



A theologian from the Reformed Church speaks

For a dialogue of con-version

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The author is a Swiss Reformed theologian and pastor who has been engaged in ecumenical dialogue for decades, particularly with brothers and sisters of the Anabaptist tradition. His publications include: 'Wem gehört Jesus? Kirche aus reformierter Sicht' (To whom does Jesus belong? The Church from a Reformed Perspective) and the co-authored text with Catholic theologian Eva-Maria Faber, entitled: 'Eucharistie und Abendmahl' (Eucharist and the Lord's Supper).

"The whole Gospel in that cry": in Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross there is contained the whole Gospel. This is hub of the wheel where all the spokes are connected. The closer the Churches get to this "zero point", the closer they are to one another.

Churches cling to their traditions which are part of their identity but they also distance them from one another. Faith in Jesus crucified and forsaken means knowing how to set aside again and again even the most precious of traditions - in order to be healed from all wounds.

Unity of the Churches can only arise from their renewal but the opposite is also true: renewal of each individual Church leads to unity. The closer we get to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the closer we become, in fact, to one another. John Paul II writes in his ecumenical encyclical *Ut unum sint*: ". . . The commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer which will also lead to the *necessary purification of past memories.*" (Introduction, 2). Renewal, if it is to be radical, must be accompanied by conversion: "The Catholic Church must enter into what might be called a 'dialogue of conversion' which constitutes the spiritual foundation of ecumenical dialogue." (n. 82).

A "dialogue of conversion" begins by honestly and openly revealing the wounds of one's own Church. What then are the wounds of the Reformed Churches that obscure the Gospel? They are the same ones that Piero Coda speaks of in the Catholic Church:

1. *The obscured Gospel.* In many Reformed Churches - especially in Europe - the Gospel has lost its splendour. The Reformation was intended to be a movement that would again bring the Gospel to the forefront. The light of the Gospel must shine again in the Reformed Churches.

2. Even in the Reformed Churches, a *privatized Gospel* must return to be a Gospel of encounter, one of communion. Zwingli and Calvin understood that the Gospel must renew

not only the Church, but society as a whole. And the socio-religious movement of the twentieth century argued that the Church should not revolve around itself but instead fight for the Kingdom of God among peoples, cultures and nations.

3. As for *the truncated gospel*, Reformed Churches may think they can feel safe and at ease. Over decades, many have introduced the ordination of women. Yet, it seems to me that the dignity and genius of women are still too little recognized even in our Churches. It is not enough for women to be admitted to parish ministry, they must be able to shape this ministry in the Church according to their gifts. Here, it is necessary to arrive at a real collaboration in the Reformed Churches.

4. The Reformed also seem on the right track regarding risks of a *clericalized Gospel*. Their hierarchy is equal and democratic. There is no episcopate. Church leadership is through the Synod. The common priesthood of the faithful is deeply rooted in the Protestant Churches and yet I see our Churches suffering from two wounds, or challenges. One is the dominance of the parish ministry. Since there is no ministry of unity, each pastor acts as his own "bishop". Consequently, pastors are dependent on being able to form a community in which Jesus is effectively present. The second challenge is linked to the decision-making dynamics of the synods. For the life of the Church, it cannot be enough to decide according to democratic rules. The Holy Spirit must be involved, as in the first synod of the apostles: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us ...". (*Acts 15, 28*).

5. *From a silenced Gospel to a truth-filled Gospel*: This challenge remains the same for all the Churches: how do we become leaven, salt of the earth and light of the world? This is possible only by giving and immersing ourselves in the world. The Anabaptists tried from the beginning: a simple lifestyle of non-violence in accordance with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount! For this, they have been persecuted for centuries. Their communities are a model for us in their simplicity, in their pacifism, without power or defences. On the other hand, there was a risk of isolation and retreating into a small, elite community.

6. For the Reformed Churches I see a sixth wound: *the divided Gospel!* From its beginnings, the Reformation led to division. And still, Reformed churches - and Protestantism in general - are divided into many denominations. From the earliest years, different interpretations of the Bible were in opposition to one another. How is unity in diversity achieved here? Again, it is only Jesus crucified and forsaken who can make us one! It is Jesus among us who guides us to shared scriptural understanding: "My" truth is not the decisive one, but rather the one that HIM *among us* brings us to understand.

