



## Lukas Vischer: Jesus Christ Behind Western Culture

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### 2. Historical Context

In 1980, Lukas Vischer requested the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to work out a position paper on theological issues which challenge the life and witness of Reformed churches. The request resulted in the 1982 document "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today" which initiated a worldwide study process in many churches and became the central activity of WARC until its 1989 General Council in Seoul. The following lecture was given on the way, at the WARC consultation in Cairo 1984.

### 3. Summary

Why "Jesus Christ *behind* Western Culture"? The title points to a tension. Jesus Christ manifests himself in a perspective *different* from moral standards, political options and the culture which bears his name. Western culture today is in fact post-Christian. While most problems in this connection are common to all Christians, some questions arise specifically for Reformed churches.

The discovery of the reformers implied both a radical critique of the medieval synthesis of church and empire *and* a critique of the rising consciousness of human autonomy rooted in contemporary humanism. Since the enlightenment a scientific approach to nature gained ground; priority was gradually given to the technological mastery of life. - More and more the Reformed tradition identified itself with this modern culture. The doctrine of predestination was called into question; churches affirmed the autonomy of reason and the principles of human rights. In many ways Reformed tradition was in the forefront of the struggle for modern society. An internal struggle, however, between very progressive and most reactionary elements continues up to this day. - If we consider that the reformers' confession of Jesus Christ enabled them to be critical both of the established order *and* of humanistic self-affirmation: What is it the church has to confess today?

Some aspects: As we strive for emancipation we cause suffering and injustice. *homologeïn* means affirming and admitting. In affirming Jesus Christ and in admitting our sin to him we begin to see beyond the contradictions of our human existence. - The confidence in Christ who will bring about the kingdom of God overcomes the paralysis caused either by the magnitude of the tasks before us to prevent the self-destruction predicted by scientists or the paralysis caused by fear of ultimate failure. - Confessing Christ requires a strong emphasis on his lordship not only over the sphere of inner life but over all realms, including the claims of nation-states. - It implies to identify ourselves with the victims society is constantly creating all over the world. Each local community is a building stone and has the task of representing the universal community in the context in which it lives.

The churches in the Western world need the witness of churches in other parts of the world to be liberated both from excessive claims and from parochialism. - This is why the exercise proposed by the study "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today" is so essential for the future of Western churches.

# REFORMED WORLD

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## **CALLED TO WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL TODAY**

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# Jesus Christ Behind Western Culture

By LUKAS VISCHER

## 1. *Behind*

The wording of the theme I have been asked to address is interesting. Jesus Christ *behind* Western culture. Why behind? For other regions the formulation of the theme is different. Who is Jesus *in* an Islamic society? Jesus Christ *in* African perspectives? For the Western world the preposition changes from *in* to *behind*. Obviously, this change expresses a definite view on the relationship between the Gospel and the Western world. It assumes that the relationship to Western culture is different from the relationship to other cultures. What is the difference?

Perhaps consciously or perhaps unconsciously, the wording points to a tension. In one sense it must be said that Jesus Christ is present *in* Western culture. He is an inevitable point of reference in Western culture. The Gospel, the biblical tradition and the teaching which resulted from it are part of Western history. They are at the basis of many values which are recognized as self-evident in Western culture and society. They are the framework in which the religious dimension of society finds its expression and serves as a source of constant inspiration. They are a powerful element in the artistic tradition of the West. In the Western culture some kind of encounter with Jesus Christ is almost as inevitable as in India with the tradition of Hinduism.

But is it really Jesus Christ who is present in this culture? Jesus as he taught the disciples? The risen Christ as he appeared to the apostles and sent them into the world? Is it really him to whom the "Christian" elements of Western culture point? Or is Jesus Christ to be found somewhere "*behind*" Western culture? The thesis of the title which I have been given obviously assumes that Jesus Christ is not identical with the name Jesus Christ which serves as point of reference in Western culture. In order to discover Jesus Christ we need to penetrate *behind* the Christian surface of Western culture. Perhaps the relationship can be compared to the relationship of a source and a river which carry the same name despite the fact that the river in its course from the heights of the mountains has absorbed many other rivers and smaller waters by which it has been polluted to a certain extent. Or is the tension perhaps even more serious than this image suggests? Is the relationship to be

understood in terms of contradiction? Christ obscured and made unrecognizable by the Christian tradition?

The tension the term "*behind*" points to is also very much my personal experience.

I could describe my own biography as a journey to discover Jesus Christ behind the Christian world into which I was born. My parents were Christians. They were not particularly members of the church but they had a very genuine commitment to the "faith of the fathers". I have great respect for the way in which they gave expression to the Christian faith in their life, especially for the courageous and sometimes non-conformist views of my father.

In any case the framework in which I grew up was indisputably dominated by Christian values. It took many years before I met people who called into question the validity of the Christian tradition. The friends of the family who, in fact, were agnostics were polite enough not to speak about their views in front of children. But then I became gradually aware of the tension which exists between the Gospel and the world in which I lived. Studies, encounters and conflicts made the conclusion inescapable: the assumptions of the Christian world in which I lived were perhaps not as Christian as I had thought. Unexpectedly, Jesus Christ manifested himself in new perspectives, different from the moral standards which I had accepted as valid, different from the political options which I had taken for granted, and (especially through the encounters with Christians representing other cultures) different from the culture which bears his name. A journey unfinished to this day.

The same problem arises in the other direction. Communicating the Gospel is a difficult task in all cultures. It presents particular difficulties in a Christian culture. When I speak about Jesus Christ I am speaking to people who know or think to know about him. On the one hand this is an immense advantage. There is a common framework facilitating the exchange. On the other hand the message always tends to get confused with the Christian tradition which has contributed to giving shape to Western culture; and because the Christian tradition is an integral element of Western culture there is an interest in Western society in gaining the support of the Christian tradition for all kinds of causes. The message of Christ is interpreted to favour both the status quo and the most radical criticisms of it. Sometimes, even circles alienated from the church, continue to claim Christian values for themselves.

Thus the study "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today" confronts the churches in countries dominated by Western culture with the following challenge. How do you witness to Jesus Christ in a Christian context? Who is the Christ behind your culture? Who is he in the conflicting interpretations of Christianity which are

represented among you? The question can also be asked differently. What kind of confession is required today? And what kind of church is required to make this confession credible to the world?

## 2. *A New Missionary Situation*

The tension between Jesus Christ and Western culture has become even more obvious in recent decades and years. The view that Western culture is based on Christian values has become more and more difficult to maintain. In fact, the churches increasingly recognize that they are living in a missionary situation. Years ago a book was published in France whose title quickly acquired wide currency: "France - pays de mission". At the time of publication many were still of the opinion that the situation in France was exceptional. In the meantime it has become clear that the same situation applies to almost all countries living in a Western culture. The churches have to learn anew to live in a missionary situation. Western culture is in fact not Christian but post-Christian.

This is true at various levels of the churches' witness and life:

- There is first the numerical problem. Increasingly the churches are led to the recognition that they represent no more than a minority in the population. In many countries, large sections of the population have given up even their nominal membership of the church. The movement has recently begun to touch the churches in Switzerland. The church of Geneva — to take just one example — is severely hit. Attendance at public worship has become minimal. Many people have given up membership and the church, despite the fact that it is placed in one of the richest cities of the world, struggles with serious financial problems. The same is true for my native town Basel. Over the last years hundreds, especially of the younger generation, have left the church. The new situation requires from the churches a new orientation. What does it mean to be a minority in a post-Christian society? How can the church adjust to the new status without losing the horizon of the whole society?
- But the tension appears at an even deeper level. It becomes more and more evident that standards which for generations were regarded as Christian cannot serve anymore as general rules for the life of society. Legislation on marriage and family is the most obvious example. While in the past the teaching of the church was regarded as capable of generalization through legislation for the whole of society it is now recognized that it belongs to the realm of the witness of the church. Similarly, the church finds itself in a minority over decisive political questions. In the course of the last years the churches in Switzerland took a clear stand on several issues which were submitted to a popular vote —

they opposed the production and sales of arms, they pleaded for a more generous legislation concerning the rights of foreigners in our country, for many years they fought for the decriminalization of conscientious objection. They lost all these cases. The issue of nuclear armament raises an even more fundamental problem for the relationship between the church and Western society. More and more the churches are led to recognize that the production, the possession and the use of mass destruction means are incompatible with the Gospel. But this stand is in fact not followed by governments nor by the majority in society. Western society is so firmly based on other grounds that it seems incapable of changing the course which leads to ever more nuclear arms.

- It would be too simple to see the tension between the Gospel and Western culture exclusively in a difference of ethical options. Especially the last example shows that the difference is much more fundamental. The frame of thinking on which Western culture is based is, in fact, at stake. Since the enlightenment the scientific approach to nature, human existence and society has gradually gained ground. Priority was given to the technological mastery of life. The churches' response to the dominance of the scientific world view was characterized either by defensiveness or surrender. The conflict was avoided either by retreat or by reinterpreting the Gospel in the perspective of the scientific world view. A fragile co-existence developed. It was based on the distinction between the realm of history and human existence on the one hand and the realm open to scientific research and explanation on the other hand. God and faith in God may be relevant in the life of individuals and groups of individuals but convictions based on faith cannot gain the general acceptance which is required for ordering society. Because of their "self-evident" character the values of scientific research and technological progress became dominant in Western culture. The relevance of faith was increasingly confined to the personal realm.

For generations the church tended to accept this dichotomy between the world of faith and the world of science. It was inclined to be content with its limited role. It shared the conviction that the scientific world view was coherent and capable of explaining nature and human life and of leading the way to progress. It was, therefore, prepared to recognize the autonomy of reason and of culture. It was satisfied with the view that scientific and technological discoveries were good and ethically neutral; ethical considerations had to begin only when they were put to wrong and destructive use.

But are these assumptions really justified? Can the church be satisfied with the dichotomy between the world of faith and the

world of science? Is there not the need for a much more critical evaluation of the very bases of Western culture? Does faith in and communion with the risen Christ not demand a radical critique of the scientific world view when it begins to act as an ideology in society? The Church is called to a "missionary" attitude at the deepest level of Western culture! The developments of the last decades have led in a relatively short lapse of time to an impressive loss of self-confidence in Western culture. The promises of the scientific world view have not been fulfilled. It has brought many blessings; but it is becoming increasingly manifest that it has also destructive effects. Where are we going? In principle, this question opens the possibility of a new relationship between the church and the scientific world. The time has come for a critical dialogue. Outstanding scientists are ready to consider afresh the significance of faith. But the church is not yet prepared to accept the challenge and to respond critically and constructively to the crisis of Western culture. It has itself accommodated so solidly to the scientific world view that it lacks so far the resources for a genuinely missionary response to the new situation.

### 3. *The Case of the Reformed Tradition*

But why do we discuss these questions in a meeting of Reformed Christians? Are we not dealing with problems which are common to all Christians? No doubt, the crisis of Western culture touches all churches. But there are questions which arise specifically for the Reformed churches. The Reformation and subsequent developments have resulted in a very complex relationship to Western culture. A few words on this subject may be helpful for our discussion.

The Reformation was an ambivalent event. As far as the relationship to Western culture is concerned the movement inaugurated by the Reformation can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand it can be seen as a movement paving the way to a new era in Western culture. On the other hand it can be understood as a "conservative" movement of protest against the nascent emphasis on the autonomy of man and of human reason. The two interpretations are equally possible.

The discovery of the Reformers inevitably implied a radical critique of the medieval synthesis of church and empire. They were led to a new understanding of the Gospel. God in his infinite love speaks to human beings imprisoned in their sinfulness. Through his word he restores them to communion with him. He sets them free. The church has its *raison-d'être* in receiving and proclaiming this liberating word. The word calls the church into being and the church has life by faithfully listening to the word. The new emphasis on the personal character of salvation was bound to lead to a conflict



with the established order. Luther was soon confronted with the representatives of both the church and the empire. As a consequence of his discovery of the Gospel he was forced to call into question the authority of the tradition, the conciliar decrees and the hierarchy of the church. He even had to defy the authority of the emperor. As it turned out the pillars on which the medieval synthesis rested were shaken by the message of the Reformers. Luther became a powerful messenger of freedom. The Reformers who were at the root of the Reformed tradition went even a step further. They took an active part in reordering society on the basis of the critique to which they had been led by their theological and spiritual insights. Zwingli and Calvin contributed directly to the rise of a new era in Western culture.

But there is the other side as well. The Reformers found themselves soon in conflict with the humanist movement of their time. They shared with them the passion for the return to the sources. They wanted the truth of the origins to be restored in their time. The *vetustas* (the old time) was the guiding norm for both of them. But, in fact, in turning to the past, they found different sources. The biblical tradition was not in harmony with the sources to which the Renaissance and the humanist movement appealed. The Gospel could not be interpreted as favouring the self-realization of man. The conflict was therefore inevitable. It was less dramatic than the conflict with the established authorities and attracted less public attention. But it had a determining effect on the tradition which resulted from the Reformation movement. I am thinking in the first place of Luther's controversy with Erasmus of Rotterdam on the issue of human freedom. Against the humanist scholar Luther maintained that human beings find freedom exclusively through God's grace. I am also thinking of Ulrich Zwingli and his spiritual evolution to biblical teaching which after several stages made him reject his earlier humanist orientation. In fact, all Reformers had to deal in one way or another with this second front. Sometimes I wonder whether it is due to this controversy that the Reformers developed with so much insistence their doctrine of predestination. For what else is this doctrine in its deepest intention than a consistent witness to the sovereignty of God's love and a radically critical assessment of man's innate capacity to realize the sole purpose of his life. In any case the Reformers are united in their stand against the rising modern consciousness of human autonomy.

The two impulses had a continuing effect on the Reformed tradition. While the second prevailed in the first centuries after the Reformation, the first has become more and more dominant since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is no exaggeration to speak of a shift within the Reformed tradition. More and more the

Reformed tradition identified itself with modern Western culture. More and more it began to promote as part of its message the values associated with the modern image of man — it affirmed the autonomy of reason, it made its own the principles of human dignity and human freedom, it defended the liberty of conscience and human rights. In many ways, the Reformed tradition was in the forefront of the struggle for modern society.

It is interesting to note that this shift was connected with fierce debates on the validity of the doctrine of predestination. For two centuries the doctrine was of central importance in Reformed teaching. In the course of the seventeenth century it was gradually called into question. Today it has almost entirely disappeared from the body of Reformed teaching. Though it has still a firm place in Reformed dogmatics, I am thinking especially of Karl Barth's extensive treatment of the subject, it is not even mentioned in the statements of faith which have been issued by Reformed churches in the last five decades.

Obviously, the shift has never been complete in the Reformed tradition. The internal struggle between the two approaches continues up to this day. The Reformed family is divided on the issue of its relationship to modern culture. A small group of churches maintains the classical teaching of the Reformed confessions of faith and accuses the other churches of having surrendered the substance of Christian faith to the modern world. It is characteristic of the Reformed family that it includes the two extremes: most reactionary and very progressive elements.

Where do we go with this double heritage? As we have seen the basic tension between the Gospel and Western culture has become much more manifest than it was in the past. A more critical approach is required with regard to the assumptions on which Western culture is built and is pursuing its course. Where will the Reformed churches find the inspiration for the new response which is required? A simple return to the classical positions of the Reformed teaching in the 16th and 17th centuries is excluded. The categories used in the classical confessions of faith may have served their purpose at that time but they cannot be taken over today. Even on biblical grounds their limitations have to be recognized. The confessionalistic approach has been further disqualified because it has been misused by certain Reformed churches to reject imperatives which in obedience to Christ have to be accepted. But does the liberal approach provide the alternative? As we have seen, the confidence in this approach is rapidly vanishing. It starts too easily from the assumption of a basic harmony between the Christian tradition and Western culture. While it was progressive and perhaps even revolutionary at a certain moment of history, it turns out to be basically supportive of the frame of thinking today.

Thus where do we go? Personally I think that a return to the Reformers themselves is required. They were capable of conducting the struggle on a double front. Their confession of Jesus Christ enabled them to be critical both of the established order *and* of human self-affirmation. They fought on the one hand for the liberation of the people from the authorities standing in the way of their salvation. They warned on the other hand against the naive confidence in human self-determination. True humanity can be found only in A communion with Jesus Christ. Today the Reformed churches living in the context of Western culture have the task of re-capturing in their preaching and their life this double concern.

The tradition of the original impulses of the Reformation has never entirely died. There have always been voices in the Reformed tradition which cannot be identified either with the Orthodox Reformed teaching or with the affirmations of the modern world. Their witness was particularly alive in minority groups. It is probably this tradition of "unrest in the name of Christ" which provides some clues for the future.

#### 4. *The Central Affirmation: Jesus Christ — Lord and Saviour*

What is it the church has to confess today in Western culture? The immediate answer is obvious: Jesus Christ. The theme of the church's witness is not to be invented. It is given. At the centre of every confession of faith stands the simple affirmation: Jesus Christ — Lord and Saviour. The study "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today" is very clear and definite on that point. It invites the churches to give expression to the Gospel in their respective contexts. At the same time it makes clear that whatever the context the point of departure remains the same: Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed. The theme is common to all churches; and they can live up to their calling only by sticking firmly to this theme. This is true also for the churches in the context of Western culture. They will be able to meet the challenges of the new missionary situation only through a passionate concentration on the very basis of the church's faith. *Christus solus* — Christ alone.

Two considerations may be of some importance at this point:

— *Christus solus* — Christ alone: Is this formula really helpful? Does it not inevitably lead to a reduction of the fullness of biblical teaching? In fact, the insistence of the Reformers on the centrality of Jesus Christ has often been misunderstood in this way in subsequent times. The Reformed churches have often given the impression in their teaching and preaching that the church's attention had to fall exclusively on the redemptive work of Christ and the way it is to be appropriated by man. The

Reformers themselves did not intend such a reduction. Their use of the formula had in the first place a polemical note. It was due to the concern that the way of salvation which God himself in his infinite love had chosen could be obscured in the church. The one source could be replaced or supplemented by other sources. Methods of self-redemption could be proposed. The Reformers did not intend to isolate the redemptive work of Christ from creation and fulfilment. They unhesitatingly affirmed the trinitarian teaching of the Ancient church. They determinately held together creation, redemption and fulfilment: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their insistence on the formula "Christus solus" was simply meant to provide the key for understanding the trinitarian teaching anew. Creation, redemption and the fulfilment of history in the kingdom of God could be properly understood only in the light of the election and mediation of Jesus Christ. The formula "Christus solus" will only be helpful to the churches if it is placed in this comprehensive trinitarian perspective.

- The second consideration concerns the connection between the confessions of faith and the confessing community. The confession of Jesus Christ requires a confessing community. In fact, it is inadequate to speak of Jesus Christ as a theme. He is present in the midst of the community which calls on his name. The confession of faith is therefore not in the first place a theological statement developing correctly the basic theme of the Bible. It is a matter of the community responding to the presence of Jesus Christ in its midst. The confession of faith expresses in words the faith by which the community is moved in its life. The confession of faith must always be supported by the life of the confessing community.

The consideration is of particular importance for the churches in the context of Western culture. If they are to confess anew Jesus Christ they have to constitute themselves anew as communities in Jesus Christ. The new missionary situation has not yet led to this consequence. The borderlines between the church and society continue to be blurred. Recently I had a three day seminar with Swiss pastors on the booklet "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today". During the first two days we had a very interesting theological debate. On the third day we tried to draw some conclusions for the witness of the church in Switzerland. Very quickly the discussion ran into an impasse because the pastors suddenly realized that they had never thought of themselves as a community called to confess the faith together. Each had faithfully fulfilled his or her task but they had never worked on the common understanding of their witness. The question was even raised whether it was desirable to form a

community capable of such a confession? Was it not better to offer to society a multiplicity of witnesses? Would the common confession not further disrupt the fragile relationship between the church and the "Christian" society? On the other hand, it became quite clear that for many the lack of community was a cause of suffering. The renewal of witness was to come only out of a new sense of being the church.

The dilemma is, I think, genuine. The question is how to form a confessing community without withdrawing into a ghetto where the witness to Christ can easily end in irrelevance.

### *5. How is the Central Affirmation to be Developed in the Present Western World?*

Clearly, the central affirmation needs to be developed differently in each situation. Where should the emphasis fall in the Western world? Let me mention a few themes which were invariably suggested in recent discussions I had on the study "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today". I shall choose six themes.

#### 5.1 Jesus Christ brings life to fulfilment.

Jesus Christ gives ultimate meaning to our lives by offering us communion with him. We are incapable of bringing our lives to fulfilment. Whatever we undertake we remain in the prison of contradictions. God's word announces to us that in Christ we are accepted as we are. Justified by the faith that Jesus Christ will bring our lives to fulfilment. A new life begins as we abandon ourselves to Jesus Christ.

Justification by faith as the only ground for a life in hope and love remains the first affirmation to be made in the confession of the church. Possibly it is today even more relevant than in the past centuries.

On the one hand people in Western culture have acquired enormous new capacities. New horizons have opened and in many respects life has become richer. Human efforts in science, technology and daily work have indisputably brought considerable gains to both personal and collective life in the Western world. People have been freed of many limitations. At the same time the new standards represent a considerable pressure. People live under the obligation to make use of the new capacities and gains. Meaning of life is being measured by the degree of self-realization which can be achieved.

On the other hand people increasingly realize that the gains of modern times have also led to new forms of suffering and injustice. Emancipation and self-realization in the Western World demand a high price. They can be obtained only at the price of victims both

inside and outside its own realm. As we strive for emancipation and self-realization we cause suffering and injustice. Everyone of us in the Western world is inevitably part of a system which is based on exploitation. Moral efforts of the individual will not remove the contradiction in which we are living. They are just capable of pointing to the problem and perhaps of establishing signs of protest against the injustice. They will not free us from the sin which is inherent in our style of life.

Jesus Christ brings our lives to fulfilment. We entirely depend on his acceptance and forgiveness.

I think it is immensely significant that the word "confessing" (homologeïn) is used in the New Testament in two meanings. It can mean both affirm and admit. We affirm Jesus Christ as Lord and we admit our sin before him. One is not possible without the other. As we make our "confession" in this double sense, we can begin to see beyond the contradictions of our human existence. Ulrich Zwingli once said: "Truth has a joyful face." I think it is because the truth is a message of ultimate liberation.

## 5.2 Christ brings history to fulfilment.

The message concerns not only the personal existence of every individual but also the fulfilment of history. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history. Despite all powers of destruction and death he will bring about the kingdom of God.

For two reasons it is essential to underline this conviction in the Western world.

On the one hand Western culture is characterized by a strong emphasis on human responsibility in history. The future is in your hands. In fact, the statement cannot be denied. The modern *homo faber* is bound to build a next stage of Western culture. Mutations of immense magnitude are approaching. In a relatively short time the Western world will again change its face and shape. Enormous strides are being made in many fields at the same time: nuclear research, genetics, electronics to name only a few. Though we cannot make out yet where precisely we shall be led by the combined impact of these discoveries and their technological application, we know that the very bases of Western culture will be transformed. Human effort changes the course of history.

On the other hand Western culture is characterized today by an atmosphere of doom. The uncertainty of the future is being felt very sharply at all levels of Western society. Renowned scientists point to the threats awaiting us and project images of dehumanization and even self-destruction. Apocalyptic visions until recently considered to belong to a previous stage of history are again discussed in many circles. Fear has become a dominant feeling in the Western world. Fear is at the root of both attitudes: The

widespread mood of cynicism and non-expectation as well as the desperate appeals for a radical "moral rearmament" by which, it is said, the future catastrophe might be avoided.

Christ brings history to fulfilment. The message is simply that the future is finally in his hands. Whatever occurs, every step brings us closer to his kingdom. When these things happen, says Jesus, "lift your heads because your liberation is at hand" (Luke 21:28). The confidence in Christ as Lord of history restores the sense of expectation. It frees both from and for history. It overcomes the paralysis caused either by the magnitude of the tasks before us or by the fear of ultimate failure. Even if we should not be able to master the course of history we know that every act of obedience counts in his eyes.

### 5.3 Christ — Lord over all things.

Confessing Christ in the Western world today requires a strong emphasis on his Lordship over all realms of life. The relevance of the Gospel must not be confined to the spiritual realm; it extends to all spheres of life. God is not only concerned with the spiritual fulfilment of man. He is not content with freeing him from the complexity of history. He wants him to recover the fulness of life. The Gospel is therefore a permanent protest against all forces which tend to de-humanize life.

The churches in the Western world are particularly exposed to the temptation of confining the relevance of faith to the sphere of inner life. The theory of two distinct realms is a convenient design for both the church and society. It permits avoiding the direct encounter or perhaps confrontation between the Gospel and the forces operating in society. It makes peaceful co-existence possible.

The fulfilment of the missionary calling of the church, however, requires both an analysis and a critique of the priorities society is choosing for itself. Where does it neglect or even violate the fundamental values which count in the eyes of God? What use is made in society of open and hidden power? Where are the direct and indirect causes of suffering?

Fifty years ago the Barmen declaration rejected as heretical the "false teaching that there are areas of life in which we do not belong to Jesus Christ but to another Lord, areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through him" (§ 2). The warning is as valid today in the Western world as it was in 1934.

### 5.4 Christ sets limits to the claims of the state.

When the church seriously pursues its witness in all realms of human society it will soon be confronted with the claims of the state. The nation-state plays an enormous role in Western culture. Recently,

Lesslie Newbigin wrote in a study booklet published by the British Council of Churches: "How and by whom is human happiness to be secured? With growing emphasis, post-Enlightenment societies have answered: by the State. The nation-state, replacing the old concepts of the holy church and the holy empire, is the centre piece in post-Enlightenment Europe... The passions which had formerly been invested in rival interpretations of religion were more and more invested in the nationstate. Nationalism became the effective ideology of European peoples, always at times of crisis proving stronger than any other ideological or religious force. If there is any entity to which ultimate loyalty is due, it is the nation-state... The charge of blasphemy, if it is ever made, is treated as a quaint anachronism; but the charge of treason, of placing another loyalty above that to the nation-state, is treated as the unforgivable crime." (*The Other Side of 1984*, p. 15).

I think this judgment is accurate. The state holds responsibility for large sections of human life. To a very large extent family life, school, professional education, the economic development of the country are under its authority. Increasingly, the state is promoting arts and artistic expression. But more important than everything else: the state is expected to offer security to its citizens in more and more spheres of life; health, employment and defense are to be secured by the state.

As a consequence of this development the role of the church in society is largely defined by the claims of the state. The church enjoys a clearly limited freedom; it may offer criticisms of certain deviation; it may even provide correctives. Basically, it is expected to support the state in the fulfilment of its tasks.

In almost all countries, the relationship between church and state is today anew under discussion. There is a search for new solutions.

Under the aspect of the missionary calling of the church the present relationship is unsatisfactory. The proclamation of the Gospel requires more than the limited freedom the churches enjoy. As we move to a new stage of Western culture witness must be given more and more through the life of the community. The values neglected or violated by society must find expression in a distinct community. Confessing Christ today means therefore the courage to set limits to the claims of the state.

### 5.5 Christ's partiality to be reflected in his body

Confessing Christ today in Western culture means to stand as a community where Christ himself is to be found in society: To identify ourselves with the victims society is constantly creating. The rapid changes of society may bring liberation in some respects,



but they are also the cause of much suffering. With every change new groups of people are marginalized. Will the churches follow Christ where he is going?

The identification cannot be confined to the immediate neighbourhood. It has to extend beyond the borders of the nation-state. The fulfilment of the missionary calling implies a protest against the collective self-interest of the Western world. Confessing Christ leads the church to be a place of solidarity with the suffering everywhere.

A year ago an international colloquium took place in Geneva on the struggle against torture. Several people who had gone through times of extreme suffering attended the meeting. I was impressed and almost embarrassed by their expectations with regard to the church. Wherever the state decides to defend its interests at all costs and turns dictatorial the church is a decisive element of resistance. While other independent organizations very quickly lose their freedom of action the church can continue to offer a place of solidarity. It is the last refuge in society. But of course, the question is whether it is prepared for this role.

The deepest meaning for the resolution against torture which the General Council adopted is to remind the churches of their task of identification with the victims society is creating. Torture stands symbolically for all sufferings caused by so-called higher interests. It is the extreme expression of the disregard for human dignity.

## 5.6 Christ's body is universal

Confessing Christ today in the Western world implies a new vision of a universal community. The church must not be limited by borderlines. It is a community extending over all continents. Of course, we are all in the first place members of a local community. We are called to witness to Christ in the setting in which we are placed. But as members of the local community we are at the same time members of the universal community of all Christians. When we witness to Jesus Christ in the local community we are surrounded by the witness of all Christians. The local community always lives in a global context.

Confessing Christ today requires the readiness to participate in the construction and the life of the universal community. He has crossed the borderlines which separate humanity and draws us into a communion where exchange and mutual solidarity become possible. Each local community is a building stone of the universal community. At the same time each local community has the task of representing the universal community in the context in which it lives. It has the task of challenging imprisonment in national and local interests.

The churches in the Western world are exposed to a very particular temptation. They easily confuse the local and the universal. They tend to think that their understanding of the Gospel has universal validity. They do not realize that it is rooted in and limited by the particular context in which they live. For the same reason they tend to disregard as irrelevant the expressions of faith developed in other parts of the world. Despite their claims of universal validity for their understanding of the Christian faith they tend to remain parochial in their outlook. In order to contribute constructively to the realization of the new vision of the universal community they need to become both “less” and “more” European.

They will not achieve this change through their own efforts. They need the witness of the churches in other parts of the world to be liberated both from their excessive claims and from their parochialism. This is why the exercise proposed by the study “Called to Witness to the Gospel Today” is so essential for their future.

Prof. Dr. Lukas Vischer, of the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches, is Moderator of the Department of Theology of the WARC.

# **CALLED TO WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL TODAY**

**AN INVITATION FROM THE GENERAL COUNCIL  
OF THE  
WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES**

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**STUDIES FROM THE  
WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES**

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# Called to Witness to the Gospel Today

## PREFACE

In sending this document in the name of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to our member churches for study and reaction, we, the undersigned, are acting at the specific request of the General Council, which met, August 17-27, 1982, Ottawa, Canada. At the outset we wish to underline that this is not just another document, produced by yet another international gathering, for yet another study project.

To get the background straight we have to return to the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Alliance, August 1980, Princeton, USA, when a memorandum was received from the Federation of Protestant Churches of Switzerland, urging upon the Reformed family a specific study of "certain distinctive theological issues which challenge the life and witness of the Reformed..." The Alliance reacted positively. An international colloquium of theologians worked out a draft document with the title "Reformed Witness Today". That document was published along with others as a preparatory paper for the Ottawa General Council. During the General Council a committee, representative of all parts of the constituency, worked intensively to reshape the original draft in the light of debate. Consequently the General Council resolved to receive the document, instructing that after due process of final editing, taking account of comments made, *it be sent to all member churches for their study and reaction with responses to be in the hands of the Geneva secretariat not later than December 31, 1984.*

Those who take up these pages will quickly sense the serious nature of the issues explored. Not a few are obviously theologically divisive, not only within our own family of Reformed churches, but far beyond within the oikoumene at large. In recognition of this situation, the original decision of the Executive Committee to mount this project stressed the forthcoming discussion within the Reformed family "as an integral part of the Reformed self-understanding of role and policy in the ecumenical movement".

The document tries to identify certain major issues, recognising that there is no attempt to be exhaustive. Many of the questions raised are not new, and yet to continue to ignore them, would be to jeopardise the integrity of the truth and very nature of the Reformed family. A variety of decisions during the Ottawa General Council have evidenced the determination of the member churches to grapple seriously with major problems confronting the Christian and the

Church in the world of today. It is vitally important that in all of this we as a family know on what we are agreed and on what we are in disagreement.

As we invite the churches to take up this study we recognise that we are all being challenged together to engage in a certain pioneering adventure. We cannot tell where the road will lead. At this stage we want to assure the member churches that their reactions will be most carefully considered and evaluated. At present, the important decision is the willingness to be involved and to be committed. It is the conviction of those of us who went through the Ottawa experience in August 1982 that the considerable demands of this study will remain with the Alliance as a major priority for several years ahead. It is our expectation that not only will the member churches set up specific study groups but that the document will also be used as a discussion tool at the level of congregations. It is also our hope that the process of liason and contact between the churches will draw us all closer together in the unity of the Faith.

A word of appreciation must be expressed to the many who at several stages have carried a major responsibility in producing the text. A list of names would be invidious but we wish to mention in particular, Dr Lukas Vischer, who was the Moderator of the special Committee on Reformed Witness Today during the General Council. The inspiration and the challenge of these pages owe much to his distinguished leadership.

May the work to which we are now setting our hand bring us all to a deeper awareness of our calling in the service of Jesus Christ, the King and the Head of the Church.

*Allan A. Boesak*  
*President*  
*WARC*

*Edmond Perret*  
*General Secretary*  
*WARC*

Geneva, Christmas 1982.

## INTRODUCTION

As we have met, as we have shared in worship, as we have meditated upon the concluding words of the Lord's prayer, 'Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory', we have experienced afresh God's presence in Jesus Christ. He is our hope because, in him, in his cross and resurrection, God has made it clear that his love is stronger than all kingdoms, powers and glories of this world. We praise God for this love.

As we have met, we have been given a new awareness of the manifold ways in which the Spirit is at work in our midst.

- In God's good purpose, the Gospel has spread into almost all parts of the world. In many countries the Spirit is opening new doors for the proclamation of the Gospel; the churches in Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan and in many parts of Africa have grown and are still growing.
- Facing the challenges and crises of their societies, many churches have discovered in new ways the challenge and relevance of the Gospel.
- Above all, we have been strengthened by the steadfast witness of churches and many individual Christians in situations of injustice, repression and persecution; many are prepared to pay the price of suffering, of prison, and even of death.

For all this we give thanks. At the same time, we have realised how immense are the tasks which lie before the Reformed churches. What is the witness we have to bear today? As we ask this question we are faced with challenges and unresolved questions which call for fresh answers.

The Reformed churches have always placed primary emphasis on contemporary witness to the Gospel. They are indebted to the Reformers for the renewal of the church in their time. They continue to live in the movement initiated by them. They meditate upon the heritage they have received and seek to learn from the insights of earlier generations, especially as these are expressed in the ancient creeds and the confessions of the Reformation. But they have always been aware that new situations may require fresh expressions of the faith of the church. New issues may arise which demand a new response on the basis of Scripture and in the light of experience. The Reformed tradition cannot be simply defined by

reference to the Reformed Confessions of the 16 and 17 centuries; we are only faithful to its spirit as we obey the call of the Gospel in the contemporary world.

We face here three major challenges:

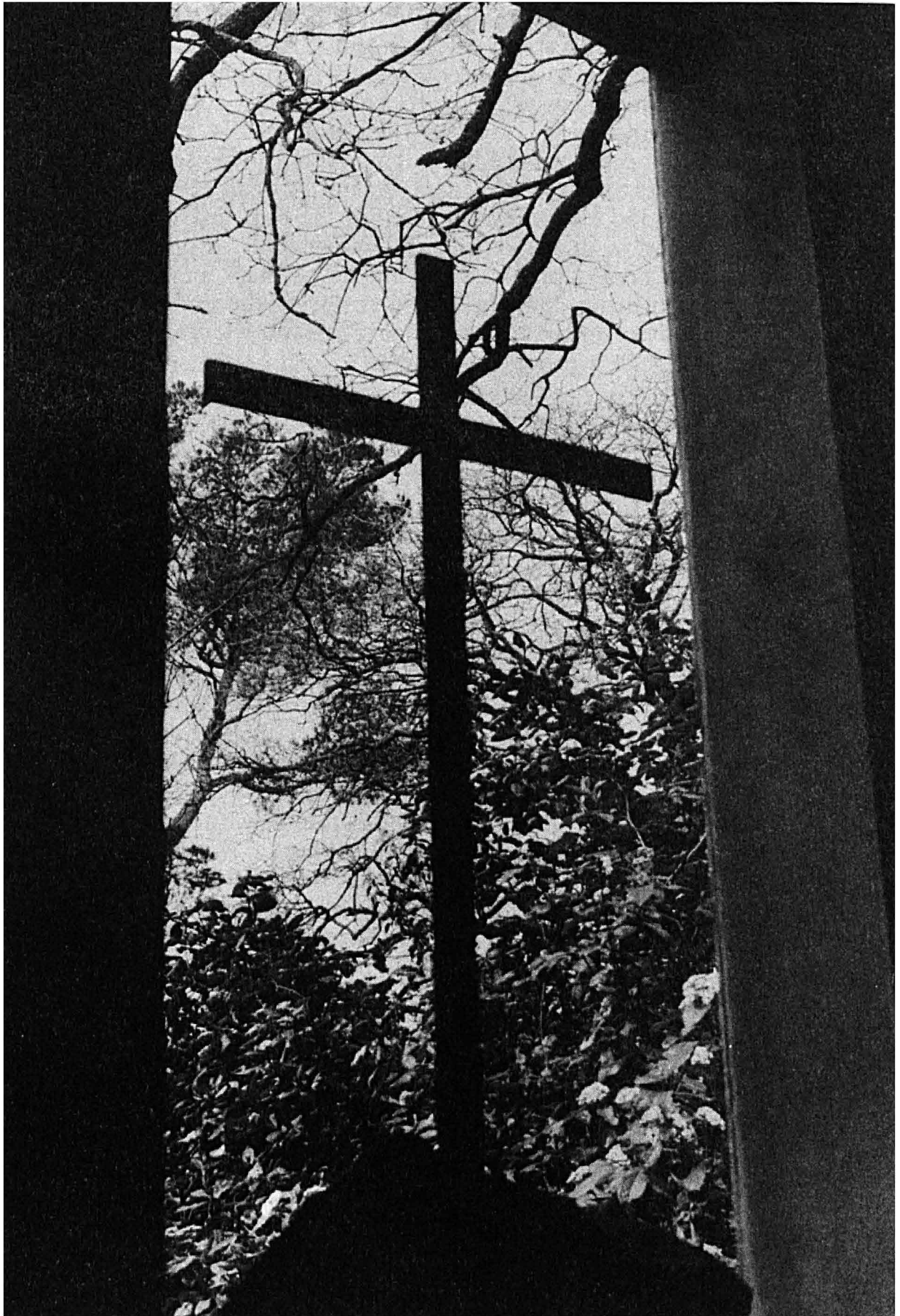
1. The supreme challenge is the Gospel of Jesus Christ himself. We believe and affirm that in him, God through the power of the Spirit has revealed himself. We believe and affirm that in him salvation has been brought to us. We believe and affirm that, as we live in him, no power is capable of separating us from God's love. At the same time we have to reckon with the mystery of God's revelation, which surpasses our understanding. Life with Christ means to discover him constantly anew. Life with Christ means both for the Church and each individual growth in experience and knowledge. We know and do not yet know the 'breadth, the length, the height and the depth' of God's love. Like Paul we need to pray that God may grant us to speak of the mystery of Christ as we ought to speak (Col. 4:4).

2. The second challenge comes from both the promising and threatening developments of the contemporary world. At the close of the second millenium how do we respond to the human condition and the world scene?

- To scientific discoveries and the increase of knowledge with their promise of new perspectives and experiences?
- To the new possibilities of living with people of all nations and religions, with their promise of a widened horizon?
- To the increasing capacity of the human race to shape the physical world with its threats of environmental collapse, biological catastrophe and genetic manipulation?
- To increasing and already excessive concentrations of power with their threats of exploitation and poverty?
- To the seemingly uncontrollable growth of armaments with its threats of war and nuclear destruction?
- To the manifold forms of assault on human dignity — contempt for life, discrimination, imprisonment for reason of conscience, torture and extrajudicial executions?
- To the pressures and forces everywhere which threaten to fragment the human community and deprive human beings of the sense of belonging, creating a sense of meaninglessness and absurdity in human life?

3. The third challenge comes from the encounter with other churches in the ecumenical movement. The new relationships which have become possible among the churches provide an opportunity of witnessing in a new way to the deepest intentions of the Reformation.





The Reformers did not seek to establish a new church. They aimed at the renewal of the whole church. Divisions occurred because of failure to carry through necessary reforms of doctrine and practice in the unity of the Spirit. As a consequence divisions hardened with all their sinful consequences — self-centeredness, competition, hostility, even persecution. Today the situation is changing. Dialogue and collaboration have become possible. The issues raised by the Reformers and by subsequent generations can be taken up again. In unexpected ways the movement of the Reformation finds today its continuation in the ecumenical movement. But are the Reformed churches really prepared for this new situation? If they are to make a significant contribution to restoring the unity of the church, they need to reflect on their own renewal. Unity can be achieved only through a process of renewal.

The response to these challenges requires a *common effort* of the Reformed churches. No central authority can decide and speak on their behalf. Clarity can be reached only by a process which involves the churches and their membership to the largest possible extent. The General Council therefore suggests that such a concerted process be initiated. In the following study document a number of issues are identified which in its judgement require special attention. It is hoped that they will be taken up by the churches in the appropriate way.

As we issue this invitation for common reflection we have in mind not only theological discussions. This is an invitation to a common adventure. It is addressed to whomever wishes to take part in it. We hope that the process of reflection will lead to concrete steps for renewal of life. We hope that the process will provide the Reformed churches with the opportunity to grow together: to form a communion bound together by common witness and intercession, sustained solidarity and mutual support. We hope that visits from church to church will play a vital role in this adventure and will contribute to each church becoming more aware of the concerns of others in order to deepen and strengthen our common witness.

## I. THE CENTRAL AFFIRMATION: JESUS CHRIST - LORD AND SAVIOUR

The message of Jesus Christ is the Good News of God's love. God sets us free. Despite our disobedience he does not abandon us to destruction and death. He has given his son Jesus Christ who died and rose again so that we may have life. As we trust him in faith and live in communion with him we discover that we have been forgiven and can live a life in thankfulness and praise. There is no other purpose for our life than to 'glorify God and to enjoy him forever'.

*How do we express this message today?*

Because at the Reformation this message touched the hearts of people it brought movement and renewal into the church. Because it brought new meaning into the life of every single member it opened new perspectives for the church as a whole.

*How does this message move the church today?*

God's love is primarily concerned with the life and salvation of human beings, created in the divine image. People matter. God seeks them in their fear and despair. Heaven rejoices when one sinner is saved and renewed to life. Every other consideration is secondary and subordinate to God's redemptive work.

*How do we give expression to this priority today?*

The discovery of the Gospel moves hearts; it leads to singing a new song. The praise of Christ grows out of the language of love and thankfulness:

*What is the language of love and thankfulness which we are compelled to speak today?*



## II. RE-THINKING THE REFORMED HERITAGE

We bear witness to the Gospel as churches belonging to the Reformed tradition. We are thankful for the heritage which we have received through that tradition. We regard its insights and emphases as essential for the proclamation of the Gospel. At the same time, as we face the challenges mentioned in the introduction, we realize that we need to give fresh thought to certain characteristics of the Reformed tradition. In this section we draw attention to a number of aspects of the Reformed teaching and life which, in our view, call for new responses.

### 1. *Confessing and Confessions of Faith*

To be the church of Jesus Christ means to celebrate and share with others what Jesus Christ means both for us and for the world. God's love is present in him. Through the power of the Spirit it has been poured into our hearts. As we speak of the witness of the Reformed churches, the main question must be how God's liberating love can be manifested in the world of today.

Many Reformed churches have been led in recent years to restate their faith and commitment in contemporary confessions\*. Written confessions serve the witness of the church. They are meant to assist the church in the fulfilment of its calling.

These new confessions vary in purpose and in form. Some seek to summarize the faith; others to provide a song of praise; some have been written for catechetical purpose; some are responses to crises which call into question the integrity of the church's witness; some are the results of union negotiations in which Reformed churches have been involved.

These contemporary statements invite common reflection. They do not speak with one voice. They are rooted in particular contexts and express the responses of the churches to the challenge to witness in these contexts. On the one hand, the diversity of these texts reflect the richness of the Reformed family; it is reason for praise. On the other hand, this diversity raises the question how the churches can form one confessing communion. A dynamic approach is needed. There is no need for uniformity in confessing the faith. But if the churches are to form one confessing communion,

\* The most important of those confessions have been published in the volume, *Reformed Witness Today*; 468 p., 1982, and can be obtained from the Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Okumene Schweiz, Sulgenauweg 26, 3000 Bern 23, Switzerland.

In preparation for the Ottawa General Council a consultation, June 29 - July 4, 1981, was held on "Confessions and Confessing in the Reformed Tradition Today" at Leuenberg, Switzerland. Representatives of different Reformed churches explored the implications of the contemporary texts for the whole Reformed family. The report of the Consultation will be published.



we need to seek the common ground of faith they articulate. The Reformed family must be prepared joyfully to accept new emphases and insights which arise from specific contexts in the contemporary world. We must let the Spirit guide us into deeper experience in understanding the Gospel.

The following questions arise:

- a) What are the experiences, verbal or otherwise, which the witness of your church has made to the Gospel in your situation? To what extent did you take into account the voice of other Reformed churches?
- b) A significant number of Reformed churches united with churches of other confessional traditions. What does this new situation mean for the whole Reformed family? Are these churches to be regarded as 'anomalous exceptions'? Or does their witness point the way for all Reformed churches?
- c) In certain situations a church may need to draw a clear line between truth and error. In faithful allegiance to Jesus Christ it may have to take a stand against Christians who willfully persist in the distortion of their faith. Where this happens, how should other Reformed churches show their solidarity? The whole family may need to exercise discipline where a member church justifies error, injustice or oppression.

### *BERNE SYNOD 1532*

*But if something is forthcoming from our pastors or from any other quarter which leads us closer to Christ and which, in the light of God's Word, is more conducive to general concord and Christian love than the opinion here set down, we will gladly accept it and not obstruct the movement of the Holy Spirit, Who drives us not backwards but always forwards towards the likeness of Christ Jesus our Lord. May He keep us all ever in His grace.*

## 2. *The Lordship of Jesus Christ*

The Reformers pointed forcefully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In the words of Calvin, "Everything which concerns our salvation is comprehended in him." (Institutes II, 16, 19). Through his sacrifice on the cross and his victory over death he has brought salvation to the human race caught by the power of sin. He is the saving Word of God to be heard and proclaimed by the church. Through the power of the Spirit this Word of God becomes alive in human hearts. The church in its witness and its life totally depends on Jesus Christ. He is its head and its judge. He gives the church its life and its vitality.

The Lordship of Christ over the church and the world is of central importance for the witness of Reformed churches today. Jesus Christ as the source of salvation protects against false promises and the illusions of self-liberation. Concentration on Jesus Christ as the only head of the church makes clear that the church does not live out of its own vitality; it provides the basis for self-criticism. Concentration on Jesus Christ as the centre of true communion helps the separate churches in their search for unity; it makes possible a sound balance between unity and diversity.

But this concentration also raises questions. Three may be mentioned here:

- a) What importance do the Reformed churches give to the trinitarian understanding of God? How do they give expression to the trinitarian understanding of God in relation to Jesus Christ as the centre of their faith? The Reformers affirmed the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the context of the Trinitarian theology of the ancient church. How do we follow them today? How do we develop together a fuller understanding of the relation between Father, Son and Holy Spirit? In particular, how do we respond to the increasing emphasis on the Holy Spirit both in the doctrine and in the life of the Church?
- b) Closely connected with this first question is the issue of the status of the ecumenical creeds in the Reformed tradition. Their authority was clearly recognized in the 16th century and in all classical Reformed confessions. Is there not need for more clarity as to the degree and kind of authority which they possess in the church and concerning their place in worship and instruction? Such clarification is obviously required for dialogue with other churches, especially for the proposed dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox. This latter conversation is likely to concentrate on the theme of the Trinity.
- c) Finally, our concentration on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ requires us to ask how God's love is at work outside the realm of the church which confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. Emphasis on 'Christ alone' can easily lead to a narrow concept of salvation. How do we affirm Jesus Christ as the source and fulfilment of salvation and at the same time affirm God's saving presence in the whole of human history?





### 3. *Scripture Alone*

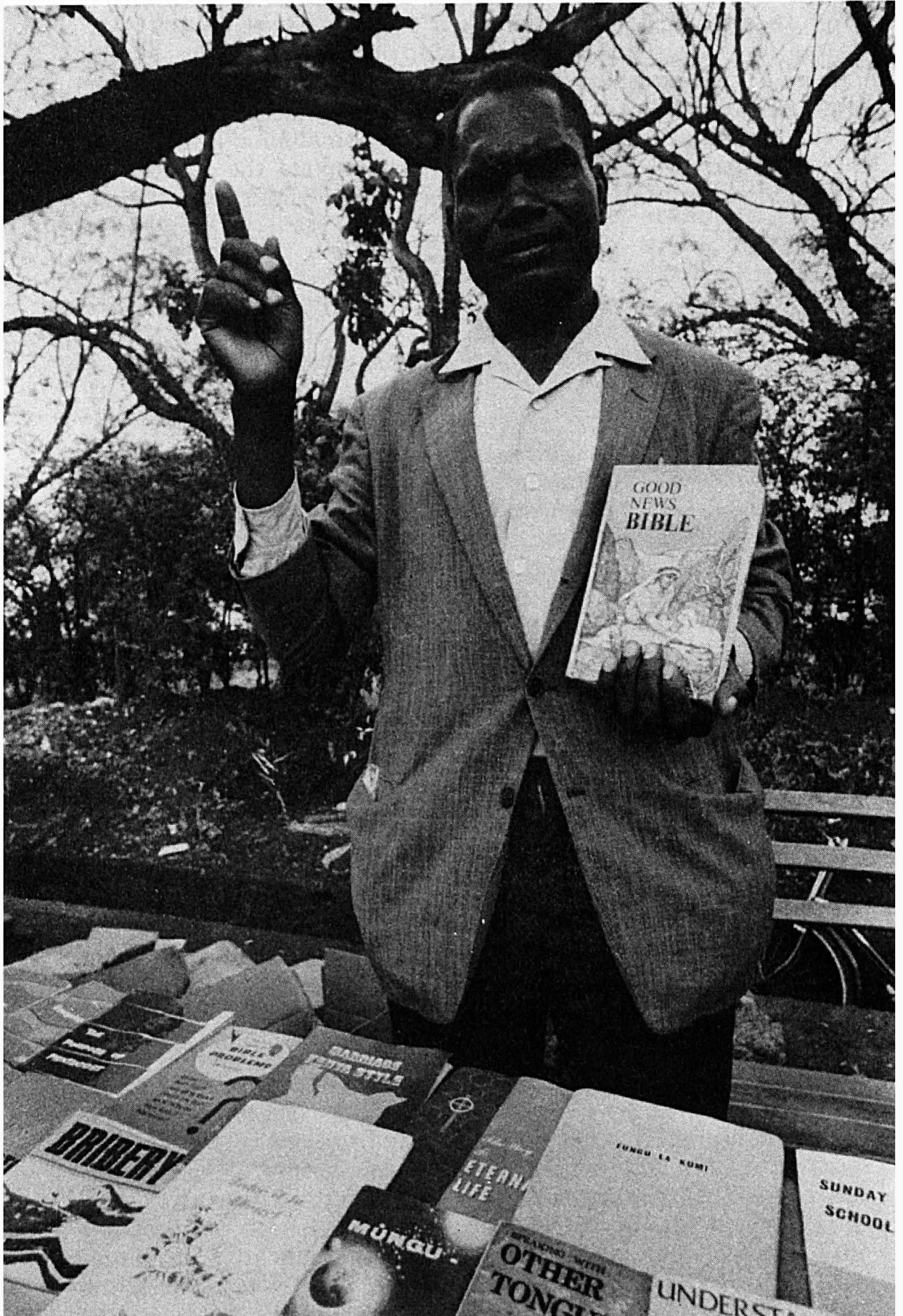
The affirmation that the living Word of God speaks to us through the witness of both the Old and New Testaments together is one of the central insights of the Reformation. Scripture is the source to which we have to turn in order to hear God's voice. It is in allegiance to the Word of God as witnessed to in Scripture that the proclamation, worship and government of the Reformed churches have taken their characteristic form. This affirmation is as relevant today as it ever was. The churches need constantly to turn anew to the witness of Scripture. They need to give Scripture the prominent place it deserves in all aspects of their life: prayer, worship, instruction, administration, evangelism, social witness and personal life.

The emphasis on 'Scripture alone' raises, however, three questions. First, we need to clarify the relationship between the Word of God and the written word of the Bible. In what way can it be said that the Scripture is God's word? There are among us diverse views on the nature of this relationship, often resulting in controversy or estrangement. Secondly, we need to clarify the relationship between the authority of Scripture and the authority of Tradition. Thirdly, there is a question of the relations between Scripture and lived experience in diverse social, cultural and historical situations. The principle 'Scripture alone' was developed in the Reformation to secure the obedience of the church to the liberating Word of God and to set God's word above all human traditions. The point remains important. The original witness to the Gospel must inspire and control the witness of all generations. We ask, however, whether the Reformed churches sufficiently respect the relative authority of Tradition. The Spirit has guided the church through the centuries. The church of our generation must make appropriate use of the insights and the experience it has accumulated.

The Reformed churches must face these issues both as they seek to give witness today and as they enter into interchurch dialogue. It is imperative that they reach a common mind concerning the meaning and the formulation of the 'Scripture alone' principle.

Two questions arise:

a) What importance do we attribute to the findings of historical and literary research on the origin, context, and history of the Biblical documents? Because of their strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture, the Reformed churches are especially prone to fundamentalism, ignoring the historical context in which the Biblical writings emerged. Holding the Bible as an inspired book has often been equated with exempting it from historical criticism. How are we to restate the Reformers' views of Scripture consistently with what we know of the Bible's complex historical development?



b) What is the relationship between Scripture and the church? Scripture originated in the church of the earliest times. It is a witness of the church to the tradition initiated by Jesus Christ himself: a tradition which continues through the proclamation of the Gospel down to today. Because it is the original witness, it is above the church. But it requires the context of communion in Christ to be rightly understood. The Spirit which inspired the authors of Scripture is at work in the church today. How is this interrelation best expressed?

#### 4. *Worship, Preaching and the Lord's Supper*

Reformed churches understand worship as the congregation assembling in prayer and adoration in God's presence through Jesus Christ. Encounter with God in Jesus Christ takes place both by preaching on the basis of Scripture and the celebration of the Lord's supper.

In practice, preaching tends to dominate the worship of the Reformed churches. The elements of praise, meditation, silence and celebration, though not absent, tend to remain underdeveloped. The worship of the Reformed churches is often experienced as exposition of biblical passages or of general Christian insights; it can become primarily intellectual and does not sufficiently involve the whole human person.

The following questions arise:

a) How can the Reformed churches, without minimising the important place of preaching, celebrate a form of worship which includes more effectively these neglected dimensions? In dialogue with other churches, particularly in union negotiations, the Lord's supper has played a central role. How can Reformed churches give more prominence to the regular celebration of the Eucharist in their worship?

b) Ecumenical discussion has led to common perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. The Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has recently sent to all churches three agreed texts on these subjects and has asked them to examine their own doctrine and practice in the light of these findings. Should the Reformed churches not use this opportunity to reflect together on their understanding and to share their responses with one another? How can an understanding and a practice be developed which in faithfulness to the biblical witness contributes to closer communion with other churches? With regard to the eucharist, special attention should be paid to the role of the Spirit in celebration, the role of the ministry in the administration and the eucharist as the expression of authentic communion of the church.

c) The Reformed tradition has always placed strong emphasis on the second commandment. God's presence must not be represented by any human images. God is present in the ways he has chosen — in Jesus Christ, in the word and the sacraments, in the community of believers. No human images should detract attention from these ways. As valid as this argument is the question arises whether this emphasis has not led to the depreciation of visible and bodily expression in the worship of the church. What is the rightful place of the arts in the church?



## *THE BURNING BUSH*

*The burning bush it burns  
it burns in fiercest flame,  
Yet it is not devoured,  
but firmly stands the same,  
The fire does not depart  
Yet still new shoots outsurge  
The kindling flames will start  
and blossoms fair emerge*

*E'ven in the fiery flame  
Christ's Church can prosper still  
His Holy Spirit burnish  
Those who seek His will  
With courage then we strive  
to be Christ's servants true,  
And as our pain fills up  
So faith is deepened too*

*In persecution's urns  
Christ's own their courage keep  
The burning bush still burns  
and we are still His sheep  
The burning bush it burns,  
it burns in fiercest flame,  
Yet it is not devoured,  
but firmly stands the same.*

The above hymn was sung during the worship at the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Ottawa, August, 1982. It is the metric version of a poem written in prison by the Rev. Dr. C.M. Kao, the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.

### *5. Freedom for Discipleship*

We affirm that the Gospel summons us to a life of freedom and discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Incorporated into the Church of God by holy Baptism, the individual Christian is at once set within the communion of the whole people of God. The tension between the call to freedom and the responsibility for the corporate life of the whole church is a fact of church history. That issue can only be resolved by a deeper understanding of the nature of discipleship, as lived out in the obedience of faith. To that end the church must exercise a pastoral discipline which in all aspects reflects the fulness of the Gospel.

The challenge remains with us. Our search for the dynamic relationship between freedom, communion and church discipline has clear biblical warrant. Paul's language of justification by faith alone arises from his reflection about these matters in connection with the Galatian church. Should Gentile Christians be required to keep the Jewish law? In what sense are Jewish Christians free of the law? On what principles can the integrity of the new Christian community be maintained? From the doctrinal point of view justification and sanctification in an ordered common life clearly go together.

How well have we respected the right relationships between freedom, communion and discipline today? In some parts of the world the call to freedom has been understood as an invitation to individualism. In these places the Reformed churches have often had some part in providing motifs for an individualistic culture, and now tend to reinforce and legitimate such culture. Under these conditions the church is in danger of becoming little more than a gathering of loosely associated individuals. The importance of Eucharistic communion and the acceptance of discipline are minimised. In pluralistic situations and cultures with high mobility, individuals at odds with their church can easily join another denomination. Inevitably such behaviour perpetuates the scandal and sin of a divided church.

There is of course the danger of legalism, so often evidenced when the Church insists on its membership following a particular line of conduct. However, to correct a false legalism the pastoral claim of the Gospel must be met, testifying to the reconciling power of God in Jesus Christ. No matter how we may interpret the Christian life, that life can only be lived by the power of the Holy Spirit 'in Christ'. The call to freedom and discipleship through the gift of the Gospel requires that the church, the people of God, individually and corporately, should live out the obligations of the covenant of grace. It is by the grace of God we are freed to live that life here and now with Christ.



Mindful of those problem areas, sketched in the previous paragraphs the crucial question is, the nature and meaning of discipleship as proclaimed and nurtured by the church. Discipleship and discipline have a common root. Therefore, we must ask:

- How should the Church attend to a rightful 'disciple-ing' of the people of God at every level of the Christian life?
- To that end, what is the distinctive role of worship, preaching, and the sacramental life in the nurture of the people of God?
- Is the application of church law/discipline adequately controlled by our understanding of the Gospel of Grace?

## 6. *Church Order and the Ordained Ministry*

Churches of the Reformed tradition hold that Christ alone is head of the church and that the church must be so ordered that He himself may rule it through his word. There is no single concept or pattern of church governance among them. The WARC includes churches of the Presbyterian and the Congregational type. Nevertheless all Reformed churches share certain basic convictions with regard to the ordering of the church. They give a prominent place to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments in the life of the church: they emphasize the role of the congregation and affirm the priesthood of all believers; they underline the importance of representative synods; they insist on the parity of ordained persons and stress therefore the collegial character of church governance; they uphold the principle of constitutionality.

The difference which exists among Reformed churches is due to different emphases in understanding Christ's living presence through the word in the church. Some place primary emphasis on the ministers called, trained and ordained to proclaim the word of God; they regard the ministers as the successors of the church's apostolic governing body. Others stress the role of the gathered congregation in discerning Christ's presence; ministers are primarily understood as servants of the gathered congregation; their leadership arises out of the life of the congregation and functions on its behalf.

The Reformed churches believe that their basic convictions on the order of the church reflect the spirit of the New Testament. For the most part, they do no longer claim that the New Testament leaves room for only one polity and that other forms are therefore not valid. They know that concepts and patterns of church governance have evolved at the time of the NT and in the course of history, and that they need to be adapted to the conditions in which we live today.

In this connection the following issues arise:

a) To what extent are the basic Reformed convictions really embodied in the actual practice of the churches? How can the churches avoid the danger of their polity becoming window dressing rather than lived reality? For instance, there has been in many churches, in response to the increasing complexity of the modern world, a rapid growth of administrative and bureaucratic structures. More and more decisions are taken by boards and committees through processes whose style has been borrowed from modern management. In this new situation, how can both 'Christ's ruling through the Word' and the real participation of the congregation be effectively maintained?

b) What is the relationship between the Ministry of Word and Sacraments and the role of the congregation in discerning the meaning of God's Word? How can the complementarity between the Presbyterian and Congregational emphases in the Reformed family of churches be more clearly shown?

c) While giving prominence to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments the Reformed tradition has always emphasized the need for diverse ministries in the church. In fact, at the time of the Reformation the Reformed churches restored at the level of the local congregation the 'threefold ministry' which was characteristic of the ancient church: the bishop (pastor) surrounded by a group of presbyters (elders) and assisted by deacons. How does the three-fold ministry need to be adapted today to respond to the variety of tasks which each congregation has to fulfil?

d) Reformed churches have always emphasized the role of corporate governing bodies in the exercise of episcopate or oversight. At the level of the local congregation the minister of Word and Sacraments fulfils this task together with the group of elders and deacons. At the level of an area or region oversight is exercised by presbyteries or synods. The question arises whether at this latter level Reformed churches attach sufficient importance to the personal dimension of pastoral oversight. Do they not tend to consider personal offices beyond the congregation as administrative rather than pastoral? What can we learn from other traditions in this respect?

### III. COMMUNION IN CHRIST - A SIGN OF CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

The Church bears witness to God not only by proclaiming the Gospel but by its very being and life. In the Holy Spirit a quality of communion emerges which can reflect the vision of new humanity which God will create. It is a communion which lives in thanksgiving and praise, in mutual love and support, in solidarity with those who are exploited and suffer. We know that our churches are far from reflecting this vision. The gift of communion in Christ is constantly denied and distorted. God may of course act even through our shortcomings. The power of the Gospel does not ultimately depend on the quality of the witnesses. But as we seek to be faithful stewards of God's calling we need to turn our attention to the ways in which the life of our churches witnesses to God's gift of communion.

#### 1. *The Catholicity of the Church*

Proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ implies a vision of and a commitment to the catholicity of the church. The church is catholic because Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the whole world, is present in its midst. It is catholic by witnessing to his work of salvation. It is catholic by embodying in its life the message addressed to all people: be reconciled with God. It is catholic by being a sign of the communion to which all people are called. To this catholicity the church is committed. Its vision embraces the promise of God in Christ for the whole world. It may not be narrowly concerned with itself. It must be open to all people in their aspirations and in their sufferings. The church is a wandering people who look forward to the fulfilment of history in the kingdom of God.

What are the consequences of this vision?

a) Most obviously, the vision of the catholicity of that church requires commitment to the visible unity of the church. To this end the Reformed churches need to ask first how they can more effectively express *unity among themselves*. What are the reasons for the multiple splits which have occurred in Reformed churches and how can this tendency be overcome? Can we gain insights from other traditions, perhaps in the area of sacramental theology, which will help us?

b) But the vision of catholicity requires at the same time commitment to the ecumenical movement? The Reformed churches need to give fresh thought to the next steps to be taken in the search of the visible unity of all churches. What might they contribute to the clarification of ecumenical goals for the years immediately ahead? The ecumenical movement has experienced both impressive achievements and disappointing setbacks in recent years. But that movement, once a vision and a hope, is now a living reality. What appears to some as loss of momentum or even impasse we interpret

as an opportunity for reappraisal and new commitment. Today we need a new, shared setting of ecumenical goals in which the Reformed churches should play a vigorous part.

What is the understanding of unity by which the Reformed churches should be guided in the ecumenical movement? Can you agree that on the one hand the unity we seek does not require one single ecclesiastical organization, but that on the other hand it does presuppose, at the minimum —

1. Some articulation of our unity in the one faith,
2. Some form of mutual recognition of baptism, eucharist and ministries,
3. Some agreement on standards of ethical witness for Christians in the world, and
4. Some appropriate common discipline for decision-making.

c) The vision of catholicity goes still further, it requires a commitment to a communion capable of sending a message of reconciliation to all humanity. Barriers which separate people from one another, especially barriers which lead to domination, oppression and exploitation need to be overcome. The church which will be a sign of the kingdom needs to be governed by the words “there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female, you are all one in Jesus Christ”. Commitment to catholicity means a constant growth to maturity in this respect. It means overcoming inherited patterns of domination in the church, as our ways are judged in the light of the coming kingdom.

The thought grows among us that we may be helped in both respects by Isaiah’s vision of Israel as “... a covenant to the people, a light to the nations...” (42:6). May we not think in terms of a worldwide covenant people of God whose life-together could bring the deepest hopes and fears of humankind out of tribalism into transforming relationship with God’s kingdom, power, and glory? Such a covenant people, made possible in the midst of the graceless powers by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, would be a reality more comprehensive than any existing church traditions. The churches as we know them should be its instruments, its earthen vessels, not its masters. To what creative initiatives are we called by God in this moment of history? Read Lev. 25 in conjunction with Luke 4? Does it provide any guidance?

d) Reformed churches have always attributed special importance to the relation with the Jewish people? What is the role of the Jews who, while not acknowledging Jesus as the Christ, yet claim to be the true Israel? Many Reformed churches place special emphasis on this mystery; at the same time there is sharp controversy on the issue. What place does this mystery have in your view? What is the appropriate relationship to the Jewish people — required by the vision of the catholicity of the church?

## RACISM AND APARTHEID

The General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches meeting in Ottawa, August 17-27, 1982, took several official actions on the issue of racism and apartheid, including the following:

*“The General Council expresses its profound disappointment that despite earlier appeals by WARC General Councils, and despite continued dialogue between several Reformed Churches and the white Dutch Reformed Churches over twenty years, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (in the Republic of South Africa) and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika have still not found the courage to realize that apartheid (‘separate development’) contradicts the very nature of the Church and obscures the Gospel from before the world; the Council therefore pleads afresh with these Churches to respond to the promises and demands of the Gospel...*

*Therefore, the General Council, reluctantly and painfully, is compelled to suspend the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (in the Republic of South Africa) and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika from the privileges of membership in the WARC i.e. sending delegates to General Councils and holding membership in departmental committees and commissions, until such time as the WARC Executive Committee has determined that these two Churches in their utterances and practice have given evidence of a change of heart. They will be warmly restored to the full privileges of membership when the following changes have taken place*

- a) Black Christians are no longer excluded from church services, especially from Holy Communion;*
- b) Concrete support in word and deed is given to those who suffer under the system of apartheid (‘separate development’).*
- c) Unequivocal synod resolutions are made which reject apartheid and commit the Church to dismantling this system in both church and politics.*

*The General Council pays respect to those within the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (in the Republic of South Africa) and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk van Afrika who have raised their voices and are fighting against apartheid; the General Council further urges member Churches to pray that these efforts bearing witness to Christ, who frees and unites, may prevail within their Churches.*

*The General Council asks the Executive Committee of the WARC to keep this whole issue regularly under review.”*

## 2. *Racism and South Africa*

(This part of the present document was officially voted by the General Council of the WARC, in August, 1982).

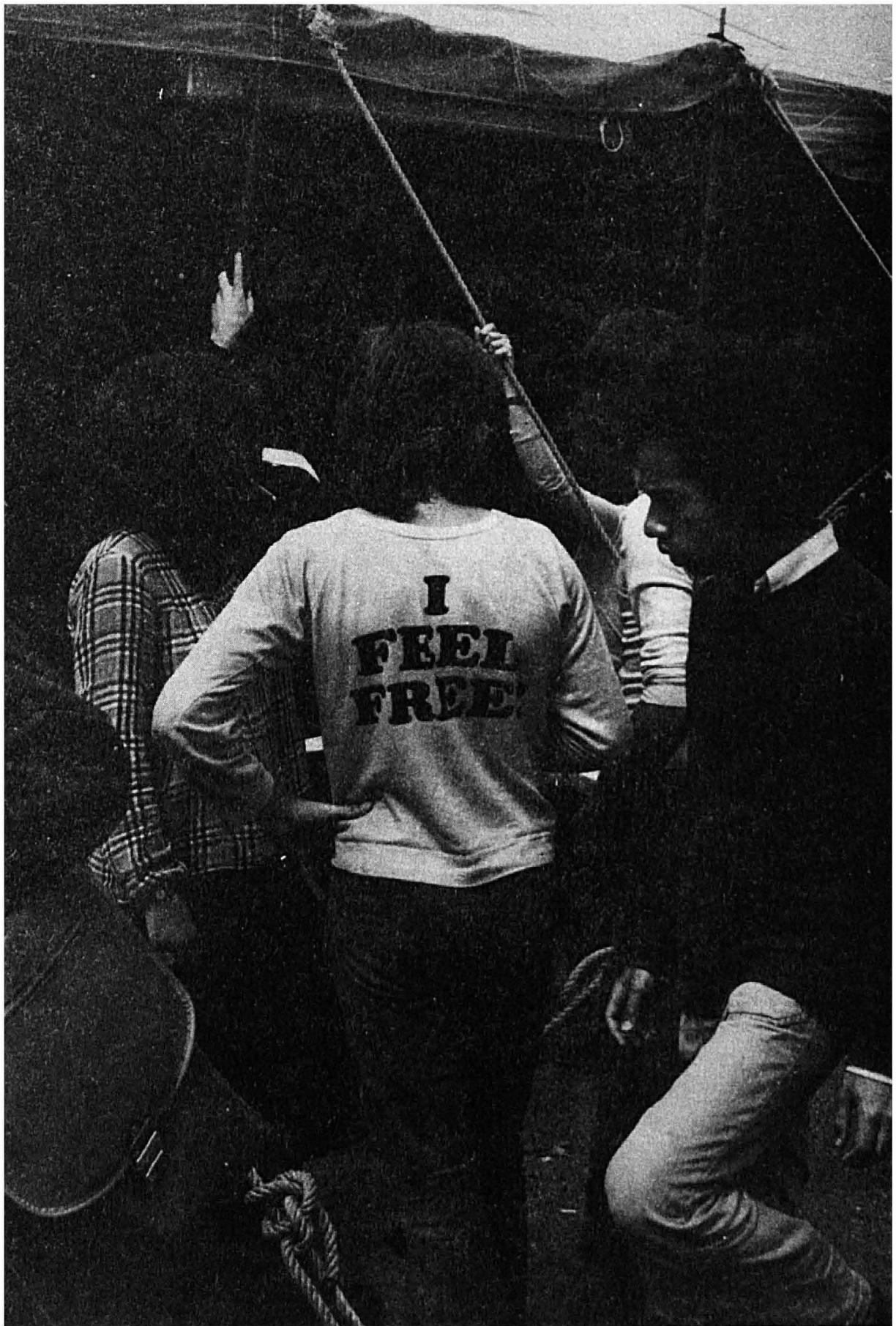
God in Jesus Christ has affirmed human dignity. Through his life, death and resurrection he has reconciled people to God and to themselves. He has broken down the wall of partition and enmity and has become our peace. He is the Lord of his church who has brought us together in the one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God who is the father of us all (Eph. 4:5, 6).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ demands, therefore, a community of believers which transcends all barriers of race — a community in which the love for Christ and for one another has overcome the divisions of race and colour.

The Gospel confronts racism, which is in its very essence a form of idolatry. Racism fosters a false sense of supremacy, it denies the common humanity of believers, and it denies Christ's reconciling, humanising work. It systematises oppression, domination and injustice. As such the struggle against racism, wherever it is found, in overt and covert forms, is a responsibility laid upon the church by the Gospel of Jesus Christ in every country and society.

At the present time, without denying the universality of racist sin, we must call special attention to South Africa. Apartheid (or 'separate development') is therefore a pseudo-religious ideology as well as a political policy. It depends to a large extent on this moral and theological justification. The division of Reformed churches in South Africa on the basis of race and colour, is being defended as a faithful interpretation of the will of God and of the Reformed understanding of the church in the world. This leads to the division of Christians at the table of the Lord as a matter of practice and policy, which has been continually affirmed save for exceptional circumstances under special permission by the white Afrikaans Reformed Churches. This situation brings a particular challenge to the WARC.

This is not the first time that the Alliance has dealt with this issue. In 1964 the General Council, meeting in Frankfurt, declared that racism is nothing less than a betrayal of the Gospel: "The unity in Christ of members, not only of different confessions and denominations, but of different nations and races, points to the fullness of the unity of all God's coming kingdom. Therefore the exclusion of any person on grounds of race, colour or nationality, from any congregation and part of the life of the church contradicts the very nature of the church. In such a case, the Gospel is actually obscured from the world and the witness of the churches made ineffective". In 1970, the General Council held in Nairobi confirmed this stance: "The church must recognise racism for the idolatry it





is... The church that by doctrine and/or practice affirms segregation of peoples (e.g. racial segregation) as a law for its life cannot be regarded as an authentic member of the body of Christ.”

This strong language by the WARC was not heeded by the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk who were mentioned by name, and it was not given any follow-up by the WARC itself.

The General Council of the WARC meeting in Ottawa 1982, declares: The promises of God for his world and for his church are in direct contradiction to apartheid ideals and practices. These promises, clearly proclaimed by the prophets and fulfilled in Christ, are peace, justice and liberation. They contain good news for the poor and deliverance for the oppressed, but also God’s judgement on the denial of rights and the destruction of humanity and community.

We feel duty-bound by the Gospel to raise our voice and stand by the oppressed. ‘None of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused or in any way offended by us, without at the same time injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do... We cannot love Christ without loving him in the brethren.’ (Calvin).

In certain situations the confession of a church needs to draw a clear line between truth and error. In faithful allegiance to Jesus Christ it may have to reject the claims of an unjust or oppressive government and denounce Christians who aid and abet the oppressor. We believe that this is the situation in South Africa today.

The churches which have accepted Reformed confessions of faith have therefore committed themselves to live as the people of God and to show in their daily life and service what this means. This commitment requires concrete manifestation of community among races, of common witness to justice and equality in society, and of unity at the table of the Lord.

The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk, in not only accepting, but actively justifying the apartheid system by misusing the Gospel and the Reformed confession, contradict in doctrine and in action the promise which they profess to believe.

Therefore, the General Council declares that this situation constitutes a *status confessionis* for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardising the integrity of our common confession as Reformed churches.

We declare with Black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid (‘separate development’) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.

Even as we say this, we confess that we are not without guilt in regard to racism. Racism is a reality everywhere and its existence calls for repentance and concerted action.

Out of this certain questions emerge for our churches:

1. How do we combat racism in our societies and our own churches?
2. How do we come to understand our complicity in the racist structures of South Africa through the economic involvement of especially Western European and North American countries and churches?
3. How do we remain sensitive to the insidious way in which racism and social injustice are so often excused in the name of economic interest and national security?
4. How can we give concrete manifestation to our concern for and solidarity with the victims of racism in South Africa and elsewhere in their struggle for justice, peace, reconciliation and human liberation?
5. How can the churches best develop relationships with black Reformed churches in South Africa and with churches and Christians (black and white) who are engaged in this struggle?
6. In expressing solidarity with those who struggle for justice in this situation, how do we witness to the reconciling grace of God for those whom we see as oppressive and in error?

### 3. *The Community of Women and Men*

We rejoice in the growing realization in our churches of the biblical promise that in Christ there is “neither male nor female”, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-28). Women are finding increasing opportunity for participation in service as elders and as pastors, as well as in more traditional women’s roles. They are finding the confidence to express, out of their special experience, aspects of the Gospel which have been voiced less clearly at other times.

There remain, however, many concerns for women *and* men about our life together in the church.

1) Some of our member churches still officially restrict the participation of women by refusing them the right to be ordained as elders or as pastors. Some churches unofficially limit women’s participation as well by ignoring the potential contributions of the laity. We call upon such churches to acknowledge full privileges of membership for all the baptized, so that their communities can more clearly demonstrate to the world the renewal of human community in the body of Christ. When our churches fail to do this, we deny the personhood of women and reinforce the discriminatory attitudes and practices of society at large.

2) Even where official restrictions on women’s participation in the church have been removed, both women and men are uncomfortably aware of the need for new styles of collaboration between women and men in the life of the church. Women are particularly concerned that styles of leadership in our churches are too often hierarchical and oppressive, not conducive to the sharing of the gifts and wisdom of all. The work of the Holy Spirit in the church is never completed. Thus, we challenge all people in our churches to take the risk of joining together, in an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect, in a search for new styles of collaboration which will permit the churches to be enriched by the gifts of all the faithful. Such a venture would help to revitalize our Reformed heritage of shared ministry and service.

3) We welcome the fact that in recent times biblical studies and theological reflection have led to a fuller vision of the trinitarian understanding of God; placing the images of Father and Son in a proper perspective. We must also emphasize biblical imagery for God which points to God’s love, compassion, nurture (qualities which some cultures have identified as feminine), in order to balance the emphasis too often found on images of God’s lordship, dominion, kingship (qualities which some cultures have identified as masculine). Over-emphasis on the latter sort of imagery has, in our generation and previous ones, reinforced authoritarian and

repressive styles of leadership in church and society, and oppressive male dominance over women and has distorted our understanding of God's nature.

4) We are encouraged by increasing attention in many churches to language which includes both women and men. We must not grow slack in our efforts to discover and employ non-sexist language. Nor should we imagine that the task is accomplished when the vocabulary of public statement and documents is inclusive, while private conversations and attitudes remain exclusive and sexist. We challenge our churches and their members (both women and men) to strengthen their efforts to speak in ways which include and affirm persons of both sexes, as well as persons of all races and nations, and of all ages and abilities.

5) As the church becomes ever more inclusive of persons previously marginalized by many societies (members of racial/ethnic minorities, the young and elderly, woman, the handicapped), there is danger that these groups may be perceived as competing for power in a way which weakens the participation of others. Inclusion of all persons in full participation in the body of Christ is *not* a power struggle which one group wins and another loses. Thus, the challenge for us *all* is to work for a transformed church open to the ministries of all the baptized, in such way that *all* our ministries may be empowered and that the mission and witness of the church as a whole may be strengthened.

#### 4. *The Family and Marriage*

The family, with marriage as its foundation, plays a central role in the Christian tradition. In the Reformed family of churches the emphasis has been on the covenantal character of relations between men and women, children and parents. The ultimate basis of the family and marriage is the patient committed covenant love of God in Jesus Christ for His Church (Ephesians 5). Seen in this light the family is the place of a creative, shared life in freedom and responsibility where human beings are able to be nurtured and grow in maturity, in mutual love and support.

Throughout the centuries, the witness of Christians and the churches to Christ's Gospel in and through the family and marriage has been borne in a constantly changing society. Their understanding and practice has been challenged and influenced by these changes.

As they seek to bear witness to the Gospel in this important area of human life, they face many direct and indirect challenges. Different cultures with differing patterns of family life and marriage exist side by side in pluralist societies; there are economic and industrial forces which threaten the stability of family life and marriage; there are growing popular forms of permissiveness in various cultures which challenge the Christian view of freedom and discipline; there is the increasing frequency of interconfessional 'mixed' marriages.

How do our churches witness to the Gospel today in their teaching and practice in this area?

Some of the questions are:

- 1) How are the biblical insights on which the Christian and Reformed view of the family and marriage rest reflected in the contemporary teaching and practice of our churches?
- 2) How far does the teaching and practice of our Western churches in this field simply reflect the 'diluted' Christian attitudes of a post-Christian society? Are the churches alert to the need to ensure sufficient independence from secular norms to allow for Christian pastoral concern?
- 3) For many churches in the countries of the Third World the question of the Old Testament practice of concubinage and polygamy is one which calls for clarification in the context of a Christian doctrine and praxis of family and marriage. Has your church any light to throw on this question?

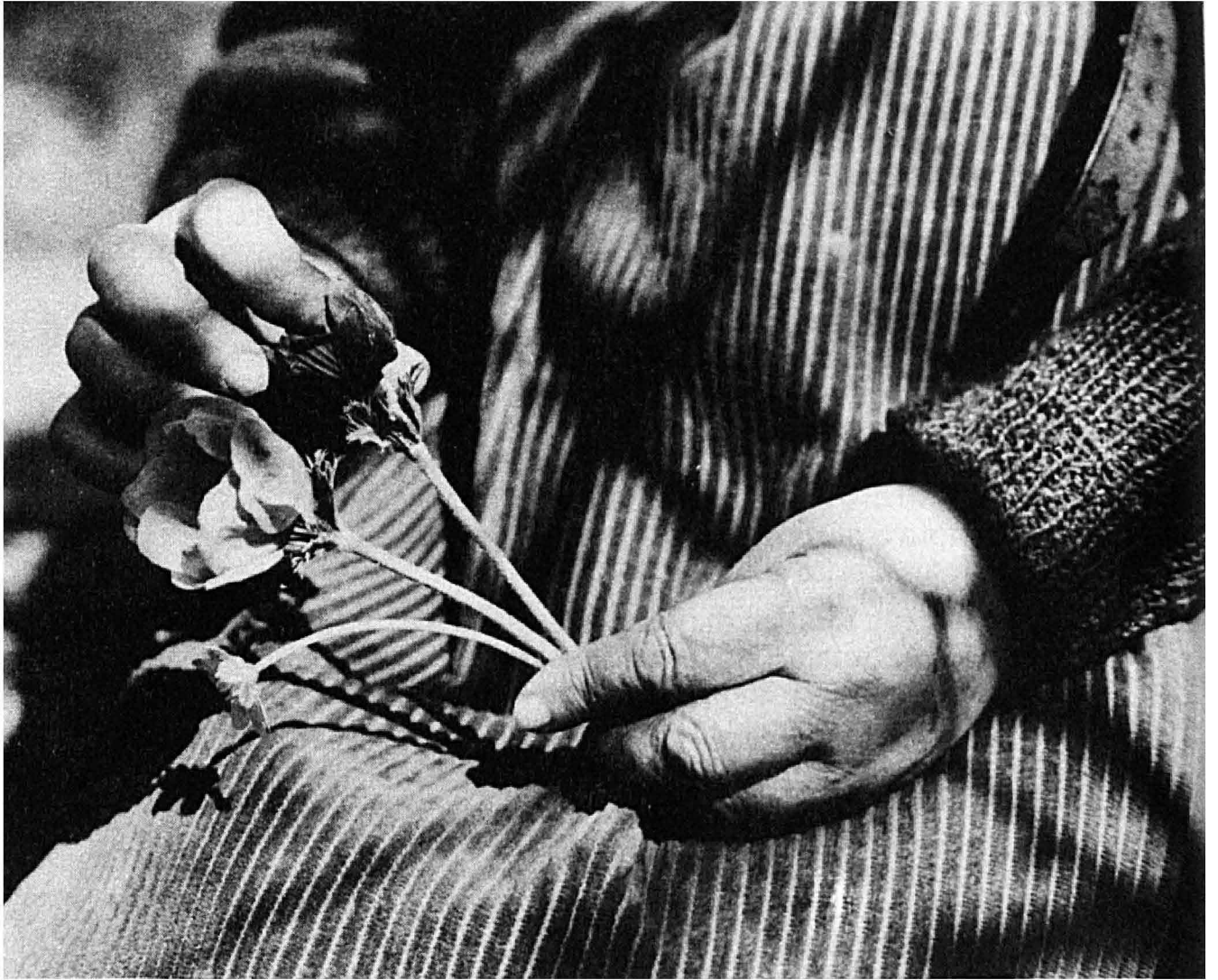
- 4) Has the Reformed tradition overstressed the vocation to marriage to the detriment of vocations to celibacy and the disciplined life of religious communities? What is the place of such religious communities in the life of the Reformed churches?
- 5) How do churches respond to the new forms of relationships between man and woman, parents and children, which are practised by many young people today and who see no need for civil or religious rites or sanctions?

#### IV. WITNESS IN A THREATENED AND DIVIDED WORLD

We turn in this section to certain subjects which have a distinctive bearing on the witness of the church today.

As the church witnesses to the Gospel, it needs to mirror faithfully the totality of God's mission. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not to be abbreviated by a one sided emphasis on any one aspect of God's saving purpose. In Jesus Christ, the healing love of God reaches out bringing wholeness for the whole of humanity, both individually and corporately. The Gospel is at once addressed both to humanity, called to live in community and to the individual called to live as a child of the Father. On the one hand there is the biblical truth that God as Lord of history is intensely involved in the upheavals of history and therefore the evangelism of the church must engage with every level of the social, political and economic life of humanity. On the other hand, there is the witness of the Gospel to that redeeming power of God which embraces without exception every living person, for in the sight of God, every single person counts. Not one is forgotten. No matter how we may describe the nature of God's gift of salvation, overcoming sin and death and creating newness of life, we must never minimise the vast sweep of his redemptive purpose for the whole of creation. The Gospel of God in Jesus Christ is cosmic.

An urgent task of the Reformed churches is to rethink their witness to the totality of God's mission in a world endangered by ideological, political and racial divisions, threatened with nuclear destruction, and corrupted by economic injustice. Furthermore, despite the unprecedented mobility of people across national and geographical boundaries, thanks to rapid means of travelling and swift communications' systems and devices, Christians have barely begun to grapple with the reality of cultural and religious pluralism of our world and to wrestle with the relations between such pluralism and God's mission of redeeming, restoring, and recreating this threatened world and divided humanity. A deepened and broadened understanding of evangelism is bound to emerge out of such grappling and wrestling.





## 1. *Amid Diversity of Cultures*

The Reformed churches in the West have responded to the call of God to make the Gospel known to all people. Necessarily their witness was shaped by conditions and events of the sixteenth and subsequent centuries in Europe and North America. That same witness has helped to form western civilisation down to this day.

The missionary calling has, however, led these churches beyond the limitations of the western world so that today by far the larger part of the Reformed family of churches is found in regions of the world with quite other cultures, religions and histories.

We praise God for this spreading of the Word. We also recognize its problems. The missionary message accompanied the spread of European-North American culture and power to all parts of the earth. Too often it was assumed that the cultural forms in which the message came were essential to the Gospel itself. Too seldom was the sustaining grace and providence of God discerned in the history of other peoples with their cultural and religious forms. Too often the line was drawn between the 'Christian culture' of Europe and North America and the 'non-Christian cultures' of Africa and Asia, instead of between the judging and reconciling work of Christ and *all* cultures. As a result the Christian message has not yet become the dynamic force it should be, testifying God's presence among all peoples. We need therefore to re-examine the relations between the Christian faith and cultures shaped by other faiths as they are changing in the modern world, in order to discern more deeply God's work in human history.

Human culture is rooted in God's creation and calling. By entrusting the created world to human care and management, God has given human beings the ability to be culturally creative. Diversity of culture is a divine blessing.

Human culture is also an expression of a desire to raise common life to the level of permanent value, to secure it against danger from other people, and to glorify the power and institutions of society. In this effort, culture can become self-contained, excluding God and the neighbour.

All culture, including that influenced by Christian faith, moves between these poles, and in this movement God is at work. Culture bears the marks of divine-human encounter in tension, conflict, and in reconciliation whether or not the Gospel has been heard in it. The meaning of culture must be fathomed theologically, not anthropologically alone. The Bible itself can be our guide in doing this. The history of the people of Israel is one of constant reformation of culture, by an ever renewed experience of God in the midst of the nations. The New Testament message led the apostles out of Israel into the Gentile world, with the promise of the risen Christ for



its cultures and its future. We are to go the same way into the cultures of our world. The church with its Gospel needs to penetrate into the soul of a culture where people celebrate life in all its joy and agony and experience hope and despair. Witness to Christ is the extension of his ministry here at the very heart of human experience, bearing the suffering of the people through the cross and leading them to hope in his risen presence.

How can we more faithfully fulfil this mission? We suggest the following:

- We need a more intense dialogue among the Reformed churches about the theological understanding of human culture in which Euro-American as well as African and Asian theological ideas and Christian practices will be subjected to creative examination in the light of the Gospel.
- We need more profound participation in the world's secular and religious cultures by Christians, in order that in each place the work of God and the presence of Christ may become more clear.
- We need clearer vision about how all our cultures are being changed by world powers and events, and the relation of God's saving power to this change.



## 2. *Peace*

The commitment to peace has a central place in the Biblical message. God wants the people he has created in his own image to live together in peace. He opposes the forces of hatred and destruction which threaten human community.

The commitment to peace requires a renewed approach in every generation. The forces of violence, war and destruction take new forms in every century. Since Hiroshima we are aware that we are living under the threat of nuclear weapons. The means of destruction have changed; they are such that the possible good to be obtained by a nuclear war will not outweigh the horror of destruction which will be its consequence. But no warnings have been able to stop the nuclear armament of the nations. In recent decades an ever more impressive arsenal of nuclear weapons has been built up. The threat of the nuclear holocaust gives an added meaning to the phrase in the letter of James "let us not say we shall do this or that", rather let us say "if we shall be alive we shall do this or that".

Reformed churches have persistently raised their voice against the nuclear arms race. The General Council has re-stated its conviction that Christians are under the obligation to work for peace:

"The WARC calls upon its member churches and the individual members thereof to regard the question of peace as not merely a political question but as one that immediately concerns our commitment to the God of peace; to support in their respective societies by all means available to them all measures towards nuclear disarmament; to support the concerted action of the international community for disarmament; and in particular to urge the nations to take unilateral initiatives toward this end."

Obviously commitment to peace does not only mean opposition to the use of nuclear arms. The responsibility is much wider. Commitment to peace means struggle for more justice in society. Peace cannot be defined negatively as absence of the use of arms. Peace means a community living in mutual respect, solidarity and justice. Peace without regard for the poor, for oppressed and suffering people is no authentic peace.

The countries of the developed world tend to regard the nuclear threat as the primary threat to peace. Representatives from Asia, Africa and Latin America have reminded the General Council not to concentrate on the nuclear threat at the expense of solidarity with the poorer nations.

The scandal of hunger must not be minimized. "While you rise in the morning", a representative from Africa said, "and ask, 'What and when are we going to eat?' many of us have the anxious question 'Will we eat?' While your primary concern is nuclear destruction our primary concern is the minimum which makes life possible."

1. How does your church understand the commitment to peace? What does it in fact undertake to give expression to its commitment? In particular, how does it express its resolute opposition to the use of nuclear arms? How does it make clear that it is concerned with all aspects of peace?
2. The General Council has clearly stated its conviction with regard to nuclear armament. What implication does this have for the Christian witness in your country?
3. In the course of the past decade many Reformed churches have spoken on the issue of peace. The Reformed churches in Eastern Europe, in particular the Reformed Church of Hungary, have repeatedly called for a resolute commitment to the cause of peace. More recently the Hervormde Kerk in Holland and the Moderamen of the Reformed Federation in the Federal Republic of Germany have issued statements on peace. The latter declared: "... Now, as the possibility of atomic war is more than ever before becoming a probability, we come to this recognition: The issue of peace is one which concerns the faith of the church. For us the *status confessionis* is given with it because the attitude taken to means of mass destruction has to do with the affirmation or denial of the Gospel itself..."

Such a statement presents a challenge to all Reformed churches. So you agree with it or do you have a different view of the Christian commitment to peace?

### 3. *Human Wealth and Power*

The problem we face is familiar to us all. There has been an extraordinary expansion of human wealth and power, of technological control over nature, and of human productivity in the past two centuries. Yet we face the prospect, by the very existence of this power, that we may become victims of our own systems and may destroy the earth which is our home. Power is becoming more and more centralized. We feed it with our own short-term interests, our greed and our fears. We need a new understanding of God's judgment and promise for our stewardship of the earth, our ways of securing the common good, and our hopes for the future. We must therefore face the challenge of a) poverty in the midst of wealth, and b) abuse of power in human community.

#### a) *Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*

In our world today medical science has eradicated malaria, achieved transplantation of human organs, and ventured into the dangerous experiment of genetic engineering. Science and technology have turned the dreams of space voyage into reality, put transistor radios even in the hands of people living in isolated villages and remote mountains, and has succeeded in mass-producing everything from automobiles to vacuum cleaners through computerization and automation. But at the same time we are constantly made to realize that poverty plagues large sections of human society. We live in the world divided into the rich North and the poor South.

It is estimated that in the Third World the number of destitute was 700 million in the early 1970s and 800 million today. This tells us that almost 40 per cent of the people in the South are surviving — but only barely surviving (cf. *North-South*, a Programme for Survival, Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, 1980, p. 50).

This raises a particular dilemma for Christians. It has been alleged that the economic system which created the rich North West has been inspired by the Protestant work-ethic and fostered by the aggressive attitudes of Christians of Reformed tradition towards the affairs of this world. Even in the poor South-East, Christians tend to be successful socially and economically. This suggests that Christianity is partly responsible for the North-South division in the present world and for the unjust economic order and practice prevailing in human community today.

#### b) *Abuse of Power in Human Community*

In our world we are confronted with power used and abused to undermine human dignity and integrity, to limit severely freedom and to hamper the development of the God-given gifts to human

beings. Such use and abuse of power takes many and varied forms. There is the economic power that imposes poverty on millions of people on the one hand, and on the other hand allows the monopoly of rich resources of the earth by a few as mentioned above. Abuse of power also expresses itself in authoritarian governments in many countries, depriving people of their social and political rights, even their right to live, and keeping the entire society in a state of siege. Countless numbers of people have fallen victim to this blatant form of abuse of power by political authorities. Another frightening development manifests itself in the endless arms race, putting the destiny of humankind at the mercy of military powers of rival nations.

In situations such as these, there are increasing numbers of people who refuse to accept with resignation the exploitation of the human person and destruction of human community by those who hold economic, military and political power. They resist such powers by peaceful demonstration, by active engagement in reform efforts, or by violent revolution. In short, resistance, in whatever form, to the powers that abuse human persons and endanger the future of humanity and the world, has become a world-wide movement. The resistance movement to oppressive powers has come to shape and define the spirit of our age.

Christians too are caught in the struggle between the powers that dehumanize and oppress and the counter-powers that seek liberation from human bondage. An increasing number of Christians consider it their Christian duty to resist oppressive powers by peaceful means. There are also Christians who, after peaceful means and reform efforts have failed, join in the use of physical force.

It is particularly the use of physical force that raises for Christians searching questions. In a sense, resistance is an element in all Christian witness which points toward the coming judgment of God at the end of time. When this is translated into participation in a struggle to replace an unjust power with one relatively more just, especially when this struggle is violent, special opportunities and temptations are involved. Acts of violence, even in a just cause, have their own dangerous consequences. At the same time, it may be that only by taking part in such a struggle can the Christian give expression to solidarity with the oppressed. And we have come to realize more and more that such solidarity is part and parcel of Christian witness to the God of love and justice, redeeming and reconciling the world in Jesus Christ.

In view of what has been said, we ask the following questions:

1. We need to discern and proclaim a new vision of the promise of God for human society which will replace the goal of ever-expanding, unfairly distributed, wealth and power. What does the Bible tell us about such a new vision? What are the shape and content of the new vision when translated into our particular situations?

2. We face the power structures of the world that express themselves in political-authoritarian government, exploitive and profit-centred business concerns, prejudiced and self-centred races and nations, or ideological-selfrighteous movements which tolerate no critique in pursuing their goals. We need to understand more deeply how such powers are at work in the world at large and in our respective societies and nations. What then does commitment to the faith in Jesus Christ require of us vis-à-vis these powers? What is the missionary task of the church?
3. The prevailing poverty in the world does put into question the success-oriented view of life encouraged by a Protestant work-ethic. Millions of the poor are witnesses against the exploitive economy which grew out of the West under the influence of Christianity. How do we then reformulate our view of life in the world on the basis of Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom of God?

## *AGAINST TORTURE*

The General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches meeting in Ottawa, 17-27 August, 1982, took the following action on the issue of torture: -

*The General Council of the WARC meeting in Ottawa in 1982 condemns the use of torture as a serious violation of human rights, and it explicitly calls on its member churches:*

1. *To break the silence surrounding the use of torture and to denounce it publically;*
2. *To make Christians aware that it is the duty of the churches to be in the forefront of the struggle against torture, and by using all possible means to enlist them in this struggle which is to be waged by prayer and action;*
3. *To urge their governments to support the establishment of an effective International Convention Against Torture whereby countries would at all times permit visits to places of detention by delegates of an impartial international commission''.*



#### 4. *Human Rights: Theological Basis and Political Consequences* \*

The theological foundation of human rights in the tradition of the Reformation is the essential dignity of the human being, created in the image of God, called and claimed by God in his covenant, reconciled to God in Jesus Christ and partaking of the hope of the coming Kingdom when the Triune God will glorify human beings and they will take part in his eternal life and his unending joy. Human rights are therefore not attributes of individuals in themselves; they are functions and descriptions of relations between human beings which reflect the covenant, grace and promise of God. The dignity of human beings in this relationship implies also responsible community with God and their neighbors, and to realize in themselves and in the community God's promise for them, is the gift of God in Jesus Christ. It is also the command of God to realize human rights in society.

The struggle for human dignity and rights takes place in a sinful world where selfish powers will dominate and suppress others when they can. In such a world God's judgement and grace take form in two kinds of "rights":

1. Rights of persons to freedom from coercion by others, to liberty of speech, press, assembly, dissent, and self-expression. The suspicion of unchecked social power and the demand for its constitutional limitation is a heritage of Reformed theology.
2. Rights of persons to life, to basic food, clothing, and shelter, to peace and a fair share in the commonwealth. These are rights which government must secure, by its social action, to the people.

Both kinds, personal freedoms and social welfare, are essential to human dignity. The heart of the one is respect for the humanity of other persons; the heart of the other is justice in sharing the resources and power of the world. Both are secular foundations of the responsible community God intends among his people. Both involve struggle with the powers of this world. Both require not only the compromise and adjudication of rights which conflict with one another, but also the witness of the church to the reconciling grace of God which leads people beyond insistence on their rights to self-giving for the neighbor in community.

The struggle for human rights involves therefore a concrete understanding of the forces in each society that threaten or deny them. Different combinations of rights are most important in different situations in a divided world. Given this, we recommend:

\*From 1970 to 1976 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches sponsored a major study on the *Theological Basis of Human Rights*. The report was published, Feb., 1976 and can be obtained from the WARC, 150 rte de Ferney, 1211, Geneva 20, Switzerland.



- a. That the church in each place discern the human rights that need special attention in the society where it lives, bear its witness there and draw on the support of the whole church in doing so.
- b. That the church be the conscience of the government, industry and other social powers, discerning subtle as well as brutal violations of humanity, and pointing the way to sacrificial action which will realize a higher level of community.
- c. That the church continually seek in society a balance between individual liberties and public responsibility, between freedoms of speech, press, religion, enterprise and rights to food, housing, clothing, medical care, education and a healthy environment.
- d. That the churches consult and inform each other on these matters so that a common mind and mutual support may be strengthened across the world.
- e. That the churches set forth together a basic core of human rights that may not be violated without protest and action by the ecumenical agencies of the church as a whole. The right to life against starvation or mass murder, the right to dissent against total control of mind and speech, and the right to personal integrity against torture would belong to this core.

## CONCLUSION

God calls us to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.

But we live today in a world where the signs are not promising. Over our world hangs the possibility of annihilation by seemingly incorrigible human greed, folly and violence. Some rate the chances of evading catastrophe as very slim. In apocalyptic mood, some even consider disaster inescapable. But God calls us to bear witness today not on the basis of optimistic, pessimistic, apocalyptic or even realist analyses of our times. He calls us to witness to the good news of faith, hope and love in Jesus Christ. Our witness is not at the mercy of human diagnoses but derives its confidence and responsible realism from the very calling of God to us to witness to His care for the earth and all its inhabitants, knowing that He who calls us is faithful and can make use of our witness in the preparation of His kingdom.

*God calls us to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.*

He sustains and leads His church from one generation to another. The church may pass through deep waters and take wrong turnings. It nevertheless has God's promise that it will continue to be preserved in truth. In decay and reformation, death and resurrection, God gives His church a deeper and surer continuity than can be secured by external forms however significant they may be. Despite all the confusions arising in its train, the Reformation witnessed to this continuity in God's fidelity to His gracious promise and our response to that promise in faith, hope and love. The way of the church through the centuries is no triumphal march. It lives, as Calvin testified, by "many resurrections".

*God calls us to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ today.*

In the world as it is today, witness to the Gospel calls us to accept the ministry of suffering. For the church throughout the world today, the horizon of trial and suffering is the normal situation. Christians in many parts of our world testify to us by their sufferings that Christian believing, hoping and loving can never be without a cost, sometimes a very heavy one. Yet the promise of resurrection remains. As we pray to be delivered from evil and from the time of testing, we know that God may call upon us, too, to suffer for our Christian faith. Yet we affirm that God's love is stronger than death, for to Him belong the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory, for ever. Amen.

## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How do *you* give expression to the central affirmation (p. 7)?
  - Jesus Christ, the Saviour — what does this mean for you?
  - What 'Songs of love' (p. 7) do you or does your congregation have to offer?
2. God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit: what does it mean for you to describe God in this way?
3. Where, in your eyes, is the Holy Spirit at work today? Where do you see signs of renewed life
  - In your own life?
  - In your congregation?
  - In the Church at large?
4. Confessing the Gospel may mean drawing a line between truth and error (p. 11). Where do you think that today the truth of the Gospel is being obscured or even denied by error?
5. We believe in Christ as members of the church (p. 7). What does it mean for you to be a member of the church?
  - To what extent is faith a 'personal affair'?
  - Do you see a connection between discipleship and discipline?
  - What do you do to serve the unity of your congregation?
6. What do you think of worship as it is celebrated in your congregation?
  - Are there aspects which require renewal?
  - Are you in favour of a more regular celebration of the Lord's Supper?
7. How do you understand the relationship between 'Reformed' and 'Ecumenical'? The movement of the Reformation finds its continuation in the ecumenical movement. Is this true?

8. Try to enumerate the insights and perspectives the Reformed tradition may have to contribute to the ecumenical movement? Try to enumerate the points on which Reformed churches may need to learn from other churches?
9. How would you describe the relationship of your church to the culture of your country?
10. What does it mean for you to be in communion with churches of other countries? Where does this communion find expression in the life of your congregation?
11. What understanding of marriage and family do we transmit to the coming generation?
12. What proposals do you have for responsible stewardship?
  - With regard to wealth and money?
  - With regard to power?
13. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has declared that Racism is sin and that Apartheid (separate development) in South Africa is not compatible with the Gospel. What does this statement mean for you and for your church?  
  
Seek to identify the reality of Racism in your own context?  
In what ways are you prepared to combat it?
14. Discuss the issue of Human Rights (p. 45). What relation do you see between the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the commitment to the protection of Human Rights? In what ways will you join the struggle for Human Rights? In particular, the struggle against the use of torture?
15. For Peace and Justice — How do you see the relationship between the No to nuclear arms and the struggle against the hunger of the poor nations?

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