

PACIFIC COAST THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION GROUP

What is Essential in the Christian Religion?

IS PROTESTANTISM A POSITIVE PRINCIPLE

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History abundantly has made clear that the beginnings of the Reformation were not doctrinal but experimental. A fear and dread of God in the heart of Luther had changed or been abolished by a love to God and the experience of this became the cornerstone of the Reformation. Men followed Luther not because of the skill of his logical arguments, but because they felt and knew that he had, as he said, found a gracious God by trusting in the grace of God revealed to him in Christ Jesus. The Augsburg Confession did not make the Reformation, nor could it hold or encompass the Reformation. It was, as can be said of other Confessions, the pouring of new wine into old wine skins. It was Luther's experience of faith, not a dogma about it that burst the bounds of monastic life for him and made of him a personality possessed of stability, firmness, personal joy and assurance, rare in his day. His description is pragmatic rather than logical. "It is a living, busy, active, powerful thing, faith; it is impossible for it not to do us good continually. It never asks whether good works are to be done; it has done them before there is time to ask the question, and it is always doing them." "There are two kinds of believing; first, a believing about God which means that I believe that what is said of God is true. This faith is rather a form of knowledge than a faith. There is secondly, a believing in God which means that I put my trust in Him, give myself up to thinking that I can have dealings with Him, and believe without any doubt that He will be and do to me according to the things said of Him. Such faith, which throws itself upon God, whether in life or in death, alone makes a Christian man." Echoed by Brunner "To have faith is to refer everything to Jesus as the one ground on which we stand." Faith - personal trust in personal God.

This faith, this type of vital experience can never be adequately expressed or contained by the phrases of scholastic Theology, despite the magnificent attempt made by Calvin. (We praise him for giving in to a streak of humanness when he confesses that Predestination is a horrible decree). Luther's attempts to express this faith soon brought him into conflict with the Church that had been stressing the power of a mediatorial priesthood which barred the way to God. "Out of a complex system of expiations, good deeds, and comfortings, of strict statutes and uncertain apportionments of grace, out of magic and blind obedience, Luther led religion forth and gave it a strenuously concentrated form. The Christian religion is the living assurance of the living God who has revealed himself and opened his heart in Christ - nothing more." (Harnack - History of Dogma). In his teaching concerning the Universal Priesthood of Believers, Luther stresses the fact that the living God who had manifested himself in Christ is accessible to every Christian. Thus at one stroke he removed vague fear of the clergy from the minds of men, and opened up the possibility of the reformation of the Church. He could not so successfully have attacked and overthrown the medieval conception of the Church had he not grasped with singular strength and clearness the principle that there is no inherent and essential difference between religious and what are called secular things. The dualism of the medieval Church, inherited from the Latin fathers was the belief that the divine and the human were foreign to each other and led to the distinguishing between clergy and people, between Church and state, between nature

and grace, and no doubt, bolstered political ambitions of the popes. Luther taught that the secular power was divine, directly ordained by God without papal mediation; that civil or secular functions do not differ in kind from those called religious; that even a shoemaker, a blacksmith or a peasant were alike set apart with bishops and priests to a calling that was sacred, inasmuch as all kinds of service minister to the wellbeing of the community and knit together the members of the one body in a closer communion and fellowship. (All this is comforting to one who in seminary days opposed magical conceptions of the ministerial call on the part of men who took selves far too seriously.)

A third principle is of course the authority of the Scriptures. The Bible as a particular possession in care of the episcopate, to be interpreted by the papacy, became in the work of Luther the property of the laity who were entitled to interpret it for themselves. Hence we have the affirmation of the Christian consciousness as the basis of certitude for Christian belief which later is called the right of private judgment. The Bible is divine because it is the mirror in which is reflected the experience of humanity in its highest exaltation, under the influence of a divine Spirit. "For unperverted Christian faith, however, Scripture is only revelation when conjoined with God's spirit in the present. The testimonium spiritus sancti and the clarity of God's word are one and the same thing." (Brunner, Phil. of Religion, p. 151). In view of these principles it is easily seen that it is a popular mistake to regard the Reformation as having for its main object the correction of abuses which had grown up in the Church. It is interesting to note how various individuals lay different stresses upon the principles. Allen states Luther's title to greatness as a spiritual hero rests upon his proclamation of the doctrine of justification by faith, or, in other words, his readjustment, first for himself and then for others, of the conception of man's relation to God. Of course Allen is followed by many writers in ascribing chief importance of the Reformation of Luther to his doctrine of justification. McKinnon, Lindsay and others see in the principle of Universal Priesthood the chief cornerstone of Luther's work. Lindsay states that it was the rock on which all attempts at reunion with an unreformed Christendom were wrecked; it was the one outstanding difference between the followers of the reformed and the medieval religion. Hence all the distinctive principles of the Reformation group themselves round this one thought of the Priesthood of all Believers.

Mackintosh however maintains that the secret and inspiration of the Reformation lay in a new thought of the intrinsic authority belonging to God's revelation of Himself. "It was the discovery that unless Jesus Christ attests Himself to the soul in whom His Word has been made living and powerful by the Holy Spirit the Christian religion cannot begin to live." Mackintosh evidently wrote his last book, if not under the influence of Barthian theology, at least greatly stimulated by Barth. Likewise, the great weight laid upon the Word of God by the crisis theologians need not here be stressed. Though Mackintosh denies that the explanation of the Reformation is found in the affirmation of the immediate access of the soul to God, since that can hardly be denied to great saints like St. Bernard, it would seem that the general principle of the Reformation is that knowledge of God is direct and personal. It does not consist in a change of authority from Church to Scripture, for Scripture often is misused and Protestant Churches have exerted an authority not always based on Scripture. Mackintosh himself states that fear of the Church's disciplinary action has retarded the movement of individual thought, and calls this an excessively high price to pay for discipline. More than one American Presbyterian would agree with him, I am sure. The objections of sincere religious people to the Church of 1500 A.D. were not that the papal claims were unfounded, or that the Church was full of scandals or that certain doctrines were untrue, but that the system as a whole was a practical hindrance and not a help to devotion. As to the Pope, Melancthon even put an O.K. on him, provided he would allow the gospel to be preached. Many of us, I am sure, would prefer a human pope in Rome to the ruthless paper pope in the hands of certain militant Protestants, who err on the side of legalism as much as Rome ever did.

Luther found ascetic piety to be of no value. Rome had substituted legal principles for the living power of Christ, and like St. Paul before him, he severed Christianity from the Law, enabling men to enter into a higher relation towards God.

Unfortunately, when we examine the historical effects of the principle of Protestantism we see the inadequacy of words as symbols of living experience, for they so easily lent themselves to the development of Scholasticism. When Luther used the phrase "justification by faith" he was borrowing a figure of speech from St. Paul by which the great apostle sought to convey to the legal mind of the Roman people how it was possible that a guilty person might be acquitted at the bar of infinite justice. The Latin mind naturally fastened upon an illustration so apt, and the word "justification" became, like "grace" one of the current phrases of Latin theology. Instead of a figure of speech, an adaptation of language for a special end, it was made the cornerstone of a system of theology by the successors of Luther, and its very significance perverted and lost in the effort to follow out the figure to its logical results. We are reminded of Bishop Oxnam, who, in reply to an address in which the speaker quoted again and again Wesley's "I gave them Christ," asked pointedly: "Did you give them merely a word?" History may well have been different had Luther used the concrete elements of the parable of the prodigal son, rather than the abstract symbol of Justification to make clear his great discovery. Nevertheless, with Luther the reality was greater than the now obsolete language in which it was clothed would seem to convey. The implication of the doctrine that shall ever have value is that man stood to infinite Deity in the closest and most endearing relationship. In the day of Paul, Jewish Christians interpreted the Gospel as a new Law, while Greek Christians made of it a new philosophy. Paul proclaimed it as a new life, and it was this element of new life that Luther seized upon and which shall ever be an abiding principle of true religion.

Harnack holds that even Luther did not fully apprehend and apply his favorite doctrine of Justification by faith. He states the fundamental principles of Protestantism as: "1. The Christian religion is wholly given in the word of God and in the inner experience which answers to that word. 2. The assured belief that the Christian has a gracious God. 3. Restoration of simple and believing worship, both public and private. But Luther took too much dogma into Christianity, insisted too much on the authority of the written work; cared too much for the means of grace, such as the Lord's Supper; identified the church too much with the organized body." (*Wesen des Christentums*, p. 168). Yet Luther revived faith, and with it came the revival of the life and spirit of theology. With the believer brought face to face with God, his convictions are reached by responsible decision, and we learn from Luther that there is theological material in the living experiences of Christian souls. "From the outset, accordingly, evangelical Protestantism had its honourable risks. It was at least possible that the personal beliefs held by evangelical Christians might differ. But more; there existed a danger lest the Reformer's protest against a legally prescribed system of dogma should get beyond control and - perhaps by imperceptible degrees - change into a positive assault on the central facts of Christianity. Not seldom, as all men know, the right of private judgment has been taken to legitimize this equally into other more positive forms of opinion. It has been construed as meaning that every one is entitled to think as he likes. But this is merely Protestantism in caricature. No sane man thinks just as he likes; he thinks, at least by intention, in accordance with fact. None the less, a new principle for theology had been introduced, viz; that truth revealed in Christ admits of no external proof, but is made the inward possession of the believing mind by the convincing power of the Holy Spirit. To perceive and affirm this called for a real choice between alternatives; personal judgment comes in, forming finally its own conclusions, and standing by them in the sight of God, whether it stands in a great company or stands alone. It is not a faith any man or Church can make for you. If it be said that this invitation to think at the level of freedom is perilous, the only

reply is that apart from such perils there can be no such thing as true personal faith." (Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology.)

The scholasticism which came in the 17th century was a return of the spirit of law, and theological stagnation, or Orthodoxy resulted. Mackintosh aptly and rather slyly characterizes one of the developments of this period as the "Sub-Christian" doctrine of Verbal Inspiration of Scripture. As a corrective to such tendencies he suggests that theologians should read more poetry. Among the many troubles which have beset Protestantism as a result of too rigid application of its principles is the neglect of tradition and the rise of a multitude of sects and denominations. Beginning perhaps in Marburg where Luther and Zwingli found it impossible to come to terms and ending with the tragedy of American denominationalism (Zersplitterung) we have a ghastly travesty at war with the idea of the church as the body of Christ. Sectarianism is marked by a want of respect for history, tending to fall back immediately and wholly upon the Scriptures without regard to the development of their contents in the life of the church as it has stood from the beginning. The scriptures may be the only source and norm of saving truth, but tradition is the channel by which it is carried forward in history. (By tradition we understand not the Catholic thought of a source of knowledge independent of the Bible and equal with it in value, but rather exhibiting the consciousness the Church has of the contents of the Bible, the Christian reason in the form of history, the living word of God in the Church.)

A great defect of Protestantism then is its lack of an adequate conception of the nature of the Church and of its relation to the individual Christian on the one hand, and the general life of man on the other. Lop-sided doctrines of the Holy Spirit or no doctrine at all have contributed to denominationalism. Calvinist groups, despite Calvin's insistence on the true marks of the Church and the wickedness of secession wherever these marks are found, still are dividing and subdividing the Body of Christ, and not in a Eucharistic sense! Schaaf wrote, in 1845, to complain and lament the many sects in America. There were then 42 sects and now we have 216. Truly Protestantism has no profound appreciation of the Church as the body of Christ, when we blithely skip over 20 centuries of church life and development to found new denominations on scripture authority. The atomism of Protestantism, foreseen by Luther, brought bitterness to his closing years. If there is a positive principle of Reform in Protestantism, it must heal its own open wounds before it can ever become a Church triumphant.

In the case of worship the pendulum swung to an extreme of simplification. Liturgy was sacrificed, worship minimized as generations were taught to go to church to hear sermons of men rather than to listen for the voice of God. To this day we hear the distasteful word "preliminaries" applied to the worship part of the service, - a not so subtle way of exalting the sermon, our brain child, the "real climax" of the service. Indeed, my phrase, "worship part of the service" is a mis-nomer for the whole service, including the sermon should be towards one end, of drawing men near to God. Yet for millions of Protestants the service is a failure if the sermon is dull.

The neglect of art need not be dwelt upon, we all know about the broken art glass, the burned pipe organs, the bare whitewashed walls of the Protestant churches. In the Dutch village of my forbears I found a beautiful church dating back 600 years. The walls were covered with a thick coat of whitewash, and only this past summer was its removal authorized, for underneath are paintings dating back to Pre-Reformation days which may prove of priceless value. This one church well serves as a symbol of a sorry epic in Protestant history. Only now is Protestantism building cathedrals just in time for them to be bombed by the super de luxe products of our business civilization which grew up while rationalistic and sectarian Protestantism forgot to protest.

The neglect of social religion in a one-sided stress on personal salvation scarcely need be mentioned in this group. A long time ago we were taught that no man liveth unto himself alone, the social gospel prophets kept crying in the wilderness, and today psychology adds the note that responsible decision not only, but altruistic living for others is the only way to build unified personality.

By way of conclusion may we review the permanent, constructive effects of the Reformation. What is coherent and progressive in Protestantism? When Liberalism began to become an orthodoxy with its own creed it began to die. The liberal spirit can never die as long as men are born who love Truth and tolerance. Brunner states "there is orthodoxy wherever living faith stiffens into a settled system of belief, i.e. into a false objectifying of faith." And so Brunner does yeoman service in attacking orthodoxies of every stripe. In a way, one of the finest answers to the question which is the subject of this paper is found today in the work of Brunner.

Protestantism runs through the entire history of the Church, and will not cease, for the battle which opened with Paul has ever since continued. The Christian conception of religion has always been opposed by the legal, external conception which was typified in Judaism. In the centuries succeeding Paul the gospel itself was construed as a "nova lex," similar in its demand and character to the law of Moses, and the whole system was established again with only a thin disguise in the Catholic Church. Luther re-discovered the central Pauline idea, but in Protestantism also the religion of the letter, of submission to some outward yoke of bondage has never ceased to maintain itself over against the religion of the Spirit. The Judaism which was the ultimate object of Paul's attack had its ground in certain permanent tendencies in human nature. Thus Reformation will ever be in order, unless a truly scientific Psychology of personality types will enable us to forestall this battle in each generation or century. Professor William Adams Brown's conception of the Church goes a long way towards this possibility. He understands both the Catholic and Protestant meanings of the word and of their implications, as "two different ways of apprehending a divine reality which in its completeness transcends man's ability to grasp." Widespread appreciation of this definition would prove exceedingly helpful.

Dr. Seebach in reviewing the "Path of Protestantism" finds through the many differences one thing in common, the active, positive, dynamic principle of faith which sought God directly. He points to the gradual development of the principle and practice of religious liberty "which made possible the expression of the spirit inherent in Protestantism and which would have been impossible under the authority of a national church as under the Roman Catholic rule." Protestantism can be called a "unitas multiplex" (unity in diversity), when we remember its achievement in forming the Federal Council of Churches. Our social consciousness has made a belated appearance, but it is here, and here to stay. Ecumenical conferences of the recent past show us possibilities along the line of union. President Baird said recently in introducing a student delegate to the Amsterdam conference, "Business long has been ecumenical, war has become ecumenical and now at long last the Church interests itself in ecumenical movement."

No one then views the present state of Protestantism as ultimate or complete for it possesses within itself too many evils and tendencies always likely to defeat its goals. The international situation has a most definite bearing on our problems here. Deification that the Roman emperors played with is but a pale reflection of the state deification aimed at by modern state planners. Will the Church of the twentieth century victoriously face this crisis as did the early church?

"The nations of the world today, not of one continent or another but of all continents, are in a crisis perhaps more decisive than that which was precipitated by the fall of Rome or by the Renaissance and the Reformation. We have passed through the age of catholicity and conformity and the age of individualism and division. What next? How shall we meet the present issues which concern the life of every man, woman, and child? Shall we return to imperialism, that is, to the Middle Ages? Shall we accept the programme of the Third International or of Fascism? Shall we attempt to patch up, as best we can, the existing order, and let things remain as they are? Shall we go forward, intelligently and freely accepting the best of the past, incorporating the best of the present, blending catholicity and individualism, authority and freedom and advance into an order better than any we have yet attained? It is clear that upon the answer the nations (and Church) give to these questions will depend not only the fate of each individual, but the fate of humanity as a whole." (Richards, Creative Controversies in Christianity)