



Living in and under God's covenant

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● The invitation

"Called to witness to the gospel today". That was the title of the study launched by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches at its general council in Ottawa seven years ago.¹ Some of you will still recall the genesis of this project. Throughout the Ottawa meeting a special group worked to draft a small study booklet to be addressed to the member churches. It was meant as an invitation. It was intended to encourage the member churches in their mission of witnessing to the gospel and its relevance to the present situation in their respective settings. Underlying this project was the conviction that the *raison d'être* of the Reformed churches lies in their concern to confess their faith *today*. "What does it mean to be Reformed?" To answer this question, it is not enough to focus on the past and to enumerate certain convictions and characteristics of the Reformed churches. This question can really be answered only when, on the basis of Holy Scripture and in dialogue with the witnesses of all the centuries, the Reformed churches seek to bring out the significance of the gospel for *today*. The church is a pilgrim people. Certainly the source of salvation by which it lives remains one and the same in all ages; but its service as witness is one which must be performed anew in every age. The study "Called to witness to the gospel today" was meant as a small contribution to help the member churches along this common way. Its sub-title described it as "an invitation..." and its introduction spoke of the challenge to the churches "to engage in a common adventure". And the study was precisely that. Instead of starting from a precise definition of the Reformed tradition, it called the Reformed churches to undertake a journey together, a journey which promised the possibility of new discoveries.

What came out of it? The project was not a resounding success. The proposal was too new and, coming from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, too unexpected to be adopted at once by a large number of the member churches. But to a certain extent the project undoubtedly achieved its purpose. The booklet was translated into a considerable number of languages and reached a wide audience. It led to meetings and

discussions, occasionally even across the frontiers between Reformed churches divided from each other today. Some of the responses are good illustrations of the way Reformed churches are bearing witness today. In some cases the booklet also occasioned a certain embarrassment and the responses spoke not so much of the confession of the faith as of the obstacles preventing a clear witness today. They lament the spiritual infirmity preventing the church from advancing boldly. In short, in the course of the last seven years, the study became something of a mirror reflecting the present condition of the Reformed churches.

The experience shows that a project of this kind will be urgently required also in the future. If they are to perform their mission, the Reformed churches need to keep in close and constant contact with each other on the question of their common witness. They know that the confession of faith must constantly be reformulated. They know that the fresh answers required of each of them cannot be dictated to them, so to speak, from above, by some superior court of the church but can only emerge from the first-hand experience of the individual churches. Communication among the churches is therefore indispensable. Certainly their representatives meet in general council every seven years or so, as we are doing now, but is that really enough to ensure that we are continuing to wrestle with the real issues *together*? The question is almost rhetorical: clearly the Reformed churches need a more intensive rhythm of exchange and consensus concerning their common witness and it is vital that here in Seoul we should give some thought to ways and means of making this possible. A project along similar lines to the study "Called to Witness to the gospel Today" could prove helpful and even decisive in this respect.

● The hour of conversion

The urgency of such a project is intensified by the present situation confronting the churches. Now more than ever they are challenged to bear clear and unambiguous witness. The present situation is clearly such as to countenance less and less any irresolute "wait and see" attitude on the part of the churches. It is certainly not by mere chance that the biblical word *kairos* has become so current in recent years. Not so very long ago this word was part of that esoteric vocabulary intelligible only to theologians. Now it is on everyone's lips and occasionally even finds its way into the daily press. What does it mean? The *kairos* is the hour of conversion appointed by God, a moment, but more than just a moment in the chronological flow of time; the *kairos* is the hour in which God's summons comes to us, the moment of God's initiative and offer, God's invitation which we can either seize with both hands or else, at our cost, let slip by untaken. The first example that comes to mind in this connection, of course, is the South African Kairos Document in which a group of committed Christians seek to grasp and point to God's summons to repentance and conversion in the special situation of *apartheid* with all its implications for the church and its witness. Meanwhile a similar attempt has been made in Central America, and I know of groups in other parts of the world who set themselves the same task. Everywhere we find the same recognition that the moment of decision has arrived and that the church, if it is to acquire authority and overcome ambiguity in its proclamation and action, needs an "exodus" from its involuntary or voluntary houses of bondage.

How are we to explain this concordance? Certainly not simply in terms of the individual situations each of which in its intensity represents separately a *kairos* for the church in question. The sense of an inescapable call of God in so many places at one and the same time is, on the contrary, a token of

the fact that for us all a new time has dawned, a time which differs profoundly in character from earlier times. I am thinking here of the fact that humanity as a whole today is exposed to mortal dangers. Its very survival is at risk. I forbear itemizing once more the grounds which make this conclusion inescapable; they have already been rehearsed often enough. The transgression of God-given limits by many generations, above all in the western world and western civilization, is now bearing its bitter fruits. The wages of sin, says the Bible, are death. It is becoming ever clearer today that this death is not just at the level of the spiritual but is literally true both for the individual human being and for humanity as a whole. Earlier we could still take it for granted that, despite the destructive consequences of sins committed, God's mercy would again and again grant us a fresh start. Today we are being forced to question whether we still have any right to count on this grace. Take war, for example: At the end of the Thirty Years War, Paul Gerhardt formulated in one of his great hymns the following prayer: "After so much blood has flowed, let the streams of Thy grace, O Lord, flow once more..." Shall we still be able to pray this prayer after a nuclear war? Will it then be a case, as it was for Gerhardt's generation, of an event which, though it certainly meant untold suffering for countless human beings, could in the end, so far as its consequences were concerned, be absorbed and left behind? Or will we thereby have brought judgment on ourselves? Whatever estimate we may make of the degree of the various dangers we risk provoking, it is certainly the case that we are now confronted in a quite new way with the consequences of human (and, I repeat, chiefly western) transgression. Humanity has become a fellowship of survival. Disaster has drawn so palpably close that the choices we make and the decisions we take acquire a new dimension and quality because of their implicit consequences. God's call to repentance and conversion is meant for us all, therefore. The *kairos* is not for individual situations only but is universal and all-embracing.

● **God's covenant**

In such times as these, what can we say? If I am not mistaken, the message of God's covenant has in recent years assumed a new importance. It has always had an important place in the Reformed tradition, of course. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has itself focused special attention on it. I am thinking here of the study conducted on this theme in the years prior to the Ottawa general council. Since Ottawa, however, interest in the covenant has deepened. Reference should be made here to the summons to a "covenant for peace and justice" issued by the executive committee immediately following the Ottawa general council (Spring 1983),² and the recent publication *Covenanting for Peace and Justice*.³

Why is this message of God's covenant so important in the present *kairos*? The answer is that it reminds us of God's faithfulness to God's covenant primarily means a self-commitment on God's part. God allows us to rely on his love. God is and remains committed to humanity, indeed, to the whole creation. God seeks their salvation by entering into communication with them. Again and again, the covenant is renewed in new forms and expressions: with Noah and all creation, with Abraham, with Moses, with the people of Israel, with David. And in Jesus Christ, the promise extends to the whole of humanity. It becomes clear that, in love, God had always envisaged the salvation of humanity, indeed, of the whole of creation. Despite all the abysses into which human history may lead, God remains the God who seeks fellowship with the creation, ie, humanity and everything which constitutes humanity's environment. We are privileged,

moreover, to witness to this faithfulness before the world.

One possible misunderstanding must be cleared out of the way at once here. Though God makes us partners in the covenant, God remains its sole subject. God is and remains the source of this fellowship. The covenant never becomes a matter of human initiative. But is this not the impression which is given again and again today? Rise and let us enter into a covenant together for justice, peace and the integrity of creation! As if it were merely a matter of recruiting as many people as possible under this banner! As if God's plan for the future could be reduced to human strategy! Even the Alliance itself contributed to this misunderstanding by its call after Ottawa. But what an impoverishment it would be if we were ourselves at the centre of the covenant! Surely the liberating power or the message of God's covenant lies precisely in our no longer needing to "preach ourselves" (2 Cor 4.5) but in being able to bear witness that God is at work despite all our failures.

God makes us partners by taking us *into* the covenant and enabling us to live *under* his promise. In much the same way as Mary we are enabled to see something of the order which God will establish and already establishes here and now at least in signs: the hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent empty away, the mighty are cast down from their thrones and the humble and meek exalted. Creatures whose dignity and rights are trampled under foot are raised again to life. It may not yet be apparent that God stands on the side of those who are the victims of power and violence. It may not yet be apparent that God will not abandon any part of creation. Yet, however much the forces of injustice, destruction and death may seem to have the upper hand, God's covenant of love and peace is even stronger. The foundations of this new world have already been laid by God's raising to new life the crucified Jesus, the victim of human power and violence. The fulfilment of human life lies in bearing witness to this now still hidden order of resurrection. Bearing witness to God's covenant means opposing the forces of death even though they seem to have everything, even the future, going for them. We are called to live in and under God's covenant. What does this mean concretely for the Reformed churches today? On the basis of our experiences in recent years, let me try to answer that question in five specific points:

● **In and under God's covenant, a fellowship of confessing churches**

The response of the churches to God's covenant consists, firstly, in their confessing the great things the Lord has done. The task which awaits every church, each in its own place and the churches all together, is to be clear and to make clear to those around it what the gospel is and means. How is the church to speak and act, therefore, so that something of the radiance of God's covenant may shine out from within it? This question confronts the church at every level of its life.

According to good Reformed tradition, every individual church is responsible for its confession of faith. In contrast to other confessional traditions, Reformed churches have never produced a common confession which was then declared to be binding on them all. What is to be said about the gospel is to be said by each church in the place where it lives. This tradition has also been adhered to in recent years. Since the Ottawa general council, a whole series of Reformed churches have produced new statements of faith or issued new confessional declarations. To give just one or two examples: the Belhar Confession of the Sending Kerk in South Africa, the confession of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, the declaration

on church and state by the Presbyterian Church of Japan, the confession of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. There is much to be said in favour of this emphasis on the individual context. The church's confession of faith can never be produced in a vacuum. The real meaning of the gospel only becomes clear as we wrestle with the realities of a specific situation. No church, therefore, can evade the question of what the gospel means in the concrete constellation of principalities and powers in whose midst it is set. The diversity of confessions of faith is an enrichment which should not be underestimated.

But is that all there is to be said? Is the gospel already adequately expressed in this diversity of individual confession of faith? Or is it not also essential that the Reformed churches should speak and act together today? If it is in fact the case that the *kairos* is universal and all-embracing today, it is hardly open to doubt that the witness of the Reformed churches can no longer be made exclusively in the multiplicity of specific contexts but must also be borne more and more by the Reformed churches *together*. Karl Barth was one of the Reformed theologians who pleaded passionately for the traditional Reformed emphasis on the contextual confession and witness. In an article which achieved fame, he declared over sixty years ago, that the production of a common Reformed confession of faith was "neither possible nor desirable."⁴ He strongly warned the World Alliance of Reformed Churches against any temptation to move in this direction. But Barth also pointed out that times could change. In his view, a historical situation could arise in which the Reformed churches would have no other choice but to speak as one. As I see it, precisely such a situation has arrived today. In face of the all-embracing dangers confronting the world, the Reformed churches must bear witness together to God's covenant.

Again we ask, what does that mean? Is a common Reformed confession of faith to see the light of day after all these centuries of managing without one? Any attempt to produce such a common confession would probably end up in the same impasse as previous attempts. The real task is for the Reformed churches to seek agreement on those items and affirmations which cannot be left out of any of our individual confessions today. Not a supreme confession of faith which would render our individual confessions superfluous but rather a deliberate effort to ensure that what must be confessed together can find its place *within* the multiplicity of the individual confessions. The Reformed churches must become increasingly a fellowship or communion of confessing churches.

In other words, in greater measure than hitherto they must be ready to listen to one another and to recognize their obligation to verify their confession of faith in the fellowship with other churches, to understand their confession of faith as one string of an instrument, a string which to be sure has its own distinctive sound but which must be attuned to the other strings so as to bring out their harmony. Every church must examine which statements of another church are possibly of universal significance and should therefore have a place in its own confession of faith, too. Take the example of the position of women in the church. The demand that the basic equality of women and men must find expression in the life and witness of the church cannot be limited to certain situations only. It has universal validity and must therefore leave its clear imprint on the language, contents and thrust of each individual confession of faith.

● **In and under God's covenant, a fellowship of missionary churches**

Confessing churches are always missionary churches. Certainly, the immediate aim of the confession must be to help members of a church themselves to be clear about the gospel. At the same time, however, the confession is also aimed at those outside. "You will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judaea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth." The fact that the church has been commissioned to witness to God's everlasting covenant to all human beings could not possibly be more clearly stated than it is in this promise to the disciples at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (1.8). It is easy to misunderstand this formulation, of course. It suggests that the church's missionary task is fulfilled by the outward journey, beginning in Jerusalem and leading by a series of successive steps to "the ends of the earth". This idea of the missionary task still predominates in wide circles of the church even today. In fact, however, it has long become largely obsolete. The missionary journey to the ends of the earth *has* already taken place. Churches have come into existence in all parts of the world. These churches in their turn are confronted with the same promise and the same mission; "You will bear witness to me". Mission today is no longer the movement from a centre towards the "periphery". Mission is the common witness of the many churches which are scattered over the face of the earth.

What does this mean for the Reformed churches today? How do we become this fellowship of missionary churches? The first condition is that we should simply take cognizance of each other's existence and situation. Today, there are Reformed churches in almost every country in the world. The fact that they are spread in this way throughout the whole world constitutes a considerable potential for the missionary endeavour. Again and again, however, we find that many Reformed Christians have only a very incomplete picture of the Reformed family. You will all have received a copy of the brochure containing a call to mutual intercession with a view to this general council. I am sure that, like me, you too were surprised to find in how many countries of this world, Reformed churches are bearing their witness!

What can be done to deepen our mutual knowledge and to develop the network of relationships between the Reformed churches? In my view, this is a question we need to reflect on here in Seoul. At present the flow of communication between the Reformed churches is in channels which are far too narrow. It continues to be limited too exclusively to "mother and daughter churches". The Reformed family is not one *single* network but is made up of a number of different "sub-networks" of relationships historically determined by the course of the missionary movement. But if we are to become a *fellowship* of missionary churches, we must break out from these limits. Each church must be able to see itself as part of a whole.

The second condition is that we work at a common understanding of our missionary task. For clearly the Reformed churches are not of one mind on this today. The differences which emerged clearly once again at the international conferences in San Antonio and Manila are also recognizable in their midst. These differences threaten to lead to polarizations which not only hamper the missionary task but also in some cases call in question the unity of the church. But is it really inevitable that they should do so? Are the differences, as long as they are wrestled with on the basis of the witness of Scripture, really as irreconcilable as they are sometimes made out to be? The message of God's covenant could, in many respects, turn out to be the very thing we need in order to come closer to reconciling answers. Differences can sometimes prove to be simply the two faces of one and the same coin. Take for example the need for individual conversion so frequently emphasized and recalled in evangelical circles. God's covenant does indeed have this personal aspect. Genuine liberation

is only possible on the basis of individual conversion to God. God's covenant embraces both the intimate life of the individual human being and the public realm. God heals the individual and makes it possible for a new solidarity to grow and deepen in the most personal of relationships, between husband and wife, in the family, between the generations, between neighbours, between those whom daily life has turned into enemies. At the same time, however, God wants us to be committed to the cause of justice. The specificity of God's covenant is precisely that it addresses all spheres of life. Why then should we allow to be thus torn asunder what God has joined together?

● **In and under God's covenant, a fellowship committed to justice, peace and the integrity of creation**

In recent years, these three terms - justice, peace, the integrity of creation - have acquired ever increasing importance. It was not by chance that they were welded together in a single formula. They indicate the three fronts on which the churches' witness is put to the test today. The churches are called to witness to God's covenant in face of an injustice which claims its victims in ever-growing numbers, in face of the destructive need for security which makes peace ever more precarious, in face of the systematic exploitation of nature which irretrievably destroys the life created by God. Together they constitute a single whole. The idea behind the formula is not that the churches should be in a position to bring into existence a just and peaceful world in which the rights of every creature are respected. The World Council of Churches' proposal that the churches should commit themselves ecumenically across all confessional barriers "in conciliar process of mutual commitment for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation" rests on no such illusion. It is to be understood, rather, as a cry of alarm and a warning. Survival is in danger. In this situation how are the churches to be witnesses of life?

What contribution can they make to keep the potential damages within bounds? Above all, in this time of survival, how can they become a force for and a source of mutual solidarity? As I said earlier, humanity has become a fellowship of survival. But is it really a fellowship of survival? Alas, the more the threats accumulate and intensify, the more ruthlessness too increases. If only we survive! What continues to surprise me is the degree of cynicism and indifference in what is said about the endangerment to "others" in so many "scientific" scenarios of the future. "The love in many will grow cold", said Jesus prophetically to his disciples (Mt 24.12). The conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is to be understood as a resistance movement: love must remain and increase!

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches not only took part in initiating the World Council of Churches' project but has also from the outset borne encouraged and promoted it. It is important, therefore, that here in Seoul we should reflect together on our future participation in this project.

I would like here to draw attention to one aspect which could well be increasingly important in the future: the relationship between church and state. For it is surely a striking fact that in many countries the witness of the church leads to conflicts or at least to tensions with the state, or, more precisely, with the powers which carry political weight. We could give many examples here. For instance, think of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan with its demand that the people be given the right to determine itself the future of its country. Or think of the churches of this country which, often in conflict with official strategies, support the reunification of Korea. Or

again, think of the countries where conflicts have erupted over the reception of refugees; of the witness of many individual groups who prefer to violate official regulations rather than leave expelled refugees to an uncertain future. Think of the situation in South Africa, steadily worsening, and prompting many to ask how far the present government can still claim legitimacy. What are we to make of this accumulation of conflicts? Each has its own profile and calls for individual scrutiny. Together, however, they also confront us with the general question of how the relationship of church and state is to be viewed today. For the sake of an ordered common life, the authority of the state must be affirmed. But how much obedience is required of the church and when does the obligation to civil disobedience begin? These questions confront us all the more urgently today when the commitment of the churches for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is likely to increase still further the number of conflicts with the state, particularly where this commitment is consistently kept. God's covenant is addressed directly to the whole of humanity. In and under God's covenant, therefore, the churches of the individual countries are left with no other choice than to understand themselves increasingly as a universal fellowship and to measure the authority of a national State by the degree to which it serves justice, common security and the integrity of creation for all. The threats to which humanity is now exposed makes national sovereignty even more relative than it in any case already was.

● **In and under God's covenant, a fellowship of living communication**

A fellowship of confessing churches, a fellowship of missionary churches, a fellowship of solidarity among the churches - three times in succession we have spoken of fellowship. But do the Reformed churches today really constitute a fellowship? Any impartial observer would, I fear, soon reach the conclusion that this is not the case. The Reformed churches today are deeply divided. Although the family is spread throughout the whole world, there are only a few countries where Reformed Christians form one united church.

The Reformed churches have played an active part in the ecumenical movement and still do so today. Some of their representatives are in the vanguard of the movement for church unity. A large number of Reformed churches are members of the World Council of Churches and make an essential contribution to its witness. In recent years, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has also cultivated ecumenical contacts intensively. It has conducted a whole series of dialogues: with Anglicans, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Lutherans, Mennonites and Methodists, with the Roman Catholic Church and more recently with the Orthodox Church of the east. The findings of these dialogues have for the most part been published and it will be one of the tasks of this general council to draw the necessary conclusions and to decide what further steps can and should be envisaged.

But what is the point of all these ecumenical efforts when the Reformed churches pay so little attention to fellowship among themselves? It is true that the question has from time to time been discussed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. More than once it has urged that there should not be more than one Reformed church in anyone country. This has hardly halted the tendency towards new divisions, however. In the course of time, division has become so deeply rooted a characteristic of the Reformed family that it is hardly any longer felt to be in contradiction to the message of Christ and is even occasionally justified and defended by all sorts of threadbare arguments. But the commitment to the ecumenical movement can only be credible if it is accompanied by a concentrated

effort to develop fellowship among ourselves. Indeed, all reflections on confessing the faith, mission and solidarity remain abstractions if not supported by a fellowship of living mutual communication.

The answer to an often recurring objection may here be anticipated right away. When we speak of unity, we should not think of uniformity but of fellowship and exchange. Unity is the opposite not of diversity but of rupture or non-existence of communication. Unity does not presuppose agreement in all things; all it requires is sufficient agreement in the understanding of the gospel to permit churches to pray together, consult one another and make joint decisions. It would be an illusion, however, to imagine that such fellowship will always emerge automatically when it is required. If it is to exist, live and grow, it needs constant cultivation. Part of our response to God's covenant, therefore, will be to work at our fellowship; the commitment to make regular exchange and communication among the Reformed churches a living reality

What will be the contribution of the Seoul general council to halting the tendency to division? Even more, to the awakening of the forces which promote fellowship, to an ever increasing number of Reformed Christians making commitment for unity their personal task, to the revival today of the passion for unity so characteristic of the Reformers, not least of John Calvin? Calvin once wrote that he was prepared to cross ten seas for the sake of unity.⁵ Most of us here have crossed seas to come to this general council; but have we crossed them also for the sake of unity or, better still, for the sake of a living communication among the Reformed churches?

● **In and under God's covenant, a fellowship of praise**

Finally, God's covenant is also an invitation to praise the name of the Lord, to give God thanks that we are permitted to exist in this world in God's presence, to celebrate the promise of God's salvation before the whole world.

In the study booklet *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today* an attempt is made to summarize in a few pages what the gospel is ultimately about. This is what it says: "The message of Jesus Christ is the good news of God's love. God sets us free. Despite our disobedience God does not abandon us to destruction and death... As we trust Jesus Christ in faith and live in communion with God's Spirit we discover that we have been forgiven and can live a life in thankfulness and praise." It is important constantly to set this confession of God's grace and forgiveness right at the beginning. We need reminding that we depend on forgiveness before God and our fellow human beings. No truth is so difficult to hold on to, no truth vanishes so quickly. Scarcely have we become aware of our helplessness that we are again overtaken by the desire to take charge of our lives. And yet we know in our heart of hearts that we shall be thrown back again and again on the cry "*Kyrie eleison! Lord, have mercy!*" Today as perhaps never before we are coming to realize how little the consequences of our actions, even our best-intentioned actions, are in our own hands. How much that we once thought in good faith that we had to do turns out today to have been a false track. Even the division of the church has its grounds, perhaps the most profound of them being our failure to utter with sufficient clarity before God and our fellow human beings this confession of God's grace and forgiveness, but insist instead on our own wisdom and strategies.

A fellowship of praise - in other words, a fellowship of worship. It is vitally important that we assign the dimension of worship its due place in the life

of the church. For is there any better way of maintaining the confession of God's grace than in worship? Where, if not in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, will it become more evident to us from what wellspring we derive our life? Worship is, so to speak, the entrance to the Christian life. As a rule, the Reformed churches are rather reticent in this respect. They tend to regard worship as an occasion for mutual or even unilateral instruction. They have an inhibition about common celebration. In the last analysis, however, is there any witness more genuine than to celebrate a feast to the Lord? In praising God's name, we become, perhaps, a little more free to witness to God's covenant in this world.

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Notes

1. *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today*, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches no 1, (Geneva: WARC, 1983).
2. *Reformed World* vol.37 no.6 (June 1983), pp.179-182.
3. Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches no.13 (Geneva: WARC, 1989)
4. "Wunscharbeit und Möglichkeit eines allgemeinen reformierten Glaubensbekenntnisses", *Gesammelte Vorträge II* (München: 1928), pp.76-105.
5. Letter to Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, April 1552.