

## Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth

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*“The covenant construct permits us and requires us to think afresh about the character and business of the church. That is, the move God has made in heaven opens up for us a new agenda: What is possible on earth? God’s move to solidarity is a hint that solidarity on earth is possible. And the covenantal theme permits a new ecclesiology. The church is the community attentive to the dangers and possibilities of solidarity in a culture that thrives on and celebrates our division and isolation.”<sup>1</sup>*

Where we come from and what we have learned

Calvin’s concern for the economy was based on the sovereignty of God in all spheres of life.<sup>2</sup> Thus he spoke against the “rich and powerful exploiting their material edge to increase the poverty of the poor”. He had no time for the idea of a value-free economy, for “God wills that there be proportion and equality among us, that is, each one is to provide for the needy according to the extent of one’s means, so that no one has too much and no one has too little”.<sup>3</sup>

Faith and the world are not separate domains. Economic life and the use of natural resources are spiritual questions. Material goods, whether traded in the market or provided by creation, are instruments of God’s providence and signs of grace, to be used in the service of life. Selfish accumulation, hoarding and over-harvesting are signs of a world in rebellion against God. Resistance and regulation to ensure a just distribution of resources is a task entrusted not simply to individuals but to the whole community. Without such resistance, the body of Christ will wither, the economy will collapse and God’s creation will be destroyed.

For this reason Calvin calls the rich “ministers of the poor” and the poor “vicars of Christ” or “proxies of God”. A gracious God has given that which, if shared, will provide abundant life for all. The blessings of material goods and money are intended to sustain life, not threaten it.

Our modern history as a fellowship of churches reaffirms and reinterprets these traditional principles in today’s context.

*Seoul 1989: The present global economic order is immoral...*

The 22nd general council, recognizing before God that the earth was gravely threatened, expressed concern for the consequences of “gross injustice, with many human beings doomed to lives of unending poverty and oppression; violence, wars and the threat of nuclear holocaust; and the destruction of nature under the burden of human greed and carelessness.”

The council called Alliance churches “to recognize and declare that the present global economic order is *immoral* and must be changed to one that is just and produces conditions in which justice, wellbeing and wholeness are possible”.

It also drew attention to the threats to creation and urged churches and their congregations to make their members and society at large conscious of the threats to the earth’s atmosphere – the greenhouse effect and the destruction of the ozone layer. “Rapid action is required if disastrous consequences for the whole created world are to be avoided,” the council said.

And it called member churches to covenant: “God initiated his covenant with his creation and so we are all called to enter into a covenant for justice.”<sup>4</sup>

*Debrecen 1997: ...and challenges the integrity of our faith*

The 23rd general council went further, affirming that the quest for economic justice touches upon the integrity of our faith as Christians and as churches:

“In discussions of economic justice, we have heard about the unfairness of the prevailing world economic system, which creates injustice at both international and national levels... In discussions of creation and justice, we have heard that creation continues to groan, in bondage, waiting for its liberation... We are challenged by the cry of the people who suffer and by the groaning of creation... We want to affirm the gift of life. We consider this affirmation of life, commitment to resistance, and struggle for transformation to be an integral part of Reformed faith and confession today...”

On this foundation, Debrecen issued its call to member churches to join in a process of “recognition, education and confession” regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction, asking them “to work towards the formulation of a confession of their beliefs about economic life which would express justice in the whole household of God and reflect priority for the poor, and support an ecologically sustainable future”.<sup>5</sup>

It is one thing to call for a confession of faith. It is another, and more difficult, thing to make one.

A confession of faith interprets the word of God in the circumstances of its day. Its biblical basis must be clear for all to see. It must express the faith that lives on the streets, and in the hearts of Christians, in many different contexts. It must know what it is for and what it is against: what false doctrines or practices – inside or outside the church – it is rejecting.

And the challenge a confession of faith presents is not just intellectual, but existential: it challenges us, not just our beliefs, because it has to be embodied by the Christian community.<sup>6</sup>

How is the Alliance family, in Accra and beyond, to “affirm life” not as a merely ethical concern, but as an inseparable part of Reformed faith and confession today?

### Confessing our faith before God and one another

The injustice and the destruction that call us to confession stem from a practice and an ideology whose ramifications are global but affect each situation uniquely. In the face of such complexities, a confession of faith must take a gospel stand against the exclusionary practices of the economy, the exploitation of creation and the commodification of life.

Is it possible to envisage a confession embodying some or all of the following elements?

- God's creation and redemption of all life
- God's sovereignty over the whole earth
- God's gift and command of human solidarity and mutual responsibility
- God's justice for the marginalized and the oppressed
- God's reconciling power in the world
- An affirmation that when one suffers, all suffer
- Resistance to the idolatry of money and markets
- Discernment of cruel and merciless powers
- Rejection of absolutist and exclusive claims to truth
- Restitution, and restoration of right relationships

The south-south forum of Alliance churches (Buenos Aires 2003) proposes a covenant for life modelled on the 10 commandments:

- I. We shall not make Mammon our God, accumulating power and wealth.
- II. We shall not make ourselves an idol, worshipping the effectiveness of our own achievements.
- III. We shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord God, calling the implementation of the wealth-accumulating market and imperial wars a Christian policy.
- IV. We will observe the sabbath day by not exploiting human labour and destroying mother earth.
- V. We will provide for solidarity between the generations, not only by securing a decent living for the aged but also by not burdening the coming generations with ecological damage and debt.
- VI. We shall not murder, excluding from the economy those who have no private property nor ability to sell their labour in the market.
- VII. We shall not tolerate the commodification and sexual exploitation of women and children.
- VIII. We shall not allow the manifold robberies of economic and financial actors.
- IX. We shall not misuse the legal system for our personal profit but promote the economic, social and cultural rights of all people.
- X. We shall not follow the greed of limitless accumulation by depriving our neighbours of their means of production and income, so that all may live in dignity on God's rich and beautiful earth.

### Covenanting for life in fullness

Finding a common language for confession may be far from easy, but it is not enough. We are called to confess our faith not in word or speech only, but in truth and action (1 Jn 3.18). We are to be a covenant people, acting in obedience to God's will, as a sign of the hope that is in us and for the sake of the world.

Covenant is a gift of God and a task to be fulfilled. God initiates the covenant in response to injustice and oppression and as a sign and promise of new life. In the act of covenanting we are embraced, transformed and bound together through the love of God. Transformation leads to new beginnings in which God and the people of the covenant embark on a journey of liberation, restoration and the struggle to remain faithful (Jer 34.8-22).

Covenanting for justice, covenanting for life, is based on an alternative perception of how things are in heaven and how things could be on earth, a vision of a kingdom that is not simply future or otherworldly, but breaks into our history to challenge us, both as churches and as a church fellowship.

### Each church a covenant community

Walter Brueggemann, in the article from which we quoted, draws on Jeremiah to identify three marks of a covenanting church.<sup>7</sup>

#### *A community governed by a biblical code of faith*

This is not to be confused with a legalistic application of law. It is a "release from petty moralisms" to see the world through the eyes of God's passion and anguish. It is a radical reorientation of the church: from self to neighbour, from indifference to relationship, from triviality to the weighty matters of justice, mercy and righteousness.

#### *A community in solidarity about the knowledge of God*

Knowledge of God is attentiveness to the need of brothers and sisters (Jer 22.13-17). Knowledge of God in this sense calls the church away from other knowledges that betray and divide. It is radically democratic, refusing all monopolies of wisdom, whether by wealth or age or gender or status. It challenges all abuse of power in the church, because the church is one in the knowledge of God and of the gospel.

#### *A community that knows and practises forgiveness*

The church is a community for which the past is past: "I shall remember their sin no more" (Jer 31.34). But then the past really should be past: our relationships within the church should be "a genuine yielding of the past for a hope". And this demands real change. "The community of forgiveness means a redress of power in which the weak and the strong, the least and the greatest, really derive their life from one another (see Mark 10.42-44)."

Forgiveness means repentance.

These marks of the covenant church are not new, but we need to recognize anew how sharply they challenge the conventions of everyday life. The church is a community neither of fate nor of convenience, but a *called* community, a “people addressed and bound in a concrete and abiding loyalty” to God and one another, to those within their walls and those outside them.

Covenant is the religious construct with the greatest potential to transform a worldview that seeks to promote limitless expansion and growth over and above God’s sovereignty and the human family’s responsibility for one another and the whole creation. “The covenantal paradigm affirms that the world we serve and for which we care is a world yet to be liberated.”

### The Alliance as a covenant fellowship

How we relate together as a family of churches in a time of crisis – a time of life and death – reflects our commitment to transformation and to the fullness of life for all promised by God.

As a family of churches covenanting together, we affirm that the world is not fixed, that institutions can be altered and that communities can live in solidarity.

A covenant for justice in the economy and the earth by Alliance churches throughout the world is a sign of hope, strengthening the witness and mission of our churches. It is a vision for the world that is not limited by the reality of the world. It declares in word and deed that “the world is intended by God to be a community that covenants, that distributes its produce equally, that values all its members and that brings the strong and the weak together in common work and joy”.<sup>8</sup> It implies for each and all of us a committed movement seeking to move from error to truth in our witness of faith.

### *A fellowship of solidarity and mutual accountability*

By embracing one another in covenant, we experience a solidarity that goes beyond mere concern. It is a relationship of love and accountability rooted in the belief that when one member of the body of Christ suffers, all suffer, and faith is distorted.

Each church, in its own place, is challenged to strengthen its witness in the world. Each church, making its own confession, is accountable to its sister churches because of the covenant we have made together. “Covenanting is an assertion that vulnerable relationships of solidarity constitute an alternative way to organize the world.”<sup>9</sup>

### *A fellowship of resistance and proclamation*

We are called to confess our common faith, giving an account of our hope for a world that is suffering and in pain. The injustices in the world and our increased

knowledge of one another reveal that the measure of “what is enough” must be brought to bear on the global stage. Life in fullness, sufficiency and sharing, cannot be the privilege of a minority, but must embrace the whole creation. As churches covenanting for justice, we are called to resist openly all threats to life, proclaiming the promise of life in fullness for all, but especially for the oppressed, the vulnerable and the excluded, because these are our sisters and our brothers and the earth is our common home.

*A fellowship united in mission and service*

Our covenant together for justice in the economy and the earth means working together in mission to resist injustice and to struggle for transformation. It means choosing life over and against everything that may separate us. It calls us to choose life, not for the future, but for today; not in our image, but in God’s.

Working together, we can strengthen the mission of each church to sustain life in its community. We can exchange people and prayers; we can compare our experiences with alternative models; we can share testimonies; and we can develop common resources and united strategies. Together we can work with other churches, social movements and people of faith to challenge and recast the values of our globalized world.

*“Behold the day is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”*

– Jer 31.31

*“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.”*

– Deut 30.19-20

Biblical considerations

What do the following texts say about covenant, God, the human family and creation?

- God’s covenant with creation (Genesis 6.18-22)
- God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17.7-14)
- God’s covenant of liberation from slavery (Exodus 6.2-9)
- God’s sabbath covenant with the Israelites (Exodus 31.12-17)
- God’s jubilee covenant (Leviticus 25)
- God’s covenant with the exiles (Jeremiah 31.31-34)
- God’s new covenant in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 8.6-12)

### Questions

1. What signs of economic injustice and ecological destruction do you see in your local community?
2. How does your congregation respond to the needs of the people and the environment around you?
3. How would the economic reality and ecological concerns of your local community challenge churches in other countries?
4. How do economic injustice and ecological destruction challenge your faith in Jesus Christ? The witness of your congregation? The witness of your church?
5. How would “covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth” with churches in other countries challenge you? Your congregation? Your church?

### Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann, “Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm”, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, ed Patrick D Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p.47.
2. Calvin understood freedom as the “freedom to participate in history in the Holy Spirit’s creation of the new society envisioned and empowered by God” – Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom and Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p.121.
3. Ronald H Stone, “The Reformed Economic Ethic of John Calvin”, *Reformed Faith and Economics*, ed Robert L Stivers (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), p.38.
4. *Seoul 1989: Proceedings of the 22nd general council*, ed Edmond Perret (Geneva: WARC 1990), pp.191, 200, 202.
5. *Debrecen 1997: Proceedings of the 23rd general council*, ed Milan Opocensky (Geneva: WARC, 1998), pp.192, 198, 199. In 1992, as a follow-up to Seoul, the executive committee wrote a letter to Alliance member churches about faith and economic life. This laid the foundation for an Alliance study on Reformed faith and economic life, punctuated by consultations in Manila and Kitwe (1995), San José and Geneva (1996). After Debrecen, the Alliance sponsored a series of hearings on economic globalization and the response of the church, together with the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and regional ecumenical councils: Bangkok and Seoul (1999), Budapest and Fiji (2001), Soesterberg (2002) and Buenos Aires (2003). Throughout this period many Alliance churches have been concerned with economic and environmental issues and since 1997 many have responded to the Debrecen call. In April 2003, 23 member churches in the southern hemisphere sent delegates to a south-south forum in Buenos Aires to share experiences and insights and to formulate a “faith stance on the global crisis of life”. In early 2004, a wider forum of member churches from both north and south will meet in London to review the journey since Debrecen and to prepare our deliberations in Accra. A full report will be published in *Reformed World* (March 2004).
6. Only once in its history has the Alliance made a statement of a confessional nature: the resolution on racism and South Africa adopted by the 21st general council (Ottawa 1982). This statement applied the Alliance’s long-standing opposition to

racism in any form to its particular expression in apartheid and to the theological defence of apartheid by some South African member churches.

7. Brueggemann, "Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm", pp.48-50. The quotes in this section come from these pages.
8. Brueggemann, p.50.
9. Walter Brueggemann, "Covenant and Social Possibility", *Covenanting for Peace and Justice*, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 13 (Geneva: WARC, 1989), p.8; also in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*, p.57.

## Join the gathering!

Reformed Christians around the world are invited to join the journey towards Accra. Name issues, offer insight, reflect biblically on what life in fullness means and how our witness as a Reformed family can make a difference!

Here are some things you can do:

1. study John 10.1-17 and related Bible texts
2. form study groups to discuss the theme and issues related to life
3. identify threats, challenges and affirmations of life
4. celebrate life in worship services
5. intercede for the Reformed family
6. pray for those seeking justice, peace and fullness of life
7. help delegates from less wealthy churches to finance their travel to Ghana
8. visit our Accra website at [www.warc.ch/24gc/](http://www.warc.ch/24gc/)

You can also come to the general council.

### Visitors' programme

People from anywhere in the world interested in the people, churches and culture of Ghana and eager to be strengthened by the witness of the worldwide Reformed family are invited to join the visitors' programme. Visitors will share in worship, Bible study, discussions, visitation programmes, cultural events and celebrations. When delegates are busy in committees, visitors will have their own programme on "Mission for Life in Fullness".

Visitors should budget US\$30 per day for board and lodging in the student dormitories of the University of Ghana.