In the summer of 2010 I had the opportunity to participate in two wonderful events, first the June conference on “Reformed Mission in an Age of World Christianity,” and then a Roman Catholic wedding at the Basilica of Notre Dame, Indiana. Both events were filled with fellowship, celebrative worship, and enriching conversation. Both were also events that highlighted roles of the church. The conference on Reformed mission witnessed a strong effort to unify Reformed churches behind the Accra Confession (AC). The AC calls on churches to covenant for justice, to which Christians of goodwill are likely to assent. It embeds that call in a strong position on the causes of poverty and the character of the global economy. In the wedding, the priest presented the betrothed couple, and all in attendance, with an ardent plea to work in God’s world, fulfilling his purposes by using their abundant gifts not to serve themselves only, but to work for justice, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and heal the sick. In so doing, he alluded to Catholic Social Teaching, a body of social thought that has been growing and maturing ever since its birth in 1891.

Ultimately, both Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians are, in the contexts of their own traditions, attempting to work out what it means to be faithful Christ-followers in a fallen world. Both have struggled through time to discover the proper role of the church in engaging world events and issues. For Reformed churches, the AC provocatively raises the question of the church’s role in global economic affairs and provides us with an existential case to study this basic question. As we seek a constructive answer to this question, we may find helpful insights from the Roman...

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Catholic Church’s development and use of its increasingly rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching.

**Justice, the Global Economy, and the Accra Confession**

There is something fundamentally right about the AC’s call to the global Reformed community to covenant for global justice. Foundational pillars of Reformed thought and life—like God’s sovereignty, the goodness of creation, Christ’s salvific and redemptive purposes, our covenantal role to be responsible agents, and such values as stewardship and shalom—all combine to push the church to focus on global affairs and to ask the sorts of questions raised by the AC. The supporters of the AC thus rightly position the Christian community to fight mightily against global poverty, ecological destruction, and the spirits of consumerism, greed, and selfishness. Point 5 says, “We have heard that creation continues to groan, in bondage, waiting for its liberation” (Rom. 8:22). We are challenged by the cries of the people who suffer and by the woundedness of creation itself.

These are indeed matters that should be on the minds and hearts of God’s people and motivate the work of our hands. In calling Reformed churches everywhere to respond to the cries, the AC draws on God’s sovereignty over the whole creation, his love of justice and peace, our responsibility to “choose God over mammon,” and God’s requirement to “do justice, love kindness, and walk in God’s way” (Mic. 6:8). As point 32 says, “We are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us” (2 Cor. 5:10). As point 33 reminds us, “We are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us” (2 Cor. 5:10). As point 32 says, “We are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us” (2 Cor. 5:10). As point 33 reminds us, “We are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us.”

The AC is also right in many of its statements about what these beliefs lead God’s people to reject, like “rampant consumerism,” “the unregulated accumulation of wealth,” ideologies that put “profits before people,” theologies that claim that “God is only with the rich,” and “teachings which exclude the poor and care for creation.” Furthermore, the AC prophetically reminds us that there is much to be done and that God calls us to the task. Poverty is widespread. Victims of injustice abound. The creation suffers from ecological devastation. The AC will serve a great purpose if it generates an enthusiastic recommitment in the Reformed church to covenant together to be a healing presence in the midst of such pain.

At the summer conference, speakers supported and elaborated on all these important and motivational points.

- Puleng Lenka Bula of South Africa argued persuasively that though many Christians are wary when the church takes up economic issues, the church must not back off, for the simple reason that there is probably no other aspect of our daily lives that Scripture discusses so frequently.
- Ofelia Ortega Suarez of Cuba saw the AC as an invitation for Christians to live redeemed lives, to be different from the world, to care about others, and to say no to all other worldly idols (like materialism) that compete for our worship.
- Philip Peacock of India highlighted the AC’s call to Christians to engage in the struggle for global justice.

All three participants, and others besides, come to the table of the church with a profound spiritual sense that our world is terribly broken and that God’s people, especially the rich and well-off, have not taken seriously enough God’s call to do something about it. All of this is to be affirmed.

The troubles with the AC begin in its attempts to “read the signs of the times.” It moves quickly from identification of serious global issues into a particular social-scientific analysis of global economic affairs. This particular analysis is definitely one that the church needs to hear and learn from, but the AC’s endorsement of it is problematic. There are several reasons for this, but the main one is anticipated by the AC itself when it “recognize[s] the enormity and complexity of the situation” (point 11).

The world situation is indeed both enormous and complex, so much so that analysts who dedicate their lives to figuring out pieces of it often find themselves at odds with each other even in identifying the relevant facts, let alone understanding them. The AC, however, maintains that root causes of global economic and ecological injustice are what it calls the “neoliberal global market system,” which is “defended by empire.” Empire is defined as “a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests.”

True, there are social scientists who analyze world affairs this way, but there are also many who see things very differently. For example, there are likely more books that trumpet market solutions to global poverty than there are books that find markets to be its root cause. Many of the economists who write such pro-market books are themselves from the developing world, like Jagdish Bhagwati, George Ayittey, Hernando de Soto, and Muhammad Yunus (of Grameen Bank fame), to mention only a few.

Whereas every reference to markets in the AC is negative, these scholars of the global economy are much more positive, finding that people are poor not because of what markets have done to them. Quite the contrary, they argue almost the polar opposite, that poverty stems from lack of access to markets, and that properly structured market institutions actually
serve the poor. Unfortunately, in the real world such markets are often repressed, sometimes under the weight of heavy local and national corruption. Instead of denouncing markets, many social scientists and policymakers work to discover what measures can be implemented, and by whom, to establish and regulate well-functioning markets. The church needs to hear and wrestle with these prominent views just as it hears the analysis supported by the writers of the AC.

In support of these more pro-market views is the fact the nations most successful in defeating poverty, creating jobs, and improving life in general for the poor and the marginalized are those that have expanded their participation in global markets. Not that liberalization is without problems, but many countries that have liberalized internal markets and opened up to external markets have done very well. Korea, Malaysia, China, Brazil, India, and Ghana all come to mind. None of these nations has followed a simplistic pattern, and all of them face real, significant, and ongoing problems of justice. But the AC's argument that global markets and market economies in general are a sure road to poverty and despair for the masses is difficult to sustain when the experiences of a whole range of developing countries are considered.

Perhaps a more moderate response is in order. Such a case was presented at the conference in a session by Augusto de la Torre, chief economist for Latin America and the Caribbean at the World Bank. The AC identifies the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank as international institutions that use their power "to protect and advance the interest of capital owners" (point 13). Yet de la Torre has spent most of his life studying poverty and working to improve policy measures designed to reduce poverty, all the while in the employ of the World Bank and the IMF. In his efforts to understand poverty and its solutions, de la Torre has found the simple model on the next page for visualizing some of the complexity and pressures that developing countries face.

His point in presenting this diamond model is that for a nation, or even the world as a whole, to enjoy sustainable development, it must balance its attention on the four goals at the points of the diamond. If a nation focuses too much on growth, then fairness and the environment may suffer, which creates social and environmental problems that one day come back to hinder growth. On the other hand, nations that focus too much on fairness (e.g., through poverty alleviation measures) often find their economies in decline and ultimately causing greater poverty. If the goal is to achieve sustainable development, then the interaction, synergies, and feedbacks among these different goals need to be understood and taken into account in policy decisions.

De la Torre has learned that each country has unique constraints and possibilities in the pursuit of its goals, including each country's unique political culture. In spite of such uniqueness, however, there are nevertheless some modest conclusions researchers have reached. One of those is that economic growth is tightly correlated with success in reducing poverty. Another is that establishing markets is a key component of these successful strategies. Still, de la Torre is no laissez-faire economist, for he also noted that markets on their own are not enough to address issues of justice, especially in the area of income inequality. Consequently, each country must find ways to not only establish and support but also regulate markets. In part, this means that countries need strong governments able to exercise checks and balances on markets and take redistributive measures oriented toward helping the poor.

Like most economists, de la Torre recognizes a legitimate role for markets but is also aware that they cannot handle every social problem. Markets must be integrated with other spheres of society—particularly, but not exclusively, the state. A main task of economists is discovering the proper degree and type of state involvement in markets.

Economists like de la Torre are not the types the AC seems to have in mind when characterizing the economics profession as defending what it identifies as the "neoliberal" market model. Instead, the economists critiqued in the AC are what might be called "market fundamentalists." Such fundamentalists do exist and they can be influential, but most economists are more balanced.
In its discussion of “neoliberal economics” the AC advances from its particular analysis into the realm of what is often called ideology. Among the main critics of today’s global economic order, and those who refer to this order as “neoliberal,” are those with a strong background in the Marxist-inspired dependency theory. I confess that I find much explanatory power in dependency theory, which explains better than other theories the way powerful institutions all too often abuse their power to exploit and oppress. But it is one theory among many. Though dependency theory often has been helpful in understanding poverty and oppression, it has a dismal record of finding constructive solutions. In fact, one of the early and oft-cited proponents of dependency theory, Fernando Enrique Cardoso, took a much more conventional market approach to economic policy when he became president of Brazil in 1995. Since then, Brazil’s overall economy has improved dramatically, with both poverty and inequality declining significantly.

Finally, it is important to make a few comments about the factual pillars of the AC’s reading of the times. The AC is certainly correct in stating that poverty, inequality, and ecological destruction continue to be serious global problems. But the AC relies on some facts that are by no means obviously true. For example, the AC says that “the debt of poor countries continues to increase” and “the number of people living in absolute poverty on less than one US dollar per day continues to increase” (point 7). On the point about debt, the AC neglects to mention largely successful efforts in the last ten years to reduce the debts of poor countries. Much of the debt has by now been forgiven. This is shown in the graph below, which refers to developing countries and is drawn from World Bank and IMF data. The graph on the next page indicates that the debt burden is actually declining.\(^1\) Granted, the issue of debt is complex, yet it seems that the statement “the debt of poor countries continues to increase” may not be true.

A similar observation can be made about poverty. Like debt, poverty is also a complex phenomenon that is hard to define and measure, but a review of easy-to-access evidence does not support the bleak picture painted by the AC. Consider the following statement taken from the World Bank’s site “Understanding, Measuring and Overcoming Poverty”:

Using improved price data from the latest [2005] round of the International Comparison Program, new poverty estimates released in August 2008 show that about 1.4 billion people in the developing world (one in four) were living on less than $1.25 a day in 2005, down from 1.9 billion (one in two) in 1981. . . . The developing world as a whole remains on track to meet the first

Millennium Development Goal to halve extreme poverty from its 1990 levels by 2015.\(^2\)

The United Nations confirms these findings with its own broader measure of human well-being, the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI includes inequality, educational, and health issues in addition to simple income figures and reports that well-being has been improving for most of the world’s peoples for the last two to three decades.\(^3\) None of this argues that poverty is no longer a global problem, but the fact that the lives of the global poor seem to be improving on some significant and widely used measures tells quite a different story from the one told in the AC. It may also lead to different conclusions from those reached in the AC.

It seems then that what we encounter in the AC is a document that powerfully identifies the concerns of the church for global economic and ecological justice, but that is suspect in its analysis of the global economy. If we follow Paul’s advice to the Thessalonians to “test everything. Hold on to the good” (1 Thess. 5:21), we will want to affirm the theological underpinnings of the AC and its call to covenant for justice, while setting aside the analysis for further study and debate by scholars, practitioners, and experts from a whole range of fields. To achieve such a two-pronged approach, Reformed ecclesiology may provide a valuable framework, not
only for the AC and the global economy, but also for other difficult life issues the church is called to address.

**The Church and Its Mission**

It has long been accepted that the Reformed tradition of Christianity expects the church to be deeply engaged in economic life and that a main mission of the church in the world at large is to work for justice. Calvin himself clearly understood this, as have Reformed theologians from Kuyper to Barth to Newbigin to Brueggemann. The difficult question has always been how.

To answer this question, we must gain clarity about what the church actually is. This was an important issue for the Reformers, because once they left the fold of the Roman Catholic Church, the meaning and the identity of the church was no longer settled. Whereas under the Roman Catholic Church the institutional church and the general body of believers were essentially coterminous, the Reformation spawned many different congregations and institutional structures. All the new churches were staking out different theological positions and engaging in different life practices. In such a world, the definition of the true church became a pressing question.

To address this problem, a strong theme that arose in Reformed ecclesiology was the distinction between what Abraham Kuyper calls the church as institute and the church as organism. Other ways of referring to this distinction are the visible and invisible church, and the church gathered and scattered. On the one hand is the institutional church, made up of elders, deacons, worship patterns, and buildings. On the other hand is the church in mission, Christ-followers everywhere who work redemptively in all areas of life in response to God’s call on their lives.4

When Christians join a congregation and perhaps also become part of a denomination, they become members of the church as institute. They join in fellowship with God’s people to worship God, to participate in the sacraments, to hear God’s Word, and to be part of a community of believers. When they leave for their workplaces on Monday, they remain members of Christ’s church but now go out as members of the organic church. They are God’s people sent on a mission as “priests” to bring Christ’s redeemptive message and practices to the world.5

The church as institute and the church as organism both have essential roles to play in addressing world issues. The role of the church as institute is to prepare its members for their lives in society. According to Lesslie Newbigin, institutional churches should “train, support and nourish” their members to enable them “to think out the problems that face them in their secular work” so that “groups of Christians working in the same sectors of public life” can meet “to thrash out the controversial issues of their business or profession in light of their faith.” The goal of the church sent into the world, says Newbigin, is nothing short of a “new social order” that conforms to the will of God.5

As the Belgic Confession says, one of the primary tasks of the institutional church, and one of the marks of the true church, is the pure preaching of the gospel. It is in large measure through such preaching that the community is trained, supported, and nourished to think with a renewed mind, to increasingly understand God’s will and carry it out. With renewed minds, focused on kindness, compassion, patience, justice, stewardship, and God’s special heart for the poor, members of the church go into the world and work for social transformation. In the church as organism, God’s people have a general vocation to respond to God’s Word, to be obedient to his call, and to do his will. At the same time, each person in the body of Christ has a particular vocation or calling to discover and carry out God’s will in the area of life in which he or she is especially involved and especially trained. Pastors are not expected to be economists, political theorists, or environmental scientists. The institutional church should preach on justice in economic life, but should refrain from prescribing trade policies.

In his study of Reformed ecclesiology, Wallace Alston Jr., referring to Karl Barth, argues that the church should engage in both diaconal service and in prophetic action. Such service, says Alston, “requires attention to the social, economic, and political disorders in society, as well as the church’s commitment to alter those forms of social injustice that cause people to suffer.” But then Alston adds an important caveat, noting that public pronouncements on such issues, while at times necessary, can be “dangerous for the ministry of the church.” When the issues are sufficiently clear, as for example those addressed in the Barmen Declaration or the Belhar Confession, then the institutional church should definitely issue a pronouncement. Alston senses, however, that he must also warn us that most issues . . . are more complex and cannot be so simply addressed. There is often no single interpretation of the facts that is completely adequate, no one solution that can be honestly affirmed to be the will of God, and thus no universally normative Christian response. . . . The danger is that the church will confuse social or political ideology with the divine will and proclaim it as gospel to the world.6
Newbigin makes a similar point when he says that “the major role of the Church in relation to the great issues of justice and peace will not be in its formal pronouncements but in continually nourishing and sustaining men and women who will act responsibly as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens.”

Following the advice of Alston and Newbigin, the church as institute, with its trained expertise in theology and Scripture, should focus on scriptural foundations for addressing economic and environmental questions. By so doing, pastors and theologians can inspire the church’s members who specialize in these fields to apply the insights of Scripture in their daily lives. The institutional church should neither ignore such issues nor dominate them. Instead, it ought to instruct its members on the insights of Scripture for life in this world and by so doing enable the organic church to interpret those insights for businesses, households, civil society, and government, all the arenas into which the organic church spreads. In this conceptualization, the institutional church would affirm the theology of the AC while the organic church would wrestle with the economic analysis.

To see how this could work in a Reformed context, the experience of the Roman Catholic Church with its tradition of Catholic Social Thought (CST) might be instructive. Contemporary CST began in 1891 when Pope Leo XIII issued the first papal encyclical on social and economic questions, and since then a rich tradition of social thought has developed and continues to grow in depth of insight and influence.

Consider the most recent encyclical, _Caritas in Veritate_ (2009). Like the AC, this encyclical speaks eloquently against global poverty and ecological breakdown. It then reminds the church and “all people of goodwill” of scriptural principles like justice, human dignity, community, God’s preferential option for the poor, the common good, and solidarity. The encyclical takes stock of the world’s brokenness and suggests how CST’s principles might be applied. The encyclical becomes a public document, and it is the job of everyone in the church (which seems quite like the church as organism) to discuss, debate, and apply to real life this teaching of the church (which seems quite like the church as institute). But CST stays clear of theoretical economic analysis and policy prescription. As Pope Benedict XVI says, “The Church does not have technical solutions to offer” (para. 9). Instead, the pope calls people to analysis and action, noting that “the development of peoples today in many cases demand[s] new solutions. These need to be found together” (para. 32).

The encyclical thus becomes part of the general conversation about how these insights can and should be applied in the contemporary world.

Not surprisingly, people of goodwill who seek to integrate CST into their professional practices and daily lives do not generally come to a consensus on which set of policies or behavior patterns the teachings support. The world is too complex for that. Still, the conversation takes place and it has made a difference.

I believe institutional churches in the Reformed tradition can find a way to keep these vital issues before their members and thus foster a lively and productive conversation in the organic church. Such a conversation would influence public life in transformative ways, without falling victim to the need to make definitive pronouncements, especially on matters beyond the expertise of the institutional church. If this distinction were followed with respect to the Accra Confession, Reformed churches would enthusiastically agree to covenant for justice. Beyond that, however, the jobs of identifying the precise causes of global injustice and then finding pathways to a more just society would fall to the organic church. Yes, the analysis in the AC should be studied and taken seriously, but it should not be confessed.

**NOTES**


