



## Lukas Vischer: Justification and Sanctification by Grace in a Time of Survival

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### 2. Historical Context

Lukas Vischer wrote this article for a meeting which brought together participants from WARC and the Lutheran World Federation with representatives of the “First” and the “Radical” Reformations. *Justification* and *sanctification* were central concepts of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation.

### 3. Summary

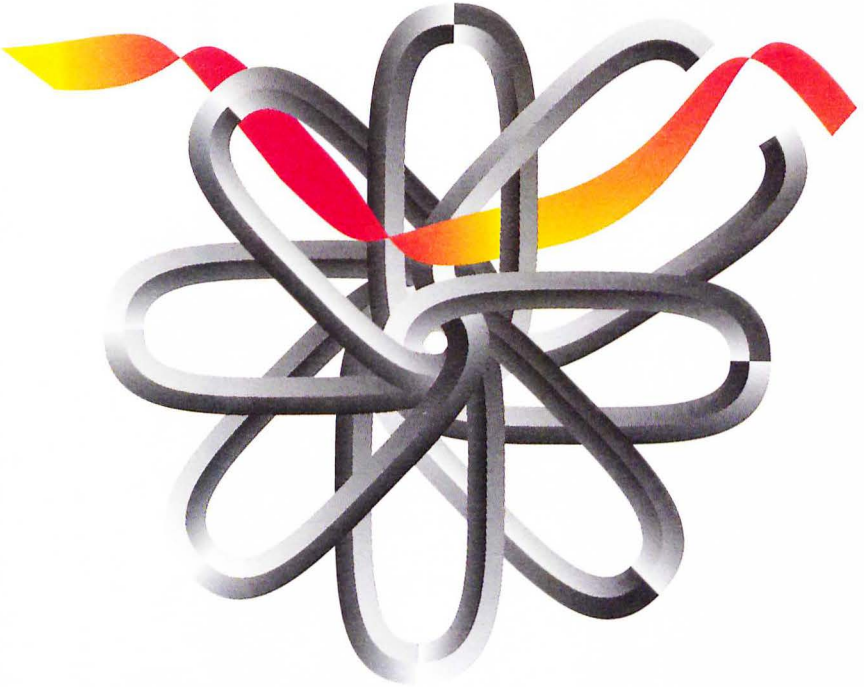
Humanity has entered a qualitatively new period of history. Since the discovery of nuclear power we are confronted with the possibility of self-destruction. Obviously, humanity is engaged in undermining the very basis of its existence on planet earth. A reorientation in the industrialized world and the project of churches’ commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation is to be understood in face of the interconnected threats of destruction which reinforce one another. According to the Reformers it is through the encounter with the triune God that we get to know ourselves – God who is bound in love to all human beings and, indeed, to all creatures. Confronted with this love, we discover that we are possessed by *concupiscentia*, i.e. the will to live at the expense of others. - Will human history end like fireworks – producing impressive and beautiful effects, but in fact destroying itself?

Evidently, we remain prisoners of ourselves. Justice which is acceptable to God is to be found in Jesus Christ alone. Even in those who accept the gospel, the power of sin continues to be present. How much non-sense has been done by Christians in the course of the centuries! There is another aspect: Although justification makes us just before God, it does not wipe out the effects of sin. The damage done by human oppression and aggression does not disappear with our trusting in Christ’s justice. We are still faced with the project of a society which is explicitly built on values of self-assertion: ideologies of economic growth and increasing wealth, of self-interest and competition, and of the single market with its aggression against nature and exploitation of natural resources. Justification does not imply a claim to a future within history. The future is radically in God’s hands. This must not prevent us, however, from seeking to establish *counter-signs* to human self-assertion in public life. Such a witness is particularly required today.

What difference does it make, after these considerations, to have been justified by grace? The main consequence is an *inner freedom which does not depend on hope or despair*: a freedom to face the prospects of the future, a freedom from the need of self-justification, a freedom from despair, and a freedom for a witness of love. The church is the place where the implications of justification by grace are to be worked out again and again. A community comes into existence which will be characterized by a new lifestyle, counter-sign in a world dominated by self-assertion. Such a community will be a source of freedom by offering forgiveness and the possibility of a new departure. It will be a place where love can shine forth. – Justification by grace *anticipates God’s kingdom*. Ultimately, the church has no other wisdom than to declare its total dependence on this reality.

# REFORMED WORLD

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**God and the Market**

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Volume 49

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Introduction	Páraic Réamonn .....	77
Surmounting the Current Economic Crisis	Presbyterian Church of Korea .....	78
God and the Market – Affecting your Life and Faith	Ted Reeve .....	92
From Death to Life: Reflections on Gobal Economics	Mark D. Hathaway .....	99
Justification and Sanctification by Grace in a Time of Survival	Lukas Vischer .....	109

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## REFORMED WORLD

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## Introduction

The Korean economic meltdown sent a shockwave through Korean churches, and one immediate result was the 1998 statement of faith by the Presbyterian Church of Korea reprinted in this issue. For me, at least, the fascination of this text lies in its startled recognition that not only Korean society, but the church itself, has been permeated with the false values of an acquisitive materialism that is the antithesis of the gospel. As economic conditions in Korea begin to pick up again, it remains to be seen whether the PCK will come to regret its vehement denunciations of last year, or whether it will deepen its critique into a comprehensive theological and economic analysis of Korea's problems.

The United Church of Canada has a long history of prophetic social critique and in its current moderator it has someone who stands squarely in that tradition. But the Moderator's Consultation on Faith and the Economy which Bill Phipps initiated attempts to be traditional in non-traditional ways, using e-mail and the worldwide web to break with hierarchical modes of communication and to create something like a town meeting extended in time and space. Both the matter and the manner of the consultation (see the contributions by Mark Hathaway and Ted Reeve below) may offer a model to other churches.

The paper by Lukas Visser comes from a meeting which brought together participants from the Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation with representatives of what have been called the 'First' and the 'Radical' Reformations in an effort to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the Reformation trajectory in Christian history. But the turn to our roots is always for the sake of a return, and Lukas deploys the central Reformed concepts of justification and sanctification to throw theological light on our own time – a time, as he contends, of survival.

One may wonder how many of the delegates to the 23rd General Council (Debrecen 1997) fully realized the significance of what they were doing when they issued the call to Alliance member churches to engage in a common process of recognition, education and confession with regard to economic injustice and ecological destruction. All member churches, at all levels of their lives: so ambitious an undertaking tempts one to reach for the word, *hubris*.

Papers like these presented here may help, as may the regional hearings on globalization which the Alliance is organizing together with the World Council of Churches. We will do all we can to involve our churches in this *processus confessionis*. But in the end it is your engagement that counts.

*Páraic Réamonn*



## JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION BY GRACE IN A TIME OF SURVIVAL

Lukas Vischer

More and more insistently, in recent years, we have become aware that humanity has entered a qualitatively new period of history. The newness of the situation lies in the capacity of self-annihilation humanity has acquired. The discovery of nuclear power, a few decades ago, has made the difference. Since then, human beings – or at least certain human beings – are in principle capable of extinguishing much of human life on this planet. Since then, we are confronted with the possibility of an end caused by our own human activity. Since then, strictly speaking, humanity finds itself in a situation of survival. It is constantly struggling against the realization of the destruction which it has become capable of causing, constantly pushing off into the future an end which, in principle, could occur at any moment. It will not any more get rid of this capacity for self-destruction. It is bound to live with it. Life has become survival.

Since the discovery of nuclear power, the threats to life on the planet have become even more formidable, in particular as a consequence of the increasing destruction of the human environment. There is today a growing awareness that humanity not only has acquired the capacity for self-destruction, but is actively engaged in undermining the very basis of its existence on the planet.

There has been much talk among the churches about the need for a new concerted commitment to the causes of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The proposal is not to be understood as an invitation to work for a 'better world' in which there is no injustice nor war and in which the whole of creation is restored to a harmony which, allegedly, was characteristic of earlier centuries. The present situation does not really allow for such dreams. The project is rather to be understood as a cry of alarm. It points to the threats of destruction confronting us. There is the economic injustice, both national and worldwide, which so far no efforts have been able to remove, an international society so organized that starvation and the death of thousands of human beings are bound to occur day by day. There is the increasing disintegration of states and societies which causes injustice to increase. There is the continuing threat of ethnic and religious tensions, of revolts and terrorism, and, because of it, the increasing desire for security which leads to increased police control and in all likelihood to new dictatorships. There is the exploitation of nature hardly mitigated by some timid ecological measures. Already thousands of species of animals and plants have been extinguished.

The list of threats could be extended. It is important to realize that they are mutually connected and reinforce one another. The over-consumption by industrialized nations increases injustice. The disasters which may occur as a consequence of the greenhouse effect will no doubt first hit the weaker nations of the South; they may provoke streams of ecological refugees. The over-exploitation of the earth's resources is likely to cause conflicts – fights over water supplies or fishing rights are the first signs of a new world obliged to cope with scarcity.

It is a time in which we are confronted anew with ourselves. With horror we ask the question: what have we done? and inevitably we are led to the question: who are we and where are we going?

The fact that we are living in a qualitatively new period of history was reflected upon for the first time after Hiroshima. The most famous among the early reflections was probably Karl Jaspers' book, *The Atomic Bomb and the Future of Humanity*.<sup>1</sup> He suggested that a new quality of life was required to be able to live with this new instrument of destruction. Since the late sixties and the early seventies analyses and reflections of this kind abound. There was the study, *Limits to Growth*,<sup>2</sup> which called into question so many of the so far undisputed assumptions of the industrialized world – both in the East and the West. There were the warnings by Denis de Rougemont<sup>3</sup> and by Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker.<sup>4</sup> They all point to the urgency inherent in the present moment of history.

Their appeals are based on two considerations:

The present situation is ultimately the result of human irresponsibility or, more precisely, of western irresponsibility. Therefore, the impasse in which we find ourselves can only be broken by a radical reorientation of humanity or, more precisely, of people and nations in the industrialized world.

The need for such a reorientation places an extraordinary challenge before this generation. If the challenge is not met, survival cannot be assured. A conversion is required. Jaspers spoke of the need for a new 'courage for reason'.

How does our generation deal with this challenge? What does the gospel have to say to humanity in today's dilemmas? What spirituality does it have to offer? The issue is of decisive importance. Personally I am convinced that an adequate

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, München 1957, pp.487ff.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Meadows, *Limits to Growth*, Boston 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Denis de Rougemont, *L'avenir est notre affaire*, Paris 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Die Zeit drängt*, München 1986.

answer can only be given on the basis of the biblical message on justification and sanctification by Jesus Christ.

The report of the official International Lutheran–Reformed Dialogue offers a hint. Although the connection between the Reformation message and the response to today’s threats to the future is not really thought through and developed in this report – in any case not sufficiently to grasp immediately the immense relevance of the inherited doctrine of justification by grace – the report clearly alludes to it. Paragraph 18 reads:

‘The world and the human family owe their existence to the grace of this triune God who created us in the divine image. We acknowledge that, despite our misuse of the creation and our disregard of human communion, the future of the world and our destiny as human beings are defined by the grace which surpasses all understanding and merit. God’s purposes have been revealed and lived out as gracious promise in Jesus Christ our Lord. We believe that the Holy Spirit will empower the fulfilment of this promise in the coming kingdom of God of which the risen Christ is the first fruits.’<sup>5</sup>

Let me try to develop this brief reference.

### **God, the Source of Knowing Ourselves**

The Reformers stress unanimously that it is through the encounter with God that we get to know ourselves. John Calvin opens his *Institutes* with the affirmation that the knowledge of God is the presupposition of knowing ourselves. There is no true knowledge of ourselves independently from God. There we have to direct all attention to God. God is, so to say, the mirror in which we recognize our own image. It is only through God that the meaning of our existence as human beings can be understood. Outside this mirror, everything remains obscure. The meaning of our existence and thus also of our role in today’s world remains inaccessible. Who are we? According to the Reformers, God alone is capable of answering the question, and when they say ‘God’ they mean the triune God, the Father who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. In their understanding, God is not an impersonal absolute transcending everything human. Scripture points to a God who, as a person, is seeking communion. God, the mirror in which we recognize ourselves, is a God who is bound in love to the creation – to all human beings and, indeed,

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<sup>5</sup> *Toward Church Fellowship, Report of the Joint Commission of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, Geneva 1989, p.11.

to all creatures. God does not want anybody or anything to get lost. God's intention is to bring all created beings to their fulfilment. In particular, God is on the side of all those who have become victims of power and violence and vibrates with the creation which is groaning and crying out for liberation and redemption.

### **The Fruit of Sin is Death**

As we are confronted with this perfect love we discover who we are: human beings so entirely under the domination of the power of sin that we are unable to face God. There is an abyss between God and ourselves. We realize that sin has penetrated all parts of our being. We are possessed – as Luther put it in his lectures on the epistle to the Romans<sup>6</sup> – by *concupiscentia*, a term which is misunderstood if it is translated by 'sensual desire'. *Concupiscentia* means the love of one's own self. The will to be at the expense of others, the self-aggrandizement, the determination to conquer the world, to dominate others and to put them to our service. It is precisely this *concupiscentia* which leads eventually to self-destruction. It is the way of death. Human beings find fulfilment through communion with God. They fall under God's judgement through *concupiscentia* which bypasses the rights and interests of other human beings and of creation as a whole. Of course, the biblical passages on God's judgement have always been there; they have always validated by the experience of life. But it becomes particularly obvious today that the fruits of sin are literally destruction and death. In fact, the escalation of evil today should be of no surprise to us. It is the consequence of a human choice – our choice.

But is this all we can say about the human condition? Is all simply evil? Are there no human achievements which are impressive, good and beautiful? Certainly there are, and the moment will come when God will make manifest what has been in harmony with his intentions in history. There is much reason to rejoice in everything which reflects God's presence in this world. But at the same time we need to be clear – even when we think that we are doing what is good and beautiful we are determined by *concupiscentia*. In the course of the last decades we thought we were working towards a responsible society, but now we must recognize that we were contributing in many ways to the increased vulnerability of humanity and, even more, of our fellow creatures. Personally, when I look back on my life, I feel ashamed of how long it took me to realize the degree of aggression and violence we are daily committing against life. What

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte I, Luther*, p.137.

horrors were we able to overlook! Obviously, we can claim not to have known it, but this does not mean that we are without guilt.

### **Jesus Christ – Justice Acceptable to God**

Is there any escape? Or are we living under a curse? Will humanity gradually move towards self-destruction? Will we increasingly get caught in the contradictions of history which we are unable to overcome? Will human history end like fireworks – producing impressive, good and beautiful effects, but in fact burning and destroying itself?

Evidently, all attempts on our part to be in harmony with God's perfect love are bound to fail. In whatever direction we turn and whatever effort we undertake, we remain prisoners of ourselves, and it is therefore more than doubtful whether the new orientation which so many call for today can ever be realized. A just and peaceful world is a very unlikely hope.

The decisive insight, also and perhaps especially for this qualitatively new period of history, is provided by the biblical message of Jesus Christ. Justice which is acceptable to God, justice not as a notion, but as a reality achieved in human life, is to be found in Jesus Christ alone. Jesus has lived that life of perfect love which we were called to live. He was totally available to God's will. He was radically open to others. He identified with the victims suffering under power and violence. He died and his death was the supreme expression of love. Jesus is the justice acceptable to God and because of this he is the source of life for this world. In Jesus Christ, the one who is just, God is able to say yes to humanity. By raising him from the dead, God breaks the chains of sin. Christ's life, death and resurrection are, so to say, the key opening the door to the realm of the life-giving Spirit – the Spirit who was active in creation and continues to give life, the Spirit who was in Jesus Christ and is now working towards the coming of God's kingdom, the Spirit who is responsible for all signs of life in the decay of the world. Through the resurrection of Christ, God has overcome the irreversibility of death. God's *yes* has the last word. There is the promise of new life, of a new heaven and a new earth.

We can now become witnesses of that justice which was and is in Jesus Christ. We can point, through our words and lives, to that source of life. Justice becomes reality in this world through communion with Jesus Christ, a power breaking into all realms of life, personal, communal, in society and in creation. The report of the Joint Lutheran Reformed International Dialogue Commission states: 'There is no area of life, indeed in all creation, which does not belong to Jesus Christ, who sends us into all the world to be a sign of God's kingdom and

to preach and live the gospel of reconciliation in a common concern for justice, freedom, peace and care for the creation' (para. 25).<sup>7</sup>

### **The Continuing Power of Sin**

To what kind of witness does justification by grace lead? Before addressing this question an important further consideration needs to be emphasized. Justification by the justice of Jesus Christ does not remove the power of sin from the world.

In the first place, the message of justification does not find acceptance with human beings. It meets, on the contrary, with resistance. Conversion to Jesus Christ is seen by human beings, not as liberation, but rather as a capitulation. They prefer to continue on their own ways. In rejecting the gospel, their hearts harden. The history of alienation from God goes on at a new level. Jesus seems to be aware of this effect of his coming. As he is led to the cross, he foresees the end of the people. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold your house is forsaken and desolate' (Mt 23.37–38, cf. also Lk 19.41ff.). He weeps over their self-destruction, but does not force them to accept the salvation God offers.

But even in those who accept the gospel the power of sin continues to be present. The firm trust in Christ's justice brings me the assurance that I shall not perish, but it does not mean that I can cease to pray '*kyrie eleison*'. The daily experience of every Christian bears witness to the continuing presence of sin; and there is the humbling record of the history of the church. How much non-sense has been done by Christians in the course of the centuries, and very often in the name of God and the Bible! The many generations of Christians who have placed their hope in Christ have certainly not been saved by their witness and achievements, but by Christ's justice alone. Often they have failed without even being aware of their failure. Shall we turn out to be better? This is very unlikely.

Certainty can only grow by concentrating on Christ's justice. The new life is never simply at our disposal. It is not under our control. It does not become part of our 'character' which we could mould. Justification does not result in a process of consolidation which we could observe, after all nevertheless a merit which distinguishes us from the rest of the world. As soon as we think of ourselves as having become just, certainty begins to vanish. Again Luther's lectures on the epistle to the Romans are important here. At one point he refers

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<sup>7</sup> *Toward Church Fellowship*, p.12.

to 1 Cor 4.4, where Paul defends his personal conduct. *Nihil mihi conscius sum* – ‘I am not aware of anything wrong I have done’, but he hastens to add: It is not this good conscience which is the reason of my being justified.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, there are acts of love we are able to achieve. We seek to be open to the prompting of the Spirit. But we shall never become masters of the new life. Conversion is not a once for all occurrence which can then be left behind. There is constantly need to resort anew to his justifying justice. Insofar as we turn to him, love is witnessed to. Insofar as we seek self-assurance, the Spirit will be contradicted.

There is still another aspect of the continuing power of sin. Although justification makes us just before God, it does not necessarily wipe out the effects of sin. Forgiveness does not restore the *status quo ante* and allow us to start again from zero. The course of history as far it is determined by human sin will not necessarily change. The damage done by human oppression and aggression does not disappear with our trusting in Christ’s justice. People who have been killed by our participation in economic injustice will not be brought back to life. The exploitation of nature will not be reversed; it has taken place. Species of plants and animals which have been extinguished cannot be revived. We may mourn, but we cannot any more undo the effects of human sin. What has been done, and its being done, has consequences which need to be accepted and lived with. Justification removes God’s judgement, but not necessarily the historical consequences of human sin.

Human sin cannot be seen as distinct acts which can be dealt with individually. They are connected. They are part of a developing history. Each act adds to the history and brings about a new situation. Although each act defies God’s will, there is at the same time something like an inescapable accumulation of human sin leading to God’s final judgement. ‘Then I heard another voice from heaven, come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues, for her sins are heaped high as heaven and God has remembered her iniquities’ (Rev. 18,4–5).

The recognition of this fact leads inevitably to the conclusion that justification does not imply a claim to a future within history. As disturbing as this conclusion may at first sight be, it is very important for the church to be clear on it. The future of each individual, but also the future of humanity as a whole, is radically in God’s hands.

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<sup>8</sup> Johannes Ficker, *Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief 1515/16*, Leipzig 1930, Scholien, pp.69, 89.



God will deal with human sin and its effects in his own wisdom. The course of history cannot be foreseen, and all projections we are tempted to make are likely to turn out to be mistaken. God may render sin ineffective and prolong the time of history, or he may not. We have no means of knowing with certainty. God may 'satisfy us with the goodness of his house' (Ps 65.4). But he may also lead us through dark valleys. The experience is familiar to all of us. Acts which could have had disastrous consequences have remained without effect, while, on the contrary, acts of seemingly little importance could mercilessly bear their negative fruits. Both for each individual and for humanity as a whole, the historical future God provides is radically hidden.

### **Witnessing to God's Justice**

Is there then no place for a constructive witness? Are we simply witnesses of a world in increasing decay? The apocalyptic writings of the Bible may give this impression. According to the book of Daniel, the empires follow one on the other, each worse than the one preceding it. The forces of human history are consumed by the destructive effects of sin. The vocation of believers would then simply consist in not becoming the prisoners of history. Justification would be the source of an inner freedom, but would not provide guidance for a witness within society.

Very often justification by grace has been interpreted in this way. Justification leads to a renewal of personal life. By God's grace self-centeredness is replaced by love. Trusting in God, believers discover new capacities of freedom, personal discipline and solidarity; having been forgiven, they find in themselves the strength to forgive others. But justification, it is maintained, does not provide the basis for Christian action in society. 'Churches have no mandate to shape or to contribute to shaping society, state and legislation', a recent study on justification unambiguously states. Their public witness is confined to proclaiming the good news, to reacting critically to current issues and possibly to intervening in emergency situations. According to this view, the world of politics and economics is to be distinguished from the spiritual world; it is governed by the laws of reason, and the role of the church consists in recalling these laws as occasion requires and enabling society to find its way back to political and economic reason.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Schäfer, *Die Botschaft der Rechtfertigung. Eine Einführung in ihr biblisch-reformatorisches Verständnis, Im Auftrag der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands (VELKD)*, Hannover 1997, p.41.

But there is certainly more to be said. There is a more direct relationship between justification and justice in society. Justification inevitably leads us to witness to God's justice in Jesus Christ. As we become aware of God's grace we become at the same time aware of God's design for the world. We discover like in a mirror who we are, not only as individuals, but also as the society to which we belong. We realize where human self-assertion leads. There is therefore no other choice than to witness to this order – governed by respect for the rights of others, mutual care and solidarity. True, God's justice can ultimately not be translated into historical projects. We are bound to plan, but projects and strategies can never be more than instruments of witness; God's free gift of grace would be betrayed if they claimed more for themselves. Since the purpose of history remains hidden, we shall never fully know what love ultimately requires. Whatever we plan and undertake will remain fragile in the extreme. Even with regard to the demands of love we see everything only as through a veil. Faith in God's saving grace is in danger if God's purpose in history is identified with any historical design, even if it is the cause of the church. Justification puts a question mark behind any form of messianism.

But this must not prevent us from witnessing to God's order and seeking to establish counter-signs to human self-assertion in public life. In the first place, this means to take sides consistently with the weak and oppressed. Justification results in new relationships. Although all have sinned and are in need of God's liberating word of grace, the strong and the weak, through justification a communion comes into existence which is characterized by a new dignity offered to the weak. The man in the parable whose immense debt has been remitted is called to let a new relationship arise with his weaker fellow-men. Justification is the door for God's justice to enter the world. The justice bestowed on us engages us in a struggle for justice.<sup>10</sup>

There are further implications. The witness to God's justice and order inevitably leads to a critique of all forms of self-assertion in society. As we are set free by God's liberating word we begin to see more clearly the destructive effect of certain values in the life of society. Love demands a critical attitude towards any order of society which exalts human achievement and thus reduces the chances of mutual respect and true communion. Confronted with God, we realize the potential of rebellion and destruction within ourselves. Justification points us in the opposite direction. According to Paul the fruits of the Spirit are

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<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, 'Gerechtigkeit für Opfer und Täter', in: *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes, Beiträge zur trinitarischen Theologie*, pp.74ff.

‘love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-discipline’ (Gal 5.22).

Such a witness based on justification by grace is particularly required today as we are faced with the project of a society which is explicitly built on values of self-assertion. Taking seriously the message of justification and its consequences for Christian life, we discover that we are bound to be in conflict with the dominant economic system. Sensing intuitively the contradiction, the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Debrecen, 1997) called on the churches to engage in a analysis of the system in the light of the gospel and to identify the points where roads are bound to part. The Council spoke of the need for a *processus confessionis*, i.e. a movement of reflection on the implications of our common confession of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup> I think that the contradiction between allegiance to the gospel and the present system becomes most apparent when we take our starting point from the message of justification.

Let me be more specific by giving three examples:

#### *The goal of economic growth and increasing wealth*

Throughout the New Testament, especially in the Gospel according to Luke, we are confronted with a severe critique of the rich. The accumulation of goods is denounced as a source of false security. ‘Fool! This night your soul is required from you; and the things you have prepared whose will they be?’ (Lk 12.20) Relying on accumulated riches means denying trust in God. Justified by grace, we have been freed from greed and the search for self-satisfaction by acquiring more and more.

Today’s economic system is built on the accumulation of wealth or, more precisely, on the continuing increase of wealth. The health of a society is to be measured by the degree of economic development. The assumption is that human beings are primarily to be seen as *homines economici*, whose vocation it is to contribute to the wealth of the nations.

There is no rejection of human needs and desires in the New Testament. The need for food has even a place in such a central text as the Lord’s prayer. The critique concerns unnecessary needs and desires. The disciples are invited to be content with their daily bread from day to day. Justified by grace, they are able to rely on God for the fulfilment of their needs. The present system promotes economic desires far beyond the limits of what is needed for a fulfilled life.

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<sup>11</sup> *Debrecen 1997, Proceedings*, ed. Milan Opočenský, Geneva 1997, p.197ff.

We now discover where excessive needs and desires are, in fact, leading. The resources of creation are in danger. Nevertheless, the economic system continues to proclaim economic growth and increasing wealth as the primary goal of humanity. It favours an attitude in life which is in clear contradiction with the direction in which justification points.

*Self-interest and competition as main motives of economic life*

The gospel places central emphasis on love of, and solidarity with, our neighbour. Paul gives a succinct summary of this general orientation in his epistle to the Philippians: 'So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being of full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves' (Phil 2.1-3). Justified by grace, we have been placed at one and the same level before God. We have become a communion to which all members make their contribution.

Today's economic system is explicitly based on the principles of self-interest and competition. The assumption is that human beings, acting out of self-interest, will ultimately contribute to increased production, trade and consumption. People are therefore consistently exhorted to follow the lead of their self-interest. To ensure the health of the economy they are to gain, to acquire and to consume. The system functions best through the free competition of economic forces. Engaged in competition, all parties are forced to achieve their maximum. In order to survive they need to win. Competition turns the dynamics of society into a continuing struggle for victory.

There is no question that self-interest and competition are characteristics of human life. There is, indeed, in human beings the innate drive to seek advantage over others. Within limits, self-interest and competition must not only be tolerated, but upheld and even promoted. There is sound self-respect, and competition can, indeed, contribute to the development of human capacities. All depends on the purposes underlying competition. Paul can even speak of spiritual competition (1 Cor 9.4). But what we experience today goes far beyond the normal interaction of forces within any community. The principles of self-interest and competition have acquired an ideological dimension. The pursuit of self-interest and competitiveness is systematically promoted. To favour the laws of competition everything is done to create the conditions for a free and worldwide encounter of economic forces.

The consequences of the system become more and more manifest. Competition, systematically applied as a principle, demands an enormous social

and ecological price. In order to remain competitive on the worldwide market each country has to enforce measures of readjustment for which the weaker members of society have to pay. Competitiveness leads to an acceleration of developments in many fields – science, technological innovation, production and consumption. It leads humanity further and further away from the created order into a ‘second world’ of artefacts and diminishes the awareness of ecological destruction.

But there is, above all, a spiritual price to be paid. Competition is geared to victory. There are winners, but there will be at the same inevitably also losers. Within a competitive system solidarity with the victims will never be more than an afterthought. The present system favours thus an attitude in life which is in clear contradiction to the direction in which justification by grace points.

### *Respect for creation*

Throughout the Bible human beings are reminded of their dependence on God, the creator of heaven and earth. They are called to share the goods of the earth and, at the same time, to respect the limits of its resources. The commandment to remember the Sabbath day can serve here as an illustration. The Sabbath is both a social and an ecological institution. It is a day of communion when all people rest and enjoy the blessings of creation; it is at the same time a reminder of our dependence on the God who created heaven and earth in six days (Ex 20.8–11). Dependence on God is the guiding principle for our common life on earth. Being justified by grace, we are forcefully reminded of this principle.

Today’s economic system clearly sets another priority. We are faced today with a dilemma. There is the growing awareness that a new departure is required if we are to achieve a sustainable society, i.e., a society which is committed to ensure the quality of life of future generations. The UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (1992) made an attempt to formulate the requirements of sustainability (Rio Declaration, Conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity, Agenda 21). At least a beginning was made to indicate an alternative path for human society. The fact is, however, that the perspectives of Rio cannot be achieved within the present dominant economic system. The ideology of the single market inevitably leads to increased ‘through-put’ and therefore more human aggression against nature and increased exploitation of its resources.

Disrespect for God the creator is an inherent aspect of the present system. Justified by grace, we have been reminded of God’s presence in creation and are bound to inverse the priorities. Sustainability is to be pursued in the first place.

Again, the present system favours an attitude which is in clear contradiction to the direction in which justification points.

Three perspectives, then, which cannot be reconciled with faith in God's justifying grace! Three values which are incompatible with confessing and celebrating Christ's justice imparted to us! On the basis of our faith, we cannot but reject and protest against a system which is bound to lead to injustice and destruction. Justification by grace implies a life based on fundamentally different values – simplicity, solidarity and respect for creation. It calls for a lifestyle which parts ways with present trends. Of course, justification does not provide the basis for developing in all details an alternative project for society, but it makes us aware of the incompatibility of God's will with the fundamental values guiding the present economic system. The true meaning of justification is, in the first place, a challenge to the church itself, because the community of faith is in many ways tributary to the system. It is far from clear about the implications of its own faith, and in daily life compromises with perspectives of self-assertion are in any case inevitable. But there can hardly be any doubt that the Christian faith and the present project of society are in opposition. Inasmuch as the Christian community is faithful to the implications of its faith, it will always point to other horizons.

### **Hoping for God's Kingdom**

But will this witness change the present orientation? Will it succeed in creating a movement of renewal and healing? What can we expect of the future? As we have seen, justification by God's justice does not necessarily mean that God will provide humanity with a brighter future. The effects of sin have not been removed and remain active as destructive forces in history. Evil may accumulate; conditions of life on the planet may gradually deteriorate. There cannot be any claim to a historical future, and it is certainly not in our hands to ensure the future.

There is no doubt need to mobilize all available forces, and it may well be that another road into the future will be provided by people's movements. But there is no certainty that they will succeed. I am myself committed to several such movements and I am supporting them with conviction; in my view, this is what Christian witness requires from the church today. But will they really achieve what they pursue? Often a language is used in such movements which disqualifies doubts about the future as a mere lack of faith. But there is no assurance about the future, and God's promise of the kingdom does not mean that the voice of reason will be heard. Room needs to be left for God's

judgement. Even the most persuasive programmes may fail. God may choose very different ways.

What difference does it then make to have been justified by grace? The main consequence is an inner freedom which does not depend on either hope or despair, a freedom to engage in love for each neighbour and all human beings even if there are no prospects of permanent change. Let me make this clearer by the following three remarks:

### *Freedom from self-deceit*

The certainty of justification helps us to face reality and to recognize without fear the immense threats under which humanity lives. The great temptation of our society is to ignore or minimize them. Warning voices are systematically called into question. In fact, there is still the widespread belief that science and technology will not only find the means to avoid catastrophes, but lead through new achievements to a better world. The reason for this superstition is simple. Meeting the threats would require such far-reaching changes in our present lifestyle that we are unable face the magnitude of the challenge. We either suppress it from our consciousness or lessen its impact by dividing the total picture into a series of threats which can each be clearly circumscribed and can therefore find a relatively easy solution. The message of justification is decisive in this respect. It gives the freedom which is required to overcome the blockages in our minds and hearts and to face the prospects of the future.

### *Justification and Self-justification*

The certainty of justification frees from the need of self-justification. The present time is characterized by an enormous need for self-justification. There is a defence mechanism, not only in individuals, but even more in society, which responds allergically to every criticism. This disposition makes it difficult to come to terms with our own past. It makes it almost impossible to assess the dynamics of the present. Why should the progress of the last decades be regarded as guilt? Why call the dynamism of the technological age exploitation and aggression? Why should we be held responsible for consequences of which we were not, and could not be, aware? Why should we, members of the industrialized world, bear the responsibility for the effects of a project, given the good intentions we had in pursuing it? The same attitude of self-justification can also be found among people who are critical of the present system. They accuse. They point to the culprits – people in key positions who misuse their power and prevent reason to from prevailing. Justification by grace makes it impossible to engage in such movements. Clearly, not all share the same responsibility for the



destructive course of history. Generalized statements about human guilt will never do justice to reality. But the presupposition for a new departure is the readiness to admit that we have all, each in our own way, failed to fulfil the demands of God. It is essential that any statements churches issue reflect the recognition of our common responsibility.

### *Freedom from Despair*

The analysis of today's threats almost inevitably produces a feeling of despair. There was a time in the recent past when hopes were flying high. Darker perspectives have taken their place today. Hopes which have broken down lead to frustration. There is today a tendency to derive a certain satisfaction from discussing the 'problems' of our time. Despair of the future can become an intellectual fashion. But despair in all its forms is the end of love. Jesus possibly had this in mind when he told his disciples that in the last days 'love will grow cold in many' (Mt 24.12). Trust in Christ's justice frees from despair because it carries with it the assurance that in Christ the forces of death have been, and will be, overcome. It liberates for a witness of love.

### **The Church and its Witness**

If all this is true the church is in the first place the community of those who share the faith in God's grace through Christ's justice. As nothing vanishes so quickly as the awareness of God's grace, the primary purpose of the church is to ensure effective communication of the message of justification. As the Reformers never ceased to emphasize, there is constant need to proclaim the message. But we know that proclamation is not enough. God's great deeds need to be celebrated by a worshipping community, and there is need for the members to communicate the message to one another. The churches of the Reformation have still much to learn in this respect. As essential as proclamation may be, the role of worship and community life must not be underestimated. Though the message concerns each person individually it only stays alive through interpersonal relations. Justification by grace leads into communion; and awareness of God's liberating presence is decisively strengthened by communion.

The church is the place where the implications of justification by grace are to be worked out again and again. Only through a common effort can we hope to discover gradually the response justification requires. The fellowship of those placing their trust in Christ's justice will necessarily be characterized by a new lifestyle – with new values and priorities in all aspects of life. A community comes into existence which is bound to be a counter-sign in a world dominated by self-assertion. It will point to alternatives. It will be a source of freedom by

offering forgiveness and the possibility of a new departure. It will be a place where love can shine forth.

Justification by grace anticipates the future kingdom. Justified on the basis of Christ's justice the church constantly prays for the coming of God's kingdom. *Maranatha!* The witness points to a reality beyond oppression, destruction and decay where God will be all in all and all nations healed. Ultimately the church has no other wisdom than to declare its total dependence on this reality. The justification of us sinners is the anticipation of that coming world when God's purposes will become manifest in all their implications.

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