TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 11: THE CONFESSION OF 1967

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In 1958, the United Presbyterian Church of North America ended one hundred years of denominational life when it merged with the northern mainline Presbyterian church (PCUSA) to form the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (UPCUSA). For the PCUSA, the union marked the partial success of its ecumenical ambitions.

What began as three-way discussions was reduced when the Southern Presbyterians pulled out. North-South reunion would have to wait another quarter century. For the former United Presbyterians, this was an astonishingly quick assimilation from their Covenanter past into the American Presbyterian mainstream. Among the terms of the union was an agreement to write a new confessional standard in order to offer contemporary advice for American Presbyterians. Although the United Presbyterians were generally considered to be the more conservative party in the union, they were eager to craft a new confession. In that denomination's history, the Testimony of 1858 and the Confession Statement of 1925 sanctioned the idea of writing contemporary statements in order to guard the church against the perception of creedal obsolescence.

The committee assigned to this task was quick to identify supposed flaws in the Westminster standards. It was considered too legalistic (especially in the moral casuistry of the Larger Catechism), and there was little social dimension to its teaching. (The chief evidence for critics was the absence of the word *neighbor* in the standards, although the ill-regarded Larger Catechism's treatment of the Decalogue provided much instruction about loving one's neighbor.) Most objectionable was its decretal theology, which starkly separated the elect from the reprobate. In all of these respects, Westminster was badly dated. John Mackay of Princeton Seminary urged loyal Presbyterians of the twentieth century not to adopt the absolutism or sectarianism of the seventeenth century.

Nearly a decade later, what emerged was the Confession of 1967. In neo-orthodox fashion, the Confession affirmed God's transcendence over creation, humanity's fall into sin, and the call to faith as a response to God's grace in Jesus Christ. It also described the Bible as the "word of God," subordinating it to Jesus as the incarnate "Word of God," to whom Scripture was a faithful and "normative" (though fallible) witness. Moreover, the Confession endorsed modern biblical scholarship, encouraging Presbyterians to read the Bible historically and not literally, thus liberating it from the doctrine of inerrancy.

The heart of the Confession focused on reconciliation-but, as Westminster Seminary's Edmund Clowney pointed out, this was not the biblical doctrine of reconciliation between sinners and a wrathful God through the merits of Christ. Rather, the Confession described the calling of the church in terms of the social gospel: the church "is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares his labor of healing the enmities of mankind." In outlining what was crucial for the church to testify to the world in its age, the Confession omitted biblical infallibility, the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ, and all of the other essentials that American Presbyterians had debated a half-

century earlier. The "stunning" effect of the Confession of 1967, Clowney concluded, was to "open the church wide to unbelief."

Clowney's colleague, Cornelius Van Til, took the Confession of 1967 as proof of his charge (made in a 1946 book) that the theology of Karl Barth had infiltrated the PCUSA as the "new modernism." Indeed, neo-orthodoxy had proved to be more triumphant in the Presbyterian Church than liberalism. Liberalism undermined the church's confidence in the Westminster standards, but never to the point of crafting a new confession. However, the largely Barthian Confession of 1967 entailed the rejection of the Westminster standards-and indeed of all that the historic Christian creeds affirmed.

Evangelical Barthians disagreed with this assessment. They charged that Van Til exaggerated the new confession's Barthian roots. Geoffrey Bromiley of Fuller Seminary conceded that there were parallels to Barth's theology. But upon closer inspection, he claimed, Barth's teaching on Scripture and the Trinity was far more orthodox. Bromiley went on to argue that the Confession of 1967 accommodated itself to liberalism and Romanism in ways that Barth never did.

The full measure of the significance of the Confession of 1967 must take into account other confessional changes by the UPCUSA. The church did not replace the Westminster Confession, but rather joined it and several other confessions in *The Book of Confessions*. The UPCUSA now received multiple documents from the ancient church (Nicene and Apostles' Creeds), the Reformation (Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, and Westminster Confession and Shorter Catechism), and the modern church (Barmen Declaration and Confession of 1967). Presbyterians united them in one book to remind the church of the cloud of witnesses from its Christian heritage, and also to remind it that no single creed could capture the fullness of the Christian faith, because each of them was a product of particular historical circumstances. For Van Til and other critics, however, *The Book of Confessions* was a book of discord-a collection of mutually exclusive gospels.

The overt conflicts among these various creeds were resolved by rewriting the church's ordination vows. Presbyterian officers were now required to perform their ecclesiastical duties "under the authority of the Scriptures and the *guidance* of the confessions" of the church (emphasis added). No longer were they to receive confessional standards as "containing the system of doctrine found in Scripture."

By making these changes, the PCUSA arguably abandoned its confessional identity, because the confession no longer bound the officers of the church by determining what was within or beyond the pale of Reformed orthodoxy. The new role of the confessions (as Presbyterians learned to express them in the plural) was to instruct, to lead, and to guide. If Presbyterians sympathetically studied how the faith was once confessed in these windows into their Reformed heritage, they would be better equipped to confess their faith today.

The Confession of 1967, then, marked the end of the Northern Presbyterian Church as a confessional church. In Clowney's memorable phrase, the Confession of 1967 relegated the Westminster standards to a creedal museum, its value restricted to its historical significance. Van Til added that the mainline church would recognize the Westminster Confession as much as modern highways would permit the traffic of Amish buggies.

One reason that Clowney, Van Til, and other Orthodox Presbyterians devoted so much attention to the Confession of 1967 was their anticipation of a windfall of congregations joining the OPC, anxious to escape the established neo-orthodoxy of the mainline church. However, the exodus involved only a handful of churches, largely because mainline conservatives were able to put a positive spin on the new confession and its accompanying terms of subscription.

No one tried harder than John Gerstner of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In evaluating a preliminary draft of the confession, Gerstner labeled it "the greatest doctrinal disaster in the history of Presbyterianism" and a "slander to our Presbyterian fathers." But when he later focused on the change in the subscription vow as approved by the General Assembly of 1966, he claimed that the intent of that Assembly made the "instruction and guidance" to be "tantamount to believing what is catholic, evangelical, and reformed in the Book of Confessions." That eliminated, he reasoned, the neo-orthodox elements of the Confession. Gerstner concluded that the new vow rendered the UPCUSA, "in its officially subscribed documents, more catholic, evangelical, and reformed than ever before." Rhetoric like this was all the rationale that conservative churches needed for staying in, anxious as they were to retain their property.

But even as they suggested that the Confession of 1967 would usher in a new phase in the life of American Presbyterians, observers like Clowney and Van Til may actually have underestimated the effects of the actions of 1967. When the OPC perceived modernism as the greatest threat to Christian faith and practice, it insisted on the importance of confessional fidelity for ecclesiastical health. In its constant sparring with the PCUSA during the first quarter century of its history, the OPC maintained a consistent tone of Reformed militancy, commending its confessional integrity in contrast to the counterfeit confessionalism of the mainline church.

But 1967 may have ushered the OPC into its own confessional crisis. Once the UPCUSA changed its confessional standard and its constitution, the OPC could no longer accuse the UPCUSA of intellectual dishonesty. From that point on, the OPC expended less energy contrasting itself with mainline Presbyterianism, with which it differed. Instead, it increasingly compared itself with American evangelicalism, and sought to emphasize the things they had in common.

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