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OCTOBER IS THE MONTH to remember the cataclysmic changes brought to the Western world as a result of Martin Luther's action of nailing his 95 theses (complaints) to the church door at Wittenburg. Such was the rather abrupt beginning of Protestantism. This essay has been prompted by an essay, *Condition and Prospects of Protestantism*, written last century by the Reformation historian, James Anthony Froude. He had been to an evangelical meeting and what he witnessed there caused him to reflect on the Reformation, of which he was one of the foremost historians of his time, and what for him was the contemporary state of Protestantism.

Can we say that contemporary Christianity is living in the tradition of the Reformation? Our answer to that question will depend on our understanding of both the Reformation and what it stood for as well as our understanding of contemporary Christianity.

Unlike the sixteenth century, our age is not governed by religious debate. We are, instead, governed by political issues. In particular, it is *secularized* political debate that leaves God out of the discussion. Legislators do not look to the Bible for answers; they prefer to study political economy (which masquerades as economics) for the answers to the issues before them.

We cannot read the history of the Reformation, however, without becoming aware that religion and politics were tied up in a bundle. The implications of religion for politics were understood — and expected — by all. This helps explain the increasing rift between church and state. Kings wanted to be free to govern according to their own laws. The Church, on the other hand, not only wanted to maintain the connection between religion and politics but was insisting that it was the true power, both political and religious, even claiming the right to appoint and remove kings.

Reformation or Decline? or: Where are the Protesting Protestants?

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Against this trend, Martin Luther, came with another message. All men, whether they be in church or state, were to be under the authority of God, who spoke to men and women through the Bible. Neither the church nor the state could claim to be the spokesperson for God, since God had spoken directly to the people. No intermediary was needed, it was claimed.

We can begin to fathom the real challenge of the Reformation when we recall that Luther had been teaching justification by faith alone for some time prior to his 95 theses. There was no restriction on his teaching, nor was there any attempt to have him change his doctrine. The pre-Reformation Western Church had developed a tradition of incorporating diverse views within its umbrella, and even Luther's views on justification were tolerable.

What was not tolerable, however, was Luther's attack on the priestly class. This was his great argument with the church. Priests did not have magical powers to grant indulgences, he claimed. Later, this was extended to include the idea that the priest did not possess magical powers to turn bread and wine into the physical body of Christ. The special privileges the priests had created for themselves were at risk while Luther was free to speak.

We see here an underlying attitude on the part, not only of Luther, but other Reformers such as Calvin and Knox. It was their twofold insistence that *the truth* mattered, and that they would not be

compelled to believe or teach something that they held to be untrue. The idea of *the truth* should be contrasted with the idea of *truth*. Most people believe in the concept of *truth*. But the Reformers were not just interested in *truth* as a concept, but in the idea that *the truth* was known and knowable, and that it was better to believe *the truth* than to believe a lie. In particular, they claimed against the Church of the day, that what they taught *and* practiced was *the truth*.

That men would die for this position seems strange in our age. Today, many Christians do not defend *the truth* because this modern world has abandoned the idea of *the truth*. Any belief is as good as another. Sincerity is what counts, even if a person is sincerely wrong.

At this point, contemporary Christianity cannot claim to be Protestant in the same sense that Luther, Calvin, Knox, Cranmer, Ridley, and others, were Protestant. The contemporary Christian world's acquiescence to philosophical relativism does not provide it with a basis for arguing that men ought to believe *the truth* rather than a lie. Thus many of the sermons from Protestant pulpits are not declarations of the truth; rather, they are a smorgasbord of opinions. Members of the congregation are free to choose whichever opinion they fancy. They select for themselves which opinions to believe and which ones to reject.

The results of this position, which began as early as the seventeenth century, have been devastating for Protestantism in general. The ideas of Protestantism

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once commanded the attention of scholars and the wealthier classes, men of position and power. We need only think of Oliver Cromwell as an example. Contemporary Protestantism, at least in its Evangelical form, today is almost relegated to the middle and lower classes, a fact most noticeable in Australian church life. Contemporary scholars and leaders that hold to an Evangelical faith tend to suppress this knowledge of the past and deal with the issues of faith outside the terms of reference often demanded by Christian faith. It was not always so.

The early Protestants refused to believe in lies. In contrast, some Protestants today are often arguing for the right of men and women to believe those lies. Sometimes they even believe the lies themselves. What is not in dispute, however, is the fact that many Christians today are unwilling to stand up for what they believe. For many, their jobs and livelihood would be at stake.

Modern Sacerdotalism

THROUGHOUT THE FIRST fifteen hundred years of New Testament Christianity, the clergy gradually built themselves a position of special importance. The Reformation, on the other hand, reduced their status from one of supremacy to one of servitude. Especially did they become subject to the political powers, as the contest between church and state was won by the state. But even within the church where they had claimed special powers due to Apostolic succession, they were reduced to the level of being just one of the Christian community, albeit with special duties to perform.

While the influence of the clergy on politics today is at best minimal where it exists at all, the same cannot be said for the influence of the clergy in the church. The priestly class has risen again, as evidence in some fundamentalist circles where the local pastor has more power than a bishop or even the Pope. The Protestant pastor can often exercise excommunication without a church trial; he controls the pulpit and determines who preaches in "his" church; and worse, he often claims a "spiritual" authority that he simply does not possess.

For some clergy, their power rests in their willingness to comply with the regulations of their denominational training requirements. This might be three or four years in a college (sometimes less), where students undergo studies in a piecemeal fashion, copying the methods and standards of the contemporary humanistic university. All this is done under the pretence of scholarship, but if there is one thing that marks the modern clergy it is its almost complete lack of scholarship. There are, fortunately, some exceptions, but they are few. These poorly educated clergymen then become the teachers of the flock, and we wonder why contemporary Protestantism is in such an appalling condition. We do not have to look far. When the pastor is not committed to diligence in his study it cannot be expected that he will set an example or inspire a desire for learning among the people of God.

It cannot stop in the study, however. Where contemporary Protestantism has emphasized scholarship it is often only for intellectual stimulation and does not translate into everyday life. No wonder many Australians believe the church is irrelevant.

Where scholarship has waned the clergy have capitulated to the idea that truth is relative, that creeds are no longer statements of truth but merely matters for conjecture. Theological study thus becomes something necessary to qualify for the position, a job, not something that should be undertaken so that the pastor can preach *the truth*.

This lack of truth was evidenced in an article published in New Zealand in 1992 by a lecturer at a well-known Bible College in that country. In an article sub-titled "Scriptural guidance is not as clear-cut as we like to think it is, nor as simple", the author deals with some of the issues concerning biblical interpretation. While laying down some relevant cautions about the possibility of mis-

reading the text, he is certain there are "no fixed rules" in interpretation. Instead, he offers "a few guidelines" to supposedly help us. When a Bible college lecturer cannot tell us the rules for biblical interpretation, only a few guidelines to help us arrive at our own opinions, we know we are in trouble. In fact, for this teacher, "it is a sign of arrogance and dangerous spiritual pride" for any person or group (my italics) to claim to understand the meaning of Scripture.

For these reasons, and while these attitudes remain in the contemporary "Evangelical" churches, it is hardly appropriate to grant them the name 'Protestant.' They protest about very little.

Schemes of Salvation

AN INDICATION OF THE GREAT disparity between the Protestantism of the sixteenth century and that of today can be seen in the way that salvation is now portrayed. God has a wonderful plan for our lives, it is claimed, and if we want happiness now and in the life hereafter all we must do is appropriate this plan by faith. Thus the emphasis is not on service in the Kingdom of God, which is man's chief obligation, but in having "peace" and "happiness." God is now seen to serve man, rather than the other way around. All we need, it is said, is faith to appropriate God into our service.

This is *not* the same as justification by faith alone, since the Reformation had one very important difference that is missing in contemporary Evangelicalism. The first Protestants were insistent that with faith went action. The man or woman of faith was the person who took on *new obligations*. And these new obligations required a *duty* on behalf of the follower. That duty was summed up in the moral demands of Scripture as they were applied to daily aspects of life.

Early Protestantism was not a "do nothing" religion. It did not say or teach that to be a Christian one had to do nothing. Rather, it emphasized the idea of moral duty and obligation, even though it recognized that these were not meritorious actions which could be used to bargain entrance into heaven. In the modern version, belief has come to mean doing nothing, whereas in the Bible belief and *doing* are inseparable.¹ So, to the question, "What must I do to be saved," the contemporary response is that you do nothing but intellectually assent to some propositions.

Without labouring the point too far, this is not the message of the early Protestants, even with their idea of justification by faith alone. In the sixteenth century, the connection between faith and action was not severed as it is today. In addition, there was far greater acceptance of the unity of the Old and New Testaments and the moral requirements of the Law of God as contained in those Testaments. Buckle claimed that theology was separated "first from morals, then from politics." The former, he said, had been achieved towards the end of the seventeenth century, and the separation from politics by the eighteenth century. Both indicate a very great shift in the theology of Protestantism.²

Thus, while the language of modern Protestantism is similar to that of the sixteenth century Reformers, the meaning those words convey is not necessarily the same. Contemporary Protestantism can only claim to be a relative — a distant relative — to the original Protestant Reformation.

Indulgences

WE MIGHT LOOK, for example, at the motivation behind Luther's attack on the church. Injustice and poor treatment of the flock by its leaders led Luther to mount a blast against the Church of his day from which it has never recovered. The selling of indulgences was not only theologically incorrect, it was an exorbitant *lie* perpetrated by those who were supposed to be teaching *the truth*.

Today, on the other hand, leaders — now from the political realm rather than the ecclesiastical realm — continue selling indulgences to the poor and needy. Everything will be forgiven if people will just place their blind faith in the modern political state and its powers of salvation. All they must do is pay whatever is demanded in the name of "social justice or equity." Child poverty was to be eliminated by 1990. A basic wage for all is yet to be achieved; instead we have 8.8% unemployment. Universal education, provided by the state, has led to the "dumbing down" of the population. Abortion, the murder of the unborn, is available on demand, at state expense, while voluntary euthanasia — and per-

haps even involuntary euthanasia — is on the horizon. Payment of the taxes demanded will keep the people out of economic "purgatory" and translate all directly into political and economic "heaven." It is only necessary to pay the taxes and maintain implicit faith in the political leaders to solve the problems of life. Our requests for daily sustenance are no longer addressed to "Our Father, who art in heaven," but to "Our Providers, who are in Canberra" — or the State capital.

Where are the Reformers of this age who will speak for the unborn, the poor, the badly educated and the overtaxed? Citizens have been lied to by their leaders — political and ecclesiastical — cheated from their homes, had their property and livelihoods confiscated by politicians, while contemporary Protestantism raises not a word in protest to assist them. It can only remain silent because it has accepted that living a lie is better than living *the truth*; that remaining silent in the face of powerful and often wealthy opposition is more important than helping one's neighbour. Thus, religious duty is no longer living by those rules that require us to treat our neighbour with the love and respect we would like him to treat us. Instead, religious duty demands that we purchase one or more of the indulgences offered to us by the political leaders of the day.

A large portion of the blame can be placed at the feet of the modern priestly class. That the professional clergy class exists in its present form is evidence that modern Protestantism may have lost its way since Luther. Congregations remain in blindness and darkness because the clergy itself is blind. Protestantism today claims to follow in the steps of the Reformation when in reality it has placed us in a state of affairs that would cause Luther to nail a second 95 theses to the church door immediately.

The Reformation was not based on a system of opinions. Opinions rarely cause men to lay down their lives for the cause. What the Reformation offered, especially the Calvinistic wing, according to Froude, "was a view of life that made the will of God as revealed in the Bible an authoritative guide for social as well as personal direction."³ Nothing else can explain the very great transformation that

took place in parts of Europe as a result of Luther's willingness to speak out in defence of *the truth* in order to defend the laity from being shorn by their shepherds.

A New Reformation

IT SEEMS UNLIKELY in our day that another Luther will emerge who, like his predecessor, is willing to risk all in the defence of *the truth*. For a contemporary Luther this would mean, among other things, turning his back on what is most sacred in the Protestant churches today. This is theological *relativism*, where *the truth* is no more than a matter of opinion. Even more, it would demand that he make his stand in public, which is what Luther did by nailing his theses to the church door. People flocked to hear him as a result, and the Reformation was underway in full swing.

Yet we must ask, if there is no Luther to guide us, who will lead the people? This is the great question that faces the Australian church. A common Australian attitude to the church is one of indifference. The Christian church is irrelevant, it is claimed, and unfortunately the claim is too close for comfort. But if the church is irrelevant, it is irrelevant because too many of its leaders make it that way. We clearly need more Luthers and Calvins, men who will uphold *the truth* above everything else; men who prefer to die for *the truth* rather than to believe and live according to lies.

Can the Protestant churches revive themselves? The answer is clearly, "yes." Not in the sense that they can do this without the power of God working in the hearts and lives of His people, but in the sense that Christians today have the same power of choice that was available to Martin Luther.⁴ This power of choice available to Luther is available to all those who take the name of Christ. It is not confined to the clergy, but is the possession of every baptized believer.

The very great difficulty here is that people cannot make choices when they do not know what is *the truth*. This means that the first choice for everyone is to abandon the lie that truth is only a matter of opinion. What's required is a return to a belief in the revealed Word of God as being propositional truth and that this

1. See, for example, Hebrews chapter 11.

2. Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1869), Vol. 1, p. 424f.

3. James Anthony Froude, "Calvinism", in *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903), Vol. 2, p. 53.

4. In this respect, we should note that his great book was not called *It's Unnecessary to Make Choices*. It was, rather, entitled, *The Bondage of the Will*.

truth becomes the standard for all other decisions. We will know this has occurred when people no longer accept Christian dogma as opinion; when they are willing to defend it as truth, both publicly and privately; when they no longer tolerate the kind of preaching that is afraid to distinguish truth from error and portrays different views without any guide as to which opinion might be the right one.

Second, aligned with a recovery of the concept of truth must be a belief in the necessity to do our *duty*. "Duty," argued Froude, "has no meaning and no sanction except as implying responsibility to a power above and beyond humanity."⁵ This also implies that duty is only

possible when there is a revealed set of standards for life that require men to live by them.

That both these concepts, truth and duty, are unfavourable in our age is only evidence of the task before us. What price do we put on truth? What price are we willing to pay to indulge in the luxury that permits us to remain silent in the face of some of the silly nonsense that is taught to us in school, university, through the media, and from the pulpit?

Conclusion

IF THE REFORMATION is to have any meaning for us today it must be to challenge us with its bold principles, and

unshakable resolve of the early Reformers to defend and practice *the truth* whatever the cost.

We do not need another Luther when we already have the example of the first Luther. We do not need another Calvin or another Knox when we have their writings and lives before us as examples of what it means to be a Protestant, a "protector" against lies.

All we need is men and women who will, with the same resolve as the early Protestants, refuse to believe in lies, refuse to listen to lies, and refuse to live a lie. In other words, what we need is more Protestants.

Numbrous Beasts

With fear and trepidation, your editor recently decided to join the millions who surf their time away browsing on the Internet. Would it be worth the exercise, he mused to himself? Was it a good use of time and resources?

Well, two weeks later, this arrived in the mailbox from other parts of the globe. Hopefully, readers will find enjoyment at this diligent use of biblical numbers. It proves the value (?) of the Internet!

We all know that 666 is the Number of the Beast.

But did you know that:

660	Approximate number of the Beast	6.66%	5 year interest rate at First Beast of Hell National Bank
DCLXVI	Roman number of the Beast	\$666	Minimum deposit in the Beast's bank
0.666	Number of the Millibeast	Lotus 6-6-6	Spreadsheet of the Beast
/666	Beast common denominator	Word 6.66	Word Processor of the Beast
666 ^ (-1)	Imaginary number of the Beast	i66686	CPU of the Beast
1010011010	Binary of the Beast	666i	BMW of the Beast
6666	Postcode of the Beast	Op.666	Opus number of Beast's Hellish Symphony
(666)	Area code of the Beast	6.6.6	Beast's decimal system
6666-6666	Beast's phone number	DSM-666	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the Beast
\$665.95	Retail price of the Beast	668	Next-door neighbour of the Beast
\$699.25	Price of the Beast plus 5% sales tax	664	The other next-door neighbour of the Beast
\$769.95	Price of the Beast with all accessories and replacement soul	665	Across the street from the Beast
\$656.66	K-mart price of the Beast		
\$646.66	Next week's K-mart price of the Beast		
Route 666	Way of the Beast		
666F	Oven temperature for roast Beast		
666mg	Recommended Minimum Daily Requirement of Beast		
			Happy Reading!

5. "Condition and Prospects of Protestantism" in *ibid.*, p. 178.