



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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## 500 Years After the Protestant Reformation: A Critical Assessment from an Ecumenical African Perspective

Setri Nyomi

*The Reverend Dr. Setri Nyomi is John Mackay Visiting Professor of World Christianity (Spring, 2015/2016) at Princeton Theological Seminary, and Senior Pastor of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Adenta, Ghana. Dr. Nyomi delivered the John A. Mackay World Christianity Lecture on February 2, 2016.*

**T**hank you for this invitation to give the 2016 John Mackay Lecture. I deem being called to be the John Mackay Visiting Professor of World Christianity a great honor, and to give this lecture simply doubles that pleasure. This is because out of all the twentieth century theologians who have made an impact on the world church and ecumenical scene, John Mackay stands as the most remarkable. Even before taking up my role as General Secretary of the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in the year 2000, I am glad I was introduced to the important contributions of John Mackay when I was a student here at Princeton Theological Seminary. Not through my formal studies, but simply through my own curiosity in finding out more about the Princeton Seminary President for whom the center where we shared our meals and bought our books was named. My readings in those days led me to discover a personality who applied his faith and scholarship to the vision of the unity of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ in a manner unmatched in the twentieth century.

When I become General Secretary of the WARC, I took some pride in constantly lifting up the visionary contributions of this leader who was once president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. That pride was heightened by the fact that I could say he was president of my alma mater, Princeton Theological Seminary. I am glad that others have followed his example as a leader of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Jim McCord, his successor as president of Princeton Seminary, also became president of the WARC, as did

Professor Jane Dempsey Douglas, who continues to be engaged in various ways in issues that make a difference in the world. Other Princeton Seminary presidents and professors have also contributed immensely to the life of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. But still the one who has done the most happens to be John Mackay. So when a chair is named for him as a leader in World Christianity and today I am called to occupy it, I deem it a great privilege. And I give this lecture in his honor, and in honor of all who have followed him from this community in serving the ecumenical family and in making a difference in our world.

Before I get into the lecture, I pause here to thank President Barnes, who invited me to take this chair for this semester. He himself stands in that tradition of a pastor and theological educator who understands the role that Princeton Seminary an institution can play in the world church, and I am grateful to God that he once shared with me that he was in the World Alliance of Reformed Church's 21st Assembly in Ottawa, Canada. I am grateful to Dean Kay for his leadership and guidance. I am grateful to God for my colleagues in the History and Ecumenics Department, led by Professor Elsie Mackie who herself has contributed greatly to the life of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in our quest to live out the gift and calling to Christian unity. I am grateful to God for my wife, Akpene, who has accompanied me on these journeys. And we are both grateful to God for the education we received here at Princeton Seminary, and how that education has continued to shape our ministry in the various locations of our calling.

It is providential that we are here this year, 2016 – just one year before we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Many of the activities that will take place this year and the next in many churches and theological institutions will be connected to marking this significant anniversary. It was very tempting to avoid this topic, because undoubtedly there will be many opportunities for this community to have expositions on themes related to the 500 year anniversary of the Reformation. I chose to focus on it, even with the full knowledge of that risk, because I am convinced that it will take multiple perspectives and assessments in order for us to use the opportunity offered by this commemoration to be more faithful to God in our calling as agents of renewal and transformation in the world today. We cannot afford to have this go the way of other such occasions – a talk shop and feel good series of events with no visible action or orientation for making a difference in our world.

In this presentation, I am not going to recount in depth what happened in the sixteenth century and since, or do a century by century assessment of the impact of the Reformation over the last five centuries. My scope is more narrow. I will refer to some of the main elements of the sixteenth century Reformation, and through a twenty-first century ecumenical African lens reflect on and assess their impact. In the process, I hope together we can both establish the relevance of the Reformation movement initiated in October 1517 and offer some proposals of how this movement can have a greater impact in our day as we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. In reflecting on this, three sets of questions took center stage:

1. How was a European event that occurred in 1517 transformed into a worldwide event? Or has it been so transformed?
2. Can we celebrate something that essentially marked a break in Christian unity?
3. Did the Protestant Reformation foster a more just society in the sixteenth century? What inspiration do we take from the Protestant Reformation to lead us towards a more just society today?

## **The Sixteenth Century Reformation and Its Impact**

On October 17, 1517, something happened in the small town of Wittenberg, Germany. None of the actors at that time could have imagined on that day that 500 years later, in the year 2017 this event would make news headlines beyond Germany, let alone serve as reference point for millions of people in every generation and across geographic and cultural lines throughout the world. How did an event in a small Saxony town in Germany become a phenomenon whose 500th anniversary will be a worldwide affair? Of what relevance is the outcome of this event to the world in which we live today?

Martin Luther's action of nailing 95 theses on the door of the Schlosskirche (Castle Church) in Wittenberg marked the beginning of the sixteenth century Reformation and is our reference point for these 500 years. This struggling monk dared to express himself against the tide of his times. He was not afraid to raise the troubling questions that plagued him as he sought to come to terms with his understanding of God and God's love vis-à-vis what his church's tradition had become. For him, it was no longer acceptable to go through the motions of simply doing what everyone did and playing it safe. It was a matter of living by faith and following one's conscience even if it meant going against the tide. He presented his understanding of faith in response to these troubling questions in the form of theses; statements he was prepared to debate and defend in any forum. Indeed, they were an invitation to a debate.

A brief look at the era in which this occurred reveals how daring this seemingly simple act was. By the end of the fifteenth century, it was clear that the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, and the papacy in particular, enjoyed a level of power that one could describe as the absolute power of a holy empire. This power was exercised together with the monarchs and nobles of the then-known world. So it was easy to quash dissent. All that was necessary was for the papacy or its agents to declare someone a heretic, and the accused would face dire consequences, including death at the stake and the discrediting and burning of one's works. It was a clear example of what a powerful force ecclesial, political, economic, and military might create when they join together. In that era, such a force quashed dissent and stifled any life-giving action it deemed against its interests. It is in this context that we can see Martin Luther's actions as very daring. Indeed, it took the protection of some powerful German personalities, for example, Frederick the Wise, the elector of Wittenberg to shield him from the fate of those in earlier centuries who expressed similar questions, such as Jan Hus of Bohemia.

The 95 theses nailed that Martin Luther nailed to the door possessed theological content as well as criticism of how certain church practices were being carried out. In these theses, Martin Luther mainly targeted the excesses of indulgences, and especially church agents so focused on raising funds for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome that they were practically selling God's forgiveness under the guise of the assumed power of the pope to hold the keys to human destiny as far as justification and access to heaven were concerned. In these theses, Martin Luther took pains to ensure that he was not directly criticizing the pope. In fact, he even assumed that purgatory was an acceptable concept. As others have articulated over and over again, Luther's aim was not to cause a break in the Western church or to create his own church. He wanted to expose excesses and address them so that the church could be transformed into what it is called to be. It was only when he encountered by a chain of reactions that culminated in his excommunication three years later that he was pushed into a movement that was openly critical of the papacy and into articulating clearer theological stances of what became a new church.

Meanwhile, Wittenberg was not alone. Similar movements were happening in other centers. By 1523, under the leadership of Huldrych Zwingli, the canton of Zurich in Switzerland had embraced Reformation principles. Although there is no evidence that this was a result of what happened in Wittenberg, there are clear similarities

between the principles of the Reformation in Germany inspired by Martin Luther and the Reformation movement in Zurich inspired by Zwingli. In the next few years, other Swiss cantons adopted this movement. In Geneva, church leaders such as Guillaume Farel persuaded a brilliant young man, John Calvin to stay and participate in their embrace of the Reformation. Calvin's was instrumental in giving the movement solid theological and ecclesiological rooting. The Swiss Reformation took the Reformation to levels that seemed more radical than simply wanting to correct excesses in the then-Western church. This gave birth to what we now describe as the Reformed movement. Within the first century of the Reformation, the Reformed movement as well as the broader Reformation movement had spread to other countries such as the present day Netherlands, Scotland, Hungary, England, and what is now Southern France. Followers of earlier renewal movements begun by Pierre Valdes in the twelfth century and Jan Hus in the fifteenth century also joined in the growing Reformation movement. Thus, territories in Italy and Bohemia also became part of the Reformation movement.

In those first years of the Reformation movement, the slogans *Solus Christus*, *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*, emerged as the theological affirmations of the movement. These "*solae*" already mark out the positions around which the Reformers were not ready to compromise, and thus placed them at odds with the traditional Western church. One notable feature of the Reformation movement was how it became the channel for translating the Bible and other Christian literature into vernaculars, thus giving ordinary people access to reading the Bible. With the appearance of the printing press, what had hitherto been solely the prerogative of clergy became available to all. While under the protection of Frederick the Wise and essentially in hiding in Wartburg Castle, Martin Luther published the first translations of the Bible into German. Other centers of the Reformation began to produce their own Christian literature as well. John Calvin was one single personality whose brilliance and prolific writing acumen have come to benefit the Reformation family. By the age of 27 he had written the first edition of his *Institutes of Christian Religion* – a systematic theological presentation of the Christian faith. Calvin had also published commentaries of almost every book in the Bible. His published sermons cover volumes that remain a treasure trove from which we continue to draw.

While many good things characterized the lives and actions of the early Reformation leaders, some of their actions were questionable. The access to the written word of God ordinary people now enjoyed became a major asset and empowering tool for peasants of the time. At the same time, some of Martin Luther's actions during this time seem baffling. An example that stands out is Luther's support of the nobility and his advocating violence against the peasants during the peasant revolts of the 1520's. It appeared the protection Reformation leaders received from the nobility made them into persons who inadvertently fell into the very pattern of injustice they sought to overcome: collusion with political, economic and military might to serve as a force against common people. In the Swiss Reformation, there was a similar collusion between the church and state. In Zurich, the power of the state was very much behind the moves of Zwingli within the church, and indeed he met his death at the battlefield. John Calvin's works and actions are very much responsible for shaping the city of Geneva for what it became in the centuries that followed. While for the most part Calvin challenged the cantonal political leadership, there is also some evidence he sometimes did what was politically expedient, for example his role in the execution of Servetus.

By the end of that first century of the Reformation, the movement seemed to have remained a European affair. It braved many challenges and overcame many obstacles and by that time was a major force on the European scene. It is only as the Reformation entered its second century that other continents began to feel the presence of the Reformation movement. With the arrival of Puritans on the Eastern coast of what is now the United States of America in the 1620s the history of Protestants on this continent began. In the same century, Dutch

merchants and explorers travelling to and in some cases settling in South Africa and places such as Ambon in Indonesia took the Reformation movement to these parts of the world. These were the beginnings. The main explosion of appearances of the Reformation movement in most parts of the world came with the development of missionary movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, we can truly say the Reformation movement has reached every continent, bringing transformation to every place it has touched. But it has also raised questions. For example, in the years of the transatlantic slave trade, even the Reformation churches could not criticize the gross injustice and cruelty meted out to human beings who were commoditized by the trade. A visit to the Elmina castle on the coast of current day Ghana would reveal that just above the female slave dungeon where unimaginable suffering was taking place, was the chapel in which supposed Reformed Christians constantly worshiped. This was a Dutch post. There is also much evidence that in many places the good work of missionaries was tainted by how some of them sought protection from the colonialists and therefore often collaborated with the colonialists against the indigenous people.

The testimony to the Reformation's worldwide reach is how two of the Christian World Communions that serve Reformation movement churches will be marking 2017 as the 500th anniversary. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) will hold its Council meeting this year in Wittenberg and their 12th Assembly in Namibia in May 2017, symbolically affirming the movement that began in Wittenberg is now a worldwide movement. In June/July 2017, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) will hold its 26th General Council in Leipzig, Germany during which there will also be some significant events in Wittenberg. Then in October 2017, all member churches are expected to commemorate this in the 108 countries in which WCRC member churches live and witness.

The impact of the journey of these churches over the last 500 years will truly be felt if, in the process of celebrating this renewal movement, the two world organizations (the WCRC and the LWF) could engage in assessments that lead to new commitments to unity and overcoming the challenges faced in the last centuries. They can do so in partnership with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and all other church bodies who were touched by the renewal movement. It is important that the Reformation's impulses of renewal are felt again in the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, in all its expressions, so that it can truly be an agent of transformation.

### **The Reformation – A break in Christian Unity?**

As already indicated, Martin Luther's intention was not to break from the Roman Catholic Church, but to correct to the excesses of the church and thereby bring about reform in a manner that would align the church to the will of God. Yet, he was virtually pushed out by the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. However, we need to acknowledge that while the break may have been unintentional, the Reformation does mark a break in the unity of the church. It was not the first break. And on this anyone who understands the passion with which our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of his followers in John 17 cannot rejoice. We always need to remember that while we celebrate the renewal movement in the church, we should confess the scandal of division.

The leaders of the Swiss Reformation may have been more radical than their German counterparts, yet even they did not frivolously rejoice in the division. There were a number of attempts to bring together the different actors of the Reformation. One such attempt led to a meeting between Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli that failed because they disagreed on the essence of the elements of the Holy Communion. John Calvin's stand on Christian unity is so clear that I devote a good portion of this presentation to it.

Calvin tried to reach out to Reformation leaders known to him. While he never met with most of them face to face, he had a vigorous correspondence with some. One of the letters that we have often quoted is the 1552 letter he wrote to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer of England in which Calvin indicated that he would cross ten seas to promote Christian unity. In the preparatory resource material for WARC's 24th General Council, we quoted from this letter as a means of affirming WARC's commitment to Christian unity. Calvin was responding to a meeting of Reformation leaders to confess their common mind on central Christian doctrines proposed by Thomas Cranmer, the first protestant Archbishop of Canterbury. To Calvin, the divisions in the church of his day, destroying human fellowship and Christian relationship, were among the chief evils of that time. In the Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians 4.5, Calvin writes:

Each time we read the word "one," let us be reminded that it is used emphatically. Christ cannot be divided. Faith cannot be rent. There are not various baptisms but one, which is common to all. God cannot be torn into different parts. It cannot but be our duty to cherish holy unity, which is bound by so many ties. Faith and baptism, and God the Father and Christ, ought to unite us, so as almost to become one human being. [1]

In the Commentary on John 17:21, Calvin goes even further:

"That all may be one." He again lays down the end of our happiness as consisting in unity, and justly; for the ruin of the human race is, that, having been alienated from God, it is also broken and scattered in itself. The restoration of it, therefore on the contrary, consists in its being properly united in one body, as Paul declares the perfection of the Church to consist in believers being joined in one spirit, and says that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors, were given, that they might edify and restore the body of Christ, till it came to the unity of faith; and therefore he exhorts believers to grow into Christ, who is the head, from whom the whole body being joined together, and connected by every bond of supply, according to the operation in the measure of every part, makes increase of it to edification. Wherefore if Christ speaks about unity, let us remember how basely and shockingly, when separated from Him, the world is scattered; and next, let us learn that the commencement of a blessed life is, that we be governed, and that we all live, by the Spirit of Christ alone. [2]

Today's division in the church is a scandal. Viewed against the background of Calvin's words and against the actions of others in the Reformation movement, it is as if we think Christ is divided into tribes, classes, ideologies, ignoring the vision of the perfection of the one Church. While we celebrate the growth of the Church in Africa, we are also aware of the scandal of divisions as well as the tendency for new independent churches to emerge, many of which come from already established churches. Another reality in Africa is that the nature of missionary work is such that we have come to inherit tribal churches in many countries. Just by mentioning the name of your denomination, people can tell the tribe to which you belong. In my tenure as General Secretary of the WARC and the World Council of Reformed Churches, we did much work with our churches in South Africa where there is still a struggle to move beyond the legacy of apartheid and divisions in the churches along racial lines, and to commit to genuine Christian unity which values justice for all.

This phenomenon is not limited to Africa. Migratory patterns from Europe to the Americas in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries have exported similar divisions. In the Reformed family alone, one can spot the descendants of the Scottish, German, or Dutch by whether they belong to the Presbyterian churches, Reformed churches, Lutheran churches, Methodist churches, or others. It was not too long ago that worship

was conducted in the languages from which the immigrants who brought these churches came. The issue is compounded when one includes the entire Christian family in this analysis.

The emergence of United and Uniting Churches in the world today constitutes a refreshing attempt to reverse this fragmentation. While in some cases these were occasioned by secular authority or royal decrees, this phenomenon is nevertheless an important development in Christian unity. We have to make every effort to overcome Christian disunity. The World Communion of Reformed Churches, which I served for more than fourteen and a half years is committed to working for Christian unity. Its programs of bilateral theological dialogues with other church families constitute one expression of such a commitment. The fact that in 2010 the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches united with the Reformed Ecumenical Council to form the current World Communion of Reformed Churches is another expression of this commitment to overcome division.

Commitment to Christian Unity is also seen in how in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries there have been some openings of dialogue and work together between the Roman Catholic Church and a number of Reformation movement churches. Every January for over a hundred years we have had a week of prayer for Christian Unity. There is a Working Group between the WCC and the Vatican. There is also the 1999 signing of the Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. Later, the Methodists signed this document as well.

It is worth noting a significant event that took place in the year 2001. More than 484 years after Martin Luther called for a debate on indulgences, it finally happened in Rome in February 2001. It was my joy to be one of the co-chairs, together with Dr. Ishmael Noko of the Lutheran World Federation and the then Bishop Walter Kasper. Edward Cardinal Cassidy, who was then the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was also present throughout the meetings. Two Roman Catholic representatives presented papers on Indulgences, and there were responses from two Reformed and two Lutheran scholars. Professor Ellen Barbinsky of the United States and Professor George Sabra of Lebanon presented the two Reformed papers. While we did not come to any agreements, the discussion itself was significant because it opened a dialogue that furthers the course of Christian unity.

John Calvin believed one of the ways to foster unity in the church was through the frequent celebration of the Eucharist. In fact, he wanted the Eucharist as the visible sign of Christ's presence; it "could have been administered most becomingly if it were set before the church often, and at least once a week."<sup>[3]</sup> In this particular desire, the authorities of Geneva who thought such frequent celebration would make the church feel too closely linked with Roman Catholic practices, overruled him. In the book, *Legacy of John Calvin*, we raise the question, "Can the frequency of celebrating the Holy Communion contribute to a stronger feeling of unity among Reformed churches?"<sup>[4]</sup> Some of us are convinced it can. We are grateful that the Disciples of Christ family is leading the way in this regard. In 2004, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches asserted that, "This is an aspect of our worship that can most powerfully equip us to resist, celebrate and feel for others in the midst of everything we face. How can we remember Jesus at the table, on that night, with those disciples and not be inspired to seek fullness of life? Far from allowing communion to divide us, even within the Reformed tradition, we see it calling us into a passionate, generous and joyful way of life together."<sup>[5]</sup>

Christian Unity is not only expressed when Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and others come together to form an Organic union. It is also expressed profoundly when the gifts of all God's people, women and men, young and old, regardless of race or any other form of human division are used and



appreciated fully in all aspects of church life. It is time for the Reformation movement to be even more intentional about ensuring that the church affirms the gifts of all God's people, women and men in carrying out the mission and ministry.

As a product of his time, Calvin and the other Reformation leaders would not have applied much of their vision of Christian unity to a relationship with the Roman Catholic Church or have any thoughts that the papacy could be part of that vision. However, today, on the verge of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Christians in the world can go far beyond what these early Reformers envisaged. This does not mean that we do not have any differences. We do. But we need to be more intentional about dialogue. The task of Christian unity is an urgent one even as in the twenty-first century we have new forms of division – liberal and conservative, Christian right and Christian left, pulling the Church of Jesus Christ in all kinds of directions. This is a scandal we must overcome.

When bodies such as the World Council of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches and others set out to heal divisions among Christian communities today, or seeks to foster mission in unity or engage in dialogue with other Christian families, it does so in the full conviction that this is the calling of God on the church. We do so, thankful that this understanding has been in the Reformation movement for a long time and is articulated in the vision of John Calvin and others. Today, we as Reformed Christians hold the view that “to be Reformed is to be ecumenical.”

As we commemorate this 500th anniversary, we need to make new commitments to overcoming divisions and being faithful to the vision in our Lord's prayer that His followers may be one. Since the beginning of the Reformation, there has been a tension between radical obedience to the Word and the quest for Christian unity. This tension was not easily resolved in the first centuries of the Protestant Reformation. It is not any easier in our day with new theological and ethical questions leading to tension and division in our churches. The question is, as we address these new questions, to what extent are we willing to give strong attention to the gift of unity. Our callings as persons who appreciate the gifts of the Protestant Reformation over the last five hundred years beckons us not to be comfortable with demonizing the other and staying in that “we-they” syndrome, or simply living with a kind of false peace because we have finally gotten to a stage where we think everyone in the body agrees with our positions. The issues are very complex, and I do not intend to offer any lame easy answers. At the very least, we need to keep that healthy tension as part of our calling.

## **The Protestant Reformation and Justice**

I have already noted ways in which some of the early Reformed leaders colluded with powerful political, economic and military leaders. But we also know that the understanding of the Gospel and access they gave people of all classes to have access to the Word of God also contributed to bettering the lives of the lower classes. Here again, I will single out the work of John Calvin as an entry point into catching a glimpse of the Reformation movement's engagement with social justice.

The person who has written the most on John Calvin's views on social justice is André Biéler. His volume, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, was first published in 1961. In 2005, the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches together with the World Council of Churches published the English translation of this text. André Biéler offered many examples of how Calvin's vision for social transformation is relevant for our times today. Biéler demonstrated how Calvin expresses opposition to all forms of social oppression resulting from

money. He quotes a lengthy section of Calvin's New Testament commentaries and from the *Institutes* to prove his point.

Quoting from Calvin's *Institutes*, Biéler makes an even stronger point about the rich oppressing the poor:

"All those arts whereby we acquire the possessions and money at the expense of our neighbors are to be considered as thefts. Although those who behave in this way often win their case before the judge, yet God upholds them to be none other than thieves. For he sees the intricate deceptions with which crafty people set out to snare those of simpler mind; he sees the rigor of the exactions which the rich impose on the poor to crush them." These words of Calvin written more than four centuries ago resonate with life in the 21st century. In the consultations, biblical and theological reflections, as well as economic analyses carried out by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the conclusion began emerging after the Seoul General Council in 1989 that it is not only in relationships of individuals to how money is related to, that has become a source of oppression. Today, it is the global economic systems and practices that have more sophisticated forms of effects as Calvin saw them. [6]

André Biéler attributed Calvin's establishment of the fourth order of church government, deacons, to his disgust in the disparity between the rich and the poor. Calvin saw in this disparity a scandal, which is "unworthy of a church reformed by the Word of God." [7] Calvin advocated for just wages for all. This was also part of his commitment to justice. Several times he called for increased wages, especially for teachers. In Biéler's analysis, John Calvin's advocacy for more just wages went far deeper than that of most theologians and other leaders of his day. This was not just a means of getting wages to match the high cost of living; it had to do with a spiritual commitment. Biéler helps us understand that while in debates relating to just prices and wages most theologians seek to fix a standard based on hypothetical natural law, Calvin located the problem precisely in its spiritual perspective by showing that wages can only be understood on the basis of God's free gift of remuneration, providing forgiveness and life to everyone." He writes:

While God owes nothing to man (sic), that does not mean that he fails to give abundantly what is needed. It does not prevent His giving a wage for human labor. But what God gives, He grants freely and generously, as a product of sheer goodness, for Jesus Christ has gained favor and grace from His father for those for whom He gave His life. [8]

It is a shame that almost 500 years later the church has still not fully integrated this message in its challenge of unjust structures.

Much that concerns justice in the economy relates to banking and finance. Here, John Calvin's actions are sometimes confusing. On the one hand he was the first church leader to give his blessing to the practice of lending with interest. While lending with interest was practiced widely, Christian bankers often did so with a guilt-ridden spirit. Calvin's stand made it possible for lenders to do so without guilt. Many people may find this puzzling. However, one may also see Calvin's actions as seeking justice for all. In addition to guaranteeing fairness to banking and lending systems, it enabled Calvin to establish a system that ensured interest rates were reasonable. There were limits to how much interest one could charge. He advocated strict regulation of how banks could operate – especially how much interest they put on a loan. In that sense, he was still operating within the bounds of seeking justice for all.

Calvin was also interested in the issues of environmental protection. On 20 December 1555, John Calvin preached a sermon on Deuteronomy 20:16-20. He focused on verse 19, which reads “If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?”<sup>[9]</sup> A few sentences from this sixteenth century sermon illustrate how concern for ecology was in John Calvin’s understanding of living faithful Christian lives. Calvin proclaimed, “When we find ourselves driven by wickedness or some evil thoughts to the point of destroying trees, houses and other such things, we have to control ourselves and reflect: Who are we waging war against? Not against creatures, but against the one whose goodness is mirrored here. Not against one man only, but against each and everyone, we included.”<sup>[10]</sup> John Calvin continued elsewhere in the same sermon. Speaking of cutting down trees he asserted, “Today, such cruelty is even greater among those who call themselves Christians ... For today they go about scorching and burning the land which is worse than cutting throats ... Human beings have distanced them from God and become brutish as a result.”<sup>[11]</sup> This is John Calvin, 460 years ago – not a twenty-first century ecological activist. In his conclusion, Calvin notes, “Let us therefore take care not to uproot any fruit trees, but since the Word of God is the seed of life, let us endeavor to scatter it widely, so that it can put down strong roots and produce a tree that is not unfruitful, but one that produces much fruit. God has chosen us for His people and here God shows us a justice that must permeate our whole lives.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Calvin’s sermons were filled with references to societal transformation. His attention to refugees in Geneva was remarkable. His views went beyond simply having pity on those who were poor and displaced to a real commitment to ordering society in order to diminish marginalization. His reading and proclamation of Scripture had a definite slant towards transforming the society in which he lived. While how Calvin did it, and how both his struggles as well as his achievements with the authorities of Geneva may be different from approaches in the twenty-first century, much of what he did inspires our actions today.

A former president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Professor Jane Dempsey Douglass, has helped us to recapture Calvin’s vision regarding the gifts of women. Jane Dempsey Douglass states that Calvin emphasized that every human being is made in God’s image. It is out of the conviction that all humankind is made in God’s image, that he interprets 1 Corinthians 11:7. In this interpretation, Calvin states that women’s subordinate role is not acceptable in the areas of human order, in the political order, or in marriage. To Calvin, women, like men, are fully made in God’s image and regenerated in the Holy Spirit. At the end of time in the Kingdom of God, there will be neither feminine nor masculine, nor class distinctions between the rich and the poor.<sup>[13]</sup> Let me point out that Calvin here missed the opportunity to include church leadership in this list. And this is very disappointing. This omission makes his commentary on 1 Timothy 3 define how we see his attitude to women. Here his exposition was along the traditional lines of negativity towards the ordination of women. Even in the sixteenth century, there were visionary Reformation leaders who made sure the church knew that God’s gifts of leadership were not limited to men. These visionary women include Marie Dentiére, Katharina von Bora, and Olivia Fulvia Morata of Italy and Heidelberg. Marie Dentiére was herself a preacher who was an advocate for women preachers.

The commitment of the World Communion of Reformed Churches to gender justice is therefore consistent with the vision of some of the early reformers. While they may not have applied it with vigor to women’s ordination, today we stand on this legacy, among others, in challenging all churches to recognize the gifts of God given to all, and affirm the calls of all, women and men, to the ordained ministry and church leadership at all levels. The World Communion of Reformed Churches, as the body that unites in common witness churches that trace their

historical and theological heritage to Calvin, Zwingli, Bullinger and others could not simply limit itself to a shallow reading of the Scriptures which stop at positioning the church as a channel of charity while knowingly or unknowingly supporting the oppressive systems that provide the atmosphere for the poor to increase. Thus, when bodies like the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches and the Council for World Mission engage in the serious theological analysis that has led to covenanting for economic and ecological justice, it does so because it is remaining faithful to the legacy of the Reformation movement.

## Conclusion

Today, almost 500 years after the Reformation initiated by Martin Luther and followed by Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin, Dentièr, Knox, and others, we can be grateful to God that we have inherited a renewal and transforming movement in the church. Today's challenges may be new, but they are also similar to those that confronted the sixteenth century Reformation movement. Because of this, the church today can just as easily lose credibility and effectiveness unless we open ourselves to renewal. We face new challenges that often threaten to divide us. There are no easy ways to resolve some of the ethical questions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, we can learn from the focus of the renewal movement at the heart of the Reformation. Rather than seek victory on whose point of view or tradition should carry the day, the renewal movement of the Reformation can give us counsel for the way forward. The five *solae* can be helpful. The commitment to Christian unity that the Reformers wished for can be a guide. Yes, even where they did not go far enough, our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ could lead us to go further in our time. *Sola Scriptura* should lead us to reading and rereading Scripture in a manner that inspires us to be God's instruments of transformation in society. The stances that many churches of the Reformation, especially through the ecumenical organs, have taken for justice have come from an inspiration to be faithful to God. The work of covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth, gender justice, racial justice, and others are expressions of this commitment.

The economic meltdown that took place a few years ago has exposed, among other things, the consequences of human greed left unchecked. This led to systems where without proper regulations the global economic system was allowed to enrich a few and impoverish millions. It was a system that did not pay enough attention to the safety nets that would ensure that the gifts of God benefit all people. One simply has to look at the bonuses the chief executive officers of large multinational companies and financial institutions gave themselves, while many lay starving in their own backyards. Reformers who took on similar issues, like John Calvin, have left us a good example to follow. It is against this background that the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches developed the Accra Confession in 2004. Its message is as difficult to hear in some contexts as was Calvin's message in the 1540s on financial systems in Geneva. We can use these and other resources to maintain the spirit of renewal that characterized the Reformation. This renewal can make a difference in our broken world.

The Protestant Reformation is in essence a transformation and renewal movement aimed at getting the people of God to be more obedient to the Word of God. To say "Only Jesus is Lord" is to say nothing else could occupy the position of Lordship; not tradition, not political power, not military might, not the empire in any shape or form. The Reformers in the sixteenth century were not always able to avoid the temptation to join the powerful players in the empire of their days. Today we are better placed to deal with the empires of our world in which the church still faces the temptation to join in collusion with political, economic, and militarily powerful forces against ordinary people, many of whom are in our own churches. We dare not say, "Here I stand!" in the face of these powerful forces.

As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the time has come to take a stand and see that our calling to be faithful to God includes faithfully proclaiming the Gospel, evangelism, and being God's agents of transformation. This includes being prophetic in our different contexts. In addition to the Accra Confession, instruments such as the Belhar confession developed in South Africa can help us be more faithful to God in our local circumstances.

In the sixteenth century, this was a European movement. Today, this is a worldwide movement that covers all continents. In fact, statistics show the continent on which Christianity is growing most rapidly is Africa. So the twenty-first century has witnessed a change in the landscape of Christianity. We all need to join hands and value the contributions that come from each of the locations in which the Reformation movement finds expression.

The calls to overcome division and to be agents of transformation are important legacies of the Reformation movement. To commemorate the Reformation properly, we have to find ways in which the church of our Lord Jesus Christ can effectively engage in both of these legacies. Anything less would simply be participating in a birthday bash, with no intention to honor why we are marking this birthday. It is because of the need to overcome divisions that many in the ecumenical movement have chosen to use the word "commemorate" rather than celebrate. Because celebration will mean we are blind to the fact that we have to do everything possible to overcome the division that came in the sixteenth century. It is my hope and prayer that all churches in the Reformation movement, as well as the Roman Catholic and newer expressions of the church, will join hands in allowing ourselves to be renewed by God in these two years, so that we can be more faithful agents of God in God's work of transformation.

I finish on a note for theological institutions such as my own alma mater. Here my task is made easier because I can draw from the past president of Princeton Theological Seminary who contributed the most to the ecumenical vision, John Mackay. In the 1956 Executive Committee of the Alliance, John Mackay stated, the Alliance "is loyally committed to the Church Universal of Jesus Christ whose interest it exists to promote. It does not regard itself as existing to promote World Presbyterianism but rather to strengthen the Holy Catholic Church throughout the Presbyterian witness."<sup>[14]</sup> This statement from 1956, about sixty years ago, is relevant for our time as we commemorate the Reformation's 500th anniversary. If all of us could see the reason why we exist as a church and from whatever our worship community location is, see ourselves as belonging together and called to fulfill the interests of the Lord of the church, then we would be effective as witnesses operating from our particular family bases but all being God's agents of transformation. With a vision of this kind we can build on the Reformation movement's legacy in making a difference in our world.

Soli Deo Gloria.

<sup>[1]</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 4:5.

<sup>[2]</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, 387.

<sup>[3]</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.43.

<sup>[4]</sup> Setri Nyomi, ed., *The Legacy of John Calvin* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Alliance of Reformed Churches

and the John Knox International Reformed Centre, 2008), 21.

[5] *Proceedings of the 24<sup>th</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (Accra, 2004), 172

[6] André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought* (WCC Publications, 2005), 301. This particular quotation of Calvin is taken from Calvin's *Institutes*, 2.8.45.

[7] *Ibid.*, 135.

[8] *Ibid.*, 367.

[9] Deuteronomy. 20:19

[10] John Calvin, *Fourth Sermon on Deuteronomy 20*, XXVII.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*, 1.46.728

[14] Minutes of the Executive Committee (Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 7-11, 1956), 38.