



Lukas Vischer: Reformed Witness Today

1. Place and Date of Publication

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2. Historical Context

This volume was suggested by a consultation which met from June 29th to July 4th, 1981, at Leuenberg in Switzerland. The consultation dealt with “Confessions and Confessing in the Reformed Tradition Today” – one of the main subjects at the forthcoming 1982 General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa. Lukas Vischer was in charge of both the Leuenberg consultation and the workshop on confessions and confessing in Ottawa.

The Leuenberg consultation discussed recent Reformed statements of faith from all continents and reflected on their implications for the Reformed family.

3. Summary

“The churches belonging to the Reformed tradition have always been inclined to state their deepest convictions afresh *in every new generation*. They tend to regard the formulation of confessions of faith as part of the mandate of proclamation entrusted to the church.”

Reformed confessions are *contextually* determined. The richness of the material contained in this volume proves the seriousness of the conviction that the Gospel requires renewed expression in order to respond to new situations.

Consequently, the statements collected here differ in content and purpose. Some churches update or re-define earlier confessions. Some pursue catechetical purposes. Some statements arise from the struggle of Christians in a critical political situation. They seek to alert the church to its task by reminding it of the implications of the faith in Jesus Christ. Others reconsider the Reformed heritage in a new cultural context or in the process of union negotiations with other churches.

Official texts certainly don’t represent the whole life of the church. Yet the formulations often summarize efforts of many years and represent the result of an extended process of reflection, consultation and exchange.

The confessions raise a number of questions: How is the relation of earlier and new statements to be understood? Are the earlier confessions the criterion for judging the new? Or are the old ones to be read in the light of the new? How are different approaches to be evaluated?

The Reformed family has never sought to express the faith of the church through a single statement, and there cannot be any question of making that attempt today. But there is certainly need for increased communication among the Reformed Churches on the *fundamental issues* they face as they confess the faith in their respective situations.

Reformed Witness Today

**A Collection of
Confessions and Statements
of Faith
Issued by Reformed Churches**

edited by Lukas Vischer

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Those statements of faith with * have been elaborated and adopted by an important movement within the churches.

Those statements of faith with ** have been elaborated by churches with a view to official adoption, but they have either not been approved or are still under discussion.

PREFACE

The collection of statements of faith gathered in this volume intends to give an idea of the position Reformed Churches take in the contemporary world. The churches belonging to the Reformed tradition have always been inclined to state their deepest convictions afresh in every new generation. They tend to regard the formulation of confessions of faith as part of the mandate of proclamation entrusted to the church. The present generation is no exception in this respect. In the last two decades many churches have felt impelled to give new expression to their faith in Jesus Christ.

The statements have been made by churches living in different situations. They differ therefore both in content and in purpose. Some are attempts to update or re-define earlier confessions of faith. Some have been written primarily for catechetical purposes; they seek to make the Christian faith more accessible to the members of the church. Some reflect the need to re-state the Reformed heritage in a new cultural context. Others arise from the struggle of Christians in a critical political situation and seek to alert the church to its task by reminding it of the implications of the faith in Jesus Christ. Many churches, finally, have been led to reflect afresh on the faith because of their involvement in union negotiations with other churches.

The preparation of this volume was suggested by a consultation which met from June 29th to July 4th 1981 at Leuenberg in Switzerland and dealt with the theme "Confessions and Confessing in the Reformed Tradition Today" (1). Representatives of different Reformed Churches came together to consider recent statements of faith and to reflect on their implications for the Reformed family today. In preparing for the consultation they realized that the relevant texts are relatively little known even among the Reformed Churches. For this reason the consultation strongly recommended that they should be made available in one volume.

(1) The report of this consultation can be obtained from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 150 route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.

The selection presented some problems. It was finally decided to include the confessions of faith which have been officially adopted by a church or at least were written with a view to such adoption. A few exceptions were made for statements which had wide repercussions in the Reformed family, although they have been published only under the responsibility of a movement or group. Special attention was given to texts which have resulted from union negotiations; clearly, the fact that so many Reformed Churches find it possible today to confess their faith together with churches of other traditions must be a matter of reflection for all Reformed Churches. It is quite possible that statements which should have been included in the collection have escaped the attention of the editor. Any suggestions for additions and corrections will be most welcome.

The volume does not give a complete picture of Reformed thinking and practice today. Official texts, as important as they are, do not represent the whole life of the church. Many debates which are of crucial importance for the Reformed family (to mention only one example, the debate on the authority of Scriptures) could have been documented only by adding material of less official status like occasional declarations and publications of the churches, movements or organisations within the churches or even certain statements made by individuals. The official texts deserve, however, special attention because of the status which they have received through a formal decision of a church. In many cases, the formulations summarize the efforts of many years and represent the result of an extended process of reflection, consultation and exchange.

The richness of the material contained in this volume is in the first place cause for rejoicing. It proves the seriousness of the Reformed conviction that in order to respond to new situations the Gospel requires renewed expression. The reader will soon discover, however, that the collection also raises questions which call for answers. The new confessions of faith do not simply restate in new terms the content of earlier confessions. How is the relation of the old to the new to be understood? Are the earlier confessions the criterion for judging the new? Or are the old to be read in the light of the new? Furthermore, the statements adopt approaches which differ in many respects. How are these differences to be evaluated?

The collection witnesses to the concern of Reformed Churches to confess their faith in Jesus Christ today. As in the past they do so each in its own situation. They see their primary responsibility in relation to the context in which they have been placed. They are also aware, however, that they need the support and the critical solidarity of their sister churches. The Reformed family has never sought to express the faith of the church through one statement and there cannot be any question of making that attempt today. But there is certainly need for increased communication among the Reformed Churches on the fundamental issues they face as they confess the faith in their situation. It is hoped that the present collection will serve as an instrument to facilitate this exchange.

Finally, I want to thank all who have contributed in making possible the publication of the volume - the World Alliance of Reformed Churches for its encouragement and the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research for the grant made available for the realisation of the project. Special thanks are due to two colleagues who have given much time and energy to collect the material and to obtain the necessary introductions - Ms Karin Bredull and Mr Heinz Rüeeggler. I want to express here my sincere thanks for their help.

January 1982

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