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6-1-1961

### Whither Protestantism?

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#### Recommended Citation

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# whither

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FROM week to week Protestant lands resound with numerous sermons repeating the basic tenets of Protestantism, looking back to the epic time of the reformers of the sixteenth century.

But often Protestant churches, especially in Europe, have their spacious sanctuaries empty. The people live on the insipid diet of the past, on capital that has ceased to grow. The sermons—and many of them are excellent—do not change the world and rarely affect man's life today. True, we often hear self-accusing voices in Protestantism pronouncing a doleful *mea culpa*. One deploras that Protestantism is waning; that it is "sick," suffering from vagueness of belief; that the vision has gone—that vision without which the people perish.

Protestant ministers notice, with some concern, the vigorous growth of Catholicism, which insists under various disguises on political rights and diplomatic privileges while highly proclaiming the American principle of church-state separation. To a dynamic expansion of Catholics (although the figures of Catholic growth should be critically examined) is opposed a vacillating and confused Protestantism, unable to muster the needed leadership.

Of course, the ever-increasing membership of Protestant churches is proudly mentioned. Indeed, there is a quantitative increase, but many a church is similar to a civic club with its traditions and where the membership is attracted by a fancy liturgy. In the last resort there is no substitute for the simple, everlasting Word of God, the warning of the prophets. There is no equivalent for divine grace, and nothing can take the place of a dedicated, inspired, message-bearing voice.

Many seek salvation in one of the numerous peace-of-mind cults. Edward L. R. Elson, pastor of the National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C., says adequately, "As a generation we dope ourselves with amateur psychology. We buy up all the books of the peace-of-mind cults, pitifully confident that it is possible to have peace of mind in our kind of world. We follow preachers who hawk formulas for banishing

worry and fear and tension while the prophets of God, with their painful judgments requiring repentance, go unheeded. We turn wistfully to 'inspirational' speakers, and are left with a terrible emptiness and loneliness of soul and a desperation of spirit. . . . To man today comes a tragic sense of failure—failure in living. We are brilliant but unhappy, clever but unstable, comfortable but comfortless; we own so much and possess so little. We are forlorn souls, groping and hungering and lost. Once again, as in the Garden of Eden, man is a fugitive from God and bereft of spiritual certitude."

Protestantism has wrestled for its very existence since its inception. It came into existence through the courageous ministry of Spirit-filled, gifted men who wanted to do God's will; nothing less, nothing more, nothing else. But as it happened before, the initial vision which brought forth a new movement slowly vanishes and is replaced by erudite, man-made creeds which temporarily satisfy the scrupulosity of theologians. Formalism takes over. The church longs again for a change. Thus, Lutheranism was reformed by Pietism. Anglicanism had its Puritan and Methodist reformers.

Calvinism was the builder of Protestant theology and still is a potent framework. Calvin's *Institutes* are the clearest and most intelligent apology of the Protestant faith, and it was Calvinism that was the acceptable Protestant type in Holland, England, Scotland, and America. It even contributed to the survival of Lutheranism (Heidelberg Catechism). That Calvinism is not a spent force today is evidenced by the never-ceasing output of monographs on Calvin, whose works are constantly re-edited. Calvinism continues to challenge the thinking of leading theologians such as Karl Barth, whose conception is permeated by Calvinism. (Barth started by opposing an over-critical trend of German theology as

was fashionable among the higher critics of the nineteenth century, as well as the mysticism of theologian Schleiermacher.)

One of Protestantism's severest trials came in the nineteenth century, when higher criticism sapped the foundations of the faith. Nineteenth-century liberalism was meant to be a protest against dogmatism in religion and science. It demanded a spirit of free inquiry, but in its extreme form it capitulated to science "almost to the point of kowtowing before it."

There came a sharp reaction under the skilled leadership of men like Karl Barth, who challenged liberalism in its extreme forms. Barth and other theologians were concerned about the very survival of Protestantism, and they demanded a return to orthodoxy; but it was to be a "new" orthodoxy that would retain the scientific and critical achievements of our age. However, neo-orthodoxy did not succeed; it was unacceptable to the evangelical conservatives as well as to the liberals. Even Barth has abandoned his early position.

The liberal modernist wants intellectual independence. He rebels against man-made creeds. He would rather follow the scientific fact found by research than the dogmatic assertion by a church. Similar to the Renaissance humanist, he seeks the solution of man's quest, not in theology but in man's own achievements.

The fundamentalist—a beautiful term but ruined by misuse—keeps intimately close to the Bible. He accepts the full text of the Bible though he does not necessarily accept "literal" inspiration, but plenary inspiration just the same from Genesis to Revelation. In the 1920's fundamentalism was tied in with the Genesis record of creation in opposition to evolution, which in its early form made a belated appearance in the South. The controversy came to a head in the famous "monkey" trial

"Once again, as in the Garden of Eden, man is a fugitive from God and bereft of spiritual certitude."

# PROTESTANTISM?

—which took on national, and even world, proportions. The law of the State of Tennessee forbade the teaching of evolution in public schools, a law which was challenged by a young teacher, Scopes. He was convicted and tried in Dayton, Tennessee. The dramatic episode was one of the amazing events of the time, when questions of geology, paleontology, and Bible exegesis were debated by a politician (Bryan) and a criminal lawyer (Darrow). To the fundamentalist trend of those days was opposed the modernist reaction of a Fosdick, who undertook to “spare” Protestantism from extremism. The fundamentalist is not a bigoted obscurantist; he simply believes what the Word says: “In the beginning God.” God is the Alpha and Omega.

This does not mean, by any means, that science is considered irreligious and that scientists have declared war on God. When a scientist discovers a law of nature, it is by painstaking research and not by a premeditated attack on religion. Millikan states that “mechanistic philosophy is bankrupt. The trend is toward God all right. Or rather, it is away from his enemies.”

Although the stubborn authoritarianism of the medieval church greatly retarded the advance of free inquiry and scientific research, religion, especially Christianity, is based on the principle of authority. Basic concepts have to be accepted by faith, on the authority of God’s Word, as the Latin Father Tertullian said so beautifully: “By whom has truth ever been discovered without God? By whom has God ever been found without Christ? By whom has Christ ever been explored without the Holy Spirit? By whom has the Holy Spirit ever been attained without the mysterious gift of faith?”

While firmly and uncompromisingly believing the Word of God in its entirety, the evangelical conservative avoids an unsound dogmatism; he welcomes genuine scholarship which widens his outlook and thus conveys a larger concept of God. He endorses earnest and solid research and truth-seeking scholarship because it improves his knowledge of God and makes him an enlightened witness.

The higher critics of the past century demanded that the Bible be submitted to critical investigation like any other text; they believed that they would render a service to honest scholarship by hunting for basic facts in trying to discover the factual origins of Christianity. They were anxious to separate reality from tradition or, as the Marburg theologian Bultmann has it in his famous phrase, to “de-mythologize” Christianity. The higher critics, no matter how intransigently honest they wanted to be, just about wrecked theology, and were not able, after all, to establish what they set out to do. It is impossible by any method of literary or historical criticism to remove the supernatural elements of the gospel.

Even the intellectual thrust of modern conservative theologians was not able to bring about a lasting reinvigoration of Protestantism. Other means were suggested. Especially since the beginning of this century, when Protestant missionaries brought back reports of the “scandal” of denominational division abroad, Protestant leaders decided to do something about it. The idea to unite Protestants was soon considered for the home base as well. Innumerable interfaith conferences have been held all over the world. Protestant leaders endeavored to find a *modus vivendi* (and *modus operandi*) to cut across denominational confessions and stress instead the common Christian denominators.

When the World Council of Churches came into being in Amsterdam in 1948, obstacles were far from removed. The W.C.C. affirms that it is not seeking to create a “superchurch.” Unity must be achieved on the high level of the lofty Christian concepts, and yet each member church is to retain its traditions. The ecumenical idea has not reached the grass roots, and even some ecumenical leaders express doubts about it. Some theologians are not altogether won to the ecumenical idea, either. Did not Karl Barth at Amsterdam address the Council by using the passage in Isaiah, “Take counsel together, and it shall come to nought; speak the word, and it shall not stand: for God is with us”?

It is clear that modern aggregate Protestantism has not the answer for our day. The left wing, liberalism, led to a barren result; literalism, on the other hand, went to extremes that were distasteful even to the conservative.

While mankind has always been restless, as Augustine expressed it in the oft-quoted passage of the *Confessions*, our age is tragically disturbed yet blasé, and desperately craves certainty. To our confused age comes a message which we believe is the last one: a message of certainty, loudly proclaiming the advent of portentous events as heralded by Bible prophecy. Seventh-day Adventists believe that God lives and will have the last word. They believe that Christ’s coming is not only imminent, but that it is also the one solution to our problems. The “calamity howling” of this denomination has been immeasurably surpassed by statements of soldiers and statesmen. At the end of World War II General MacArthur, in Tokyo Bay on the battleship “Missouri,” said, “We have had our last chance. . . . The problem basically is theological and involves a spiritual recrudescence and improvement of human character. . . . It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh.”

Has Christianity grown old? Has Jesus, as one observed, become an enigma and a stranger to our world? On the contrary, it is our belief that Christianity never grows old. Its eternal youth and vitality are as real today as ever. The trouble, therefore, lies not in Christianity but within us.

The Apostle Peter, in 2 Peter 3:10-12, sums up the urgency of the hour in these words: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens . . . shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?” ★★