

'Whatever became of that earlier time of grace?' Luther, Bonhoeffer and the quincentennial



Author:
Henco van der Westhuizen¹

Affiliation:
¹Department of Historical and Constructive Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Henco van der Westhuizen,
hvdw@ufs.ac.za

Dates:
Received: 07 Sept. 2017
Accepted: 27 Nov. 2017
Published: 31 Jan. 2018

How to cite this article:
Van der Westhuizen, H., 2018, "'Whatever became of that earlier time of grace?' Luther, Bonhoeffer and the quincentennial', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(1), a4808. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4808>

Copyright:
© 2018. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The quincentenary of the Protestant Reformation creates a challenge. With reference to Protestant churches in South Africa, the ambiguity inherent in this challenge is considered in the first part of the essay. In the second part, Martin Luther's famous discovery is investigated in light of his earlier theology leading up to 31 October 1517. It is argued that Luther's earlier theology is characterised by a hermeneutic rediscovery. In the third part, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology is brought into conversation with Luther. It is asked how Bonhoeffer received Luther's theology – more specifically, how he re-appropriated the hermeneutic inherent in Luther's earlier theology. In the final part, it is asked what the theological hermeneutic inherent in Luther's earlier theology – re-appropriated by Bonhoeffer – can mean for South African churches commemorating the Protestant Reformation.

The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God. (Luther 2012b:11)

Introduction

It is difficult not to be taken up by the Reformation commemoration of 2017.¹ The different projects in the most diverse fields worked out in detail by distinctive traditions within Protestantism contribute to this commemorative jubilee.²

That the commemoration or *jubilee*³ creates challenges is part of the celebratory discussions worldwide.⁴

When are we to commemorate the Reformation?⁵ *Who* is to commemorate the Reformation? Those in the tradition of Luther, or also those finding themselves in the tradition of Calvin⁶ and

1.In contrast to the place of the Reformation in European history between the Middle Ages and modernity 'as something long ago', Brad Gregory (University of Notre Dame) recently argued that 'what transpired five centuries ago continues today profoundly to influence the lives of everyone not only in Europe and North America but all around the world' (2012:1, [author's own italics]). In fact, he finds a central argument of his book to be that the shifts that occurred five or more centuries ago 'remain substantively necessary to an explanation of why the Western world today is as it is' (2012:7, [author's own italics]). For an in-depth assessment of the consequences of the Reformation (2016:523–740), see Carlos Eire (Yale University). Eire, 'who accepts the concept of multiple Reformation', indeed, who while stressing the interrelatedness 'seeks to deepen the concept, paying equal attention to all of the different movements ... that developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' (2016:xi), researched the Reformation as turning point in history 'with an eye firmly fixed on present-day concerns' (2016:viii). See also Carter Lindberg (Boston University School of Theology), who reiterates that 'the legacies of the Reformation have affected every aspect of modern life and thought' (2009:347, [author's own italics]). In this regard, see also the research of Diarmaid MacCulloch (University of Oxford) on the legacy of the Reformation (2017). The influences of the Reformation in South Africa have been both direct and indirect. What influences constitutes as positive and what as negative is, however, not only difficult to decide on but also dangerous.

2.Because of the vastness of the commemoration, a *Luther Decade* (www.luther2017.de) was initiated from 2008 to 2017. In these years, different aspects of the Reformation legacy were commemorated. Themes include 'Reformation and Confession' (2009), 'Reformation and Education' (2010), 'Reformation and Freedom' (2011), 'Reformation and Music' (2012), 'Reformation and Tolerance' (2013), 'Reformation and Politics' (2014), 'Reformation, Image and Bible' (2015), 'Reformation and the One World' (2016) and finally the controversial *Reformationsjubiläum* (2017).

Refo500, a platform that 'wants to reach a wide audience by giving broad attention to the meaning of the Reformation' (www.refo500.com), has been particularly well received in South Africa because of its broader focus on the Reformation and its reformers.

3.It is particularly interesting that the essays in the recent publication of *The Ecumenical Review* (69) mostly do not 'celebrate' but 'commemorate' the Reformation. This is the case as a commemoration does not necessarily include a triumphalist celebration, which is counterproductive for ecumenical dialogue.

4.The planning of the Luther Decade was accompanied by *Perspectives for the Reformation Jubilee 2017*, by which the Board of Trustees of the *Reformationsjubiläum* attempted to provide 'a foundation that bears in view the matter of the Reformation and the leading standpoints in contemplating a suitable shaping of the Reformation Decade' ([author's own italics]). Already in these perspectives it is clear that the Reformation contributed towards 'the breakup of the Western church and gave rise to contradiction' (Perspective 3), and that 'this differentiation occurred within a world that reacted with violence to contradictions', in fact that 'together with other factors, it became a cause of religious wars and conflicts between the confessions', the consequences of which 'reach down to the present day' (Perspective 4).

5.Hartmut Lehmann argued that although this 'seems like a minor matter ... it is not' (2016:330). This, of course, *inter alia* is the case as the when 'now' relates to the when 'then'.

6.According to one of the directors of *Refo500*, Herman J. Selderhuis (Theological University Apeldoorn), 'the debate over the meaning of the Reformation jubilees or commemorations is an old one'. He refers to the hundredth celebration (1617) of the Reformation as proposed by the Calvinist leader Friedrich V. Although he wanted to celebrate the Reformation together with Lutherans, his plan was criticised by Lutherans 'who accused him of making this proposal for improper reasons' (2016:190, [author's own italics]).

Note: The essay was read on 30 August 2017 on the occasion of celebrating *Reformation-500* at the Odeion, the University of the Free State.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

the radical Reformers?⁷ Who is commemorating?⁸ Are we to commemorate the Reformation in Africa?⁹

It has often been noted that to commemorate the Lutheran Reformation today means to protest, as Luther protested. What would Luther protest for or against today? Already in light of the introductory questions regarding commemorations, it is clear that the uncritical answering of this question is utterly problematic. In *Protestantism after 500 Years*, where the authors particularly endeavoured to ask what Reformation celebrations *ought* to entail, Thomas Albert Howard (Valparaiso University, Indiana) emphasised that ‘past centennials have been profoundly coloured by their respective historical milieu’. ‘What current circumstances’, he asks, ‘will celebrations in 2017 reflect’ (2016:10).

The question, of course, asks how the Reformations will be commemorated in different contexts, how differentiated circumstances will colour centennials, often to further ideological causes. The question is therefore what the Lutheran Reformation, or at least the igniting thereof actually was, and how these proposed answers are to be commemorated contextually. In short, what are we commemorating, and how is the commemoration thereof a challenge for Protestant churches in South Africa today?

Martin Luther and the cost of the gospel

In 1545, a year before his death, the first edition of Luther’s Latin writings was published in Wittenberg. In the preface, Luther reflected on his life and theology and, more particularly, on what became known as his Reformation *discovery*.¹⁰ In this short fragment, addressed to the *pius lector*, argues Alister E. McGrath (University of Oxford, Oxford), Luther describes how through biblical inquiry he ‘came to acquire new insights which were essentially complete’ in the

7.In the mentioned *Ecumenical Review*, Stephen G. Brown in the editorial highlights the fact that the Reformation commemoration is not a Luther commemoration. Rather, Luther’s actions were embedded in the context of other movements for reform within the Western church, such as that of the Czech reformer Jan Hus more than a century earlier, as well as those seeking to purge the church of distortions and deformations, but not then assimilated into Protestantism (Brown 2017:141). *Europa reformata* (Welker, Beintker & De Lange 2016) traces the profile of different cities in early Reformation periods, painting the portraits of the most diverse reformers connected to these cities.

8.Margot Käßmann of the Evangelical Church in Germany notes how previous celebrations have been misused and are therefore not merely to be commemorated uncritically (2017).

9.The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Luther has been both positive and negative. For a view of Luther in Africa, see Omolo (2016). For a historical view of Lutherans in South Africa, see Scriba and Lislrud (1998). ‘Lutheranism’, they argue, ‘has put down deep roots in black culture while at the same time retaining its role as preserver of several white immigrant cultures. The core message of Lutheran theology has not been silenced in the South African context, even if it has been diverted for many years into separate ethnic and racial spheres: that God’s love for a fallen world, given by grace, is received solely by faith in Jesus Christ’ (p. 194).

10.Peter Marshall (University of Warwick) recently argued that Martin Luther’s *Thesenanschlag*, the post of the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, probably did not take place at all. The fact that a *non-event* have had such a *Wirkungsgeschichte*, however, exemplifies not only why the question regarding the *Thesenanschlag* does matter, but ‘why examining the genesis and evolution of “false memory syndrome” is indeed a worthwhile exercise’. He describes his research as ‘a cultural history of an imagined event’ and wishes that the research: ‘can shed considerable light on how societies construct their understandings of the past, on how those understandings develop and change over time, and on how scholarly and popular views of history co-exist with each other, as well as combine, collude, and occasionally clash’ (2017:13). In this regard, see also Oberman (2016:180–216).

year (1519, rather than 1517, which is linked with the Lutheran Reformation) he mentions in his reflection (McGrath 2011:197).

He hated the phrase ‘the righteousness of God’, which he had been taught to interpret philosophically, by which ‘God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner’. Even though he lived blamelessly ‘as a monk without reproach’, he felt that he was a sinner before God. In fact, he ‘raged with a fierce and troubled conscience’. It was then – ‘by the grace of God’ – that he discovered, or rediscovered, what he would regard as the core of the gospel (Luther 2012c:497).

He realised that ‘righteousness’ was not something he could work towards; it was not something that he could attain by what he did or did not do. He began to understand that the righteousness of God ‘is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God’ ([author’s own italics]). This righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, in Jesus Christ. It is thus a ‘passive righteousness’. It is God who through this mentioned gift clothes human beings with righteousness (Luther 2012c:497).

It is with this rediscovery that he ‘ran through the Bible from memory’. Thus, for Gerhard Ebeling (University of Zürich, Zürich), the Reformation rediscovery was first of all a discovery of a new hermeneutic, *by which is merely meant a new way of looking at the biblical traditions* (1991).¹¹ The whole face of the Bible was seen in a different light, ‘a totally other face of the entire Bible showed itself’ (Luther 2012c:497, [author’s own italics]).

Although his rediscovery cannot in any way be regarded as ‘exhausting his early theological insight’,¹² it was important precisely because of the way his interpretation of the concept ‘was immediately applicable to other related concepts’. In fact, it provided ‘the model on which his programmatic reinterpretation of such concepts could proceed’ (McGrath 2011:196,197).

Markus Wriedt (Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main) argues that Luther’s delay in going ‘public with his “new theology”’¹³ is probably founded on the fact that *he did not fully comprehend the consequences* of this hermeneutic. It was only as he became more involved in different theological controversies that ‘he felt himself forced to lay open the hermeneutic foundations of his exegetical discovery’ (Wriedt 2003:94, [author’s own italics])

Although his theology would still develop towards what he described in the mentioned preface, the main element of *this*

11.See also Ebeling (1970).

12.It is important to not reduce Luther’s immense theological work into a category. For an introduction to important themes in his theology, see the very recent *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation* (2017). In this regard, see also McKim (2003) and Kolb, Dingel and Batka (2016). Themes minimally include Luther’s theology of the ‘Word of God’, the ‘Theology of the Cross’, ‘Law and Gospel’, the ‘church and the sacraments’ and the ‘two Kingdoms’.

13.Luther’s earlier thoughts were *inter alia* developed in the form disputations *within* the University of Wittenberg.

theological hermeneutic was thus already present in what he wrote up to 31 October 1517.

In his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, it is precisely the method of Scholastic theology that he criticised. His critique is that human beings 'are unable to want God to be God'. In contrast, 'they want to be God' (Thesis 17). He thus criticised the Scholastic method by a re-appropriation of who God is and concluded the disputation by reiterating that the will of human beings is constantly to be conformed to the will of God. For Luther it is important (Thesis 97) not only that human beings 'will what God wills, but ought to will whatever God will' (Luther 2012a:4–7, [author's own italics]).

In what has become known as his *Ninety-Five Thesis*, or rather his *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, this hermeneutic gains particular contours. In contrast to 'the most insignificant graces' of the indulgences is what Luther finds 'even the present pope, or what pope whatsoever' to have at his disposal, 'the gospel' (Thesis 78). For Luther (Thesis 62), and this is what distinguished Luther's theology from his contemporaries, the true treasure of the church 'is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God' (Luther 2012b:11, [author's own italics]).¹⁴

'The first and only duty', he wrote in an accompanying letter to Albrecht of Mainz dated 31 October 1517, 'is to see that people learn the gospel', or rather, *this gospel*.

It is this gospel of grace – grounded in the biblical traditions and in Jesus Christ – that became the hermeneutic of his theology.

Bernhard Lohse (University of Hamburg, Hamburg) argued that two things indicate the significance of the famous *Disputation* for Luther. The first is that during this period Luder changed the spelling of his name to Luther, which is derived from *eleutheria* and means 'freedom' or 'the free one', the 'one set free', the 'liberated one'. The second is that in his foreword to the disputation 'he claims to speak "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"', which wasn't the case in the numerous other disputations (2011:101).

The fact that it is precisely this hermeneutical key that Luther wants his devout readers to know before reading his Latin works highlights the fact that the grace he has come to know through the Bible and in Jesus Christ is to be seen at least as a central characteristic of the Lutheran Reformation.

This is particularly clear in *The Lutheran World Federation's* contribution to the present commemoration with the theme 'Liberated by God's Grace' (Burghardt 2015). Linked to this theme is Luther's doctrine 'by which the church stands or falls'. In Christ, it is argued in their booklet with their main

14.In his research on Luther's early theology, Berndt Hamm (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) argued that although: 'theologians of the fifteenth century had already made justification by grace alone and on account of Christ alone the fulcrum ... of the turning point that results in a life's salvation' (Hamm 2017:235), Luther's theology contains a 'paradigm shifting newness' (2017:235). The central characteristic of this shift is the concretion of the fact that human beings are liberated by *grace alone*, grace being pure gift without reciprocation (Hamm 2015).

theme as title, 'God's grace is given to us as a free and unconditional gift'.¹⁵

Bonhoeffer and the cheap gospel

That Bonhoeffer finds Luther's hermeneutic to be important is clear when he states in his later years of conspiracy and imprisonment¹⁶ that 'Luther's Reformation came not from the attempt to realize a better, perhaps "original Christian" ideal of church, but rather from *the new recognition of the gospel from Holy Scripture*' (Bonhoeffer 2006:569, italics mine). It is not about 'doing something new', he says in a letter to Ruth Roberta Stahlberg. 'The only true Reformation sprang not from so-called longing for reformation, but rather from a single, *newly given biblical rediscovery*' (Bonhoeffer 2006:37, [author's own italics]).

Interestingly, it was precisely the church's enervating of 'the force of the Reformation's insistence on "God's word alone"', states Jeffrey Kelly (LaSalle University, Philadelphia) and John Godsey (Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC) in their 'Editors' Introduction to the 'English Edition', that led Bonhoeffer to publish *Discipleship*.¹⁷ In fact, they describe the publication, with its now merely subtle reference to following after 'Jesus Christ', as 'a daring attempt to retrieve Luther from the shambles of his irrelevance' (Kelly & Godsey 2003:8).

Already in the preface, Bonhoeffer links the renewal of the church to the Bible and to Jesus Christ, 'the one who is our sole concern'. In contrast to Jesus Christ being the church's sole concern, he states, are 'so many dissonant sounds, so many human, harsh laws' that in many ways 'made it too difficult for human beings to get to know Jesus'. For him, if Jesus Christ really is the sole concern of the church, 'then quite a different set of people' would get to know him, 'and quite a different set of people would again turn away' (Bonhoeffer 2003:37). This is the case because who Jesus is and who the church wants him to be are generally very different. He therefore asks himself if the church not too often gets in the way of Jesus, perhaps, by confusing Jesus Christ with 'our own opinions and convictions', by 'preferring certain ideas' from the Bible over against 'other important passages', in short, by a dependence 'on certain formulations' (Bonhoeffer 2003:38).

For him this is true of the concept of grace. Grace 'has become frightfully empty' (Bonhoeffer 2003:55), which led 'to the complete destruction of its essence' (Bonhoeffer 2003:51). He therefore famously distinguishes between cheap grace and costly grace. In his recently published *Bonhoeffer's*

15.The main booklet is available at https://2017.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/documents/DTPW-2017_Booklet_Liberated_by_Gods_Grace.pdf. The study booklets with the sub-themes: 'Salvation – not for sale', 'Human beings – not for sale' and 'Creation – not for sale' are also available. See www.2017.lutheranworld.org/study-booklets

16.See the 'Editor's Introduction to the English Edition' by Brocker (2006:1–32). See also Part Three of Bethge's monumental biography (2000:681–934).

17.See Russel Botman (1994), who did his doctoral research on Bonhoeffer's theology of discipleship and its relevance for a theology in South Africa. For introductory remarks on Bonhoeffer's discipleship, see Willmer (1999:173–189).

Reception of Luther, Michael P. DeJonge (University of South Florida, Florida) argued that in *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer precisely wanted to ‘correct pseudo-Lutheran cheap grace by reasserting Luther’s costly grace’ (2017:4).

What was the true treasure of the church has now become cheap grace, the church’s ‘inexhaustible pantry’ of ‘bargain-basement goods’, ‘doled out without hesitation’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:43).

For Bonhoeffer, cheap grace means grace as a ‘general truth’, ‘as doctrine, as principle, as system’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:43), and grace as a ‘presupposition’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:50).

Cheap grace is grace as ‘common property’ of the church (Bonhoeffer 2003:46), grace ‘in possession’ of the church, grace of which the ‘possibilities for taking advantage’ are considerable. Therefore, ‘Christians better not rage against grace’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:44).

Cheap grace is grace that the church ‘bestows’ and ‘confers upon itself’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:44).

It is grace as a ‘cheap cover-up’. Because grace alone does all things, all things ‘can stay in its old ways’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:43).

Thus, cheap grace is ‘a denial of God’s living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:43), *a denial that this grace still comes into our worlds ever anew today*. It is grace without ‘the living, incarnate Jesus Christ’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:44). It is grace that ‘became its own god’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:55).

In brief, it is ‘grace without discipleship’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:44).

Costly grace, in contrast to cheap grace, thus ‘calls for discipleship’. In fact, ‘it comes to us as a gracious call to follow Jesus Christ’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:45). The fact that for Luther it was grace alone that ‘did it’ was often repeated literally by his followers. However, as argued by Bonhoeffer, they very soon ‘left out and did not consider and did not mention what Luther always included as a matter of course: discipleship’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:50).

Costly grace ‘is the incarnation of God’ ([author’s own italics]). It is costly because it cost God the life of Jesus Christ; it is grace because the life of Jesus Christ ‘was not too costly for God in order to make us live’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:45).

It is this concept of grace, Bonhoeffer reiterates, that ‘God reawakened’ ([author’s own italics]) during the Reformation ‘through God’s servant Martin Luther’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:47). It was this grace that ‘seized Luther’, that was ‘given as a gift’ to him. In contrast to being liberated ‘by grace from discipleship’, he was instead ‘all the more thrust into it’. The fact that he followed was ‘God’s grace’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:48). In fact, grace ‘sharpened the call to discipleship’, it ‘led him into a most difficult following of Jesus’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:49).

What Luther knew was that this grace ‘had cost him’. In fact, it ‘daily continued to cost him’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:49). What was left of the Reformation’s legacy, however, was not this recognition of costly grace. Luther’s words were quoted, ‘but twisted from their truth’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:53). It was grace ‘at the cost of discipleship’, grace ‘at an all-too-cheap price’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:45).

‘What happened’, Bonhoeffer asks, ‘to Luther’s warnings against a gospel which made people secure in their godless lives?’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:45). He answered that while being members of a church with a ‘pure doctrine of grace’, they were nevertheless ‘no longer members of a church which follows Jesus Christ’ (Bonhoeffer 2003:55).

Luther, Bonhoeffer and the quincentennial

What this re-appropriation of the hermeneutic inherent in Luther’s earlier theology might mean for us celebrating the Lutheran Reformation today is appropriately manifested in Bonhoeffer’s famous sermon on Reformation Day.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer begins by saying that they do not have much time until it was decided ‘whether (their) church (was) finished, or a new day (was) beginning for it’. He reiterates that ‘this should have become clear to (them) by now’ (Bonhoeffer 2009:439). It might be precisely because they know that this is the case that they deceive themselves with celebrations. Like the trumpets ceremonially blown at a funeral, the church celebrating the Reformation ‘secretly knows that it is separated from the Reformation by an abyss and is already shuddering at the approach of death’ (Bonhoeffer 2009:440).

In these Reformation celebrations they recall Luther. Although he is dead, they:

prop him up in (their) church and make him hold out his hand, gesture towards the church, and keep saying over and over those self-confident words with all their pathos, ‘Here I stand – I can do no other’. (Bonhoeffer 2009:440)

For Bonhoeffer, these words were not suitable for them. They were not ‘to take refuge behind these words’, because they ‘(could) indeed do otherwise, or at least (they) should be able to do’ (Bonhoeffer 2009:440, [author’s own italics]).

For Protestant churches observing Reformation Day, he says, ‘protest is among its traditional obligations’. It protests against a plethora of things, ‘but protest it must’ (Bonhoeffer 2009:441). He perspicuously mentions protests against ‘secularism in the form of godlessness’, ‘Catholicism and its dangers’, ‘dogma and authority’ – in our day he could have said the lack of dogma and authority – in fact ‘anything that binds us tightly’. Protests against ‘indecency and lack of faith’, against ‘everyone who doesn’t come to church’, thus everyone that ‘doesn’t take much notice of this protest’. The point for Bonhoeffer, however, is not that whatever

¹⁸Bonhoeffer preached the sermon on Reformation Sunday, 06 November 1932, at a university service at Dreifaltigkeitskirche. See Bethge (2000:173–256).

they decided is worth protesting for is right or wrong. *His point is that it is God that protests.* For Bonhoeffer, this is what is important to recognise: 'Protestantism is not about (them) and (their) protest against the world'. Luther, he says, 'was distressed and agitated' (Bonhoeffer 2009:440). It is rather 'about God's protest against (them)' (Bonhoeffer 2009:441, [author's own italics]).

He therefore states that they 'better not make up any fine words, today, about the heroic things (they) would do' (Bonhoeffer 2009:445). No, they should rather 'listen to the gospel, reading the Bible, hearing God's *own word* in it' ([author's own italics]). It is thus not about a mere repetition of whatever Luther said, as if his words were also their words, spoken in protest against the other. For him, the question is thus not whether they celebrated Reformation Day in an appropriate way. Rather, it is asking if they *have heard God's own word*, 'and kept it' (Bonhoeffer 2009:442).

It is interesting that what Bonhoeffer heard was in line with how he interpreted Luther's hermeneutic. It is these words he wanted to reiterate in such a way that 'it would really hurt (them) to listen to'. It is the fact that they have abandoned 'the love that comes from God *and to God*', he says, the love for God *and* our sisters and brothers. For Bonhoeffer, there was a time that this was true, a time when the church really had an effect on the world, when 'something really happened'. This was the time when they were still thinking of God not only as the Lord of their lives, but 'the Lord of all life that there is' ([author's own italics]). He restates it in the most concrete terms: '(They) once loved *the others*', those who 'makes things difficult for (them)' (Bonhoeffer 2009:442, [author's own italics]). In fact, they loved the others in such a manner that (they) came down 'to them in *their need*' (Bonhoeffer 2009:443, [author's own italics]). This was the case because they had God's love in their minds, he says. There thus was a time, and this is Bonhoeffer's main point, 'when (they) had something to do with God' ([author's own italics]), in other words, with 'Jesus Christ in (their) thoughts' (Bonhoeffer 2009:442).

He therefore asks: '*whatever became of that earlier time of grace?*' (Bonhoeffer 2009:442, [author's own italics]); 'where is it now', he asks, 'the church that believed in the power of *grace*', amongst other things? (Bonhoeffer 2009:443, [author's own italics]).

It is in light of questions like these that Robert Vosloo (University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch) in a very recent essay on Bonhoeffer's Reformation Day ruminations argued that for Bonhoeffer 'reflection on the legacy of the Reformation is not primarily about quoting some of Luther words'. No, he reiterates, 'there is a different hermeneutic at work in Bonhoeffer's engagement with his own theological legacy'. What is required, Vosloo argues in light of Bonhoeffer's reflections, 'is not a mere restatement of seemingly timeless truths'. What is required is 'a *renewed* and *unscripted engagement* with the legacy of the Reformation "in our time"', that is 'amidst the turmoil and challenges of "today"' (2017, [author's own italics]).

This of course is also true of Bonhoeffer. His own engagement with the legacy of the Reformation in his time, however, is of worth for a critical engagement with the Reformation amidst the turmoil and challenges we face today. This is to take place in ever-renewed and unscripted ways.

Already in the mentioned sermon it is clear that Bonhoeffer anticipated the many Reformation Day celebratory reactions that would enervate what he reacted against. Precisely for that reason he wanted those celebrating to again read 'the Bible', to actually 'read what Luther wrote' (Bonhoeffer 2009:443).

It is when they read the Bible and Luther – ever renewed and unscripted – that they will realise that the Reformation is not merely a commemoration to be celebrated. This is because Luther stressed the importance of *repentance*. And even more so than Luther, the Bible. It was precisely with the Bible that Luther began the Thesis that unintendedly ignited the Lutheran Reformation: 'When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent", he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance' (Thesis 1). For Bonhoeffer, a church of the Reformation is a church that stands on 'God's Word alone', a church that 'expose(s) themselves to *this call*' [author's own italics]. It is a church that stands 'in *repentance*' that is a church 'who lets God be God *here*' [author's own italics], Luther's concern already in his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*. This is a church still standing in the tradition commemorated today, he says, this 'is the church of Luther' (Bonhoeffer 2009:444).

To commemorate the Reformation would thus mean to realise anew who the Lord and Master is who wills the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. To commemorate would mean to *relearn* to remember from what we 'have fallen', to follow the words of Bonhoeffer's ruminations.

That *repentance* is to be central in our Reformation celebrations is also the view of Martin Marty (University of Chicago, Chicago). In fact, in his *October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World* (2016), Marty examines the concept of *repentance* as the central theme of Luther's famous Thesis. For him, it is precisely Luther's focus on *repentance* that is relevant for the Reformation commemorations today.¹⁹

For Bonhoeffer – who re-appropriated Luther's hermeneutic in his own context – the question of where the call to discipleship will lead those who follow it is answered in that it will lead to '*a path full of grace beyond measure*' (Bonhoeffer 2003:40, [author's own italics]). For this reason, a Reformation commemoration today would have to mean *repentance*, would have to mean that we *relearn* to remember from what we 'have fallen', or at least realise that today our church's path is anything but full of grace beyond measure.

¹⁹In this regard, see also Marty's work on the life of Martin Luther (2008). More recently, Marty wrote the introduction to the mentioned Encyclopedia (Lampert 2017).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Bethge, E., 2000, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A biography*, rev. edn., transl. E. Mosbacher, P. Ross, B. Ross, F. Clarke & W. Glen-Doeppel, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Bonhoeffer, D., 2003, *Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer works*, vol. 4, transl. R. Krauss & B. Green, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Bonhoeffer, D., 2006, *Conspiracy and imprisonment, 1940–1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer works*, vol. 16, transl. L.E. Dahill, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Bonhoeffer, D., 2009, *Berlin, 1932–1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer works*, vol. 12, transl. I. Best & D. Higgins, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Botman, R., 1994, 'Discipleship as transformation? Towards a theology of transformation', Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.
- Brocke, M.S., 2006, 'Editor's introduction to the English edition', in M.S. Brocke (ed.), *Conspiracy and imprisonment, 1940–1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer works*, vol. 16, transl. L.E. Dahill, pp. 1–32, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Brown, S.G., 2017, 'Editorial', *The Ecumenical Review* 69(2), 141–143. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12276>
- Burghardt, A. (ed.), 2015, *Liberated by God's Grace*, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig.
- Dejonge, M., 2017, *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Ebeling, G., 1970, *Luther: An introduction to his thought*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Ebeling, G., 1991, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik*, Mohr Siebeck, Heidelberg.
- Eire, C.M.N., 2016, *Reformations: The early modern world, 1450–1650*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Gregory, B.S., 2012, *The unintended Reformation: How a religious revolution secularized society*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Hamm, B., 2015, 'Martin Luther's revolutionary theology of pure gift without reciprocation', *Lutheran Quarterly* 29, 125–161.
- Hamm, B., 2017, *The Early Luther: Stages in a reformation reorientation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Howard, T.A. & Noll, M.A. (eds.), 2016, *Protestantism after 500 years*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Kässmann, M., 2017, 'Commemorating the reformation in 2017', *The Ecumenical Review* 69(2), 144–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12277>
- Kelly, G.B. & Godsey, J.D. (eds.), 2003, 'Editor's introduction to the English edition', in G.B. Kelly & J.D. Godsey (eds.), *Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer works*, vol. 4, transl. B. Green & R. Krauss, pp. 1–36, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Kolb, R., Dingel, I. & Batka, L. (eds.), 2016, *The Oxford handbook of Martin Luther's theology*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Lamport, M.A., 2017, *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD.
- Lehmann, H., 2016, 'The quincentenary of the protestant reformation in Germany', *Lutheran Quarterly* 30(3), 329–335. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2016.0073>
- Lindberg, C., 2009, *The European Reformations*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.
- Lohse, B., 2011, *Martin Luther's theology: Its historical and systematic development*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Luther, M., 2012a, 'Disputation against Scholastic Theology (1517)', in T.F. Lull & W.R. Russell (eds.), *Martin Luther's basic theological writings*, 3rd edn., pp. 3–7, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Luther, M., 2012b, 'The ninety-five theses (1517)', in T.F. Lull & W.R. Russell (eds.), *Martin Luther's basic theological writings*, 3rd edn., pp. 8–13, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Luther, M., 2012c, 'Preface to the complete edition of Luther's Latin writings (1545)', in T.F. Lull & W.R. Russell (eds.), *Martin Luther's basic theological writings*, 3rd edn., pp. 496–497, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- MacCulloch, D., 2017, *All things made new: The reformation and its legacy*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Marshall, P., 2017, *1517: Martin Luther and the invention of the reformation*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Marty, M.E., 2008, *Martin Luther: A life*, Penguin Books, London.
- Marty, M.E., 2016, *October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the day that changed the world*, Paraclete Press, Orleans.
- McGrath, A.E., 2011, *Luther's theology of the cross: Martin Luther's theological breakthrough*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.
- McKim, D.K., 2003, *The Cambridge companion to Martin Luther*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Oberman, H.A., 2016, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel*, Pantheon Verlag, Munich.
- Omolo, T.J., 2016, 'Luther in Africa', in R. Kolb, I. Dingel & L. Batka (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Martin Luther's theology*, pp. 621–626, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Scriba, G. & Lislerud, G., 1998, 'Lutheran missions and churches in South Africa', in R. Elphick & R. Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa: A political, social, and cultural history*, pp. 173–194, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Selderhuis, H.J., 2016, 'Commemorating the reformation in "Post-Christian" Europe?', in T.A. Howard & M.A. Noll (eds.), *Protestantism after 500 years*, pp. 190–207, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Vosloo, R., 2017, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reformation day sermons and performative remembering', *Theology Today* 74(3), 252–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573617721916>
- Welker, M., Beintkler, M. & De Lange, A. (eds.), 2016, *Europa reformata: European reformation cities and their reformers*, transl. M. Lampe, N. Williamson, D. Stott & E. Iszai, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig.
- Willmer, H., 1999, 'Costly discipleship', in J.W. De Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 173–189, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Wriedt, M., 2003, 'Luther's theology', in D.K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Martin Luther*, pp. 86–119, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.