

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
July 28, 2013

2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Matthew 5:23-24, Galatians 3:27-28
“Faith in the 1960s and Beyond”

Last week I mentioned that in the final Sundays before I take off on vacation my sermons will look at our denomination’s contemporary confessions, a separate confession each Sunday. I began last Sunday with The Theological Declaration of Barmen and today we look at The Confession of 1967 (C67).

We’re a confessional church. In other words, we like to communicate the best we can our thoughts about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and other aspects of faith pertinent to events and issues of the day. Confessions and declarations are important mainstays for our faith but they are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.

The Book of Confessions forms the first part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). There are eleven confessions in all: two ancient creeds, six Reformation confessions, and three contemporary declarations. The contemporary declarations are The Theological Declaration of Barmen, The Confession of 1967 and A Brief Statement of Faith.

When you think about the 1960s – the whole era of the sixties – what comes to mind?

[Congregational response]

Given what we have said it is not surprising that the theological concepts around which C67 revolve are the concepts of “reconciliation” and “the equality of persons” thus, the scriptures for today’s worship service.

C67 notes that God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the church’s mission of reconciliation are the heart of the gospel in any age, but “our generation stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ.”

The Confession of 1967 was drafted after two “northern” Presbyterian denominations united in 1959, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the United Presbyterian Church in North America. The new denomination was called the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The confessional basis of the union was the Westminster standards, despite the fact that the United Presbyterian Church in North America had its own confession written in 1925. Leaders of both denominations apparently anticipated confessional revision in the united church.

The uniting General Assembly appointed a Special Committee on a Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith with Edward A. Dowey, Jr., a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, appointed as chair. After millions of meetings, reviews and revisions, and circulation of the draft document throughout the denomination the confession was approved at the 1967 General Assembly.

C67 confirmed the values of the New Reformation theology initiated in Europe by Karl Barth and others and marked the culmination of theological homogeneity in the church since the fundamentalist/modernist controversies in the 1920s in the U.S. It constituted a new beginning in the expression of Reformed confessional statements.

All the creeds, confessions, and declarations of the Reformed tradition arose in the context of social and political controversy. Each of these implicitly addressed the issues of their time in ways which the authors and original recipients understood. But the Confession of 1967 was the first Reformed statement to overtly and explicitly name and confront current social problems of its own era. Thus, C67 provided the church with a clear theological orientation by which to meet central social issues of the 1960s and 1970s.

Four issues were specifically identified. Each will be read and discussed by us now. Anna will read the first. You may follow along in the insert. Listen for the issues and how the church deals with them.

Anna:

a. God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, God overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic differences, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize others, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.

What are the issues here and how is faith affirmed? Racial discrimination...

Alan:

b. God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of the peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend. The church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This search requires that the nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding. Reconciliation among nations becomes peculiarly urgent as countries develop nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, diverting human power and resources from constructive uses and risking the annihilation of humankind. Although nations may serve God's purposes in history, the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling.

What are the issues here and how is faith affirmed? Peace among nations...

Melissa:

c. The reconciliation of humankind through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God's good creation. Because Jesus identified himself with the needy and exploited, the cause of the world's poor is the cause of his disciples. The church cannot condone poverty, whether it is the product of unjust social structures, exploitation of the defenseless, lack of national resources, absence of technological understanding, or rapid expansion of populations. The church calls all people to use their abilities, their possessions, and the fruits of technology as gifts entrusted to them by God for the maintenance of their families and the advancement of the common welfare. It encourages those forces in human society that raise hopes for better conditions and provide people with opportunity for a decent living. A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God.

What are the issues here and how is faith affirmed? Enslaving poverty...

Cornel:

d. The relationship between man and woman exemplifies in a basic way God's ordering of the interpersonal life for which God created humankind. Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of alienation from God, neighbors, and self. Perennial confusion about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day by the availability of new means for birth control and the treatment of infection, by the pressures of urbanization, by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication, and by world overpopulation. The church, as the household of God, is called to lead people out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, people have joy in and respect for their own humanity and that of other persons; a man and woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality. The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by society when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.

What are the issues here and how is faith affirmed? The equality of women and men...

The particularity of Reformed confessions does not confine them to their own time and place. In each time and place, the church benefits from the witness of the church in other times and places. Listening to the faithful voices of our forebears in the faith can liberate us from captivity to the limitations of our own cultural and ecclesial assumptions.

It is clear that our present generation also stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ. Thus, C67 is especially important to a contemporary articulation of Christian faith and life.

The Confession of 1967 states that members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of all in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics. But they have to fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human

welfare. Their strength is in their confidence that God's purpose rather than human schemes will finally prevail. Amen.