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The Cry from the Outside:
The Communion of the Holy Spirit

THESIS: The Confession of '67 gives us theological criteria by which we can distinguish a Christian spirituality from the variety of claims made in our world, but it functions within a theology which could lead to a co-option of that spiritual life in the service of the powers and the principalities, needing therefore, to be deepened and corrected by the contextualization of feminist and liberation theologies and their concerns for equality and freedom as the indispensable ground for the work of reconciliation.

As I sit writing, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, aided and abetted by President Reagan, are gathered together inside the White House. They are lighting candles, singing hymns, and praying. Their concern is that of “praying” in the public schools. Their claim is that we in America need a return to “spirituality.” Falwell, Reagan, et al. are not the only ones concerned for spirituality in modern American life. Many cults have sprung up to claim our young. Charismatic, ecstatic groups have multiplied. Yoga, meditation, and contemplation have become common religious words. The signs are that large numbers of people are reaching for ways by which they can deepen their “inner life” to make it more satisfying, to give them meaning, direction and stability. Louis Dupre, in a recent Daedalus article, has said, “The search for a deeper spiritual life is, in fact, more than a passing phenomenon on today’s religious scene: it is a movement for religious survival.”¹ In the midst of this array of voices, we of the Reformed faith will want to turn to the documents of our history for their guidance about the spiritual life, or what we call, “life in the Spirit.” We must ask the Confession of ‘67: what does the...
Confession say are the basic characteristics of life lived in the Spirit?

HOW THE CONFESSION OF ’67 VIEWS LIFE IN THE SPIRIT:

The Confession of ’67 gives us at least ten characteristics of life in the Spirit:

1) First and most basically, life in the Spirit is tied to the work of God in Jesus Christ, seen to be “the reconciliation of persons (9.20; 9.24). In 9.07 Jesus is described as “God with humanity.” He came “to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission.” Wherever the authentic life in the Spirit is present, there Jesus himself is present, reconciling enemies to God. This reconciling act is understood to be “a mystery” (9.09) in which persons are “set right with God and commissioned to serve as (God’s) reconciling community” (9.10).

2) Secondly, life in the Spirit is thus tied to the Scriptures, for it is there that the “Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness” (9.27). In addition, life in the Spirit is tied to the Word of God as proclaimed. The Confession says that Jesus’ reconciling work, witnessed to in the Scriptures, “becomes personal crisis and present hope for persons when the gospel is proclaimed and believed” (9.21).

3) Life in the Spirit is seen to be in essence a life of forgiveness (9.21). This forgiveness is experienced as a sure and steady knowledge that “God loves them and accepts them in spite of what they do” (9.22).

4) Spirituality is always communality, since God’s forgiveness is received “as they forgive one another” and God’s peace is established “as they make peace among themselves” (9.20). One does not receive the Spirit for one’s own self alone. Through the Spirit individuals form a communal life where God’s action is mirrored in human action with others.

5) Life in the Spirit is being moved “to love others” (9.22). Here again there are echoes of the mirroring act which is the human life in the Spirit.

6) Spirituality is full of the conflict of unbelief, pride, lust, fear, difficulties, and problems.

7) The life in the Spirit is also a life of freedom, good cheer, and faithful witness.

8) The new life receives its direction from “the life of Jesus” (9.24). Spiritual life is not so much a possession as a movement, a way along which life is walked. Here are intimations of an imitatio Christi. The way of spirituality is to be a “lover to all kinds of sinful persons” (9.08).
9) To be a “lover” to all kinds of sinful persons is also to be an “emissary of peace.” Thus the spiritual life engages one either in cooperation or conflict with those structures which make or break the good life for humanity.

10) And finally, the spiritual life is characterized by an “openness” to the leading of the Spirit as the Spirit reveals to the reconciling community those locations in the world where it is called to live and act (9.43). The Confession of ’67 identifies four such arenas: racial and ethnic differences; peace, justice and freedom in international relations; poverty; and sexual anarchy/confusion. The new life of the Spirit will consist of acting out God’s work of reconciliation in these worldly arenas.

We can summarize all these characteristics of the new life in the Spirit with the following words: The new life of the Spirit is the reception of the reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ and the acting out in the world of this mystery of “healing enmities which separate persons from God and from each other” (9.31). This is a clearly demarcated picture of what spiritual life is and stands in sharp contrast to many of our contemporary understandings. Three foci stand out in this picture: the work of Christ, the formation of a community, the living of this community at certain places in the world.

Yet, the Confession is unclear in its understanding of faith and the life of the Spirit at three crucial points. First is at the point of anthropology. Although the Confession has a communal orientation, and although in 9.20 it uses a phraseology which could carry what I would call a theo-anthropology (“God enables them to receive forgiveness as they forgive one another and to enjoy the peace of God as they make peace among themselves”), other phrases in the Confession carry an atomized anthropology which perceives and acts temporally second to the act of God. For example, the movement “to love others” is seen as a consequence of God’s loving and accepting (9.22), and the exact nature of the sequence is not clear. In addition, the trials of the life of faith which are listed are individual and inward trials: unbelief, pride, lust, and fear.

Secondly, the Confession is vague in its understanding of sin. The Confession conceives of sin in terms of “mastery over one’s own life, turning against God and their brothers and sisters, and becoming exploiters and despoilers of the world” (9.12). Sinners belong to the realm of “rebellion, despair, and isolation.” To be forgiven and accepted by God is to be moved toward others, the neighbor. If the anthropology underlying the Confession is atomized then this expression of the nature of sin does not grasp the systemic nature which sin takes in our world, nor does it raise in a serious way the question “who is my neighbor?”
Thirdly, the Confession understands the source of the new life to be the Word as it is heard through the Scriptures and proclamation. But there is no indication given that the Confession takes seriously the question as to the locus in which one receives the living Word in Scripture and proclamation—other than to identify that place as the Church. The Church is unwittingly thus imaged as existing prior to the worldly history in which it takes form.

These issues need to be addressed seriously or else the spirituality which is guided by the Confession displays what Gustavo Gutierrez has called a “capacity to be reabsorbed by the social order” to which it is ministering. Instead of a newly enlivened body of Christ and a renewed creation, the end result is domestication of the Gospel and an even deeper entrenchment of the forces which exploit, despoil, and alienate (i.e., marginate) persons and groups of persons.

THE PRODDING OF LIBERATION AND FEMINIST THEOLOGIES TOWARD A DEEPLY UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE IN THE SPIRIT:

The claim of a new spiritual experience, the experience with the Other: When Gustavo Gutierrez wants to speak of the locus where the Spirit enlivens the Word and of how we can walk in the Spirit, he speaks about the Other who “appears as a revealer of the totally other.” In this regard, Gutierrez is reaching for a theo-anthropology similar to that expounded by Joseph Haroutunian (although in a linguistically sexist theology) and by Carter Heyward in her book, The Redemption of God. I call this anthropology “theo-anthropology,” not because it makes human beings God or God merely human, but because it insists that relation is prior both ontologically and temporally to individuation and that God is experienced only in the context of human relation. Haroutunian puts it this way:

We do not know our “nature” as human beings except in our transac tion with our fellowmen. We do our speaking and thinking, our pur posing and acting, in the process of our mutual transactions. Even our perceptions, and emotions, our eating and drinking, and our loving and hating occur in a social process that makes them what they are.

He goes on to say:

... a human being exists as a fellowman. He is human by virtue of his communication with me, a communication in which he exists as my fellowman. ... He knows himself in his response to my response to him, and I know myself in my response to his response to me. ... In our transactions as fellowmen the word becomes “flesh.”
These transactions are occasioned by the presence of the Holy Spirit. In them we know Jesus Christ and God. Haroutunian says, "Communion is Jesus’ knowledge of us and service of us, and our knowledge and service of him and one of another, so that these three make one thing, which is common." And again he says:

In "the order of knowledge" everything depends upon the Spirit, who reveals us one to another in our faithfulness and knowledge of one another. The miracle of the presence of our brother is one piece with the miracle of the presence of Christ with us, and the presence of Christ, signifies, and is the presence of God. The knowledge where-with I know my fellowman . . . is the same wherewith I know Jesus Christ and the father.

Carter Heyward develops a similar (though not identical) anthropology when she says,. . . "the experience of relation is fundamental and constitutive of human being; that it is good and powerful; and that it is only within this experience—as it is happening here and now—that we may realize that the power in relation is God." And again she says, "Relation is in-carnate, between us, in the physicality of all that we do: breathe, move, think, feel, reach, touch," For Heyward, as for Haroutunian, human nature is relational first, and individualized and atomized into my-your, inner-outer, self-not self only arbitrarily or else, if it is to happen without violence, only as the gift of the other.

This kind of anthropology drives us away from the possibility of any happening between God and human beings which takes place apart from or prior to—in either an experiential or ontological sense—those happenings which take place between us as humans. The locus of the work of the Spirit, which is the hearing, believing and living of the Word is always our encounter with our human other—our neighbor (Matt. 25:31-46). Gutierrez says, "To be with the poor the other is to have a relationship with a God who loves me gratuitously, strips me, leaves me naked, universalizing my love for others, and makes it gratuitous." Again he says: "The liberating commitment is the place of a spiritual experience where we find again the great prophetic subject of the Old Testament and of Jesus’ preaching . . . . it leads to a new way of being a person and a believer, to a new way of living and thinking the faith, to a new way of being gathered in the ‘ecclesia.’" There is no spiritual life for us which can be inner and private. To receive the gift of the Spirit is always from the very first to the very last to receive my neighbor for good or for ill.

One of the implications of such a theo-pneuma-anthropology is that, taken consciously to the Scriptures, the messages Scripture provides us become understood differently. This, in turn, occasions new insights into the Church in the world. One of the most interesting biblical settings to work with in this regard is the...
complex group of stories Luke gives us which begins with the baptism of Jesus and culminates in the preaching of the Good News in Nazareth. In between, of course, are the genealogy and the temptations of Jesus.

It is no accident that liberation theology finds its locus here. It is also no accident that liberation theology claims that out of this it is finding a new spirituality. Three of these Luke stories involve statements about the Holy Spirit, so one can assume that how one understands the Spirit here is crucial for other understandings. If one approaches the Scriptures with an atomized anthropology, then the Spirit descends “on Jesus,” she “drives Jesus into the wilderness,” and she “leads him” to preach to Nazareth but without any recognition of the community which is Jesus’ life blood. But the crucial thing about these passages is that none of this is possible without the confrontation of Jesus with John the Baptist and, by extension, with the suffering poor people and the righteous tax collectors and soldiers who made up the crowds which heard John. John preaches the message of justice for the poor (Luke 3:10-14). Jesus’ response to John’s message includes baptism (Luke 3:21-22), the struggle in the wilderness whose central point is the poor (the temptations are cradled between two passages about the poor!), and by preaching in Nazareth that his message is “Good news to the poor.” Jesus meets the poor and John together, and he receives the Spirit, the symbol of which is baptism. John’s call and the cries of the poor are symbolized in the Spirit’s driving Jesus into the wilderness where he listens and clarifies, and then returns to the people to preach and to heal. To receive the Spirit in the struggle with and for the neighbor does not preclude solitude. But genuine solitude is not atomization, but the gift of the Spirit which comes by and for our neighbor, in this case John the Baptist and the poor whose cries have reached Jesus and who are fed and healed.

The Other as Outsider, a deepening and historical locating of the neighbor: Such a theo-anthropology does not yet protect us against a spirituality which can be co-opted. We find it very easy to receive the neighbor who is “next door” and “like us.” But such a reception does not necessarily bring us “new life,” nor do we necessarily become “faithful” thereby. Gutierrez puts it aptly when he says:

... while I consider my neighbor to be someone “nearby,” the person I meet on the road, the one who comes to me seeking help ... my world remains the same. It is a love which never leaves the backyard. ... If on the contrary, I consider my neighbor the person in whose way I put myself, the “distant” person to whom I draw near ... if I see my neighbor as the one whom I go out to seek in the streets and market places, in the margined neighborhoods, in the farms and mines, in the factories, my world changes.
The issue hidden at the heart of the encounter with “the other” is the issue of “difference.” And difference becomes the occasion for the exercise of power. Only if we understand “the other” as he or she exists within the context of power will we be able to understand “who is our neighbor” (Luke 10:25-37)? Power can be experienced as empowering by the other or it can be experienced as control. Those areas of our common life where it is experienced as control produces the other as “the outsider” or “the margined person.” Power relations set up bondages and inequalities which give a depth dimension to the question “who is my neighbor?” Communion is not necessarily common commerce. When some people have been marginated by our modes of togetherness there is no communion. Here liberation and feminist theologians agree.

Liberation theologians see economic exploitation or racist factors as the basic source of margination whereas feminists see its ground in our experience of sexuality. Beverly Harrison asserts:

Our fears regarding human sexuality, and the widespread confused and phobic anxieties about the same sex eroticism, together with the disordered relations between men and women generated by deep inequality in power and respect in this society, are the major sources of our other fears of diversity and difference. . . . We must come to see that it is through our socialization to sexuality that we learn to “fear equality,” and some to feel “strong” by lording it over others or to feel “safe” by being controlled by them. It is through learning what, for better or worse, it means to be male or female, or to be “masculine” or “feminine” that we learn more basically to tolerate inequality.12

One cannot escape the fact that these three senses of “Outsider” the economic, racial and sexual, are inextricably intertwined, since the majority of the poor in today’s world are red, black, and yellow women.

The point is that the neighbor with whom the quickening by the Spirit occurs, the hearing and believing the Word of God takes place, and the living in the Spirit happens is the neighbor who has been forced to the edges of society and has been given a place which is not that of a “fellow-citizen creature.”13 For us the Other is the Outsider who calls us to come, and in whose presence we know “ . . . a new way of being a person and a believer, . . . a new way of living and thinking the faith, . . . a new way of being gathered into the ‘ecclesia.’”14

The nature of sin as “distance”: Both feminist and liberation theologies spatialize the awareness of sin. Sin consists in “distancing” the neighbor so that he or she is no longer visible as a human being. This is an understanding of sin in the context of social power. There is a sense in which the death of Jesus on the cross is the paradigm of all distancing. Jesus, our brother, was
pushed out of existence on the cross. In less extreme forms (Jeremiah 7:1-7), distance means “to push out” by marginalizing, so we do not have to speak to, worry about, see, hear or touch our neighbor. It is lived in our racial ghettos, our poor neighborhoods, our encapsulated women, our impotent children, our neglected old persons, our sick, deranged, and handicapped. It is the extreme form of our power.

Feminist and liberation theologies are loud cries from those whom we have distanced ourselves. The claim “Look, God is over here with us, the invisible ones. God loves us. God is setting us free, we who are the Outsiders, from your control and manipulation. We are becoming responsible subjects of our own destinies. God is making us the equal of all creatures and providing us the opportunity for mutual and fulfilling relationships.” When put this way, reconciliation between enemies takes place only as an end-product of the freedom of equals, and the spiritual discipline of reconciliation described so authentically by the Confession of ’67 takes place as part of the larger context of the spiritual discipline of liberation. So the issue becomes, how does the “new life of liberation” broaden, deepen and ground the “new life of reconciliation?” This is, of course, the difference between “peace with justice” and a “peace” which is brought prior to justice and which then moves into the realm of justice. The latter understanding of “peace” finds itself co-opted in an establishment church to a maintenance of systemic injustice.

Some essential characteristics of life in the Spirit with the Outsider: There are four characteristics of our communal life with the Outsider to which we now turn. These are not the only characteristics but, to my mind, they are the most important.

The first characteristic of life in the Spirit for those who want to take the Outsider seriously is metanoia. Gutierrez says:

We have to break with our mental categories, with the way we relate to others, with our way of identifying with the Lord, with our cultural milieu, with our social class, in other words, with all that can stand in the way of a real, profound solidarity with those who suffer, in the first place, from misery and injustice. Only thus, and not through purely interior and spiritual attitudes will the “new man” arise from the ashes of the “old.”

And Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza says: “At the beginning of the Christian life and discipleship stands metanoia, a new orientation in the life power of the Spirit. Christian theology and the Christian community will only be able to speak in an authentic way to the quest for feminist spirituality . . . when the whole church, as well as its individual members, has renounced all forms of sexist ideology and praxis. . .” Here is a call for the discipline of a radical break, a break which calls for a new mind, a new heart,
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and a new body. But the paradox of such a demand is that this break is not possible without the presence of the distant neighbor. Conversion comes only as we are willing to respond to the Outsider and unite ourselves with him or her.

So metanoia is always an act of solidarity which is built on “hearing” the outsider speak to us. Such hearing means “being where the other is.” This new solidarity with the Other makes possible the break with the old. “Hearing” the Outsiders means becoming vulnerable to the ways in which the very power we possess thrusts them to the margins of life. It is to experience the consequences of our own actions which are paradoxically so close to us by the act of distancing that we cannot see them for what they are. Without the “solidarity of hearing” there is no break. With it, there is a break which makes for a new life together.

The second characteristic of life in the Spirit is that of conflict. To move toward the neighbor who is the distant Outsider, to break with the structures which distance, to hear the Outsiders and to become one with them, is to side with their efforts to be free and full of power over their own destinies. But this brings us into conflict with persons-in-power and the structures whereby they maintain themselves. New life in the Spirit is not primarily besieged by inner conflict as the Confession implies, but is in its very structure, conflict with the powers and principalities of this world. It reveals new “enemies” out of the obscurity of our old comfortable ways, and raises to the surface unknown hostilities. The life of liberation makes very clear the nature of the hostility amongst us. In this it prepares the way for reconciliation and peace.

The third characteristic of the life of the Spirit is joy. This joy is not a momentary feeling but an all-pervading quality of life. It grows out of the realization that the “break” and “solidarity” of our conversion, and the conflict which arises in our life with the Outsider, is the sign of the Spirit that “history is being made over into a history of authentic brotherhood [and sisterhood].”

It is the joy of the shared life which is the only life there is, a life of free equals mutually responding to one another with life-giving words and empowering touch. It is the communion of creatures which is the reality of Jesus Christ and the presence of God in the world. This joy is given celebrative form in the Eucharist which, along with the Word, is the central act of the spiritual life with the Outsider. We eat and drink together, we nurture one another, we grow in each other’s life-giving care, we set one another free. And we rejoice in one another.

The final characteristic of the life of the Spirit with the Outsider is that of sensuality, or the enfleshing of the word. This
characteristic is seen in liberation theology's concern for the well-being of the poor. It is acted out in concern for food and drink, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, fulfilling work and politics. Feminist theologians push this spirituality even closer home in their concern for the body. As we have already seen, Carter Heyward has said, "Relation is incarnate, between us, in the physicality of all that we do: breathe, move, think, feel, reach, touch." And Beverly Harrison says:

Our energy—literally the gift of life—is body-mediated energy. Our sexuality does not detract from, but deepens and shapes our power of being. Our bodies, through our senses, mediate our real, physical connectedness to all things. Our sexuality is the deepest, most intense dimension of our interaction with the world and because it is, it really is a key to the quality and integrity of our overall spirituality. . . . We use touch either to control others or to communicate our caring. Hence sexuality is not only critical to, but indispensable in our deepest spiritual power, i.e., our power of communication, and to the self-respect we give and receive.

Our solidarity with the other, our life together, is always an enfleshed life. It is always bodily. It is always sexual. The loving coming together of bodies becomes the metaphor for the life of the Spirit. The spiritual life with the Other will develop a new sense of bodily relationships, a new sense of the wonder of touch, a new sense of mutuality. Here once again the Eucharist becomes a communal act of celebration of the body, where the community shares not only the life-giving bread and wine with one another but also the kiss of peace and love. To become one with the Outsider is to receive the body and the blood of the Outsider even as it is to give our own. For us who live in the Spirit, it is to become one in the flesh.

Prayer is wrung from our lips as we struggle with and for our neighbor. It is first and foremost an act of human community as it places itself before God. This does not preclude solitude and the prayers which we commonly call the "inner" struggle of the Spirit. But such solitude is not to be confused with aloneness. Solitude is not something one grasps by some herculean effort. It is the gift of the Spirit (Luke 4:1), and therefore the gift of the neighbor whose cry of pain becomes our own, whose claim for joy and peace provides us with the space in which we can be in solitude. Our prayers in solitude come from our loving-hating-oppressing-freeing interactions with our fellow human beings (Mat 6:12) and, like Jesus in the wilderness, the identity of our neighbor-with-us becomes clear in our solitude. The work of the Spirit, in prayer, as in all else, is to bind us to our neighbor in the reconciliation of Jesus who is the Word of God (Ephesians 2:11-22).
What liberation and feminist theologies drive toward is a theo-pneuma-anthropology which gives depth and substance to the reality of the life in the Spirit, the new life in communion. It focuses the locus of our receiving the Word and our believing in the reality of one who is without power, the Outsider. It sees the formation of a new community with the Outsider, a community of equal and free persons, living together as one body, mutually upholding and nurturing one another. In one respect feminist and liberation theologies fill out and complete new life in the Spirit as it is expressed in the Confession of '67. In another respect they ground and prepare the way for the Spirit seen in the Confession of '67. In both instances, the work of the Spirit in the building of the reconciled and reconciling community is the work of the same Spirit in liberating, equalizing, and embodying the new community. We meet that Spirit as we meet our neighbor. Together we confess in our loving and by our loving that Spirit as the sure and steady presence of Jesus in the world for the world.

NOTES

4 Ibid., p. 31f.
5 Ibid., p. 97.
6 Ibid., p. 110.
8 Ibid., p. 31.
10 Ibid., pp. 26, 3.
11 Ibid., p. 15.
14 Gutierrez, op. cit., p.3.
17 Gutierrez, Praxis de Liberacion y Fe Cristiana, p. 29.
18 Heyward, The Redemption of God, p. 29.
19 Harrison, op. cit., p. 23.