



Lukas Vischer: Berith, covenant and covenanting

1. Place and Date of Publication

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2. Historical Context

Lukas Vischer, from 1982 to 1989 moderator of the Department of Theology of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, was one of the promoters of the ecumenical process for “justice, peace and the integrity of creation”. The term *covenant* was widely used in this connection.

3. Summary

The World Council of Churches General Assembly in Vancouver (1983) called for a “conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) for justice, peace and the integrity of creation”. Covenant was mainly seen as a *human* initiative. The same meaning occurs in the the World Alliance of Reformed Churches General Council in Accra (2004). The term is used as a noun (*covenant*) and as a verb: *we covenant*.

The notion was introduced by Zwingli in the 16th century, further developed by Zwingli’s successor Bullinger and taken up by Calvin. Among the reformers, covenant is understood as *God’s* initiative. This is no doubt closer to the original meaning of the Hebrew term *berith* which does not stand for an agreement between equals. In the LXX, berith is translated by the Greek term *diatheke* which means a unilateral action in favour of another person, e.g. a last will. Via LXX, diatheke found access in the New Testament. The Latin translation is *testamentum*.

How was it possible for *covenant* to acquire today’s activist meaning? A first step was the Latin translation *foedus* by Hieronymus. Foedus is closer to the idea of an association of *equal partners*. In the 16th century Anabaptists called on believers to *federate* with one another. In the Anglo-Saxon Congregationalist movement, *covenanting* under Jesus was the equivalent to being the Church. The covenant was now understood as a *human* initiative taken in faith and offered to God. Clearly, the ecumenical movement and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches follow this line of thinking.

Is there any bridge between these two approaches?

The call of the WARC General Council in Accra points to the witness the Church is to bear today. It is an attempt to articulate the implications of God’s covenant for the life of the Church in the face of today’s challenges. But before we can engage in witness, we need to be reminded of God’s will to establish communion with humankind. We are, in fact, in a situation of helplessness. We are caught in the burden of failures inherited from the past. We are faced with structures of evil that surpass our ability to cope. We know that we are and will be in need of God’s forgiveness. Only if we rely on God’s initiative, can we engage in witness. Only when we know that the whole of creation is in his hands and will be brought to fulfilment by God’s own action, can we face the powers of destruction within and around us.

The discourse of *covenanting* has the merit of giving expression and shape to God’s covenant. The biblical discourse on *God’s* covenant points to the firm basis on which all true witness must be built.

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Editorial

Calvin John Calvin's contribution to Christian witness in the economic and social spheres was the theme of an international consultation held in Geneva, November 2004. That consultation, which marked the publication in English of André Biéler's *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, called upon the Reformed family to take the opportunity of the 2009 jubilee "to rediscover Calvin beyond the tenacious stereotypes of Calvin".

Reformed World published the statement adopted at that consultation in its March 2005 issue. It now publishes four articles prepared for that occasion. Jane Douglass shows the continuity between the ecumenical impulses in Calvin's life and thought and the ecumenical work accomplished by WARC. Margit Ernst looks at how contemporary Reformed confessions relate Christian faith and issues of social and economic relevance. Dirk Smit helps us discern the universal significance and value of the Reformed resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Lukas Vischer reflects on covenant and covenanting in the Scriptures and in current church usage.

Communion The WARC Executive Committee has recently restated the WARC vision in the following terms: "We are the World Alliance of Reformed Churches consisting of Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, Waldensian, United and Uniting churches. We are called to be a communion of churches joined together in Christ, to promote the renewal and the unity of the church, and to participate in God's transformation of the world." The Dutch Reformed theologian Karel Blei provides a brief overview of the Reformed understanding of "communion", the central element in the new WARC vision statement.

Berith, covenant and covenanting

Lukas Vischer

Vischer makes a clear distinction between the biblical and classical theological usage of the term covenant and its usage in contemporary ecumenical language. The roots of the contemporary use of the term lie in the radical reformation and in non-conformist movements within the Anglo-Saxon world. He argues that the two uses should be seen as complementary. A Swiss Reformed theologian and ecumenist, he was the director of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order (1965-1979) and the moderator of the WARC Department of Theology (1982-1989).

Two uses of the term covenant

The term covenant is today widely used in the ecumenical movement. The WCC Assembly in Vancouver (1983) called for a conciliar process of mutual commitment (*covenant*) for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. More recently, delegates attending the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches formulated a "Confession of Faith in the Face of Economic Injustice and Ecological Destruction" accompanied by the following solemn declaration: "By confessing our faith together, we *covenant* in obedience to God's will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships. This binds us together to work for justice in the economy and the earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings (§37)."

The notion of covenant also plays a central role in the thinking and writing of

Calvin. Introduced by Zwingli in the 1520s, the notion was further developed by Heinrich Bullinger in his famous treatise *de unico et aeterno testamento seu foedere Dei* (1534). Calvin makes use of Bullinger's thinking. In his eyes, God's covenant with the fathers provides the key for the adequate understanding of the Scriptures - Old and New Testament. There is but one covenant. "Both (*scil.* what is similar and what is different between the Old and the New Testament) can be expressed in one sentence: the covenant God established with all fathers is in substance and in truth so similar to the covenant established with us that it can be regarded as one and the same. It only differs in the way it is administered (*administratio tamen variat, Institutes II.10.2*)." God has chosen a people and remains faithful to his choice. God guides and protects this chosen community throughout history. In Christ the full

meaning of the covenant becomes manifest. The signs of the covenant change but the covenant as such remains the same. Old and New Testament form a unity. The Old points to the New and the New sheds new light on the Old. They are both God's word witnessing to God's love in choosing his people.

What is the relationship between these two uses of the term covenant? Clearly, though the same term is used, its meaning is very different in both cases. To avoid confusion it is important to be aware of the difference. Only on the basis of clear distinctions can the two perspectives be related to one another in constructive ways.

God's covenant and our covenant

The primary concern of the Accra General Council is the common commitment to the cause of justice and ecological responsibility. Having analysed the signs of the times, having recalled the fundamentals of the Christian faith in the face of injustice and environmental destruction, the General Council calls for a new common departure. The emphasis is on the need for a new orientation. The churches are summoned to live up to their common calling in the world. Covenant is primarily seen as a common initiative. The term can be used both as a noun and as a verb. *We covenant*.

For Calvin, covenant is primarily God's gift of love to God's people. The covenant is primarily, even exclusively, God's initiative. It is his inscrutable will to choose a people

witnessing to his glory. God draws us into his covenant. There are no merits on our side. Everything is based on his mercy. We are certainly called to respond to God's gift. It is our duty to glorify his name through our lives. God's self-commitment to the covenant is the *cantus firmus* of both the Old and the New Testament.

Calvin's understanding of the term covenant is no doubt closer to the original meaning of the word. The Hebrew term *berith* refers to an initiative taken by God. *Berith* always involves a partner. But it does not have the meaning of an agreement between equals. It is significant that the word is translated by the LXX by the term *diatheke* which means a unilateral action in favour of another person, e.g., a last will. Another term *syntheke* would have been available which suggests the idea of a pact and treaty between two partners. But the translators obviously preferred a term emphasizing God's initiative. The New Testament also uses the term *diatheke* for covenant. The Latin translation of the word is *testamentum*.

The origin of "we covenant"

How was it then possible for the term covenant to acquire today's activist meaning? A first step was the translation adopted by Hieronymus. He chose for *berith* the term *foedus* that is, of course, much closer to the idea of an association of equal partners. A further development took place in the 16th century. Anabaptists conceived the Church as a voluntary association. There

are Anabaptist texts calling on believers to federate with one another. Melchior Hofmann writes: "In these last days messengers of the Lord Jesus Christ will gather the chosen community, call it through the Gospel and lead it as the Lord's bride into the spiritual desert. They will be betrothed and covenanted to the Lord. In the same way Paul has betrothed the Church of Corinth to the Lord like a virgin to her husband and engaged it under God's covenant." But the decisive step was taken by the Congregationalist movement in the Anglo-Saxon world. The Christian community was seen as a covenanted community, i.e., a community constituted by Jesus Christ and committed to his service. Covenanting under Jesus Christ was the equivalent to becoming and being the Church.

The covenant was now understood as a human initiative taken in faith and offered to God. This understanding is particularly evident with the Pilgrim Fathers. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, interpreted the expedition as a mandate received from God. Before disembarking he called on the colonists to ask for God's blessing on their common undertaking. "We have concluded a covenant *with the Lord* in this regard. We have accepted a mandate. The Lord has given us the freedom to set up our own articles. We have accepted the commitment to engage in this undertaking with particular goals and duties. We have prayed for his favour and blessing. And if it now pleases

him to hear us, and to guide us in peace to the place we have longed for, what else does it mean than that he has confirmed the covenant and put his seal on the mandate..."

Clearly, the ecumenical movement and also the World Alliance of Reformed Churches follow this line of thinking.

Is there any bridge between these two approaches? Or are we confronted with two different, even conflicting discourses?

Covenanting in witness to God's covenant

In the first place, it is important to be aware of the difference. Since the term covenant is used in so many meanings, confusion can easily arise. In order to advance, the different meanings need to be distinguished from one another.

Having said this, there is much to be said for relating the two discourses to one another. They can both contribute to a fuller understanding of God's purpose with this world. The call of the General Council in Accra points to the witness the Church is to bear today. It is an attempt to articulate the implications of God's covenant for the life of the Church in the face of today's challenges. The call to common action seeks to show what it means to live under God's covenant.

But before we can engage in witness, we need to be reminded of God's will to establish communion with humankind. Even with the very best of intentions, we shall not bring order into the disorder of the world. True, justice and care for God's creation are

indispensable, if humankind is to survive. But we are, in fact, in a situation of helplessness. We are caught in the burden of failures inherited from the past. We are faced with structures of evil that surpass our ability to cope. We know that we are and will be in need of God's forgiveness. Only if we rely on God's initiative, can we engage in witness. Only when we know that the whole

of creation is in his hands and will be brought to fulfilment by God's own action, can we face the powers of destruction within and around us.

The discourse of covenanting has the merit of giving expression and shape to God's covenant. The biblical discourse on God's covenant points to the firm basis on which all true witness must be built.