom" needs a lot of biblical, theological, philosophical and psychological work.

But the even more difficult and problematic questions lie in the realm of the first characteristic. If reconciliation is ultimately an act of God, the most critical question is: how does God use our poor imperfect acts of following Christ in the "way of the cross" to move God's whole creation on the way towards the

consummation of the goal of reconciliation? The answers are multiple. Some say God does not need or use our acts at all; it has already been accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. Some say we don't need to know, just obey. Others try to work out complicated Christian philosophies of historical process. Here again the Christian community has a lot of theological work to do.

In the meantime, however, the dialectic of reconciliation as a call to suffer with Christ, in compassion for those who are "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk. 6:34), is unambiguous. If this vision is at the heart of the *Confession of 1967*, this Confession will never be fulfilled or outmoded. But it will ever and again require reforming "as new occasions, in God's providence, may demand" (§ 3).