

REFORMATION

The Reformation in the sixteenth century was essentially conservative. It was not a revolution. It did not set out to overthrow violently what had been in the past. The preface to the *Augsburg Confession*, addressed to Emperor Charles V, states its desire for agreement in the one Christian truth. It aims to present the faith on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. It expresses the hope that the evangelicals may participate in a general free council. At the end of Article XXI it expresses the conviction that nothing has been taught that is contrary to the Holy Scriptures or to what is common to the Christian church, and in the remaining articles it desires to remove abuses that have crept in.

The word “reformation” contains the word “form.” Since the full writings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle had come into vogue in the schools in the West early in the thirteenth century, the words “substance” and “form” came into fresh usage. The basic idea in “reformation” is that previous form returns into the original “stuff”, the “substance”, and the unchanged substance then takes on a new form. It is important to observe that though many people were disillusioned by scandalous abuses in the church, there was no cynical rejection of the church, the substance, and everything that it stood for. What the “reformers” wanted was that the same substance of the church should take on its earlier, pristine form.

The word “reform” came into special use in the church after the schism in the papacy. In AD 1309 factions in Rome had become so difficult for Pope Clement V that he bowed to pressure from the French King Philip IV to move southern France. Avignon became the home of the popes in the “Babylonian captivity” until 1417. When Gregory XI returned to Rome in 1377, however, the French cardinals elected a French pope of their own, and thus began the papal schism, which lasted until 1417. There were two popes, one at Rome, and one at Avignon, each supported by different countries. When the Council of Pisa (1409) dismissed both, and elected a third, neither of the former two would resign, and “then there were three.” The notorious Baldassare Cossa, as JOHN XXIII succeeded the first Pisa-pope. The twentieth century pope John XXIII must have had a sense of humour! During that period of schism a succession of writers proposed measures for healing it, and for reform in the church. One of the chief proposals was for a general council. After the Council of Constance dismissed all three popes in 1417, the new popes, from Martin V, frustrated further attempts to reform the church. Later a pope declared it heretical to appeal against a pope to a general council. That is part of the background for the concept of “reform.” However, it should be obvious that this movement for reform was chiefly concerned with external structures, and abuses like “simony.”

On the other hand, all genuine calls for reformation among God’s people have begun with a call to repentance. The prophets of old did. The threats of retribution for disobedience in Leviticus 26 included this one: “And if by these things you are not reformed by Me, but walk contrary to Me, then I shall also walk contrary to you, and I shall afflict you seven times over for your sins.” Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their preaching with the message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews used the word “reformation” for the ways in which the New Testament fulfilled and replaced the sacrificial system, the regulations about food and drink, the washings, and the other fleshly ordinances of the Old Testament. The “reformation” was to be in spiritual things. It would be an improvement, a new order. In the same vein, the first of Luther’s 95 Theses called for spiritual reform, for repentance: “Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, in saying, ‘Repent’, etc., intended that the whole lives of the believers should be repentance.” The Latin for “repent”, *poenitentiam agite*, had been Jerome’s translation of the Greek word for “repent”, which meant a change in heart. However, in the usage of the church the phrase “*poenitentiam agite*” had come to mean, “do penance.” Luther’s problem was that a person could go through the motions of penance by the purchase of an indulgence, which provided an outward way of by-passing both genuine sorrow for sin and faith in God’s forgiveness for Christ’s sake. It is obvious that the concern of the Sixteenth Century reformation was spiritual.

Previous calls for reform in the church had concentrated on external things, such as the two or the three popes, or abuses. There had been “reformers” before Luther, men like Wycliffe, John Hus, and Savonarola, but they had concentrated on abuses, without going to the central doctrine of the Gospel, which had been obscured by much mixing of Law and Gospel. The central issue was: “How can a sinner find a gracious God?” The answer came through a recovery of the meaning of the theme of Paul’s letter to the Romans: “The righteous will live by faith.” It was realised that “the righteous man” was not righteous because of works, which then became the qualification for having life by faith. Paul made it abundantly clear in Romans that he understood that verse from Habakkuk 2:4 to mean “the ungodly person who is declared righteous before God through faith will live.”

This was the rediscovery of the Gospel. Salvation did not come through the righteousness of the Law, but through the substitutionary obedience of Jesus the Saviour alone. Luther was helped in this rediscovery by His work as a lecturer in the Old Testament. He recognised that the word “righteousness” was often parallel to Gospel words like “mercy” and “salvation” in the Psalms, Isaiah, and elsewhere.

If reformation is essentially ongoing repentance, then the call goes out to us today to continue to live before God in a spiritual way, in genuine repentance for the sin that we daily commit, and in continually renewed faith in our Lord’s atoning death and glorious resurrection.

The church today is again ripe for reformation. The things that are being said by many theologians and bishops these days, with the respectability of clerical collars and Doctor titles, were said in the time of the early church only by heretics and bitter opponents of Christianity, like Celsus. The “respected theologians” in the so-called “Jesus Seminar” conclude that Jesus did not in fact say and do many of the things that the Gospels said that He said and did. Bishop Spong uses his position as a bishop to attack fundamental teachings of the Christian faith. Well may one ask, “Why does he want to be a bishop at all?” On many issues the authority of the Scriptures is assailed. At least at the time of the Reformation, in spite of the controversies that concerned the central core of the faith, it was assumed by all that Jesus is true God, and that God’s word of truth is to be found in the Scriptures. In many ways the situation is far worse these days than it was before the Reformation in the 16th century. It is tragic that in this sad confusion the faith of many people is being assailed, and there is danger that many people will conclude that the substance of the church, the Gospel itself, and the claims of the Scriptures should be roundly rejected, not only their form. Therefore our prayer for the church of the late twentieth century should continually be, “Lord, have mercy! Grant another reformation!”