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### Has Modern Protestantism Abandoned the Reformation?

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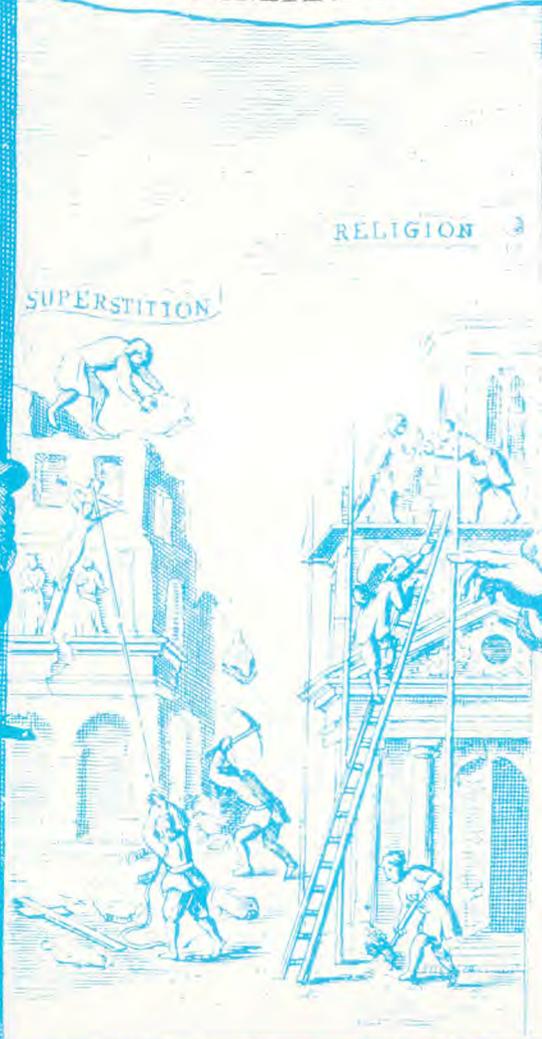
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HAS MODERN  
PROTESTANTISM  
ABANDONED THE  
REFORMATION?



Contrary to the expectations of certain Protestant theologians, so-called "modern man" is not happy to learn that God is dead, nor is he satisfied with a secular "religionless Christianity." He wants something to hang on to.

**T**O THIS QUESTION several answers are possible. The natural reaction would be, Yes, unfortunately. Modern Protestantism has clearly deviated from the Reformation message of 450 years ago. Another opinion is that Protestantism has remained, by and large, true to its basic principles, though in modern dress.

First let us consider what is meant by *Reformation*. When this term is used, it usually refers to the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when gifted theologians gave a new interpretation of Christianity and brought Jesus Christ back into a formalistic church. They stressed the classic concepts of justification by faith, the priesthood of the believer, and, especially, the Scriptures as the source of belief and life. But that movement was not really a reformation in the Church. Reformers were not able to reform Catholicism from within. In order to accomplish their task they either left of their own accord, or never entered the priesthood (like Calvin), or they were excommunicated (like Luther).

To reform means to alter, improve, and possibly revert to pristine conditions. The church which deviates from the original pattern and allows alien ideas and worldly practices to penetrate has to be reformed. And that should be a work from within. To what degree is such an inner reformation possible today?

The Christian church has always been in need of reformation. From its inception in the first centuries, when the Christian churches did not yet have a canon of the New Testament or a creed, the Christian communities were already vulnerable to heterodox ideas. A creeping worldliness blurred the purity of the gospel and brought forth various movements of reform, such as Montanism, which tried to discipline its members and called for a complete

BY DANIEL WALTHER

commitment to the gospel of Christ. Thus the church has been and always will be in need of reformation: *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church is always to be reformed).

#### ONE FALLACY IS TO THINK THAT THE PAST WAS BETTER.

Indeed, the church needs to be constantly reformed. A church that is satisfied with existing conditions is in greater danger than a community which is aware of its shortcomings and strives for a purer understanding of the Christian faith, yearning to fulfill its responsibility, which is, essentially, to witness.

The need for a Reformation is often predicated by a longing to return to earlier times. One fallacy is to think that the past was better. An examination of the past, however, reveals that the church back there already thought that it was in the worst possible condition. Even in the early apostolic church, conditions were far from perfect. To attempt to direct a growing movement to the past is to go into reverse; a growing church naturally moves forward.

If we use the term "Reformation" as referring to the sixteenth-century revolution when the monk Martin Luther "shook the world," we might again ask the question, Have Protestants today changed to such an extent that though they have a common denominator, they are almost unrecognizable? Have the lessons which the Reformers taught in such luminous fashion been forgotten? Did Calvin's labors in Geneva, especially his gifted theological teaching, die out? Did Luther's cry for justification as the sole means of salvation vanish? Is Protestantism of today so blurred by the ecumenical trends that we no longer know what the genius of Protestantism really was and is?

## ◀ INTERPRETING THESE TIMES ▶

### MODERN MAN STILL CRAVES PEACE, SECURITY.

Every movement, when successfully launched, rapidly evolves into new patterns; it must adapt itself to changing surroundings. As time marches on, a movement takes on another hue and places different emphasis on traditional ideas as it adapts to different conditions. Our present world with its impressive technological accomplishments and its nuclear obsession is vastly different from the Reformation era, which was still deeply rooted in medieval concepts. Yet these adaptations are often external. The basic message remains the same. The accent may be different, but the thought remains. Man does not change intrinsically. He has similar needs. He craves inner peace. He longs for security. He gratefully accepts the message proclaimed with authority.

Christ is the answer today as He was in Luther's time. Luther was personally concerned in finding a merciful God who would not deal with him as a tyrannical judge to punish and pursue him day and night. While yet in the monastery, Luther was still afraid of God. He used to say that he "hated" God, until he found that he was saved not by his own efforts but by faith alone, without the deeds of the law. To Luther that was the gate to Paradise. When he understood the message of faith, his fears were appeased. Today the aim is not quite the same. Although we do need the mercy of God, the problem seems to be how the Christian can relate to the scientific and technological world of today. Also he wants to find that "merciful neighbor."

One of the Reformation's greatest concerns was to have a true understanding of God's power and perfection. Calvin developed this thought more fully than any other evangelical theologian. Calvin was equally convinced that man, opposed to God, was

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This drawing shows the issuing of Letters of Indulgence at a German county fair. The paper commissioner collecting the money may be seen at the left side. Martin Luther participated in the paying of indulgences until he found that men were saved not by such efforts but by faith alone.

*Continued*

utterly depraved, conceived in sin, and hopelessly lost. It was only the grace of God that "elected" certain men to salvation. Calvin's *Institutes*, easily the most important work of Reformation theology, is not dead, nor is God, who was luminously proclaimed then. Influential modern Protestant theologians, such as Karl Barth, are deeply rooted in Calvinistic theology, to which they give a modern, sometimes modernistic, interpretation. Barth proceeded to unshackle modern Protestant theology from its crassest liberalism and to enhance the Word of God. What mattered, he stated, was what God thinks about man, not what men have said about God. By suggesting a new (neo) orthodoxy Barth emphasized the transcendence of God. Whether we admit it or not, the Reformers, particularly Calvin and Luther, contributed to make our world. Their influence extended not only to the church, it also affected political developments and even economy.

#### PROTESTANTS TODAY ENVY THE BOOMING ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH.

It is sometimes alleged, as it was recently by Professor Outler, an old hand at ecumenism, that contemporary Protestantism is down and out and that while Catholicism has produced a "theological boom," Protestantism has entered a theological slump. In the aftermath of a "time of titans," Protestants today have a kind of "death of God hullabaloo," which gives Protestants, thinks Outler, a "theological colic." It appears that Protestants have largely abandoned the hallowed principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone).

Protestants today are often alarmed when they consider, not without envy, the patient and careful reappraisal of the Catholic Church in Vatican II—a type of reform. Protestants like to gather in council, but it is usually for business: organization, budgets, raising of funds, building of institutions, ex-

pansion, promotion, public relations, etc. Not often do Protestants meet for an inventory of their teaching. In a rapidly developing world the Protestant message of yore fails to keep pace. The message, like a creed, becomes a dead message unless it is reevaluated, strengthened, rejuvenated. If Protestantism is to be energized, it should be keenly aware of what the Protestant message is really about. What does the church actually believe today? What comfort, what certainty, does it offer to modern man? An answer to this question could be gotten from an intelligent understanding of the creative and invigorating message of the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The Protestant message of 450 years ago can become theologically stale unless it is recharged and reilluminated in order to comfort frightened man in our age by the heralding of glad tidings, which modern man is looking for desperately.

## UNLIKE TODAY, EARLY PROTESTANTS LET THE BIBLE SET THE PACE.

The real interest, in comparing the Reformation of 1517 and the church in 1967, does not relate to externals. Admittedly, different conditions call for a differently defined message.

The Protestant message, then and now, relates to eternal essentials:

Primarily, what is modern Protestantism's relation to the revealed Word of God? The Reformers, 450 years ago, rediscovered the Bible and proceeded to translate it into the vernacular, to bring it in contact with the common man. The Bible was not to be interpreted by the priest; it was to be laid in its entirety in the hands of the man in the street. He was urged to be his own priest and to find his own way to God. Paradoxically—there are many paradoxes in the Reformation movement—the Reformers requested at the same time that the individual be part of the Church as the Reformers understood it. The One Holy Church (*Una Sancta*) was indeed, to Luther, a place where the Word of God was preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Calvin's idea of a church, besides being a community or fellowship, was mainly that invisible fellowship of the elect, predestined by God's grace. But in every case the Reformers considered the Bible as setting the pace. Luther was convinced that the important thing was not what man did but what and how he believed. Whether it was in Wittenberg or in Geneva, the Reformation movement was eminently Bible centered. In this respect, modern Protestantism is not what it was.

In contrast to the medieval Catholic Church, which asserted with arrogance that it alone was the way to salvation, the evangelical Reformer asserted on the contrary that the Church could err. The attention of the Christian man, who ought to be free, is to be guided not by the priest, the "director of conscience," but by the living, ever-available God.

## THE REFORMERS BELIEVED JESUS WOULD RETURN.

Moreover, into a Christless church the Reformation brought a living Saviour—Christ the Priest. It was taught that when a man sinned, he had an advocate, namely, Christ the Lord, the Righteous One. (1 John 2:1.) Christ, to the Reformer, is not a mere theoretic

cal concept. He is the Son of man, the living Saviour, and the living Christ, who will return.

The belief in Christ's second coming was of immense importance to the Reformers. Frequently Luther preached on the second coming. He was often impressed that the world could not last much longer. The Christian church through the ages has often fallen into deep lethargy because it lost the vision of Christ's second coming. The less the church believes in the second advent of Christ, the easier it is to sink into formalism and a lethal conformism.

Man today is relatively better educated and lives in comparatively excellent economic conditions. He has solved many of nature's problems and has discovered some of its laws. He has been able to harness the most awesome power that nature can yield. And the more self-sufficient man becomes, the less he thinks he needs God. Even in religious circles God seems irrelevant, passé. Man has an amazing amount of knowledge, yet man himself remains an unknown stranger, an enigma.

## MODERN MAN IS MORE THAN EVER A FUGITIVE FROM GOD.

In spite of all technological achievements and man's cynical boast that he is self-sufficient, he still is "incurably religious." His most brilliant accomplishments cannot satisfy the deep-seated longing of his soul. The trend today is an anthropocentric formula, not unlike that of the humanists in Reformation times, who sought the solution to human problems by their own strength and wisdom.

Today one of the greatest failures is that of authority. On every hand authority is challenged: in the school, the church, and the state. The ultimate authority for the Reformers rested in God. The principle of authority ever resides not in philosophical concepts but in God, the supreme and final authority. And God is unchangeable. Ever since man was, he has endeavored to run away from God. Today, regardless of many scientific triumphs, man is more than ever a fugitive from God. More than ever he needs to recapture the Reformation message: Back to God. It is the simple, eternal, authoritative Word of God that helps man to come to his senses and makes him realize that he is far away from the Father's house. Modern man, too, can "come to himself" and decide to return home.

Have we abandoned the Reformation?

Unquestionably, yes. Protestants have outgrown the initial aims. They have deviated into manifold interests. Liberalism has blurred the basic fundamental message. Protestant theologians were fascinated by the critical so-called historical methods of the nineteenth century and are today obsessed by the existential concepts of Bultmannism.

In another sense Protestants today are aware of their historical heritage and basically know that they are committed to the same propositions as the Protestants 450 years ago. They realize that there is no salvation apart from our divine Lord, who speaks to us in Holy Scripture.

## THE CHURCH MAY BE "DEAD," BUT GOD IS NOT.

One basic truth must not be overlooked: it is God who appoints the time for a reformation and drafts men to do His task. As Calvin once said, when the church is asleep, it is actually dead. Man cannot accomplish an awakening any more than he is able to bring about a resurrection. Man may wish for renewal of the church, but the Bible has its own ideas as to "the fulness of the time." God said, "Behold, I make all things new." That applies also to the church. It is God who reforms. It is God who has the last word as to when, where, and by whom a new reformation is to occur. Yet, though the Lord appoints the time, man need not be idle.

Man can help to prepare the climate for a reformation today. He can study the Scriptures with renewed intelligence. He must learn to pray, to replace formalism by that inner communion with God. Then again, the Christian man today desires to follow the Reformation tradition in seeking the assurance of a personal salvation. In the last resort, religion is a personal matter.

Finally, the Christian man today holds himself in readiness by sharing his faith; the Christian today remains a witness who cannot resist the urge of sharing his religious experience.

There is a live connection between 1517 and 1967. The earnest Bible Christian today must rediscover this connection and witness to the availability of a living God in these times and pray that the Lord in heaven may send that revival for which all creation yearns. END