



Lukas Vischer: Worship as Christian Witness to Society

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2. Historical Context

In the 1990s, the renewal of worship was on the agenda of many Reformed churches. This volume is the result of a consultation held at the International John Knox Center in Geneva from January 5-12, 2001. It was attended by theologians and liturgical scholars from a wide range of Reformed churches.

3. Summary

Reformed worship has never been confined to spiritual themes but has always included aspects of public life. Its credibility depends on the willingness of the community to share in God's movement of love for the world. Since the 16th century, Reformed churches, more than others, have emphasized the claims of the gospel on state authorities and society. The privileged instrument for the reflection of public issues in worship is the sermon. Another place for themes of public life is intercession. Responsibility for sermon and intercession lies principally with the leaders of worship.

But how can the worship of the *community as a whole* become a sign to the world? Some attempts may be mentioned here as illustrations: In the late fifties and early sixties, some churches interpreted Lent as a time for learning and practicing solidarity with the poor; the old tradition of agape meals was given the meaning of a sign of solidarity. - In the 1970s, Amnesty International launched a vast campaign against judicial arbitrariness, the use of torture, and death penalty. Numerous congregations mentioned the names of particular political prisoners at the time of intercession in their worship; at the end of the service the opportunity was offered to sign petition letters to governments and police of the countries concerned. - Several congregations have offered their churches to refugees as sanctuaries. - Special worship services can be organized to pray for an end to violence and war, for reconciliation and peace, or for the success of a certain conference. Some congregations choose public places for the celebration of worship on certain occasions. – But the political witness of the churches sharply raises the question of the extent to which the community practices *in its own midst* the solidarity it is calling for in society. On two issues - the relationship between men and women, and racial and ethnic barriers within the church – the insistence on the inclusiveness of the community has led to far-reaching debates and changes. Can i.e. a church in South Africa that does not admit Christians of a different race to the Lord's Supper be considered the church of Christ? – Finally: The ecological crisis has led to surfacing the theme of creation in preaching, changing the hymn tradition, decorating the church with symbols of nature, blessing animals, and celebrating services in the open air. A "time of the Creator and creation" has been suggested to find its place in the church year.

It is true: The political witness of the church will often consist in rejecting outside claims that threaten to distort the gospel and the *raison d'être* of the Christian community. Political witness in worship services will never be possible without the risk of ambiguity. Nevertheless, acts of true solidarity have the promise of bearing the fruits of the Spirit.



CHRISTIAN WORSHIP
IN REFORMED CHURCHES
PAST AND PRESENT

edited by LUKAS VISCHER



The CALVIN INSTITUTE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP LITURGICAL STUDIES SERIES, edited by John D. Witvliet, is designed to promote reflection on the history, theology, and practice of Christian worship and to stimulate worship renewal in Christian congregations. Contributions include writings by pastoral worship leaders from a wide range of communities and scholars from a wide range of disciplines. The ultimate goal of these contributions is to nurture worship practices that are spiritually vital and theologically rooted.

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Edited by

LUKAS VISCHER

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Series Preface

“One holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” This book is about the all-encompassing biblical vision of the church captured in these six creedal words. It is a book that helps us sense the underlying *unity* of the body of Christ, as it describes worship practices across great divides of both time and space. It is a book about *holiness*, as it bears witness to efforts at liturgical purity, truth, and integrity, and names work yet to do. It is a book about *catholicity*: even though it is a book about only one tradition within the Christian faith, it describes a tradition that bears witness to the catholicity of the church and attempts to enhance it through tangible decisions about how to worship, preach, and celebrate the sacraments. It is a book about *apostolicity*: its global scope is itself a witness to the missionary work of the church in declaring the good news of Christ’s gospel worldwide. Reading the essays in this book is an exercise in making these creedal statements a part of our working theological imagination. Taken together, these essays can help us experience Christ’s church in a new and more profound way.

These essays also have much to teach us about worship. Nearly all of today’s challenges and controversies about the practice of Christian worship relate to the church’s posture toward culture. All Christian congregations must somehow decide how their worship can at once transcend, reflect, and critique culture in their local environment. Most churches are better at one of these postures than the others. Some congregations have an identity that is defined over against culture; others almost entirely reflect culture. The only way to gain perspective on how to achieve balance in being “in, but not of” the world is somehow to step outside of our own world, to find a perspective from which to perceive the water in which we swim. This book promises to be a significant resource for Reformed Christians in particular to do just that — to learn how

fellow Christians, with a common theological and ecclesiastical heritage, have practiced their faith in very different times and places. The goal here is to invite a deeper level of reflection about how a given theological vision can become enfolded in a local cultural context.

For its part, the Roman Catholic Church has the wonderful advantage of having centuries of practice at thinking globally. Some of its most mature efforts at addressing questions of worship and culture after Vatican II bear witness to this legacy. Perhaps this book can play a small role in challenging Protestants to gain a deeper level of understanding about the interplay of ecclesiastical tradition and cultural context in shaping patterns of worship in a global context. In this task, this book will complement a fine volume of essays on worldwide Methodism: *The Sunday Service of the Methodists: Twentieth Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism*, ed. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Kingswood Books, 1996).

In addition, this book can help many of us Reformed Christians to sense the global scope of the Reformed branch of the Christian church. It has often been tempting to equate Reformed Christianity with particular ethnic identity (whether that be Hungarian, Korean, Scottish, or Dutch), and then, when that ethnic identity erodes, to assume that Reformed Christianity has little more to offer. This book helps us understand how the Reformed tradition need not be dependent on a particular ethnic or cultural context.

Perhaps this book can also serve as an invitation to further work in the field. This book can't begin to encompass even all the many voices within the Reformed tradition — either culturally or theologically — to say nothing of the potential comparative studies of various Christian traditions in many particular cultural contexts.

All of us who benefit from this book are indebted to Lukas Vischer and the John Knox Center for hosting the consultation that produced this volume and for editing these essays for publication.

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Introduction

The renewal of worship is today on the agenda of many Reformed churches, and the need for adaptation and new approaches is acutely felt in many circles. How can the church faithfully worship God in the midst of rapidly changing situations? How can it constructively relate to widely differing cultural contexts — in the countries of both the North and the South? What is its place in the wider ecumenical scene?

The purpose of the present volume is to provide some help to those engaged in responding to these questions. For some years the International Reformed Center John Knox has conducted studies on worship. In 1994 it organized a first international consultation on the “Place and Renewal of Worship in Reformed Churches,” issuing a report that was published and widely shared throughout the family of Reformed churches. It surveyed the issues at stake and addressed in particular the topics of the “sacraments” and of “text, context, and culture.” It also suggested that an effort should be made to write a “history of worship in the Reformed tradition.” The present volume is an attempt to build upon the beginnings made in 1994. It is the result of a second international consultation held at the John Knox Center from January 5-12, 2001, which was attended by theologians and liturgical scholars from a wide range of churches and countries.

The volume offers first (Part I) a history of worship in Reformed churches. Behind this effort is the conviction that, as the 1994 report put it, an awareness of history is required to be freed for a creative future. In order to know where we are to go, we need to know where we have come from. The pages that follow do not give a complete and detailed history of all ramifications and aspects of Reformed worship through the centuries. Instead, they

provide a general survey of the most important developments and seek to identify the major “ingredients” of the Reformed worship tradition.

The history of Reformed worship displays a wide variety of forms and has been multivocal from the very beginning. As history progressed, it was further diversified. In the encounter with new situations new emphases developed and insights were gained that went beyond the original impulse of the sixteenth-century reformers. As the Reformed family developed stage by stage into a worldwide communion, the Reformed heritage was appropriated in a wider range of contexts. Growing variety is therefore a characteristic of the Reformed tradition.

What does this simultaneously rich and confusing picture mean for us today? How do we deal with the legacy of history? A tentative answer to this question is given in the chapter following the historical section: “A Common Reflection on Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Today” (Part II). The participants in the second consultation made an attempt to identify the main issues that arise as we engage in the renewal of worship in today’s Reformed churches. Their report, included here, offers a summary of the discussions.

The last part of the volume (Part III) offers contributions on aspects of worship that are today particularly relevant for a constructive discussion in Reformed churches.

It is our hope that this volume will contribute to a new interest in the renewal of worship. It will have achieved its purpose if it helps to promote discussion, exchange, and also action.

As editor I would like to thank all who have participated in this effort and given time and energy to it. To build together a volume like this was an extraordinary experience. Special thanks are due to Professor Marsha M. Wilfong, who helped produce the report and patiently and skillfully accommodated the remarks of all participants. Good drafters are like people with the gift of arranging flowers. The flowers are not theirs — but the bouquet is their achievement!

LUKAS VISCHER

Worship as Christian Witness to Society

Lukas Vischer

Reformed worship has always been public worship. The proclamation of the word has never been confined to spiritual themes but has also included aspects of public life. But the awareness that worship is always taking place *in* the world and has to contribute to the promotion of God's love and will in society has become stronger in recent decades. It is true that worship implies, in a certain sense, a withdrawal from the world. The community gathers in order to concentrate minds and hearts on the essential content of the Christian message — to listen to the word and to praise God's name. It distances itself, for a time, from the world in order to engage afterward in an even more determined service to the world. The life of the community is characterized by the double movement of gathering for worship and being sent into the world, and these two movements cannot be separated. The sending is prepared by the gathering. The witness in the world receives its strength from the relationship with God that has been renewed in worship. From the service in the world the community returns to the praise of God in worship. Appropriately, the witness in the world is often called by Orthodox Christians the "liturgy after the liturgy." This means that the witness to the world is inherent and present in every true act of worship.

The two movements can easily fall apart. Again and again worship is being celebrated as a self-contained event. Again and again worship becomes a refuge from the world and its challenges. Often, the community succumbs to the temptation to leave the world to itself. But the truth stands: God so loved the world — this world — that he gave for it his only begotten Son. The credibility of worship depends on the willingness of the community to share in God's movement of love for the world. Worship will always have an impact; it can either lift up God's love for the world or it can, on the contrary, hide that love behind spiritual walls.

Facing today's ever more rapid social change, the question of the political and social witness through the church's worship must be asked anew. How is the impact of worship on society to be seen? On the one hand, the rapid change calls for an even more determined concentration on the *raison d'être* of the church. On the other hand, there is, in the face of the injustice, violence, and suffering resulting from the change, even greater urgency to appeal to the critical and transforming potential of the gospel. In the course of the last decades, many attempts have been made to relate worship to the world. Many of these attempts were ecumenical, and in many cases Reformed congregations, communities, and churches were directly involved. The debate on the pros and cons of "political worship services" is still far from concluded.

The Public Character of Reformed Worship

The aim of the sixteenth-century Reformation was a comprehensive renewal. Most importantly, the church was to be purified from errors and abuses, but at the same time, society was to be renewed. Without hesitation the reformers — particularly those of the Reformed vein — addressed issues of public life. More than in other Christian traditions, especially more than in the Lutheran tradition, the Reformed churches emphasized the need for the independence of the church from state interference or control. At all times the church was to be free to point to the claims of the gospel on state authorities and on society as a whole. The witness of a church ceasing to enjoy this freedom would inevitably be reduced in its effectiveness. Facing the threat of a totalitarian ideology, the Confessing Church reminded Christians in Germany of the need for this freedom. Thesis 2 of the Barmen Theological Declaration (1934) states that the God who turns to humanity in forgiveness is the master of the entire life of humans and that there is therefore no aspect of human life that would be exempted from God's claim. Thesis 5 both explicitly recognizes and limits the authority of the state. The authority of the state has its legitimacy and its limitation in God's mandate to "be responsible for law and peace." The church is not an organ of the state, but it has the task of reminding people of God's kingdom, commandment, and justice, and of pointing to the responsibilities of both authorities and citizens.¹

The interaction between church and state also has its place in worship.

1. An English translation of the Barmen Declaration can be found in Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Constitution, Part I, Book of Confessions*; cf. also Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).

The community gathers in the first place in order to praise God. As it assembles under God's word it also seeks to gain clarity about itself. Who are we who have come together here? Where have we failed? In what direction are we sent by God's forgiving word? The search for clarity also includes the reflection on the place and vocation of the community in society. What has happened around us? What developments are becoming apparent? At what points is the proclamation of the gospel being challenged in a particular way? A common effort at "reading the signs of the time" needs to take place; in other words, an effort needs to be made to understand the events and developments in society in the light of God's liberating message and to judge the degree of their relevance or nonrelevance. The interpretation of developments in society is not automatic. The connection between God's word and the diverse realms of human life needs to be constantly rediscovered. Worship provides the occasion to establish the connection in the first place for the community itself. As the community gains clarity on its vocation in society, God's word begins to be effective also beyond the community's boundaries.

At all times the *sermon* was the privileged instrument in this process of reflection and recognition. Preaching is by nature the attempt to understand God's word and to interpret its significance for today. Throughout history there have been pastors who also included in their preaching the realm of public life; at all times preachers have publicly called injustice by its name. Think of the religious socialists at the beginning of the twentieth century and their efforts to interpret the concerns of the labor movement in the light of the gospel. Think of the significance of preaching in the Confessing Church at the time of the Third Reich. Think of the warnings issued by the churches against economic injustice and the increasing destruction of the environment, and in particular of the role of preaching in the struggle against apartheid. Pastors addressing in their sermons political and social issues are, as a rule, controversial figures. They meet with both applause and criticism. Very often, only their graves will be decorated. But without the dimension of political and social witness, the proclamation of the gospel would lack the salt that the disciples have been promised by their Lord.

Another element of worship in which issues of public life have their place is *intercession*, which is an integral part of every worship service. Through the prayer of intercession the community brings itself, the church, and the entire world before God. It prays that God may make manifest the power of the Spirit, that the church may be strengthened, and especially that all those suffering from illness and despair may experience God's forgiving and healing presence. It gives room to its worry about the future and implores God to set limits to human irresponsibility and prevent further exploitation, violence,

and destruction of life. As the psalmists did, it asks God to impose restraint on the “enemies” of the gospel. At all times intercession has included prayers for the government of the country, asking that God would empower the authorities to fulfill their tasks. This intercession is to be understood as an act of loyal solidarity. It becomes an act of political critique when government authorities transgress the function they are mandated to fulfill. Intercession especially acquires a political character when victims of political or economic oppression are mentioned explicitly and by their names.

New Dimensions of Political Worship

Does the political dimension of worship find expression exclusively through preaching and intercession? Or are there other ways of celebrating worship through which the political and social commitment of the community as a whole can even more clearly become visible? Reformed churches around the world have been increasingly preoccupied by this question. Preaching and intercession are fundamental elements of worship. As they are used as instruments of a determined witness in the world, the whole worship is given a new direction. Responsibility for preaching and intercession lies principally with the leaders of worship, since the content of both the sermon and the free prayer of intercession depends largely on their insight and decision. But how can the worship of the community as a whole become a sign to the world? True, preaching and intercession can have the support of the community as a whole; leaders can see themselves as representatives of the community and speak on its behalf, and their witness can be the expression of a position officially adopted by the church. (It may be preceded by a debate in the parish council or even an assembly of the community as a whole.) Nevertheless, preaching and intercession largely rest on the voice of a single person. Are there acts of political worship that involve to a larger extent the community as a whole?

Some attempts that have been made in the course of the last decades may be mentioned here as illustrations:

International Social Justice

In the late fifties and early sixties an awareness grew that the present economic system was the cause of increasing social injustice. The hope for a better world entertained in the first years after World War II vanished. Conscience was

faced with the fact of a growing gap between rich and poor nations. At an early date the churches raised their voice to call for a correction of the economic course. Numerous church organizations that sought to alleviate the injustice and develop solutions came into existence. Increasingly, the issue had to be faced how churches in rich countries were to deal with their wealth. Was it not necessary to transcend the barriers of rich and poor, at least within the communion of the church? Was it not necessary to establish a kind of worldwide eucharistic communion and to share the gifts of creation with one another?

One response to these questions was a new interpretation of Lent. In many congregations the period of Ash Wednesday to Easter came to be a time for learning and practicing solidarity with the economically underprivileged. Fasting was practiced not only as the door to a deeper spiritual understanding of Jesus' passion but as an expression of solidarity. More and more development agencies used the period for their campaigns and sought, in diverse ways (often through special worship services), to raise the level of consciousness in the churches with regard to the intolerable disparity between rich and poor nations.

A similar function was fulfilled in many places by the renewal of the *agape*, the ancient tradition of the common meal after the celebration of the Eucharist. Generally, not only in Reformed churches but in the ecumenical movement as a whole, greater emphasis was placed on the meal aspect of the Eucharist. Was not this a way to overcome the concept of worship as mere ritual and to emphasize, through the actual sharing of a meal, the diaconal character of worship? In many places, *agape* meals were given the meaning of a sign of solidarity with the poor.

Intercession Leading to Intervention on Behalf of the Persecuted and Oppressed

In the 1970s Amnesty International was founded in response to the increased practice in many countries of oppression, torture, and extra-judicial killings. If the vision of a just economic order could not be realized, no effort was to be spared to protect at least the most fundamental human rights. Amnesty International launched a vast campaign against judicial arbitrariness, in particular the use of torture and the death penalty. Numerous congregations participated in this struggle. In worship, at the time of intercession, the names of particular political prisoners were mentioned, and at the end of the service the opportunity was offered to sign petition letters to governments and police of the countries concerned. The intercession in the service was understood as the first

step toward concrete action. In certain cases, the intercession resulted in projects with wide ramifications.²

Sanctuary

How are we to deal with refugees fleeing from oppression, armed conflicts, and poverty, and seeking security outside their own country? Can churches resign themselves to the restrictive measures adopted by more and more countries, especially the rich industrialized countries, that are meant to reduce the influx of refugees? Can churches remain quiet as refugees are expelled and forced to return to their home countries? Churches have consistently argued in favor of a more generous strategy toward refugees and migrants. Some congregations have gone beyond statements and have offered their churches to refugees as sanctuaries; in other words, they have allowed them to stay in the rooms of the church building and in this way prevented the immediate execution of the expulsion order. An old tradition — biblical and ecclesiastical — thus gained new life.

The intention of such efforts is not to question the authority of the state and establish a separate sphere of law. As congregations accept refugees in their midst they only wish to compel state authorities to interpret the existing laws and administrative rules to the highest possible extent in favor of the refugee. An example: Twenty Kurds who had been expelled from Switzerland sought refuge in a Reformed church of Geneva. The parish council called a parish assembly. It was decided to put at the disposal of the Kurdish group the rooms of the church until their case was examined once more in all its aspects by the competent authority. Several weeks passed without police intervention. Finally, the verdict of the authorities was to maintain the expulsion of two leaders of the group but to grant the rest at least temporary asylum in Switzerland. The sanctuary time was concluded with an interreligious worship service.³

2. Egon Larsen, *A Flame in Barbed Wire: A History of Amnesty International* (London: F. Muller, 1978). An analogous organization with an explicitly Christian profile — Action des chrétiens pour l'abolition de la torture (ACAT) — was founded in France and spread to other countries.

3. Jill Schaeffer, *Sanctuary and Asylum* (Geneva: WARC, 1990).

***Worship Services in Connection
with Political Events or Initiatives***

It is one thing to address political and social themes in preaching or intercession, another to devote the whole service to a particular political or social issue. Special worship services can be organized for many reasons, such as to pray for an end to violence and war, as in the period of increasing tensions in Yugoslavia; to pray for reconciliation and peace, as for the peaceful reunification of Korea; or to pray for the success of a conference, as for the U.N. conferences on economic justice or climate change. Even more than official statements, worship services on a particular political or social theme have become part of the witness of the churches in public life.

**The Community Bearing Witness:
Who Celebrates the Worship and Where?**

The political witness of the churches sharply raises the question of the extent to which the community practices in its own midst the solidarity it is calling for in society. Is the community a mirror of what it proclaims in public? Again and again communities lag behind the image of community that corresponds to the gospel. Is it a community in which the poor have their place? Do the weak, such as the handicapped, receive the place of honor they deserve? Or is the Christian community just another association of healthy, strong, and successful people in which the weak and disabled are a foreign body?

More is at stake than the moral integrity of the church's witness. More and more, in recent decades, an awareness has grown that the inclusiveness of the community is decisive for the credibility of its witness. Reconciliation cannot be communicated if it is not celebrated by the community as a whole, if the barriers that separate people from one another are not overcome and transcended within the community itself.

On two issues — the relationship between men and women, and racial and ethnic barriers within the church — the insistence on the inclusiveness of the community has led to far-reaching debates and changes.⁴ The struggle for a true community of men and women in the church and a true partnership between them clearly has spiritual dimensions, and inevitably affects ways of

4. The debate on the place of the handicapped both in society and in worship is another illustration of the quest for inclusiveness. Cf. Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *Partners in Life*, Faith and Order Paper 89 (Geneva, 1979).

worship. To what extent do women participate in giving shape to and leading worship? To what extent does the language used in worship reflect the fact that the congregation is a community of men and women? How does worship underline the commitment of the church to inclusiveness in society?⁵

Equally, the inclusiveness of the worshipping community is indispensable in the struggle for reconciliation between races and ethnic groups. In many churches, in the past decades, the common celebration of the Eucharist across racial or ethnic barriers was not only a crucial issue but part of the confession of faith. During the civil rights movement in the United States, sharing or not sharing in the same worship became a test of the commitment of the churches to the rights of the black minority. In the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the consciousness matured in the Reformed churches that faith in Jesus Christ, the source of reconciliation, inevitably implies communion at the Lord's table. The decisive step was taken by the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed churches in Ottawa (1982). It decided with an overwhelming majority to declare the *status confessionis* on racial discrimination within the church. In other words, it declared solemnly that racial discrimination was incompatible with the confession of Jesus Christ; the issue was declared to have the status of a fundamental truth. It is important to recall that the impetus for this decision was given at the opening service of the General Council. Through a statement read at the beginning of the service, the delegates of the black churches in South Africa made clear that they felt unable to share in Communion. What was not possible at home could not suddenly be practiced at an international conference. As long as the common celebration of the Eucharist was not permitted in South Africa, they had to refrain from participation at the General Council. More clearly than as the result of any long statement, the delegates were given a choice: would they participate in a Communion service reflecting a distorted fellowship? What was, under these circumstances, Communion at the Lord's table? Can a church that does not admit Christians to the Lord's Supper on racial grounds be considered the church of Christ? The clear language of the General Council on racial discrimination and apartheid thus has its roots in the celebration of the Eucharist.⁶

To make visible God's reconciling work to the world, the inclusiveness of the worshipping community is not the only prerequisite. Very often the question arises as to *where* worship takes place. Again and again congregations have had to decide to celebrate worship not as usual within the walls of their

5. See Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's chapter in this volume on the place of women in worship.

6. World Alliance of Reformed Churches, *Ottawa 1982, Proceedings of the 21st General Council*, Geneva 1983, pp. 55 and 176ff.

church building but in places where their witness was more likely to be heard by the public. Instead of waiting for the world to enter the church, they decided to choose places for their witness where the conflict was actually going on. When organized in the world, worship services become to an even higher degree political signs. They acquire symbolic character. Five years after the Tchernobyl accident, various organizations in Switzerland announced a demonstration against the further expansion of nuclear energy in front of the parliament building in the capital Bern. Theology students of the University of Bern decided not only to participate in the demonstration but to organize a worship service in a nearby church and to express in a worship context what they had to say. As police began to use tear gas, many people took refuge in the church. Another example comes from Korea, from the worship service that Pastor Park Hyung-kyu celebrated at Easter 1973 in an open-air theater on the top of Namsan mountain near the center of the capital. The political repression had become harsher and harsher and, in order to show that the opposition could not be muzzled, Pastor Park proclaimed the victory of Christ over all powers of the world at a symbolic place outside the church building. He was arrested before the service had come to an end.

Respect and Responsibility for God's Creation

Among the themes that have preoccupied the churches in the past decades and that also have found an echo in worship, the issue of respect and responsibility toward God's creation holds a special place. Who are we, human beings, in the whole of God's creation? What is our calling in relation to our co-creatures? In the early 1970s, we began to become aware of the ecological crisis, as it became clear that the present technological and economic course would inevitably lead to an intolerable over-exploitation of the resources of the planet. In more and more realms limits began to appear that could not be transgressed without creating dangers for the future. The quality of life began to suffer from the pollution of air, soil, and water. Numerous species of plants and animals disappeared altogether or were in danger of becoming extinct. More and more people recognized that present developments were not sustainable — in other words, they could not be continued without limiting the life chances of future generations.

For many Christians the ecological crisis was at first simply a new and additional political and social theme. Hesitantly, they participated in the public debate. How serious was the threat? What measures needed to be taken? Many warned against exaggerations and against the "greening" of the

churches. For others the protection of the environment was a matter of course and needed no special theological legitimation. But soon it became clear that the ecological crisis raised deeper questions for the church. Often in public debate voices could be heard that attributed the responsibility for today's aggressive attitude toward nature to the Jewish-Christian tradition. Though it could easily be shown that the charge rested on a misinterpretation of the biblical sources (both Jewish and Christian), it could not be denied that the theme of creation had been neglected by the churches, receding into the background more and more since the Enlightenment. Confronted with modern natural sciences, theology placed all emphasis on history and human existence in history. Both in theology and in the actual life of the churches, the theme of creation had disappeared from view.

Intensive theological reflection began. The true intention of the biblical texts on creation was recalled and re-stated, and the Christian tradition was re-read and reinterpreted in light of the challenges resulting from the ecological crisis. In many Reformed churches a debate started on the meaning of the first article of the creed. Several churches issued statements on faith in God the Creator and on the responsibilities implied in this faith. Among these texts the statement by the Christian Reformed Church in the United States holds a special place.⁷

Worship also was affected — in the first place, simply by the fact that the theme of creation surfaced more frequently in preaching. In recent decades the hymn tradition has also markedly changed, with new hymns on the Creator and creation finding their way into Reformed worship. In many places, new ways are sought to give more ample room to creation in worship, such as decorating the church with symbols of nature like the sun or water. In some cases, worship services have taken place in which animals were blessed. Attempts have also been made in the opposite direction: instead of bringing nature into the church, services have been celebrated in the open air — on mountains or in the woods, for example. In most cases such services are the occasion for raising concrete political and social issues.

From various sides the proposal has been made that the theme “Creator and creation” should also find its place in the church year. The suggestion is that the period from the Sunday preceding September 1 to the Sunday following October 4 should be observed as a “time of the Creator and creation.” It is, indeed, striking that the first article of the creed has no firm place in the church year. The important feast days from the Advent season to Pentecost and

7. Christian Reformed Church, “Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony,” especially para. 7-10, in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987).

Trinitatis all recall God's great deeds in Jesus Christ. They lead from the incarnation to the passion and resurrection and then to ascension and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. True, in all these feasts the theme of creation is indirectly present. But throughout the year the worshipping community is never explicitly guided toward praise of the Creator. The debate on the expansion of the church year through a time of the Creator was launched by a proposal of the Patriarch of Constantinople Dimitrios I (1989) to celebrate September 1 (the beginning of the church year for Orthodox churches) as a day of care for creation. Many Reformed congregations, especially in Switzerland and Italy, have taken up and re-formulated this proposal; they are celebrating a *time* of creation, which extends over several weeks and gives the opportunity for a genuine reflection on the responsibility that flows from faith in God the Creator.⁸

Authentic Worship vs. Succumbing to the World

Reformed churches confess God's reign over the whole world, believing that God's will is valid in all realms of life. Worship, therefore, also needs to be open to all realms of life. It is, however, necessary that the political witness of the church be explicitly rooted in the gospel. Worship must be celebrated in such a way as to make visible — both for the church members and for the world — the center of the Christian message. The political witness must be so formulated that it leads back to the center. The circle must be complete.

The church can lose its freedom and through its worship serve purposes that have little or nothing to do with its true calling. The temptation is real, and the church has often succumbed to it. The world looks for blessing and confirmation, with the result that the church can easily be misused by the powers of the world and subjected to its claims. Its symbols can be used to "humanize" the face of power. Churches are invited to appear at national celebrations at the side of the authorities and to ask for God's blessing on them. After having agreed to bless new bridges, they are eventually also invited to bless armies. To protect the church from this kind of prostitution, clarity needs to be reached on the legitimacy of political options. The church must not degenerate into a lackey of power.

Often, the political witness of the church will therefore consist in rejecting outside claims that threaten to distort the gospel and the *raison d'être* of the Christian community. A good example of this comes from the church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar. In May 1968, the government requested the churches to

8. Lukas Vischer, "A Time of Creation," *Ecumenical Review* 1999/3.

introduce the national flag into all church buildings. The church rejected the demand and declared that the symbol of the state and state power was not an appropriate symbol in a place where Christians worship God. Glory was due to God alone.⁹

When, however, the gospel and its claims are at stake, the politicization of worship is not only admissible, it is required. The decisive criterion will always be solidarity with victims of human power. As much as the church's worship must reject the glorification of human power, it must embrace all those who are being marginalized, oppressed, and exploited.

In practice, political witness in worship services will never be possible without the risk of ambiguity. Even if the arguments in favor of a political, social, or ecological cause seem to be indisputable, errors and misunderstandings remain possible. Political witness often leads to uncomfortable political "neighborhoods." The church can find itself close to parties or groups that, for totally different reasons, happen to be committed to the same cause. The church may be applauded by "friends" whom, for other reasons, it is bound to reject. Such neighborhoods are no reason to avoid witness in society. As long as the church is sure of its cause, it can stand with them with serenity, and also live through the debates and conflicts that may arise within the church.

Despite possible errors and misunderstandings the church has to remain committed to the struggle for true solidarity. It must not withdraw from it; though ambiguity will never be removed, acts of true solidarity have the promise of bearing the fruits of the Spirit.

Further Reading

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9. Cf. Marc Spindler, "L'usage de la Bible dans le discours politique malgache depuis l'indépendance (1960-1990)," in *Histoire religieuse, Histoire globale, Histoire ouverte*, ed. Jean-Dominique Durand and Régis Ladous (Paris 1991), pp. 204ff.; cf. also *Bulletin d'information de l'Eglise de Jésus-Christ à Madagascar*, no. 1 (January 1969).