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COMMENT ON THE CONFESSION OF 1967 AND THE
ISSUES OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION

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Professor Landes's paper is remarkably thoughtful, balanced, and irenic in tone. He is right, I think, in saying that it may not be controversial enough for some in this room. Or perhaps it does not deal sufficiently with some inevitably controversial matters. Yet several topics of contention and moment have been dealt with in ways so even-tempered and judicious that we may not have fully heard the attack on certain contemporary exegetical practices—mainly but not exclusively in feminist and liberationist circles—that is implicit in Prof. Landes's handling of them. No doubt, as Prof. Landes says, "bad exegesis can create a bad conscience." And it is also true that "in situations such as this (matters of social-ethical controversy) the exegesis rarely gets the close scrutiny it deserves." It still does not in this excellent paper. Would Prof. Landes contend that the practice of exegesis in contemporary theological controversy not only falls short of scholarly standards (which we do not doubt) but also misses basic insights concerning the Bible in the Church contained in the *Confession*? If so, I wish he had told us more. Would the quality of debate in our Church improve if we renewed our acquaintance with these four paragraphs on "The Bible?"

I was Secretary, under Sherman Skinner, of the "Special Committee of Fifteen" that edited the text provided by the "Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith" chaired by Prof. Dowey. This editorial process was also a political process designed to prepare the Church and the *Confession* to meet each other halfway. I think we did our work reasonably well: or at least successfully in the sense that C'67 was finally adopted by at least a four to one Assembly vote, if not by quite so large a margin in the presbyteries.

If I understand him, Prof. Landes is generally satisfied with the *Confession's* position on the Bible, especially when he views the advance it represents over what our Church formally affirmed before. Certain dangers are mentioned, such as the particularity of the reconciliation theme and the limits, despite the indispensability, of historical-critical method, but Prof. Landes proposes no changes in the text. Neither do I, except possibly for one passage I will mention. I wish I could throw more light on the usefulness of the C'67 language in guiding the use of the Bible in contemporary controversy. A task remains to be performed here. What I will do inevitably reflects how I myself have spent the last

fifteen years: more in teaching and writing about biblical hermeneutics, as well as in the work of committees connected with the ecumenical movement, than in the debates that have wracked our denomination as such. What does C'67 on the Bible look like in the light of this subsequent hermeneutical and ecumenical discussion? I will make four points.

First. The opening sentence of the section on the Bible affirms that God's revelation "is Jesus Christ the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears. . . witness through (not "to" as in Westminster) the Holy Scriptures. . . ." The position goes back to Calvin, although the statement of it here shows the influence of Karl Barth. The use of the word "incarnate," combined with what is said later about literary and historical understanding, shows that the drafters presuppose that revelation is event, a great advance over the view that it is proposition. Jesus Christ does not first become the Word when the Holy Spirit bears witness to him through the Scripture. He is the Word already. The Spirit renders Scripture, as the accompanying ordination questions say, the word of God to us. Unsolved behind this formulation is the question of revelation and history. If there is no problem with C'67's language so far as it goes, there are plenty of problems with the attempts of scholars of the neo-orthodox period to say what they mean by revelation in history, and how historical understanding in the modern sense is compatible with the view that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God. This is not merely an academic matter. Much of the rest of C'67 is based on a highly realistic concept of history: we are called to seek reconciliation in society with respect to very concrete problems: those of race, war, poverty, confusion in standards of personal life. How does this comport with the notion of history implicit in the *Confession's* view of revelation? Or are we to interpret paragraph 9.27 in the manner of the Barth of the *Römerbrief*, where revelation is almost identified with existential encounter and we decline to say what we mean by the revelatory character of the history "behind" the text?

Second. The Scriptures "are received and obeyed as the word of God written." As has often been pointed out, "the word of God written" is the sole phrase in C'67 which appears also in Westminster, although there it has a radically different meaning, as the respective contexts show. There were probably those for whom these "Westminster" words tipped the scales in the direction of a positive vote. Was the Special Committee of Fifteen less than honest in trying to attract a last percentage point of support by encouraging a misunderstanding? Yet "the word of God written" is, as Prof. Dowey points out, a legitimate phrase in its new context, even though nothing is said in C'67 about what it now

means. This makes it especially interesting that the whole question of revelation and the written text has entered a new phase since 1967. There is a new interest in the question of literary form in the Bible. We are asking how the different kinds of writing to be found in the Bible function in relation to whatever may be our view of revelation. Paul Ricoeur, for example, has shown that, whatever else may be said about them, the different theories of "verbal inspiration" seem to stem from one particular literary style in Scripture: that of the prophetic oracle introduced with the words "And the Lord said. . . ." But much of the Bible is in other styles: we have to account for narrative, poetry, parable, aphorism, Gospel, letter, and so on. So at least "the word of God written" today raises the question of "text" and "textuality" in relation to revelation. The reference to "literary fashions" in 9.29 barely begins to scratch the surface of this new discussion. We are now deep into semiotics, structuralism, the use of the term "text" as a metaphor in the philosophy of the human sciences, and many other matters that the drafters of C'67 did not have in mind.

Third. In the four brief paragraphs on the Bible we find the verb "receive" three times. The Scriptures are "received and obeyed," the Church has "received the books of the Old and New Testaments. . . ," and we read the Scriptures "with readiness to receive their truth and direction." The first two of these at least are compatible with the technical use of the term "reception" to refer to the process by which the Church, often over a long period of time, adopts a text in such a way that it becomes canonical or confessional. Today, in a way not yet evident in 1967, biblical scholars are engaged in research into the meaning of the "canon," both as a process in ancient times and as a context for reformulating our view of scriptural authority in the Church. Our notion of the canon and its functions has much to do with the way we read Scripture as revelation. Reception is a hermeneutical process in itself, and indeed is the process through which the Holy Spirit bears witness among us to Jesus as the Word of God. And it becomes ever clearer to us today that the different ways of receiving are liable to have different social and cultural contexts. We cannot speak of reception today, in short, without attention to the sociology of knowledge. The reception process is deeply implicated in the social being of the Church, its relation to and understanding of power, its witness to the powers around it.

Fourth. In the light of all this, we need to say something more than C'67 does about hermeneutical understanding that can make good on the confidence expressed in paragraph 9:30, that "God's word is spoken to the church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read. . . ." We are more aware

today than we were in 1967 that Scripture is read in different ways in different parts of the world. Fifteen years ago few of us had heard the terms "liberation theology" or "feminist theology," although we were beginning to hear of "black theology." Whatever we may think of specific examples of exegesis in these genres, we must be sensitive to the fact that our criticism of that exegesis may betray our own setting, our own institutional and even economic self-interest. The whole of what we say about "The Bible" in C'67, and the way we say it, expresses our particular situation in the affluent western world. This is not to say that these paragraphs would not be meaningful in a Christian "base community" in a Peruvian *barriada*. They would indeed. But the members of such a community would no doubt attach a further condition to our confidence that the Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus Christ the Word in our midst: that of engagement in the liberation struggle of the People of God. One may say that this is simply a hermeneutical theme alternative to that of "reconciliation," or a theme to be combined today with that of reconciliation. But whatever the theme of our engagement with the world, that engagement itself generates "texts" which need to be compared with the biblical texts. I, with others, propose the development of a kind of "comparative hermeneutic of engagement," in which we understand anew—and with much more concreteness than the last generation could—that just as the Bible is an interpretation of the world-engagement of the ancient People of God, so we must allow it to be, by the Holy Spirit, a critical interpretation of our own forms of world-engagement. The term "historical-critical method" takes on new meaning when we understand that the critical factor today does not lie only in the use of the methods of critical historiography we share with those in the academy, but in our living out a critical ecclesiology, by which I mean criticism of the social form of the faith-community in which interpretation of the Bible takes place. The witness of the Holy Spirit does not merely interpret Scripture to an existing Church. Rather it constantly and critically brings the Church newly into being.

These remarks are not proposals for change in the language of the *Confession*, and not proposals that we now need to write a new one. They are musings on some of the new interests and perspectives in biblical study which give the words before us implications which may not have been in the minds of the drafters: which certainly were not in my mind when I did my secretarial duties. So long as a text is capable of raising fresh questions, as this one is, it is alive. We should not tinker. Rather we should think the thoughts of today as we read, mark, inwardly digest, and outwardly seek the path of obedience.