

'COVENANTING FOR JUSTICE'? ON THE ACCRA DOCUMENT, REFORMED THEOLOGY AND REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The essay provides a brief summary of the main argument of the Accra Document drafted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and entitled 'Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth'. The focus is on discovering and describing the internal structure, the logic and focus, and thereby some of the most important implicit and explicit theological and ecclesiological convictions, suppositions and claims of the document, as far as possible in its own terminology. It then offers a tentative theological assessment, pointing out four very typical Reformed characteristics of the document, including its typical confessional nature and style. It finally suggests some ecclesiological implications arising from the document, again calling to mind four very specific characteristics of Reformed ecclesiology. On the whole, the essay serves as an invitation to further study, discussion and reflection on the challenges and calling implied in the document.

COVENANTING FOR JUSTICE?

In order to make a theological assessment of the Accra Document and to reflect on some of the ecclesiological implications, a brief summary of the main argument may be helpful – in addition to the historical background and ecumenical comparisons already provided in other contributions. The purpose is to obtain clarity about its internal structure, its own logic and focus, and thereby a greater focus on some of the important implicit and explicit theological and ecclesiological convictions, suppositions and claims, as far as possible in its own words and terms. The document consists of four sections (with 42 paragraphs), namely

- a brief but important introduction;
- a second section entitled 'reading the signs of the times', providing crucial claims concerning the nature of our world today and how it is to be interpreted; followed by two important sections respectively including
- a faith stance expressed in confessional style entitled 'Confession of faith in the face of economic injustice and ecological destruction' and
- a few practical commitments and calls under the heading 'covenanting for justice.'

In itself, this structure of introduction – analysis – confessional response – covenantal commitment is already instructive.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction begins with a short historical reminder. It was 'in response to the urgent call of the Southern African constituency which met in Kitwe in 1995, and in recognition of the increasing urgency of global economic injustice and ecological destruction' that the General Council in Debrecen (1997) invited all member churches to a *processus confessionis* is, a process of 'recognition, education and confession' – 'as they heard the cries of the brothers and sisters around the world and witnessed God's gift of creation under threat' (par. 1). Many churches and ecumenical bodies have already responded, in diverse ways (par. 2). Now, in Accra, the new General Council is very much under the impression of their visits to the slave dungeons of Elmina and Cape Coast, and of the cries of 'never again' (par. 3), and therefore, 'today', we make a new 'faith commitment' (par. 4).

ANALYSIS

The second section offers a social analysis of the world today and suggests an understanding of the economic causes, under the heading 'Reading the signs of the times.' 'We' hear the creation still groaning, with an immediate Biblical allusion, to Romans 8. This groaning comes both from people and from creation itself, challenging the General Council and the churches and believers represented by them. 'We are challenged by the cries of the people who suffer and by the woundedness of creation itself.' In fact, they see the two forms of suffering as somehow related to one another: 'we see a dramatic convergence between the suffering from the people and the damage done to the rest of creation' (par. 5).

The Accra Document immediately continues to provide an economic (and moral) explanation of the causes of this groaning, claiming that these 'signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted.' Such an interpretation is immediately offered, namely that 'the root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might.' After all, 'economic systems are a matter of life' (par. 6).

In an extended argument, this economic and moral interpretation of the signs of the times is developed further, by means of statistics, trends, brief narratives of economic history and concise claims about present-day 'empire' (par. 7–14).

We live in a scandalous world that denies God's call to life for all (par. 7). A double-pronged strategy or policy of industrialised countries and transnational corporations is together threatening creation. 'The

policy of unlimited growth among industrialised countries and the drive for profit of transnational corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment' (par. 8).

This crisis is directly related to the 'unjust economic system' already called the root cause of the massive contemporary threats to life,' but now named more clearly, namely 'the development of neoliberal economic globalization' (par. 9). This 'system,' according to the document, is 'based on beliefs' which are then briefly spelt out in the form of four promises about well-being, namely that unrestrained competition, consumerism and unlimited economic growth and accumulation of wealth 'is the best for the whole world'; that ownership of private property 'has no social obligation'; that diverse forms of capital speculation, liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, unrestricted access and movement of capital and lower taxes 'will achieve wealth for all'; and that social obligations, protection of the poor and weak, relationships between people and trade unions are all 'subordinate to the processes of economic growth and capital accumulation' (par. 9).

Together, these beliefs form 'an ideology' – an ideology that claims to be without alternative and an ideology that demands an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and from creation. The claims of this ideology are described in deliberately religious and even salvific terminology – this ideology makes the false promise that it can save the world through the creation of wealth and prosperity; this ideology claims sovereignty over life; this ideology demands total allegiance; taken together, the claims of this ideology amount to idolatry (par. 10).

In a brief, complex, but crucial internal move in the logic of the document, it first claims that 'we' recognise the enormity and complexity of the situation, and that 'we' therefore do not seek simple answers. However, secondly, 'as seekers of truth and justice,' the General Council wants to look at the world 'through the eyes of the powerless and suffering people.' Doing this, thirdly, 'we see that the current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral system defended by empire' (par. 11). This is the moment where the term 'empire' is introduced for the first time, and the document immediately attempts to define the term. 'In using the term "empire" we mean the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests' (par. 11).

In a brief account of recent economic history, the document narrates the story from classical liberal economics to global neoliberalism, with less of a role for states and the growth of international finance and trade institutions 'using political, economic, or military alliances to protect and advance the interest of the capital owners' (par. 13).

In a final conclusion to this reading of the signs of the times, many of these economic, moral and religious claims are woven together in a powerful contrast and rejection. We see the dramatic convergence of the economic crisis with the integration of economic globalization and geopolitics backed by neoliberal ideology. This is a global system that defends and protects the interests of the powerful. It affects and captivates us all. Further, in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus has told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Lk 16:13) (par. 14).

CONFESSIONAL RESPONSE

The third section offers a faith response to 'what was seen' in the previous section. It is deliberately done in confessional style, and although it is (as is also immediately explained) not a confession in any historical and technical sense (par. 15–16), this is the section that is sometimes called the Accra Confession (par. 17–36), although the whole document as such is also often popularly but inaccurately called the Accra Confession.

The General Council is of the opinion that faith commitment may be expressed in various ways in different regions and traditions. They choose a confessional expression, although 'not meaning a classical doctrinal confession'. They thereby intend to show 'the necessity and urgency of an active response to the challenges of our time and the call of Debrecen.' In a very important comment for further appropriation and reception, in search of assessment and implications, they explicitly 'invite member churches to receive and respond to our common witness' (par. 15).

Again, in a brief and complex introductory comment of crucial importance for the logic and status of the document, and drawing several themes together, the General Council explains and motivates as follows why they use a confessional style, structure and language:

- they speak from their Reformed tradition
- they have read the signs of the times
- they affirm that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of their faith in God, and
- of their discipleship as Christians
- they believe that the integrity of their faith is at stake if they remain silent, or
- refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalisation; and therefore
- they confess before God and one another (par. 16).

The confessional part has a very clear and deliberate orthodox Trinitarian structure (par. 17–27; 28–31; 32), concluding with a complex human response (we commit ourselves; we humbly confess; we believe; we join in praise, par. 32–36).

In the Trinitarian part, classical convictions about God, about Jesus Christ and about the Holy Spirit are expressed (each time, 'we believe'), followed by rejections flowing from the respective faith claims ('therefore we reject').

The confessional claims are related to the analysis of the signs of the times (God's sovereignty; God's covenant; God's household of life; God's justice; God's call to stand with the victims of injustice; Jesus Christ's public mission; the call to visible unity and reconciliation in Christ; the call of the Spirit to account for the hope within us), and likewise the rejections flow forth from the reading of the signs – rejecting 'the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life'; rejecting 'any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule'; rejecting 'the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the neoliberal global market system, or any other system, which claims there is no alternative'; rejecting 'the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation'; rejecting 'any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all of creation, and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all'; rejecting 'any teaching which justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel'; rejecting 'any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor'; rejecting 'any form of injustice which destroys right relations – gender, race, class, disability, or caste'; rejecting 'any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature'; rejecting 'any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation in its mission; (while) giving comfort to those who come "to steal, kill and destroy" (Jn 10:10); rejecting 'any attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity.'

The final paragraphs with the varied human response (we commit ourselves; we humbly confess; we believe; we join in praise, par. 32–36) are instructive, for several reasons. The council commits itself 'to seek a global covenant for justice in the



economy and the earth in the household of God' (par. 33). The council humbly confesses its own joint complicity and guilt, in a long and carefully structured formulation: 'We acknowledge the complicity and guilt of those who consciously or unconsciously benefit from the current neoliberal economic global system,' recognising that this includes both churches and members of their Reformed family, and therefore 'we call for confession of sin.' They also acknowledge that 'we have become captivated by the culture of consumerism, and the competitive greed and selfishness of the current economic system' and that this has 'all too often permeated our very spirituality.'

They confess their sin in misusing creation and failing to play their role as stewards and companions of nature, and they also confess their sin that the disunity within the Reformed family has impaired their ability to serve God's mission in fullness (par. 34). The council believes that the church is called 'to confess, witness and act, even though the authorities and human law might forbid them, and punishment and suffering be the consequence (Acts 4:18ff) – because 'Jesus is Lord' (par. 35). The council finally joins in doxological praise to the Triune God, with words from Mary's *Magnificat*, recalling that God brought down the mighty and filled the hungry with good things (par. 36).

COMMITMENT

The fourth and final section is entitled 'covenanting for justice' and contains a number of practical commitments and appeals (par. 37–42). A first paragraph describes what is meant by the key term 'covenanting.' 'Covenant' and 'covenanting' are deliberately used as verbs, to describe what the council and the member churches are doing together with one another and with other partners. By confessing together, the council says, 'we covenant in obedience to God's will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships'. Almost every term is loaded with meaning, including covenant, obedience, God's will, act of faithfulness, mutual solidarity, accountability, and relationships. They continue, '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'. Covenanting together in other words means that they freely bind themselves together (par. 37).

Many member churches already find themselves at different stages of this common journey, and the council urges them all to move further forward 'on the basis of our mutual covenanting responsibility' (par. 38). The council calls upon member churches 'on the basis of this covenanting relationship' to undertake the difficult prophetic task of interpreting this confession to their local congregations (par. 39). The council urges member churches to implement this confession by following the practical recommendations on economic justice and ecological issues of the Public Issues Committee (par. 40). The council commits itself to work together with other communions, the ecumenical community, the community of other faiths, and civil and people's movements (par. 41). The council proclaims 'with passion' that they will commit themselves totally to choosing life, which means 'changing, renewing and restoring the economy and the earth' – 'so that we and our descendents may live (Dt 30:19)' (par. 42).

THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT?

It should immediately be clear that the document shows several very typically Reformed characteristics. Almost all confessional communities and ecumenical bodies are deeply concerned about the negative effects of globalisation today, but their responses have all been based on their own particular theological convictions and their own ecclesiological traditions. It is no wonder that the Ecumenical Movement launched a three-year project attempting to bring these diverse 'ecclesiological entry points' together in what was eventually called a common 'spirituality of resistance.' All these communities attempt to resist, but each one according to its own resources. The Accra Document most certainly

reflects some of the deepest convictions and assumptions of the Reformed faith. At the same time, it once again becomes clear why precisely these Reformed characteristics have so often in history been so controversial, not only between the different confessional communities, but also within the Reformed community itself. It is precisely these typically Reformed traits of the Accra Document that today again raise critical questions, objections and concerns. A brief look at four of these Reformed characteristics – and the concerns they raise – may therefore perhaps contribute towards a theological assessment.

In the first place, the structure of the document is very Reformed. Reformed theology – documents, studies, decisions, even confessions – often follow the logic of an analysis of the situation, a response from the perspective of faith, and an attempt to take concrete action. The Kitwe Declaration, that played a significant role in the genesis of the Accra declaration and is acknowledged in the opening sentence, already explicitly followed a similar structure of argument, namely see – judge – act.

This approach involves that Reformed faith – including Reformed confessions – are deeply historical and contextual; they do not claim to offer timeless formulations and eternal truths, but rather attempt to be historical responses to particular circumstances and threats. This inevitably raises many difficult questions for the Reformed tradition, about the status and authority of these claims, about the nature of their truth claims, about their applicability in different contexts and historical moments. The Reformed logic itself raises these critical questions. Is the analysis of the situation correct – and what if others would disagree? Is the faith response the proper one, the most adequate and responsible – or could other responses also be possible and legitimate? Is the concrete action suggested the most suitable response, adequate, effective, and responsible? It should not surprise anyone that the Accra Document once again raises these kinds of questions.

Secondly, therefore, the first urgent question is always whether the (characteristically Reformed) point of departure, the analysis of the situation, the reading of the signs of the times, is indeed accurate, correct, fair, convincing, and the only legitimate reading available? And if other readings could perhaps also be possible and legitimate, what would that imply for the truth, the authority, the binding nature, and the status of the confessional response? More concretely, what precisely is the relationship in the Accra analysis between the 'cries of the people who suffer' and 'the woundedness of creation itself'? What is the nature of 'the dramatic convergence' between the two? How are these two challenges – 'justice in the economy and the earth' – related? How integral is the ecological destruction to the logic of the argument, and is it also part of the struggle for justice, or something else?

Equally important, according to some critical voices, is the question concerning the extent to which the truth claims and binding authority of the document depend on the specific economic analysis provided in the reading of the signs of the times. Most believers would probably agree with the claims that economic systems are a matter of life and, therefore, that a faith response to injustice is called for. Most may even agree that our world is today challenged by an ideology and by a culture of rampant consumerism and competitive greed and selfishness. Most Reformed believers would – hopefully, since this is such a central characteristic of the Reformed faith and tradition – agree that they want to see the world through the eyes of the powerless and suffering people. But is the analysis provided of the root causes of the massive threat to life and ecology sufficiently described here? What exactly is meant by 'system' and is it helpful with a view to resistance to describe reality in terms of 'system'? Is it accurate and helpful to describe the system in terms of beliefs, as religious claims, as offers of salvation, as idolatry, and does this help towards a proper response of resistance? Is the notion of 'empire' helpful, and is the description of empire convincing and accurate? Is such



an analysis and description empowering or disempowering, and does it encourage or discourage human agency, moral responsibility and the commitment and obedience of faith?

Is the brief narration of economic history the only true and accurate one that all Christian economists would give, so that it forms an integral part of the faith that is confessed – and if alternative accounts would be possible, what would the implications be for the logic and truth claims of the whole argument? In fact, the presence of the situation analysis itself within a Reformed confessional document is not characteristic. Although most Reformed confessions were responses to specific historical circumstances, these documents typically do not mention the historical causes at all, precisely because their truth claims were claims about the gospel and therefore claims with catholic appeal, not only relevant for the specific situation and not dependent upon the situation. Well-known examples would include the *Confessio Belgica*, the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, and the *Belhar Confession*.

This leads to the third – and again very Reformed – characteristic, namely the confessional nature of the Accra Document. Already at Debrecen, the General Council wisely decided not to declare a *status confessionis*, since, for a variety of reasons, the most common criteria for such a declaration are not present in the contemporary process – also in terms of the description of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) of a *status confessionis* in Seoul. Also at Debrecen, the WARC wisely decided to call for a *processus confessionis*, a process of self-critical study, inquiry and discussion within the member churches in order to determine if our faith, the integrity of our own life and witness, is not at stake in the way we respond to the challenges of our time, in the form of economic injustice and ecological destruction. Again, this has been a typically Reformed decision, since other confessional communities have not and will not respond in a similar way, since they all have their own characteristic ways of dealing with such challenges, which do not involve confessional language. For the Reformed faith, however, this is indeed the proper way.

Most Reformed churches and believers will probably also agree that at Accra the General Council again decided wisely that the outcome of the *processus confessionis* should be that our faith is indeed at stake, that these are matters of life and death that are challenging the integrity of our faith, life and witness, that we are called to a faith stance, to a common witness, to publicly express what we see and believe, and to search for and practise a responsible spirituality for this time. The language of the Accra declaration quite appropriately makes use of powerful allusions to Biblical notions and to crucial themes and even direct expressions from the Reformed confessional tradition, including the *Belhar Confession*.

Importantly, the General Council very wisely made it explicit that the Accra Document is not itself a confession. For a number of reasons, it cannot fulfil some of the common criteria for Reformed confessions – for example drawn together in Karl Barth's famous description for the WARC assembly in Cardiff almost a century ago. The WARC cannot and should not attempt to draw up a common Reformed confession for Reformed churches and congregations, since that would be a denial of the very nature of being Reformed – as the recent survey of this question in the history of the WARC by Odair Mateus has again convincingly shown. For that reason, it may even be seen as an unfortunate and confusing development that the document (sometimes only the third section; sometimes the whole document as such) has popularly become known in many circles as 'the Accra Confession.' This development could raise unnecessary concerns and distract attention from the real issues involved.

The real issue involved in the confessional style is that the Reformed world community uses confessional language

to describe the nature of our world today as seen from the perspective of suffering and groaning; that this is a response to the urgency of the situation; that they feel challenged to respond on the basis of their own faith; and that they feel called to commitment and action.

But what about the confessional content, what about the theological convictions on which this response is based? Again, the Accra Document provides a characteristically Reformed answer. The deliberately Trinitarian expression of the faith is typical of Reformed theology. The so-called Debrecen litany already followed a similar Trinitarian structure, woven around the recurring phrase 'we are not our own' (from the *Heidelberg Catechism* and Calvin's own exposition of the Christian life, but for example also characteristic of the *Brief Statement of Faith* of the Presbyterian Church (USA)). The Trinitarian argument is obviously different from the theological approaches of most other confessional communities, including the Alternative to Economic Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth project (AGAPE) of the World Council of Churches – whether built on notions of natural justice, *communio*-ecclesiology, the body of Christ, the nature of the eucharist, a spirit of love, the golden rule or the love commandment.

On closer inspection, once again, it becomes possible to ask questions about the content of the Trinitarian argument; not to critique what is mentioned, but based on the somewhat surprising absence of some themes that others within the Reformed tradition may regard as central and in fact, very relevant. It is already somewhat remarkable that the section on God as Creator is by far the longest one, covering several sub-themes (sovereignty, covenant, household of life, divine justice), while the section on Jesus Christ is much shorter and under-developed, and the section on the Spirit is only one short sentence (and the only one paragraph not containing a rejection). This is of course not the place to develop a full Trinitarian perspective and an entire systematic theology. It would certainly be unfair to expect every possible theme here, yet it is somewhat surprising to consider the crucially important theological themes not developed or even mentioned here that would indeed characterise Reformed Trinitarian thought and also inform and inspire many Reformed churches and believers towards 'a spirituality of resistance' in the face of injustice in economy and earth. When compared with the theological approaches and 'ecclesiological entry points' of other confessional bodies, the emphasis on God the Creator together with the absence of many christological and pneumatological themes is even more remarkable.

It should therefore not come as a surprise when the confessional content of this section calls critical responses to the fore, not from people who disagree with the stance of the document, but precisely from those who feel that the Trinitarian thought of the Christian faith and the Reformed tradition could offer much richer, more complex, more varied, and more specific and focused theological resources, when the very characteristic christological and pneumatological themes of Reformed theology would be more fully developed.

The one theological theme that is very prominent and is indeed characteristically Reformed, is – fourthly – the role of covenant in the argument. It is found in the section on God as Creator, forms the heading, determines the inner logic of the final section on practical commitment, and is even used in the title of the document itself. Once again, however, the actual way in which it is used may surprise many Reformed churches and even lead to critical responses. For many of them, this usage of the term may be new and strange.

Originally and traditionally, the Biblical notion of covenant (*berith*; *diatheke*; *testamentum*) played a central role in Reformed faith and life (Zwingli; then Bullinger; then Calvin; then often developed in detail in so-called covenantal theology). It was primarily used as a noun, or derived from that as an adjective



to describe God and God's grace and faithfulness. The emphasis was on God's initiative of love;

First in Anabaptist circles (already in the 16th century; Melchior Hofmann), then decisively in the Congregationalist movement in the Anglo-Saxon world (where the church is seen as a community based on their own covenant with one another), until it was fully developed by the Pilgrim Fathers and in the covenantal social thought of the North American colonies, a second meaning arose.

Now the notion of covenant is used primarily as a verb. Believers (or human beings) covenant with one another. They make a shared commitment to pursue a common purpose, on which they jointly and freely agree. Under the influence of this Anglo-Saxon and North American tradition, many ecumenical bodies increasingly began to use the term covenant in the second sense since the World Council Assembly of 1975. The WARC played an important role in the process. In many documents from these decades, covenant is used almost exclusively as a verb. It has an ethical meaning and function. It is used to call churches and believers to commit themselves to a common ethical purpose and to work together to attain that goal.

In the Accra Document, there is some use of covenant in the first sense, when the covenant of God the Creator with the whole of creation is confessed (par. 19–20). The dominant use is the second one, however, namely covenanting as verb, as a common commitment, a social contract, into which churches and believers are called, in order to work together for this common purpose. Not all Reformed churches and believers, however, know and use this ethical or 'activist' usage (as aptly described by the late Lukas Vischer), and it may not appeal to all with the same rhetorical power and emotion that it seemingly has for Reformed churches in the Anglo-Saxon world.

In the process of the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches, for example, and the Kitwe declaration, this use of the term did not play the same role. This is of course no reason not to use the term, but it may at least be respectful and wise to remember that it does not resonate with everyone in the Reformed community in the same way, and not at all with many believers from other confessional traditions whose ecclesiological viewpoints leave even less room for an ethical or activist understanding of the nature and role of the church. A consideration of the ecclesiological assumptions and implications of the document, however, is of such great importance that it deserves some special attention.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS?

Almost in passing, the Accra Document describes the church as 'seekers of truth and justice' (par. 11). In a way, this is a very suitable summary of Reformed ecclesiology, as long as all three terms are emphasised, and the tensions between them are retained. The Reformed church is concerned with truth (therefore the importance of theology, of faith stance, of confession), with justice (therefore the emphasis on calling, on commitment, on covenanting as ethical and even activist engagement), and with seeking (therefore the emphasis is on *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, on humility, on teachability, on conversation and listening and learning, and on no final, timeless and universal formulations).

As a whole, this process of reading the signs of the times, responding in faith, commitment to action, and calling on others to engage in a joint process of discerning and mutual learning is a typical Reformed activity, belonging to the heart of Reformed ecclesiology. A brief reminder of four very specific characteristics of Reformed ecclesiology – the one almost flowing from the other – may perhaps help to discern some of the implications more clearly.

The first important question is related to reception according to Reformed ecclesiology, also the reception of this particular

document. How should it be received in the church? When is it properly received? Many other confessional communities are concerned about what they regard as the lack of reception, the lack of *Verbindlichkeit*, of authority, and of a binding nature in Reformed churches. What status does this document have, and what ideal status could it perhaps attain? Who is the 'we' that the document refers to so consistently? On behalf of whom does this document speak? These are difficult questions to answer.

Reception has been called the single most difficult question for the ecumenical church. For Reformed ecclesiology this may indeed be true. For the Reformed view, reception is simultaneously extremely important and extremely difficult. It is extremely important, because, according to the Reformed view it is not enough that structures of authority – whether they be popes, patriarchs, bishops, synods, assemblies, federations, alliances, or moderators – take decisions and make declarations. It is instead necessary that local congregations and the ordinary believers receive these decisions, own them, understand them, agree with them, appropriate them, make them their own, and live them.

At the same time it is precisely this ecclesiological presupposition that makes agreements with other world churches and confessional bodies so difficult. The other bodies can simply not depend on the fact that a decision of the WARC has the same authority or *Verbindlichkeit* that a decision of the Vatican or the Lutheran World Federation may have. Wherein then lies the authority of the Accra Document? How should it be received? There are many indications in the document itself that the General Council was deeply conscious of these difficult questions, that they did not understand the document as a final and authoritative word – and therefore certainly not as a common Reformed confession – and that they therefore call on the worldwide Reformed Church 'to receive' the document fully and properly. Not seeing the document as the final and authoritative Reformed position is already a first very important ecclesiological implication.

But who is the worldwide Reformed Church? Once again, the General Council demonstrates that it is fully aware of the presuppositions of Reformed ecclesiology. From a Reformed perspective, the church consists of local congregations (par. 39). The congregations consist of believers who together make up the member churches, and together are involved in the ecumenical church. For Reformed ecclesiology, taking these social forms of the real church – in history and society – very seriously, is of extreme importance. It is therefore not without good reason that the General Council attempts to translate the document into practical proposals addressed at the wide variety of the social forms of the church, calling them all to receive the document by becoming part of the ongoing and global process of reflection and resistance.

It is also not without good reason that the council stresses the crucial relationship between unity and justice. The church cannot love and serve justice if it is not one; and the church should not strive for forms of unity that do not involve the practice of justice. Already for Calvin these two belonged together – as well as right through the genesis and history of the WARC. Therefore, other reports to the Accra meeting and many other concrete decisions and suggestions should be read as integral to the reception process. Joint projects like this one, between the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the ERK, which take the process further on global, regional and local levels, both critically and constructively, are precisely what is necessary for responsible reception.

This offers a second important ecclesiological implication. Indeed, many initiatives are called for, by the many different social forms of the church. The critical question would be whether the present proposals and suggestions are already creative and comprehensive enough, truly inviting and inspiring



diverse social forms of the church to receive the document and to seriously become part of the process.

The Reformed view of being church, however, also involves the very fundamental conviction that the different institutional forms of the church are not, by far, the only or even the most appropriate actors and agents for public engagement, for serving the common good or for resisting injustice and destruction. After all, it was precisely this characteristic that distinguished the Reformed tradition as wanting the whole of society to be renewed and transformed, according to the historian Jaroslav Pelikan. Again, the General Council therefore quite characteristically and correctly moves immediately from the diverse social forms of the institutional church to the commitment to work together with others, with other bodies and communities, with people of other faiths, with civil movements and with people's movements.

In principle, this move provides a third very important ecclesiological implication. The church is never the only actor. In practice, however, the absences and the silences in the document on this point may again be very surprising to many, precisely within the Reformed faith itself. Given the sophistication of social thought in the tradition, and the commonly held awareness of the complex nature of social life in the world, and of societies and their structures and institutions, it is almost remarkable that the document does not make any reference to the role and responsibility of states, of governments and politics, whether national or regional. It does not even make mention of the important formative and protective role of legal systems, of law, including international law and trade law. Neither does it really mention the role of contemporary economic institutions (except for civil movements and people's movements, and earlier trade unions). It does not refer to cultural formation, to education, to scholarship and science, or to the building of public opinion and the public media.

The document shows hardly any sensitivity to contemporary forms of structured pluralism and the political, social and cultural complexities of our global world. Does the General Council no longer see any potential in these other social spheres and institutions? Has the council completely given up on the responsibility of politics, law, education and culture in the global struggle against economic injustice and ecological destruction? Are these forms of our life together not crucially important to meet the challenges of ecological dangers, of global warming and climate change? In short, do these recommendations in practice reflect the sophistication of Reformed social thought today, or perhaps rather what many would regard as a rather one-sided and inadequate economist response to the global economic and ecological threat?

These critical comments therefore lead to a final set of questions – and a fourth important ecclesiological implication. For the Reformed understanding, proper reception involves more than merely study, reflection and agreement. It involves action, embodiment, and life. For the Reformed understanding, the goal should never be merely to speak together; the goal should also include acting together. According to Eberhard Busch, Calvin used to end meetings by asking who will now go and do what had been decided! This emphasis on life, on discipleship, and on embodiment has remained characteristic of the Reformed view of the church.

So, do these practical proposals offer sufficient ways of confronting economic injustice and ecological destruction? Particularly concerning ecological challenges, readers may be disappointed by the lack of analysis, detail and concrete suggestions about the way forward. There is in fact almost nothing to be found. Does the tension perhaps already lie in the unclear way in which economic injustice 'in economy and earth' is combined? Are the 'root causes' of the global injustice described almost exclusively in economic terms in fact the 'only causes' of the ecological threat as well? Is the ultimate challenge

concerning the ecology also one of injustice – and if so, towards whom, or what? This relationship is not spelt out at all. In fact, the ecological disaster is not really described or interpreted – or is the brief history of neoliberal economics also the only and sufficient explanation of all ecological threats today?

With such questions one returns to the first theological comments. Is the global situation really adequately read and described? If the church is also a truth-seeking community, is the truth about the ecology really spoken if the present threats are described only in terms of system and empire? In fact, are such descriptions empowering ordinary believers and local congregations – of such crucial importance for Reformed ecclesiology – to engage the beast in their own way, or does such a description take away any responsibility from them towards the power centres of the world, where the struggle for an alternative system is being fought?

If the problem is one of spirituality, theology, false teaching, propaganda, ideology, contemporary culture, church practices, strengthening the powerless, standing by the suffering, idolatry, greed and consumerism – this would be another matter altogether. Then local congregations and ordinary believers could all get involved, irrespective of where they are. If, however, it is primarily and even exclusively a matter of an alternative global economic system, then it will indeed become 'a difficult and prophetic task of interpreting to local congregations' (par. 39).

Taken together, these ecclesiological implications imply that the Accra Document is not and cannot be the final word – and it does not claim or want to be that. It is rather a call to the many social forms of the church to commit themselves to the process because they confess that nothing less than the integrity of their Christian faith, life and witness is at stake. It is a matter of life. It is a call to consider together with one another and together with other social institutions and powers – and a critical question will be with whom, and with whom not, and why – what could and should be done to love and serve justice in the face of the injustices and exclusion of the global economy today, and in face of ecological destruction and impending disaster. In asking what could be done, it will be important for Reformed churches not to exclude and disempower the poor, the marginalised and the weak, the oppressed, the suffering and the downtrodden, but precisely to help them to live actively according to their calling.

REFERENCES

World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2004, 'Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth', viewed n.d., from http://www.warc.ch/documents/ACCRA_Pamphlet.pdf.