

## 101. A Journey for Life: from Kitwe to Debrecen

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1. We meet here together at an important moment. It is seven years after the General Council In Debrecen, which called upon all of its member-churches to engage in *a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession regarding economic injustice as well as ecological destruction*; and it is less than half a year before the General Council in Accra, where again decisions have to be taken about this process. Should this process be continued, and if yes, in what form? Or should it somehow end, for instance with a declaration of faith which has the character of a *'status confessionis'*?

These questions look like formal questions but they are not. These questions relate to our deepest faith and to the life of all churches, of which several delegates are present here. And we all know, that what is decided here will have a substantial impact on what is decided in Accra.

It may be good, therefore, to ask at the beginning of this meeting about what is at stake here, as well as in Accra, and to see that in a historical perspective. What we have to deal with here is primarily the presence of a Call. It is a Call which had its origin mainly in a meeting of churches in Kitwe, Africa 1995, but was later on affirmed and to some extent broadened by the General Council of 1997 in Debrecen.

This Call is related to our present world, a world in which many people deeply suffer under intolerable injustice, and in which we observe also an ongoing destruction of creation. But it was and is also a Call related to the heart of our Christian faith. For in the word 'Call' we hear the echo of the word 'Calling', which reminds us of our faith in a living Lord who calls us to be obedient to his will. In the coming days these two dimensions will no doubt form for us the main points of orientation: the dimension of a suffering reality (see point 2) and the dimension of our Christian faith and of the possibility of an answer fed by faith (point 3). Both dimensions which were are also recognizable in the reaction of the churches worldwide in answer to this Call, and about which Dr Seong Won Park will give us some further information later this morning.

In the coming days we also have to find an own answer to this Call. But in doing so we have to remind ourselves that we stand in a very rich tradition, in a community of saints of all centuries. For through the whole history of the churches, especially those of the Reformation, there have been moments in which churches choose for what could be called an actualised confession or a concrete stance of faith. A first example is the Scottish confession of 1560. In a time of brutal violence and oppression it boldly declared, that *"the*

*Commands of God ask us to save the life of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed, to live in soberness and temperance. Acts to the contrary are sins, by which God's anger is kindled.*“ As soon as serious crises developed in society, reformed churches and communities have always tried to relate that to some kind of intolerable revolution against the Living God and His Sovereign Will. I just remind you here of the *Barmen Declaration*, the hallmark of the German Bekennende Kirche (Confessing Church) which was formulated in 1934 at the time of the rise of Nazism, and also of the *Belhar Confession* which was written in the heyday of racism, condemning Apartheid as nothing less than heresy. In all these moments some facts or developments in reality were seen as so deeply opposed or contrary to the will of God, that churches understood that it was time to raise their voice - even if heavy risks were involved. Said in more general terms: now and then in history there is a *kairos* - a crucial moment which asks for Christians to come out for their faith in an actualised way. And that is simply because present earthly powers claim a dominion of life which only belongs to God. For this always necessitates a deep protest of faith by Christians.

Which brings us immediately to the heart of the matter. For behind the Call, coming to us from Kitwe in 1995, and reaffirmed in Debrecen in 1997, burned the same deep conviction. During the church meeting of Kitwe - which, by the way, was meant as a regional, African preparation for the Council in Debrecen, the awareness grew that also in our present world some absolute claims of dominion have become visible. These claims are of course not of the same character as those made by the Nazi-party and the German state in the time of the Barmen Declaration, or as the cruel claims of the Apartheid Régime and the National Party in the time of the Belhar Confession. This time, so Kitwe declared, the encompassing claims on life and nature come mainly from the global side of the world. They are directed at economic and political powers which work behind the scenes. But they are also of a sovereign nature, and because of that exercise a deep destructive influence on all living communities. So Kitwe decided that the time to confess, a *Kairos*, was coming back. Let me quote some sentences from the report of the meeting of the churches in Kitwe in 1995, so that you feel its burden and its spirituality.

*What we see in 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 the global economic plans of the G-7 group of countries are concerned. Our people's dreams and hopes of social equality, political freedom and economic justice, which were kindled at the time of independence 30 years ago, have turned into a long and harrowing winter of despair. 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 the global economy, of the almost untouchable structures of production, distribution and consumption of material goods and services.*

And after this, and based on this row of experiences, there comes the following stance of faith:

*Today, the global market economy has been sacralized, and elevated to an imperial throne. Thereby it usurps the sovereignty of God, claiming a freedom that belongs to God alone. For us as Christians, this raises the question of idolatry and of loyalty to God or mammon.*

Those who manage the world economy often talk of the 'sacrifices' that must be made. We are the victims they have in mind. All the signs of the times lead us to conclude that Africans live on a crucified continent as people to be sacrificed. This sacrifice of humanity on the altar of the global economy is intertwined with the sacrifice of nature. It is our painful conclusion that the African reality of poverty now constitutes a status confessionis.

As we all know, the General Council of the WARC in Debrecen honoured this call in initiating the process of recognition, education and confession about economic injustice and environmental destruction, and called all member-churches to respond. But let us here not deny that it was difficult for the churches of Africa to put this as a separate item on the agenda of the General Council. A special evening of the South, organized by the representatives of the churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America was needed in Debrecen to turn it into a matter for central consideration. For especially the churches of the North were, generally speaking, not quite willing at that moment to engage themselves wholeheartedly in this process of economic and ecological confession. And I mention this here because a similar hesitation may occur or come back in Accra.

In the coming days we will dig deep in trying to understand various aspects of our global reality. We will have to understand again what in the present developments conflicts with the will of God. I will not anticipate those inputs and discussions. But given the possibility of hesitation of some churches which I just mentioned it may be good to make some initial remarks about the degree to which the diagnosis which Kitwe made still holds. For since that time almost nine years have passed by. Has the urgency to take a faith-stance grown or has it perhaps since then diminished? It is the question about the possible implications of recent changes in global reality for a possible present stance of faith.

2. In my view three developments in the world economy have become more evident since 1995. The first is the enormous growth in the quantity and influence of the so-called financial markets(a). The second is the growth of imperial thinking and acting (b), and the third is the growing mismanagement of creation(c). I will try to explain why developments have not diminished but indeed why there is increased urgency for a faith-reaction from the side of the churches.

a) **Financial markets**, our first point for consideration, are surely not a new phenomenon in modern Western Capitalism. But in recent years they not only handle far more money than ever before, but also have begun to steer and control the real economy to a large extent. Stock markets now demand not only annual, but also quarterly, reports to control the degree of financial profitability of all companies; and it is on that basis that they decide about the future of millions of employed people. And most governments have now begun to fear the financial markets, especially since the occurrence of a number of crises - in Asia, Mexico and Argentine. It is sometimes called the new Big Brother Syndrome: how can a national economy remain acceptable in the eyes of global capital, so that the Capital does not leave one's country overnight? States have now even started to compete with each other by reducing capital taxes and bringing down safety nets for the poor, just to lower costs and become more attractive for Capital from abroad. This is surely a sign of increasing dominion and of growing dependency. Especially the indebted countries of the South are deeply influenced by the dominion of the financial markets. I mention only one figure, which is taken from the United Nations Development Program Report for 2002. It contains a table (1.4) of present capital flows to and from the South, expressed in percentages of the Gross Domestic Product of all the developing countries. These figures are just astonishing. For while in 2000 the capital flows from the North to the South were 3.1% of their Gross Domestic Product - namely 2.5% in the form of foreign direct investments and 0.6 % in the form of net grants and development aid - the capital out-flows from the South to the North (in terms of interest and amortization payments, their so-called debt-service) amounted to no less than 6.3.% of their joint GDP. So even in this 21st century a yearly net transfer of capital takes place from the poor countries to the rich, of a size which is no less than 3% of their entire annual income! Here there is surely more to it than merely that the poor grow poorer while the rich become richer. Somehow the rich are simply taking what is not theirs, consuming the houses of the poor. And that is something which the Old Testament prophets have already told us arouses God's anger. Several poor nations are now caught in the chains of systemic financial dependence, which for more than 20 years has required them to endure a net transfer of capital to the banks and the enriching countries North.

b) **Secondly, there is the growing influence in our time of thinking and acting in terms of *Empire***, that is, in terms of giving priority to the so-called *vital interests* of the richest

countries of the world. Sometimes it looks as if the ancient Roman Empire has returned, an Empire which tried to encompass the whole inhabited world and pursued its interests to the most remote corners of the earth. The Biblical metaphor for world powers like these are giants which, however, stand on feet of clay. And also that seems to fit our time. Take, for instance, the United States of America. How much has it, in recent years, become dependent upon the inputs of foreign capital and of energy, just because of its massive aspirations and its extremely high use of material resources! This dependency implies that those external sources and inputs are seen by the Empire as the lifeline and they therefore have to be protected at all costs. Which implies, however, a policy of growing external control and domination, in order to safeguard those vital interests. But how easily those self-chosen vital interests run contrary to the really vital interests of other countries and of the poor people of this earth! And so such interests usually weight as dust in the balance during any international negotiations, since the poor countries have to compete with the 'vital interests' of the rich. This deeply distorts almost all international relations.

c) **Last, but not least, we have received in recent years several signs of a growing *mismanagement of nature*.** Next to the harvesting of the world's forests, which was already so clearly addressed in the resolutions of Debrecen, we see now signs everywhere of what a growing over-consumption and over-use of fossile fuels and what this over-use can do to God's creation. We are confronted, not only the threat of a rising sea-level, but also with a growing man-made instability of climate, while biologists have recently warned that a quarter of the world's living species of animals will come to their end in this century if no measures are taken to reverse the trends.

In the reformed tradition we confess that human stewardship of the earth is a divine mandate, and also recognize that humans and animals were joined equally in God's covenant with Noah. But what if we as producers, consumers and governments continue to so intensively threaten all God-given life? Obviously we then no longer deserve the name of stewards.

My over-all conclusion is therefore that the urgency for churches to take a stance has surely not diminished since Kitwe and Debrecen. It now even looks as if the traffic lights of the world have turned from orange into red. There lurks a deep injustice behind what happens in the world, as well in relation to the poor as to the entire creation - though now it is cloaked more than ever before by the formal rules of the global financial, property and trade systems.

3) But if the Call of Kitwe and of Debrecen has not diminished in urgency, the question still remains as to how we should react from our Christian faith to these most recent developments. Here we must firstly listen to what the churches from all over the world have said already and to what they have done in reaction to the Call of Debrecen, and Seong-Won, our next speaker will give us more insight into those reactions. But perhaps we need more than that for a fully actualized statement of real confessional quality. This is because confessing is never without a price. You better not confess if you are not willing to accept it wholeheartedly the risky consequences. A sincere confession can therefore never be enforced from above, it just has to grow from the bottom up.

Let me therefore conclude by looking for the last time to the messages of Kitwe and of Debrecen, just to see if they have characteristics which can help us somehow in our coming reflections and discussions. Three observations immediately come to mind.

**The first observation is about *language*.** Kitwe has clearly shown that an intellectual kind of reasoning, however correct it may be, does not of itself lead to the kind of speaking which belongs to the heart and the soul of the churches. Churches should always speak a language of their own. For only in that way they can give the convincing proof that the deep problems of our time are rooted in the spiritual realm, that they are at least to some extent the fruits of disobedience, and give a clear message of resistance to live and to act according to the will of God. This looks even more to the point now the power of money and finance has grown so immensely in the present world. Then it does not suffice to endorse, for instance, a strong declaration against ruling neo-liberal convictions. For if we stop there the real point will still be missed namely, the presence of an enormous financial greed and an obsessive lust for power in our days, for which concepts like those we have been discussing somehow function as an intellectual covering cloak. The language in which Kitwe spoke of abuse and sin was a language in which you feel the presence of a living word of God, which goes as a sword through anyone's deepest thoughts and intentions. And it is this Word which is therefore able to uncover all forms of structural idolatry, even those which creep through the minds and the bodies of even very Christian looking societies.

**My second remark is about *self-inclusion*,** and it is narrowly related to the first remark. For as we attempt to go to the deepest roots of the present global structural problems, we discover how difficult it becomes to put our own behaviour between brackets. Both Kitwe and Debrecen explicitly referred to sins from which also churches and Christians should repent. For you cannot, you may not, judge others while proposing that your own behaviour is above rebuke. But admitting guilt in general terms is possibly not enough in a time, where the imperial interests of the rich push away the vital interests of the poor and in which the creation itself is threatened unto death. For in such a

time it becomes also clear, that simply more economic growth and more sophisticated technologies will not help us. These painless ways of rescue, which are so intensively supported by the financial markets and the growing western empires, simply fail as saviours. And therefore the present styles of living, of production and consumption in the rich countries, now have to be brought under the blast of a biblical critique. Let me just remind you of the words of Charles Birch who said during the WCC Assembly of Nairobi: “ *the rich should live more simple, so that the poor can simply live*”. This message includes all rich Christians and all their churches. Confessing Jesus Christ implies also the recognition of his Lordship over the distribution of capital and income on this earth and over the administration of all scarce resources.

**Which brings me to my last remark**, and that centres around *hope*. Kitwe radiated real Christian hope in the darkness over Africa, and I hope that also this line will be picked up by us. Christian hope has namely not its source in what we propose or do, but in the promise of the Morning Star, and in the Call to live concretely up to that bright future. It is for instance simply not true that there are no alternatives to the present style of globalization. These alternatives have already shown their significance and feasibility in different parts of the world and bear there the names of community-economics, Ubuntu economy (the term of Kitwe), sustainable economies, economies of caring and sharing, or economies of enough or contentment. Just look to the three characteristics which they have in common. Their first common element is always real *people’s participation*. It leads to honouring the economic principle that the fulfilment of basic needs should have priority above the satisfaction of the whims and desires of utmost luxury. The second common element is the *economic recognition of given assets*, or as you might put it, of the need of economic preservation of existing natural, cultural and human capital. The Call to care for nature, for forms of real community and for the health and talents of people is never pushed aside by new or existing private property claims. The third common element, which binds the whole together and makes it also economically consistent, is *the choice of a responsible and sober income and consumption level*. That level is not derived from the goal of maximum economic expansion, but is chosen in such a way that it upholds the meaningful employment of all in a blossoming economy.

These three elements at first sight look like they are only possible in local and regional situations, but this impression is simply wrong. For these three principles can also be transferred to the global level where they imply in the first place, a thorough democratisation of all international institutions. Secondly, they require the full recognition of the world’s natural, social and human capital as part of the global public good. Thirdly, they imply the need for a drastic renewal in the international financial system and a renewal that would honour the rights of the poor countries to have real access to the sources of financial capital, while at the same time restraining the richest countries to maximum levels for the creation of international money. Proposals

like these belong to a Jubilee- style of globalization, which is not oriented to the survival of the fittest but to the support and care for the weak. They therefore remind us of what Philip Potter once called 'God's own globalization' in which in the Lordship of Jesus the pastoral, rather than the imperial, sets the tone (Ephesians 1). Is living out of that hopeful future not the main challenge for all churches?

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