

**LIVING GOD
RENEW AND
TRANSFORM US**



**Prayerful Preparation:
Exploring the 2017
General Council Theme**



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Preface

Chris Ferguson
WCRC General Secretary

**Living God, renew and transform us!
A communion confessing the God of Life in a world
fallen among thieves as all creation yearns for
liberation from bondage.**

It is my great pleasure to present this excellent collection of articles exploring the theme of the World Communion of Reformed Churches' 26th General Council Meeting in Leipzig, Germany, in June 2017. The WCRC has asked outstanding theological thinkers, teachers and leaders to help all member churches and congregations enter deeply into work of the 2017 General Council by engaging its theme: "Living God, renew and transform us."

The General Council meets at the intersection of colliding contexts!

The context of the WCRC itself is the first, a newly formed Communion with a long history and deep roots as a family of Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregational, United and Uniting, Waldensian, Hussite and other Reformation churches. Only together in our present form since 2010—still learning to be a Communion as we both grow closer together in deeper *koinonia* and also face challenges to our unity. We have been shaped by recent financial pressures, relocating from Geneva to Hannover, and the subsequent need to purposefully reconnect and witness within the wider ecumenical family, as well as to bring our contributions to inter-religious situations and relations. Representing 80 million Christians, most of whom live in the Global South, we need to close the distance between and among us.

We embrace diverse regions and have far to go in order to honour all our regional, linguistic and cultural diversity and identities as a Communion. We are part of the Reformed church always reforming. We are committed to communion and called to justice. Ecumenical by vocation in the context of a wider ecumenical movement facing historic challenges. A confessing communion of churches of Jesus Christ everywhere in the world. Witness, ministry, service and mission. Everywhere. A World Communion that reaffirmed the Belhar and Accra confessions seeing justice as a matter of faith. Economic, racial, ecological, social and gender injustices and complicity with them is far from faith in the living God.

The 2017 General Council will meet in the context of the common commemoration of 500 years of the Protestant

Reformation. For the Reformed tradition, 2017 is not the key historical year; Martin Luther is not the key theologian of reference; nor is Germany our main geographical focus. Our meeting in Leipzig gives us the opportunity to embrace our own roots and history, to add our distinctive voices, to consider our unique contribution with humility and repentance. Clearly our tradition must take responsibility for our part in divisions within the church, regardless of intentions, and for the exclusion and violence against those who did not follow our understanding of what faithfulness to God required of us.

The point of this critical reflection is to move forward in faith and in response to the God of Life. The Reformation commemoration is for us not about theological nostalgia. It is about putting the Reformation into the present tense. This means not just the here and now; it means bringing Reformed traditions, theology and the confessing faith stance into the tense present—into the tensions, conflicts, violence, suffering, beauty, wonder and promise of this historical moment.

These two contexts collide explosively and urgently with our global context: a world of no peace, and no justice; with unprecedented human displacement and migration; spiralling militarized violence; unfettered racism and social exclusion. We live in a crisis of "the whole." The planet and the people...all of creation face a massive threat to life. Not all of us can see this, but those whose lives are most threatened can help us see that it is a truly global crisis. We live in the depths of a world created and loved by God fallen among thieves (John 10:10).

Our theme speaks to these colliding contexts. It is dynamite. It refuses to let us alone. For people of faith there is no business as usual. For our Communion there is no separating love of God from justice here and now. Economic, ecological and gender justice issues grip us as a foundational imperative of faith in the Living God as revealed through Jesus Christ lived in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Living God

We start by crying out of the depths of our contexts to the Living God. It is both a prayer and a confession. Our faith tradition calls us to turn to the God of Life. We engage and pray to God when confronted with brokenness and threats to life. The biblical tradition shows us that the Living God is invoked when the

community is faced by false gods (Jeremiah 10:1-10): idols of war, of death, of domination; idols of prosperity and of "Mammon." In confessing the Living God we reject those systems, structures, values and teachings that foster racist, economic, ecological, social, religious and gender injustice.

We confess that the earth is the Lord's and all that it is in it. But this world is beset with many masters, and our confession of the Living God requires us to name and resist the lords of domination and embrace the God of Life. Our theme invites us to a theological and spiritual encounter with the God of Life as revealed through the Scriptures and through Jesus Christ. The invitation is to engage the three contexts we face. The first movement of the theme is to evoke and turn to the living God. To turn to God is to embrace Life. To embrace life is to love and serve God. It is to defend and protect the life of all people, especially the poor, marginalized, excluded, dispossessed and all creation (Luke 4:16ff, Matt 25, John 3:16-17).

Renew and Transform

The next movement of our theme invites us to embrace reformation in the present tense, "renew and transform." Here Romans 12:1-2 calls us "not to be conformed to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewal of our minds..." For the WCRC it is imperative to address this not only as individuals but as church and a Communion. Here we are called to embrace the renewal of the church for the transformation of the world. Here transformation is based on the Greek word *metamorphosis*—which means a total and radical change in thinking, acting and understanding, a transformation of form and substance. The biblical concept is more radical than any political or psychological concept of mere reform.

We have as a family through the Accra Confession clearly named the specific structures, systems and institutions of neoliberal free market capitalism as a foundational source of injustice which demands transformation in order for us to be faithful to God. Rejecting the ideas, structures and spirituality of unlimited growth and accumulation is a theological imperative and an ethical obligation if we are to embrace God's love and justice for all of creation and the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Attention to the systems and structures that make up "the patterns of this present age" as part of our world civilization and world (dis)order is the meaning of reading the signs of the times and discerning the *kairos*. The changing world situation and the intensity of the threats to life help us recognise that in 2004 the Accra Confession's assertion that we live in a scandalous situation has only gotten worse. Specifically that there is a solid link between the cause of human and social injustice and the damage to creation which is rooted in our present economic system and which is defended

by military and political power supported by cultural and religious ideas and practices in the interests of the few at the expense of the majorities. Foundational to this complex, multidimensional reality is racism, sexism, classism, casteism and all other forms of systemic inequality.

All around the world there is talk of transformation but often of a superficial kind. The United Nations has a framework for sustainable development that seeks to transform the world without changing the economic or political systems or structures. The Romans passage calls us to a deeper transformation of all structures, systems, attitudes and actions that oppress or enslave. Many in civil society are joining the call found in the Accra Confession and in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* to understand the link between the current neoliberal market economy with its structures and institutions and climate change and ecological destruction. Briefly, Naomi Klein has said that the inconvenient truth is that "climate change is not about carbon but capitalism." There is a growing awareness that to protect God's creation we must change the economic system. To address poverty and inequality we must transform the economic system. The WCRC family has proclaimed that this is tied to our faithfulness to and love of God. It is bound to our confession of Jesus as Lord.

Christians around the world are seeking to detangle themselves spiritually from the false gods of consumerism. Reformed theology powerfully challenges theologies of prosperity and spiritualities based on individualism rather than Jesus' love and call to compassion and solidarity. Prayer and action must combine to follow Jesus.

Luke 4:16ff is Jesus' public witness to his mission where reading from the book of Isaiah, he stands firmly in the prophetic and jubilee traditions saying:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus stands firmly in the jubilee and prophetic traditions. We recall Micah 6:8 in this critical moment in human history we do know what is required of us: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Our context and our faith compel us to seek justice and resist evil. The WCRC in its General Council will be guided by the Accra Confession and bring the confession into the present tense in seeking to faithfully resist all that

threatens life in God's creation and to follow Jesus in the mission of good news to the poor, liberation, freedom, healing and justice for the earth. This requires ecumenical, interfaith and civil society alliances to work together for justice, peace, healing and reconciliation for all of creation.

This is part of a wider journey, as well, as the World Council of Churches has called the whole Christian family and all people of good will to join on the "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace."

Us

Here our theme is inclusive of person, church and world—all of creation. The call to put God-Life at the centre of all we are and do will change the WCRC. It will change our churches. It will change our society. It will change relationships between men and women. It will respect all differences. The "us" includes the earth—all of creation.

Unity and overcoming human and church division is an unshakeable vocation for us. We as a WCRC family don't of course apologize for the Reformation and its world-changing contribution to humanity, but we do repent of the division, separation and violence that was an unintentional but real consequence. Calvin lamented the "dismembered body of Christ." He said he was so committed to unity he would cross ten seas for that cause. The WCRC in seeking renewal as a Reformed church always reforming must, in fact, renew its approach to the visible unity of the church and embrace such unity as an imperative of the highest order. Not only the koinonia amongst the WCRC family, not only communion with other communions but the true and deepest unity for the sake of God's kingdom. What renewal as churches and as Church are we called to? What renewal is imperative to join God's mission without obstacles or hesitation?

What are the resources of our shared and diverse tradition that we must bring to theological reflection? What are the gifts and imperatives of being a confessing Communion turning to the Living God in a world fallen among thieves? How will we together name this *kairos* and chart a course together to overcome what threatens to divide us and instead together witness to justice? How will we show compassion, love and solidarity within the family as we pray, worship and witness together? How will we be powerfully present confessing Jesus is the way, the truth and life in a creation groaning in travail?

Our contexts collide. Church, history, present tense. The Spirit of the Living God also collides into us, urging our renewal for the transformation of the world so that all may have abundant life.

This booklet invites us to embrace this explosive prayer, confession and theme and prepare for the gathering of the WCRC family. The authors have grappled with key dimensions of our theme in order to debate, reflect, comment, engage and dialogue as each church, hopefully each congregation, prepares to embrace our three colliding contexts and enter into the communion-building and justice-seeking opportunity of the 2017 General Council in Leipzig.

Soli Deo Gloria! Glory to the God of Life!



Introduction

Jerry Pillay
WCRC President

In 2013 we celebrated the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. I remember very distinctly a paper presented by Dr. Iain Torrance where he stated that every 500 years there was some really big historical event which influenced both church and society in a very powerful way. He proceeded to show how this also impacted on Bible translations over the centuries and illustrated this with the use of biblical texts which then communicated the majesty and awe of God. When you read the Scriptures it was as if God was talking. This has now changed with the new translations carrying the image of friendship and a conversation with God rather than God talking to us in majesty and authority. What is reflected here is the transformation and renewal of scriptural translation and understanding over the centuries.

One such major movement in history was the sixteenth-century Reformation which was an attempt to renew and transform the church. The Reformation embraced a number of quite distinct, yet overlapping, areas of human activity: the reform of both the morals and structures of church and society, new approaches to political issues, shifts in economics thinking, the renewal of Christian spirituality and the reform of Christian doctrine (McGrath 2012). It gave rise to significant theological themes, some of which I will briefly discuss below.

At the heart of the Reformation was the quest to return to the Bible. The Reformation saw a new importance being attached to Scripture—or, perhaps, an ancient view of the importance of Scripture being recovered. The idea of *sola scriptura*, “by Scripture alone,” became one of the great slogans of the Reformers as they sought to bring the practices and beliefs of the church back into line with those of the Golden Age of Christianity. According to McGrath (2012), if the doctrine of justification by faith alone was the material principle of the Reformation, the principle of *sola scriptura* was its formal principle. If the Reformers dethroned the pope, they enthroned Scripture.

The difference between the Reformers and medieval theology at this point concerns how Scripture is *defined and interpreted*, rather than the *status* that it is given. It is this interpretation of Scripture in a changing world that becomes a crucial element for renewal and transformation. It is a stark reminder that the Reformation cannot only be discussed in terms of its ecclesial meaning but also in its relation to culture as a

whole. The issue of context and biblical interpretation becomes a serious matter of importance. The Bible is a central document of Western civilization, not only as the source of Christian ideas but also as an influence upon education and culture. Today this is being seriously challenged as we question the “hermeneutical lens” we tend to use in interpreting Scripture. Further, the critical question is “Who is interpreting Scripture and for whom?”

The Reformed faith has the obligation of protecting the text from being co-opted by the powerful and the elite.

Gerald West (2009), speaking into the South African context, makes the point that the Bible has always been at the centre of the liberation struggle even though it has been categorised as a tool of oppression. For example, it was used as the tool to build an apartheid South Africa but equally it was used as the key text of the struggling masses in South Africa for liberation and justice. The above points establish the need for Reformed theology to seek renewal and transformation in the area of further understanding *sola scriptura*, the focus is not only on *what* the interpretation is but, more significantly, on *who* is interpreting. The Reformed faith has the obligation of protecting the text from being co-opted by the powerful and the elite and, thereby, giving vent and expression to the “voice” of the poor, marginalized and oppressed masses. How do the latter groups inform biblical interpretation? How can this become a source for renewal and transformation?

Essential to the Reformation is the doctrine of justification by faith alone: *sola fide*. The theme of “redemption through Christ” is central throughout the New Testament, Christian worship and Christian theology. The term “soteriology” is used in Christian theology to communicate the images which describe the redemption achieved through the death and resurrection of Christ. This new theological emphasis

led to a focus on individual faith and contributed to the growing influence of the new individualistic philosophy. The basic tenet of Protestantism was the doctrine that human beings were justified by faith rather than by works. Each person had to search his or her own heart to discover if acts stemmed from a pure heart and faith in God.

Unfortunately, the new theological focus on individual faith was to strongly influence the economic views of the new middle-class artisans and small merchants. Such people felt quite genuinely and strongly that their economic practices, though they might conflict with the traditional law of the old church, were not offensive to God. On the contrary: they glorified God. The new doctrines stressed the necessity of doing well at one's earthly calling as the best way to please God, and emphasized diligence and hard work. These doctrines subsequently led to the spiritualizing of economic processes and the belief that "God instituted the market and exchange." This emphasis, however, sadly took the Christian focus away from the general concern for the community and the obligation to the poor. It gave acceptance to the liberal paradigm: poverty as backwardness, stressing that the poor should be enabled to reach their full potential (Pillay 2002).

Although this view on poverty has been seriously debated and challenged over the years, we still need to assess how the Reformation relates to imperial capitalism and to the male means-end rationality in science, technology and individualistic calculating mentality (Duchrow 2015). How does this view of *sola fide* stand in need of renewal and reformation is a question we must continue to engage. Especially given the dynamics of a world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It is important for Reformed theology to make a clear commitment of standing with the poor and oppressed in the world. We need to shift from a "widow-dressing" theological approach to an in-depth involvement with the plight of the poor. We need to ask whether our theological positions are life-enhancing and life-affirming; do they follow the Bible in socio-historic precision, in essence, do they contribute to liberation and justice?

In addition, we need to reflect on the Reformation and its historical impact in view of the global threat to humanity and the Earth—both positively and negatively. We are living in difficult times as we experience climate change and witness the devastation of the earth. Reformed theology must awaken to a renewed sense of responding to our given realities and focus on the need of "caring for the earth."

The Accra Confession (2004) is a significant attempt in focusing theology on "covenanting and caring for the earth." It has outlined and prophetically engaged the

issues of economic justice, gender justice and ecological justice. It has rightfully pointed us to these matters and prompted us to respond to the unjust realities of life. Now in this second decade of the Accra Confession we need to ask how this document can be a basis for renewal and transformation for ourselves as the WCRC and for the world at large. The refusal to do this is to not take seriously one of the significant tenets of Reformed theology: the Reformed church is continually reforming.

This also impacts on our understanding of *Reformed spirituality*. Spirituality is the pattern by which we shape our lives in response to our experiences of God as a very real presence in and around us (Rice 1991). To be spiritual is to take seriously our consciousness of God's presence and to live in such a way that the presence of God is central in all that we do. Such spirituality turns to the world, not away from it. It gives attention to the threats of life and embraces the need for justice. Reformed spirituality is thus geared towards equipping life-giving transformative engagement in the world. It is a spirituality that is built in community and builds community. Thus, any piety that appears to be content with a personal relationship with Jesus, and which shuns or belittles the horizontal dimension of discipleship, is suspect. Any spirituality that advocates a withdrawal from what is going on in the world is contrary to Christ's spirit.

The critical question is: How do we understand this concept of grace in the light of the new emerging world experiences?

At the centre of Reformed theology is the message of *sola gratia*. It reminds us that grace alone is the source and sustenance of our salvation. God's provision of saving, sustaining and glorifying grace is the golden thread uniting all Christian scripture and enabling all Christian faithfulness. This means all works honouring God—including our personal sanctification, our love for neighbours and enemies, our zeal for world mission, our free offer of the Gospel, our warnings of judgment, our promises of eternity, our mercy toward the poor and oppressed, our stewardship of God's world, our battles against Satan, our prayer for God's blessing and our work toward Christ's coming—all find proper motivation and enablement in love for Christ. Of course, this can be misused to use grace to excuse sin, but the principles of

grace revealed in all Scripture are the fuel of personal holiness and spiritual revival for those led by the Spirit.

Thus, presenting the doctrines of grace in a warm and embracing way is not to obscure holy boldness but to encourage compassion and humility in the face of God's sovereign mercy to all he loves from every tribe, language, people and nation. As the kindness of God has led to repentance and renewal among us, we must be committed to a manner and ministry that reflects God's grace to others (cf. Romans 2:4; 1 Peter 3:15). We must be on guard that the grace message that God has brought to us (or our particular expression of it) does not become a jewel that we admire and adore for the joy it brings us rather than for the hope it offers the world.

The critical question is: How do we understand this concept of grace in the light of the new emerging world experiences impinging on the role of women in society, issues of human sexuality, interreligious encounters and violence, racism, xenophobia, tribalism, the refugee situation, climate change, etc. How do we express grace and hospitality to differing views, theological beliefs and human experiences? All of these impress upon us the need for renewal and transformation as we seek to build inclusive communities and foster better relationships with people of other faiths. These are realities that the WCRC has to deal with, and it is these that will hopefully bring theological renewal and transformation.

All of these theological teachings mentioned above had a huge impact on society; they influenced politics, societal transformation, theological developments, etc. But as we have shown these concepts themselves are in need of renewal and transformation. They were all contextually based and informed and emerged mainly in the Western world. These were then transported and transplanted into other parts of the world, often without taking the local context seriously.

In any case, the world has changed quite significantly in the last 500 years. Today we live in the midst of globalization, poverty, hunger, refugees, economic injustice, secularization, political instability, climate change and environmental challenges, liberation and feminism, religious pluralism and religious violence and a sexual revolution. It is therefore appropriate to ask how we can seek renewal and transformation of Reformed theology, tradition and practice in light of these new or continued developments. The theme of the General Council is thus appropriately set: "*Living God, renew and transform us.*"

The theme reflects a prayer to the "living God" which speaks of God's presence and power in the world. The Resurrection power tells us that there is nothing in this world that God cannot overcome. The cross speaks of the measure that God will go through to restore and

save the world. It is all because of love! This theme is reflected as a prayer to God who lives and reigns in the world to make us more like Jesus. It is a prayer that God will make the church and Christians to be what God wants and wills for us to be, and that God will use us to change the world so that it may reflect God's reign and presence bringing justice, peace, love and abundance of life to all. But what does it mean to be renewed and transformed?

The word "renew" implies that we have lost something, and that we should go back to what we should be, to begin or take up again, to restore to a former state, to replenish, revive or re-establish, to make new. It is the first step to real transformation. In many senses the church has lost, neglected, forgotten and forsaken its calling. We are called to proclaim the good news of salvation and life in Jesus Christ, but we have become side-tracked from our main purpose as a church. The word "transform" means to change completely from inside out. It has the same meaning as transfiguration (Matthew 17:2) or metamorphosis which means to change into another form. The picture here is of a caterpillar which changes into something quite different when it becomes a butterfly.

The "us" in the theme is a reference to both the church and the world. We recognise that the church is in much need of renewal and transformation in as much as the world with all its injustices, corruption, deceit and unrighteousness. We thus need to speak to ourselves first before we can tell the world what to do or not to do. In some senses the church is a microcosm of the world rather than being a bridgehead to an *alternative society* filled with justice, peace and fullness of life for all (John 10:10).

Renewal and transformation impresses upon us the need to relook at the Reformed essentials through new lenses, contextual realities and ecumenical developments. Liberation, African and black theologies have encouraged us to undertake a "theology from below" approach, as we reflect on the realities of life and the sufferings and oppression of people in different contexts. It challenges us to read and reread Scripture from the "preferential option of the poor," the empowerment of women, inclusivity and acceptance. It calls us to take the issues of justice and peace seriously. It calls us to relook, re-examine and even reinterpret positions of the past. These are not easy things to do. It can shake and uproot our fixed beliefs and understandings of the past and rock the very foundations of what we have always believed. It can even cause a crisis in faith. But it can also bring us into a new place of faith-encounter and experience of love, service and acceptance of others, hospitality and grace instead of hostility and defence, inclusivity and the embracement of diversity. It can open new doors to understanding human life, human dignity and human

needs. It can shed new light on communion (unity) and justice. All of these can lead us into a new appreciation of the God of love, grace and holiness.

It is my hope and prayer that the biblical reflections in this book would help to do just that as we prepare for the 2017 General Council and as we prayerfully and discerningly reflect on the theme: *Living God, renew and transform us*. May this prayer begin with each of us inviting the Holy Spirit to start with "me" saying: "Here I am Lord, Jesus Christ, standing in need of renewal and transformation, please begin with me."

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Bible Studies

Wake Us from the Nightmare

Jeremiah 10:1-16

Dario Barolin

Introduction

"Living God..." Our theme begins as a prayer that comes from the need to be transformed. It is a crying out which is born from our awareness that only through being dislocated in our understandings and our lifestyles can we be renewed, as also the whole of God's creation.

This prayer is born in the deep need and full awareness of the suffering which the majority of humanity and God's creation experience, subsumed, beaten, squeezed. This prayer rises to the only one who hears and acts. It's not a cry into emptiness as it searches destination (Exodus 2:23), rather it has a concrete direction, *the living God*.

This adjectival use applied to God, as alive or living is not unique to our passage, it can be found numerous times in both the Old and the New Testaments. Deuteronomy 5:26, Psalm 42:3, Daniel 6:20, Hosea 1:10 (repeated in Romans 9:26), Matthew 16:16, 2 Corinthians 6:16 and 1 Timothy 4:10 are just a few examples.

Jeremiah 10:1-16 and its context

Jeremiah 10:1-16 invites us to think the living God is in conflict with idolatry and the communal and individual practices that stem from this.

As a way of introduction we must recognize this passage is part of a larger unit (8:4-10:25) in which a succession of poems warn of the consequences of death that the options chosen and the way forward of the community have brought upon themselves (8:4-7). The people of God ignore the ways of the Lord (8:7), they have upset God's law (8:8) and have rejected God's word (8:9). As a result the covenant that linked Israel with its people in a unique and special way (Exodus 19:5-6) has collapsed.

For these reasons Jeremiah concludes his accusations affirming that circumcision, which was the sign of this covenant between God and the people, is now only an empty ritual which does not nourish, which does not integrate the people, who have become "uncircumcised in heart" (9:26). From this point on and until the end of the section, the poem addresses this same mistaken walk, which comes from following the mistaken trend, which is that of idolatry.

The same way that faith in the Lord is firmly based on a social organization, to follow other gods also includes a particular social, cultural and political organization.

Western modernity tends to separate one thing from the other, though the biblical text has a much richer and complex understanding than the one we currently have. The biblical vision shows an indelible and undeniable relation between faith in Yahweh and social structure. The covenant between God and the people after liberation from slavery is based on the commitment of adhering to the God who liberated from oppression (Exodus 20:2) and at the same time to a social structure directed towards justice (Exodus 19-24).

The rejection of the social structure that stems from such a covenant inevitably leads to idolatry. In the same way, and in reverse, the worshiping of other gods leads to a new social structure and new scale of values.

The biblical vision shows an indelible and undeniable relation between faith in Yahweh and social structure.

The emptiness of idols

Our passage begins with the prophetic formula as a way of introduction: *"Hear the word that the Lord speaks"* (10:1) and this marks an inclusion with the new prophetic discourse which is introduced by this same formula in 10:18. The central calling of the prophetic utterance is found in verse 2:

*Do not learn the way of the nations,
or be dismayed at the signs of the heavens;
for the nations are dismayed by them.*

The verses that follow bring out the constant contrast between Yahweh, the living God, and idols and in this way justify the prophetic warning. As a matter of fact verses 3-16 systematically intersperse opposition of idols and Yahweh.

Idols: verses 3-5
 Yahweh: verses 6-7
 Idols: verses 8-9
 Yahweh: verses 10
 Idols: verse 11
 Yahweh: verses 12-13
 Idols: verses 14-15
 Yahweh: verse 16

Idols are characterized especially by what they cannot do: they don't move (4), they cannot speak or walk, they do neither evil nor good (5). But above all else they are a lie and have no breath in them (14) because they are the work of human labour (3, 14). What characterizes them, and the culture that they generate is "vanity" (3, 8, 15). We find similar expressions in the Psalms 115:4-7 and 135:15-17.

Finally, but in no way least, the text actually dedicates quite a large portion to inform how these idols are fabricated: gold and silver (4, 9), purple and blue (9). To adore these idols is to adore the materials from which they have been fabricated; it is the divinization of such *commodities*.

Though, while even the prophet puts a lot of effort into pointing out all they cannot do, their "non-existence," he cannot deny that there is something that they do manage to do, as they generate and they uphold customs and laws (4) and they create instruction (8). Truly they are contrary to Yahweh and are at the same time empty, but they are there as a powerful attraction for the people of God and they have the strange power to numb those who follow them (14).

The temptation of following the ways of the nations is not new in the history of Israel. In 1 Samuel 8 we find the same temptation in the leaders of the people and the prophetic warning about the consequences in the life of the people. In our passage, this call does not come from nowhere; rather it is part of the narrative of the fall of the kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. This does not make seduction any the less, the empire with the power it has and its gods seem stronger than Yahweh. Isn't this what the ruins of Jerusalem and exile seem to show?

The prophet puts great effort into demonstrating that the present ruin is not the result of the lack of power in Yahweh, but rather the disobedience of Israel. Their path, so far from justice, has brought this upon them. Faced with this scenario, to follow their gods, their customs (3) and their instruction (8) is not an option.

Yahweh the living God

Contrary to them, Yahweh appears. If the idols are characterized by their non-power, Yahweh is presented with power and wisdom. The chosen path is to point to God as creator (12), while the idols are created

(9). Yahweh is presented in wisdom and creative understanding (12), which contrasts with the stupidity and foolishness of the idols (8). These do not utter words (5) while Yahweh's voice creates storms (13).

Yet Yahweh's power is not confined to creative actions of the past. Yahweh is not a *Deus ex machina*, Yahweh is capable of giving all creation its form (16). Yahweh is acting in history as the nations can experience power that comes from Yahweh (10). The image of the creator God does not ignore history but rather understands it as part of the creative and transformative actions of God. In the same way, in Isaiah 40-55 the image of God the creator inspires new opportunities of liberation for a people in exile.

It is precisely this reality which leads the prophet to affirm, contrary to the emptiness of the idols, that "*Yahweh is true Lord, the living God and the everlasting King*" (10). And as such in conflict with all idols or power which pretends to become equivalent to God (cf. Ezekiel 28:1-10).

The decisive conflict is found in verse 11. This verse, different from all others written in Hebrew, is written in Aramaic and is structured in a beautifully poetic way, in a concentric form. In a graphic way it can be shown as:

*The gods
 that heaven
 and earth
 did not make
 shall vanish¹
 from the earth
 and under the heaven
 they*

Living God vs. idols

We have just pointed out the narrative context of Jeremiah 10:1-16. This emerges in the situation of oppression that the Babylonian empire has imposed on the small kingdom of Judah. Faced with this, the prophet desperately seeks to convince the people of the validity of Yahweh and above all about the efficiency of the promise. The prophet needs to demonstrate that his God, the God of the oppressed and the exiled, is more than the idols of the empire. If not there will be no hope. Worshiping the gods of the empire means the destruction of the people themselves.

This vital situation which feeds into the understanding and the invocation of the living God in conflict with idolatry is often misunderstood when power structures or the empire try to use it to domesticate the gods of the oppressed. Latin America and Africa have experienced in blood and fire the religious justification of military and economic power. It is impossible to find in this god of conquest the living God present in Jeremiah and shaped

by Jesus Christ. The living God is life; the actions that come from the living God bring life and can never be justification for death and oppression.

Now then, the emphasis of Jeremiah is not that the other peoples have other gods, though he certainly ridicules their religion; rather he dwells on the people of Israel themselves who feel tempted by the power of such gods and are ready to follow them (2). Even when they continue to offer sacrifice in the temple and invoke the name of Yahweh their actions are far from Yahweh. With their lips they call on Yahweh, but their heart and their ideology run behind other gods, with other values and a different culture.

This unveils a second aspect of idolatry. It refers to the mental images of God we build up and transmit. Very often these have very little to do with the living God. It is true that for human beings it is impossible to capture the totality of divinity and necessarily, the urge to understand God and relate to God, makes us emphasize, reduce or limit God. But we should be aware of this necessary mental operation and avoid turning our reduced and limited visions of God into the true God. These inevitable images of God which we form, for our history, our culture and our life should be fragile enough to surrender to the glory of the living God. We should be humble enough so that on each encounter with the living God, we can claim *“there is none like you, O Lord; you are great and your name is great might”* (Jeremiah 10:6).

A third aspect which often goes unnoticed concerns the human constructions which are turned into gods, with the same power as the ones that Jeremiah denounces. They are capable of creating culture, values and even of demanding sacrifices for themselves. In this brief commentary we draw your attention to the fabric with which these idols are constructed. This produces a sort of synergy between the representation of the divinity for which the most valuable materials have been used, and the divinization of such materials. Gold, silver, purple, blue (4, 9); this emphasizes the value of the represented god, but at the same time these materials begin to be divinized for themselves and as such lead to stupidity (14) in such a way that they become gods and as such direct and govern our decisions, our values and our culture.

This is made starkly clear in Colossians 3:5 when greed is referred to as idolatry. The idolatry mentioned is not the one of worshiping other gods, but rather that of making wealth the ultimate goal of our existence, turning it into a god of our lives, directing our decisions, emptying the sense of life in our society. These false gods demand sacrifices and even life itself, while promising salvation and fullness of life.

The living God is life; the actions that come from the living God bring life and can never be justification for death and oppression.

In this same line of thought, the Accra Confession in paragraph 10 refers to neoliberalism as a modern god with the same pretence:

This is an ideology that claims to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and creation. It makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity, claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance, which amounts to idolatry.

This form of idolatry is the most complex and challenging for the “secularized” humanity of the XXI century.

Confessing the living God

The passage of Jeremiah 10:1-16 helps us understand the intrinsic relation between our social practice and the faith we proclaim. The prophet exposes the pretention of the whole empire to impose its own gods, which legitimizes its power and the oppression of all those it subjugates. Contradictorily, these idols of human creation seem to have the power of seduction and deceit.

Calling out to the living God in such times is to affirm God’s power to give life. It is to recognize that other false gods seek to displace God and claim our worship and adoration. We know they don’t exist, that they do neither evil nor good, that they are human creations. In spite of this, they are there, powerful, perverting the communion between human beings, with creation and with God. They are there, dragging God’s creation to its death, subjecting the large majority of our people to poverty, creating suffering and exalting the vast wealth of a minority as “divine prosperity.”

Minds numbed by consumerism, the contemporary elixir, humanity dangerously draws near to self-destruction. For this reason we need to lift our eyes and cry out to the true God, living and eternal, capable

of transforming and renewing us to a communion of justice.

To confess the living God also means recognizing our patriarchal, racist, anthropocentric and discriminating categorizations as evident signals of an “uncircumcised heart” which must bow before the true, living and eternal God and be transformed so as to be liberated from such a nightmare and be transformed and renewed to live in fullness, harmony and communion with the living God.

Study Questions

1. What is the final and main criterium that governs our most complex and difficult decisions? What is God’s place in such decisions?
2. When was the last time God transformed and renewed our vision of what goes on around us? When was the last time we were surprised by God’s grace?
3. What situations of death and oppression are today justified in the name of God?
4. What does it mean to confess the living God, faced with the pain and suffering of our people?

Suggested Readings

- Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah. Exile and Homecoming*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998.
- E. Ray Clendenen, “Discourses strategies in Jeremiah 10:1-16,” *JBL* (106/3), 1987), pp 401-408
- José Comblin, “El Dios de la vida” (2014)
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Transl. Liber Tradux

Endnote

- 1 A detail that shows the relevance of this verse is found in the poetic play of words between *to do* and *to disappear*, which in Aramaic sound nearly identical.

On Being God's Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1-2

Musa W. Dube

The book of Romans, held to be Apostle Paul's magnum opus, was written to the Church in Rome, the seat of imperial power. He writes to the Church in Rome saying, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). Paul knows that empires demand bodies and minds of their subjects; they demand their subjects to conform to their ideology. Thus Paul underlines, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect*" (12:2). As Katherine Grieb point out, "To the degree that the living Lord has drawn us into a new sphere of power, the powers of the present age lose their ability to conform us to the world. Christians no longer 'belong' to these powers because their bodies have been offered as a living sacrifice to God and belong to God as the body of Jesus Christ" (2002:119).

Paul, therefore, calls for absolute resistance to the Roman Empire. Empires are, by design, governments of subordination, exploitation, violence upon its subjects; regardless of the reasons they advance to justify their power over the Other. Empires forcibly cross many boundaries through military force; ethical claims to save the natives from their own cultures; ideological claims of superiority of sorts, which they use to impose their religions, economic and political structures upon their colonized subjects. Empires are more about excessive collection of wealth from the subjugated through the exploitation of their labour and resources, thereby creating established global economic inequalities. Displaced and dispossessed populations become economic refugees, who are forced to migrate in search of greener pastures, even to the central cities of the empire. Imperial settings are thus multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial contexts without celebrating diversity.

*Lord Remind me
when I need to know,
You did not
Ask me to
Defend your church
But to lay down my life
For people*
(Bishop Colin Winter, in: Carden, 1998:185)

The exploitative agenda of empires does not only affect human beings, it also affects the land. Not only are there wars of imposition and resistance that often devastate the land, there are also resettlements and the over-crowding of the dispossessed as their lands are given to imperial agents and class. Since empires are about accumulation of wealth for their mother countries, they, more often than not, turn massive lands into commercial projects that deny their subjects land for subsistence living. Driven by the ethic of excessive profit, its commercial projects inevitably beget pollution, exploitation and violence upon the land as large tracts are cleared to make room for commercial projects to feed the imperial tastes, while indigenous people are displaced and forced to live in arid and crowded areas, thereby further stressing the environment. Imperial structures create social, cultural,

**The exploitative agenda
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economic and political contexts where human dignity is denied and God's whole creation suffers violence. Modern imperial structures affected two-thirds of the planet. Although wars of liberation have been fought and won, many former colonies' economic, political and cultural structures remain tied to their former colonizers in a relationship that continues to peddle inequalities, while in many settler colonies, natives remain permanently displaced from their land. Moreover, we are living in a new imperial age, popularly known as globalization or the neo-liberal economic structure, which is driven by competition for profit so much as that the welfare of communities, families and the land are a second hand concern. In the neo-liberal economy, the state must give way to privatisation, which is the handing over social welfare services and public resources such as water, electricity, grazing land, education, health, etc. to profit-driven companies. The empire is violent to God's created community as a whole.

*Because you have given us the Earth to care for
But we take more than our share
We come to you*

*Gracious God
Come to us and meet us on the way.
You have given generously
But we do not know how to respond
So help us to strive for integrity and faithfulness
(Brienen, 2000)*

In Paul's time Rome was an empire of equal repute. The Revelation writer describes the Roman Empire as Babylon, as the seven-headed dragon and as the prostitute that intercourses with all, to gather profit to "himself." Scholarly research highlights that wealth was in the hands of few, while unacceptable poverty prevailed in Rome. Much evidence highlights that Rome was violent, brutal upon resisting subjects. It was exploitative, collecting taxes from its subjects and transporting them to its center. It was culturally suppressive, imposing imperial cults upon its subjects. The emperor was to be worshiped. In this setting both Jews and Christians were in the line of fire for refusing to bow down and worship the emperor, as they theologically recognized only one God. Subjects had to learn to collaborate, to assume arts of hidden resistance or to undertake open resistance at their own risk.

The attestations of the canonical Gospels are eloquent on the Roman imperial presence, its violence and its exploitation. For example, Jewish Palestine featured puppet kings exemplified by Herod (Matthew 2 and 14:1-12); Roman Imperial troops and their captains were deployed to suppress uprisings (Matthew 24:27-31); tax collectors were engaged to fulfil the exploitative needs of the Roman Empire (Matthew 5:46 and 9:10); and the representative governor, in the person of Pilate, was stationed in Jerusalem (Matthew 27:1-23). Jesus was born, lived and died under the Roman imperial power. In fact, the Matthean testimony highlights that baby Jesus, proclaimed to be the King of Jews, was immediately recognized as a threat to Roman imperial structures. His life was hunted and his parents had to flee with him to Egypt (Matthew 2:1-23). During his ministry Jesus was asked questions about paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 17:24-27); he was tried in the court of Pilate for being subversive to the power of Caesar (John 17-18). Knowing the power and violence of the empire Jesus turned to both open and hidden arts of resistance: He openly proclaimed the present and soon-coming kingdom of God, thereby challenging the prevailing kingdom of Caesar as illegitimate; he taught that one should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God (Matthew 22:21), a statement that automatically disqualifies Caesar's power, for there was only one God for Jewish people; he identified Roman occupying forces with demons that needed to be exorcised from the

possessed (Mark 5:1.20). When asked about his kingship by Pilate the Roman governor Jesus employed various arts of resistance, ranging from silence, to changing the topic, to employing hidden transcripts such as, "You said so," an answer that neither denied nor confirmed his kingship.

*You asked for my hands
That you might use them for your purpose
I gave them for a moment
Then withdrew them for the work was hard*

*You asked for my mouth to speak against injustice
I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused
(South Africa, in: Carden, 1998:180)*

Although Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor in Palestine, sentences Jesus to death, Jesus rises from the dead (Matthew 28:1-10). Resurrection is itself a divine statement and action against exploitative structures that dehumanize people and reduce the quality of God's good creation. Resurrection remains an attestation of God's solidarity with the subjugated—God's insistence on life in abundance for all of the creation community. Resurrection remains an attestation that those who lay down their lives for the realization of God's justice, though they lose their lives they shall regain them. God transforms and renews believers and a church that presents itself as a living sacrifice. The resurrecting people of God become a living sacrifice that can never be decimated by forces of evil. A living sacrifice is thus an offering that keeps on giving in the struggle for and in solidarity with God, for God's justice to be realized on Earth as it is in heaven. The church, and members of the church, who present their bodies as a living sacrifice do not die, for they embody the indestructible power of God. God renews and transform them. They rise. As Maya Angelou said in her book, *I Shall not be Moved*:

*Into the crashing sound,
Into wickedness, she cried
No one, no, nor one million
Ones dare to deny me God. I go forth
alone, and stand as ten thousand*

*The Divine upon my right
Impels me to pull forever
At the latch of freedom's gate*

Angelou was describing the evil forces that confronted African Americans. Enslaved and denied their human dignity, "their eyes were watching God," as Zora Neale Houston said. Their eyes kept on looking to and for God—for the justice that God guarantees to all members of the creation community. Unceasingly calling, "kumbaya my Lord" they continued to rise, for the God of resurrection was with them. Becoming a living sacrifice thus does not exclude vulnerability to destructive powers of the world.

Resurrection remains an attestation that those who lay down their lives for the realization of God's justice, though they lose their lives they shall regain them.

It is rather to live in the transformational power of God, the power of resurrection that enables us to speak truth to power and to become mustard seeds that have been planted in the good soils that arise in multiple-folds, becoming houses for many birds in the field. To become a living sacrifice is, therefore, to become a church, and members of churches, who will keep coming back to face all destructive powers. Living sacrifices do not surrender to the forces of evil, for they have surrendered themselves to the power of God. To become a living sacrifice is to live in and move by God's power in the world. It is to embody the light of God and to shine it where evil structures are ever invading, marring God's created community. To become God's living sacrifice is therefore to assume a posture of vigilant resistance to forces of evil invading the creation community. As Bruce Malina and John L. Pilch point out, "the purpose of sacrificing is to have life-effect: to preserve life or transform life" (2006:276). To offer our bodies as a living sacrifice is to acknowledge that we have been transformed, when we became the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ.

*You asked for my life
That you might work through me
I gave a small part that I might not get involved.*

*Lord, forgive me for my calculated efforts to serve you
Only when it is convenient for me to do so
Only in places where it is safe to do so
And only with those who make it easy to do so*

*Creator God forgive me
Renew me
Send me out as a useable instrument
That I might take seriously the meaning of your cross
(South Africa, in: Carden, 1998, 180)*

And so it was in the first-century Palestine that Roman exploitative rule met resistance of sorts, from those who prayerfully offered themselves as living sacrifices to God. This resistance was characterized by Pharisees who resorted to learning, teaching and keeping God's law

meticulously; by back-to-the-desert movements, characterized by John the Baptist, Qumran and Essenes groups, which prayerfully sought to experience God's liberative powers as experienced by the Israelites' emancipation from Egyptian slavery; by the Sadducees and high priests, who seemingly resorted to collaboration, to trick the system and mitigate the violent power of the empire, holding that "if we let him (Jesus) go on like this... the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation... it is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed," (John 11:49-50); and by Zealots, who rose up to fight and to remove the imperial presence in their land in 66 CE. Their uprising was a statement to the effect that the Roman imperial rule was unwanted and unacceptable, for its self-imposition and exploitative agenda. Although temporarily successful, the strategy of open confrontation proved fatal, for Rome unleashed its military power, with devastating consequences of the destruction of the temple and the banning of Jews from Jerusalem, their centre of worship (Matthew 24:1-2). The thing that the high priests and Sadducees were at pains to avoid through adopting strategies of collaboration to trick the enemy had happened.

It is within this context that Apostle Paul writes a letter to the Church in Rome, the seat of the imperial power. The Roman Church constitutes those who were in the line of fire daily. Paul urges them to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. He urges them not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the mercies of God. Believers confronted by and living within the structures of evil and injustice are urged to present their bodies "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God," for such constitutes their worship. The Christian physical bodies and their minds are to be dedicated to God and to make no room for any other power, save for the power, will and mercies of God. Paul knows that the temptation may be high to conform to the standards of the Roman Empire, but advises otherwise. Believers are to be "transformed by renewing their minds," for the purposes of vigilance, namely, to develop the capacity to "discern what is the will of God," so that they do not err or move from the mercies and will of God. His is a call for focus and dedication. Such dedication demands bodies and minds to be fully given to God to allow no room for compromising and collaboration with forces that contradict God's will on Earth. Understanding the mercies and will of God demands self-dedication to the same, that is, offering oneself as A LIVING SACRIFICE TO God. It calls the whole church, which is the body of Christ, to remember that they have already been transformed and renewed, yet they have to keep on rededicating themselves anew.

A church that knows itself to be a living sacrifice does not embrace imperial values and standards. Consequently, Paul opens the letter to the Romans by identifying Jesus as one who descended from "David according to the flesh

and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:3-4). The tradition of messiah, the Christ, or the anointed one amongst Jewish people, referred to the expected liberator from imperial structures, who was expected to come from the house of David. By evoking the Davidic line of Jesus, Paul asserts that Jesus resists the empire, and so should his church—by offering themselves as God’s living sacrifice. Given the contemporary imperial structures that characterise this world today, the church and its members are still being urged to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God, for even though they confront violent and crushing powers of evil and injustice they live in Christ’s resurrection power, the power to keep coming back to speak the will and mercies of God in God’s creation.

Study Questions

1. What Empires exist today, especially in your life?
2. How do Empires operate today? In what ways do they exploit, repress, subjugate, destroy?
3. In what ways have you become reliant on or benefited from today’s Empires?
4. In what ways can “offering your body as a living sacrifice” resist today’s Empires?

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There is Only “All of Us!”

Luke 4:16-30

Revelation Velunta

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Introduction

The Bible studies for this gathering break down the theme “Living God, renew and transform us” into three sessions. The first session will be on “Living God” (with Dario Barolin). The second on “Renew and transform” (with Musa Dube). And this, the third, is focused on “us.”

Many students of the Bible do not read the Bible. They either read books about the Bible or very small parts. A lot are experts in proof texting. One of the best ways to understand scripture is to read each passage as part of a greater whole. Luke 4:16-30 is part of Luke 4. Luke 4 is part of the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Luke is one half of the two-volume work, Luke-Acts. One of the best ways to understand the text we call Luke-Acts is to understand

the context that birthed it: the Roman Empire.¹

First century Palestine, according to historians, had the elite, the rich and the landed, composed mostly of monarchs and aristocratic families, representing the top 1%. Moving down the ladder, was a retainer class: tax gatherers, police, scribes, priests, etc. (9%). The bulk of the population, three out of every four, consisted of merchants, very few of whom were well off; artisans, almost all of whom lacked worldly goods; and farmers and fisher-folk. Finally below these were the untouchables (i.e., 15%) who were cripples, prostitutes, excess children of peasant farmers sent away as day laborers and beggars, runaway slaves, who lived in the hedges outside the cities. Half of the population subsisted on 1,000 calories a day which meant they were slowly starving to death. The poor could afford only bread and fish, dried or salted, which were the basic food of the lower classes in the cities, slaves, and peasants. There was even a presumption then that when a poor person had fresh fish, the person was a thief!²

Good news to the poor

The empire preached good news to the rich. Luke’s Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor. Liberation theologians have argued for decades that Luke-Acts is the best source for underpinning the church’s

The empire preached good news to the rich.

preferential option for the poor, its anti-imperial rhetoric. Mary’s Song of Praise celebrates the God who takes sides, the Lord who scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, and sends the rich away empty. The same Lord who lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Luke’s Jesus proclaims, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” His Sermon on the Plain declares blessings to the poor and woes to the rich. The rich are challenged to sell everything they have, give all the proceeds to the poor and follow Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles tell of communities where no one was in need and where ministry to widows and orphans and strangers was a priority.

Historical Jesus scholars argue that the passage we are studying anticipates and summarizes the whole Lukan gospel story: the Christian mission is to carry good news to the poor beyond Israel, to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth.³

To bring my point closer to home: this particular passage, specifically verses 18 and 19, is a favourite among many churches and church-related institutions in the Philippines, especially among those who confess that our mission and witness as followers of Jesus should take the poor and the marginalized as our preferential partners. Verses 18 and 19 are included in the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.⁴

Us, them, all of us

The pronoun “us” assumes belongingness. Being a part of a whole. More particularly, “us” are insiders. As far as the people of Nazareth were concerned, Jesus were “one of us.” Isaiah was “one of us.” The promises from Scripture was “for us.” Jesus’s proclamation of said promises fulfilled in their hearing was also “for us.” Ultimately, all these presuppose that God is always and only “for us.”

“Us” also presumes another group. Those that do not belong. Them. The outsiders. The empire, built on privilege, power, possession and commodification, divides and conquers peoples. The empire creates “us” and “them.” The passage in Luke 4, referenced several times in the Accra Confession (2004) and implied in the Manila Declaration (2006), presents both groups and posits an alternative.

What Luke’s Jesus declares in verses 25-27 echoes the inclusive theme of the gospel and resonates with Paul’s declaration in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female...” Jesus actually proclaims the alternative to the Kingdom of Caesar, “In the Kingdom of God, there is no ‘us,’ there is no ‘them.’ There is only ‘all of us.’”

At first, those who listened to Jesus read Isaiah were happy. Then as they listened to him interpret the challenge of the jubilee they metamorphosed into a mob bent on throwing Jesus off a cliff! Why? Because Jesus dared to change the beneficiaries of God’s jubilee. Leviticus 25, the year of the Lord’s favour, proclaimed land, liberty and cancellation of all debts. Jubilee meant gospel, good news to a people suffering under Roman occupation. Jesus challenged their interpretation of “us” to include “them.”

For Jesus, there is only “all of us.” If God is our parent, then we, all of us, are God’s children. We are all sisters and brothers. Not just his fellow Nazarenes. Not just his fellow Galileans. During the time of Elijah, when drought and famine ravished the land, there were many widows

If God is our parent, then we, all of us, are God’s children. We are all sisters and brothers.

in Israel, yet God sent Elijah to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, yet none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. For Jesus, God’s children include the widow at Zarephath in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian.

To reiterate, for Jesus, the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed and everyone waiting for the year of the Lord’s favour were not just “us” Israelites but also “them,” the Gentiles, who were poor, captives, blind, oppressed and everyone waiting for the year of the Lord’s favour. Thus, the jubilee is not just for “us” but also for “them,” and therefore for “all of us.”

If we do a quick survey of the gospel, Luke’s Jesus includes a lot of “them” in “all of us.” Shepherds, a leper, a paralytic, a centurion, a centurion’s servant, a sinful woman, a Gerasene formerly possessed by demons, a hemorrhaging woman, a crippled woman, children, ten lepers, a blind beggar, a widow, one of the two who was crucified with him, Lazarus, The Samaritan, and Zacchaeus, the tax collector, to name just a few.

And if we need more biblical and historical support for Jesus transgressing the widest divide empire created to separate “us” from “them,” then his challenge, “Love your enemies” (Luke 6.27f and Matthew 5.33f) removes all doubt. Even Jewish scholars agree that these statements are unique to this particular first century Jewish rabbi!⁵ In the gospel, we have “enemies who love,” who actually serve the least, who actually take the side of those whose only hope is God. There’s Zacchaeus, the rich, chief tax collector who gives back to the poor and pays back four times everyone he had defrauded. The centurion, who not only loved the Jewish people and built their synagogue, but loved his slave⁶ dearly and sought help when the latter was ill and close to death. Then, of course, we have the Samaritan who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers.

And the book of Acts follows this transformed, alternative, expanding community—of Jews and Gentiles, of former enemies, now sisters and brothers in the faith—from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, into the heart of the Empire! And several centurions play

important roles in bringing the gospel of the poor to Rome.

Lest we forget, postcolonial theories argue that the empire's divide and conquer techniques pit one colonized group against another. The oppressed, the colonial subjects, become enemies. The oppressors, the colonizers, become benevolent masters. Empire perpetuates its self-serving paradigm by constructing one group, one race, one place or one people as superior to another. Imperialism, then and now, has always been about forcing a single truth upon a plural world. This creates alienation and enmity among the colonized groups. Thus, dynamics exist not only between the colonizer and the colonized, between the margins and the centre, but more importantly among various groups of the colonized, the margins. Some try to gain power to define national cultural identity, as well as to compete for the attention of their collective oppressor. Empire creates colonies that seek its favour. Empire also creates colonial mentality; when the colonized are possessed by the colonizer. Rome maintained its power by pitting different groups of "us" against different groups of "them."

The Spanish occupation of the Philippines lasted for over

three centuries. During those three hundred years, there were no more than five thousand Spaniards in the islands in any given time. There were revolts against Spain every nine months during those three centuries but the Spaniards did very little fighting. The natives did most of the fighting among themselves!

There is only all of us

A life dedicated to the liberation of the poor, oppressed and marginalized was a dangerous threat to the empire. And so was the movement that followed that life. The empire crucified Jesus. The empire swallowed up Christianity. The empire strikes back. It always does. Divide and conquer. Insiders and outsiders. White and colored. Straight and gay. Men and women. Saved and heathen. The 1% and all the rest. Christians and those damned to hell. Us versus Them. Forcing a single truth upon a plural world.

Western Christianity has been closely related to empire since the Roman days and has thus spread throughout the world. It is now being used to provide ideological legitimization for today's empire. Globalized Christendom and the "crusades" it embarks upon today are symbiotically intertwined



We need to repent.
We need to be transformed.
We need to remember.
We need to act.

with global capital and the power of the global empire. In its triumphalistic pursuits, it discounts if not condemns all other religious faiths and cultures. The indigenous religions of many communities are destroyed and Islam is vilified.

The convergence of Christian religion with Western modernity has destroyed the religious and cultural life of peoples and their communities throughout the world. The powers and principalities of the global market and empire are being baptised by these theological distortions of “Christianity,” which promote religious conflicts and bigotry globally.

The Christian religion of empire treats others as “gentiles” to be conquered, as the “evil empire” to be destroyed or as the “axis of evil” to be eradicated from the earth. The empire claims that the “goodness” of the empire must overcome these “evils.” Its false messianic spirit is imbued with the demonic.

Today, global empire, with its unprecedented reach, represents a massive threat to life. In the face of this pervasive and death-dealing reality of worldwide hegemony, we are inspired and empowered by Jesus of Galilee to resist empire and to renew communities of life. This new reality has economic, political, social, cultural, religious and spiritual dimensions. It presents life and death challenges for Christians, as the empire uses religion to justify its domination and violence and makes claims that belong to God alone.

We ask all churches whose missions and peoples have historically been involved in empire building to seriously scrutinize—in partnership with the victims of their imperial past—their structure, teaching, liturgy, funding agencies and policies as well as their political allegiances, in order to repent and reshape their life in all aspects in the spirit of the anti-imperial biblical heritage.⁷

In the Kingdom of God there is no “us;” there is no “them.” There is only sisters and brothers.

The fifteen million Africans we abducted and forced into slavery and kept chained in our basements while we sang our hymns and worshipped regularly upstairs are our sisters and brothers. The millions of Syrian refugees that we refuse entry into our borders are our sisters and brothers. The 25,000 children, aged five and younger, who starve to death every day because of poverty are our sisters and brothers. And the millions of indigenous peoples we have dispossessed, displaced, and exterminated throughout the centuries are our sisters and brothers. The borders that separate us, our comfort zones, our prejudices, the thick and high fortifications around our homes, our buildings, and places of worship, our accurate colour-coded maps, even that Israeli-made apartheid wall in Palestine, the boundaries of caste, creed, race, gender, class—visible and invisible—that separate us, that alienate “us” from “them,” are all man-made. We put them up, which means we can tear them down!

We need to repent. We need to be transformed. We need to remember. We need to act. And many among us who have no idea what “give us today our daily bread” means need to sell everything we have, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Jesus.

Yes, the Crucified One is risen!

God’s question to the first sibling, Cain, has not changed. It is the question Jesus’s whole life answered. It is the question we face every single day. It is the question most of us have failed miserably to answer. The day of reckoning is now. Where is your brother? Where is your sister?

The Risen One enjoins us: In the Kingdom of God there is no “us;” there is no “them.” There is only “all of us.”

Study Questions

1. Where is your brother? Where is your sister?
2. What barriers do you see in your neighbourhood?
3. What barriers have you constructed?
4. In what ways does your church deconstruct barriers? In what ways does it build walls?

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Endnotes

- 1 Musa Dube expounds on empire and imperialism in her Bible Study.
- 2 The works of John Dominic Crossan and William Herzog are excellent resources on this topic.
- 3 *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*.
- 4 <http://uccpchurch.com/what-we-believe/>
- 5 According to Amy Jill Levine. *Who did he say he was? Jesus in Text and Context*. Available at <https://youtu.be/wbE87SHRQ3A>
- 6 I have argued elsewhere that the slave was the centurion's lover.
- 7 Excerpted from the Manila Declaration, July 2006. World Alliance of Reformed Churches.



Theology

UTHIXO O PHILILAYO: Living God

Vuyani Vellem

Abstract

True to our Reformed heritage, this reflection assumes that God can only be understood if we too as human beings understand ourselves. Essentially framed within the philosophy and ethics of *Ubuntu*—*motho ke motho ka batho babang*—our conversation, without suggesting that black African life is the criterion for Christianity provides the testimony of the Living God within the interstice of black African experience. Western Christianity castrated black Africans of their history and identity, incorrigibly and totally subjecting black African life to the spell and myth of the “white power structure.” The survival struggles for the restoration of *Ubuntu*, the performances of the oppressed obstinately holding on the knowledge of who they are, crack the husk of tyranny and reveal the Living God not as a noun, but a “verb.”

Introduction

The first section of our reflection takes us through the search of those who are far away from our sight without whom our encounter with the Living God might be significantly opaque. We then briefly allude to the struggles of the gods, concluding with the cracking of the gods of empire in the art of survival for the restoration of *Ubuntu*.

Outside of sight, far away from sight

The wretched bodies, broken bodies, excruciated bodies, wasted black bodies, human beings out of sight, hidden away from us in times of empire, matter most if we seek to encounter the Living God. That God is revealed in the history of the struggle for liberation is one of the most saving lessons we should treasure whenever and wherever we participate in any conversation centred on God-talk. Without denying the centuries of the church’s discourse on social justice, God’s mystery of the preferential option for the poor “has swept some sections of the Christianity for some time now” (Tefsai 1996: 126) and indeed represents “a significant breakthrough in the history of the church” (Tefsai 1996:127).

This mystery of faith praxis among the wretched in the social and historical process of liberation remains an antithesis to a dominant understanding of the “ordering of creation”¹ experienced as pushing the poor out of the sight of the wealthy, “their filthy outfits and dirty bodies” (Tefsai 1996:127) out of God’s worship and glory. In South Africa this experience of keeping the wretched out of sight resulted in one of the worst forms of religious

fascism, racially justifying the total exclusion of black Africans virtually from the whole of life. This disdainful rejection of black life is traceable to the 1857 Dutch Reformed Synod’s decision to separate black and white in worship for “practical considerations” (Cf. De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2004: 7-9). The history of South Africa is virtually incomprehensible without faith contesting imperial and tyrannical forms of power virtually prone to life killing as apparent in the context of empire.

For example, the Union of South Africa in 1910, symbolizing the unity of Afrikaner farmers and the British merchants, is a quintessential text of the unity of gold, land dispossession, cultural and faith exclusion of the South African majority—this racial exclusion justified by faith. As Musa Dube aptly states, “Missionaries as Bible readers and their historical acts as performances that reflect the ethics of their texts and institutions” (2000:15) became part of the god of gold, land dispossession, cultural and epistemicide of the black African people. The encounter between the West and black African contexts remains a narrative of the encounter of gods. Mudimbe’s rendition of religion as performance explains this well: “Let us accept any religion, its rituals and theatricality as perceptual phenomena” (1997:2), “in reality performances referring to an external ‘something:’ an incredible transcending everyday practice and its obvious rationality, a Word signifying both revelation and salvation” (1997:5).² This historical performance of religion, if we follow Eagleton’s caution, “...that theology cannot be limited to a narrowly defined religious sphere,” (1996:10) is intriguing. The most dangerous idols are concealed in what appears “religion-less,” outside religious and theological sight.

We have become aware of theologies that taught the church must not fiddle in politics, pie-in-the-sky theologies, yet paradoxically, secular performances and institutions remain truly related to the religious, if not truly religious. Against this dominant understanding of “the ordering of creation,” separating the secular from the religious, now the “ordering of creation by empire,” which ties together the whole of creation at the destruction of life, the mystery of the option for the poor inspires our search for “Where God is at work” (Boesak: 19-25). Reflecting on the theme: *UTHIXO O PHILILAYO: Living God*,³ the thought of three human beings who are trapped in the belly of the earth, somewhere in Barberton, a gold mining city located in the province of Mpumalanga in South Africa, refuses to fade away

from one's mind. Almost a month since Pretty Nkambule, Yvonne Mnisi and Solomon Nyerende were trapped underground, the reality of the tragic conditions of black life in post-1994 South Africa remains shocking. The rescue mission had to be suspended due to a tremor, the breakdown of drilling machines and rock falls to mention but a few hindrances.

These human beings, who get lost from sight while at work, are experientially part of the millions who drown while crossing the Mediterranean from Africa in search of a better life, ostensibly on the "other" side of the coastal line. They are the same as those millions who had to flee Syria to seek refuge in Europe, those who die in Iraq, the landless in Bolivia, Guatemala, the farmers, indigenous peoples, Dalit and Palestinians throttled by savage occupation—indeed lives that matter while far from sight and our imaginations. Violence against women, incidentally: recent revelations within the United Nations about the UN Peacekeeping Forces that defile the bodies of powerless women, let alone millions of children scattered away from their families and homes, all speak to us about human beings out of sight, far away from our vision of life at the hands of the empire gods. Indeed what the secular world refers to as the struggle for survival, Cone in agreement with Eagleton above, says is what theology should refer to as God's grace (1975: 2), and our task is to unmask the hidden "gods" of empire. Cone says:

In the larger "secular" black community, this perspective on life is often called the "art of survival;" but in the black Church, we call it the "grace of God." It is called survival because it is a way of remaining physically alive in a situation of oppression without losing one's dignity. We call it grace because we know it to be an unearned gift from him who is the giver of "every good and perfect gift" (1975:2).

I grew up in a gold mine city where the surviving migrants, dislocated from their families, constituted a large section of the congregation that shaped my faith journey in search of the Living God. In their dramatic and performative acts in the rendezvous of survival for life—when *Ubuntu* seemed to be far away from their lives—these miners seemingly danced their God, dancing their lives on God's rendezvous of life with humanity and the whole of creation.

If *Ubuntu* broadly speaks about the integration and conviviality of life, among black Africans to be alive means life *coram Deo*— the dance and rhythms of life in the presence of God (Cf. Buthelezi 1987: 96). The memory of melodious sounds of men singing and dancing is both marvellous and frightening as images of tribal wars equally accompanied by singing and dancing refuse to escape my mind. Leonardo Boff says:

The memory of the founder of the Christian community is dangerous and subversive. Its content is one of liberation, and therefore its message inevitably prioritizes the poor and the marginalized (1989: 4)

Men and women out of sight, entangled somewhere deep underground, out of sight through the barrel of the gun, deeply entangled below, many layers down below and far away from our sight! Cone's God of the oppressed must rightly be God the oppressed. Allan Boesak agrees: "Discipleship, Bonhoeffer argues, is to 'stand with God in the hour of God's grieving'—that is 'to be caught up in the way of Christ'" (2015:23).

The struggle of the "gods:" "Israel does not know what the ox knows..."

When the castration of creation, *Ubuntu* and life takes place while we do not know when the prayer of the far sighted and the vision of the broken holds faith "the way the earth holds the seed until it sprouts" (Boff 1987:97), the donkey will know:

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." (Isaiah 1:1-3; NIV)

Israel does not know what the ox knows, even what the donkey knows. Israel does not understand. About "gods" John De Gruchy says:

The word "god" is a symbol for what we worship, for what is ultimately important in our lives. What separates people from one another in this regard is not that some people believe in a "god" and others do not. What separates people is their understanding of who their "god" is, how their "god" relates to them, what moral values derive from their "god," and what all this means for them in their daily lives as individuals and as societies (1991:94).

Some of the works authored by South Africans who could be described as Reformed theologians are significant for this conversation by merely glancing at their titles.⁴ First, Boesak's *Black and Reformed* (1984), suggests a number of things, one of which is the core question of black identity and its relationship with our Reformed heritage. By engaging this tradition, one cannot overlook the struggle for the identity of the black people and what the tradition itself did to black identity. Almost an inversion of the first text, John de Gruchy's

Liberating Reformed Theology (1991) ostensibly posits the identity of Reformed faith as the core issue to be disentangled or liberated from the epistemic distortions apparent within the historical narratives of black and white conflict. Khabela, in his *Tiyo Soga: The Struggle of the Gods: A Study in Christianity and the African Culture* (1996), presents a homogenic perspective of the first black ordained pastor in South Africa, Tiyo Soga, within the quandaries and contradictions of the Reformed faith's embroilment in wars and the defeat of black people at the heavy hands of the British colonialists. At core is the issue of identity, verily, the cultural struggles of the black people against colonialism, conquest and Christianization as a struggle of the "gods." From these works and many others, *inter alia*, one simple theme that vividly comes out is that the text of God and "gods" is not only written on paper, but on bodies, minds and the souls of these people. It is a performance of the religion of the Reformed faith and that of the survival struggles of black African people.

Cracking the husk of the "gods" of empire

The castration of the "gods" lies in Terry Eagleton's dictum, namely that "God is more of a verb than a noun" (2009: 87). Yes the whole life of black Africans—*Ubuntu*— is a "verb" and knowing these "verbs" is to know the Living God and God's castration of the "gods." About these "verbs" of black life, Steve Biko says:

Black Consciousness therefore, takes cognisance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life (2004:53).

The weeping and broken bodies of black Africans heard the voice that said to them "do not weep, your triumph is assured in your black 'verbs' of pride and efforts to crack and castrate the power of the gods among you!"

"Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

The rhythm, lyrics and the street liturgy of the masses of the students during the State of Emergency, elderly men

and women, detentions without trial, deaths numerous and untold at the hands of the hit squads, almost every weekend townships filled with the reverberations of this subversive song became the "verbs" of the Living God:

Thula! Thula! Sizwe
UYehova wakho uzokungqobela!
Inkululeko, Zizoyithola

Quiet! Quiet! people
(Your God) Jehovah will gain victory for you
Liberation we shall achieve!
Deo Gloria is not a noun but a verb!

Un-concluding thoughts

When *Ubuntu* seems castrated and far away from sight, deep underneath the layers of human degradation, when the gods put God far away from sight, "verbs" of liberation reveal the Living God.

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Endnotes

- 1 I employ this well-known phrase in the Reformed world deliberately to signify what this tradition entailed as a whole in the experience of the black Africans, especially in South Africa.
- 2 For further clarity of my thoughts on this matter see, Velle, VS'Spirituality of liberation: A conversation with African religiosity', HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 70(1), Art. #2752, xx pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2752>
- 3 This is an isiXhosa translation for "Living God." It is important.
- 4 It is not possible due to our limited space to provide a comprehensive review of these texts; however, their descriptive presentation here is authentic to their core arguments, a matter one could only achieve in producing another paper.

“Renew and Transform” Reformed Theology

Lilly Phiri

Introduction

“The Church [is] Reformed, Always Reforming” (*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*) is not only a motto, but part of our identity, which appealed us to hold up the faithfulness to the Gospel of full life through the constant renovation of the church, through a continual reading of the signs of the times.
(WCRC Executive Committee Minutes, 2015)

As the worldwide church prepares to commemorate five hundred years of the Protestant Reformation, it is our responsibility as individual Christians, churches and institutions belonging to the Reformed tradition to not only conduct introspection on our theological journey thus far, but anticipate and dare envision new theological trajectories that will keep the Reformation fires alive. It is a time that challenges us to remain theologically relevant and formulate new theological directions as part of the “renew and transform” process. In taking stock of how far we have come and where we hope to venture theologically, we need to be brave enough to embrace a “renew and transform” approach in our theological engagements. On the one hand, it is prudent that this moment encourages us to hold onto the fundamentals and “non-negotiables” inherent within Reformed theology so as to maintain our identity. On the other hand, it is a time to undertake the task of embracing a “renew and transform” paradigm of doing theology which pushes us beyond our comfort zones in a quest for revived “faith seeking understanding.” “Renew” means to recreate, repair, restore or rejuvenate which basically entails giving back life to something, while “transform” denotes a metamorphosis in form, nature and character. Therefore, “renew and transform” are simultaneous engagements as with God’s help, we give back life to Reformed theology while at the same time changing the complexion of our theology.

A synopsis of the roots of Reformed theology

The basic understanding of theology is that it is the study about God and religious ideas. It is more difficult to define Reformed theology than it is to describe, hence Jan Rohls asserts it “dissolves into a plurality of highly different theological positions all belonging to the same family” (2003:35). It is theology marked by theological and confessional differences, and at the same time emphasizes ecumenism among churches that fall under the Reformed tradition. Reformed theology was born out of the efforts of Reformers such as John Calvin,

Johannes Hus and Huldrych Zwingli, among others. Its emergence can mainly be traced among the Dutch, English, French, German, Scottish and Swiss theologians. The Reformers theologically challenged the Roman Catholic Church on an elitist Bible that was only written and could only be read in Latin, the concept of purgatory and the selling of indulgences. Over time, Reformed theology has grappled with other theological concerns of its time. Below, I walk you through some of the realities that theologically challenge Reformed theology today.

Doing Reformed theology today

Every theology worth its salt should respond to the challenges of its time. Today’s Reformed theology is faced with a number of contentious realities which continue to beg for its theological attention and theologically inspired action. Although not exhaustive, the following are some of the challenges facing Reformed theology: ecological and climate change, economies that enslave humanity, poverty, political systems that promote self-service, unemployment, militarization, sex and sexualities, gender equality, human trafficking, discrimination, racism, etc. Some of these challenges are within and outside the Reformed family; hence, theological responses have been and ought to be both inward and outward looking. Within itself, Reformed theology is also faced with challenges of continuous self-redefinition whilst maintaining a Reformed identity, undertaking mission amidst growing levels of global Pentecostalism, ecumenicity beyond the frontiers of Christianity, sex and sexualities, as well as gender equality.

The globe continues to experience climate change and ecological imbalances which adversely affect human and non-human lives. Thus, ecological theological discourses cannot be wished away. Through the Accra Confession of 2004 and other theological discourses, Reformed theology has responded to the challenges of climate change, calling for responsible relations among the created order. Notwithstanding the efforts of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, we still experience and read reports of deforestation, pollution of water bodies, air and the land, harmful farming practices, etc. which jeopardize the future of the globe. The “think global, act local” mantra has not been implemented to allow for the translatability of the Accra Confession among individual, local churches as many remain ignorant about the existence of the Accra Confession.

Reformed theology needs to “renew and transform” its theological strategies and methods of addressing climate change through a hands-on approach by deliberately emphasizing human responsibility towards the created order at individual church level.

Furthermore, matters of climate change are closely linked to the economy, politics, poverty and unemployment. Current capitalism encourages wealth creation over the wellbeing of humanity and the created order; e.g. the infamous sweatshops in which children and adults work in inhuman conditions. Capitalism also promotes militarization in the protection of territories and acquisition of natural resources. Economies are usually aided by political policies and systems that only benefit a few people at the expense of the many. Resources from struggling economies are extracted to feed the lifestyles of beneficiaries of capitalism whilst leaving those who rightfully own the resources more impoverished. Additionally, poor economies are subjected to a new form of colonialism; economic colonization, through transnational corporations that operate in their countries, uses cheap labour and significantly contributes to resource depletion. In this worrisome context of survival of the fittest, such injustices pose theological challenges to Reformed theology at global, national and local church levels on the need to be prophetic by addressing these systemic injustices. At such a time, can Reformed theology, local churches and individual Christians afford not to speak truth to power?

Gender inequality, caste and racism are some among the many forms of discrimination prominent in contemporary society. In 2012, I had an interesting conversation with a friend who lectures in a seminary and is entrusted by her church to groom theological students through ministerial training, but she is considered to be of a “wrong” gender for ordination. This situation is not unique as many females within and outside the Church continue to face discrimination of all kinds based on their gender. In some cases, recognition of females comes in the semblance of tokenism and not merit. Reformed theology has tried to address gender inequality at a global level but the onus remains with individual churches and Christians within the Reformed tradition to make gender justice a practical reality. After all, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The journey to “renew and transform” Reformed theology demands the restoration of human dignity of persons regardless of gender. Any form of injustice should make us uncomfortable enough to act against it. What theologies and hermeneutics in our churches hinder gender equality and how best can we revisit, “renew and transform” them to foster human flourishing?

I have decided to dedicate more space discussing sex, sexuality and the human body simply because it is time that Reformed theology talked about sex not by default but by design. In spite of sex and sexuality being integral components of our being as they embody our humanness, they remain contentious and touchy subjects. In the process of writing this paper, I was reminded of the importance of the subject of sex, sexuality and the human body after a vibrant young man I have interacted with on a few occasions attempted suicide because his sexual orientation and gender identity were assumed to be against the religio-cultural grain. Matters of sex, sexuality and the human body hinge on life and death, but no life needs to be lost on account of sexuality. The human body, regardless of its form, shape, orientation or identity needs to be celebrated simply because it is created by God and is not synonymous with sin. Calvin, the Reformation frontrunner, basing his argument on the creation and fall of humankind and Paul’s writings, asserts that original sin is a result of disobedience to God’s word through the futile human attempt to be like God. Therefore, “when the word of God is despised, all reverence for Him [sic] is gone. His [sic] majesty cannot be duly honoured among us, nor His [sic] worship maintained in its integrity, unless we hang as it were upon His [sic] lips” (Calvin 2002:154). What constitutes sin therefore is disobedience to God’s word and humankind wanting to assume the place of God, instead of letting God be supreme and worshipping God. Calvin aligns his argument in relation to the goodness of creation unlike the Augustinian tradition which regards sexuality as sin, hence, placing emphasis on the ethics of disciplining the human body. For Calvin, the story of the fall does not denounce desire but the human attempt to be like God. Building on this understanding on the fall of humankind, it can be offered that human sexuality and the human body are not sinful objects for control and policing but subjects for celebration. The non-prescriptive approach towards sexuality and the human body enables a holistic embrace of our humanness unlike locking human sexuality to procreation only, thereby, subscribing to heteronormativity. Can today’s Reformed theology envision what it would mean to worship God together with our different bodies and sexualities?

Issues of sex and sexualities have been a source of divisions in the Church with some expressions maintaining heteronormativity, while others are more embracing of all sexualities. Both trajectories rely on the Bible as a source of authority for their positions. Among some of the texts used to denounce non-normative sexualities are Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 19 which are understood from a dominant narrative perspective, hence rejecting other forms of sexualities in preference for heterosexuality. In our bid to “renew and transform” would we acknowledge that the Bible has many voices and when the dominant narrative is not life affirming

for all human beings, alternative narratives need to be sought. Imagine what alternative narratives of the Genesis 1:27 without a focus on sexual complementarity would look like. What would alternative narratives of Genesis 19 look like? What would the counter narratives of sin be?

The Reformation agenda was partly pioneered out of the quest for a “liberated Bible,” the question then is: How liberated is the Bible in the 21st century in relation to biblical hermeneutics around sex and sexualities? Let us dare to theologically discuss sex and sexualities with non-judgmental attitudes. No matter how contentious sex and sexualities may be portrayed to be, they are part of the 21st-century challenge and need to be addressed. As is typical of Reformed theology that promotes theological and confessional plurality, can we be transgressive enough to imagine possibilities of convergences of life-affirming sexualities at the expense of diversities of sexualities. Encouraging convergences of sexualities will allow for the promotion of life-affirming sexualities and not focusing on what divides sexualities. A convergence of sexualities has the potential to influence our biblical hermeneutics leading to the embracing of all humans on account of their humanness and not sexual orientation. After all, “renew and transform” of Reformed theology prods us to operate outside our comfort zones and speak the “unspeakable.”

Renew and transform: the way forward for Reformed theology

Arguably, Reformed theology has undergone a significant “renew and transform” process in its bid to respond to challenges of particular moments in history. Projections towards the future and reading the theological terrains of our time, the global Reformed family cannot escape the reality of the need to maintain a Reformed identity amidst the rise in the number of Christian expressions and religious beliefs. George Stroup notes that:

when Christians from the Reformed tradition participate in ecumenical conversations with other Christians (and with representatives from other religious traditions), it is important they understand their own theological identity – that is, who they are as Reformed Christians and what it is they bring to ecumenical conversations (2003:257).

In as much as Reformed identity undergoes transformation once it comes into contact with other Christian and religious identities, it is vital to maintain who we are as that is our uniqueness. Furthermore, whilst maintaining our identity, how then do we as Reformed Christians engage in ecumenicity beyond the frontiers of Christianity?

With the rise in global Pentecostal extremism which promotes subjective materialism as a distorted form of spirituality, the challenge for Reformed theology is how to theologically engage such developments and also do mission. “Renew and transform” understanding demands that Reformed theology transcends theologies of prosperity which encourage accumulation of material possessions as a sign of divine blessings at all costs at the expense of sound relations with God and the rest of the created order.

Furthermore, how best can we theologize gender, sex and sexualities in life-affirming ways in the 21st century and beyond? How does our Reformed identity, which promotes unity in diversity at confessional and traditional levels, best translate into unity in diversity in matters of gender, sex and sexualities?

Conclusion

Approaching five hundred years of the Reformation is a moment of reflection on where the Reformed family has come from theologically and where it sees itself going in the years to come. This paper is not a comprehensive guide, neither is it as straightjacket as I take cognizance of the contextual differences that determine the kind of theologies we engage in. However, my hope is that by reading this paper, it challenges you and I to think outside the box, to allow for a breath of fresh air in our theological endeavors.

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- World Communion of Reformed Churches Executive Committee, 2015 Minutes.

Endnotes

- 1 John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*. (Owen. J. Trans & Ed.). (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1980).
- 2 Lilly Phiri and Federico Settler, “From Sexual Diversities to Convergences of Sexualities’: Possibilities within Southern African Protestantism,” *Diaconia*, vol, 6 (2015): 117-132.

“Living God, Renew and Transform US”

Anna Case-Winters

Introduction

When we pray, “Living God, renew and transform us,” how are we meaning the word “us?” This is a word with many dimensions and points of reference. We could mean it very personally, as we as individuals need God’s renewing, transforming work in our own lives. Or we might mean it more communally, especially now as we pray it in the context of our Reformation jubilee. We hope that the God who reformed the church in the 16th century is still at work reforming the church today—renewing and transforming it. Even as we pray with the church in view we remember that God is at work not only in the church, but also in the wider world, embracing the whole of creation. The meaning for “us” embraces an ever widening circle.

Renew and transform the church: “Called to Communion”

The church stands in need of transformation and renewal today. God’s reforming work in the church did not begin or end with the Reformation! As we look back to the Reformation from the standpoint of this jubilee, we want very much to reclaim its insights, to repent its oversights and go forward with the *unfinished business* of the Reformation. Part of that “unfinished business” is in deepening communion particularly with those from whom we have become estranged. Our celebrations of the Reformation must make clear that we are not celebrating the division of the church. This is a good time to shine a light on our good faith efforts toward more visible unity both among the churches of the Reformation and with the Roman Catholic Church. Our interpretation casts a compelling vision of how we together may make visible the unity which—by the grace of God—is already ours in Jesus Christ.

This is a *kairos* moment for the church. This could be a time not only of celebration and commemoration but also of much needed reorientation—a *metanoia* (turning around). There may be a turning toward those from whom we have become estranged not only by that Reformation divide but by all the many divisions since, among the churches of the Reformation. Some say that the Reformation set a precedent for dividing in the face of difference. Now we have “developed a habit of splintering”—even our splinters have splinters! We have too often been content to live apart; complacent with our separation. Though we may hold that the Reformation was necessary; the divisions that came in its wake were tragic.

Luther (and Calvin with him) thought the division in the church was scandalous. Neither aspired to founding a “new church.” Martin Luther, even after his excommunication in 1521, constantly strove for dialogue. He was completely convinced that Rome would come to see the necessity of the reforms, and he cherished a hope that that the Pope would convene a General Council. John Calvin shared Luther’s profound regret over the division of the church. He expressed his deep concern in a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury (Thomas Cranmer). He declared that the division of the church “is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time....Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding.”¹ Calvin’s depiction of Christ’s “dismembered” body is a powerful and compelling image. His discussions of the Lord’s Supper insist that we cannot separate communion with Christ from communion with one another.

We are called to communion. Can God renew and transform us in this calling? Can we possibly be *renewed* by new patterns of reconciliation that will foster a more visible unity? Can we be transformed into new forms of being together—something like what Cardinal Walter Kasper called “a communion of communions?”

We may take hope when we consider examples of advances made just since the last General Council. Ongoing efforts between churches of the Reformation have come to fruition in “*Communion: On Being the Church*” which expressed the foundations and expressions of our communion. The Reformed-Catholic International Dialogue has yielded a new shared statement on “Justification and Sanctification: The Christian Community as an Agent for Justice. The new pattern of “differentiated consensus” has opened the way for affirming what we can affirm together while allowing remaining differences to be articulated rather than obscured. It testifies that differences need not divide but may become occasions for further conversation. Progress toward reconciliation is possible. God is at work renewing and transforming the church, leading us toward true communion.

We are most receptive to this work when we are turned toward Christ, in him we find that we are being “transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Romans 12:2). Perhaps an ingredient in this is having in us “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2; being in our right minds at last!). As we “day by day, more

and more” are conformed to his image we necessarily draw closer to one another in deepened communion. At the same time we are drawn outward in mission and ministry to the wide world beyond the church.

**Renew and transform the human community:
“Committed to Justice”**

Here the “us” begins to broaden out, because it is not only the renewal and transformation of the church that God intends. God’s project is much larger still. So the “us” turns out to be all inclusive. In a world that so readily divides into “us” and “them,” friends and enemies, insider and outsiders, it comes as a revelation that there is no “them”—we are all together “us”—we are all together one human community. In Scripture we read that, “God so loves *the world*” (our God is a “worldly” God). The whole world is included in God’s renewing, transforming work.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray that God’s will may be done on earth. This is a prayer on the lips of every Christian—across the theological spectrum, across all the divides of denomination and across the disagreements of current debates. It has been prayed by Christians for two millennia and is offered up most every Sunday in most every church. But what are we really saying as we speak these words? What way of life is incumbent upon those who pray in this way? For example, we have a habit of privatizing the petitions of this prayer. But there are *no first person pronouns* in this prayer. It is not about “I” and “mine.” It is about “us” and “our.” When we take the “us” and “our” to include the wide circle of the world we unavoidably encounter global implications. A petition for “our” daily bread lays upon us a calling to address the

problem of world hunger. A petition that goes “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” lays upon us a calling to address the global debt crisis. So the prayer goes, petition by powerful petition.

Can we possibly be renewed by new patterns of reconciliation that will foster a more visible unity?

Praying the Lord’s Prayer is a “subversive” activity. When we pray “thy kingdom come,” kingdom is not a place but a new reality, namely the reign of God in our midst. So we are actually praying for the overturning of the present order. We are aligning our hearts and lives with a new reality. We cannot pray for the coming of God’s reign while contradicting it and even resisting it, all at the same time. We cannot pray it without working for a different kind of world—one where justice prevails. Christians pray this prayer by heart—what would it mean to pray it *from the heart*—to begin to live as we pray? A commitment to justice is entailed.

- Where are the places of injustice and suffering in our world today? We contradict ourselves if we pray “thy will be done” and allow ourselves



to “pass by on the other side?” Because we pray this prayer, we cannot refuse to see what is happening in the world around us or fail to interpret the “signs of the times” or close our ears to “the cries from below.” These insights are integral to the Accra confession and its call to justice in the economy and the earth. The readiness of the Reformed representatives gathered at Accra to make such a radical call to justice was heightened by our shared experience of the “slave castles” at Elmina (a personal accounting of this transformative experience is appended to this contribution).²

- Where are we being called to prophetic ministry? Our commitment to justice may call us to bear witness that challenges unjust systems and structures. We have a calling to speak truth to power, and issue a resounding call for change (repentance). If we read the book of Jonah through a liberationist lens³ the story is substantially reframed. Many of us grew up hearing the story as a call to evangelize the nonbelievers. In fact, it may better be read as a call to speak truth to power. Nineveh is the capital of the powerful Assyrian empire, and the Ninevites inhabit the seat of power. Jonah and the Israelites, along with many other people, inhabit the margins. They are destined to fall to the Assyrian armies within a generation of this story’s setting. Jonah turns out to be a story of “an evil and oppressive empire that has achieved wealth, power, and privilege at the expense of the surrounding marginalized communities.”⁴ A rebellious and reluctant prophet from the margins, Jonah is charged to bring them a message of repentance. He is angry when God shows them mercy. We can almost hear him cry, “No justice, no peace!” There are clear socio-political parallels to “empire” as it is manifest today in world powers. How might we, like Jonah call for repentance?

Praying the Lord’s Prayer is a “subversive” activity.

- Are there places where it is *we ourselves* who need to hear the call to repentance? Some of us inhabit centers of power in our contemporary context to which a prophetic witness is being addressed today. Are we able to hear and respond? Is our hearing muffled by the benefits we ourselves receive from oppressive systems? Where are we implicated? Are we lending

credence and support to a system that is not working—or is working only for the privileged and powerful? Where are we co-opted by empire? There is no neutrality. To be neutral is to support the oppressive system.

- Do we believe that our God is one who answers prayer? In the Exodus story we read that God saw the misery of the people, heard their cries, and came to deliver them (Exodus 3:7-8). If our God is one who sees and hears and comes to deliver, then we as people who worship and serve and pray to this God should see, and hear and come to deliver.
- What does it mean to follow the one who taught us to pray the Lord’s Prayer? Jesus’ own ministry brought to the center those who were at the margins (the little, the least, the last, and the lost). The most vulnerable persons seemed to be at the heart of Jesus’ ministry and message. If his is the pattern for our ministry, what would that orientation mean for us? Jon Sobrino has proposed that Christ is to be found precisely among the poor. This is the case even though “we have learned that the world’s poor are practically of no consequence to anyone.”⁵ In every crisis it is they who suffer the most. “The same things happen to the same people all the time.”⁶ Sobrino speaks of them as the “crucified people”—the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized. Their suffering presents an urgent demand that we “take them down from the cross.”⁷

Renew and transform the whole creation: “Called to Communion, Committed to Justice”

Our calling to communion and our commitment to justice must extend to the whole creation—stretching even as wide as the divine embrace. The biblical notion of the *oikos* gives us a metaphor for understanding our true relation. *Oikos*, which means “household,” is the root in all our “eco” words, including both “ecology” and “economy.” “Ecology” comes from *oikos* + *logos* (reason). It signals the “logic” of the household—how it is configured and how it runs. “Economy” comes from *oikos* + *nomos* (law) we might say it refers to the “house rules.” As God’s own household, the creation’s internal logic or rule is the rule of love. Sharing, providing for one another, doing our part in upkeep and care, these are ethics implied in the metaphor of the creation as God’s “household.” It should be noted that creation is not just a “house” for humans; rather the whole creation and all creatures together are together members of God’s “household.” We are a community of life, a communion of love. We seek the well-being of the whole household in our work for the common good. Our life together in this household is to be marked by solidarity, sufficiency and sustainability. Part of the genius of the Accra Confession is in making the connections between

economy and ecology, in committing us to “covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth.”

How wide is the divine embrace? Our Trinitarian vision is a vision of a God who is in, with and for the whole creation.

- The Creator is invested in the natural world: calling it into being and calling it “good.” And God deigns to be revealed in all creation, “everywhere we turn our eyes.” Further, God’s providential care in every time and place extends to the sparrow and the lilies, as it does to us (Matthew 10). And at the last, in the anticipated consummation of all things what is envisioned is a “new creation” where God will be “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). These broad strokes tell a story of God’s all-embracing care for the whole creation.
- Perhaps this reality is even more evident to us when we remember how God, in Jesus Christ, has come “down to earth” and entered into material existence as such. In the incarnation, our God proves to be a “down to earth” God. The writer of Colossians, reflecting upon the incarnation, recognized that the incarnate one is the divine *logos*, in whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together—the very foundation of creation (Colossians 1:15-20). The whole creation then, is a place of grace. God’s love, which is personal and particular in its expression, is cosmic and universal in its scope.
- God’s Spirit, who hovers over the face of the deep at the dawn of creation, is even now the one who renews the face of the ground (Psalm 104:30). Our communion in the Spirit is surely a communion with all things. Here we see God in creation renewing, regenerating and reconciling all things in a loving, life-giving communion of communions.

Conclusion

As we pray, “Living God, renew and transform *us*,” who are we including in that word “*us*?” Surely we are praying for church and especially that its communion may be renewed. Surely, though, we are also praying for all God’s people in the whole wide world—a larger circle of “*us*.” We pray that our human communities will be transformed so that justice will prevail. As the circle of our care continues to grow it comes to embrace the whole “household” of God—the whole creation—as “*us*.” How wide indeed is the divine embrace!

We are a community of life, a communion of love.

Endnotes

- 1 Letter to Cranmer (1552), *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, pt. 4.
- 2 At the meeting of the General Council in 2004 in Accra, Ghana, our hosts took us to see what they call “the slave castles.” These fortresses date back to the days of trading rum and sugar and spices. Under the castles were cargo holds where this cargo would be stored until the ships came. In later years, the Dutch traders found a more profitable trade in human beings. West Africans of the area were hunted down, captured, and imprisoned. They were held in the cargo holds like so much cargo. The great doors were closed and padlocked and sometimes not opened again until the slave ships arrived—a period of up to three months. Food was sent down a chute from a window above. People got sick, but the doors did not open; women gave birth, but the doors did not open; people died, but the doors did not open. It was an unimaginable horror. We were stunned to see these places and hear what had happened there.

The tour continued and we found that just above the cargo hold there was a large open room with big, bright, airy windows—a lovely room. We asked, “What is this place?” They told us this was the place where the Dutch Reformed folk worshipped. We found ourselves asking, how could they worship above the cargo holds? Did they not make the connections between their worship in this high place and what was happening in the low places? Our group was outraged. One person quoted the prophet Amos where God says, “I hate, I despise your feasts, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24). We were appalled. A righteous indignation rippled through our company. How could they not hear the cries from below?

It was then that we had a bit of a revelation. Someone asked the question, “I wonder...where are the places we are not hearing the cries from below?” This was a transformative moment. It was decisive for the work we needed to do. Much work remains, of course, if we would make good on the strong statements of the Accra Confession—transforming them from rhetoric to reality. May God give us ears to hear the cries from below and hearts to care and courage to act.

- 3 For this reinterpretation see Miguel de la Torre, *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Jon Sobrino, *Jesus: The Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).
- 6 Jon Sobrino, *Where is God?* (Maryknoll, NY: 2004).
- 7 Joh Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: 2004).



Confessing Processes

Confessing the Living God – Living Out a Living Faith

Margit Ernst-Habib

How do we recognize the true, Living God in our lives today? How do we recognize and unmask false gods? How do we devote ourselves *concretely* to God's holy will for the life of all creation? To put it another way: How do we live out our Christian faith as the confession of the Living God who creates and fulfils life? Throughout time, Christians have had to ask themselves these questions and find their own contextual answers. Perhaps a small world tour of the Christian faith can show us how we Reformed Christians confess our common *God of life* and strive to live by this confession.

Let us start with the confession that is unequivocally the most influential confession of the twentieth century (along with the Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934) and plays a large role in Reformed Churches on all continents: the Belhar Confession of 1982/84, from the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa. We will look (naturally only briefly) at how Christians confess the Living God and the mission of the church and the faithful, not only in the apartheid context, but also in a situation of widespread injustice (emphasis mine):

We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is *in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged* and that God calls the church to follow in this.

This South African Church, and other Reformed churches worldwide who have since made the confession their own, see the Living God not only as one who has "revealed Godself" as the God of justice and peace, but who has also distinctly and specifically *taken* the side of those who have suffered injustices and hostilities of all kinds. The death-dealing idols, then, are all powers and forces "which would legitimate forms of injustice" and cause the church to avoid taking the side of the Living God "against injustice and with the wronged." In order to live the living faith, the church is challenged to follow the "Messiah of the oppressed and the outcast" and to become "allies of the Risen One," the very similar formulation from the Kappel Creed (*Credo von Kappel*) by the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches in 2008.

Belhar and Kappel are not alone in their understanding of this Living God; such an understanding, which derives in particular from the biblical tradition of the prophets and gospels, plays a central role in many of the current

confessional texts from churches in the Reformed tradition. The Living God is the God of life and is especially protective of those from whom the fullness of life in peace and justice has been denied, a thought that comprises more than a little of the basis for the Accra Confession: *Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*. This text was adopted by the 24th General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (now the World Communion of Reformed Churches) in 2004. In view of the "signs of the times" of economic injustice and environmental destruction, it confesses the living God as the Covenant God of grace and justice:

We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation. God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place [sic]. It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the "least of these" at the centre of the community of life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant.

Continuing our journey, we move to the North American continent, where our gaze is drawn to the abundance of new confessional texts by Reformed churches from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with their desire to confess the Living God anew, contextually and in their own words. One particularly impressive instance is the 2006/7 confession *A Song of Faith*, by the United Church of Canada. In an almost poetic way, this confession attempts to describe and praise the Living God not "for all time, but for *our time*" (emphasis mine) and to sing a "timely and contextual" song of the Church's living faith. The confession thus opens by emphasizing one aspect of our knowledge of God that is very meaningful for many contemporary Reformed confessional texts and at the same time succinctly describes the significance of the Living God for this church of the twenty-first century:

God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description.
Yet,
in love,
the one eternal God seeks relationship.
So God creates the universe

and with it the possibility of being and relating.
God tends the universe,
mending the broken and reconciling the
estranged.
God enlivens the universe,
guiding all things toward harmony with
their Source.
Grateful for God's loving action,
We cannot keep from singing.

The Living God is the God of love: of perfect, divine love. But in this love is also visible the brokenness of human life and human community, a consequence of sin. All are affected by this brokenness of sin, as is the entirety of human life, in all its aspects, and the response of living faith to this is to sing lamentations, show repentance, and follow the calling as the children of the Living God. In this, the Living God not only *is* Perfect Love, but also *acts* as the perfectly loving: God forgives, reconciles, and transforms:

Yet evil does not—cannot—
undermine or overcome the love of God.
God forgives,
and calls all of us to confess our fears and
failings
with honesty and humility.
God reconciles,
and calls us to repent the part we have
played
in damaging our world, ourselves, and each
other.
God transforms,
and calls us to protect the vulnerable,
to pray for deliverance from evil,
to work with God for the healing of the world,
that all might have abundant life.
We sing of grace.

This is the Living God: the God of grace, who forgives, reconciles *and* transforms. The Living God does not remain neutral in the face of evil, but with grace and in just, merciful, transforming actions, God encounters the sin, the brokenness of our communion with God, humanity and creation:

We sing of God the Spirit,
faithful and untameable,
who is creatively and redemptively active in
the world.
The Spirit challenges us to celebrate the holy
not only in what is familiar,
but also in that which seems foreign.
We sing of the Spirit,
who speaks our prayers of deepest longing

and enfolds our concerns and confessions,
transforming us and the world.

The Living God of grace sends God's *Spirit of transformation and calling* into the heart of this world, to us and into us, and we respond in living faith with "God's good news lived out": one of the central statements of the Song of Faith, which runs through the confession like a guiding thread. We respond to good news with an urgent prayer: "Living God, renew and transform us!"

The Living God is the God of life and is especially protective of those from whom the fullness of life in peace and justice has been denied.

But where and how do we recognize the good news of the Living God, and how can we distinguish it from the false promises of death-dealing idols? Reformed confessions of both the present and the past are largely unified here in pointing to the Son of the Living God. The Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934 confesses in its famous First Thesis that (emphasis mine):

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the *one* Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

Reformed churches of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries repeat this confession emphatically. The Uniting Church in Australia confessed in 1971/1992 in their The Basis of Union:

The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. In Jesus Christ "God was reconciling the world to himself" ... Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist. Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to



be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.

Reformed Christians cannot confess the Living God without referring again and again to God’s life-giving, transforming, renewing presence and action in the world and for the world. They consider this the most fundamental cause and reason for every *reformation*, every transformation, every renewal, in all of the spiritual, religious, private, social, political, and economic aspects of their lives, which are *new* lives through the power of the Living God. The work of the Holy Spirit makes this new life a renewed life, the life of the justified and sanctified, as the Confession of Faith of the Toraja Church of Indonesia (1981) confesses:

In the Holy Spirit God is present and works in the midst of the world. He cares for, frees and governs this world in the framework of the realization of the Kingdom of God.

This presence of God is the power which reorganizes, renews and sanctifies us, so that we leave behind the old life and live a new life. The Holy Spirit convinces us through the Word of God that we have been justified in Jesus Christ, so that we are a new creation.

That God is Living, as opposed to all the death-dealing, man-made idols whose power God has already broken, is the actual reason we honour and extol God, that we obey God and love God. The first chapter of the 1976 confession by the Presbyterian Church in the United

States, A Declaration of Faith, is headed “The Living God” and begins with the following sentences:

We believe in one true and living God.
 We acknowledge one God alone,
 whose demands on us are absolute,
 whose help for us is sufficient.
 That One is the Lord,
 whom we worship, serve, and love. ...
We acknowledge no other God.
 We must not set our ultimate reliance on any
 other help.
 We must not yield unconditional obedience to
 any other power.
 We must not love anyone or anything more than
 we love God.
 We praise and enjoy God.
 To worship God is highest joy.
 To serve God is perfect freedom.

These two words—“living God”—are in themselves a confession and an obligation; a claim and a consolation, exacting and comforting. In confessing the Living God, we confess the change in rule that delivers us from the rule of death-dealing powers and forces, renews our lives, and sends us into the world. Finally, these two words are the foundation of all Christian hope: our God is the Living God, who creates life, preserves life, renews life. The final confession that will conclude our reflections on confessing the Living God sings a song of hope to this God. In 1974, the Reformed Church in America confessed in Our Song of Hope:

We sing to our Lord a new song;

We sing in our world a sure Hope:
 Our God loves this world,
 God called it into being,
 God renews it through Jesus Christ,
 God governs it by the Spirit.
 God is the world's true Hope.

To briefly turn back to the questions that began these reflections: How then do we recognize the Living God whom we confess together, and how do we live out our lives as a confession to this God? The quotations from the confessional texts from around the world could perhaps offer some initial suggestions on how to translate the call to prayer, "Living God, renew and transform us!" into our context. Paul called upon the Christians not to conform to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed "by the *renewing of your mind*, that you may discern what is the will of God: what is good, and acceptable, and perfect" (Romans 12:2). If our minds are renewed by our confession to the Living God, then our lives are also to be altered into a "reasonable service" (Romans 12:1) and at the same time into the festive "fullness of life that God has promised," as the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann states in his most recent book, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*. What could such reasonable service, a festive, joyful life of solidarity, look like? Three suggestions:

- (1) If with the Belhar Confession, we confess a Living God who in Christ has taken the side of the destitute, the poor and the wronged, then not only do we see refugees and those seeking protection in Europe (and throughout the world) with different eyes, but we also know that we are called to stand at their side. Our reasonable service to God, then, will not be conformed to the pattern of the world, but to the fullness of life that God in God's covenant has promised not only to us, but also to precisely those who live in exclusion and marginalization and who hope for justice. The Living God transforms us and calls us, as the Canadian Our Song of Faith confesses, to "protect the vulnerable... that all might have abundant life."
- (2) The faithful and untameable Spirit of the Living God, acting creatively and redemptively in the world, "challenges us to celebrate the holy, not only in what is familiar, but also in that which seems foreign" (Our Song of Faith). When we consistently cling to what we already now (whether this is our version of the Christian faith or our understanding of society and culture), when we define ourselves over against "the others" as outsiders, then confessing the Living God might give us new prospects to transform and renew our limited minds. The growing movements in many parts of Europe that encourage and promote an egocentric

nationalism and cultural chauvinism deny the work of the Holy and Living God inherent also in those very things that seem foreign to us. But the Living God will not be tamed or limited by our ideas and attributions. To the contrary, the renewal and transformation of our minds is also a conscious and critical openness, in solidarity, to everyone and everything that initially seems foreign.

- (3) Finally, the confession to the Living God is the Easter Confession to the Living Lord, to the "Risen Crucified One"—a confession to the glory of God (The Basis of Union). Against all the resignation, despair, hopelessness, and desolation of our time, then, it is also the highest joy (the Declaration of Faith from the United States) as a post-Easter worship, and guides us into the freedom of the children of God, into a life of hope and abundance, in and for our world—in spite of everything.

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Race and Reconciliation

Clifton Kirkpatrick

The Confession of Belhar

Echoing through the Belhar Confession is the wonderful vision of Galatians 3:28, *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* From the beginning to the end of the Belhar Confession are affirmations that we are all part of one human family, that we are called to be one church and that we are to stand firmly against any injustice that denies these realities.

The framers of this confession would also remind us that one of the most important ways the church influences the world in accord with the reign of God is to be a living demonstration of what God intends for all humanity. Or, as Belhar puts it, *“Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another.”*

Drawing heavily on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Belhar explores how God has taken the initiative in reconciling us to God and to one another. Much of what is expected of Christians is captured in the notion that *“God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ.”*

It started in a seminary classroom in 1978. Professor Jaap Durand was teaching students at the seminary of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (the “coloured” church) in Cape Town and faced a classroom full of students who were still traumatized by the massacre in Soweto a couple of years earlier and by the climate of hatred, fear and violence that gripped South Africa. He asked these students to write about whether there was a theological case to be made for resistance to the apartheid regime.

They struggled together and came up with a collective statement that would later find expression in the Belhar Confession and much of the witness of Reformed Christians in South Africa and elsewhere against apartheid. They stated, *“Apartheid is grounded in the irreconcilability of people of different racial groups. It is thus against the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is grounded in the doctrine of reconciliation.”*¹

Apartheid (the “state of being apart” in English translation) had long and deep roots in South Africa. For hundreds of years, Dutch and British settlers oppressed and even enslaved the indigenous African populations

and later populations of people of mixed-racial background and of South Asian origins. Apartheid became the law of the land in 1948, and it quickly became a reality not only in civil society but also in the church. The church of the Afrikaner establishment, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), separated out but continued to dominate three “daughter” churches: one for indigenous Africans, one for mixed-race Christians and one for those of Indian origin.

The basic affirmation the seminary students articulated soon became the official position of the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), and it was shared with great passion at the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in the summer of 1982.² I will always remember being at this global gathering of Reformed Churches in Ottawa and feeling the oneness of spirit behind this theology of reconciliation and the strong commitment that apartheid was contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When the two Dutch Reformed Churches refused to repudiate their theological support for apartheid, the World Alliance suspended their membership in the WARC. In a strong way, the global Reformed community had repudiated apartheid and declared itself a community of justice and reconciliation.

Emboldened by the show of global support, the DRMC concluded that God was calling them to make a public confession of their faith in these tumultuous times that would guide their witness and be a gift to the world church. They named a small committee, chaired by the two theologians, Russell Botman and Dirkie Smit. In just a few days, while the synod was still in session, the committee came up with the remarkable document that would become the Belhar Confession. The document was then sent out, in good Reformed fashion, for congregations to study and react to it until the next General Synod meeting that was to be held four years later (in 1986) at the church in the town of Belhar. That synod then adopted the confession and offered it as a gift to South Africa and the world as *“a cry from the heart, as something we are obliged to do for the sake of the gospel in view of the times in which we stand.”*³

While the Belhar Confession was written to be useful to churches in many different contexts it made a huge contribution to the struggle for justice in South Africa and, at the same time, has amazing relevance to a

context like ours in the United States in the twenty-first century. While the confession itself was meant to have universal implications, the drafters also developed an Accompanying Letter, which they asked to always be included with the confession, to make clear why it was written and what might be some of its implications, especially in South Africa.

The Accompanying Letter declares that like all true Reformed confessions, Belhar is written to respond to a situation in which “the gospel is at risk” if the church and good Christian people do not respond in faithfulness to the challenges at hand. In short, the Accompanying Letter makes it clear the Belhar Confession seeks to transform church and society in South Africa; it is also a confession for the church universal and for all times. Quite a claim, but one that has been shown to be true over the years.

The Belhar Confession has made a real difference both in South Africa and in other parts of the world. Modeled on the Barmen Declaration (1934), a confession from the Confessing Church in Germany standing up to Adolf Hitler and his regime, the Belhar Confession helped countless Christians in South Africa and elsewhere see the struggle to end apartheid not only as a political struggle but also as a struggle in which the integrity of the gospel is at stake. It helped create a climate that enabled Nelson Mandela to come out of prison, be

elected president of South Africa and lead that nation not toward retribution but toward genuine reconciliation where all people are valued as children of God.

Among the churches in South Africa, the Belhar Confession was the foundation on which churches that had been torn apart by apartheid were reunited. The best example of such a union, based on the Belhar Confession, was the union of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (the “coloured” church) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (the “black” church) as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.

The Belhar Confession has also inspired Christians in other parts of the world who struggle to overcome oppression in the Spirit of Christ.

Palestinian Christians, who live in a context with walls, passbooks and ethnic homelands, have found great relevance in the Belhar Confession in their struggle for liberation and freedom. African Christians, who have experienced the enslavement of a global economic system that has left millions of Africans in grinding poverty, have found special resonance in the Belhar Confession as they have joined others in the World Communion of Reformed Churches in the Accra Confession, which calls for economic and ecological justice.



Belhar, as is typical of Reformed confessions, begins with an affirmation of the Trinity and closes with a ringing affirmation that “Jesus is Lord.” In between those two solid foundations, the Belhar Confession offers fascinating and helpful insights into the unity, reconciliation, and justice to which Jesus Christ calls the church.

Unity

Belhar makes three major affirmations about unity. First, it states in that somewhat unusual phrase that unity is “both a gift and an obligation.” It is a gift in that unity is God’s intention for the earth, for humanity and for the church, a blessing that God has freely given us. However, it is also an obligation since it is what God expects us to be about.

Second, Belhar states that unity must become visible. There is no focus on an invisible church in Belhar. God wants us to make unity visible so that it can be replicated. Christians are not primarily called to live together in unity for themselves but rather “so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered.”

Third, unity must be active. There is no place in Belhar for Christians to withdraw from the world to be united. Drawing on Ephesians 4, Belhar sees our unity leading us to love one another, to join with one another in community, to share our deepest faith—one Lord, one faith, one baptism—with each other, and to gather together around one table in communion with the Lord. One of the most painful separations in apartheid South Africa was that even Christians of different races were not allowed to gather together to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Finally, this unity leads us out from the gathered community to serve the cause of unity in the world.

At a time in which this position was extremely unpopular, Belhar was forthright in making it clear that neither race, nor class, nor gender, nor sexual orientation, nor theological position, nor disability, nor age were legitimate barriers to exclude people from the church. The Church of Jesus Christ is open and welcoming for all people. It is very clear in Belhar that unity is not just to be experienced with “people like us.” The confession sees diversity of races, backgrounds, languages, cultures and spiritual gifts as given by God so that we can enrich one another. With Belhar, it is hard to imagine a faithful church that is not a multicultural church.

Reconciliation

Central to the whole of Belhar is the sense that “God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation.”

It cuts to the heart of the matter in South Africa when it states, “The credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is

proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity.” This section closes with a strong condemnation of the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour, claiming that any such action is based on false doctrine and ideology and is an affront to a ministry of reconciliation.

Justice

Belhar saves its strongest language for the confession’s focus on justice. The section begins with the affirmation that God is “the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people.” Maybe its strongest statement is the next one: “God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.” This theme of God’s preferential option for the poor has significant roots in the Confession of Belhar. Another strong statement on justice in the confession is “that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.”

We are called to stand where Jesus stood—with the poor, the sick, the woman at the well, the outcasts, the tax collectors and the like. A justice-seeking church is one that focuses its life and ministry on those outside the church and on the “edges” of society and is willing to take the risk to confront “powers and principalities” for the justice of those Jesus loves and favours. We are encouraged to be ardent advocates for justice even when that witness may run afoul of human laws and authorities and may result in punishment and suffering. That was certainly one of the consequences of justice-seeking ministry in South Africa and continues to be the reality in so many parts of the world as Christians take seriously God’s call to justice.

To authorities like those in South Africa, the Belhar Confession served notice that there can be no compromise with the commitment of Christians to unity, justice and reconciliation. To people like us, it should serve notice that unity, justice and reconciliation are foundational values for faithful Christians and the guideposts by which we live our lives.

Endnotes

- 1 Rogers, “The Belhar Confession,” p. 5.
- 2 The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has since become the World Communion of Reformed Churches.
- 3 Accompanying Letter to the Confession of Belhar.

Walking Humbly with God in a Scandalous World

Allan Boesak

It seems to me that the word that was spoken at the 2004 General Council in Accra, Ghana, has been validated over and over again in the past ten years, and that is a tragedy. Our situation today confirms in more ways than we would have liked to see what the Accra Confession has described as a “scandalous world.”

The so-called “recovery from the financial crisis in 2008” has meant that 94% of the financial benefits of that recovery have gone to the 1%. The poor have remained poor and have become even poorer. And here we are not talking about poverty; we are talking about a perpetual process of impoverishment. Fifty million-plus dollars per year go into surplus food that is being dumped, while a billion people go hungry every night. It’s a scandalous world. Accra was right.

There is a United Nations (UN) report that now describes violence against women as a global pandemic. South Africa is now called the “rape capital of the world.” A woman is raped in my country every 6.2 minutes, in the United States (US) every 36 minutes. There is a European Union (EU) report that came out in February 2014 that speaks of violence against women that has reached unprecedented heights. It’s a scandalous world. Accra was right.

This year living in the US I saw many things and this is one of them: In February of 2014, Congress passed a law that cut 8.7 billion dollars from the budget that would have been directed at making sure that there are food stamps available for poor families. This cut affected 14 million people. The reason was that they thought the deficit was too high, and the United States should be more careful in how it spends its money. That was in February 2014, and in October 2014 that same Congress all of a sudden found the money for the war in the Middle East, an estimated 18 to 22 billion dollars per year. It is a scandalous world. Accra was right.

In 1974, German theologian Helmut Gollwitzer wrote something that I will never forget:

Whether Rome won or Wittenberg or Geneva; whether it was to be justification through good works or by faith; whether the Decrees of Dordt or the Statements of the Remonstrants were to become the official church doctrine; whether Cromwell or Charles I would be the victor—for the red, yellow, and black people of the world

this was all irrelevant. This had no bearing whatsoever on their situation... Nothing of all this would stop the capitalistic revolution as the revolution of the white, Christian, Protestant peoples that would spread all over the world to open the era of slavery which even today is not yet ended.

I think it is true, and to paraphrase Gollwitzer, whether Washington or London or Beijing wins; whether it was to be liberal democracy, democratic despotism or any ethnic nationalism; whether Romney or Obama or Putin would be victorious; for the poor and the oppressed and the downtrodden of the Global South, and for the excluded people of the Global North this would be irrelevant. Nothing would stop the new liberal capitalistic revolution as a revolution of the powerful privileged elites in the North, still struggling all over the world to ensure that the era of slavery and destruction is not yet ended. It is a scandalous world. Accra was right.

When we respond to the cries of the poor and oppressed in the world, we are responding to the agony of God, to the outrage of God.

Accra has taught us that the reason why we can write in the language that we did was because we were not simply reading the signs of the times, but we were reading the signs of the times and discerning them through the eyes of the poor, the oppressed and the wounded of the world. In my view the cries of the poor and the oppressed are the cries of God. That means that not only God hears those cries or that God has implanted those cries in the hearts of those who cannot bear injustice, but that God becomes the poor and the oppressed and the downtrodden. So when we respond to the cries of the poor and oppressed in the world, we are responding to the agony of God, to the outrage of God; we are responding to the wounding of God. John

Calvin says, "Every act of injustice, every bit of damage that is done to any of God's children, any hurt inflicted on any of God's children is a wound on God's self. So doing injustice is wounding God. Undoing injustice is healing the wounds of God."¹

But what does that mean for those of us who stand before the Accra Confession as a confession? It means that we will have to learn what it means to walk humbly with God. It is rather an act of learning to read the heart of God as we read the signs of the times, to hear the voice of God in the cries of the victims of our own voracious greed, and in so doing to understand what is to be asked. And that cannot be done but in utter humility before God and before the world that we have hurt and damaged due to our arrogance and greed and in our love of violence.

Walking with God means just what it says, walking with God through Egypt. Seeing through the oppressive and heartless Pharaoh to the pain of the suffering of God's people. Walking with God's people is standing in the midst of slaves counting the blows, bending under the weight, feeling the pain. It is understanding the power of the Pharaoh and the mercilessness of the slave drivers. Walking with God is to come down to rescue, to liberate and to end the violence and the suffering. Walking humbly with God is walking from the brickmaking yards to the palace gates, to the throne telling Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" It is breaking down the wall of resistance between the will of Pharaoh and the longing of the people. Walking with God means being humbled by what you see, by what we are doing for others, by our capacity for harm and destruction in what we are doing to God's creation.

So where does this walking humbly with God take us, if we follow the Accra Confession? I have yet to see a church that is willing to make its hands dirty. We talk too much about the bleeding hands of Christ, and we don't want to even make our hands dirty with ordinary mud, never mind the blood of those who are the victims of our violence.

Accra used prophetic language. It's time now that we ask what it means when the church uses such prophetic language, speaking about "empire" and the "scandalous world" we live in. You go to Pakistan and ask any family who has lost a member to a drone strike and then talk again about "empire." The day when two families came to the United States to testify about drone strikes in their area—one family had lost a grandmother, the other family had lost a baby—only five members of Congress showed up to hear what they had to say. We can vote billions of dollars to buy weapons that destroy the lives of other people, but we cannot bring up the courage to look them in the eye. Five people only came to hear the consequences of their decisions, the consequences of their imperial power.

We talk too much about the bleeding hands of Christ, and we don't want to even make our hands dirty with ordinary mud.

This is what Accra means for us: That we shall not take this lying down, that we shall not be silent when this happens. Those families in Pakistan have a right to count on our solidarity and action because we use prophetic language. If you are not ready to do that, scrap the word "scandalous world" from our Accra Confession.

Faithfulness to the Accra Confession, today, means that we have to ask again the question M.M. Thomas asked in 1961, "Where, in all these people's revolutions around the world, is God at work? And where does the church participate in these movements to discern God's work towards the creation of a new humanity?"

Let me end with the parable Jesus told in the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The

next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25–37)

Helmut Gollwitzer, way back in 1974 France, raised the question about this parable in which he asked, What would happen if the Samaritan came down the road while the robber was still on the scene? Now that question takes the parable out of the "let's do some mercy works," "let's do some charity works."

We have always waited until the robbers were gone, so the dangers no longer existed. And then we would do some quick mercy work before the next batch of robbers came along.

Well, the question is, what do we do if the robber is still on the road? What if we are called not to do charity but to stop the attack? What if we are called to stop the violence? What if we are called to put our bodies on the line so that nobody can get hurt anymore? What if we took our Accra Confession seriously? What if we took justice seriously? What if we simply realized that we have to put our bodies between the powers of empire and their victims? What if we actually believed Jesus is alive and watching us?

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Endnote

- 1 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Wounds of God: Calvin on Social Injustice," *The Reformed Journal*, June 1987, 14-22.

Barmen and Leipzig

Two Stations on the Path of the Evangelical Church in Germany

Wolf Krötke

It is certainly bold to draw a line from the Confessing Synod of 1934 in Barmen to the Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig in 1989. In 1934, the emerging Confessing Church in Germany distanced itself from the “false doctrine” the “German Christians” (*Deutschen Christen*) had used to infiltrate the regional Evangelical (Protestant) churches in Germany with the spirit and above all the practices of National Socialism. In 1989, the popular demonstrations in Leipzig heralded the end of the socialist state in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Most of the demonstrators had no connection to the church. For them, the church only played a role insofar as it was where their protests had begun and concentrated, and it had shaped their demonstrations with the watchword of non-violence.

The Leipzig demonstrations, then, were a political action in which the church was strongly involved. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, however, had no intention of taking a political position on the National Socialist state, whereas in Leipzig, the church was highly politically active in promoting the end of a state that had denied fundamental liberties to its population. The Theological Declaration of Barmen played no role in this. Nevertheless, the Leipzig demonstrations made a feature of a concern about the state that is enshrined in the fifth thesis of the Theological Declaration of Barmen. This thesis argues for a clear differentiation between the task of the state and the task of the church, meaning that the state is not permitted to “become the single and totalitarian order of human life.”

This was precisely the goal of both the National Socialist state and the socialist state, both of which desired to impose their ideology on all areas of society by force. But the two political systems are not to be conflated: the East German state was no killer. Despite its myriad violations of human dignity and human rights, the GDR also proved to eventually renounce violence in the era of the Peaceful Revolution. Its Marxism also had embedded values of European humanism, which morally prevented it from giving orders to shoot the defenceless protesters.

Structurally, however, this state created a problem for the churches in the GDR that was comparable to that of the National Socialist state: it attempted to deploy its power to press the entire society into the spirit of its ideology, “from kindergarten to the nursing home.” Since atheism was part of this ideology as well, the church

particularly suffered under the totalitarian aspirations of the socialist state, whose aim was the “withering away” (*Absterben*) of religion: according to Marxist theory, religion as an orientation “towards heaven” “dies” on its own when a socialist society satisfies all of the people’s earthly needs. As this did not fully take root in the GDR by any stretch of the imagination, it was vigorously helped along by the ideological state. With the atheistic indoctrination of the population and the massive disadvantaging of Christians, this “withering away” was self-enforced. It was also successful. In the forty years of the GDR, the Evangelical Church in East Germany lost three-quarters of its members. While 90% of the population belonged in 1949, by 1989 church members had become a minority in society.

The question of whether one could attest of the state that it carried out its function “by divine appointment [...] of providing for justice and peace” (Barmen V), was part of the path of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR from the beginning: the harassment of not only Christians, but the whole population, was a glaring injustice. The military escalation of the East-West conflict threatened the peace. Nevertheless, a synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany referenced the fifth thesis of the Barmen Declaration to explicitly affirm the legitimacy of the East German state before the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, when the churches in Germany still made up one organizational unit. The synod formulated this precept: “The gospel shifts the state to us under divine merciful appointment, which we know to be valid, independent of the realization of state violence and its political form.”¹ Accordingly, only in isolated cases was resistance to the totalitarian aspirations of the state or criticism of its injustices possible. Those who objected were expected to be prepared to suffer.

The terms by which the church had interpreted the fifth thesis of the Theological Declaration of Barmen gave it no categorical right to deny this sort of state. The kind of declaration the church had made, however, was not at all in accord with Barmen V, which holds that Scripture tells us which duty is allocated to the state “by divine appointment,” but not that the state is “shifted” into divine appointment no matter how it has come into being. The formulation that utilizes the Gospel to “shift” the state has the unmistakable shimmer of the old “orders of creation” theology from the Reformation, apparent in the writ that the self-evidence of “authority”

is already in itself understood as divine “order,” and that any “insurrection” against it is declared to be irreconcilable with God’s law.

This is why a storm of indignation was triggered in the church and the socialist state when Berlin Bishop Otto Dibelius took the view in 1959 that Christians in a state where force dominated the law were not obliged to conscientious obedience.² In terms of theology, Dibelius was actually quite close to Karl Barth, the author of the fifth thesis of Barmen: it can be read from Dibelius’s interpretation of this thesis that a state that deploys its power to disseminate a worldview is to be answered with “an unhesitating ‘No!’”³ It must be clear, Barth writes, “that Christians must not only endure the earthly State, but that they must *will* it, and that they cannot will it as a ‘Pilate’ State, but as a *just* State.”⁴ In the same era, as the so-called *Obrigkeitsstreit* was raging in the GDR, Barth said in his lecture on ethics in Basel: “If power becomes disengaged from the law [...], the result is [...] the demonization of the political,” which ruins the *statism* of the state, as in fascism, National Socialism and Stalinism.⁵ From this it can only be concluded that part of the mission of Christianity, even in the GDR, was to champion a democratic constitutional state, and not a power state that disregards its citizens’ right to liberty.

In 1959, however, the political situation was so poisoned by the East-West conflict that the Berlin bishop became

suspect of escalating Cold War tensions of West against East. But Karl Barth, citing Barmen in this conflict, called for the church to take a “third way,” by which it was incumbent upon the church to freely advocate the message of reconciliation to people who had become enemies of one another. However, he also took into account the possibility that the churches in East Germany would reactivate the archaic concept of “authority” that had not been needed in Barmen, in order to express the church’s fundamental recognition of the GDR state.

Then came the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. By any reasonable estimation, this meant that the church would have to live under the rule of a state that was supported by the vast military power of the Soviet Union indefinitely. From a pragmatic standpoint, it now had no other recourse than to talk to the state. One of the first statements from the conference of Evangelical Church leadership in the GDR in 1963 reiterated that it honoured the GDR’s “authority” (!) as a “divine appointment” which the church prayed for and respected.⁶ Added to the statement, however, was that the church would be acting “in disobedience” if it failed to defend “the truth” or remained silent about abuses of power or were unwilling to obey God over the people.⁷

Fundamentally, this double accentuation of the relationship of the church to the socialist “authority” held



out the prospect of a difficult balancing act: the church's relationship to the "dictatorship of the proletariat," as the East German state referred to itself. On one side: the divinely legitimated honouring of the state. On the other: criticism of the abuse of political power. All in all, this balancing act was always in danger of tilting, first towards affirming the state and then back towards criticizing it.

Two stations on the path of the Evangelical churches in East Germany highlight this particularly well. In 1969, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR was launched. It marked the organizational separation of the East German regional churches from the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). The federation states in its preamble: "With its member churches, the federation affirms the decisions taken by the first Confessional Synod in Barmen. It calls upon the member churches to listen to the testimony of their brothers. It [the federation] helps them in their joint defence against church-destroying heresy."⁸ As Albrecht Schönherr, the first chair of the Federation of the Evangelical Church in the GDR, put it, Barmen was to be understood as an aid to the church in its "search for a path" in the "socialist society of the GDR."⁹ This "search for a path," however, led to the acknowledgement of the formula of the "church within socialism" that the GDR ideologues had concocted in order to take under the state's wing a church that, despite everything, had not withered away. Albrecht Schönherr admitted after the end of the GDR that the approval of this formula had been a mistake.¹⁰ The formula sounded as though the church "within socialism" had been embedded within a friendly home and, accordingly, had also been at home with socialist ideology. What had been meant, however, was that the church had wanted to *support the people* in socialist society and that it had advocated for them as a church. As a student of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Schönherr had envisioned that the church could become an authentic "church for others" by affirming the genuine socialist ideals of a socially just world and promoting these within the church as well.

But the socialist state had continually darkened and distorted these socialist ideals through the manner by which it chose to exert its power. It was therefore inevitable that criticism of this state from church circles would become even louder. Symptomatic of this was the lecture by Heino Falcke at the Synod of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Dresden in 1972. His talk was entitled: "The Deliverance of Christ – The Reason for a Church for Others."¹¹ The GDR prohibited its publication, but copies and transcripts still entered into broad circulation. Here Falcke combined the statement of Barmen II, that Jesus Christ delivers the community to "a free, grateful service to his creatures," with Bonhoeffer's talk about a "church for others": the deliverance of Christ (Barmen II) as the reason for a church for others

(Bonhoeffer). It is this very concentration on the innermost church—the suffering of God in the person of Jesus on the cross—that liberates the church to exist for *the world*, "in mature responsibility." This motivates the church to not settle for any injustice of which the state could be guilty. The lecture therefore called for an "improved socialism" as opposed to the "real existing socialism" cemented by the state.¹² In so doing, Falcke touched the very foundations of this political system.

After all, the "church within socialism" ought never to be allowed an *independent* say in "religion" as far as socialism was concerned. This was regarded as "revisionism," the undermining of the true doctrine of Marxism-Leninism by an "enemy of the class." But these kinds of voices nevertheless had gradual repercussions, becoming louder and louder in the mid-1980s. The congregations generated "peace circles" that questioned East Germany's military options in alliance with the Soviet Union and fiercely criticized the militarization of the society as a whole. Environmental initiatives exposed the unbridled ecological destruction wrought by the East German economy. Philosophy and literature circles scrutinized the intellectual context of Marxism-Leninism. Alternative art found a means of expression in the congregations. The establishment of citizens' movements and even political parties, like the Social Democratic Party (SDP), were prepared and finally completed under the auspices of congregations. The "Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation," which was well received in worldwide Christianity, was a discussion in the GDR of all of the shortcomings of the socialist state's exercise of power, those that could not be reconciled with human rights and a policy in favour of God's creatures.

Of course, many factors were involved in these voices from church circles becoming successively more audible in public. Primary among them is the policy of *perestroika* in the Soviet Union: the opening up of socialist society to its citizens' potential freedom. It is the reason that Soviet tanks like the ones used during the popular uprising of 17 June 1953 were no longer available to the East German leadership to bulldoze their citizens' desire for freedom. Through its tireless advocacy for the rights of the citizens of this state, however, the Evangelical Church had looked after even the most unchurched people and acquired the confidence to be the champion of its own desires for freedom. This is the only way to explain how the Evangelical Church in the GDR could generate the impetus for the Peaceful Revolution not only in Leipzig, but also in Berlin and then in the entire country.

This was the year that the East German leadership wanted to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the GDR in grandiose fashion, even as protest gatherings and demonstrations against its rule were taking place in and

out of the country. The streets in central Berlin were still full of protesters during the anniversary celebration on 7 October 1989 at Berlin's Palace of the Republic. The police went after them with the utmost severity: more than a thousand people were arrested. In other cities too, the police violently dispersed demonstrations. But the demonstration that would sound the death knell for the socialist dictatorship took place in Leipzig two days later, on 9 October 1989. Seventy thousand people set out for the city centre from the *Nikolaikirche* (Church of St. Nicholas) and other churches under the slogans "We are the people" and "No violence." There were fears of a bloodbath. The People's Army and combat groups were standing by to reinforce the huge police presence. The population was called upon to avoid the city centre.

But hundreds of people, their numbers steadily growing, had already gathered inside and in front of the *Nikolaikirche* for the peace prayer. Groups and initiatives advocating a just, free, and environmentally responsible society had been meeting in Leipzig for this peace prayer since the early eighties, including many who wanted to leave the GDR. The prayer for peace had a long and rather conflict-ridden tradition, since it had not always been easy for the congregation to bring the politically motivated demands of such groups and initiatives into harmony with the church's duty to proclaim the gospel. Above all, these prayers for peace and the actions that resulted from them were an annoyance to the state. The state security service and the police had been applying sanctions to the prayers for years, harassing participants and making arrests. To ease the situation in this regard, the church side had forgone the dangerous word "peace" and introduced the language convention of "Monday prayers." But this did not prevent their increasing popularity.

On 9 October 1989, however, the "Monday prayer" faced a crucial decision. Everyone involved was aware of how the Chinese leadership had fired on the demonstrators at Tiananmen Square, to acclaim from the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in Germany. So prominent citizens of the city took the initiative and negotiated an appeal with leading functionaries of the SED district leadership of Leipzig, promising the state party's willingness to dialogue with the demonstrators. The military and police contingent was withdrawn. For the first time in the history of the GDR, the state had declined to exercise its power, but this was the beginning of its end. This beginning was enthusiastically welcomed across the country. After decades of oppression, people were able to breathe again.

This remains a singular event in the history of the Christian churches' dealings with state power—and especially of the German churches' dealings with state power. This church did not opt for oppressive force this time, or justify it by "divine appointment." The church

took the side of the oppressed. It comprehended the "divine appointment" of the state in terms of Barmen V so that it benefited precisely those people who had to suffer under the unlawful use of force. The church aimed for a better state than the socialist one. But it did not do so in the same way as had repeatedly been accomplished historically, namely, with violence, blood and tears. The Peaceful Revolution in East Germany also made it clear that non-violent paths to changing inhuman regimes are no illusion. Not only are they possible, they can indeed come true.

Endnotes

- 1 *Theologische Erklärung der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland in Berlin 1956*, in: *Für Recht und Frieden sorgen. Auftrag der Kirche und Aufgabe des Staates nach Barmen V. Theologisches Votum der Evangelischen Kirche der Union*, Gütersloh 1986, 110. English translation from https://www.ekd.de/english/barmen_theological_declaration.html (accessed 20 March 2016).
- 2 Cf. Otto Dibelius, *Obrigkeit?*, Berlin 1959.
- 3 Karl Barth, *Rechtfertigung und Recht*, ThSt 1, Zollikon-Zürich 1944, 44. English translation from Karl Barth, *Church and State*, G. Ronald Howe, trans., London 1939, 77.
- 4 Barth, *Church and State*, 80.
- 5 Karl Barth, *Das christliche Leben. Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/4, Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß. Vorlesungen 1959-1961*, Karl Barth. *Gesamtausgabe II*, Zürich 1976, 374; 377. Author's translation.
- 6 *Zehn Artikel über Freiheit und Dienst der Kirche*, in: *Für Recht und Frieden sorgen. Auftrag des Staates und Auftrag der Kirche nach Barmen V. Theologisches Votum der Evangelischen Kirche der Union*, Gütersloh 1986, 124.
- 7 Cf. *ibid.*
- 8 Cited in Friedrich Winter, *Die Geltungsformel der Theologischen Erklärung von Barmen in den Ordnungen der Evangelischen Kirchen in DDR. Ein Beitrag zum Dialog um Barmen*, in: Rudolf Schulze/Hartmut Ludwig, (eds), *Barmen 1934-1984. Beiträge zur Diskussion um die Theologische Erklärung von Barmen*, Berlin 1983, 130. Author's translation.
- 9 Albrecht Schönherr, *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung als Hilfe für die Wegsuche in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft in der DDR*, in: Wilhelm Hüffmeier, (ed.), *Das eine Wort Gottes – Botschaft für alle. Vol. 1, Vorträge aus dem Theologischen Ausschuß der Evangelischen Kirche der Union zu Barmen I und VI*, Gütersloh 1994, 381-396. Author's translation.
- 10 Albrecht Schönherr, *...aber die Zeit war nicht verloren. Erinnerungen eines Altbischofs*, Berlin 1993, 374.
- 11 *Abgedruckt in: Zum politischen Auftrag der Gemeinde. Barmen II. Votum des Theologischen Ausschusses der Evangelischen Kirche der Union*, Gütersloh 1974, 213-232. Author's translation.
- 12 *Loc. cit.*, 227.



Context

Empire

Philip Peacock

Word Up!

The Accra Confession played a pivotal role in placing the concept of “Empire” firmly at the centre of ecumenical discourse. The word itself had, for some time, within both secular and theological academics, a certain circulation, and this was particularly true of the post-colonial scholars of both persuasions. Yet there can be no doubt that it was the Accra Confession that was responsible for the prominence of the word and concept within ecumenical circles. It is not insignificant that the proliferation of the concept within the wider ecumenical circles was the substantial contribution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC, now part of the World Communion of Reformed Churches). After all, the communion of Reformed churches have for a long time have been at the forefront of the long road to freedom and justice of the ecumenical movement. Years ago at the Seoul assembly of the WARC the seeds of the justice, peace and integrity of creation movement were sown, which found its fruit in a variety of movements within the churches.

Yet though the idea of Empire received a certain currency since Accra 2004, it was not without controversy both within and outside Reformed circles. Debates, discussions and even unusual alliances developed around the word.¹ Words are theologically significant, theology as an art; science and practice is about words and how they are used. Words cannot be distinguished from the dynamics of power that produce and popularize words. Mary Daly, the radical feminist theologian constantly reminds her readers of the importance of creating new words and giving old words new meanings.²

What’s in a word?

George Orwell in his famous book *1984* describes a dystopian future under a totalitarian government with one of the departments of this government being the department of languages. In a context of double-speak where each department does precisely the opposite of its name³ the department of languages seeks to reduce the number of words by the invention/imposition of “Newspeak,” a created language with the minimal number of words. This practice has two effects, which speak to us of the power of words themselves. On the one hand words enable us to describe our experience. Without the right words we will not be able to articulate the experiences we face. A far deeper power of words, though, is that not only do they enable us to describe our experiences, but words also have the power of

enabling us to understand our experiences. The ability to have words, to have language, then, is the ability to both understand, as well as articulate what is happening around us. It is therefore always in the interest of the powerful to be able to control language. To control language is to be able to control people.⁴

It is in this sense perhaps that we can understand the imperative and the importance of using a word such as Empire. It offers us a means of understanding, articulating and therefore naming the experiences of those who suffer under the present global regime. Even further we can claim that the word Empire offers us a hermeneutical lens to uncover and expose the dynamics of power that we possibly find ourselves in.

Empire in the Bible and theology

Empire is not a new word, neither is it a new concept. The Bible narrative for example comes to us in a complex engagement with Empire. The biblical story is told and written in a context of Empire—Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Roman—and in the intertestamental period we had the Persians and the Greeks, as well. Sometimes the biblical texts seem to have imperial aspirations, at others they seem to seek collaboration with Empire, but at the same time there is also a counter-imperial narrative that is also central to both several parts of the Hebrew Bible, the life and ministry of Jesus and the epistles. Further apocalyptic literature is replete with a counter-imperial theology.

The doctors of the early church similarly had their own ambiguity towards Empire, while Eusebius seems to suggest that Empire lays the ground for the spread of the gospel, Hippolytus on the other hand argues that Empire is anti-church or rather the demonic imitation of the church. The same concerns are to be found in the radical Reformation’s ecclesiological visions of the relationship between the church and state and are perhaps also reflected in Calvin’s distinction between the visible and the invisible church.

The relationship between Christianity and Empire took a peculiar but familiar twist in the contexts of Christendom and in colonialism. Christianity became the justification for imperialism and imperialism used theological language to mask its violence. It is not insignificant that the missionaries and the guns came on the same ships to the colonized world. While again the history of missionary activity around the globe is complex and was

not always complicit with Empire, the interconnections cannot be missed here.

Contextualizing Empire

While it is necessary to set the present discourse on Empire within this larger political and theological background, what is imperative is that we locate the use of the word Empire in the Accra Confession in its contextual setting.

It is important for us to remember that the Accra General Council took place in the turbulent period after the events of 11 September 2001. It is without doubt, and is becoming clearer now, that the events of 11 September fuelled the agenda of the military-industrial complex, if they were not already rooted in its logic. Decades of interventionist policies by both sides of the parties of the Cold War had now thrown up non-state actors with their own global agendas. While the rhetoric of anti-imperialism was and is being used by such actors, they continue to operate within its framework, with the intention of changing the regime but not the structure itself.

On the one hand we had and continue to have the complexities of West Asian politics that are literally fuelled by the political economy of the control of fossil fuel both at the local and the international level. In West Asia itself this has devolved into a serious crisis that has brought a local elite into conflict with the popular masses which has taken identity politics to a horrifically violent level. It has further resulted into a migration crisis of epic proportions on the one hand and the hardening of oppressive structures that affect workers, mostly migrant, in this area.

On the other hand the politics of a fossil fuel-dependent economy has global implications for the region and has had for some time now. Susan George in her article "Manufacturing 'Common Sense'" offers a history of the "long march through the institutions" which has resulted in the logic of the market system becoming unchallenged and even normative.⁵ While there is no doubt that the history of the globalization of neo-liberal economics is long and torrid, its history can be traced to the Chicago School of Economics and perhaps even the School of the Americas and the techniques developed there. Perhaps a more immediate concern for us would be to take into account the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). Initiated by a handful of neo-conservatives in the United States in 1997, the group had developed a clear and definitive vision of the foreign policy of the United States that was clearly informed by notions of Empire. It is no coincidence that this neo-conservative think tank was funded by the arms and oil industries. It was this group that pushed for a war to initiate regime change in Iraq as far back as 1992.⁶

It is not surprising that nine days after the 11th of September the PNAC suggested that even though Iraq may not have been responsible for the attacks, it should be attacked and Saddam Hussein removed. Even more surprising was that Paul Wolfowitz, one of the founding members of the PNAC had as far back as in 1992 recommended the attack on Iraq.⁷

We must remember that the mechanizations of Empire are always dynamic, normalizing oppression and disabling us from thinking beyond its framework.

Therefore, in the years building up to Accra a clear and concerted effort that was intended to solidify the military-industrial-patriarchal complex became visible.⁸ In the aftermath and in the midst of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the need to respond in concrete theological language that was determined to discern the signs of the times was imperative, and Empire provided exactly this language. It offered us the ability to join the dots, to make the connections and most of all to expose the realities of what was wrong with our world while at the same time to discern what was a faith and a faithful response. The Accra Confession offered us language to speak about the same, to name it theologically and to be able to offer a response of faith to the same. It is important that it is called the *Accra Confession* in whatever sense we choose to define the term confession. The idea of confession has embedded in it a faith response.

Thinking of Empire today

Empire offered us a way to name this "coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today. This is constituted by a reality and spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind."⁹ It is also fluid and changing. We must remember that the mechanizations of Empire are always dynamic, normalizing oppression and disabling us from thinking beyond its framework; it hides behind the mask of "common sense" until we are made to believe that there is no alternative. It is not just important that we continually be able to discern the signs of the times, it is imperative that we continually do so. We have to ask the question whether Empire is adequate language today, as

well as clarify what is it that we really mean by Empire? The context is always fluid precisely because the context is continually changing. Indeed the context has changed between the time I have started this paper and will end it.

Two particular points are of significance here, firstly as Foucault reminds us, power in modernity is no longer vested in persons, and we can perhaps also now say nations, but is rather found in the process of administration itself.¹⁰ It is not just that we have new state and non-state actors on the scene now but we have to come to understand that Empire lies beyond both of these; it is a system and a structure that has immersed itself in our thinking, as well as our social and economic structures. Not only have we seen an ascendancy of Russia and China but a collusion between the interests of capital around the globe in a way that Empire is no longer a single entity but the multi-headed hydra of capitalism itself.¹¹ A system more than a State.

Secondly the feature of Imperialism and abusive power that is part of this project is that it continually gets more and more sophisticated; it has the ability to normalize and normativize violence through the anonymity of structures on the one hand and mask its violence by what I would refer to as the banality of fascism on the other. While we are concerned with overt acts of violence, its glorification and a growing culture of overt racism and religious intolerance, which we justifiably should be, what we should also be in recognition of is the slow but sure education of each one of us into being loyal subjects of the market and consumerism, to such an extent that it becomes part of our normal selves.

This is in fact the beauty of the beast (and we will refer to this language in a bit): Capitalism has the ability of conquest and cooption of any and every resistance and contradiction. Capitalism creates alienation, social anxiety and depression but then goes on to sell us an anti-depressant; the market has come to have complete control. Perhaps the most apparent contradiction of capitalism today is the environmental crisis which is wreaking havoc on climatic conditions the world over. Yet capitalism calls us to "buy green" to assuage our collective guilt. Buying carbon miles, cloth bags and fair trade coffee has become the norm. Resistance has been reduced to consumerism. The beast is smarter than we imagine it is.

And we use the language of the beast because it is biblical language. The Bible, particularly apocalyptic literature, continually uses symbolic language to refer to Empire. The beast, the problematic term "whore," etc. The reason perhaps is that the imaginers of apocalyptic literature understood this fuzzy, shifty nature of Empire that it can only be spoken of in symbols rather than in direct language.

And perhaps this is how we should conceive of Empire now, as symbolic language that represents this coming together of abusive power that cruelly destroys the lives and livelihood of many. The beast is a shape shifter, it changes form, it is beautiful in the sense that it charms us into its wiles. Yet it is destructive and evil and stands opposed to the God in whom we express faith. What Leipzig 2017 calls us into is a continual discerning of the signs of the times that we are always conscious of Empire, no matter what form it takes.

What is required of us as a World Communion then is an adequate and radical discernment of the sophistry of the beast so just like Accra we will once more be offered the gift of tongues to be able to coin new words and give new meanings to old words so that we shall be able to name the beast and in naming take the first steps in controlling it.

What is required is a continual commitment to radical discernment, as well as a prophetic spirit in which that discernment is converted into radical direct action.

It is perhaps here that the Reformed theologian Mark Lewis Taylor becomes important for us. In his book *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, he speaks about Empire in terms of a spectres, spectres which he identifies as "American Romanticism and Contractual Liberalism." These two spectres of Empire, Taylor contends, are to be countered through a prophetic spirit. Interestingly in all his analysis, Taylor is insistent that the ideas of spectres, souls and spirits are not transcendent but are in fact material forces. What we require then in our counter to the spectres¹² of Empire is a prophetic spirit.¹³ While Accra gave us the language of discernment, what we need now is the language to counter what is being discerned. It is here that the work of the Globalization Project becomes useful. The Globalization Project has now become famous for its definition of Empire which we have referred to above, interestingly though, the Project saw the definition of Empire as not the fixing of what Empire means but really as a "starting point" for further discussions. The Project sees as the ethical consequences of reflection on the question of Empire the question of seeing, judging and

acting, and this is outlined in its very last chapter. It is here that they speak of what possibly Taylor has referred to as “Prophetic Spirit” in terms of “Prophetic Envisioning,” a process of not merely overcoming the suffering of this world, but of envisioning an alternate one. Prophetic Criticism involves a laborious process of radical criticism of all that causes injustice. Prophetic Story-Telling affords a place for memory and re-membling a broken community. But we cannot stay at the level of narration but must move on to a place of Prophetic Analysis, which requires technical and academic rigor. This should lend itself to Prophetic Policy-making, which is done under the larger umbrella of Prophetic Action Faith, Hope and Love.¹⁴

The radical politics of Accra lay in its ability to discern the signs of the times. What is required is a continual commitment to radical discernment, as well as a prophetic spirit in which that discernment is converted into radical direct action. Accra led to the formation of unlikely alliances, of alternative visions, of theological articulation that sought to grapple with this beast. This is the task which we look forward to at Leipzig. Not just a discernment of the times but to see how we can move that forward towards a world characterized by justice.

Endnotes

- 1 Consider, for instance, the work done between the German and South African Churches, which has been reflected in work *Dreaming a Different World: Globalization and Justice for Humanity and the Earth*. Their common definition of Empire still continues to inform what and how Empire is defined in several usages of the term in Ecumenical documents. Cf. The Letter from Johannesburg.
- 2 Mary Daly *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) p. 340.
- 3 For example the Department of Peace plans for war.
- 4 Colonial Missionary drives towards codifying grammar and translating texts; both biblical and native can also be read within this matrix.
- 5 Susan George, “Manufacturing ‘Common Sense’” in Achin Vanaik ed. *Masks of Empire* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2007) p. 46.
- 6 In the terms of the Statement of Principles of the PNAC itself: “America has a vital role in maintaining peace and security in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. If we shirk our responsibilities, we invite challenges to our fundamental interests. The history of the 20th century should have taught us that it is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats before they become dire. The history of this century should have taught us to embrace the cause of American leadership.” The PNAC, a massively funded and largely influential project has four basic principles. First is the need to increase the military budget. Secondly it sought to strengthen common allies and “challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values.” Thirdly it was to promote political and economic freedom abroad. And lastly the PNAC recommends the need to rise to the challenge of preserving and extending an international regime that is to accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order that would ensure the security and prosperity of American interests. The imperial intentions of the PNAC were not just explicit but were extremely influential.

- 7 Susan George, “Manufacturing ‘Common Sense,’” p. 57.
- 8 The interconnections between war-capitalism and patriarchy were always present but they perhaps became more apparent during the Bush regimes. It was easier to connect the dots and lay open the military-industrial complex. A more detailed analysis, under the rhetoric of what can be referred to as Disaster Capitalism, that is the opening up of markets through natural or human-made (read war) disaster is made by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).
- 9 Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali, *Dreaming a Different World* (The Globalization Project) p. 2.
- 10 Peter Denis, “Power and Subjectivity in Foucault” in *New Left Review*, No. 144, p. 76-77.
- 11 The term is borrowed from the title of the book *Global Capitalism as Hydra*. Cf. Indukuri John Mohan Razu, *Global Capitalism as Hydra: A new look at Market, Money and MNC’s* (New Delhi/Mumbai, ISPCK/BUILD, 2006).
- 12 And though Taylor uses it in the sense of material force we may also sense in his choice of words an attempt to capture something that is fluid and dynamic, which therefore needs an ethereal symbol to be able to speak of it, just like the biblical idea of the beast.
- 13 Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right: Post 9/11 Powers and American Empire* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 2005), p. 96.
- 14 Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann, Charles Amjad-Ali, *Dreaming a Different World* (The Globalization Project) pp. 75-78,

Listen, Listen, God is Calling!

Reflections on Women's Ordination

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The 2017 General Council theme "Living God, renew and transform us" points to the Divine Spirit at work among us. While this General Council marks a historic event, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the theme is not only about a commemoration of the past but about a celebration of the present that is oriented toward the future. God is not static and we are called to discern a call that is dynamic, challenging us to be faithful and prophetic today and in the days to come. The theme also captures our imagination with a vision of the Kingdom of God that is here and now. We imagine a transformed world, a radically different world, even though we recognize the broken and unjust reality in which we live. Women's ordination is one such reality, a reality yearning for fulfillment.

What is at stake?

The issue of women's ordination has been viewed as a church-dividing issue. But is it? Should the issue of women's ordination become the issue that polarizes the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)? Can we be in communion when certain members of the communion are being kept from using their Spirit-gifts to build up the Body of Christ and to share fully in God's mission in the world? Does Scripture restrict the scope and nature of women's ordination on the basis of gender? What does God, the Living God, require of us in this matter?

1. The issue of women's ordination is more than a church doctrine issue.

The ordination of women issue derives from a biblical witness, manifested in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. How Jesus treated women, men and children matters. Equally important is the context. Christian faith does not exist in a vacuum. Our church is in the world. It is not an option for the church to not engage with the world, its brokenness and its wholeness. Our faith is influenced by our own contexts, which are culturally and socially bound. Connecting the biblical witness with the contexts means that as social conditions change, the weight and meaning of particular passages may change as well. It is critical to know this as a limitation but at the same time a reference point. The following story from the United Church of Canada may be a good example of how women's ordination issue should be looked at biblically and contextually:

Case study: The United Church of Canada's Story

Lydia Gruchy was the first ordained woman in the United Church of Canada in 1936. She was also the first woman student studying theology at the Presbyterian Theological College (now St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon) in 1920. Upon her graduation in 1923 she was sent to work with children in Verigin, Saskatchewan. Soon she was leading worship services there and in 1926 Kamsack Presbytery requested her ordination. When a motion was made at the 1926 General Council (the first Council after the church union as the United Church of Canada) to grant this request, the "meeting exploded."

The Christian social context of the 1920s through the 1950s strongly opposed the idea of women working in the public sphere. Contextually speaking, the idea of ordaining women was difficult to accept in Canada at that time, probably other places as well. It was virtually impossible to imagine women as equals to men in public positions. In this context it is possible to understand why the General Council of 1926 "exploded" with this issue, and it took 10 years for Gruchy to be ordained. Even in the decades following her ordination it was a long and difficult road for women (especially married women) to be ordained. However, there is another factor that needs to be named here. It is the context of the post-World War I and II. Not only did Canadians lose so many young men, but they also witnessed the old family order fall apart. As a matter of fact, Lydia's brother, who was a very promising theology student, was killed during World War I. Wartime saw many women taking jobs that used to belong to men in public places. These losses and the great societal changes that occurred through this period made the call for the ordination of women something that could be imagined.

Let us go back to 1926. The 1926 General Council constituted a Committee on the Ordination of Women with instructions to report to the 1928 General Council. This report came in 1928 and offered biblical references of some New Testament passages concerning women and public leadership in the church. It asserted that according to the gospels, Jesus considered men and women to be spiritually equal. It then quoted the writings of Paul. The report cited 1 Corinthians 2:5 and Galatians 3:26-28 to show how women and men exercised leadership as equals in the early church. It also noted passages attributed to Paul which restricted the

ministries women might exercise in the church, such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-36. By reading these different passages together, the report undermined the binding authority that these latter passages would have if cited alone. Here is an instance of different passages from Scripture being used to help determine the relative weight or meaning of a passage in question.

Biblically speaking, two insights can be gleaned from this report. One is the ambiguity of Scripture, which sometimes contains contradicting views. Paul spoke of women as equals to his fellow workers and leaders in one place. But in another place and to a different audience he downplayed women's roles in the church. While the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is not to be taken literally because of its ambiguity and ambivalence. The second insight is that we as interpreters of the Bible have evangelical freedom to counterbalance the weight of passages that have come to be seen as going against the underlying tenor of biblical revelation on such particular issues as women's ordination. Evangelical freedom is the freedom Christians have to go beyond established practices or understandings of the faith in response to the gospel. The general orientation of teachings by Jesus and that of Paul in Galatians 3 were invoked to relativize the explicit teachings of some biblical passages (e.g., Ephesians 5:21-33; 1 Timothy 2:9-15) as no longer binding in detail.

The United Church of Canada's story shows how we can learn from our foremothers and forefathers of faith who took a biblically sound position that led to a prophetic, counter-cultural call to justice, a call to the inclusion of women in ordained ministry. The North American culture of the 1920s through 1950s opposed the public role of women, such as in leadership in churches. Yet, this particular church heeded a biblical call against the pervasive reading of its own cultural context by discerning God's voice in the Bible. The life and the ministry of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate was the guiding principle of how they as a community of faith felt they must address the issue of women's ordination.

2. The issue of women's ordination is more than an issue of tradition.

It is no longer sufficient to approve or oppose women's ordination simply on the grounds that the church has done so or has not in the past. Rather Christians must engage in theological anthropology, a study of what it means to be human in relation to God. The 2017 General Council confesses belief in God as a living God, and not a God in the past only. Its theme directly points at "us," with whom God made a covenant and to whom God called. It is "us" who are to be renewed and transformed both as individual human beings and as a community. To point to "us" is also to recognize that our human relationship is broken. The Divine Spirit grieved because of our rebellion

(Isaiah 63:10) and Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) because we disobeyed God by allowing ourselves to treat women to be unequal to men. Where does this inequality come from? Is there any theological justification that women are subordinate to men?

To respond to this, we must go back to the beginning of how humans were created in the Bible. The creation story in Genesis has two different, seemingly opposite, versions. Genesis 1 clearly tells that God created both female and male in the image of God, pointing to the equality of men and women. Chapter 2 has a different account. God created a man first, and then a woman was created out of this man's ribs. The latter account has served to justify the inferiority of women, placing women in a secondary place relative to men.

While these two accounts seem contradictory this is not the case when one examines the biblical meanings of the following two words—that is, *ezer* (helper) and *adam* (humanity). The word *ezer* comes when God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a *helper* as his partner" (Genesis 2:18). Biblical scholars have sought out other uses of *ezer* through the Bible. The word appears 29 times in the Hebrew Scriptures and it mostly appears when referring to God. In the case of God being our helper (i.e., Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7; Psalm 20:2, 33:20), this word *ezer* is used. Thus the first woman as the helper does not imply her subordination to men or a secondary status as far as the biblical witness is concerned. Furthermore, right after the helper is mentioned God called the woman a "partner," that is an equal companion to the man.

The other important word is *adam*, which is often taken for the name of the first man in the Bible. However, in Genesis 1:26-27, *adam* refers to the human person or humanity of both female and male. It may be argued that a singular noun that represents both female and male genders emphasizes human unity in diversity. Male and female are created together for partnership with one another and with God as part of God's desire to bless the whole world.

In short, a theological anthropology out of both the Genesis 1 and 2 affirms relationality. As human beings we are related to one another and to God. We cannot live alone. God saw this at the very beginning. Not only do we need God but also we need each other. As much as we try to deceive ourselves that we are independent, capable of doing things alone, we know from the bottom of our heart that we must depend on each other. As much as the world, our economic and social system, endorses hierarchy and inequality as the status quo, we as people of faith know that that is not God's way. We know from the bottom of our heart that we cannot live fully until the unequal relationships are broken down and mended.

3. To affirm women's ordination is to declare the priesthood of all believers not only with words but also with actions.

Not ordaining women in public ministry may be status quo, and for some, it may look even natural, following the long-standing tradition in church history. But it is not what God requires of us. We must listen, listen to God calling us to repent and to renew so that we would be transformed, taking a prophetic step, beholding a world that is constituted with equality and justice. From the very beginning, when God created "us," both female and male in the image of God, God said, "it was very good."

There are many stories of women in the leadership roles throughout the history of the church so it is ironic that women's ordination is still strongly opposed in many churches. One may imagine an undercurrent of living water moving beneath the frozen ice above. Though the reality looks fixed and static, this frozen water is bound to melt and move with the current below eventually. There are plenty of exemplary Christian women whose public leadership in church and society bears witness to the spiritual gifts with which God endowed them. Churches in our communion have confirmed that the Holy Spirit is indeed calling women to ordained ministries and through them equipping the members of the church to be light and salt of the earth.

In the early church, before it succumbed to the lure of power, there were many amazing women leaders. Here are a few examples. St. Perpetua was educated and was a teacher for the church. She is the author of the earliest extant extra-biblical teaching material. When she was 21 years old, like many other martyrs of her day, she was held in prison in the Coliseum and eventually murdered in 203.*

By the medieval era, the only official role available to women in the church was that of a nun. Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) devoted her life entirely to know the mind of Christ. She recorded 16 experiential visions from God, which were about the creation and fall, the crucifixion of Christ and grace. Her writings are the first of any English woman.* The church historian Jane Douglas claims that Christine de Pisan, a lay woman who lived around the turn of the 15th century, set off a centuries-long literary debate about the nature of women in which she challenged the theologians' assumptions.

The Reformation took place. Marie Dentiere in the early years of the Reformation in Geneva took up this debate, insisting that the liberating Gospel called on women to speak and write, and she did, according to Douglas. Katherine Zell (1497-1562) met and married Mathew Zell, a Catholic priest, and together carried on ministry in partnership with one another. The Catholic Church

ex-communicated him for his marriage, but the Lutheran church took him in. When their marriage began to hurt their ministry, Katherine wrote and published a well-argued biblical defense for their marriage. Later it was commended by Martin Luther.*

In North America Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874), though married to Walter Palmer, pledged her life to the promotion of holiness. In 1835, Phoebe and her sister established a women's prayer meeting, and in two years this became the start of a renewal that would eventually impact all of American Methodism. She was well known for her exhortations and preaching. Her influence was advanced by her writings. She critiqued the church by remarking that it had buried women's gifts in a Potter's Field. This field is referenced in Matthew 27:1-10, pointing to a land to bury foreigners purchased with the money Judas received for the betrayal of Jesus.*

Many missionaries went out all over the world in the 19th century. While their attitude was often colonial and oppressive, some of their evangelization work was illuminating and liberating in terms of women's education. Jeong-Shin Yang was one beneficiary from this education. Born in northern Korea, she became blind at age six due to illness. She was invited to go to a school for the blind that missionaries from North America had built. Despite her physical disability, she was enabled through this school to go on to study medicine in Japan and theology in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s. She became the first ordained woman in the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea in 1977.

It is nothing surprising to note that the church lost its vitality when it lost sight of the equality of women and men. Once the church was established and institutionalized, it exercised its power like an imperial state. As the church became the dominant power in society, the role of women was pushed to the margin. Attempts were made to silence women to the point that they were murdered such as in the witch hunts of the inquisition. But as we have listed above, there were strong and faithful women who the church failed to silence. These women form a cloud of faithful witnesses, watching over "us," who were called by God. This same God, this Living God, is calling us to open a new chapter of the WCRC history.

*Source taken from Shannon Nicole Smythe, *Women in Ministry*.

A Biblical Vision of Gender Justice

A Bible Study of Numbers 27

Ofelia M. Ortega

For our reflection, I have chosen a text from a book, which I had no end of trouble to “digest.” As a matter of fact, it almost brought me to a sort of reading indigestion, as it were. The book of Numbers is undoubtedly not very attractive and certainly little known. Origenes admitted this as he wrote: “The reading of the Gospels, the Letters or the Psalms is assumed with joy by everybody, and all stick to them with pleasure; people are happy to find in them some remedy to their illness. However, if they turn to read the book of Numbers ... many will believe that it is all useless, that it will not provide a remedy for their weakness, nor salvation for their souls; they will reject it and put it aside as food that is difficult to digest.”

Nevertheless, as Katherine Doob Sakenfeld stated, “the book of Numbers, even though it is not well known today by comparison to Genesis or Exodus, helped to provide basic religious guidance for the ancient Israelite community.”

This book seems to intend to make women “invisible.” The Levite and priesthood leadership in worship is really surprising. They “surround” the holy places as guardians, closing constantly any “space” to the participation of women. And yet women appear now and then as bright flashes of revelation in nine out of the 36 chapters in the book, showing to us that the male priesthood barrier, marked by women’s exclusion, can always be surpassed by women who are capable of adding “courage” to the faith they profess. To put it in the words of Ivone Gebara: “the patriarchal wall is tall and impenetrable, but we are like small ants smart in opening holes into it to get to the other side.”

And this is precisely what is done by the daughters of Zelophehad—Mahlah, Noah, Milkah, Hoglah and Tirzah—when they went to talk with Moses personally and publicly (Numbers 27). *It is then no wonder that the message of these five women reaches us today, like the glowing light of a candle, which, small though it may be, dissipates the surrounding darkness.*

I: These women have their names

We—women—lose our names along the way, first legally, then emotionally. We no longer know who we are. We lose dignity and self-esteem by not being called our names. These women (although “the daughters of”) have proper names, which entitles them to establish a

claim to get back the inheritance they seemed to have lost; the inheritance of the father who died and had no sons. These women were really smart. They advocated that the name of their father should not be lost by losing the land, which should have corresponded to him if he had had sons. Their decision was a clever one, and it is for this reason that their names appeared in the Scriptures.

We—women—lose our names along the way, first legally, then emotionally.

II: The voice of women

In claiming for their right to receive their heritage, these women challenge male authority and the power. Their voices must be heard. They have the courage to face Moses, the priest Eleazar, the leaders and all the congregation (Numbers 27:2). *They stood before*, so it is stated in the text. They did not bow, they did not kneel down in humiliation. They were *standing up* before them “by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation,” evidently by the entrance of the sacred enclosure. Here, in the void space, in the midst of the camp, and close to the presence-chamber of God, they spoke. But today we need to break the spell of silence which covers women’s lives, as Mahlah, Noah, Milkah, Hoglah and Tirzah did.

III: Let us go into the sacred space

And they spoke at *the entrance* of the sacred space! The sacred space has also been banned for us. One of the most precious experiences in my life was a visit I paid to the Orthodox Church in Romania. At the time of the Eucharist, by the altar, the group that was conducting the worship service went around in circles with the sacrament while the choir performed. The women in the congregation then moved to the “sacred area” intended for men, and there they threw blouses, kerchiefs and pieces of cloth, so that the sacrament (which was in the hands of the priests) could exert a beneficial influence upon these cloth items. This meant invading the sacred space, but the invasion was beautiful, and

blessed by God. In the Old Testament, God dwelled in the OPEN SPACE. Jews did not conceive the presence of God materially, that is, as corporeal. The theological concept of OPEN SPACE was central to the prophetic announcement of the Jewish people. God dwelled in the "OPEN SPACE" between the two wings of the cherubs, almost on the verge of touching (infinitesimally separated from each other).

We Christian people have minimized the value of this concept of the presence of God in a particular OPEN SPACE, and not only have we "closed the space" but have rendered the sacred corporeal. We have enclosed it in a body. We have rendered it material. Such a conception of the sacred, besides becoming material as a temple-object, sacrament, Eucharist, priest, bishop, pope, is placed in the exterior, outside ourselves. That is the reason why it is a sacrilege to profane or treat with disrespect a sacred person or object. The point is not what they are in themselves but what they represent.

In contrast with this, to mistreat, manipulate (profane) the dignity of any human being is not seen as something grave. Sometimes the death penalty does not give rise to any condemnation, and yet to profane a sacred person or object does. We have to affirm that "every life is sacred." It is necessary to *open up the spaces*. We need to break down the "sacred and the chastity belts" which have been imposed upon us, rendering our bodies impure, regardless of the fact that God made them pure and holy, in God's own image and likeness.

IV: God makes a choice in favour of women (verse 5)

This decision is an act of justice, "women are right." The matter is discussed: Victory! The demand has been listened and accepted. Grave injustices may derive from adhering to cultural and social traditions, without judging the consequence that such traditions or laws may have for the life of our women. In this narrative we see a God of equity showing God's disregard for mere legal rights. Any law that contradicts the law of love to God and love to the neighbour is doomed in the very making of it, and it is a blessing that such laws get broken and ultimately destroyed by the energy of an expanding life. And this is exactly what happens in our story. "Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our fathers' brothers... Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying: the daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance of their father on them" (4-7).

What are the rules or norms which regulate and govern the lives of our women and girls in church and in society? Shall we have the courage to analyze them, eliminate them or change them in order to enrich the life of our communities? Let me tell you a little story about Evangelina Corona Cadena from the Presbyterian Church of Mexico. In this church a woman became a Federal Deputy of the Congress of the Mexican Union. Her participation in the political life of the country was brilliant. Shortly after this, she was elected elder of her



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local church. The presbytery voted against the decision of this congregation, since the Presbyterian Church in Mexico does not ordain women pastors or elders. Unbelievable! Is it not? A woman can become a member of congress in Mexico but not elder of her own local church. I was glad to learn that the women in Mexico published a book with a photo of Evangelina's face on the front cover, showing this woman to the ecclesiastic world that rejected her. But God is on our side, and the Bible story in Numbers 27 reaffirms this fact.

V: The action of these women became a rule or norm of the right for the Jewish people

It was the promulgation of a new legislation! Yes! We as women can bring about changes in the laws that mean oppression and exclusion for us! Changes such as the long-term imprisonment of rapists and the laws against family violence which are in practice today in many countries. Women are creating new areas of action that did not exist previously in social and economic policies. And we have to continue fighting in that direction, just as the daughters of Zalophehad did! This Bible text is a proof that an act in favour of justice will have consequences for men and women.

I love this narrative, because the five sisters, besides defending a just law are ready to take the property of the land, which implies breaking with their domestic role, to take over the responsibility of the farm. So they receive a position of privilege but at the same time take over a great responsibility. The law founded on their case must help to make the women of Israel intellectually and morally vigorous. Property is only of value as it is a means to the enlargement and fortifying of people's life. Nevertheless, we could find the control of the women's heritage in chapter 36:1-13. This means that we always need to continue the struggle for life alternatives. The decision on behalf of the daughters of Zelophehad was of importance for what it implied rather than for what it actually gave. The original qualification that justified heirship of land was ability to use resources of the inheritance and take part in all national duties. The decision in this case marks the beginning of another

conception—that of the personal development of women. The claim of the daughters of Zelophehad was allowed, with the result that they found themselves called to the cultivation of mind and life in a manner that would not otherwise have been open to them.

There is no doubt: they are from now on, NEW WOMEN!

Together
through a love
that surrounds everything
in an eternal sunrise.
No more child deliveries in the exile,
no more dreams of captivity,
no more condemnations on the shoulders.
Now is the time for freedom
which dances joyfully in the daylight...
freedom in the voice and in the eyes,
freedom where to walk and what to sing.
Newness of life!
They accompany one another,
and applaud,
and carry out their struggle
at the rhythm of their Encounter.

Rebeca Montemayor L.



Resources for Worship

An Affirmation of Unity

We
share one faith,
have one calling,
are of one soul and one mind;
have one God and Father,
are filled with one Spirit,
are baptized with one baptism,
eat of one bread and drink of one cup,
confess one Name,
are obedient to one Lord,
work for one cause,
and share one hope.

Together we
come to know the height and the breadth and the depth
of the love of Christ;
are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity;
know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling
the law of Christ
that we need one another and up build one another,
admonishing and comforting one another;
that we suffer with one another for the sake of
righteousness.

Together we pray; together we serve God in this world.

(Nolan Palsma)

An Affirmation of Faith in the Context of Economic Injustice

(Based on the Accra Confession)

We do not believe in exploitation of the earth for the
sake of economic profit
But we believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of
heaven and earth.

We do not believe in the obscene accumulation of power
But we believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.

We do not believe in the increasing distance between
those who make the decisions and those who suffer
them
But we believe that God became human and was
conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of
the Virgin Mary.

We refuse to give our consent to militarization and the
weapons of mass destruction

For we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered under
Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

We do not believe that the forces of death will prevail
But we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, his ascension
and that he is seated at the right hand of the father.

We do not believe that the world is at the mercy of the
powerful
But we believe that Jesus will come again to judge the
living and the dead.

We do not believe in the ideology of market,
consumerism or materialism
But we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of life

We do not believe in hierarchy, prejudice and
discrimination
But we believe in the holy catholic Church, the
communion of saints,

We do not believe in revenge or the annihilation of the
oppressor
But we believe in the forgiveness of sins,

We do not believe that death is the end
But we believe in the resurrection of the body and the
life everlasting. Amen.

(from *Broken for You*)

Meditation: They didn't believe me

(In light of Luke 4:14-30)

In the power of the Spirit,
after going through my own struggles
and after accepting that it was the time,
I went out to the streets and entered the houses
of those who had made space for me,
and I went to the towns
and I preached in their holy places,
announcing with joy
that the time for change had arrived,
real change,
change which transforms lives
and brings them into fulfillment
based on the grace of God.
A change for the dignity of every person,
towards justice that takes care of the smallest,
towards truth that is told from below,
towards equal opportunities,

towards a society that includes every human being valued as son or daughter of God. At first they smiled and applauded and received the good news with enthusiasm...

But then...then they began to insult me, they threatened me and even tried to kill me. Why? What offended them?

"I bring good news for the poor," I told them.
"No, we don't want to hear you," they replied.
"A more just economic system is necessary, that promotes equality and doesn't benefit barely a few, in which human beings are prioritized above money," I proposed to them.
However, they preferred to live under the tyrant's yoke.
"I want the blind to see."
"Here no one is blind and no one needs you," they responded.
"Give me the opportunity to embrace those who suffer, to give a little bit of hope to the sad, to encourage the fallen and the weary..."
"And who do you think you are, bastard son of Joseph?"
"Is it that you truly do not understand?
I come to open the doors to the prisons that contain you, to release you from the heavy bars of fear, from the cells of mediocrity, from the dungeons (or black holes) of 'every man for himself'..."
"No one needs you, Jesus. Go take your ideology somewhere else."
"Today the scripture is being fulfilled in front of you..."
I tried to explain to them. "It is not ideology, it is the word of God!"

But no one wanted to listen. The hearing of the most powerful, the apathy of the religious who merely comply and the complicit fear of many succeeded...
And putting the good news under my arm, I shook off my sandals, and had to leave that town.

(Gerardo Oberman, translated by Katie Fiegenbaum.)

Prayers

Confession

Let's talk together to our Lord as we seek help to live as his faithful followers in the world today.

God blesses those who realize their need for him, for the kingdom of heaven is given to them.

But we have been proud in spirit, inflated with pride in our own self-sufficiency. We have forgotten how needy we are.

God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

But we have not mourned over our personal, cultural or national sins. Instead we have insulated ourselves from those around us, from their pain, needs, loneliness, injustice and suffering. We have even hardened ourselves so that we are unaware that our own personal and national lives cause grief to the Lord.

God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will be their inheritance.

But we have valued toughness over gentleness. We have too often chosen to be concerned with ourselves rather than with our brothers and sisters and neighbours next door or around the world. Like the prodigal son, we want to satisfy ourselves rather than our Father.

God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full.

But we have hungered after the pleasures, prestige, and possessions of this temporal world. Like Esau, we have despised our birthright by choosing to satisfy our immediate desires.

God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

But we have often presided as harsh judges over the lives of others. We have been quick to place blame on anything or anyone but ourselves. We have avoided obligations to care for or to help people suffering injustice in our own land or in other lands.

God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

But we have defiled our hearts with idols of our own choosing, doubting that God will keep God's Word and God's promises. We continually compromise the truth by trying to find meaning and security in our jobs, our friends, our pleasures, our projects—but not in God.

God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

But we are often at war with one another, personally and nationally. In a thousand little ways we demand

to be catered to. We seldom esteem others as more important than ourselves. We often create strife by demanding our way rather than by walking in God's spirit.

God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

But we have too often retreated from the disapproval of others. We've sought to please the world rather than risk offending the status quo or rocking the boat of what is accepted by the majority. We regard rejection for righteousness as a burden to be borne, rather than an honor to be humbly received.

Lord, please show us your mercy.

Lord, have mercy upon us in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

(from *Broken for You*)

For Justice

Lord our God, you have revealed yourself as One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;
In a world that looks away from injustice,
You cast your eyes on the destitute, the poor, and the wronged;
You have called us to follow you,
to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed
and to proclaim the time of your blessing.
Be present with your church, Lord, as we respond to your call.
Open our eyes to the downtrodden.
Fill us with compassion for the plight of the alien, the refugee, and the immigrant.
Lead us into ministries that help orphans and widows.
Give us courage to block the paths of the ungodly who exploit the poor.
Set us free from pious exercises that prevent us from the true worship you choose:
Sharing bread with the hungry,
Sharing homes with the homeless,
Sharing clothes with the naked,
Sharing hearts with our own kin.
So may your justice roll down like waters, your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
Lead our footsteps to stand with the poor, that we might stand with you.
Have mercy, O God:
Scatter the proud,
Put down the mighty,
Lift up the lowly,

Fill up the hungry,
And send the rich away empty-handed.
Our Father, etc. ...

(Paul G. Janssen)

Thanksgiving and Intercession

Lord of heaven and earth, we have begun to listen to your Holy Spirit, calling us to unity in Christ:

We thank you, O Lord.

May we be more attentive to your inspiration and more ready to listen to one another.

We ask you, O Lord.

We have begun to dialogue with one another, celebrating our common faith and seeking to understand our differences:

We thank you, O Lord.

May the patient work of pastors, theologians and Christian people continue to progress and bear lasting fruit:

We ask you, O Lord.

For the agreements reached on matters of theology and pastoral life:

We thank you, O Lord.

That we may be able to face and resolve the difficult issues which still divide us:

We ask you, O Lord.

For common witness in Christ which we have given in times of crisis, for justice, peace and humanitarian aid:

We thank you, O Lord.

That our unity may one day become such that the whole world may believe in the Christ you have sent:

We ask you, O Lord.

For progress in inter-religious dialogue throughout the world:

We thank you, O Lord.

That engaged in this dialogue, we may sense the urgency of full communion among Christians as a witness to other believers:

We ask you, O Lord.

For all living witnesses of personal communion in the love of Creator, Christ and Comforter.

We thank you, O Lord.

May their family life contribute to the Christian joy of the members of their churches:

We ask you, O Lord.

May the hope of one day sharing the same table and drinking from the same cup, increase our desire to do your will so as to receive from you this gift:

We ask you, O Lord.

We raise before you the concerns raised before us this day.

(Nolan Palsma)

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Hymn

Da berühren sich Himmel und Erde Earth and heaven are meeting, rejoicing

Thomas Laubach

Christoph Lehmann

1. Wo Men - schen sich ver - ges - sen, die We - ge ver - las - sen
1. When we for - get our old way, our need for our own way,
Refrain
und neu be - gin - nen, ganz neu, da be - rüh - ren sich
start fresh, start o - ver, start new, Earth and Heav - en are
Him - mel und Er - de, dass Frie - den wer - de un - ter uns,
meet - ing, re - joic - ing, sing - ing that Peace has found a home.
da be - rüh - ren sich Him - mel und Er - de, dass
Earth and Heav - en are meet - ing, re - joic - ing, for
Frie - den wer - de un - ter uns.
Peace has found a home with us.

2. Wo Menschen sich verschenken,
die Liebe bedenken
und neu beginnen, ganz neu,
Refrain

3. Wo Menschen sich verbünden,
den Hass überwinden
und neu beginnen, ganz neu,
Refrain

2. When we remember loving,
the way of self-giving,
start fresh, start over, start new,
Earth and Heaven are meeting, rejoicing,
singing that Peace has found a home.
Earth and Heaven are meeting, rejoicing,
for Peace has found a home with us.

3. When once we feared a stranger,
but now love a neighbour,
start fresh, start over, start new,
Earth and Heaven are meeting, rejoicing,
singing that Peace has found a home.
Earth and Heaven are meeting, rejoicing,
for Peace has found a home with us.

Music: Christoph Lehmann. Text: Thomas Laubach © 1989 (vd-Verlag Düsseldorf, Germany).
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Every seven years hundreds of people—women and men, lay and clergy—come from churches around the world to form a General Council. Gathered together they discern God's will through Scripture to set the World Communion of Reformed Churches' direction and elect new leadership.

The 2017 General Council's theme—**Living God, renew and transform us**—not only reflects the WCRC's heritage but centres the Council around the God of Life and challenges participants to renew themselves and the church so that the world can be transformed.

This booklet explores the many aspects of the theme through Bible studies, theological, confessional and contextual essays and a sampling of worship resources. It is intended to be used both individually and collectively, by both those planning to attend the Council, as well as by all members of the Communion.

You are invited to share this booklet and the resources contained within it freely—in whatever language is best suited for you. If you quote this material elsewhere, please give credit to the respective author(s) and to the World Communion of Reformed Churches. For additional copies, as well as information on the General Council, please visit wrc.ch/gc2017.



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