

Authoritative witnesses: Accept no substitutes

Written by Ted A. Smith
Monday, 04 December 2006 12:00

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Our Presbyterian system places great demands on the governing bodies of the church. We believe that presbyteries and sessions should examine officers in light of essential tenets of the Reformed faith. We also believe that governing bodies should apply all the standards set by the whole church, rather than requiring subscription to partial and local lists of essentials. And so we ask elders and ministers to know the Reformed tradition well enough to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in individual cases. A range of groups -- most notably the Presbyteries of Santa Barbara and San Diego -- have put forward guidelines to help sessions and presbyteries in this demanding work. But while the texts of these guidelines profess fidelity to Scripture and confessions, the practice of using them promises to displace the very authorities they celebrate.

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Consider the lists of "common biblical doctrines" and "Reformed distinctives" from Santa Barbara. At first glance they may appear to be simplified but faithful summaries of some set of truths that Scripture and the confessions teach, followed by snippets of Scripture and confessions that support the summaries. The whole project, however, assumes that little bits of truth can be cut out of the Bible and the confessions and then paraphrased and recombined into a single, unified summary. That is possible only if faithful testimonies contain a set of abstract principles that can be severed from the witness of actual people to the glory of God made manifest in a particular time and place. We who confess faith in Jesus Christ, Word made flesh, resist such abstractions. The truth of witness clings to its particularity. Since its earliest years, the church has resisted the kind of abstraction, paraphrase, and summary of Scripture found in the Santa Barbara lists; the early Reformed churches resisted similar treatment of the confessions.

In the second half of the second century some Christians worried about the plurality of witnesses in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The gospels differed in some details, like the genealogy of Jesus. And they presented different pictures of who Jesus was and what it meant to follow him. Concerned about confusion within the church and embarrassment beyond the church, some Christians adopted "harmonies" of the gospels. One of the best known of these came to be called the Diatessaron. Attributed to Tatian, a student of Justin Martyr, the Diatessaron cut each of the four gospels into parts, reconciled the differences, and then stitched the parts together into a new, singular whole. The Diatessaron made it easier to teach people about Jesus. It simplified the liturgical calendar. It clarified witness for mission. In short, it did much of what the Santa Barbara guidelines promise to do: it reduced a complex plurality of voices to one single voice, and so promised to help the church accomplish its work more efficiently. And the entire Western church rejected it almost from the start. That rejection is built into the canon of Scripture that preserves four distinct gospels.

In the sixteenth century the question of multiple witnesses arose again, this time in a distinctively Reformed key. In the first fifty years of the Reformation the Calvinist churches made more than fifty different confessions of faith. Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans mocked this hodge-podge of confessions. It looked like an obstacle to mission, education, and church unity. Hoping to unite all the Reformed bodies under a single confession, Johann Casimir, the Count Palatine, convened an international body of Reformed theologians in September of 1577. The French divines supported the idea of a new confession, working toward it at their assemblies of 1578 and 1579, but the idea met strong resistance from the churches in Zurich and Geneva, who feared that a new confession would only add to the confusion and conflict. At length the

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Reformed bodies reached a compromise. They would make no new confession, but instead would ask a group led by Lambert Danaeus, Theodore Beza and Jean-Francois Salvard to compose a "harmony" of already-existing Reformed confessions. They completed work on the *Harmonia confessionum fidei* in 1581.

At first glance the *Harmonia* might seem to establish a precedent for guidelines like those from Santa Barbara and San Diego. The *Harmonia* collected passages from eleven confessions and arranged them topically according to the outline of the Second Helvetic Confession. But that initial similarity is overwhelmed by differences in purpose and authority. Unlike the contemporary California guidelines, the *Harmonia* does not synthesize the statements into supra-confessional summaries. The purpose of the *Harmonia* is not to make the plurality of confessions disappear, but to display that plurality for study and witness.

This difference in purpose is matched by a difference in authority. The sixteenth-century Reformed communions took great care to define the *Harmonia* as a private collection with no confessional or disciplinary authority in any major church. It functioned as a document for apologetics and as a tool for teaching and study. The document from Santa Barbara uses modest language in places, insisting that it offers nothing more than "a partial list" of "guidelines." But it also describes a clear disciplinary role: "The Presbytery shall use the Guidelines when examining Ministers of Word and Sacrament brought before them for ordination, installation, and transfer. The Guidelines shall be used both for formulating questions and for evaluating answers" (iii, capitalization original). This is exactly the role that the early Reformed churches rejected for their own harmony.

Whatever their intentions, guidelines like the ones from Santa Barbara and San Diego are shot through with ironic effects. The guidelines claim to uphold the authority of Scripture and confessions but end up replacing those great witnesses, in the actual work of the church, with second-hand summaries that are not witnesses at all. The guidelines claim to maintain the purity of the church, but then they presume that the truth of witness can be severed from the historic communities that made that witness. Such abstraction of confession from church, Karl Barth wrote, treats the church as "only an institution, an official board."

Our calling now is not to be a regulatory agency that enforces abstracted guidelines to ensure the smooth functioning of a bureaucracy. Our calling is to be a community of witness, gathered again to listen to the authoritative witnesses that form our faith. The conflicts that tear at our church right now have thrown us back to basics. They have driven us back to the hard, glorious work of reading Scripture, studying the confessions, and discerning the will of God in the calling of people and communities. I believe that this forced return to authoritative witnesses is one of

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the ways God is at work among us, already performing the work of redemption. We should not create guidelines that deliver us from Scripture, confessions, and prayer. We should rather embrace the task before us. And we should do so with penitence, and gratitude, and trust that the Holy Spirit is with us as we work.

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