

A Living Confession

The Presbyterian Church
and the Anniversary
of the Confession of 1967



by Erika Marksbury

Edward Dowey, professor emeritus of the history of Christian doctrine at Princeton Seminary, sits with an old Bible in his lap, his thin fingers slowly turning the worn pages in search of what he calls “some of the most beautiful and profound words that we have ever heard from Scripture.” Arriving at II Corinthians 5:19-20, he reads, “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

When a committee was called together following the 1958 union of the Presbyterian Church in the USA and the United Presbyterian Church of North America and given the task of drafting a new confession, they turned to these verses.

“The first thing we decided,” remembers Charles West, PTS’s Stephen Colwell Professor of Christian Ethics Emeritus, “was that in our time, for our place, the theme would be reconciliation. In other words, if you’re going to preach the gospel, present the Christian faith in the mid-20th century, that’s where you start.”

It was a break from the tradition that preceded their work. Other confessions of the church since its earliest days, the committee was well aware, opened with statements about Scripture or about the majesty of God and the depravity of humanity. This confession wanted to say, instead, that everything flows from an understanding of humanity’s reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ.

“We don’t start with how sinful we are and therefore how much we need grace,” West explains. “We start with what Christ has done and discover human sin in the light of it.”

It was bold, but necessary, the drafters believed, to speak in challenging ways to the culture of the church, still deeply rooted in the 17th-century language and ideas of the Westminster Confession. But the new confession was not written for that reason alone.

“Confessions are usually a response to great issues facing the church and the world, situations of crisis in which the church feels compelled to articulate its faith as unambiguously as possible,” explains Daniel Migliore, PTS’s Charles Hodge Professor of Systematic Theology. This one, drafted during a time of racial, international, economic, and sexual crises, Migliore says, emerged as “a pioneering confessional statement of the 20th century.”

Though even the confession’s title acknowledges its time-bound nature, its words continue to speak prophetically today. Under the heading of “Reconciliation in Society,” the Confession of 1967 (C-67) names four broad issues of justice on which God calls the church to act. “The following,” it states, “are particularly urgent at the present time”: the elimination of racial/ethnic discrimination; in politics, the search for cooperation and peace among the nations; the eradication of enslaving poverty; and equality, joy, and respect in male/female relationships. Though progress has been made on some of these critical issues, sadly they still sound all too current.

Every word of the Confession of 1967 was carefully chosen—from its claim that the church forms out of mission and not mission out of the church, to its statement about pursuing “fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to [the first draft read, ‘of’] national security.” (Circulating during the Vietnam era, the original wording was highly controversial; some early readers were unhappy with the implication that their national security could be stripped from them. In its current form, this phrase only implies a *possible* jeopardizing of that security. This issue of national security as it relates to faith is again at the forefront.)



Charles C. West, PTS professor emeritus of Christian ethics (above), Janet Harbison Penfield, writer and editor and former member of the Seminary staff (right), and Edward A. Dowey Jr., PTS professor emeritus of the history of Christian doctrine (far right) were members of the drafting committee for the Confession of 1967, and attended the Seminary’s recent conference celebrating their work.



Photo: Loren Pankratz

Though the writers spent a painstaking seven years on its formulation, Dowey is quick to point out, “What’s important isn’t always what you write into the confession, but what the reader finds in it.”

That, of course, is different for every reader. When C-67 was introduced, its statement on Scripture was perhaps its most controversial element, and debates over its implications still arise. PTS M.Div. middler Eddie Nabhan admits his own difficulties with that section, saying, “It states that Scriptures, ‘given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written.’ It also says the Bible is a ‘prophetic and apostolic testimony in which [the church] hears the Word of God.’ Together, these statements place the responsibility of finding what in the Bible is the Word of God on the shoulders of the church. This idea, in my view, allows us to remove a part of the text or claim it as nonauthoritative on the basis of historical situation or culture—resulting in the church having more authority than the text.”

The writers would argue that they were not trying to emphasize Scripture or the church, but Jesus Christ as “the one sufficient revelation of God” and the Bible as a witness to that revelation. There is freedom, however, for both of these views and others to exist, because of the way the Presbyterian Church (USA) defines its relationship to its confessions.

A Confessional Church

A confession, Migliore says, is “a public declaration of what the church believes and teaches, what will guide its witness and mission in the world. In our confessions, we say to God, to ourselves, and to the world, ‘These things we hold to be true,’ not just as individuals, but as a community of faith.”

The Confession of 1967 locates itself in a heritage of similar statements, all efforts to articulate the faith in a particular context. The committee that drafted C-67, wanting to emphasize the Presbyterian Church’s confessional tradition, also decided to adopt a book of confessions, the resource in which the creeds and catechisms that the

Drafting the Confession of 1967

Charles West, PTS professor emeritus of Christian ethics, reflects on the drafting process:

1) Production

“Our committee was a very interesting group, and we learned a great deal from each other, theologically and practically, over the years.... Our task was to write a new confession, but one person left the committee because he didn’t agree with our formulation of that task. He said, ‘Our job is to define a Presbyterian *theologically*’ and the rest of us said, ‘No! Our job is to ask how we are to confess Jesus Christ in the 20th century.’ Then we asked, ‘What does that mean?’ We decided that the theme would be reconciliation, and we went ahead with that.”

2) Circulation

“With three pastors and some professors on the committee, we knew, of course, what issues would come up in local church discussions, and they did. But for one year, we who were members of the committee went out among the churches and presented the draft to the members to study. It was the most effective theological education of the church that I ever participated in. People who had always thought, ‘Oh, theology, that’s a subject for the experts,’ suddenly realized that they were theologians, that theology really was an issue every time they talked about the Christian faith. I mean, the light I saw in people’s eyes when they suddenly realized theology mattered!”

3) Presentation

“We gave the General Assembly a draft in 1965; they commended it for the study of the church and commissioned another committee to revise it in light of the discussion. They sat in one room and we sat in another. They ran across the hall and said, ‘How about making this change?’ We said, ‘Okay,’ and they ran back across the hall to make it. This is a church document, and not just our opinion.... But we tried to be specific enough, sharp enough, so that we would confront some people, including ourselves.”

4) Adoption

“The confession took its final form in 1966 and was adopted by the General Assembly, but in order for it to be constitutionally adopted, a majority of the presbyteries had to approve it. So it went out again for discussion, and there were some who were rigid, who wanted things said in a certain way. But I wasn’t surprised when it was overwhelmingly approved.”

Presbyterian Church has affirmed as authoritative are gathered together. That book now stands, with the *Book of Order* (the two make up the church’s constitution) and secondary to the Bible, as a guiding standard for the church.

There are areas of convergence and divergence among the *Book of Confessions’* 11 documents, says George Hunsinger, PTS’s Hazel Thompson McCord Professor of Systematic Theology, “so it’s a little puzzling for us to have a book of confessions. But it’s actually quite a Reformed thing to do.” Some doctrines, such as the mystery of the Trinity, the centrality of Jesus Christ, and salvation by grace through faith, remain constant throughout the book. Each confession also expresses some particularities of its time, allowing readers to better understand how, historically, the church has attempted to respond faithfully to its circumstances.

The PCUSA does not ask its members or ministers to agree with all the details of the confessions, but that they allow the themes and claims to speak to their lives and ministries. Dawn DeVries, the John Newton Thomas Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, says, “The idea is that we will be guided by the confessions, but do not have to subscribe to every word. And this allows us to have a conversation with the confessions rather than have them determine in advance what we believe. We refer to them and defer to them. They are representative of some of the best thinking of the church, and I couldn’t imagine being a Presbyterian theologian and not working with the *Book of Confessions*. But we are able to say when they no longer best state our faith.”

Located in the Reformed tradition, the PCUSA takes seriously its historical identity as “the church reformed, always reforming.” The church articulates its faith and understands its mission in different ways in different times and places, responding to ever-new revelations of the Holy Spirit. Embracing a confessional tradition, then, allows Presbyterians to learn from, be in conversation with, and position themselves alongside believers throughout history and today.

Living, Breathing Documents

"I learned the Apostles' Creed by rote memorization," says John Gulden, PTS M.Div. senior, "and I remember sitting in church when it came to that part of the worship service, and thinking, 'Yeah, now I can say it with everybody else!' I was only in third or fourth grade, so I didn't understand fully what everything meant, but I remember thinking that just knowing it provided a link with, and into, the church."

At The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia, its pastor, Cynthia Jarvis, is trying to encourage that same sense of connection, with both the local church and its larger tradition. Her congregation just completed an overview course—what she laughingly calls "romping through the confessions"—in which they studied three confessions each Sunday. "We've done that before," she says, "but what people really wanted [after the three-week study] was to then do a year-long study. There's a real responsiveness to teaching these confessions."

The congregation's positive response seems to indicate a desire for a better understanding of doctrine. "There was a time," says Hunsinger, "when a minister could get into the pulpit and presuppose a fully catechized congregation, a time when ordinary people even had all of this committed to memory." This is no longer true for a majority of congregations, and Hunsinger suspects that a lack of intentional doctrinal teaching is hurting these churches.

"We don't have a culture, an ethos in the churches that vital doctrinal teaching is expected," he says. "Anyone who becomes Catholic is instructed in the new Roman Catholic catechism, a big, thick volume, and that to me says, 'Here is a church that has a future.' If the Reformed churches don't recover some kind of serious catechesis and ways of equipping people in the knowledge of their faith—especially young people—we don't have a future."

This concern for the church's apparent neglect of its rich confessional tradition served as part of the inspiration for "We Trust in Jesus Christ," a November conference held at the Seminary. According to Migliore, Hudson River Presbytery overtook the most recent General Assembly to

use C-67's 35th anniversary as "an occasion to summon the church for energetic study of the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*." In response to that idea, PTS's Center of Continuing Education created a one-day event to celebrate of the anniversary of the Confession of 1967, to discuss the nature of the confessional witness to Jesus Christ, and to examine how confessional documents can be part of congregational life and training. Nearly 60 people gathered to participate, including Dowey, West, and Janet Harbison Penfield, members of the committee that drafted the Confession of 1967.

In the event's opening lecture, William Stacy Johnson, PTS's Arthur M. Adams Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, called confession "a matter of identification with the One who is the way, the truth, and

a different aspect of the confessions, spoke to this unity and diversity."

Participants received a copy of the inclusive language version of the Confession of 1967, which a group of women, including Jarvis, created by editing the original draft to rid it of exclusively male terminology without changing the theological content. The event concluded with a reception in honor of drafters Dowey, West, and Penfield.

Participants were challenged to consider whether the current confessions are adequate for expressing the faith in this present and difficult time. Migliore believes that there are issues facing the church and the world today that may well summon the church to articulate its faith anew—to declare, for example, that in response to our culture of violence and death, "Christians are called to say an unequivocal 'no' to the use or development of nuclear, biological, or any other weapons of mass destruction by any nation and to bear witness to Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace."

Standing with the Tradition

While the confessions may never be able to speak specifically to every issue in our changing world, they continue to invite readers into identification with the historical community of faith and challenge them to understand what that means today.

"I very much see that what I am to do Sunday in and Sunday out is to proclaim the gospel with a cloud of witnesses around me," Jarvis says. "Back when I was ordained, I kind of blithely promised to be guided by the confessions. Then during the past 30 years of ministry, they have become very important to the work I do, and to me.... The incredible thing about being in a tradition like this is to know that you are not alone, not the first one to go through this—trying to figure out where to stand. You are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. Though you might not stand right where they did, they do help you figure out the ground on which you need to stand."

And this seems like solid ground: in a sanctuary, as part of a congregation that, with congregations around the world, announces through its recitation of both ancient and new words, "These things we hold to be true." ■

Included in the *Book of Confessions*

Nicene Creed (325/381)
 Apostles' Creed (814)
 Scots Confession (1560)
 Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
 Second Helvetic Confession (1566)
 Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)
 Westminster Larger Catechism (1647)
 Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)
 The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934)
 The Confession of 1967
 The Brief Statement of Faith (1991)

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the life," and highlighted the confessions as a history of witness to Jesus Christ. Hunsinger spoke next, naming classical Christology as at least, but not merely, Chalcedonian Christology. He pointed out the confessional tradition's strengths and weaknesses in its reflection of classical Christology. DeVries, guided by the Second Helvetic Confession's (1566) statement, "Preaching the Word of God is the Word of God," described preaching as sacramental, being a manifestation of the presence of Christ in the community. A panel discussion, moderated by Migliore, followed the event's three lectures.

Kim Armstrong, PTS M.Div. senior and conference participant, was thankful for the chance to immerse herself in the confessions. She says, "The confessions witness to the rich diversity and unity that is the Reformed tradition, and each presenter, focusing on