

The Heritage of the Reformation

The Continuing Hope of the Reformation

Keith Clements

19 October 2017

'The depth of every present is its power to transform the past into a future.' So declared one of the most eminent Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich (1951, p.214). By the same token, we may say, the shallowness of any present is its inability to see anything in the past but itself, or reflections of its contemporary situation. So it is with the Reformation, and the way it is being talked about in some quarters today: a melee of competing fundamentalisms (an anachronistic term), forerunners of the Taliban. No matter that Luther taught people to sing more widely than ever before, and in music alone prompted one of the greatest cultural enrichments that Europe has ever known. Or that Calvin, arch-demon in the canon of secular liberalism, infamously burner of a heretic, was in fact a humanist of his time. Calvin believed strongly in education of the populace including - unlike the Taliban - education for women. Or, there are those who welcome the English Reformation as the prototype of Brexit. No matter that the English Reformation was part of a Europe-wide movement and greatly dependent on it; I once heard Professor Geoffrey Dickens saying there was evidence that within days of their appearance in Wittenberg, Luther's 95 theses were being discussed by his Augustinian confrères here in Cambridge. William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament was indeed a cornerstone of the English Reformation. But it is highly likely that during his labours he went to see Luther at Wittenberg, and in the end his first edition could not be printed in England but only in Worms and then smuggled into London. Or let us think of that rolling seminar of reformational thinking that linked Basel, Strasbourg, Geneva and Frankfurt with Cambridge and Oxford, of which Martin Bucer - of whom John Arnold is reminding us today - was but one embodiment.

In a climate where theology and faith are public embarrassments, all such thinking fails to see what was central to the Reformation: an issue of faith and theology, which our contemporary secularist historiography (not to speak of journalism) is unable to take seriously. At heart was the question: how can we be saved? If that is not a question acceptable to today's mind, perhaps Luther's related question is nearer: how can we be righteous? Our contemporary culture is filled with discussion and debate on this.

Newspapers love talking about righteousness - albeit usually the need of other people to be righteous, and always assuming that 'we' are the righteous ones, the people in the right. If not righteousness, then at any rate, perfection, or wholeness, or 'fulfilment', is the talk of the hour; or security, the longing to know that that all is well with us. Luther's answer was that we can't be 'in the right' - not by ourselves, by our own efforts whether moral, religious or otherwise. It is God's righteousness, putting us right with himself, which alone we can rely on. It is a radical awareness of grace:

*All things you send are full of grace;
You crown our lives with favour.*

*All our good works are done in vain
Without our Lord and Saviour.*

*We praise the God who gives us faith
And saves us from the grip of death;
Our lives are in his keeping.*

(from Luther's hymn *Aus tiefer Not*, English translation G.Grindal.)

Luther's protest was against the way he believed this had been obscured by the teaching and practice of the church of his time. Now many good Lutherans and others tell us today that we should not speak of 'Protestantism' because that was the term that came in later on the political side of the Reformation: we should speak of the Evangelical (in the German sense) churches, or churches of the Reformation. True, but we should not soft-pedal the radically critical element in the Reformation tradition: not by individual efforts, nor by ceremonial or ritualistic practice, nor by sacerdotal mediation is salvation imparted to us. It is by grace alone, received by faith alone, in Christ alone, that we are put right with God. And to emphasise what Luther meant by Christ he used the Latin phrase *Christus extra nos* - Christ other than us, over against us, from whom we receive in Christ. We look away from our own selves, own goodness, piety etc, to him alone. Yet at the same time it is grace we receive from him because he himself is for us, *Christus pro nobis*. This constant juxtaposition of *extra nos* and *pro nobis* is the nerve centre of what we call the Reformation faith. Criticism and affirmation, judgment and grace, repentance and promise, go together. And this applies to the church too. The church itself is never wholly righteous. It is always, in Luther's terms, *semper reformanda*, always in need of being reformed before the End has come. Everything in the church is always to be subject to review in light of the Gospel of Christ. Paul Tillich famously spoke of this in the most radical terms as the 'Protestant Principle':

The central principle of Protestantism is the doctrine of justification by grace alone, which means that no individual and no human group can claim a divine dignity for its moral achievements, or its sacramental power, for its sanctity, or for its doctrine. If, consciously or unconsciously, they make such a claim, Protestantism requires that they be challenged by the prophetic protest, which gives God alone absoluteness and sanctity and denies every claim of human pride. This protest against itself on the basis of an experience of God's majesty constitutes the Protestant principle... It implies that there cannot be a sacred system, ecclesiastical or political; that there cannot be a sacred hierarchy with absolute authority; and that there cannot be a truth in human minds which is divine truth in itself. Consequently, the prophetic spirit must always criticise, attack, and condemn sacred authorities, doctrines and morals. (Tillich, 1951, p. 226)

To which one might well wish to respond, 'Who can stand when he appeareth?' Whatever else, repentance is of the essential being of the church. Judgment begins with the household of God. As Luther said, the church tower, being closest to heaven, is the first building in the village to be struck by lightning. The church is *semper reformanda*, always to be reformed, and it is at this point that the 'nevertheless' of faith in God's grace can be uttered too.

This is not just a narrowly religious issue. The Protestant Principle has been vital both in European church life and the wider secular sphere. It has spurred the spirit of enquiry, the habit of asking awkward questions. Here let us not forget, either, the Radical Reformation which in Luther's view had got out of control, unleashed the Peasants' Revolt and thanks to the excesses of John of Leiden created the terror at Münster. Yet it was the radical reformers who asked the questions which, once out of the bottle, have proved impossible to get back in again. It was Karl Mannheim - secular Jewish sociologist - who stated that modern political science began with the radical reformers. Till then, Machiavelli and his ilk had asked how the Prince should act. The radicals put the question, why have princes?

The problem has always been, as Tillich saw, that 'mainstream' Protestants have not always been true to their own Protestant principle. An established confessional orthodoxy set in, codifying doctrine in a way which appeared to downplay even Scripture. The Pilgrim Father John Robinson protested against how Lutherans, Calvinists and others seemed to regard their founding figures as God's final prophets, whereas 'the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word'. But before we get too hard on the Reformers as blinkered dogmatists, we would do well to note that some framers of the great Reformation confessions were not without a dose of humility, and saw their work as not (yet) set in stone. For example, the Scots Confession of 1560 (John Knox and company!) was prefaced with the rather touching disclaimer

that if any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugnant to God's holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honours and fidelity, by God's grace do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from his holy scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss.

I don't think this is just a polite invitation to 'choose your weapons'. There is a real measure of humility in face of the God to whom doctrines aspire to point but can never wholly comprehend. Moreover, we should note that at the same time as this, the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent was meeting - and some German Protestants attended several sessions, and were allowed to speak (MacCulloch, 2017, p.74). History is so often a tale of missed opportunities. Only when things have actually happened do they appear inevitable. It has always been a temptation for Protestantism to endue its products with finality. If 'by Scripture alone' was one of Luther's watchwords it seems that sometimes it was supplanted by 'the Augsburg Confession alone'. The most prophetic Protestant figures have always realised this. Sometime in the 1950s a meeting of a study group of the World Council of Churches was taking place at the Bossey Ecumenical Centre near Geneva and Karl Barth was present. During one session he was growingly restive at the lengthy discourse of one of the theologians, expatiating on the importance of the confession of his particular church, copies of which had been distributed to each participant. Eventually, his patience exhausted, Barth opened his Greek New Testament and ostentatiously placed it firmly on top of his copy of the confession. (*My apologies for not checking in the time available the actual source of the story - probably either W. A. Visser't Hooft or Lesslie Newbigin. Compare the way in which the 21 year-old Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his doctoral thesis dared to challenge Article 7 of Augsburg which deals with 'right doctrine' being taught to the congregation, on the grounds that 'The community of saints will no doubt always strive for pure doctrine; but through historical circumstances this effort can remain ineffective. We are therefore bound to believe and acknowledge that in principle the sanctorum communio is present both in the Roman Catholic church and in the sect.'* (Bonhoeffer, 1998, p.180)

In addition, Protestants have betrayed the genius of their tradition by investing certain structures within this world with final and unquestionable sanctity. Romans 13:1, 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...', became the proof-text not for responsible citizenship, respectful of legitimate authority, but for absolute, unthinking obedience and idolatry of the state - or nation. Most infamously in 1930s Nazi Germany the so-called Faith Movement of German Christians (and others) made much of 'orders of creation'. Race, nationhood and people were regarded as inviolable structures instituted by the Creator. This was a major forgetting of the Protestant principle amounting to heresy, especially when the racist so-called 'Aryan clause' was introduced into the church itself. In response, in 1934 came the Barmen Theological Declaration with its

forthright assertion that Jesus Christ as known in Scripture is the one Word of God whom Christians are to hear, trust and obey in life and in death, in contradistinction to other leaders, forces and movements claiming allegiance. Barmen was Karl Barth's, and 20th-century Protestantism's, finest hour. It laid the basis of the Confessing Church. At the same time Dietrich Bonhoeffer was attacking the 'orders of creation' heresy, while identifying family, nationhood and state (and equally, 'peace') as orders of preservation allowed by God, desirable but provisional and always open to revision in light of the ultimate sovereignty of God in Christ. (One is reminded here, where we are meeting, of the oft-quoted aphorism of the Cambridge Christian historian Herbert Butterfield: 'Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted'. Maybe that's a bit too idealistic for life in this world. Bonhoeffer I think would prefer 'only provisionally' to 'totally'.)

Protestantism has been prone to captivity to populist movements or state-sponsored ideologies. In South Africa, one version of Calvinism undergirded the ideology of apartheid. But Calvinism also nerved the chief theological opposition to it, as seen in such figures as Beyers Naudé and Allan Boesak who utilised the prophetic side of Calvinism and were inspired by the examples of Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church to declare apartheid a heresy. There is constant need for Protestantism to recover its critical edge: *semper reformanda*. The continuing hope of the Reformation lies in its readiness to draw the sword of the Word of God in order to expose and attack corruption, injustice and self-deception, and not simply to lay that sword gently as an accolade on the shoulder either of dictatorial government, complacent or acquiescent church leaders, or herd-like public opinion.

But let us not forget the positive, affirmative side of Reformation faith: Christ *extra nos* is *pro nobis*. The God in whom faith is placed is not just apart from and over against the world, but is for it in utter grace. Grace comes as a new creation, the new humanity transforming both church and world. Luther, so often accused of touting sheer religious individualism, certainly believed in personal faith in Christ but not the isolated redeemed individual. His teaching on the church, based on Galatians 6:1-6 ('Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ') called on members 'to be Christ to one another'. Liberated from self, they are to become means of grace to others in the church and world. Made righteous before God, they are to pursue righteousness in church and in society. The Gospel critiques all forms and structures but gives rise to new forms, what Tillich calls the 'Gestalt of grace'. These words are also to be pondered:

We cannot but behold our own face as it were in a glass in the person that is poor and despised... though he were the furthest stranger in the world. Let a Moor or a Barbarian come among us, and yet inasmuch as he is a human, he brings with him a looking glass wherein we may see that he is our brother and our neighbour.

That (many may be surprised to learn) was John Calvin, also preaching on Galatians 6 ('So let us not grow weary in doing right...let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.') (quoted in de Gruchy, 2009, p. 205). Switzerland was just then beset by refugees!

We started with Tillich saying that the depth of every present is its power to make the past into a future. One sign of that transformation is the Accord on Justification reached in Augsburg in 1999, between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, subsequently endorsed also by the Methodist and Reformed world bodies. Justification by grace through faith is now a doctrine that unites, not divides. That is reason for much gratitude. But for this agreement really to generate the fullest continuing

hope of the Reformation it will be important also that the critical concomitant of the doctrine be not domesticated and totally subdued. The *semper* of the *reformanda* must be maintained by all parties, not least those which count themselves of the Reformation tradition.

The same applies on the wider European level. Europe at the present time manifests great contrasts. On one hand there has been great achievement in the developments of the 72 years since the end of the Second World War, in the 60 years since the Treaty of Rome was signed, in the 28 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the development not just of the EU but of other European institutions dealing with justice, human rights, security and culture. On the other hand just now there is a sense of fragility. *[I well recall in 2002 a meeting of executive staff of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) in Leuven, at which we were warned even then by Keith Jenkins, Director of the Church and Society Commission, not to assume the inevitability of progress in European integration.]* There is a return of virulent nationalism especially in the east. Europeans share in the global sense of insecurity, in face of major shifts of power and nuclear confrontation in Asia, of unpredictability in the Middle East, and of the growingly uncertain mood and global role of the USA. This being so there is need for both humility and a properly based confidence. Certainly in an age of religious bravado and extremism the faith communities need to be able to manifest a will for correction, which fundamentalism eschews. Yes, it will always be possible to retrieve and exploit those parts of the Reformation story which can generate conflict. But it is also offers crucial elements for a more human future, a repentant but faithful style of faith, for righteousness, for life *semper reformanda* in the light of grace, which makes room for genuine hope. The Reformation faith offers resources for the present task of maintaining and recreating a Europe of justice and peace, in a common life together.

Exposure of false gods is still necessary, and especially of religious acquiescence in them. The Reformation message is that we ourselves are not God, or gods, but God is the God of grace. If Europe needs lessons in self-criticism combined with hope, they are to be found here. Equally Europe needs confidence and the Reformation faith offers it: confidence which in the end is not in our achievements, in constructs which ultimately are friable. Faith offers the *nevertheless* to be said even when things are at their worst, for it is faith in the grace which is *extra nos*, which says 'nevertheless' even though all may go wrong through human sin or natural calamity, or whatever other manifestation of that forever haunting feature of human condition, the tragic. Faith attaches to the *extra nos*, not as a way of escape but as a source of strength and renewal, transcendent of our current situation, and ever before us.

The Reformation should be seen as a gift to all the church. Indeed, the Reformation faith can exist only in an ecumenical context. How else could we be sure that the critical principle is being applied properly unless we have the critique of one another in the Body of Christ? How else could we learn adequately about the gospel of grace without the insights and experience of one another? Today, there is a common ecumenical enterprise in Europe comprising Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox traditions, and the Reformation legacy is to be appropriated by all in whatever ways help in building up the whole household of faith. As the Charta Oecumenica (2001), signed by leaders of churches of all traditions, states:

Through the centuries Europe has developed a primarily Christian character in religious and cultural terms. However, Christians have failed to prevent suffering and destruction from being inflicted by Europeans, both within Europe and beyond.

We confess our share of responsibility for this guilt and ask God and our fellow human beings for forgiveness. Our faith helps us to learn from the past, and to make our Christian faith and love for our neighbours a source of hope for morality and ethics, for education and culture, and for political and economic life, in Europe and throughout the world.

That is indeed to make the hope engendered in our past a promise for our future.

References

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Keith Clements, a Baptist minister, writer and theologian, was General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches 1997-2005.
Email: ckw Clem[at]aol.com