



The Reformation

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1.

In 1440 Johann Gensfleisch invented printing by movable metal type. Some years later he printed a version of the Holy Bible, now known as the Gutenberg Bible. This was a discovery that was to change the face of Christianity. It was not long before a great many people, not just clergy, had access to the text of the Bible. Soon they were able to read it in their own languages, not in the Latin of the official Vulgate version. The Church still claimed the sole right to interpret the text. But once the text got into the hands of the general literate public, it became much harder to stop individuals interpreting it for themselves. That is the hallmark of Protestant Christianity. The Bible is available to all in a language they can understand, and they are encouraged to read it and interpret it for themselves. Christianity was re-thought as a religion of the book.

The Protestant Reformers did not wish to leave the church; they wished to reform it. Virtually everyone agrees that some reforms were needed to abuses, most famously the abuse of selling Indulgences for money. But as Reformers looked to the Bible as the source of true doctrine, it seemed to them that a very different view of the church than that which had become common in Western Europe was to be found there.

The Roman Catholic Church had developed a doctrine of the Church as one visible institution, defined by the communion of its members with the Bishop of Rome (except for the awkward case of the Eastern Orthodox Churches). The Pope, as successor of Peter, had the divinely appointed role of defining correct doctrine in faith and morals. Membership of the church was by baptism; continuance in it was by confession, penance and communion.

The Reformers failed to find these doctrines in the Bible. Certainly there was a church in the New Testament, but the church seemed to be a fellowship of those who were disciples of Jesus. Paul had founded many churches, and they seemed to be more or less autonomous local fellowships, where prophecy and speaking in tongues were common, and where leaders were appointed in accordance with their particular gifts from among the congregation. There were links with the apostles, just as missionary churches today preserve links with the original missionary organisations. But, partly because of the difficulty of communication, local churches functioned more or less autonomously. They were influenced by, but did not seem to consider themselves under the authority of, the Jerusalem apostles. Indeed James, leader of the church in Jerusalem, who sent out envoys to persuade local churches to obey Torah, was repudiated as troublesome by Paul, and no doubt local churches came to their own decisions about this and other matters of concern. Over the years the churches came to be organised under five Patriarchs, but the early Patriarchates seem to have constituted a federal organisation rather than a top-down institution.

As the Reformers read it, the New Testament churches were local fellowships that accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour, as redeemer from evil and giver of eternal life. There was no mention of a class of celibate priests, offering the sacrifice of the Mass for the souls of the living and the dead, and being informed of the

truths of faith from a central source.

2.

Classical Protestants seek to base their doctrines and practices on the New Testament. To them, that suggested that the church exists, as both Luther and Calvin held, wherever the gospel of Jesus as saviour is preached, and the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, both mentioned in the New Testament, are celebrated. There is no magisterium, no teaching office, of the Church. There is no hierarchical priesthood. There is no class of celibate priests and no religious elite, whether monks or nuns, who have higher spiritual standing than others. There is no control, by any personal authority, over the content of faith. There is only the preaching of the gospel, and faith in Jesus. As Luther put it, justification (acceptance by God) is by faith alone, by a living trust that Jesus died and rose to redeem humanity. To make the point, Luther inserted the word 'alone' into his German translation of the letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verse 28, which actually reads, 'We hold that person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law'. It is ironic that he had to change the Biblical text to make it say what he wanted!

In any case, he was adamant that salvation cannot be accomplished or helped by good works, penances, obedience to the Pope, or attendance at Mass. It is a matter of the relation of the believer to Christ the Lord, not needing any intermediaries, any visible institution, or any teaching authority. The Mass remains, for Luther, a rite that makes Christ truly present, and for the person of faith, it is a way of expressing and strengthening the personal union of disciple and Lord. But mere attendance at its performance does not save, and it cannot be offered in private to save those who are not present. So the pulpit, as the place where the Word of God is read and preached, takes precedence over the altar.

The Reformers tried to make the Mass (or the Lord's Supper, as many call it) a focal event for the believing community, where the presence of Christ is celebrated (or where, for extreme Protestants, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is devoutly remembered). It is a service of communion for all present, a meal that is a foretaste of the feast of the kingdom of God. So to have a Mass celebrated by priest on his own for the sake of someone who is not present, is to miss the meaning of the rite. It is to replace a celebration of a truly personal relationship with what was often referred to as a 'quasi-mechanical' conveyance of merit. And to adore or carry in procession a consecrated and reserved Host is to disconnect the sacrament from the personal act of God in communion.

In this respect, Reformed practice tried to make the sacrament more constitutive of a local community and more communicative of a personal relationship than a rite efficacious simply by its private performance. Whereas the Mass had become, for some, the observation of the elevated Host far away and almost hidden by a choir screen, the Reformers wanted the community to come together and share the life of the risen Lord in fellowship. And they were concerned that people should know what was going on. Preaching assumed a new importance, and the rite was conducted in the local language, with the active participation of those present (most of these reforms were to be implemented by the Catholic church at the second Vatican council).

Luther said, 'Christ's kingdom is a hearing-kingdom, not a seeing-kingdom' (Luther's collected works, Weimar, 1883-, 51, p. 11.) It is by hearing the word that one comes to saving belief. Without that, all rituals and all images are empty. Luther did not ban images or rituals entirely. But in Lutheran churches images were often removed, walls whitewashed, and in Reformed (Calvinist) churches the stone altar replaced by a wooden communion table. The central artistic image of Lutheranism is not a painting of the Passion or a statue of the Virgin, but the sound of Bach's musical settings of the words of the Bible.

3.

For classical Protestants, it is still right to speak of a catholic – a universal – church. But that church is the company of all who trust in Christ, located in thousands of different fellowships of different sorts. Thus

Protestantism is essentially pluralistic, in acknowledging many forms of Christian fellowship, without any one central authority. It is essentially diverse, and is logically bound to permit many ways of understanding the gospel and the Bible, since it accepts no authoritative interpreter of the Bible.

It did not work out like that in practice. Since the New Testament is a diverse and unsystematic assembly of gospels and letters, there are many possible ways of interpreting it, and once Protestants decided to make the Bible the only test of faith, all those ways were tried.

That is not odd or unexpected. The oddity is that each of them tended to declare itself to be the one true interpretation, to the exclusion of the others. Lutherans excluded followers of Calvin. They both excluded Zwinglians. And hundreds of denominations sprang up, each of which excluded everybody else.

For political reasons, the organising principle of Protestant faith came to be that the ruler of a State or nation would choose a form of belief, and the members of that State would then find themselves obliged to profess it. They could move over the border, where that was feasible, and profess a different form of faith. But acceptance of pluralism was not a marked feature of the classical Protestant world in Europe. That had to wait until the founding of America as a secular state, when religion would truly become a matter of free choice. Even in America, however, there was much local intolerance as various Protestant churches tried to ban others as heretical and dangerous.

It is clearly very difficult for Christians truly to accept full freedom of belief. In the contemporary United States of America, freedom of belief exists. Yet hundreds of churches do not hesitate to exclude those of their members who have the 'wrong' beliefs, and to deprive them of teaching positions in their training colleges. It looks as if everyone is free to start their own church, but within it they can be as intolerant as they like.

The irony of all this, within Protestantism, is that the whole Protestant movement exists because it asserted the right of dissent (from the Catholic Church), the importance of free personal decision (a personal decision of faith in Jesus, not simply baptism into a religious group), and the rejection of an authoritative teaching authority (the magisterium of the church).

4.

The problem is that Protestants still believed that salvation is, literally, a matter of life and death – eternal life and eternal death. The way to eternal life is much more rigorous than the traditional Catholic requirement of being a good member of the church, making confession and attending Mass. It is really believing, with the whole heart, that Christ is your personal Saviour.

In order to do that, you must know who Christ is, what salvation is, and be confronted with the necessity of making a personal decision for faith. Preaching, and preaching the truth, becomes vital for salvation – whereas, for most traditional Catholics, it did not matter much whether you never heard a sermon, or whether the Mass was in a language you did not understand. For Protestants, everything had to be made plain, and everyone had to understand it. Protestantism became a didactic faith, and preaching had to be precisely correct.

The source of this correctness, in the absence of the Pope, had to be the Bible itself. The text had to be self-interpreting and clear, and all preachers had to do was expound it correctly – to say what the Bible itself really says. The strange thing was that when they did this, they came to many different and conflicting conclusions.

Most classical Protestants did not in fact derive all their doctrines from the Bible alone. They accepted the decisions of the first ecumenical councils of the church. They accepted that Jesus was fully God and fully man and that the Trinity was three persons in one substance. They also tended to accept some specifically Western doctrines, as formulated by Augustine – that humans are born with original guilt, that the ‘saved’ are predestined by God, and that human free will is compatible with such predestination. Many of them accepted a theory of atonement that derived from Anselm, as adjusted by Calvin, that we can only be saved because Jesus died ‘in our place’, to pay the penalty of death that God’s justice required for our sins (Aquinas, it may be recalled, denied the necessity, but not the actuality, of such a payment, and the Orthodox do not make this account central to their understanding of the death of Jesus).

So Protestants did not in fact rely on Scripture alone for their doctrines, as they sometimes claimed. They relied on a number of traditional interpretations of Scripture, interpretations that got more and more specific and exclusive, until in the end some of them relied on Luther, some on Calvin, some on Zwingli, and some on other less famous but equally cantankerous interpreters of the allegedly ‘self-interpreting’ Scripture.

5.

This is a matter that requires some explanation. How can it be that a faith that insists that even general councils of the church can err, may in practice insist on the exclusive correctness of one man (like Luther) as interpreter of the Bible? The Protestant rule must surely be that, if the church has erred, then any interpreter of Scripture can err, including you and your own church. The Protestant rule is that anyone may be mistaken. This does not mean saying, ‘I think I am wrong’. But it does mean saying, ‘I am not certain I am correct’. You must allow that, while you do not agree with other views, you could be the person who is mistaken. An admission of personal and institutional fallibility is built into Protestantism. But it does not always seem like that.

The rejection of any infallible teaching authority, and the establishment of the right to dissent on grounds of conscience, seem to me the distinctive marks of Protestant Christianity. They seem to entail the provisional nature of most doctrinal beliefs, especially very complicated ones – meaning that we admit our interpretation could be mistaken. This in turn entails pluralism, in the sense of acceptance of a diversity of interpretations of the faith.

The fact that many Protestants seem to be absolutely certain of their beliefs, even when they know that a majority of other Christians disagree, and that they find themselves unable to live together with people who have different interpretations of doctrine, is a mystery. It can only be accounted for by thinking they have been so influenced by the Latin tradition that they think three highly questionable things, which their own faith should undermine. They think that people can only be saved by believing correct doctrines, that the commitment of faith requires theoretical certainty, and that there is some set of doctrines that needs to be defined as correct by some authority, which can then exclude and condemn contrary views as heretical. But none of these beliefs is really consistent with the basic character of Protestantism. They are precisely the beliefs of the Catholic Church that Protestants denied, and that traditional Catholics used to condemn and exclude Protestants.

6.

In classical Protestant thought, these three beliefs are put in question by a strong emphasis on the importance of personal commitment to Christ, and on personal experience of the risen Lord or of the Spirit. This arises from Luther’s emphasis on justification by faith, that is, by living trust in Christ, and from Calvin’s emphasis on faith as giving assurance of final salvation. Whereas faith in Catholicism is primarily an assent of the will to the authoritative teachings of the church, for Luther and Calvin it is a perfect trust in Jesus, and especially in his death as atonement for our sins. Protestants typically speak of ‘making a decision’ for Christ, whereas Catholics tend to think that, if you are baptised, there is no specific, decisive decision to be made.

You just naturally grow in the faith to which you belong.

Although Protestantism, I have suggested, remained largely intellectualist, it gave to personal experience an importance it had not previously had. Of course there were devotional movements in the Catholic Church, and mystics who claimed direct experiences of God. But to profess the faith was to be baptised, probably as an infant, and accept the teachings of the church. Personal experience remained a matter for you and your confessor.

For classical Protestants you must be confronted with the need of personal salvation from sin. You must consciously and explicitly commit yourself to Jesus as Saviour. You must have the experience of 're-birth' in the Spirit, whereby Christ comes to be known to you as an inner personal and renewing presence. This emphasis on personal choice, on commitment, and on dramatic and inner experience of the Spirit, with the concomitant down-grading of all external rituals, religious imagery, and such things as bodily prostrations and pilgrimages, re-draws the lines of faith in a radical way.

Faith becomes a purely inner encounter with a life-transforming Spirit, for even the act of commitment is possible only when the Spirit evokes it. God encounters you in the preaching of the gospel. God convicts you of sin. God impels you to bow before him in repentance. God brings Christ to birth within you. And God gives the assurance of eternal life.

All this is a drama played out within the soul, and it is hidden from the eyes of the world. Protestant churches, or meeting rooms, need no ornaments or images, for the dramas of the Spirit are played out in the secret places of the heart. The true, holy, universal and apostolic Church is not a visible institution with a visible head. It is the invisible communion of those whose hearts have been claimed for God, by God, whose membership is unknown and whose head is invisible to the public gaze.

7.

Luther and Calvin were clear that good works, the attempt of humans to do good things, were irrelevant to this inward drama of the Spirit. They should have been equally clear that the acceptance of correct doctrines, the attempt (as Protestants thought) of humans to formulate correct beliefs, are irrelevant to the drama of salvation. But they were not.

The point is that if God saves you by predestinate grace, God does not have to wait until you believe all the right doctrines before his salvation can take effect. You are not saved because you have correct beliefs. You are saved solely by grace, through faith. And that faith is just the inward assent to the work of the Spirit, as it unites you to the divine life, the life of Christ.

Good works may follow from faith, as the Spirit empowers you to goodness. Correct beliefs may follow from faith, but only insofar as those beliefs are immediate entailments of true faith. It is not, for instance, entailed by transforming encounter with the risen Lord that the doctrine of double predestination, of God predestining some to salvation and some to damnation, is correct. The Chalcedonian definition of Christ's person is not entailed either, though it would be necessary that the new life that comes through Christ truly unites you to the divine life. There may, however, be various ways of trying to spell this out more completely, if you were inclined to do so.

With regard to the second belief, faith, in the Protestant sense, does not require theoretical certainty, especially about widely disputed doctrines, and it does not require acceptance of a set of 'correct' doctrines. Moreover, since God will save whomsoever God will, there is no set of doctrines and no institution that we must defend at all costs, in order that the faith will survive. Heresy need not be suppressed, as a danger to human souls. For salvation is purely in the hands of God, and if it is the divine

will that the gospel should be preached effectively, then it will be, whatever humans may do. Toleration becomes a Protestant Christian virtue, when it is recognised that, for the vast majority of Christians, Protestants are the heretics, and intolerance would wipe them out. More importantly, since salvation is by grace not human works, we do not need to guard the truth by policing the souls of men and women. God will ensure that his purpose is carried out. And, if Jesus is any model, it is not by violence and repression that it will be carried out. Salvation is by the grace of God, which is neither hampered nor hindered by the plans of men and women. And it is appropriated not by assent to a complex set of doctrines, but by faith, by living trust in Jesus as personal Saviour.

8.

Of course to trust in Jesus you must believe that Jesus existed, and had a specific personality or character, that he did and taught specific things. So there must exist a trustworthy record of Jesus' life. That argument is strong, though even then if what is important is personal relationship to a living Lord, the information about the historical character of that Lord does not need to be very detailed. It might be a positive advantage to have different accounts and assessments of Jesus, showing the ways in which he affected very different people.

However, classical Protestants usually went on to say that the Bible can be trustworthy only if it is given by God, and since God cannot lie, the text must be true in every detail. It is true that God cannot lie, but why should it be thought that the text is actually given by God? Divine dictation has never been part of a Christian view of most of the Bible. What is required is something both vaguer and more subtle. If God wishes us to know and love the divine in and through the person of Jesus, then God must ensure that we know that person in sufficient detail to be able to identify him. So God must ensure that there exists a reliable tradition or traditions about the historical Jesus. But how God ensures this, and in what form, is not entailed by these requirements.

All Christians agree that the New Testament contains records of the life of Jesus from very near apostolic times. All agree that they provide the best evidence we have for the life of Jesus. All Christians agree that the evidence must be reliable or trustworthy. It is reasonable to think that God ensures that such a reliable record exists. The question is, how?

God could dictate it; but that does not seem compatible with the varying styles and authorship of the texts, and the fact that some texts are occasional letters written to churches. It is also in tension with the fact that Jesus did not write or dictate anything himself – which suggests that dictation is not the means of Christian revelation.

God could preserve it from all error, but that is incompatible with the varying accounts of incidents in Jesus' life (see chapter 1). It is also in tension with the results of archaeological and historical study, which throw doubt on many historical accounts in the Old Testament.

God could ensure its general reliability, exercising a guiding influence on the selection of gospels and letters that go to make up the canon of the New Testament, so that the rather subjective emphases of one account are balanced by complementary emphases of others accounts, and the whole is sufficient to give a clear account of how Jesus can be a channel of the divine life.

This is vague, because it does not say exactly when or how God exerts such influence. It is subtle, because it suggests that 'reliability' is necessary only insofar as it preserves what is necessary for a saving relation to God through Christ – and that, too, is left undefined. Presumably we need to know that Jesus was a man filled with the divine Spirit, and therefore wise, spiritually powerful, and loving. He was empowered to forgive sin and to inspire his disciples. His vocation to be God's Anointed was genuine. He died voluntarily, for the sake of the redemption of the world, and was raised from death. These are the

things we need to know, if we are to relate to God through him as mediator. It would be reasonable to think that God would ensure these things were recorded reliably.

But reliability does not entail that an account is without any error. It entails that the accounts are accurate and full enough to give a correct impression of Jesus' character, and of his death and resurrection. But this suggests that God's influence works through the process of gathering together the documents that were to make up the New Testament, as well as through the writing of them. And that influence must continue to work through subsequent history, to ensure that a saving relation to God remains a living possibility, not just a recorded historical fact.

9.

In other words, it seems reasonable to think that, whatever form of inspiration or guidance God exercised in the composition of the Bible will continue in the history of the church. God may not preserve the church from all errors, but God might well guide the church so that it remains a vehicle of saving knowledge of God, a community in which the Spirit acts.

There is an evident tension in the frequent Protestant claim that the Bible is inerrant and the sole source of authority, whereas the whole Catholic Church seems to have become irredeemably corrupt. The tension is that if God worked through groups of humans over many centuries to write and compile the Biblical documents, it is strange to think that God ceased to guide the church at all over the next thousand years.

We can ease that tension by denying the total inerrancy and sole sufficiency of the Bible, and also by denying that the church is irredeemably corrupt. In practice this is what Protestants have largely done. In accepting the theological interpretations of the Councils and of Augustine, they accept some tradition of interpretation in addition to bare text. And the Protestant movement is meant to be one of reform, not of denial. The church, as the set of many communities that accept the apostolic faith and celebrate new life in the Spirit of Christ, remains the divinely mandated way of salvation. But the Reformers believed that many errors had crept into the Western church, and some of these were re-affirmed at the Council of Trent. They included the doctrine of papal supremacy over Councils of the Church, doctrines of merit and indulgences, the invocation of saints, especially of Mary, and the veneration of relics and images.

When the Reformers rejected these doctrines, they did not reject the church. They claimed to be returning to the original apostolic faith, and often tried to model their churches on New Testament accounts. That faith had never been lost. It had just been overlaid by practices and beliefs that were no part of the apostolic faith.

The apostolic faith was never quite as the Reformers pictured it. For a start, it had no New Testament, and so could hardly be called a 'Biblical church'. It also undoubtedly contained many Jewish Christians, who upheld the strict observance of Torah. It was much more closely related to Judaism than were the Protestant churches, which regrettably tended to be anti-Jewish. And it almost certainly had never formulated views like substitutionary atonement, Chalcedonian Christology, predestination, sacramental theology and all the complicated versions of the 'second coming' that many Reformers seemed to be fixated with.

Still, the idea of a return to apostolic faith is a powerful one. It is a traditional Catholic view that the deposit of revelation ended with the death of the last apostle. It might be useful advice to say that no doctrine should be regarded as absolutely necessary to Christian faith unless it was part of the apostolic faith. Our only written evidence for that is the New Testament. So, while the Reformers may have thought that too many of their doctrines were apostolic when they were not, and though some of them may have had an exaggerated view of the inerrancy of Scripture, one may feel a great deal of sympathy with the recommendation that the New Testament is the only source of doctrines that are strictly necessary to

Christian belief. This would not commit us to accepting that everything in the New Testament has to be believed today – I have shown clearly enough that such a position is insupportable. But it might commit us to saying that no belief is absolutely necessary to being a Christian if it cannot be supported by the New Testament. That, we have seen, leaves a lot of room for disagreement and development, and it would leave even the incarnation and the Trinity open to many diverse interpretations.

If that is so, Protestants should allow much diversity of interpretation of the texts, and should be very careful not to claim certainty in matters that are highly disputed among intelligent readers of the texts. The besetting heresy to which Protestants are prone is to claim certainty in matters that do not allow of certainty, and to fail to see the diversity of Scripture, and the necessity of following some interpretation of it which will not be found in Scripture itself, and is bound to be less than universally appealing.

10.

Protestantism is thus essentially liberal, in the classical sense of allowing, and even encouraging, diversity of interpretation, the right of dissent, and personal freedom of belief. It calls for liberty of conscience, as a condition of its own existence – even though it could practice intolerance of disagreement within its own fellowships. It calls for the equality of all before God. In rejecting a central teaching authority and in insisting upon an open Bible, which all could interpret for themselves, it undermines any spiritual hierarchy – even though it reinforced many social hierarchies in its church organisation. It calls for fraternity and brotherly love and fellowship, in rejecting any distinction of clergy and laity, any special class of ‘religious’, and in stressing the participation of all in the communion service and in the running of the churches – even though some of its tracts are still filled with vitriol against Christians of different persuasions.

Liberty, equality and fraternity were the ideals of the Protestant Reformation, even though they were rarely put consistently into practice. Today those words do not suggest Protestantism, but something more revolutionary, something that was to destroy the feudal order, and to challenge a Christian faith that had become perhaps too closely associated with it. Europe was about to be changed by a force even more powerful than the Reformation, though the Protestant Reformation prepared the way for it. Before it, Christian faith, in all its forms, was to tremble. The Enlightenment was at hand.

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