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A time for confession? On the WARC project “Reformed Faith and Economic Justice”

ABSTRACT

In 1997 the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches called for “a *processus confessionis*, a committed process of progressive recognition, education, and confession, within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding world economic justice and ecological destruction”. This paper reflects on some of the important theological questions at stake in that decision, namely whether, how, on what grounds and in what sense our time could indeed be considered “a time for confession” regarding economic justice and ecological destruction. First, the story of some major developments leading up to the WARC’s call for a *processus confessionis* is briefly told. Some of the relevant but unpublished decisions and reports are presented. Then a few general theological reminders are offered, clarifying why such decisions are not strange to the Reformed tradition and community. Finally, the specific theme of a *processus confessionis* is considered in some detail.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches¹ in Debrecen, Hungary, August 1997, the 400 delegates unanimously called for “a *processus confessionis*, a committed process of progressive recognition, education, and confession, within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding world economic justice and ecological destruction”.

This paper is not about economics or ethics, but about theology. It is an invitation to reflect on the theological questions whether, how, on what grounds and in what senses, it could indeed be “a time for confession” regarding economic justice and ecological destruction.

In order to do that, the story of major developments leading up to the WARC’s call for a *processus confessionis* is briefly told in a first section. In a second section a few general theological reminders are offered, before the theme of a *processus confessionis* is addressed in a final section.

2. THE STORY BEHIND THE *PROCESSUS CONFESSIO*

The story obviously goes back a very long way. Particularly during the 1980s, however, several churches and church bodies around the world began to express “a deep concern about the

1 The WARC was founded in 1875. It presently includes 211 Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational, and United churches in 103 countries, with an estimated number of between 70 and 80 million communicant members. About two thirds of the churches are in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Most are minority churches.

challenges that prevailing economic trends put to Christian faith and to ethical convictions of Christians involved in public matters and economic processes”².

These issues were also, in a number of different ways, on the agenda of the WARC. Soon after the 22nd General Council of the WARC in Seoul the Alliance started to deal with “global economic injustice in the context of Christian faith”. Many consultations took place and many papers, study documents, declarations, decisions, and Bible studies were produced and often published.

In 1992 a small consultation was convened in Geneva to design a project for the years to come. A letter to the WARC member churches, adopted by the Executive Committee in Wellington, New Zealand in August 1992, explained the purpose well:

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. God the Creator entrusts humans, male and female equally, with responsibility to care for the earth and for each other. The Bible relates to economic questions throughout. It speaks of justice as central to God’s will. Prophets call the people not to adjust to sinful structures, to repent and create institutions which protect the rights of the poor. Jesus himself in his life and teachings, fulfilled the prophetic message of liberation in his solidarity with the poor. Likewise the Church has been requested to preach this message of liberation to the present poor and marginalized. Our belief in the Holy Spirit which renews creation empowers us to keep being *ecclesia reformata* and *semper reformanda*. The Holy Spirit sustains us in the hope that history has not ended, that the world does not end in a huge catastrophe but that Christ is the Alpha and Omega” (Faith and Economic Life 1992:71ff, *Reformed World* Vol 42/3, 70-73).

Many of these themes would reappear in the ensuing process of reflections and discussions, including the listening to the Bible, the affirmation of the Trinitarian faith and the responsibilities and hope it brings for the church.

It was decided that the central theme of the 23rd General Assembly would be directly related to justice, and it was reaffirmed that the WARC was called to be “an alliance of solidarity and hope”.

It was, however, also immediately clear that “this wide awareness of Christian churches about the relevance of the challenges of economic realities to Christian faith in its aim to witness for justice is far from being accompanied by a consensus about how Christians are called to act in the realm of economics” (De Santa Ana 1995:1). For this reason a process of study was initiated to analyse seriously prevailing economic realities, trends and practices in the light of the faith and its commitment to justice.

Towards this goal, the Executive Committee in Pittsburgh (1994) adopted a programme of regional conferences. Three of these conferences took place in Manila, Philippines (March 1995), Kitwe, Zambia (Oct 1995) and San José, Costa Rica (May 1996).³

2 De Santa Ana 1995. He refers for example to the paper on “Christian Faith and Economic Justice” approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1984 and the programme on “A just political economy” commended to this church by the Assembly for study as part of an educational process. For several informative documents related to this process, see also the website <http://warc.ch>.

3 Many of the papers and recommendations of these conferences have been published, particularly in different editions of *Reformed World*. For the following comments, I make use of the very helpful summaries and interpretations provided by the General Secretary, in Opocenský (1999).

The Manila meeting drew attention to rapid economic growth that, however, is only beneficial to a small minority.⁴ Over against this analysis of economic and cultural realities and trends, the consultation proposed convictions of faith. An appeal was made to churches and individual Christians in Asia to leave the mainstream of economic life and to resist the culture of prevailing trends. They are encouraged to develop their own lifestyle, free from consumerism. The participation of women in a male-dominated economic life is important. New principles for an international economic order must be found. Questions of poverty and the deteriorating environment should be paramount. The Reformation principles of grace and community contradict the competition struggle and the spirit of the market. The supposed connection between Reformed faith and prevailing economic injustice, between a Calvinist ethos and the trend towards competition, should be critically investigated. Some suggestions towards action were also made.⁵ Christians should strive towards harmony and communion with every creature in the common household of God. They are called to be God's co-workers, to cultivate human life and to maintain the integrity of creation. In particular, an appeal was made to Christians of the North to consider that their profit-oriented economics impose an unbearable burden on the global economy and on the poor of the world. God's covenant with earth and people is violated. Christians are called to join a struggle for an alternative society, to refuse the concentration of power, the recolonisation of large parts of the world and life based on exploitation of resources and human labour.

In his keynote speech to the WARC European Area Council in Edinburgh, Scotland in September 1995 the General Secretary Milan Opocenský suggested that the "problems that confront us with the confessional issue" should be addressed "within the context of the *status confessionis*" (Möller 1996:139; the speech itself was to be published in Lucke, H [ed], *Hope and renewal in Times of Change*, European Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, no 2).

This would happen during the second regional consultation of the Southern African Alliance of Reformed Churches in Kitwe, where Opocenský was again present. After several days of Bible studies, lectures, working groups and plenary discussions, a working paper was compiled. It has three sections, dealing respectively with seeing, judging and acting. Since this document is still unpublished (available on the website <http://warc.ch/pc/kitwe.html>), it may be helpful to quote the text in full:

Seeing

The history of Africa has been a bitter one characterised by colonialism, slavery, racism, sexism and repressive labour practices. In some countries of our region, white people controlled and still control large parts of the economy. This economy was established on

4 The contradiction between growth and poverty should not be ignored. 70-80% of the poor of the world live in Asia. This poverty manifests itself in massive unemployment and the painful exclusion of millions of people from the process of production. The population pays a high price for the Structural Adjustment Programmes prescribed by the IMF and World Bank. The environment is poisoned and threatened. The deregulation, privatisation and growing influence of money characteristic of the economy of Asian countries at the time lead to the commodification of life. The mass media creates artificial needs and economic injustice creates cultural injustice. Indigenous cultures are not respected.

5 Cooperatives should be created. Life should be more important than money. Cultural identity must be protected against human desire. Ecological movements should be supported to mobilize people. Limitless growth and competition should be resisted. Many anti-system movements are to be regarded as sources of hope, including the women's movement, tribal movements, the farmer's movement and civic organisations.

enforced racial division in every sphere. The result of this economy was that every sphere of our societies in Southern Africa – economic, social, legal, political, moral, cultural, environmental, was affected. We observe that this is the state of affairs in our region.

1. What we see from the Southern African region is the systematic exclusion of Africa from the world economy. Large parts of Africa have already been declared dead as far as the global economic map and plans of the G-7 countries are concerned.

2. We observe that our people's dreams and hopes of social equality, political freedom and economic justice which were kindled at independence 30 years ago have turned into a long and harrowing winter of despair. It is our common experience that the condition of our hard-working people and nations has worsened rather than improved after all serious and concerted efforts to pool our energy, intellect and know-how in order to lift up from poverty and neglect.

3. It is our common experience that the overwhelming majority of our people is becoming poorer and poorer and their material condition is deteriorating fast. We begin to understand something of the all-pervasive power of global economy, of the almost untouchable structures of production, distribution and consumption of material goods and services. We are discovering that global economic world-views contain a hidden premise which has to be revealed: the premise is that peoples from the South have no right to their own labour; they then have to be subservient to market forces. This has led to our enslavement to our products, and to the powerlessness of our congregations and our churches.

4. We realise that our ethnic and national cultures have lost the power to inform our economic practices because they have been turned into commodities in the service of an economy with a different goal. Those that could not be commodified are gradually disappearing under the weight of imported powerful Western cultures. Further, we see that cultural homogenisation has become the order of the day as all the cultural boundaries fall to the displacing commodity culture in which everything can be bought and sold. Our experience is that in this situation only the culture that can promote the interests of the exchange market survives for as long as required.

5. Furthermore, instead of political freedom and national autonomy, our national states are losing the power to protect the democracy and economic autonomy for which we have struggled so long and paid dearly. Our observation is that small emerging local enterprises and co-operatives that need state protection from unfair competition for the small local markets with foreign giant companies, are folding before our eyes because they are pushed out of existence and such protection is more often than not forthcoming. Those who cry out are told that they should compete and succeed and that if they do not succeed then they are not worth existing.

6. Multinational companies are usurping the democratic will of most of the people in Africa by coercing our own governments to remove all desperately needed protection of fragile enterprises.

7. Our general and pervasive experience is that, instead of rivers of economic prosperity and justice flowing season after season in all Africa, poverty and misery, hunger and chronic unemployment have become endemic in Africa. Again, we notice that it is because money flows from the poor South to the rich North to further enrich the North.

8. This systematic impoverishment of Africa has led many people to lose their capacity for self-help and self-employment. We are painfully aware that this condition would have disastrous repercussion for future generations.

9. The irony of this painful situation is the fact that Africa dies at a time in the history of humankind when the accumulated global wealth to which our parents have handsomely

contributed and to which we still are, is larger than ever before due to unprecedented high development of technology and know-how.

10. We observe that it is ironical that mass hunger that we see everyday co-exists in the global contexts, side by side with immeasurable opulence without tearing the consciences of those who are beneficiaries apart.

11. We note that according to Bob Goudzwaard, a Dutch Christian economist, these paradoxes are even found at the heart of the industrialised countries of Northern Europe and America, as well as in the so-called six Tiger nations of Asia.

12. Goudzwaard contends that no one nation has been able to eradicate the intolerable co-existence of mass availability of commodities (overproduction) and scarcity, of poverty and wealth, of the need for more labour and constantly rising in unemployment, of the fast emergence of new cities and homelessness, of the highest developed health care systems and rapid spread of diseases of mass destruction.

Judging

Having done an analysis of the global economic map in the light of the African experience we reached the following conclusions:

1. The promising market economy that used to enjoy John Calvin's blessing in the 16th century when he saw it as a system that developed naturally from human ingenuity and had the potential of "spreading God's bounty throughout society" and still remain within human control and criticism, has been sacralised and ascended to a throne above all human creation. It has changed places with human beings who created it and become the creator of human beings by redefining what it means to be human. It claims a freedom that only belongs to God and thereby usurps the sovereignty of God, raising the question of idolatry and human loyalty to God or Mammon.

2. This idolatrous and dehumanising nature of the global economy now propagates the exclusion of Africa and Africans from the human family. Such denial of our humanity by cutting us off from the human family is a direct contradiction of our faith that we were created by God in God's image.

3. Those who manage the economy often talk of the "sacrifices" that must be made for the sake of the economy. All the signs of the times lead us to conclude that Africans live on a crucified continent as people to be sacrificed. Our humanity and the future of our children are of no further beneficial consequence to the global economy. We have almost all the powers in the world ranged against us. We certainly have against us the oligarchies, the multinational corporations and various armed forces. In some countries of our region even democratically elected governments are knowingly or unknowingly subverting the emergence of a just economy in our own region.

4. The global economy has invented or produced almost everything – except justice, solidarity, peace and humaneness. For all its many advantages the sum total of the West's scientific and technological knowledge, its impressive political democracy and Judaeo-Christian traditions, the power it amassed in its government, its enterprises, its universities and its churches has not been sufficient to enable us to find a just and humane economy. For justice, solidarity and humanity we are thrown back to the revisitation of the gospel of the poor of the Bible, the reformed concern for a mutuality and equality in the nature of economic systems and our own cultural and traditional African resources of community and Ubuntu.

5. We say these things knowing that the relationship between economy and faith is not obvious. However, we contend that this misunderstanding has to do with the impersonal

and abstract way in which the global economy is sometimes presented and operates. The global economy is not merely about things and markets, it is about human beings and how they choose to relate to each other. It is often also presented in a pseudo-religious form with undoubtedly messianic claims.

6. The sacrifice of African humanity to the demands or will of the global economy is an extension of its historical sacrifice of nature. This is especially true in the South, which the North regards as the rightful dumping ground for its toxic waste. At first the voice of weak guardians of nature was drowned by the loud propounders of the right of the economy to limitless expansion. Now it has returned with a vengeance and the “weak guardians” have become the hunted. The destruction of nature is being executed in the false belief that powerful human beings were given dominion over nature. And now they act as if that alleged god given right of creation has been extended to a dominion over all of Africa.

7. We as Africans constitute mainly the labour market of the global economy. The dishonesty of the process of economic globalisation lies in the exclusion of the globalisation of the labour market because that market consists of poor people of Africa as well as those of the Third World and other continents of the South. The unhampered movement of commodities and capital is encouraged and that of labour discouraged. This causes the deliberate exclusion of the human factor and condition.

8. A few nations in the world have accumulated power that they use to deprive other nations of sovereignty. This they do while verbally professing to stand for democratic rights of people and nations. They have become the sole human agents who have elevated themselves above other human beings and nations and reduced the human agency of their fellow human beings. They are thereby contradicting what John Calvin saw as the ultimate goal of human economic activity at the market as, namely to “promote mutual intercourse among human beings”.

9. As African Reformed Churches we must also confess our sins of omission in that we did not resist enough and that we are only taking it now upon ourselves to break the chains of economic injustices.

10. We are now challenged to choose between a coerced allegiance to Mammon or the faithful worship of God. One cannot be a Christian for others in following Christ and pay allegiance to the sovereign claims of the global economy. Indeed, one cannot profess to be a Christian and not act to break the chain of injustice.

11. It is our painful conviction that the African reality of poverty caused by an unjust system has gone beyond being an ethical problem to a theological one. It now constitutes a *status confessionis*. The gospel to the poor is at stake in the very essence of the global economy.

Action

1. A collective effort of the SAARC is needed to address the global, regional and national threats to economic justice.

2. We must contribute by keeping a dream, a vision alive – a dream of a just society. We have to share our dream and refuse to let it die. We must affirm life against death. We must proclaim the Triune God as the God of life of creation, of care, of hope. We must confess that, “We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that in a world full of injustice and enmity he is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that he calls his Church to *follow* him in this” (Confession of Belhar).

3. We therefore call on our member churches to accept the challenge to become more vigilantly a church of the poor bringing good news to the impoverished African masses.

4. We need to promote an alternative economic practice that is guided by the needs of human beings in the form of the preferential protection of the poor and respect for nature. Such an economic practice should be informed by the sovereignty of God and the principles of the Kingdom of God. It will embrace African cultural values like “ubuntu” (community) over against individualism, unequal competition and exploitation.
5. We, therefore, call upon the WARC to consider our submission that a *status confessionis* be declared in the light of the African theological experience.
6. We, therefore, urge the WARC to have a preconference on economic justice of member churches from countries of the Southern hemisphere. Such a conference should consider and advise the WARC’s General Council in Debrecen, Hungary in 1997 on the following:
 - (a) Address the expendability of the continent of Africa in the context of the global economic planning.
 - (b) Consider to develop an action plan around the jubilee motif regarding the debt of the South.
 - (c) The calling of a confessing movement of churches of the South and others who are in solidarity.
7. We call on governments in the region to address the desperate plight of our people as a matter of urgency. Our churches are prepared to engage with our governments in collective action to address the situation.

The thrust of the document is clear. Special attention is given to “the systematic exclusion of Africa from the world economy”. “Africans live on a crucified continent as people to be sacrificed.” This contradicts their Christian faith itself. The global market economy “claims a freedom that only belongs to God and thereby usurps the sovereignty of God, raising the question of idolatry and human loyalty to God or Mammon”. This “idolatrous and dehumanising nature of the global economy propagates the exclusion of Africa and Africans from the human family – a direct contradiction of our faith that we were created by God in God’s image”.

The paper therefore uses confessional language. As African Reformed Christians they confess their sins of omission. They feel themselves challenged to choose between “a coerced allegiance to mammon or faithful worship of God”. “One cannot profess to be a Christian and not act to break the chain of injustice.” Therefore, the conclusion follows, “It is our painful conviction that the African reality of poverty caused by an unjust system has gone beyond being an ethical problem to a theological one. It now constitutes a *status confessionis*. The gospel to the poor is at stake in the very essence of the global economy.”

In the light of this, several concrete proposals are made. Christians must contribute by keeping a dream, a vision of a just society, alive – and the Belhar Confession is quoted. Member churches are called 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. The WARC is asked to consider the submission of a *status confessionis*, but then, more specifically, WARC is urged to have a preconference (in Debrecen) of member churches from the Southern hemisphere, to advise the General Council on the expendability of Africa, an action plan around the jubilee motif, and “*the calling of a confessional movement of the churches of the South and others who are in solidarity*”.

The third regional meeting was in San José. Again, globalisation with its resultant exclusion is criticised, but now from a Latin-American perspective. There is asymmetric growth and a lack of access to the capital and technology needed for integral development. Problems include a culture of corruption, monopolisation by minorities who do not use the land productively, militarism, rapid change of technologies, a steadily growing external debt that becomes an

“endless debt”. The result is hopelessness and individualism. Attention is drawn to the fact that the gospel is often misused by great powers as means of conquest and for political and economic domination. The relationships between First World and Latin American churches are bemoaned as paternalistic instead of partnership-like.

In May 1996 an international consultation in Geneva evaluated this process of regional meetings. It also prepared an important study text for the delegates to Debrecen. In this working paper, the guilt of the Reformed tradition concerning an oppressive economic order, causing misery and death to many, is confessed. It is suggested that the time has come to examine economic principles and activities in the light of faith. The conversion of personal relationships and lifestyle has become imperative, as well as new directions in the churches and society. The world economic order must be changed in favour of a new economy that affirms life for all. According to this consultation, this affirmation of life, a commitment to resistance against injustice and a struggle for transformation are all an inseparable part of Reformed faith and confession today. An act of repentance, as a new beginning, is necessary. Christians from the Reformed tradition have to confess their complicity in the global system and their insensitivity to the victimisation of people. The WARC member churches must continue to discern the suffering of the households of the poor and weak due to globalisation. They should enter into discussions with the key actors of the global economic system, and into liturgical movements of tithing, celebrating the Sabbath and Jubilee, as well as confessing guilt of involvement in globalisation.

6 “Towards an Economy of Life”. For a useful interpretation of the economical argument, which is also representative of many of the discussions and papers in this process of reflection and preparation for Debrecen, see the following comments by Opocenský (1999:6-8), “With thanksgiving we acknowledge the abundance of life offered to us by God and accept our responsibilities to nurture the life of the household of God and to care for creation. With distress we view the current distortions that make the household the servant of the economy. Although it claims universality, the newly emerging global economy creates enslavement and injustice.

“This situation can be compared to the unleashing of the idol Moloch. The consequence is exclusion, injustice and death, the denial of God’s blessing. Care for the household is driven out by demands of the market. Everything has a price that can be paid only by those with the money to become consumers. In place of care for creation we find exploitation. In place of order of creation we find the disorder of injustice.

“Hearing the pleas of the deprived and excluded, we seek to understand the mechanisms of their misfortune. We witness today a process of globalization, promoted by improvements in transportation and communications technology coupled with the use of mass media to reach ‘new markets’. Through advertising, cultures around the world are converted into markets. Autonomous peoples are transformed into consumers. The trade and payments agreements that have facilitated this process provide the basis for the transcendence of transnational corporations over the limitations of national boundaries and cultures. The pressure of ‘competitiveness’ has been loosed on the world.

“The claims made for this global economy are that it will bring peoples of the world into the global marketplace where they can freely choose among abundance. We find, however, that the globalization of the market economy has been accompanied by the denial of the expectations of development. There has been an institutionalization of the transfer of wealth from the South to the North, leading to the exclusion of millions of people from an economy that was supposed to meet their needs.

“We can no longer believe that economic globalization is merely a process of extending the structures and benefits of the economy of the industrial countries of the North to the rest of the world.

“The driving force of globalization is the relentless accumulation of capital. Its vehicles are transnational corporations and financial institutions. Through the press and media, we are told that the welfare of these corporations is more important than the welfare of the household of God.

“Until the changes in 1989-90, globalization was to some extent restricted by the existence of the Soviet bloc and the Council for Mutual Economic Cooperation (COMECON). While the system in Central and

The theme for the 23rd General Council was taken from Isaiah 58:1-12, "Break the chains of injustice." Four keynote speakers, Elsa Tamez (Costa Rica), Walter Brueggemann (USA), Leonor Briones (the Philippines) and Aaron Talon (Cameroon), addressed the theme from different perspectives. In the preparatory study documents, occasions for worship during the Council, official business like the addresses by the President and the General Secretary and messages and greetings, as well as during the discussions, reports and proposals of all three subsections, dealing respectively with "Reformed Faith and the Search for Unity" (Section I), "Justice for all Creation" (Section II) and "Partnership in God's Mission" (Section III), this overall theme was present in many forms. It was, however, the particular focus of Section II, and of the meeting of the "Forum on Economic Justice" for the delegates from the South, for which the Kitwe consultation had asked.

Section II had three subsections, dealing respectively with "Reformed Faith and Economic Justice", "Justice for All Creation" and "National and Ethnic Identity". In the final Report, it is

Eastern Europe was not a real alternative to the emerging global market system, for many people around the world its existence was nonetheless a source of hope because it provided employment, education and health for all its citizens. It introduced trade relations with the Third World that were fairer than those offered by Western countries.

"Globalization has resulted in a massive debt crisis for developing countries. As a condition for loans with which to repay debts, the indebted countries are required to implement Structural Adjustment Programmes (stipulated mostly by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). As a consequence, national budgets for health, education and social services are drastically reduced. Priority is given to the repayment of debts, although in fact it is only the interest that is being paid while the debt remains as a means of domination.

"The sovereignty of nation states is put into question. National control over domestic policy has been largely lost with the signing of trade agreements and the consolidation of their power by transnational corporations. As governments have reduced trade barriers and other restrictions, they have also reduced their ability to act in the interest of their citizens.

"Economies such as those of the island states of the Caribbean and South Pacific, too small to be sources of wealth in and of themselves, find new roles in the global economy as money laundries as well as tourist resorts. This is a significant function, since only a small percentage of global currency flows is actually required to finance trade in real goods and services. The fact that so little capital is actually required for trade purposes means that there is a large and growing amount of money available for speculative purposes or to be applied for political or economic leverage anywhere in the world on short notice. This results in a high degree of instability for the temporary host economies of this capital (as was the case in 1995 in Mexico).

"The culture of competition created by the corporate and financial forces behind the global market economy creates a downward spiral of impoverishment and injustice as cities, regions and states compete against each other for corporate favours in the form of investments and jobs. There is also competition for deregulation and environmental exploitation to attract capital. Eventually the poorer regions no longer have anything with which to compete, not even cheaper labour. At this point, they become excluded from the global economy altogether, consigned to the garbage dump, except for the women and children who are forced to sell themselves in the new globalized sex trade.

"The globalization of advertising that accompanies the globalization of the market creates a monoculture of consumerism. It creates insatiable desires that can easily be manipulated, including the desire to exploit women. It can be described as a colonization of consciousness. As a result of the financial rewards of advertising, the media develop a symbiotic relationship with their corporate benefactors and begin to see themselves as autonomous agents shaping political choices. What is generally referred to as 'the environment' also becomes a victim of the culture of competition fostered by the global economy. It is essential that we gain a new understanding of creation, not as our 'environment', as something outside and apart from us, but as the matrix of our life, both physically and socially. Creation and our household must be restored as the context of our lives, and the economy once again viewed as the organization and structures of nurture."

said that in all three subsections “we have heard from witnesses around the world about the chains of injustice that must be broken. Together we have considered the responsibilities of living together in the household of God: management of the household so that all may have life (economy); care of relationships within the household (ecology); and respect for the diversity of the household (national and ethnic identity)” (Debrecen 1997:192ff).

Between these challenging issues, it is claimed, there are “webs of interconnection”, including “the impact of the globalization of the world’s economy, that is, the integration of national and international markets to achieve maximization of financial profits”. Drawing on the earlier consultations and the study documents, key characteristics of globalisation are again described and some results of its impact reiterated (Debrecen 1997:193).

In a long and important section of the Report, relevant Biblical perspectives and Reformed convictions are then applied to an analysis of some of the contemporary issues (Debrecen 1997:193-107). On the basis of this argument, the “call for a *processus confessionis*” is then adopted:

In many parts of the world, Reformed churches and communities are challenged by the appalling circumstances in which many people live and by the threat of the ongoing destruction of the environment. Many believe that the time has come to make a confession of faith, which rejects and struggles against these injustices, while affirming our faith in the triune God who in Christ offers a new creation.

We are challenged by the cry of the people who suffer and by the groaning of creation. We Christians of Reformed churches are aware of our complicity in an economic order that is unfair and oppressive, leading to the misery and death of many people. We participate in attitudes and practices, which erode the foundations of the earth’s livelihood.

We want to affirm the gift of life. We consider this affirmation of life, commitment to resistance and struggle for transformation to be an integral part of Reformed faith and confession today.

In the past we have called for *status confessionis* in cases of blatant racial and cultural discrimination and genocide.

We now call for a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) within all the WARC member churches at all levels regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction (Debrecen 1997:197-198).

In two recommendations, approved by the General Council, the content of this *processus confessionis* is further explicated. The General Council

1. calls upon the WARC and its member churches:
 - a. to give special attention to the analysis and understanding of economic processes, their consequences for people’s lives, and the threats to creation;
 - b. to educate church members at all levels about economic life, including faith and economics, and challenge them to develop a lifestyle which rejects the materialism and consumerism of our day;
 - c. to 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;
 - d. to act in solidarity with the victims of injustice as they struggle to overcome unjust economic powers and destructive ecological activities.

2. calls upon the WARC and its member churches to facilitate the necessary programmes, resources and practical steps to initiate and nurture the *processus confessionis* at all levels as a matter of extreme priority. This process requires:
 - a. within the WARC and its member churches:
 - i. to study and explore just and sustainable alternatives to the present economic structure in order to equip the churches to speak and live a word of hope in our fractured world;
 - ii. to develop programmes of economic literacy to allow ordinary people to understand the circumstances in which they live and to see how they may change them;
 - iii. to explore the meaning of Sabbath, as it relates to creation, contemporary challenges and their own contexts, and to give special emphasis to God's gift of creation in the churches' educational work at all levels, especially with children;
 - iv. to study the "colonization of consciousness" (advertising and mass media) and to continue the study of government-sponsored lotteries, since they injure and exploit the poorest in the community;
 - v. to examine their own economic activities in the light of Christian faith by investing without speculation, increasing the level of solidarity funds and using exemplary investment schedules (eg Ecumenical Development Co-operative Society) which concentrate on ethical investment, micro-credit schemes, etc;
 - vi. to organize team visits as fact-finding missions to particular situations of crisis, where a member church is deeply affected and engaged in witness, to practice fellowship and solidarity.
 - b. in relationship with other international organizations and partners:
 - i. to contribute to the renewal of efforts in the UN system, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) to establish international codes of conduct for TNCs with regard to labour standards, product safety and environmental protection;
 - ii. to support the UN Development Programme's recommendation for the introduction of the Tobin Tax (a tax on the movement of capital) to be used for sustainable development;
 - iii. to assist in actions within the UN and other international organizations when confronted with threats such as global warming and climate change, deforestation, pollution of the oceans, and nuclear waste;
 - iv. to support campaigns for the end of laws and practices that discriminate against women in property ownership, inheritance, remuneration and access to credit, and recognize the essential place of women as participants in development;
 - v. to join the global campaigns for the cancellation of debt (eg Jubilee 2000);
 - vi. to support community-based organizations and organizations for working and unemployed people within countries and across the national boundaries;
 - vii. to initiate in cooperation with other Christian world communions and the World Council of Churches a dialogue with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO) with the goal that they review their policies and actions in the light of their adverse effect on the people of developing countries.

- c. in all efforts to implement the *processus confessionis*, it is necessary:
 - i. to strengthen the cooperation of WARC and its member churches with other networks and partners, such as Christian World Communions, the WCC, and other relevant organizations and movements;
 - ii. to join forces with people of other faiths and people of goodwill who are looking toward the same goal.

The “Forum on Economic Justice, sponsored by the people of the South” also presented a Report to the Council, with recommendations reminiscent of the Kitwe Declaration. “The Forum ... recommends that the General Council ...”

1. affirm:
 - 1.1 churches of the South living in the context of severe and progressive exclusion of the poor from global economy;
 - 1.2 the growing understanding in the South that our common humanity, and our common faith in the humanizing work of Jesus Christ, are at stake at this historical moment;
2. declare:
 - 2.1 a *processus confessionis* on economic injustice;
3. embark:
 - 3.1 on a programme of progressive analysis, recognition and confession regarding economic injustice;
 - 3.1.1 for which the General Secretary will be directly responsible and financial resources be made available as a matter of extreme priority;
 - 3.2 on an advocacy process to address the issue of the debilitating foreign debt creatively and prophetically, calling for a Jubilee for the South;
 - 3.3 on solidarity action with women and children who form the first line of victims;
4. urge and assist:
 - 4.1 member churches to conduct workshops with people in congregations to empower them in their need for progressive analysis, recognition and confession in this matter;
5. do this:
 - 5.1 believing that God in Jesus Christ has affirmed our common human dignity;
 - 5.2 knowing that Christians are called to break the chains of injustice;
 - 5.3 insisting that the church should speak at the outset of exclusion in the globalization of the economy;
 - 5.4 committing the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to the struggles of the South.

In its Final Message, the General Council draws many of these ideas together (Debrecen 1997:240-243) and concludes this Message with what they call *The Declaration of Debrecen*. It is deliberately written in a confessional style. They explicitly claim that it has a Trinitarian structure, Reformed theological content, and contemporary moral commitments. It is based on Calvin’s

popular notion that we are not our own, and on the answer to the first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. They call it “a covenantal litany”, sign the Declaration, and urge member churches and congregations to do the same:

We belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to ourselves but to our faithful saviour Jesus Christ.

We confess our theological and moral failures, our complicity in adding to the world’s burdens, our inadequate witness to God’s purposes. We ask forgiveness from God and from each other for these transgressions and also for the injuries we have done to one another. Claiming the new life which forgiveness makes possible and relying on God’s promises that the chains of injustice can be broken, we declare:

* We are not our own. We belong to the living God who made all things and declared them to be very good. We will not exploit and destroy that creation. We will be stewards of creation for God.

* We are not our own. We believe in Jesus Christ, who died for us and was raised for our salvation. We confess that no human ideology or agenda holds the secret to the ultimate direction of history. We are in all things dependant on our Redeemer.

* We are not our own. We know that in Jesus Christ we were bought with a price. We will not patronize, exclude, or ignore the gifts of any person, male or female, young or old. We declare our solidarity with the poor and with all who are suffering, oppressed or excluded.

* We are not our own. We believe in the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth. We refuse the false assumption that everything, including human beings and their labour, is a commodity and has its price.

* We are not our own. We are called to be built into a new community in the Spirit of God. We pledge ourselves to a simple lifestyle which bears witness to God’s ordering of the household life.

* We are not our own. We do not despair, for God reigns. We will continue to struggle against injustice in this world. We look forward to the Holy City in which God will dwell with human beings and be their God.

* We are not our own. With Christians of the Reformed faith through the centuries and with the whole people of God, we join our voices to proclaim *Soli Deo gloria!*

3. THEOLOGICAL REMINDERS

Stanley Hauerwas made the critical comment that so-called theological ethics often lack all theological content and that so-called Christian ethicists are often nothing else than social scientists who happen to have religious interests and who back their partisan social theories and claims with religious rhetoric, in order to be more persuasive and influential. Is this perhaps the case regarding the WARC project on “Reformed Faith and Economic Justice”?

Although Christians from other confessional traditions may perhaps suspect this, it is probably not even necessary to point out that many of these ideas are indeed very characteristic of the Reformed tradition.

(a) Firstly, the Reformed vision is one of continuous transformation and renewal. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. This call for renewal covers the whole of society. According to many observers, “the question of whether, and how, the law of God revealed in the Bible was to be obeyed in the political and social order” constitutes *the* characteristic of the Reformed tradition, in comparison with all others. This certainly includes the sphere of economic life. What is new in the recent debates may be the scale of affairs. Both the acknowledgement of the overriding importance of present economic realities in comparison with the state, politics, civil society, public opinion and individual freedom and action, as well as the insight that this has become an integrated global issue, are new, but in principle both these convictions are completely in line with traditional Reformed theology and world-views (see eg Wolterstorff 1983; Stackhouse 1995; Meeks 1989; 1995; Forrester 1997, as well as the relevant sections in the impressive Stackhouse, McCann *et al* 1995).

This vision is based on Trinitarian theology. The church is called to obedience, even in its structures and organisation. The obedience is owed to the revealed Word of God. Bible study and preaching therefore form an integral part of this vision.

(b) This leads, secondly, to a strong interest in ethics and moral issues in the Reformed tradition and community. Reformed Churches have characteristically been more interested in morality and ethics than perhaps most other Protestant communities and traditions, precisely because of their vision of God and the will of God. Reformed ecclesiology is integrally related to ethics, to discipleship. Well-known Reformed theologians therefore often, and quite rightly, warn against the dangers of moralism that continuously threaten this tradition, but these criticisms are directed against misuses of the tradition, and not against the sense of calling and responsibility itself.⁷

This is true of all the traditional ways of approaching the moral life. One may, for example, distinguish between four inseparable distinctions of the moral life, namely moral vision, virtue, value and decision-making. Reformed theology and faith characteristically regard all four approaches as important.⁸ In particular, notions like “justice”, “calling”, “responsibility” and

7 Often this form of criticism is directed against a reversal of the promise and the claim of God’s Word. Sometimes it is directed against a kind of moral optimism that threatens when the Reformed vision is linked to a modernist trust in progress and success through moral improvement. It is obvious that the WARC project cannot be accused of any of these misunderstandings. Several of the documents emphasise the priority of the promises of hope on which the call is based, and there is little sign of any belief in social and moral progress, on the contrary. Some respected Reformed systematic theologians have warned against these forms of moralism, but at the same time are sensitive to human suffering and write powerfully about justice and the responsibility of Christians and the church.

8 Reformed believers, ministers and theologians are well known, if not notorious, for their firm convictions about moral *visions* for communities and societies. Normally these are transformative visions – in Niebuhr’s famous description – both affirming the importance of society, politics, culture and creation in the divine will and therefore the human calling, and at the same time criticising the sinful aspects of a particular situation. This has often been called the prophetic role of the Church, but many other biblical motifs and symbols have also been appropriated. Influential examples include the Reformed claim about the Lordship of Christ, Reformed views on justice and freedom, Reformed usage of the social and political categories of covenant and election, and Reformed claims concerning the first use of God’s law.

Reformed Christianity is equally well known for its keen interest in moral *virtues*. Teaching and teachability, instruction and education, personal formation and character building have received serious

“fellowship” (*koinonia*, sharing, equality, solidarity, mutuality, hospitality) have all been dominant in Reformed thought and spirituality. It is indeed possible to claim that a strong concern for – what they perceive to be divine and biblical – justice is at the heart of the Reformed tradition. The passion of Calvin and other Reformers for social justice most certainly left its mark on the witness of Reformed churches. The history of the WARC itself is a remarkable witness to this. This becomes more than evident when one reads Jill Schaeffer’s (1998) extremely interesting account of “WARC’s historic commitment to justice and human rights”.⁹

(c) Thirdly, the Reformed faith has always been keen to confess, and even to express itself in the form of confessional documents. Confessions are typical products of Protestantism, and in the Reformed tradition it is not an exception to find believers or a church that feel compelled to confess their faith anew. Karl Barth’s well-known comments on the nature and role of confession can serve as classical reminders of this position.¹⁰

4. A TIME FOR CONFESSION?

However, although the theological convictions expressed in these developments, the moral vision and commitment articulated, and the need for confession are all characteristic of the Reformed tradition, it is also clear that something more is at stake here. The WARC itself is aware of the newness of what is happening here. It claims that “this resolution advances ecumenical discussion on global economic injustice. It elevated moral and ethical questions to a qualitatively new level of faith and confession. It is a bold and significant step with far-reaching implications. It is a challenge to the universal church. New ground has been broken which may deepen our

attention in the Reformed tradition, often to the dismay of other Protestant communities. Reformed views on justification and sanctification, on calling and vocation, on edification and teaching, and on the third use of the law, all play a major role in this regard. Reformed liturgy has a strong formative function.

Reformed communities have been the advocates and defenders of powerful moral *values* in the past. John de Gruchy, for example, in his study on *Christianity and Democracy*, reminds us of the intimate historical connections between Reformed faith and central democratic notions and ideas, including the rule of law, principles of equity and justice, covenantal or contractual relationships between rulers and the ruled, the sovereignty of the people, and the theory of resistance against tyranny.

Finally, the Reformed mindset has often been more interested in questions of moral *deliberation and decision-making* than most other Protestant traditions. The Reformed emphasis on the Ten Commandments and the revealed will of God, in fact on the normative authority of the whole of the Bible – however problematic it may be to ascertain “what the Bible says” in a particular situation – has always strengthened this focus. Reformed handbooks in ethics, sermons and synodical documents often tended to be almost casuistic in their attempts to clarify and prescribe exactly the moral decisions to be taken and the actions to be followed regarding specific so-called moral issues or questions. Notions like moral obligations, moral responsibility, respect for moral standards and moral behaviour are commonplace in Reformed language and thought.

9 In reality, many Reformed Christians and churches obviously do not demonstrate or practice this characteristic passion. For a discussion of the seeming apathy regarding public life and challenges, including moral crises, amongst South African Reformed Christians and churches, see Smit 1999. It is noteworthy that the General Council took an explicit decision in this regard, asking that the Alliance “in accordance with the historical Reformed emphasis, continue to resist the tendency to withdraw from the public sphere” (Debrecen 1997:24, 190).

10 See, for the way confessional documents are seen in Protestantism and specifically the Reformed tradition, Jonker 1994; Botha & Naude 1998. See also Smit 2000 and the very informative and helpful Link 1998 for more general discussions.

understanding of Christian political and social responsibility” (Debrecen, Preface; also Opocenský 1999:10).

Perhaps the newness lies in the fact that these three fundamental aspects of Reformed theology – the continuous transformation of society in obedience to the Word of God; the strong link between ecclesiology and ethics; the need to confess – are related to one another in a dramatically new way.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish carefully what is at stake in the present developments, in order to be able to evaluate them. Hopefully, asking *four* closely related but different *questions* could prove useful. Firstly, does the present economic reality indeed challenge the Christian faith and confession? Secondly, does it constitute a *status confessionis*? Thirdly, does it make the drafting and adoption of a new confessional document necessary? And fourthly, could the call for a *processus confessionis* prove helpful in this regard?

(a) Does the present economic reality indeed challenge the Christian faith and confession? Few Reformed Christians and churches would deny this. In his very helpful analysis, Ulrich Möller convincingly summarises this claim,

Because of the global dynamism of economic injustice, more and more people are deprived of decent living conditions and millions of people are being denied a fulfilled life. In view of the threat to life posed by the worldwide adverse effects of the globalization of the market economy, the church will have to consider whether its present witness in word and deed is sufficiently clear and binding to confess faith in God as the advocate for life.

Given the urgency of the situation, the church is called upon radically to change its views and to bear witness speedily and unanimously so that the remaining time can be used for repentance before more and more people perish (particularly in the countries of the two-thirds world), the very basis for elementary rights of future generations is destroyed, and irreversible damage is done to nature by an unrestrained over-exploitation of natural resources. There can be no doubt about the need for the church to go beyond an ethics of mere discretion to clear church witness against economic injustice. Those who have already recognized this need render a vicarious service to the whole church (Möller 1996:140-141).

(b) Secondly, however, does this mean that it constitutes a *status confessionis*? This will obviously depend on what a *status confessionis* is. The WARC provides its own description, based on its own use of the expression in earlier debates, on racism and nuclear weapons.

Any declaration of a *status confessionis* stems from the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is in danger. It is a call from error into truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching or practice as heretical. The declaration of a *status confessionis* refers to the practice of the church as well as to its teaching. The church’s practice in the relevant case must conform to the confession of the gospel demanded by the declaration of the *status confessionis*. The declaration of a *status confessionis* addresses a particular situation. It brings to light an error which threatens a specific church. Nevertheless the danger inherent in that error also calls in question the integrity of proclamation of all churches. The declaration of a *status confessionis* within one particular situation is, at the same time, addressed to all churches, calling them to concur in the act of confessing (Debrecen 1997:198).

Strictly speaking, however, this is not a definition, since a technical definition does not exist. There are no timeless criteria that need to be fulfilled for a *status confessionis* to be declared, no template to be applied in order to determine beyond doubt and controversy that such a moment has arrived (for a discussion of the nature of *status confessionis*, see Möller 1996 as well as his *Habilitationschrift*, on which this essay builds; also Smit 1984). At most, one could perhaps say that the expression *status confessionis* means that a Christian, a group of Christians, a church, or a group of churches are of the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth has dawned, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most fundamental confession concerning the Christian gospel itself, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over against this threat. The implications of this description will become more obvious when a few of its aspects are scrutinised more closely.

Firstly, it supposes that Christians share the opinion that a *situation* has developed, a *moment of truth* has struck, in which the gospel itself is at stake. The role of the situation, the *kairos*, the moment that has ripened, cannot be overemphasised. *In statu confessionis nihil est adiaphoron*. Precisely the abnormal situation itself causes viewpoints and arrangements, which are adiaphora or neutral matters under normal circumstances to lose their innocence and neutrality. The power of the confessional word emerging from a *status confessionis* lies exactly in the fact that it is a word aimed at the concrete moment in the present.¹¹

11 The analysis of the existing situation therefore plays a decisive role in arguing for a *status confessionis*. Hence the necessity of penetrating preliminary discussions, airing all different viewpoints and theological arguments. Under normal circumstances the Church has a variety of ways in which she can act and fulfil her task of constant confession (*confessio continua*). Only when all other avenues have been explored may she come to the conclusion that an abnormal situation has arisen.

The recognition that a *status confessionis* exists may never be a premature and arbitrary attempt to cut the Gordian knot with force instead of unravelling it with fairness, wisdom, and responsibility. It may not be a unilateral standpoint in a discussion where a unilateral standpoint is not yet justified. It may not merely be an attempt to proclaim the point of view inherent in one's own group with the pretence of a last word, as a sort of "ethical protest, but with 'the volume tuned up'".

That the analysis of the situation plays an important part does of course not mean that the confession is derived from the situation or that it originates in the situation. The situation does not speak, but the gospel. The confession does not receive its content from the situation and consequently does not lose its truth or validity outside the situation; at the most, it may lose some of its immediate relevance. This is the fate of all polemic confessional utterances, from some of the old ecumenical creeds to the Canons of Dordrecht. The involvement with the concrete present is not a weakness; on the contrary, it is the very power of the confession. The gospel is being concentrated on the need of the hour – and in another hour and in another place the same truth may indeed suddenly become relevant and alive again.

Of course the dangers are very great. The possibility always threatens that Christians can analyse the situation wrongly or – worse still – that the word is projected into the situation by the desire or the interests of the group. There are no guarantees that the situation has been analysed correctly and that the issues which are really at stake have been fathomed correctly. Of course the persons addressed and sometimes accused will usually judge the situation differently than those pronouncing the *status confessionis*. Christians can at most appeal to the evidence and clarity of the gospel, perhaps to the consensus among Christians and churches, and finally to their own convictions and conscience in responsibility before God.

This immediately lends to any such action the character of venture or risk. It is indeed a bold step, taken without any formal or objective criteria by means of which it can be ascertained conclusively that a *status confessionis* does clearly exist. No confession is in any way absolutely necessary, writes Polman, but only hypothetically necessary, in the light of the historical situation. The confession inevitably carries "the stigma of historical involvement on its forehead". The recognition of a *status confessionis* has therefore always the character of a subjective decision. It is experienced as a compulsion, as something undertaken for the sake of necessity. Barth says, "Confession will always cause headshaking

In the second place *status confessionis* means that Christians are of the opinion that a moment of truth has dawned in which *the gospel itself is at stake*. That which may be adiaphora under normal circumstances is transformed on account of the gravity of the situation into a gravely decisive issue. *In statu confessionis nihil est adiaphoron*. The essence of the church and the credibility of the gospel are at stake. A moment of “to be or not to be” dawns for the Church (Berkouwer). That which under normal circumstances belongs to the “wellbeing” (*welwese*) suddenly becomes part of the being (*wese*). That which in the normal course of affairs is a nonfundamental article or custom becomes the focal point of the decision itself. An innocent matter suddenly becomes an article with which the Church stands or falls. A heretical version of the gospel is identified and rejected, and the truth of the gospel defended.¹²

In the third place, announcing a *status confessionis* means that the Christians who make the announcement judge that a situation has developed in which the *gospel* itself is at stake. It is necessary to emphasise the term “gospel” once again, because it recalls the deepest *intention* of every declaration of a *status confessionis* and describes the *spirit* or disposition with which it ought to happen. Precisely because it does not concern merely the postulation of a personal opinion or the viewpoint of one group, but the truth of the gospel itself, such an announcement is *never calculated to result in a schism*. The intention is, on the contrary, always the purification or (re-)uniting of the “true church”, the defence of and witness to “the credibility of the gospel”. When heresy (in the form of an ideological travesty of the gospel or schism which may divide the Church and violate the community – to use Calvin’s definition) threatens to blind believers in the name of the gospel itself, the moment of confession has dawned.

In all three respects, it seems questionable whether it would be wise to declare that a *status confessionis* has arrived. Firstly, although there can be no doubt about the seriousness of the moment and the necessity to confess – as has already been indicated – it is not immediately clear what the positions and practices are that have lost their neutrality and must now be renounced. The globalisation of the market economy is so complex, that “a whole series of arguments” is indeed needed. Secondly, it is even less clear in which sense the gospel is at stake and the truth of the church’s proclamation is being threatened by heretical teachings and practices. Throughout the

among serious people who do not know the particular seriousness of confession. Why? they will ask themselves and us, and the more seriously we confess, the less will they find the answer.”

The recognition of a *status confessionis* must therefore by no means have the overtones of triumphalism, self-assurance, complacency, a show of strength, or any other ulterior motive.

Status confessionis is no weapon in a private struggle, no handy “stick to hit with” (Noordmans), but the trembling acknowledgement that an hour has struck from on high in which something needs to be said. Such a word of confession is consequently never calculated or planned, but is born, it is “bestowed” (Barth); in one sense it surprises all those concerned. Whenever this happens, it is of no avail to object that it is not a suitable time or that it has come too soon. Nobody chooses the hour. In a *status confessionis* all tactical considerations are abandoned.

12 This means that a *status confessionis* can hardly be announced in terms of a whole series of arguments. A (new) theological compendium is not coming into being when a *status confessionis* is recognised; what is needed is a simple reminder of the heart of the matter. Often the announcement of a *status confessionis* is expressed in terms suggesting that it merely concerns the recognition and acknowledgement of some (already clear-cut) “boundaries”. Such an announcement may only occur in extremely extraordinary cases, where the gospel itself is truly and evidently at stake, where the “boundaries” are already drawn and the church need only acknowledge it, where Christians take a stand simply because “they cannot do anything else”.

When it is judged that the gospel itself is at stake, it also means that an attitude of neutrality or nonalignment is no longer possible, or rather, having such an attitude implies that a choice has already been made.

WARC Project, there has only been a few allusions in this direction, and it has clearly never been the thrust of the argument and the initiative to demonstrate that some Christians or churches are actually proclaiming a false gospel.¹³ Thirdly, declaring a *status confessionis* in the face of such complex issues, that call for unity and for joint response and confession, by word and deed, will certainly have exactly the opposite effect. As Möller correctly points out, our situation today “is not primarily a matter of clearly distinguishing confessing the truth of the gospel from deliberately and intentionally denying it by following wrong teachings and deliberately refusing to bear witness as required. The lack of confession is rather first and foremost a problem of not-yet-recognizing, linked with the absence of a binding, relevant and at the same time ecumenical peace-ethic, in the broadest sense, which is related to the church’s current responsibility in the world” (Möller 1996:143).

(c) Thirdly, if we are called to confess, although the situation does not have the characteristics of a *status confessionis*, does this imply that the drafting and adoption of a new confessional document has become necessary? From time to time, some remarks seem to suggest that the WARC is contemplating this possibility. According to Opocenský, the WARC’s resolution “expresses the conviction shared by the General Council that it is time to write a confession of faith which rejects injustice and struggles against it” (Opocenský 1999:9). The *Declaration of Debrecen* may even be regarded as a first attempt in this direction, particularly when one considers the way it was signed and recommended to churches, congregations and Christians to be signed.

It is clear that not even a *status confessionis* necessarily implies the need to write a new confession. Historically new confessions have not always been written in situations where a *status confessionis* had been declared. In the case of the Belhar Confession there were very specific reasons that led to the drafting of a confessional document (see the instructive discussion by Durand 1984; also Botha & Naude 2000; Smit 1984; 2000). A new confession is also not a necessity whenever the Christian faith is challenged and Christians or a church feel themselves called to confess. *Tota nostra operatio confessio* (Luther). Our whole life is confession. Everything we say and do. Christians and churches have many other ways of confessing our faith. The Confessing Church in Germany taught us that daily lives of concrete and practical confession are perhaps more important than having a confessional document.

It may be that a truly ecumenical confession could play a meaningful role in this regard. It may, however, also be true that any attempt to write and adopt such a document will only underline the conviction of many that the problem of “reception” is the single most important challenge to the ecumenical movement. If an ecumenical body or meeting should adopt such a confession, but it makes no difference to the everyday lives of the member churches, the congregations and the individual Christians, the attempt would certainly have failed (on the problem of reception in the ecumenical movement, see Naude & Smit 2000).

Several serious attempts have recently been made to rethink the different ways of speaking and acting in the public sphere that are available to churches and Christians. The church is indeed

13 The San José Consultation remarked more generally that the gospel is often misused by great powers as means of conquest and for political and economic domination, and that relationships between churches often remain paternalistic. The Kitwe Consultation (Judging, theses 5-11) came the closest to describing the situation in these terms, saying that the global economy “is often also presented in a pseudo-religious form with undoubtedly messianic claims”, and that Christians are facing a choice between Mammon and God, between following Christ or the global economy, but even these powerful remarks are clearly directed against the religious, idolatrous nature and role of the global economy and the influence it has on Christians and churches, and not against Christians or churches who deliberately use the gospel to legitimize the global economy, for example in the way that the Bible was used to legitimate apartheid.

challenge to *learn* to speak in public, particularly in modern, democratic and pluralistic societies. This involves new processes of learning to think, listen and speak within the churches themselves, as well as new ways of participating in discussions and activities in the public arena and contributing to public opinion and civil society. The church has many communicative actions at its disposal. It may be that the writing and adoption of confessional documents is not the first one to consider, however important, yes, imperative (Barth) it may be when the time has come for *that* form of witness.¹⁴

(d) This brings us to a final question. If Christians and churches are indeed called to confess, but a *status confessionis* does not exist and a new confessional document is not obviously necessary, could the call for a *processus confessionis* by the WARC prove helpful in this regard?

Several important aspects of this call should be noted. Economic injustice and ecological destruction are integrally related. The process must be one of commitment, since it deals with issues of faith, worship and spirituality. All member churches are called to become involved, and on all levels, which is ecclesologically of the utmost importance. Networking, partnerships and co-operation are encouraged.

What is most instructive, however, is the description of practical ways in which this process is to be implemented. According to the decisions of the WARC, it should be a four-fold process. It involves *recognition, education, confession, and action*. Concrete proposals for each of these aspects of the process are suggested.

This is clearly a serious theological attempt to face the problem of reception, and to take the different ways of confession available to the church into account. No final outcome is described. An ethics of discourse is suggested. Together, member churches, congregations and individual believers should find imaginative and responsible ways of facing the idolatrous and life-threatening realities of contemporary economic trends, inspired and strengthened by the faith, hope and love made possible by the grace proclaimed by the Triune God.

This is certainly a time for confession. And the process called for by the WARC may indeed show us a new but meaningful direction.

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14 For different forms of communicative action, including different forms of confession, available to and practiced by the church, see Arens 1989. For a very helpful reflection on the challenge to the church to rethink its traditional ways of issuing authoritative declarations, see Clements 1995. Also De Villiers & Smit 1995.

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