

Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scripture together Living Faith in a Challenging era

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Hebrews Chapter 11 has been described as the chapter on faith in the Bible. Beginning with a definition of faith the author goes on to illustrate, through the lives of many biblical characters, what faith has meant to people through whose lives we have seen some expression of how God relates with humanity. This survey which covered from Abel to New Testament times indicates very clearly that what was described as living faith was not merely something that once possessed could be a means of living above suffering or acquiring all the wealth and health that one wished for. On the contrary, the long list of people whose experiences illustrated faith went through very challenging times - and in the words of the author of Hebrews, not receiving the fullness of what they believed was promised.

This is a lecture (not a sermon). But in keeping with good Reformed tradition, I could not help but start on the basis of "*Scriptura*". How can we talk about living faith in the challenging times in which we live without reference to living faith in the *sitz in leben* of biblical times, through the eyes of biblical passages? Indeed I am very grateful that the theme Professor Iain Torrance, our President, has chosen for these inaugural events of his presidency have to do with reading Scripture together as we discern what constitutes faith in this millennium in which we find ourselves.

Reading Scripture together is very important. In order for Scripture to inform living faith for our challenging times, we have to ensure that while it is fully grasped in one hand, our other hand equally grasps the newspapers, the television, the radio (to paraphrase the statement that has been attributed to Karl Barth) - with the Bible in one hand and the newspapers in the other. We have to carefully read the signs of our times together and listen afresh together to God for the mission to which we are called and sent.

Leading up to the 24th General Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches conducted a survey of challenges that face the church today in the various contexts in which we find ourselves. The signs of our times that became evident in that survey include the search for meaningful spiritual renewal, threats to peace and security in our world today, environmental degradation, and worldwide economic injustice¹.

The world is in dire need of meaningful spiritual renewal. Churches in some parts of the world are experiencing a decline while those in the parts which are growing are facing major challenges. In some areas, the very joyful phenomenon of growth and vitality is often burdened by dangers of falling to forms of spirituality which put a premium on health and wealth as rewards and evidence of faith. Many of us live in secular societies. The post-modern era seems to indicate to many that there is no need for God. Young people in many parts of the world find little meaning in associating with Christian churches while in other parts of the world, young people are indeed flocking to church – often to newer non-denominational churches. The church is often ill prepared to deal with these mixed messages.

In spite of the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ's birth was greeted as "peace on earth" (Luke 2: 14), our world is less peaceful and less secure today than ever before. Domestic and public violence and

¹ These are adapted from The Alliance Today and Tomorrow: Towards Accra and Beyond, published by the World Alliance of reformed churches (2004) pp. 71 - 73

the many conflicts in many parts of the world give much cause for concern. The WARC publication I referred to indicates:

"A widespread feeling of national and international insecurity, magnified by terrorism, weakens structures of governance, favours the restriction of civil liberties and inspires international relations based on cultural and religious prejudices and the survival of the fittest. Unilateral, preemptive military responses in the "war on terrorism" do not address the root causes of the phenomenon they pretend to resist. Violence and counter-violence create vicious circles².

In connection with worldwide economic injustice and environmental degradation, two quotes from the WARC document will illustrate the points:

"While some of us enjoy and rightly celebrate the growing interaction and mutual interdependence of the global village made possible by information technology, many more experience the inhuman consequences of neoliberal economic and financial globalization: 54 countries are poorer today than they were a decade ago. The world's economy is on the whole more unequal than it was 20 years ago. The richest 1% of the global population has as much income as the poorest 57%. ... Many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean stagger under the burden of private and public debt"³.

"Climate change, tropical deforestation, and the decline of water sources are likely to be followed by increasing droughts and floods, rising sea levels and their unpredictable disastrous human consequences. ... While industrialized countries of the Northern Hemisphere represent only 20% of the world population, they produce 90% of the gases that cause global climate change"⁴.

In the General Council itself, we were shocked and challenged as we visited the slave Castles on the coast of Ghana. In Elmina, the Reformed Church literally worshipped directly on top of the dungeon in which women slaves were going through unimaginable dehumanization and suffering. From all indications, their reading of the word of God, on their own, 7 feet above suffering people, did not equip them to question their complicity in such a terrible sin against humanity, nor did it help them experience any call to do something about human suffering. People of faith may be in the same danger today of missing God's calling if they are not ready to read the Bible together mindful of the contexts of injustice and suffering around them.

These are some of the challenges of our times. To these, we must add two others. We live in pluralistic contexts. The geo-politics of our times have turned the co-existence of people from different religions and cultures living side by side into communities of conflict and suspicion. In addition the tendency for conflict and division among churches - especially Reformed churches is another major challenge.

How can people of faith make a difference in challenging times such as the ones in which we live? What can we learn from how people of faith in the past engaged their faith in addressing the challenges of their times. Frederick William Faber's 19th Century hymn has been a major source of inspiration to me.

² ibid. p. 72

³ ibid. p. 71

⁴ ibid. p. 72

Faith of our fathers! Living still, In spite of dungeon fire and sword:
O how our hearts beat high with joy, whene'er we hear that glorious word!

Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death!

Our fathers, chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free:
How sweet would be their children's fate, if they, like them, could die for thee!

Faith of our fathers! We will love both friend and foe in all our strife:
And preach thee, too, as love knows how, By kindly words and virtuous life.

The faith of our parents – Peter, Paul, and the other apostles, Louis and Eunice who nurtured Timothy, Athanasius, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Ignatius, Tertullian, Polycarp, Origen and all the unnamed women of those early centuries of Christianity whose faith and witness constitute a living inspiration for us today as well as the parents of more recent centuries such as John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Marie Dentiere and others. The list is very long.

Although in Reformed culture, we do not tolerate personality cults, and certainly do not label those who have gone before us as exclusive saints, permit me to include this short list above as some of those for whose living faith we can be grateful to God. In my culture, thanking God for the role and contribution of ancestors is important. In addition, scholars such as our new President Iain Torrance, have brought alive the contributions of our parents of those early centuries. The Summer/Fall *Inspire* rightly observes that Professor Torrance believes that the early Christian writers provide foundational documents for the contemporary church that can be exciting and helpful reading for today's minister⁵.

The Faith with which our fathers and mothers confronted dungeons, fire, etc. continues to live still. The dungeons and fires of today may include the lack of spiritual meaning and the emptiness in people's lives, the challenges caused by the forces of death in the global economy, the glorifying of violence and polarization at home and in public, and the ways in which military responses to terror have exacerbated world insecurity.

Can Christians today be inspired to express a living faith which address the challenges of our days? Can institutions of theological education, especially those which have a special role to play in raising up world theological leaders, be the solid space for the formation and inspiration of leaders whose faith can be described as living in the face of global challenges today?

How do we counter all these situations with living faith today? We are indeed in a very challenging era. What is called for is not easy answers – but the readiness to struggle with the resources which those who have gone before us have left as a legacy of living faith for their times. The living faith, which is relevant for our days, continues to stand on the wisdom attributed to Karl Barth – holding the Bible in one hand, and the newspapers in the other.

In this part of the third millennium, there is a greater need to read the Scriptures in the light of our times. Not as providing simple answers but as illuminating the questions we raise along the way. Institutions such as the Princeton Seminary can be even more intentional about providing that space where the Scriptures are read and re-read with new eyes in the light of the challenges of our days. Reading the Scripture in monologues can be easy and common.

⁵ Inspire, Summer/fall 2004, Volume 9, No 1, PTS Office of Communications

The world needs more than simply reading Scripture within our known frameworks. How can we read Scripture effectively together –including all the voices of the people of God? The insights from women, voices from the global South and the global North, eyes of those who have been marginalized, are important in intentionally reading the Scriptures together in our times. Insights from different cultural, professional and experiential perspectives are necessary to enrich our reading together. With so much scientific advancement, what can we learn about the human genome, the modern applications of new scientific discoveries in research to impact how we read Scriptures together? How can we bring ethical values of our faith into the dialogue in ways that preserve life in fullness for all?

The Reformed family's global instrument, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, is one of those instruments which, with varying degrees of success, provide space for the reading together of Scriptures. Other ecumenical and confessional bodies as well as the wider ecumenical organs such as the World Council of Churches do the same. Theological institutions such as Princeton Seminary have the calling to be such a space.

Princeton Seminary has a long history of responding to this call. Under past presidents this place has developed a real niche in providing space for an international mix of people to read the Scripture together. In addition, some presidents and faculty have understood their calling to include being God's instruments in making an impact in the world together with others with whom we share the same values as we read Scripture together. In the years of the existence of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, this seminary has historically given real leadership to the worldwide Reformed family. Presidents John Mackay and James McCord, Professor Jane Dempsey Douglas and at least one past member of the board of Trustees were past presidents of WARC, making Princeton the only institution of its kind to produce so many presidents. The current General Secretary is proud to be an alumnus of Princeton Seminary. In addition this seminary has produced many church leaders around the world. Princeton Seminary can be at the cutting edge of the ecumenical movement.

Such a rich heritage does not happen by accident. Any seminary could reduce itself into a place where people of different nationalities, or women and men, are uncomfortably reading Scripture side by side, and not together. If this happens, we can conclude that such a seminary is not fully harnessing the potential of forming women and men equipped with living faith, capable of taking on the challenges of our world today. I hope Princeton Seminary will not fall into such a trap.

These are challenging times. If we had a God who did not care about the state of the world or who was not willing to be touched by human suffering, human callousness or the effects of evils and difficulties on people, then we could give up in despair or respond with cynicism. In Jesus of Nazareth, we learn that our God is different. God is not apathetic to challenging situations that face God's creation, especially human suffering. The German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann helps us move beyond a Greek understanding of a God who is immovable. In contrast, Moltmann draws on Jewish philosophy to place an emphasis on the pathos of God in contrast to a view that God is apatheia. He points to the expression of human sympathy as the human answer to the pathos of God⁶. In Jesus, we experience God's incarnation in the world as Emmanuel, God with us.

A Christian faith, which is experienced as a non-engaging maintenance of historical traditions around some carefully formulated doctrinal principles about an apathetic God, can be valid only if taught in cemeteries – not in Seminaries. This is not to put down the creeds and confessions that have guided the church throughout the ages, or to question the curriculum of systematic theology and other theological disciplines. On the contrary, it is to recapture the living faith in a living God.

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, Translated by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, SCM Press Ltd. 1974, pp. 267 – 278.

This is the faith that the creeds and confessions sought to express, and which our early church fathers and mothers have passed on to us.

Thank God history has demonstrated that despite its imperfections and failures, the church has also been able to express its faith clearly and prophetically when faced with some challenges. It has been a source of transformation from death to life. Three confessions or declarations in which WARC member churches have been involved illustrate this.

In the face of the terrible era of Nazism, the confessing church in Germany produced the Barmen declaration in the 1930s. In response to the evil apartheid system the Belhar confession of 1994 emerged in South Africa in 1994. In the just ended 24th General Council of WARC in Accra, member churches covenanted together and expressed their common stand *vis-à-vis* the injustice in the economy and the earth. The resulting “Accra confession” is an expression of the churches in a clear stance of faith against the evils inherent in economic systems which are sources of death and destruction for large sections of people. One can add to these confessions the many actions of faith taken by churches in their own contexts against gender injustice and all other forms of injustice.

These are forms of making our faith come out alive and relevant for our times. A major factor that will address challenging times is the sense in which the church can inspire hope. This hope is rooted firmly in what God has already done, and the possibilities for transformation that we know based on our faith and our acting out that faith. This is living faith. It entails engaging in the mission to which we have been called in a manner consonant with how our Lord Jesus Christ understands his own Mission. The Gospel of Luke presented Jesus as understanding his mission to include “... proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, setting at liberty the oppressed and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord.”

These are not innocent words to be theologically dissected with the proper exegetical tools and left as a lofty academic exercise. They have to do with the lives of people who are often not found in high places or even in popular spots. It has to do with people who are suffering, in need of healing and freedom in every sense – spiritual, physical, psychological, etc. It has everything to do with revitalising our faith in challenging times.

It is remarkable that these words were presented in the context of worship – not a political lecture. Jesus was in the synagogue for worship on a Sabbath day when he was handed the scroll for reading – a central part of the worship. His sermon after reading was very brief – but it made an impact because it came out alive. Reading Scripture together with people at worship for Jesus was not simply a part of the ritual of worship to be traditionally performed Sabbath after Sabbath. It was meant to come out alive – today this Scripture has been fulfilled. The people had to ask – “Is not this the same person we knew?” Oh, that the church would have that same kind of impact today – where people begin to raise questions about the difference that they see and hear in us when we read the Scriptures together. Those words quoted from the Hebrew Bible were made to inspire a new understanding of life and mission relevant to what people were going through. This fosters life. This inspires hope. This constitutes living faith.

Another Gospel – that of John captures Jesus describing his understanding of his mission in equally strong life-giving terms: The thief comes only to kill and to destroy, but I came so that they may have life in fullness. These are not docile words. They inspire hope for people who are experiencing destruction in their lives or are simply bored by a faith which sees itself as maintaining tradition but is inactive in the face of contemporary destructive practices.

These Biblical passages point to the fact that the God we know in Jesus Christ is not apathetic. Jesus' mission is engaged in bringing life to replace the forces of death that are experienced in society. Embraced, this is not only a source of vitality where people are tempted to give up in despair, it is also a source of hope. If we are to address the challenging times in which we find ourselves and inspire hope, we have to learn from how the Lord of the church did it. How can we identify the thieves and destroying agents today, so that people can truly experience the action of Jesus in providing life in fullness – in every sense.

The starting point is to foster living faith – not mere maintenance of church rituals. Living faith for our times is based on reclaiming the right relationships - vibrant meaningful relationships which are consonant with our faith. The relationship with God is the first of these relationships. The key component of the Christian message of being reconciled to God through Christ is at the centre of vibrant meaningful relationships (2 Corinthians 5). The Biblical message affirms the profound love that God has for humanity, and the resulting sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our redemption. The cross is at the centre of restoring the relationship between God and humanity. But, it does not stop there.

The cross is also at the centre of how we appropriate this message in the mission we have. This understanding of mission should necessarily follow the example of Jesus Christ who came that all may have life. It takes into account how Jesus saw mission as proclaiming good news and release to those who were left on the margins of society. This understanding helps equip us to engage in the critical reflections with which we can make a difference in the world. The foundation of this understanding is how Jesus' life was given on the cross for humanity. Our critical reflection therefore should be focused on the cross.

Reformed theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann have helped us affirm that this form of critical theological reflection is at the heart of being Reformed. He writes:

To realise the theology of the cross at the present day is to take seriously the claims of Reformation theology to criticise and reform, and to develop it beyond a criticism of the church into a criticism of society⁷.

It is in agreement with this that the Reformed family has historically chosen constantly to respond to societal issues by engaging prophetically. We can recall the commitments of Old Testament prophets. When Old Testament prophets say, "Thus says the Lord..." they do so as persons who are very much engaged in the social issues of the day. Their words had significance for what the people were going through – challenging the forces of evil and bringing hope for life. They did not stay silent in the face of evil.

In the New Testament, what got the early apostles in trouble with the powers of the day was not only their stance on the *kerygma*. It was often how their proclamation was linked with practical expressions of their faith evidenced in how they brought healing or relief to ordinary people. This attracted the action of the leaders who had vested interests in keeping things as they were even if this brought death and destruction. The narrative in which the apostles were arrested and thrown in prison in Acts of Apostles Chapter 5 indicates that in healing the sick they attracted the jealousy of the leaders (verses 15 – 18). In this passage they declared "We must obey God, rather than human beings."

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology, Translated by R. A. Wilson and John Bowden, SCM Press Ltd. 1974, p.4
The original German is on page 9 of Jürgen Moltmann, Der gekreuzigte Gott, Chr. Kaiser Verlag München, 1972.

It is in the light of these reflections that I offer five suggestions for the church to respond to our challenging times. When our critical reflections impact church and society they lead to transformation, which in turn produces renewal and hope.

1. **Renewing the church and how it engages in mission.** The church has always valued evangelism – proclaiming the good news of God’s salvation to people who have not heard and inviting them to participate in God’s marvellous light. There is a renewed passion for this especially in Africa today. This is a source of renewal of the church. However, we cannot simply be satisfied with measuring the results of evangelism in terms of increasing numbers. The critical questions include, to what extent are people experiencing the cross of Jesus Christ as both the source of life and a challenge to evil in society? To what extent are lives of communities being transformed as a result of what they see in the churches? Therefore, the first implication of revisiting a theology of the cross is a critical message to the church. In the cross, we have the most profound message of Emmanuel – God with us. Faced with challenges, when there is a tendency to feel that the post-modern world is a post Christian world, it is the message of the cross - not a triumphal proclamation of a faith supported by political powers – that reminds the faithful that in Christ God is alive in our situations.

2. **Mediating fullness of life for all.** Lessons from the theology of the cross are not limited to the internal life of the church. It helps us be attentive to the millions of people who are suffering as a result of spiritual emptiness, poverty, disease, economic injustices, conflicts, etc. – both Christians and non-Christians in the light of Jesus coming so that all may have fullness of life. Many have very little opportunity to experience the “life in fullness” for which Jesus Christ came, very often because of the selfish callous actions of people in their locality or nation or sometimes from far away lands. If we have truly experienced the cross as liberating, how can our lives and our messages proclaim the good news in word and action? Reformed people understand our calling to include being prophetic in advocacy, challenging the forces of evil and death, and speaking in places where the victims of oppression, injustice and suffering do not have a voice or presence to speak. Our calling includes becoming living critics of structures and systems whether in church or society which contradict life. This is not simply offering charity, but doing the critical analysis and actions that make for transformation from the roots.

3. **Being effective neighbours in pluralistic communities.** For all these to be successful we have to recognise the danger in enjoying a privileged status as the dominant majority in any community. Maybe for that reason it is good that we now operate in pluralistic contexts. We need to make a shift in our mentality to become effective people who are sometimes in the minority. In fact, even if Christianity is the majority religion, often those who are engaged in prophetic action as God’s instruments of transformation are in the minority. Therefore, having a “minority” mentality can be helpful. As effective minorities, we can have a more realistic appraisal of ourselves – knowing that what we proclaim can have a transforming impact on the world – but will not be easy to embrace by the majority of people. Our calling is to model our message. It also calls on us to find ways of being in dialogue with non-Christian neighbours with whom we live in our communities. Avoiding this will simply be burying our heads in the sand while there are challenges to be faced.

4. **Using the gifts of all God’s people.** Being an effective minority also entails harnessing the gifts of all God’s people. This is both an issue of justice as well as efficiency. The church has for far too long in its history often seen the mission of God as the domain of only men of a particular age. Thankfully, this injustice is in the process of transformation. The change is rather slow in some communities. Gender injustice is alive and well in many churches today. In addition, young people are often excluded from decision-making and the full use of their gifts in church

and society. Some of our churches have structures that make it difficult for persons with disabilities to enter the sanctuary for worship, let alone participate in the leadership. If the church is to be effective in addressing current challenges comprehensively, it has to be faithful to God, harnessing the gifts of all people and repenting from the prejudice that leads to exclusion of the communities mentioned here. In addition, in the Reformed tradition we believe in the priesthood of all believers and yet far too often we act as if only the ordained pastor is a priest. In the face of societal injustice, the church has often neglected to use the gifts of its economists, lawyers, environmentalists, journalists, psychologists, social workers, etc. to engage in analysis of our times and strategize towards viable actions that will bring life in fullness for a greater number of people. This commitment makes us value the gifts we have received from modern technological advances. We can be more committed to interdisciplinary actions to counter the forces of evil.

5. **Receiving strength from spiritual renewal.** The effective mission of the church should be based on renewed worship that strengthens the people of God. Effectively linking prayer, analysis and action in a manner relevant to the challenges facing our communities is very important for transforming actions that inspire hope. If worship life is disjointed from what people go through, they will experience Christianity as irrelevant to them. This is why it is important to have a link between worship and action in the world. Worship and prayer can provide the context in which people of faith can garner spiritual strength, value those with gifts of analysing the contexts and providing pointers towards the concrete actions that will make a difference in the world and therefore make the church experienced as relevant today. This is a call for spiritual and worship renewal. As Livingstone Buama, a Ghanaian theologian noted, “Worship is the heartbeat of religion. It is also the wellspring of spirituality, and, for that matter, the wellspring of the vitality of life. When worship is stifled or denied its authentic and native expression, life itself is stifled”⁸.

If the church of the 21st century dares to engage in these five and many other steps, it can be a vibrant community for transforming society and a real source of hope. Challenges take a toll if there is no sign or source of hope. Yes, in facing challenges, people of God from time immemorial have also found hope through their faith. Such faith always found expression in action to counter the forces of death. The Christian today is called upon to be that source of hope for the world. Through commitment to action, we can be the light and salt of our communities, being that source of hope for all as we take on our role as co-workers with God in the transformation of society.

No Christian community or tradition can be effective witnesses alone. Whether we are Reformed, Baptist, Methodist or Episcopal, our reflections and actions make an impact if we overcome our divisions and act ecumenically. One of the past Presidents of this great institution, John Mackay said of Presbyterians

Let us be ecumenical Presbyterians. Grasped afresh by Jesus Christ Himself, let us dedicate ourselves to propagate the one holy faith throughout the world and to seek the unity of the one Church of Christ. Let us do what John Calvin wanted to do. Let us cross “seven seas” and the great terrestrial spaces as well, to make Jesus Christ known as the World Saviour, as the sovereign Lord of life and death, in whom all His followers are one”⁹

⁸ “The Worship Experience of the Reformed Family in Ghana” by Livingstone Buama in Christian Worship in Reformed Churches – Past and Present, (ed. By Lukas Vischer), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, p. 222

⁹ The Presbyterian World, June 1950, (Published by the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian tradition) p.56

Yes, people of faith are facing great challenges today. But we cannot be overwhelmed. We can hold out hope for all. Hope that is based on the God who feels with us, is with us and works through us to transform the challenges. That hope will be invigorating and life giving because women and men of faith have dared to believe that transformation is possible and they have committed themselves to be God's instruments acting ecumenically to usher in transformation.