



## **The Reformation heritage and the ecumenical movement**

**Lukas Vischer**

---

- Justification by grace
  - Asceticism as witness to the world
  - The Reformation event
- 

What is it the churches of the Reformation - both of the first and the second Reformation - have to witness to in the ecumenical movement? What is it they have to say on the basis of the heritage they have received? When I was asked to address these questions, I spontaneously thought that I knew at least part of the answer. As I began to prepare myself, I more and more realized their complexity.

Let me start with two general considerations.

### **Reformation heritage**

This is a misleading term. "Heritage" suggests the idea of a clearly circumscribed possession. In fact, however, the impulses of the 15th and 16th centuries have come to us through a complicated history of several centuries. Whatever the origins we claim for ourselves we are not direct heirs of the Reformers but equally, and in certain respects perhaps even more, influenced by subsequent periods. The Reformation heritage has passed through the hands of several generations. There is no access to the heritage apart from this history. It has suffered losses in the course of this process but there have no doubt also been considerable gains. Today the heritage exists only with the modifications which have occurred in the course of history. We are the children not only of the 15th and 16th centuries but equally of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

It is, of course, important to scrutinize history. What was the First Reformation? What was the essential message of the "magisterial" Reformation? How is the relation between the two to be assessed historically? But as we address the question of our witness in the ecumenical movement it is essential to recognize who we are today. We are no more the same as in the beginnings. The First Reformation has been profoundly touched and transformed by the Second Reformation, and both have experienced further transformations in subsequent centuries. The subject of witness in today's ecumenical movement are the Protestant churches as they believe and live today.

Let me mention just one example - the geographical expansion of Christianity in the last two centuries. Through migration and mission all Christian traditions have spread over the whole globe. For the first time in

history, not only Christianity as a whole but the individual traditions have become global realities. The Reformation heritage is now being received and transformed by churches outside the cultural context in which it was born. There are new Protestant centres in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The insights gained in the 16th century controversy cannot simply be taken over by these churches. Take the example of the Presbyterian churches in Korea. Before reaching Korea the insights of the Reformation have crossed several cultural boundaries, each time undergoing substantial transformation - from Geneva to Scotland, from Scotland to America, from America to Korea. The Korean churches are now faced with the task to find, on the basis of this complicated history, their own response to the gospel, a task whose fulfilment is still in its beginning. Reformation heritage? The question is rather in what way the affirmations of the 15th and 16th centuries continue to be resources for the witness of today's churches in the ecumenical movement.

### **The ecumenical movement**

The call to witness in unity represents a challenge to all churches. But it concerns the churches of the Reformation in particular ways. Basically, the exposure to other churches reminds them of the unfinished character of the Reformation. None of the reforming movements of the 15th or 16th centuries was simply a secession from the church. They were attempts at renewal of the church. They were protests against errors and abuses. They were calls to deeper obedience. They sought to bring to light the fundamental affirmations of the Christian faith. They were all related to the universal horizon of the church.

They failed in persuading the church as a whole. They were expelled and forced to form separate churches. Through a painful process of consolidation they became confessional churches. They became guardians of a message they were unable to deliver to all concerned. In stages they developed their doctrinal positions and spiritual particularities.

It can be said that the ecumenical movement reopens a debate which had prematurely been closed. The original impulses of the Reformation can now again be affirmed in a wider context. In 1954 the general council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Princeton spoke of this new departure in the following words: "We believe that the deep stirring among the churches and Christian groups to surmount the barriers and to express the unity of the community of believers in accordance with the mind and will of Jesus Christ, the head of the church... is of God, not men, a sign of the Holy Spirit". Clearly, the ecumenical movement constitutes a new chapter in the history of the Reformation churches. On the basis of their heritage they are called to respond to the opportunities of dialogue and collaboration. Again, they will not simply reiterate the affirmations of the Reformers but seek to respond as the communities they have become today. In faithfulness to their origins they cannot but go forward together with other churches and develop with them the response to the gospel which is required today.

In fact, however, much of the response of the Reformation churches is clearly sectarian. They cling to their tradition - immobile and unmoveable. In saying this I am not only thinking of fundamentalists and evangelicals. There are other - more subtle - ways of being sectarian. Let me mention two.

Protestants can become sectarian by exalting the initial period of the Reformation or even the persons of the Reformers. The insights of the 16th century are regarded as providing the key to understanding the gospel.

Particularly among Lutherans the period of the Reformation tends to get isolated both from earlier and subsequent periods. Its message - in the form it was given in the 16th century - is taken to be valid for all times and places. Truth *has* been restored to light.

Another way of becoming sectarian, more evident among Reformed Christians, consists in identifying permanent "characteristics" of the Reformation tradition. There is often talk of a "typically Reformed" *ethos*, a term which is even used in the constitution of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Reformed, it is often claimed, have no common doctrinal basis, but they can be recognized by certain typical features - they emphasize the glory of God, they place the witness of the Bible in the centre of the life of the church, they reject images and speak of the church as the wandering people of God, a priesthood in which all believers participate, they have a passion for democratic structures and normally engage in the struggle for justice. Such descriptions are, however, dubious. They are sectarian because, as a rule, they are self-congratulatory and tend to minimize the darker sides of the Reformed tradition; even more dangerously, they enclose the churches in preconceived perspectives and force them to be what they are supposed to be. In my view, therefore, the search for identity as it is pursued today in many churches is utterly uninteresting and even counterproductive. It almost inevitably leads to a spiritual impoverishment and to the continuation of existing divisions. At the same time it closes minds for new spiritual contributions.

Identity can only be found by responding to the gospel today. It is not simply the result of history. It is a gift bestowed on the church as it opens itself to God's word.

With these two considerations in mind I should like to take up three aspects of the Reformation's heritage.

---

### ● **Justification by grace**

We are sinners who are lost without God's grace in Jesus Christ; there are no merits we can offer to God for our salvation; we can only be saved as we rely on his justice in faith. The affirmation is so central that it is hard to speak of a Reformation heritage without referring to it. Whenever we talk about the heart of the witness the churches of the Reformation have to bear, justification by faith will immediately come to our minds. It is interesting, for instance, that the Evangelical European Assembly in Budapest (March 1992), in seeking to formulate today's witness of the churches of the Reformation, spontaneously immediately referred to the message of justification by grace.

The problem is that this message has become extremely difficult to communicate. It continues to be regarded as the foundation of the Reformation tradition. It will certainly be restated and explained in bilateral dialogues with other churches but it can hardly be considered as the message of the Reformation churches to the ecumenical movement. The many attempts made in the last decades to interpret the message have not succeeded to show its relevance. For many years I have not heard a sermon seeking to explain the doctrine of justification by faith.

Nevertheless I continue to believe that the message of justification is central for the witness of the Reformation churches today. The question to be answered may have changed. While the 16th century was haunted by God's judgment on human sin and the prospect of eternal condemnation

the present generation looks for the sources of hope in a time of disintegration and destruction. Is there anything we can rely on beyond the impasses of the present historical developments? We live in a time when the project of western civilization increasingly shows signs of failure and imminent collapse. Instead of leading to the promised land of wealth and welfare it produces more and more bitter fruits. Unemployment and social injustice are on the increase. The gap between north and south becomes more and more unmanageable. At the same time, the project of western civilization depends on an overexploitation of the planet. We know that we are engaged in a suicidal course. We know it and at the same time refuse to know it. The present project of society continues to exercise a fatal fascination. We go on rejoicing in the ostensible achievements of the technological-industrial age. Despite all signs to the contrary we continue to believe that the present course can be held. By doubling efforts salvation can be obtained. By setting aside extraordinary financial means - the contemporary form of indulgences - we believe that the fate can be diverted. But, in fact, these efforts obscure the issues. They are bound to fail.

Where shall we find salvation? The first step is the recognition that the threat of the future is of our own making. The present situation is not the outcome of fate. We need to recognize our own part in all these developments. Generations have participated in building up the system. But it is roughly since World War II that the movement of destruction has accelerated and made manifest the contradictions inherent in the system. The most recent generations, many of those still living today, bear the greatest part of responsibility. They, or rather we, have failed to recognize the course of disobedience we are engaged in.

Where shall we find salvation? The second step is the recognition that we are totally dependent on God and find salvation only through his grace. We have to return to him. We have to accept his verdict on us. We know that we are acceptable to him only as we are just. But there is obviously no justice in us. We can only become acceptable only through Jesus Christ. He alone has lived the life perfect love we were called to live. He alone was totally available to God. He alone was totally open to others. We can only become just by relying on the justice achieved in his life and death. But relying on his justice does not mean that the prospects of the future will automatically be restored. Jesus Christ is not simply a new motor in our old lives. We are not entitled to any claims on a future in history. Though God accepts us in Christ he does not necessarily remove the consequences of the sins we have committed. He will deal with our sin and its effects in his own wisdom. The history cannot be foreseen, and all projections we are tempted to make will necessarily turn out to be mistaken. God may render sin ineffective and prolong the time of history, or he may not. We have no means to know with certainty. Communion with Christ means that we cease to be the prisoners of history. Communion with Christ gives hope beyond destruction - in communion with him we shall not perish with history, whatever it will be - progress or failure.

What difference does justification by faith then make? I think the quiet conviction that life, independent from hopes and fears, has meaning is the source of immense freedom. It enables us to face the threats without succumbing to the temptation to suppress or minimize them. It frees us from the need to seek assurance by self-justification. It makes us open for one another in love. Times of impasse and uncertainty tend to harden hearts. Jesus speaks of the loss of love as a sign of the last days. "In those days love will grow cold in many" (Mt 24.12). The main difference justification makes is that this prediction will not be fulfilled.

But there is still another aspect. We are engaged in a course which is not only suicidal but at the same time murderous. We are not only putting at risk our own lives and the lives of our children but are constantly engaged in destroying life - the life of humanity and of God's creation. What does justification mean for the victims of injustice and violence? In Christ, dying on the cross and rising from the tomb God's justice is revealed. Justification is not simply grace for the perpetrator of injustice; it is justice for the victim. Justification is the vindication of victims. It makes manifest that the days of murder are counted. "And will not God vindicate his elect who cry day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily" (Lk 18.12). There are two aspects in justification - making acceptable the non-acceptable and providing justice to the victim. Because both aspects are present in and through Christ God's kingdom is present in him.

In my view there are good reasons for the churches of the Reformation to develop in the ecumenical movement the message of justification in this particular time, not as a particularity of their tradition but as the common response to the threats the present generation faces.

---

### ● **Revival of the "ascetic" tradition as witness in the world**

Justification by faith implies a new relationship to the world. Christian life is no longer the effort to obtain salvation through pious works. Justified by faith, we are called to witness to God's grace through acts of love in the world. Christian life does not consist in withdrawing from the world. God's grace and will are to be witnessed to in and through daily life. The role each member of society fulfils is valued. Work is not a curse but a vocation. Through fulfilling the role assigned to us God's name is glorified. There is no division between spiritual and temporal work. Wherever we are placed in society we are to serve the interest of our neighbours and to contribute to the needs of the whole community.

The polemics of the 16th century against "meritorious" spiritual life were fierce. Practices which were meant to "merit" salvation were denounced by the Reformers in the strongest terms. Spiritual exercises, prayer hours, fasting, pilgrimages, indulgences, certain forms of almsgiving were emphatically rejected. In particular, monastic life was called into question. Of course, most of the texts primarily ridicule the hypocrisy and double standards of many monks and nuns. But more fundamentally, they denounce the illusion that heaven can infallibly be merited through fulfilment of the three counsels - celibacy, poverty and obedience. Again and again, the "idleness" of monks and nuns is criticized. Instead of engaging in useless spiritual exercises they should fulfil a constructive role in society. True Christian calling is service in the world.

Justification is therefore a source of freedom also in this respect. It sets free for service. The world becomes the "stage" of Christian obedience. Energies which had so far been consumed by meritorious efforts are now directed to society. Rules which had become "taboos" are abolished. Breaking the taboo of Lent, for instance, has become a symbol of the Reformation in Zurich. Christians are free for uninhibited witness in the world. At the same time, the Reformers insist that freedom is service. They oppose humanist ideas of human self-development. Freedom finds its fulfilment in love. Even more: freedom is love.

But are these polemics of the Reformation time really the last word on the ascetic tradition of Christianity? Do they still sound right in the present situation? What, in particular, about the glorification of daily work? As we

witness the destruction resulting from human activities, questions inevitably arise. Faced with the consequences of human efforts in the world we need to ask whether the question of value and meaning of work has been examined with sufficient consistency. Have we perhaps allowed the glorification of work and human creativity to go too far? Has work perhaps become too much of a value of its own independent from its meaning and outcome? Have we, for instance, sufficiently asked the question what the kind of work we are doing today does to future generation? Has activity in the world perhaps absorbed the spiritual dimension of Christian life? The present situation is characterized by an extreme affirmation of *homo faber*, master and co-creator in creation. Obviously, the churches of the Reformation, on the basis of the heritage they have received, have only limited spiritual resources to resist this image both in theory and above all in practice. The delicate balance between "inner work" and activity in the world has broken down.

There is in my mind no doubt that the message of freedom arising from justification by faith remains valid and provides beyond the boundaries of the churches stemming from the Reformation a common Christian ground. The breakthrough of the 16th century needs to be maintained. God's will regards all spheres of life. The test of Christian obedience is to proclaim and to live God's commandment of love in the context of daily life. But is it not necessary - precisely for the integrity of this witness - to revive the ascetic tradition which was combated with so much vigour in the 16th century? The value of this tradition cannot be judged exclusively under the aspect of meritorious acts. Spiritual life needs to be cultivated in order to maintain the balance between inner life and activity. Restraint is needed in order not to become prisoner of the present project of society and to facilitate the reorientation which may lead to life. The ascetic tradition is required in a new perspective.

Perhaps the dialogue between the First and the Second Reformation can prove helpful in this respect. The emphasis on discipleship and life with Jesus in the early reform movements constitutes a tradition which deserves fresh attention in the churches of the magisterial Reformation.

---

### ● **The significance of the Reformation event in the church of Jesus Christ**

The third consideration is of a different category. It concerns the Reformations as an event. The reform movements of the 15th and 16th centuries led to divisions which have not been healed to this day. What is the meaning of these divisions? What are their implications for the ecumenical movement? They also are part of the heritage we have received from the time of the Reformation. They present a challenge not only to the churches of the Reformation themselves but to the ecumenical movement as a whole. There is much reason for the ecumenical movement to meditate on the deeper meaning of this event for the church of Christ.

The divisions which occurred in the 15th and 16th centuries confront us with an at first sight insurmountable impasse. They represent a new kind of division in the history of Christianity. Since the Reformation movement was not joined by bishops the episcopal apostolic succession could not be preserved by the churches of the Reformation. For churches relying on this sign of apostolic continuity the lack of episcopal consecration constitutes a serious obstacle to unity. It is not by chance that the issue of the ordained ministry proves to be so intractable in ecumenical dialogues. The dilemma is obvious. The catholic churches have no other choice than to ask for the restoration of the sign. But if the Churches of the Reformation accept the

sign of the laying-on of hands they admit by implication that their church was not fully the church of Jesus Christ in the past.

Either judgement and exclusion or acceptance of diversity? The dilemma is, I think, part of the witness the churches of the Reformation are bound to bear in the ecumenical movement. They need to point consistently to the need for the churches engaged in the ecumenical movement to rethink the continuity of the church in history. They are certainly one in affirming that God's faithfulness is reliable. "God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord" (1 Cor 1.9). But can this faithfulness be tangibly expressed through the visible sign of episcopal succession? Does not the event of the Reformation point to the fact that the continuity of the church is a much more mysterious and hidden reality? The history of the church of Jesus Christ is not straight. It is full of unexpected events and developments. It dies within orderly structures. It comes to life through apparent breaks and divisions. Luther spoke of God's word passing through humanity like a *Platzregen* (local downpour) and Calvin uses in one of his letters the striking formulation that the church becomes alive in resurrections.

The new kind of divisions which arose in the Reformation may be a blessing in disguise because they lead us to a more embracing vision of the unity of the church.

They teach us to accept within the one church a wider range of diversity. Since the Reformation has led to insights which are valid for all churches the break cannot be regarded as simply irregular; it had a meaning in God's purpose which needs to be recognized. The event as such shows that there is no uniform way of transmitting God's truth from generation to generation.

They teach us to be open to surprising events and developments. New insights may arise which at first sight may seem to be in contradiction with inherited standards of doctrine and teaching. This is particularly true for the reception of the gospel in cultures outside the realm of European and American Christianity. Among other things, the Reformation was also a process of indigenization. Cultural factors had an enormous impact on the conflict. It was a struggle between the Latin south and the Germanic north of Christian Europe.

Similar processes can repeat themselves today. Ways of transmitting the gospel can become oppressive. The conflict cannot be solved by exclusion. It needs to be faced - with the readiness for surprises.

The heritage of divisions also teaches us that a new quality of communication is called for to make manifest communion within diversity. A constant effort of communication is required to keep communion alive. Doctrinal agreement can be reached in dialogue. Structures can be agreed upon to ensure common life and witness. But agreements and common structures are no guarantee. The decisive factor for unity is constantly renewed communication.

This triple teaching could be an essential contribution to the ecumenical movement. It could help to overcome the stagnation in the present relations among the churches. The difficulty is that the churches of the Reformation are far from bearing this witness persuasively - both with regard to their partners in the ecumenical movement and with regard to the intercultural dialogue. They tend to stick to their traditions. While the churches of the Reformation like to describe themselves as ecumenical, sectarianism of all sorts are, in fact, widespread among them. The triple

teaching emanating from the event of the Reformation needs to be primarily heeded by themselves - to the extent it will be heeded by them their impact on the ecumenical movement will increase.

---

Originally published in *Towards a Renewed Dialogue: the First and Second Reformations*, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches no.30, ed. Milan Opocensky (Geneva: WARC, 1996), pp.161-9.