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WHY DID THE REFORMATION SUCCEED?

by

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Authorities agree that the Protestant Reformation was a success. Rudolf Eucken, the celebrated German philosopher, for example, regarded the Reformation as "the animating soul of the modern world, the principle motive-force for its progress...."¹ Gerhard Ritter, dean of German historians, considered it a major "reorganization" of Western society at the close of the Middle Ages.² J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, Swiss theologian and historian, viewed the Reformation as one of history's two most important revolutions.³

A Unique Movement

Why, however, did the Reformation succeed? On this issue the authorities disagree. This is a difficult question to answer because there is little in the history of Christianity that is like the Reformation. Parallels for the basis of comparison are either lacking or are incomplete. This is the case for two reasons:

1. There was nothing like the Reformation before the sixteenth century. Earlier efforts at reform had failed. Peter Waldo, the businessman of Lyons, had advocated church renewal in the twelfth century, but his reward had been excommunication and obscurity. Francis of Assisi, the gentle Italian saint, had sought a spiritual revival in Christendom in the thirteenth century, but he succeeded only in establishing a new monastic movement. John Wycliffe, the Oxford professor sometimes described as "the Morning Star of the Reformation," had urged a regeneration of Christianity in the fourteenth century, but his achievements were limited largely to the Lollard sect in Britain. John Hus, the brilliant preacher of the Bethlehem Chapel in the city of Prague, had called for a purification of the church in the fifteenth century, but his voice was silenced and his body was consumed in flames at Constance. A half century later, Girolamo Savonarola, an Italian Dominican monk, had proclaimed repentance in the city of Florence, but, like Hus, he reaped only his own martyrdom. By the end of the fifteenth century, wrote Denys Hay, "Spiritual revival and reform was...confined."⁴ In the face of four hundred years of frustrated reform efforts the amazing success of Protestantism becomes all the more puzzling.

2. There has been nothing like the Reformation since the sixteenth century. The past four hundred and fifty-eight years have not produced any movement that can compare in both quality and quantity with the Protestant Reformation. The Puritan Revolution of the seventeenth century, through profound in its beneficial impact on Britain and America, did not affect the masses of Continental Christendom. The Methodist Revival of the eighteenth century, fathered by the devout and dedicated John Wesley, resurrected the biblical emphasis on holiness, spread the Gospel among England's poor and America's pioneers, and resulted in a host of social reforms, but its salutary influence was largely confined to the English-speaking nations. The world

missions movement of the nineteenth century, inaugurated by the Baptist shoe cobbler-preacher, William Carey, swept the Atlantic community with a passion for souls, but this awakening, though strong, has subsided leaving India, China, and much of Africa still unconverted to the Gospel. The ecumenical movement of the twentieth century, described by Archbishop William Temple as "the great new fact of our era," has, nevertheless, after some fifty years failed to produce the results its founders anticipated.

The Role of Secular Forces

Why then did the Reformation succeed? Some have suggested that its achievements were due to secular forces. Four of these are frequently mentioned.

1. It has been remarked that Protestantism prospered because of the support of the princes and political authorities. These writers point out that the Reformation was not successful where it did not convert the rulers to the Protestant cause. In France, where Frances I and Henry IV refused to establish the Reformed faith, it remained a minority movement. In Spain, where Charles V and Philip II opposed Protestantism, it was virtually eradicated. On the other hand, Protestantism was frequently successful where the magistrates endorsed it. Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I nurtured Anglicanism in England. Elector Frederick the Wise protected Luther and Lutheranism in Saxony. Philip sustained Protestantism in Hesse. The town councils of Zurich, Geneva, and Strasburg respectively upheld Zwingli, Calvin, and Bucer. Gustavus Adolphus defended the Lutheran faith in Sweden and in the Empire. In light of this, some historians have tried to explain the triumph of Protestantism in purely secular terms and some actionist clergy have advocated that evangelical Christians today seek political power in order to enforce their principles and their programs upon society.

These assumptions, however, fail to grasp the real connection between chancel and chancellery, pulpit and throne in the Reformation Era. The support of the secular authorities was as often the result of prior evangelical successes as it was a cause of later Protestant growth. According to S. T. Bindoff, writing in Tudor England, Henry's

... 'faithful commons' did what he asked them to do, not simply because he asked them to do it, but because it was what they themselves would have done if they, and not he, had been responsible for shaping policy.⁵

Henry VIII was able to establish Anglicanism in England because the leading people of the realm were sufficiently spiritually prepared for a break with Rome by the preaching and teaching of evangelical pastors and professors to support him. The rapid expansion of evangelicalism under Edward VI and its survival during the brutal persecution of Mary Tudor indicates that its strength depended upon more than royal decrees.

In Germany, meanwhile, the Lutheran reformers certainly profited from the protection afforded them by the princes, but Luther steadfastly insisted that the Gospel should not be compromised through political necessities.

The Wittenberg professor maintained that

If the civil magistrate interferes in spiritual matters we must 'rather lose our head' than obey. If an emperor or prince asks a man's faith, he must declare it, since it is his duty always to confess his faith before men. But if he commands this or that belief, says Luther, 'I would answer, "Dear sir, mind your secular business."'¹⁶

In keeping with this position, Luther steadfastly refused to use the sword to spread Protestantism. At the height of his pamphlet popularity, he might have joined with the Revolt of the Imperial Knights in 1522-1523 to launch civil war in Germany, but Luther did not confuse political with spiritual power. Three years later in 1525 when the social actionist clergy, as Thomas Muentzer, were inciting the peasants to revolt to attempt to usher in the Kingdom by violence, Luther carefully drew the sharp distinction between revolution and reformation. At Marburg in 1529 when Prince Philip of Hesse urged Luther and Zwingli to arrive at doctrinal consensus, especially on the Eucharist, so that the theological basis would be present for a Saxon-Swiss military alliance, both reformers refused to compromise spiritual principles for this secular purpose. It can be said, therefore, that the evangelicals in the Empire obtained the support of the princes and town councils, but that this was not done by political intrigue or by doctrinal indifference, but instead by converting the statesmen to the Gospel. The Electors, knights, and councilmen rallied to the Protestant preachers and teachers because they were convinced, in the words of Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus, that one should "rather die a hundred times than abandon the Gospel." The rulers, therefore, would have been unable to endorse Protestantism had it not already won the hearts of their subjects and indeed, had it not already captured the allegiance of their own consciences. Governmental favor, necessary in a time when the established Roman Catholic Church frequently relied on secular force to squelch reform, was as often as not a result, rather than a cause, of the success of Protestantism. One cannot, therefore, explain the appeal and power of the Protestant Reformation in purely political terms.

2. It has been observed that Protestantism spread and triumphed because of significant sociological factors. Scholars have indicated that Protestantism expanded along the international trade routes - across the Baltic and North Seas, along the Rhine, and beside the inland trails of commerce. It established itself in the heavily populated areas of Northwestern Europe and thrived in the metropolitan centers of the sixteenth century. Socially inclusive, the Protestant fellowship numbered not only kings and councilmen, but the businessmen of the market, the craftsmen from the guilds, the peasants behind the plow, and the soldiers in the armed forces. Popular among the intellectuals, the evangelical cause was born in a college and won the commitment of students. Bridging the generation gap, it challenged Europe's youth with the Gospel. A "folk movement", the Reformation swept along with mass conversions among the nations of Northern Europe. The social inclusiveness of sixteenth century evangelicalism has been described by Gordon Rupp as follows:

And how many and various they were and from all layers of society: from the statesmen and the civic officers, Vadianus, Spengler, Thomas Cromwell, to physicians and lawyers, artists, gentlemen and servants, from noblemen like Caspar Schwenckfeld and von Hutten and Philip of Hesse, from the jobbing gardener, Clement Ziegler of Strasbourg to the cobbler, Hans Sachs of Nuremberg, or the poet, Nicholas Manuel of Bern, and the artists like Albrecht Duerer and Matthias Gruenewald.

The Reformation, then, was the most socially comprehensive evangelical awakening since the Age of the Apostles. Its inclusiveness, however, like that of pristine Christianity, was due to theological not sociological factors. The broader, deeper fellowship prevailing between the classes and the masses was the result, not the cause, of Protestant success. This was because the reformers had a message that transcended earthly distinctions before the one difference that ultimately matters: whether one is in Christ or not.

3. It has been commented that the Reformation was successful because it employed superior men, measures, and methods.

The fathers of Protestantism were surely a gifted minority. Martin Luther was described by Swedish Archbishop Nathan Soederblom as a "religious genius." Ulrich Zwingli was hailed by historian Arthur Cushman McGiffert as a far-seeing visionary who was "the first modern man." John Calvin has been esteemed, along with Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther as one of the five most profound theologians in Church History. Philip Melancthon still stands unmatched in his brilliance as a Christian educator. Thomas Cranmer is yet "the devotional and liturgical genius" of the English language whose collects have placed successive generations of Protestants in his debt. Certainly not since Pentecost had such a congregation of inspired and inspiring leaders appeared in the Church of God.

The reformers were also masters of the communicative arts. They revived powerful, popular public speaking; they restored the ancient practice of hymn-singing, composing texts which proclaimed the Gospel; they re-established vernacular services of worship which were characterized by piety and lay participation; they skillfully utilized the printing press, an invention as new and significant for the sixteenth century as television is for the twentieth, to spread the Word. The "talented tenth" of the Reformation boldly used appropriate methods and measures to disseminate their message.

Men, measures, and methods alone, however, cannot account for the phenomenal success of the Reformation. A spiritual movement, though assisted by intellectual brilliance and effective public relations, does not derive from them. The fathers of the first century Church, as Peter the fisherman and Matthew the tax collector, were simple men, yet they altered the history of the West more than the philosophers of Athens and the literati of Alexandria. Furthermore, gifted men are not necessarily saintly men. Among the chosen twelve it was Judas, in many ways the most talented, who became not an apostle but an apostate. It could very well be that the Reformers became instruments of the Word as much in spite of as because of their many and varied abilities. The intellectual giants of the sixteenth century - as the Italian "men of genius," the Humanists, and the celebrated Erasmus - frequently failed to make the transition from Humanism to Protestantism.

Finally, there are men equally gifted as the reformers in nearly every epoch, yet not each generation has a Reformation. The causes of the success of the Reformation rest deeper and must explain why such brilliant men as Luther and Melanchthon devoted their skills to church renewal.

4. It has been written that the Reformation of the sixteenth century succeeded because the time was right. Europe was in a state of great unrest during the era. There was run-away inflation due to the influx of precious metals from the mines of the New World. Strikes, riots, and social upheaval rent the cities and stirred the countryside. Conflict between rival dynastic houses plunged the Continent into the Hapsburg-Valois Wars which extended through the century. While there was competition between the Christian states within Europe for hegemony, there was the constant threat from without of conquest from the East by the Muslim Turks. Europe was ripe for revolution.⁸

This crisis, however, did not necessarily have to lead to a spiritual awakening. It might have ended in class conflict (as occurred in the Russian Revolution of 1917), or in civil strife (as in the French Revolution of 1789), or in a secessionist movement (as in the American Revolution of 1776), or in a constitutional crisis (as in the British Revolution of the 1640's). It resulted, however, in a religious reformation.

Why?

Because in this particular situation there appeared the right men, men "of God's own choosing," using appropriate methods, witnessing in the strategic places, to win all elements of the populace to a transforming message.

The Role of Biblical Faith

The right message - this is the crux of the matter. We continue to remember the reformers not primarily because of their works, which have been eclipsed by more recent events, but because of their confession of faith which remains relevant. The reformers succeeded because they passed beyond the babel of human voices and behind the confusion of history's events to recover the eternal Word of God. Protestantism's patriarchs were, in the fullest meaning of the term, "Radical Theologians."

The reformers were "Radical Theologians" because they uncovered the very roots of the Christian religion in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. ("Radical," from the Latin, radix, "root"); because they advocated a return to the first principles of the primitive Church ("Principle," from the Latin, principium, "beginning" or "origin"); because they reverted to the primary and only source of saving faith, the Sacred Scriptures. The Reformers succeeded because they produced a thorough-going "Radical Theology" that consistently insisted on reviving the original message of Christianity - salvation by grace alone through Jesus Christ! If Protestants today are to be equally successful, they must forsake the false gospels of secular and sensationalist theologians (as the misnamed "Radical Theology" of the sixties), and, like Luther and Melanchthon, "put first things first."

This need to return to the inerrant Word and the pure Gospel has been indicated by the advent of an imitation "Radical Theology" in the last decade. Its presence reveals a need to recover Christianity's primary loyalties; its popularity speaks of a longing, particularly among the young, for an authentic faith stripped of false accretions; its indistinct doctrinal position and its

inability to satisfy the soul's deepest hungers testify to its essential lack of perspective and power. It is instructive, however, to compare the "Radical Theology" of the twentieth century with classic Protestantism of the sixteenth to learn why the first is failing and why the latter was filled with success.

1. The "Radical Theology" of the twentieth century starts with the statement that "God is dead" while that of the sixteenth began with the affirmation "God is alive." Surrounded by a scientific-technological culture, twentieth century theologians have often sought to accommodate the ancient confession to modern circumstances by abandoning the supernatural. This is, in effect, the worst kind of materialism, theological naturalism. A process that started in the Enlightenment, it has climaxed in the current generation with the affirmation that even God is expendable for a theologian!

The Reformers, on the other hand, in the midst of the secular, self-confident society of the Renaissance, preached God's absolute sovereignty and of man's total dependence upon Him. Luther saw God as sovereign because of his amazing grace which alone was powerful enough to absolve and transform human personality. Zwingli saw God as sovereign because of his abundant energy and creative might displayed in the world of nature. Calvin saw God as sovereign because of his intelligent direction of the events of history to accomplish his eternal purpose. The reformers thus spoke to the new psychology, science, and history of their day by showing how God lives and rules in the realms of personality, nature, and society. In doing this, the Protestant fathers returned to the initial and fundamental affirmation of biblical faith: "God is."

The Scriptures commence with the testimony, "In the beginning, God," and they close with Christ's promise, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:13). When Moses, early in the Old Testament revelation, asked God His Name, the Lord replied, "I am who I am," thus revealing his Perpetual Presence and Power. God, the Eternal Contemporary, was called by the Israelites Elohim, a name conveying the concepts of pre-eminence and strength. Syrian Christians centuries later used a similar Semitic root, Alaha, the "sovereign One," as the name of God. Jesus opened this Model Prayer with a confession of faith in "Our Father, who are in heaven." The Apostles' Creed begins with the affirmation, "I believe in God the Father Almighty." The first commandment is a similar statement of the unity and omnipotent sovereignty of God: "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods before me." Luther in his explanation of this injunction expounds the very first principle of religion: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." The Heidelberg Catechism in similar fashion taught that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. The reformers, thus, returned to what Jesus, in his commentary on the Law, called "the great and first commandment," the invitation to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

The correlary of this commandment is the confession of man's total dependence upon God. Modern technology and material prosperity have done little to eliminate man's need for the Lord. On the contrary, wrote the British Methodist pastor-teacher, C. Cyril Eastwood,

...every new discovery increases our moral and spiritual responsibility. The truth is: man is now more dependent upon God not less. His fundamental needs have not changed, neither has God's capacity to supply them. In every age God hands to man a new key that he may unlock the door to greater wonders.Does this mean that man is now good enough to handle this new gift? Certainly not, Man is never good enough to handle God's great gifts. God does not wait until man is good enough. That is the essence of grace. God gives in love and expects man to receive in faith.⁹

2. The "Radical Theology" of the twentieth century states that "God is silent" while that of the sixteenth was assured that "God speaks."

Contemporary theology, intimidated by "scientific semantics" and philosophical linguistics, has come to question the ability of man to say anything meaningful about God. Historical criticism has increased the loss of confidence so that modern theologians have researched, reduced, demythologized, and remythologized Scripture to the point that no clear proclamation remains. In this context it is suggestive to recall that the reformers lived in the midst of a generation of Humanists committed to a historical-grammatical study of the Scriptures; yet the reformers asserted that the Scriptures are the very Word of God.

Humanism, with its concern for rhetoric, manuscripts, and the ancient tongues, paved the way for the Biblical Renaissance. Lorenzo Valla, a Humanist writer employed by the Pope, prepared Notes on the Greek New Testament for scholars. Cardinal Ximenes of Spain had the Complutensian Polyglot of comparative biblical texts compiled for the use of his students. Erasmus of Rotterdam produced a remarkably error-free edition of the text of the Greek New Testament for the priests. This historical-grammatical study of Scripture resulted in the revival of the biblical languages, the appearance of a purer text of the canon, and the publication of many aids for Bible study. For the Humanists, however, the critical method too frequently replaced the message, and so, in the pattern of Erasmus, they often failed to pass from documentary research to doctrinal reform. It was Luther, who was to go beyond the method to the message, behind manuscript study to the Saving Master, from the critical apparatus to the appearance of Christ.

Luther's career, like that of Erasmus, began in a monastic cell in the scholarly study of Scripture. To Luther, as to his contemporaries, God at first seemed silent and distant. There was no Word of certainty - only the conflict words of tradition, reason, philosophy, councils, decretals, and commentaries. While preparing lectures on Romans, Galatians, and the Psalms, however, Luther discovered that he was dealing with something other than ancient religious documents. In the canon Luther encountered Christ, and learned the meaning of the Master's words, "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39 AV). For Luther the Bible was the very Word of God, for in Scripture "Christ speaks" (Christus loquens). Study of the Bible ceased to be just an academic enterprise - it became a personal conversation between Luther and his Lord. Dr. Carl Henry, long-time editor of Christianity Today, was persuaded that just as Luther believed that

Christ was "in, with, and under" the earthly elements of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper to assure the sinner of salvation, so the Wittenberg reformer was also convinced that the Master was "in, with, and under" the words and text of Sacred Scripture to summon men to faith and to bestow on them the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

This discovery of the Word of God, what Dr. Henry calls "the inscripturated Christ," solved for Luther the problem of the silent and distant Deity. Since the Ascension, Christ, the Personal Word, is present among the faithful in the Written Word of Scripture and in the Sacramental Word of Baptism and the Eucharist. These two - Word and Sacrament - are the "means of grace" whereby forgiveness is proclaimed and the Church is called into existence. Apart from the Scriptures and the Sacraments there is no Church, no salvation, no Word, no Christ. Luther's position on Scripture implies that Christ's presence is now mediate, not immediate.

This teaching has saved Lutheran Protestantism from two dangers:

1. There is the temptation of false prophecy. The "Spiritualists" of the Reformation Era sought an immediate word from the Lord apart from the Scriptures. This quest for voices and visions resulted in a demonic summons to heresy and revolutionary violence as is illustrated in the life of Thomas Muentzer and the strange career of "the Muenster Saints."

2. There is the tendency to substitute the traditions of men for the Word of God. This occurred in the Church of the Middle Ages. Nineteenth century divines, more influenced by the spirit of the age than the Spirit of the Scriptures, spoke of a "progressive," "continuing," or "evolving revelation." God's will is only partially revealed because it comes gradually in a process perpetuated in the Church. The Church becomes the creator of the Word rather than the creature of the Scriptures. The real order of events was inverted. Since Scripture becomes the "supreme good work of the Church," to even think of justification by grace alone becomes unthinkable. Works righteousness is dominant.

The Word creates the Church. Here is the fundamental reason for the success of the Reformation - the recovery of Scripture. Luther explained his accomplishments in such terms:

Take me, for example. I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the Papacy that never a prince or Emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.¹¹

The success of the Reformation-ministry of Luther and his colleagues confirmed anew the promise of the Lord through his prophet Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10,11)

In this text and in its application in sixteenth century Europe there is a powerful lesson for the church today. God grant that we may have "ears to hear."

NOTES

1. Rudolf Euchen, Can We Still Be Christians? as quoted by Walter S. Gamertsfelder and D. Luther Evans, Fundamentals of Philosophy (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1930), p. 620.
2. Gerhard Ritter, "Why the Reformation Occurred in Germany," in Lewis W. Spitz, editor, The Reformation: Material or Spiritual? (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1967), pp. 68-73.
3. J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, translated from the French by H. White (New York: American Tract Society, 1849), I, 18.
4. Denys Hay, "The Background of the Reformation," in Joel Hurstfield, editor, The Reformation Crisis (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 15.
5. S. T. Bindoff, Tudor England (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1952), V, 98.
6. John T. McNeill, Christian Hope for World Society (Chicago: Willett, Clark, and Company, 1937), p. 105.
7. Gordon Rupp, The Old Reformation and the New (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 20,21.
8. This is the thesis of Harold J. Grimm, long-time Professor of History at the Ohio State University. See The Reformation Era 1500-1650, second edition (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), pp. 1,2.
9. C. Cyril Eastwood, Life and Thought in the Ancient World (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 49.
10. Personal conversation between author and Carl Henry, July 12, 1967. Compare these comments with the Solid Declaration, Article VII, "Lord's Supper," in Theodore G. Tappert, et al, translators and editors, The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 575.
11. Quoted by Gordon Rupp, The Old Reformation and the New, p. 9. For a fuller treatment of the role of the Word in the Reformation, see C. George Fry, "The Reformation as an Evangelistic Movement," Christianity Today XIII (October 25, 1968), 9-11.