

Was the Reformation a Tragedy?

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Some years ago, the late David Watson went on record as saying that the Reformation had been a great tragedy in the history of the church. His statement caused quite a stir at the time, particularly among people who thought that Watson was repudiating more than 400 years of the Church of England's history and heritage in the name of a Christian unity which he and others claimed to have found in and through their shared charismatic experience. When he was challenged on this score, Watson beat a somewhat hasty retreat and explained that there were many good aspects of the Reformation, although it had left a divided church and a sense of bitterness between Christians. Over the years those feelings had done untold harm, and negative repercussions could still be felt, even in today's more secular climate. In such a situation, claimed Watson, Christians had a duty to be healers and bridge-builders, setting aside ancient prejudices and accepting each other as fellow believers. The charismatic movement, to which Watson belonged, had been a pioneer in this respect, breaking down denominational barriers right across the spectrum and creating a sense of spiritual communion among those who were doctrinally and institutionally divided. In the 20 years or so which have passed since then, relations between the churches have not always been smooth, but it would be fair to say that ecumenical conversations between Evangelicals of different denominations and Roman Catholics have borne more fruit than would then have seemed possible. It is also true, of course, that these conversations have provoked some disquiet (on both sides), and that the future of Evangelical-Catholic dialogue is at best uncertain. On the Evangelical side, many believe that they have gone as far as they can go, and some think that even that is too far. For them, the Reformation was a parting of the ways which can never be undone, and Rome remains both alien and hostile to what they understand as gospel truth.

Were the differences which split the church in the sixteenth century really so profound that they can never be healed? What should the attitude of Protestants, and especially conservative-evangelical Protestants, be towards Roman Catholics and their church? Was David Watson right to call the Reformation a 'tragedy', and if he was, should we be seeking to put matters right at this stage? And what would 'putting matters right' actually mean? If we are ever going to overcome the hostility of centuries, these questions are ones which Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have to grapple with, however painful and difficult that may sometimes be. If we do not do so, then neither the conversations which have so far taken place, nor any future dialogue, is likely to get us very far along the road towards reconciliation.

In favour of David Watson's claim, it is certainly true that hatred between Catholics and Protestants caused wars and persecution in many different countries, and that the effects of these are still visible in some places today. No Christian person can be happy about this, and all of us have room to repent of the notorious *odium theologicum* which has so often dominated theological debate and stifled that spirit of charity, which lies at the heart of Christ's teaching. Both Protestants and Roman Catholics ought to recognize that this history of confrontation has usually been to the sole benefit of sceptics, atheists and other disparagers of Christianity who dominate our secular society. In the seventeenth century, the spectacle of

Christians torturing and killing each other in the name of competing versions of ‘absolute truth’ was enough to sicken sensitive souls, and it became a major factor contributing to the rise of the Enlightenment, which sought to build a new social consensus on the basis of human reason rather than on incompatible interpretations of divine revelation. In this sense the Reformation and its aftermath were indeed tragic, and we may agree fully with David Watson.

Furthermore, we must recognize that in the twentieth century, and with increasing momentum since the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), Roman Catholics have for the first time made a sincere and wide-ranging attempt to change this atmosphere of mutual suspicion and hatred. The ecumenical movement may have begun nearly a hundred years ago as an effort to coordinate missionary work among Protestants, but since about 1960 it has widened to include both Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox.¹ This has happened, partly because persecution in the historic lands of Eastern Orthodoxy has driven those churches to look for support elsewhere, and partly because the Roman Church has woken up to the need for modernization and engagement with the wider world – what the late Pope John XXIII called *aggiornamento*.² Ecumenism has now become a Christian subculture, offering a wide range of meetings, publications and initiatives designed to show how Christians of different persuasions can work together. It has been most successful at the academic level, where Protestants and Catholics now interact with each other as a matter of course. So much is this the case that nowadays the United Bible Societies can (and do) produce editions and translations of the Scriptures designed to serve all Christians without discrimination, and only very rarely do serious problems arise.³ There has also been considerable progress in joint liturgical ventures, with common texts being produced for the Lord’s Prayer, the Creeds and the Ten Commandments. The casual worshipper who visits an Anglican, Lutheran or Roman Catholic service may not be immediately aware of where he is, so similar are the forms of worship now in use. Furthermore, we all sing the same hymns and choruses, which know no denominational frontiers. The extreme banality of most of these (not to mention the turgid and uninspired style of modern liturgies) may be off-putting to those with sensitive ears, although this is not a denominational issue, except in certain Roman Catholic circles.⁴

But over against these signs of growing convergence *between* the churches must be set the growing disintegration *within* many of these churches. Roman Catholics today are not nearly as united behind the Pope as they were even 50 years ago, and criticism of the hierarchy is now commonplace, particularly among the laity.⁵ But in spite of this challenge, Rome has so far managed to contain criticism within certain limits. Lay people may complain about the lack of women priests, for example, and even some priests may criticize papal pronouncements of one kind or another. But when it comes to the crunch, no official spokesman of the Catholic church, and above all no bishop, is allowed to depart from the approved line with impunity.⁶ In stark contrast to this is the almost complete disappearance of any form of church discipline in most Protestant churches. Worst of all, it is often not lay people but the official leadership of the Protestant churches which denies the most basic tenets of Christianity, and promotes a lifestyle totally at variance with biblical norms. The Church of England can suspend a clergyman who refuses to baptize a baby, and threaten ordinands who do not want to wear a stole at their ordination, but it does nothing to silence bishops who deny the resurrection of Christ or who encourage the practice of homosexuality.

This situation puts loyal church members in a difficult position if they try to uphold their church’s confessions of faith, and doubly so if they try to insist that those confessions ought to have some authority over the consciences of church members. An evangelical Anglican

who takes his stand on Scripture and the Thirty-Nine Articles is an unpopular figure, whose views are liable to be dismissed out of hand – with or without the ridicule which will certainly be expressed in private, even if it does not reach the public domain. The main reason for this is that such loyalty to the church's official teachings, if it were to be generally accepted, would lead to the departure of a significant proportion of the church's senior leadership. It is therefore not on the agenda, and conservative Protestants must either live within a church which they regard as corrupt, or leave and form a splinter organization, with all the problems which then ensue.⁷ Either way, they are in a difficult position with respect to Roman Catholicism, since they cannot easily justify their separation from Rome as a corrupt church when their own communion is far worse – in practice, if not on paper.

This is a matter of particular importance to committed Protestants, because the credibility gap between what their churches officially proclaim and what the leadership actually believes is so great that many otherwise loyal members are tempted to look elsewhere. Indeed, not a few have gone over to Rome or to one of the eastern churches, in search of the authority and assurance which their own church cannot give them. This has been going on for a long time of course, and Anglicans have grown used to seeing it among erstwhile Anglo-Catholics. But recently the movement has spread beyond this traditional recruiting ground to attract people who come from a very different kind of Protestantism. The trend is more apparent in the United States than it is elsewhere, but there are now many people from a conservative-evangelical background who have become Roman Catholics, and perhaps as many again who have become Eastern Orthodox. In terms of overall numbers, this may not be very significant, since there are also many Catholics and Orthodox who have become Evangelicals, but the type of convert is noticeably different. Catholics (and Orthodox) who become Protestants are usually people who were only nominal members of those churches. They seldom know much about them beyond what they may have experienced as children, and they have hardly ever studied their theology seriously. Very often they have heard the gospel in a parachurch situation, made a profession of faith and joined an evangelical church, becoming active church members for the first time. Their memories of Catholicism or Orthodoxy may be bitter, not least because they did not hear the gospel in that setting, but they are seldom well-informed about what they have rejected.

It is very different with the Evangelicals who have been attracted to Rome or to the Orthodox. Usually they are people who have been deeply committed to their faith (if not to a particular church), and who are well-versed in the basics of evangelical theology. They have been attracted by these other forms of Christianity partly because they perceive them to be more authentic guardians of ancient tradition, and because they practise the sort of church discipline lacking in their own communities, but also because they have been convinced that Catholicism (or Orthodoxy) is the 'fullness' of a Christianity which they have only partially absorbed in an Evangelical setting. To them, Protestantism, and especially evangelical Protestantism, is a truncated form of Christianity – the gospel *minus*, as opposed to the traditional evangelical charge that Roman Catholicism (and presumably also Eastern Orthodoxy) is the gospel *plus* a number of later accretions. Even when due allowance is made for romanticism in this observation,⁸ such people can become articulate proselytizers for their new church. They are all the more persuasive because there is no doubt that they have a genuine, inside knowledge of the evangelical (and Protestant) world and its beliefs. Evangelicals may think that they are wrong, but they cannot dismiss the charges out of hand.

Is there any truth in the claim that evangelical Protestantism is an inadequate, deficient form of Christianity? Can the problems of indiscipline which we see in Protestant churches be

attributed to some missing ingredient which the Catholics (and/or the Orthodox) possess? What can we say to someone like Scott Hahn, a former Evangelical: that conversion to Rome is comparable to the homecoming of the prodigal son who has wasted his inheritance in a vain attempt to be free?⁹

The Development of the Christian

To answer those questions, we have to look back to see how the Christian theological tradition has grown and developed since New Testament times. There are many different ways of looking at this, but a Trinitarian approach can fairly claim to be the one most faithful to the inner genius of that development. After all, it is the doctrine of the Trinity which both *distinguishes* Christianity from other religions, including the closely-related Judaism and Islam, and *unites* all professing Christians.¹⁰ If we look at Christian theological development in Trinitarian terms, we can see that there has been a logical progression from the person of the Father to his work, then to the Son's person and work, and finally to the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

The struggle over the person of the Father is what set Jesus against the Jews of his time, and it is therefore apparent in the New Testament. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he told them to say 'Our Father', and the New Testament preserves the Aramaic word *Abba*, as having been used by Jesus himself. From John 5:18 we know that this teaching was not popular with the Jewish leaders, because to them it sounded as if Jesus was making himself equal with God. The logic behind this belief is simple. A child is equal to his parents in the sense that both are fully human, and so if Jesus is the Son of God he must be fully divine. Jesus probably meant just that with respect to himself, but he also told his followers to pray to God as 'Our Father', which indicates that he wanted them to have a relationship with God which would be significantly different from anything which the Jews were used to. It is hard to find the right way to express this difference, but perhaps we can say that the Jews looked at God on the 'outside'. God was a presence in their midst, not to be approached too closely, and definitely not to be touched. He stood over and above his people, and therefore the law which he gave them was fundamentally external in its nature and in its demands. Jesus Christ, however, internalized the law, so that in him we have somehow gone 'inside' God. To put it as the New Testament does, the veil in the temple has been torn in two so that now we can stand with him in the holy of holies (Matt 27:51; Eph 2:6). The barriers have been removed, to enable us to know and experience him in a way which was previously impossible. In a word, we can call God 'Father' as Jesus did, because by our adoption as sons we participate in the relationship which is his by nature (Gal 4:6).

Once that point was understood, Christian theology moved on to the next question, which concerned the Father's work. Here Christians found themselves opposed not so much by the Jews, as by the many different groups to whom we now give the catch-all label of 'Gnostics'. These people entertained all kinds of weird theories about the relationship of creation to redemption, but basically, most of them believed that Yahweh (the creator) was an inferior god, who had been supplanted by the Father of Jesus Christ, whom they identified as the redeemer god. Over against this theory, the church had to proclaim that the creator and the redeemer were one and the same God. Our redemption in Christ is not the fruit of a cosmic battle between two opposing deities, but the fulfilment of a plan which was in the Father's mind from the beginning. By uniting creation and redemption as the work of a single God, the Christians were redefining the relationship between spirit and matter, as that was

generally understood in the ancient world. They were affirming the sovereignty of this God over all creation – no form of evil, however powerful it might appear, was any match for him. Within the Trinitarian Godhead, it was the Father’s special work to shape the plan of creation and redemption. It was he who sent first the Son and then the Holy Spirit to accomplish his will. By sticking to this and insisting that the unitary view (whatever its difficulties) was superior to cosmic dualism, the church eventually sloughed off Gnosticism and emerged with a gospel message which laid claim to the whole of creation.

The next stage of Christian theological development had to do with the person of Christ, and it grew naturally out of the question of the Father’s work. If the Father was both creator and redeemer, where did the Son fit in? Was it possible to say that, as part of his plan, the Father created the Son and made him our redeemer? This was the teaching of Arius (d 336), and for a while it looked as if it would take over the church completely. There were many Bible verses which seemed to indicate that the Son was somehow inferior to the Father, and it was not difficult to use the language of ‘begetting’ to mean ‘creating’ – after all, we still talk about birth as ‘procreation’! What Arius did was to force the church to rethink its whole theology, in order to make it perfectly clear that the Son was a divine person absolutely equal to the Father and yet distinguished in some mysterious way from him. It was the Son who became a man and who died on the cross, not the Father,¹¹ and yet the fulness of God dwelt in the body of the Son (Col 2:9).

It took a long time to work out the implications of this, but the history of the church from the first council of Nicaea (325) to the council of Chalcedon (451) and even later is the story of how that was done. There was a price to pay for this clarification however, because it was at this time that two great branches of the church broke away from the main body. One was the branch which we now call ‘monophysite’, because it clung to the belief that in Christ there is only one nature – the divine one – even though it somehow acquired all the attributes of humanity as well.¹² The other is the branch we call Nestorian, after its supposed founder, Nestorius (d c 451). The Nestorians maintained a strict distinction between the divine and human natures in Christ, but pushed this so far that it ran the risk of splitting his personhood in two.¹³ The church had to keep a balance here, stressing the unity of Christ’s person and the distinctiveness of his two natures. This was only possible by turning commonly held ideas of how these two things were related on their head. Before the council of Chalcedon, most people thought primarily in terms of nature (e.g. the word ‘God’ meant what we would now call ‘deity’ or ‘divinity’, and ‘man’ meant what we would now call ‘humanity’) and a ‘person’ was just the visible shape which the underlying nature took. In battling for the unity of Christ’s person, Christians turned this around and said no – the person of the Son is primary, and possesses his nature. By becoming a man, he acquired a second nature without losing the first. This is what made it possible for him to save us as a man, without giving up his power and identity as God.

Once this was settled, the theological question turned to Christ’s work. In the early church, this question was answered by appealing to the Son’s incarnate being – as Gregory of Nazianzus put it: ‘What has not been assumed has not been healed.’¹⁴ To know whether or not we have been saved, it was thus necessary to know whether or not the Son of God was a complete human being, with a soul, a mind, a will and so on. That was fine as far as it went, but it did not explain why the Son of God had to suffer and die for us. As we would put it today, there was no developed doctrine of atonement, linking Christ’s death to the sacrifice made once a year by the high priest in ancient Israel, even though such a link is clearly present in the New Testament. It was not until the time of Anselm of Canterbury (c 1033-

1109) that this problem was tackled directly, and it is noteworthy that Anselm began with the Incarnation – why did God become man?¹⁵ But although he started there, Anselm went much further, and discussed in some detail what the incarnate Son of God actually did on the cross. His conclusion was that Christ paid the price for the sins of the whole world, making satisfaction to God the Father for the offences which his people had committed. Anselm's theory was widely accepted, and before long it became the standard teaching of the Western church.

Anselm's doctrine did not penetrate the Eastern Orthodox world however, because by then another controversy had broken out, this time concerning the person of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ John 15:26 states quite clearly that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, and that teaching was incorporated into the Nicene Creed, but nothing was said about the part played by the Son in this. Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father *alone* or does he proceed from the Father *and the Son*? The Eastern Orthodox churches said the former, and the Western church (following Augustine) said the latter. This controversy has never been resolved, and it continues to be the major stumbling block to full communion between East and West. The issue is too complicated to deal with here¹⁷ but virtually everyone would agree that this difference of belief is reflected in a noticeably different sense of spirituality in the two churches. Western Christianity is generally thought to be less 'mystical' and otherworldly in tone than its Eastern counterpart, and this may be at least partly due to its different understanding of the procession of the Holy Spirit. What is certainly true is that the Augustinian doctrine of the double procession is rooted in a particular understanding of the Trinity as a community of divine love, and Western theologians have generally believed that the doctrine is necessary if that community of love is to be realized in the church's experience.

The final theological question which had to be addressed is that which concerns the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is here that the cleavage between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism makes itself felt. Both branches of the Western church agree that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and that it is he who gives life to the body of Christ. But they differ as to how this happens. To put it simply, we may compare the difference to that which we have already noticed between Judaism and Christianity.¹⁸ Roman Catholicism stresses the external working of the Holy Spirit – in the priesthood, the sacraments, the church and so on. It justifies this approach by claiming that it is objective, i.e. that a person who is baptized in the right way receives the gift of the Holy Spirit and is born again, whatever he or she may think about it personally. For this reason, the Catholic understanding of 'faith' is indissolubly bound up with works, because external activities stimulate and build up faith. Without works, particularly the sacramental works of the church, there can be no faith – the very idea is a nonsense.

Led by Martin Luther, Protestants have rejected this way of thinking because they believe that the work of the Holy Spirit is primarily internal, resulting in a change of heart and mind. This is why Luther insisted that a believer is justified in the sight of God by faith *alone* (i.e. without works), but it also explains why his Catholic opponents did not accept his teaching – they did not understand what he meant. The Catholics had no problem with the idea of justification by faith – not even with justification by faith 'alone', but because of their understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit as fundamentally external, they could not imagine how there could be faith without works. The two necessarily went together, in much the same way that marriage is not just a spiritual commitment between two people, but a change of lifestyle which involves a public ceremony and subsequent cohabitation. To have

one without the other makes no sense, and so it was with the attempt to separate ‘faith’ from ‘works’. In Catholic minds, Luther was saying that a Christian could be saved by mere belief, whether his behaviour corresponded to that belief or not. Protestants, on the other hand, appealed to the Apostle Paul’s teaching in Romans 6 – that once a person is born again, everything else flows naturally from that basic fact. In other words, if the Holy Spirit has changed your heart, then your behaviour (‘works’) will reflect that. But if he has not done so, no amount of ‘works’ can make it happen – going through the motions, even if they are motions which have the church’s seal of approval, will not bring you or anyone else closer to God.

It is this sense of the indwelling presence and transforming power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer which distinguishes the Protestant from the Roman Catholic most clearly. Its effects are immediately visible when we discuss the question of assurance of salvation. Ask a Roman Catholic whether he is going to heaven when he dies and he will say that he does not know. He trusts the church for his salvation, and hopes that by doing what it says he will be on the right track when he dies, but if (as is very likely) he has not quite arrived at that point, he can go to purgatory to work off his excess debt of sin for however long it takes until he is worthy to be admitted to heaven. Ask an evangelical Protestant the same question and he will say quite simply that yes, he will be going to heaven when he dies, because he has been united with Christ, not only in his death but also in his resurrection and new life. On hearing this, the Catholic will probably accuse the Evangelical of presumption (‘how can you know such a thing?’), to which the Protestant will reply that his assurance is not based on anything which he has done or achieved, but on the grace of God promised to him in Christ. If getting to heaven were a matter of worthiness, then nobody would ever go there, since even a million years in purgatory could not make a person any worthier than he is already. Those who get to heaven are completely unworthy of this gift of grace, and always will be, even after they arrive. Why? Because getting to heaven is a matter of being united to Christ in such a way that it is his righteousness, and not ours (which is non-existent), which provides the platform on which we can stand in God’s presence. As Jesus himself said, he has chosen us – not the other way round (John 15:16). I know that I am going to heaven because, although I shall continue to sin until the day I die, Christ’s righteousness and the forgiveness which comes from it can never fail. My assurance of salvation is not presumption but faith – and faith ‘alone’.

This brings us back to the atonement theory of Anselm, which Luther and his followers modified in a small but significant way. Anselm had spoken of Christ dying for sins, but Luther changed this to say that Christ died for sinners. In other words, Christ died not for things but for people, just as the Holy Spirit works not on things but in people. Christ died for me, and in doing that he wiped away my sins in the process. A Catholic believes that he died for our sins in an objective sense, but if we want to benefit from this death, we have to draw on the grace available to us through the ministrations of the church. These are the works of faith which make the grace of God a reality in our lives. Protestants say no to this – the grace of God is given to us by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Christ who died for me. I am still a sinner and whatever righteousness I may claim is his, not mine. In the language of reformation theology, it is ‘imputed’ to me, not ‘imparted’ or ‘infused’. The difference is that I remain totally dependent on Christ for everything when his righteousness is ‘imputed’, because it remains his full and unique possession. If, on the other hand, it were to be ‘imparted’ to me or ‘infused’ into me, then I would to some degree become righteous in myself, and would in some sense be able to co-operate with God in achieving my own salvation.

Here we see that Catholic theology does not make the same distinction between justification and sanctification which Protestants are accustomed to do. Because Protestants believe that they have been justified once for all by Christ's death on the cross, they regard subsequent growth in the Christian life as a process of sanctification which goes on as long as we walk this earth. I may be more or less sanctified, but we are never more or less saved – that is a once-for-all work of Christ which cannot be undone, however poor the fruits of our sanctification may turn out to be. Catholics on the other hand, see justification and sanctification as two sides of the same coin – a believer is as justified as he is sanctified, and the latter may be used as an index by which to measure the former. By that standard of course, no-one can ever be sure of being saved, since even the greatest saints are hardly very sanctified in God's eyes! Catholics sometimes accuse Protestants of believing that they can do whatever they like in this life because it will not affect their salvation, an accusation which illustrates their own way of thinking quite well, but which leaves most Protestants puzzled. To our minds, a person who is born again will not dream of sinning willy-nilly, because in Christ he has been made a new creation and the old way of thinking has passed away (Rom 6: 1-14). Every Christian knows from experience how much he has to depend on God for grace to overcome both temptation and actual sin. The Holy Spirit inside us gives us the strength to win out in this struggle, and evangelical Protestants believe that anyone who does not realize this is not a Christian at all.

It is true that success or failure in the spiritual struggle does not affect my salvation, but that is because my salvation rests not on my 'works', but on a different basis altogether. That basis is God's choice (election) of me, quite apart from anything which I might have done to deserve it. Protestantism is a radical denial of any kind of merit, and Evangelicals believe that those who are closest to God are those who are most aware of how undeserving they really are. The most spiritual person is also the humblest, because he or she knows only too well that it all depends on God's will and on his initiative. To suggest otherwise is to detract from God's glory, however good the intention may be, and for that reason there can be no place for works (or the boasting which successful works might lead to) in our salvation.

Where do we go from here?

From this it will be clear that evangelical Protestantism cannot be regarded as an inadequate form of Christianity. On the contrary, it would be better to say that it is the most fully developed theological understanding of our faith which has yet appeared. That is not to say that nobody understood the work of the Holy Spirit before the sixteenth century, or that one has to be a card-carrying Evangelical in order to be saved. There have always been many faithful Christians who have not understood these matters in such depth, but who have nevertheless experienced the saving grace of God in their lives. Knowledge is a wonderful thing, for which we must be eternally grateful, but it is not the basis on which we are saved, and even the most enlightened believer still has a great deal to learn. It may well be that the church will go through further convulsions in the future as it is called to work out the implications of its teachings in areas which up to now have remained hidden from our eyes, and future generations may look back on us and wonder whether we really understood something of which we are unaware. They may conclude that we did not, but they will be wrong if for that reason they deny us the name of Christian. In the same way, we must be careful not to pass judgment on earlier generations who did not share our understanding of the gospel in every detail. For example, when we look back on a giant of our faith like

Augustine, we immediately recognize in him a fellow believer and see our experience of grace mirrored in his, even though we also know that he did not explain penal substitutionary atonement in the way that we do. Whether he would have done so had the opportunity arisen must remain an unanswerable question, just as we cannot now say how we would handle a future controversy of which we have no knowledge.

What matters here is that we should come to a common mind once the issue has been raised. In all conscience I have to say that a Roman Catholic who does not accept the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone has an inadequate grasp of the true meaning of New Testament Christianity. This does not mean that such a person cannot be a Christian, but Evangelicals everywhere will want that person to enter into a deeper understanding of his faith. This is not because we want him to become a Protestant, but because we want him to get closer to God. Whether he then leaves the Roman Catholic church or not is up to him, though many Evangelicals will testify from personal experience that people who come to experience the grace of God in an evangelical way find it increasingly difficult to remain in the Roman communion. This is not merely because Rome has failed to understand what Protestantism is all about, but because it actively opposes it. To fail to understand the evangelical gospel is one thing, but to consciously reject it is quite another. The tragedy of the Reformation is not that Luther and his followers split the church – that was the last thing they wanted to do – but that many parts of the church were unwilling to appreciate the significance of what he discovered. At the time that may have been understandable – after all, how many of us understand the importance of new ideas when we first hear them? But after several centuries in which Protestant churches and societies have been in the vanguard of human development generally, it can hardly be denied that Luther had something to say which all Christians need to hear. To reject this in the name of ‘tradition’ or ‘authenticity’ is to prefer an arrested form of theological development which does not do justice to the fullness of the biblical revelation. Those who opt for the spiritual equivalent of the abacus and reject the computer may be described in any number of ways, both positive and negative, but they cannot reasonably be regarded as more fully Christian than those who have moved on to higher things!

Having said this, we must accept that evangelical Christians can learn a great deal from other traditions, and the importance of church discipline is one of them. The cause of Christ is not served when his official servants deny him, and it is a matter of urgency for us to find ways of dealing with this. Let us never forget that it is this weakness, as much as anything else, which attracts some of our number to more authoritarian, but also more logically consistent forms of Christianity. Admittedly, it is difficult to maintain the primacy of an internal, heartfelt faith and impose church discipline at the same time, because it is always possible to argue that however wrong a person may be about something he says or does, ‘his heart is in the right place’. That may be true, at least in some cases, and it is precisely for that reason that we must respect a person’s freedom of conscience and expression. The issue is not one of ‘heresy hunting’ in the traditional sense, but of ecclesiastical credibility. Those who are licensed to teach are held to a higher standard, and we cannot lightly accept a situation in which our official spokesmen betray their trust – often quite consciously and unrepentantly. Before throwing stones at Rome (or anyone else) we have to put our own house in order, so that those who look at us may at least see that we practise what we preach, even if they disagree with it. That is the challenge we face at the present time, and the attraction of Rome (or of the Eastern churches) is unlikely to diminish significantly until we learn how to deal with it.

The dialogue between the Roman Catholic church and Evangelicals is never likely to get very far, because it is a meeting of two bodies which are quite unlike one another, even if there are points of compatibility. Roman Catholicism is a highly organized church, with a central command structure. On the one hand, this means that it could become an evangelical body tomorrow, if the Pope were to decree it. But on the other hand, it also means that nothing will happen officially until he says so, and that is unlikely to be any time soon. Evangelicals, by comparison, are a diverse group with no institutional unity or official spokesmen. Even if the majority of these were to agree on reunion with Rome, it would still only happen one step at a time. As we have seen with the most recent dialogues, there will always be dissenters, and even many of those engaged in discussion will not move over to Rome in some form of reunion – they do not see any need to do so, and most of them continue to believe that Rome is an unreformed church which is not acceptable in its present form. The most that can realistically be hoped for is that Evangelicals and Roman Catholics will co-operate more in areas where they can (i.e. social and relief work, academic study, etc) and learn to respect each other more than they currently do. Reunion (if it ever comes) is a very long way off, and those Evangelicals who feel that their brethren who have entered into dialogue with Roman Catholics have sold their birthright for a mess of pottage can relax. What we are engaged in is an outpouring of Christian love, which is an affirmation, not a surrender, of Christian truth. Those who love the truth walk in the light, and do not need to fear that they will lose sight of the One who is the Light of the world. In that Light we shall see the way ahead, whatever form our future ecumenical relations will take.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Ironically, the most missionary-minded Protestants today also tend to be those who are the most suspicious of the ecumenical movement!
- 2) In this respect, Rome is very different from the Eastern churches, which have generally resisted any form of modernization.
- 3) This happens most frequently with the Eastern Orthodox who are tied to the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament and to the so-called Byzantine, or ecclesiastical text of the New, which makes it difficult for them to accept translations based on modern critical editions.
- 4) Very conservative Roman Catholics regard all modern, vernacular (as opposed to Latin) liturgies – to say nothing of hymns and choruses – as creeping Protestantism.
- 5) This is true even in traditionally conservative countries like Ireland. Fintan O'Toole, who writes for the *Irish Times*, has recently said that Irish Catholics have now become 'Protestants' in their thinking, because they are no longer prepared to follow their church's moral teachings without reflection. This may not be what a Protestant thinks of as 'Protestantism', but neither is it what the Catholic church has traditionally expected of its flock.
- 6) E.g. Catholic university professors. It was his failure to toe the line on papal infallibility which led to the removal of Hans Kung's title in 1979. He kept his professorship, but was no longer regarded as officially 'Catholic'.

- 7) In the Anglican tradition, for example, there have been several recent breakaways, especially in the United States. But very often, these groups are more united in what they oppose than in what they affirm, and many have found it difficult (or impossible) to work together.
- 8) It is relatively easy to contrast the best in Roman Catholicism (or Eastern Orthodoxy) with the worst in (evangelical) Protestantism and conclude that the former is superior. But anyone who has lived in a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox environment knows that the grass is not greener on their side of the hill.
- 9) Scott Hahn *Rome Sweet Home* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press 1994)
- 10) This is still true today. Groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses are not considered Christian, mainly because they deny the Trinity.
- 11) There were some people who thought that Jesus was the incarnate Father, and that therefore it was the Father who had died on the cross. They are called 'patripassians'.
- 12) Today, the Coptic church of Egypt, the churches of Ethiopia and Armenia, and the ancient 'Jacobite' church of South India are all 'monophysite'.
- 13) Nestorians were once very numerous, but have now been reduced to a small number of adherents in Iraq and in different lands of emigration, especially the USA. They are sometimes called 'Assyrians'.
- 14) *Epistle 101*
- 15) This was the title of Anselm's great work on the subject: *Cur Deus homo?*
- 16) Anselm, as it happens, got involved in this when he was an exile in Italy (1098). He wrote a treatise on the subject which grew out of a debate which he had with Greek churchmen at Bari, and which remains one of the most important statements of the issue from a Western standpoint. A new translation has recently appeared in G R Evans ed *Anselm of Canterbury. The Major Works* (Oxford 1998).
- 17) Those who are interested should see my article 'The *Filioque* clause in history and theology' *Tyndale Bulletin* XXXIV (1983) pp 94-144.
- 18) This comparison is not new – Martin Luther saw quite clearly that the Roman Church was a kind of Judaism in comparison with his own understanding of Christian teaching.