

# The Accra Confession as a response to empire

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The Accra Confession was formulated and adopted by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana, in 2004. This article traces the historical development of the Accra Confession and its continued impact on the present. It aims to show the confession as a Reformed response to 'empire'. The article explores the content, debates and challenges the Accra Confession offers to the notion of empire.

## Introduction

The history of Christianity is completely intertwined with the history of various empires. The life of Jesus Christ and his death on the Cross are shaped by the context of the Roman Empire, as are the theology of the apostle Paul and the ecumenical councils of the 4th and 5th centuries. The global spread of Christianity as a result of the great missionary enterprises of the 16th to 19th centuries cannot be comprehended apart from the history of the colonial empires of early colonialism (Spain and Portugal) and later colonialism (especially Great Britain) – in short: Christianity cannot be understood apart from empire (Van den Bosch 2009:648).

Colonialism has been essentially linked with mission in Africa. Missionaries have been seen as playing a major role in undermining the life and culture of indigenous tribes in order to make them victims of easy conquest. Most missionaries were certainly victims of their time and they definitely promoted Western culture, imperialism and civilisation. There have been many reactions against imperialism that can be found in the resistance of some missionaries, the formation of the African-initiated churches, churches and ecumenical movements. This article does not attempt to delve into these because they have been well covered from a research point of view (see Pillay 2002). The aim of this article is to examine new approaches challenging empire. It specifically looks at the Accra Confession as a resistance to empire.

In 2004 the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) adopted the Accra Confession, based on the theological conviction that the economic and environmental injustices in the global economy require Reformed Christians to respond as a matter of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It offers a critique of empire and calls on churches to 'covenant for justice in the economy and the earth' (see Accra Confession 2005:1). This research attempts to show how the Accra Confession is a major response from Reformed churches against empire, which has its roots in the West, especially through the work of the early missionaries. The article explores how the Accra Confession has been received and its significance for Africa in resisting empire. It also offers suggestions as to how the confession should be implemented in the African context.

## History of the Accra Confession

The Accra Confession did not emerge from a vacuum or somewhat immediately. It is the product of a long process (21 years), which also indicates the WARC's historical stance against empire. In this section I will attempt to show this development, which led to the adoption of the Accra Confession in 2004.

The WARC has a long history of involvement in issues concerning economic justice. Since the late 1970s WARC has focused strongly on the concept of covenant. It is in this understanding that it engaged the broader sense of economic justice in particular. According to Gollwitzer (in Kraus 1979:268), 'the community living in the covenant of God is a group which lives a transformed life and radiates change.' Ellul (in Kraus 1979:268) describes the covenant as a treaty of allegiance and argues that these social and ethical principles are to be sought and found afresh again and again 'on the way'. Economic justice is perceived as a precondition to a secure, viable, humane order in society (Brueggemann 2001:109–112; 2008:99–109).

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The WARC Executive Committee meeting in August 1981 worked on a draft study on issues such as the catholicity of the church, confession and the act of confessing, worship, power and wealth, racism and the theological basis of human rights. At the Ottawa General Council in 1982 (WARC 1982a), the WARC called on its member churches to bear witness in a world where powers and principalities are constantly defying the purpose of God and the lordship of Christ. The following ways in which churches could do so were suggested:

- responsible participation in the power structures of the world with the aim of making them more human and more just
- an alternative witness in the life of the church but on behalf of society as a whole, which refers to a simpler Christian lifestyle that goes against consumerism and greed
- expressing obedience to God by taking political responsibility through active resistance to unjust power structures.

It is thus not surprising that soon after the 22nd General Council in Seoul, the WARC turned its attention to global economic injustice in the context of Christian faith (WARC 1982b). In 1983, the WARC issued a statement to its member churches to form a 'covenant for peace and justice'. Many study documents, declarations and Bible studies were subsequently devoted to economic injustice as an issue of faith. This was part of the WARC project 'Reformed Faith and Economic Justice'. In August 1992, in Wellington, New Zealand, the Executive Committee drafted a letter to WARC member churches, which read as follows:

We want to listen to the laments, the prophetic critique, the commandments and the visionary expressions of hope for the hopeless in the Bible. We want to turn to the sources of our faith in order to resist the temptation to accept a status quo which is unbearable for many and unsustainable for all in the long run. (WARC 1992)

It was understood that Christians from all over the world had a different understanding of economic justice. With this in mind, the Executive Committee of the WARC at its meeting in Pittsburgh in 1994, adopted a programme of regional conferences in Manila in the Philippines (March 1995), Kitwe in Zambia (October 1995) and San Jose in Costa Rica (May 1996).<sup>1</sup> In Manila the focus was on the cry of the people and discussions centred on the process of growth, the increasing power financial capital and the media as an important instrument of the market. In Kitwe the focus was on the systemic impoverishment of Africa, social injustice, peace and suffering of the masses. Here the Belhar Confession was brought into dialogue with what was happening in the world, and it was felt that the unjust economic system had gone beyond an ethical problem to a theological one. Several proposals were adopted in Kitwe that called on member churches to bring good news to the impoverished masses of Africa and to promote alternative economic practices, guided by the needs of human beings and respect for nature.

1. For more on this, see Rust (2009:2–6).

At the Costa Rica conference, attention was given to globalisation and the lack of access to the capital and technology needed for integral development, the misuse of the gospel by great powers to support political and economic domination and external debt. An international consultation took place in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1996 to conduct an evaluation of the regional consultations. The consultation declared that the affirmation of life, commitment to resistance against injustice and the struggle for transformation are an inseparable part of Reformed faith and confession today.

The real impact of the consultations was to be seen at the 23rd General Council of the WARC in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1997. Among the discussions, and in response to the Kitwe consultation, the question was raised whether or not it was possible to declare a *status confessionis* regarding economic injustice, especially with regard to the exclusion of Africa from the market mechanism. Unfortunately, the council came short of such a decision and instead called for a committed process of recognition, education, confession and action regarding economic injustice and the destruction of the Earth. This *Processus Confessionis* was also referred to as '[c]ovenanting for justice in the economy and earth.' Further, the council in Debrecen called on WARC member churches:

[T]o work towards the formulation of a confession of their beliefs about economic life which would express justice in the whole household of God and reflect priority for the poor and support an ecologically sustainable future. (Opocensky 1997:199)

With this goal in mind, further consultations took place in Bangkok (November 1999), Cape Town (March 2001), Budapest (June 2001), Soesterberg, Netherlands (June 2002) and Buenos Aires, Argentina (April 2003). These consultations indicated the commitment of the WARC to address matters of economic injustice and provided the groundwork material for the adoption of the Accra Confession in Ghana, in 2004.

## The Accra Confession

At the 24th General Council of the WARC in Ghana, from 30 July to 12 August 2004, more than 400 delegates met to worship, study the Bible, deliberate on urgent issues facing God's world and participate in the rich life of local churches in Ghana (Letter from Accra, p. 1). The delegates also went on a visit to Elmina and Cape Coast, two 'castles' on the Coast of Ghana that held those who had been captured into slavery, as they suffered in dungeons waiting for slave ships that would take them to unknown lands and destinies. Over the centuries, 15 million African slaves were transported to the Americas, and millions more were captured and died (Letter from Accra, p.1). As the delegates were told the stories and conditions of the slaves they wondered how Reformed Christians could turn a blind eye to the realities of the slaves right below the place where they had worshipped, noting that this went on for more than two centuries in that place. It is without doubt that this experience prompted the delegates to shape, form and craft the eventual Accra Confession but this was not without challenge, disagreements and struggle, as Chris Ferguson, the current General Secretary of the World Communion of

Reformed Churches (WCRC), recalled in an interview I had with him in Ghana (13 May 2015).

Though not a doctrinal confession like the Heidelberg Catechism or Westminster Confession, the Accra Confession challenges current economic doctrines with the traditional Reformed criticism of idols (i.e. Mammon, consumerism, the financial and speculative markets) that deny God's life-giving sovereignty and defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of Creation from the fullness of life. In essence the Accra Confession (2005) is a response and resistance to empire. The confession defines 'empire' as:

[T]he convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks for the purpose of amassing political power and economic wealth. Empire typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful. The Bible is full of stories of empire rising, over-extending, and falling. Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts culture, subordinates nation states, and marginalizes or co-opts religious communities.

In the body of the text, the confession does a reading of the signs of the times. It points out that 'we live in a scandalous world that denies God's call to life for all' (Accra Confession 2005:point 7). It refers to the debt of poor countries, the drive for profit of transnational corporations, climate change, crisis caused by the development of neoliberal economic globalisation and an ideology that claims to be without alternative (Accra Confession 2005:point 9). The confession attributes these challenges to empire:

We recognise the enormity and complexity of the situation. We do not seek simple answers. As seekers of truth and justice and looking through the eyes of powerless and suffering people, we see that the current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral economic system defended by empire. (Accra Confession 2005:point 10)

The confession then moves to a section titled 'Confession of faith in the face of economic injustice & ecological destruction'. In this section from paragraphs 14 to 36 it offers a theological response to empire. It states that:

[W]e believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and therefore we confess before God and one another. (para.15)

The confession then proceeds to clearly set out what it believes and, in light of that, what it rejects. The 'reject' aspects are, in my opinion, strong resistance to empire from a theological and biblical perspective. I shall illustrate this by citing a few of these paragraphs.

17. We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that all might have life in fullness (Jn 10:10). Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world.

18. We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' (Ps 24:1).

19. Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political and military empire that subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule.

20. We believe that God has made a covenant with all of creation (Gen 9:8–12). God has brought into being an earth community based on the vision of justice and peace. The covenant is a gift of grace that is not for sale in the market place (Is 55:1). It is an economy of grace for the household of all of creation. Jesus shows that this is an inclusive covenant in which the poor and marginalized are preferential partners and calls us to put justice for the 'least of these' (Mt 25:40) at the centre of the community of life. All creation is blessed and included in this covenant (Hos 2:18ff.).

21. Therefore we reject the culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the neoliberal global market system or any other system which claims there is no alternative.

22. We believe that any economy of the household of life given to us by God's covenant to sustain life is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are called to choose God over Mammon and that confessing our faith is an act of obedience.

23. Therefore we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation.

24. We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused (Ps 146:7–9). God calls for just relationships with all creation.

25. Therefore we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching which justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

26. We believe that God calls us to stand with those who are victims of injustice. We know what the Lord requires of us: to do justice, love kindness, and walk in God's way (Mic 6:8). We are called to stand against any form of injustice in the economy and the destruction of the environment, 'so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Am 5:24).

27. Therefore we reject any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations – gender, race, class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature.

28. We believe that God calls us to hear the cries of the poor and the groaning of creation and to follow the public mission

of Jesus Christ who came so that all may have life and have it in fullness (Jn 10:10). Jesus brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry; he frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind (Luk 4:18); he supports and protects the downtrodden, the stranger, the orphans and the widows.

All of these paragraphs from the Accra Confession are a clear indication of a reaction and resistance to empire. It is a call for the church and Christians to follow in the way of Christ. It is a reminder that Christians should not sit comfortably in the grip of empire but in all respects and ways to walk in the path of Jesus Christ, who himself resisted the empire of his day.

## Responses to the Accra Confession

The responses to the Accra Confession can be captured in three distinct themes: the understanding of empire, whether it is a confession or declaration, and the relationship of unity and justice. I shall now briefly explore these themes.

### What is empire?

The responses to the Accra Confession were varied. The Reformed Churches in Germany (RCG) questioned what was meant by the term 'empire'. As Wasserloos-Strunk (2010) states:

[E]mpire is a topic that has constantly fuelled, inspired and sometimes unfortunately stifled discussion since Accra – it has been discussed in many settings, from different standpoints, and with great enthusiasm, sometimes even bordering on aggression. (pp. 69–79)

Allan Boesak (2014:55) observed that 'the Accra Confession's identification of empire and a global imperial reality caused great tension among the churches.'

The fact that global structures have been termed 'empire' has often been understood as an accusation levelled at the European churches of being part of the imperial machinery themselves. They sense that their way of being a church of Jesus Christ within the area of 'empire' is being questioned (Ostendorp 2010). In this tense and difficult situation the Reformed Church in Germany and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) decided to conduct a joint project known as the 'Globalisation Project' (see Boesak et al. 2005:2) in which the 'Declaration of Accra' was not questioned but was taken as a starting point. The dialogue with URCSA, a church not far removed from the experiences of apartheid South Africa, no doubt, allowed for fresh insight and practical understandings that informed and analysed perspectives on empire. The result was that the Globalisation Project developed an expanded definition of empire that allowed the churches to deal head-on with the realities of empire and the challenges Accra has identified:

We speak of empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today. This is constituted by a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind. An all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of

powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while exploiting creation, imperiously excludes, enslaves and even sacrifices humanity. It is a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed – the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed. It is the colonisation of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit of lacking compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life. (Boesak et al. 2005:2)<sup>2</sup>

In the controversial debates they succeeded in reaching a definition of 'empire' that was acceptable to all. As Bukowski (2010) puts it:

In the end it should be [...] noted that the discussion on the concept of 'Empire' has made a decisive step forward thanks to the successful and consequently ground-breaking theological co-operation of the RCG and the URCSA. Empire is now understood as a theological category, as what Karl Barth described as a 'lordless power'. Empire describes a dangerous and threatening mechanism of reciprocally reinforcing powers and tendencies which in the end leads to an idolization of power and money. Consequently 'Empire' becomes a critical challenge to all rather than a supposedly empirical concept designating a country or economic area. (p. 116)

Bukowski (2010:117) states further that the new definition of empire unfolds its potential for a religious critique in that what appears as a concentration of power is at bottom a false religion: *In this system consumption is proclaimed as a gospel that exploits others.*

It is interesting to note that the collaboration between the URCSA and the RCG led to the formulation of a joint declaration known as 'Dreaming a Different World Together', which is a response to the Accra Confession. However we choose to understand empire it is important to take note of Cuban theologian Ofelia Ortega's (2009) description of empire:

The Empire functions today, as never before, through colonization of subjectivity. It is a complex construction of a colonised subjectivity. This is more than imperial ideology – we are facing an imperial subjectivity – which ends up in suicidal annihilation of the human being, of human freedom, of human judgement, and from a dreadful ecological perspective, of human and natural life on earth [...] Above and against the final word of the empire, the cross, there comes God's truth, Resurrection. It is a beyond, beyond the power of the empire, beyond the ideology of the empire, beyond imperialized subjectivity. (p. 5)

It is fairly apparent that though the tensions surrounding the understanding of empire are far from over, there is a reasonable consensus of what 'empire' means. Perhaps the 2008 economic meltdown also helped strengthen the focus and acceptance of the Accra Confession. However one looks at it, Allan Boesak (2014) sums it up well:

Reading these realities as the signs of the times, the Accra Confession comes to the conclusion that the world – and hence also the Christian church – is once more faced with the challenge of empire. Our reality is an imperial reality. (p. 55)

<sup>2</sup>For a helpful explanation of the definition of 'empire', see Boesak (2014:56–60).

## Confession or declaration?

A huge controversy also emerged on the understanding of a confession. A confession is understood as a statement of faith in a particular context. There were many churches within the WARC that found it difficult to accept the Accra Confession as a confession.

In speaking about the Belhar Confession, which also was difficult for the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa to accept as a confession, Botman (2006:244) identified the justice question as essentially a confessional concern for economic justice. In his interpretation, the justice issue of Belhar is 'a testimony to the liberating activity of God in history.' The confession, according to Botman's understanding, takes the matter of justice beyond the boundaries of the ethical to an affirmation of faith.

In 2010 the WARC and the Reformed Ecumenical Council joined to form the WCRC. One of the major decisions taken at the Uniting General Council in Grand Rapids in 2010 was to affirm the Accra Confession as a key document for the newly-formed WCRC. Since then it is true that the debate on whether it is a confession or declaration has somewhat subsided. For example, the Presbyterian Church (United States of America) accepted it as a confession, as did many other churches across North America and Europe. The Christian Reformed Church in North America accepted it as an 'ecumenical confession', and virtually all the churches in Africa have recognised it as a confession. Is it a matter of concept or content? Whichever term is used, the call to obedience in matters of justice remains unavoidable, and therefore failure to respond would mean jeopardising the very integrity of the gospel (Botha & Maruping 2013). Haase (2009), in explaining the difficulty around the German equivalent for 'confession', *Bekennntnis*, which is used for all aspects of 'confession', nevertheless asserts that the issue is not so much about a confession 'but rather a renewed discussion among all concerned on the best ways to achieve more justice.' It seems that most churches are coming to terms with the use of the words 'empire' and 'confession', although some do not accept the Accra Confession in the formal sense as a confession.

## Unity and justice

In responding to the Accra Confession, another key debate was and is around the question of unity and justice. The main question is whether there can be unity without justice. Former President of the WCRC Jerry Pillay expressed his thoughts about this matter:

The focus of the WCRC is on building communion and justice. This is, indeed, a necessary combination because we cannot build communion without justice and we cannot have justice without working for unity at the same time. Although the WCRC has been saying this all along yet it seems to place these in different camps of emphasis and responsibility. There are some who care more for unity and others more for justice. However, we need to accept both dimensions with equal care and responsibility. (Pillay 2017)

Pillay (2015) also stressed this connectedness between unity and justice in his report in 2015 to the WCRC Executive Committee:

The 2010 General Council met under the theme: '*called to communion, committed to justice*': We have said quite emphatically that we cannot have communion without justice and justice without communion. They are two sides of a coin, two wings of a bird or two blades of a scissor – you need both to work effectively. However, the tendency has been to put more emphasis on communion and less on justice or vice-versa. There are those who are not comfortable talking about justice so they wish to focus more on communion and then there are those who only really wish to speak about justice. In the context of the WCRC, you have to have both. Our communion has great diversity. How do we experience *koinonia*? How do we engage true fellowship, justice, peace and integrity? We are surrounded by inequalities brought about by economics, socio-political standing, geographical setting, etc. The question is: How do we bring these inequalities to the table and how do we address them within the communion because invariably they influence and affect relationships.

It is also heartening to note that in a special WCRC consultation (2015) on communion participants expressed the depth and connectedness of communion and its link with justice. The following statement out of that consultation expresses this well:

Participants shared the conviction that communion is a gift from God. It is the gift of '*koinonia*' that the life of Jesus exemplified. Through this '*koinonia*' or '*communio*' we participate in the body of Christ especially through baptism and the Lord's Supper. This participatory aspect is very essential. We are invited to participate in something [*sic*] that is there already as a gift. It is not us building up something that we then open for ourselves and for others. Communion is first of all experienced in the congregation where we worship. It is also experienced in a wider context when churches of the same confession or crossing the confessional borders come together sharing the full participation into the body of Christ [*sic*]. In that sense, the WCRC seeks to be the body in which the gift of communion is lived out in a manner that provides a forum for the member churches to participate in the body of Christ in full communion. This is expressed by the conviction that the WCRC is '*called to communion*' – the gift of communion leads to a deep commitment to justice. The commitment to justice is the way to live out the communion. The call for justice requires our churches to listen deeply to those who suffer and to act in solidarity with them, even when it is costly to us. In responding to this call, we experience God's gift of communion to us (Statement from the Consultation 2015).

It can be seen from these lengthy quotations where the WCRC has located the debate surrounding unity and justice. The Accra Confession holds these two together in its resistance to empire. The Accra Confession clearly addresses issues of justice in three dimensions: economic, gender and ecological justice (see Lam 2013; Sheerattan-Bisnauth 2008:233–244).

## Ten years after Accra

Since 2004, the Accra Confession has availed many opportunities to gain partners who are walking together, such as the Council for World Mission, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, to name a few, resulting in many initiatives including the New International Financial and Economic Architecture. New faith-based social movements, such as *Oikotree* and *Peace for Life*, and numerous publications have been made possible because of the principles of the Accra Confession. The confession also gives entry points for individuals, churches, NGOs and even governments to engage realities of power, domination, inequality, gender injustice and climate change (2014).

In 2014, the WCRC held regional consultations on the 'decade of the Accra Confession'. A final global consultation took place in Hannover, Germany, in November 2014. It was here established that the need for the Accra Confession and the struggle against empire is evidently more needed today than ever before because the endeavour of empire building is on the increase. Admittedly, it has now taken new forms and given urgency to new matters for consideration. It is thus not surprising that the WCRC consultations on the Accra Confession committed to the following action areas:

- critical reading of scripture and creative resources for congregations to the God of Life
- caste
- climate change
- gender and sexuality
- human trafficking
- immigration and migration
- the New International Financial and Economic Architecture
- racism
- the theology of enough.

All of these not only show the changing faces of empire but demonstrate the growing need to resist empire. It reinforces the stance of the Accra Confession and impresses on all Christians, not just Reformed Christians, to stand up against the forces of empire and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus to resist economic, social and political domination, which is oftentimes embedded in religious coatings, like imperial Christianity.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have stated that Christianity was propagated with colonial and imperialistic tendencies. Christianity, right from the time of Jesus, was embedded in the heart of empire. I have also indicated that there have been Christian movements directly and indirectly opposing empire. This article has essentially focused on the WARC, which is now called the WCRC, and its historical development to the formation of the Accra Confession, which, I believe, is a strong response and resistance to empire. Given the realities in our world today of empire building, the Accra Confession is more relevant and needed currently than it ever was before. This is crucial to the confessing nature of the church in the rise of the growing empire.

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