

“Reconciliation: Confession of 1967”  
Isaiah 32:16-20; 2 Corinthians 5:16-19;  
Ephesians 3:14-21; Matthew 5:21-26

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Where were you in the 1960s? I’ve heard it said that if you remember, you weren’t there. I don’t think that’s really quite true. Some of us weren’t there. It was before our time. Some of us were pretty young at that time. Some of us probably remember it.

It was an interesting time. Coming out of World War II through the ‘40s and into the ‘50s, there were many changes. In the ‘50s television started to come in, technology started to come in, the civil rights movement started to come in. The ‘60s were kind of the crest of that wave. There were a lot of things happening. The civil rights movement kept going. We began to get involved in Viet Nam, and then we struggled over whether we should be involved in Viet Nam. Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in 1960 or ‘61 to help us recognize that sometimes chemistry might not always be helpful. There was a whole beginning of a change.

Some people would say the youth culture took off in a certain way during that time. I think Elvis Presley, then the Beatles brought changes in the way music was done. There were disagreements between generations, perhaps. It was a time when there was a struggle about women’s roles, and not everybody agreed about what those roles were. It was a time of change and conflict.

Did I miss anything? There was a lot going on. The first direct dial phones. The technology was changing, the society was changing. The church—what was the church doing? It’s interesting because there was a struggle going on in the church as well. Some of it was around how we interpret scripture. How do we interpret scripture in light of the modern era?

You’re going to get a little bit of Presbyterian polity here. A Presbytery is a local governing group. All the churches in a specific area, called a Presbytery, send representatives to that Presbytery. The Presbytery, then, is the governing body that votes. All the Presbyteries send representatives to General Assembly so that the whole church can make decisions. In 1956, the Presbytery of Amarillo decided to send a resolution to the General Assembly, asking that the Westminster Larger Catechism be updated to modern language so that it could be understood in the modern era. That began a trajectory where they set up a commission to understand what the best thing to do would be.

Two things came out of that commission. One, they said that in light of all the conflict and change going on in our society, perhaps we should look back to our history, the confessions of the past (basically all the confessions we have talked about up to this point), and put them together because when we are going through this much change and have this much variety in our society we need to remember that there was change at other times as well. It wasn’t just the Westminster Confession. There was the

Heidelberg, the Barmen Declaration, there were all these others. So they put the Book of Confessions together at that point. Before that, it had just been the Westminster Confession. They said we need that broad memory to help us in this time.

The second thing they said was that we need a new confession. The Barmen spoke to the situation in Germany in a particular time. We feel like there's so much going on now in the '60s that we need a new confession as well. So over about 10 years, they put together a confession.

If you were in the midst of all that was going on, what kind of confession would you write? Would you write a confession that described how society was going wrong? Would you write a confession that was a theological treatise? The people who wrote this confession took a middle ground and said they weren't going to write a theological treatise. We looked back and we're not changing our theology. What we recognize is that God has a particular call on us in this particular time. So at the 179<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Portland in 1966, they accepted both the Book of Confessions and the Confession of 1967.

Now, why is it called the Confession of 1967 instead of 1966? They first voted on it in 1966. It's like changing the constitution of the United States. Just because Congress says they want to change it, now the states have to vote. With changing the constitution of the Presbyterian Church, the GA can say it's changed, but the Presbyteries have to vote. So there's a year-long study and it goes to all the Presbyteries. The majority voted to accept the Confession of 1967, which was ratified by another vote of General Assembly in 1967. So General Assembly had to vote again in 1967 to accept it. The Book of Confessions became a book that had all these confessions in it, including this new confession.

In the midst of all that, what did they decide was the central theme of the confession? Can anybody guess? The central theme of that confession was reconciliation. In the midst of conflict, we don't take sides. We recognize the need for reconciliation. Why? Because of what we see going on around us, and because that's what we're called to. God reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That's what we read in Second Corinthians.

So as the people put together that particular confession, they began with and made reconciliation the theme for the whole confession. They didn't try to restate the nature of the Trinity, the nature of who Jesus was. They did say a little bit about how to read scripture, and that was a little controversial, but that's where we get the language of scripture being the "authoritative, unique witness to the Word of God, Jesus Christ." They went to scripture to try to understand what to do, and their understanding was reconciliation. In the midst of the conflict of their time, what they wanted to lift up was reconciliation.

What they recognized is that if you want to do reconciliation, you can't just tell people to be reconciled and expect it to work. They identified particular issues and

struggles in the society of the day. They recognized what they called enslaving poverty. They recognized that there were conflicts between nations and that it had gotten more dangerous with nuclear and biological weapons. There was a reconciliation that needed to occur. They saw the relationship between men and women was a struggle, and they saw that it needed to be reconciled. They saw racial discrimination and all that was going on with that, and saw the need for reconciliation.

It feels to me like these things haven't gone away. We still have a need for reconciliation between men and women, a removal of harassment. Black Lives Matter is about a feeling of being discriminated against and how it might act out in our society. We still see conflict between nations. And there is still poverty, a poverty that makes it hard for people who are born into poverty to get out of poverty. These are issues that haven't gone away and if we look, we could see some more.

How do we reconcile in the midst of such difficult problems? We have an interesting model for reconciliation. When Second Corinthians talks about reconciliation, it says "We have been reconciled to God in Christ." So what is the model of reconciliation that God has given us? Did he send his General down to gather us all into a group and tell us that we have to reconcile right now? It's a strange model. It's the person who has the most power deciding to become humble and like the very ones that he has to reconcile. It's a strange model of not using power to try to force reconciliation, but to invite reconciliation. It's a model of taking on a lot of abuse to the point of being crucified, but he doesn't go away.

We are given a model of getting in to relationship, and in spite of the difficulties with that relationship (I don't know how much more difficult it could be than crucifying somebody)—in spite of the difficulties with that relationship, sticking it out. Working it out. Inviting us to find that there might be something about that relationship, and that if we let ourselves in and be reconciled, we find something wonderful. We find a joy. We find a grace. We find a gift of life that we didn't even know was there. It's an interesting model.

We are invited to become ministers and to take on reconciliation as a ministry. I don't know about you, but that's a little overwhelming to me. I have a hard time taking abuse from somebody else and not just wanting to get violent instead of being able to stay as a child of God, one who recognizes that the violence against me is not mine to deal with, but the relationship is. There is a way of trying to work past the abuse. I'm not talking about being in an abusive relationship and staying in an abusive relationship because of the call God has on our life. But I am saying that to change our relationships we have to sometimes have to accept somebody's differing opinion of us. We have to sometimes accept that we're not just going to be the good guys coming in and changing everything. Sometimes we may have to humble ourselves and recognize the need, the anger, the struggle of someone else. I don't think that's something I can really do on my own.

As I noted, when I'm in disagreement with somebody else, on the edges of feeling abused—not actual abuse, but the sense of I'm right and they're wrong—to get past that so oftentimes it requires remembering that it is in Christ that I have my own value. It's not the way I'm valued by somebody else, but it's the way I'm loved by God. When I'm rooted and grounded in that love I'm able to see the pain of another person, to see how they sometimes lash out through that pain and not run away, to stay with one another in our relationships in spite of our struggles. That's the path to reconciliation. It's a path that's not simply saying to somebody else, "Yes, all your grievances are true." It's not saying "no." It's looking for the way forward.

I think Isaiah is the passage that helps us see it. It says when we follow God, when God teaches us, the way forward is through justice and righteousness. It's a way of beginning to see how the relationship can be one that is good for both of us. God wanted us to see that a relationship with God can be good for us, so he came to us to reconcile.

So the path forward is in justice and righteousness. And what does Isaiah have to say? When we get in those right relationships, when we get in a relationship that works the way God intended our relationships to work, the fruit is peace. The process is reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not easy. It's work. It's hard. It's maintaining our faith, holding on to the one who holds on to us, allowing ourselves to be rooted and grounded in love, and recognizing that in the end it is the power at work in us through Jesus Christ that is beyond what we can imagine or think that really is the power that will work. And we can give glory to God. Amen.