

500 years: From the Reformation of the Church to the Reformulation of (Christian) Faith

Martin Luther never set out to reform the church. When he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, as tradition has it, he was quite simply registering a protest. That is why he may rightly be called the father of **Protestantism**. In particular, he was protesting against the way in which the church, by selling Indulgences, was claiming authority to shape the eternal destiny of its members. But this was only the climactic point of a period during which he had become increasingly critical, and even outspoken, about the practices in the church that he believed to be inconsistent with the basic Christian Gospel.

By protesting as he did, Luther, no doubt unintentionally, did a great deal more than pioneer the reformation of church. He set in motion three interconnected movements in human culture, which were to have far greater consequences than he ever intended or even imagined. They had to do with:

1. The Christian world-view.
2. The role and authority of the church.
3. The nature and content of faith..

I shall sketch each of these movements in turn, from his day until ours.

First of all - the Christian world-view. In the course of its 1500 year old history the Christian world-view had changed out of all recognition from what it was at the beginning. The first Christians, being Jews, simply inherited from their culture the Jewish world-view of a three-decker universe. This consisted of the sky or heaven above (the dwelling-place of God), the flat earth (the dwelling place of humankind) and the gloomy underworld (inhabited by the shades of the dead).

The first Christians believed that Jesus, after his crucifixion, had been raised from the underworld of the dead to the over-world of heaven. The Fourth Gospel rather quaintly records this rising as it describes how he, almost accidentally, met Mary Magdalene as he rose up. "Don't touch me", he said. - "I am ascending". Indeed, we can now say that the myth of his ascension to heaven actually preceded in time the story of his resurrection from the burial grave. The story of the empty tomb was a later development, for it was seen to be the logical consequence of this ascension.

The first Christians further believed that Jesus would shortly return from the heaven above to which he had been raised so that he could establish on earth the Kingdom of God that had been the substance of his teaching. When his expected return did not eventuate, the Christian world-view underwent a slow but, radical transformation, made possible by the increasing influence of Plato on Christian thinking, by introducing his notion of an immortal soul.

Whereas the Jews thought of the human being as an animated body, Plato analyzed the human condition into a mortal body, inhabited from conception to death by an immortal soul. Plato taught that the soul, being eternal, existed in a soul-world even before it came to inhabit (or be imprisoned. as he said) in a physical body. This notion of his is beautifully illustrated in Charles Lamb's delightful essay, *Dream Children*, but was not adopted by Christians when they drew upon Plato's philosophy with which to reshape the three-decker universe inherited from Judaism.

The first Christians had also inherited from the Jewish Pharisees the notion of the Last Judgment at the end of time and Paul expected this to occur in his own lifetime. But, as time went on, and Jesus had not returned by the end of the first century, the teaching of Plato about an immortal soul was instrumental in causing the Christian world-view to be reshaped. Divine Judgment was thought now to concern at first only the soul and to take place immediately after death. The Christian world-view changed from its Jewish beginning into this:

Heaven (dwelling-place of God was now accompanied by the souls of those who, at their death, were judged to be righteous), the earth (dwelling-place of living humans) and the underworld of Hell (dwelling place of Satan accompanied by the souls of the damned).

However they still, rather unnecessarily, retained the original belief in the Last Judgment at the end of time. At that point in time their bodies would be resurrected, rejoined with their souls, and judged all over again. As my theological teacher pointed out long ago - this development meant that the Great divine Judgment took place twice.

During the early middle ages this three-decker universe was further changed with the introduction of a fourth deck between earth and heaven. It was known as Purgatory and was regarded as a place where the dead were given an opportunity to suffer the consequences of their venial (or minor) sins in order to prepare them for entry into heaven. Once the idea had taken root it brought great comfort to all those who recognized they were not righteous enough to enter Heaven immediately they died yet felt they had never committed the mortal sins which would have condemned them to Hell. And that number included nearly all devout church people.

But unfortunately this idea of Purgatory proved to be open to abuse. By the time of Luther, the Pope, claiming the 'power of the keys' supposedly given to Peter and his papal successors, hit upon the idea of resorting to this concept of Purgatory to raise money to build the new St Peter's Basilica at Rome. He offered to people the opportunity to lessen the time in Purgatory being suffered by their deceased loved ones by selling Indulgences for them.

This became the straw that broke the camel's back, prompting the learned monk Martin Luther in 1517 to make his historic protest. Luther felt complete confidence in his protest because his study of the Bible convinced him that there was no biblical warrant for the existence of such a place as Purgatory, as there

was of course for both Heaven and Hell. Luther's protest led to the sudden disappearance of Purgatory from the world-view held by Protestants thereafter.

The sudden abolition of purgatory from the Christian world-view had quite a dramatic effect. It made death an even more frightening prospect than before, since it meant that one's soul faced immediate judgment with no opportunity to atone for one's sins. This was a fact that Protestant preachers used to great advantage in their preaching over the next four hundred years. People were afraid to die, particularly if they were not in communion with the church or had failed to have their sins absolved.

What Luther did not, and could not, foresee was that such a catastrophic change in the Christian world-view opened the door for further dramatic changes in the Christian world-view. After the 18th century Enlightenment encouraged people to be more critical in their thinking, attention began to fasten on other aspects of the unseen spiritual world for, after all, even though supported by the authority of Holy Writ, this world existed only in Christian imagination. So, as soon as the Bible itself began to be subjected to modern critical thinking from the end of the eighteenth century, the Christian view of reality came under threat. During the latter half of the nineteenth century some theologians began to question whether the idea of Hell as a place of eternal punishment could be morally reconciled with the idea of the eternal love of God for humankind. Preachers made less and less of it until it began to fade out of the Christian world-view before disappearing altogether for most people but rigid fundamentalists.

That left the concept of heaven still operating well into the twentieth century. John Baillie, the highly celebrated Scottish theologian of Edinburgh, in 1934 wrote a book about it, *And the Life Everlasting*. I heard him lecture when he visited New Zealand in 1948. When I read his book - and it was about that time that I did so - I was surprised to find that his defence of the traditional Christian belief of a post-mortem existence rested more on philosophical

grounds, such as Platonism. and somewhat less on biblical sources still being appealed to by fundamentalists and other traditionalists. From that time onwards the Christian idea of heaven slowly changed for many into a vague form of after-life, such as that to appealed to by spiritualists or else it faded out of reality altogether, as it did for an increasing number in the twentieth century.

This can be documented by the way in which the funeral service changed so significantly during the 20th century. It had long been a ceremonial send-off to the next world. But increasingly references to an after-life were omitted altogether from the service, which increasingly became the opportunity to celebrate a life that had come to its natural end. It was a time when speakers at the service recalled with gratitude all that they owed to the deceased person.

Of course Luther was a man of his time and could not be expected to foresee the coming of the secular process which eventually eliminated all sections of the unseen spiritual world that had long existed in Christian imagination. Nevertheless, Luther's quite sudden elimination of purgatory from Christian thought-world proved to be the first step in that evolving process.

Let me now turn to the second movement initiated by Luther, the one that concerned "The role and authority of the church". The essence of this is to be found in what became a Protestant slogan - "The priesthood of all believers". This is not a phrase that Luther actually used himself but it is implied in much of what he said. In particular he appealed to what is written in I Peter. "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation".

Luther wanted to re-assert the equal status of all Christian believers before God and to abandon the grades into which they had come to be divided. In particular, he wanted to remove two types of divisions - first, that between the 'religious' and the 'seculars', and second, that between the priests and the laity.

First let us look at that between the 'religious' (monks and nuns) and the seculars (the laity and the priests).

Christian monasticism had originated out of the example of the third century Egyptian Desert Fathers who had gone out into the desert, each to live a solitary ascetic life to prepare himself for heaven. It was there that St Pachomius gathered some into a community and formed the first monastery in the fourth century. It was St Benedict of the sixth century who established the rules for the monasteries in Italy and gradually throughout Europe. By the time of Luther monasticism had developed into such a widespread phenomenon in the evolution of Christendom that nearly ten per cent of Christians lived in monasteries and convents, preparing for the life to come.

Thus Christians became divided into two classes - the 'religious' (as the monks and nuns were referred to because they chose to live by the strict rules of their community).and the secular (so called because they, priests and laity, chose to remain living in the world, *saeculum*). (Parish priests were referred to as the 'seculars' in the middle ages). The 'religious' were commonly regarded as Christians - First Class - because they were wholly committed to serve their Lord, while the 'secular' Christians were to be regarded as Second Class followers.

Luther completely rejected this division of Christians into two classes and, as the Reformation spread, his judgment quickly led to the dissolution of the religious monasteries and convents. This event was quite catastrophic in England, where Henry VIII, having broken with the Pope, closed down 900 religious houses between 1536-1541 and confiscated their lands. By the end of the 16th century there were very few left in Europe.

Viewed in the larger context, this move may be seen as an important step towards the democratizing of all society. We are so used to the idea of democracy today that we forget that, in the ancient world and right up to the 16th and 17th centuries, the stratification of people into unbridgeable classes

was taken for granted. (In India it remained in its entirety right up to the time of Gandhi). A relic of this view is found even to this day in the Westminster Parliament, consisting as it does of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The House of Lords consists of the Bishops of the Church of England and the cream of the aristocracy - they have right to scrutinize and, supposedly, even veto the decisions made by the House of Commons.

Luther also rejected the idea of an authoritative priesthood that claimed the power to be able to exercise some authority over a person's eternal destiny. This led the Lutheran and Calvinist churches to abolish the priesthood, as an order, and replace it with an ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament with emphasis on ministry or service, rather than authority. They acknowledged that there needed to be an order of men who were especially commissioned to preserve order in the community of Christian believers. Whereas the priest stood between God and the Christian believer, the minister had a pastoral role only, and, because of his special training, became the official interpreter of the Bible, which had replaced the Pope as the earthly authority over the church.

The Reformers were guided by the pattern of the early church which had overseers (episcopoi), elders (presbyters) and servers (deacons), none of whom had a priestly role. Of course they were all male!. This was so taken for granted concerning those ordained to the ministry that it was not even spelled out in the Presbyterian Book of Order, as it was indeed for the eldership.

The Anglican Church never went as far as the other churches that emerged out of the Protestant Reformation and retained more of its earlier Catholic status, being content simply to break its allegiance to the Pope. They also followed the lead of the early church but regarded the episcopoi and the presbyters as priests. They argued that 'presbyter' is simply 'priest' writ large. Presbyterians on the other hand emphasized the non-priestly character of their officials by regarding all of their officers as elders, dividing them into ruling elders and elders ordained as ministers of words and sacrament. The chief ruling

body of the church was hence called the Presbytery, and, to avoid any return to priestly authority, always consisted of equal numbers of ministers and ruling elders. Generally speaking, therefore, we may regard the changes in church organization that began at the Reformation to be the first steps in the democratization of the church.

These steps were all of a piece with the growth of democracy in society and the decline of absolute monarchy. The authority of the Papacy had unified Europe as Western Christendom. The Protestant rebellion against the papacy did not lead to the formation of only one Protestant church but to a collection of national Protestant churches. In turn this division became the forerunner of the further fragmentation of the church organization, so that by the nineteenth century there was a whole host of denominations and sects. Late in the nineteenth century some began to unite, leading during the twentieth century to the rise and slow collapse of the ecumenical movement.

A second slogan of the Reformation was "justification by faith". By this Luther meant that is by faith alone that the sinner is restored to a right relationship with God, and not by works or the doing of good deeds. So strongly did Luther affirm this that he took a strong dislike to the Epistle of James, which he dismissed as "an epistle of straw". He added that he would laugh at it were not in the Holy Bible. James, in contrast to Luther, insisted, and I believe rightly so, that faith without works is dead.

Luther's insistence on justification by faith had the long term effect, not only of undercutting the power of the priesthood but also the need for the structure of the church itself. Of course, as I have already indicated, this did not happen all at once. The disintegration of the one, holy, catholic church into an increasing number of denominations was only the first step in a long process, which by the 20th century saw the gradual disappearance of church structures and church buildings.

The movement we know as the Reformation applied only to the structure and authority of the church. It did not affect the basic elements of the Christian Faith. Both Protestants and Catholics were united in their adherence to the Creeds. But to these the Protestants added their denominational Confessions, such as the Westminster Confession, to make quite clear how they understood Christian Faith, since they no longer had a Pope to appeal to. For them the Bible replaced the authority of the Pope.

It was not until the 18th century Enlightenment that the Faith itself came to be questioned. The pioneers of the Enlightenment took the Reformation theme - 'the priesthood of all believers' - to its logical conclusion. They were known as freethinkers because they claimed the right to think through for themselves all the various components of the Christian faith and how they related to the world in which they lived. While only a few, at first, were willing to go to the extreme and question of the existence of God, they nevertheless pioneered the practice of critical thinking which has now become so widespread as to characterize modern culture. During the 19th century this critical thinking enabled the Western Christian world to break out of the rigid framework of thought which had held its culture together for about fifteen hundred years. This critical thinking led to the flourishing of modern biblical scholarship and in the 20th century it led to the end of Christendom and to the 'death of God' theologians.

Now we turn to the third movement that stems from Luther's historic stance - the nature and content of faith. As our biblical scholars have recently demonstrated, it was at the very beginning of Christianity - and largely under the impetus of St. Paul - that the historic figure of Jesus of Nazareth was transformed and replaced by the divine figure of Christ. In a similar way, faith became transformed into, and replaced by, the acceptance of a set of beliefs, as

the very word 'creed' illustrates. To this very day it is assumed that to be Christian one must hold certain orthodox beliefs.

But that is not what Jesus was referring to when he said to the paralytic who had been healed, "your faith has made you whole". Jesus did not first question the man about his beliefs and judge whether they were orthodox. What Jesus was referring to was the paralytic's attitude of trust. For that is faith basically means. Faith has less to do with the mind and more to do with the heart, the heart being the metaphorical way of referring to the whole person - body, mind and soul.

Faith is an internal attitude that is directed towards the objects and subjects of one's personal environment. For example, faith involves such things as trusting one's friends, trusting the future, and even trusting oneself. Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest once confessed, " If ever, for some extraordinary reason, I were to lose my faith in God and Christ, I would still have faith in the world". By that he meant that he was so overawed by the process of the evolution of the world and of life that he would trust himself to it.

It may be claimed that it was Luther's basic "Here I stand, I can do no other" was the beginning of this rediscovery of the nature of personal faith. This faith gave him the courage to question some of the basic practices in the church of his time and to defy the authority of the Pope, even at the risk of his own life..

When we separate faith from the holding of certain beliefs, we are set free to explore - free to become ourselves - or rather, perhaps, free to create what we may become. Faith does not enslave us as beliefs do. Rather it sets us free. Faith is basic to the human condition. It enables to face whatever comes our way.. We can have little faith or great faith. The great achievers in the world are those who have great faith.

Of course, faith has to be accompanied by values to achieve the best results. Both Hitler and Gandhi were people of great faith but they had greatly

different values. The values we hold shape whatever our faith leads us to achieve. And we do not so much choose our values as do we find them calling us to respond to them. That is the role the concept of God played during the period, first of polytheism and then of monotheism. God was the bundle of values - truth, compassion, goodness, justice - that called for our response.

The western world has changed out of all recognition during the 500 years since Martin Luther and he, as much if not more than any other individual, helped to bring the modern world into being though he had no idea he was doing so. His stance led to the fragmentation and eventual end of Christendom. First it led to national churches, followed by an increasing multiplication of denominational churches and sects. His personal stance opened the way for the Enlightenment in which people began to feel free to think for themselves and were hence labeled freethinkers.

Today we glory in living in a post-Enlightenment era. It was only to be expected that this would mark the end of the authoritative church, which in turn would lead to the increasing decline of church organizations. The enthusiastic gatherings of charismatic Christians is no replacement for the organized church of the past. This current phenomenon is regarded by some as the new form of Christian allegiance but in my view they mark the swan-song of organized Christianity. They are based on emotional feeling, appealing to the heart but not to the mind. Such gatherings organizations are ephemeral, often dependent on a charismatic preacher and hence short-lived; They lack the intellectual content that would give them some staying power.

Luther would have had little time for them. He was driven by those ideas and values which underlay the strength and power of Christendom and these have continued to shape modern culture. Today's humanistic secular culture is the direct product of past Christendom. Indeed they are the most vibrant component of the more recently emerging global culture.

It is 2000 years since the first Christians declared, in their basic doctrine of the incarnation, that God had come down to earth to dwell in humans and to establish his rule or kingdom. When we translate that, from the supernatural medium of the ancient world into today's secular language it means that the bundle of our highest values, symbolized and personified in the mythical symbol we refer to as God, are now manifesting an increasing presence in human minds and are shaping human culture on a global scale.

Turn your mind back to 1900 and think only of a few of the things achieved in the twentieth century - the acknowledgment of human rights, the abolition of the death penalty, greater equality between the sexes, the liberation of gays and lesbians, more intensive care of the disadvantaged, hopefully the end to international war due to the establishment of the United Nations Organization inspired by the vision of a community of nations living in peace and harmony.

And in this long and complex process of the coming to earth of the of the Kingdom of God, Martin Luther in his day played a leading role. We honour his memory in this 500th anniversary of his heroic act.

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