

## Reform and Reformation—Two Perspectives

There are two dimensions which we want to place in confrontation, the contemporary reform of Vatican II and the 16th century Reformation of Martin Luther. We shall therefore occupy alternately two vantage points. First we shall concern ourselves with the present reform and view Luther's Reformation from that vantage point. Then we shall transfer ourselves back into the situation of the old Reformation and from there consider the modern reform. From each vantage point we shall attempt to make as positive a judgment of its counterpart as possible.

Let us assume that the modern Catholic judges *everything* that Luther said concerning the gospel and concerning the justification of the sinner to be a correct interpretation of Scripture and as divine truth. What, then, is wrong in Luther, and what is his sin? The sin is precisely the shattering of the church's unity. Even if one speaks the truth and even if church authorities do not understand, one can still have patience, wait and suffer. If one cannot do that, then the truth shatters love. This evaluation of the Reformation in no way means that Luther's teaching is false. It is correct in every point and can be accepted by the church today—precisely by *that* church which hurled the anathema at Luther. A 450-year waiting period is a long time, but not *too* long for the truth. The destruction of the church's unity is a much more serious matter, because it cannot—or can hardly—be healed, not even with a waiting period.

Let us change our vantage point and transpose ourselves back into the old Reformation and from there consider Vatican II. Again we shall assume that no objections are to be raised against what was said by the bishops in Rome. Then what is it that is incorrect, what is still lacking? A clear statement on the authority of the church is still lacking. In no statement of the Council is the teaching office subordinated to the word of Scripture in such a way that God can choose other means than the teaching office in order to give to the church redemptive truth, and as long as this is not clearly expressed the church lacks that power which really can reform her. The critical power of the divine Word received a potent new place at the Council, but the Word is not yet *free*. There is still a limitation to the freedom of the Word, the limitation of the infallibility of the teaching office.

To sum up, Luther's Reformation meant the discovery of the gospel, but at the same time disobedience over against the teaching office of the church, the destruction of the church's unity. The modern reform means the discovery of

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the gospel, but at the same time obedience over against the teaching office of the church, a limiting of the freedom of the Word. The central problem to be dealt with here is obviously the problem of the continuity of the church.

The word "continuity", however, can mean different things. When Luther says there there has always been one holy church he is thinking of the power of the gospel to be able to break through every external form. Even when doctrine in an age past actually presupposed that justification was determined by man's deeds, there were yet always people such as St. Bernard who saw themselves condemned and could hope in *nothing* other than grace, that is, who actually lived on the basis of the sinner's justification *sola fide*. This is a statement of faith: there never has been a time in which the gospel has not been at work. Thus the fact of the worship service obviously played a great role for Luther, the simply reading of the gospel, baptism, etc. The task of the preacher is to make available these enduring sources.

The Catholic, on the other hand, means by "continuity" a visible continuation from generation to generation. If this visible continuity should become lost, that the truth remains is not of much help. Therefore, it is significant to have patience and to be obedient, even if the truth is veiled for a while by such an attitude. The role that the worship service with the gospel at its center played for Luther is taken over in Catholicism by the teaching office with its dispensation of grace. The gifts of the worship service unfold with their full blessing in the life of the individual through fellowship with the visibly united church (ending finally with the bishop of Rome).

Behind these two conceptions of continuity are two different types of Christology.

That Luther can speak so casually of an enduring church without seeking guarantees that she really is everywhere the same united church—this must be seen together with the fact that Christ is in the first place regarded as living now. Of course, the manger and the cross, as well as the earthly deeds of Jesus, also play a central role for Luther. But the New Testament accounts of these earthly events primarily serve the purpose of showing what sort of blessing one can expect from the Lord, who is living now, who therefore comes to us now in the Word and in the entire worship service. The external means (word, water, bread, wine) are his means, and since he himself lives, he makes use of these means. These are such means which human hands and human lips dutifully must take in order to be able to reach new recipients.

However, the office (i.e., these hands and lips) has basically no other priority regarding continuity than does, for example, the office of the farmer. Continuity between all farmers and unity in all agriculture lies in the fact that something is always *growing* on earth and that God *creates* on the earth. It is not necessary for one farmer to extend the office of farmers to the farmers of the next generation. Continuity and unity are assured by God himself. The office stands in the

service of an already existing estate and does not have the task to create that estate. The task of the office is this: to take in hand the fruits of the earth and to distribute them.

The ecclesiastical office begins at the same point, namely that Christ is risen and *is living now*. He is *here*, in his proper means, himself assuring the identity of his gifts with himself, when we faithfully proclaim the gospel as it has been given in the Scriptures.

On the Catholic side, the resurrection and the presence of the living Christ obviously play a central role. But in the development of the decisive argument concerning the relationship between Christ and the church, one proceeds from the presupposition that Christ *did live prior to* the apostles. As an historical personage he instituted something which had its results in a further developing chain of events. The primary passage, i.e., the statement of Jesus concerning the appointment of Peter, could actually have been spoken by one historical person to another historical person, without the resurrection of the first person contributing anything basically new to this development. It has its effect through historical chronological order: there is a chain of bishops in Rome. The construction of this argument proceeds from the basic premise that Christ *did live*.

From this comes also the necessity of insuring continuity. The structure in which the heritage of the first historical person is to be preserved is—at least *in nuce*—given by this first person himself and its firm shape came later. Since the blessing of Christ is given *in just this way*, by preserving it within a chronological order, it is obviously a duty of the church to hold sacred not only the first institution (Scripture) but also the means by which it has been passed on (Tradition).

Correlated with these two conceptions of “continuity” and with these two kinds of Christology are also two different types of *Pneumatology*.

For both sides the Spirit is connected with external means. Subjectivism in the sense of the Spiritualists and *Schwärmer* is to be found neither in Luther nor in Catholicism. With Luther, Spirit and Word are correlated—and Word here means the external Word, the preached, written or printed Word. Moreover, the preached Word is both beginning and end. Already before the written Word, says Luther, there was a gospel spoken by the apostles (with the Spirit-Pentecost!): Scripture came into being in order to preserve this preaching, to give it apostolic content. And when I have read and “heard” the gospel in Scripture I must preach it to other people. The Spirit always works in us through the Word. This is conceived very Hebraically: speaking and breath pour forth together from the mouth of one person; along with God’s Word comes God’s Spirit.

The ecclesiastical office has the task only to be a mouth. And it is a mouth when it takes the Word just as it finds it, and when it sees itself as a tool of the Spirit-

filled Word. The Word indeed *has* Spirit. What is lacking is solely the “distributing”, and it is for this distribution that the office is there. The same holds true for baptism, for the Lord’s Supper and for the Word of absolution in confession. The work of the office is the distributing, not the securing, of the gifts of the Spirit.

In Catholicism, on the other hand, the doctrine of the Spirit cannot be separated from the doctrine of the consecration of priests (or bishops). The distribution of grace in the sacraments signifies the communication of the Spirit’s gifts, but the presupposition for this is the abiding of the Spirit in the body of the church. Thus we have returned again to the same point, namely to the chain of bishops. The Spirit remains by means of the unbrokenness of the chain. The sharp polarity in the relationship between Christ and his church, the lordship of the Risen One over the church, which is typical for Luther, this polarity applies in the strict sense for Catholicism only for the beginning of the succession. After Christ appointed the apostles one can no longer speak of a polarity: the Spirit proceeds horizontally through each generation. The external means to which the Spirit is bound are in the first place not the Word and the sacraments. In the first place it is consecration, and because we are able to know that this consecration will always be there, we can say with certainty that the Spirit is given to us through the Word and the sacraments.

The difference between the two positions is clear. For Luther the correlation of Word and Spirit means that the polarity is retained: Christ is the Lord, the Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life, whom the church does not have at *her* disposal. In Catholicism the method of the horizontal passing on of the church’s tradition means that the church possesses a guarantee for the presence of the Spirit. The statement that we can with certainty count on the work of the Spirit among us is a statement of *faith* for Luther in another way than it is in Catholicism. For Luther this certainly rests *only* on the fact that God lives and is faithful, that Christ lives and is faithful; this certainty has no visible foundation in the constitution of the office. In Catholicism, on the other hand, there are visible guarantees in which one must in fact believe, but which at the same time make possible judgments on other constitutions of the office: here or there one cannot receive the full blessings of the sacraments. Judgments of this sort are for Luther impossible. One must hear what the other person says when he preaches, that is, only from the content of the gospel is one able to make a judgment about whether or not the office is “correct”. The church, he would say, has no possibility of establishing a certainty or a guarantee apart from the Word itself.

And with Luther this is based on *principle*. It is not the case that he really wanted another stronger foundation, some sort of guarantee, and that he had to be satisfied with the weaker one, with the gospel alone. On the contrary, such a guarantee would mean the removal of the lordship of the Spirit (and of the lordship of the Risen One), and thus finally the weakening of certainty. That Christ *comes* to us with the Spirit, that he is faithful, this is for Luther more certain than every ecclesiastical horizontal line.

The attitudes over against the classical and controversial theological problem of "Scripture", or "Scripture and Tradition", can be seen, from one point of view, as mere *consequences*. A position is taken in one way or another because one already has a Christology or Pneumatology. If the Spirit is a power which can be passed on through a horizontal line by consecration, then there exists no possibility for the emergence of the position of *sola scriptura*. And on the other side: if one—alone in the monastery—has received in faith the justification of the sinner through the Word of the New Testament, it would only destroy the certainty which he already has received as a gift if "tradition" is added to Scripture. A meaningful conversation between Catholics and Lutherans today must ask the question of whether the two positions which the participants have already taken are really such positions according to which one can *live*.

If it be asked how Lutheranism really *does live*, we would certainly find "tradition" there also. According to Lutheran doctrine the Confessions are nothing other than examples of Scriptural interpretation from different times (so for example in the introduction to the Formula of Concord). The statements in the Confessions should therefore be tested by a constant comparison with the statements of Scripture. The Confessions are binding for the church only in those instances where they are supported by biblical texts. The factual life of Lutheranism, especially in deliberating ecumenical questions, can exhibit a much more traditionalistic stance. Conversely, it is important that Lutheranism does have *in* the Confessions this clear doctrine of the subordination of every ecclesiastical authority to the Word. On that basis, Lutheranism's own traditionalism can always be viewed critically. In Rome, on the other hand, traditionalism is expressed directly in *doctrine*. It is only a question whether the Catholic church actually *lives* according to her axioms.

What happened at the Second Vatican Council? The bishops are the official occupants of the teaching office; *they* are by virtue of their consecration the bearers of the Spirit. But they were actually guided by professors of theology, that is by men who possessed no authority in the church. Another authority stands behind these professors, and not the majority of the members of the church (for without doubt the major decisions were made against the majority of these members) but the *study of the Bible*. The forces which developed before the Council out of the biblical movement were at the same time the spiritual forces present in the circle of the theology professors during the Council. And the bishops, who have the teaching office, were actually being guided by these forces. Moreover, it had to do with a *reform* of the church. Just at this point was *the Spirit* to be the working subject, just here were the theologians to be guided by the bishops. But life did not follow official teaching.

That which happened in Rome in conformity with official dogmatic teaching is the result of the convoking of the Council by *the Pope*. With this someone acted, someone who also officially possessed the Spirit and who is *vicarius Christi*". But John XXIII, who "in obedience to an inspiration" inaugurated the entire event

of the Council, is a phenomenon more difficult to classify among contemporary churchmen than any other modern figure. Who spoke to him in this “inspiration” which has altered a host of “tradition”?

Today it is always difficult to bring the factual life of the church into full conformity with her established doctrinal formulations. But what appears to me to be more important is this: if one attempts to assert *Scripture* as an authority in the church, one has to do this critically over against *those* churches which according to their official doctrine have Scripture as their sole authority.