



Reconciled with one another: commemorating the Reformation ecumenically in Germany

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This article includes a specially commissioned translation of 'Reconciled with One Another', an ecumenical statement from the Council of Christian Churches in Germany for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Introduced by a member of the working party that composed it, the statement is followed by a liturgical order which picks up the text of the statement. The liturgy is offered here as a valuable resource for English-speaking churches in this commemorative year.

GERMAN REFORMATION • ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS • LITURGY •
ECUMENICAL STATEMENT

Introduction

by Prof Dr Ulrike Schuler

I am the delegate from the United Methodist Church to the German Ecumenical Theological Study Committee (Deutscher Ökumenischer Studien Ausschuss). All delegates are theologians from different confessional faculties in Germany. The DÖSTA is associated to the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen). The ACK wanted an ecumenical statement to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and we composed this statement, 'Reconciled with One Another', which the ACK finally approved.

It was a really effective process to write this statement and discuss the paragraphs in the context of ecumenical richness. All delegates always learn a lot by doing these kinds of studies. I think the statement is really significant. It has been written by theologians from the Roman Catholic Church, the different Orthodox Churches, Lutherans, Reformed and Free Churches (including Baptists and, of course, Methodists). The original German text can be found on the website of the ACK: www.oekumene-ack.de.

The ACK celebrated a service to mark the statement's adoption, with representatives of each of the churches reading out parts of the statement. When I organised a study day at our Reutlingen School of Theology (the Methodist Seminary for the German-speaking area – Germany, Switzerland, Austria) in June, we celebrated this service at the end of the study day. The study day was entitled *Freiheit und Verantwortung: Zur Bedeutung der Reformation Heute* (Liberty and responsibility: the significance of the Reformation today).

Celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation together is a clear sign of the extremely positive experience of the Second Vatican Council. It is significant that the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church have been holding a dialogue at world level since 1967 – that is, in this year of the Reformation 500th anniversary, now continuous for 50 years.

An ecumenical statement from the Council of Christian Churches in Germany on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation

Within the Christian community, 2017 is a special year. The Council of Christian Churches in Germany, within which for seven decades people of different denominations have encountered one another in spiritual solidarity within the one Christian faith and together shaped church and social life, has taken the opportunity of the anniversary year 2017 to provide for all Christians in Germany a considered statement of common witness and of commitment to 'oikonomia'.

1 Considering the year 2017 ecumenically

The anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 is the first year in which it is possible to consider across the entire ecumenical community of all Christian denominations the process of the Reformation, its effects on Christianity, and also the barriers and dangers which have arisen in the Western Church as a result of the Reformation.

Previous anniversaries have been characterised by denominational self-assertion. Thus the early commemoration of Luther in the sixteenth century already reflected historical and theological interpretations: Martin Luther was proclaimed prophet, teacher and hero. Even later commemorations of the Reformation served primarily to strengthen political, denominational or national convictions.

Today we recognise in 'oikonomia' that the Reformation was and remains not just a significant event in the history of Protestant churches and in German and European history, but also a salient event in Christianity which is of significance in world history. Nevertheless, the different positions of the Christian churches result in different views on the reasons for, course of and consequences of the Reformation. The impact of the events of the Reformation has been felt differently within the denominations.

In the sixteenth century, claims to truth that were asserted against other claims to truth did at times lead to considerations of possible tolerance, but above all led to mutual condemnation. The efforts to enforce such truth claims politically

frequently resulted in the persecution of religious minorities and in repeated military disputes. The consequences of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in connection with the exclusion of religious minorities are a common legacy for Christianity which continues to burden us. For the churches in the ecumenical age, questions arise about how to deal with the competing claims to truth which are made in the name of Jesus Christ. The Reformation's message about the freedom of every single Christian, which reveals itself in service to neighbour, is today a common ecumenical conviction. The entirely personal conviction of faith in the gospel of every baptised individual is a key consideration. Freedom of conscience in religious judgement is an undisputed basis for conversations about faith. In numerous conversations between the churches important commonalities in teaching and life can be recognised.

As a sign of this ecumenical solidarity and understanding, the Christian churches look together with gratitude in this year 2017 at the core concerns of the Reformation and want to make them fruitful for their present-day co-existence. These include:

- 1 reference to Holy Scripture in every situation in life and in every formation of theological judgement. Together we confess that the Bible must be considered the source and norm for ecclesial and personal life.
- 2 orientation towards the grace of God with respect to eternal salvation and the Christian life. Together we confess that for our redemption we are utterly reliant on the mercy of the Triune God and that we remain dependent on the support of God in the Holy Spirit for the success of our Christian actions. Together we confess Jesus Christ as the only true foundation of our Easter hope.
- 3 the conviction of the priesthood of all Christians, grounded in faith and baptism. Together we confess that the whole people of God has the responsibility of making known and living out the Easter hope and the limitless mercy of God in the world.

2 Taking up the impulses of the Reformation

From the perspective of the Reformed traditions, the central theme of the sixteenth century was the question of certainty in trusting faith. Were sinners able to trust in God? As long as doubt and uncertainty with regard to individual

worthiness for redemption dominates, the centrality of faith remains unrecognised. Many Reformers, such as Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, Menno Simons, Balthasar Hubmaier, Thomas Cranmer and John Knox, pushed the gospel to the centre of faith as the message of the free grace of God, that is, the undeserved turning of God to people hopelessly entangled in their sins. In the sixteenth century many women stood alongside the men in social, charitable, political and theological engagement. All Reformers spoke decisively against any attempt to obtain the grace of God through special efforts of piety. In contrast they offered the insight that only faith in the unconditional intervention of God for humankind in Jesus Christ offered certainty of salvation. The grace of God cannot be linked to any human endeavour, but rather it flows ahead of human endeavour and only then opens up the horizon for their fulfilment. The reformational criticism of the Church of the time was directed above all against practices (indulgences and money for Masses) which gave the impression that the means of grace of God could be administered by church officials for a corresponding financial consideration.

It was the newly rediscovered gospel message of justification which the Reformers pointedly pushed into the centre of the life of the Church. At the same time, the specific form of Christian freedom was given prominence in a special way: the freedom of each Christian is based on God's promise of mercy.

The Reformers attached special importance to two further matters, connected to the foundational call of justification purely by faith. The first is the instructional power of the biblical witness which is foundational for every church teaching. The biblical witness has always to be heard anew, for it is connected with the promise of the self-revelation of God through the life of his Spirit. Even if, now as before, there are different perspectives in the different denominations in dealing with the Bible, today the Bible is generally recognised as the highest norm for the teaching of the Church. Given this agreement, the ecclesial tradition has the task of preserving the one gospel through the ages. The second clear shift resulting from the Reformation is the prominence given to the priesthood of all the baptised in the life of the Church. On this point, too, many churches have taken up the impulse of the Reformation and have rediscovered the fundamental significance of the common worth of all believers and their joint responsibility for the life of the Church.

Above all, it is these biblical insights, pushed to the centre of the Christian life of faith by the Reformation, which we can celebrate ecumenically today.

3 Jointly considering the division of the Church and its painful consequences

As a result of the Reformation, which was originally theologically motivated and later had a marked effect on all areas of the social and cultural life of the early modern age, denominational and cultural differentiation and pluralisation became an enduring hallmark of Europe. In a long process, a plurality of independent denominations arose which were distinct from one another. This development was accompanied by polemical disputes, mutual exclusions and persecutions which ultimately led to confrontation between states of different confessions and to religious wars lasting decades.

The Reformation and the associated disputes had, like all great ground-breaking movements, both perpetrators and victims. Fringe Protestant movements, above all the Anabaptist communities, were discriminated against and persecuted both by Roman Catholic as well as Lutheran and Reformed authorities for many centuries, starting in the sixteenth century. On every side, political power was misused and people suffered when under the dominance of another denomination. The commemoration of 500 years of the Reformation must therefore inevitably also include remembrance of the numerous victims of religiously motivated violence: wars, deportations and executions were justified in the name of God. Social unrest was brought to a bloody end. Today the churches jointly deplore that both before and after the sixteenth century their anti-Semitism repeatedly had such devastating consequences.

One of the consequences of the Reformation was an increasing alienation of Christians from one another in the individual denominations, which not only brought about a different understanding of faith and life but also gave rise to many prejudices and assumptions. The claim to be the sole possessor of the truth was directed against members of other denominations, and also against members of other faiths. Up to and into the twentieth century, Christians lived in denominational cultures largely cut off from one another, in which differences were clearly marked, extending beyond exclusionary rites into issues of daily life (for example, marriage and divorce, choice of names, burial procedures, and education), leading to manifold hurts.

We must confess that as Christians we are mutually at fault. Together we are striving towards the healing of painful memories. We honour the many witnesses to the faith and the martyrs from the time of the Reformation and

the wars of religion as well as all Christians still suffering religiously motivated persecutions, and we jointly commemorate their courageous faith and their loyalty to the gospel. We also honour those who in earlier times stood up for religious peace and for the end to the use of any violence.

4 Learning from one another

Looking back over the past 500 years, the churches have not only reason to confess fault, but also occasion to give thanks. Much learning has been shared, especially in the last 50 years. Together we live in the knowledge that the gifts of God's Spirit, which have been preserved and are experienced currently in one Christian denomination, can also enrich other churches. Thus, today it is undeniable that important issues addressed at the Second Vatican Council were also concerns of the Reformation: respect for Scripture for the spiritual life and for theological teaching; the sacramental ties of baptism connecting all Christian believers; the common priesthood of all the baptised; the necessity of all churches to return to the one gospel; spiritual 'oikonomia'; the common diaconal and missionary service to all humanity; freedom of religion. On the side of the Reformation, there is recognition that the Orthodox tradition has retained the legacy of the liturgy in great richness and that the Roman Catholic tradition has kept the memory of the universality of the Christian Church beyond ethnic or state boundaries. The Baptist and Methodist traditions enrich the whole Christian community of faith by their emphasis on a personal profession of faith. Many denominations place particular emphasis on working towards peace in the world or on serving society. As a result of different historical, regional and personal conditions, individual churches have developed different responses to the challenges of the places where they live. The multiplicity of these denominational characteristics is a richness. Within the ecumenical movement we have been able to develop a culture of valuing all God's good gifts.

All churches are jointly asked to pray for unity and to seek a form of unity which serves the credibility of the gospel. Together we confess the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We need one other in order to fill this declaration with life.

5 Shaping the ecumenical future

Today we are jointly called to review our fidelity to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to shape our ecclesial life according to the gospel. This requirement, which has been repeatedly pushed to the centre of ecclesiastical reform movements, is expressed above all through the high standing the Holy Scriptures enjoy in the preaching, liturgy, service and mission of our churches. As Christians we are encouraged readily and constantly to rediscover the renewing power of the gospel of Christ, to call it to mind and to allow ourselves to be inspired by it in our daily church life, in order to draw from it the necessary guidance for an ecclesial practice in society which is true to the gospel. To this extent, talk of the *ecclesia semper reformanda* – of the Church always in need of renewal – speaks a truth which all churches can accept.

In 2001 the churches in Europe together signed the Charta Oecumenica, in which it said:

We commit ourselves

- to follow the apostolic exhortation of the Letter to the Ephesians (Eph 4:3–6) and persevere in seeking a common understanding of Christ’s message of salvation in the gospel;
- in the power of the Holy Spirit, to work towards the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in the one faith, expressed in the mutual recognition of baptism and in eucharistic fellowship, as well as in common witness and service. (ChOe I.1).

Together, as the Council of Christian Churches in Germany, and in the face of the commemoration of the Reformation in 2017, we renew this commitment. We continue on the ecumenical path – with gratitude for mutual trust achieved, with energy in the face of the demands of society, and with confidence in the presence of God’s Spirit in all the good that happens. We are certain: reconciled with one another, we are credible witnesses to Jesus Christ.

An ecumenical act of worship on the occasion of the publication of a statement by the Council of Christian Churches in Germany to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation

Hymn: Praise to the Lord, the almighty, the king of creation (*Singing the Faith*, 88).

Welcome

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The grace and peace of God who has reconciled us to himself through Christ be with you all (2 Cor 5:18).

And with your spirit.

Introductory words

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

This year many churches and Christians are commemorating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. The member churches of the Council of Christian Churches in Germany have adopted a statement on this matter, 'Reconciled with One Another'. We are celebrating this act of worship on the occasion of this joint statement on the Reformation. We celebrate it by using words from this joint statement as prayers. We give thanks for what we have learned together from the Reformation. We lament and seek forgiveness where we have been at fault towards one another and in witness to the gospel. St Paul reminds us that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ. With the words 'reconciled with one another' we ask to be servants of reconciliation. In the unity of the Holy Spirit, let us praise God together and celebrate this act of worship.

Psalm: Psalm 36:5–10

I CONSIDERING THE YEAR 2017 ECUMENICALLY

Reading: Galatians 3:26–29, 'You are all one in Jesus Christ'

Litany of thanks (in the style of Psalm 136)

L: Using words from 'Reconciled with One Another' we give thanks for what has grown between us since the Reformation.

L: Good God, you have made yourself known to us and taught us the Way of Life. We thank you for the Holy Scriptures. They have become for all of us the source and norm for our church and personal life.

A: Give thanks to the Lord, for his goodness endures for ever.

L: Merciful God, you humbled yourself and became human. We thank you for Jesus Christ, our Lord. In him you show us your mercy and offer us salvation. He is the only true foundation for our Easter hope.

A: Give thanks to the Lord, for his goodness endures for ever.

L: Merciful God, in faith and baptism you make all Christians to be your kings, priests and prophets. We give you thanks that you allow us to be participants in your love for the world. You send us, your people, into the world so that we can make known the Easter hope and can hand on your limitless mercy in word and deed.

A: Give thanks to the Lord, for his goodness endures for ever.

L: Good God, we thank you for the seven decades in which the Council of Christian Churches in Germany has met. Trust has grown and we have learned that we are bound to one another through faith in you. We thank you that in Germany our spiritual bond has become so close that we shape our church and social life together.

A: Give thanks to the Lord, for his goodness endures for ever.

L: Threefold, One God, we give you thanks that after 500 years we can celebrate in ecumenical community the anniversary of the Reformation as a Christian festival.

A: Give thanks to the Lord, for his goodness endures for ever.

Song: Lord, your goodness extends to the heavens (Ps 36). (Alternative song from *Singing the Faith*, 77, Give thanks to the Lord)

II TAKING UP THE IMPULSES OF THE REFORMATION

Reading: Romans 3:21–31, 'Justification through faith'

L: Faithful God, you turn again and again to your people. You have renewed your Church through humankind and in and through her have offered life. We thank you for all who have dared new ventures in your Church. Throughout the centuries your Spirit has moved people to rekindle the fire of faith, to push the gospel back to the centre and to call for a fresh start.

A: **Yes I will sing, I will sing of the mercy of the Lord.** (Ps 89:1)

L: The message of your free mercy returned to the centre of faith. Through your unmerited gift, the sinful may hope and receive salvation in you. You give faith and certainty that in Jesus Christ you have unconditionally stepped in for us. In your great mercy you consider us. You justify us sinners and absolve us in Christ.

A: **Yes I will sing, I will sing of the mercy of the Lord.**

L: Good God, the source of life, you give us your good Spirit. You lead us in all truth and enliven your word within us. You make us kings, priests and prophets and show each of us where we can serve you and your community.

A: **Yes I will sing, I will sing of the mercy of the Lord.**

SILENCE

III LAMENTING THE DIVISION OF THE CHURCH

Reading: Mark 10:35–45, 'Masters and servants'

Lament

L: Our God and Father in heaven, in Jesus Christ you forgive us our sins. In your word, you promise, 'If we confess our sins, you are faithful and just so that you forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' (cf 1 Jn 1:9)

L: We lament the absoluteness of the claims to truth which our respective churches have proclaimed and which in the course of time have led to irreconcilable differences.

A: O Lord hear my prayer, O Lord hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

L: We lament the mutual condemnations, the persecution of religious minorities and the constantly recurring warlike quarrels. The exclusion of religious minorities burdens us even today.

A: O Lord hear my prayer, O Lord hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

L: We lament that our denominations have over a long time disassociated themselves from one another. The polemical disputes, mutual exclusion, persecution and decades-long wars of religion of the past weigh down our co-existence even today.

A: O Lord hear my prayer, O Lord hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

L: We lament discrimination and persecution, above all of the Anabaptist communities by Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed authorities. Political power was misused on all sides. Denominational dominance has caused pain.

A: O Lord hear my prayer, O Lord hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

L: We lament the estrangement of Christians from one another. Prejudices are still perceptible today. Often differences between us are clearly highlighted. This causes pain.

A: O Lord hear my prayer, O Lord hear my prayer, come and listen to me.

Confession of sins

L: Merciful God and Father in heaven, we look on the history of our churches today and recognise that we are mutually at fault. We confess this sin to you: all religiously motivated violence and the wars of religion, deportations and executions in your name, social unrest which was ended by bloodshed. We confess also our anti-Semitism and the dreadful consequences of it which are still unfolding today.

A: Kyrie eleison.

L: Forgive us our sin and heal all painful memories. Help us to honour the many witnesses to the faith. Let us honour together especially the Christians who suffered as martyrs under religious persecution.

A: Christe eleison.

L: Remind us of those who already in earlier times stood up for religious peace and an end to the use of any force. Help us to honour them and to align ourselves to their witness.

A: **Kyrie eleison.**

L: May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and lead us to eternal life.

A: **Amen.**

Hymn: Praise the Lord for all his mercy. (Alternative hymn from *Singing the Faith*, 681, Community of Christ)

IV LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

Reading: Galations 6:1–10, 'Doing good to all'

Short sermon/homily

Instrumental music

Prayer for unity (from the Fifth World Congress on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela, 1993)

L: We pray for the unity of the church.

A: **O God, holy and eternal Trinity, we pray for your Church throughout the world; heal her life, renew her worship, strengthen her witness, heal her divisions, let her unity become visible. Lead us with all our sisters and brothers to community in faith, life and witness so that we, united in the one body, through the one Spirit, may together witness to the complete unity of your love.**

L: All that has moved us we bring together in the prayer which Jesus taught us:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn: Come Lord, bless us. (Alternative hymn from *Singing the Faith*, 689, Summoned by the God who made us)

V SHAPING THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE TOGETHER

Reading: John 17:18–23, 'Jesus' high priestly prayer'

Personal commitment

L: On the first ecumenical church day in 2003, the member churches of the Council of Christian Churches in Germany signed the *Charta Oecumenica*. The present document, 'Reconciled to One Another', reminds them of this commitment and encourages everyone, each in their own churches, and with God's help, to satisfy those obligations which were entered into at the signing. We say together the foundational obligation of the *Charta Oecumenica* which relates to the unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Charta Oecumenica

A: **We commit ourselves:**

to follow the apostolic exhortation of the letter to the Ephesians and to work steadfastly towards a common understanding of the message of salvation of Christ in the gospel;

in the power of the Holy Spirit to work towards the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in the one faith, which finds expression in the mutual recognition of baptism and eucharistic communion, and also in common witness and service.

Sending and blessing

L: We cry to you, merciful God, let all who seek reconciliation experience your help so that they can make known the great deeds of your love. This we pray through Christ our Lord.

A: **Amen.**

L: The blessing of almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be upon you and remain with you always.

A: **Amen.**

L: Go in the peace of God

A: **Thanks be to God, the Lord.**

Hymn: Now sing praise, all Christians. (Alternative hymn from *Singing the Faith*, 684, Here on the threshold of a new beginning)