

The Missiological Implications of the Accra Confession

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Introduction

Much has been said about the Accra confession since 2004. The WARC Assembly will long be remembered for its controversial stand of placing economic issues central to the Churches understanding of what they are called to be and to do. Although the churches have in their different ways been in the struggle against poverty and economic oppression, their responses tend to be influenced by an “us/them” dichotomy and a ‘subject /object’ ideology of development rooted in a Western model of donor influenced charity. This is under girded by a deceptive theology of salvation and a mi-evangelisation model in which being saved is presented as a personal life-transforming gift that comes from others (external source/s) without equal emphasis being placed on challenging and changing the political, social, religious and economic structures that are the root causes that keep the poor in poverty!

The Accra Confession has raised the stake concerning the Reformed Churches’ attitude to issues of structural poverty in the world. Our presence in Malaysia constitutes another important step along this difficult journey of seeking to facilitate the conversion of churches from their reluctance to address and take tangible action on structural issues that create and maintain poverty. This concern has become urgent in our era because some churches with a conservative faith understanding and praxis have embraced prosperity-gospel understanding of their faith expression. They teach that wealth should be sought by Christians because wealth is regarded as a sign of God blessings. Such churches have sought to protect their economic status by rationalising that there is no hidden or obvious links between wealth and poverty. The deep scandal of this kind of faith understanding and expression is that it seeks to scape-goat the poor by blaming them for their poverty. The reality is that we are in a consumer driven church culture in which there is a growing self-centred perception of Christianity.

The fast pace of geo-political changes being experienced in our world today has further accelerated the process of economic globalisation. The church and other ecumenical organisations must be pro-active in rethinking their principles, objectives and methodologies that govern their participation on developmental projects that are meant to address poverty. It is good to see WARC and CWM coming together to think through this important aspect of human development. The truth is that the nature of the challenge that we face necessitates the churches and other ecumenical instruments build strong and effective relationships to confront poverty and unjust wealth. This would require that steps be taken to work out a broad based ecumenical theology of poverty, wealth and justice.¹

Missiological soundings from a Caribbean perspective

I therefore seek to bring to this consultation a tentative missiological reading of the Accra confession that embodies the perspectives of Caribbean hermeneutics. This is a world view rooted in suspicion of any human system because of our experience of colonialism and neo-colonial cold war politics that have consistently demonstrated the presence of historical error by those who are the owners of the means of the means of production. Idris Hamid, the late Principal of St Andrew’s Theological College in Trinidad, has identified five features that were part of the core of colonial Christianity that to a great extent continues in the present dispensation of Christian witness:

1. It was tied to a system that created, sustained, and justified a system of wickedness and brutality.
2. Its theology fell prey to the dominating colonial ethos (thus becoming) a theology of oppression despite the good intentions and great sacrifices of church workers.
3. (It presents) an unflattering and demeaning evaluation or estimate of the peoples of the Caribbean.

4. It was afflicted by a blinding reality of power. Evangelisation was done by the powerful to the powerless.
5. It skirted the burning social issues that weighed heavily on the lives of the colonised.²

Hamid infers that the dysfunctional features were endemic to the colonial missionary church. This reflection proposes that the contradiction identified in the understanding and practice of colonial Christianity was not an abrogation but a constitutive element in the ongoing process of indigenisation and inculturation. Christianity in any given social context exists in tension. It exists in contradiction³ regarding what it is in practice and what it is called to be.

Brokenness in a Changing World

The neo-liberal economic order that under girds this contemporary phase of globalisation is to a great extent linked to the demise of Christendom in Western society and the emergence of a post-Christendom culture that carries major missiological implications for the Church. Stuart Murray Williams identifies eight transitions that characterise the Post –Christendom era:

- From the centre to the margins: In Christendom, the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom they are marginal
- From the majority to minority: In Christendom, Christians comprised the majority, but in post-Christendom they are in the minority
- From settlers to sojourners: In Christendom, Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post Christendom they are aliens, exiles and pilgrims.
- From privilege to plurality: in Christendom Christians enjoy privileges, but in post-Christendom they are one community among many in a plural society.
- From control to witness: in Christendom, churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through telling our story.

- From maintenance to mission: in Christendom, the emphasis was maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment
- From institution to movement: in Christendom, the churches operated mainly in institutional mode, but in the post-Christendom they must become again a Christian movement.

The implication of this paradigm shift is referred to by eminent Caribbean theologian Dr Burchell Taylor as “Brokenness in a Changing world”. Brokenness for Dr Taylor is the reality that emerges when people have been forcefully separated from their humanity. The triumph of human rationality in knowledge and the consequential advances in science, technology and economics have been achieved mainly at the expense of the poor. The changes that we are celebrating in the name of globalisation and post-modernity have been achieved through awesome displacement of people. If wholeness of life is central in the understanding of God’s purpose for the world (John 10:10), then wherever people are experiencing brokenness it constitutes a clear sign of life-denying forces at work.

Signposts of the Accra Confession

Before proceeding to offer a missiological critique of the Accra confession I wish to lift up some of the critical points that can serve as sign post for my reflections. The confession of faith emerged in response to the challenges faced through the experience of global economic injustice and ecological destruction. The Accra confession’s emphasis on Covenanting for Justice emerged in response to a reading of the signs of the times in which it is attested that “the root causes of the massive threat to life are...the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by the political and military might.” The global statistics on poverty, HIV and AIDS pandemic reveal that there is a direct link between poverty and health. Also the advancement of neo-liberal economic

globalisation has consistently subordinates the wellbeing of people to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation.

The most poignant claim in the Accra Confession concerning this new economic order is the demand for total allegiance from people and creation that tantamount to idolatry. It is based on the false assertion that there is no alternative and therefore demands from the poor and the environment endless sacrifices in the insatiable quest for wealth creation and prosperity at any cost.

The controversial terminology “empire” is used to describe ‘the coming together economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by the powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests’. International institutions that are created to manage political and economic order are perceived to be acting in the interest of the powerful nations and to protect and advance the interest of capital owners.

Based upon their critique of the current world economic disorder the WARC delegates sought to offer a confessional response in which the affirmation of God’s sovereignty over all of his creation and his purpose in Jesus Christ for all to share in his fullness of life. This constitutes the foundation upon which Christians are invited to expand their faith confession from the narrow confines of theology and ecclesiology to include other legitimate justice issues pertaining to economics and ecology. These two important areas of life have traditionally being relegated as low priority for theological critique. Accra participants refused to embrace the false dichotomy and boldly invite Christians to put up resistance and to risk involvement rather than opt for disengagement. The call to confession implies that there is an awesome deceptive system at work in our world that is seeking to control people’s desire for fullness of life by using enticing and pleasurable offerings that are really meant to facilitate enslavement. To confess is therefore a missional calling that the Christian will not be sucked into the deceptive world order but will rather agree that God’s reading of what is going on constitutes the real truth of the situation! The Accra Confession emerged from a

context of diverse cultural, theological, political, economic and faith experiences from which they recognised that they had arrived at a kairos that called for cooperate confession or truth telling about what going on in the world today. Confessing together...is an act of responding and being obedient to the gospel is a matter of both word and deed.

The issues and choices are unclear and complex

My critique of the Accra confession is that the reading of the signs of the times and confessional response that is proposed suggest that the realities that we are facing constitute clear issues for which we must make a choice to be one side or the other. The notion that the empire is on one side and that Accra confessors are on another side is not as clear as we are being led to believe. The reality on the ground is that the issues are not ‘black and white’ but ‘grey’. They are not monochrome but polychrome. They are not easy but complex! Confessing together is not an easy option or way of living. In reality it calls for living with tensions and disagreements. We must be very careful not to fall into the ‘no alternative trap’ of the empire by also implying in our confession that “those who are not with us are against us”.

Truth Telling as a Missional Response

Journeingy towards truth telling and praxis it involves identifying, analysing and knowing indepth the reality that we are facing. It is a cooperative venture of conversation and dialogue, listening and speaking, acting and observing. How church engages with the voiceless and the marginalized will determine to a great extent the focus of the church’s mission. It requires truth telling, naming the powers that are promoting threats to life, controlling people’s lives and denying them fullness of life. The church must not assume that the way things are is the way they were meant to be. It also involves seeking to hear God at work in the different and unsuspecting voices that are resisting the threats to life and providing different perspectives and giving clearer glimpses of how God’s reign is breaking into the world and offering new possibilities and

challenges for mission that were not previously recognised. Today's context calls into question the church's assumption and challenges it to revisit its priorities and ideals. The church more than any other organisation is mandated by the Missio-Dei to expose and put up resistance against the rouge powers that are shaping human development based on greed and immeasurable devastation and desolation of the environment.

Babylon: Naming the Powers

The experiences of those that served as labourers led them to critique the oppressive socio-political and economic order through the lenses of the book of Revelation. Chapters 17 and 18 in particular offered some signposts that ordinary people used to make sense of the life denying social order in which they lived. 'Babylon the great' of chapter 17 and 'the whore of Babylon' represented systems built of foundations characterised by deception. Her addiction to acquiring power and wealth at any cost is used to seduce the gullible and un-conscientised ones within the society. The real danger and threat of the Babylonian society is not so much the obvious and rampant oppression but rather the camouflage reality of its deception that neutralises the moral capacity of persons to detect injustice and to act in ways that seek to correct the wrong that has been done. The deception is masked because the Babylonian system is attractively clothed in economic and military power.

The Babylonian system described in chapter 18 is built on foundations that thrive on deception. The author stresses that systemic evil is not always obvious. It camouflages itself as luxury that is neutral and attractive and seeks to hurt none! This city is a powerful representation of the wealth of the earth where the traders and merchants wheel and deal to maximise profit at all cost. The luxurious goods brought comfort to the wealthy minority but at great cost to the common people. What brought happiness in material goods and the available of slave labour to meet the needs of a few persons is often based on oppressing and exploiting the

common people. The trade in slaves as a commodity was central to the wealth of Babylon. This was an economic system that necessitated that the wealth and happiness of the few who control the commanding heights of the economy must be realised by oppressing others especially the common people.

Chanting Down Babylon

John's reading of the signs of the times in his age led to a call for engagement to expose and put up resistance against the life denying powers. His message also invites us to do the same in our generation because evil mutates but it consistently manifest itself throughout history using different agents and system but with the same objective of denying people fullness of life. The book of Revelation is still a message for our age where the "whore of Babylon" is still present with its economic system of 'free global market paradigm' built on the deception of the lure of wealth and materialism for the masses. But the strength of Babylon is also the basis of its inherent weakness. With its almighty power it behaves as an invincible force, arrogant and glorifying its false confidence that her dominance and empire will last for ever. Because the system is deluded and addicted to its own importance it does not recognise that a malignant socio-economic tumour has taken hold of the system and that decay is weakening its moral foundations. The author declares the fall of Babylon is quick and certain, in a 'single day' (v.8) and even in one hour (v.7)! This suggests that its demise came not from the military might of an external force but from an implosion of its corrupt foundations!

There is a deep-seated propensity among African-Jamaicans and their experiences of political, economic and religious world powers to take serious the message of Revelation concerning the pervasive Babylonian system. When the pre-modern reality of globalisation expressed itself through colonialism and slavery the Jamaican church that embodied the wellbeing of the common people raised up lay and clergy leaders whose contextual reading of scriptures, understanding and practice of their faith led them to engage in a missional response of resistance and revolt against what they

deemed to be 'a Babylonian system'. Most of them paid the ultimate price for their resistance with their lives that the corrupt political system uncompromisingly demanded by hanging them. When our ancestors sang Psalm 137 on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean they knew that the rivers of Babylon were not the Euphrates and Tigris in Iraq but the evil mercantile system that enslaved them to make profit for a few owners. They also had to learn how to sing the Lord's song in exile The bible was not viewed as an ancient text that neutrally described events of the past that were totally unrelated to their context. Rather they viewed the word as the living voice of God speaking to their context with an uncompromising message of freedom and liberation for the oppressed.

The contemporary Afro-centric apocalyptic movement of Rastafarians in Jamaica describe Babylon as "the oppressive social, political, economic and cultural realities of Jamaica and the Western world".⁴ Babylon represents the experience of suffering and alienation in the African Diaspora that is rooted in the experience of forced deportation and servitude. In the contemporary global socio-political context Babylon is that state of affairs in which the struggle for power and possessions take precedence over the cultivation of human freedom and concern for human dignity.⁵ In their counter-cultural ideological reconstruction they invite those living within the Babylonian empire/system to get themselves ready to chant down Babylon! To chant constitutes a revolutionary posture of "beating down Babylon".⁶ This requires reconscientising of those who are being oppressed to embrace a psychological, spiritual and cultural rejection of the values and institutions of Babylon. Like the author of Revelation, Rastafari missiological hermeneutics calls for us to embark on an intentional journey of "stepping outa (out of) Babylon one by one"! This requires using the forces of life to undermine the Babylonian system and make it impotent to wheel its influence. Chanting involves using the philosophical forces of words, sound and power to weaken the system. Rastafari speech, rituals and ceremonies rest upon the principle of word, sound and power.⁷ The use of reggae music

becomes the most potent articulation of resistance against the Babylonian system in which overt and covert messages of resistance and revolt are communicated for those who choose to enlist in the global movement of resistance. The spirituality of this movement teaches us that in the struggle against any world system of oppression that one cannot fight using the system's weapons. Rather Babylon is most vulnerable words and sounds embodied in the oral tradition of the people.

Come out from her?

When the Author of Revelation counselled its community to "come out from among her", this was interpreted as a clear message that the Babylon constitutes "a clear and present danger" in response to which the inhabitants must embrace an alternative lifestyle of resistance. Revelation invites us not only to understand Babylon but to engage in mission action for transformation.

What does it mean for the WARC and CWM community of Church to practice the Accra confession? Despite the well intentioned 'for and against' model of the Accra Confession statement the reality of the world and the church suggests much more of an uncertain, unclear and confusing polychrome and polyphonic place with more questions than answers. The 'empire' is not 'them' but it includes us. The Accra Confession critique of the neo-liberal economic system and its deity of materialism also apply to us and our addiction to comfort that sometimes depends on the oppression of others. How does WARC, CWM and our member churches come out of the 'Babylonian' financial market place where there is little clarity or certainty about the profits that that come from the stocks and shares. Within the CWM Trustee Body we demand high standard from our investment advisors to ensure that we engage in ethical investments. But the truth is that we cannot be 100% sure about all of our profits. Could it be that some of our profits come from carefully hidden oppressive financial practices? Are we prepared to live with less so that others can simple live?

Initiative taken by common People

I would like to conclude by suggesting some insights for mission action on the Accra confession that emerge out of the experiences of Peter and John as reported in Acts 4. The two disciples were brought before the authorities who maintainers of the socio-religious status-quo. They were accused of restoring a lame man to fullness of life and communicating a good news message that the resurrected Christ offers an alternative vision of hope that usurped and displaced the existing world order. Having listened to a bold defence of their faith the disciples were sent out of court while the court considered their verdict. Two significant things stood out. Firstly, they were ordinary uneducated persons who experienced the transformative power of the risen Christ in their lives were not prepared to remain silent. In spite of threats they were not afraid to take a stand and publicly confess their faith. Secondly the authorities were forced to take notice and concluded that their boldness came from their close relationship with Jesus.

I would like to suggest that the real challenge to the socio-economic power of empire will come not from the educated privileged class who are beneficiaries of the system but those common persons who are on the fringes and margins of society with little or no social or economic status. These are the people who are willing to envision new possibility of life in its fullness and are therefore willing to risk hoping against the odds. They possess and exhibit great self confidence and exuberance in the midst of a pervasive culture that celebrates death. Disciples that spend quality time in and with the company Jesus will be exuberant with hope

The cost of confessing

My reading of the Accra confession suggests that the church has a choice to make. Sitting on the fence is not an option. According to Dr Burchell Taylor the choice involves exposing the pretentiousness of the powers-that-be. In the network of politics, economics, culture and religion... the powers that-be claimed to have had the ability and authority to establish the ultimate horizon of life's possibilities.⁸ At the core of a confessing church is the humility and steadfastness of the Christians to follow a path of commitment that leads to a separation from the dominant order that has succumb to corruption, unrighteousness, injustice and idolatry in order to build an alternative vision of community of hope.

The same question about loyalty and obedience confronts us as it has confronted Christians of every culture and throughout the generations. To confess Christ involves missionary implications. It raises the issue of conscientious disobedience to earthly authority. What is the role of civil disobedience in our faith confession when confronting global power systems that deny people, especially the poor, fullness of life? Do we give our loyalty first to our nation and its rulers or to God? If the Accra confession were to be taken to its ultimate conclusion then it invites churches to enter into solidarity with the disadvantaged and deprived ones of this world? Can the church today truly become the church of the Poor and Powerless? But to do so will involve risk of the church in some contexts experiencing persecution or social exclusion from the corridors of power.

What is the role of ecclesiastical disobedience in the struggle for faithful confession in the context of neo-liberal economics that cause death to the poor? Do we obey our church and its councils that prefer maintaining the status quo or risk disunity and confrontation in the quest of being faithful to our Lord? Faith and economics can become a poison chalice, a deadly mixture that requires deep spiritual wisdom and maturity to navigate without experiencing a deadly fall.

Having confidence that we will overcome

The strength of the Accra confession does not rest in the language construction of the document. The call to confession is predicated on allegiance to Jesus who has set us an example to follow in his steps. He was a public figure and what he taught and did impinged on every aspect of our lives. The gospels record incidents where he engaged in political action in defence of persons who lived on the margins of society. Members of his inner team included persons who were considered to be political activists. He consistently confronted civil and religious authority that posed a threat to law and order to the extent that Jesus experienced a political death by crucifixion on a cross.

It is this confidence in the power of the crucified and risen Christ that constitutes the vindication that in the end the rouge economic powers of this world will not win out in the end. The call to confession implies that vindication is anticipated even when it is not seen clearly. Although the context contains clouds of despair, fatalism, cynicism and self pity the rouge powers are neutralised of their potency by the hope giving message

of the gospel. In the end hope will overcome all of the factors that contribute to the state of denying people fullness of life.

End Notes

¹ Michael Taylor, *Christianity, Poverty and Wealth*, SPCK, London, 2003, p.76

² Idris Hamid, ed., *Out of the Depths*, Port of Spain, St. Andrews Theological College, 1977, p. V11-V111

³ I use the term 'Contradiction' to describe the capacity of living with identities/worldviews that are against each other's vital interest. However, the nature of the social environment necessitates that both realities co-exist.

⁴ Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, Adrian Anthony McFarlane, *Chanting Down Babylon, The Rastafari Reader*, Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, 1998, p.443

⁵ Ibid, p.24

⁶ Ibid, p.23

⁷ Sw. Anand Prahlad, *Reggae Wisdom, Proverbs in Jamaica Music*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2001, pp. 19-21

⁸ Burchell Taylor, *The Church Taking Sides*, Bethel Baptist Church, Kingston, 1995, p.50