

# REFORMED WORLD

VOLUME 68, NO. 1



World Communion  
of Reformed Churches



**World Communion  
of Reformed Churches**

The Catholic Presbyterian (1879-1883), The Quarterly Register (1886-1936), The Presbyterian Register (1937-1948), The Presbyterian World (1949-1955), The Reformed and Presbyterian World (1956-1970), Reformed World (1971-)  
Volume 68 (1) • ISSN 0034-3056

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**REFORMED WORLD** is published by the World Communion of Reformed Churches, [www.wcrc.ch](http://www.wcrc.ch).

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## Introduction

Every several years, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, in association with Lombard, Odier & Cie, Bankers of Geneva, Switzerland, offers a prize for a theological essay in memory of the late Georges Lombard, associate of the bank.

The aim of the essay contest is to encourage theological work in the tradition of Reformed thought that responds to challenges of our time, bringing together elements of faith and theology in dialogue with justice and peace issues and mission in the world—all central themes of Reformed witness.

The last round of the competition was specifically intended to challenge young theologians no older than age 30 to write on any aspect of the WCRC's 2017 General Council theme: *Living God, renew and transform us*. Qualifying essays were to illustrate a familiarity with the Reformed tradition and theology and to demonstrate both theological imagination and a willingness to relate theology to modern-day challenges to witness and mission in the church and the world.

The essays were judged by a panel of Reformed theologians, and those determined to be the top three are presented in this edition of *Reformed World* (unfortunately delayed from last year).

Jordan Redding, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and a doctoral student from Dunedin, New Zealand, was named the winner, and he also received an all-expense paid trip to attend the General Council.

His essay, titled "Living God, Renew and Transform Us: Awakening to God's Reality," related to the notion of transformative prayer. The piece was based on a passage from John 3 where Nicodemus approaches Christ and acknowledges his divinity. Jesus responds by commanding Nicodemus to be born again.

"Nicodemus came to Jesus on his own terms," said Redding, "and Christ turned things around. Prayer is not about us coming to God alone, but rather about God's awakening us to transformation and renewal." Redding based his essay in part on his doctoral research subject, the 19th-century Swiss Protestant theologian Eduard Thurneysen.



The other prize winners were South African theologian Nadia Marais for "Refugees, Strangers, Aliens? Reformation as a Cry for Life" and Indian theologian Rangang William Anāl for "The Wounded Mother Earth and Her Suffering Children."

Also in this issue are two essays from more seasoned theologians: "A New Reformation: God of the Rainbow and the Transformation of Christianity" by Yoon-Jae Chang, originally presented as a keynote address to an assembly of the Northeast Asia Area Council; and "The Church in Cuba: A Historical and Theological Approach" by Reinerio Arce-Valentín.

We trust you will appreciate all aspects of this edition of *Reformed World* as we resume our regular publication schedule, even as we continue to align the journal more closely to the WCRC's strategic goals.

## Living God, Renew and Transform Us:

### Awakening to God's Reality

#### *In conversation with Eduard Thurneysen*

By Jordan Redding

The night is for dreaming. In the obvious sense, most people sleep and dream at night. But there is also something about the night that lends itself to dream-like conversation. The night, preferably accompanied by good company, food, and drink, invites table talk about life and death, humanity and God. The great mysteries of human existence seem somehow closer when the work and chaos of the day have come to an end. It is at *night* that Nicodemus visits Jesus. He comes to begin a conversation with Jesus, this Rabbi who has come from God. This Jesus is not only wise, but possibly God-sent. In Nicodemus' reckoning, it is worth a stealthy, evening conversation to obtain his opinion on many thorny religious or philosophical issues. They will dream of God together, and if they disagree, then they will part ways like ships in the night, happy to have had the conversation, but free to carry on as they were. But Jesus refuses to converse on Nicodemus' terms. The conversation takes an entirely different turn and suddenly Nicodemus finds himself "at the point where he had to fight for his life."<sup>1</sup>

This is the scene set by Eduard Thurneysen at the opening of a sermon on John 3:1-10. Nicodemus wants to approach Jesus on his own terms, with his own questions, and when the time is right for him. But, before he has barely begun, Jesus cuts off Nicodemus' presuppositions, well intentioned though they might have been. Instead he confronts Nicodemus with the terrifying limits of his own existence: "...unless one is *born* again..." Jesus says. It is a statement of rebirth, of a new existence from above, of renewal, of transformation from old to new.

Nicodemus and Jesus' conversation can, in a sense, be heard as a prayer. Or if not a prayer, then it is a conversation that should inform a proper *understanding* of prayer. In conversation with Thurneysen and in particular his sermon<sup>2</sup> on John 3:1-10, I will explore what it means to pray, "Living God, renew and transform us." Specifically it is (1) a prayer of the church, which, like Nicodemus, stands in needs of renewal and transformation. Unable to renew or transform itself, this prayer

1 Eduard Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," in *Come, Holy Spirit*, translated by George W. Richards, Elmer G. Homrighausen, and Karl J. Ernst (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1934).

2 Delivered between 1920 and 1924 while Thurneysen was ministering at Bruggen.



is (2) necessarily enabled by the Spirit who unites us with Christ. It is in Christ that we are shown what it means to be truly human, fully awake and obedient to the reality of God. But if the reality of God is the foundation not only of the church, but of all creation, then the prayer is cosmic and missional in scope. In Christ, the prayer for renewal and transformation is (3) a vicarious prayer on behalf of all the world in the hope of God's eternity becoming fully present by the Spirit.

When one prays, "Living God, renew and transform us," what is the posture that they assume? It is possible to come to God in prayer as Nicodemus came to Jesus. Such a posture leaves the one praying essentially unchanged. They come on their own terms, desiring to ask God for advice or help to solve their problems. Perhaps this is the only posture one is capable of assuming out of their own initiative. Certainly this is the case for Nicodemus. But only for Nicodemus? If Thurneysen in his sermon is to be taken seriously, then there is something of Nicodemus in each of us,<sup>3</sup> indeed in all humanity. The proper posture of prayer, however, is one that is given in the address of Christ. It is *given* upon the realisation that God in Christ is not to be grasped but *encountered*. In the encounter, the creation enters through Christ into relationship with its Creator and must confront the very limits of its own existence.

To pray, "Living God, renew and transform us" is to be awakened to *God's* reality. By encountering the living God in relationship, one is professing that God is not an object of investigation which can be empirically studied. Jesus cuts off Nicodemus' inquiry and establishes the ground on which the conversation is to continue. Neither is God a mere product of human existence, a projection of what humanity could or should be. Rather God is *living*: a *Thou* who can be addressed; a *Thou* who can initiate and respond; a *Thou* who can renew and transform. But further still, to pray to this living God with the supplication to *renew* and *transform* presupposes that God's life, God's reality, is greater than that of humanity. God has power to renew and transform human life. Human existence depends on God, who is the supreme reality. Conceived in this way, the relationship between God and humanity is subverted. It is not human experience that is the foundation of reality while God is the object of our dreaming and wishful thinking. Rather *God* is the true foundation of reality. Human life, lived in denial or forgetfulness of this reality, is comparable to dreaming. Prayer can therefore be said to be an awakening by the Spirit (or in the context of the Nicodemus conversation: *being born of the Spirit*) to the reality of God.

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<sup>3</sup> "We are like him perhaps far more than we think." Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 103.

## Eduard Thurneysen, Swiss Reformed Pastor

The epistemological conviction, that true reality and therefore true knowledge begins and ends in God and not with humanity, undergirds Eduard Thurneysen's early theology of prayer. Though relatively unknown in the English-speaking world, Thurneysen is a helpful conversation partner in exploring what it means to pray, "Living God, renew and transform us." If he is known at all, it is most commonly in relation to Karl Barth, with whom he developed his dialectical theology. His comparative anonymity is understandable: he was not nearly as prolific as Barth, nor was he nearly as confrontational and antagonistic in his disposition. He was first and foremost a pastor of souls who felt uncomfortable in the academy, preferring instead to focus his energy on the tasks of preaching and pastoral care. Even his eventual professorship at Basel University was specially created so he could continue his role as minister of Basel Cathedral. From an early stage the friendship between Thurneysen and Barth was very close. Since they befriended one another as young ordinands, Thurneysen's personal and theological development became closely intertwined with Barth's.<sup>4</sup> But Barth himself said, on the occasion of Thurneysen's 70th birthday, that it is simply untrue that he was the contributor and Thurneysen the receiver.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Thurneysen introduced Barth to the likes of Christoph Blumhardt, Hermann Kutter, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, all of whom had a significant influence on Barth's early development. Furthermore, in the early years, while Barth busied himself with Paul's letter to the Romans, Thurneysen focussed on John's gospel and came close to producing his own commentary. It is precisely due to his different theological emphases and to his pastoral disposition and focus that Thurneysen has so much to offer to the discussion of what it means to pray, "Living God, renew and transform us." He is a preacher. He is a pastor of souls. For Thurneysen, more than for Barth, renewal and transformation is an explicitly *pastoral* task concerned with the lives and anxieties of ordinary, everyday people.

Eduard Thurneysen was a Reformed Swiss pastor who, in the years during and following World War I, ministered in the small town of Leutwil<sup>6</sup> and then Bruggen,

4 Sönke Lorberg-Fehring and Rudolf Bohren, *Seen Again: Biography and Theology of the Great Pastor until 1927* (Marburg: Tectum, 2006), 16.

5 *Worship Service: Eduard Thurneysen's 70th Birthday, July 10, 1958* (Basel: Protestant Publishing House, Zollikon, 1958), 13.

6 Leutwil was a neighbouring town of Safenwil, where Barth first ministered. The two towns were only a few hours' walk apart, making it easy for Barth and Thurneysen to maintain regular correspondence.



a suburb of St. Gallen. It was the war that drove Barth and Thurneysen to develop their theology of *Krisis*. Over time they rejected most of their theological education, which they found simply inadequate to deal with the harsh realities of parish ministry in the years during and following the war. While Switzerland remained neutral, it was by no means spared hardship. In villages like Leutwil, where Thurneysen ministered, men were called to defend the border while the women and children were left to get by with little state assistance.<sup>7</sup> Thurneysen himself, while exempted from service, saw his wife suffer from malnutrition. On the day World War I came to an end, Karl Barth wrote to his friend:

“One stands astonished, does he not, and can only state how the face of the world changes visibly: on *this* side of things. But the *other* side: the meaning and content, the actual trend of it all, the movements in the spiritual realm that now take place, the doors of God that now open or close, the progress or standstill in the *eleutheria thes doxes ton teknon tou theou?*”<sup>8</sup>

In their eyes, the self-sought “freedom and glory of the children of God” had ground to a cataclysmic halt. Barth and Thurneysen were utterly disillusioned with “this amiable lagoon of pietism, crossed with faith in the progress of culture, again crossed with naturalistic romanticism, and once more crossed with a pinch of idealism.”<sup>9</sup> Yet for the two young pastors, any halt of human progress opened the door for true progress to enter in: that is, the freedom and glory of the children of God comes *from* God and returns *to* God. *God*, not human effort, is the true ground for renewal and transformation.

## The “Nicodemean” Church

The church is like Nicodemus far more than it would think. So says Thurneysen: Nicodemus “stood as a Jew with his Judaism about where we stand with our Christianity.”<sup>10</sup> With Nicodemean eyes, Jesus is a religious leader, a moral leader. More than this, Jesus ranks, by comparison, higher than any other religious or moral leader. He sets the bar. Nicodemus pushes even further: Jesus comes *from* God. Like a moth to a flame, he eagerly hovers expecting answers, anticipating some sort of enlightenment, some sort of intellectual ascent. But the terms are still set by Nicodemus. The presuppositions upon which the conversation

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7 *Biography and Theology*, 19.

8 Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence 1914-1925*, translated by James D. Smart (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 45.

9 *Ibid.*, 159.

10 Thurneysen, “Jesus and Nicodemus,” 103.

rests are still his. The limits of the inquiry are framed by his intentions (noble or otherwise). Most prayer is a kind of “Nicodemean” conversation: There’s no reason to doubt its sincerity, or its genuine faith in Christ, or its eager desire for divine answers. Such prayer is commendable in a sense—as is Nicodemus. But it is not the ground for true renewal and transformation because the starting point is still human inquiry, the *old* human looking up. It is a kind of prayer that assumes the questions are right, if only God would provide the answers. It is a kind of prayer that leaves the human unchanged, an equal partner in the relationship.

But Jesus cuts off his words. Suddenly Nicodemus “finds himself face to face with something new and incomprehensible, something that he cannot fathom.”<sup>11</sup> He is silenced. He is stopped in his tracks. For Thurneysen, this is the only legitimate starting point. True knowledge comes from the *revelation* of God, not from the *elevation* of human reason or experience. Revelation implies two things: firstly, that that which is revealed is not previously known by the receiver of that revelation—it comes from *outside*; secondly, that that which is revealed is given or made known by the revealer—it goes *inside*. Put differently, God is wholly transcendent and hidden beyond human comprehensibility. But God chooses not to remain transcendent and hidden. Instead God desires to enter into our world of human knowing and existence: the Wholly Other, the Object of revelation *becomes* Subject.<sup>12</sup> As such, if the church is truly to proclaim God’s revelation, it is first and foremost to be a *listening* church. It is to be a church that *knows* its words are utterly inadequate to convey the mysteries of God; and yet, as God’s revelation is given by the Spirit, it dares to speak anyway (albeit with fear and trembling!).

If the human spirit is to be “born of the Spirit” then all that is flesh—“our religious opinions, views, feelings, experiences”<sup>13</sup>—must die. So for Nicodemus, and indeed the church, prayer is no mere conversation but involves an existential crisis. One is confronted with the true origin and goal of life beyond the limits of human existence. In another sermon of a similar era to the Jesus and Nicodemus sermon, Thurneysen develops this idea with slightly different language. He

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11 *Ibid.*, 103.

12 “The hidden, otherworldly ‘object’ has to become the ‘subject’ in order to reach the communication, which communicates itself.” Eduard Thurneysen, “Scripture and Revelation,” *The Word of God and the Church: Essays and Lectures* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Publishing House, 1971), 37.

13 Thurneysen, “Jesus and Nicodemus,” 110.



talks about revelation as eternity “set into our hearts”<sup>14</sup> through the Holy Spirit. In his sermon on eternity and time, Thurneysen reflects: “We all have come out of a time in which men have tried, of their own might, to put eternity into their hearts. But today, through grievous sacrifices, we have been taught, more clearly than ever, that all these attempts have utterly failed.”<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, “eternity” is humanity’s desire for a better time, a time which humanity sets in its own heart and seeks to attain through progress and development and glory. But the horrors of the War shattered such idealism and revealed, for Thurneysen, that this “eternity” was in fact just any other human era characterised by sin and death. True eternity, on the other hand, comes from God and condemns our human efforts. The dawn of eternity in time is not a human *dream*, but the *reality* of God shaking humanity awake. God, whom we encounter in prayer, is the eternal and living God, whose reality is the source of all existence in every time and place.

The prayer “Living God, renew and transform us,” can be prayed in two different ways. Firstly, it is possible to be prayed as a “Nicodemean” prayer: that is, the church petitions God to help it in its own dreams for renewal and transformation. God in Christ is an equal partner with the church. While the church can go *some* of the way to renewing and transforming itself and society, it needs divine assistance to cover the shortfall. At times the shortfall may be monumental, at other times not so big, but the request for renewal and transformation remains exactly that: a humanly initiated *request*. It is the human projection of eternity that we ask God to realise, not eternity itself.

But it can be prayed another way. It can be prayed in and through the Holy Spirit, who sets God’s eternity into our hearts. In this prayer, even as the church prays, “renew and transform us,” all human scheming and dreaming falls away. Like Jesus’ interjection of Nicodemus’ inquiry, it is a prayer that brings the one praying to the very edge of their existence: It is a prayer concerned with rebirth from above. Precisely in that moment of awakening to the limits of human existence, the word of resurrection<sup>16</sup> bursts forth. Prayed in this way, the church is not only awakened to God’s reality, but in the awakening it finds the true source of its own existence. The church has no right, no *claim*, to *exist*, except for

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14 Thurneysen, “The New Time,” in *Come, Holy Spirit*, 45.

15 *Ibid.*, 36.

16 In his essay “The Task of Preaching,” Thurneysen argues preaching is justified paradoxically under the same premise. Only when all human ideas and knowledge die away can the “Resurrection word” be heard. Eduard Thurneysen, “The Task of Preaching,” *The Word of God and the Church: Essays and Lectures* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Publishing House, 1971), 97.

the word of resurrection, the word of God's eternal life, heard and witnessed in its midst.

## United with Christ in the Power of the Spirit

As a praying community to whom the word of resurrection is addressed, the church becomes a concrete sign and witness to God's Kingdom coming on earth. It does not exist in its own right, but only insofar as it is continually *addressed by the living God*, continually gathered by the Spirit, and, in hearing, continually enabled to respond in turn: "Living God, renew and transform us." Yet paradoxically and necessarily, the church is also a community that *fails* to hear: *paradoxically*, because, in failing to hear, it actually ceases to be the church. It exists in denial of the very source of its existence; *necessarily*, because, the church stands as Nicodemus stands—perhaps well-intentioned, eagerly seeking Christ, yet not able, this side of eternity, to fully comprehend the mysteries of God. The church exists in tension *between the times*, at once elected to witness to God while also constrained by the utter inadequacy of human language and action to fulfill such a task. As such, the church exists in and through the Holy Spirit in every time and place as a praying community *shaped* and *sustained* by the Christ-event. It is a community of *forgiven sinners*. Justification is therefore not merely a past event, which recedes into the mists of time, from which the church climbs up to the giddy heights of human progress and glory. Rather the church is continually justified as it is conformed by the Spirit, *even* in its deafness and dumbness, to the life and ministry of Christ. Consequently, for Thurneysen, Nicodemus and the "Nicodemean" church is conceived of in *negative* terms within a strong dialectic between God and humanity. The task of preaching, for instance, is to break down (*Abbau*) rather than to build up (*Aufbau*):<sup>17</sup> *Only* when Nicodemus is silenced can he hear. *Only* in crucifixion can there be the possibility of resurrection. Therefore, in sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, only the *death* (or *Abbau*) of all human words, ambition, and efforts, leads to the word of new life, the word of resurrection, being heard.

But even in hearing the word of resurrection, the church does not grasp or comprehend it. Rather *in the Spirit*, the resurrected Christ is *encountered* and, by grace, *witnessed* to. Therefore to pray in the Spirit to the living God is to pray "from above," from outside, from eternity. It is *not* to pray from a position of human initiative or comprehensibility. Says Thurneysen in his sermon: "We stand before God when we say 'Spirit'; we are and remain cast upon him, upon

<sup>17</sup> "The death of everything human is the theme of the sermon. That's why you do not build in the sermon, but deconstruct." *Ibid.*, 103.



him alone. We live by grace. He gives us what we cannot give ourselves—access to him.”<sup>18</sup> God is encountered in God’s mystery and incomprehensibility. Any attempt to reduce or contain God’s enigma is to replace God with a human projection of God. So in Thurneysen’s sermon:

“Jesus saw Nicodemus standing, as it were, under a room that kept him from looking toward heaven. He could not show him heaven at all, as long as he was under the roof.... As long as one stands under the roof, one only dreams of God. But Jesus came to drag men out of all their dreaming of religious ideas, their feelings, and conversations and to put them before the supreme reality—God.”<sup>19</sup>

During the same period as the delivery of this sermon, Thurneysen published a short book on the Russian novelist, Dostoevsky. In it he draws on the artist El Greco to make a similar point.<sup>20</sup> El Greco’s paintings famously appear distorted, almost like the artist had defective vision. But not so, argues Thurneysen. Rather the relationship of all the lines point to a single vanishing point *outside* the frame. The piece appears distorted because it has its original viewpoint and perspective *beyond* the limits of the painting. The perspective from beyond which reveals the ugliness of the human condition is the very thing that witnesses to God who fixes a faithful gaze upon us. If this is the case, then the purpose of prayer is precisely *not* to conceive of God in limiting human terms and images—even with the best of pastoral intentions. To do so is to bring God “into the frame” or to “place a roof between heaven and earth.” The purpose of prayer is to witness to the mystery and the freedom of a God who *lives* and addresses humanity! Anything less is “only dreaming of God.”

Prayer is therefore the act of being taught to see with new eyes. As one prays, the Spirit enables a *New Seeing*.<sup>21</sup> But what is it that one sees anew? For Thurneysen, the one praying is being taught to see God’s Kingdom, God’s eternity, dawning in space and time. This is genuine renewal because one is awakening from one’s dream state and seeing the world as it truly is: the world as it is claimed by the victory of Christ; the world being redeemed in the Spirit; “the triviality and banality of *this* life... latent with the secret of a wholly *other*

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18 Thurneysen, *Jesus and Nicodemus*, 110.

19 *Ibid.*, 109.

20 Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 55.

21 “The new seeing,” “Scripture and Revelation,” *The Word of God and the Church*, 37.

life!"<sup>22</sup> In his short book on Dostoevsky, Thurneysen notes that Dostoevsky's novels don't have a happily-ever-after. Transformation is not materially realised. Society remains corrupt. Many of the characters continue in hardship. Yet in the "triviality and banality" of life, the word of resurrection and new life is heard. Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, for example, has a conversion moment and suddenly learns to see the world with new eyes. On the one hand nothing has changed. He is still a murderer. The authorities still hunt him. On the other hand *everything* has changed: "the questionability of everything human has become greater, and now with truly shattering power the problem of all being cries out for its final solution in God. That is the result."<sup>23</sup> In a similar way, Thurneysen says in his sermon on Jesus and Nicodemus: "We must awaken to God. We must have eyes for God's concerns, then our concerns will shrink before us."<sup>24</sup> In doing so, human concerns, hardships, and sins do not come to end. Raskolnikov must still face the consequences of his actions. To believe otherwise would be to deny the tension of a world living in forgetfulness of God; a world still under the sway of sin and death. Yet in prayer, one is learning to see the world as it truly is; as a world crying out for its final solution in God.

Prayer is therefore a subversive activity through which genuine transformation can and does take place. In encountering Jesus in prayer, one may prefer, like Nicodemus, to remain unchanged. One may never move beyond praying to Jesus as a conversation partner. But when one prays in the Spirit, one is praying from above—in and with the resurrected Christ. As such, the church praying in the Spirit is a church sharing in the life and ministry of Christ. This is where Thurneysen ends his sermon. Not with Nicodemus. Nor with Jesus as a mere example. But the resurrected Christ, who is himself the Way. A person who prays:

"...is the new man [woman] who knows that he [she] comes to [God] because he [she] comes from [God]. That is the mystery of the life of Jesus...He was Himself the new man [woman] born of God and lived wholly by God's incomprehensible strength.... With Him there is no room for religious dreams; no ways are prescribed how we, without God, can come to God. But He said of Himself: 'I am the Way!'"<sup>25</sup>

22 Eduard Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, translated by Keith Crim (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 15.

23 *Ibid.*, 43.

24 Thurneysen, "Jesus and Nicodemus," 110.

25 *Ibid.*, 111.



Here then there is a strong link between renewal and transformation. The Spirit renews the one praying so that they are “born from above.” They are being taught to see the world from the perspective of eternity. In being born *from* above, they are born *into* the life of Christ. They are transformed and conformed to him in space and time. In this sense, the church as a praying community *becomes* the presence of the resurrected and eternal Christ in the world.

## **A Vicarious Prayer on Behalf of the World**

As the church prays in the Spirit for renewal and transformation, it becomes a sign of God’s eternity dawning in time. But the church does not just pray for its own sake. As God’s eternity lays claim over every time and every place, the prayer for renewal and transformation is *cosmic* in scope. When praying, “Living God, renew and transform *us*,” it is not a prayer restricted to the bounds of the church. But in the hope of God’s day breaking over all creation, it is a vicarious “*us*” on behalf of the world.

In his sermon, Thurneysen uses the imagery of dreaming and waking. God is the ground of reality and, by the Spirit, humanity is awakened to that reality. Prayer is the act of continually being awakened from the “dreaming” of humanity’s selfish existence to the supreme reality of God. The temptation with this language is that prayer loses its missional directedness or its cosmic scope. For instance, does prayer conceived in this way promote a kind of escapism, i.e., that our world as one experiences it is merely a dream or shadow of what is real in God, and therefore one need not take the world seriously? On the contrary, for Thurneysen, if God’s reality is true reality, then this is the proper ground for genuine renewal and transformation of the world to take place. Thurneysen does not trivialise Nicodemus’ intentions, nor does he trivialise the ethical questions of other “serious souls” disturbed by what they experience in the world. “We must take these questions seriously,”<sup>26</sup> he says. Ethical engagement with the world is a necessary endeavour. Working for the realisation of God’s kingdom is central to Christian discipleship. But without the proper starting point, it is ultimately a fruitless venture: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Thurneysen ends his sermon on Jesus and Nicodemus with the person and work of Christ. Christ is the true human who lives in perfect obedience to and dependence on God.<sup>27</sup> In prayer one does not just meet Christ as a conversation

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>27</sup> Jesus “lived wholly by God’s incomprehensible strength.” Ibid., 111.

partner, but prays *in* and *through* him. The praying community is transformed by the Spirit and conformed to the life of Christ. Prayer therefore involves a transformation of the one praying. But prayer is also the starting point for the transformation of the world. In praying, the community is not only conformed to the *life* of Christ but also to the ongoing *ministry* of Christ in the world. For Thurneysen, the resurrected Christ stands victorious in eternity over every time and place. In a Pentecost sermon, he likens time to a circle revolving around a central point: the Resurrection. Yes, time is dynamic and linear in a sense. But in relation to Christ who inaugurates God's eternity, it is as if all time stands still; every moment is equidistant from him.<sup>28</sup> God's victory in Christ is certain. Like a gravitational pull all of creation is latent with this secret of God's eternal victory. In this sense, Christ's ministry in the world has forever been established. The church's role in sharing in Christ's ministry, is to draw attention to the true reality, to be a sign or symbol of Christ's resurrected life in the world.

If this is the case, it means a number of things: Firstly, that the church's actions really do matter, not as the source of transformation itself, but as concrete *signs* of reconciliation and redemption—a world awakening to its ultimate destination in God. With regard to the renewal of both the church and the world, upheaval or revolution lead “like all other human anticipations of the kingdom of God, merely to a premature destruction of the eschatological tension that gives life its meaning.”<sup>29</sup> That doesn't mean resistance against tyranny and oppression is not necessary. But it does mean that one should be under no illusion at the ability of humankind to save itself from sin and death. One's words and deeds have *eternal significance*, but it must be stressed, not as a kind of bridge-building from the side of humanity. The “bridge” has already been built in Jesus Christ. Rather one's words and deeds have eternal significance as moments of God's resurrected and eternal life breaking into space and time. Hearing God in prayer is the proper starting point for such transformation, otherwise the church is merely acting like Nicodemus out of its own questions and agenda.

Secondly it means that, though the church's actions do matter, they do not of themselves establish God's kingdom on earth. God's kingdom is already eternally established in Jesus Christ. Christ stands victorious! The church's role is to witness to this reality in space and time, to remind the world of this reality which it forgets or lives in denial of, and to direct the world in hope to its final solution in God. This understanding emerges out of Thurneysen and

28 Eduard Thurneysen, “Come, Creator Spirit,” in *Come, Holy Spirit*, 173.

29 Thurneysen, *Dostoevsky*, 76.



Barth's strong dialectic between God and humanity. Reacting strongly against any claims that humanity could itself "set eternity into the heart," Thurneysen juxtaposes human effort on the one side with God's gracious action on the other. The danger is that this dialectic becomes so strong that human effort and participation in the ministry of Christ become mere lip-service to a foregone conclusion. While Thurneysen's early theology needs to be read with this potential danger in mind, the dialectical tension properly suggests that prayer for renewal and transformation is less about the work of humanity and more about receiving new eyes in order to witness to God's new day dawning.

## **Conclusion**

In conversation with Eduard Thurneysen and his sermon on John 3:1-10, I have considered what it means to pray, "Living God, renew and transform us." Because prayer constitutes its very existence, the church is necessarily a praying community. The church becomes the church as it prays in the power of Spirit through Jesus Christ. Apart from this, it has no right to exist. As the church prays in this way, transformation takes place as it is conformed in space and time to the life and ministry of the resurrected Christ. Finally therefore, to pray, "Living God, renew and transform us," is to pray with Christ on behalf of all creation in the hope of God's eternity dawning once and for all in space and time. Though it is still nighttime and the night is for dreaming, prayer is the language of the dawn. When one prays, one is awakened to the way the world truly is and responds in sure and certain hope: "Come, Living God, renew and transform us!"

## Refugees, Strangers, Aliens? Reformation as a Cry for Life

By Nadia Marais

### Introduction

What can the church proclaim as good news? In a world increasingly marked by violence—war and acts of war, terror and terror attacks, deportation of asylum seekers and refugees, violation of women and queer bodies, exits from international unions and withdrawals from international agreements, the resurgence of nationalisms, the merciless consumption of natural resources, and the ruthless negligence of political leaders in working toward more humane societies—it may not be immediately apparent what kind of good news churches can proclaim. Indeed, the very choice of speaking the language of “good news”—of happiness, human flourishing, fullness of life—may seem trivial, superficial and perhaps even delusional. What good news can possibly stem the tide of bad news? What kind of good news can save such a world?

In South Africa, a campaign named “Save South Africa” would organize and coordinate recent nationwide protests against corruption, state capture, and abuse of political power—including a motion of no confidence in the president of South Africa.<sup>1</sup> The rhetoric of salvation, of saving and being saved, would become the *lingua franca* of these protests; in that public, civil meanings of salvation would provide a shared grammar of resistance among protestors. Herein the campaign raises theological questions not only about the language of protest and reform, but particularly about the language of salvation. What kind of a salvation is in view here? What does “being saved” mean—and, indeed, saved from what or whom?

### Cry for Life, Cry for Reform

*Reformed theology is best understood as a liberating theology.*

—John de Gruchy

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<sup>1</sup> More information about this campaign, which comprises various civil organisations and South African business and political leaders, is available at [savesouthafrica.org](http://savesouthafrica.org). Interestingly, this campaign is convened by the South African businessman, politician, and struggle leader, Siphosiso Pityana. Earlier this year, the #savesouthafrica campaign was launched in an alternative state of the nation address (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-02-02-siphosiso-pityana-south-africas-real-state-of-the-nation-address/>; accessed April 13, 2017). His brother, Barney Pityana, is a well-known theologian, also within the World Council of Churches (where he was the director of the Programme to Combat Racism), and a founding member of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa.



The language of protest and reform—of public outcry against injustice, corruption, violence, and oppression—is deeply embedded in the theological grammar of the Protestant Reformed tradition.<sup>2</sup> A particularly fascinating theological notion that would emerge from this embeddedness is that of “crying for life.” Liberation theologians would develop the soteriological motif of “crying for life” in response to the destructive, death-dealing realities of violence and violation.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore worthwhile to consider the rhetorical power of “crying for life,” including its reliance upon certain grammar patterns that articulates the yearning for human flourishing. Firstly, the cry for life is a cry from a specific place: *a cry from the “midst of misery.”*<sup>4</sup> Secondly, this is *a collective cry*: a cry from the Third World, including its formal articulation by a gathering of Third World theologians from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, the USA, and Africa.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, this cry is *an active and resistant* cry that “witness[es] to the persistence of life”<sup>6</sup> and protests “against the dehumanisation of life.”<sup>7</sup> Fourthly, it is therefore

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2 J.W. De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology. A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 13. de Gruchy defines “Reformed tradition” as “that tradition within the Christian movement, diverse as it may now be, that has grown out of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation associated chiefly, though by no means only, with the life and work of John Calvin.”

3 This would be particularly evident in the work of South African theologians. The authoritative 1983 doctoral work by the South African theologian Lekula Ntoane, entitled *A Cry for Life*, is perhaps among the best known theological analyses that employ this metaphor. Other publications include the conference proceedings of a 1994 meeting of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, entitled *Spirituality of the Third World: A Cry for Life*; Maria Aquino’s feminist theology from Latin America, entitled *Our Cry for Life* and published in 1994; the South African theologian Russel Botman’s 2003 public theological analyses of the global economy in an article entitled *A Cry for Life in a Global Economic Era*; and more recently, in 2014, a published series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer by the South African theologian Nico Koopman, entitled *Cries for a Humane Life*.

4 K.C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Buya, editors, *Spirituality of the Third World: A Cry for Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 2, 190. The EATWOT Statement of the Assembly (188 – 206) describes the misery from which this cry for life is uttered very particularly, as (190) a cry “from within situations in which... children die by the thousands from diseases related to malnutrition while elsewhere food is wasted, milk and grain are destroyed, and resources are hijacked from life’s need to a life of luxury and to the production of weapons of annihilation.” It is a cry “from the midst of the politics of the powerful who rule by torture, assassination, and the contriving of the disappearance of women and men, and who commit aggression through proxy wars” (190); and so it is “the cry [which] rises from the midst of structures designed for our subjugation, marginalization, and extinction, through distorted priorities, skewed agricultural policies, unjust trade arrangements and inhuman economic manipulations and pressure tactics, all practiced and imposed in brutal and subtle ways by neo-colonialism and the international imperialism of money built up through the atrocities, cruelties and robberies of the era of military colonialism” (190).

5 *Ibid.*, 189-190.

6 *Ibid.*, 190.

7 *Ibid.*, 190. In the EATWOT Statement of the Assembly this means that “the cry of the Third World is not a passive cry for resignation to the realities of death,” nor is this cry for life “a cry

a specific kind of cry: *an urgent, multitonal cry* that “reflects the various ways oppression assaults Third World life.”<sup>8</sup> The cry for life is fifthly *a cry for a humane life*, for “the humanization of life” and the calling to “become truly human.”<sup>9</sup> As such, this cry is a cry for justice, equity, equality, dignity, and care (1991:31)—in short, it is a cry for liberation.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, the cry for life is *a confessional cry*—a theological cry that affirms that “God has not disappeared,” but that “God is present in the Third World cry for life.”<sup>11</sup> In short, the rhetoric of crying for life is shaped by the theological conviction that the living God is the God of life<sup>12</sup> who gives life and who draws us into life-giving communion.

The emergence of the “cry for life” outlined above should, however, not be surprising, for the affirmation of “ordinary life” and the quest for human flourishing<sup>13</sup> would be central to the story of the Reformation. For Reformed churches, cries for life therefore challenge the willingness to remember what it means to be Reformed. In South Africa the cry for life would become the

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of despair, sorrow, hopelessness or grief.” The cry for life instead “denies victory to torture, detainment, starvation and military might.”

8 *Spirituality of the Third World* and Nico N. Koopman, *Cries for a Humane Life* (Wellington: 2014), ix. In the EATWOT Statement of the Assembly, this cry is portrayed as “carrying” a variety of interrelated cries (190 – 191): “It carries the cries of countries protesting economic indeture to IMF and the World Bank. It contains the cries of nature against technological devastation. It contains the cries of religious cultures oppressed by the dominant ones. It carries the cries of the innocent massacred by the bombs of the sophisticated technology of war. It carries the cries of indigenous, tribal and aboriginal peoples for land, civil rights, autonomy and cultural respect. It carries the cries of refugees, children, displaced people and those afflicted with AIDS, the cries against the discrimination of homosexuals, of those who suffer from economic oppression, women forced into prostitution, victims of drug abuse and the unjust politics of health care. It carries the cries of Blacks against apartheid. It carries the cries of the Dalits against the apartheid of case oppression. It carries the cries of women against patriarchal dominance and sexual violence.”

9 *Spirituality of the Third World*. As such, this cry (2) is “a cry for freedom and dignity that constitute life as human. It is a cry for the rice and bread that sustain life, as well as the community that symbolizes and grows from rice and bread eaten in company.” Nico Koopman highlights, in *Cries for a Humane Life*, his series of sermons on this topic, a variety of interrelated cries for humane life (vii), including the cries to belong, for the kingdom of life, for daily bread, for forgiveness, for deliverance from evil, and for freedom from anxiety.

10 *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 30. Indeed this, writes de Gruchy, is “what liberation is truly about”: namely, “the redemption of men and women, as well as societies and nations, from those tyrannies and powers that enslave them and prevent them from knowing the fullness of life God intends for all humanity,” which “includes and integrates the redemption and renewal of the whole of life” and that is concerned with “the bestowal and renewal of life in all its dimensions.”

11 *Spirituality of the Third World*, 191.

12 See the book by Gustavo Gutiérrez with this title, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

13 C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 80-81 and 16-17.



litmus test for Reformed churches, argues John De Gruchy—particularly in the church struggle against apartheid.<sup>14</sup> It would therein appear to be a *lack* of Reformed theology—not a *surplus* of Reformed theology—that would lead Reformed churches to commit the heresy of providing theological justification for apartheid.<sup>15</sup> This would involve “the refusal to be truly Reformed” which would lead to “the absence of a truly Reformed theology.”<sup>16</sup> This refusal would become the ultimate denial of such Reformed theology’s rootedness in “life and its struggles,” and therein distort Reformed theology’s “revising, reforming, or liberating critical approach to itself,” writes the late Russel Botman.<sup>17</sup> In his magisterial book on modernity, entitled *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes the Reformation as a story of reform—of church as well as society—in response to the call for “sanctification of ordinary life.” In the Reformation’s turn away from “the enchanted cosmos” and toward the “modern individual in the world,” the modern focus on human flourishing—with its liberating potential—effectively begins.<sup>18</sup>

A related argument is evident in Alister McGrath’s description of the Reformation as born of a cry—namely, “the cry for reform.”<sup>19</sup> This cry—or “plea,” or “need”—

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14 *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 33. See also the book by John de Gruchy with exactly this title, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

15 See the book edited by John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio called *Apartheid is a Heresy* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

16 *Liberating Reformed Theology*, 34.

17 H.R. Botman, “A Cry for Life in a Global Economic Era,” in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, edited by W.M. Alston and M. Welker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 375. The description of Reformed theology as liberating theology is, however, by no means simple or straightforward. Nor is it an apologia for the Reformed tradition’s compliance with life-denying principalities and powers. It is therefore important to admit that there is “an ambiguity in Reformed theology and the Reformed tradition more broadly.” Liberating Reformed theology may be “liberating in intent” but “[has] also been guilty of legitimating oppression in practice,” and therefore “need[s] to be liberated in order to fulfill... [its] liberating potential and role.” In South Africa it is particularly in the guise of Afrikaner Calvinism and its theological support for apartheid that much of what can and did go wrong in the Reformed tradition stands exposed (*Liberating Reformed Theology*, xii-xvii). As such, writes Botman (376), “speaking of being Reformed in South Africa is not unproblematic” for “our country has had an oppressive as well as a liberative appropriation of Reformed theology.” More can be said about the relationship between Reformed theology and liberation theology—which was the subject matter of John de Gruchy’s Warfield Lectures in 1990, later published under the title *Liberating Reformed Theology*—but a last remark pertaining to this relationship has to do with the convergences and overlap between these. Reformed theology “cannot simply be equated with any particular contemporary liberation theology,” even though “many of the insights and issues which liberation theology has placed on the contemporary theological agenda are already part and parcel of Reformed theological thinking.” In short, the relationship ought to be a relationship of “critical tension” (*Liberating Reformed Theology*, xvii).

18 *A Secular Age*, 75-88, 146, 179, 243-245.

19 A.E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, second edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988),

necessitated a set of interrelated reforms within the church of the sixteenth century in Western Europe, he writes—which included “administrative, moral and legal reformation of the church” but also “reformation of Christian doctrine, of theology, of religious ideas.”<sup>20</sup> The interpretive choice for describing the Reformation as “a cry for life” may therefore not be altogether unfamiliar or unfitting. The cry for life reminds Reformed churches of the heart of the Reformed tradition—namely, the good news of the gospel. In the conclusion to his doctoral study, Lekula Ntoane<sup>21</sup> writes that the struggle for human flourishing, or the cry for life, articulates a core theological conviction within the Reformed tradition. This year may therefore very well require calling upon the dangerous memory of Reformation as a cry for life—and herein provide the contours for lifegiving theologies that may make for good news for those unwelcome and unwanted in our world and in our churches.

## How Can I Find a Gracious God?

*Justificatio articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae.*

The site of struggle for theological meaning—the cry for reform as the cry for life—would, within the Reformed tradition, arguably be centered in the doctrine of justification—as the “living center” of our creeds and confessions<sup>22</sup> and “the heart and soul” of (Luther’s) Reformation theology.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly so, for Martin Luther describes this as “the first and chief article” of the Christian faith, namely that salvation is a gift given to human beings by the death of Jesus Christ, which cannot “be obtained or grasped with any work, law, or merit.”<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere Luther would famously describe the doctrine of justification as

the master and prince, lord, guide and judge of all kinds of teaching. It preserves and rules over every teaching of the church and restores our

2. Compare to B. Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, translated by R.A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 11-12.

20 *Reformation Thought*, 3.

21 L.R.L Ntoane, 1983. *A Cry for Life: An Interpretation of “Calvinism” and Calvin*. Doctoral dissertation completed at the Theological Academy of the John Calvin Institute in Kampen, Netherlands. (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok-Kampen, 1983), 257.

22 E. Jünger, “On the Doctrine of Justification,” translated by J. Webster, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1(1) 1999, 24.

23 *A Cry for Life*, 258.

24 Kurt K. Hendel, “The Smalcald Articles,” in *The Annotated Luther, Volume 2: Word and Faith*, edited by Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), article 1. Compare to 429 and to E.W. Gritsch, *Martin: God’s Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983), 168-169.



consciences before God. Without this article the world is nothing but death and darkness.<sup>25</sup>

Inevitably this classic dictum—namely, that justification is the article by which the church stands or falls—would come to provide theological impetus for church reform,<sup>26</sup> as the doctrine that “constitutes the real centre of the theological system of the Christian church.”<sup>27</sup> As such, the doctrine of justification by faith would become a major theme of Reformation thought, argues McGrath, even as there would be serious theological divergences among Reformed theologians with regards to the content and function of the doctrine of justification.<sup>28</sup> However, amidst the many different views of justification a core theological insight would remain consistent: namely, that human beings are incapable of saving themselves. The externality of grace would become a crucial theological landmark—without which the church cannot be church, for “there never was, and there never can be, any true Christian church without the doctrine of justification,” writes McGrath in the introduction to his history of the doctrine of justification.<sup>29</sup>

Yet why justification? Should justification be the theological starting point for a reflection on the Reformed tradition at all—and, if so, how would one go about doing this? Indeed, “what is the question to which the ‘doctrine of justification’ is the answer?” asks N.T. Wright in his recently published work on justification.<sup>30</sup>

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25 E. Jüngel, “On the Doctrine of Justification,” translated by J. Webster, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1(1), 1999, 12-15; also God’s Court Jester, 169. This quotation comes from Luther’s *Die Promotionsdisputation von Palladius und Tileman* (1537), which is published in the *Weimar Ausgabe* 39/1, 205:2 – 5. There it reads as follows: “Articulus iustificationis est magister et princeps, dominus, rector et iudex super omnia genera doctrinarum, qui conservat et gubernat omnem doctrinam ecclesiasticam et erigit conscientiam nostram coram Deo. Sine hoc articulo mundus est plane mors et tenebrae.”

26 A.E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification: The Beginnings to the Reformation* (vol 1) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2; also *God’s Court Jester*, 176. Although Eric Gritsch (169) has pointed out that this exact formulation cannot be found in Luther’s work (instead this phrase was first employed by Lutheran theologians such as Valentin Löscher), similar formulations do permeate Luther’s writing (239 endnote 29). A similar phrase is evident in Luther’s commentary on Psalm 130 of 1532/1533, published in the *Weimar Ausgabe* 40/3, 352:3: “If this article stands, the church stands; if it falls, the church falls (*quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia*).” See also Carl Braaten’s book with this subtitle: *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

27 *Iustitia Dei* vol 1, 1.

28 *Reformation Thought*, 87, 109-112. See Alister McGrath’s history of the Christian doctrine of justification, published in two volumes – from its beginnings to 1500 (volume 1), and from 1500 to the present day (volume 2) – entitled *Iustitia Dei* (1986a & 1986b); as well as Bernhard Lohse’s classic work entitled *Martin Luther’s Theology* 2006).

29 *Iustitia Dei* vol 1, 1.

30 N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic,

Justification is a central theme of both the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, in its report entitled *From Conflict to Communion*<sup>31</sup> and the the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, in its report entitled *Communion: On Being the Church*.<sup>32</sup> Both of these documents were written in preparation for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation—and both documents remind their readers that “the church stands and falls” by the message of “God’s all encompassing justifying action”<sup>33</sup> for “the church is part of God’s justifying action; it is the community in which God’s justification is mediated to us.” Justification reminds the church that her deepest identity is shaped by God’s gift of grace—both of which (namely, gift and grace) are “given to a Christian through Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Simon Peura explains that for Luther “grace and gift together constitute the donated righteousness of a Christian.” It is therefore by way of the language of gift-giving that Luther would call upon the “alien righteousness of Christ” (*iustitia Christi aliena*), and thereby illustrate that salvation originates, lies, and remains outside of the sinner. The

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2016), 79. In a chapter entitled “Justification: Definitions and Puzzles,” Wright emphasises the crucial importance of conceptual clarity about justification. In his portrayal of the conceptual foundations of the Christian doctrine of justification, McGrath (*Iustitia Dei* vol 1, 4) points out that “the concept of justification is inextricably linked with that of righteousness, both semantically and theologically”—particularly in forensic soteriologies (*Reformation Thought*, 106-109). This does not mean that all soteriological metaphors should necessarily be subsumed under the nomen “justification,” but it does position justification as a soteriological metaphor (perhaps even the best known and most familiar articulation of salvation in the Reformed tradition) (*Iustitia Dei* vol 1, 2-3) and therein point to possible rhetorical patterns at play in the language of justification. However, as N.T. Wright points out (79-80), it may be of the greatest importance, particularly in the attempt to provide theological clarity on the relationship between the concept of justification and the doctrine of justification, the soteriological logic of the metaphor of justification, and justification’s reliance upon Pauline writings (including the often quoted Letter to the Romans, which was central to Martin Luther’s portrayal of justification). McGrath explains that “the *concept* of justification is one of many employed within the Old and New Testaments, particularly the Pauline corpus, to describe God’s saving action towards his people” whereas “the *doctrine* of justification has come to develop a meaning quite independent of its biblical origins, and concerns the means by which man’s [sic] relationship to God is established.” As such, “the doctrine of justification has come to bear a meaning within dogmatic theology which is quite independent of its Pauline origins” (*Iustitia Dei* vol 1, 2-3)—a view that Wright shares (80 – 81).

31 *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 21-27.

32 *Communion: On Being the Church: Report of the Lutheran-Reformed Joint Commission between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)*, 2006 – 2012 (The Lutheran World Federation and World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2014), 28-29. See also Gerrit Berkouwer’s *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1954) and Martin Brinkman’s helpful *Justification in Ecumenical Dialogue* (Utrecht: Interuniversity for Missiology and Ecumenical Research, 1996).

33 *On Being the Church*, 28; *Conflict to Communion*, 25.

34 Simon Peura, “Christ as Favor and Gift: The Challenge of Luther’s Understanding of Justification,” in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 42-44.



good news of the gospel stems from the confession that justification is “imputed, not imparted; external, not internal.”<sup>35</sup>

As such, God’s grace, not human merit, become the basis for the assurance of salvation. No initiative, or theological insight, or work—including good work—done by the church can therefore replace, replicate, or repeal the grace given by God. Herein “the doctrine of justification,” writes Ntoane, “is of primary importance because the extra nos character of salvation is in it attested in the clearest manner.”<sup>36</sup> In short, “far from being an outmoded teaching, the doctrine of justification, when properly understood, continues to have enormous relevance for today.”<sup>37</sup> This may be particularly true in the church, where we may find ourselves participating in “ways by which we try to justify ourselves” and thereby “render our lives acceptable and meaningful to others, to ourselves, and perhaps also to God.” In the first official Lutheran-Reformed dialogue (1983 – 1989), justification also stands central. The statement or report of the dialogue reads as follows:

We are justified by the grace of God and not by our own works, and are therefore called to communion with God and one another, not on the basis of our own achievement but on the strength of the divine gift. God accepts us into his fellowship, not because we are acceptable in terms of his norms of acceptance – God’s law – but because in Christ by grace God has broken down the barriers which separate us from God. So we are called to accept one another in costly discipleship as freely and unconditionally as God in Christ has accepted us.<sup>38</sup>

Herein there is resistance to the logic that “made good works a prerequisite for attaining the justifying grace of God,”<sup>39</sup> and which implies that the acceptance or acceptability of persons may be determined by anything other than the grace of God in Christ. Luther’s own lifelong struggle would involve various attempts to respond to the classic question: How can I find a gracious God?<sup>40</sup> The search for a gracious God is deeply subversive, in that it interrupts the cycle of punishment and reward, of good work that is rewarded and trespasses that are punished,

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35 *Reformation Thought*, 106, 115, 117.

36 *A Cry for Life*, 120.

37 Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 248.

38 *Conflict to Communion*, 25.

39 *Faith Seeking*, 248.

40 *Conflict to Communion*, 2.

by adjusting the grounds for acceptance—into the divine communion of the triune God, into the shared communion of the worldwide church, into the lived communion of local congregations—to exclude our inherent goodness (or lack of goodness), our work (or lack of work), and our faith (or lack of faith) as the basis for our salvation. In short, we are eccentric beings—refugees, strangers, aliens—whose salvation lies outside of ourselves, in the triune God relating to us.<sup>41</sup>

However, this *does not* signal the eradication of Christian ethics. Instead, the emphasis on the eccentricity of salvation forms the foundation of the Christian ethos, argues Paul Althaus.<sup>42</sup> This position is echoed in Botman’s argument for a close connection between justification and justice in the light of “everything that Christianity has learned about justification after Auschwitz and apartheid.” The doctrinal connection between justice (*Recht*) and justification (*Rechtfertigung*) must be maintained, he points out, because it is a connection that is “rooted in our Reformed tradition” (including, he adds, in the thought of Karl Barth and John Calvin).<sup>43</sup> He regards this with the utmost seriousness, and argues that “to see a separation between justification and justice as a differentiation between doctrine and ethics... would amount to nothing less than a doctrinal betrayal of recent developments.” What this *does* mean is that the coherence of any moralistic or natural theology<sup>44</sup> is undermined by the theological affirmation

41 D.H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 1024-1025, 1040-1042.

42 Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, translated by R.C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 3-24. He argues that “justification by faith determines Christian ethics because, for the Christian, justification is both the presupposition and the source of the ethical life.” This is so because justification “governs the Christian’s understanding of what the Christian life is,” which is shown in two ways: namely negatively (“by what it rules out”) and positively (“by what it affirms”). However, “justification [also] does far more ethically than determine the character of the Christian life and regulate its self-understanding,” in that it provides “nothing less than the basic source of the Christian ethos.” As such, Christian ethics are deeply necessary for the church’s proclamation of grace; not as the basis for our salvation, but as the product of our salvation. Luther writes that, although the merit of good works cannot save us, they also should not be viewed apart from grace—for, on the one hand, good works “follow” faith, renewal, and forgiveness of sin; and, on the other hand, a lack of good works prove such faith to be false and untrue (*Smallcald* article 13 and 464).

43 H. Russel Botman, “Should the Reformed Join in? Reformed Reflections on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” *Reformed World* 52(1) (2002), 14-16. Compare C. Helmer, editor, *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 9.

44 “Natural theology,” argues Ntoane in *A Cry for Life*, “bases its theological reflection on natural reality and man’s [sic] natural capacities.” As Ntoane points out, natural theology is Christologically poor and has provided—by way of a particular strand of Calvinism— theological legitimacy for “a naturalistic structuring of life which finds expression in the socio-economic and political apartheid policies.” In *Liberating Reformed Theology*, De Gruchy writes that it is this theological justification that has done damage to human life, undermined the Christian gospel, and brought the Reformed tradition into disrepute. It is in reaction to Afrikaner Calvinism,



that “our lives are lived by grace and not simply by nature.”<sup>45</sup> The good news of our salvation can therein no longer lie within our natural or moral capacities and powers, as intrinsic qualities, but must necessarily lie outside of ourselves—in God’s freely given grace.

## The Church as a Place of Grace—for Refugees, Strangers, and Aliens

What does this mean for Reformed churches who take the act of remembering—and the commitment to being “truly Reformed”—seriously? How does the confession that we are justified by God’s grace shape the social fabric—indeed, the communion!—of the church? Theologians have described the implications for the church as communion—an image also invoked in the name of the World Communion of Reformed Churches—from a variety of doctrinal loci, including the incarnation,<sup>46</sup> pneumatology,<sup>47</sup> and the eucharist.<sup>48</sup> The church is herein described as “welcoming and affirming,” “inclusive and unconditional,” and “inclusive and inviting.”

In his well-known Rustenburg speech, wherein he apologizes for apartheid on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church and all Afrikaners, the South African theologian Willie Jonker points out that the church itself also has a critical role to fulfil in society if it is “to be inclusive in the sense that it knows no favouritism, but seeks the salvation and benefit of all.”<sup>49</sup> Exactly in this resistance to various forms of natural theology—as theology that contemplates God from other sources than the revealed truth in Christ, the gospel, or Scripture (including *ervaringsteologie* [experiential theology] and *volksteologie* [people’s theology])<sup>50</sup>—theological reflection from the locus of soteriology would remind the church,

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as propagated by the Afrikaans (Dutch) Reformed churches, that Ntoane as “a black Dutch Reformed theologian” would articulate his “a cry for life.”

45 “Should the Reformed Join in?” 383.

46 W.S. Johnson, “Toward a Welcome, Affirming Church,” *A Time to Embrace: Same-Sex Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics*, second edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 78.

47 *Cries for a Humane Life*, 4-5.

48 P. Houston, “Inclusion and Exclusion at the Lord’s Table in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 151 (2015), 41 – 58.

49 W.D. Jonker, “Understanding the Church Situation and Obstacles to Christian Witness in South Africa,” in *The Road to Rustenburg: The Church Looking forward to a New South Africa*, edited by L. Alberts and F. Chikane (Cape Town: Struik Christian Books, 1991), 96-97.

50 D.J. Smit, “Om saam met al die heiliges Christus te ken...”: Persoonlike indrukke van ’n ekumeniese waarheidsoeke,” in *Remembering Theologians: Doing Theology: Collected Essays 5*, edited by R.R. Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2013), 270.

and in particular, Reformed communities, that it is the grace of God which relativizes all preferences—even those preferences that includes more people than it excludes, and for which we might feel the urge to congratulate ourselves for!

However, it also means that the language of inclusion ultimately undermines its own good intentions. The rhetoric of inclusion, welcoming, and hospitality is perhaps clear in intention —namely, that the church should strive to be an affirming community that embraces all those who are “other”—but the potential for creating new boundaries, new limits, and new exclusions may already be embedded in its existing grammar patterns. Stated somewhat differently, it calls upon the same logic as other problematic arguments—including the language of “the weakness of some,” which would lead to deep racial divisions within the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa—in that the terms for inclusion are determined by those already included. However, there is an even more problematic aspect to the language of inclusivity, namely, collapsing salvation into the metaphor of inclusion. It is exactly the insight that apartheid was about a distorted soteriology that would provide the theological heart for the church’s struggle against apartheid, and therein the recognition that “a position against apartheid was not a theological ‘extra,’ but something at the heart of the gospel itself.”<sup>51</sup>

This is, however, by no means a new point of critique. Queer theologians have warned that our languages and doctrines may themselves become co-opted in the “process of the language-building of a theological reality,” so that, in the case of salvation, the radical and disruptive potential of salvation by grace alone may come to be replaced by a more docile and politically correct soteriology, a “salvation of repetition” instead of salvation by redemption.<sup>52</sup> Here we may have come up against “the limits of inclusion.”<sup>53</sup> Apart from the possibility that a theological indifference regarding the soteriological use

51 S. De Gruchy and P. Germond, editors, “Introduction,” *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 2.

52 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 135-139. Althaus-Reid describes redemption as a coming out, an “expansive experience and not just a retention of traditions.” Yet this might very well include “redeem[ing] what never was: the denial of grace and holiness and the presence of God in the lives and relationships of people at the margins of the colonial heterosexual order, but all this according to a new and different creative pattern.” This means, she argues, that “redemption as disruption should never be part of an adoptionist plan, but rather part of an existential exception.”

53 L.M. Tonstad, “The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and Its Others,” *Theology & Sexuality* 21(1):1 – 19 (2015) Available: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13558358.2015.1115599?journalCode=yths20>.



of inclusion may prove confusing (and possibly replicate old soteriological distortions), it is also not impossible that our languages of inclusion and inclusivity may themselves become silencing tactics in our churches, and therein strategies to limit the reforming power already present in the Reformed tradition. Perhaps this too can become guises for “refusals to be truly Reformed.”

The Lutheran theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber writes about “the limits to inclusion” in a reflection on the baptism of the nameless eunuch in Acts 8:26 – 40; she argues that the language of inclusion depends upon preference and allowance, not belonging and communion.<sup>54</sup> This means, she argues, that

If the quality of my Christianity lies in my ability to be more inclusive than the next pastor, things get tricky because I will always, always encounter people... whom I don't want in the tent with me. Always. I only really want to be inclusive of some kinds of people and not others.

Theological attempts to broaden inclusion talk into the metaphor of “embrace” may arguably be indicative of the recognition of the limits to inclusivity talk.<sup>55</sup> Yet the conviction that anything *but* God's free, gracious initiative can save us, and thereby determine who belongs in the church—who is baptised, who may be ordained, who may marry (and indeed, who may marry whom!)—is theologically problematic, because it does not reckon with the radical, liberating grace that justifies all of us. It confuses salvation with inclusivity—the terms or ground of which is determined by that which we think we might be open-minded enough to accept, or strategically smart and forward-thinking enough to imagine—which again becomes nothing more than a collection of our own theological preferences. As such, Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu points out that the same sex debates in our churches are neither neutral, nor peripheral. It is, instead, “the ultimate blasphemy”: namely, “making the children of God doubt that they are children of God.” And in this, he writes,

The church of Jesus Christ, far from being inclusive and welcoming of all, has over and over again pushed many to the periphery; instead of being hospitable to all, it has made many of God's children outcasts and pariahs

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<sup>54</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Eunuchs and Hermaphrodites,” *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2005), 90-93.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996) and William Stacey Johnson's *A Time to Embrace* (2006).

on the basis of something which, like race or gender, they could do nothing about—their sexual orientation.<sup>56</sup>

If the doctrine of justification is taken seriously, however, “the message of the gospel and the good news of God’s grace is that in Christ all have been made members and fellow citizens of the household of God.”<sup>57</sup> The church therein becomes not primarily an inclusive space—the terms or grounds of which can be changed—but a place of grace, wherein refugees, strangers, and aliens are welcomed as those who participate in “eccentric existence”<sup>58</sup> within triune communion of grace.

## Conclusion

So we return to the question: What can the church proclaim as good news?

In the face of a continuum of realities of human despair,<sup>59</sup> it is the prophetic refusal to forget the church’s beginnings in protest and reform, and the willingness to remember its theological struggles deeply and truly, that a lifegiving theological imagination can be cultivated. For Reformed churches, this means taking seriously the language of salvation—and in particular the grammar patterns of the confession that we are justified by grace alone<sup>60</sup>—amidst cries for life and “the search for a place under the sun”<sup>61</sup> for all people. Herein the good news of the gospel—the good news of a community of justified sinners’ homecoming in the triune life of God—may create imaginative possibilities for the human flourishing of refugees, strangers, and aliens. Perhaps the question of our time—the question that will reveal the integrity of our witness and mission in the church and world today—is not going to be “How can I find a gracious God?” but “Where will I find a gracious church?”

56 Desmond Tutu, “Foreword” in *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, edited by P. Germond and S. De Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997).

57 “Introduction,” *Aliens*, 3.

58 *Eccentric Existence*.

59 “Should the Reformed Join in?” 383.

60 For “if justification justifies the human truly, then language and emotions will express this transformation,” writes the Lutheran theologian Christine Helmer (*The Global Luther*, 8-9). However, it also means admitting that “as people and powers, religious believers and political folk are thrown together into the teeming struggles of history, they can only momentarily grasp the actuality of justification without ever really embodying it definitively and permanently.” Perhaps here, argues Helmer, “lies Luther’s potential for today.”

61 *A Cry for Life*, 257.



# The Wounded Mother Earth and Her Suffering Children<sup>1</sup>

*By Rangang William Anāl*

## To Little Children,

Dear little children, I am Mother Earth.  
Before you, I was there  
so are your elder brothers and sisters.  
You're the youngest of the Grand Design,  
formed from the dust,  
breathed life into you.  
The One I Am Who I Am  
called us by our names,  
covered us with the best clothes.  
One family, to have life together  
praising the One I Am Who I Am.

Now, if you have ears,  
listen to the pain of a wounded Mother Earth.  
Isn't the birth pang enough?  
that you inflict my children too.  
If you have eyes,  
see my wounded body.  
What have you done?  
Aren't you satisfied with my Care?  
that you care yourself to the portal of Death.  
If you have mind,  
think before you wound your mother again.  
Am I not your Mother and you my Children?  
If I am your wounded Mother Earth,  
You are my suffering children.

—Mother Earth

## Introduction

<sup>1</sup> The title is inspired from an interdisciplinary paper presented by Rangang William Anāl and E. Gift entitled, "The Wounded Mother and the Suffering Children," on October 28, 2011, at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India. The title was originally suggested by E. Gift.

We may ask ourselves with hopeful confidence but an insidious nervousness, is “life together”<sup>2</sup> possible at all? Mixed feelings may steer our mind to iterate between the “very much possible yet difficult” and “very much difficult yet possible,” to escape becoming an irresponsible member in the *oikos*. In *Choruses from the Rock*, T. S. Eliot raises a sense of community that is missing in modern liberal society:

What life have you [we] if you [we] have not life together?  
There is no life that is not in community,  
And no community not lived in praise of God.

There is a sense of similar voidness in today’s context, and responsible members in the *oikos* can’t pretend to be total strangers to a wounded Mother Earth and her suffering children. If I may, it is juxtaposition akin to manufacturing a suicide bomb inside a mother’s womb, turning a life-affirming womb into a life-threatening womb.

What is life together? What kind of community are we living in and expecting to continue to live in? Life-threatening or life-affirming? How could a mother’s womb be life threatening? Isn’t a womb life affirming? Would you, little children, not care for Mother Earth’s wounded body and her suffering children? Or would you continue to inflict the wounds on her body? Little children, the hour has come to listen to our wounded Mother Earth and her suffering children. Let us listen.

## **What Is Not “Life Together”? Redesigning the Earth/Creation with Wounds and Bruises**

Over the years, the view of earth from outer space has changed drastically. We don’t necessarily see the same view that once enthralled our minds: her beauty, biodiversity, and desire to praise the one who created her. Today, to our surprise, we may be less captivated by her beauty and more captivated by fear. Nevertheless, it is worth describing her enchanting beauty to recognize the redesigning that little children have done to the body of the creation, with wounds and bruises. It is not too late to “return to Mother Earth.”<sup>3</sup>

At the conclusion of the first American spacewalk during the Gemini 4 mission,

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is adopted from T.S Eliot’s poem *Choruses from the Rock*.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase is inspired by A. Wati Longchar’s book, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education An Indigenous Perspective*.



on 3 June 1965, Edward Higgins White, captivated by the view of earth, said: "I'm coming back in... and it's the saddest moment of my life." Neil Armstrong, on looking back at earth from the moon in July 1969, said, "It suddenly struck me that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet earth. I didn't feel like a giant. I felt very, very small." Talking about his time on the lunar surface during the Apollo 14 mission in February 1971, Alan Shepherd said, "If somebody'd said before the flight, 'Are you going to get carried away looking at the Earth from the moon?' I would say, 'No, no way.' But yet when I first looked back at the Earth, standing on the moon, I cried." On 2 October 1985 in the opening ceremony of "I Congress of the Association of Space Explorers" held in Carney, France, on the theme "The Home Planet," Sultan bin Salman Al-Saud remarked that, "The first day or so we all pointed to our countries. The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were aware of only one Earth."<sup>4</sup>

Today, if Mother Earth is observed from outer space and any achievable heights, narrators will still speak about earth, but differently. It is not the same as the first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had said then; rather there is a transition in expressions now, from "it [she] is so beautiful" to "she is so wounded and [there are] bruises on her body." There is less to inspire appreciation of the aesthetic view of earth and praise of the one who called her into existence, and more to regret and fear about the wounds and bruises that have bedeviled her life-affirming womb and body by her very own little children.

On 29 November 2016, Google Earth Engine published a time-lapse video featuring fresh images on how climate change has transformed the world in 32 years, from 1984-2016. These images are not beautifying; rather, the results are shocking. It reported that cities are expanding, lakes and bodies of water are shrinking, and glaciers are receding.<sup>5</sup> On 18 January 2017, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) data showed that earth's 2016 surface temperatures were the warmest since recording began in 1880.<sup>6</sup>

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4 "Top 10 Best Earth Quotes Said by Astronauts and Scientists, *Space* blog, <http://www.spacequotations.com/earth.html>. Accessed April 4, 2017.

5 "Watch: A Time-Lapse Video Shows How Climate Change Has Transformed the World in 32 Years," *Scroll*, <https://video.scroll.in/823516/watch-a-time-lapse-video-shows-how-climate-change-has-transformed-the-world-in-32-years>. Accessed April 4, 2017.

6 "NASA, NOAA Data Show 2016 Warmest Year on Record Globally," NASA (January 18, 2017), <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasa-noaa-data-show-2016-warmest-year-on-record-globally>. Accessed April 4, 2017.

The view of earth from outer space that enthralled the astronauts and cosmonaut with much excitement is now inspiring fear and a sense of loss on earth. Based on these transitional images of real life, researchers could also predict the future of life on earth. To cite one instance among many, an Oxford University study has predicted that as global warming lowers food production, many more people will die in densely populated and vulnerable countries, like India, by 2050.<sup>7</sup> The future is endangering life's sustainability and survival on earth. But it is not too late to "return to Mother Earth."

## Whom to Blame? Game Over? Critiquing Life Together in One Mother Earth

One may ask whether the statistics and data provided by the researchers truly justify the quality and quantity of predictions. The number and nature of life-threatening statistics may not be confused with exact predictions, but one cannot be complacent about the changes recorded in earth's images in the presence of scientific data and anecdotal, personal stories of life-threatening experiences. We may seriously like to, and it is needed to ask over again, what has contributed to so much change in our expressions of earth's beauty from then to now? From a life-affirming to life-threatening future? To this, I would like to follow the responses of Laurel Kearns's "The Context of Eco-theology."<sup>8</sup>

First, much attention has been focused around the biblical text of Genesis 1:28, which is argued and assumed to be divine sanctioning of anthropocentrism. Lynn White's thesis on the "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in 1967 insisted that this provided a portal to understand God's will for people to exploit nature for their own ends. This means that White identified the roots of ecological crisis in Judeo-Christian tradition. On the contrary, the question should rather be centered on a hermeneutical misinterpretation-representation of the reader of the text, and not in the text itself. White's thesis received scholarly responses by interpreting the text as meaning "stewardship" and "caring," and others laid much emphasis on Genesis 2 to "till the ground."<sup>9</sup>

Second, it is the influence of dualism found in Aristotelian, Platonic, Stoic, and Manichean philosophy that disparity, bifurcation, and anthropocentrism

7 Darryl D'Monte, "Climate change could kill 160,000 people a year in India by 2050," *Scroll*, <https://scroll.in/article/813488/climate-change-could-kill-160000-people-a-year-in-india-by-2050>. Accessed April 4, 2017.

8 Laurel Kearns, "The Context of Eco-theology," in *The Blackwell Companion of Modern Theology* edited by Gareth Jones (Blackwell Publishing Ltd: Malden, USA, 2004), 466-484.

9 Ibid., 467-468.



excelled with force. Ian Barbour, as cited by Kearns, argued that “Aristotle’s view that plant and animal life exist solely for humans; the Stoic view that since animals are non-rational one need not respect them; and the Gnostic and Manichean philosophy that nature is a realm of evil from which humans must escape.”<sup>10</sup> So does Rosemary Ruether to Platonic dualism of spirit/body, mind/matter division, which privileges the former from the latter.<sup>11</sup>

Third, scientific innovations like the industrial revolution and monetization of the economy created a greater opportunity to justify the demands for goods, land, and natural resources. In fact, this led to the growing search for founding colonies. Out of this gluttonous search, dualistic notion of civilized and uncivilized, colonization of cultures, space, and mind were enforced with power and domination.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, along with scientific discoveries, there grew the age of Enlightenment. This is also connoted as reason over grace. With scientific exploration, a mechanistic view of the world developed, furthering the transcendentalism of God, removing the sacredness of the world. The age of Enlightenment (reason) inured the attitude of a dualistic matter-spirit philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

Having identified the causation of anthropocentrism, Kearns identified three Christian critiques for living life together: 1) Christian stewardship, 2) eco-justice and 3) creation spirituality.<sup>14</sup> Christian stewardship is advocated by evangelical and Bible-centred theology based on Genesis, which argued that Christians are given a responsibility of “stewardship,” “to till” and keep the creation”; this is especially appealing to conservatives. Eco-justice is represented by the liberal Protestants and Catholics, who understood Christianity from a point of view of social justice by referring to God’s “Kindom” and not Kingdom. God’s Kindom is referred to a just relation between humans and the creation. It speaks for environmental justice, without which social justice for the poor, weak, women and children is impossible. Creation spirituality focuses on interdependence, inter-relatedness, a familial relationship, where humans are one of the members of the creation. It moves away from centrism and perform a centripetal movement towards Earth as the center. This is also known as earth/creation-centered spirituality and life.

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10 Ibid., 468.

11 Ibid., 468-469.

12 Ibid., 469.

13 Ibid., 470-471.

14 Ibid., 477-479.

## A Wounded Mother and Her Suffering Children: Social Ecological Concern

A human being who is content with the world will not have the least interest in unmasking the mechanisms that conceal the authentic reality.<sup>15</sup>

In today's context, critical analyses and concerns related to earth have become pertinent. Scientists from all parts of academia have been engaging in dialogue, conferences, writing, making suggestions for sustainable development, and living with respect for biodiversity in the ecosystem. Human beings have encroached on Mother Earth in unprecedented ways and degrees. We may continue to ask, is anyone listening to the voices of Mother Earth and of the concerned members in the *oikos*? Or have human beings hibernated in self-contentment with the world? One must realize that when Mother Earth is wounded, her children suffer, too.

Ecological devastation and imbalances, and their effects in poverty, economic injustices, and the pathos of women and children, had led to an ecumenical program of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to voice justice, peace, and integrity of creation. George E. Tinker advocated for reversing WCC's message from justice, peace, and integrity of creation to integrity of creation, justice, and peace.<sup>16</sup> It is theologically, politically, and socially significant that justice for creation is also justice for creatures: Justice for creation is foundational to spirituality and liberation.

Environmental devastation has a global character: Even when it occurs in the most remote corner of earth it affects the inhabitants of all countries and continents in one way or another. The increase in the number of congenital and genetic illnesses sharply poses questions of safeguarding the health of future generations. Today, socio-ecological responsibility is preventing the advances of science from having a disastrous effect on people's health and physical environment.<sup>17</sup> It is maintained by chains of actions and interactions, which link man with the rest of the living realms.<sup>18</sup> Social conflicts arise over the

15 Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 10.

16 George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 111; quoted by Yangkahao Vashum, *Christology in Context: A Tribal-Indigenous Appraisal of North East India* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017), 149.

17 S.M. Tripathi, editor, *Human Ecology and Social Consciousness* (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2003), 182.

18 Radhakamal Mukherjee, "An Ecological Approach to Sociology," in *Social Ecology*, edited by Ramachandra Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.



issue of control over resources or when habitats and life support systems are threatened by the action of the “omnivores.”<sup>19</sup> The nature of society determined the significance of nature within its social norms. Social groups that depended totally on the environment had system maintenance as part of their principles. An important factor completely disregarded by development policies and programs in India is the role of common property resources (CPR).<sup>20</sup>

Socio-ecological concern “must be rational, planned development for everyone’s equal benefit, which would therefore be ecologically caring. ‘A society based on common ownership and democratic control, with production solely for use—not sale and profit—alone provides the framework within which humans can meet their needs in ecologically acceptable ways.’<sup>21</sup> If not, the alienation from the nature is separation from part of us. Capitalism must be replaced by socialist development where the technology 1) is adaptive to all nature (including human) and not destructive of it, 2) strengthens the ability and controlling power of the producers. Jürgen Moltmann cites, “We shall not be able to achieve social justice without justice for natural environment; we shall not be able to achieve justice for nature without social justice.”<sup>22</sup> True community or life in community is what threatens gluttonous powers and organizes mass movement and liberates both the creation and its related structural injustice manifested in the *oikos*. One cannot afford to be changed into a destructive agent of climatic injustice but to renew and transformed into climatic justice.

## **An Indigenous Peoples’ Earth/Creation-Centered Spirituality and Life**

What is indigenous spirituality and life? What relation do indigenous people have with the creation? According to the spirituality and life of the indigenous Nagas of northeast India, “spirituality for the indigenous people is a way of living in the constant consciousness of the presence of God. It has to do with the way they live, act, and relate with God, fellow human beings and the whole creation of God’s creation.”<sup>23</sup> The Naga people are known for their closeness

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19 Sudhakar Solomonraj and Ashok Patet, “Sociological Perspective On Environmental Depletion,” in *Ecological Challenge And Christian Mission*, edited by Krickwin C. Marak and Atul Y. Aghamkar (New Delhi: CMS/ISPCK, 1998), 127.

20 N.S. Jodha, “Common Property Resources,” in *Social Ecology*, edited by Ramachandra Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 150.

21 David Pepper, *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), 219. This includes a statement from the Socialist Party of Great Britain’s 1990 manifesto.

22 K. C. Abraham, *Eco-Justice: A New Agenda For Church’s Mission* (Bombay: BUILD Publication), 6.

23 Yangkahao Vashum, “Space, Creation and Land: Indigenous Peoples’ Spirituality,” paper

with the creation. This closeness with the creation is neither for individualistic gain nor for dominant possession over the creation but closeness understood in terms of interconnectedness and interrelatedness. This interconnectedness and interrelatedness is expressed in terms of one family, one community, and the earth as the mother of all. The earth is our mother who takes care, nurtures, sustains lives and teaches us about the wholeness of life in all.

Taking the interconnection aspect of all, Wati Longchar, a Naga theologian, argues that space is the foundation of indigenous spirituality, which is a common spiritual heritage of all indigenous peoples.<sup>24</sup> According to Naga people, interrelatedness with the creation is well expressed in the holistic view of reality [God-human-world relationship], a familial relationship with the world of nature [totemism, lycanthropy, and shamanism, etc.], reverential/ethical use of natural resources [genna, taboo], and communitarian principle and values of life.<sup>25</sup> Indigenous spirituality is to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, neighbours of all kinds and forms. Yangkahao Vashum, a Naga theologian, would say that in today's context, Earth Day is observed for one day, but to indigenous people, every day is Earth's Day.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, space as the deeper dimension of interconnectedness of all is the foundation of indigenous spirituality, ethics, and perception of others as their own selves.

## The Need of the Hour: Reaffirming Earth/Creation-Centered Spirituality and Life

Having learned to listen, now we must take this hour to act. This needs proper theological care, care that adheres to a living God, who renews and transforms us to cosmic sustainability and climate justice. Kosho Niwano, speaking in one of the session on "Interfaith Summit on Climate Change," states that, "Greed, fear,

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presented at the Asian Theological Forum, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, 24 to 26 July 2014, 1-2.

24 Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education, An Indigenous Perspective* (Kolkata: PTCA/SCEPTRE, 2012), 19.

25 Lovely Awomi, "Indigenous Spirituality: Insights for a Life-Affirming and Life-Sustaining Economy of Life," paper presented at the Theological Consultation on the Economy of Life, Chennai, 27 to 30 October 2014, 1-3. To maintain a cosmotheandric relationship, Shamans play a vital role in maintaining an equilibrium relationship between God-human-creation. Similarly, Jesus is better understood as Indigenous Shaman, called "Jesus the Shaman." See Rng William Anäl, "A Theological Study of Spirit in Shamans Among Anäl Nagas: A Resource for Doing Tribal/ Indigenous Spirit Christology" (M.Th Thesis, Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, 2015), 84-85.

26 Class Lecture delivered on July 28, 2014. For further readings, see Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education, An Indigenous Perspective*, 19-42; also see Yangkahao Vashum, "A Tangkhul Creation Myth: Implication for a Holistic View of Human Rights," in *The Tribal Worldview and Ecology*, Tribal Study Series no.2, eds. A. Wati Longchar and Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1998), 34-40.



and insecurity do not provide the ground for solving the challenge of climate change. Rather, reclaiming our original blessing must be and remain our starting point for addressing this challenge. Climate change is a severe challenge, but is it not also a message from the earth? A message to return to our original selves?"<sup>27</sup> Let us first return to our original selves.

## **A Reminder: Who are we? Terrorists or Pilgrims?**

"Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!"

—Psalm 150:6

Who called us by our names and let us breath life through our nostrils? What is the meaning of life without being thankful and praiseful to the One, I am Who I am? Shouldn't our thankfulness reflect praises to the One, sharing and celebrating life together? Batista Mondin in his writing, *Philosophical Anthropology*, states that the true significance of human beings can only be grasped by discovering the goal to which s/he is directed.<sup>28</sup> Now the question is, where is our goal directed? Is it directed as a terrorist, who in a ruthless manner destroys life, leaving no space for life to breathe? Or as a pilgrim, who renders his/her enlightened spirituality to the service of life?

To the indigenous people, human beings are co-pilgrims who walk on the land distracted neither by greed nor wants of human dominion. Instead, it is believed that disrespecting creation is a breakdown of spirituality that acknowledges God's creation. It is believed that there is an integral relationship of God-cosmos-humans; furthermore, creatures—both animates and non-animates—are considered persons, brothers and sisters in the one family called Mother Earth. According to Longchar, the foundation of indigenous spirituality is the creation:

The indigenous communities all over the world uphold a special relationship with their land. Land, for them, is more than just a habitat or a political boundary; it is the basis of their social organization, economic system, and cultural identification. Even the sacred power is understood in relation to land/space. The land/Mother Earth is also the symbol of unity, identity, and life of all living creatures, the spirit(s) and the Creator.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Koshi Niwano, in a session of the Interfaith Summit on Climate Change, September 22, 2014, in New York. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/weaving-together-personal-faith-and-climate-change>. Accessed on April 4, 2017.

28 Batista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology-Man: An Impossible Project?* Translated by Myroslaw A. Cizdyn (Bangalore: Theological Publication in India, 2007), 50.

29 A. Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological*

To have an encounter with the creation is to live life in its fullness based on integral relationship. In the words of Elizabeth Amoah, the basis of a living spirituality is preceded by a radical encounter with that which gives life and that which empowers men and women, young and old, rich and poor, to be sensitive to and get involved with life-giving activities.<sup>30</sup> Taking a further step, God does not merely create and abandon the creation, but chooses the ways to sustain the creation through interdependence, so that the creation may praise the Lord together in peace, realizing creation as the work of God's hand. This is to say that, human beings are tenants, stewards in the *oikos* of the creator. In the words of Dhyanchand Carr, "this is God's universe. All conscious beings live in the universe primarily as God's tenants. This life as tenants has to be lived in mutual interdependence and mutual respect for each other."<sup>31</sup>

To embrace all kinds of life in living is to liberate praises to the creator and to acknowledge creatures in the creation as co-pilgrims in praising the creator. Therefore, the spirituality of our original self is that of co-pilgrims, walking on the land so that living spirituality may manifest in taking care of God's creation as tenants.

## Visualizing God's Sustainable Act in the Creation

"Ever since the creation of the world His [Her] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things [S]He has made. So they are without excuse."

—Romans 1: 20

Creation is a mirror of an invisible God, and to visualize God in creation is to return to our original spiritual selves, that is, to acknowledge God's visibility or presence in the creation. It also means that human beings are one member among the big web of family where God is the ultimate grand designer. In the words of Longchar, "the world of creation or space is the exegesis of the Supreme Being, creation declares the Supreme Being."<sup>32</sup> He goes on to say that the Supreme Being speaks and reveals through creation. Furthermore, to

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*Education An Indigenous Perspective*, 26-29.

30 Elizabeth Amoah, "A Living Spirituality Today," in *Spirituality of the Third World: A Cry for Life*, edited by K.C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 51.

31 Anand Chandulal, comp., *Defending the Earth: A Way of Life* (New Delhi: Earth Centre, 2003), 1.

32 A. Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education An Indigenous Perspective* (Kolkata: PTCA/SCEPTRE, 2012), 41.



visualize God in creation is to come to the knowledge of God who cares for the nature. As Sallie McFague notes, “the theology of embodiment takes seriously space, because the primary struggle of all life form is to find space, which will provide the necessities for life. Space should become the primary category with which we think about ourselves and other life.”<sup>33</sup> To visualize God in creation is to make space for life to sprout in fullness and this space-making presence of God in creation is foundational and fundamental.

For many indigenous people’s spirituality and life, it is their religious conviction that God is present in their natural environment. The *Noctes* of Arunachal Pradesh in India believed in *Jauban*, a supernatural being who dwells in the earth. This deity assumes many forms and manifests himself in natural elements like jungles, riversides, ditches, etc. The *Karam* festival of Adivasi is a veneration of the *Karam* tree called *Karam Raja* by the maidens. The tree represents God’s power of fruitfulness and growth.<sup>34</sup> According to Robert Boyle, human beings are the priests of God’s creation.<sup>35</sup> It is also believed that God’s presence in creation itself foster providence for life. According to the Mundas prayer after sowing the seeds:

*Haram* [Creator] has given us bullocks and buffaloes, plough and seeds; let Him/Her now grant us a good crop. By our own strength we can do nothing. However much we plough and manure, however good the seeds we sow, if *Haram* turns His/Her back on us, not a single grain will grow.<sup>36</sup>

Affirming a close affinity with the nature is a spiritual indication of visualizing God in the creation because nature sustains human life in terms of providing food, fodder, herbal medicine, etc., and this life-sustaining nature is protected and considered sacred. Wolfhart Pannenberg states that the creation of sun, moon, and other celestial bodies, the separation of land and water from each other, the positioning of the heavenly vault to retain water vapor, the cultivation

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33 Sallie McFague, “Human Beings, Embodiment and Our Home the Earth,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 144.

34 Barnes L. Mawrie, “Towards a Christian Tribal Eco-Theology: The Church’s Response to the Current Eco-Crisis,” in *The Quest for Harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspectives*, edited by Alphonsus D’Souza, Yangkahao Vashum and Lalrindiki Ralte (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2013), 334.

35 Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 115.

36 Xavier Topno, “Eco-Theology and Spirituality from the Perspective of Sarnâ Munda Tribe,” in *The Quest for Harmony: Christian and Tribal Perspectives*, edited by Alphonsus D’Souza, Yangkahao Vashum, and Lalrindiki Ralte (Guwahati: NESRC, 2013), 315.

of trees, plants, and grasses: all can be interpreted as preparation for the physical necessity for life.<sup>37</sup> God's providence is visible through nature, and nature is an instrument where God sustains. Therefore, human beings must be actively involved in deepening our appreciation for nature and admiration for the designer through the creation.

## Liberation of the Creation

"Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping things of the ground according its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive."

—Genesis 9:20

Can we also speak of justice and rights of the creation and all forms of creatures both animate and inanimate inhibiting the creation? How is our spirituality related to the liberation of creation? Today, environmental depletion has become a pertinent issue, for which a theological response to constructing a liberative vision for creation must first separate "centricism" from "anthropos." Stephen Bede Scharper argues that the problem is not the "anthro" but "centricism." Scharper proposes three phases to move toward new theological anthropology, a new ontology, and new praxis.<sup>38</sup> The first phase is to develop a notion of person in community, that is, an anthro-harmonic understanding of the human-nonhuman relationship. The second phase contributes toward a moral dimension of new ontology [being human], that is, humans and environment are mutually constitutive [interdependent]. And the third phase is an integration of praxis, first identifying the context and the importance of adopting a distinctive vantage point.<sup>39</sup> The liberation of creation encompasses cosmic concern as public concern, including both human and non-human. Therefore, theological spirituality must break away from the anthropological clutches to include nature and to propagate cosmotheandric vision as a public discourse. Jürgen Moltmann also propounded that no liberation of men [women] from economic distress, political oppression, and human alienation will succeed that does not free nature from inhuman exploitation and which does not satisfy nature.<sup>40</sup>

37 W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. no. 2, translated by Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 116-130.

38 Stephen Bede Scharper, *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 186.

39 *Ibid.*, 186-191.

40 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, translated by R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974),



For eco-liberation to be realized, we must speak of equality and interdependence in the creation as the foundational discourse of spirituality. We become voices for climate justice and rights for the creation and creatures, and we determine our spirituality with care for creation and creatures. According to Longchar, the issue of space is not merely a justice issue to be set alongside other justice concerns. But it is a foundational theology of self-understanding out of which liberation, justice, and thus peace will flow naturally and necessarily.<sup>41</sup> To privatize our spirituality, justice, and peace to “anthropocentrism” is to think and act as a salient supporter to wounding Mother Earth; to de-privatize our spirituality is to manifest an intrinsic relation with all forms of life on the earth. According to Leonardo Boff, spirituality is that attitude which puts life at the center and defends and promotes life against all the mechanisms of death, desiccation, or stagnation.<sup>42</sup> This means that theology of liberation for creation is also the theology of spirituality. And it necessarily prioritizes the assurance of the rights of and justice for creation.

For centuries, creation has been nurturing human existence and that of all other creatures, but now the body of nature is inflicted with wounds and paralyzed with exploitation. She demands life with rights, justice, and freedom to nurture her children with care. The voices of nature’s desire for liberation can be heard and seen in her vulnerability, a message to claim her rights, rights for redemption and co-existence, out of human exploitation and dominion. Thomas Berry would claim that not to recognize the spirituality of the earth is to indicate a radical lack of spiritual perception in ourselves.<sup>43</sup> To recognize earth’s spirituality is to recognize the rights of the earth. In the words of Boff, we should see the creation as the expression of God’s joy, as the dance of God’s love, as the mirror of both God and all the created things. In this sense every creature is a messenger of God, God’s representative as well as sacrament. Everyone therefore is worthy and to be accepted and listened to.<sup>44</sup> As a foundation to liberation, full manifestation of coexistence, interdependence, and interconnection recognizes the integral right to breathe freely without

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41 A. Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology-Issues, Method and Perspective* (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2000), 25.

42 Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, translated by John Cumming (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 36.

43 Thomas Berry, “The Spirituality of the Earth,” in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, edited by Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 11.

44 Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 46.

exploitation of beings over other beings. This is the “ethics of humanization”<sup>45</sup> that contradicts dehumanization ethics.

## **Faith Affirmation of the Church: A Possible Conclusion**

We believe in one creator and one mother.

We believe in all creatures as interrelated, interdependent brothers and sisters of one family.

We believe in journeying with God as co-pilgrims.

We believe in the integrity of creation, justice, and peace.

We confess to live life together in coexistence and harmony.

We confess that space is foundation to spirituality and liberation.

We confess that Mother Earth owns us, not we own her.

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45 Nancy J. Duff, *Humanization and the Politics of God: The Koinonia Ethics of Paul Lehmann* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 44.



# A New Reformation: God of the Rainbow and the Transformation of Christianity

By Yoon-Jae Chang

## Signs of the Times

We live at a time when all the inhabitants on this planet earth sense the unusual change in the look of the sky. I live on the Korean peninsula, where we used to have four distinct seasons. But now the climate of the Korean peninsula is changing rapidly into a subtropical climate. The strict cycle of three cold days and four warm days in winter was broken many years ago. The winters are becoming shorter and the summers longer, and the kinds of fish in the surrounding seas have changed because the temperature of the water has risen. Even more shocking is the fact that the warming of the Korean peninsula is twice as fast as the average pace of the whole world.<sup>1</sup> I don't have the exact statistics, but I believe that Northeast Asia is in a similar situation. Jesus said, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." (Matthew 16:2-3) If Jesus saw us today, I guess that our Lord would say that the changes in the "appearance of the sky" that we see are the "signs of the times."

## Climate Collapse

The earth's climate went through huge change even before human beings started intervening, but now we are experiencing human-made climate change, or "climate collapse." Since the industrial revolution in the mid-eighteenth century, humankind raised the average temperature of the earth by 0.8 degrees Celsius.<sup>2</sup> Since the so-called industrial revolution, we have chosen a strategy of economic growth that puts greater materialistic abundance and convenience as the ultimate values. This has been linked with the consumption of energy, namely fossil fuels, which emit carbon dioxide, a

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1 The average temperature of the Korean peninsula has risen by 1.7 degrees Celsius in the 96 years from 1912 to 2008; the earth's average temperature rose by 0.74 degrees during the same period. The speed of warming in the Korean peninsula is twice as fast as the world average. Korea National Institute of Meteorological Research, *Understanding Climate Change II* (May 7, 2009).

2 Mary Lynas, *Six Degrees Could Change the World* (New York City: Random House, 2008) explains in detail what would happen if the earth's temperature rose by 1 to 6 degrees Celsius.

major greenhouse gas, and this has become the reason of climate collapse today.<sup>3</sup>

We don't have so much time on our hands. The World Environment Crisis Clock already pointed at 9:33 p.m. in 2008.<sup>4</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that unless appropriate responsive actions are taken by governments, global warming will cause great catastrophes including floods, droughts, disease, and extreme changes in climate. There is not much time for humankind or other living creatures to figure out how to respond to and survive in the extreme changes in climate. We could even say that unless human beings reach a revolution of civilization in the ecological sense within the next 10 years, we will not have a future.

A revolution of civilization does require a revolution of idea, of worldview, and of religious beliefs. As Lynn White, Jr., the American science historian, asserted many years ago, both our present science and our present technology are so tainted with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecological and economic crises can be expected from them alone. The British historian Arnold J. Toynbee also said that human exploitation of the earth began because of the Christian teaching that humans are superior to nature, especially the command of God that says in Genesis 1:28 to "subdue" the earth and to "have dominion" over all living creatures. "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious," therefore, "the remedy must also be essentially religious."<sup>5</sup> This insight invites us to fundamentally rethink of our Christian beliefs.

It was 1517 that Martin Luther initiated the Reformation. Today we need to initiate a new reformation to transform Christianity itself. As Luther nailed 95 theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, calling for a Reformation, today we must nail a new set of 95 theses on each and every church door calling for a reawakening of the Christian spirit of renewal and

<sup>3</sup> Of the primary energy provided to the world in 2005, 35 percent was from oil, 25.3 percent from coal, and 20.7 percent from natural gas; in total, fossil fuels accounted for 81 percent. In the Paleozoic era, plants were fossilized, capturing energy in them. This "buried sunshine is the main force of modern capitalist industrial economy and the main culprit of climate change at the same time.

<sup>4</sup> The Environment Crisis Clock measures the severity of environment degradation in the world, and it says that we are in the most serious situation since 1992, when the investigations began. The clock was set at 7:49 in 1992, and is running towards 12 o'clock, which marks the extinction of humankind. In 1997 we had already passed 9:04 p.m., a "very unstable situation": 9:17 in 2006, 9:31 in 2007, and 9:33 in 2008. (*Seoul Daily*, September 17, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, 155 (1967).



the radical transformation of Christianity itself. We need a new vision of Christianity that honors God, values the earth, and emphasizes humility and stewardship of humanity.

For this purpose, I'd like to revisit the story of Noah's Ark in the Bible, a story that has been told and retold for generation after generation. It is the story of God's new covenant of life, which has captured the intellect and heart of every generation because of its beautiful image of the rainbow; we have, however, failed to see its naked truth. The rainbow in the sky symbolizes God's new covenant of life not only with Noah but also with the earth, both then and now. A revolution of civilization or a sustainable future can only be built upon our God of the rainbow, the rock of our salvation (2 Samuel 22:47, Psalms 18:2), who makes a new covenant of life with all flesh and calls us to "choose life" so that we and our children may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

## **Noah's Ark**

The story of Noah's Ark in chapter 9 of Genesis is a story of God's new creation. It is not a story of destruction or annihilation; rather, it is a story of new beginnings, new hope, and new vision for a sustainable future. The flood was not simply about heavy rain. We should go deeper than the literal sense. According to Genesis 7:11, "In the 600th year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the 17th day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened." What are these "fountains of the great deep" and the "windows of the heavens"? A Hebrew cosmology is assumed here. Let us go back to the very first moment of God's creation. According to Genesis 1:2, when God was creating the heavens and the earth, "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep while a wind from God swept over the face of the water." It was like a world full of water and no dry land. However, God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters" (Genesis 1:6-7), so God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome.

This reflects the ancient Hebrew cosmology in which dry land is created and protected by two domes above and beneath. The "flood," then, was a cancellation of this separation of waters, and, as such, it implies a return to the original state before God's creation where "the earth was a formless void" and simply full of water. God was determined to end the first creation because of the fall of the first man and woman, because of the brutal murder of the

younger brother by his own elder brother, and because of many other sins, like the Tower of Babel. God's intention, however, was not to terminate the creation itself but to begin it, or to "reset" it, anew. This is why God opened the "fountains of the great deep" and the "windows of the heavens." The story of Noah is not a story of destruction or annihilation but a story of God's creation of "new heavens and a new earth." (Isaiah 65:17). The Book of Jeremiah sustains my point: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope'" (Jeremiah 29:11).

The ark, or *teba* in Hebrew, was not a boat in a proper sense, although the size of it was enormous compared to that of Gilgamesh, for we are told that there lived a man named Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia, who also built an ark to prepare for a large flood. His ark, though, was very small compared to Noah's because he just loaded gold, silver, and his family members on it. We know that the purpose of the huge ship of Noah was to save all the animals, which would become one of the partners of God's new covenant of life after the flood. As a matter of fact, a *teba* is a box, like the reed box that saved the baby Moses (Exodus 2:3). It is an instrument to save life. What is peculiar to a *teba*, however, is that it has no engine or steering gear, just like a barge. The ark, therefore, symbolizes the total guidance and protection of God and the absolute dependence of our salvation upon God, who is the rock of our salvation. This ark, or *teba*, of Noah, without a compass and without self-generating power, went back alone on a sea of trouble to the very original moment of chaos before the creation. It was sent back by God to the point of the void, or to the point of zero, from which everything can be started anew.

After the flood, "the waters were dried up from the earth" (Genesis 8:13), and Noah built an altar to God and offered burnt offerings on it. (Well, I regret that by this act of Noah, at least one species of animals became extinct, because only one pair, male and female, entered the ark. [Genesis 7:8-9].) And when God smelt the pleasing odor, God said in God's heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth, nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done" (Genesis 8:21). This observation is, in fact, a shocking statement of God! God must be feeling remorse for God's own act, and yet, what is striking here is that God makes a firm resolution not to curse the ground because of humankind and not to destroy again every living creature because of humankind. In the first creation before the flood, the earth was cursed because of human sin, and it brought forth thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18). In the second creation after the flood, however, God vows that God will not curse or destroy the earth because



of human beings, i.e., us! What is happening here? God is now disconnecting the destiny of the earth from that of us; in other words, God dissolves, if you will, a “guilt association system” between us and the earth and frees the earth from the faithless heart of human beings and our own inclination to sin and self-destruction.

I’d like you to pay closer attention to the significant difference between God’s first commandment to the first man and the first woman before the flood and God’s second commandment to Noah and his family after the flood. In chapter 1 of Genesis, after creating a male and a female in God’s own image, “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing’” (Genesis 1 :28). This verse is what has become known by biblical scholars as God’s “cultural commandment” to the first human beings. Compare it, however, with God’s second commandment in chapter 9 of Genesis: “God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth [and full stop here]’” (Genesis 9:1). Here, in the second creation story, God no longer commands humans to “subdue” the earth and to “have dominion over every living thing” upon it. Not many theologians and biblical scholars have paid attention to this significant change unfortunately. God is withdrawing the “cultural commandment” to subdue and have dominion over other forms of life! Biblically speaking, we are descendants of Noah, and we are living in a post-flood world. This reality means that God’s cultural commandment to the first male and first female is no longer valid and legitimate for us. We are not the heirs of the cultural commandment because it was simply cancelled by God after the flood. The earth and every living thing upon it are no longer under our dominion; they are no longer associated with our sins and thus doomed with our own destiny.

Meanwhile, we are relieved to realize that there is a continuity between the first creation and the second one. Do you know what the very first act of God after the flood was? God blessed Noah and his family, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1 and 9:7). In the first creation, God’s very first act was blessing the first male and female, saying to them to “be fruitful and multiply.” However, don’t be mistaken: God did not bless human beings alone. In the first creation, on the same day God created the first male and female, God also blessed all the living creatures in the sea as well as in the air to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:21-22). In the second creation, God also blessed “every kind of living creature that is with Noah—the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground” to

“multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it” (Genesis 8:17) Indeed, our God is a good and impartial God whose first act is giving a blessing to all life. It is therefore right for us to praise our God as the source of all blessings.

## The God of the Rainbow

Let us now move to the climax of God’s new creation story in chapter 9 of Genesis. As I mentioned earlier, it is the story of God’s new covenant of life, which has grasped the intellect and heart of every generation because of its beautiful image of the rainbow, only to fail, however, to see its naked truth. God says to Noah and his family, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you [my emphasis], the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark” (Genesis. 9:8). See how God is repeatedly emphasizing here with whom God makes a new covenant for a sustainable future. In verse 12, “God said, ‘This [rainbow] is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you [my emphasis] for all future generations’”; in verse 13, “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth [my emphasis]”; in verse 15, “I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh [my emphasis]”; in verse 16, “When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth [my emphasis]”; and finally in verse 17, “God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth [my emphasis].’” You can never miss it! At least six times, in this short chapter of Genesis 9, God is repeating, restating, and re-emphasizing with whom God makes this new covenant. The contract is not simply between God and us human beings but is among God, human beings, and the earth. The rainbow covenant for a sustainable future is, in fact, a triple contract among God, human beings, and the earth. After the flood, as I said, the earth and every living thing upon it are no longer under our dominion, but they are now a legal, legitimate, and independent party of God’s new covenant. A human-centered reading has looked away and pretended not to have noticed it, but it is crystal clear here in the scriptures that we humans do not represent the earth anymore and that the earth stands next to us as a lawful and independent entity before God’s new covenant of life.



To make it worse, many Christians have terribly misunderstood the essential points of God's new covenant of life for a long time. We have naively and wishfully assumed that God will not destroy us with a flood again. But read the Bible carefully: God is saying that "never again shall all flesh [my emphasis] be cut off by the waters of a flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth [my emphasis]" (Genesis 9:11) and moreover that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh [my emphasis]" (Genesis 9:15). See how God emphasizes "all flesh" over and over again here. Remember that, after God smelt the pleasing odor from the burnt offering by Noah, God said, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind" (Genesis 8:21). The point of God's new covenant is not that God will not destroy human beings by a flood again but that God "will never again curse the ground because of [us] humankind... nor will [God] ever again destroy every living creature as [God has] done" (Genesis 8:21). We are quite stunned and deeply troubled, but the Bible makes it clear that God will show no more favor, no more preference or no more partiality to humankind.

This revelation may sound shocking to you. This discovery may, indeed, sound strange, unfamiliar, and inconvenient to you. This God of the rainbow, who shows no more favor to us human beings, must be looking odd and eccentric to us. However, we should face the facts as they are. Our God is not simply the God of our human species alone but is the God of all species, of all life. And it is my argument today that in our present era of total crises—the crises expressed through climate change, continuous war, and worm eaten injustices done by us human beings—the ground of hope for a sustainable future, or the rock upon which we must anchor our hope and commitment, is only this God of all flesh, this God of all life, who was determined to continue life on earth in spite of us human beings whose heart is evil from youth, whose eyes are blinded by their sumptuous greed. This new awareness is, indeed, a paradox, and, indeed, "hope against all hope" (Romans 4:18); but if this paradox and this uncanny hope is not fully understood and grasped, our WCRC vision "To live out the Communion of Reformed Churches, participating in God's mission, that all [my emphasis] may experience the fullness of life in Jesus Christ" (WCRC Mission Statement) and also WCRC's affirmation to embrace "God's covenant promises for the redemption, restoration and renewal of the whole creation through Jesus Christ" (Article IV-C of the WCRC Constitution) may end in mere gestures.

## Brother Sun and Sister Moon

To initiate a new reformation, we must rid ourselves of all the residues of a human-centered understanding of God and of the world. To live out a sustainable future, we cannot anchor our hope on the conventional and narrow understanding of God because such an understanding of God is, in fact, the roots of our crises today. We used to think that we human beings are the crown of God's creation. Nevertheless, we are greatly challenged today by Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), the "incomparable saint," who was also called the "Second Christ" (alter Christus). The key to an understanding of Francis' spirituality is his belief in the virtue of humility, not merely for the individual but for human beings as a species in God's entire creation. Francis tried to depose human beings from their monarchy over creation, and he set up, if you will, a "democracy" of all God's creatures. This was well expressed in his "Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon":

Good Lord, most high almighty, to you all praise is due, all glory, honor, and blessing, belong alone to you; there is no man whose lips are fit to frame your name.

Be praised, my Lord God, in and through all your creatures, especially among them, through noble Brother Sun by whom you light the day. In his radiant splendid beauty, he reminds us, Lord, of you.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and all the stars. You have made the sky shine in their lovely light. In Brother Wind, be praised, my Lord, and in the air, in clouds, and calm, in all the weather moods that cherish life.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water. She is most useful, humble, precious, pure.

And Brother Fire, by whom you lighten night; how fine is he, how happy, powerful, strong.

Through our dear Mother Earth be praised, my Lord. She feeds us, guides us, gives us plants, bright flowers, and all her fruits.

Be praised, my Lord, through us when out of love for you we pardon one another, when we endure in sickness and in sorrow. Blessed are they who



preserve in peace; from you, Most High, they will receive their prize.

Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Death from whom no man alive can hope to hide; wretched are they who die deep in their sin, and blessed are those Death finds doing your will. For them, there is no further death to fear.

O people! Praise God and bless him. Give him thanks and serve him most humbly.

With this canticle then, an ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy, the flames are no longer a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are “Brother Ant” and “Sister Fire,” praising the Creator in their own ways as brother/sister human does in his/her own way. In a word, Francis tried to substitute the idea of the equality (democracy) of all creatures, including human beings, for the idea of human’s limitless rule of creation, human dominion over every living thing on earth. Today we must continue his effort because we will continue to have worsening ecological degradation and economic injustice until we reject the old Christian axiom that nature, or the earth, has no reason for its existence except to serve our human interests.<sup>6</sup> We must cultivate a more community-based understanding of humans in which human beings are perceived as those who belong to earth. Although we human beings are the self-consciousness of the universe, we are not the only important beings. We are not controllers of the earth who exist above or outside of it. Not only do we belong to the earth, we are absolutely dependent on its water, food, land, and climate. We exist inside the earth, along with other living things, and we are deeply indebted to them for our very existence.

In the story of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:4-3:24), the human is not a ruler of the earth that could conquer and rule over it but a humble farmer who tills the land. In this story, God creates Adam, or a human from Adama, or “the dust of the ground.” Very interestingly, we can also translate this Adama as “farmland” and therefore Adam as “farmer.” According to this translation, God created a farmer from farmland in the Garden of Eden. What is amazing in chapter 2 of Genesis is that God’s commandment to this Adam is not to “subdue” the earth and to “have dominion” over every creature; instead, God commanded Adam to “farm” (or in Hebrew, abad), which means to cultivate and take care of the land. What is emphasized here is caring for, or managing the land, not possession or control over the land by humans. We are not the owner of the earth, but God is!

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

It is God's earth and not ours. This is the fundamental understanding of being human in the scriptures, and we must return to this biblical view if we are to initiate a new reformation and to live out a sustainable future.

God is not the God of human beings alone but of all flesh, of all life. God does care about human life and all life because our God is the Lord of all hosts and "spirits of all flesh" (Numbers 16:22, 27:16). Moreover, paradoxically speaking, the hope, the only hope, or the only rock upon which we can anchor our faith and commitment to renew the church and to build a sustainable future is this God of the rainbow covenant, who "will never again curse the ground because of humankind" (Genesis. 8:21). We must turn to this biblical God of the rainbow, who took an oath with Noah and with the earth, assuring that "as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22). It is this God who is the rock upon whom we can build the church of Jesus Christ and a genuinely sustainable future.

## **Exodus to a New Earth**

Today we need an "exodus" to a new earth for a sustainable future. The present human civilization of greed and conquest is no longer sustainable at all. Two hundred years of the Industrial Age is enough! We need an exodus from the Industrial Age to the Ecological Age. We need civilization change, not climate change! We must seriously ponder the basis of the false plentitude that we have enjoyed. We must liberate ourselves from the fossil and nuclear energy-based civilization with its endless greed for energy and consumerism.

We need an exodus into new light. This is an exodus from the blinding flash of nuclear bombs and deadly glow of nuclear reactors to a world free of nuclear weapons and power plants. Northeast Asia has become the global ground zero of nuclear danger. This region is the only place in the world where nuclear weapons have actually been used. Hiroshima and Nagasaki lie just across a strait from Busan. Furthermore, more than 1,000 nuclear tests have been conducted in adjoining areas of Asia and the Pacific, all with no regard for the local inhabitants. To make it worse, all states in Northeast Asia either possess nuclear weapons or are protected by an ally's nuclear weapons. Since the last WCC Assembly in Asia met in New Delhi in 1961, the number of states with nuclear weapons has more than doubled. Unbelievably, Asia has become the locus for the biggest armies in the world. In 1961, there were no nuclear power plants in Asia at all, In East and South Asia today, however, there are 117 in



operation, and 344 under construction or planned. All these nuclear plants are powering our growing economies and consumerist lifestyles. South Korea is the most dangerous part of the world in terms of nuclear threat. It has the highest geographic density of nuclear power plants in the world. We are having a conference here at the very center of a nuclear minefield.

Nuclear weapons and nuclear power cannot coexist with peace. They cannot coexist with Christian faith either. When human beings entered the twentieth century, despite our previous assumptions, we found that we were able to split the nuclear atom. We discovered that in doing so a massive amount of energy was emitted. Humankind took possession of this great power that could destroy the whole world, including ourselves, by artificially breaking the basic structure of material. In this way, humans became "Death, the destroyer of the worlds" as in the passage from the Bhagavad Gita. In 1942, scientists proudly announced that they had entered the creator's territory in building Chicago Pile 1, the world's first reactor, in a squash court located in the south corner of the playground at Chicago University. In this context, nuclearization can be compared to "the modern day fruit of the tree of knowledge."

In the Bible, God allowed Adam to do everything in the Garden of Eden except for one thing. God permitted everything but imposed one single restriction. A restriction was imposed on human beings who were "like emperors." They could eat all other fruits but were forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This order, I believe, was like a "boundary stone" that represented God's ownership of Eden. What was the serpent's temptation? "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). To "be like God" is the essence of temptation. Indeed, Adam wanted to become the owner of Eden like God so that he could do all he pleased. The fruit of the tree of knowledge represents that fact that Adam is not the owner of Eden and therefore cannot do whatever he likes. It represents a "boundary" that he should not cross as a human being. However, Adam wanted to cross it. It is for this reason that the story of Eden is our own story today.

From a Christian perspective, our sin is to not admit our finitude. As Augustine taught us a long time ago, our sin lies in the arrogance of human beings, who do not admit that they are not gods. In our life, there is a line we should not cross. Even if we are able to, there is a boundary line we should not cross. Thinking that we can cross this line is arrogant and haughty. In fact, Japan was arrogant about its technical ability to maintain the safest nuclear power plants in the

world. Japan built the Fukushima nuclear power plant assuming that no tsunami over 10 meters would ever come. However, a 17-meter-high tsunami struck Fukushima. Japan thought it could predict nature, and this was its arrogance. God speaks to us through the prophet Ezekiel: “Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: In the pride of your heart you say, I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas. But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god’” (Ezekiel 28:2). Indeed, as the consequence of the fall of human into sin, every person is enslaved to sin. We are not by nature inclined to love God but rather to serve our own interests and to reject the rule of God. Indeed, we are totally depraved, totally unable to choose to follow God.

Having eaten the forbidden fruit and upon hearing that God was walking in the Garden of Eden, Adam hid himself behind a tree. In the Bible, God called out for Adam, asking, “Adam [Human], where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). This is the very first question God asked human beings in the entire Bible. God did not ask Adam about his geographical or physical location. God was asking the greedy human who had tried to become like God, or the owner of the Garden of Eden, where he should be. Even today, God asks us where we should be. Disobeying God’s order to “work and take care of [the Garden of Eden]” (Genesis 2:15), we came to cities building civilization. And we have civilized this world having played with nuclear weapons. “Adam [human beings], where are you?” Even today, God asks the same question to us human beings who, through arrogance, delude ourselves that we can become controllers of the world through nuclear power.

Nuclear weapons and power plants cannot coexist with Christian faith. It is a system of death and such a system cannot possibly coexist with Christianity, nor with any other religion that cherishes the value of life. Nuclearization is the path of our self-destruction. It threatens not only us but also all life. The Fukushima nuclear catastrophe is a clarion call from God alerting humanity to the urgency of a radical transformation of the way of our life.

### **“Now Choose Life” (Deuteronomy 30:19)**

Today the world is standing at a crossroads, a point in time when we must either choose a society of self-destruction or a sustainable society of mutually enhancing life. As the human economy has continued to expand globally, nearly half of the world’s forests, which once covered the earth, have already been lost. Despite the fact that the earth does not have an infinite capacity to supply the resources necessary for production and to absorb the resulting waste



from us, we are, nonetheless, blindly exploiting our natural resource base and generating waste, including nuclear waste, at a rate that exceeds the capacity of the natural world to regenerate and heal itself. We are, in fact, borrowing and plundering from our future generations, who will inherit from us only a depleted and degraded earth. We may well be on the way to our own extinction.

Before the Israelites entered Canaan, after surviving in the desert for 40 years crossing the Jordan River, God said, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you. Now choose life so that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). With heaven and earth as witnesses, we are faced with this same covenant and challenge. "Now choose life" is God's own word to us today. The twenty-first century, which was expected to be a time of hope, has begun as a time of unprecedented war and violence, economic injustice, climate change and ecological destruction, religious conflict, division between religions and generations, and spiritual and psychological chaos. Our age is one in which human greed is hastening the collapse of civilization and even of the cosmic end, an era when "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). In the midst of this chaos and crisis, God speaks to us: "Now choose life!" God says, "Now." This "Now" is the eschatological time; it is a kairotic time, that is, the time of repentance, determination, and full of grace. Indeed, this "Now" is the irresistible and efficacious grace of God that is applied to us all who always resist to obey the call of the gospel. God has prepared for us a path toward life and commands us to turn our feet away from the path of violence and self-destruction. This God is the God of the rainbow in whom and through whom we can dream and act for a new reformation as well as a sustainable future. Deeply anchored on this God, the rock of our salvation, we will choose life, not death, renewing the church and building a sustainable future. This is the mission, vocation, and reason for being of WCRC today, which is called, at this very critical moment of human and earth his/herstory, "to live out the Communion of Reformed Churches, participating in God's mission, that all [my emphasis] may experience the fullness of life in Jesus Christ."<sup>7</sup>

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7 Mission statement of the WCRC.

## The Church in Cuba: A Historical and Theological Approach

*By Reinerio Arce-Valentín*

I appreciate the opportunity to share our experiences, our practices of faith as Christians, and as church in the Cuba of today. We live very particular moments for all human beings and for all God's creation. In a certain way, wherever we are there is a challenge for those of us who want to be followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The reality of the globalized world of today has different expressions depending on the place we are and the lenses we use to look at it. The threats to peace and to the integrity of Creation—and above all, the lack of the necessary justice to guarantee a worthy life for millions of people, children of God who die unnecessarily of hunger, disease, and violence—constitute the realities of the present. In the face of these realities, God calls us to be instruments of his peace and doers of his justice.

In Cuba we also live a special moment as a people and of course as church. The internal changes in Cuban society generate a feeling of insecurity and abandonment for many people. The economic and social changes in motion now have created social and economic differences that did not exist some years ago. We could say that a few years ago we distributed poverty equitably; now there are groups more privileged economically, associated with the free market, and also major sectors that are more impoverished than before. Of course, this last aspect would have to be observed in context. It is not the same to speak of a poor person in Cuba, where they still have social protection in education and health, as in Latin America, where the poor in many cases lack the basic conditions of life, including education and health. Moreover, it certainly cannot be compared with poverty in the United States.

Our people have desired the reestablishment of diplomatic relationships and the process of normalization of these relationships between our two countries for a long time, and it will undoubtedly be a benefit in many senses. Among other things, it will bring the scattered Cuban family closer together; it will bring together our peoples, separated by force for many years. However, at the same time this creates in us a feeling of insecurity and fear. What will be the impact on Cuban society of the thousands of American tourists that will arrive? What will be the impact on Cuban society of the avalanche of American businesses and enterprises? What impact will normalization have on our sovereignty, in our culture as a nation, but also in our churches, which have been Cuban and



autonomous for almost 50 years? All these aspects I have mentioned, and others unmentioned are present in our reality today.

This essay has three parts. In the first, I will briefly describe what I would call the religious map at present. In a second, I will make a brief historical description of the churches and their expression at present. Last, I will share some of our approaches or theological readings of our reality.

## I. Religion in Cuba

I believe I have to begin by saying that the Cuban people are deeply religious. As we would say in Spanish, he who does not worship Ochun (one of the African deities) worships *la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Mary, Virgin of Charity) or, at best, worships them both.

Aboriginal religions disappeared almost completely among the native people with the arrival of the Spanish colonizers, who exterminated them by forcing them to work looking for gold and as a result of the diseases they brought from Europe.

Christianity then, in its Roman-Catholic expression, arrived in Cuba with the colonizers. In this way, with very few exceptions, the Christian Roman-Catholic religion was an instrument of domination and exploitation of the natives in the island and an accomplice in their extermination. As I said, with very few exceptions, like the Dominican father Fray Bartolomé de las Casas who experienced a process of conversion to become one of the greatest advocates of the natives in Latin America, especially in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. This process began when he felt deeply touched by the sermon of another Dominican father on Ecclesiasticus 34: 21: "Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the person who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor."

They also brought African slaves almost from the very beginning of colonization. There are estimates that by the nineteenth century almost a million Africans had been brought by force to Cuba. They arrived with their own religions, and through the process of various centuries those religions became the so called Afro-Cuban religions or Cuban religions of African origin. The most widespread is *Santería* from the Yoruba religion, also known as *Regla de Ocha*, practiced by thousands of Cubans at present.

There is a wide variety of religions in the island. Besides Christianity, in its different expressions, and the Cuban religions of African origin or Afro-Cuban religions, we can also mention Judaism, Spiritism coming from Europe and from the United States; a Cuban variant called crossed Spiritism; and in smaller groups, Islam, Baha'ism, and Buddhism.

At the same time, religious syncretism is expressed in the popular practices and in what we could call popular religions. Maybe the most famous in Cuba is devotion to Saint Lazarus, Babalu Aye in the Afro-Cuban religion, whose sanctuary is near Havana, where thousands of people make pilgrimage, people with beliefs in Christian or Afro-Cuban religions. According to popular belief, Saint Lazarus has healing powers. The most interesting thing is that the announcement of the reestablishment of relations by the Cuban and U.S. presidents was made on December 17, Saint Lazarus day.

Even though the Cuban culture has a great Christian Roman-Catholic component, the minority of our people are Christian in their religious practice. The influence of Afro-Cuban religions prevails in the syncretic and popular religiosity and religious practices of our people. It would be difficult to give the percentage of people who attend the churches, including all Christian denominations, but evidently, they constitute the great minority of the population.

## **II. Christianity and the Church in Cuba**

As I mentioned, Christianity arrived in Cuba in its Roman-Catholic version together with the colonizers, and was instituted as the official religion of the colony up to the independence from Spain. And after, it was the “unofficial official Church” until 1959.

One of the principal characteristics of Protestantism in Cuba is that the first churches were founded by Cubans who were engaged in the independence struggle against Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. Pedro Duarte, a patriot fighting for the independence of our nation, founded the first non-Roman-Catholic church organized in Cuba. He knew of the Gospel during his years of exile in the United States. He founded the first Episcopal Church in Matanzas, Cuba, in the year 1883; as Alberto Álvarez founded the first Baptist Church; Enrique Someillán established the Methodist Church; and Evaristo Collazo started the first Presbyterian Church on the island. All of them became familiar with Protestantism during their stays in the United States, where they



arrived as refugees because of their commitment to the independence of Cuba from Spain. When the last war of independence against Spain started in 1895, they closed their churches, joined the independence army, and served as nurses.

After the invasion and occupation of Cuba by the United States in 1898, the first Protestant missionaries from many denominations started to arrive. They displaced the founders and organized their own churches according to their original denominations. It is interesting to observe that all of the missionaries that came to Cuba were sent by their National Boards of Mission.

Hence, Cuban Protestantism began to develop with a great pro-independence spirit; years later it had a great influence from the groups coming from the United States. The majority of the so-called “historical” churches in Cuba were an organic part of the churches in the United States, and many obtained their autonomy after the mid-1960s. This double character persisted in Protestantism: progressive and pro-independence minority groups, and the great influence of American culture that established their style of being church, from theology to liturgy.

For their part, Protestant churches had to challenge an extremely conservative Roman Catholicism with a great percentage of power in all the governments prior to 1959, the year of the triumph of the Revolution. Despite the fact that from the first constitution proclaimed in 1869 during the Independence War to the present one in 1992 our Constitutions have all stated the secular character of the State, the Roman-Catholic Church was the “official non-official” church in Cuba up to 1959.

On the other hand, Protestant churches imbued by the spirit of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, especially the radical Reformation, have been staunch advocates of the secular character of the state, which included public education. Up to 1961, there were private Catholic as well as Protestant schools. Protestant schools (the great majority were for primary education) were established next to the churches, and their students came from poor families, which constituted the great majority of their members. Therefore, we can recognize the first great influences of the spirit of the Reformation in the defense of Cuba as an independent nation, and in the character of secular education and the state. Nevertheless, after independence it was also a means of cultural neocolonization by the U.S.

Another important contribution of Protestantism was in the field of reflection and of theological production, before and after the Revolution of 1959. At that moment it was an attempt to contextualize the message of the Gospel and the mission of the Church for the new historical situation in which Cuba was living due to the radical changes that occurred after the triumph of the Revolution. In this sense, the contribution of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church through its Confession of Faith in 1977 is outstanding. The theological production made from the Evangelical Seminary of Theology of Matanzas, founded in 1946 by Protestant denominations, has also been significant. Undoubtedly, it is the result of the influence of something essential in the spirit of the Reformation: the recognition of the historical-cultural contextualization of the truth of the Gospel. This spirit obviously includes reflection in the light of the Word about the ways of life of the human being under the demands of the Christian faith at a determined moment and context. Moreover, we must highlight the fact that among the pillars of Protestantism—sometimes forgotten or badly approached—we find the need to understand the relativity of human thought and deed, including the theology and the action of the Church and respect for the other, the freedom of thought and act in accordance with the basic principle of the Gospel: Love.

If we tried in the same way to describe the churches in Cuba now, the general picture would have the following components: on one hand a Roman Catholic Church, scattered along the island, trying to relocate as “The Church” in the present Cuban context. The consecutive visits of three Supreme Pontiffs have favored this attempt; especially the last one with his discourse and practice in favor of the marginalized and his charismatic personality, which won over the sympathy of Cubans, including the high spheres of the Cuban political leadership. On the other part of this description, we find a less numerous group of the so-called historical churches within Protestantism. In this group two churches must be highlighted: the Methodist Church and two of the Baptist Conventions, which are somewhat different from the other churches. The first one, the Methodist, has a strong charismatic component and a greater number of members compared to the other churches; the Baptist also have a great number of members and an extremely conservative theology. To complete the picture, I would add what in the United States you identify as evangelical churches and the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches, with a numerous participation of people. The same goes with the Adventists of the Seventh Day and the sect of Jehovah’s Witness.



After 1959 with the triumph of the Revolution, four stages could be described in the relations between the church and the state. A first brief stage could be called the honeymoon. Indisputably, Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship had been one of the cruelest and most murderous in Latin America up to that moment. Many majority sectors of the Cuban population joined efforts to face the dictatorship, including the Roman-Catholic Church, with the few exceptions of its hierarchy that supported the dictator. The same could be said of Protestant churches that, with few exceptions, did not approve of Dictator Batista.

In the second stage, more prolonged in time from the beginning of the 60s to the first years of the 90s of the past century, the Catholic Church and the government grew apart, and there was even a confrontation between them. Priests and religious women were expelled from the country. The same occurred with the Protestant churches. But differently from the Catholics, there was a massive exodus of pastors from all denominations to the United States. Eighty-percent of the pastors who graduated from the Evangelical Seminary of Theology to that time immigrated to the United States.

A third moment began in the mid-80s with the publication of the book *Fidel y la Religión (Fidel and Religion)*, the result of Frei Beto's interview to Fidel Castro, in which the latter speaks about his ideas about religion. However, what really makes this stage effective at the beginning of the 90s was the collapse of the European socialist bloc. At the time, a series of dialogues took place with the high spheres of the government on religious freedom and discrimination against Christians and religions in general. Changes began to be introduced into Cuban politics and policies allowing greater participation of religions in Cuban society and a greater number of spaces for action for religious groups, above all in the social sphere.

At present we could say that we are living a fourth stage of relationships between religions and the state; a stage of openings, dialogue, and collaboration between both. This could be evidently demonstrated with the recent visit of the Supreme Pontiff of the Roman-Catholic Church.

### **III. Politics, the Church and Theology**

Perhaps we should begin by clarifying how we understand each of these terms without trying to give polished definitions. We understand the political in the sense of broad meaning of *polis*, the society where we live, and the context where we live and practice our faith. We do not understand it in the reduced sense which denotes the political or the political parties.

We conceive of the Church as the community of believers, the believing people, located in the *polis*—not alien or outside of it, as the institutions occasionally intend to do. The church is part of the *polis*; that is, it cannot live alien to the reality in which it is immersed, where God has placed it to serve. It is impossible to separate oneself from the context in which God has placed us. Since it is part of the reality where it lives, inserted in the *polis* as part of it, it cannot be apolitical. On the contrary, if saying we are apolitical is a way to be political. Anything we say or do as individuals or as church, whether we recognize it or not, is always motivated by something that has happened in the *polis*; therefore, it will have an impact on the context where we are and will always have a political repercussion. This means that all our actions, our preaching, and our education will always have a political meaning.

On the other hand, we would understand theology, *which is more difficult to define*, as the critical reflection from the experience of faith of a community of believers, about the practice of that community as a response to the calling of God for the construction of the kingdom of God and His justice. To do this some things are combined: “feeling,” which would be the experience of personal and community faith; “seeing,” that is, the participation in and confrontation with the reality where we live, which is in the long run God’s and the Church’s dwelling in the world; “thinking,” that is, the critical reflection on reality. To this end theology enters into a dialogue with the social and economic sciences: the analysis of the role of the Church as a community of Christians immersed in the world. Lastly, “acting,” bringing into praxis the commitment with the kingdom of God in our respective realities in a reciprocal way. But I would also say in the simplest way that theologies, and mind that I say theologies in plural, are the maps of faith we make to walk together, men and women, towards that kingdom. That is why in the same way that maps change with time, theologies also do, according to the context and the particular historical moment in which we live.

Theology as we conceive it has four interrelated characteristics that cannot be seen in an isolated way.

### ***1. It is contextual.***

We try to respond to the calling of God in our context, as we have already said. Together we elaborate our map of faith to walk together as a church towards the kingdom of God, in the context where He has placed us. We construct theology from our history, from our culture, and from our social, economic, and political situation; but also from our personal experience and history. Even if we want to



deny it or not recognize it, all theological reflection is contextual for this same reason. The symbols we use linguistically change from a cultural context to another, in a way that they may mean something different, can even mean the opposite.

Some authors speak of three obstacles to understanding and accepting the reality that all theology is contextual theology. On one side, there is the still-colonial vision of thinking that any theological analysis and production that comes from the (global) South and not from the centers of the (global) North is the contextual. It obviously has to do with the vision of dependence of the centers of the North as the centers of economic power and hence ideological power. A theologian of the South who does not know Melancthon, Hegel, or Barth would be considered ignorant. And it is good that we know about them. However, let's ask... a theologian of the North... whether they know about Mariátegui, Sarmientos, or Leopoldo Zea. And finally, from the centers of power the contextual is many times understood as the syncretism with other religions or other sciences of knowledge and as something *not theological enough*.<sup>1</sup>

Contextual theology is a theological reflection that gathers the sensitivity of the moment; that reads the signs of the times; that intends to respond to the concerns that must be faced in the sphere of the church or in society. Moreover, it presupposes a hermeneutic and methodological option that gives meaning to concrete history, to the culture of the addressees of the Christian announcement and of the social or personal issues and concerns.<sup>2</sup> Thus, our way of producing theology is consciously contextual and particular.

## **2. It is politically committed.**

Evidently this means we assume the risk of responding critically to the reality where we live. We are partners of God in His work in the world. The church cannot accept that any social political group or any individual assigns how its mission and preaching must be done. The "co-mission" of the church must be determined by the answer in obedience to God's mandate. The mission is God's, and we are "co-missioned" by Him to serve Him in the society where we have been placed to live.

The churches can grow apart from the real foundation and sense of their "co-mission," trying to satisfy the demands coming from the social and political

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1 Marc Cortez, "Context and Concept: Contextual Theology and the Nature of Theological Discourse," *Westminster Theological Journal* 67:1 Spring 2005

2 L. Oviedo

groups to save their interests, or from their own economic or hegemonic interests. Or on the contrary, it can only obey the mandates of God regardless of the risks and consequences. Therefore, in the midst of all the difficulties we assume the political character of all theology as practice.

### **3. It is biblical.**

Pastor Karl Barth said that when he prayed he did it with the Bible on one hand and the newspaper on the other. We understand that we must produce theology in the same way: context and the Word of God, The Word of God and the context.

In this sense we emphasize the need to understand that the biblical testimony, because the Bible is testimony, is contextual for its part. We must understand the context where the witness offers this biblical testimony; in this way we can give what has been called the hermeneutical leap in order to understand what the Word of God wants to tell us now in our context and in the historical moment we are living. The more we understand the context of the biblical testimony, the more we will understand what God is telling us through his Word now. That is the dialectic relation between the particular and the universal.

### **4. It is missiological.**

If we understand theology as the critical reflection of the faith that will lead us to praxis, then theology is missiological. We are partners in the mission together with God. We are, in the words of Paul, the collaborators for his reigning. The mission is God's. We are collaborators in the mission of God.

We define the objective of theological education in Cuba as missiological. We train leaders of the churches, whether laypersons or pastors, to help the church to fulfill its commission.

Dr. Sergio Arce Martinez, a Cuban Reformed theologian, wrote a book over 40 years ago entitled *The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society*. In it he emphasized that the mission has a name: witness. This word comes associated with an adjective: prophetic. It has a purpose: evangelize. Moreover, in that book he added the following,

"The commission of the Church is witness (*marturia*). Jesus tells us: You *shall be witnesses to Me*. (Acts 1:8) to be witness is the obedience to the mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ to become His witnesses."



That same God tells us that he does not want sacrifices, but mercy. That is, worship, the foundation of witness, can only be done through service (“I do not want sacrifice but the practice of concrete love”). Then the only worship to God is service: “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Witness is service. The only way to worship God is to serve your neighbor. Witness and worship of the church can only be given through diaconia. In these particular moments our world is living today, it is necessary to reaffirm this essential element of the commission of the church: service. In a world where large groups of people die of hunger and curable diseases, the church is called to act in favor of the weakest of the society helping to transform this reality in a possible better world for all. Creation is God’s workshop and we are His workers for the well-being of all that has been created.

When we repeat the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday we are making a commitment that we must accomplish. We pray, give us this day our daily bread. The expression is in plural; not give me my bread, but give us all the bread. It is a commitment to work for the bread of all men and women, of so many people needy in this world.

Witness that is service has a quality: It has to be prophetic. To be prophetic is not only criticizing what is wrong. Indeed, criticizing what is wrong must come from social commitment. If there is no participatory commitment, criticism becomes opportunistic idle talk or gossip, since it has the intention of taking advantage for one’s benefit or the benefit of an institution. Criticism has to come from a commitment embodied in a concrete human project that comes near God’s project. God’s project will be finally realized in his Kingdom, but this will only become possible through the limited human approximations which will have to be corrected in their concrete historical evolution. The Kingdom of God is the full realization of His justice and of life. Consequently, prophetic witness has to be oriented to the implementation and realization of justice and of life. Biblical justice is not only retributive. Biblical justice is manifested through the grace of God. Biblical justice is distributive and restoring. God wants well-being for all human beings and for all His creation. As Creator Father and Mother, God wants all His creatures to live fully; that was his intention at the moment of creation, to give full life to all His Creation—to distribute to all the resources of creation.

Biblical justice is also restoring. That is the meaning of the biblical Jubilee, the one Jesus describes in the inaugural speech of his mission at the Synagogue

of Nazareth and has come to become true. God orders that everything should come back to its origins and all the debts should be forgiven. There will be no more slaves or accumulation of property, since everything belongs to God.

However, it is also the restitution of life on earth that is why it is necessary to let it rest. The biblical Jubilee is the expression of a prophetic witness that seeks restitution for the victim. It seeks to correct what our sinful actions have taken away, against other human beings and against nature.

Prophetic action also consists of showing where God acts in the world, which is not necessarily through the church. The prophets of the Old Testament exerted their action from their commitment with the people, telling about the deviations of the people and about God's actions in the midst of his people. Hence, it is not only about criticizing, but also announcing where God is manifested in the world; it is finding where the promotion of life manifests concretely, a full life for all human beings and all creation; and committing to doing concrete actions in favor of that full life.

Prophetic witness denounces idols. Jesus Christ is the unique Lord. There is no other Lord, or Caesar, or ideologies, or political systems, nor physical or mental idols. In the world of today money and consumerism have become gods with huge cathedrals: mammon's cathedrals. There is no other Lord but Jesus Christ. Prophetic witness has to be committed only to renewing service in the name of the love Jesus showed us. "There is no greater love than the one that gives one's life for one's friends."

Prophetic witness as commission of the church is ecumenical because it brings us together in the midst of divisions and differences for the same purpose; the purpose of God for His creation: justice and life.

Our question, our challenges and surely necessarily our prayers in Cuba have been: How can we be prophetic in our context? Or, in theological terms, how can we discern the signs of times and God's will in such convulsive times to be faithful to Him in His name and raise a prophetic voice in this world of today? That is the question we ask of ourselves in Cuba constantly today. Finally, the goal of the commission is evangelization. But evangelism is not to fill the temples of people, but to bring the liberating message of Jesus Christ to the world—bringing the good news of the Gospel, which is the total liberation of human beings and of creation. We are called to bring the good news that God does not abandon us, but is present the acting world, through his Spirit, in the promotion



of life, the fullness of life for all human beings and his creation. And this God is calling us to be his collaborators.

Prophetic witness comes first and evangelization is the result. It is like the affirmation of the Samaritan woman by the well with Jesus: "Give me some water to drink." Or the jailer of Phillip: "What do I have to do?" We have to provoke the question. We seek to open the way to the Spirit so that Jesus enters and acts in the so needed world of today, as Jesus tells his disciples in front of Lazarus' grave, "remove the stone." He is asking us "remove the stones" so He can call to life. This is the theology that we try to do in our context. The challenge is to be collaborators of God in his mission.

I would like to end by making reference to something that is part of our competence as churches in the United States and in Cuba. We are living in interesting moments which constitute a real challenge to our peoples. For many years the churches have been the only link between our peoples, building bridges above the walls that have been raised. These walls are beginning to fall, and it is the moment to work together so that they finally break down, so that we can live in peace and harmony as historically neighboring and united peoples. May God give us the wisdom to act and work together, not only to accomplish that, but also to work together for justice and peace, in Cuba, in the United States, and in the world today. Let's pray and pray and pray more, so the Holy Spirit will give us strength, wisdom, and for all "effective" love to work in that sense.





***Subscription prices:***

1 year: 25 euro/30 USD

1 year solidarity subscription: 40 euro/50 USD

Single Issue: 15 euro/20 USD

*Reformed World is published three times a year.  
All prices include the cost of surface mailing.*

***Back issues, books and other  
publications are available from:***

World Communion of Reformed Churches  
Knochenhauerstrasse 42  
30159 Hannover  
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***Financial contributions are welcome!***

Cover, design and layout: Michael Kolk, Kolk Creative  
Printed in Germany.

Published by the World Communion of Reformed Churches  
42 Knochenhauerstrasse, 30159 Hannover, Germany

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