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Reconciled with one another

An Ecumenical Statement
by the General Assembly
of the Council of Christian
Churches in Germany
on the 500th anniversary
of the Reformation

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The year 2017 is a special year for the Christian churches. For seven decades now, people of different denominations have been working together in the Council of Christian Churches in Germany, spiritually united in the one Christian faith and jointly shaping the life of church and society. On the occasion of the commemorations in 2017, the Council addresses all Christians in our country, reflecting on our common witness and our commitment to ecumenism.

1. Considering the year 2017 ecumenically

In 2017, for the first time, it is possible to commemorate the Reformation with the entirety of all Christian denominations, seeing the process of the Reformation, its benefits for Christendom and also the limitations and dangers which it brought upon the Western Church.

The earlier Reformation celebrations were characterized by denominational self-reassurance. Thus the early reception of Luther in the 16th century already reflected a historical-theological interpretation: Martin Luther was proclaimed as a prophet, a teacher and a hero. The later Reformation celebrations also served primarily to strengthen political, denominational or even retrospective national convictions.

Nowadays, in ecumenical fellowship, we recognize jointly that the Reformation was and is not only an important event in the history of Protestant churches, of Germany and Europe, but also an outstanding occurrence for Christianity as a whole, with additional significance for the history of the world. Nevertheless, Christian churches with different backgrounds also have different perspectives on the cause, course and consequences of the Reformation. The various denominations are affected in very different ways by the events of the Reformation.

In the 16th century, claims to the truth that were asserted in irreconcilable contradiction to others did indeed lead to considerations of possible tolerance, but mostly to mutual condemnation. The efforts to enforce such truth claims politically often resulted in the persecution of religious minorities and repeatedly to armed conflicts. The consequences of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, combined with the exclusion of religious minorities, are a common legacy of Christendom and a burden. For the churches in the ecumenical age, it is necessary to ask how one should deal with competing truth claims raised in the name of Jesus Christ. The Reformation reference to the freedom of every Christian, which proves itself in the service of one's neighbour, is today a common ecumenical conviction. It is necessary to respect every baptized person's individual conviction in the faith of the gospel. Freedom of conscience in judging religion is an undisputed basis of discussions about faith. In many dialogues between the churches, it has been possible to identify important similarities in teaching and life.

In the spirit of their ecumenical ties and understanding, in 2017 the Christian churches are jointly grateful for the core concerns of the Reformation and want to make them fruitful for their present work together. This includes:

(1) The basic reference to Holy Scripture in every situation of life and in every theological judgment. Together we confess that the Bible must act as the source and norm for the life of the church and of individuals.

(2) Orientation to the grace of God with regard to eternal salvation and Christian life. Together we confess that we rely entirely on the mercy of the triune God for our salvation, and that we remain dependent on the assistance of God in the Holy Spirit for the success of our Christian action. Together we confess Jesus Christ as the one true foundation of our Easter hope.

(3) The conviction that there is a priesthood of all Christians, founded in faith and baptism. Together we confess that the whole people of God is responsible

for proclaiming and living the Easter hope and the boundless mercy of God in the world.

2. Taking up the impulses of the Reformation

From the point of view of the Reformation traditions, the central theme in the 16th century was the question of certainty in trusting faith. May sinful man trust in God? As long as doubt and uncertainty as to whether one is worthy of salvation dominate, the centre of faith remains unknown. Many reformers such as Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, Menno Simons, Balthasar Hubmaier, Thomas Cranmer and John Knox placed the gospel, as the message of God's free grace, at the centre of belief, that is to say, the undeserved love of God to his people although they are hopelessly entangled in sin. Alongside the men, many women in the 16th century were involved in social, charitable, political and theological issues. All the reformers strongly opposed any temptation to earn the grace of God through special acts of devotion. On the contrary, they supported the realisation that faith in God's unconditional intervention on mankind's behalf through Jesus Christ is the only source of assurance of salvation. The grace of God cannot be tied to any human achievements, but precedes all human efforts and opens the horizon for their fulfilment. The Reformation criticism of the Church of that time focused above all on practices (especially indulgences and Mass stipends) which created the impression that God's „means of grace“ could be administered by the church on the basis of a corresponding financial contribution.

It was the newly perceived gospel message of justification which the Reformers purposely placed in the centre of church life. Thus, the specific form of Christian freedom was also emphasized in a special way: the freedom of every Christian is founded in God's promise of mercy.

Together with the fundamental call to justification by faith alone, two other accents were given special importance by the reformers. Firstly, it was the orientation to the witness of the Bible as foundational for all doctrine of the Church. The biblical testimony has always to be heard anew, for it is connected with God's promise to reveal his presence through his living Holy Spirit. Even though the various denominational families continue to be marked by their different ways of dealing with the Bible, it is now generally acknowledged as the highest norm for the doctrine of the Church. Given this agreement, church tradition has the important task of preserving the one gospel down the centuries. The second clear new accent which was set by the Reformation is the emphasis on the priesthood of all baptized believers for the life of the Church. In this respect, too, many churches have in the meantime taken up impulses from the Reformation in various ways and rediscovered the fundamental importance of the common dignity of all believers and in this connection their joint responsibility for the life of the Church.

It is first and foremost these biblical insights, which were re-established by the Reformation as central elements of the Christian faith, which we can now celebrate ecumenically.

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

Through the Reformation, which was originally theologically motivated and later made its mark on all areas of social and cultural life in the early modern period, the differentiation and pluralization of confessions and cultures became a permanent characteristic of Europe. In a long process, a multitude of independent and dissociated denominations arose. This development was accompanied by polemic conflicts, mutual exclusion and persecution, ultimately leading to confrontation of confessional states and decades of religious wars.

The Reformation and the subsequent confrontations had both perpetrators and victims, like all major upheavals. As from the 16th century, individual Protestant movements, especially the Anabaptists, were discriminated and persecuted for hundreds of years not only by Roman Catholic, but also by Lutheran and Reformed authorities. On all sides, political power was abused and suffering caused by the power of denominational rulers. When commemorating 500 years of the Reformation, it is therefore indispensable to remember the numerous victims of religiously motivated violence: wars, deportations and executions were all justified in the name of God. Social unrest was brutally suppressed. The churches today deplore jointly that their anti-Semitism before and after the 16th century has unleashed devastating effects over and over again.

One of the consequences of the Reformation was the increasing alienation of Christians from one another in the individual denominations, which not only caused differences in understanding of faith and life, but also gave rise to many prejudices and misunderstandings. The consciousness of being the only ones in possession of the truth excluded not only adherents of other confessions, but also of other religions. Until the 20th century, Christians often lived in confessional cultures that were largely self-contained, in which the differences were clearly defined, extending beyond exclusionary rites and symbols into issues of daily life (for example marriage, the choice of names, burial procedures, education) and causing pain in many cases.

We have to admit to our guilt toward one another as Christians. Together we are striving to contribute to the „healing of memories“. We honour the many witnesses of faith and martyrs from the times of the Reformation and of the religious wars, as well as all Christians suffering from religiously motivated persecution, and commemorate together their courage and their faithfulness to the gospel. At the same time, we honour those who already in earlier times were working for religious peace and the end of all violence.

4. Learning from each other

Looking back over the past 500 years, the churches do not only have grounds for confessing their guilt, but also good reasons to be thankful. Especially during the last 50 years, many learning processes have taken place in fellowship. Together we live in the awareness that gifts of the Spirit of God which have been preserved and are currently being experienced in one Christian church can also enrich other churches. It is therefore undisputed today that important issues which were addressed at the Second Vatican Council were also the concern of the Reformation: the high estimation of Scripture for spiritual life and for theological doctrine; the sacramental ties of baptism connecting all Christian believers; the common priesthood of all the baptized; the necessity for the return of all churches to the one gospel; spiritual ecumenism; the common ministry to all mankind in social service and mission; freedom of religion. On the Reformation side, it is acknowledged that in the Orthodox tradition the legacy of the liturgy was preserved in great richness, and that the Roman Catholic Church kept the memory of the universality of the Christian Church alive beyond the borders of nations and states. The Baptist and Methodist churches enrich the entire Christian community of believers by emphasizing personal confession. Many denominations lay particular emphasis on working towards peace in the world or in the area of social and charitable work. Due to different historical, regional and membership conditions, individual churches have developed a variety of responses to the challenges in their surroundings. The diversity of these confessional peculiarities is a valuable resource. In the ecumenical movement, we were able to develop a culture of appreciation for all the good gifts of God.

Jointly, all churches are called upon to pray for unity and to look for a form of unity that serves the credibility of the gospel. Together we confess the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. We need one another in order to fill this confession with life.

5. Shaping the ecumenical future

Together we are called upon today to review our fidelity to the gospel of Jesus Christ critically and to shape our church life according to the gospel. This challenge, which has always been the focus of church reform movements, is expressed above all by the high esteem in which Holy Scripture stands in the preaching, liturgy, social work and mission of our churches. As Christians, we are encouraged and prepared to repeatedly discover and remind ourselves of the renewing power of the gospel of Christ, to be inspired by it in the everyday life of our churches and to draw the necessary conclusions for the practical application of the gospel in society. In this regard, to speak of „ecclesia semper reformanda“ – of the Church which is always in need of renewal – is to utter a truth which the churches can accept.

Together, the churches in Europe signed the Charta Oecumenica in 2001, stating, „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; we commit ourselves 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).

As the Council of Christian Churches in Germany, we jointly renew this commitment in the light of the commemoration of the Reformation in 2017. We continue to follow the ecumenical path – grateful for the trust in one another which has been achieved, actively facing the social challenges confronting us and confident in the certainty that the Spirit of God is present in all good things that happen. Of this we are certain: reconciled with one another, we are credible witnesses to Jesus Christ.

