

# NOW IS THE TIME:

## Baptists and Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

### 1. THE HISTORY OF JPIC

The sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches met in Vancouver in 1983 amidst fierce political controversies over NATO's response to the Soviet Union's installation of new medium-range missiles. NATO's decision to develop new weapons and deploy the cruise missiles and the Pershings on European soil met with stern opposition from the peace movement in many European countries. In Vancouver delegates from East Germany introduced the idea of convening a *Friedenskonzil* (a council of peace). This was again taken up in 1985 when the German physicist, philosopher and peace researcher, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, at the West German *Kirchentag*, called upon all churches of the world to come together for such a council. The Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches were quick to respond. In both traditions a council is the highest authority. The Orthodox have been without a council for over 1200 years. For decades now they have been trying to organize a pan-Orthodox council and some observers believe that it will take another decade or more for them to succeed. In the Roman Catholic tradition the Pope is the appropriate authority to convene a council. In fact, neither Church was persuaded by a German layman, however important he might be, to come together in an all-Christian council.

The idea of a council was alighted upon for the peace issue precisely because a council has, in Christian history, exercised the highest authority. When certain controversial issues came up, a council was convened and decisions were made by it possessed binding quality. Von Weizsäcker clearly wanted the churches to commit themselves to a pronouncement that would be binding. As early as 1934 Dietrich Bonhoeffer had called upon the churches to come together in a council. Individual Christians and the individual denominations, although obliged to be witnesses of peace, would be swept away by the forces of hatred. 'Only the one great ecumenical council of the holy Church of Christ from all over the world can speak in such a way that the world will have to listen to the word of peace, although with gnashing of teeth, and then the nations will become glad because this church of Christ will take weapons away from their sons, forbid war and call out Christ's peace over a raging world'. (*Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.I, p.219)

Arguably, the unifying quality of a council and the number of Christian people it represents would lend such weight to its statements that the world, although unwillingly, would have to listen and follow the churches' lead. Von Weizsäcker, in his reference to Bonhoeffer, thought of a council to meet for six months and then speak to the world on behalf of a billion Christians. As it became apparent that any such coming-together of churches would not be called a council, this term was dropped. Various other names have been used for conferences on JPIC; the word 'Convocation' being used for the global gathering.

Prior to the global Convocation there were several national, regional and other inter-church meetings on justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The major regional conferences included one in the Pacific (September 1988), the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel (held in May 1989 and co-sponsored by the Conference of European Churches and the European Bishops Conference of the Roman Catholic Church, with significant Baptist input), a conference in Asia (September 1989), and Latin America (December 1989). Strangely, there was no such conference on the North American continent. In addition, some regional meetings of women discussed the issues, and immediately prior to the Convocation there was

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a women's meeting in Seoul. Orthodox theologians came together twice (Sofia 1987; Minsk 1989) to discuss the Orthodox contribution. The General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches (Seoul 1989) also took up the issues.

Four questions may be asked at this point:

- (1) Does the refusal of some churches to apply the term 'council' to the peace issue mean that these churches do not consider the questions in relation to the so-called arms-race theologically important enough? Is it of theological significance, or is it not, that the development and deployment of nuclear arms and the threat to use these weapons are carried out in countries that are allegedly Christian (including Holy Russia)? Are, then, the churches faced with massive apostasy by all those in the industrial, banking and military sectors of society and by politicians? Is the trust in nuclear arms a heresy that cries out for condemnation from the churches?
- (2) Is not the isolation of the peace issue and the call for a council of peace reflective of the Northerners' preoccupation with the peace issue? By contrast, is not peace one aspect of a total perspective that the JPIC programme would like to bring into focus?
- (3) What ecclesial quality do such conferences have and what legal status do texts, resolutions, statements or addresses have that come out of conferences in which churches that are otherwise still divided participate? Are conferences that deal with political, economic, military and ecological issues helpful in the quest for Christian unity? What is the particular Baptist position with its emphasis on the autonomy of the local church?
- (4) Bonhoeffer and von Weizsäcker seemed to think that the numerical strength of the Christian community would give special significance to the statements of such a council. Is this putting too much trust in sheer numbers? Are Christian churches such a driving force in our societies that engineers, chemists, physicists, computer and other 'high tech' experts, high level management in industry and banking, the military leadership and the political establishment would ever listen to what the churches have to say? Can we, indeed, say the decisive 'word' together or are our churches divided on the issues?

A preparatory consultation for the Seoul Convocation was first held in Montreux in November 1988. It produced a working paper which was the basis for discussion by the Preparatory Group in April 1989. This group issued the first draft of a document which was circulated for study and comment to all WCC member churches, Central Committee members, Christian World Communities and other interested persons and/or organizations. All recipients were requested to send their reactions, responses, criticisms, suggestions or whatever to the Geneva WCC headquarters by middle of October 1989. About 250 responses were received from various churches, agencies, groups and individuals. The Preparatory Group met again in November 1989 and, taking these responses into account, revised the document. The Second Draft Document was to be the basis of discussion in Seoul.

The Central Committee of the WCC, at its meeting in July 1989, made the decision to limit the 'Acts of Covenanting' to three main issues: the present international economic order and the debt crisis; total security strategies (militarism); the 'greenhouse effect' (global warming).

After the Preparatory Group had met in November 1989, the WCC received a letter from the Vatican stating that the Roman Catholic Church would not send delegates, but only 'observers', who would be without authority to vote in the plenary sessions.

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### 2. THE WORK OF THE CONVOCATION

The work of the Convocation was carried out in plenaries, hearings and working groups which were supposed to discuss various sections of the draft document. It had been sent to delegates in advance so that they would come prepared to discuss the issues. As it turned out, however, a number of delegates had not done their homework or had not been able to do so because of difficulties in postal communications. Moreover, it soon became obvious that many delegates were not satisfied with the draft document. They felt it was too 'northern' or too 'European'. Even members of the drafting committee, who had been carefully selected from all over the world, voiced their dissatisfaction. Thus it was that the working groups submitted their findings, suggestions and other items to drafting committees, which existed for each of the three sections of the draft document. The twenty working groups of about twenty members each went through the sometimes bewildering experience of wrestling with the problems put before them by the draft document, but also with their desires to communicate the issues facing them in their own home-countries.

On one evening hearings were scheduled. As they took place simultaneously, delegates had to decide which hearing they wanted to attend. Because organizers had failed to invite enough experts, the hearings were by and large not very productive.

The plenary sessions were devoted to two distinct experiences: the spiritual and the working-debating experience. Every morning there was a worship service from 9 till 10.30. The services were very well prepared and extremely provocative. Speakers from all over the world, clergy and laity alike, related their stories to the Convocation. An Australian Aborigine woman spoke of her thoughts on JPIC, whilst Frank Chikane, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, also bore his witness to the issue involved. A Dalit theologian from India gave his testimony, just as a Japanese nun lent her voice in support of a Philippine woman: her name? 'I have had many names in my life. I will share all of them with you. Right now it is AIDS ..... Women are blamed for being prostitutes. All I know is that I had no choice in the matter. For myself and most of the women I know, we live like this because we have to feed and educate our brothers and sisters so they don't have to "live like this" ..... The multi-billion dollar sex industry feeds on our poverty. So don't give me your sympathy, do something!'

The Rt Revd Barbara Harris preached (and the Orthodox delegates walked out in protest at a woman-bishop), as also did a Lutheran from Brazil who related what a Latin-American 're-reading of the Scripture' signified: 'the confluence of the text, the reality of oppression, and the community of faith'. Thus he posed the question: 'Do we agree that we have to read the biblical texts with the poor and in the perspective of the poor, because God Himself is "biased" in favour of them?'

A 25-year-old biology student from East Germany told how she felt when the wall collapsed. 'The sense of inner liberation was beyond description'. But later that early enthusiasm was replaced by vague feelings of uncertainty, frustration and anxiety. Under the old system the church was not officially recognized, but it tried 'to provide a voice for those who had no voice in our society. That called for great effort, and it was dangerous. Will our church become more powerful in the future and will it then still be the voice of those who have no voice', she asked.

Jim Wallis of the Sojourner Community in Washington, D.C., challenged the Convocation: "Let justice roll" into a church made lukewarm by its conformity, and isolated by its lack of compassion. "Let justice roll" and set free all the captives - those under bondage to poverty's claims and those under bondage to money's desires. "Let justice roll" - and let faith come alive again to all those whose eyes long to see

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a new day. Most US political leaders are drawing all the wrong lessons from the tumultuous happenings in the Eastern bloc. They see it as vindication rather than prophecy. "Communism has failed and we won", they proudly exclaim. That perspective is as shortsighted as it is self-serving. History will overtake the West as well. It is only a matter of time .... Today it is an east wind of freedom and democracy that is blowing out the old. Tomorrow it will be a south wind of justice and liberation to set free the oppressed .... When the south wind blows with the hopes of the world's poor on its wings, it will cause a chilly gale to be felt by those northern global power centres that run the world's system of economic apartheid. Today an ugly wall of ideological repression is crumbling down. Tomorrow the invisible walls of international trade, finance, and economic oppression will also come tumbling down.'

The liturgy of the seven days of the conference followed that of Israel's celebration of the year of jubilee or the renewal of the covenant: remembering the mighty deeds of God; praise and adoration; contrition and confession, word of forgiveness; proclamation of hope; confession of faith; intercession; commitment, covenanting and sending forth. This was the spiritual frame of reference for the Convocation.

### 3. THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE CONVOCATION

The Convocation, despite all difficulties, was able to address issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation as interconnected parts of the one global reality that humankind faces today. This is communicated to the churches in a message that was debated and adopted by the plenary.

The Convocation was required to make its responses to the Second Draft Document. In its first part this document presented an analytical description of the threats to life and the response of the churches. The working groups and the Convocation at large could not adequately deal with the plurality of different and often conflicting local and regional concerns. Although the material submitted by the working groups was carefully handled by one of the drafting groups (under the leadership of Ronald Sider of Eastern Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia) and presented to the plenary, there was no debate due to lack of time and consequently this section was not adopted.

The second task of the Convocation was to make its own affirmations of faith on the basis of the draft document. The plenary spent most of its time discussing and adopting ten affirmations, most of which were adopted by an overwhelming majority, some even unanimously.

The third goal was to enter into covenant solidarity. This was done in terms of generally accepting positions and policies, but not in terms of the details. Again, there was no time for the plenary to debate and adopt the details. The drafting group, however, listed all the consequences that would follow from the general policies as the working groups had recommended. That there was no time for this most important task is highly regrettable. Upon the request of black participants from North America and Africa, the Convocation decided to add a fourth covenant 'for the eradication of racism and discrimination'. Clearly, the affirmations are of central importance. They are meant 'to reaffirm God's covenant which is open to all and holds the promise of life in wholeness and right relationships .... We can only make these affirmations as we acknowledge our shortcomings and failures and commit ourselves anew to the reality of God's reign. This means to resist in thought, word and action the powers of separation and destruction and to live in active solidarity with the suffering people.' The affirmations, then, follow the same pattern

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throughout: there is a statement, then a sentence that begins with 'we affirm', then 'we will resist' and finally 'we commit ourselves'.

The message of the Convocation is worthy of quotation in full:

(1) *Now is the time to commit ourselves anew to God's covenant. The moment of history is unique. All life on earth is threatened by injustice, war and destruction of creation because we have turned away from God's covenant. Knowing of the opportunities that are offered to us, we ask for God's forgiveness. We witness many hopeful changes.*

(2) *Now is the time to welcome and confirm the achievements in linking local and regional struggles for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Our contexts and perceptions are different indeed. Yet we have to overcome our divisions. Among them we must encourage wider support of the churches for people's movements. There are no competitive efforts for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. There is one single global struggle.*

(3) *Now is the time to consolidate all struggles for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. We must free ourselves from bondage to power structures which blind us and make us accomplices in destruction. Christians have to move out into the world to which Jesus came.*

(4) *Now is the time to join the struggle of the Korean people for reunification and to support their plea and prayer for a year of jubilee in 1995.*

(5) *Now is the time when the ecumenical movement needs a greater sense of binding, mutual commitment and solidarity in word and action. It is the promise of God's covenant in our time and our world to which we respond. Thus we affirm:*

- *that all exercise of power is accountable to God*
- *God's option for the poor*
- *the equal value of all races and peoples*
- *that male and female are created in the image of God*
- *that truth is at the foundation of a community of free people*
- *the peace of Jesus Christ*
- *the creation as beloved of God*
- *that the earth is the Lord's*
- *the dignity and commitment of the younger generation*
- *that human rights are given by God.*

(6) *Now is the time for the ecumenical movement to articulate its vision of all people living on earth and caring for creation as a family where each member has the same right to wholeness of life. While this vision is spiritual in nature, it must be expressed in concrete action. On the basis of our spiritual experience here in Seoul we have committed ourselves to work for:*

- *a just economic order and for liberation from the bondage of the foreign debt;*
- *the true security of all nations and peoples and for a culture of non-violence;*
- *preserving the gift of the earth's atmosphere and for building a culture that can live in harmony with creation's integrity;*
- *the eradication of racism and discrimination on all levels for all people, and for the dismantling of patterns of behaviour that perpetuate the sin of racism.*

(7) *Now is the time to recognize that there is a long process still before us. We will take to our churches and our movements the affirmations and commitments we have made in Seoul, inviting others to join us. Together with them we struggle for the realization of our vision. We are accountable to one another and to God. We pray that we do not miss the kairos to which we have been led by God.*

## 4. BAPTISTS AND JPIC

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Baptists were involved in several of the national and regional conferences and assemblies in the 'conciliar process'. In Seoul not too many Baptists were present. In the delegation from the USA there were at least three Baptists, two black women and a native American. Notably there was no participation from the Southern Baptist Convention. Nicaraguan Baptists were in attendance. By contrast, many Baptist Unions/Conventions, Baptist congregations and Baptist individuals are very reluctant to enter into the conciliar process because they think this to be a 'worldly' affair from which Baptists had better abstain. But Baptists have not always taken this line. The Fifth Baptist World Congress, meeting in Berlin, Germany, in August 1934, passed the following resolution about three weeks *prior* to Bonhoeffer's statement to which reference was made above:

This Congress affirms its profound conviction that war is contrary to the mind of Christ.

The international misunderstandings, jealousies and rivalries which have followed the last Great War have baffled every effort to secure general disarmament. The preparations of munitions of war is a commercial interest. There is throughout the world a growing sense of insecurity because of the failure thus far to establish an effective commonwealth of nations possessing the authority and the means for redressing and preventing international injustice.

This Congress therefore urges upon all its constituent bodies, by all possible means to induce the Governments of their respective countries to declare themselves ready to surrender whatever of their national sovereignty it may be necessary to surrender in order to establish an international authority for the maintenance of the peace of the world on the basis of equity and right.

The Congress further urges upon all Christian men and women constantly to bear their personal testimony against the inhumanity and anti-Christian character of war, earnestly to promote the corporate and united action of the Christian Churches in the cause of peace, and untiringly to advocate and practise goodwill toward people of all nations.

The Congress would welcome the calling if practicable of an international Conference of Christian Churches to avert war and establish peace, and it would urge its constituent bodies to join in such a movement.

J. H. Rushbrooke, ed., *Fifth Baptist World Congress, Official Report*, London 1934, p.14.

The JPIC process, therefore, is very much in accordance with the BWA heritage. In 1934 Baptist men and women clearly perceived the connection between preparations of war, the economy and the issue of justice. They also had the vision that only an inter-church conference would be able to help the Church (Baptists included) change the course of events. A similarly bold stand was made by the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Singapore in July 1986 which passed this resolution on 'Peace with Justice':

Whereas humankind has now entered the fifth decade of life under the awesome threat of nuclear annihilation, and  
Whereas the nations of the world will spend approximately the equivalent of one trillion US dollars this year on military forces and weapons, and  
Whereas the peoples of the Third World are suffering the burden of rapidly increasing militarization in the midst of their poverty, and

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Whereas the need for peace has never been more urgent, nor have the prospects for peace with justice ever have been more subject to political manipulation and rhetoric, and

Whereas Jesus Christ our Lord was called the Prince of Peace in an era dominated by a heavily militarized empire, and God has called us to be peacemakers;

Be it therefore resolved that we, the participants in the meetings of the Baptist World Alliance in Singapore, July 1-5, 1986, call upon Baptists worldwide:

- (1) to unite in earnest prayer for the peace of the world;
- (2) to communicate to their political leaders our deep conviction that the future of the human race will be tragically imperilled without a prompt de-escalation of the arms race and a reasonable agreement on arms control among the nuclear powers;
- (3) to work diligently within their respective political, economic and organizational systems to champion the priority of peace with justice as a worthy goal for the world's nations, as a humane approach to the current crisis of militarism, as a powerful ideal in our Christian faith and as a precondition of human survival.

Be it also resolved that we reaffirm the conviction expressed in the BWA Congress resolution, Los Angeles, 1985, that the meetings of the leaders of the USSR and the USA are an important contribution to the peace of the world.

- (4) to endorse wholeheartedly and encourage a worldwide *Christian Council of Peace* in which the Christian Churches could address in unison and with spiritual authority the issues of peace and justice.

Two years later in the Bahamas there was a further underlining of the importance of this resolution which was reinforced by specific and enthusiastic support of the JPIC process, with encouragement of the member churches of the Alliance to participate, whilst the BWA's 1989 Council balanced earlier references to Peace with Justice by a specific resolution on 'Stewardship of the Earth' which, noting the 'interdependence of all life', expressed concern for the well-being of the global environment and the many threats to its delicate balance. 'Every continent is affected by irresponsible patterns of life: the depletion of non-renewable resources, explosive population growth, pollution of our land and water, the use of synthetic materials which are not biodegradable, the failure to recycle and the build up of waste.'

### 5. TEN QUESTIONS FOR TODAY'S BAPTISTS

(1) If God is the God of justice, Jesus Christ the prince of peace and the Holy Spirit the sustainer of the created order, then JPIC is reflective of the triune God. What socio-political, economic, military and ecological implications does it have to proclaim and believe in the triune God?

(2) If it is true that the JPIC programme addresses issues that have far-reaching implications for the life on our globe, why is it that churches in general and Baptists in particular think they can disassociate themselves easily from these concerns?

(3) The JPIC programme has rightly emphasized the inter-relatedness or inter-connectedness of the three issues as but one expression of the present global crisis.

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How can churches and Christian World Communions (like BWA) avoid the danger that church representatives from certain contexts (e.g. 'developing countries') take only one aspect (e.g. 'justice') as their point of entry?

(4) Given the fact that the Convocation could not agree easily (and was, for this reason, called a failure by most of the media), is there reason to believe that Baptists from different parts of the world would have done any better?

(5) Do questions of social and environmental ethics divide the community of churches and each individual denomination? Is it unrealistic to expect the churches to give a common witness to justice, peace and the integrity of creation to a raging world? What are the precise theological and/or non-theological factors that prevent the churches or one church community from speaking with one voice?

(6) What leadership will the Baptist World Alliance and its regional fellowships, together with national unions and associations, give to ensure that our churches, seminaries and other agencies actively participate in this crucial process?

(7) What does it mean for our Baptist participation in inter-church activities that the Convocation (and the WCC) resorted to traditional Baptist language (shared, of course, with some other communities) when 'covenant', 'radical discipleship', 'repentance and conversion', 'commitment', and the church as the 'jubilee community of hope and sharing' were singled out as theological metaphors for approaching the present crisis?

(8) It has been an important and vital part of the Baptist heritage to have raised a 'prophetic voice' on occasions. What must we do today to read the 'signs of the time' and come to prophetic pronouncements?

(9) How can the Baptist boat that steers through troubled waters avoid the Scylla of being politicized (at the expense of the gospel) and the Charybdis of staying aloof (and thereby supporting the *status quo* which is no less political)? What does it mean that the gospel must be relevant to the (world) situation lest it be found to have no relevance at all?

(10) How can Christians/Baptists claim to be a 'covenant' people of God and, at the same time, endorse prevailing worldly orders like the present world economic order or doctrines of national security or the destruction of the environment as part of economic progress? How do we as Baptists regain a vision of the people of God as a distinct and alternative community? How do we expose and transform rather than excuse and legitimize evil and sinful structures and processes?

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