

The Importance of the Reformation for the Discussion between the Churches

by

Prof. K. Runia

It is beyond any doubt that this is a topical subject. Here two matters are inter-related, both of which are of the greatest importance. On the one hand, there is the Reformation, one of the decisive turning points in the history of the Christian Church. What is more, it is not merely a historical event, but even today, after four centuries, we still see the results; and the principles, that once were at stake, are still very much alive. On the other hand, there is the present-day discussion between the churches. We live in the so-called ecumenical age. The problem of ecumenicity is one of the most burning problems of our time. One meets with it on all levels of church life: the local, the national and the international. In our own country we see a movement towards union between the Presbyterian, the Methodist and the Congregationalist Churches. Yes, in the union scheme, defined by the Joint Committee of the participating Churches, the Church of England is already seen as a prospective partner in the negotiations. For that reason the office of bishop was introduced in the Proposed Basis of Union.¹

In this situation there is every reason to interrelate these two matters and ask the question: what is the importance of the Reformation for this discussion between the churches?

Before we can answer this question, however, we have to ask yet another question. What is the essential character of the Reformation? For we are not interested in a merely historical fact as such, but in its decisive meaning, its spiritual significance.

When one studies this matter from the historical angle, one soon discovers that in the course of the centuries many different answers have been given, according to the starting point of the investigator. In his biography of Luther, recently translated into English,² the German scholar Franz Lau shows the variation in the portraits given of Luther. In the so-called Lutheran Orthodoxy of the Post-Reformation period, Luther was first of all seen as the renewer of pure doctrine. Pietism saw him primarily as the man who discovered faith as trust in God's gracious mercy. By the people of the Enlightenment the Reformer was celebrated as the liberator from narrow-mindedness. During the 19th century many people hardly saw him as a man concerned about religion, but they extolled instead his significance for modern culture.

We mention this because similar evaluations of the Reformation itself could be easily collected. And yet they all miss the real point. This is true even of Orthodoxy and Pietism. Of course, we do not wish to deny that the Reformation was a renewal of pure doctrine, nor that it meant the

1) The Church. Its Nature, Function and Ordering.
(The second report of the Joint Commission), 1963, pp. 83f.; cf. pp. 27ff., esp. pp. 45ff.

2) Franz Lau, Luther, SCM Press, 1963, pp. 12f.

discovery of faith as trust in God's mercy. These were indeed important aspects of the Reformation. To a certain extent even the people of the Enlightenment and of 19th century "Kultur-Protestantism" were right. The Reformation was also a liberation from narrow-mindedness and it did have great significance for modern culture. But at the same time the Reformation was much more. The deepest dimension (which at the same time includes all the other aspects) was that through the guidance of the Holy Spirit the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ was rediscovered. This was not only a matter of true doctrine, but it concerned the very heart of the Gospel itself. In the spiritual struggle of Luther and the other Reformers the Christian Religion itself was at stake. Wm. Childs Robinson says in his book "The Reformation: A Rediscovery of Grace": 'The Reformation . . . was a deeper plunge into the meaning of the Gospel than ever Augustine had made' Luther found the Cross in the outskirts of the cathedral, often overshadowed by the statutes of the Virgin, of Joseph, or of St. Anna. He replaced it in the centre of the Church's Gospel and rested all his weight upon it.'³

This re-discovery of the Gospel can conveniently be summarized in a few expressions.

(a) **Sola gratia.** Man's salvation is a matter of pure grace. Man does not contribute anything to his salvation. Of course, it was not denied that man has to perform good works, but His works do not precede his justification, but follow it as its fruit. Justification itself is all a work of God's grace.

(b) **Solus Christus.** Actually this expresses the same truth; only the words are different. It is only through Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God, that we can come to God. "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 2 : 5). There is no place for Mary or the saints in the divine scheme of salvation. There is no place for priests as absolutely necessary intermediaries. There is no place for the church as "another Christ" (Alter Christus). Jesus Christ, and He alone, is the One we need, for Him "God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (I Cor. 1 : 30).

(c) **Sola Scriptura.** Again it is actually the same message. God has the first and last word in our life through His Word. There is no place for ecclesiastical tradition, however old and venerable, as of equal authority. There is no place for a 'magisterium,' that has the right to interpret Scripture with an absolute and infallible authority. Holy Scripture is the only basis and form for the Church and, being the Word of the Sovereign God, it is sovereign and free, carrying its own authority.

(d) **Sola fide.** Again we say the same, but this time we say it from the side of man. The only possibility for man to receive the grace of God is to accept it by faith. This faith does not derogate from the 'sola gratia,' as if, after all, man still has to make his contribution to the work of salvation. On the contrary, it is only the empty hand, by which we receive the gift of grace. Faith always means to look completely away from yourself

3) Wm. Childs Robinson. *The Reformation: A Rediscovery of Grace*, Eerdmans, 1962, p. 59. The first part is a quotation from P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, I p. 204.

and expect everything from God. What is more, faith itself is a gift of divine grace (cf Eph. 2:8).

It is evident that all this is much more than a matter of **pure doctrine** only. Pure doctrine, however important, is, taken by itself, primarily a matter of the **intellect**. If this had been Luther's main concern, there would have been place for him within the Roman Catholic system. This system is so wide that it leaves room for the most diverging views and conceptions. But for Luther, Calvin, and all others this was an existential matter of life and death. Their whole spiritual existence was at stake because the Gospel of grace itself was at stake.

This is also the reason why the Reformation is not a mere historical phenomenon, interesting from the historical point of view, but not really relevant for our day. No, the Reformation is still of the greatest importance for the churches of today and also for the discussion between the churches. We even dare to say that it is an issue of life and death for the ecumenical encounter, because the very same Gospel, which was rediscovered in the days of the Reformation, is still the **only true Gospel**, the acceptance or rejection of which means life or death.

I. THE DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE CHURCH OF ROME AND THE CHURCHES OF THE REFORMATION

The first thing that strikes every student of the relation between the Church of Rome and the Church of the Reformation is the great change that has taken place in the years after the last war. In fact, the change is so enormous that sometimes one can hardly believe that it is true.

We can easily summarize it in these words: we are living in the day of the **Second Vatican Council**. This is the third council of the R.C. Church in the period after the Reformation and it is altogether different from its two predecessors. The first of the Three was the notorious **Council of Trent**, that took place shortly after the Reformation (1545-1564). It was the council of the Counter-Reformation. All its decisions were taken in direct opposition to the views of the Reformers, and intentionally and consciously the Church of Rome continued and fixed the theological development of the Middle Ages. The second council, **Vaticanum I** (1869-70), also was a purely Roman Catholic affair. The Protestants simply did not exist for the majority of the council fathers. All they did was to fix the development of the three centuries after Trent. In these centuries, especially the last one (the century of J. A. Mohler and J. H. Newman), more and more emphasis had been placed on the derisive role of the Church itself in the evolution of the tradition and the dogma, and this resulted almost naturally in the decree of the First Vatican Council, "that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks **ex cathedra**, that is, when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal Church, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals; and that therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irrefragable of themselves, and

not from the consent of the Church."⁴ Preceded by the mariological dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and followed by that of the Assumption of Mary (1950), this seemed to be the end of all future discussion between the Church of Rome and the Churches of the Reformation.

And now, all of a sudden, we have Vaticanum II, which breathes an altogether different spirit. To be sure, it is still first of all meant as a council for the R.C. Church itself. In the original Encyclical 'Ad Petri Cathedram' in which he announced the convening of the council, Pope John XXIII stated: "The prime aim of the Council itself will be to promote an increase of Catholic faith, a healthful renewal in the conduct of Christian peoples, as well as to revise church discipline in accordance with the needs of today"⁵ At the same time, however, there was an ecumenical motive, although it was not so strongly expressed in the official encyclical. Yet it became very clear when Protestant Churches were officially asked to send their observers to the meetings of the council. The Pope also established the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity, under the leadership of Cardinal Auguste Bea, one of the most ecumenically-minded cardinals. Related to this is the fact that today it is customary in official R.C. statements and documents to refer to the non-R.C. Christians as 'separated brethren.' Although the expression dated from the time before the pontificate of John XXIII (we find it already in the early writings of Fr. Yves Congar), it has come into vogue especially through Pope John himself. And, as Robert McAfee Brown remarks, the use of this expression is not a matter of ecumenical tactics only, but it has a theological basis.⁶ Admittedly, in itself it is not a new viewpoint. Rome has always held that those who were baptized in the Name of the Triune God, somehow belonged to the mystical body of Christ, though separated from the visible manifestation of this body in the Catholic Church. In other words, they were separated brethren. In the past, however, the full emphasis was on the adjective. The great change of our day is that it has shifted to the noun: we are separated brethren.

All this is connected with the emergence of a new theology in the R.C. Church. Over against the traditionalists with their emphasis on 'integrist', i.e. the pure and simple submission to the claims of Roman authority, the return of the prodigal sons to the father's house, stands the progressive party with its stress on 'integration', i.e. the necessity to take the Gospel truths professed by non-Catholics and insert them into the framework of the Catholic system.⁷ The last view is eloquently and impressively advocated by a comparatively small avant-garde of brilliant theologians, who wish to adhere faithfully to the dogma of their Church, but also assert that this dogma has not in every respect achieved its complete form. There is, on the one hand, development, which means that "the same truth of faith can always be experienced in a still more complete, more adequate, better formula." There is, on the other hand, polemic, which means that some dogmatic formulations are one-sidedly anti-Protestant and have to be complemented by aspects of the truth better retained by the Churches of the Reformation.⁸ All

4) P. Scheff, op. cit. II, pp. 270/271.

5) Vittorio Subilia, *The Problem of Catholicism*, SCM Press, 1964, p. 19.

6) Robert McAfee Brown, *The Emerging Ecumenical Complex*, *Theology Today*, January, 1964, pp. 532/33.

7) Cf. V. Subilia, op. cit., p. 13, note 8.

8) See for all this H. Kueng, *The Council and Reunion*, Sheed and Ward, 1962, pp. 162 ff.

these theologians still maintain that the definitions of the teaching office are "irreformable," but at the same time are engaged in a rather far-reaching re-interpretation of these irreformable definitions in order to bring out the fullness of the truth revealed in Scripture.

A striking example of this new approach we find in the doctoral thesis, which the young Austrian theologian Hans Kueng wrote on the doctrine of justification in the theology of Karl Barth and in the decrees of the Council of Trent.⁹ He freely admits that the decrees of Trent, although fully true in their foundations, were one-sidedly anti-Protestant. Catholic doctrine is bigger than Trent. On the other hand, the decrees have often been misunderstood, as if they taught "Co-operation" of man with God in the act of redemption. Basically there is place for the Lutheran 'simul justus et peccator' (at once just and a sinner) and 'sola fide' (by faith alone) in the R.C. doctrine of justification, and therefore Karl Barth is altogether wrong in calling the R.C. doctrine "another gospel".¹⁰

All this just goes to show, how much has changed in the theological and ecclesiastical climate in the last few years. In one of its latest sessions the Vatican Council even went so far as to use the term "church" for the Protestant Churches. Up till recently we were called 'separated brethren,' but the term 'Churches' was studiously avoided in official documents. Instead they used the word: "communities".¹¹ On September 29, the Melbourne Herald reported that the Council accepted the first chapter of a decree giving detailed guidance on how Roman Catholics can work more actively for Christian Unity. "The new text, revised and strengthened after debate last year, refers to Protestant faiths as "churches or communities." The original text described them as "communities" and reserved the word "churches" to the orthodox."

::

How must we assess this amazing development? To put it in the terms of our subject: can one still speak of the "**Importance**" of the Reformation in the discussion with Rome? In our opinion the answer must be a straightforward Yes.

One of the first requirements for a correct and balanced assessment of the new situation is a clear discernment of its various aspects. To be more exact, we have to distinguish between the present-day theological and ecclesiastical climate, on the one hand, and the essential structure of Rome and its dogma, on the other. There is no denying that the climate has changed considerably. In fact, it has veered round completely. And this is very important indeed. For the first time since the Reformation Rome shows that it is willing to take the Reformation seriously. It is even willing to admit that in the Churches of the Reformation aspects of truth have been retained, which did not receive proper attention in the R.C. dogma. In other words, for the first time in four hundred years there is a real basis for discussion.

But — has Rome itself, with its dogma, really changed, so that one can say that the Reformation has become superfluous? Does Rome now have

9) H. Kueng, *Rechtfertigung — Die Lehre Karl Barths und eine Katholische Besinnung*, 1957.

10) Cf. V. Subilia, *op. cit.*, pp. 39 f. This is a rather extreme example of re-interpretation, but for that reason it clearly shows the trend of thought in the 'theologie nouvelle'. In his preface to Kueng's book Barth himself rightly remarked that, if Kueng's interpretation were right, there would really be no reason to remain Protestant. But is it right??

11) Cf. V. Subilia, *op.cit.* p. 20, note 2.

a real understanding of the existential protest of the Reformation? Is there any trace of a similar re-discovery of the full Gospel of grace on Rome's side?

In his recent book 'The Problem of Catholicism' Dr. Vittorio Subilia, Dean of the Waldensian Theological Faculty at Rome, gives ample documentary proof that this is not the case. Admittedly, Rome is prepared for "reformism." In fact there are many reforming tendencies in the Church of Rome today. It is readily granted in R.C. circles that there are 'subjective faults,' requiring a reformation of life; institutional faults, requiring a cleansing of the Temple; historical faults, requiring a 'de-westernizing' of Christianity; ecumenical faults, requiring a reform of the confessional psychology. The language and the intellectual framework of the Church need reform too.¹² But — a dogmatical reform is an impossibility! Even the most ardent advocates of ecumenicity in the R.C. Church (such as Cardinal Bea and Father Boyer) uninhibitedly speak of the immutability of the Dogma.¹³ Rightly Subilia says: "We must categorically exclude any reform of the sort to which Luther and Calvin called the universal Church of their days."¹⁴

For this reason we must reject attempts of reinterpretation, such as that of Kueng. They are not really helpful, but rather confuse the issue. "No real ecumenical contribution is made by this sort of approach, in which Trent's semi-Pelagian phrases are subtly wrapped up in Augustinian ones, and by clever documentation Luther is made to look like a Catholic, and the Fathers of Trent like Lutherans, and the Catholic-Protestant antithesis is drained of its meaning, and reduced to an accidental if regrettable misunderstanding that no one in four centuries had ever noticed before Dr. Kueng."¹⁵

The Catholic-Protestant antithesis is still there in all its force and sharpness. For proof we only need to point to the R.C. Mariology. This doctrine is not just a matter of popular devotion, nor something on the edge of the doctrinal system, but in it the deepest essence of the R.C. conception of the Christian faith, namely, the necessity of co-redemptive mediation on the part of the creature, is expressed. G. C. Berkouwer has rightly pointed out that the Mariology cannot be considered as an excess, an exaggeration which might be eliminated from Roman doctrine without effecting its heart.¹⁶ He also quotes the leading R.C. theologian Scheeben, who said: "On these grounds Mary occupied a position in the divine world plan and in the dogma and the life of the church, which is as essential and universal as it is exalted and striking. And, therefore, the doctrine about her constitutes an organic part of dogmatics." All this is still fully maintained by the R.C. church of today and also by the representatives of the "theologie nouvelle." Pope John XXIII said in one of his addresses: "He sets in jeopardy his salvation, who tossed in the storms of this world, refuses to clasp her helping hand," since "it is through Mary that we come to Jesus" and "to love Christ means to love Mary his Mother and, in the light of redemption, our universal Mother."¹⁷ Likewise Hans Kueng, though rejecting excesses of Marian devotion, nevertheless asks his Protestant brethren the following question:

12] Cf. *Ibid.*, op.cit. pp. 66-94.

13] Cf. *Ibid.*, op.cit. pp. 96 f.

14] *Ibid.*, op.cit. p. 97.

15] *Ibid.*, op.cit. p. 41.

16] G. C. Berkouwer, *Conflict with Rome*, 1958, p. 165.

17] Quoted by V. Subilia, op.cit. p. 44.

"Can we raise our voices in praise of Christ without also raising them in praise of her who spoke the decisive fiat to Christ? Can we be Christian without — though in a different way — being Marian too? Can we work at Christian theology without — though in a different way — working at Marian theology too? . . . Can there, finally, be any reunion in Christ which would leave the mystery of Mary to one side?"¹⁸

Personally we have recently made a special study of the R.C. doctrines of the Primacy, Petrine Succession and Infallibility of the Pope. In our study we were struck by the fact that also in the new theology these doctrines are fully maintained. No doubt, there are differences of emphasis. There is a general desire to define the independent place and authority of the bishops beside and under the Pope, a matter left undecided at the First Vatican Council. There is also a much stronger emphasis on the necessity of the activity of the Holy Spirit within the content of apostolic succession, and papal infallibility.¹⁹ Yet the fact of primacy, Petrine succession and papal infallibility is undisputed. The Pope is still "Sanctissimus Dominus noster Papa" (our most holy Lord, the Pope.)²⁰ Pope John XXIII himself left no doubt on this point.²¹ The present Pope Paul VI, in his first encyclical 'Ecclesiam Suam' (August, 1964), emphatically declares: "We bear the responsibility of ruling the Church of Christ, because we hold the office of Bishop of Rome and consequently the office of successor to the Blessed Apostle Peter, the bearer of the master keys to the Kingdom of God, the Vicar of the same Christ who made of him the supreme shepherd." In this same encyclical he warns those 'separated brethren' who say that if it were not for the primacy of the Pope the reunion of the separated churches with the Catholic church would be easy: "We beg the separated brethren to consider the inconsistency of this position, not only in that, without the Pope the Catholic church would no longer be catholic, but also because, without the supreme, efficacious and decisive pastoral office of Peter, the unity of the

-
- 18) H. Kueng, *The Council and Reunion*, p. 187. Cf. also G. C. Berkouwer's latest publication: *Vaticana Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie*, 1964. Ch. VIII Mariologie, pp. 274-315. He mentions the two different positions in the modern R.C. debate on Mariology. The one, called the maximalist position, emphasizes the co-redemptive function of Mary in the divine place of redemption. The other, called the minimalist position, sees Mary first of all as the type of the 'ecclesia'. In the second session of the Council in 1963 a small majority seemed to favour the minimalist position rather than the maximalist. This may have important consequences for the further development of the Mariology. It may even mean that the way to a new dogma of Mary's co-redemptive place is definitely blocked (Berkouwer, *op.cit.* 315). Yet the fact is there, that this co-redemptive function is already so inbedded in the R.C. dogma, that it cannot be removed without destroying the whole doctrinal system.
- 19) Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *op.cit.*, Ch. VI, *Primaat en Episkopaat*, pp. 177-216, esp. pp. 205 f., 211 f.
- 20) V. Subilia, *op.cit.* 122. This is the official style of address used in documents and acts of the Pope.
- 21) Cf. the following quotation from an address given on 22 Feb., 1962: The Pope is "the universal prince and pastor who guides the flock in Christ's own name. It is into this process of government that Peter's successor will summon and associate with themselves their brother bishops from all the world, simply by their own concern. At this chair shall there even be consecrated the episcopate of the Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic. From Christ to Peter, from Peter to the individual pastors of the Christian flock, passes the power of the keys, sent from heaven in the person of the Roman Pontiff, through the bishops, over the whole of Christian society, to guide and sanctify humanity redeemed by the blood of Christ." cf. V. Subilia, *op.cit.* p. 51.

church of Christ would utterly collapse. It would be vain to look for other principles of unity in place of the one established by Christ Himself."²²

::

In the light of these statements — and they could easily be augmented with many others on other doctrines — we must conclude that **Rome has not fundamentally changed**. Certainly, there are important changes in climate, in approach, in emphases and here and there even in aspects of truth, but the system as such has not changed at all. Cardinal Bea, one of the leading ecumenists, did not hesitate to apply to the R.C. dogma the words of Jesus: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall never pass away."²³

But this also means that the Reformation has not lost anything of its **spiritual importance**. To say, as some R.C. ecumenists do, that it represents an insight which had been long neglected by Rome, but which in our time is being incorporated into the fullness of the R.C. system, is a serious misunderstanding of the Reformation. As we have said before, it was no less than a re-discovery of the Gospel of grace. And it is this Gospel of grace, which we still have to hold before Rome as the real spiritual challenge. What the church of Rome needs is not 'reform'— which amounts to pruning away some of the historical accretions, but 'reformation' — that is a new, completely new understanding of the Gospel itself. Karl Barth has put it all into sharp focus, when in a recent interview he remarked: "In my view the greatest obstacle to rapprochement between the Reformed Church and the Catholic Church is a tiny little word which the Roman Church adds after each of our statements: the word 'and'. When we say Jesus, the Catholics say Jesus **and** Mary. We try to obey Christ as our only Lord; the Catholics obey Christ **and** his representative on earth, the Pope. We believe that Christians are saved by the merits of Jesus Christ, the Catholics add, 'and by their own merits', i.e., by their works. We believe that the sole source of Revelation is Scripture, the Catholics add 'and tradition'. We say that knowledge of God is obtained through faith in his Word as expressed in the Scriptures; the Catholics add 'and through reason.'²⁴ As long as Rome maintains this word 'and'— and it is maintained even by the adherents of the new theology!— there is no reason to say that the Reformation is an antiquated historical position. In fact, it will never be such a position, because it is not primarily an historical event, but rather a **spiritual understanding**. No one, neither Rome, nor we, can ever pass by this re-discovery of the Gospel. To be a true Church of Jesus Christ we always have to begin with the a. b. c. of the Reformation: sola gratia, solus Christus, sola Scriptura, sola fide. Without this a. b. c. no one can spell the Gospel, and as long as Rome refuses to do this, it will have a distorted understanding of the only true Gospel, the Gospel of pure, sovereign grace in Jesus Christ.

-
- 22) Christianity Today, August 28, 1964, p. 44. For the "theologie nouvelle" see also: A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture, 1953, pp. 817ff.; 881; 1022; Fragen des Theologie Heute (ed. by J. Feiner, J. Truetsch and F. Boeckle), 1959; Otto Karrer, Apostolische Nachfolger und Primat, pp. 175-206; V. Subilia, op.cit., pp. 45ff.; K. Rahner, Episkopat und Primat, 1961; H. Kueng, Strukturen der Kirche, 1962.
- 23) V. Subilia, op.cit., p. 96, note 1.
- 24) Quoted in an article of J. D. Douglas, Reflections on a Common Heritage, Christianity Today, Oct. 11, 1963. p. 6.

II. THE DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES

At this point we seem to have a totally different situation. For is it not so that all these Churches trace their origin back to the Reformation itself? Some do it directly, as they have come into existence in the time of the Reformation. Others owe their origin to secessions from Reformation Churches in later centuries. At this moment we cannot enter into a discussion of what caused the division of these Reformation Churches. In fact, this is a very complicated matter. Hardly ever was it a matter of purely doctrinal nature, but in nearly all cases so-called non-theological factors played a decisive part. One could easily point to economical and political factors, to the influence of nationalism and immigration, etc.²⁵

More important for our subject is the fact that in our day there is a strong desire for unity in nearly all these Churches. This desire has found its most conspicuous form in the **World Council of Churches**. Again we must refrain from a discussion of the historical development which led to the formation of this council. It must suffice to mention some of the most important data in its history. The W.C.C. was established at Amsterdam in the year 1948. At that time the only participants were Protestant Churches from Western Europe, America, South Africa and some of the younger Churches from Africa and Asia. At the 2nd Assembly at Evanston, U.S.A. (1954), the number of participating churches was already larger, including, among others, some of the smaller Eastern Orthodox Churches. At the 3rd Assembly, at New Delhi (1961), the Russian Orthodox Church was officially admitted to full membership.

The admission of the **Eastern Orthodox Churches** clearly shows that the W.C.C. is not a "Reformation"-council. As a matter of fact, the Reformation-principle is permanently under pressure, for the Orthodox Churches do not recognize it as necessary. These Churches themselves never went through the historical Reformation. They regard it as an essentially "Western" affair. John Meyerdorff, an Orthodox theologian, writes in an article on "The Significance of the Reformation in the history of Christendom": "The historical impermeability of the Orthodox world to the great movement of the Reformation simply illustrates the fact that the theological formulation of Protestantism — at least when it is seen in the light of Eastern Patristic tradition — is fundamentally dependent upon Western Augustinian problematics."²⁶ The Eastern Orthodox tradition itself does not need such a reformation, for it never fell into the Augustinian heresy of "created grace," against which heresy Luther and Calvin rightly reacted. The doctrine of 'Ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda,' essential to the Reformation, is only partly acceptable for the Eastern Church. It "can and must be applied, in Orthodoxy, to those elements which are only human — and they are many in the historical Church — but that which God gives to us, the divine presence of his fullness in us and among us, in the sacraments and in the Truth

25) Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, first published in 1929, reprinted as a paperback since 1957. Undoubtedly this book minimizes the doctrinal factor, but, in spite of this, it is very helpful in understanding the complicated structure of denominationalism. Cf. also E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols. reprinted as paperback in 1960, esp. Vol. II on Protestantism.

26) *The Ecumenical Review*, January 1964, Vol XVI, no. 2, p. 172.

presented by the Holy Spirit in the Church, is above and beyond 'reformation'.²⁷ To this "Truth" belongs in particular the idea that man was created in order to share in God's life, which excludes the purely passive role of man in his own salvation, and includes such matters as sacramental theology, veneration of the virgin Mary and the saints, and the essentially catholic ecclesiology. For this view the various aspects of Modern Protestantism, ranging from Barth to Bultmann,²⁸ all belong together and are essentially identical. "Whether one holds an optimistic anthropology, so widespread in American Protestantism, or the pessimistic Calvinistic remembrance of sin still holding humanity, whether one considers God as the For-giver or simply as a nice heavenly Father who has nothing to forgive, it remains that the life of the Christian in the Church does not **participate** in God's life."²⁹

It is obvious that in this situation the W.C.C. cannot possibly take the Reformation, in both its historical and its spiritual nature, as its **starting point**. This does not mean that the Reformation is not taken seriously at all. Already in 1948, at Amsterdam, the Report on "The Universal Church in God's Design" stated as the great difference the difference between Catholic and Protestant.³⁰ We also know that in the discussions within the W.C.C. the real questions and problems are not avoided. The different views of the ministry and the sacraments come again and again to the fore. And yet one wonders, whether in these discussions between the Protestant and the Eastern Orthodox Churches the real nature of the Reformation is fully honoured. What are we to think of the description given of the views Catholic and Protestant in the report of 1948, referred to above? Of the emphasis usually called 'Catholic' it is said that it "contains a primary insistence upon the visible continuity of the Church in the apostolic succession of the episcopate." Of the 'Protestant' emphasis it is said that it "primarily emphasizes the initiative of the word of God and the response of faith, focussed in the doctrine of justification *sola fide*."³¹ It is very significant that the Protestant view is called an 'emphasis'! Here the existential, all-embracing and all-penetrating character of the Reformation as the re-discovery of the Gospel of free grace is relegated to the position of one view alongside another view. Within such a context the Reformation-principle is paralyzed and virtually ignored.

This is even more so, when we realize that the W.C.C. refuses to take a stand regarding **present-day liberalism**. If there ever was a denial of the Reformation-principle, it is in liberalism. This is true of the older type of liberalism, which actually regarded Jesus only as the teacher of a new morality. It is also true of the neo-liberalism of our day, as it becomes manifest in the theology of a Bultmann and a Tillich. Admittedly, for them Jesus is more than a teacher. In the man Jesus we find our "authentic existence" (Bultmann) or the "new being" (Tillich). One can even notice, in their emphasis on faith as "justifying" faith, that these scholars are from Lutheran stock! And yet, in spite of some reminiscences of their Reformation background, there is nothing left of the Gospel rediscovered by the Reformers.

27) Art. cit., p. 173.

28) Art. cit. p. 177.

29) Art. cit. p. 177.

30) The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, ed. by W. A. Visser 't Hooft, London, 1949, p. 52.

31) Loc cit.

The whole history of salvation, upon which our redemption is built, has evaporated into existential categories. The incarnation itself, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, they all have to be de-mythologized and deliteralized in order to find their real, existential meaning.³²

Just as Eastern Orthodoxy, this Liberalism — in all its variations — has a legitimate place within the W.C.C. From a certain point of view this is fully understandable. Does it not have the same legitimate place within many of the participating Churches? Personally we would even be willing to accept this situation, if the W.C.C. was only a platform for discussion between the Churches. We should always be willing to enter into a discussion with others, even with those who deny the Gospel. But the W.C.C. claims to be much more. It claims to be the manifestation of a **community of faith**. The 1948 report on "The Universal Church in God's Design" opened with the following paragraph: "God has given to this people in Jesus Christ a unity which is His creation and not our achievement. We praise and thank Him for a mighty work of His Holy Spirit, by which we have been drawn together to discover that, notwithstanding our divisions, we are one in Jesus Christ." This same thesis was re-iterated at Evanston³⁴ and New Delhi.³⁵ This 'given' Unity is the **premise** of the modern ecumenical movement. Now we would be the last to deny that there is such a given unity between all true believers and all true Churches of Jesus Christ, transcending all existing denominational divisions. But — may one claim this unity as starting point for a Council consisting of churches that not only tolerate modernism, but sometimes even honour and promote it? Is this the given unity of which Christ spoke in his high priestly prayer in John 17? Was not that a unity-in-the-word of Christ Himself and of His apostles? (cf. John 17 : 6, 8, 14, 17, 20).³⁶ But the W.C.C., although it has included a reference to Scripture in its basis, does not uncompromisingly insist on adherence and obedience to this Scripture.

Our **conclusion**, therefore, must be that in the present structure of the W.C.C. the Reformation-principle does not play a decisive part. On all sides it is thwarted and paralyzed. The existing structure simply does not permit the Gospel, rediscovered by the Reformers and confessed in the great confessions of the Reformation, to be the determinative starting point. And this is the reason, why we believe that the W.C.C., as it functions now, will never lead to a truly scriptural unity, for such a unity is only possible on the basis of the Gospel of the Reformation.

The same is true of the many **negotiations for church union**, as they are carried on in our days. They are all patterned after the unity-approach of the W.C.C. This also holds — to mention just this one as an illustration — of the present union negotiations between the Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists in **Australia**. The first report, submitted by the Joint Com-

32) Cf. my booklet, *I believe in God* . . . Tyndale Press, 1963. Ch. VII, *The New Liberalism*.

33) *The First Assembly*, etc. p. 51.

34) Cf. G. K. A. Bell, *Document on Christian Unity*, Fourth Series, 1948-57. London, 1958. p. 235.

35) *The New Delhi Report*, ed. by W. A. Visser 't Hooft, 1962. p. 116 — *The Report on Unity*.

36) Cf. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity. An Exposition of John 17 and Ephesians 4*, I.V.F., London, 1962, esp. pp. 12 ff.

mission under the title 'The Faith of the Church' contained many valuable insights. But again the great antithesis between liberalism and orthodoxy was glossed over. The formulations of the new confession are such that all parties in the existing churches can subscribe to it, for these formulations leave sufficient room for various interpretations. There is no frank statement of the Reformation Gospel, as H. Sasse rightly pointed out in his review of this report. "In the absence of a clear statement that man is saved by grace alone without any doing of himself lies the greatest weakness of the new confession. Arminianism seems to be taken for granted and the comforting biblical doctrine of predestination (election) seems to have disappeared."³⁷ No more is the scriptural principle of the Reformation upheld. Although many good things are said about the Bible and its place in the Church, the whole doctrine of Scripture is conceived in a Barthian sense and "the truly ecumenical doctrine that the Bible is the Word of God"³⁸ is abolished.

Perhaps we could formulate our view thus: the tragic situation of the modern ecumenical movement, in all its phases and on all its different levels, is that it aims at **union without preceding re-formation**, i.e. without the rediscovery of and the return to the Gospel of the Reformation, the Gospel of the **sola gratia**. We do not wish to be misunderstood here. We ourselves do not desire a mere re-formation or restoration. We realize that one cannot put the clock back and repeat history. No doubt, there are certain matters which we today would formulate differently from the Reformation confessions, had we to write them again. But whatever may change in our formulations, the Gospel, as rediscovered by the Reformers, is and remains the only true Gospel.

::

What then is our task as children of the Reformation in our peculiar situation? We see a twofold task lying before us.

(1) We, first of all, have to work persistently for a reformation of our own Churches. We should not try to escape into the doctrine of the "invisible" Church. No doubt the distinction between a visible and invisible aspect of the Church is truly reformed. But we should never forget that for the Reformers these two aspects always belonged together. "The visible and invisible are not for Luther separate entities. They interpenetrate one another, and, in part, his aim as a Reformer was to give visibility to the spiritual Church of God."³⁹ Likewise Calvin always keeps the two concepts together. Although the Church is essentially an object of faith and as such invisible ("Credo ecclesiam"), at the same time — Calvin states emphatically — "this article of the Creed relates in some measure to the external Church."⁴⁰ And immediately after that he can write his famous words about the visible church as "the mother of believers." "There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels."⁴¹ It is obvious that the Reformers would never allow us to escape from our respon-

37) M. Sasse, review of *The Faith of the Church*, *The Reformed Theological Review*, July 1960, Vol. XIX. No. 2. p. 59.

38) H. Sasse, art. cit., p. 58.

39) J. T. McNeill, in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948* (ed. by Ruth Rouse and S. C. Neill), 1954, p. 31.

40) J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, 1, 3.

41) J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, 1, 4.

sibilities towards the visible church by fleeing into the invisible. Nor would they allow us to seek our spiritual comfort and fellowship in inter-denominational organizations, such as missionary societies and the like. We are members of the church, which is the body of Christ. If our church has deviated from the true Gospel, it is our duty to call it back to this Gospel. We should never weary of this task, but, living by this Gospel in a true faith, discharge our task of **witnessing to this Gospel** with humble faithfulness and persistency. And we should do it on all levels, not only on the local, but also the supra-local level. We should thereby realize that we may suffer the same fate as the Reformers, who were condemned by their own church because of their unwavering allegiance to the Gospel of free grace. But is not suffering for the Gospel part of being a Christian?

(2) But what, if our church refuses to listen to this call? What, if our church persists in its misunderstanding of, and deviation from, the true Gospel? Although we loathe the very thought of it, yet we believe that there will come a time that we have to **say No to our own church**. It should be clear at the outset that we may do this only, when we are convinced that God demands it of us. We may never seek it as an easy way-out. **Separation as a principle** is contrary to the Reformation. The Reformers never sought separation, but it was forced upon them by the unrepentant attitude of their own church, which refused to obey the Gospel. Calvin, e.g., has written sharp words against all capricious separation. A difference of opinion over non-essential matters should never be the basis of schism among Christians, nor should we ever forsake the church because of any petty dissensions.⁴² But at the same time Calvin refuses to maintain the unity of the church **at all costs**. He strongly **defends** separation from the Church of Rome, because the Word "has been destroyed from among them."⁴³ Here separation is a duty towards God, for in the Church Jesus Christ must reign supreme through His Word and Spirit.

It must be admitted, of course, that in the days of the Reformation the issue was, in many ways, much clearer than in our day. Many of our Churches are more a mixture of truth and error than that one can say with Calvin of the R.C. Church of his day that "instead of the ministry of the Word, they have schools of ungodliness and a sink of all kinds of errors."⁴⁴ Yet we are sure that neither Luther, nor Calvin, nor any other Reformer, would have endured the presence of liberalism or neo-liberalism in their church — not to speak of the many catholicizing tendencies in many Protestant churches today.

Separation, however, **never** means isolation, in the sense of remaining alone, separate from the communion of the saints. It is our divine calling to seek visible unity with all those who call upon the Name of the Lord from a pure heart (II Tim. 2 : 22). It is our God-given duty to worship and serve God in the fellowship of all who accept that wonderful Gospel, rediscovered by the Reformers. Perhaps such a fellowship, at first means tensions and even frictions. There may be many obstacles of a historical, sociological, traditional or even national nature. But all such obstacles are

42) J. Calvin, Institutes, IV, 1, 12f.

43) J. Calvin, Institutes, IV, 11, 10.

44) Loc. cit.

not essential and they may never keep God's faithful children apart. Essential is only that we are the true church of God, "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2 : 20).

Such was the view of the church held by the Reformers. They "never broke away from the church to found their own sects and parties . . . These men knew no plurality of churches and they cared nothing for what Wesley would have called 'singularities;' they knew only one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, by which they meant the congregation of faithful men, where the Word is preached in purity and the sacraments are administered to our Lord's ordinance. This to them was not a matter of new viewpoints versus old but a grim battle of truth against error. Luther, at the end of his life, insisted that "we are the true old Church" of prophets and apostles, known by the seven authentic marks of Word, Baptism, Holy Communion, Ministry, Absolution (meaning the word of forgiveness), Prayer and Cross (meaning the suffering Church)."⁴⁵

Just as there always shall be a tension between the visible and the invisible aspect of the Church, so there shall ever be a tension between the aspect of unity and the aspect of truth in the life of the Church. In faith they belong together: 'Credo unam sanctam apostolicam Ecclesiam.' For the New Testament apostles the Church was unthinkable without this oneness and this apostolicity. In utter amazement the apostle Paul asks the Corinthians: "Is Christ divided?" (I Cor. 1 : 13). And with the full weight of his apostolic authority he declares: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all; who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4 : 4-6). But it is equally clear that in the New Testament the one-ness does not qualify the apostolicity, but, conversely, the apostolicity qualifies the one-ness. There is only one-ness in the common adherence to the apostolic Gospel. Wherever and whenever this Gospel is adulterated, the New Testament sounds its anathema and the one-ness, no, is not broken, but is denied (Gal. 1 : 8, 9; Titus 3 : 10, 11; II John 10, 11).

The same happened in the days of the Reformation, and it will happen again and again, where children of God accept the Gospel of the Reformation and show themselves willing to face all the consequences of such an acceptance. Indeed, the Reformation is still of the greatest importance for the discussion between the churches, for only it knows of the truly ecumenical nature of the church, as this is so clearly expressed in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: "Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. This Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught (purely preached) and the Sacraments rightly administered (according to the Gospel). And unto the true unity of the Church, it is sufficient to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments."

45) Franz Hildebrandt, Reunion and Reformation, Christianity Today, June 19, 1964, Vol. VIII, No 19, pp. 3/4. Cf. T. H. L. Parker, Portrait of Calvin, n.d., p.p. 105 f.