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Confessional Documents As Reformed Hermeneutic

I. CONFESSIONAL DOCUMENTS AND THE ACT OF CONFESSING

THE ECUMENICAL CREEDS of the early catholic Church and the confessions of classic and modern Protestantism are *documents*. Obviously! We know this from common usage, from the dictionary, and from the constitutions of various church bodies. But documents, even when assent to the content is required by subscription and sealed by ordination, are only part of the Church's act of confessing and believing. These documents represent the literary precipitate of the verbal side of confessing, usually formulated under special historical conditions. They are not divine revelation, but part of the Church's answer to the revelation that has created and renewed the Church in history and does so in the present.

Christian confessing has at least three aspects. It is verbal, volitional, and personal-communal. (1) There is a content to the Christian faith, expressed most briefly in the earliest confession of the Church: "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11). Words are needed to understand as well as to communicate and elaborate the meaning of this confession. Hence arose the verbal character of confessing as well as preaching, teaching, theology, doctrine, and dogma. (2) But uttering these words confessionally is never merely verbal. It is at once an act of will, a total commitment that expresses itself in praise and obedience. The term "Lord" makes the confessor a servant, subject, or follower in all possible conditions of life. The one who confesses in these words puts her or his life on the line, as is shown by the language of church history and

liturgy in which “martyrs and confessors” are those who sacrificed or were willing to sacrifice their lives for the faith. (3) Confessing is personal-communal, not private or individual. Even when the confessor is physically alone, he or she shares in the community that is created by participation in the Lord’s kingdom, both in and beyond the empirical Church. Christian confessing always reflects the correlative personal and community dimensions of life in the Church.

This threefold character gives rise to certain prominent aberrations in the history and current life of the Church. One is *confessionalism*, the canonization of verbal formulae (sometimes claimed to be infallible) combined with a fixation on doctrinal correctness, usually oriented toward the past and often at the expense of love and faithful obedience. Another aberration so completely emphasizes obedience, departing from old doctrinal formulae or sometimes from any verbal formulae at all, so as to become wordless, anonymous action. But love, minus confessing words (derived from the Word himself) will finally be cut off from the wellsprings from which it originates. A third aberration is exhibited either in a separated privatism or a formal institutional legalism, whether with reference to words or to deeds.

All this having been said, the confessions and creeds of Christian history still come to us in the first place as documents. They are collectible in large volumes like Schaff’s *Creeds of Christendom* or more handy form in Leith’s *Creeds of the Churches*. Throughout Christian history these documents have been understood as containing biblical teaching in brief form, focused on the essentials, truly stated so as to ward off erroneous construal and heretical distortion. As such these documents were meant to be the formal, authoritative interpretation of Scripture in the Church, the end product of a churchly hermeneutic. Both in the patristic period and in the Reformation, rare or difficult biblical materials were to be brought into harmony with the clear and known consensus by a principle designated the “analogy of faith.” This proved to be a powerful control on the hermeneutic process. Hence we turn now to formal authority.

II. FORMAL HERMENEUTIC AUTHORITY IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

The Protestant Reformation was at root an event in the realm of hermeneutics. For all the issues of personal and social psychology, economic, political and cultural change, ecclesiastical and liturgical practice of the late Middle Ages, the Reformation (Lutheran and Reformed) offered a *corrected interpretation of what the Bible means by grace*. In response to this interpretation,

the Church confessed anew and in confessing re-formed itself in words, deeds, and the form of community life. Confessional documents expressing the fresh understanding of grace soon came into being. These documents were to have their influence chiefly as part of the constitutions of the Reformation churches in various lands. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) is a case in point. It was not only set within the constitution as a criterion of orthodoxy, it provided the structure of theological lectures for the education of ministers, it was divided into fifty-two sections so that each might serve as a sermon subject each week of the year, and it was memorized by all communicants.

Another example from the century after the Reformation is the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*. Sydney Ahlstrom calls the Westminster standards "by far the most important confessional witness in American Colonial history. . . . That so many learned and contentious men in an age of so much theological hair-splitting could with so little coercion establish so resounding a consensus on so detailed a doctrinal statement is one of the marvels of the century" (*A Religious History of the American People*, p. 94). Nonetheless, as time went on both in Scottish and American Presbyterianism, formal authority did become coercive. Strict subscription in Scotland forbid "any minister or lay member of the church . . . to speak, write, preach, teach, or print anything whatsoever that would be contrary to, or even inconsistent with, any view contained in the Confession." (L. J. Trinterud, *The Making of An American Tradition*, p. 39.) American Presbyterian subscription was milder and was always limited to the ordained. From the Adopting Act of 1729 to the present, it was not the *ipsissima verba* of the documents, but presbytery's often milder judgment of the acceptability of the ordinands' views within the confessional "system of doctrine" that determined who was to be ordained. When, however, this procedure was seen to allow both Old School and New School interpretations, a more sinister tack was taken, requiring a more severe adherence among seminary professors. The professor being installed in an Old School Presbyterian seminary, after 1838, was asked to promise *ex animo* "not to inculcate, teach, or insinuate anything which shall appear to me to contradict or contravene, either directly or impliedly, anything taught in the said Confession of Faith, . . . while I shall continue a professor in this Seminary." This *reductio ad absurdum* of the formal authority of "subordinate" standards survived the reunion of 1869 and remained in effect until twenty-five years ago. (The present writer's refusal to consider teaching at Princeton with the oath in force was the occasion for its removal.) The demonic rigor of this Old School oath was self-defeating, as we shall see below in Section IV, where the confessions themselves

are seen to call for the continuing hermeneutic process in the Church.

III. THE HERMENEUTIC OF CONFESSING OBEDIENCE

Confessing engages the will. But is there a formal authority for this volitional aspect of confessing, comparable to the doctrinal authority just observed? The immediate answer is No. It has not been characteristic of Christian history to produce documents of prescriptive obedience comparable to the Nicene or Chalcedonian theological documents. This may seem strange, given the range of ethical action that across the centuries variously expressed the will of the Church: from early pacifism, through just war for the protection and advance of Christian civilization, to military crusades that were meritorious for salvation; or the shift from family-oriented Christianity to the ascetic, celibate "religious" life; or from accepting to rejecting human slavery and witchcraft. All of these forms of obedience and many more were both the product of and the producers of changes in biblical interpretation, but generally did not find their way into formal confessional statements.

The Reformed tradition may offer here something of an exception (possibly along with Methodism). Already in early Zürich and Geneva the "third use of the law" and the discipline of the Church were used to bend the will of the recalcitrant confessor. When practiced with the cooperation of the state, this produced an ethical impact on society that has been called revolutionary, albeit a "repressive" revolution so far as immediate political liberty was concerned (M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*). Martin Bucer's program for the kingdom in England, never enacted, contained essentially the same social control. Analogously, the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Questions 91-148, gives an extremely detailed account of what the various commandments of the Decalogue "require" and "forbid" as the Christian's obedience. Generally these teachings belong to individual or personal ethic, although the prescription for the relations among "inferiors, superiors, or equals" is a social dimension of great import. Generally the *Larger Catechism* was used in America, if at all, to find grounds for the prosecution of ministers caught in egregious immorality. Nonetheless, the personal and social sanctions and prohibitions of nineteenth century evangelicalism bear a strong resemblance, and not merely by chance, to this Westminster ethic (cf. Ahlstrom, and R. Handy, *A Christian America*). Subsequently, liberal Protestantism, insofar as it flourished in Presbyterianism in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, turned the ethical compass more directly to-

ward social and structural evils, although not away from personal sins and vices. This emphasis was tacitly received and acknowledged within "the broadening church" (see L. A. Loetscher's book of that title) after the General Assembly deliverance of 1927.

It is with the *Confession of 1967* that a strong social-ethical hermeneutic of faithful obedience is introduced into a Reformed confessional document. There was some precedent in the *Barmen Declaration* of Germany in 1934. But that great confessing document condemns only Nazi impingement on the institutional church. Thus, while rejecting totalitarianism, it does not even mention anti-Semitism or various other social evils of Hitler's Germany.

More directly, the *Confession* is informed by (1) a reapprehension of the Pauline doctrine of reconciliation under the tutelage of Calvin's Institutes, Book III, at a time when (2) twentieth century Christian pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) had already for many years confronted the Church with the structural forms of sin in human society. This doctrine of reconciliation overcomes the orthodox dichotomy of justification and sanctification and apprehends with Calvin the inseparability of regeneration and justification, the virtual identity of the terms justification and reconciliation (*Institutes*, III.xi.4), and the societal import of all this taken together.

It bears repetition that the prominence of reconciliation in the *Confession* does not mean that the document is to be understood as highlighting a single doctrinal topic among others, any more than in the Reformation itself justification was just one of a list of topics. Luther is said to have called it "the article by which the church stands or falls," and Calvin, "the main hinge on which religion turns." In the Reformation, justification by grace through faith was the fundamental motif decisively affecting the import of all confessional words, obedience, and life within the Christian community. It was, in short, the hermeneutical key to faith and life in the sixteenth century church. And so it is with reconciliation as apprehended in the *Confession of 1967*.

The word "is" in the first sentence of paragraph 31 offers a succinct way to present the role of reconciliation in the *Confession*. "To be reconciled to God *is* to be sent into the world as his reconciling community." Calling is sending. As prophets, apostles, and disciples were all called to be sent, so the community created by God's reconciling work *is*, as such, "sent into the world." There is no gap, no option. The Church is at once a mission. The structure comes from II Corinthians 5:17 through chapter 6, capsulated as: "This community . . . is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares his labor of healing the enmities which separate people from God and from each other."

The societal dimension of the ethic of reconciliation is not constructed in terms of a theory of the state or of economics, a system of discipline, or a prescriptive program for action. Rather its "direction" and "pattern," as befits disciples who follow their Master, is drawn from the life of Jesus (§ 24 and 32). The *Confession* points in a *direction*—a very important word in this document—which is derived from the ministry of Jesus and, like that ministry, drawn by human need. Careful attention should be given to paragraph 43:

In each time and place there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity, and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations.

These words point the confessional direction for a hermeneutic of faithful obedience. The four paradigms on race, peace, economic life, and sexuality indicate the following of this direction in the contemporary world. They are not exhaustive, but make the direction unmistakable and concrete. They recognize contemporary (not merely current, or passing) personal and social reality in which the Church lives and which must enter its confessing obedience—for otherwise it "denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling" (§ 43). The sharp closing words at the end of each of the four paragraphs are meant to serve the function of the anathemas of certain early creeds, defining the Church also by negation: in these instances, self-pronounced anathemas.

IV. THE CONTINUING HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS

An insight of Harnack about the history of doctrine is relevant here. Harnack holds that the history of doctrine as authoritatively formulated teaching always fights against the history of theology out of which the formulations actually spring. This is because the Church finally claims that its dogmatic decisions are biblical, and represent the original truth of revelation, not a historical development. In the Reformed tradition, we have already seen this maxim illustrated, where formal authority tried to hold the line against subsequent development. But this is not the whole story, because correctives are built into the confessions themselves.

The *Westminster Confession* which we have seen made the subject of some of the most frightening legal restrictions, is well known to teach that "All synods and councils since the apostles' times whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both." (Ch. xxxi.) The Preface to the

Second Helvetic Confession notes with approval the variety in expression and formulation of doctrine and in rites and ceremonies among the churches stemming from the Reformation. All these are to be allowed within the unity of the fellowship, but may be corrected by appeal to Scripture and the "ancient apostolic Church." This subordination of churchly documents to Scripture, and correction by appeal to Scripture, works against overemphasis on formal authority, and condemns the very process by which too much is claimed for the confession itself.

More important by far than the formal approach presented above (Part II) are those provisions in the confessions themselves for the lively process of biblical interpretation in the preaching and teaching of the Church. This process continues before, during, and after the preparation of formal documents. The same hermeneutic process that brought on the Reformation, continues to modify the Reformed church throughout history. *Semper reformanda!*

Most interesting in this regard is chapter two of the *Second Helvetic Confession*, titled "Of Interpreting the Holy Scriptures, and of Fathers, Councils, and Traditions." This remarkable chapter brings into focus both the technical side of exegesis, and the movement of the history (fathers, councils, and traditions) in which the Church lives as interpreter of Scripture. The need for interpretation is taken as self-evident, along with the need to arbitrate among rival interpretations. The goal is the natural or genuine meaning derived from the Scriptures themselves, expounded and applied to contemporary life. The minister "expounds" and "applies" in order to comfort, strengthen, raise up, rebuke, etc., those in the parish, whether common people or officers of civil government (ch. xviii). And the scope of it all is "the glory of God and man's salvation."

Technical exegetical advice, not at all to be taken for granted in the sixteenth century, is offered by insisting on understanding according to the genius of the original languages, the context and the historical circumstances, the comparison of like and unlike, clearer and more obscure passages. If this application of the techniques of humanist literary analysis to the text of Scripture seems tame in the twentieth century, it was not so in the sixteenth—where the Council of Trent had already canonized the Latin Vulgate and condemned any interpretation "contrary to that sense which Holy Mother Church—whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scripture—has held and does hold."

A quite different hermeneutical situation prevails for the Church after the scientific and cultural watershed of the eighteenth century. Thus were brought on the efforts in American

Presbyterianism to revise the *Westminster Confession* in the 1890s, the failure of which resulted in the narrowing of the church in the direction of Benjamin Warfield's fundamentalistic orthodoxy. But in the middle of the 1920s a truce was struck. The "broadening" church would stay together, but at the expense of being a vigorously confessing church.

Fortunately, however, the continuing hermeneutic process in the context of teaching and preaching was to show new life, fructified in part by Neo-Reformation thought from the continent, and partly by a growing social conscience. One evidence was the appearance of the magnificent *Faith and Life Curriculum* for church schools, a Christ-centered and covenant-oriented educational instrument. Under the rubric of confessional obedience in a changing social scene came the numerous activities of "Social Education and Action"—which functioned along with the curriculum in preparing the way (without intending it) for a coming new confession of faith.

It falls to Professor Landes in another part of this Symposium to expound and criticize the more prescriptive hermeneutic sections of the *Confession of 1967*, titled "The Bible." Suffice to say, these brief paragraphs respond at long last to the cultural change of three centuries in which the modern world was born. The *Confession* reaffirms the revelation of God in Christ the Word as the Reformation did, over against every human invention and innovation, whether secular or biblicist and fundamentalist. This is a unique achievement among confessional documents to date, and appears strong enough to lead the Church into an unknown future, despite the recent sounds of a frightened and backward-looking bibliolatry.

V. A PRACTICAL CONSIDERATION

Throughout the history of the Reformed tradition, the central place both for the ongoing hermeneutic process urged in the confessions, and for the general influence of the confessions in the Church, has been the pastoral office through preaching, teaching, oversight, and leadership. Correspondingly, it is chiefly the minister of the word, among the other ordained ministries, who is held accountable in the constitutional questions for following the leading and guidance of the confessions of faith. Appropriately, theological education was in the past structured by the theology of the confessions. Rather strongly, thus, I wish to remind those of us that find our calling in theological education that it is scandalous for a faculty member in any discipline in the church's seminaries not to be able to locate his or her work and thought and teaching matter with relation to the confessional

teachings. We do not want again the old teaching oath, or any teaching oath at all, and the inevitably stifling conformity it promotes. But neither do we want the chaotic non-conformity of private, virtuoso theologies that leave the relation of thought to life in the empirical church to the improvisation of individual ministers. Further, theological education carried out in programs of continuing education or presbytery projects of many types, should be oriented by a reasonable awareness of what the Church teaches in its confessional and credal literature.

More broadly, it is the educational ministry of the Church on all levels that should bear the chief responsibility for a confessionally rooted hermeneutic, worship, and mission. The idiom of the tradition, whether in words or ethic, needs to be exercised in spiritual, biblical, theological, and ethical education.

It would be well, we often think, if one might be just a Christian, and not a Presbyterian, Catholic, or Methodist. But so, it might seem, is the case with language. What if we could avoid German or English and just speak language? But it doesn't work. Esperanto is a wonderful idea, but like Basic English a few years back, it is bereft of the richness of meaning and naturalness of a true language. So a theological Esperanto, or ecumenical Esperanto—for the time being at least—leaves us far from the concrete reality in which we live and speak. The idiom of the Reformed tradition, when fully understood, is the ground and motive both for ecumenical awareness and progress, and for other kinds of reform and advance. Not abandonment, but reform, as new light breaks forth from Scripture and illuminates new situations in our culture and environment and in the world Church, is the promising idiom of our tradition. So the confession arises out of the hermeneutic process which advances—in words, in obedience, and in churchly militance—under the guidance of the Word and the Spirit.