



The ecumenical commitment of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches

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- The basis of our commitment
 - Our domestic tasks
 - Our ecumenical tasks
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It is impossible to read through the reports and declarations of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches without being struck at once by their evident and keen interest in the ecumenical movement. That WARC should participate in ecumenical meetings and programmes is almost axiomatic. In the years between the two world wars, the World Alliance was already among the bodies which sought to promote the ecumenical movement. Its commitment became even clearer after the Second World War. This is evidenced in an impressive series of official declarations. Particularly important here are the declarations made by the Princeton general council (1954), the centennial consultation in St Andrews (1977), and the Ottawa general council (1982). Even more important perhaps is the fact that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches consistently championed the creation and development of the World Council of Churches. It chose deliberately to subordinate the cultivation of its own fellowship to the promotion of this wider fellowship in the ecumenical movement.

Participation in the ecumenical movement seems, therefore, to be something of a vital necessity for the Reformed churches. There can be no doubt that this impression is correct. This focus on the ecumenical horizon is something already built-in to the Reformed tradition. The emergence of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century *could not fail to evoke* a sympathetic response in the Reformed churches and establishing more clearly the steps which this commitment to the ecumenical movement entail. In what follows I shall present some reflections on this theme from three angles:

- What is the basis of the commitment of the Reformed churches in the ecumenical movement?
 - What are the domestic tasks confronting them?
 - What tasks confront the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the ecumenical movement?
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● What is the basis of the commitment of the Reformed churches in the ecumenical movement?

The Reformed tradition is a complex phenomenon, of course. It is marked

by the experience of various historical periods and various geographical regions. Some of the individual churches belonging to it go back to pre-Reformation times. The Reformation itself took different forms on the European continent and in the Anglo-Saxon world. Within the family of Reformed churches, "Reformed", and "Presbyterian", churches constitute two recognizably different groups, and the "Congregational" churches add a further dimension to this diversity. These different forms of the Reformed tradition were carried to other continents by migration and by the missionary movement. In their interaction with different cultures and social systems, the Reformed churches which came into being in Asia, Africa and, to a lesser extent, in Latin America, have developed characteristics which cannot be incorporated in any of the Reformed types already mentioned.

It fits well with this picture of diversity that neither at the beginning of the Reformation nor in subsequent centuries did the Reformed churches unite around a *single* common confession of faith. The Reformed confessions were formulated by individual churches in their different situations and subsequently acquired a certain authority beyond their place of origin. But none of these confessions of faith was recognized by the Reformed churches as *the* Reformed confession. While the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism won wide recognition mainly in the European area, in the Anglo-Saxon world it was mainly the Westminster Confession of Faith which became authoritative. The Congregationalist churches in any case had their own confessional tradition. This confessional diversity has been increased still more in recent times by the decision of many Reformed churches to formulate their own confessions of faith to match their own specific situations.

What is it then that holds the Reformed churches together? What is the common basis which enables them to give their ecumenical commitment a common thrust and focus? The answer is far from obvious. It is possible, of course, to point out certain common characteristics. Even though the Reformed churches are not united by a common confession of faith, there are fundamental doctrinal statements on which they are *de facto* agreed. Almost all of them assign a central place, for example, to the "covenant" concept in the presentation of Christian doctrine. They are united by the emphasis they place on the word of God, despite all differences in detail, their worship bears the marks of this emphasis. They attach great importance on the need for church order to ensure that the whole congregation and every individual member of it can share in fundamental decisions: They are distinguished by a definite spirituality; as a rule they consider it their task to make the claims of the gospel operative in the common life of society. But is the really essential point made by pointing to these characteristics? Can the common basis uniting the Reformed churches be defined at all in terms of certain common features and characteristics? The constitution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches is right perhaps to define the Reformed tradition as a "biblical, evangelical and doctrinal ethos". Not a particular confession, not a particular liturgy, not a particular order, not a particular spirituality, but a common *ethos*.

This term is certainly open to misunderstanding. Is it asserting that the Reformed tradition, though distinguished by certain common intuitions, nevertheless remains indefinite and indefinable in detail? Is it saying that the only common feature of the Reformed churches is a common "approach" to certain questions about life? Is it even saying, perhaps, that the content of the Reformed tradition *must* necessarily remain indefinite and indefinable? That the Reformed churches *ought not* to confess their faith together, because by doing so they would cancel the very diversity

which is their characteristic?

Is this a plea for a pluralism which allows each church to ~o its own way undisturbed on the basis of a common ethos which defies a more precise definition? This is how the term is sometimes interpreted.

Another interpretation of it is possible, however. Common to the Reformed churches is their confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. They are also united by the determination to take their bearings from the witness of Holy Scripture. The Reformed tradition which binds them together consists in their determination in every age to start from Jesus Christ and Him alone. The Reformed tradition which binds them together consists in their determination constantly to listen anew to what Scripture attests of Christ. The Reformed tradition contains, to be sure, a wealth of insights and experiences and the Reformed churches would be ill-advised to ignore this as if it were of no importance. But their very tradition requires them, above all, to proclaim the one Jesus Christ within their own time and situation. When the Reformed tradition is defined as an "ethos", this can only mean acknowledging Jesus Christ as source of salvation and head of the church and allowing themselves to be so fashioned and formed by the love of God which has been revealed in Him that it shapes their whole life, thought and speech. It is a priority which must be known and respected in constantly new forms, a priority which is so unconditional that existing confessions, doctrines, liturgies, orders and spiritualities, however "Reformed" they may be, can never claim more than a subordinate place.

But there is another possible misinterpretation of the term "ethos". It can easily be mistaken to mean that we are dealing with a characteristic inherent in the Reformed churches by virtue of their tradition. But how could the confession of Jesus Christ as the priority of all priorities ever become an inherent characteristic? The whole point of the confession is that the initiative lies entirely with God. In his free and pure love, God turned towards the world. Despite our disobedience, he will not abandon us to the forces of destruction and death. The single object of the confession is to acknowledge this intervention and to extol it by a life of thankfulness. Presupposed in the ethos which constitutes the very heart of the Reformed tradition is the eagerness to give Jesus Christ his due place and scope. Yet how often Reformed churches have lacked this eagerness! How often they have forgotten this rock from which they were hewn and adopted different priorities! How often they have, in spite of everything, regarded their tradition as their fortunate possession, a mark of distinction and even perhaps a sign of their superiority over others! Ultimately it is only in prayer, however, that that ethos can become a reality.

One further point needs to be considered before we can consider the implications of this fundamental confession for the ecumenical commitment of the Reformed churches. The Reformed tradition began as a movement of reform and the Reformed churches have been decisively influenced by this fact. It was not the will or intention of the Reformers to found a separate church. The aim of the movement they initiated was, on the contrary, "to clarify and restore the faith and life of the church in obedience to the word of God" (Princeton 1954, p. 74).

They were aware that the church of Jesus Christ is by its very nature one. "As there is but one head of the faithful, so they ought all to be united in one Body; there are not several churches but only one which is extended throughout the world" (Calvin). What the Reformers were concerned to do was to assemble this *one* church once again around its head. When division ensued, when indeed a separate Reformed church emerged, this was contrary to their will and intention, and even after this happened, they

were unable to reconcile themselves to this situation. Even then the movement continued to be directed towards the whole church.

This original perspective is still vitally important even today. Even today the Reformed churches are still in a real sense a movement *in* the church and dependent on fellowship with other churches if they are to perform their mission. While they regard themselves, of course, as church of Jesus Christ, they nevertheless know at the same time that the church of Jesus Christ extends far beyond their own bounds. They know that it is their obligation to cooperate in every movement of reform and renewal whereby the unity, witness and service of the one church can be given a more inclusive form. Far from authorizing them to remain self-contained, the confession by which the Reformed churches live drives them out beyond their own bounds to seek dialogue and fellowship with other churches. "Faced by a plurality of churches throughout the world, we have a choice between claiming to be the one true church to which all others ought eventually to come and, on the other hand, seeking the fullness of Christ's church by entering into dialogue and fellowship with those other churches which share with us the gospel. As we may not claim a monopoly of the gospel, there is for us no alternative to involvement in the ecumenical movement" (Ottawa 1982, p. 87).

What do these reflections imply for the Reformed commitment in the ecumenical movement? Four directions may be mentioned here:

Confessing Jesus Christ

Even in the ecumenical movement, the primary concern of the Reformed churches will be to make the confession of Jesus Christ as source of salvation and head of the church the starting point of all deliberation and endeavour. Since this was the Reformers' concern, it must also be the concern of the Reformed churches. Like them, they see it as their task, too, to understand the gospel and to declare it in contemporary terms. The witness to Jesus Christ can never be frozen into a "creed" but must constantly be born anew in terms of the contemporary situation. For precisely this reason, moreover, the Reformed churches will never confine their effort to carry out this mission exclusively to their own family. Could it not be that the vital insight has been granted to another church? The Reformed churches, therefore, will seek fellowship with the other churches in order to understand and confess the gospel *with* them.

The aim of the dialogue with other churches, of course, will be first of all to eliminate misunderstandings and conflicts which have arisen in the course of time. It will seek to broaden the common basis between the churches by showing differences to be complementary or at least by making them transparent. It cannot, however, rest content with the achievement of this objective. It must eventually turn to the task of making the gospel luminous in our present time. The Reformed churches will therefore include even contemporary problems and decisions in the dialogue, as these arise. What does the gospel challenge the churches to be and do today? What is the Holy Spirit saying to them today? At what point does the *status confessionis* become inescapable for them today?

Missionary calling

The Reformed churches will also champion the fulfilment of the church's missionary task within the ecumenical movement. The gospel must be proclaimed and spread. By its very nature, it is a message to be passed on. The proclamation can never come to a halt, therefore. The church is

constantly confronted with the task of transcending its bounds and making salvation audible, accessible and intelligible in every possible way.

Since the Reformation, the Reformed churches have taken this task seriously. In a missionary movement they have carried the gospel to the ends of the earth. Today there are Reformed churches in all the continents. This has not brought the missionary task to an end. It must be carried out today in a new way. How do the Reformed churches pass on the message entrusted to them, each in its own situation and all of them together? While it is true that the Reformed churches make their own tradition the starting point in answering this question, they know that the proclamation of the gospel can never simply mean passing on their own tradition. Evangelization is never the prosecution of our own cause. It is, on the contrary, Jesus Christ Himself offering his salvation to those who are addressed. The Reformed churches will therefore be alert for the diverse ways which the Holy Spirit may employ for the proclamation of the gospel. One of the blessings of the encounter with other churches will be to help to ensure that advantage is taken of every opportunity of proclaiming and communicating the gospel.

The purpose of the dialogue between the churches is to promote unity. This does not mean that we can divide unity and common witness into two stages, that differences must first of all be resolved and eliminated before we can turn to consider the common missionary task. On the contrary, this common missionary task has to be considered from the very outset. It is part of the main agenda of every dialogue.

Church renewal

Within the ecumenical movement, the Reformed churches will also be champions of the renewal of the church. The movement of renewal initiated by the Reformers in the 16th century was not a complete success. It was only in parts of the church, and even there only partially, that the reforms could be carried out. The Reformation continues to await its continuation.

But the lesson learned in the subsequent centuries was that in any case the renewal of the church cannot be achieved by a single event. Not even the Reformation made it clear once and for all what the gospel and the church are. Renewal is a permanent obligation for the church. The church can continue to be the church only by being constantly renewed.

It is with this conviction that the Reformed churches enter the ecumenical movement. For them, the encounter and dialogue with other churches is the opportunity God gives for this renewal which he expects from his church today. The purpose of the dialogue with other churches must be to help us to discern signs of the gospel and of the renewal of the church in our time.

Overcoming human divisions

Another concern to be championed by the Reformed churches in the ecumenical movement is that the fellowship of the church shall transcend human divisions. The gospel is addressed to every human being and gathers together a community in which divisive human differences must cease to count.

The insight was taken seriously by the Reformation in its emphasis on the significance of the Christian community. God is present in the assembled

congregation; his salvation is not mediated by a special priesthood. In this sense, the Reformation was a people's movement. Although in many cases it was initiated "from above" by the decision of the supreme authorities, its deepest concern was to give breathing space for a movement "from below". The Reformed tradition in particular constantly sought to ensure that the equality of all members could find expression in the life of the church. We have only to think here of the emphasis on the synodal principle in the Reformed churches or the emphasis on the gathered congregation in Congregationalism.

But the corollary of this emphasis is surely the recognition that the dividing lines arising, for example, from membership of a particular class, a particular race, or a particular sex, must be transcended in the church? The congregation must surely be the place where members of different classes, human beings of different colour, men *and* women are united in Christ.

The Reformed churches still sponsor this vision of the church, too, within the ecumenical movement. The purpose of the dialogue with other churches will be not only to surmount the divisions between the confessions but also to make room for this new fellowship in Christ.

● **What are the domestic tasks confronting the Reformed churches?**

But are the Reformed churches in a position today to make this contribution to the ecumenical movement? Are they an adequate instrument for this task? Are they convincing advertisements for the ethos supposedly characteristic of them?

The answer to this question is so obvious as hardly to need stating. The Reformed churches fall far short of the witness their tradition requires them to bear. However strongly they would wish to endorse the ecumenical movement, it is by no means evident that they are constructive partners in the dialogue and in cooperation with other churches. If they are to perform their mission in the ecumenical movement, they must undergo a process of self-correction and renewal; The task of the Reformed churches within the ecumenical task is not concerned only with others but first and foremost with themselves.

The first and most important requisite for participating constructively in the ecumenical movement is a sense of the church's catholicity and universality. For the Reformed churches this has to be axiomatic, in the light of their origin, but it is a very different picture that their present condition presents. It is far from axiomatic that the Reformed churches live within the horizon of the one holy church which God "out of the whole human race from the beginning of the world to its end... gathers, protects and preserves for Himself in the unity of the true faith", (Heidelberg Catechism Q 54). Despite the original purpose of the Reformation they have developed into a denomination. As a result they have to some extent lost their sense both of catholicity in time and of catholicity in space: of catholicity in time because the Reformed tradition grew in importance and pushed the tradition of the *one* church throughout the centuries increasingly into the background: of catholicity in space, because confessional self-consciousness distorted their view of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in other churches.

But may not the problem lie at a deeper level? May it not be that the

Reformed churches have to some extent lost their sense of the church's catholicity because they have to some extent lost their sense of the meaning and the role of the church itself as such? All the emphasis was placed by the Reformers on the need for the message of salvation to be audible. It was this consideration which largely determined their criticism of the church in their day. Under no circumstances was the proclamation of salvation to be hindered by the church and its tradition. The constantly renewed reminders of the priority of the message over the church could easily lead in the end to minimizing the importance of church membership. The question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism already quoted, after its description of the church gathered by God, concludes with the impressive declaration: "and (I believe) that I am and will forever remain a living member of the same." Even here, however, the emphasis lies on the part which the individual believer has obtained in the divine plan. The church as the overarching fellowship retires into the background. The ground is already prepared here for a certain individualizing of faith, a trend which developments in succeeding centuries would only intensify still more.

The ecumenical movement confronts the Reformed churches, therefore, with the need to achieve a deeper understanding and awareness of the significance of the church as the fellowship of believers. What does it signify that God "gathers, protects and preserves" the church throughout the centuries? That the church existed before us, therefore, and will presumably still continue to exist after us? What does it signify that in our faith in Jesus Christ we are surrounded and upheld by the church? What authority can the church claim? What obedience do we owe to the church? The root of almost all the difficulties by which the Reformed churches are confronted in the ecumenical movement is their failure to pay sufficient attention to these questions in their theology and, above all in their practice.

What tasks does all this imply? To illustrate these tasks, we shall take the points mentioned in the previous section:

Restating the confession

The Reformed churches must constantly re-state their confession of faith in Jesus Christ. But are they sufficiently of one mind to be able really to perform this task? While it is true that many Reformed churches have come forward with new confessions in recent days, are these really confessions of the churches in their entirety? Has their formulation been achieved so carefully and with sufficient participation to warrant their being described as common confessions? Are these confessions, moreover, really taken note of, not to speak of being taken seriously, by the fellowship of Reformed churches? Can it be said of them that they have been informed by a passionate concern for the need for common confession of the faith?

The primary point to be clarified if the Reformed churches are to make their contribution to the ecumenical movement concerns the nature of the act of confession to which they are called today.

Reformed mission

The Reformed churches must draw attention in their own way to the church's missionary calling. Can we be sure, however, that they have really become prepared for the problems arising from the missionary expansion into other continents? They have contributed to the growth of the church. Many new churches have come into existence and even today

continue to grow in some countries. But has a worldwide fellowship come into being as a result of this movement, a fellowship in which the witness of each church is supported by the others? Have we succeeded in developing a real relation of partnership between the sending churches and the churches which have come into existence in consequence? Have we answered satisfactorily the question of the significance of declaring the gospel in a new cultural context?

If the Reformed churches are to perform their task in the ecumenical movement, they must first of all put these questions to themselves.

Continued reform

3. The Reformed churches must champion the renewal of the church. Are they in a position, however, to achieve common reforms themselves? Are they able to welcome suggestions and to join together in efforts to implement them? Whether asked or not, they will readily inform all and sundry that the church is in constant need of reform - *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. But does this make them more flexible than other churches? While the Reformed churches have an unusual capacity for posing questions, they experience great difficulties once it is a matter of uniting to translate new insights into practice. Despite all flexibility in principle, therefore, the upshot in most cases is the *status quo*.

If the Reformed churches are to perform their task in the ecumenical movement, they must find ways whereby they can consult each other and make decisions together. Until the principle of "continued reform" is translated into a common conciliar process, it will never be more than high-flown rhetoric.

Cutting across divisions

The Reformed churches must cut across human divisions. Is it not the Reformed tradition, in particular, however, which has encouraged confinement to a particular class and even division between different groups? In a number of countries, has it not been the Reformed churches in particular which identified themselves with the upper class of the population? Is it not generally the case that the Reformed churches tend to belong to the wealthier classes? Is not a tendency to elitism characteristic of the Reformed tradition? But above all, is it not Reformed churches which have promoted and maintained the system of apartheid in South Africa?

If the Reformed churches are to carry out their task in the ecumenical movement, they must take all this into account and deal with the problems it presents. What caused these identifications? Why was it possible for the Reformed tradition to lose the capacity to cross frontiers? How can the Reformed churches today become a fellowship in which these divisions cease to count?

🟡 The tasks of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the ecumenical movement

In the light of these reflections, what are the tasks confronting the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in the ecumenical movement?

The first point to emphasise is that, in "the Reformed view, the responsibility for commitment in the ecumenical movement rests primarily on the individual churches. They are the real agents of "Reformed witness

today". They must therefore seek contacts and fellowship also with churches of other traditions in their respective situations. What is the witness required by the gospel in their immediate context? What opportunities are there to bear this witness together with other churches? The World Alliance is not set above them so that they have to or could wait for its directives! Each of them must listen to Holy Scripture and let itself be guided by the Holy Spirit in its particular setting.

At the same time, however, commitment in the ecumenical movement is also a shared task. A common tradition and a common mission binds the Reformed churches to one another. All share some responsibility for the witness of each individual church. They have mutual obligations of solidarity but also, in certain circumstances, of mutual criticism. A constant exchange is therefore essential to their life. Each of them knows itself to belong to a wider fellowship and must also be prepared, therefore, to listen to the experience, the witness and the views of the other churches. This applies also, and perhaps especially, to the ecumenical movement.

In this connection the World Alliance has an important role to play. It is an instrument at the disposal of the churches for deepening mutual fellowship and promoting dialogue. It is the "trade-centre" where agreement on urgent fundamental issues is made possible. It is the "loud hailer" through which common convictions may be articulated. It can claim no higher role than that of servant and auxiliary yet in this role it is indispensable for the witness of the churches.

So far as the ecumenical movement is concerned, the primary task of the World Alliance is an *internal* one. It must help the Reformed churches to welcome the suggestions and impulses resulting from participation in the ecumenical movement. The role of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has sometimes been defined in different terms, of course: it existed, it was asserted, to remind the Reformed churches and others of the Reformed confessions, Reformed doctrine, the Reformed order and Reformed spirituality to ensure that this heritage was respected in the ecumenical movement and maintained in all its purity. It may be said, for example, that the aim of the World Alliance is to secure the endorsement of the "basic doctrines" of the Reformed churches in the ecumenical movement. Undoubtedly there will be circumstances in which the World Alliance *also* has to do that. But it would be a mistake to limit its task to this. The World Alliance would then become the bastion of a Reformed tradition which has hardened into a "confession". Its primary task, on the contrary, is to help the contemporary witness and confession of the Reformed churches and in this way to continue the development of the Reformed tradition in this present time.

The report of the Princeton general council (1954) contains a section which deserves attention in this connection. It states:

"The task of the Alliance is steadily to exhort the Reformed churches to have recourse to the Holy Scriptures; and then, if a renewed study of the Scriptures, pursued in common with brethren (and sisters) from other confessions, should disclose aspects of truth not yet apprehended, to be ready to accept them. If, on the other hand, the Reformed churches should become persuaded, through such a study of the Holy Scriptures, of an error in their own doctrinal positions, they should be ready likewise to acknowledge and abandon it."

There could hardly be a clearer statement of the principle of fundamental openness in the ecumenical movement. The only question is how the Reformed churches are to translate this principle into practice. By what

road is this common insight implemented? The general council limits itself to generalities in this connection:

"(The Alliance) *may* be the means of facilitating the continuous joint study and clarification of our basic doctrinal positions in the light of Scriptures."

But the Princeton general council leaves us in the dark as to how this clarification can be achieved; it seems, indeed, to be starting from the premise that this clarification will somehow emerge, automatically so to speak, by means of some mysterious self-regulation.

In fact, however, clarification can only be achieved by mutual discussion and joint consultation. Only as they are prepared to face and wrestle *together* with the questions calling for an answer today, will the Reformed churches be able to carry through the further development of their own tradition which is required of them. Perhaps the most important *internal* task to be performed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in respect of the ecumenical movement is the strengthening of conciliar practice among the Reformed churches themselves.

The task of the Reformed churches also has an *outward* thrust, however. Dialogue and cooperation with other churches cannot and should not be postponed, for example, until the Reformed churches have completed their own renewal. Just as renewal is the prerequisite of constructive participation in the ecumenical movement, so dialogue and cooperation are the prerequisite of relevant work within the Reformed family. Inner and outer are indissolubly connected. It is the task of the World Alliance, therefore, to intensify contacts with other churches. The purpose of such contacts is twofold: on the one hand, they are meant to help to strengthen the common witness of all the churches at the world level; on the other hand, they are meant to make it easier for the individual Reformed churches to carry out their commitment in the ecumenical movement.

Can this task of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in relation to other churches and to the ecumenical movement be described in greater detail? To answer this question, we need to look at three main areas:

- The World Council of Churches
- Dialogue with other church traditions
- Contemporary developments and movements

The World Council of Churches

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches recognizes its special solidarity with the World Council of Churches. Not only did it encourage its members from the very beginning to join the World Council; it has also repeatedly encouraged them to cooperate actively in its work. The concept which underlies the World Council of Churches is particularly close to the Reformed view of the ecumenical way: churches of different traditions unite to form a fellowship in order, on the one hand, to overcome divisive differences by a continuing discussion, but also, on the other hand, in order to already bear common witness. They associate together under the banner of the mission which has been entrusted to them by Jesus Christ, God and Saviour. They try to discern the new horizons towards which it is God's will to guide his people. By their common endeavour, they try to make clear what obedience to his word means today. It is their hope that, in precisely this way, the divisive differences which they have brought into this fellowship will appear in a new light and the way to unity be opened up to them.

Even today, this concept of the ecumenical movement seems to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches the most promising way forward for that movement. It therefore makes support of the World Council of Churches a priority in its commitment.

It would be wrong, of course, to ignore the difficulties which have arisen over the years. These are connected mainly with the fact that the way to unity is proving to be more strewn with hindrances than was originally thought to be the case. Inspiring the creation of the World Council of Churches was the hope that this association would gradually bring the churches closer to mutual recognition. The Council was thought of as a temporary instrument. It was to help the still divided churches so that they could achieve complete fellowship. It now appears that this hope was not a realistic one. Although the churches have come very much closer to one another, they are still, evidently, far off the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement. The differences between them continue to exist. Indeed, the complexity of the situation has been intensified still more by the addition of other traditions. It is becoming more and more apparent that the task for which the World Council of Churches was created will still take some considerable time.

Let me spell that out. On the one hand, the attitude of the member churches towards the World Council of Churches is changing. The longer the way takes, the harder it becomes to endure the contradiction inherent in the ecumenical movement. On the one hand, the member churches are *still* divided churches; on the other hand, they *already* live in the fellowship represented by the World Council of Churches. When its resolution seems promised within a measurable distance of time, this tension presents no insuperable difficulties. But what if this resolution becomes remote? The churches are then compelled to resign themselves to the tension as a "provisional permanency".

On the other hand, the danger arises that the World Council of Churches, instead of being an instrument of transition, becomes an institution with its own momentum. Because its history is prolonged, it begins to develop a dynamic of its own. Instead of bringing the churches together, it becomes one more authority alongside them.

In face of this twofold danger, there will not be any fundamental change in the attitude of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to the World Council of Churches. But the question arises all the more insistently: how this new situation is to be handled. On the one hand, the World Alliance will have to devote itself even more intensively to what we have earlier described as its "domestic" task among its own member churches. For the unresolved tension between the condition of being "no longer divided" and that of being "not yet united" can only be to some extent overcome by a deliberate conciliar process of renewal among the Reformed churches.

On the other hand, the World Alliance will have to pursue and accompany the work of the World Council of Churches more actively. For it to retreat from the World Council would be no solution at all. On the contrary, it is up to the World Alliance to stimulate the ecumenical movement from its own resources of understanding and to contribute to the strengthening of the fellowship in the World Council of Churches.

Dialogue with other church traditions

Official dialogues have been conducted by the World Alliance of Reformed

Churches with a number of other churches in recent decades. What is the significance of these discussions? What are their implications for the Reformed churches?

Dialogues are meant in the first place simply to provide an opportunity for the churches to become really acquainted with each other. Who are they? Where lie the differences which divide them from one another in practice and in truth? However strongly convinced that they already know the answers to these questions, they are constantly surprised to discover how many things they did not know. In the second place, dialogues should help the churches to discover common ground and to re-examine their differences in the light of this common ground. Dialogues can also, thirdly, pave the way for concrete steps bringing the churches closer together.

What is important in all phases of the dialogue is that the partners keep in view the present condition of the churches. It is certainly their task to clear up the controversies of the past. But if the dialogue is not to be no more than a merely theological exercise, the churches cannot rest content with that but must also turn their attention to the present form of the doctrine and witness of the churches. For, in the last analysis, what is required is that the churches should draw closer together in the form in which they now teach and live. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches will always urge that, in these dialogues, the present relations between the churches should also be on the agenda for discussion.

While all the dialogues have the same general goal in view, each dialogue nevertheless has a special character of its own. The expectations cannot be the same in each case, and it is important that the partners should be clear from the outset as to the concrete goal which can and should be achieved through the particular discussion. In some cases, the goal will simply be better mutual acquaintance. In other cases, the object may be to achieve a partial agreement on certain clearly defined questions. But it is also possible for the goal to be more ambitious. The dialogue can be initiated with a view to taking a definite step towards unity; finally, it can also be distinguished by the hope of achieving eucharistic fellowship or even a union between the churches concerned. The nature and the agenda of the dialogue will necessarily differ in accordance with the goal established for it.

In the light of this, what can be said of the dialogues conducted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches?

The churches of the Reformation

Obviously, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches must assign priority to the dialogue with the churches which cherish the heritage of the Reformation. The bond between the Reformed churches and other churches of the Reformation is particularly strong and intimate. Because of their common roots in the Reformation, they share with these churches many assumptions and convictions even when these may have been obscured beneath a deep layer of special developments and misunderstandings in the course of a history of division and estrangement. Unity with these churches must therefore be possible. Here and there, this unity has also actually been achieved, at least partly. We think here of the church fellowship between Reformed and Lutheran churches in Europe, and of the emergence of united churches with the participation of Reformed churches, Anglicans, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and Methodists. The goal which all the dialogues of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches with these churches must in principle serve is the mutual acceptance in

eucharistic fellowship by the churches of the Reformation in the nearest possible future, and in certain countries, even the formation of united churches. The individual dialogues, of course, are at different stages and it may well be that the goal with individual partners has to be framed more cautiously. But, as far as its own hope and expectation are concerned, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches will leave it in no possible doubt that it is very strongly in favour of the unity of the Reformation churches.

The focus here will be on all traditions deriving from the Reformation. The following dialogues call for mention in this connection, therefore:

The Lutheran World Federation: Reformed-Lutheran talks have a long and complex history. In a number of places they have recently been resumed and with partial success. Most of the European churches have affirmed church fellowship among themselves by the endorsement of the Leuenberg Agreement; a new round of talks has begun in the United States; Reformed and Lutheran churches in Indonesia are considering a closer union between themselves and other evangelical churches. Discussions at the level of the world communions must be developed on the basis of these contacts.

The Anglican Communion: Reformed and Anglican churches in many countries have been for many years engaged in union negotiations. The question inevitably arises, therefore, of the consequences of the successes and failures of these discussions at national level for the two families as a whole. A first round of discussions at world level has already taken place and it remains to be seen what further steps can be planned on the basis of the results of this initial dialogue. A similar question arises in respect of the World Methodist Council. Here, however, official contacts are still only just beginning.

The Baptist World Alliance: Theologically there are many close affinities between Reformed and Baptist churches. Official relations, however, have been much less developed than those with the other Reformation traditions. Although in a few countries Reformed and Baptist churches are now members of the same united church, in most countries they live in relative independence of one another. A round of official conversations at the level of the two world bodies ended in 1982 and it remains to be seen whether it will result in deepened fellowship. In the context of these talks the question of relations with the Mennonites also arose. Considering the long history with its weight of injustice, the Reformed churches have every reason to seek this dialogue and to develop fellowship with the Mennonites.

The Churches of Christ (Disciples): On historical grounds alone there would be sufficiently urgent grounds for closer relations between the two traditions: the Disciples of Christ movement came into being as a result of controversy with the Presbyterian church. But the World Alliance of Reformed Churches needs to enter into official discussions, above all, because the two traditions have in recent times united to form united churches in a number of countries.

United churches

From what I have already said, it will be clear that united churches represent a special challenge for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In many countries, Reformed churches have joined with other churches to form united churches. What are we to make of this fact? Does it mean that these Reformed churches are no longer Reformed? Or is there also a legitimate place in the Reformed tradition for united churches? The World

Alliance leaves no room for doubt on this score. It is expressly stated in the constitution that united churches can be members of the World Alliance. Today there are fifteen such member churches.

The challenge is twofold. The very existence of united churches compels the World Alliance to give special attention to the traditions with which Reformed churches have been able to unite to form united churches. What individual Reformed churches have already been able to achieve in their own immediate context, the Alliance must seek to emulate at the world level. It must do all it can to ensure that these Reformed churches are not isolated by their step into fuller unity. The priority assigned by the World Alliance to the dialogue with the Reformation churches implies pressing forward at the same time with the effort to achieve fellowship at all levels.

At the same time, however, the united churches pose an internal "domestic" question. The advance into unity always amounts to something in the nature of a new confession. A church which previously believed itself obliged to confess its faith in separation is now enabled by intensive discussions to confess its faith together with other churches. It therefore poses a question to *all* Reformed churches: "How far are you, too, in a position to take this step?"

This question demands an answer even if the other Reformed churches in their own countries are not confronted with the same partners. For the advance into this new confession introduces a fresh element into the Reformed tradition, one which all Reformed churches must come to terms with.

The evangelicals

Is there not, however, another task to be mentioned here? Is it not also essential for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to seek dialogue with the evangelicals?

This question is inescapable, for hardly any other division represents so radical a challenge as this to the common witness of the Reformation churches today.

The Reformed churches have every reason to come to terms with the evangelical movement. It is undeniable that the movement has many roots in the Reformed tradition. To some extent it originated in this tradition and the question for the Reformed churches, therefore, is what they can contribute to the achievement of a creative relationship to evangelical and "fundamentalist" circles.

There are considerable difficulties. The evangelical movement has neither a uniform orientation nor a clearly defined shape. It is to be found within the Reformed churches as well as without. The dialogue here, therefore, will differ from other dialogues and have to acquire a shape of its own.

The Orthodox Church

Relations between the Reformed churches and the Orthodox churches have a character all their own: they do not share a "common history of separation". It was only through the ecumenical movement of this century that they became real partners. Yet a careful study would show that the contacts between the two traditions have been much more frequent than has generally been assumed. But certainly it is only in recent times that the pressure to enter into dialogue has emerged. Reformed and Orthodox

churches meet one another regularly within the World Council of Churches and have in several countries entered into an official dialogue. There are ample reasons, therefore, why the World Alliance of Reformed Churches should seek dialogue with the Orthodox Church. Today, of course, it is still only at the stage of preliminary discussions.

The Roman Catholic Church

Both historical considerations and the present situation lend special significance to the encounter and dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. The relationship between the two traditions since the Reformation has been marked by conflicts and controversies. For centuries they have lived in separate camps. Readiness for dialogue has broken down the barriers and made it possible for both churches to re-examine their mutual relationship. The very fact that the division is so profoundly rooted in the consciousness of both churches means that every clarification of differences and misunderstandings has especially far-reaching consequences for the self-understanding on both sides. In almost every country the two traditions live side by side and are confronted with questions as to how they can together bear witness in the world today. Urgent as this dialogue is, its goal cannot nevertheless be set too high. It would be foolish to talk already of union today. It must be the aim of the dialogue, rather, to bring the two traditions closer to one another, to demonstrate common perspectives, to formulate the critical questions which they have to ask each other and to lay the foundation for a common witness in the world today. A first round of talks between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Vatican Unity Secretariat was already held in the years 1970-1977. They will be continued in the coming years.

Contemporary developments and movements

The dialogues already mentioned were all concerned with divisions which arose in the past. Are there not, however, contemporary developments and movements to which the church must pay attention? History does not stand still. Every generation is confronted with new horizons and therefore with new questions. People come forward with new insights and new answers and the controversies thus provoked almost always contain within them the seeds of fresh divisions. The strange situation can then arise that while the churches strive to overcome the divisions inherited from the past, unity is endangered by new divisions.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches, therefore, if it is really to promote the unity of the church, must also come to terms with the movements which have emerged for the first time in this century and which continue to grow. Its interest cannot be confined to churches which have already become confessional traditions, therefore, but must be extended to groups which claim today to proclaim the gospel in a more authentic way. Many examples could be cited: for example, the Pentecostal movement, the charismatic movement, the independent churches in Africa, the uniting churches, the movements which take their bearings from eastern religions, etc. etc. What are these groups saying? How far is God speaking to his church through them? To what extent are they distortions which must also be unmasked as such?

In this case, dialogue is an instrument which enables the church on the one hand to discover new gifts of the Spirit, and on the other hand to recognize dangers before they have had time to take effect.

Note

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