

C-67 and the End of Christendom

One interesting thing about the Confession of 1967 is that it could have been written, with only relatively minor changes, in 1977, 1987, or even 1997. Some portions remain so current that they could have been developed today. But it is inconceivable that this confession could have been composed by the church even in 1957, let alone in 1947, or 1937. Something clearly happened in the decade during which this confession was being put together that shifted the church's self-understanding forever.

I suspect that what happened was that people began to sense the end of the socio-religious system which has come to be called "Christendom." "Christendom" has become a sort of technical term for when the church is all but identical with the society; the church functions as an arm of the culture and sometimes even of the State. In Christendom, Christians are born, not made. The church in this model is not sent into the world; it is an integrated element of the world. It is a system that began in the 4th century with the Roman Emperor

Constantine, and continued in full-force, in various ways, in Europe and America, until... well, until that decade which ended with the emergence of this statement of Christian faith.

I doubt if even the framers of the confession were fully conscious that this was going on. It was not until later that scholars like Douglas John Hall and Stanley Hauerwas even began to talk more systematically about the end of Christendom. But this consciousness is foreshadowed and anticipated in the Confession of 1967 in subtle but quite recognizable ways. The context and the assumptions which prevail in this confession are very different from those undergirding the parts of the *Book of Confessions* which came out of the 16th and 17th centuries.

In none of those earlier documents do we find anything like the words in the Confession of 1967 found at the beginning of part 2, in 9.31. “To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community.” This sentence is crucial because the recognition that Christians are “sent into the world” was at the time a newly recovered idea. Under Christendom there was hardly any sense

that Christians are “sent into the world.” Christians *were* the world. The church was allied with the State. The West was a thoroughly Christian culture. If any Christians were ever “sent” anywhere it was to do foreign missions in Africa or Asia. In the Westminster Confession, or the Scots Confession, or the Heidelberg Catechism, it is assumed that Christians are born into a Christian society; they are not sent into the world as if the world were some alien land that needed to hear the gospel.

In the Confession of 1967 we hear a new emphasis on this human society into which Christians are sent. Few of the other confessions mention society in this way. At best it was covered in the chapters about the “Civil Magistrate,” which was also always assumed to be Christian. This attention to society in C-67 is itself an indication that society was increasingly being experienced as an “other” to which the church must relate, and less something with which the church is properly identical. Now society is something *apart from and outside of* the church into which the church and its members are sent. No longer identical, or two aspects of the same integrated whole, now the society is the world

outside the church.

The Confession of 1967, therefore, quite appropriately, follows, in our *Book of Confessions*, the Theological Declaration of Barmen. For it was at Barmen that the church finally realized that to remain wedded to Jesus Christ it was going to have to categorically and finally reject any responsibility or allegiance to “still other events and powers, figures and truths,” particularly those put forward by the State or culture. At Barmen, the unequal marriage between church and State was finally annulled. The church gets its identity and mission from its Lord, not from any part of society.

Assuming this breach and separation between the church and the State, the Confession of 1967 never mentions the State at all. Under Christendom, the church had a degree of access and responsibility relative to the State. But this confession is not a guide for lobbying the government. It addresses not the State or government, but the church and individual Christians who live *in* the world dominated by these and other institutions, but who also are increasingly conscious that they are

not *of* the world.

At every point in the Confession of 1967 we hear of what the *church* is called to be and do. It makes no pompous pronouncements about what *anyone else* should do. Only the church. And the church is called to be a reconciling community, an example of reconciliation to the world, in society. The confession sees in Jesus Christ “the renewal of human life in society.”

The four examples it identifies as primary arenas in which this renewal is carried out remain important even today, though today we might add a few more. The confession mentions racism, militarism and nationalism, economic injustice, and sexual anarchy. All are examples of how alienation and enmity come to characterize human life; all are arenas in which reconciliation is sorely needed. Hence, they are the fields into which the church finds itself sent by its sovereign Lord.

The church addresses these issues, not by following the latest fads in sociology, psychology, economics, or political science. Rather, the Confession of 1967 refers the church back to its Lord and to the means

of grace he gives to it: prayer and praise, preaching and teaching, and the sacraments. These are the places where we encounter the Word and Spirit of God. This encounter with the God who “was in Christ, reconciling the world” is our answer to these and other social problems.

In other words, as the confession says, “to be reconciled... is to be sent.” The church with its unique “equipment” is sent as a reconciling agent.

This is the element of the confession that we still have not grasped. For most of us, regardless of where we fall on the theological spectrum, still have Christendom on the brain. It is easy to read the Confession of 1967, mistakenly, as a recipe for what we have to get government to do, or how we have to influence society to act. But no. It is not about society anymore. It is about the church and its faithfulness to its Lord. We cannot possibly be a reconciling community in the world until we have made considerably more progress in becoming ourselves the reconciled community.

For the sad fact remains that racism, nationalism and militarism,

economic injustice, and sexual anarchy are not just problems out there in society. They characterize our life in the church. They are embedded in our polity, our language, our worship, and our outlook. We even waste a lot of energy arguing about what these terms mean, assuming at the outset that they don't refer to us but to those *other* Presbyterians.

Clearly, we still have a great deal of work to do in addressing these four crises. And we could add a few others while we're at it, like the ecological crisis that the confession hints at but doesn't address systematically. But the confession teaches us that we have to face these situations and challenges *ourselves*, with the equipment given to us by the Lord.

It may be argued that this approach is far too interior. That what the confession requires is that we be sent out. Therefore, we should be focused on the world and its needs. But we cannot focus on the world unless we are first of all differentiated from the world. We need to realize that we have something for the world which the world does not have. This is the good news of God's reconciling love in Jesus. This

truth must be made real first in our lives and congregations.

I suspect that this is our calling, in light of this confession. To shape and form spiritual communities of reconciliation; oases of acceptance, forgiveness, love, joy, and peace, in a hostile and fearful world; safe zones where people may come together to discover in mutual support and encouragement the goodness and blessing the living God has in store for us.

This is the Christ-centered, reconciling, evangelistic vision of the Confession of 1967. May God open our hearts to receive it anew, and have its message reshape our life together.

To quote from the confession: “This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares his labor of healing the enmities which separate men from God and from each other.

Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call.” (9.32)

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