

Reformation and Mutual Accountability

A Common Agenda for the Reformation and the Ecumenical Movement Today?

Olav Fykse Tveit

Olav Fykse Tveit is a Norwegian theologian and general secretary of the World Council of Churches. This is a revised version of an address given at the Peterskirche, the University Church of Heidelberg, on 27 October 2016.

Abstract

This article argues that commemorating the Reformation properly means doing so in a spirit of mutual accountability to others in God's world from whom we learn, through affirming the gifts we have received and shared, and through constructive critique. Mutual accountability involves dialogue about how we deal with the differences and divisions that have developed, and how we are stewards of this legacy.

The 500th anniversary of the 16th century Lutheran Reformation marks the actions of Martin Luther in denouncing church abuses, setting in motion events that led to the Reformation and the separation of Western Christianity into Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Against this background, the Reformation can be commemorated properly only if remembrance is undertaken in a spirit of mutual accountability. Celebrating an institution or an ideology in a one-dimensional, self-sufficient, and self-affirming way cannot bring the world forward beyond the pride of success and power of those identifying with it. Such jubilees, however, can be valuable when they reflect an attitude of accountability. This means asking openly and self-critically the following questions: What have we learned? What was important and significant in this particular history? How has it been diverted or even abused? And how can we bring the best of it forward into the future of our life together?

The most effective and appropriate approach is for Christians and the church to look to the past and the present in accountability to God, whatever has happened. To stand before God is to stand at the same time in accountability to all of God's creation, and particularly to those created in the image of God – human beings and the one humanity. The best way of celebrating a jubilee so that we really learn from it is to do so in mutual accountability to others in God's world from whom we learn, through affirming the gifts we have received and shared and through constructive critique.

Mutual accountability is a central attitude that has brought the ecumenical movement to life as a fellowship of churches, as I have tried to demonstrate my book *The Truth We Owe Each Other: Mutual Accountability in the Ecumenical Movement*.¹ Mutual accountability is exercised when we ask and respond to each other in a transparent, open, humble, and constructive way what we have done with our common legacy as churches, with the gospel, and the with the one tradition of the church. Mutual accountability involves dialogue about how we deal with the differences and divisions that have developed, and how we are stewards of this legacy. We need to ask, as well, how we are mutually accountable to the values and the things we have learned that we affirm and share together and how we, therefore, engage each other in finding a way forward together. We need to show that we are accountable, reliable, and honest. In all of this, we are mutually accountable to how the gospel is shared so that those to whom the gospel is addressed can receive it as a word of liberation, transformation, and hope that the holy scripture brings to the church and the world in every generation and in every context.

The gospel passage of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) shows clearly the difference between self-centredness and pride, and standing in full accountability for who we are as sinners before God, so that we rely fully on God's grace alone. It shows the link between God's gift of grace, accountability, and repentance.

My thesis is that a sense of accountability, even mutual accountability, was at the heart of the matter that led Martin Luther to start a dispute about the real meaning of penitence in his theses of 31 October 1517. The openness in his approach was an academic prerogative, searching for a better way for how the church could be accountable to scripture and the gospel, so that the accountability of the believer could be given proper expression. He wanted thereby to be of service to the church and to believers. Remembering this event, we can explore in an open discourse the value of penitence as a power of real liberation and transformation. We can discern how to avoid it being distorted to something that makes neither the church nor the believer really accountable to God and others.

¹ Olav Fykse Tveit, *The Truth We Owe Each Other: Mutual Accountability in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016).

The Need for Accountability and Reformation in Church and World

Many of the ecumenical discussions today regarding the 500th anniversary of the Reformation are looking back at the church-dividing events in the 16th century and the theological, political, and cultural divisions and conflicts that followed. This perspective asks what we can learn from what we call Reformation, and the potential for change today as seen through the lens of the Reformation.² The most impressive ecumenical dialogue on the Reformation has applied the “healing of memories” approach that has been an important dimension of the peace-building work of churches in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and many other countries. In Germany, for example, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the German Bishops’ Conference have jointly published the document *Erinnerung heilen – Jesus Christus bezeugen* (Healing Memories: Witnessing to Jesus Christ) as a contribution to a joint commemoration of the Reformation.³

Others have been developing interdisciplinary research, such as the project on “Radicalizing Reformation,” which demonstrates that the Reformation has been part of an era of profound changes and transformations in world history, leading to the modern world with important threats to life for our and future generations.⁴

I would like to go one step further, combining the understanding of the word “ecumenical” as a “house of the living stones” (or the fellowship of Christian churches) and as “God’s household of life” (which embraces the whole of creation). Remembering the impulse the Reformation gave in its time to the transformation of church and society, my question is what kind of renewal of churches and theology is required today in view of the threats to life and survival humankind is facing? My ecumenical experience tells me that there is no single answer or ready-made solution at hand. No one alone has the full picture. Indeed, we urgently need to understand what is required to be on the way of justice and peace as a diverse community in mutual accountability and what the core of our Christian faith can contribute in responding to the main challenges we are facing together as human beings on the way.

² See, for example, the presentations at a congress in Zürich in October 2013 organized by the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, and in the publication that followed: Petra Bosse-Huber et al., eds, *Reformation: Legacy and Future* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015). My own contribution was “The Legacy of the Ecumenical Movement and Its Significance for the Ecumenical Movement Today,” 86–97.

³ *Erinnerung heilen – Jesus Christus bezeugen: Ein gemeinsames Wort zum Jahr 2016*, Gemeinsame Texte 24 (Hanover: EKD and Bonn: DBK, 2016).

⁴ See the website “Radicalizing Reformation,” <http://www.radicalizing-reformation.com>.

In other words: What does it mean and require today to be together on the way following Christ, looking for signs of God's reign to come, and discerning the way guided by the Holy Spirit, and to do all this in mutual accountability? What does this mean in a multicultural and multi-religious context where the strong self-interests of individuals, groups, and nations block the change that is necessary and fuel conflict and war to the detriment of human communities and all life on planet Earth?

In short: What does it mean to be on a pilgrimage of justice and peace in today's world together with people of good will of different cultures and faith communities? I have asked myself this question every day as general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) since the 10th assembly – which in 2013 gathered in Busan, Republic of Korea – called churches and all people of good will to join in transformative action on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

Before trying to address these questions, let me recall some of the things that we have learned in the more recent past. We have been reminded that there have been difficulties in celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation ecumenically. Cardinal Kurt Koch and others pointed to the fact that the Reformation led to a schism of the Western Church and in consequence to conflict and war in Europe. These realities stood, it was suggested, in the way of a jubilee celebration.

The first time I participated in discussions about the 500th anniversary of the Reformation was in the committee for ecumenism of the Lutheran World Federation more than 10 years ago. I urged that the results of the extensive ecumenical dialogues of recent decades should be the basis for the commemoration. The ambiguity of marking the 500 years as a jubilee celebrating all we give thanks for, and the critical scrutiny of the negative and dramatic consequences of the schisms that occurred during and after the period of Reformation, were, in my mind, to be addressed through a common celebration of the gospel. Was not this – the celebration of the gospel – the central point in the critical questions and the finest initiatives from Luther and other reformers?

The phase of discussion about the profile and the purpose of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary is now behind us. The churches are together celebrating the gospel of Christ at the centre – “ein Christusfest.” It is remarkable that Protestants and Catholics together are taking responsibility for the conflicts and wars that followed the Reformation. The joint publications – *From Conflict to Communion* of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity⁵ and *Erinnerungen teilen* of the German churches

⁵ *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, report of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt and Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2013).

– show how the churches have received and own together the progress made in ecumenical dialogue since the Second Vatican Council.

The same spirit prevailed in the preparations for the joint Catholic–Lutheran commemoration of the Reformation in Lund and Malmö in Sweden on 31 October 2016, where I represented the whole fellowship of the WCC. This event was significant for the whole ecumenical movement. As part of the commemoration, Caritas Internationalis and the Lutheran World Federation – World Service signed a declaration of intent for closer cooperation. All these are promising signs of new energy for ecumenical cooperation in mutual accountability. We are indeed harvesting some of the fruits of the dialogues that were pursued in the past.

Interdisciplinary cooperation demonstrates clearly that a theology and church-centred approach alone is never enough to understand the dynamics of change in history. The scope of mutual accountability needs to include the religious dimension, but it cannot be reduced to it. We are also to be accountable beyond the church to our fellow human beings in all dimensions of life. The insights of social, economic, political, and cultural research contribute to a more holistic understanding of the Reformation in the spheres of both the church and the world. The Reformation was part of a broader historic process that led toward colonialism, on the one hand, and modernity, on the other.

In the German Catholic and Lutheran perspective, for instance, when thinking about the Reformation, it seems evident to look to 31 October 1517 as the date when Martin Luther publicized his 95 Theses about indulgences. This date, therefore, is seen as the starting point of the Lutheran Reformation. Looking at the events, however, in a broader European and worldwide perspective, it becomes obvious that we are not to forget Hus, Zwingli, and Calvin, also catalysts for change that both preceded and followed the Lutheran Reformation and developed in parallel. Further, the development of Anglicanism and new Protestant churches in the English-speaking world needs to be taken into consideration. Historical actors such as Luther, Cajetan, Frederick the Wise, the Emperor Charles V, or the Fugger family, others like King Henry VIII or Queen Elizabeth I, or rich merchants in Amsterdam and Antwerp, Hamburg and London who supported the new theological orientation were fully aware of their own context. This context included the beginnings of the colonial conquest of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, with new opportunities for global trade, as well as the advance of the Ottoman Empire. In 1492, Martin Behaim, a German cosmographer and philosopher, presented a globe to the Welsers and other rich banking and trading houses in Nuremberg to demonstrate the new realities of a radically changing world. Reformation is thus intertwined with a long process of globalization that accelerated with colonialism and neo-colonialism.

We see the emergence of the modern world with a worldwide, but divided, Christianity and with global competition for economic and political power coupled with important technological advances. This is the historical background to growing inequalities, economic injustice, and claims to hegemonic political and military power as an environment for mutually reinforcing economic, ecological, and social-cultural crises in our days. This is not to say that the Reformation is at the origin of all these developments, but it unfolded in the context of these trends.

The Reformation has led to developments in the areas of modernity and democracy, and was also followed by a globalization of Christianity in its many forms through mission. Konrad Raiser has explored these dimensions of Reformation in his newly published study about these issues, seen in the perspective of the life of the churches worldwide today and their relations through the ecumenical movement.⁶ We find ourselves today in a situation that requires developing new forms of sharing, cooperation, and ecologically sound lifestyles, but in which the capacity and the will to do so is weakened by reactions against global trends and powers often magnifying regional cultural and religious particularities. This is a common feature of populist political movements, religious fundamentalism, and other justifications of violence that also affect groups in the churches. Those who belong to such movements refuse to be held accountable by others who do not belong to their particular group.

The Relevance of Luther's 95 Theses for the Ecumenical Movement as a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace Today

Many of the first manifestations of the challenges with which we are confronted today were already identified within the Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research (FEST) in Heidelberg by people such as Georg Picht, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Günther Howe, and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker. For many decades, this institute has been addressing key questions for the future of humanity in interdisciplinary approaches, and continues to do so. Motivated by the experience of two world wars, the Shoah, and the destructive power of nuclear weapons, the founding generation of the FEST understood that in our times we need new forms of cooperation, worldwide in scope and encompassing all dimensions of life. This has also had a significant impact on the shaping of the agenda of the WCC throughout its nearly 70 years.

⁶ Konrad Raiser, *500 Jahre Reformation weltweit* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 2016).

Peace, they said – and I would add justice for people and the earth – is a necessary condition for the survival of humankind. There is only one common future and hope for all, or there is no hope for the future at all.

This generation of the founders of the FEST realized that none of the existing cultures and religions were fully prepared for the kind of social and cultural changes that were required for lasting peace and justice on a global scale. In fact, some of them identified the lack of such readiness as a, if not *the*, major underlying problem. Neither postmodern relativism nor attempts to foster agreements based on a minimal number of shared principles are enough. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent human rights covenants have shown a way forward, but they are still vulnerable to the fact that their origins are in the northern hemisphere with its Christian roots. The opposition of “us” and “them” is dominating thinking and action at a time when we need to speak of “we” as a planetary community in recognition of the difference and the otherness of the “other.”

In theological terms, the lack of capacity to relate to the “other” or the neighbour in responsible ways reflects the brokenness of community with the other and with God. Such brokenness of the most basic set of relationships is called sin in the biblical tradition. Sin is a reality that disrupts and diminishes human relationships and destroys the life given to us as human beings in God’s creation. It is a destructive reality in our own lives. To build up our lives and new relationships, a kind of conversion toward the other is needed – a new, more inclusive understanding of identity that includes the material, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life.

It makes good sense to me to address this underlying dimension of contemporary challenges using the categories of the Reformation. In view of the deep conversion that is needed, I would emphasize one single dimension, referring to Luther’s first thesis on the door of the church in Wittenberg: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Sin is real, and it undermines the lives of individuals and communities. There is no way to avoid the reality of sin through money, power, ignorance, pious practices, church doctrines, offices, or any other means. There is no way to avoid the need for repentance, conversion, and the renewal of life.

Repentance is the way to receive justification by grace and to be liberated from the shackles of sin. Repentance leads to a conversion that involves all dimensions of our identity. Its horizon is the renewal of life in the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Luther argues that the notion of repentance is not a once-for-all action or word. It is an attitude, a way of being that represents attentiveness to the critical voice, an

understanding of the dimension of tragedy, and willingness to acknowledge the reality of what is wrong. It is also the attitude of hearing carefully the voice of God's complete forgiveness, not in the sense of accepting a deal, but as openness to change the direction of life in order to focus on the needs of the other, especially of those who are poor, in need of safety, of justice, and of having their rights and dignity recognized. The way toward justice and peace is a way of repentance, conversion, and renewal. Anticipating the goal that already describes the way, our way becomes indeed a pilgrimage *of* justice and peace.

In other words, true repentance means real accountability to our past, as individuals and as a fellowship, in the churches and as peoples (*confessio*). True repentance means a real willingness to change, listening carefully to the other and particularly to those who are less privileged and victims of what we have done, past and present (*contritio*). True repentance means real actions of transformation, and an ongoing willingness to be in a process of transformation that focuses on how the other – other human beings as well as the whole of creation – is affected constructively or destructively by my and our attitudes and actions. Transformation is the essence of a pilgrimage of justice and peace that leads to addressing the needs of the poor, in a wide sense of the term, including those who are less privileged, victims, those who are oppressed – according to the expression “the preferential option for the poor.”

In this way, I unfold the meaning of mutual accountability as attitude and as form for our life together, trusting the power of the gospel to address the needs we all have of liberation from the powers of sin and for the transformation into the life and the values of the kingdom of God.

Migration and the Need for Repentance

We need to acknowledge there is never a time in the life of a human being, a nation, or a culture when the need for the attitude of repentance can be considered obsolete. The continuing existence of injustice, racism, war, killings, persecution, and despair that drives people to flee from their homes and families reminds us that these are not just matters of history but remain a reality in Europe and the world today.

We recall the refugee conventions that were established after the second world war, particularly in response to the needs for protection of the many European refugees – Germans, Polish, Hungarians, Czechs – and many others suffering from the brutal realities after the disaster of war and the later effects of the Cold War and the division of Europe. The problems have not stopped. Today there are many from Asia, the

Middle East, and Africa who have the same needs for protection and to find another place to call home. All of us must forever be conscious of the temptation to be complicit with the reality of sin in all its forms, old and new. Indeed, those of us who are Europeans are vulnerable to such temptation and therefore must guard against the tendency to ignore the need for critical self-assessment.

Many in the United States of America discuss racism these days as “America’s original sin.” They face the dimensions and expressions of racism that permeate their society, and which have been publicly exposed to the world in recent years. As Europeans, we should also look at ourselves in the same mirror: What is our original sin? Actually, we have to admit that what is seen in the US is a consequence of European migration to the United States over many centuries, rooted in Eurocentric ideas of white superiority and privilege.

Many of us today struggle to understand how we could allow such destructive notions of “Übermensch” (the super-human) to take hold in our past, and to continue to exist today – to the extent that even now, racist and xenophobic rhetoric have become acceptable and respectable in the public space in Europe as well as in the US. How can we dismantle and resist the seemingly normal reaction of self-preservation and self-protection manifested in suspicion toward the stranger and those of different faiths? How do we arrive at a modus of real and constructive repentance opening to the way forward in mutual accountability?

This is about making the best values of the Reformation a living reality today. We protect our values best by using them as the basis and the source for serving other human beings. Our present realities must be shaped by and rooted in a vision of how we should live together tomorrow as one humanity. Values are of no worth if they are solely about the past. This is also true of our understanding of sin and repentance. Those who want to protect Christian values by closing the borders to Europe do not know what Christian values are.

I am confronted with these realities again and again in my work and during my travels. This experience shows me that it makes a lot of sense to consider the challenges we face today as one humanity in the light of the legacy of the Reformation, not in the sense of a general pessimism or condemnation of everything that is human, but in attentiveness to the reality of sin and the reality of the needs of others. It rather gives me hope. There is a sign of hope in every repentance and conversion that follows.

The Reformation brought a new sense of the accountability to God as sovereign, as the one who is not at the same level as we human beings in all our failures and weaknesses. This accountability did not mean that we are accountable to powers of authority in the world or in the church that claim to have the final word about our relationship to

almighty God. Rather, the Reformation emphasized that we are called to be accountable in our humanity, called to be free and responsible to find our ways to serve God and fellow human beings. This freedom is also a call to seek the company of all people of good will with whom we can share a sense of mutual accountability for who we are and what we can do together. This includes that which is beyond the realities that are separating us or putting us against each other as “us” and “them.” The Reformation’s call to repentance is not a call to despair or pessimism or misconceptions about the possibilities of human life and efforts. On the contrary, it is a call to take these opportunities to serve more seriously and to be inspired by the liberating word of the gospel to do so.

Israel and Palestine: A Test Case for Theological and Moral Attitudes of Accountability and Repentance

Following this understanding of repentance, we can trace the trajectory from the Reformation to openness, freedom, accountability, and the search for unity on the common ground of grace, justice, and peace. However, the Reformation has also brought divisions and even discrimination against others. There can be no excuse. We have already spoken about the divisions between the churches and the need to make more visible what we have in common and share as Christians and churches today. These contributions of honesty and repentance show their relevance in many of the conflicts of today’s world.

We also have to acknowledge and understand the implications of one particular conflict in the world that also leads back to the teachings of Luther and requires particular care and analysis of what repentance means. I refer here to Luther’s writings about the Jews. At a milestone such as the Reformation anniversary, this has to be a matter of our accountability. Luther’s attacks against the Jews cannot be justified, especially because he argues theologically against the validity of God’s blessings as descendants of Abraham for them. His later writings were used as pretexts for anti-Semitism in many forms, particularly in Europe, and subsequently the murder of millions of Jews. The Shoah remains one of the darkest chapters of European and human history. The first assembly of the WCC in 1948 declared unambiguously that anti-Semitism is a sin against human beings and against God.

We have seen clear expressions of repentance for what happened, particularly from the German people in whose name the crime was committed. These have been real expressions of confession and contrition, saying “never again.” Unfortunately, circumstances in the world mean that we constantly need to continue to underline that anti-Semitism is a sin against God and other human beings. It is a fact that discrimination, exclusion,

attacks, and violence are continuing against the Jewish people and against many others because they belong to a particular people or a group of a society. Others were targeted by the Nazi regime as well, such as homosexuals, gypsies, disabled people, and political dissidents.

One of the great efforts and achievements of the post-war international society was to establish a new order of international law and conventions of human rights. There was a commitment that what happened to Jews and others should never happen again. The WCC was very much involved in building up the ethos and value basis for these expressions of new international relationships in affirmation of mutual accountability to the one humanity. Another expression of such repentance after the Second World War was the recognition of Israel as a state to be established as a home for Jews. It was stated, too, that the Palestinian people should also have their state in the same area of Palestine. The WCC supported both dimensions of this decision in the UN general assembly.

As history has unfolded, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people has developed. Today, it remains unresolved and has become even more difficult in view of settlements and the Israeli occupation of territory outside of the internationally recognized borders of Israel. This situation leads to a number of questions: What does repentance mean in this conflict today? What is the meaning of accountability for what happened in the past, both before 1948 and after 1948? How can a shared understanding of what justice and peace require be established with accountability to past and present dimensions of the conflict? And how can the churches contribute to a new approach of the healing of memories and reconciliation grounded in repentance so that both sides can express the truth in a mutually accountable way and are open for transformation in the same spirit?

The conflict has at its core important theological concerns and positions. The churches of the Reformation, therefore, have a particular responsibility to address the issues at stake that require repentance and transformation and not to deny that action is necessary. This would be a sign for the continuing relevance of the heritage of the Reformation in a very tangible way and an important contribution toward peace in the region.

Semper Reformanda in Mutual Accountability

I am convinced that the commemoration of the 500 years since 31 October 1517 has an enormous potential for strengthening hope. Hope is nurtured when there is a real willingness to repent, to change, to see what is wrong, and to contribute to changes and transformation toward just peace.

The pilgrimage is a metaphor and a way of living our Christian faith in our daily lives. It implies being open and accountable for what we are and what we do, but also listening and learning from one another so that we can find a better way into the future. Creation and the human family need a sense of mutual accountability that has no limits as to whom we are accountable. We cannot reserve such an attitude for particular groups, confessions, and people. Of course, we have to start with ourselves and where we are, and ask for God's guidance to find our common way forward toward the broader horizon of justice and peace for all. This has been the best common approach of the Reformation and the ecumenical movement: being honest, humble, and hopeful. The gospel of the grace of God is the same today as it was 500 years ago.

License and Permissible Use Notice

These materials are provided to you by the American Theological Library Association, operating as Atla, in accordance with the terms of Atla's agreements with the copyright holder or authorized distributor of the materials, as applicable. In some cases, Atla may be the copyright holder of these materials.

You may download, print, and share these materials for your individual use as may be permitted by the applicable agreements among the copyright holder, distributors, licensors, licensees, and users of these materials (including, for example, any agreements entered into by the institution or other organization from which you obtained these materials) and in accordance with the fair use principles of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. You may not, for example, copy or email these materials to multiple web sites or publicly post, distribute for commercial purposes, modify, or create derivative works of these materials without the copyright holder's express prior written permission.

Please contact the copyright holder if you would like to request permission to use these materials, or any part of these materials, in any manner or for any use not permitted by the agreements described above or the fair use provisions of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. For information regarding the identity of the copyright holder, refer to the copyright information in these materials, if available, or contact Atla using the Contact Us link at www.atla.com.

Except as otherwise specified, Copyright © 2022 Atla.