

A DIFFERENT WORLD IS POSSIBLE:

The Accra Confession: A Call for Economic and Ecological Justice in the Heart of the Empire

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It is a sign of great encouragement – and of Christian faithfulness and solidarity – that when a major disaster happens in another part of the world – a tsunami in Indonesia or an earthquake in Haiti – American Christians and congregations respond with a huge outpouring of love and concern. Millions of dollars are raised and sent to respond to the suffering, thousands of Christians join mission teams to reach out to those in need, and Christian denominations join with partner churches and agencies to respond to the emergency. These responses of compassion and concern are positive indications that we see ourselves as part of one global church and, in the words of St. Paul, recognize that “when one member suffers, all suffer together.” (I Corinthians 12: 26)

While we are willing to respond to indications of human need around the world in the name of Christ, we are far less eager to view the global church and its vision for Christian faithfulness in our time as a key resource for our own renewal and faithfulness. We are also far less eager to deal with the root causes in our own society of so much of the suffering in the world.

It is these concerns that the lectures and discussions in this Festival of Theology hope to address. We will focus on the implications for mission and ministry in North America that grow out of our being on part of a truly global church, the vast majority of whose members now reside in the global south (in Africa, Asia, and Latin America). We hope to do that especially through the lens of how the theology and life experience of Christians in the global south have found expression in ecumenical bodies that challenge us to radical new (but often quite old – even New Testament times) forms of faithful Christian response. My particular perspective will be from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (of which I have been honored to serve as President for the last six years) and its call to our churches through the Accra Confession to a ministry for economic and ecological justice, not only as a matter of social concern, but also as a matter fundamental to our faithfulness to the gospel in our time.

Like Allan, I begin autobiographically. As I shared with many of you at the seminary’s convocation two months ago, my second conversion began when I returned from college to find the elders in my home church in Memphis, Tennessee had joined arms at the doorstep of the church to keep African-Americans from worshipping with us, and I was totally unable to square that action with the gospel message I had learned in that very church. It was the

witness of the ecumenical movement and its vision that “God was in Christ reconciling the world....and giving to us the ministry of reconciliation” (II Cor. 5: 19) that brought about what I term as my “second conversion.” However, what gave power to this new vision for my life and ministry was the witness of the global church that renewed and strengthened my faith, coming from places I would have least expected it.

Through my own vocational involvements with our church’s world mission efforts and the ecumenical movement, I have been blessed with the opportunity to come to know in some depth Christians in various parts of the world that believe with incredible strength in the power of God for good in the world in spite of situations where, to the human eye, that seems all but impossible. It was in 1981 in the midst of the most difficult days of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa that I first went to South Africa. It was there that I was vividly reminded of the shameful legacy of slavery and segregation in my own country but also emboldened in my own witness by South African Christians that somehow in the midst of oppression and persecution on all sides were able to “stand where God stands” and challenged me to do the same.

On that same trip I went to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) – a place I was to return many times over the next few years. I will never forget the worship service one Sunday morning in the Yolo Church in Kinshasa, one of the largest Presbyterian churches in a city that almost all would agree is one of the worst places to live in all the world. There, in a run down, open air building filled with thousands of fervent worshippers was a service that while structurally similar to that of Presbyterians in America, seemed worlds apart with the deep sense of emotion and spiritual vitality in the congregation. I will never forget the pastor preaching what seemed like a very strange sermon on St. George and the Dragon, which during part of it he literally acted out the struggle with the dragon.

The message that came through to me – and to that congregation – was classical Reformed theology: the sovereignty of God over evil, the reminder to Christians that we have been chosen by God to share in God’s transformation of the world, and the certain assurance that even in the valleys of despair God’s will and God’s reign of justice, peace, and community will ultimately prevail. It was a life changing experience for me. It was a reminder to us all of the power of God over against the dragons of our time, and it was a call from God for us to confront the evil of the world with power and assurance that God’s reign of justice and peace will ultimately prevail.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (soon to be the World Communion of Reformed Churches) has been a venue for me to be continually challenged and renewed by the witness of Christians who are making a difference for God's justice in the world, and I give thanks to God for the opportunity to be part of this movement. A particular *kairos* moment for me in relation to WARC occurred around the time of its General Council in Accra, Ghana in July of 2004.

A couple of weeks before that General Council was to begin I broke my ankle less than a mile from here – on the third tee of the golf course in Cherokee Park! While I at least had the honor of having a “sports injury,” it raised real questions as to whether I would be able to travel to Ghana as one of the delegates of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). After promising my doctor and my wife that I would not climb any stairs but would only use elevators, I set off to Ghana only to find that there was not a single elevator on the whole campus at the University of Ghana, where we were meeting. To top it all off, just after arriving a snake came up through the drain in the shower and bit the other foot! I was sure that God either has something very special in store for me – or didn't intend for me to be there! It was then that I was elected, to my surprise, as President of WARC – and I do count that as one of the *kairos* moments of my life, where God has entrusted me with a great responsibility on behalf of this worldwide Reformed movement and has given me an incredible blessing of seeing God at work in the world where, against great odds, Christians are making an incredible witness to the reign of God in our time.

Far beyond my personal story, I also believe the Accra General Council was a *kairos* moment for the global Reformed family as we committed ourselves through the Accra Confession to a covenant for justice in the economy and the earth as fundamental to Christian faithfulness in our time. In the best of the Reformed confessional tradition (going back to Barmen and Belhar, not to mention the Scots Confession and the early church's confession that “Jesus is Lord”), we sought to discern the signs of the time and declare our faith and our faithfulness to God's call for a covenant for justice in the face of the incredible evils of the systems of our day – systems that are denying the very essence of our biblical conviction that all people are created in the image of God and ought to be treated accordingly. It was a clear and bold affirmation that the covenant with God and with one another for justice in the economy and the earth is essential to the faithful expression of the Christian faith in our time.

It was a conviction that grew among us as we together sought to discern God's will for the global family of Reformed Christians over those two weeks. We were all divided into bible study groups (like the “home groups in which you are sharing during this Festival of Theology) to study a book I had often overlooked, the Book of Ruth.

What we found was not just an account of how Ruth and Naomi were faithful in an ancient cultural setting, but we heard story after story of how women's dignity was violated and controlled in various cultures of the world today. The Book of Ruth was not just a story that happened in the past but also a living reality for far too many women and families today.

We spent time with our brothers and sisters in Christ from churches in desperate circumstances and learned how a whole generation had largely been lost to the Presbyterian community in Malawi through the ravages of HIV and AIDS, how genocide was a daily reality for Christians in Sudan, how the future was being destroyed before their eyes for Reformed Christians in the Middle East, how the island on which the people from the Reformed community in the Pacific Island nation of Nue was literally being lost to the sea, and how Reformed Christians in so many places were witnessing with their lives against the ravages of poverty and the violation of human rights.

In addition to these testimonies we also heard much deeper reflections about a Reformed theology that calls us to stand where God stands and to join in God's transformation of the world. We were reminded that many of the finest hours of Reformed witness have been when Reformed Christians, because of their faith in a sovereign God, have said a prophetic and effective "no" to the principalities and powers of the day – as the confessing church in Germany did in the Barmen Declaration and the Reformed community in South Africa did in Belhar. We also heard disturbing facts and figures that helped us discern the "signs of the times." Many of those are found in sections seven and eight of the Accra Confession:

1. That the annual income of the wealthiest 1% of the world's people is higher than the combined income of the poorest 57%
2. That 24,000 people die each day of poverty and malnutrition
3. That the gap between the rich and the poor has increased dramatically – in both the global south and north – over the last two decades
4. That our destruction of the earth has accelerated to the point that now one species disappears every hour while a decade ago it was one a day.¹

We further learned of the steps that had led to this call for a confession of faith and a covenant for justice in the economy and the earth as a response to these deep injustices that had been gaining momentum over a decade. In 1989 at the General Council in Korea, the World Alliance sent a letter to young people that called for the development of an ecumenical social ethic based on the values of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Drawing on this mantle and the reality of a global economic system that was destroying the very fabric of life in Africa, the

churches of that part of the world gathered in Kitwe, Zambia in 1995 and called on the world Reformed community to declare a *status confessionis* related to justice in the economy and the earth that paralleled earlier declarations against Nazism and apartheid. This led to an action by the next WARC General Council in Debrecen, Hungary in 1997 to begin a process of confession by which churches in various parts of the world would study this call in preparation for Accra.

What brought these difficult dialogues and startling figures to a head in Accra in terms of a new resolve was the day that we spent visiting the slave dungeons on the Gold Coast of Ghana. We went to the slave castle (or dungeon) at Elmina where over several centuries hundreds of thousands of slaves had been sold and shipped off to a life of bonded servitude – mostly in so-called “Christian lands.” Most of those who came to Elmina never made it to their destination alive and many who did wished they had not.

What was most disturbing in that visit was to see a large Catholic chapel which had operated when the Portuguese ran Elmina that was abandoned when the Dutch took over. Those Dutch Calvinists simply felt it would be a sacrilege to worship in a chapel built by Catholics but saw no sacrilege in building a Protestant chapel right on top of the female slave dungeon where the worst atrocities of the slave trade took place. What shocked us all was that for centuries many Reformed Christians saw no contradiction between their Reformed faith and the almost total genocide of a large group of fellow human beings.

We left that experience with a deep resolve to never again fail to see the connection between the worship of God and the well-being of all of those created in God’s image. It became our deepest conviction that the systems of our time that impoverish billions while the rich get richer and richer; that consign millions of men, women and children to grinding poverty, early death, and needless starvation; and that threaten the future of our planet are systems of evil. Because of our faith in Christ, who came that all might have life in fullness, we are called to stand against these massive injustices and to work for a different world. It was this context and this commitment that led to the Accra Confession as the core common commitment that molds Reformed Christians together in their witness to the world.

This confession did not mince words! It equated the global economic and ecological systems of our day with the biblical notion of empire, and called for radical action by Reformed communities all over the world for a new economic and ecological order that promotes life and not death.

At the heart of the Accra Confession – like the Declaration of Barmen and the Belhar Confession - are a series of affirmations of faith that lead to a series of rejections of the signs of the time. These affirmations of faith are affirmations of classic Christian and Reformed theological convictions. They include affirmations such as:

- Belief in God as “the creator and sustainer of life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world.”
- Belief that “any economy of the household of life given to us by God’s covenant to sustain life is accountable to God.”
- Belief that “God is a God of justice” who “calls us to stand with the victims of injustice,”
- Belief that God calls us “to follow the public mission of Jesus Christ who came that all might have life in fullness (John 10: 10).”
- Belief that God calls us “to uphold the unity of the church and its mission so that the reconciliation to which Christ calls us can become visible.”
- Belief that in Jesus Christ “justice shall prevail and peace shall reign”²

These affirmations of faith – so widely shared by Reformed Christians – when given life in relation to the signs of the times so evident at Accra gave rise to a call to radical and prophetic action in our time. They call us to reject:

- Any economic order (such as the present model of neoliberal economic globalization) that fosters greed and an unregulated accumulation of wealth while billions go deeper and deeper into poverty, ill health and starvation.
- Any ideology that puts profits before people.
- Any theology that assumes that personal wealth is a blessing from God while poverty is the fault of the poor.
- Any “church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and the care of creation.”
- Any “attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity.”³

What we are called to do is to covenant together with one another, in our congregations, among our churches, and in the public arena “to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth in the household of God.” Such a commitment is nothing less than a commitment to change the fundamental order of our world so that God’s vision of a reign of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation can find fresh expression in our time. Not a small undertaking!

I left Accra in the August of 2004 firmly convinced that this was indeed a *kairos* moment and that the actions we had taken and the commitments we had made were indeed God's thing for our time. However, I was much less sure whether our dreams and visions could really become a reality. It was far more daunting than a Samson and Goliath struggle. WARC is, in the world's terms, a very small and weak organization.

While Reformed people have always known that we are part of one church, our ties with one another and with the WARC have been quite weak. The sheer fact that we call our global body an "alliance" rather than a communion is a sign of that fragility. But most important, there are powerful forces to support the current economic and ecological systems, and if truth be told, probably the vast majority of our people and our churches, especially in the global north, while wishing compassion on the poor and oppressed, have little passion for a fundamental change in the global economic order.

The response to the Accra Confession was overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic in the global south, where many churches felt for the first time that the global body of Reformed Christians might really have heard their deepest cries. The same was true among groups often "on the margins" in our churches in the global north. When I discussed the call to a covenant for justice in the Black and Hispanic caucuses in the PCUSA, with Presbyterian Women, in our church's multicultural conferences, there was a strong sense of affirmation and an eagerness to be a part of this global movement for justice that shared deeply the values of those struggling for justice in our society.

But in most of the global north, the Accra Confession was like a "voice crying in the wilderness." Even more than in the United States, the churches in Western Europe were deeply disturbed by the action of the Alliance in Accra and many threatened to withhold funds or to withdraw from active participation in the Alliance. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, but there was less than a positive response from Western Europe.

In the U.S.A. most of our member churches, including the PCUSA, responded to the Accra Confession with declarations of support and study processes to help congregations confront these issues, and a very active North America Covenanting for Justice Network emerged to further this movement. This energy came to life in struggles supported by the churches like those of the farm workers through the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Publish What You Pay Campaigns, and efforts to stand against the export of ecological disaster to other parts of the world.⁴ However, there was far from active support or even engagement with these issues in most of our churches. And with editorials against the Accra Confession in publications like the

Wall Street Journal and an administration in Washington clearly committed to the kind of economic globalization that Accra decried, it seemed far from clear what if any impact this initiative might achieve.

While this movement for covenanting for justice is still at the periphery of our churches and our society, some things have begun to change in the last few years, and I have a new hope that what proved to be a *kairos* moment in Accra may yet prove to be that for the world community. When we left Accra, it was all but inconceivable that the economic systems of globalization could or would change, and concerns about an end to global warming and the destruction of our environment seemed hardly on the radar screen. All of that has begun to change in the last few years with the global financial crisis and the clear threat that our environment is nearing a “tipping point” that may well move us to unsustainability.

The global economic crisis has shown to all the world (and to the people of the United States) that this model of unrestrained global capitalism with no regulation for the public good is every bit as destructive as what we warned in Accra. A personal example of that came in two visits I made to the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church four years apart. That church, as some of you know, is sometimes pejoratively referred to as “Wall Street at Prayer” because of the large number of people who have leadership positions on Wall Street in that congregation. I first went to visit that church soon after the Accra General Council, and you can imagine the reaction I got from people in that church who were deeply engaged in Wall Street and its operation. It wasn’t very positive! I was invited back as part of the Calvin Jubilee celebrations last year and was deeply moved when one of the elders who had responded so negatively to me four years ago sought me out to apologize. He wanted me to know that after all of the revelations of the financial crisis, it was clear to him that we have no economic future as a planet if we don’t have a moral compass for our economic systems and if the well being of people is not at the heart of our economic order. It was a powerful affirmation of this call for a covenant for justice in the economy and the earth.

Much the same can be said for WARC’s call for climate justice. These last six years have shown in frightening ways that global warming is a huge threat to the future of our planet and that its first victims are the most vulnerable. Large parts of the Pacific (where percentage wise the Reformed movement is stronger than anywhere else in the world) are preparing contingency plans on the very real probability that in the next few years they may be forced to evacuate their countries because of rising sea water. That happened just last month to what used to be New Moore Island between India and Bangladesh before it was swallowed up by the Bay of Bengal. Beyond that, there are growing numbers of natural and man-made disasters that are

destroying the fabric of life, especially for the poor, because of our failure to respect the creation. Change is needed – and now!

Churches within and beyond the WARC family are joining in this growing momentum for a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth. Even those churches, who were most critical in Western Europe and North America, have expressed coming into the General Council this summer a deep commitment to this call. WARC has been joined in this movement by ecumenical partners such as the Council for World Mission, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Council of Churches, which has developed a very substantial global movement under the title of Oikotree.

Most significant is the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into this call for justice in the global economy through the recent papal encyclical, *Charity in Truth*. In this encyclical the Pope declares, "The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth due to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner."⁵ He goes on to call for a world political order that regulates economic systems so that they contribute to justice and the common good. Clearly, there is a growing consensus in the global Christian community that a covenant for justice in the economy and the earth is the fundamental ethical calling of our time. This consensus is one that is also being joined by a growing number of progressive movements around the world, both in and beyond the churches.

One of the most notable voices for a covenant for justice in the economy and the earth is the World Social Forum. This forum is held annually as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, which is largely concerned with preserving the economic status quo for the rich and powerful. It is composed of those peoples, organizations and movements who are seeking to order the world to close the gap between the rich and poor, to foster peacemaking rather than domination, to end global poverty and its attendant symptoms (such as HIV/AIDs) and to build a world focused on collaboration and community. Made up largely of people and leaders from the Global South this Forum has had the active participation of church movements like WARC and the World Council of Churches. Central to achieving these goals is work for a just economic and ecological order.⁶

The theme (which reflects a deep yearning in our world) that has always been at the heart of these gatherings is "A Different World is Possible" – and indeed it is! It is that very theme

- that was at the heart of Jesus announcement of the coming reign of God,

- that was evident in the experiment that Calvin established in Geneva,
- that has always been at the heart of Reformed confessions, and
- that is the bedrock conviction on which the Accra Confession is founded.

We believe with all of our hearts that the reign of Jesus inaugurates a new heaven and a new earth, and our call as Christians here on earth is to join in God’s transformation of the world in accord with the core values of the reign of God. For our time, that means to be willing to take on the principalities and powers of our day to build an economic system and an ecological order that is grounded in justice.

The task before us – particularly those of us who live in the heart of “the empire” – is profound, but it is a task that we share with a global body of Christ and that is empowered by the Holy Spirit in our time. The Accra Confession calls upon us “to work together with other communions, the ecumenical community, the community of other faiths, civil movements and people’s movements for a just economy and the integrity of creation.”⁷ Much needs to be done if we are to be faithful to that call.

There needs to be a new burst of leadership coming from our churches for a new economic and ecological order. We need to insist that there not only be principles for just war but also principles of a just economy that become the foundation for our economic life. We need to join others in doing for the world’s economic and ecological order what the churches did ecumenically in articulating “Six Pillars for Peace” that became the basis for the United Nations and the various covenants for peace and human rights in the 1940s.

We need to be leaders in insisting that global economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that are controlled by the rich are replaced with truly multilateral institutions with shared leadership of rich and poor alike to secure a just economic order, where the gap is narrowed rather than widened between the rich and the poor, and where economic justice for all is the driving goal of the international order. We need to be in the forefront of global movements that will preserve our planet and restore the earth, and at the same time, compensate the victims (primarily in the global south) for our century long model of development that is making life unbearable for so many.

We do need economic and political action, but we are reminded that we need far more than that in the Message from the Global Dialogue on the Accra Confession in Johannesburg last fall. It states with great power, “We are faced with a crisis that is far more than an economic or financial crisis. It is spiritual crisis of a civilizational model that is economically unjust,

ecologically unsustainable, and structurally violent and socially degrading of human dignity. Therefore the answer to the crisis cannot be only economic or financial. We are in need of a more holistic and integrated strategy, led by a renewed and deepened spirituality of life [John 10:10].”⁸

Most of all, we need to preach the gospel and build spiritual communities that replicate the body of Christ. We need to speak the truth in love to a world – and a church - still in the grip of empire. We need to articulate biblical principles for justice, to proclaim the reign of God, and to stand against the powers and principalities of this world. Maybe even more importantly, we need to live these values as a spiritual expression of our call to community. The PCUSA Book of Order has a wonderful aspirational statement to describe the church. It states, “The Church of Jesus Christ is a living demonstration of what God intends for all humanity.”⁹ In a world where might makes right, where economic injustice is the order of the day, where the process of destroying the future of the planet continues unabated, we are being called to build Christian communities where people love one another, seek the will of God through prayer and discernment, honor creation, seek justice, build partnerships with the poor and the oppressed (at home and around the world), and seek to be a living demonstration of the values of the gospel in our common life.

The call of the Accra Confession – this powerful statement originating from the churches of the global south – is a call to renew the church and renew the world out of a deep and profound conviction that in Christ a different world is possible: a world where those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers, those who are even willing to be persecuted for righteousness sake are blessed. This is God’s dream, and this is the dream of the Accra Confession. May it be our dream as well!

Endnotes

¹ *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth* (Grand Rapids: RCA Publication Services, 2007), p. 3.

² *Accra Confession*, sections 17-32, pp. 4-5.

³ *Accra Confession*, sections 19-31, pp. 4-5.

⁴ See www.canaac.org for the resource, *Globalization We Can Grasp*, which explores a wide variety of campaigns in which North American Christians are engaged to live out the Accra Confession through work for social change.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), p. 61.

⁶ For more information on the World Social Forum go to http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/index.php?cd_language=2.

⁷ *The Accra Confession*, section 41, p. 5.

⁸ “Message from the Global Dialogue on the Accra Confession” (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2009), section 20, p. 4.

⁹ *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), part II, The Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly of the PCUSA, 2009), section 3.