

# “What Is Reconciliation? Unbound and Unbinding”

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**John 11:1-45**

I am not a journalist, but I’ve heard about the “five W’s and an H” of a good news story. That will be my organizing concept for the day. What, how, why, who, where, when. What is our ethical and moral mandate to reconciliation in our broken and fearful world? How do we practice reconciliation? Why and who, where and when? How does following Jesus compel us to act in the world? Where are we called to restore brokenness, to repair the breach, to do justice and mercy on God’s behalf? Five W’s and an H.

To set all of this up, we will take a deeper dive into the Presbyterian Confession of 1967. You may be tiring of it; I might even be tiring of it. Yet I remain passionate about it. And its vision seems so timely and urgent, now 50 years after it was adopted by the Presbyterian Church. We’ve included a sizable portion of the Confession of 1967 in the bulletin. It might be helpful to find it, as you might want to make reference to it.

While earlier Presbyterian confessions mentioned our responsibility to act in the world -- whether in Scotland in the 1500’s or Germany in the 1930’s – the Confession of 1967 is the first statement of faith to specify, to identify particular issues to which the church is called to respond in a particular moment or context. This was controversial and scandalous to many, exhilarating and liberating to many others.

Can we find that introductory paragraph and read it together... “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. The following are particularly urgent at the present time.”

Particular problems and crises. It is a serious litany, and convicting: race, warfare, peace and violence, poverty, gender and sexuality. Demanding and difficult in 1967. What are the echoes in 2017?

1. The confession asserts that God breaks down barriers and every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference. "...the church labors for the abolition of all racial discriminations and ministers to those injured by it." This was the heart of the Civil Rights era, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Fifty years later. What is our calling, now, to break down barriers, to labor for the abolition of all discrimination and minister to those injured by it? Black Lives Matter. Internal, individualized, institutional, structural racism. Micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions. How does the Confession of 1967 punctuate the call for racial reconciliation in 2017?
2. The confession then asserts that reconciliation in Jesus Christ calls the nations to peace, justice and freedom. The era of the Vietnam War. The era of the Cold War. How did we think of forgiveness of enemies then, and how do we consider it now? The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall were to usher in a new era of global peace. What do we see when we look around? The confession poses a continually vexing ethical question: "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." That was a controversial thing to say then; how does it resonate now?
3. The confession then asserts that "enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God's good creation." Remember Michael Harrington's *The Other America* and LBJ's "War on Poverty?" What progress has been made? How much has changed? The gap between the very rich and the very poor grows. In 2014, the top 1% owned 40% of the world's wealth, and the bottom 80% owned 7% of the world's wealth. In Rochester, we know the crushing impact of concentrated poverty on education, gun violence, housing. How are we challenged by a confession that says "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."
4. Finally, the confession's assertions about gender and sexuality focus on the relationship between male and female. This paragraph was added to the confession later, and still feels to me like it is searching for clarity. In 1967

we know that divorce rates were on the rise. The availability of contraception re-framed perspectives about sexual practices. Sexuality was probably always used in advertising, but think of its growth in the 60's. The women's rights movement was in formation and gaining traction. How were we then, and how we are now, led out of "alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ." How do "people have joy in and respect for their own humanity and that of other persons..." What does this look like as sexual images bombard our children and youth? What does this look like as marriage is on the decrease, divorce is on the increase and relationships are practiced in changing ways? What does this look like as glass ceilings continue to exist and women experience discrimination of all kinds?

And what does this look like in a context that the framers of the confession either did not or could not anticipate – the LGBTQ experience and profile in church and culture and how what is progress to many and problem to some reframes our entire conversation about gender, sexuality and identify?

That is the "what." Each topic in the confession – race, warfare and violence, poverty and gender and sexuality – could be its own sermon, or sermon series, or life-long exploration. But the point today is that reconciliation not only lives out in the lives of individuals and inter-personal relationships, but must take root in the world. And a 50 year old, somewhat dry, just-a-touch obscure statement, gives us clear direction about how this ethical and moral mandate claims us in 2017.

If we were writing that statement now, we might say some things differently. But I am not sure I'd change anything on the list. I might add the environment and I might add something about inter-faith relationships. But read the headlines or scroll on your phone. We are convicted and compelled, about what progress has been made, what regression has happened, what potential and possibility remains.

That's the "what." The "who" is easy. Us. Each of us as individuals, people of faith, living in the world. And living collectively as the church.

The who is easy – us. As is the "where," simple, if not simplistic. Here, anywhere, everywhere, where reconciliation's vision needs articulation and enacting.

The “how?” That’s a good question. We are quick to solve without comprehension, quick to prescribe without understanding, and, these days, often quick to blame without understanding our own complicity and culpability – on race or violence or poverty or sexuality. We start by looking in the mirror, in our hearts and in our souls, then talking, discussing, widening the circle.

Then we begin the hard work of dismantling what we might have helped to build. The how will not be easy or quick, and it will be complex and frustrating. But without the “how,” are words of “what” are just that, a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And we must keep returning to the well of the “why,” to refresh our motivation and inspiration. We must continually renew the vision of reconciliation as God’s project and our call to be messengers of reconciliation.

There are countless biblical entry points. Last Sunday we heard the story of the raising of Lazarus as a reminder of Jesus’ solidarity with us in grief and consolation in the face of death. This morning, as Lazarus is told to “come out” and unbound from his burial cloths, we are reminded that as those who are unbound are liberated, so are those who unbind.

When those who experience and suffer racism, or poverty, or sexism, or xenophobia, or any other form of discrimination or oppression – fostered by individuals or groups, fostered by the culture or the church – when they are freed, and when those who have perpetrated or perpetuated it are as well, true reconciliation happens. As we unbind, so we are unbound. The profound and poignant connection between the why and how of reconciliation.

And the “when” is simple as well, if never simplistic. 1967, 2017, 2067, now, always, any time and every time, until all are unbound, until all are reconciled, until all find their place at the table and hunger and thirst no more. Amen.