Reformed Christianity and the Confession of Accra: a conversation about unavoidable questions in the quest for justice

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Abstract

In their quest for justice grounded in the Confession of Accra and, of course, the Confession of Belhar, Reformed churches worldwide – and in South Africa, in particular – will be faced with a set of unavoidable questions. The purpose of this article is to examine/consider some of the unavoidable/inevitable questions that arise among those seeking justice for all, but particularly for those who have been adversely affected by neoliberal capitalism, namely poor people – and the very earth itself. First, can the Confession of Accra be regarded as something that "fell from heaven", or is a proper historical perspective necessary to undertand something of the journey traversed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC)? Second, does it matter whether Accra is regarded as a declaration or a confession? Third, what justice is Accra talking about? What justice was the Kairos Document of South African Christians talking about in the mid-1980s under apartheid? Fourth, are unity and justice like twin sisters, or can they be separated; is there a connection between the two? Fifth, is the search for justice based on Accra sustainable without the search for an ongoing praxis? These questions are presented as unavoidable in the quest for justice and they also highlight the very complex nature of the quest for justice.

Introduction

The establishment of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) as a fusion between the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Grand Rapids, America in June 2010 highlighted the conversation about justice for all. In an article on the front page of the newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), *Die Kerkbode* (July 2010), there was a strong suggestion that although much of the focus at Grand Rapids was on unification, the other very central theme was justice in the sense of worldwide economic justice for all. In an interview with newly elected President Pillay of the WCRC (2010), he conceded that although the main issue for him at Grand Rapids was unity, the interconnectedness of unity and justice could hardly be overemphasised.

The intention of this article is to generate hypotheses, rather than trying to answer questions. In fact, it would be more correct to say that this is an article about generating questions that cannot be avoided in the search for the twin sisters of unity and justice and the location of Reformed Christianity within that search. We can differentiate between questions that are more directed at Reformed Christianity at large and those that are peculiar to Reformed Christians in South Africa. Most of the questions addressed to the Reformed community of South Africa relate to a greater or lesser extent to the unresolved unification of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA).

A very pertinent question for the WCRC is: What is the difference between a declaration and a confession? Does it matter whether we speak of a declaration or a confession – or even a statement, for that matter? Will the incorporation of the Confession of Belhar into the corpus of confessions of URCSA necessarily inculcate greater discipleship? Is the use of the concept "declaration" for Accra a watering down of an important theological document, which could then easily be deemed optional, rather than a serious call from the gospel to create a sustainable community on earth? Another question is whether Accra, Belhar and Debrecen can be considered separately or whether a historical perspective is needed in which all of these are kept together creatively and strategically? For Reformed Christians in the Dutch Reformed family of churches, one of the main questions will be whether, theologically, there is a difference between justice in Belhar and justice in Accra. Maruping (2008) makes the bold statement that it is hardly possible to understand Accra without understanding Belhar regarding the issue of justice. In his narrative on the role of the churches in the search for justice in South Africa, Botman (2006:244) – in a section entitled "Belhar beyond apartheid" – identifies 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". He goes on to say that the poor and oppressed are consequently the primary interlocutors of Belhar. The confession, according to Botman's understanding, takes the matter of justice beyond the boundaries of the ethical to an affirmation of faith.

A further issue is whether there can be unity without justice. And this is certainly an issue that affects not only the unification process between the DRC and URCSA, but is an ongoing matter in the struggle for greater unity in URCSA itself. When considering the discrepancies between the salaries and pensions of ministers in URCSA, it is clear to see where part of the problem lies. Unfortunately, the dividing line in this matter is still between ministers from the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and those from the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). But perhaps an even more difficult question for Reformed Christians in South Africa is the matter of changing from an anthropocentric approach to a life-centred approach, where not only the interests of human beings, but also the sustainability of the whole created universe is taken seriously. A major challenge in South Africa is whether a creative tension can be maintained between working for economic justice for the poor and paying serious attention to a number of ecological questions, to put matters in simple terms. Perhaps the most crucial question to pass the revue in this article is the issue of praxis. To formulate this as a question: Is there an ongoing praxis in Reformed Christianity of working for greater economic justice? Put differently, is there any evidence suggesting that within the Reformed churches worldwide – and in South Africa, in particular – there is a praxis of discipleship that is informed by the Belhar or Accra?

From here, the article proceeds to examine some of the above-mentioned questions in detail. First, is there a difference between a declaration and a confession? The intention is not to launch into a deep, dogmatic discussion of what a confession is or is not, but simply to deal with the feeling or atmosphere created when using the term "declaration" or "confession". Second, is there a need for a historical perspective that brings Belhar and Accra together? Third, what justice is Accra talking about? Is the justice of Accra different from the justice of Belhar, or is Maruping (2008) correct in suggesting that Accra cannot be fully understood without Belhar? Fourth, what is the connection between unity and justice? There are also a number of related questions on this topic. In the article, particular reference is made to the questions that women ask in relation to Accra and the issue of justice. Is unity achievable without justice, or vice versa, or are these two like inseparable twin sisters? Fifth – and this is perhaps more in the form of a proposal than of a question – is the issue of the **praxiological mediation** of Accra. This somewhat pretentious term is used merely to begin to ask pertinent questions about the state of discipleship in the Reformed churches. In other words, have we responded to the call to discipleship mentioned in article 5 of Belhar?

Once again, instead of proposing what is to be done to achieve justice, we have allowed ourselves to be informed by the sources consulted on the unavoidable questions that are raised in the quest for justice as a Reformed communion worldwide and as Reformed churches in South Africa, in particular. If there were to be a thesis for this article, it would simply be that there is a set of questions that cannot be circumvented in the debate on justice for all.

What is in a word: declaration or confession?

Can you have a *processus confessionis* on the basis of a declaration, or do you need a full-blown confession to embark upon such a process?

Do some people find it "less onerous" to be presented with a declaration rather than a confession, as if to suggest that there is no need to take a declaration as seriously as a confession?

Is it a matter of concept or of content? Put differently, isn't the content of both Belhar and Accra theologically so important that, 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?

There is, of course, also simply a semantic problem concerning the word "confession" in different languages. A striking example is given by Haase (2009) with reference to German. Whereas the English language allows for a differentiation between various aspects of "confession", the German equivalent for confession, namely *Bekenntnis,* is used for all aspects of confession. Haase argues that, ultimately, 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" (Haase 2009).

In considering whether to use the term "declaration" or "confession", some historical perspective is important. The debate on justice in the churches and in the ecumenical movement is as old as the hills. Within the WARC there has been concern about the injustices inherent in the global economy since at least the 1980s. Logically and coherently, Rust (2009) puts the involvement of WARC in the battle for worldwide economic justice into historical perspective, showing that the concept of *covenant* emerged within the alliance in the late 1970s. Maruping (2008:19) limits his historical treatment of Accra to the period between the Debrecen and Accra assemblies of WARC, that is, between 1997 and 2004. The debate within the WARC at the turn of the century seems to have been about the greater sense of urgency that was needed to achieve justice; hence the notion of a *processus confessionis* in viewing the justice issue in the context of the global economy. Not only is the system named, but it also poses a threat to human beings and the earth, which is regarded as something about which Reformed Christians cannot differ without seriously jeopardising their Christian faith.

In response to Haase, therefore, the debate on language can quite easily degenerate into a technical cop-out.

What justice is Accra talking about?

A simple comparison between Belhar and Accra on the issue of justice makes for some interesting reading. For Maruping (2008:40), the issue is more than a mere comparison between the two; it is an interpretive relationship where the justice of Accra cannot be understood without the justice of Belhar, and vice versa. A colloquium on the Accra and Belhar confessions at Stony Point in New York in January 2010 to explore complementary elements between Accra and Belhar found that "Accra was seen to address economic realities implicit in Belhar's justice commitment as well as realities of power politics that also threatens the church's unity"

Like Barmen, Belhar "plays it safely" by remaining in the confines of Biblical language – or, to put it differently, in the safe space of Reformed theological jargon. Although Belhar emerged during the 1980s, in the heyday of apartheid, when a state of emergency had been declared, there is no attempt at context analysis in Belhar. Nevertheless, the complete absence of any form of context analysis does not detract from a very profound theological understanding of justice, namely that God is a God of justice and true peace among people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity, God is the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; and that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry, etc. In short, the justice of Belhar – being God's justice – means justice for the poor, in particular.

The analytical mediation, which is absent from Belhar, is found in Accra. In the case of Accra, the justice debate relates to the global economic injustices and ecological destruction. A number of specific issues are highlighted, such as the levels of income in the world; poverty and malnutrition; resource-driven wars; and HIV/AIDS. Accra shows that the injustices and ecological destruction are informed by the policy of unlimited growth, the drive for profit of the transnational corporations, plundering of the earth and severe damage to the environment. The system giving rise to such developments is identified as neoliberal economic globalisation, with its unrestrained competition, consumerism, unlimited economic growth and accumulation of wealth.

In the context of Christian mission, the issue of justice featured strongly at the Athens 2005 conference of the WCC. A distinction was drawn between the different types of justice, ranging from retributive to restorative justice. Although a technical discussion of justice itself would be helpful in illustrating the complexity of the issue, such an exposition would not be particularly functional in the context of this article. In any case, Accra goes beyond a mere technical understanding of justice to an interpretation of justice in socioeconomic and ecological terms. Accra is concerned with what happens to human beings and their living environment in the context of neoliberal capitalism. More than that, the concern is that the issue at stake is not only a political, cultural, economic or ecological matter, but a deeply spiritual question of faith. The question seems to be: How can people who claim to be followers of Christ, people of faith, allow a situation to continue where the lives of human beings and the life of the created universe is being devastated by human behaviour in the form of neoliberal capitalism?

Justice in the Kairos Document

In a remarkable way, the Kairos Document, which was published in 1985, still provides a fairly useful analytical perspective on the issue of justice. In the context of this article, the analysis contained within the Kairos Document is of strategic importance if Reformed Christians are to find an ongoing praxis of seeking justice. It is the kind of praxis that goes beyond occasional prophetic pronouncements, statements and declarations; it manifests as a movement from below, among Reformed Christians on the ground.

The question that reverberates in the Kairos Document is: What kind of justice are we talking about? The charge in the Kairos Document is not that the churches are all failing to address the issue of justice. It even recognises that the calls for justice might be quite genuine and well-meaning. What the Kairos Document does expose, however, is that – at best – it calls for a half-hearted, reformist justice. The document incisively shows that an individualisation and moralisation of the justice question is unhelpful. A simple appeal to the conscience and goodwill of those responsible for the injustice and reliance on individual conversions as a response to the "moralising demands to change the structures of society" would, therefore, not suffice. At the heart of the problem, according to the Kairos Document, lies the tendency to appeal to the top, rather than to the suffering and the oppressed. If the Kairos Document is interpreted correctly, the suggestion seems to be that the strategic imperative is not to appeal so much to the powerful, but for the poor and the oppressed to stand up for their rights and to struggle for justice. In the understanding of the Kairos Document, "real change and true justice can only come from below" and "true justice demands a radical change of structures"

The Confession of Accra makes it clear which structure needs to undergo a radical change on a global level. In this context, one of the complex issues Reformed Christians in a country like South Africa have to confront is the manner in which the South African state, big business, big capital and a number of stakeholders

are dealing with the question of economic justice. Are they approaching the issue from the perspective of reformist justice, or is there an understanding that true justice is not possible under the prevailing system? Can those in government or in the private sector who have benefited greatly from the neoliberal capitalist system be expected to dismantle that very same system? Could the apartheid regime be expected to dismantle apartheid?

The rather awkward choice for Reformed Christians is between continuously supporting neoliberal capitalism, which Accra identified as the root cause of the devastation suffered by millions of people worldwide, as well as the root cause of the ecological havoc in the world, and a different, more sustainable economic system. If Accra is taken seriously, Reformed Christians will have to seriously and critically embrace the social analysis contained in the document.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the Kairos Document, we need to take a step back in clarifying the following issue: We clearly defined the context in which the Kairos Document emerged; this was the heyday of apartheid under a state of emergency. The battle lines were drawn quite clearly: on the one side was the extremely oppressive apartheid regime; on the other, the struggling masses of oppressed people. In 2010 there was a legitimate, democratically elected government in place.

Unity and justice: mutually exclusive or twin sisters?

In the interview with newly elected President Pillay of the WCRC (2010), he seemed to be place greater emphasis on unity than on justice. For Pillay, unity is one of the most important things in Christian mission, as it should be in the lives of all the churches. Pillay believes that to make an impact in the world, Christian unity is an obligation. Asked specifically about the connection between unity and justice, he claimed that unity would assist in leading the conversation on justice. He went on to argue that the many things that have affected the churches' ability to achieve unity are related to issues of injustice. His inference, therefore, is that if we deal with issues of injustice, we will be able to talk about unity. Regarding the reception of Accra in Africa, Pillay gave a rather interesting interpretation by pointing out that it is easier to receive Accra in the African churches, because of the context: African churches are able to identify more easily with the issues of Accra, since they are able to relate to the reality of the situation. On the African continent, there are oppressors and economic benefactors.

Although Pillay clarifies the connection between unity and justice reasonably well, he still gives the impression that he would like to prioritise unity. At the September 2010 meeting of the United Ministry for Service and Witness (UMSW) of the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches, two participants argued that matters might have worked out differently had we started with reconciliation first, instead of unity. The point is extremely relevant in relation to Accra – particularly the question pertaining to unity and justice. The argument of the two participants is almost symptomatic of the tendency to create dichotomies. In this article we contend that whether we start with unity or reconciliation, there is no escaping the underlying injustices that are the main cause of division and alienation. Therefore, we strongly recommend an integrated approach, where all the issues are kept in creative tension, since this may produce better results.

One of the most unavoidable questions in the debate on Accra in relation to unity and justice is the position of women. A very broad analysis reveals that although women are in the majority as far as active membership of the Reformed churches is concerned, this reality is not reflected in the ordination and decision-making processes of these churches. Unintentionally, therefore, churches provide the moral and theological justification of the continued marginalisation and oppression of women worldwide. And yet women do not give up on the church and on the confessions and declarations. This is well illustrated by the colloquium of women at the Madge Saunders Conference Centre, St Mary in Jamaica from 20-25 August 2005. Under the banner of Women and the Accra Confession: Covenanting for Life*,* they engaged critically with the Accra Confession from the perspective of women.

In an intense listening, speaking and affirming exercise at the colloquium, the women reflected critically on two dimensions: affirmation of fullness of life for women and the gaps in the Accra Confession in relation to that affirmation. The gaps in the Accra Confession indicated by the women at the Jamaican colloquium cannot be ignored with impunity in the quest for justice. It is necessary to draw extensively on the *Message* issued by the colloquium in showing the gaps from the perspective of women. The following themes emerged:

- women rendered invisible by the generalising language of inclusivity
- power imbalances in gender relations
- the absence of critical reflection on the patriarchal and racist structures that justify the oppression of women
- the absence of issues such as migration, legislation affecting women and underdevelopment

Apart from the collective voices, there are also individual women who have engaged critically with the Accra Confession. A South African example is the critical reflections of University of South Africa theological

ethicist, Lenka Bula (2006:89-106). She engages with Accra from an African feminist theological perspective in analysing whether the confession – in terms of its themes, values and principles – is affirming or limiting the experiences, spiritualities and theologies of African women. She locates her analysis in the context of the debate on economic and ecological justice. Like the Jamaican colloquium of women, Lenka Bula (2006:100) laments the limited reference to gender justice in Accra, or as she calls it "limited attention to inclusive gender justice in church and society". She does, however, acknowledge the instances in Accra where reference is made to gender injustice in the economy, human trafficking and the fact that the majority of those living in poverty are women.

An equally interesting consideration of Accra comes from Lewis (2006:107-115), in her piece entitled *A Caribbean womanist perspective on the Accra Confession.* She imagines two rural women in a church in the Caribbean trying to read the Confession of Accra. The one complains about having left her spectacles at home, thus explaining why she cannot read the document; the truth of the matter is that she is illiterate. The second woman is wearing her spectacles and tries to adjust them so that she can read the text, but it remains blurry. The long and the short of the story is that her spectacles should have been changed a year ago, but instead, she used her money to buy food and medicine for her children. She takes off her spectacles and holds the document some distance in front of her until the words come into focus. She reads the words: "This crisis is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization ..." and she is confused. In using the narrative as the matrix for her critical engagement with Accra, Lewis (2006:110-114) proposes analysis and action in four distinct areas. First, she forcefully draws attention to the language in which we communicate, asserting that the language of Accra is not accessible to many church members. Second, the culture of the context needs to be taken into consideration in dealing with the issues raised by Accra. Third, attention should be given to the ways in which economic policies affect women, and fourthly, mechanisms should be put in place to increase the participation of women in the structures of governance.

The issue seems to be clear: Reformed churches can hardly begin to work for greater justice in the world without prioritising the plight of women. In South Africa, the campaign against violence against women has made some progress over the past number of years, but it has not been able to arrest the situation. In reference to Accra, Lenka Bula (2006:104) concludes on a hopeful note:

> whilst the Confession does not give a lot of attention to gender justice, it holds promise for dealing with injustices. It addresses those issues which limit or deny the fullness of life for women and the earth, and it can thus create space for the articulation of justice in concrete situations, locally and globally.

Further unavoidable issues in the debate on unity and justice are raised in the *Message* from the New York colloquium on Accra and Belhar, specifically the issues of race, class and power. The statement is remarkably clear on the impact of race and class divisions on unity and justice. In exploring the complementary aspects between Accra and Belhar, North America and the Caribbean are identified as "contexts where matters of race and economic justice are closely intertwined". For those at the colloquium, "power was seen to be embedded in any consideration of race, repentance, restitution and more just relations in any treatment of reconciliation".

A praxiological mediation of Accra

In Maruping's (2008) script from the Protestant Theological University of Kampen, apart from his convincing thesis that the Confession of Accra indeed meets the criteria of a confession in the sense of the Reformed tradition, what emerges as a refrain in the script is the need for a practical negotiation of Accra. His finding is that one of the weaknesses of the confession is the lack of practical negotiation. In the purpose statement of the study, he contends:

> Given the important issues which the Accra Confession is all about, it will be necessary to make this confession more practical to local churches for the sake of witnessing together in relation to the issues addressed in the Accra Confession (Maruping 2008:2).

The insistence on some form of practical mediation is repeated in the study a few times, for example in the statement that "taking a faith stance won't be enough if there is no practicality" (Maruping 2008:30). The insistence upon practical mediation culminates in a chapter dealing specifically with what Maruping (2008:42) calls "the practicalization of the Accra Confession in a local church". His concern is particularly with the South African context. His argument runs more or less as follows: precisely because Accra can be regarded as a confessional statement in the category of Barmen, Belhar, the Belgic and Heidelberg Catechism, as well as presenting itself in a unique way of confessing, it poses serious challenges regarding its implementation.

Subsequently, the co-authors of this article decided that there was sufficient consensus between them to extend the discussion beyond a mere practical mediation. Although Maruping (2008:44-46) offers some pertinent questions on how local churches can develop perspectives on Accra, the issue remains whether posing

questions on the practical implications of Accra would suffice. We propose that, *methodologically,* something more is needed than merely trying to draw practical consequences from Accra.

In presenting a tentative proposal on the praxiological mediation of Accra, we would like to draw attention to the difference between what some might call the practical consequences of Accra and the search for a serious, ongoing praxis informed by the declaration. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they are also not the same. Whereas taking the practical implications of Accra into account could be an ad hoc arrangement, a praxiological mediation of Accra means that the declaration will not be treated as an appendix only, but as an essential part of who we are as Reformed Christians in our individual lives of faith, in our congregations and in our communities. It is, in brief, a question of identity. In combination with the confession of Belhar, the identity sought by Reformed Christians could be defined as uniting, reconciling, justice-seeking and obedient.

Having said this, we hurry to point out that the praxiological mediation proposed here is not self-evident. Haase (2009) draws attention to the fact that the action called for by Accra in the quest for justice is not clear, given the diversity of contexts that the confession purports to address. Acknowledging the rather complex nature of the issue at hand, however, is not an excuse to do nothing at all.

MADIP

Within the WARC itself, there has been an attempt at the "practicalisation" of the confession. A striking example of how WARC is trying to concretise the Confession of Accra is the mission programme that goes by the acronym MADIP, which stands for Making a Difference Programme. Part of MADIP is a partnership programme called Comrades, Artisans and Partners (CAP*)*, which originated as a mission relationship between the United Protestant Church in Belgium and the Rwanda Presbyterian Church. The 2008 CAP youth camp in Belgium was confronted directly with the global political and socioeconomic realities when prospective participants in the youth camp from Congo and Rwanda were refused visas to travel to Belgium, or as the CAP (2008:3) report suggests – under the theme of breaking boundaries – they were refused visas "into the European fortress". In the deliberations at the camp, a connection was immediately made between the Confession of Accra and the powers that those embracing the confession are up against. Indeed, the need for "new expressions of community and solidarity in a world dominated by neo-liberal capitalism" was felt. The report reflects a remarkable attempt at integrating themes like globalisation, social justice, economic justice, racism, HIV/AIDS and justice and reconciliation with very down-to-earth practical steps like "giving your manual labour in service of God's mission" (CAP 2008:5, 8).

Mission as the quest for justice

It is entirely beyond the scope of this article to develop a detailed mission perspective on Accra. Briefly, though, the argument is made that the quest for justice is, among others, an issue in and for mission.

The metaphorical understanding of mission as the quest for justice is drawn from Bosch's life work, *Transforming mission* (1991:400). He develops this as one of the thirteen elements of his **emerging ecumenical paradigm**. Despite wondering whether the heading for this particular element is not a misnomer in the absence of any engagement with context – let alone any suggestion for the practical meaning of the quest for justice – we still find this quite a useful notion. According to our understanding, a quest connotes constantly seeking, continuously asking difficult questions, constantly striving towards, investigating and acting. For this reason, we should perhaps say in defence of Bosch (1991:407) that his reference to the document entitled *Evangelical witness in South Africa* by the Concerned Evangelicals is instructive. The document shows that in the light of the apartheid system and experience of repression and police brutality during a state of emergency, steps were to be taken to flesh out evangelical views on evangelism, mission, structural evil and the church's responsibility with respect to justice in society. And this is the crux of the matter for us in relation to the Confession of Accra: can the profound analysis and equally profound theological argumentation be translated into an ongoing praxis of justice?

Conclusion

The intention of the article was to generate hypotheses and to raise questions that call for serious attention in taking the Confession of Accra to the Reformed churches. We believe that we have at least achieved the following two outcomes: First, by drawing from the material researched, we have identified questions that are virtually unavoidable if an integrated struggle for justice is to be achieved. That explains why questions relating to the pre-history of Accra, language, women, race, class and praxis have passed the revue.

Now it is up to the Reformed churches worldwide – and in South Africa, in particular – to find answers to these questions. We suggest that the answers might not come from further studies, debate, colloquia,

declarations and statements, but from the formulation of strategies for action. There is already a sound theoretical framework based on Accra and Belhar. What is needed now is the kind of praxis that feeds into the very simple and yet very powerful metaphor from the Bible: "by their fruits ye shall know them". Second – and perhaps more implicitly than explicitly – in raising the questions we have, we hope to have shown an awareness of the very complex nature of the issues we are dealing with. In so far as the issues are human questions, however, complexity should not function as an excuse for inactivity.

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