

Resources
for Celebrating
Reformation Sunday

Passing on the Faith



Heidelberg Catechism 1563-2013

World Communion of Reformed Churches
Geneva 2013

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Preface

This is a special year for the Reformed family, as we celebrate 450 years of the Heidelberg Catechism. The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) has designed this year's Reformation resource around the Heidelberg Catechism. We are pleased to offer this resource to our member churches and our partners and commend it for use during the week leading up to the Reformation Sunday in October or any other time of the year.

The Heidelberg Catechism is very important for the WCRC and for many Reformed churches throughout the world. It forms the contents of confirmation classes in many communities. What was written in Heidelberg in 1653 is still relevant 450 years later and is found in many languages around the world.

In its 23rd General Council in Debrecen, Hungary, the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches formulated its message with the inspiration of the Heidelberg Catechism. The words "We belong – body and soul, in life and death – not to ourselves – but to our faithful saviour Jesus Christ" that opened the Debrecen Message are an adaptation of the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. The message then continued to introduce each paragraph with words drawn from Calvin's *Institutes* and echoed in the Heidelberg Catechism – "We are not our own".

By drawing from the Heidelberg Catechism for the message from such an important gathering of the WCRC, we are making an important statement about the relevance of the catechism in the 21st Century. This was the message of an Assembly that gave birth to the *processus confessionis* on economic and ecological justice that led seven years later to the Accra Confession.

This booklet is another expression of the importance the WCRC and its member churches attach to the Heidelberg Catechism. The articles, worship resources, Bible studies, sermon outline, and reflections from young theologians are gathered from the Reformed family worldwide. We hope it will offer stimulation for worship and reflection and renew our sense that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

I pause here to offer thanks to my colleague, Rev. Dr. Douwe Visser who led in coordinating and producing this booklet. He and other colleagues worked very hard to put this resource together. Our thanks also go to the writers as well as Douwe's assistants.

We offer this booklet in gratitude to God!

Soli Deo Gloria

Setri Nyomi

WCRC General Secretary

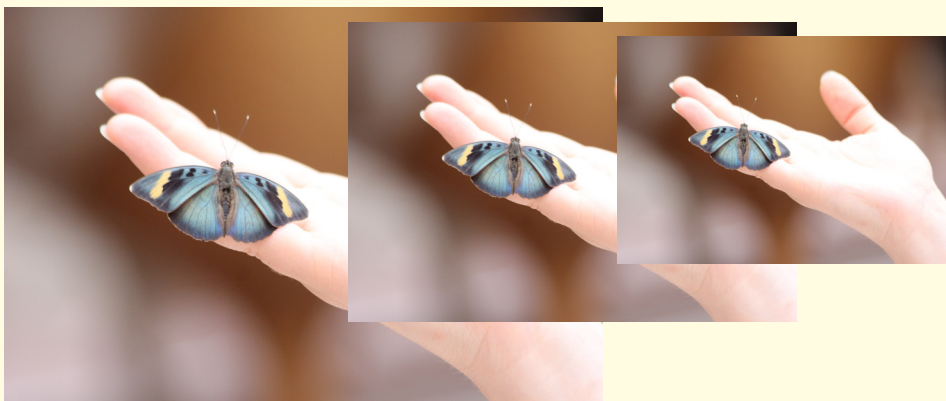


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Historical and Theological Background¹

by Lyle D. Bierma

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

These are the familiar opening lines of perhaps the most famous catechism of the sixteenth century, the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) of 1563. Shortly after it appeared, Heinrich Bullinger, leader of the Reformed church in Zurich, Switzerland, hailed it as “the best catechism ever published” and within sixty years, it had been translated from German and Latin into Dutch, English, Hungarian, French, Greek, Romansch, Czech and Spanish. Today it can be found in many African and Asian languages as well, and it is still one of the most deeply loved and widely circulated statements of the Christian faith in global Reformed Protestantism. Many scholars today regard it as the most irenic and catholic expression of the Christian faith to come out of the Protestant Reformation.

Such worldwide acclaim for this document, however, makes it easy to forget that it was originally written to a particular audience in a particular place for a particular purpose. Its full title, “Catechism or Christian Instruction as This Is Conducted in Churches and Schools of the Electoral Palatinate,” provides some clues to this background. First, although the catechism was written and published in the city of Heidelberg, Germany, it was intended for use in the entire territory of which Heidelberg was the capital. This territory was known as the Electoral Palatinate, one of some 300 small states that made up the Holy Roman (German) Empire in the sixteenth century.

Second, the catechism was to provide instruction in both the “churches and schools” of the territory. The Palatinate had become officially Protestant (Lutheran) in 1546, relatively late when one recalls that Luther had triggered the Reformation in another part of Germany almost thirty years before. When the political leader of the Palatinate, Elector Frederick III, came to power in 1559, he ordered a visitation of the churches in his realm to assess their spiritual health. What he found was disheartening. The young people especially were growing up “without the fear of God and the knowledge of his Word.” Where doctrinal instruction was being offered, teachers and

¹Parts of this chapter were adapted from Lyle D. Bierma, “The Heidelberg Catechism,” *Tabletalk* 32 (April 2008): 14-17, and are used by permission of the publisher.

preachers were using a variety of catechisms, and some instructors were confusing their students with irrelevant questions and unsound teachings. If we are really to reform our territory, Frederick concluded, the place to begin is with the training of our children—youth ministry! And for that we need a single, clear guide to biblical truth as well as instructors who will teach and live by that guide.

Finally, the full title of the catechism refers to “Christian” instruction in the churches and schools. That may indicate a deliberate attempt by Frederick to avoid such labels as “Lutheran,” “Calvinist” or “Zwinglian.” The only legal form of Protestantism in the German Empire at that time was Lutheranism, as defined by Philip Melanchthon’s Augsburg Confession (1530). Frederick’s predecessor, however, had opened up the Palatinate to followers not only of Luther and Melanchthon, but also of Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin, and Frederick III continued this policy as he became increasingly attracted to certain Reformed ideas. To help achieve religious and political stability in his realm, therefore, Frederick commissioned a catechism that would offer instruction in the fundamentals of the “Christian” faith, a summary of biblical doctrine that minimized differences and emphasized consensus among the Protestant factions in the territory.

The production of such a catechism was assigned in 1562 to a team of Heidelberg ministers and university theologians under the watchful eye of Frederick himself. Two young members of the team, Zacharias Ursinus (1534-83) and Caspar Olevianus (1536-87), have often been identified as the co-authors, but the consensus among scholars today is that Ursinus was the primary writer and Olevianus had a lesser role. Ursinus was particularly well suited to the task not only because of his moderate disposition, but also because he had studied under leading theologians from the different Protestant traditions in Wittenberg, Zurich and Geneva. The team perused and even borrowed language from a number of earlier catechisms, both Lutheran and Reformed, and on January 19, 1563, they brought the final draft of their work to a synod in Heidelberg for approval. The finished product consisted of 128 (later 129) questions and answers, each with Scripture references in the margins. The HC was also divided into 52 sections, or Lord’s Days, so that a minister could cover the entire catechism once a year in doctrinal sermons at a second worship service on Sunday afternoons.

When the HC first appeared in 1563, therefore, no one could have imagined that it was destined for greatness. Its main author was an unknown theology professor not yet twenty-nine years old. It was composed for the schools and churches of one small state in a corner of the German Empire. And in many respects it was similar to scores of other Protestant catechisms circulating at the time. Why, then, would this document eventually stand out from the rest and have such staying power?

Part of the answer lies in what distinguished the HC from its relatives. Like all catechisms for a thousand years before the Reformation, it is essentially an explanation of the basic elements of Christianity: the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments. The commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the institutions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are, of course, parts of Scripture itself, and even the lines of the creed are based directly on the text of the Bible. Since ancient times, the Christian community had considered it important to teach these key portions of Scripture to children, new Christians and laypeople as a way of instilling in them the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

What is distinctive about the HC, however, is that it connects these basic elements to a single over-arching motif, the theme of *comfort* introduced in the well-known first question and answer quoted above. In so doing, the authors were addressing the spiritual anxieties of the day. Against the background of a medieval sacramental system that required works of penance to help pay for one’s sins, the HC proclaims the comfort of belonging to a Christ “who has *fully* paid for *all* my sins” (Q & A 1). In an age of constant war, famine, disaster, and plague, the HC proclaims the comfort of belonging to a Christ who “watches over me in such a way that . . . all things must work together for my salvation” (Q & A 1). Over against a late medieval piety that encouraged people to do their best and then hope for the best, the HC proclaims the comfort of belonging to a Christ who “by his Holy Spirit *assures* me of eternal life” (Q & A 1). Some have criticized this approach as too human-centered, but it is here that the HC shows itself as first of all a pastoral document, sensitive to the spiritual *dis-comfort* of its audience and responding with the comforting truths of the gospel.

To live and die in the joy of such comfort, Q & A 2 goes on to say, I must know three things: how great my sin and *misery* are, how I am *delivered* from such sin and misery, and how I can live in *gratitude* to God for such deliverance. These subthemes of misery, deliverance, and gratitude form the three major divisions of the HC, and the explanations of the basic elements of Christianity are woven through them. I come to know my misery through the (summary of the) Ten Commandments (Q & A 3-5). I come to know my deliverance through the gospel as summarized in the Apostles' Creed (Q & A 19-58), and I am assured of that deliverance through the sacraments (Q/A 65-85). Finally, it is through the (individual) Ten Commandments (Q & A 92-115) and Lord's Prayer (Q & A 116-129) that I come to know ways of expressing my gratitude for this deliverance. In short, the HC directs all the fundamentals of the Christian faith toward the comfort of the believer.

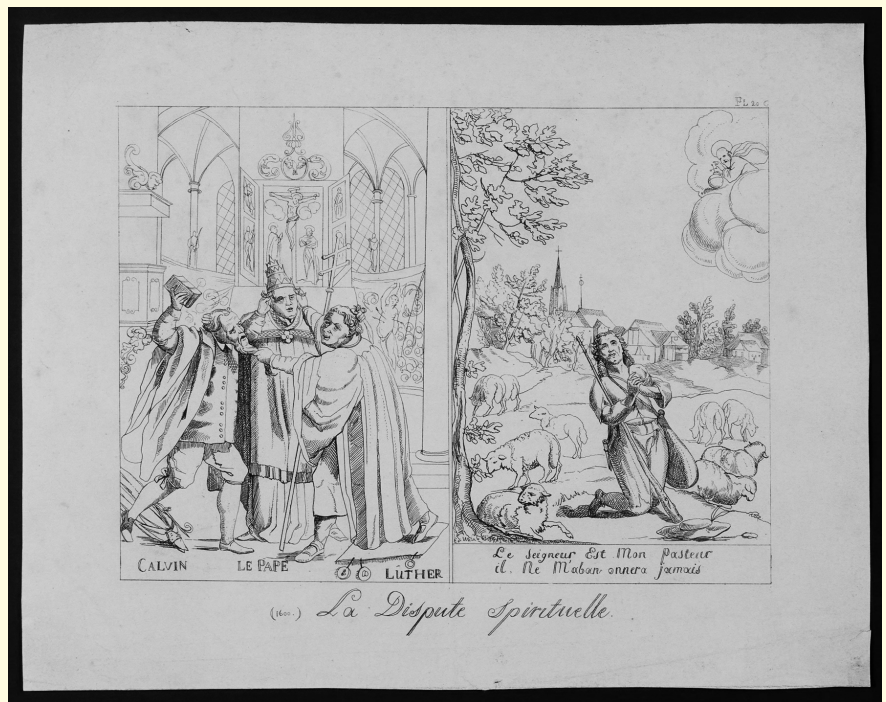
This personal and practical tone radiates throughout the catechism. For example, the HC treats each of the articles of the Apostles' Creed not just as facts to be explained but as promises of God made real in the lives of believers. It does not just ask, "What does this article of the creed mean?" but also, "How does this knowledge *help* us?" (Q & A 28), "How does this teaching *benefit* you?" (e.g., Q & A 36, 45, 49, 51), "What *advantage* do we receive from it?" (Q & A 43), "How does this *comfort* you?" (e.g., Q & A 52, 57, 58) and "What *good* is it to us?" (Q & A 59). And in the section on the sacraments, it emphasizes the *assurance* of salvation that comes from the washing of water and partaking of the Supper. This is not abstract academic theology, but pastoral and relational theology, doctrine that is connected to the spiritual lives of the catechumens.

The HC also emphasizes Christian piety, that is, how Christians can, may, and should respond to the biblical truths that are presented. This is most clearly seen, of course, in the third section on gratitude, which teaches us how "in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us" (Q & A 86). In the exposition of the Decalogue, for example, the HC not only relates the commandments to the realities of life but examines the *positive* lifestyle implied in the prohibitions of the moral law. And it does not just explain the petitions of the Lord's Prayer; it places them in extended paraphrase on the lips of the praying community.





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But this emphasis on Christian practice is not limited to the third section on gratitude; it can also be found already in the second section on deliverance. In Q & A 31, for example, the catechism explains that Jesus is also called Christ, or the anointed one, because he was ordained by the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet, only high priest, and eternal king. The catechism then goes on in the very next question (Q & A 32) to talk about our response to the threefold office of Christ. If Jesus is called Christ, “why are you called a Christian,” that is, a follower of Christ? The answer:

Because by faith I am a member of Christ
and so I share in his anointing.
I am anointed
to confess his name [prophet],
to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks [priest],
to strive with a good conscience against sin and the devil in this life [king],
and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for all eternity [king].

Christ is anointed as prophet, priest and king; we belong to Christ; therefore, we too are anointed to be prophets, priests and kings. Here is Christian doctrine at its best—not just a summary of divine revelation but also a call to respond to that revelation in Christian living.

That is the genius of the HC. It both explains the basics of the Christian faith and applies them to people’s lives. It is personal, pastoral, and practical as well as doctrinal. That unique combination, perhaps more than anything else, explains why this sixteenth-century catechism from the tiny German Palatinate has resonated with so many and, 450 years later, is still widely used in Reformed and Presbyterian churches around the world.

A Service Based on the Lord's Prayer

In Celebration of the Gift of the Heidelberg Catechism

First published in 1563 and a blessing to churches for the past 450 years

The Lord's Prayer • Matthew 6:9-13

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

Prelude

Preparation for Worship

2013 marks the 450th anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the most ecumenical and internationally known and loved catechisms of the Protestant Reformation. The designation "Q&A" indicates the Question and Answer number from this catechism, which has helped to comfort and shape the faith of countless Christians around the world. Probably the most loved Q&A is the very first one, which has often been committed to memory, and worthy of meditating on in preparation for worship:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.
He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.

Welcome and Introduction

Sung Prayer — *Our Father in Heaven* by Swee Hong Lim (*Lift Up Your Hearts* Hymnal 914)

[A congregational or choral setting of the Lord's Prayer. Alternatively, a spoken prayer ending with all saying the Lord's Prayer together, followed by the singing of a familiar hymn.]

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name

Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 122

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Help us to truly know you,

to honor, glorify, and praise you

for all your works

and for all that shines forth from them:

your almighty power, wisdom, kindness,

justice, mercy, and truth.

Help us to direct all our living—

what we think, say, and do—

so that your name will never be blasphemed because of us

but always honored and praised.

Meditation

“God is holy love, and he faces unholy nature. Yet, in his holiness, God is able to reach out to love that unholy nature... In the story of Jesus, the cross offers a more perfect resolution to this agony, where justice is served and ultimate, unqualified love is demonstrated.” (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 111-112)

Scripture — Isaiah 6:1-8

Songs —

Open the Eyes of My Heart (from the United States) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 537)

Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty (text from India) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 538)

Scripture — Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Song — A setting of Psalm 42

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven

Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 123-4

Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way
that more and more we submit to you.

Preserve your church and make it grow.

Destroy the devil's work;
destroy every force which revolts against you
and every conspiracy against your holy Word.

Do this until your kingdom fully comes,
when you will be
all in all.

Help us and all people
to reject our own wills
and to obey your will without any back talk.
Your will alone is good.

Help us one and all to carry out the work we are called to,
as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.

Meditation

“We can affirm in quiet confidence that the ship of history moves in the direction God intends even when we live in the midst of destruction, horror and tragedy. We can pray “Thy kingdom come” in faith and confidence as we labor to prepare for that coming.” (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 115)

Scripture – Romans 12:1-2, 9-12, 21

Song – A sung prayer of intercession, such as *Pelas dores deste mundo/For the Troubles* (from Brazil) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 663)

Scripture – Psalm 97:1-2, 9-12

Songs —

Mayenziwe / Your Will Be Done (from South Africa) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 909)

A setting of Psalm 117, such as *Laudate Dominum* (from the Community of Taizé in France) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 591); or *Bān-bîn ah/Let All Nations Praise the Lord* (from Taiwan) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 588)

Give us this day our daily bread

Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 125

Do take care of all our physical needs
so that we come to know
that you are the only source of everything good,
and that neither our work and worry
nor your gifts
can do us any good without your blessing.

And so help us to give up our trust in creatures
and trust in you alone.

Meditation

“Fear of not having enough to eat can destroy a sense of well-being in the present and erode hope for the future... Jesus teaches his disciples a prayer that means, “Deliver us, O Lord, from the fear of not having enough to eat. Give us bread for today and with it give us confidence that tomorrow we will have enough.” (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 122)

Scripture – Exodus 16:1-5, 34-35

Song – A setting of Psalm 23, such as *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need* (from England) (*Lift Up Your Hearts* Hymnal 369)

Scripture – Matthew 6:28-34

Songs –

My Song is Love Unknown (from England) (*Lift Up Your Hearts* Hymnal 148)
Look and Learn from the Birds of the Air (from Korea and the Iona Community in Scotland)
(*Lift Up Your Hearts* Hymnal 120)

Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors

Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 126

Because of Christ's blood,
do not hold against us, poor sinners that we are,
any of the sins we do
or the evil that constantly clings to us.

Forgive us just as we are fully determined,
as evidence of your grace in us,
to forgive our neighbors.

Meditation

“The request for forgiveness is side by side with the petition for bread. Daily life requires both bread and forgiveness. In addition, Christians must not think of forgiveness merely as a great dramatic act that occurs at the beginning of the pilgrimage of faith, but as a daily need. Each day the faithful need to ask God to pick up the broken pieces of their lives and restore to them the joy of their salvation. The one who prays this prayer asks for release from the guilt of unfulfilled responsibilities and for a lifting of the burden of wrongdoing.” (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 126)

Scripture – Colossians 3:12-14

Song – A song of confession, such as *Perdón, Señor/Forgive Us, Lord* (from the Dominican Republic and the United States) (*Lift Up Your Hearts* Hymnal 642)

Scripture – Psalm 103:8-13

Songs —

A setting of Psalm 103

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy (from England and the United States) (*Lift Up Your Hearts* Hymnal 689)

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil

Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 127

By ourselves we are too weak
to hold our own even for a moment.
And our sworn enemies—
 the devil, the world, and our own flesh—
never stop attacking us.

And so, Lord,
uphold us and make us strong
 with the strength of your Holy Spirit,
so that we may not go down to defeat
 in this spiritual struggle,
but may firmly resist our enemies
 until we finally win the complete victory.

Meditation

“John Calvin writes, ‘In brief, being conscious of our own weakness, we ask to be defended by God’s protection, that we may have an impregnable position against all devices of Satan.... The petition for protection from evil, or from the evil one, is a cry from the heart in every age.’” (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 129)

Song – *Gospel Song: His Eye is on the Sparrow* (from the United States) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 441)

Scripture — Psalm 46

Songs –

Psalm 90: *O God, Our Help in Ages Past* (from England) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 405)

Abana alathi fi ssama/Abana in Heaven (an Arabic setting in English or Arabic, from Lebanon) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 911)

For yours is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 128

We have made all these petitions of you
because, as our all-powerful king,
you are both willing and able
to give us all that is good;
and because your holy name,
and not we ourselves,
should receive all the praise, forever.

Scripture – Revelation 4:1-2, 6-11

Doxology – A setting of Psalm 150, such as *Sing Praise to the Lord, You People of Grace* (from Singapore) (*Lift Up Your Hearts Hymnal* 7)



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Notes on the Service

1. This service is adapted from one held January 25, 2013, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, as part of the annual Symposium on Worship sponsored by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (www.worship.calvin.edu). A video of this service can be viewed at <http://new.livestream.com/calvin-college/events/1738249>
2. The Questions and Answers from the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), translated from the first German edition of 1563, are from the 2011 edition approved by Synod 2011 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and by General Synod 2011 of the Reformed Church in America, and are used by permission. Each was read in a different language by one of the international guests at the Symposium. Since the prayers were all printed, everyone could understand the prayer.
3. Dr. Kenneth Bailey, research professor of New Testament at the Ecumenical Institute (TanTur) in Jerusalem (emeritus), and an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., offered brief meditations in that service; the quotations included here are from his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008) and have been included by permission. His books have been translated into many languages. These brief excerpts could be read as very short meditations, or simply printed with additional meditations offered by a local pastor or other worship leader.
4. The songs for the service were selected from *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, June 2013), a hymnal produced jointly by the Christian Reformed Church in America and the Reformed Church in America. Information on each of these songs can be found on the website www.liftupyourheartshymnal.org Songs were chosen from several different countries and traditions, acknowledging the diverse body of Christ around the world. Churches are encouraged to choose songs from their available materials in their own languages, but are still encouraged to consider songs from other cultures as well as their own.



Sermon Notes – Acts 8: 26-40

by Douwe Visser

Three female Reformed Theologians discussed the question why they felt attracted to the Reformed (Presbyterian) faith. All three referred to the notion of freedom. They felt that in the Reformed tradition the notion of Christian freedom is traditionally and still today well worked out. In a sermon on Reformation Day where – this year – the focus is on the Heidelberg Catechism we propose to reflect on the concept of freedom. It is a treasure that we can pass on to the next generation of Christians in our community. We suggest the reading of Acts 8: 26-40 together with ‘Question and Answer 1’ of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Acts 8, 26-40

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. 31 “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”

34 The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” [37] [c] 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Exegetical Notes on Acts 8: 26-40

Verse 26: The road from Jerusalem to Gaza is literally descending because Jerusalem is higher on top of the hill and Gaza is at the coast and thus at sea level. But this literal descending has in this passage also a symbolical meaning. The eunuch from Ethiopia had gone to Jerusalem to worship. He went as a pilgrim, seeking God. He looked for the mystical ‘top-experience’ of finding God. But he returned, i.e. went down, still being a seeker. Philip has to go down with him.

Verse 27: The eunuch comes from Ethiopia, from Africa. As a eunuch he must not have been able to participate fully in the temple worship (Deuteronomy 23: 1). Had he therefore bought a scroll with the book of Isaiah? Because of words like these, in chapter 56:

³ ... do not let the eunuch say: ‘I am just a dry tree.’

⁴ For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
Who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls,

A monument and a name better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

The eunuch is introduced as the official who is in charge of the entire treasury of the Queen of Ethiopia. Treasure in Greek is γαζή (gazè), which is the same word as the name of the place the eunuch is going down to, Gaza (Γαζα). The eunuch now holds in his hands a new treasure, but he does not have the key, as it later appears, to open it.

Verse 29: The Spirit leads Philip to a starting point for explanation and proclamation of the gospel. This is an important aspect of the *Missio Dei*: a starting point is needed.

Verse 30: Philip can hear what the Ethiopian reads since he reads aloud. This was practice for ages, certainly in Biblical times. In Greek, Philip's question literally reads: "Can you read what you read aloud?". Like children who learn to read the Bible and do that aloud, but cannot combine understanding with it yet: it is 'reading' without reading.

Verse 31: For 'to guide', Greek has literally 'to show the way'. The word 'way' is important in this passage and in the New Testament in general. Christians called themselves 'people of the way': followers of the way of Christ. But you need to be shown the way. This is the basic of Christian nurture and a document like the Heidelberg Catechism is something that shows the way to go. But this type of showing the way also means that the guide himself / herself has to go the way together with the one he / she guides. Christian education is going a part of the 'Way' together.

Verse 32-33: It is striking that the central Old Testament passage functions as a starting point for teaching the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as these words are taken from Isaiah 53. In HC Q. 1, we read: "... Jesus Christ who with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins ..." The first part of this text has a parallel in the Isaiah passage: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter ..." The second part of the Q. 1 quote is the proclamation of the good news, which is similar to the way Philip uses the Isaiah passage. The words from Isaiah about 'justice denied' are words to be meditated on as a deep symbol of human suffering: where justice is denied, life is taken away.

Verse 34-35: The Ethiopian's question and the Scripture passage are starting points. Can we proclaim the good news about Jesus without a starting point?

Verse 36: Again, the symbolic meaning of the word way / road: one cannot proclaim the good news about Jesus *in abstracto*, one has to go the way together with the other. The eunuch understood well the lessons Philip taught him. When he sees water he now knows that there is no obstacle any longer to come close to God. He is freed from the law that forbade him to be in the centre of worship. He belongs to Christ; no one can put obstacles between him and Christ. That is the heart of freedom. The way going down to Gaza has now become a way of going up to find the real treasure of his life.

Verse 39: The eunuch went on his way: he can now go on his own. Christian nurture has a starting point, but also a point where the guide lets the other go. The treasure the Ethiopian had in his hands is now opened with the key of the explanation Philip gave. Now he has found the treasure he can follow on his way with joy.



Sermon Outline

1. Life is often considered as descending: individual life, life of our society, of our community, of our church. But do we realise that we carry a treasure: the good news about Jesus? We do need a key to open the treasure.
2. As Philip with his explanation gave the key to find the treasure, so the Heidelberg Catechism was intended to be such a key. We can however not deny that it is in many ways a document of its time that needs (radical) re-explanation. The key does not fit so easily today.
3. We have to find starting points in our world today. They differ as individual lives differ, as cultures differ and as societies differ. On the other hand, suffering because of obstacles to freedom and denial of justice is – unfortunately – a global experience. These are signs of the misery that the Heidelberg Catechism describes so prominently.
4. Belonging to Christ (Q. 1) is not a new kind of slavery. It is a sign of freedom: no one, nothing holds power over you. The Reformed tradition of the 16th century was keen on putting forward this notion of freedom. It should however also be used as a critical notion within the Reformed community itself, where so often the notion of freedom has been distorted by new human obstacles.
5. Christian education should lead us to follow the way with joy. This means that this kind of education is more than a series of theoretical lessons. How can there be joy when freedom and justice are denied?

Ideas For Group Discussion on the Bible

Based on Galatians 5: 22, 25 and 6:14-15

by Dora Arce-Valentín

Religion is a cultural phenomenon. Religiosity, which is essentially spiritual in nature, is also cultural. But there is a difference between religion and religiosity. Religion follows certain given rituals, which we cannot change. Religiosity comes from the freedom with which Christ has made us free.

When we think of Christian freedom, we need to think of the treatise written by Martin Luther *On the Freedom of a Christian*:

'For it to be possible for us to know exactly what a Christian is and the way in which one should act in relation to the freedom which Christ has won and given us – of which Paul tells us so much – I begin by stating two conclusions:

- Christians are free persons, rulers of all and subject to no one.
- Christians are servants, in the service of all and subject to all.

Those statements are clearly Pauline. The apostle writes in 1 Corinthians 9, 'I am free... a slave to everyone' (v.19). And in Romans 13 we read, 'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another' (v.8).'

Later on, Luther adds that, because we are social beings,

'The sole free claim of Christians in all their work will be to serve... the needs of their neighbours is the one thing to be taken into account.'

Christianity is the religion of a book, the Bible, and it is therefore essential for us to approach it intelligently, interpreting it with a view to discovering what it really means for us. The great dilemma is that, on the one hand, the Bible is the faith testimony of the Church, which created the Bible. However, on the other hand, the Bible is also the one who creates the Church.

Let me explain this.

Why I say the Church created the Bible,

- 1) because the New Testament authors were members of those early communities,
- 2) because the members of those communities accepted Scripture as the Word of God,
- 3) because it was the Church that also accepted the Old Testament, and
- 4) because the Church accepted some books and rejected others as inadequate or unacceptable.

There is no doubt that that process took place over many years.

But as I said before, the Bible, additionally, is the source from which each one of us has drunk, and continues day by day to drink, the water of life, which is Christ. It has led us to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. It is through the Bible that we learn what it means to be the Church. The Bible, to a certain extent, informs us how we ought to act and how we should think. That means that there has always existed, and still exists, an inter-relationship between the biblical testimony and the Church's testimony, which is definitively our own testimony of faith as followers of Jesus Christ.



Now, the way in which we approach the biblical texts, or our 'hermeneutics' (how we interpret the text), is influenced by our culture, those paradigms in which our thinking has been built, or what sociologists call our *ideology*.

The Christian faith is certainly not an ideology. However, those who profess the Christian faith have inevitably to opt for an ideology, so to say. As human beings we develop our own way of conceiving what life and death mean, the meaning of history in our own lives and in the life of the country and the world in which we live. Then, our way of thinking (our ideology) does affect our interpretation of the biblical text.

Luther said that all human beings either worship the true God or they worship an idol. In that case, they then fall into the sin of **idolatry**, and, although for most of the time we are not aware of this, it is a risk to which we are all exposed.

The truth is that Jesus did not come to bring us a new religion but what he called his programme of the Kingdom of God. That is the Kingdom of a God who is, according to Jesus himself, our ABBA, our 'daddy'. For Jesus, this God perfectly fulfils his fatherly role. He does not act capriciously, and he does not pander to our selfish ambitions and desires for power, nor to our personal well-being as individuals, so that we can ignore other human beings and their needs. Although we often do not like to be reminded of it, we are every one of us God's creatures.

What I mean is that religion is not the same as religiosity. It is not the same to say 'I go to church' as to say 'I am the Church'. It is not the same thing to be a person who 'practices' a series of rituals that belong to a particular religion as to be a person who truly lives out their religion.

In our case, according to our statements of faith, it is not the same thing to be involved in all the Christian rituals (worship, bible studies, sacraments, spirituals retreats, etc.) as to live a life accepting that we all are sons and daughters of the one God, and that the creation, God's creation, belongs to God alone, and that we have been created in God's image and likeness, which means also creators of goods, both material and spiritual.

We can live and act in human history in the knowledge that this God is the one who rules and guides it, and that we are called to be God's co-workers in building what is called the Kingdom of God.

What then is the key that calls into life and validates this central issue of our religiosity, which is the all-embracing love of Christian freedom? In fact, the heart of the Christian faith lies in the possibility given us by Jesus to attain true freedom.

It is a freedom that frees us from our two greatest enslavements: of being slaves to sin, and slaves to an overwhelming fear of death – which in our time could be the fear of what is different, fear of the unknown.

Jesus Christ certainly frees us from both those enslavements. He has conquered sin in his flesh and death in his spirit. 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23: 46), were his last words on the cross, whereas his first words as the Risen One were, 'Peace be with you' (Luke 24: 36). He then said, 'Why are you troubled? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost [spirit] does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have' (Luke 24: 38-39).

We have thus been freed from our slavery to sin by the liberating power of the cross. We have been freed from our slavery to the fear of death by the liberating power of the resurrection. We can thus here take up again the distinction between religion and religiosity.

We can do this because the disciples, following Jesus' last instructions at his Ascension, gathered in Jerusalem (according to Luke in his second book, the Acts of the Apostles). There then happens the Pentecost experience. From then on, they cease to be a group like any other and become a **community of faith**, whose witness is based on the resurrection. In Acts 4: 33 we read, 'With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.'

On reading that, one would have expected that the witness to Jesus' resurrection would be something out of the ordinary, something extraordinary and perhaps spectacular, like Jesus' resurrection itself. However, what the text goes on to say is striking: 'There were no needy persons among them. For

from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as they had need' (Acts 4: 34-35).

It thus results that it is our religiosity and not our religion that should be what motivates the Church in seeking alternative ways for all human beings to respond to the call of the risen Christ to share the goods created by God, in order that each person may have what is needful (but no more than what is really needful), so as to be able to live a life worthy of a creature made in the image and likeness of God.

It is imperative in our age for the Church to present this dream, this vision of the Kingdom of God as completely realisable in human history. In doing that, we would be following in the steps of Martin Luther, when, before the Diet of Worms, he declared that he could neither think nor act in any other way 'unless I am convinced to the contrary by the witness of Scripture.' 'I am bound by the biblical texts that I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot, will not, retract in any way, because it is neither safe nor honest to act against one's conscience. So help me God. Amen.'

Then, Christian faith is lived, it could be said, at three levels. The first level is the leap that we have taken from being a **non-believer** to being a **believer**, of living **without faith in Jesus Christ** to living **in Jesus Christ by faith**. That is something that happens in the innermost part of our being.

This faith then takes visible shape in **hope** (the second level). In Hebrews 11:1 we read: 'Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.' That could also be translated: 'Faith is what sustains our hope.' What, however, does hope hope for? According to Paul, what we hope for is justice. In Galatians 5:5 he writes: 'But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness [or justice] for which we hope.'

However, what is most interesting, not to say the most important, thing about this hope is that those who are righteous, or practice justice, will live, according to Paul, using the words of the prophet Habakkuk, **by their faith** (that is the third level). Habakkuk's words 'The righteous will live by [their] faith' (Hab. 2:4) are repeated by Paul in Romans 1:17. Just persons, who according to Paul are all those whom the Lord has justified, will in fact live not because of their righteousness, because they have acted justly, but by their faith. It is our faith that underlies our acts of justice, our good works. The best thing that we can do is to have faith. It is faith that inspires our acts of justice, in other words, the good that we do. Our just acts are justified by our faith.

So, what is justice according to the Bible? Biblical righteousness, or justice, has nothing to do with the justice of the legal system, the justice that was invented by the lawyers of ancient Rome. That sort of justice was represented, and is still represented today, by the image of a woman with her eyes blindfolded and a pair of scales in her hand. That symbolically signifies that the key to justice lies in the complete impartiality of the person doing the judging. Judges cannot be partial in any way towards those whom they have to judge. We could say that that is dispassionate, completely unprejudiced justice.

However, in the Bible, the idea of justice definitely does not consist in remaining unaffected when confronted with situations of injustice. In concrete terms, it does not permit us to remain impassive in face of social and economic inequality, of the injustices dividing individuals, families, nations, and peoples into those who have made themselves rich and those who have become impoverished. Biblical justice contains a high level of passion, a passionate solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the underprivileged, the weak, the sick and those who are excluded or discriminated against.

The justice that accompanies faith and sustains hope is not justice of the Roman sort, but rather consists in being committed to liberating those who are oppressed by poverty and cannot defend themselves. Justice for Paul, as for Jesus, is the justice to be found in the Parable of the Last Judgment, or the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25: 31-46). In it those reckoned to be just are those who have given the thirsty something to drink and the hungry something to eat, who have cared for the sick and visited those in prison. In so doing, they affirm with Paul that 'neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value' (i.e. mere religious acts), but 'faith expressing itself through love' (Gal. 5: 6).

Faith, then, becomes a vessel given to us by God for us, using our freedom, to fill with the hope for justice and love.

Again, religion has only to do with rituals, traditional liturgical practices, and dogmas promulgated by decree. Religiosity, by contrast, has to do with spiritual values, ethical values, and faith as the source of freedom. Religiosity is a never-ending process. It will never come to an end, and will be fed constantly by our experience as believers.

Religion, then, suffers from a very serious disease, the evil of the false spirituality of dogmatism. Religiosity is the offspring of the dynamic liberating spirituality of faith. It instils in us hope for a future of justice, and creates in us a life that is renewed day by day in practicing love.

Questions to get group discussion going

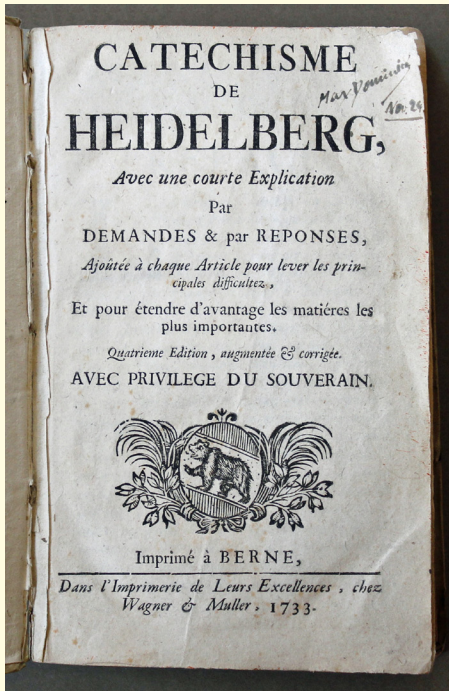
1. To what extent is your life of faith shaped by the Bible when you decide on your priorities? And does your faith community really let the Bible speak to it or does it only attempt to use the Bible as an excuse to affirm itself?
2. What aspects of your life reflect religious practice rather than a commitment to follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What about your church?
3. Can you responsibly accept the task of seeking justice above all in the way in which you relate to your family, your faith community and your neighbourhood? Or do you remain impartial and detached as in Roman-style legal systems? What is your community doing by way of response to the needs that it finds in the locality where you meet?



Heidelberg and Accra

by Robert H. Jordan

To Lew Mudge: I'm still grateful.



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When you hear these two names, what comes to your mind? To most of you, I am sure, you will think of crucial statements of faith written at an important time in church history and yet they are the names of important places – in this case in two different continents and that in itself marks an important development in the history of our churches, a transition, a challenge.

How many of our church confessions or doctrinal documents are anchored in a geographical context, known for the name of a city or important place! Heidelberg, Westminster, Dort, Helvetic, Belgium, Scots, Barmen, Accra: the names of the people involved in each of these texts is less important than that of a place where something significant happened. And yet behind each of these important documents we can trace the life of men and women, with a life, with dreams, with hopes, with needs, with faith, with determination; women and men led by God to make a statement. In most cases we will not remember the names of those inspired human beings who wrote the documents, guided by the Holy Spirit and by their passion for God's cause, but there they were, and sometimes they suffered at the hands of other human beings because they took such positions. Each of these documents is a sign of the times and has inspired people way beyond its time...in many ways we are who we are due to these documents, to these affirmations of faith.

“I” - “We”

This is a challenging tension we find so often in our personal life, which is reflected in our faith life and of course emerges in one way or another in our church documents. Do we express faith and life as an individual and personal relationship, this way using the “I”, or is life and faith to be expressed in the communal understanding by which we then use the “We”? This is not new of course and, trying to understand the way forward, I realize that this same matter is to be found in the two Creeds our churches recognize as foundational to our being Church. The Apostles Creed –at least in English and Spanish (which are the two languages I communicate in) was constructed on the “I”: *I believe*. The Nicene Creed on the other hand is constructed on the “We”: *We believe*. And from then on we live the tension, which I imagine will continue till the end of time.

Re-reading both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Accra Confession, I discover this same reality. The Heidelberg Catechism is expressed in the “I”, while the Accra Confession is expressed in the “We”. These two different approaches should be kept in tension together, if we are to grow in life and faith to be more meaningful to the world in which we live.

We are individuals, created by God, loved by God and need to express this relationship by valuing what God has done for each person and we cannot exclude the “I”, if we want to grow in faith and fullness of life. And at the same time, it is important to realize that each “I” has been called to be part of the Body with Jesus Christ as our head, becoming this way a “We”, which expresses this communal reality which is held together by the love of the Spirit.

Many of the problems we have faced in our churches over the centuries were due to the fact that we have ignored this needed tension and so the *I* suffers because of the pressure of the *We*; or the *We* suffers since the centrality of the *I*. When the “I” becomes the centre of all consideration we end up with an individualistic, selfish reality that finally develops into a ‘save-yourself’ style of life that excludes the vulnerable, clearly against what God has shown us is the way ahead.

The current socio-economic-political reality in so many parts of the world has put the *I* over and above the *We*. So many times, we hear political leaders telling us “we are all in this together”, as if the “*We*” were to be the guiding factor, when in reality what we discover is that we aren’t in this all together; the financial crisis we are facing in the world today is a clear example of this: some (very few) people are doing much better than (many) others.

Gone too far?

Some of you may believe I have stretched the matter too far; personally I believe that the distinction is an important one, and once we have recognized these two approaches, we are invited to hold them in tension, so as to build up a theology that is relevant to the reality in which we currently live. This bridge was presented to me in Debrecen, Hungary, in 1997, at the General Council of what then was the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Of course, I knew all about the Heidelberg Catechism, which this year celebrates 450 years; and what we now know as the Accra Confession did not even exist, but was only a hope in the hearts of many Reformed Christians the world around.

At Debrecen, I was invited to be part of the message committee and, though many of you may not remember what the final message of the General Council said, some of you may remember “*The Declaration of Debrecen*”. It only takes up one page in the book of the proceedings of the 23rd General Council (page 244). One of the inspirations of the message committee was Lew Mudge, and this is why I dedicate this paper to him. He was truly inspirational (in the sense of guided by the Holy Spirit) and brought out the best of all of us on that working party.

The Declaration of Debrecen was inspired by question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism and, from that day, it became an inspiration to me and I believe to many others in the whole process that followed and climaxed in Accra on the day the Accra Confession was approved at the 23th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

This Declaration of Debrecen takes up the wording of Heidelberg and presents us with the challenge behind the great words of Question 1. It does this by leading us from that wonderfully moving affirmation: “*I am not my own, but belong— body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ*”, in which we are reminded of being the individual that enters into communion with Jesus Christ, creating this new reality of the Body of Christ, in which we are all members, different parts of the one body.

This Declaration sets out our brokenness, our pain, our failures, which Heidelberg expresses so categorically, and invites us to pray for forgiveness – from God and from each other – “for all the injuries we have done to one another”. It does this, again, in the most moving way by developing the litany that still today touches our hearts: ***We are not on our own...*** followed by the reality of confession, belonging, believing, knowing, being called, not despairing. The final affirmation reminds of our mutual belonging, within the church and beyond the church, so as to proclaim SOLI DEO GLORIA!

This declaration was read out at the end of a lively march through the streets of Debrecen in the four official languages of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Many people were moved to tears and it still warms my heart when I remember this moment that was 16 years ago!

I go back to that moment because it is there that I discovered how a historical document such as the **Heidelberg Catechism**, which has been part of the life of so many churches in so many different parts of the world, in so many different languages and is still used today, could inspire human beings to produce a document as challenging as the **Accra Confession**. It is moving to be part of a church tradition which can pick up the best of the theology expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism and also be inspired to commit to justice in the economy and for the earth as the Accra Confession sets out to us all and to the world at large.

Perfect?

It is clear that neither the *Heidelberg Catechism* or the *Accra Confession* are perfect in each and every detail. They are the results of human effort to try to express as clearly as possible the

faithfulness to the God of Creation, to the Lord of Liberation and to the Spirit of Truth. Each has a different beginning: Heidelberg is an expression of faith initiated in Europe in a particular and tumultuous historical, political and religious reality, while the Accra Confession began as the result of African, Asian and Latin American Christians wanting to respond to the unjust economic reality and the ecological disaster their countries were facing and to do this from a faith perspective. Now both of these documents speak to the world.

Heidelberg is the result of Frederick III wanting to have a common expression of the Reformed Faith that could be taught and explain the basics of faith; it was born at a time of controversy, and was in itself controversial. As there were those who sustained it firmly and were willing to defend it with all they had and all they were, there were others that did not think so highly of it. It was one of many documents the churches produced, as I pointed out at the beginning of this paper. Even today some of our churches are considering the need to update some of the stinging points which reflect a different historical and religious situation that clearly is not the same world as it was 450 years ago.

The Accra Confession is likewise the result of struggle, beginning in Kitwe in 1995, and supported by the Reformed family meeting in Debrecen in 1997. From then, a march began that included analysis and contributions from Seoul/Bangkok, Stony Point, Buenos Aires, London–Colney and then Ghana where it all came together. This was not an easy process; it grew in controversy over language, description of reality and suggestions for the way ahead.

Has the world economic situation improved in any way since then for the millions of women, men, children, elderly or youth who suffer the consequences of an economy that destroys their lives and the land on which we all live? Far from it! The challenge set out by the Accra Confession is still in need of being addressed, the root problems need solving and it is nine years more urgent than it was back in 2004.

I believe that the unresolved situation we are still living is due to the “I”-“We” tension which continues to privilege the “I” over the “We”. Until we can take the theology of our historic documents that set out the faith that sustained us in the past and make it alive, real and relevant to the new world situation, we will find it very hard to overcome the tensions and it will not help us to build a world that is more just, more equal, more life enhancing for the millions and millions that continue to be ejected from the possibility of living a full and meaningful life just as God has set out for all people, and not for some few.

Allow me to close with two quotes from the documents we have considered; they speak for themselves:

- *The Heidelberg Catechism*: Q. 128. What does your conclusion to this prayer mean?
A. “For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever” means: We have made all these petitions of you because, as our all-powerful king, you are both *willing and able to give us all that is good*; and because your holy name, and not we ourselves, should receive all the praise, forever. (Emphasis mine)
- *The Accra Confession*: 42. “Now we proclaim with passion that we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing, and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live (Deuteronomy 30.19).”

Signs of Hope

Written by the students of the Global Institute of Theology, Yogyakarta, 2012

Dear Church in Canada,

I would like to challenge you to dialogue with Christian congregations of different traditions. If we could put aside our differences and our rigidity which says “we do it this way and you do it that way” then perhaps we can learn from each other, work with each other and experience the Holy Spirit through each other.

But I don't want this to stop at an ecumenical dialogue; I would like to communicate with our Muslim neighbours as well. We do not need to be afraid that we will lose our identity through dialogue; in fact we may just strengthen our identity. A conversation does not mean that you become the other. It means that you hear and respect the other. By working together we can tackle some of the local and global issues facing us as people of faith.

My dear fellow Canadian Christians, I know that you are generous people, faithful to the way of Jesus, full of love and compassion. I hope that you will trust that the Holy Spirit can and will lead you to new and wonderful ways of being.

Your sincere student,

Anita van Nest (Canada)

Dear friend,

Grace and Peace in Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this letter is to share with you some thoughts, concerns and, specially, the reason why we have hope in our own context in Brazil.

Henry J. M. Nouwen stated in his book “*The suffering that cures*” that the role of the minister is to “turn visible the first traces of liberation to the others” (p. 118). In this sense, I'm happy to say that in our local churches in São Paulo the people live the communion sharing their happiness and suffering as sinner in the strait path.

We, as a church, are trying to live what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the “spiritual communion”: where people try to live the fraternal service of love, have the Bible as word of the Lord and serve the other for the love of God, since we understand that the base of our communion isn't what someone is, in his own spirituality and piety, but what Christ has done in the cross. Therefore, the communion is a response to the preaching of the gospel.

It's true that we have difficulties and step backs, but I truly believe in the sovereign God.

To the Lord all the glory!

Paulo Pereira (Brazil)

I believe that a sign of hope in Canada and in the Canadian churches is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was initiated to deal with the aftermath of colonialism of Indigenous peoples and Residential Schools. One particular aspect that is hopeful to me is the role some of the churches played in being prophetically “ahead” of the curve of society in terms of issuing their own apologies before the government (in the 1980s and 1990s) which helped to put pressure on the government to issue its own apology and initiate this Commission. I do feel a deep sincerity in many of these apologies, particularly on behalf of the church, and am continually struck by the graciousness of Indigenous peoples to hear these apologies and to trust government, churches, and non-Indigenous Canadians with their stories. It is very hopeful to see the church also responding on the local level, with many churches learning about the particular Indigenous history and reality of the land where they are situated and working to build better relationships and work for justice with local Indigenous people and organizations.

Sheryl Johnson (Canada)

What in my own situation brings me hope?

Even in overwhelming times and struggles with the secular teachings I always find hope. As I was intently listening to Phyllis Byrd, as she linked spirituality and worship, it seemed to feed my soul. I believe that everything I do is tied to my faith, and my God and the practice of ministry. Some days I find I theologically am finding God in the moments and it is in my mind before I cognitively think it. It is part of my genetic make-up and has become as familiar and automatic as breathing.

In light of this, in my daily tasks for work or for daily life, some people this light and others feel it in me. They call me a “breath of fresh air” or comment about my endless energy. I have had people stop me in a store and comment that I am smiling and they wonder what I am smiling about and I simply say because God is in my heart! This overflows into worship and the congregational life where I serve. A small rural congregation of 20 people welcomed me as a fledgling theologian in March 2010 and together we have done amazing work. Their hunger for new ideas and my desire to try them has been a recipe for success. They have grown to 40 people on any given Sunday and we are struggling to find teachers for the 8 – 16 children that anxiously show up with grandparents and parents on Sunday morning and gleefully dig into the snacks on the dining table after worship.

There is a vitality of desire to be a vibrant rural church, numbers do not concern them, faith does. This group has no desire to become a mega church or to outgrow the lovely brick church in the corner of the cornfield. They simply want to be a community of believers that welcomes who ever happens to drop in that Sunday. They cook together three times a year and feed 350 people each time to raise funds, they are open to new programs and they are hungry to hear the gospel in a new contemporary language and invite change while still honouring tradition.

My history and undergrad work in elder care cause me to focus on death and dying and what in that is to be honoured as we focus on living. As one is to witness death how can the light of the resurrection be found? Living Holy Saturday, there is mission work to be done in the world by starting in the local community. A church can be the guide and the lifeline to the community bringing people from the cross to the empty tomb by living out their own faith. Witness is the key and that is my hope for the future of the church!

Cynthia Breadner (Canada)

I minister in a newly established congregation of about 150-200 members. We are located in a township where poverty, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, crime and substance abuse prevail. The members of the congregation are also affected by that, we have mostly broken families, a few academics, domestic

workers, labourers and unemployed people who depend solely on social grants by the government. we have pensioners who are also supported by the government, who have a responsibility to care for their families and the youth, some are still at school and unfortunately some are only able to study up to Grade 12 and unable to proceed to tertiary education due to lack of finances.

In the midst of all of that God has blessed me with a vibrant, dynamic and life filled congregation. They have a deep sense of belief that I find amazing and they have a great commitment to the life of the congregation. Even though they have low income and some none at all, they always contribute to the finances of the congregation. Worship for them is giving their all to God, they sing with passion and dance so beautiful for God. Worship gives them hope, it creates a safe space where they make requests to God for a better tomorrow. In turn they give me hope to a point where I am able to say, I am blessed to have them in my life, through them I am able to see God at work. When I visit them at their homes, I feel that I am one that is being embraced.

Fundiswa Kobo (South Africa)

During my worship in the Christian Church Pasundan, I observed that the problems that often occur are: money, indifference to others as the people of Pasundan Christian Church, and do not want to know the problem is happening in society and the state.

My hope is that the Christian Church Pasundan grow in faith in God. So they are able to do the best for others. Not remain silent on issues that exist. Not be individualistic. But the attitude of tolerance, solidarity, empathy for other people. So the rich can help the poor, the strong can help the weak, and other things done because they saw the face of Christ in every person.

But the main reason why the church in the Christian Church Pasundan not grow in service to others, is because they are thought to form through a sermon delivered by the pastor. But unfortunately, during which I heard, no new insight or perspective in interpreting the Bible. Boredom may be felt by people. Therefore, one important aspect is that the church grew to earnest efforts should be made by a leader. Although it does not mean, leaders who control everything. But like it or not, is the role of a leader is to influence, to give effect to the scope of work in the church.

Julia Sri Tanjung (Indonesia)

Dear, Mr. President

You know that we have nice weather in South Africa. Especially the warm summer days are so nice, we all have “pap”, “Braaivleis” and a cold castle while we watch Bafana-Bafana, the Springboks and the Proteas winning their sport matches. I think my support really plays a big role as I am probably one of the proudest Africans living in South Africa.

Even though I am proud, I am also concerned about our country and especially the people of our country. We live in a country with great diversity and we don't always understand one another. We also struggle to see the positive of one another's culture and it causes a lot of tension. I am very much aware of this tension and would like to ask you to guide us in our understanding of one another.

It will help if the government can start talking about challenges that are relevant to the people living in South Africa. We live with a lot of division and poverty and we are daily reminded of HIV, crime and violence. Those of us living with enough don't always want to share our wealth and we don't understand the problems. The ones who are living in poverty don't understand our frustrations and we will need to find a midway for dialogue. When these problems start to be your problems, I am sure that the people living in South Africa will start thinking and talking about alternative ways of facing these challenges.

Even though we have a lot of challenges I am positive that we will find some answers and ways to understand one another within my lifetime. I cannot live in fear and regret thus I will not be caught in the past (Apartheid), but will rather strive for a nation that can and will live in peace, respect and harmony together. Not because we are forced, but because we will have a common goal.

Yours faithfully:

Frans du Plessis

The talking about *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda est* is still running well in many universities, even in church's business too.

But, in fact, I have not seen the truly result of those efforts in taking actions. I don't know the exact reason of this. I guess, they (including me) could not understand or forget the essential of "reformed" theology clearly. Or they may be in difficulty to embodied the discourse to be an action because they are too busy to manage a lot of internal business in the church (meeting, worship, catechisms, elder election, etc). They need to realize that all of church's activities couldn't separate to social situation.

In my optimism, I have a wish: more Christians are going back to the essential of reformed spirit; change and ongoing change to have ability to respond whatever things that can be involved by the church.

The churches should be back to their main tasks, i.e back to the reality of their context as the church indeed should be there. It is vital to know whatever things about the society; to understand the problems; looking for the root of the problem. Finally, the churches do the task that God is giving to them. Especially in Indonesia, it will be good to heal the society. Because, it can heal the wound of church (Christians) who/what is affected by the wounded society too (as Henry J. Nouwen in *The Wounded Healer*). The wounds that are effected separation of society by diversities in it.

Dananf Kurniawan (Indonesia)

Brothers and sisters,

I think that I have to thank God for the communion He has created between you and us in Indonesia. I am very glad to be a part of you in order to think about our calling as the churches sent by God to the world. As a communion, I do believe that what your problems become our problems, and what ours become yours. You yourself know about what our problems in Indonesia are, and I also ask you for praying for us as we here expect:

Peace and harmony in the context of Indonesian pluralism. The conflict or riot between Moslem and Christianity is a common phenomenon where humanity and especially Christianity are threatened. We need peace! We want to live in harmony each other. We want the kingdom of God is manifested in our context through reconciliation and peace.

A large number of Indonesian people are living under poverty, suffering, and discrimination. I also hope that we can struggle together, starting by thinking and then doing in order to prevent poverty and also to protest the oppressive and unjust system.

I also invite you to pray for ecological problems which often happen in Indonesian territory. It causes people are more and more suffering.

We are also struggling for the equality between male and female where female are discriminated.

The churches are in disunity because of the diversity of denominations, localities, and ethnicities.

This disunity is the threat for all of us to be communion as the true *koinonia* which struggle for the sake of humanity, and for the glory of God in the world.

Your prayer for our expectations will be meaningful. Togetherness with you all makes us believe that we are one communion in God and will do as we are called to do!

God Bless our ministry!

Nelson Kalay (Indonesia)

Dear Friends in Christ in Sri Lanka,

‘Youth Leadership for a United Country’

The next generation has moved up into the leadership. We, the youth of Sri Lanka holds the future of our country in our hands. In this critical period of transition of our country, we need to take the best advantage in the opportunity we have to replace the culture of divisiveness and conflict and be the voice to change; for hope and reconciliation. The ‘Sri Lanka Unites Movement’ represents this choice of our nation’s youth, from ethnic and religious groups, from across the country, to rise up and provide a new voice.

‘Sri Lanka Unites’ continuously takes a multi-pronged approach in promoting reconciliation. We motivate young leaders in schools across the country to understand the need for reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka, and empower them to undertake and give leadership to inter-community reconciliation initiatives in their localities. We believe that reconciliation comes not from the cosiness of a capital, but from the grassroots of a nation.

Meanwhile, we remain constantly aware of the ongoing rehabilitation which is needed in the war zone areas and continue to actively engage in their relief efforts. We also need to provide school provisions and scholarships to students in other parts of the country. The heart of our hope is to bring the schools in all 25 districts of the country. Frequent school relations visits help strengthen and expand our grassroots net-work, and help the core team monitor the progress of local-level reconciliation initiatives being undertaken by the young leaders.

We also need to be a partner in with the local, national and the international organisations/individuals’ interest in collaborating on various youth leadership and reconciliation initiatives, and develop relevant programmes together.

Emerging out of decades of great adversity, and a culture of suspicion and divisiveness, the end of the war finally marks a window of opportunity for us to rebuild as one nation. Yet, we are still faced with a common threat - an inability to find the sustainable peace. We are standing on the cusp of a new era, where an all too familiar polarised society could be replaced with one that is determined to correct the wrongs of the previous generation; a society that comes together in the spirit of reconciliation.

Our vision is; “to unite the youth of all ethnic and religious groups across Sri Lanka in a movement that promotes reconciliation, creating a peaceful and prosperous nation for future generations”. Our mission is; “to be a symbol for, and an example of, the powerful potential of united Sri Lankans, to work towards the sustainable development, peace and prosperity”. As young citizens of Sri Lanka, we now have a unique opportunity, and a strong responsibility, to turn a new page and write a new story. We must firmly resolve to promoting reconciliation among our fellow Sri Lankans.

In Christ

Yohan Krishnakumar (Sri Lanka)

Dear Presbyterian Church in Canada:

While I see challenges and concerns in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, with declining influence in a pluralistic and secular society, dwindling and aging congregations, and financial issues, I also see signs of hope for the Church and for the global Body of Christ.

Because the Church, like so many “traditional’ churches”, has been moved to the margins of society, the Church is now also in a position, and is starting to do so, in speaking for those that cannot speak, and creating a community for the marginalized, the outcast, and the forgotten. Since the church is no longer allied with the temporal powers, the church is now free to stand in solidarity with the people that society has forgotten.

Being at the GIT has also given me hope for the global Body of Christ. Seeing the dynamic, gifted and faithful people from all parts of the world at this conference makes me realize that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world, transforming the Church so that it can be more and more a part of God’s “Missio Dei” to redeem creation so that all may have life, and life in full.

Marianne Emig Munro (Canada)

Dear all,

I write to you concerning two issues I find pertinent with regards to The United Church of Zambia’s life in the community. These are gender disparities in our congregations and poverty levels in our community; issues we have to grapple with daily.

Speaking of gender disparities, what comes to mind is the influence of our cultural practices which are patriarchal in nature, disadvantaging females in communities and households. Furthermore, many of the church and community members are rendered vulnerable by impoverishing conditions which erode them of their dignity and worth as human persons created in the image of God. These two issues need to be addressed by our church if we are to be relevant to our context, therefore preaching a liberative gospel that is life-affirming.

Following the aforementioned, I still have hope that things can get better in our midst once gender disparities and poverty are addressed. I have a dream that women shall be held in the same regard as men therefore, allowing for the celebration of the ability of our God who creates in diversity. Since the UCZ now holds a need for three quarters of female representation in every meeting and gathering, my hope is to see a 50/50 representation of both males and females. Furthermore, I also have hope that those who suffer from poverty shall be empowered by the church and community to allow for holistic emancipation through practical steps such as challenging our government to deliver basic services to all citizens. I hope that all people in my community can have life and life in abundance as God intended it to be.

In all this, I strongly hold that there is still light at the end of the tunnel that life affirming practices in our cultures, church and community shall be propagated through addressing the plight of women and poor.

May we all join in this hope and dream for a better church that lives to be what it is called to be: a liberative tool for all with a special bias for women and poor in society.

Yours in Christ’s humble service,

Lilly Phiri (Zambia)

Korean churches need a belief. The belief means an action. About 100 years passed since the Gospel first came into Korea. Korean churches achieved phenomenal growth over the last one hundred years. So it's not hard to see the church buildings and Christians in Korea.

But now Korean churches are undergoing a downturn and have been weakening with corruption and irregularities. They have to guide a society onto the right path, but they are criticized from the society. The cause is that they do not live following the word of God. I really hope that modern churches live according to Bible not worldly values.

Han Wan Wook (South Korea)

Dear friends from Church of North India,

Greetings!!!

It is good to be a part of you for many years as it assures me that I belong to a big family.

I feel happy when I think of the heritage and communion we have with the various churches around. Also it is good to see the attempts made for the Communion of Churches in India (C.C.I.), which would include Church of South India and Mar Thoma Church also. I am sure, through this communion, we would achieve a lot as we would have our family extended to celebrate diversity through unity.

Indeed it feels good to see hope for that wider unity and also the unity we proclaim today. We have various dioceses with various cultural differences and thus far we could live in harmony amidst of persecution and challenges.

Individual churches are so active in extending hope to each other by assuring prayer supports and sharing their concerns with each other, evangelizing the Gospel to the other parts of the society.

Church of North India has been taking initiatives for women ordinations and also for Dalit and Tribal issues, land rights for which I feel much hopeful about you.

Praise be to the God for what we are!!!

Satvasheela Pandhare (India)

Dear Almighty God,

The Reformed Church in my country had been persecuted since its very foundation approximately 100 years ago; by the and throughout the Portuguese colonial rule, the church has worked underground, provided that only the Roman Catholic Church (the official church of the colonial regime) was widely permitted to function freely.

When the country became independent from Portugal in 1975, the new Marxist-Communist government literally banned religion; the main reason being that religion (Roman Catholic) had collaborated with colonial authorities, which in part is true; another reason is the widely known atheistic orientation of any communist thinking.

From 1994 the country has adopted a democratic constitution which is secular; in other words, this is to say that no religion or faith is above another; actually, secularism is becoming a religion in my country; as a result, Christianity is losing ground each and every moment; secularism is pushing religion (Christianity) into a merely private life (in family and/or church circle); everywhere else, Christianity is/will be downlooked.

Dear God,

My wish for my country is that you rise God fearing leadership in all sectors of the society, including the government; my wish is that you rise a God fearing President for the Republic of Mozambique, so that he will serve as a model for present and all future generations; so that your church becomes relevant.

I trust that this letter will find your precious consideration and action.

I ask this in the name of your Son, our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Your adopted son,

Miguel Nobre (Mozambique)

The difficulties of difference:

where strangers are segregated
into the clean and the contaminated,
the welcomed and the unwelcome,
the loved and the loathed.

Where young people

find themselves ignored because they have nothing to say;

where gay people

find themselves alienated because they're a threat to the norm;

where single people

find themselves excluded because they don't have families to bring;

where black people

find themselves patronised because they don't come from around here.

In the difference we delight –

as long as difference means duplicate
and delight means discriminate.

And while strangers signify safety

the people of the Church rejoice.

Compassion laced with contradiction:

community is complicit in the charade.

But in the gaps moves the Holy Spirit.

In the places that people cannot prevent

God lives.

In the diversity of difference –

where the other and outsider
become part of the fabric of faith
and embracing the stranger
turns from a challenge
to a chance for communion –
God is present.

In hospitality,
when sharing
a meal,
a conversation,
the peace,
God's embracing embodiment lives.

The gift of God –
found in the excluded and the expelled,
in the ignored and the unwanted –
is in their presence,
in their faithfulness,
and in their stories.

But maybe looking through open eyes –
through their eyes –
we can see God anew,
embodied in each other
as symbols of restoration and signs of redemption.

In difference and diversity
as boundaries are broken down,
the gospel glimmers in the gloom,
the loathed are loved,
the contaminated are clean,
the unwelcome are welcome.

Where hope is holy
may these things be.

Matthew Prevett (UK)

Dear friends

I write to you about the context of South-Africa and as it is visible in our nation's flag, this is a very diverse and colourful matter. Because on the one hand we have a lot of problems and negative aspects that is a part of our country, but on the other hand we have so much to look forward to and to be positive about.

Firstly, our context is troubled by poverty, corruption, violence and HIV/Aids. We see the poverty of our country daily when we drive past traffic lights and see people standing there with their children, begging for their daily bread. We see it in the townships and in other rural areas. We see it in the eyes of hungry children and through the holes of ripped clothing. We see the corruption when ministers spends their budgets on a new car, house or even just on a watch. We daily read of the violence that takes place. Of families being murder, of brothers, sons, daughters, husbands, wives, mothers and fathers being killed, raped or assaulted. We see how an entire generation just vanishes because of the aids-epidemic.

And even though we see all of these dreadful things, we also see a urge for unity, of black and white hands being intertwined. We see people from diverse groups, races and cultures coming together to participate in the solving of these problems. And as church we are also part of this diverse group of people seeking for justice, reconciliation and unity.

And for this reason I am positive, and I am proud of my country. And for this reason I have hope for our country and for the role of the church in South Africa. Therefore I claim to be a proudly 'white' African.

Yours Sincerely

Michelle van Tonder (South Africa)

I see the signs of hope for my church in it's life giving ministry when I see the congregation members singing, praising, worshipping God with all their heart, listening to the word of God earnestly on on Sunday Church services or on other church programs such as bible studies. And at the aftermath of these programs they still stay to relate with the others attentively, compassionately; and trustingly share their concerns and struggles and pray for each other. Also when they will do out of their way to help others.

I see signs of hope when there are healings, deliverance and transformation in the life of the church members

I see the signs of hope when I know that members have a personal relationship with God, having time to worship Him, and spending time to know Him more through personal devotion time for bible reading and and prayer. Not merely having a busy life of productive ministry

I also see it when people around the church, Christians and non Christians, acquaintance and strangers, on the way to the church greet one another with an eye of recognition and a smile...

I see the signs of hope when church members share a testimony of how a song, a praise sung at church, a bible verse, a human's touch, a prayer, an incidence in their life brought them to feel God's love, care and guidance. When they could be who they really are, without pretension, humbly seeking for prayer support in their struggles ... God is working to bring salvation in their life through the work of the Holy Spirit.

I see the signs of hope when members are reciprocating the hope that they have received and in turn become instrumental in giving hopes to others. Some members of my congregation are active in

prison ministry, especially to foreign inmates and those who got death or whole life sentence. Some offer their gifts of teaching economic skills, art or singing or just giving a listening ear and giving hope and a sense of love and care through their presence. There are also men and women from interchurch, the True Men and Wise Women ministry, who network together to minister on a weekly basis and from time to time make a retreat camp in the prison. Many inmates have come to receive Jesus as their savior through the accompaniment of the Christians brothers and sisters in the midst of their suffering.

I see signs of hope when members act in love, trying to do little things now and then, to show love, kindness and goodness, in simple ways in their daily life. When I see them initiating a small token of respect and care to others. Once I was so touched when I saw one young man greeting the waiters and waitresses, making a light talk, help clean the table, and saying goodbye to them with a as they leave a restaurant, instead of showing gestures of impatience, grumbling or complaining.

I see the signs of hope when brothers and sisters coming from many parts of the world, come to fellowship together, offer a hand to help, for the many forms of life-giving ministry in Bali ... Trusting «where the Lord is, his servants are» ... an assurance that God is working in the midst of sufferings of people trapped in prostitution, human trafficking, slum, etc. God brings people from all over the earth to help in His ministry to bring love, justice and peace

Love in Christ,

Made Gunaraksawati Mastra-Ten Veen (Indonesia)

Dear Friend in Christ

Warm Christian Greetings. I would like to share you about the challenge before me in my ministerial ways in my place. Presently I am doing God's ministry at a rural congregation. I have seven churches in my Parish. We have all the discriminations in our area that which all we could see in Indian society. I am keenly worrying about my own Dalit people. Because many of them do not have aware about their life, family and children. The present generations also behaving as like their parents. In India EDUCATION is the only toll to a Dalit to come forward from all the discriminations. A Dalit can become as the President of India by his or her education. The former Indian president Mr. K.R. Narayanan proved this. The challenge is I must do some thing for the up coming of my own Dalit people. While house visiting, I will find out that how many of the Dalit children have not going to the school. Then I encourage them to go the school and I will support them in their financial need. The challenge before the Dalit is "we must grow threw education in Indian society". Kindly uphold the Dalit people in your prayers for their uplifting.

With Prayers

Arul Deva Asirvatham (India)

