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Jesus Christ, the Reconciling Liberator: The Confession of 1967 and Theologies of Liberation

THE TASK OF AN INTERPRETER is to say the same thing but to say it differently. This is why interpretation is such a risky business and always walks a fine line between arrogant imposition of meaning and banal repetition. There is certainly ample risk in the topic which was assigned to me for this occasion. Implied in the title, "Jesus Christ, the Reconciling Liberator," is the attempt not merely to restate but also boldly to represent the meaning of the *Confession of 1967* for the church today.

I

We honor confessional statements in the Reformed tradition by taking them seriously but also provisionally and critically. Confessions, we claim, set a timely standard for the interpretation of Scripture and the proclamation of the Gospel; they give concrete direction for the Church's message and ministry here and now. However, they do not represent infallible pronouncements. Within the Reformed church, critical review and interpretation of the confessions is always necessary and urgent. There are two reasons for this. First, all confessions are "subordinate standards," both reformable and in need of reform in response to the living "authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him" (9.03).¹ And second, confessions are relative to the time and place in which they are produced. They are the Church's witness as required by "the need of the time." (9.02). They are always and thoroughly historically conditioned. Consequently, there are no *a priori*

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guarantees that a confession will continue to bear effective witness to the Word of God in a different time and situation.

C-67 itself explicitly acknowledges the relativity of all confessional statements both to the Word of God and to the concrete situation (*cf.* 9.01-9.03, 9.06). Therefore, as we celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of C-67 by the UPCUSA, we are free and obligated to speak both of its continuing importance and of its real limitations.

The importance of C-67 to the UP Church is incalculable. No action has done more to help prepare the Church for ministry in the last decades of the twentieth century than the adoption and subsequent influence of this confession. The era of C-67 has been marked by events of epochal magnitude, including the horror of the Vietnam War, the growing threat of nuclear annihilation, the new consciousness of blacks and women in our society, and the appalling deprivation of the poor of the Third World. The proclamation and service of our denomination have been far from perfect during this period, but they surely would have been far more conformist to society and far less faithful to the Gospel without the guidance of C-67.

Basically, C-67 inaugurated a reformation which is drawing the Church beyond the paralysis of biblicism and the blindness of privatism. C-67 focuses the faith and mission of the Church unambiguously on God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture, not upon the words of Scripture construed as inerrant and divorced from the central message of Scripture. Furthermore, this confession declares the faith and mission of the Church to have public and political as well as personal and interpersonal significance. Sin and salvation are outward and corporate as well as inward and personal realities. These new confessional accents find expression in C-67 in the form of a strong beginning rather than a definitive end. We honor C-67 not by turning it into a historical or doctrinal fossil but by honestly testing its strengths and limitations and by moving courageously ahead in the direction of proclamation and service which it has charted.

My assigned topic, "Jesus Christ, the Reconciling Liberator," reminds us of the new situation in which we find ourselves in 1982. The most significant new fact in theology and church life since the adoption of C-67 is the rise of liberation movements and liberation theologies in the Third World and among blacks and women in North America. Their emergence has dramatically altered the ecclesial and theological landscape. Liberation theology claims to speak on behalf of the voiceless masses of dominated and exploited people. Three of its emphases are readily identifiable.²

In the first place, liberation theology advances a new hermeneutic of Scripture. It understands the biblical message as a message of liberation of the oppressed (oppression being defined characteristically although not exclusively in economic, social and political terms). It contends that the Gospel is good news to the poor and that God takes sides with the oppressed in their struggle for freedom and justice. We could say that Luke 4:18ff. replaces John 3:16 or 2 Cor. 5:18ff. as the key text of liberation hermeneutic.

Furthermore, liberation theology, in all of its forms, insists on radical critique. This critique encompasses both existing social and economic orders (especially advanced western capitalism) and dominant theological and ecclesiological traditions. Oppressive ideologies are exposed and attacked both in society and in the Church. The theology of liberation includes the liberation of faith and theology on its agenda.

Most decisively, however, liberation theology insists upon praxis as the matrix of faith and theology. Neither the hermeneutic of Scripture nor the social and ecclesiological critique can be separated from the praxis of liberation. That is, they only grow out of actual participation in conditions of oppression and out of the struggle to overcome these conditions.

Liberation theology constitutes an urgent and unavoidable challenge to the churches of Europe and North America. In my judgment we cannot reflect responsibly on the significance of C-67 for the faith and mission of the Church in our time without keeping this challenge before us, and without testing C-67 by this challenge. We must therefore address the following questions: To what extent can liberation theology help us to understand the intent of C-67 better? And to what extent can C-67 help us to respond to movements of liberation with increased sensitivity and theological integrity?

II

My aim is not to read recent liberation theology back into C-67. That would reflect an a-historical and a-contextual attitude toward faith and confession that C-67 repudiates by its very name. Still, at a deep level one can discern important intersections of the affirmations of C-67 and the emphases of liberation theology. Here is a brief list designed to be more provocative than comprehensive:

(1) In the light of God's work of reconciliation, C-67 views history dynamically and transformatively rather than statically and fatalistically. The power of God is the power to change an alienated world into a reconciled world. Correspondingly, human life is the gift and task to shape the world in accordance with the

purpose of God— “to develop and protect the resources of nature for the common welfare, to work for justice and peace in society, and in other ways to use their creative powers for the fulfillment of human life” (9.17).

(2) C-67 is fundamentally a practical rather than a theoretical confession. It is mission oriented. It does not engage in theological reflection for its own sake but for the encouragement and guidance of Christian faith and practice. Truth is in order to faithful obedience and service. This is evident in the structure of C-67 which is a movement from Gospel to command, from gift to task, rather than a movement from theoretical assertions to practical applications. Part I is the Church engaged in the disturbing and creative memory of God’s act of reconciliation in Christ, and Part III is the Church engaged in the great hope of God’s final victory over all wrong. The Church remembers and hopes as it carries out its ministry in the present situation. The praxis of this particular memory and this concrete hope of reconciliation is spelled out in Part II.

(3) The Christology of C-67 is historical and relational. It assumes the truth of the *vere Deus, vere homo* of the classical christological creeds. Yet it clearly prefers to speak of Jesus in relational categories rather than in terms of substance or nature. Jesus is who he is in his free obedience to God and in his free self-expenditure for others. Jesus is identified not as a god walking on earth nor as the bearer of timeless truths nor as the ideal representative of perfect God-consciousness. Rather, Jesus is identified by his pro-seity, his messianic freedom for God and for his brothers and sisters. This ministry for God and others is made concrete by his solidarity “with the needy and exploited” (9.46) and definitively by his self-giving love on the cross. C-67 attempts no direct proof-text connection between the ministry of Jesus and the urgent call to the Church today to oppose racism, militarism, poverty and sexism. Nevertheless, “the life, death, resurrection and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the Church’s mission” (9.32). There is to be a correspondence between the pattern of Jesus’ existence for God and others and the new form of human life in the community established by the Gospel. The Church is responsible for exploring all of the ramifications of this analogy of faith for personal and social life.

(4) C-67 pursues what may be called the de-ideologization of Christian faith.³ De-ideologization here means the painful exposure of our distortion of the Gospel and of our “complicity” (9.32, 9.43) in the structures of injustice and oppression. De-ideologization is a much more demanding and discomforting task than the celebrated hermeneutical program of demythologization. The latter can become a strictly intellectual exercise which

disturbs most educated, urbane Presbyterians not a whit. De-ideologization, however, cuts much more deeply into our form of life. It requires social criticism as well as historical criticism. The controversial phrase in the paragraph on peace-making—"even at risk to national security" (9.47)—is the crucial but not the only instance of de-ideologization in C-67. The confession aims to expose the ways in which Christian faith and even the Gospel itself can be intertwined with racism, nationalism, classism and sexism. The task of de-ideologization as part of the ministry of reconciliation is grounded in Jesus' own ministry. Jesus was crucified, C-67 asserts, because he judged his peoples' "goodness, religious aspirations and national hopes" (9.08). De-ideologization is an attack on the idols which we make of our morality, our ideals, our institutions, our belief systems, even the Christian Gospel itself. The essential mark of the idol is that it functions to guarantee the life and rectitude of the persons or group who worship it, to protect and bless their social and political order, to sanctify their values, practices and way of life.

(5) C-67 proclaims a "political" Christ and a "political" gospel and thus summons the Church to leave behind the privatism of North American Christianity. A political gospel is to be distinguished from a politicized gospel. There is no endorsement of a particular political program or economic system in C-67. Moreover, C-67 refrains from indulging in romanticism. There is too much Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr (not to mention the Apostle Paul) in the background of this confession to encourage romantic expectations of transforming the world by technological know-how or revolutionary force. Nor is there any suggestion that alienation from God and others is to be found only among the rich and powerful. Indeed, one might ask whether the realism of C-67 is so strong as to prevent it from acknowledging the importance of the apocalyptic and utopian imagination in the struggle for social justice. The point in speaking of the political gospel of C-67 is to underscore the fact that the lordship of Jesus Christ is understood to extend to all dimensions of life rather than being limited to the individual or private zones of existence. Sin and its consequences have public as well as personal expressions. Similarly, reconciliation to God encompasses the corporate as well as personal dimensions of life. C-67 proclaims a political gospel in another sense. While no particular political or economic program is endorsed, C-67 shows a clear bias in favor of the poor and the powerless, and an equally unmistakable warning to the affluent and the powerful who fail to face up to their complicity in injustice and their responsibility to help work for a "better world" (9.55) even though all "limited progress" falls far short of the coming Kingdom of God.

III

While this list of points of intersection could be extended, it would be a mistake to ignore the hard questions which liberation theology raises for North American churches and for a confessional statement like C-67. Two criticisms might be summarized by the terms theological positivism and triumphalism. As applied to C-67 the charge of positivism would be that the activity of God in Christ is simply asserted as an incontrovertible given that carries its meaning and power in itself. Entirely missing is any concrete analysis of the real alienation, hostility and exploitation experienced by oppressed peoples today. This gives C-67, the charge might continue, the appearance of abstractness and a-contextuality, at least until the section on "reconciliation in society." In other words, Part I seems to present reconciliation as a divine *fait accompli*. Consequently, human responsibility seems to be rendered problematic if not superfluous. Within the framework of theological positivism human beings are at first the mere objects of the power of sin and then the mere objects of God's reconciling activity. Far from being liberating, this way of conceiving the realities of alienation and reconciliation only mirrors the oppression and powerlessness of people.⁴

There is a serious warning here. If God's act of reconciliation is construed in terms of the formula, "God everything, humanity nothing," it becomes the prime instance of domination and dehumanization. The talk of reconciliation so conceived would be a religious facade for repressive attitudes and practices.

But so to understand C-67 would surely be to misunderstand it. While C-67 affirms the priority of God's grace to every human response, the work of reconciliation in Christ does not reduce humanity to a mere pawn or object. God's purpose to reconcile all things in Christ *includes* rather than *excludes* human participation. The work of reconciliation is accomplished not by God in transcendent solitariness but by God's working through the free obedience of the fully human "Palestinian Jew," Jesus of Nazareth (9.08). The Christology of C-67 is emphatically anti-docetic, and this has an important bearing on the proper understanding of the relationship of God's work and human responsibility in the whole confession. Far from being coercive or from pre-empting human responsibility, God's reconciliation is the basis and guide of human freedom in the service of God and others. The reconciling God is the liberating God, the God who frees us *from* inordinate self-interest and frees us *for* service of the coming Kingdom of justice and peace. Reconciliation that does not promote this freedom is not God's act of reconciliation. As for the charge that C-67 falls into abstraction because it does not *begin* with an analysis of experienced oppression, it may be

asked in return whether C-67 is not right in proceeding the way it does since it is only in the light of God's act of reconciliation in Christ that we are able to recognize fully the depth and diversity of human estrangement and bondage. C-67 comes out of and addresses a particular social and cultural situation even if it does not begin with an elaborate analysis of this situation.

A second serious objection which liberation theology might be expected to raise is the tendency of C-67 toward triumphalism. According to this charge, an optimism of grace is evident in C-67 which seems almost obscurantist in face of the horrors of actual human history and the inevitable costliness of the struggle against the forces of evil. This easy optimism (cheap grace?) is foreign to faith lived in solidarity with the oppressed. Triumphalism results in safe neutrality rather than dangerous commitment to the cause of the oppressed. Here again liberation theology alerts us to a possible misinterpretation of C-67 which we must strenuously resist. Our black brothers and sisters especially have noted that reconciliation is quickly equated with sentimental love by an upper middle-class church, a smoothing over of real differences and tensions, an avoidance of confrontation, conflict and prophetic protest against injustice.⁵ When this happens, the theme of reconciliation functions as an ideology in support of the existing state of affairs. The message of reconciliation becomes the seductive message of adjustment and submission to the dominant order.

C-67 is more vulnerable to this charge than we would like to admit. It is frankly regrettable that in paragraph 9.08 on the ministry of Jesus there is no reference to his solidarity with the poor and outcast (but *cf.* 9.46). Perhaps C-67's studied avoidance of all semblance of proof-texting biblicism prevented it from incorporating specific features of the Gospel narratives. Whatever the reason, paragraph 9.08 strikes us now as suffering from unnecessary vagueness. Equally regrettable is the silence about the spiritual bondage of churches that are eager to do something "for" the poor but have not yet learned to be "with" the poor and therein to become aware of their own poverty and captivity within a consumerist society. C-67 is not without marks of the spirit of the time.

Despite these limitations, there are several motifs of C-67 which tend to resist triumphalistic misinterpretations. First, while God's judgment on all of humanity is asserted, C-67 lays special stress on God's judgment of the self-righteous and the self-complacent (9.13). As already noted, the church's "complicity" in injustice is underscored.

Second, C-67 preserves an eschatological reservation in its declaration of God's "sure achievement" (9.09) in Jesus Christ.

God's victory is both present and promised. A victory has been won, but this victory meets us as judgment and promise of "God's final victory over the power of sin and death" (9.11). The distinction between victory achieved and final victory means that there is an interval of real struggle against the powers of evil. In this interval the Church is called to carry on its ministry of reconciliation. All things have not yet been completed. Jesus Christ is "the beginning of the new creation, and the pioneer of the new humanity" (9.19). What C-67 does not make sufficiently explicit is that until what God has begun in Jesus Christ is fulfilled the Church is called to live in utmost solidarity with the whole groaning creation (Rom. 8:18ff.).

Third, C-67 is conscious of the ravages of an abstract theology of the cross divorced from the reality of Christ's resurrection. While the "gravity" and "cost" (9.09) of God's reconciling work are recognized, "suffer, suffer, die, die," is not made the heart of the Gospel. The crucifixion is not a model of salvation through suffering which gives any and all suffering an inherent soteriological meaning. Rather, the crucifixion is the radical disclosure of God's love and judgment which sensitizes the Church to "all the suffering of humanity" (9.32). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are God's own revolt against all evil. Seen in this perspective, the note of triumph in C-67 represents not a cheap triumphalism but the conviction that Jesus Christ is risen, that God wills abundant life for all, and that the Church has for too long blessed suffering as the way of salvation, especially when the suffering is done by others. C-67 intends to mobilize the Church for costly discipleship. The Gospel of God's "sure achievement" in Christ gives us the courage "to fight against pretensions and injustices" of powers that are supposed to work for the common good (9.25). The hope in God's "final victory over all wrong" (9.32) is not an easy guarantee that leads us to neutrality and indifference but a great promise that strengthens and sustains us in the conflict with evil powers. Whatever charges may be legitimately brought against C-67, it cannot be said to sanctify powerlessness and passivity in the face of injustice and oppression.

IV

My remarks have aimed at showing that there is considerable commonality between the intent of C-67 and the emphases of recent liberation theology. The God at work in Jesus Christ for the reconciliation of the world is the liberating God. Both reconciliation and liberation are fundamental biblical themes.⁶ Both themes emphasize the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of sin and salvation. We are not forced to choose between reconcili-

ation and liberation as ways of expressing the wholeness of God's purpose in Jesus Christ. On the contrary, there is reason to insist that these two hermeneutics of Scripture need each other. The United Presbyterian Church is being challenged today to learn to read the Bible through the eyes of the poor and the oppressed of the earth. Out of this experience a new confessional statement, in continuity with C-67 and yet different from it, might become possible and even necessary.

I have contended that the biblical theme of reconciliation cannot be separated from the equally biblical theme of liberation if reconciliation is to be distinguished from accommodation or avoidance of conflict on behalf of justice and peace. But it is also true that without the message of reconciliation the commitment to liberation loses its direction. Christian freedom is covenantal freedom. It is freedom to be with and for others as God is with and for the world in Jesus Christ. Christian freedom is realized in new, open and inclusive community. The witness of C-67 serves to remind us of the Christian meaning and goal of liberation. Movements and theologies of liberation are necessarily concentrated on particular oppressions. Their particularity and concentration are their strengths. The strength of C-67 as a witness to the Gospel in our time is that it can help guide the Church in its support for particular liberation movements without exclusively identifying the mission of the Church with any one movement. C-67 does not define the consequences of sin or alienation from God only in terms of racism, or sexism, or militarism, or economic and political domination. It calls the Church to fight against all of these oppressions in the name of Christ the reconciling liberator.

C-67 and the theology of liberation are both concerned to promote a Christian proclamation and ministry today that work for personal *and* social change, for a world of greater freedom, justice and peace. Both want to bear witness to the Gospel as the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). Both want to challenge, in the name of the Gospel, the alleged omnipotence of oppressive principalities and powers. The Gospel attested in C-67 brings a revolutionary redefinition of the meaning of power, and this has consequences for our theological affirmations, for our pastoral activities and for our political strategies. Whereas the powerful think of power as domination over others and the powerless are tempted to understand power only as that which they lack and the powerful of the world possess, C-67 speaks of power, and above all of the power of God, in a very different way. "Human thought ascribes to God superlatives of power, wisdom and goodness. But the love of God is revealed in Jesus Christ by showing power in the form of a servant, wisdom in the folly of the cross, and good-

ness in receiving [sinners]" (9.15). These sentences call for a continuing revolution in our understanding of God's power and in our exercise of human power—power not as mastery over others but power that shares, that forgives, that serves, power that creates inclusive and lasting community. To this great revolution in all of our revolutions C-67 will continue to summon the Church.

NOTES

¹ The *Confession of 1967* is cited by numbered paragraphs as found in *The Book of Confessions*, The General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1970. Some citations are slightly altered to employ inclusive language.

² The literature of liberation theology is extensive. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973) is still the standard introduction to Latin American liberation theology.

³ For an analysis of de-ideologization as an essential element in the theology of liberation, see Schubert M. Ogden, "The Concept of a Theology of Liberation: Must a Christian Theology Today Be So Conceived?" in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response*, ed. by Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richesin (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981).

⁴ Dorothee Soelle has repeatedly criticized modern western society and theology for making persons into "objects." See her essay, "Thou Shalt Have No Other Jeans Before Me (Levi's Advertisement, Early Seventies): The Need for Liberation in a Consumerist Society" in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology*.

⁵ This criticism is expressed with great power in the writings of James H. Cone, beginning with *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

⁶ For a recent discussion, see Jan Milic Lochmann, *Reconciliation and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). Also see Daniel L. Migliore, *Called to Freedom: Liberation Theology and the Future of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1980).