



## I will be your God

### You shall be my people

#### Lukas Vischer (1986)

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- "Covenant" in the ecumenical movement
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In early 1983 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches issued a statement to its member churches to form a "covenant for peace and justice", and a few months later the World Council of Churches urged the churches to engage "in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation." Three years have passed since these proposals were made. They have been discussed here and there but so far neither the Alliance nor the World Council of Churches has succeeded in going beyond the stage of preliminary reflections and considerations. In what follows I will attempt to clarify the proposal and its implications for the life of the churches.

A covenant! At first sight the meaning of the call seems quite obvious. In view of the serious dangers to which humanity is exposed today the churches should seek to establish a liberating and healing community transcending not only the confessional lines but also the dividing barriers of wealth, race, gender and national self-sufficiency. The term "covenant" is appealing because it suggests a new quality of fellowship. Churches living in covenant will not be satisfied with new declarations. They will seek to embody the commitment in their common life. As a covenanted people they may be able to face up to the full range of today's challenges - justice, peace and the integrity of creation and avoid succumbing to the temptation of playing one task against the other. As a covenanted people they may succeed in respecting the priorities each church has to opt for in its own context and nevertheless form, in one common commitment, a universal fellowship. The idea of a new pact, of a "*pia conspiratio*" between the churches may therefore have a mobilizing effect.

But is this all? I think there is need to explore the concept more thoroughly. What is the deepest meaning of the term? Is it preserved in the current usage of the word?

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#### ● The usage of the term "covenant" in the ecumenical movement

When the word "covenant" is used today, it immediately conjures up the picture of a coalition based on human initiative. People who have hitherto lived independently of one another join together for mutual assistance or

to achieve agreed objectives. It is significant that the word can today be used in the verbal form "to covenant", an even clearer indication that in current usage the active subject of the covenant is the human being.

Used in this sense of a pact initiated by human beings the term has, from the very beginning, played an important role in the ecumenical movement. Again and again the call was heard: Let Christians at long last overcome the barriers of their separate confessions and establish an alliance or covenant with one another! At first, the favoured term was "alliance" or "league": from the "Holy Alliance" or "Holy League" down to the "Evangelical Alliance" or to the World "Alliance" of the Presbyterian Churches. Later on, the preference was for the term "federation" (from the Latin "*foedus*"): from the World Student Christian "Federation", to the "Federal" Council of Churches in the United States and the Lutheran World "Federation". More recently the term "covenant" has come to the forefront. But the underlying idea in all these different terms was that of "coalition" or "pact".

Another interesting point is that the term "covenant" has come to be used increasingly in the ecumenical movement to denote a provisional and still incomplete unity. Churches unable (or not yet able) to achieve complete union should at least, it was argued, enter into a "covenant" with one another. In other words, the "covenant" is a loose form of unity, a preliminary and provisional stage on the way to full church unity.

The call for a covenant for justice, peace and the integrity of creation obviously connects up with this earlier history of the term "covenant" in the ecumenical movement. What is called for is a new "pact" between the churches.

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### ● "Covenant" in Holy Scripture

The usage of the term in the Bible is different. Covenant (*berith*) means there primarily an initiative taken by God. It means a unilateral promise and commitment on God's part in respect of a third party. The idea of a contract or pact between equal partners is not implied in the term. This has been made even clearer by recent scholarship (Lothar Perlitt, Ernst Kutsch). It used to be said that *berith* applied in the first instance to contracts and agreements among human beings and was then applied by way of analogy to describe the relationship between God and his people. Recent studies have shown that *berith* means a commitment entered into by one partner in favour of another or, again, an obligation imposed on a partner. The verbs connected with *berith* make that clear: a covenant is "cut" not "concluded". It is not a case of mistranslation, therefore, when the word is translated in the Septuagint and later in the New Testament by the Greek *diatheke* (and not *svntheke*), or by the Latin *testamentum*. A covenant is, in the first instance, a unilateral declaration. There is no Old Testament basis, therefore, for asserting that God and his people together establish a covenant. On the contrary, the covenant is established by God and the people have to govern themselves and their life accordingly. They are privileged to live in God's presence, permitted to put their trust in God, and summoned to "keep" the *berith*.

Where does this take us? If this is the meaning of *berith*, can any connection be established at all between what the Bible says about covenant and the proposal that the churches should unite in a "covenant for justice, peace and the integrity of creation"? As I see it, the connection exists and I regard vitally important that it be made explicit. I would even go so far as to suggest that the proposed covenant for justice, peace and

the integrity of creation only makes sense against the background of the biblical affirmations concerning the covenant.

Why? Because only against this background is the proposal more than merely a summons. The hope which sustains the church rests on the assurance that God has the world in his hands. It rests on the unilateral commitment into which God has entered in respect of his creation and not on any powers of resistance supposedly native to Christians. A summons may indeed set many things in motion. A movement may be started which may achieve certain changes. But the inadequacy of the vision by which it is guided will soon become plain. God's plans are always greater than the programs, strategies and organizations conceived by man.

It was in the 7th century BC that the idea of the covenant acquired its essential character. We need to recall the situation in which Israel found itself at that time. The northern kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. All that remained of Israel was the tiny southern kingdom with its capital Jerusalem. Its situation was extremely precarious. Would it be able to maintain its independence in the midst of the clash between the "super-powers" of that day? Or would it inevitably be crushed between them? It is easy to see why the recollection of God's covenant became so important in such a situation: God's promise remains unshaken even in a time of uncertainty and insecurity: the land will not be lost. It was probably refugees from the northern kingdom who focused attention on the idea of the covenant. This idea became so important that it furnished the spiritual basis, not long afterwards, for the "*rinascimento*" under King Josiah. He seemed to be called to re-establish the kingdom of David in all its completeness.

As we know, the dream did not come true. Josiah's plan failed and he himself was killed in battle. A few decades later the southern kingdom, too, succumbed to the onslaught of the Babylonian Empire. Astonishingly enough, confidence in God's covenant survived even these disasters. Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed the renewal of the covenant: God's promise has not been cancelled. God will forgive Israel and write his law in its heart in such a way that it can no longer desert him. This covenant, too, rests wholly and completely on God's initiative. Once Jerusalem, the holy city, had fallen, Israel was less than ever qualified to come forward as God's partner. To say "new covenant" was almost tantamount to saying a "new creation"!

The statements in the New Testament are tied to this Old Testament tradition. With the coming of Christ, the new covenant is fulfilled and developed; God's kingdom, which dawns where he is present is the condition which Jeremiah had announced in his promise. Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, this condition is brought before our eyes and proclaimed to the whole world: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

Is not this promise of the *berith* supremely relevant for our generation? The proposal of a covenant for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is made in a time of extreme uncertainty and insecurity. There is nothing to suggest that peace can be achieved, justice established, or the integrity of the creation preserved. If the significance of the covenant depended on the successful achievement of these goals, a paralysing sense of impotence would surely grip our hearts. But, because it rests on God's fidelity throughout all the disasters and upheavals of the ages, we obtain the freedom to devote ourselves with a certain serenity to the tasks of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The first task God sets his people by his covenant initiative, indeed, perhaps the only task, is to attest and

celebrate his faithfulness.

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## ● "You shall be my people"

True as it undoubtedly is that the *berith* exists only because of God's initiative, this covenant necessarily has implications for the life of God's people. In promising his own fidelity, God also gives to his people the shape and form which accords with his will. The people can become visible as his people only when both the private life of every individual and also the common ordering of society reflects his presence. At certain places in the Old Testament, therefore, the word "covenant" is used almost as an equivalent for the word "law". Something of this is reflected in the phrase "to keep the covenant".

But what about the church, the people composed of representatives of all the nations on the basis of the message of Jesus to the Jewish nation? Is it also the case that the people, too, must become visible as a community which operates as a social factor in human history and not simply as a spiritual force? It can be argued (and has again and again been argued) that, with the coming of Jesus, the place of the individual people of Israel has been taken by a community of faith and internal spiritual life. When this view is adopted, the Old Testament directives for the ordering of individual and social life, especially the latter, have logically to be either spiritualized or else regarded as null and void. The Reformed tradition has always registered its protest against this spiritualizing tendency. Hardly any other confession has emphasized as strongly as it has the continuity and even identity between the Old and New Covenants. "I will be your God: you shall be my people." God's dictum - the "covenant formula" as it is often called by exegetes - also applies to the church. It is to be a visible sign of God's gracious initiative and presence. The God of the covenant is at all times the God of a socially tangible and visible people. The difference between the Old and the New Covenants is not that, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the relationship between God and humanity begins to unfold within the privacy of the human heart but rather that the presence of God in the community of the people becomes even more direct and transparent. But what does it mean to say that the church is to be a sign of God's *berith*? Let me suggest four aspects of this vocation:

### **The church as universal community**

The first aspect has already been hinted at: God's people is a community which crosses the boundaries of the Jewish people. With the coming of Christ the covenant embraces all human beings. It has become even less adequate than it always had been to speak of a covenant "concluded" by God. It would be much more adequate to speak of God "opening" his covenant in Christ to all human beings. A line which is already becoming visible in the Old Testament comes to its fulfilment in Christ. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and the attendant miracle of a common hearing and understanding in different languages are a proleptic sign that a community has come into existence which is no longer tied to any ethnic, linguistic or national boundaries. The church must prove itself to be a universal community. The churches have a duty to unite across the boundaries of the nations not only because, as we are sometimes arguing, the world has become smaller, or because the course of history has led to a greater mingling of the human race and this raises more and more problems at the international level. On the contrary, the church is designed from the very beginning to constitute a community which extends "to the ends of the earth". The universality of the church was already given in and

with the gospel.

This truth, of course, has far-reaching consequences. Indeed, it seems to me that it demands a real conversion on the part of the churches and their individual members. For this truth surely means that no church can simply belong to the nation in which it lives and witnesses. To be sure, every Christian lives in a particular context; every Christian is a citizen of a particular country. But because every Christian is at the same time, or rather, primarily, first and foremost, a member of the community of Christ which crosses the boundaries, membership in one's own nation can never become an ultimate bond. Every church must regard itself as part of the whole. Every church must be ready to judge its situation in the light of its membership of the whole. But would anyone want to claim that the churches today live with this vision and outlook?

The covenant inaugurated by Christ demands of the churches a steady witness against every retreat within national or ethnic boundaries. When God's covenant is our basis, our attention must be directed primarily to the common life of the nations. We must put the common interests before the interests of our own country. This means, for example, that we must oppose any theory or practice in which "national security" is a key idea or even the basis of political action. But is not the exact opposite expected of the churches? Is not the role assigned to them that of serving as a religious symbol of national or local interests? And are not the churches constantly tempted actually to perform this role "in the interest of solidarity with the nation"?

Careful reflection on this point is required of the Reformed churches in particular. For the effects of the idea of the covenant in the Reformed tradition have all too frequently been negative in this respect. Again and again, the idea of the covenant has been misused to legitimize particular interests. It was all too easy for the conviction that God has made a covenant with this or that people to persuade nations or particular groups to claim a special messianic mission in the history of humanity. Even when the mission was first interpreted in terms of a special responsibility and service, it could very quickly be transformed into a sense of superiority. The sense of a messianic calling can assume destructive and even pathological features and then it can turn into a threat to the common life of the nations. The Puritan idea of the covenant, for example, was undoubtedly one of the historical roots of the contemporary self-portrait of the United States. The irrational way in which conservative religious circles in the United States make use of biblical phraseology in speaking of the special role of their country is too dangerous a perversion to be dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders and an intellectual smile. It is in contradiction to God's *berith* in Christ and must therefore be denounced as a heresy. And would anyone want to deny that one of the factors which has contributed to a religious legitimation of apartheid has been a distorted view of God's covenant? More subtle though substantially similar processes have taken place in other countries. It would be worthwhile, for example, to examine the influence of the idea of covenant on the outlook of the Swiss "Confederation". Even though it may not talk much of a special mission, it does like to think of itself as a *Sonderfall*, as something unique in the orchestra of nations!

The Reformed churches have some experiences, therefore, of the aberrations to which the idea of the covenant can lead. Once bitten, twice shy! In the light of these historical experiences, would it not be advisable perhaps to avoid using the idea altogether? To my mind, however, the lesson to be drawn from these historical experiences is the opposite. They make it all the more important to remember the real significance of this

covenant idea. Rightly understood, God's covenant is the basis for the struggle against the forms of particularism which undermine community among nations. God's covenant constrains the churches to stand together and to support one another. Under the sign of the covenant a community which paves the way for the community of nations can and should become a visible reality.

### **Church as priesthood of all believers**

The community which the idea of the covenant aims at achieving is one in which every member participates with his or her gifts. "I will be your God; you shall be my people!" Underlying this dictum is the conviction that God himself wills to rule over his people. He is the sole authority and no authority is to come between him and his people. It is his will to be present and to work himself in every member. Every member, therefore, is in principle of equal significance and equally important.

In the Old Testament, indeed, we find two strands side by side. On the one hand, it is frequently emphasized that the relationship God chooses to have with his people is one which excludes the sovereignty of human beings over others. For example, the people want Gideon to become their king: "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson!" But Gideon replies: "I will not rule over you ...; the Lord will rule over you!" (Judges 8:22f.).

On the other hand, there is the undeniable fact that Israel was ruled by kings. The downfall of the monarchy was seen as a disaster and the future restoration of the nation was linked to the hope of a restored monarchy with a king like David and from the house of David. Reference is made to a covenant which the Lord made with David, one which would never be abolished (2 Chr 21.7; Jer 33.21). His throne would last for ever. Monarchy seems to be presented here as a legitimate structure or institution given by God.

With the passage of time, however, the former of these two strands prevails over the latter. The covenant inaugurated by Christ brings into being a community in which God ruled through Christ and all members participate in equal terms. The covenant with David is fulfilled in Christ. "He [the son of Mary] will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk 1.32-33). He is David's heir.

The spirit is poured out and a community comes into existence in which the members with their gifts are united by the Spirit. "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:17). By its very texture, God's *berith* envisages the participation of the whole people. Every member is a priest and contributes his or her gifts. The order which the church gives herself, therefore, must be one which makes possible the maximum possible participation in the community's life and decisions. From the very beginning, God's covenant has an anti-hierarchical bias.

This tendency, too, must have its analogy in society. By the very nature of its own order, the church is a sort of sign of participation. It must champion participation; it must champion a communicative, transparent and participatory society; it must oppose all forms of coercive repression and tyranny. The witness of the church in society necessarily assumes a non-violent subversive character whenever the concentration of power limits participation to the few or eliminates it altogether.

This tendency inherent in the *berith* is radicalized still further by the fact that God in Christ takes the part of the victims. He is always with the victims of violence. The church is a sign of participation not only in the sense of an egalitarian order, therefore, but also a sign of participation in the sense of liberation. Fetters must be struck *off*, the hungry must be fed, the prisoners must be released. Nowhere is the unilateral commitment of God more graphically described than in Mary's Magnificat: "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has cast down the mighty from their seats; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away" (Luke 1 :52). The God of the covenant is creating, indeed in Christ has already created, an order in which the victims of history come into their own. "And will not God vindicate his elect who cry to him day and night?.. I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily" (Luke 18:7-8). The people of the covenant have their place among human beings, therefore, where the God of the covenant sets the movement going, namely, with the victims, with the oppressed, with the tortured, with those who for whatever reason no longer have a say in anything.

### **Church in community with creation**

"You shall be my people!" God's unilateral commitment is primarily to the people he has chosen. This commitment comes to expression in the calling of individuals he needs as partners: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and David. Every further step in the history of God's grace always has the people as a whole in view.

But the *berith* also reaches out beyond humanity. God's unilateral initiative and commitment embraces the whole creation. God turns his attention to all the living beings he has created. Indeed, what is at stake in this covenant is the relationship between human beings and living creatures. The prophet Hosea reports the promise of God that he will protect human beings from the wild animals; he will set limits to the animals in the interest of human beings (Hos 2.18). More important still is the covenant established by God in favour of Noah and his children as well as with "living things that are with you" , forever. The commitment undertaken by God embraces not only human beings but also all God's creatures.

The faith that God embraces all creatures in his covenant is a relatively late development in Israel's history. It is, so to speak, a final corollary from the idea of the covenant. As a result of the editing of the Old Testament, however, the story of the covenant with Noah and with all living creatures took on a significance which did not belong to it originally. The story was placed at the beginning of the series of unilateral commitments entered into by God, according to the Old Testament witness. The gracious promise to all living beings thereby becomes the premise and basis of the promise to the people of Israel. The God of the covenant is the Creator who does not abandon the work of his hands. However profoundly God commits himself to the history of Israel and humankind as a whole, never for a moment does he lose sight of his creation, the living beings alongside them. The goal envisaged in the covenant is the harmonious relationship between human beings and creation.

But this relationship is far from being a matter of course. Human beings have the power and freedom to destroy it. Immediately before the story of the covenant with Noah we find the frightening statement: "The fear of you [Noah and his sons] and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered" (Gen. 9:2). The whole tension of our situation is epitomized in these words. God

pleads for his creatures. His will is that not only their life but also the rhythm established for them in the creation should be preserved. But humanity can distort the relationship of partnership with creation into one of oppression and tyranny.

But God constantly puts humanity in its proper place, reminding us that he remains the Creator and will therefore defend the rights of his creatures. However much humanity can tyrannize over nature, limits have been set to its domination and these have to be respected. Nowhere is God's concern for the creation more strongly expressed than in the regulations about the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year. The land is to be left fallow and allowed to take a rest at regular intervals.

In this context of humanity's harmonious relationship with creation the question of human freedom arises unmistakably. It is clear that God's unilateral commitment to humanity is matched by a definite view of human freedom. God calls human beings into relationship with himself. The freedom for which we are destined is nothing else than this relationship in communion with him. The freedom of the covenant is equivalent with love. God's will is that humanity should develop its full potential. But this development consists in becoming open for God and for other human beings. It also consists in becoming sensitive towards creatures and their rights.

When freedom is severed from the background and comes to be understood primarily as self-determination and self-realization, however, it inevitably leads to inordinate ambition and the transgression of the boundaries established by God. It then carries within it, too, the seeds of self-destruction and, since humanity is bound up in the bundle of life with the "living beings which are alongside" it, we drag the creation down with us into this self-destruction. In a credal confession presented recently to a meeting of the Swiss Evangelical Synod, it is, in my opinion, rightly stated: "We confess our guilt. We have made ourselves the measure of creation and forgotten God's love towards *all* that he has made." The church, therefore, is also called to be a sign of true freedom. It must reflect something of the indissoluble bond between freedom and communion. It should reflect something of the joy and fulfilment of this bond. It is to be a sign of liberation as well as a sign of freedom. Just as it takes the side of the oppressed and refuses to accept that "sacrifices are inevitable", so must it also take up the struggle against the mistaken idea of freedom understood as mere independence. The struggle for liberation and the struggle against a freedom which has become an ideology of self-realization - these are basically two sides of one and the same coin. The destruction of the environment which is becoming so apparent in the present generation has also made apparent the danger of this ideology.

### **A covenant for justice, peace and the integrity of creation**

From the foregoing reflections it should be clear in what sense it is possible in my view to speak of a covenant *for* justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The phrase "a covenant *for* ..." does not mean that the World Council of Churches and its member churches are launching a new initiative and seeking to mobilize the support of the "infantry" in the congregations for their plans and strategies. God's *berith*, God's unilateral commitment, is the source and fount of the commitment required today.

This means, however, that these three commitments - for justice, for peace, for the integrity of creation - are part of the church's confession of faith. It is impossible for us today to know and confess the God of the covenant who has graciously turned towards us in Christ without at the

same time making these three commitments. They are not open options to be discussed and considered in endless dialogues. They are to be regarded as presuppositions and starting point.

It is impossible to confess the God of the covenant without a clear repudiation of armaments, nuclear weapons in particular. The churches must be able to demonstrate that the defence sought through armaments is ultimately an illusion. In this context, the words of the prophet Isaiah are remarkably up to date: "Because you have said: 'We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement. When the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us'" (Isa 28.15). Isaiah is using the term "covenant" ironically here. What he is really saying is: "Instead of trusting in God's unilateral commitment, you imagine you have imposed on death and the realm of death an obligation not to destroy you. But you are only deceiving yourselves!"

It is also impossible to confess the God of the covenant without at the same time committing ourselves to the service and support of the oppressed people of our world: those who are being pushed down to the underside of human history. It is on the cross and in the resurrection of Christ that the real nature of the covenant entered into by God becomes plain: where else is his name to be confessed, then, if not where human beings call upon him in their poverty and abandonment?

Nor, finally, can the God of the covenant be confessed without a new respect for the bounds set for humanity in its relationship to God's creation. The recognition of the Creator as the true measure of creation has always been there but today more than ever it is part of the confession of faith which the churches have to make. To quote once again the credal statement presented recently to the Swiss Evangelical Synod: "We believe in God the Creator. To him alone we owe all life. Apart from him, there is none who can create life and call into being again the life that has been destroyed."

Let me turn back once more to the beginning. What does it mean to invite the divided churches to remember God's *berith* and to enter into a covenant for justice, peace and the integrity of creation? As we have seen, the term "covenant" has acquired a special connotation in the current language of the ecumenical movement: it denotes a form of unity which the divided churches can produce without yet entering into the full communion which would correspond to the will of Christ. But is this usage of the term warranted? Does it stand the test of the Scripture witness? "I will be your God, and you shall be my people!" It is with this promise and this summons that we are confronted whenever there is talk of covenant. If a covenant for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is proposed, therefore, what is involved is surely more than just a preliminary step on the road to unity. When the churches allow themselves to be imbued with God's promise and call, they *are* his people, and the proposal of a covenant for justice, peace and the integrity of creation only makes sense when the churches actually do allow themselves to be imbued with God's promise and call. Is not the recollection of God's unilateral commitment, therefore, as it were, a pressing invitation to come together at the table of the Lord and allow ourselves to be stirred anew by the words: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood?"