

Fall 2017

# Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

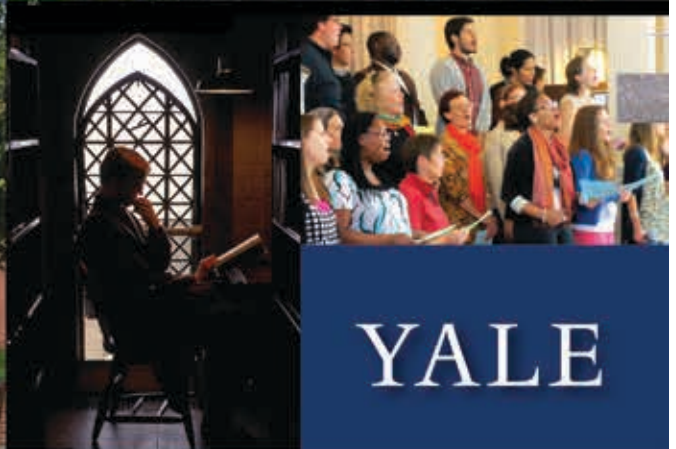
## Reformation: Writing the Next Chapter



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*a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry*

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# From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling  
The Reverend Henry L. Slack  
Dean of Yale Divinity School  
& Lillian Claus Professor  
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Although I did not attend Yale Divinity School, I was shaped by the faculty of the School, especially in my understanding of the Reformation. As an undergraduate, I read Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand* (1950) and Kenneth Scott Latourette's *A History of Christianity* in two hefty volumes (1953, 1st edition). They not only informed me, they captured my imagination.

Both works were composed at a time when mainline Protestants enjoyed an ascendancy in America that is now a relic of the past: Reinhold Niebuhr graced the cover of *Time* (March 8, 1948), and the Federal Council of Churches became the National Council of Churches (1950), constructing the 19-story limestone-clad Interchurch Center on 475 Riverside Drive in Manhattan (1952). It is hard to conceive of *Time* featuring a theologian today, and the NCC left Riverside Drive in 2013. When the Pew Research Center conducted its first Religious Landscape Study in 2007, half of Americans considered themselves Protestants (51.3 percent). By 2014 that percentage had dropped to below half (46.5 percent). A country that was once overwhelmingly Protestant is no longer so.

The composition of Protestants has also changed. From the 16th century onward, Protestants have consisted of multiple traditions. In the US today we think of three large groups: In 2014 evangelicals comprised 55 percent of the Protestants, mainlines 32 percent, and historically black churches 14 percent. The same mix was not true of the 1950s.

The other major change is the shift of the center of gravity in the global Protestant world from the North to the South and from the West to the East. The fastest growing area is Sub-Saharan Africa: By 2060 an estimated four in ten Christians worldwide will live there practicing forms of Christianity unknown in the West.

These changes mean that it is no longer possible to read Bainton's *Here I Stand* in the same way that I did in the 1970s. As we remember the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we do so through a new set of lenses.

In this *Reflections* issue we want to reflect on our heritage, assess the present, and contemplate the future. The Reformation of the 16th century, or perhaps we should more accurately say the Reformations of the 16th century, unleashed forces that changed the course of Western history. We should ask what we can learn from the Reformation(s) without feeling bound to the answers of the 1500s. Our world is quite different from the medieval world to which the reformers reacted. It would be foolish and futile to repeat views of the reformers *tout court*. We should not, however, forget the sources that have shaped us.

We need to own our present. The church today needs to hear voices that were not heard in earlier generations. This issue conveys some of the diversity that now characterizes Christianity.

Finally, we need to think about the future. Where are we headed? One of the features of the Reformation was the proliferation of denominations. I am not sanguine about the future of denominations. I do not think that they will immediately disappear, but the present does not bode well for their long-term survival. This creates an opportunity to be more ecumenical than we have been, but in a new way – a way that privileges people over institutions. Churches are a result of a prior relationship to Christ, not the goal of the relationship. The reformers can still teach us some things.

I invite you to read this issue by standing in the present and Janus-like look with one face to the past and one face to the future. God worked in a powerful way in the past and can do so again in the future.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gregory E. Sterling".

Gregory E. Sterling, Dean



Mennonites in Ontario, Canada, 1990

Photo by Larry Towell

© Larry Towell/Magnum Photos

# From Wittenberg to Global Church: The Reformation Belongs to the World



By Bruce Gordon

*Anniversaries, our private and public rituals of remembrance, tell us a great deal about our identities. They shape our lives. Looking at the past we often see ourselves. So it is hardly surprising that such rituals cast in relief not only what we choose to tell but what we omit.*

As we reflect on how remembrance changes over time, let us remind ourselves of how the Reformation was cast in a different age. In his 1873 *The Reformation*, my predecessor, George Park Fisher, the first to hold the Chair of Ecclesiastical History at Yale, wrote with confidence, “Hence intellectual liberty, freedom of thought and inquiry, was a consequence of the Reformation, that could not fail to be eventually realized.”<sup>1</sup> Across Germany in the 19th century, statues of Luther were erected to mark the triumphant Protestantism of Bismarck’s empire: Luther was the first modern German.

Several generations later, the last year of World War I defined the 400th anniversary of the Reformation in 1917, which was marked across Europe and North America – and I mean Europe and North

estants, and the African-American churches were vibrant, but for the most part the faith was seen as largely middle class, or perhaps better described as bourgeois. A century later, statistics tell us that that average Protestant is more likely to be Ugandan, Chinese, or Brazilian, and possibly quite poor. There are more practicing Anglicans in Africa than in Britain, the USA, Canada, and Australia combined.

## Exile and Persecution

It may have begun in Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva, but with the extraordinary growth of Christianity across the world the legacy of the Reformation is no longer solely a European or North American possession. Indeed, while the West has largely valorized Protestantism as the source of some of our most venal inclinations, such as capitalism, the defining Reformation experiences of exile and persecution are better known to our sisters and brothers in China and Africa. What does the Reformation mean for a global Protestant culture that is at best loosely connected to the churches of Europe and North America?

The Reformation was a revolution, a radical break that created a distinctive form of Christianity that had never previously existed. Its claim to continuity with ancient Christianity lay not in the institution of the church, nor in traditions, but in fidelity to the Word of God. Where the Gospel has been truly preached, claimed John Calvin, the light of truth has been preserved through the ages. That light, according to Protestants, was kept lit by God, not by any human means. Protestantism, if the term is to mean anything, has its focus firmly on adher-

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**Reformation principles of a radical challenge to authorities, the questioning of established doctrines, and adherence to the Word are evident in Africa, Asia, and South America.**

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America. The optimism of 19th-century Liberal Protestantism was annihilated in the trenches of France, taking with it the belief that Protestantism was the historical and rational fulfillment of Christian history, a myth soon finished off by the young Karl Barth.

At the time of the 1917 anniversary, the image of the average Protestant would have been educated, American, British or German, middle class, and white. Certainly there were many rural, poor Prot-

ence to the Word of God, but that makes it a large tent in which there was considerable diversity in outward practices and forms of worship. Because its hallmark is a firm belief that one is saved by faith alone, Protestantism as it emerged necessarily took a variety of manifestations and could not, and cannot, be described as one thing or entity.

### **Unmediated Grace**

But if Protestantism, in all its disparate forms, can be characterized as having a shape, it lies in the conviction that God's grace is received unmediated by the believer. In Christ each person encounters God individually, and the Bible is the means by which God's message of salvation is received. Although the nature of grace has been formulated in strikingly different ways – from the spiritualists of the so-called Radical Reformation to the teaching of the magisterial reformers in Wittenberg, Zurich, and

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### **Many liberal churches in the West regard the emerging Christian movements with deep suspicion and almost embarrassment.**

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Geneva – the direct encounter with God's grace unmediated by any human-made institution remains the essential mark of Reformation Protestantism.

Yet we must guard against definitions of Protestantism that simply provide mirrors for the West. In our secular world, the growth of Christian churches in the majority world is frequently treated with bemusement or disdain. Many, including those among the Northern liberal churches, regard the emerging Christian movements with deep suspicion and almost embarrassment, often suggesting that they reflect an unhealthy mixture of the Gospel with traditional religions. The generally conservative theologies of the Southern hemisphere churches have caused bitter divisions within the Anglican communion, to give one example. In short, many in Europe and North America imply that those in the South are not real Christians – they're not like us, people who have fully embraced the principles of the modern world. In 2001 Kenneth L. Woodward's article in *Newsweek*, "The Changing Face of the Church," makes the point:

In fact, much of what Western missionaries once opposed as tribal witchcraft and idol worship more tolerant churchmen now regard as the spadework of the Holy Spirit – a tilling of the soil for the plant-

ing of an authentically African church. The idea isn't new: Some early fathers of the Western church saw "pagan" Greek philosophy as divine preparation for the truths of Christian revelation. In the same way, many African theologians insist that the old tribal religions are more Christian because they are less skeptical of the supernatural than the post-Enlightenment Christianity of the modern West. "Africans are much closer to the world of Jesus" than are Western Christians, argues Protestant theologian Kwame Bediako of Ghana. What is really happening in Africa today, he believes, is "the renewal of a non-Western religion."<sup>2</sup>

In the global world we are experiencing a new Reformation, one that is transforming Christianity. God's Word is taking root, not in our image, but in new ways. The Protestantism of the South shares the Reformation's deepest convictions, but in very different cultural settings.

You may have recently read in *Christianity Today* that the Lutheran World Federation just held its 500th-year remembrance of the Reformation not in Wittenberg, but in Namibia, in southwestern Africa. The country is mostly Christian and mostly Lutheran on account of its German colonial past. The president of Namibia, Hage Geingob, himself a Lutheran, welcomed the world congress with the words that in Namibia Luther's "rebellion against

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### **A century ago, the image of the average Protestant was educated, American, British or German, middle class, and white. Today, that average Protestant is more likely to be Ugandan, Chinese, or Brazilian, and possibly quite poor.**

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Rome was also an inspiration to us during our country's liberation struggle against the injustices of apartheid and occupation."

In his sermon to the federation, Zephania Kameeta, a Lutheran pastor and currently the Namibian minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, concludes:

Dear sisters and brothers who are commemorating 500 years of the Reformation, let us go out from here with this liberating TRUTH, our Lord Jesus CHRIST, to be reformed and reformers, renewed and renewing, liberated and liberating and to live lives in which people see and experience grace, love, justice, unity and peace.<sup>3</sup>



In the West we have thought of the Reformation as our story, debating its role in the genesis of secularism, liberalism, and modernity. Such discussions should and must continue as the 500th anniversary comes at a moment when the place of religion in the contemporary world is an urgent topic.

The Reformation, however, cannot remain in the past, the preserve of a few in academia and churches. Its principles of a radical challenge to authorities, the constant questioning of established doctrines, and adherence to the Word are vibrantly evident in the exponential growth of Protestantism in Africa, Asia, and South America. As in the 16th century, new models of churches, faith, and worship are emerging with head-spinning speed. Serious problems and controversies abound, just as for centuries disputes, rivalries, and growth pains beset the Reformation.

Nevertheless, as we reflect on the 500th anniversary it should be in the humble recognition of our small place in what is now a global story. The Reformation, we can now see clearly, belongs to the world.

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*Bruce Gordon is Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History at YDS. His books include John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion (Princeton, 2016), Calvin (Yale, 2009), and The Swiss Reformation (Manchester, 2002). He has edited books and written widely on early modern history, biblical culture, Reformation devotion and spirituality, and the place of the dead in pre-modern culture.*

## Notes

- 1 George P. Fisher, *The Reformation* (Scribner's Sons, 1896), p. 10.
- 2 Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Changing Face of the Church," *Newsweek*, April 14, 2001.
- 3 "Sermon by Dr. Zephania Kameeta on the Occasion of the Global Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation," AllAfrica.com, May 17, 2017.

## CALL AND ANSWER

August 2002

By Robert Bly

Tell me why it is we don't lift our voices these days  
And cry over what is happening. Have you noticed  
The plans are made for Iraq and the ice cap is melting?

I say to myself: "Go on, cry. What's the sense  
Of being an adult and having no voice? Cry out!  
See who will answer! This is *Call and Answer!*"

We will have to call especially loud to reach  
Our angels, who are hard of hearing; they are hiding  
In the jugs of silence filled during our wars.

Have we agreed to so many wars that we can't  
Escape from silence? If we don't lift our voices, we allow  
Others (who are ourselves) to rob the house.

How come we've listened to the great criers – Neruda,  
Akhmatova, Thoreau, Frederick Douglass – and now  
We're silent as sparrows in the little bushes?

Some masters say our life lasts only seven days.  
Where are we in the week? Is it Thursday yet?  
Hurry, cry now! Soon Sunday night will come.

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Before I became a pastor, art was my professional focus, and I notice now how art today – installations, videos – has pretty much left the canvas. I can't help but wonder if there is any connection with the way people are leaving the church.

Yes, there are still traditional painters and sculptors. And there are indeed traditional steeple churches doing just fine. But for decades now a visit to a gallery inspires a basic, ancient question, "What is art?" New methods and materials are expressing a myriad of ideas. Representational art isn't capturing the imagination the way it used to. It makes me wonder what we would discover if people of faith returned to a foundational question: "What is church?"

My art history training ended in the 1980s and didn't really prepare me to understand this new "conceptual" art – although I want to. For those clergy whose seminary education was situated in another era, we too may not have the tools to understand contemporary trends, including lagging worship attendance – although we need to.

The move away from the canvas has given the artist a fresh hearing in new conditions. It promises a more direct encounter between the work and the viewer, freed from conventional expectations. Art made in an open field, art made out of light – if artists can leave behind a traditional canvas and still have art, perhaps society is ready for worship outside the familiar expectations of "church," new settings that provide a fresh hearing for the gospel.

This wouldn't be the first time. The iconoclasts in the Reformation smashed the statues and whitewashed the paintings in church interiors. Behind the destruction was not contempt for art but an awareness of the power of images upon the human spirit. Removing the gilded saints would take away the temptation of idolatry. And Protestantism thrived in plain sanctuaries. Once again, beliefs are unsettled and embattled, forcing us to reexamine whether the gospel is being obscured by ritual, by architecture, by programming.

Recently I saw an exhibit by an artist who was formerly a professional dancer. On display was a video of herself making movements around her studio. Her moves weren't dance, but they weren't random either. The choreography seemed exploratory, spontaneous. At first, her point seemed inaccessible, but with my pastor's hat on, I saw it as the beginning of a conversation. The video was about an idea that intrigued her enough to investigate. It included a tacit invitation to share in it. Not that any

specific response was required. "I don't presume to know what people should take away from my art," one painter told me recently. Yet the video seemed to invite a response.

This approach has a sustained contemporary energy in the art world. I wonder if our denominations need to reexamine what is church – and then offer a more distilled, direct experience, an unencumbered, authentic invitation to God's life in sharing, community, discipleship. And could we do it trusting the response to the Holy Spirit?

Jesus' words "come and see" come to mind. Consider all the places he taught, healed, and preached. He was out in the world where people were, and hardly ever in the synagogue – unless it was to challenge what he found there.

Here and there, ministers are finding new places for conducting church: a Bible study in a bar, worship in a café, loft spaces converted to sacred spaces. I claim no inside track to success, but my work as an artist emboldens me to take chances

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**The quiet nearly brought one visitor to tears. This is a recipe that works here, for us, for now.**

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in ministry, and I am grateful for that. Of all my experiments, our summer "Beach Church" has the strongest following. I think it's because it offers an unusual setting with a pared-down liturgy. People are relaxed and open under the sky. It feels intimate. We take time between the message and prayers to listen to the lapping water, the wind in the trees, the birds. The quiet nearly brought one visitor to tears. This is a recipe that works here, for us, for now. That is enough. I am learning to start the conversation about church in different ways and places. A one-size-fits-all proclamation isn't where the future lies.

I have heard artists say that going into their studio is like going into church. We might consider regarding church like a studio. Take some chances prayerfully. The art of doing church might mean putting traditional forms aside.

Art may have left the canvas, and people may be leaving church. But Christ has not left us to ourselves. May the Spirit guide our work to capture imaginations again with the wonder of the gospel, wherever we possibly can.

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*The Rev. Candace Whitman '79 B.A. is pastor of Fishers Island (NY) Union Chapel (United Church of Christ). She is the author or illustrator of 13 children's books.*

# Visions of Protest and Resistance



By Jeremy L. Williams '16 M.Div.

*Grasping the multipronged origins of the Protestant Reformation – its principles of resistance, its spiritual and political undercurrents – is a matter of urgency for the longevity of congregations and the life of faith. Even getting a fix on the dates of its beginning requires nuance.*

Although 1517 famously marks the moment when Martin Luther nailed the theses to the Wittenberg church door, that was not the first time that he or others challenged the church to reimagine itself. The ringing of Luther's hammer was preceded by the sounds of disgruntled parishes underserved by priests, loud complaints about a distant pope, and clamors of frustration over the questionable relationship between economics and church politics.

## **The Protest Continues**

However, what made Luther's spark significant was what happened after his excommunication four years later. With apocalyptic flare, a keen marketing sense, and a weighted belief that the world was coming to an end, he convinced Catholic parishioners

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**The Spirit provides a path to resisting hopeless poverty, unrelenting oppression, and dehumanizing conditions.**

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to form resistance communities across Germany and Europe. Their resistance encompassed socio-economic disparities, worship reform, and shifts in theological emphasis.

Those resistance communities developed into congregations and denominations, each defining itself up and against its predecessors and contemporaries. Each evolved in self-understanding or birthed new communities out of them. There was no moment when this trajectory stopped or reached a culmination. The legacy of the Protestant Reformation continues – not only through mainline

traditions, but in places and among people who embody the ever-changing resistance or “protest” core of movement.

This is important to consider at a time of widespread concern about the decline of Christianity in the West and the apparent hijacking of Christianity in America by aggressive right-wing organizations. Using the Reformation as a corrective lens, I identify three types of surging Protestant communities relevant here. These types may seem unconventional, but I believe they embody the principles of the resistance movement and have the potential to serve human liberation.

## **The Fire This Time**

The first communities involve the most religiously committed ethnic or racial group in the US, according to Pew Research: those who participate in the African-American Christian experience. I do not wish to suggest by any means that this group is monolithic; it is far from such. However, it is helpful to consider the nature of worship among African slaves in the US, their seeming worship of the god of their oppressors. A closer examination shows a more complicated story. The Africans in America by and large did not accept the slave-holding gospel peddled by their Protestant masters. Instead, they founded resistance communities by worshipping in hush harbors and proclaiming a God who liberates slaves from bondage like those in the Exodus. Although they may not have considered it such, they were embodying the legacy of the Protestant Reformation's challenge to socio-economic disparities. In their case, their resistance was protest against Protestants.

Note that Luther's 95 Theses were not only theological; several focused on the material effect the pope's policies had on the poor and how the selling of indulgences ultimately benefited the wealthy elite. In many ways, the African slaves' experience tapped into this Reformation theme and set the groundwork for generations of Christian protestors who are concerned about the in-breaking of God's justice in the world and the liberty of human dignity. This particular development in Protestantism is a pointed critique of white Protestantisms that side with racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and oppression. In our current political climate, African-American Protestantism may provide the blueprint for keeping the fire of resistance burning.

### Reimagining Worship

The second type to embody principles of the Reformation are virtual communities. Cyber sanctuaries today function like refashioned worship spaces did in the 16th century: They reimagine worship. Pushing the boundaries of worship and reshuffling liturgical priorities are Reformation hallmarks. One major shift in many iterations of Protestantism was to lower the frequency and status of the Eucharist and heighten the value of preaching. This even led to reconfiguring sanctuaries – the place where people go to worship God. Many of these changes were inspired by a desire to grant people new opportunities to meet God and to be in community with each other.

Today we are presented with a very similar task of creating worship spaces that make God more accessible to people. Sometimes those spaces are not physical places. People have friends whom they have never met in person, receive advice from reviewers who they know nothing about, and spend much of their money through plastic or virtual options rather than cash or check. Such changes implore us to rethink what *ekklesia* means in a world where people can worship together but never shake hands.

Congregations that lean into the world of social media and online ministry are resisting the notion that brick-and-mortar is the only way to gather God's people. The next Great Awakening could happen on Facebook. A new Pentecost may break out on a podcast. Instead of 3,000 people hearing one message in one place at one time, there could be 3,000 people hearing one message in 3,000 places at 3,000 times.

### Children of the Divine

The third sort of communities resist in matters of theology. These are not primarily concerned with

previously contentious debates around grace, faith, and Scripture. Instead, these are Pentecostal communities that focus on the role of the Holy Spirit in worship and lifestyle.

This is not to say other groups do not have a healthy pneumatology but to suggest that the emphasis is not the same. The activity of the Spirit is witnessed by many of these congregations, church bodies, and denominations through ecstatic worship, speaking in tongues, and healing services. The Spirit provides a path to resisting hopeless poverty, unrelenting oppression, and dehumanizing conditions. In spite of harsh circumstances, acknowledging God's Spirit within them is a constant reminder that they are children of the divine.

This movement has a history in the US, but it is particularly ascending today in the global South. It takes the Reformation notion of democratizing revelation to its extreme by going beyond making Scripture accessible to making the very presence of God available to all. These communities recognize

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### The next Great Awakening could happen on Facebook. A new Pentecost may break out on a podcast.

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that God's power is not monopolized by an institution but is accessible to all believers. In this way, they too continue the spirit of resistance – a protest against other forms of Protestantism that attempt to contain its fire.

Protestantisms continue to evolve and reimagine themselves. That is a gift and a curse. It is a curse for those who are comfortable with the past progress of the Reformation and consider its development to be completed. Yet it is a gift for those who reconceive how Christian communities can continue to dismantle systems of oppression both within and outside Protestantism. It is a gift for those who recognize that God is not limited to a room or building but realize that God's omnipresence can be tuned in through Wi-Fi. It is a gift for those who believe that God's Spirit is still blowing on God's people to kindle their spiritual flames.

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*Jeremy L. Williams '16 M.Div. is an ordained CME minister, speaker, writer, and Ph.D. candidate in New Testament and Early Christianity at Harvard.*



## REST ON THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

By Mark Jarman

How can they sleep? Joseph awkwardly  
pillows his head on a ledge in the sand,  
and Mary between the Sphinx's stone paws  
leans back with the child aglow in her lap.

Yet they are sleeping. The smoke of their fire  
pays out a vanishing thread to heaven.  
Their donkey grazes on bones of grasses,  
his saddle a shelter for darkened sand.

There are no stars. Perhaps they have fallen,  
increasing the grains of drifted sand.  
But, no. It is dawn. The statue has seen it,  
and so has the child – high in the east.

The donkey goes on breaking its fast.  
The exhausted parents continue to sleep.  
And two pairs of eyes, a child's and a monster's,  
keep their watch on a world of sand.

*After the painting by Luc-Olivier Merson*



Baptism ceremony near Cape Town, South Africa

Photo by Ian Berry

© Ian Berry/Magnum Photos

# By the Grace of God (Gradually)



By Margaret Fox '05 B.A., '15 J.D., '15 M.Div.

*I didn't grow up in the church. In high school I believed Christianity was a religion for people who wouldn't think for themselves – who were misinformed about the age of the earth or used a carrot-and-stick notion of eternal life and other shortcuts of moral reasoning. Of course, I hadn't heard many actual sermons or spoken to many actual believers – I just glibly assumed Christianity was a religion for sheep.*

So I was quite surprised – and a bit chagrined – when, 10 years later, at age 27, I found myself standing in front of the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of New Haven, awaiting baptism, hoping to hide the healthy dose of fear and trembling I was feeling. “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept

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**In Calvin I found a model for the kind of conversion I was experiencing: Faith happened not in an instant but over time, by degrees.**

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him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?” the minister asked, and despite years of puzzling over what belief in Christ could possibly mean, I managed to say, “I do.” The minister doused me with three generous handfuls of water, and with that I was sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.

## **Fits and Starts**

How did it happen, this turn from critic to Christian? There was no single, desperate night alone on my knees in a hotel room with a Gideon Bible open before me. My path was much more faltering, and it took a whole lot longer.

The summer before my college senior year, I took a research trip to France and became obsessed with the stained-glass windows of Gothic cathedrals – first for their beauty, then for the stories they told: a comic-book version of Scripture, laid out panel by

panel, scene by scene, in tiny glowing red and blue mosaic jewels of glass.

When I started reading the Bible in order to decode the windows, I found Scripture itself to be a window onto something larger: a scene of highly imperfect human beings trying to love and make sense of the powerful and sometimes inscrutable Creator who was attempting to relate to these fallen creatures made in God’s image. I had assumed the Bible was like the *Boy Scout Handbook*, stories of good people doing a good turn daily, lists of moral maxims to live by. What I read now was nothing like that. It was dark, complex, relatable. I was hooked.

Yet it took me years to realize something more was fueling my Bible fascination: a sense of both faith and vocation. I would visit churches just to see what other people made of this strange and wonderful text. But I was there to watch, not to worship. I felt like an outsider. I didn’t fit the evangelical mold of a single moment of conversion, and that was a real stumbling block to me. Without that sudden bolt of transformation, how could I know I had come to faith? And how would I then pick the right church? I figured I’d have to study the doctrinal differences among all the denominations, then decide – sort of research my way into a match.

## **Church-Shopping and After**

But it didn’t work, this effort to *think* my way into the church. What worked was actually *going* to church, entering the life of a church. I was a first-semester Yale Law student at the time. A class-

mate, a Lutheran pastor's kid, invited me to go church-shopping with her, and we landed at First Presbyterian – we just liked the preaching and the people. After a few months I sought to join, and, with only a week's notice, they baptized me. This felt sudden – not enough time to let my doubts deter me. With the water streaming down my forehead, I opened my eyes and saw the congregation beaming, heard them cheering – not for me but for what God had done. It was a moment of belonging and of welcome.

### **Opening the *Institutes***

Some time later, I was discerning a call to ministry and pursuing a joint degree with the Divinity School. I enrolled in a reading course on John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a leading Calvin scholar who happened to go to my church. Calvin wrote the *Institutes* to prepare candidates for ministry, and that's how my classmates and I encountered it. We confronted the hard questions – double predestination, for example – but we also delighted in the prose, the legal training that brought order to Calvin's writing and the humanist training that made it beautiful. And I felt a sense of personal recognition. To borrow a favorite metaphor of Calvin's, his work became like a mirror to me, in which I saw reflected my own conversion.

For Calvin, faith is not something that “flits about in the top of the brain” but “takes root in the depth of the heart.”<sup>1</sup> He argues “it will not be enough for the mind to be illumined by the Spirit of God unless the heart is also strengthened and supported by (the Spirit's) power. ...”<sup>2</sup> I found in

### **Reading Calvin, we confronted double predestination and other hard questions, but we also delighted in the prose.**

Calvin a model for the kind of conversion I was experiencing: Faith happened not in an instant but over time, by degrees. My heart mattered as much as my mind. I couldn't think my way into faith, but instead trusted that the Spirit of God was working through the Scriptures and the church to reach me. I may not have taken the Damascus Road, but the Spirit managed to lead me home nonetheless.

### **Ever Reforming**

As a new Christian, I had questions. What's the relationship between the Bible and the church? Why does worship happen the way it does? How can the church, despite its corruptions, carry a message

of redemption? I was comforted to learn that the Reformed tradition I'd embraced had gone through a spiritual adolescence of its own – wrestled with questions and conundrums of church life, authenticity, and authority, and was committed to keep doing so. It was a church reformed, always reforming.

I now pastor a small Presbyterian church in northwest Ohio. Like many mainline congregations, we worry about aging population, declining membership, lack of interest from the younger generation. But my own experience of conversion tells me the Reformed tradition has a great deal to say in this challenging environment. To a population of doubters, Calvin offers a vision of conversion that's both Spirit-led and gradual. To a population of the unchurched, Calvin provides a model of church that's

### **I opened my eyes and saw the congregation beaming, heard them cheering – not for me but for what God had done.**

both realistic and hopeful, accounting for our propensity for corruption and yet affirming that we've been trusted as bearers of Word and Sacrament nonetheless. And to a population of beautiful, fragile, fallen human beings, Calvin opens Scripture not just as a text for study but as a source of life, finding a God who knows us intimately, loves us in spite of ourselves, and redeems us in mercy and grace.

Thanks be to God for that.

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### **Notes**

- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume 1, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), p. 583.
- 2 Calvin, p. 581.





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*Like the Wideness of the Sea: Women Bishops and the Church of England (DLT, 2013) and The Accidental Pilgrim: New Journeys on Ancient Pathways (Hodder and Stoughton, 2011). These responses are based on an interview with Reflections in August 2017.*

*On the Reformation's 500th anniversary ...*

The temptation is to think we need to protect the traditions that emerged out of the Reformation. We do better, I think, to be inspired by the reformers' motivations rather than limit ourselves to protecting their legacy. The Reformation began with a few people asking good questions about church – about how it was organized, and how that affected the way people connected with God and expressed their worship. They wanted to look honestly at what was out of kilter. We need that questioning spirit today, taking a good look in the mirror. What needs reforming? What is out of kilter now?

It's important to remember that we read history backwards, already knowing what happened next. When we think of the results of the Reformation – for instance, that Scripture and hymns were translated into the vernacular – it is easy to assume that was what the reformers set out to achieve 500

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**Luther thought language should be not just pragmatic, but poetic and compelling. It should grab our imagination, our hearts and our nerve endings, not just our brains.**

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years ago. But Luther set out simply to open up debate about areas that were lacking in church life and practice. The surrounding circumstances were a tinderbox ready to ignite, and events exploded, but they did so in a number of ways he didn't anticipate at the outset.

*On media revolutions, then and now ...*

In the 1500s, the printing press affected the way people imbibed their spiritual food. Our technological revolution is just as powerful, and can positively reshape our forms of worship. There are so many things you can do with screens besides projecting words onto them. I've seen moving images project-

ed on church walls that function like a modern-day version of a medieval mural – a very creative idea.

Technology can stir the imagination through its non-verbal possibilities. The printing press made the Reformation highly word-driven, but worship becomes overwhelmed if it is entirely words-focused. Rather like a play in a theater, the words in the book are only the script; the liturgy, like a play, is what happens in time and space, to the people gathered in the room. That is not to suggest we should replace words – they give us precision – but there is more to worship than words alone. I think we need a recovery of awareness of image, light, sound, space – worship that engages all the senses.

*On the need for poetic worship ...*

The reformers famously advocated putting Scripture and liturgy into the language of the day, and we still do that today. But Luther also called for poets. He thought language should be not just pragmatic, but poetic and compelling. It should grab our imagination, our hearts and our nerve endings, not just our brains. Many modern-day liturgies sound committee-written. They might achieve pragmatic goals – for instance, an important social agenda. But that's not enough. Liturgies need to be poetic too.

*On the power and authority of Scripture ...*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was still confronting this challenge in the early 1800s. In his generation, there was a huge controversy over biblical authority, caused in part by the discovery of other ancient texts. The Bible was no longer our only source of ancient history, and it wasn't even the oldest. Coleridge's insight was that rather than protecting some notion of monolithic authority, or insisting that God dictated the Scriptures word for word, the Bible's truth and wisdom would be self-evident if people were simply allowed to read it. Inspiration, Coleridge believed, did not mean that God "wrote" the Scriptures, but that these texts had been recognized as a place where the reader and the Spirit of God could find a place of encounter. Thus there is not just one meaning, but layer upon layer of meaning to be drilled from the Scriptures.

*On the future of the church, and anxiety about it ...*

I hope we can all keep asking questions: Am I praying and connecting with God? Am I praying at all? Am I reading doctrine? If not, why not? Do I go to church? Do I need it? Why or why not? Ask and see if the fires ignite. I try to remember that the work of God doesn't ultimately depend on us. If it is a work of God, it will endure.

# Is the Bible Still Relevant?



By Gregory E. Sterling

*One of the most important legacies of the Reformation is the centrality of Scripture. Five hundred years later we need to ask whether Christians — Catholic or evangelical or mainline Protestant — perceive the importance of the Bible for their lives. According to a Pew study in 2014, approximately one-third of Americans read the Bible on a weekly basis; however, almost half (45 percent) rarely or almost never read the Bible. Perhaps even more disconcerting is that less than half of Americans can name all four Gospels.<sup>1</sup> I fear that the Bible is in danger of becoming a classic as Mark Twain defined it: “something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read.”*

In the 16th century, the humanistic call *ad fontes* (“to the sources”) led to a new appreciation for the Bible. This was true for Catholics and Protestants. Catholic Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1436-1517), for instance, oversaw the formation of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible that contained the Hebrew Scriptures, the Greek New Testament, and three different ancient translations in Aramaic (Pentateuch only), Greek, and Latin. In the preface, Jiménez explained to the pope: “And so that every student of Holy Scriptures might have at hand the original texts themselves and be able to quench his thirst at the very fountainhead of the water that

(1517). It was not, however, the first edition of the Greek New Testament; Erasmus (1469-1536) completed his work in 1516 but did not see it published until 1522. Subsequent editions of Erasmus’s Greek New Testament became the basis for Luther’s German translation (1522; full Bible in 1534) as well as Tyndale’s English translation (1526), the later Geneva Bible (1560), and the King James Version (1611).

## Ultimate Authority

The reformers not only looked to the original texts to make new translations, but gave a primacy to Scripture that it did not have in the medieval world. They developed two views: *sola Scriptura* and *prima Scriptura*. The former considers Scripture to be the ultimate authority; the latter suggests that Scripture, while holding a privileged place, is illumined by tradition, reason, or experience.

As people began to read the Scriptures, they realized that there was a significant gap between the Christianity of the New Testament and the Christianity they knew in practice. Thomas Linacre (1460-1524), the personal physician of Henry VIII, spent his later years reading the Greek New Testament. He famously exclaimed: “Either this is not the gospel or

## The Scriptures point us to God. How else can we give any specific content to our understanding of God?

flows unto life everlasting, and not have to content himself with rivulets alone, we ordered the original languages of Holy Scripture with their translations adjoined to be printed.”<sup>2</sup>

This was the first published Greek New Testament (1514); the full Bible appeared three years later

we are not Christians.”<sup>3</sup> It was this realization that drove the Reformation.

### ***Nulla Scriptura?***

Five hundred years later, I worry not so much that we need to defend the principle of *sola Scriptura* or *prima Scriptura* as much as we need to avoid *nulla Scriptura*.

Christians consider the Bible to be God’s word. It is worth noting that three-fourths of Americans consider the Bible to be God’s word in some way, according to a 2014 Gallup poll.<sup>4</sup> Whether a person is Catholic, evangelical, or a mainline Protestant, it is our common ground. Though our interpretations have too often driven us apart, the Scriptures draw us together as a common source of authority. We need to remember this.

The Scriptures not only form an ecumenical base today, they give us a connection to our past. I have met Christians who were ready to jettison the Bible or at least parts of it because they are problematic. This makes no more sense to me than arguing that we should abolish the Constitution of the United States because parts of it are flawed. How would you know that you are an American? How would we know that we are Christians if we had no Scriptures?

### **Down in the Valley**

Just as we have ways to update the Constitution, so the Scriptures are progressive and demonstrate that the understanding of God and how we live before God changes, e.g., the people of God are understood differently in Luke-Acts than they are in Exodus; sacrifices are understood differently in Hebrews than in Leviticus. The problem arises when we

standing of God? We could deduce some things from nature, but this is limited at best. It is the Scriptures that show us that God is not a remote being who must be discovered; God seeks us. The Scriptures teach that God is love in the cross of Christ. The Scriptures relate God’s liberation of the captives and care for the marginal. The Scriptures command us to extend to others the gracious experience of God that we know in our own lives. The Scriptures give us the language and inspire us to respond to God in prayer.

It is a mistake to underestimate the power of these texts. Paul’s letter to Romans changed Augustine and, consequently, Western civilization. Romans challenged a medieval monk named Martin Luther who changed history again. A Swiss pastor named Karl Barth read it during World War I and changed the course of 20th-century theology.

A surrender of the importance of the Scriptures would eliminate some of the greatest potential that we have to serve people. There would have been no Mother Teresa apart from the gospels. There would have been no Martin Luther King Jr., without Martin Luther’s insistence on the importance of Scripture. This is our legacy. May we hold it securely!

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### **Notes**

- 1 Abigail Geiger, “5 Facts on How Americans View the Bible and Other Religious Texts” (Pew Research Center, April 14, 2017), reporting numbers from the 2014 US Religious Landscape Study.
- 2 Diego López de Zuniga, et al. ed. *Biblia polyglotta*, 6 vols. (Alcalá de Henares, Industria Arnaldi Guillelmi de Brocario in Academia complutensi, 1514-1517), vol. 1, fol. 3r. The translation is from John C. Olin, *Catholic Reform: From Cardinal Ximenes to the Council of Trent, 1495-1563. An Essay with Illustrative Documents and a Brief Study of St. Ignatius Loyola* (Fordham, 1990), p. 62. Six hundred copies of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible were printed; Yale’s Beinecke Library has one of the extant copies.
- 3 Cited by Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (Scribner, 1969), p. 58.
- 4 Lydia Saad, “Three in Four in U.S. Still See the Bible as Word of God,” (Gallup, June 4, 2014).

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### **I think of Scripture as a mountain spring. We are a long way down in a valley. Our obligation is to stand on the banks of the river that flows from that spring.**

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ossify or reify Scripture by locking the understanding of God and humanity in the ancient world. This is a human, hermeneutical mistake; it is not the mistake of Scripture. I think of the Scriptures as a mountain spring. We are a long way down in a valley. Our obligation is to stand on the banks of the river that flows from that spring. We do not and cannot stand beside the spring at its source; we are removed by centuries and cultures from that possibility.

The antiquity of the Scriptures does not, however, void their value. They point us to God. How else can we give any specific content to our under-



Prayer during Baptist church service, Rochester, NY., 2012

Photo by Larry Towell

© Larry Towell/Magnum Photos



# Prayer: The Other Curve



By Mark Koyama '15 M.Div.

Do you have eyes, and fail to see?  
Do you have ears, and fail to hear?  
– Mark 8:18

*The old theologian spent his declining years in a one-room apartment in Flushing, Queens. When I received the invitation to his funeral, I drove down into New York from my home in Western Massachusetts, parked uptown, and jumped on the train. Though decades had passed since I'd fled the city, the downtown local was still the same. The flickering fluorescent-lit cars rushing headlong through stretches of grimy darkness ... station stops plotting a descent into the heart of midtown. My urban instincts kicked in. That is to say, I zoned out.*

At Times Square I switched to the number 7 train. Rent is cheaper out in Queens; the number 7 is a tin can filled with the threadbare aspirations of tired immigrants. The clatter of the tracks seems to be their ode – an Emma Lazarus remix: *Bring me your tired, your poor ... your Eritrean cabbie sleeping off the dregs of his night shift ... your Cuban gentleman*

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**In that moment I see that everyone is carrying a device. Every face is curved into an attitude of submission to their phones. What would Luther say?**

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*in the fading shirtsleeves of his exile ... your Haitian healthcare worker ... yearning to breathe free. Send these the tempest-tossed ... to the pullman kitchens and walk-up tenements of Flushing.*

## **A Teeming Sight**

After Hunters Point the train leaves the tunnel and crawls up onto the elevated track. The subway car fills with a long draught of early afternoon light. In the gaps between the buildings the East River opens out, revealing a wide swath of the Manhattan sky-

line on the far shore. Barges inch up the waterway, planes circle, a ceaseless stream of cars course up and down FDR Drive. It is an impossible vista, a monumental sight that struggles to contain its portion of teeming humanity.

I want to share it with those around me. I want others to bear witness.

The scales fall from my eyes. In that moment I see that everyone is carrying a device. I appear to be the only conscious person in the subway car that is not looking into a screen. Every face is curved into an attitude of submission to their phones.

Centuries ago, in his *Lectures on Romans*, Martin Luther speculated on the nature of human sin. Humanity, he wrote, is:

*curved in upon himself* to such an extent that he bends not only physical but also spiritual goods toward himself, seeking himself in all things. Now this curvedness ... is a natural defect and a natural evil. Hence, man gets no help from the powers of his nature, but he is in need of some more effective help from the outside.<sup>1</sup>

*Incurvatus in se.* Curved in on self.

Luther reserved his deepest frowns for the sin of hubris. Standing on Augustine's shoulders, he refined it by making it physical, by giving us the image of a person so hunched as to be incapable of looking up, insensible to surroundings, numb to any possibility of wonder outside the self-referential. The sin, for him, is our intention to usurp the rightful place of God. But even as Luther condemned this spiritual myopia, he conceded that it's hard to defeat. "This curvedness," he said, "is a natural defect." We are naturally enamored with our ever-present, fearfully impressive, inexhaustibly fascinating selves.

Yet I can't help wondering, as I consult my iPhone, whether Luther himself might not temper his righteous pique if he could only check out *this* dazzling doohickey. I wonder if he would have been able to resist. Luther could not have anticipated the ubiquity of the funny cat video, the incessant barrage of the Twitter feed, the infectious joy of carpool karaoke. If being intoxicated with our own ingenuity is a sin, we are helplessly awash in its baleful light.

### Monsoon Wonder

The theologian's funeral was in a red-brick church on Roosevelt Avenue. Back in the 1970s he and my late father shared an office at Trinity College in Singapore. His sons were my first playmates.

As my friends, now middle-aged, eulogized their father, my mind wandered back to the Singapore of our youth. I remembered the crew of Malay guys we ran with, how we used to knock mangoes from the trees with long bamboo poles, and how, during the monsoon season, the short violent bursts of afternoon rain were our time of wonder. When our parents were sure not to be looking, we sat in the deep monsoon gutters by the roadside, and let the gathering water push us down the hill.

At length, the funeral's presiding minister called us to join him in prayer. As every head bowed, I saw it again – the curve. The posture of prayer looked startlingly similar to the attitudes of submission I'd seen on the train.

### The Hegemony of Cool

In the Information Age, our data-hungry *incurvatus* appears to be less a moral hazard than our natural state of being. I've heard tell of infants who learn to swipe before they learn to make eye contact with their parents. My pre-teen boys plug in before they get out of bed in the morning. Middle schoolers measure their self-worth by the capricious gauge of social media "likes." We have shown no willingness to question the hegemony of cool.

In all this Martin Luther was prescient – we are becoming *Homo Incurvatus*, a new creature who cheerfully forsakes intention and free will in favor of the screen's next captivating banality. This in-curving is not just a social concern, it's a spiritual one.

What, then, is the response of the spirit? Luther's words resound across the gulf of five centuries. We are "in need of some more effective help from the outside." Prayer depends on the possibility of something beyond self. It moves outward toward mystery and wonder. It is Theodore Parker's long arc, bending towards justice. Prayer is the *other* curve.

Simply by virtue of being alive we are in the presence of ultimate value: the love of neighbor, the health of creation. But to be fully alive we must

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**Prayer depends on the possibility of something beyond self. It moves outward toward mystery and wonder. It is Theodore Parker's long arc, bending towards justice.**

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be attentive to the wonder these things bestow: to know love, taste mango, grow old together, watch barn swallows sweep the evening on.

Gracious God, help us to realize Christ's promise. Give us eyes to see, and ears to hear. Amen.

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### Notes

- 1 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, edited by Wilhelm Pauck, The Library of Christian Classics (Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 218-219.

HEBREWS 13  
By Jericho Brown

Once, long ago, in a land I cannot name,  
My lover and my brother both knocked  
At my door like wind in an early winter.  
I turned the heat high and poured coffee  
Blacker than their hands which shivered  
As we sat in silence so thin I had to hum.  
They drank with a speed that must have  
Burned their tongues one hot cup then  
Another like two bitter friends who only  
Wished to be warm again like two worn  
Copies of a holy book bound by words to keep  
Watch over my life in the cold and never ever sleep

Pope Francis has used a remarkable series of public gatherings to speak about the Reformation anniversary, counting the costs of the catastrophic break with Protestants but also regarding it as a prelude to future Christian unity someday, somehow.

“We must look with love and honesty at our past, recognizing error and seeking forgiveness, for God alone is our judge,” he said last year in Lund, Sweden, at a gathering of the Lutheran World Federation.

At different venues, Francis has faulted both sides for the conflict, praised Protestant contributions to theology, spelled out key difference that remain, and stressed common Catholic-Protestant ties such as baptism and the call to share the gospel with the world.

The rupture in the Western church happened when an ancient yearning for Christian unity, “the primordial intuition of God’s people,” was frustrated by powerful forces religious and secular. At pivotal moments, he says, fear trumped faith on all sides.

“Certainly, there was a sincere will on the part of both sides to profess and uphold the true faith, but at the same time we realize that we closed in on ourselves out of fear or bias with regard to the faith which others profess with a different accent and language,” he said at Lund.

He credited the Reformation for giving greater centrality to sacred Scripture. Luther’s agonized quest for redemption clarified an important truth.

“The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing. ‘How can I get a propitious God?’ This is the question that haunted Luther. In effect, the question of a just relationship with God is the decisive question for our lives.”

At a scholars’ gathering this year in Rome, Francis said sustained dialogue provides a “purification of memory” that burns away old resentments and distortions in order to tell history afresh.

“An attentive and rigorous study, free of prejudice and polemics, enables the churches, now in dialogue, to discern and receive all that was positive and legitimate in the Reformation, while distancing themselves from errors, extremes and failures, and acknowledging the sins that led to the division,” the pope told the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences.

Roman Catholic representatives has been in separate dialogue with Protestant denominations for decades, including Methodist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Anglican.

Serious obstacles to unity remain with various Protestant bodies – whether over the ordination of women, the ordination of LGBTQ individuals, same-sex marriage, the nature of church authority, shared eucharist, or the power of the papacy.

“While, like our predecessors, we ourselves do not yet see solutions to the obstacles before us, we are undeterred,” the pope said last year in a joint statement with Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby.

“Wider and deeper than our differences are the faith that we share and our common joy in the gospel. Christ prayed that his disciples may all be one, ‘so that the world might believe’ (John 17: 21).”

Francis and Welby said Christians must act together to end environmental destruction, defend human dignity, and advocate for education, healthcare, food, clean water, and other acts of mercy.

“As disciples of Christ we hold human persons to be sacred, and as apostles of Christ we must be their advocates.”

— Ray Waddle

Sources: Catholic News Service, Lutheran World Federation, Episcopal News Service

## A Brief Timeline of Reformation History

- 1517 – Luther circulates 95 Theses on Christian faith and church abuses
- 1521 – Luther is excommunicated by Pope Leo X
- 1526 – William Tyndale translates the New Testament into English
- 1534 – Henry VIII becomes head of the church in England
- 1536 – John Calvin publishes the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- 1545 – The Council of Trent begins, marking the Catholic Counter-Reformation
- 1611 – The King James Version of the Bible is produced
- 1618 – The Thirty Years’ War ignites
- 1620 – The first English Puritans land in the New World
- 1667 – The first version of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is published
- 1720 – Jonathan Edwards graduates from Yale
- 1727 – Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* is first performed
- 1738 – John and Charles Wesley are converted in England
- 1730s-40s – The First Great Awakening revival moves through the American colonies





Girls receiving blessing at Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, South Korea, 1998

Photo by A. Abbas

© A. Abbas/Magnum Photos

# The Reformation Isn't What It Used to Be



By Justo L. González '58 S.T.M., '61 Ph.D.

*I would be guilty of unspeakable ingratitude were I to write here about the Reformation without first a word of thankful remembrance. As I got ready to attend Yale Divinity School back in 1957, one of my keenest expectations was to meet Roland H. Bainton, whose book, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther, had already made a profound impression on me.*

I was not disappointed. Dr. Bainton not only became a model and a mentor, but also a friend whose advocacy and support account for much of what I have been allowed to do since. When I think of YDS I see first of all that small scholarly giant who opened the fountains of the past to so many of us.

And yet, for me the Reformation has changed radically in the intervening 60 years. It is not that Luther, Calvin, or St. Teresa have changed. Rather, we today look at it from a different perspective, because the world and the church have altered so dramatically.

## **Christendom and After**

Perhaps the best way to depict this is to speak of “horizontal” changes and “vertical” changes. Both of these profoundly affect our understanding of the Reformation.

By “horizontal” changes I mean the unexpected manner in which the map of Christianity has been transformed since my student days. Today we often speak of the end of Christendom. Most often when Protestant Westerners use that phrase, they mean Christianity and the church have lost much of the influence they once had in the lands of the North Atlantic. From that vantage point, it often carries nostalgic overtones. But when those of us from the global South speak of the end of Christendom, we are thinking rather of the birth of a global church that is no longer controlled by the centers of power that held sway long before and long after the 16th century. For us, the end of Christendom is not a cause for nostalgia but rather of hope and celebration.

This horizontal shift is often expressed statistically, which certainly proves the point. But I personally prefer human experiences to numbers, so I will portray the significance of this change with a personal story. In 1954 when I was beginning my theological studies in Cuba, our textbook for church history was a heavy tome by another professor whom I came to know later at Yale, Kenneth Scott Latourette. It was full of valuable information. I remember one day telling my church history professor that Latourette's book gave the impression that the culmination of Christian history was North American Protestantism, and I asked him to write a book that would deal more with our own experiences and perspectives. He threw his arm over my shoulder and said: “My son, that will never happen. There is simply not enough market.” By now many

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**For Christians in the global South, “the end of Christendom” is not a cause for nostalgia but rather of hope and celebration.**

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such books are widely used throughout the world, including the North Atlantic lands that we used to consider the very center of Christendom.

This is what I mean by “horizontal” changes: We can no longer talk about the history of the church in the 16th century and also forget that at the moment Luther was nailing his 95 Theses, the Spanish were moving into Mexico and the Portuguese were

sending a fleet to China to establish relations with the Ming dynasty. Nor can we ignore the fact that it was gold from Mexico and Perú that supported the anti-Protestant military campaigns of Charles V and Philip II in Europe. The reason why we cannot ignore it is that we still do not know which of these sets of events in Christian history will be more significant in the long run.

### **Vernacular Victories**

Then there is the “vertical” dimension of changes in the life of the church and in theology too. When I first studied history, we were interested primarily in the upper echelons of society. Secular history was mostly a matter of kings and battles. The history of theology seemed to be a conversation – sometimes a violent conversation – that took place from mountaintop to mountaintop, hardly influenced by the valleys in-between. Church history was about organization, hierarchy, relations with the state. Today, secular history is also about the common folk, the daily lives of women, the constant struggle for survival. In church history now, we are much more interested than before in the faith and religious practices of people in everyday life. Similarly, when we come to the history of theology, we are particularly interested in understanding how various theologians’ views were shaped by their social milieu.

This has had far-reaching impact on our view of the 16th-century Reformation. (Here again I must render tribute to Dr. Bainton, whose work on the women of the Reformation was far ahead of its time – although he, too, when considering these women, seemed to be interested more in the women of the mountaintop than in those who lived in the

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**Today, history is about ordinary people, the daily lives of women, the constant struggle for survival, not just about the upper echelons.**

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social and intellectual valleys.) When we look, for instance, at the matter of worship in the vernacular, we have come to realize the social and psychological implications this had for ordinary people. For them, it was not just a matter of being able to understand. It was also an act of affirmation of people who often had little or no voice in society. Over against the vernacular, Latin was not only the language of tradition but also the language of the intellectual and social elites. It was the language of laws that the populace could not comprehend or use in its favor.

Thus we come to understand something of the past from out of our present experience: We see the liberating power that the celebration of the Mass in the vernacular has unleashed for the Catholic masses in Latin America and Africa. Having witnessed this liberating power, we are now more able to understand why the 16th-century hierarchy so adamantly opposed worship in the vernacular.

### **Historic Exile**

And even the mountaintops look different when seen from the valleys. Look at John Calvin, about whom so much has been written. Until recently, one of the least explored facets of his life and thought has been his exile. Significantly, most references

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**We can no longer forget that at the moment Luther was nailing his 95 Theses, the Spanish were beginning to move into Mexico and the Portuguese were sending a fleet to China to establish relations with the Ming dynasty.**

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to Calvin as an exile have to do with the few years during which he had to leave Geneva and settled in Strasbourg. We tend to forget that Calvin’s entire theological career took place in exile. He had to flee from Paris in 1533, and after some wanderings he reluctantly settled in Geneva, where he spent most of his life, but where he was not a citizen until 1559, five years before his death. Today, when the ordeal of exile and economic displacement is all too frequent, we begin to see Calvin’s theology under a new light.

We know, for instance, that he understood the doctrine of grace as an experience similar to that of a stranger who is welcomed in a new land. Is there a connection between the experience of being torn from one’s homeland – from one’s kindred and one’s native kingdom – and Calvin’s understanding of communion as a kind of a transport to the final reign of God? As he is read from the viewpoint of the exiled and uprooted multitudes of the 21st century, it may well be that a different Calvin will emerge.

The Reformation is not what it used to be!

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Offerings of maize and sorghum in Presbyterian church, Akobo, South Sudan, 1998

Photo by A. Abbas

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# Faith, Reform, and the Needs of the Living



By Margaret A. Farley '70 M.Phil., '73 Ph.D.

*Five hundred years ago Martin Luther made public 95 Theses against abuses which he believed had become life-threatening to the Christian church. Today almost everyone recognizes that Luther's protest, insofar as it initiated the whole of the Protestant Reformation, contributed to the saving of the life of the whole church – the life of faith among Christians, both those who joined him in the protest and those whom he protested against.*

There had been major reforms in the church prior to Luther, prior to the 16th century, but perhaps never before had the need for reform been so widely recognized. Surely never before had the call to reform been so radical, so disruptive, so far-reaching in relation to the tradition as a whole. Such an act, such a project, deserves remembering – for what it meant in its own time and for what it can teach us today.

## **Modern Translation**

Perhaps the best way to remember this event is to recall and translate into our own lives Luther's fundamental insight into what we have come to know as "justification by faith." Yet here I want to do something else. I want to reflect, however briefly, on the general need for reform in all traditions of living

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**Reform begins in our daily circumstances – where people live and die, where they are fed or denied the food they need, where they search for meaning, alone or in community.**

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faith – on the directions reform may take and the ways in which we may be responsible for it today.

In a way which was not possible in the 16th century, we take for granted the need for change in a viable, living religious tradition. We know that religious traditions do change – for better or for

worse. When they change for the worse, we speak of them as dying, or becoming corrupt, or dissipating their central inspiration. When they change for the better, we recognize their possibilities of growth, of correction, of adaptation. We perhaps do not recognize that every change is inevitably disruptive – that everything truly new inevitably dislodges or transforms what was previously in place. We may not see that change almost always involves "protest" and "reform" – and not just a simple unleashing of what was always most deeply there.

## **Forms and Reforms of Love**

Yves Congar, the French Roman Catholic theologian, identified three kinds of reform that are needed again and again in the life of the church:

- 1) reforms that correct abuses, challenging falsifications, distortions, corruptions in belief and practice;
- 2) reforms that restore life to practices, structures, and beliefs, tapping again the sources of life in a tradition, reviving what has become tedious, apathetic, formalistic;
- 3) reforms that open the life of the church to something truly new, moving beyond the correction of abuses and the re-quickenings of old forms to new adaptations, new insights, new forms for faith and love in newly understood and experienced conditions of life.<sup>1</sup> Traditions remain alive insofar as they change – insofar as they are capable of reform – in these ways.



The reformations of the 16th century (both in the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions) included all three of these kinds of reform. But how would we know whether and what reforms are needed in the church today? It seems to me there are at least three signs:

- 1) if we see others being oppressed by the ways the church incorporates them into its life, or by the failures of the church to help them address the wider situations of their life in the world;
- 2) if we ourselves experience serious dissonance in our life with the church – serious contradiction,

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**In a way that was not possible in the 16th century, we take for granted the need for change in a living religious tradition. We know religious traditions do change – for better or for worse.**

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even, between the promise of life which the church professes and the life it actually embodies;

- 3) if our own and others' hunger for life is perhaps not denied or refused but is not yet filled because of failure in the church's attention or imagination.

#### **What Can Awaken Us?**

In any of these instances, we must ask ourselves and one another: Where is the injury, and what are its causes? Where is the apathy, and what can awaken us? Where are the old and the new springs of life, and how shall they be released? If hearts long for the nourishment that God has promised, can they be more satisfied? For whom are the pipes played and the dirges sung who will neither dance nor mourn?

Insofar as we discern our own responsibility for movements of reform, what can we know of the "way" of reform? Shall it be the way of reminder or the way of resistance? the way of collaboration or the way of protest? the way of direct critique or the way of subversion? The answers require their own discernment, but again let me only point to some clues – two, to be exact.

The first is suggested by a passage in Mark's second chapter: In answer to the question of why John's disciples should have fasted and his own not be fasting, Jesus responds that the situations are different. I know there is a mysterious meaning to this answer – a meaning that may have to do with a distinction between stages in the fulfillment of God's covenant. But it seems to me that there is also a non-mysterious meaning, an obvious meaning, that has to do with actions being appropriate to the moment. At a party, when those you have

#### **YES**

By William Stafford

**It could happen any time, tornado,  
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.  
Or sunshine, love, salvation.**

**It could, you know. That's why we wake  
and look out – no guarantees  
in this life.**

**But some bonuses, like morning,  
like right now, like noon,  
like evening.**

awaited arrive, you do not fast. When you await them, or when they depart again, you may fast. The way of reform in the church is context-relative. If we are ignorant of real-life circumstances, we may tear the cloth or break the vessels of the lives of those whom the church touches. That is the cry of liberation theologians: What may be needed for new life in the church in its struggle with the problems of

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**One sign of the need for reform: if we experience contradiction between the promise of life which the church professes and the life it actually embodies.**

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modernity – with unbelief and meaninglessness, with new forms of rationality and new tangles of confusion – is not always what is needed when the church's struggles are with destitution and oppression, poverty and death.

The life of the church, of course, cannot be divided this way. These contexts are mutually implicated and bound together. Something new is called for when the voice of the poor is raised in the church. New wine and new wineskins must be produced if long-neglected vines are to be restored. What is called for by way of "reform" is what will truly serve life, what will be true to the needs of the living.

Today surely most of us are called somehow to movements of reform – both in response to the need for meaning and to the need for justice. It is surely not possible for the church to ignore either one. The harsh experience of people’s everyday lives challenges the church to break with its past and yet find anew its everlasting source, to bring from its storehouse both old and new, to move forward with both continuity and discontinuity of life, while inevitably facing radical change as it does so.

### **A Time to Complexify**

That brings me to my second clue: Reform is always characterized by complexity. We are tempted to think of renewal, of correction of abuses, in terms of a “simplifying” process: Return to the core of the gospel, act according to the clear requirements of justice, clear away the inessentials that accrue in a tradition and be faithful to its simple and accessible essence. In a sense, of course, this is right – we must find again the center in its simplicity, and suffering asks for justice that cannot afford nuances and complexities. But there are times when a tradition’s life and power demand that we complexify, that we hold in our minds and our hearts and in relation to others the great complexities that mark the fullness of human experience.

### **Purity and Protest**

I am reminded here of Annie Dillard’s observation that “purity of practice” in art guarantees that an artist will not make mistakes, and superficial critics will find no flaw in such a “pure” work – but nothing will have been ventured.<sup>2</sup> “Purity” seeks to remove all inessentials. But, she insists, even if we could agree on the essentials, it is hard to see how anyone could think that a purging of inessentials is good in itself. Symbols – whether as the powerful source and consequence of great art or the conveyors of life in a religious tradition – arise from “material messes.” In a time when reform in the Christian churches calls for new or transformed symbols, we should not be daunted by the complexity of the project or by our seeming inability to control it at every turn. Profound reform is always a complex matter. Unless our hearts and minds can hold complexities, we risk great harm to individuals and groups, and our reform risks flattening the very life we desire to unleash.

Similarly, in theological education, we surely can find both an anchor and new freedom in a return to the sources and resources of our individual traditions. Yet there is a danger in not taking as a central task the complex project of ecumenical dialogue and learning. If we simplify our educational com-

mitments in a way that once again isolates us in separate strands of the Christian tradition, we shall never see that the very diversity and complexity of Christian belief and practices come not only from various historical developments but from Christianity’s source itself.<sup>3</sup> We shall have missed understanding and experiencing the fullness of Christianity – so rich as a Tradition that no one tradition has been able to hold all of its life.

But let me end where I began. If the church is to live, it must continually be reformed. If we are to be alive within the church, our call to faithfulness includes the call to be reformed and to reform. But reform begins in our daily circumstances – where

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**Today surely most of us are called to movements of reform – in response to the need for meaning and for justice. It is not possible for the church to ignore either one.**

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persons live and die, where they are fed or denied the food they need, where they are confused and in search of meaning, where they are oppressed or freed, empty or full, alone or in community. If we abandon these, then we despair of the possibility of hope in them – and the possibility of the church’s response to them.

Why must we ultimately attend to, and find the ways of faithfulness appropriate to, the situations of our world? Not merely so the church’s life may be preserved, but because that is what its life requires, that is what its life is.

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*Margaret A. Farley ’70 M.Phil., ’73 Ph.D., Gilbert L. Stark Professor Emerita of Christian Ethics, has been a mentor and advisor to generations of students at YDS, where she taught from 1971-2007. Her books include Changing the Questions: Explorations in Christian Ethics, edited by Jamie Manson (Orbis, 2015) and Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics (Continuum, 2006). She is a member of the Sisters of Mercy and a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. This essay is newly adapted from an address she gave at YDS in October 1989.*

### **Notes**

- 1 Yves Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l’Eglise* (Les Editions du Cerf, 1950), Part I.
- 2 Annie Dillard, *Living By Fiction* (Harper Colophon, 1983), pp. 170-171.
- 3 Congar, *Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, edited by Bernard Lauret (Fortress Press, 1988), p. 78.

## EASTER MORNING

By William Stafford

Maybe someone comes to the door and says,  
“Repent,” and you say, “Come on in,” and it’s  
Jesus. That’s when all you ever did, or said,  
or even thought, suddenly wakes up again and  
sings out, “I’m still here,” and you know it’s true.  
You just shiver alive and are left standing  
there suddenly brought to account: saved.

Except, maybe that someone says, “I’ve got a deal  
for you.” And you listen, because that’s how  
you’re trained – they told you, “Always hear both sides.”  
So then the slick voice can sell you anything, even  
Hell, which is what you’re getting by listening.  
Well, what should you do? I’d say always go to  
the door, yes, but keep the screen locked. Then,  
while you hold the Bible in one hand, lean forward  
and say carefully, “Jesus?”



Besides hallmarks such as priesthood of the believer, the Reformation spawned something else just as fateful: a trail of unintended consequences. The Thirty Years' War, the Counter-Reformation, an explosive new world of denominationalism, a propulsive relationship to individualism, nationalism, and capitalism all come to mind.

From the start, in other words, Protestantism was destabilizing. It carried a built-in restlessness, a revisionist instinct always to circle back to sources. It perennially returns to the Bible to find a new enlivening phrase, reimagine a New Testament worship pattern, or meet Jesus again in the garden or on the cross or on the Emmaus road.

This destabilizing spirit, this way of reading, borrows something from the Bible itself, which so often throws civilization off balance. Scripture is deeply ambivalent about human culture and unimpressed with human achievement.<sup>1</sup> In its pages, the gap between God and everything else is infinitely great. Yet it says we are answerable to this subversive God. The prophets preach repentance. They also embody alienation. Their words undercut and demythologize human pretensions. The Bible never relents: It wants to make all things new.

Though many today defend the biblical foundations of our nation, the Bible stirs unease – and that's the point, argues literary critic Herbert Schneidau. Our very habits of criticism and self-criticism, society's enduring sense of crisis and reform, reach back to the “sacred discontent” of Scripture.

“We love and hate our culture, and the resultant force is toward change,” he writes. “This ambivalence derives from the Bible.”<sup>2</sup>

Protestantism absorbed much of this biblical attitude, and for centuries it left its mark. But Protestant cultures assumed a dynamic between everyday faith and Bible encounter. That is no longer assumed. Biblical literacy is losing force. A growing number of Americans never read it.

This drift has political consequences. The revolutionary potential of reading Scripture's prophetic announcements and historical claims, and being changed by them, gives way to something inert but still potent: nostalgia. A stockpile of freeze-dried cultural images from the traditional Protestant past – law and order, non-inclusive language, racial separation, “simpler times” – awakens the protective passions of an entire voting bloc. There's a public swerve away from any discomfiting gospel words about embracing neighbors or forgiving enemies.

A century ago, establishment Protestantism included a twitchy mix of sectional rivalry, isolationism, Calvinism, free-will Arminianism, a recessive gene of apocalypticism too. But it often had consensus around the doctrine of original sin, a biblical skepticism of human pretensions.

Oddly, this old theological pessimism sometimes made political progress possible. Belief in sin served as a check on concentrations of power, excessive nationalism, egotism, immodesty. It could be a force of reform. Social gospelers added nuance to the picture: We can't get it done alone. The real world has dignity, and we need God and each other to fix it.

These notions were slipping away by the 1980s. Religious culture turned more therapeutic and private, necessarily more pluralistic. The white Protestant mainline broke up. “The old mainline split in two directions: ‘bourgeois bohemianism’ to the left and ‘conservative evangelicalism’ to the right,” Yale sociologist Philip Gorski writes.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the old religious pessimism has been virtually overthrown – replaced by intertwining strands of secular optimism about free markets and software revolutions. Yet cultural pessimism abounds. Millions worry that the US is losing its way and can't solve its problems.

The new ideologies of optimism imposed their own destabilization – market crashes, robotics, economic inequalities, endless wars – without changing the status quo of power. The new ethical imperative became: Get yours while you can. Lotteries replaced Providence.

In *American Covenant*, Gorski says the future of American democracy depends on recovering the “righteous republic” – the “dream of a free people governing themselves for the common good.” Self-interest isn't enough. We need social ethics that can turn away today's reckless political corruptions and protect the dispossessed. We're responsible for remembering this dream in our time, knowing it has never been accomplished, not by the Puritans, the American Revolution, the Civil War or since.

Can Protestantism – can Christianity or Bible – be part of a dream that reverses trends of social distrust, family breakdown, big-money politics, a militarized culture? Can Protestantism be a destabilizing force for good?

## Notes

- 1 Herbert N. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (California, 1977), pp. 1-2.
- 2 Schneidau, p. 2.
- 3 Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, 2017), p. 173.



Anti-Vietnam War rally, with the Rev. William Sloane Coffin '49 B.A., '56 B.D., Steve Minot, and Arthur Miller, New Haven, CT., 1968  
Photo by Inge Morath  
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# A Lush Language



By Horace D. Ballard, '10 M.A.R.

*I spend an hour or two, every day, writing. I write best in early morning, suspended between the hiss of the coffee pot and the chorale of mockingbirds under the eaves. Between the hush of sunrise and steaming Appalachian noon, birdsong translates the optical – what the birds see, the morning tasks they busily perform – into the auditory.*

I cannot see the birds from where I sit at my desk, but I recognize the tittering correspondence of these winged voices that are in love with the wonder of waking. I understand their need to sing as a kind of daily liturgy, one that affirms what poet Mark Doty calls “the ordered enactment of desire” – the daily tasks, joys, and heartbreak that give shape to a mortal life. Birdsong seems a particular language, one that sutures the infinite wonder of being to the visible world.

## Post-Postmodern Age

“Seeing,” American author Seth Godin reminds us, “despite its name, is not merely visual.” The sense of sight derives its power from its connection to the ways we taste, smell, and hear. Communication is both visual and verbal, real and metaphysical.

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**Personal revelation of the spirit, in concert with cultural dissent and commitment to communities, forms the bedrock of practical Protestant theology.**

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Words, actions, articulation, visual expression: it is all language. And language in all its iterations – its attempts at human connection, its longing – is our legacy.

In our post-postmodern age of alternative facts and parallel realities, the ways we communicate with each other are necessarily malleable, virtual, plastic.

An unfiltered, immediate, social-media, Googled access to information and experience echoes an individual ethos that enlivened the early Protestants – emboldened them to insist on divine access without intermediaries, inspired them to distrust systems of domination and submission, the kyriarchies, the one percent that stood in the way of their intellectual, cultural, and spiritual advancement. I understand contemporary Protestantism in the spirit of that theological motivation – toward a progressive and innovative language, toward choice, toward clarity of one’s own identity politics.

Like birdsong, Protestantism in our time is a particular language, a language of dissent and authenticity framed by the dual human urge toward liberty and toward relationship, despite the deep divisions of our world. Protestant language places us in a dynamic relationship with each other, the physical world, and with the divine. Drawing on a faith tradition of social reform, mission, protest, and self-reflection, contemporary Protestants stand in position to speak with power to our moment.

## Rallies of Defiance

In early July, *The Washington Post* published a poll about the political activism of its subscribers. The survey found that one in three residents of the DC-Metro area participated in a political protest since January. I stand proudly amongst those polled. Whether weeping with millions at the Women’s March on Washington, or chanting and being sprayed with tear gas alongside thousands in

Charlottesville to decry a rally of the Ku Klux Klan, or speaking from the podium at a demonstration against proposed cuts to the National Endowment for the Humanities, or holding signs and praying with a group of 20 at a public rally against proposed budget cuts to Medicaid, I was present. I am consciously adding my voice to the throng of citizens invoking the intimate connection between one's own values, interfaith respect, and justice. I believe that the personal revelation of the spirit, in concert with cultural dissent and commitment to causes and communities, forms the bedrock of practical Protestant theology. My faith and my ethics are indistinguishable.

### **Situating a Worldview**

Some fear that the discernment of one's identity politics leads to broad cultural fragmentation, an end to consensus. This is not my experience. The more I understand the experiential frames of my own "seeing," the clearer and more consistent is the language I use to situate my worldview for others. We all have our own ways of engaging the political, theological, and cultural conversations of our age. Our increasing respect for identity politics – and for the various ways we comprehend our existence and

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### **Some fear that the discernment of one's identity politics leads to broad cultural fragmentation. This is not my experience.**

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communicate our values – will make us more empathetic, more aware of the ways we are privileged, more discerning of the ways we can encounter and assist our neighbors.

I am a museum curator and an art historian by training. I analyze the religious, social, and cultural conditions of multiple cultures and language-systems in the service of beautiful objects and the people who made and loved them. And I perform this work with heightened awareness of the many atrocities of racism, misogyny, ethnocentrism, and socioeconomic prejudice committed by Protestant congregations, synods, and councils throughout the modern, postmodern, and post-postmodern eras. Yet I have also seen how the spiritual politics of Protestantism has transformed the course of western art in remarkable ways. Luther's codification of the German language in his translation of the Latin Bible led the way to a more colloquial and democratic mode in poetry, drama, fashion, furniture design, philosophical reasoning, and painting.

Protestantism was iconoclastic – yet contrary to the very claims and aims of iconoclasm, the power of visual languages was not eradicated by the Reformation. Humans are hard-wired for narrative and sensation. The primacy of the Word in

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### **An unfiltered, Googled access to information echoes an individual ethos that enlivened the early Protestants.**

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Protestantism found new forms of sublimity after the Reformation. Even as ecclesiastical visual excess and supposed hedonism were removed by the Reformation's champions, a verbal lushness grew in their place in Protestant Europe and beyond – in the fiery rhetoric of republicanism during the Scottish Secession and the American Revolution, in the sweeping narratives of Milton and the sermons of the First and Second Great Awakenings, in the very documents that formed the United States written by those two lifelong Anglican Deists from my home state of Virginia – Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

In three days' time, I will leave Virginia to begin a new position at a college museum in western Massachusetts. I will miss the trilling of the mockingbirds and remain grateful for the meditative space their hymns provide. Their songs have given respite and pleasure, and pleasure, to quote Kahlil Gibran, "is a freedom-song."

At the 500-year anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I reflect with wonder on the ways this tradition of aesthetic language has freed me to speak, work, and create with courage, conviction, and passion. In these times, Protestants must take our legacy – languages of dissent and creativity – to the streets. It is meet and right to do so. It is what birds do every day.

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*Horace D. Ballard '10 M.A.R. received his Ph.D. in American Studies from Brown University in May. His research interests include the visual cultures of religion, Civil War-era photography, and the influence of 18th- and 19th-century European aesthetics on American art. After working as a resident scholar at Monticello in Charlottesville, VA., he recently joined the staff at the Williams College Museum of Art.*

# A Puritan Mind Circling the Globe



By Harry S. Stout and Kenneth P. Minkema

*For three decades now, the editorial offices of The Works of Jonathan Edwards have had a home at Yale Divinity School, commemorating the life and work of Yale's most distinguished religious alum.\*\* That relationship has resulted not only in the publication of a 26-volume series of his writings, but an online archive totaling close to 100,000 pages, not to mention classes on Edwards, theses, and dissertations by students from Yale and from educational institutions across the globe, as well as visiting researchers, publications, and other activities.*

We should soon see in print the first-ever Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia, edited by staff of the Jonathan Edwards Center and including some 400 articles by contributors the world over. In the 21st century, Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) is still news.

## **Child of the Reformation**

Though he lived in the early 18th century, and we usually associate him with the Enlightenment, Edwards was very much a child of the Reformation, an inheritor of its concerns – and its prejudices. It is

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**One of Jonathan Edwards' favorite books was the love poetry of the Song of Songs. What is emerging today is a picture of an eclectic, fertile mind.**

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fitting that we look to Edwards, whose cultural and textual presence is a direct link to the Reformation heritage of YDS, which was established in 1822, and even more so to the School's origins in Yale College's founding as a training school for ministers in 1701. Edwards was an early graduate of the College, class of '20 – 1720, that is. His valedictory address from that year is the oldest that has survived from Yale's history.

\*\* The Edwards editorial offices at YDS became the Jonathan Edwards Center in 2003, the 300th anniversary of his birth.

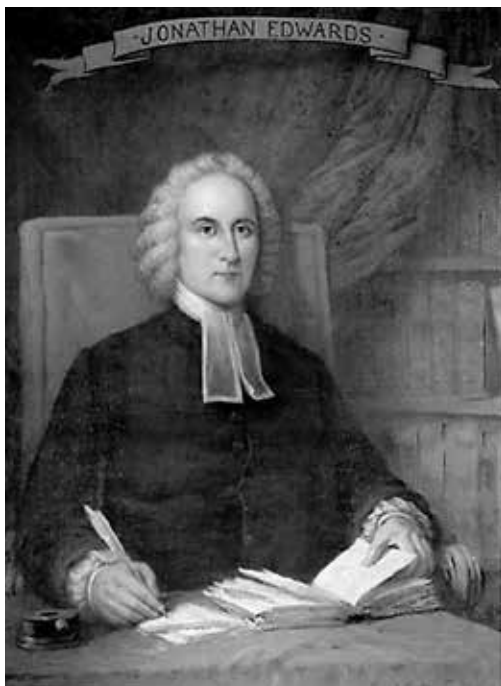
This foundational presence of Edwards at Yale has been enhanced lately by the addition of manuscripts that have come via the Divinity School's new partnership with Andover Newton Theological School. This collection includes most of Edwards' youthful essays on natural philosophy (the early modern term for science), as well as a large cache of family letters. For the first time since the mid-19th century, the complete Edwards corpus is officially reunited.

The Reformation occurred only a century and half before Edwards' birth, and he was part of the Calvinist Puritan religious culture that sought, by its own lights, to carry out the aims of the Reformation in the New World. He was also an inheritor of many of their cultural assumptions – patriarchal, a slave owner, condescending to Native Americans, and most assuredly no democrat. These are aspects of Edwards that historians of various stripes have taken up in recent years, showing him to be very much a person of his time, yet one who also effected changing attitudes towards gender, race, and egalitarianism.

## **A Famous Sermon**

But it is as a theologian and revivalist that Edwards is best known, a preacher and proponent

of the Great Awakening of the 1740s – the author of the wonderful yet wonderfully misunderstood *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* – and a fountain of modern evangelicalism. As such, he is a vital link between the Reformation and our age. Scholarship that takes a measure of the breadth of his interests, significance, and influence is thriving. Let us walk through a few areas where we see the most activity.



Jonathan Edwards, by John Weir (1910). Courtesy of Yale Art Gallery. This portrait currently hangs in the Edwards Dining Room at Yale Divinity School.

Of course, there is history of doctrine. There is no lack of work on Edwards' take on the classic Reformation tenet of justification by faith alone, for instance, making him a conversation partner in the continuing ecumenical dialogue on that topic.

One important line of this inquiry traces changes in his outlook on certain doctrines during his lifetime. This compels scholars and popularizers alike to grapple with unfamiliar, uncanonized texts, complicating any pat positions. Another direction this research takes is to examine how far Edwards departed from, or stayed true to, John Calvin and the Reformed tradition in general. For some, this is a matter of dire concern, and the slightest deviation from Reformed tenets by Brother Jonathan causes much hand-wringing. For others, Edwards was an

original thinker not beholden to Calvin or anybody else, and that's that. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle.

### A Place for Beauty

Another area of strong interest is Edwards' aesthetics, particularly his development of beauty as a theological category. He has been hailed as the first Western theologian to drive beauty to the center of his thought. Beauty for him defined God as trinity. It identified the human being as a reflection of divine beauty through received grace and manifested holiness. And beauty sacralized creation as an emanation of Eternal Mind. In this vein, Edwards has something to say to current considerations of human flourishing and joy – a subject pursued at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

Edwards' spirituality – his views on worship and prayer, his personal spiritual disciplines – is likewise a topic of scrutiny. More theoretically, some very suggestive work is being done on Edwards's idea of the soul's "participation" in God, which takes in topics such as union and communion, incarnational spirituality, divinization, and beatification. Here we approach Edwards as mystic.

Appraisals of Edwards' prodigious work as a biblical exegete are underway. Only recently has the full extent of his commentary become widely available – particularly his "Blank Bible," a fascinating study tool consisting of pages of the King James Bible interleaved with columned sheets of paper on which he could make his comments, all bound into a custom-made volume. The Reformation was so much about accessibility to the sacred texts, and New England Congregationalists were renowned as people of the Word, both printed and spoken. So it is high time that the hermeneutics, methods, and sources of Edwards' biblicism, and his significance as a biblical theologian, receive attention. We shouldn't assume that this patriarch

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**Edwards continues to gain modern readers. Yale's affiliate Jonathan Edwards Centers reside now in eight countries on nearly every continent.**

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of Puritan stock was bound to the "literal" sense of Scripture. What is emerging is a picture of him as eclectic, with a fertile typological imagination, one of whose favorite books was the love poetry of the Song of Songs.

Late in life, Edwards took up a post of missionary to native peoples in Stockbridge, MA. He entered the work with conventional colonial attitudes towards natives, but there is intriguing evidence that living with them for several years changed him, as he became a strong advocate for their rights, and came to view some native converts as better Christians than most of the English he had known. These

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### Edwards has been hailed as the first Western theologian to place beauty at the center of his thought.

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issues, and Edwards' part within the larger, tragic scene of Euro-Indian contact and domestic missions, are getting attention, but much work remains.

#### 300-year Legacy

Then there are the legacies. This is a productive field, for Edwards' influence is profound globally, nationally, and locally. Globally, his formative presence in the missions movement meant that Edwardsean texts and piety were transported to every habitable corner of the planet. Today, we see an ever-increasing readership of Edwards, as reflected in our affiliate Edwards Centers in eight countries on virtually every continent.

Nationally, Edwards' disciples adapted his thought and became involved in major religious movements such as the Second Great Awakening and in vital reform movements such as the abolition of slavery.

Locally, Edwards' influence was felt at Yale and at peer institutions through the "New Divinity," the theological movement in the late 18th and early 19th century that he inspired. Europeans called it simply "the American theology," recognizing it as the first such worthy homegrown movement. In the 20th century, H. Richard Niebuhr dubbed Edwards the "American Augustine." YDS students need only look at the figures after whom many of the pavilions in the Quad are named, to see that most of them – David Brainerd, Samuel Hopkins, Moses Stuart, Nathaniel Taylor, Leonard Bacon, Lyman Beecher – were Edwardseans of one stripe or another, and that the others – Horace Bushnell, Samuel Seabury – engaged Edwards and his legacy in formative ways. It can be argued that we are still doing that today, and in ways we may not even realize or acknowledge.

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#### OPEN CASKET

By Kathryn Stripling Byer

For two days she lay  
in our living room. That she never moved  
chilled me more than the terror she might.

A stirring in the net curtains  
over the shut window and I was wide  
awake. What happened

after the last breath? The cotton-  
stuffed silence of death,  
did it last, or would angels begin

to trill louder than katyids,  
the sinking sun burning a hole in the sky  
through which I'd be borne heavenward?





I'm not a very good Lutheran. Raised in another tradition entirely, I first considered Lutheranism while on a denominational wander during divinity school. Keenly, I watched the Lutheran students.

They threw a Saints and Sinners party on a holiday I had known as “Halloween,” and they seemed to know some kind of Scandinavian secret I wasn't in on. I wondered why they kept talking about Luther instead of Jesus. And I didn't particularly care for being called a sinner, or a saint, for that matter.

Years later, however, I learned an astonishing truth: that Lutheran theology is all about freedom.

First comes truth: the acknowledgement that we're a big mess, and we can't do it on our own. “We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves,” we declare.<sup>1</sup>

And then comes freedom: the assurance that God's grace is offered with no holds barred. We couldn't earn it if we tried. It's just freely given.

Becoming a Lutheran for me was not about joining in at the Saints and Sinners party or taking on an ethnic heritage that didn't belong to me. It was

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I am only interested in a conversation about the Reformation in so far as it is centered on the liberation of God's people. At its best, Lutheran theology proclaims that each one of God's creatures is loved wholly and completely, just as we are.

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about receiving the humbling truth that I was as close to God as the beggar on the street or the king in his palace. There were no gold stars. There was only grace: offered freely to everyone.

Lutheran theology blows away the life equations we are so often handed: “try hard and things will get better.” “Be good and nothing bad will happen to you.” We know these to be lies – lies that bind the faithful up in knots of crippling blame and self-doubt.

These equations are often deployed in the other direction as well. In fact, they run in the theological groundwater of our nation: “If you worked hard you wouldn't be poor,” and, “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” Another I've heard recently: “If you followed the rules, you wouldn't get harassed by the cops.” These, too, are lies. They place the blame on those who fail to thrive in impossible situations, rather than acknowledging that, as young

activists have been crying in recent days, “the system is rigged.”

“If/then” theology, a professor of mine called it. These days, I see if/then's everywhere, lined up around us like jail bars, locking us in. “If I could just stop being gay, then God will love me like my pastor promises.”

I am only interested in a conversation about the Reformation in so far as it is centered on the liberation of God's people. The life-giving theology Luther and his colleagues articulated has rescued me from a life of depending only on myself.

At its best, Lutheran theology has the capacity to be profoundly freeing. It proclaims that each one of God's creatures is loved wholly and completely, just as we are. We need not suppress the fearful and wonderful ways each of us has been made.

“I live here, too,” wrote Langston Hughes in his 1967 poem, “Freedom.”<sup>2</sup> There is no one who falls outside of God's promise. This truth shatters white supremacy, the notion that only some of God's people deserve access to abundant life. There is no one who owns America.

“I live here too,” cry voices from Ferguson, from Baltimore.

“I live here too,” says the dreamer, who fears deportation.

“I live here too,” calls the one who has struggled in poverty.

If we are to remember the Reformation, let it stir us to see the suffering of God's people in our midst: all those who live under beliefs, laws, and systems that withhold flourishing. There are no equations, no if's, then's, or but's. God's promise is for everyone, and so the church must blow open the power structures that have held so many of God's children captive. Let this be our reformation.

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*Emily M. D. Scott 'o6 M.Div. is a Lutheran pastor. She served as the founding pastor of St. Lydia's Dinner Church in Brooklyn until Spring 2017.*

## Notes

- 1 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg, 2006), p. 95.
- 2 Langston Hughes, “Freedom,” *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Time* (Knopf, 1967), p. 89.

# From Disenchantment To Disruption



By Philip S. Gorski

*It has been exactly a century since the great German sociologist, Max Weber, composed his essay “Science as a Vocation.” It was there that he first described the history of Protestantism as a process of “disenchantment” (Entzauberung). It is hard to overstate the influence of this neologism. Originally borrowed from Friedrich Schiller, it would provide the master frame for the most influential versions of the secularization narrative for the next century.*

A half century ago, in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), the chef d’oeuvre of his massive oeuvre, the late Peter Berger summarized the cultural impact of the Reformation this way:

The Protestant believer no longer lives in a world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces. Reality is polarized between a radically transcendent divinity and a radically “fallen” humanity. ... Between them lies an altogether “natural” universe ... bereft of numinosity.<sup>1</sup>

For Berger, secularization occurs when the “sacred canopy” withers away, leaving only a disenchanted “nature” behind.

Forty years later, in *A Secular Age* (2007), his philosophical history of the contemporary era, Charles Taylor made disenchantment a central element of his narrative as well:

Disenchantment dissolved the cosmos, whose levels reflected higher and lower kinds of being ... In its stead was a universe ruled by causal laws, utterly unresponsive to human meanings ... like a machine ...<sup>2</sup>

For Taylor, the sacred cosmos explodes in a massive “supernova” that gives rise to a heavenly host of shimmering secular worldviews beckoning for our attention.

Viewed through the lens of the present, the Protestant Reformation now comes into focus as an era

of “disruption” not unlike our own, an era in which the existing system of cultural and political authority was rapidly and unexpectedly undermined by the advent of a new technology. What the internet is to our era, the printing press was to Luther’s.

## Reams of Paper

We are so accustomed to the availability of print today – so inured to a glut of information – that it can be difficult for us to comprehend just how revolutionary the advent of cheap print really was. Medieval books were laboriously hand-copied in Latin by one or several monks onto sheets of vellum harvested from dozens of calves. They were prohibi-

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**Some of the democratizing potential of the print revolution was realized, but it would fall well short of expectations. In this, our own age of disruption will likely be similar to Luther’s.**

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tively expensive and in short supply. Renaissance books were somewhat cheaper and more plentiful, written on paper made from rags. Even in the early print era, books were still a luxury good, written and produced by and for a cultured elite. It was the vernacular pamphlets of the Reformation era that first turned printed matter into a mass commodity.



Anglican priest visiting hospital patients, London, 1964

Photo by Ian Berry

© Ian Berry/Magnum Photos

Martin Luther played a pivotal role here. Not through his 95 Theses in 1517. As anyone who's read them knows, they were intended for a learned audience and may have been hand-written rather than printed. The breakthrough text was actually Luther's sermon on indulgences, printed the next year, 1518. Written in Luther's characteristically pugilistic style, it was published in a cheap German edition and aimed at an educated lay audience. It sold massively, as did many of Luther's subsequent writings, along with those of other Protestant authors. During the first decade of the Reformation several million such pamphlets would be published. Luther dominated the market. Something like 40 percent of all Protestant texts produced in this period were penned by him.

### An Economic Reformation

There is an economic story here, too. Before the arrival of Luther and the onset of the Reformation the book trade had been a very capital-intensive line of business. Printing was time consuming. Producing a long book could take a year or more. Many printers ran out of funds and went out of business. Gutenberg himself died bankrupt. So printing initially gravitated to large trading cities, where capital and commercial expertise were in plentiful supply, places like Nuremberg, Venice, and Lyon.

The advent of cheap print changed all this. Less paper was needed to produce a pamphlet. Fewer pages meant shorter production time. Proximity to talent now became just as important as proximity to capital. Luther's base of operations, the little town of Wittenberg, soon became a publishing hub. So did Calvin's Geneva. The newfound prosperity of these towns had as much to do with the printing trade as the Protestant ethic.

The advent of cheap print also undermined the existing system of cultural authority in much the same way that the internet has in our time. The flow of information grew enormously in scope and speed. It also became much more difficult to steer or block. And it had many more tributaries than ever before.

The advent of cheap print also destabilized the existing systems of political authority. Sixteenth-century Europe was not a system of sovereign nation-states such as we have today. Politically, it was a congeries of towns and principalities that were only loosely connected via a ruling dynasty. Political authority derived from network centrality: everything was linked through the center and the dynasts occupied the center. Cheap print created lateral connections that had not existed before. It

led to the emergence of new groupings and alliances and to wave after wave of revolution and rebellion.

### Discipline and Enforcement

Out of this crucible new forms of authority slowly emerged. And cheap print would be one of its binding elements. It would be used to discipline instead of disrupt. Religious authority would be re-established via Bibles and hymnals, catechisms and confessions. Political authority would be buttressed

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**The breakthrough text was not Luther's 95 Theses but his sermon on indulgences, printed the next year. Written in his pugilistic style, it was published in a cheap German edition and sold massively.**

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with placards and proclamations and law books and learned treatises. Some of the democratizing potential of the print revolution would be realized, too. But the reality would fall well short of expectations. In this, too, I suspect, our own age of disruption will be similar to Luther's.

In the old Weberian narrative, the Reformation was the historical catalyst for "rationalization." By this he meant the emergence of distinct spheres of human activity – politics, economics, science, and so on – each oriented to its own set of "ultimate values" – power, wealth, truth, and so on – and each seeking the most efficient means to these ends, whatever the consequences. In the long run, rationalization may win out. In the short run, though, the experience is surely disruption. Can the democratizing potential of the internet be salvaged in the long run? Or will it simply lead to more encompassing and sinister forms of control? And what effect will this all have on religious tradition? For answers to these questions, we must perhaps await the next century.

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*Philip Gorski is Professor of Sociology at Yale University. His latest book is American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present (Princeton, 2017).*

### Notes

- 1 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, 1967), pp. 111-112.
- 2 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard, 2007), p. 280.



I remember the moment I learned Martin Luther may not have tacked his 95 Theses onto the doors of All Saints' Church. It was a surprising revelation because I, like many other kids, learned in school that

Luther hung the Theses up for all in Wittenberg to see. Instead, it turns out that this emblematic image may exist only in the imagination: Quite possibly the monastic Luther addressed his objections to the Archbishop of Mainz, sent them off by mail carrier, and left things at that, thinking that he was beginning an academic disputation with his superior.

But the notion of Luther sending out the 95 Theses and going to lunch, anticipating a long wait for a response, seems anticlimactic compared to the vision of him marching to the church with stolid expression, dramatically nailing the document to the doors, and departing as crowds thronged to read it, their minds and hearts so suddenly ablaze that the Protestant Reformation exploded in that very moment.

It's the glamorous stuff of movie scripts.

Yet Luther was not famous at the time. He was not known as a great theologian. No throngs followed him about. He consistently claimed that he was not interested in inciting controversy, though Rome perceived the Theses otherwise, with prominent Roman Catholics vigorously objecting to Luther's arguments, calling for him to be tried and even burned for heresy. All because of one letter sent to an Archbishop.

Why do we cling to this image of Luther hanging the Theses on the church doors? Perhaps it is because we so love to dream big. We love dramatic flair, and we get an emotional high from visions of the momentous. But an addiction to spectacle sets up disappointment: Life is not often grand even at its grandest moments. No fireworks went off when Einstein discovered his theory of relativity. No soundtrack swelled when Gutenberg got the printing press to work. A tiny mouse click delivers that long-sought college acceptance, and a handshake solidifies the job promotion. Even milestones like births and deaths are marked not by fanfare but by quiet, unassuming simplicity. Sometimes it is the smallest actions, the quietest ones, not the grand ones, that carry the greatest impact.

Luther's document, no matter how it was delivered, was quietly produced with solitary quill and parchment, yet triggered a revolution. One can imagine the labor of dipping the pointed feather into ink, then writing with the measured, prayerful calligraphy of a monk who knew that each letter

formed a word and each word mattered. It's almost possible to feel the burn of an error in theology or rhetoric that might have caused him to scrap a page and pen a new one – and the satisfaction he must have felt when looking at the completed work.

Ninety-five pointed protests, none more than a couple of sentences. Ninety-five objections to the status quo. Five short of reaching 100. For all Luther's labor, the finished product is not long – it cannot compare to *The Lord of the Rings* or the *Harry Potter* series – but its small size made for an enduring legacy no one could have predicted.

We say Luther inspired a theological revolution. He created fissures and new denominations and rocked theological assumptions held for generations. But when one thinks about the 95 Theses themselves, with all their incisive brevity, one realizes that all that momentum began with something quite small. I see Luther's legacy reflected in the ways that many Protestants practice their faith today: Small actions compose much of ministry. They are embodied by the minister who says a prayer over a stranger who comes to her office; a seminary professor who grades a paper in silence, then puts it on top of a pile and picks up another; a school chaplain who meets with concerned parents; a clergy group that marches together in a protest. Each action is small, but its impact – its impact transforms faith, instills wisdom, inculcates calm, and models bravery.

Some believe portions of Protestantism are in an unstoppable tailspin. Yet I see the impact of the Protestants that I know and love as they take to the streets to resist discrimination, craft sermons that name injustice, speak truth to power by meeting their political representatives, or tell stories and write books and volunteer with underserved populations.

They continue to protest because that is part of their theological heritage. They continue to undertake small actions because they know they can have enormous impact.

Martin Luther transformed the model of Christian leadership when he questioned assumptions about theological truth. As Protestants continue to name the unspoken, resist unjust assumptions, and confront power, they are manifesting Luther's legacy.

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# Meeting Each Other Outside the Either/Or



By Chad Tanaka Pack '10 M.Div.

*How does one queer the church? First of all, “queer” has several meanings today. Many older gays and lesbians find it offensive, because the word has a long history as a term of abuse and oppression. Alternatively, many younger people embrace “queer” as an authentic way to describe their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.*

In academic circles, queer theory understands that society has constructed binary identities for us: We are either male or female, either gay or straight. Limited by these binaries, we ignore people who are not “either gay or straight,” like bisexuals, and people who are not “either male or female,” like transgender people. “To queer” is to deconstruct these social either-or’s and challenge the systems that reinforce them. Though queer theory is rooted in rejecting the binaries of gender and sexuality, it can be applied to other socially constructed boundaries.

## **Galatian Moment**

Using this broader understanding of “queer,” we can interpret Jesus’ ministry as queering the *ekklesia*: He challenges traditional gender divisions. For example, Jesus’ ministry brought about the replacement of the initiation ritual of circumcision with

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**Jesus’ surprising exchange with the Syro-Phoenician woman tells us this: Expect to be surprised by the faith of people we meet outside our church walls.**

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baptism. This allowed females to be ritually received into the community. Jesus broke down the gender barrier that prevented females from fully participating in the *ekklesia*. Jesus “queers” the ritual that initiates membership in the community; he queers the community. Jesus’ deconstruction of either-or’s is celebrated in Galatians: “There is no longer Jew

or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

If we applied queer theory to the church today, could we reform it as Luther and others did 500 years ago?

Of course, today there is no one church. A striking legacy of the Protestant Reformation was the formation of many new denominational bodies. Any 21st-century reformation will likely be made up of an even wider diversity of church movements.

Not that every church today needs reform. There are many thriving, growing churches around the world, often in unexpected places. However, in many congregations seeking renewal, “queering the church” might be a creative, liberating force of reformation.

One significant theological idea from the 16th century was the “either-or” concept of election. We are either saved or damned, elect or reprobate. Can we queer the church by deconstructing this “either-or”? How might we challenge the ways churches have interpreted this binary doctrine of election?

## **God Alone**

To be clear, I’m not challenging the belief that God elects some for salvation and not others. A Reformed understanding of the sovereignty of God asserts that God alone determines salvation. As Paul warns in Romans: “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn



yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things (as the unrighteous)” (Rom. 2:1).

I’m suggesting that we deconstruct not the divine-determined categories of elect and reprobate but the human-determined categories of “who the church says is saved” and “who the church says is damned.” For 2,000 years, churches have made these determinations on behalf of God, largely ignoring Paul’s warning. By dividing humanity into either “who the church says is saved” or “who the church says is damned,” churches have oppressed and injured many faithful followers of Christ. One way to queer the church is to challenge this boundary between “who is in” and “who is out.”

### **Gentiles Too**

To take another example from Jesus’ ministry, Mark’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus’ encounter with a Syrophenician woman. The woman, a Gentile, begs him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Jesus initially does not honor her request, declaring the Jewish people as the “children” who should be fed first, and comparing her (and presumably all Gentiles) to “dogs.” The woman appeals to him by cleverly observing that even dogs are fed the crumbs of the children. Persuaded, Jesus expels the demon from the Gentile woman’s daughter.

And so Jesus extends his presence to the Gentiles. His ministry to the Syrophenician woman and her daughter creates a new possibility: The

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### **I’m suggesting that we can deconstruct the human-determined categories of “who the church says is saved” and “who the church says is damned.”**

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kingdom of God is available not only to Jews. (The Hebrew Bible includes stories of a few Gentiles, like Ruth, who were included in Israelite society.) Jesus breaks down a predominant binary of who is in and who is out.

Note how the story begins by announcing that Jesus has gone away to the region of Tyre (Mark 7:24). He is venturing out of Galilee into a region less known to him and his disciples. As we today think about how to create new possibilities for ministry, we can start by venturing outside our sanctuaries. To reach out to LGBTQ people, for example, one could organize a small group discussion at the local LGBTQ center. We must dare to leave the comfort of our church, and go away to regions less known to our congregations and us.

In Mark’s story, the surprising exchange between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman reveals something else as well: We can expect to be surprised by the faith of people we meet outside our church walls. Jesus’ response is changed by her appeal.

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### **In many congregations seeking renewal, “queering the church” might be a creative, liberating force of reformation.**

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We too can expect our ministries to be changed by the ideas, convictions, and needs of the people we engage outside our familiar world. We must listen and be open. The people we encounter may become partners in our reform efforts.

### **Traveling the Unfamiliar**

This story is one of a series in Mark’s Gospel that shows Jesus’ increasing involvement with the Gentiles. In his first venture into a largely non-Jewish territory, the country of the Gerasenes, Jesus exorcises the demon whose name is “Legion” (Mark 5:1-20). Despite the successful exorcism, the people are afraid, and beg Jesus to leave. Next, in the story of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30), Jesus casts the demon out of the woman’s daughter, but from afar. He is not physically near the child. In the next story (Mark 7:31-37), Jesus visits the region of the Decapolis, where he heals a deaf man by putting his fingers in the man’s ears and by spitting and touching his tongue. Jesus is intimately close to the man. Jesus’ encounters with Gentiles in Mark’s Gospel show a progression of deepening connection. So too we can expect relationships with those outside the church will develop over time. We must make long-term commitments and not be discouraged by initial setbacks.

How might we transform our churches if we broke down the boundaries between LGBTQ and straight people? Between people of different racial groups? Between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking people? Between the homeless and the housed? Between refugees and citizens? Although new ministries will require time and effort, we can expect partnerships to begin and flourish when we venture into new spaces and befriend people we find there. Queering the church can bring about a reformation for the 21st century.

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Evangelistic camp revival, Dalton, GA., 2003

Photo by A. Abbas

© A. Abbas/Magnum Photos

# A Gospel of Liberation and Self-Scrutiny



By Alisha Lola Jones '07 M.Div.

*During the 2016 presidential election news coverage, I cringed as several white national evangelical leaders failed to demonstrate socio-cultural competency or empathy for a kindred cohort – those evangelicals who are African American, Latinx, working class, female, or queer. Their continuing affirmation of a ruthless businessman in the highest political office bears no relation to any gospel politics I recognize.*

Even so, listening to popular critiques of the evangelical movement, one gets the impression that they are the only white Christians who are willfully oblivious about social injustice. This is simply untrue. I believe that the reoccurring, widespread failure among white Christians to face our racial divide is rooted in a refusal to acknowledge humbly that at any time it could be any one of us who are misguided.

Now more than ever, theological leaders are noticing what happens when we disengage from our siblings. As a womanist ethnographer, I believe

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**Theological liberation is won when we fight for our freedom while unlearning our own oppressive behaviors.**

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we need to take seriously the myriad Christian perspectives among us and commit to intra-religious dialogue, which begins when we listen to diverse, faithful resistance stories through the prism of race, gender, and class.

## **Unwelcome Identity**

I must confess that when I am among religious scholars I talk apprehensively about my upbringing in evangelical Christianity. In many of those conversations, my community is reduced repeatedly to the negative stereotypes of charismatic Protestantism:

zealous believers who lack intellectual depth, social justice consciousness, and direct-action grit.

The experience is shaming and silencing. It is also ironic, given how much we scholarly theologians boast of welcoming everyone. Evangelicals are presumed to be a monolithic spectacle absent from the ivory tower and dismissed for their theological ideas.

And yet, to borrow from the Negro Spiritual, “here is one”: I am a scholar and minister of evangelical African-American heritage, produced by a long tradition of African-American evangelicals who have used multimedia to preach resistance to white supremacy and classism. They have done so while disputing white colleagues’ tone-deaf agenda of spreading the gospel of an assimilationist Jesus Christ throughout the world without getting our house in order here in the US.

My most indelible evangelical memories are associated with my parents, the Rev. Dr. Alvin Augustus Jones and the Rev. Dr. Martha Butler Jones, who were co-pastors and religious broadcasters from 1981-1998 at Miracle Faith Centre (MFC), a multiracial, intercultural, and multilingual evangelical church of 1,000-plus members in Washington, DC.

In its heyday, MFC hosted national televangelists such as Billy Graham, Bishop I.V. and Pastor Bridget Hilliard, and Kenneth Hagin Sr. As professional broadcasters, my parents were sought after as hosts and consultants who pioneered African-American

religious broadcasting; they were founders of the first black-owned network The Dream Network on The Dish Network, DirectTV, and Sky Angel in 1992.

Countless nights after their broadcasts we stayed up as volunteers answering the phones, praying with people who were sick, depressed, and lonely. Reclusive luminaries like Etta James would call and

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### **Evangelicals are presumed to be a monolithic spectacle absent from the ivory tower and dismissed for their theological ideas.**

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tell us that our programming comforted them. This unexpected feedback gave us a sense of our impact through the media, which provided a platform to illuminate important social issues in the nation's capital such as homelessness and refugee advocacy.

When people ask me to situate the faith tradition in which I was raised, I sing a TV theme song – “Ev-i-dence, ev-i-dence, does your life show enough evidence?” – from the Rev. Frederick K.C. Price Sr.'s national broadcast *Ever Increasing Faith*, a weekly Sunday morning program that aired nationally in the 1980s and 90s. Price is the most prominent African-American figure in the Word of Faith movement.

#### **A 76-Week Series**

Price was one of a handful of black male pastors who were mentored by famous white male televangelists at the time (Oral Roberts mentored Bishop Carlton Pearson, Kenneth Copeland mentored Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Hagin Sr. mentored Price). Eventually, though, Price in Los Angeles organized the Fellowship of International Christian Word of Faith Ministries (FICWFM), a group of predominantly African-American ministries, and my parents decided to align their church plant with it.

Price's teachings over the years have yielded many spiritual deliverance testimonies and attracted criticism for his emphasis on prosperity, despite overwhelming evidence of the socio-economic barriers that people of color and the poor face. But I will never forget when he took on his white colleagues in 1999 with a reported 76-week series of sermons entitled “Race, Religion, and Racism” and launched a boycott of books and donations of white evangelical leaders who had revealed segregationist attitudes.

Price's stance shocked the picturesque dynamic of the Word of Faith movement that relied on presenting the Body of Christ as harmonious and international. FICWFM ministries were urged to confront

the sin of racial injustice by any means necessary.

Unfortunately, such newfound insight also revealed the extent to which the oppression we hope to eradicate may be so internalized that it is overlooked. Numerous male pastors within historically African-American Protestant traditions are clear about racial injustice but remain reticent about gender inequity in installing women as senior pastors. I've learned that theological liberation is won when we fight simultaneously for our freedom while unlearning our own oppressive behaviors.

#### **Risk-Taking Vocation**

To this day, I am thankful for what my parents taught me about how God can be experienced through multicultural charismatic worship and media engagement. They pursued a risk-taking, forward-thinking, prophetic ministry through what political scientist Benedict Anderson coined as “imagined communities.” These values are foundational to my own entrepreneurial parachurch ministry InSight Initiative. And as a scholar, I consistently remember the tradition in which I met God. I bring that witness into the classroom and pulpit wherever I go.

My call to action is to remember where we have come from. Surely all of us can claim communities that we both love and yet wrestle with. Nevertheless, we are all uniquely equipped to be ministers of reconciliation; we can challenge our communities with respect and care.

May we model what self-examination looks like. May we share our transformational journeys with our loved ones, yet listen more than we speak. May we engage our loved ones in our research and our

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### **May we share our transformational journeys with our loved ones, yet listen more than we speak.**

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service. May we have the courage to renounce any stance that would threaten the well-being of God's children. It is my hope that we will begin to listen to the evidence of our many faith journeys, lifting our voices, meeting needs in our ministries, and holding each other accountable.

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Chapel lunch buffet, Yorkshire, England, 1977  
Photo by Martin Parr  
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# Finding a Dignified End for White Protestantism



By Robert P. Jones

*The end of a life is often difficult to discern. In the natural order of things, it is most often marked not by a clear announcement but by a near-imperceptible sigh as breath leaves the body without return. In the era of modern medicine, when technology can artificially transform the inevitable into the indefinite, the end of a life may arrive long before breath or heart or organs fully cease to function.*

We face death not just accompanied by our family and friends (if we are lucky) but armed with “do not resuscitate” orders, living wills, and healthcare powers of attorney. The word “dignity” has migrated into the palliative care vocabulary as a way of expressing the hope for a reasonable end, where a life is ultimately honored by foregoing “extraordinary measures” and letting it go.

## Astonishing Feat

Martin Luther’s religious descendants can take an appropriate sense of pride in a remarkable five centuries of freewheeling religious innovation and

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**The sheer longevity and dominance of the Protestant movement are something that would have astonished Martin Luther, who had a keen sense that the eschaton was near.**

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massive institution building. White European Protestantism became the most powerful religious and cultural force in the modern Western world. This longevity, and the sheer dominance of this movement, is something that would have astonished Martin Luther, who had a keen sense that the eschaton was near.

The success of Luther and other reformers was initially marked by the official adoption of Protestant forms of Christianity in the emerging nations of northern Europe. But it truly flowered in American

soil that was tilled by religious liberty and congenial to the growth of an amazing diversity of Protestant denominations. Even as Protestant church member rates were plummeting across northern Europe’s state churches, Protestantism among Americans of European descent seemed to be an exception. White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism was the undisputed dominant demographic, cultural, and institutional power in the US up through the 1980s.

But over the last few decades, white American Protestantism’s vital signs have ebbed. The last year white Protestants constituted a majority of the US population was 1993, and that percentage has now dropped to 30 percent.<sup>1</sup> After so much ink has been spilled charting that decline among white mainline denominations (in the last decade alone, down from 17.8 percent of the population to 12.8 percent), we now have evidence of a second wave of white Protestant diminishment — among white evangelical denominations.<sup>2</sup> White evangelical Protestants have decreased from 23 percent of the population in 2006 to 16.8 percent today. The Southern Baptist Convention — the nation’s largest Protestant denomination — has posted losses of over 1 million members across ten straight years of membership decline.

## Diminished Clout

And the likely future trends are etched in the stark generational profiles of American adults. Nearly half of seniors ages 65 and older identify as either white mainline Protestant (19 percent) or white evangelical Protestant (26 percent). But only about one in six American adults under 30 identifies as either white



mainline Protestant (8 percent) or white evangelical Protestant (8 percent).<sup>3</sup>

White Protestants have also lost considerable cultural and institutional clout. For all the good work the National Council of Churches does, it is a shadow of its former self. Its gleaming, limestone-clad initial headquarters, the Interchurch Center

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### **One significant challenge for the future is that there has been virtually no estate planning.**

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in New York, was dubbed by its founders as “the nearest thing to a Protestant-Orthodox ‘Vatican’ that the modern world would ever see” when none other than President Eisenhower laid the cornerstone in 1958. But after years of downsizing, a reduced NCC staff left the building in 2013 to land at the United Methodist Building in Washington, DC. A growing number of white Protestant seminaries are closing, merging, tapping endowments, or selling off assets to keep the doors open and the lights on. Even among the white evangelical branch of the Protestant family tree, parachurch institutions like Focus on the Family have a fraction of the employees they had in the heady 1980s and 90s. In the elite halls of government, there is now only one Protestant – President Trump’s recent appointee Neil Gorsuch – serving on the US Supreme Court with five Catholics and three Jews.

#### **A Legacy Continues**

To be sure, there is considerable life in African-American and especially Hispanic-American churches today and among Protestant Christians of color in the developing world, who are themselves inheritors of Luther’s legacy. But because of the way racism has historically segregated the Protestant world, these institutions have by necessity developed lives of their own. The descendants of white Protestantism who deny its grim prognosis by pointing to the health of these denominations are like a person who attempts to lift her spirits by reading the chart of the healthier patient in the next bed.

The signs all point to a conclusion that is difficult for many to face: White Protestantism, as the dominant religious and cultural force in America, has reached the end of meaningful life. Though white Protestant churches and institutions are not going to disappear fully, it is time to lay white Protestantism – the infrastructure built for the days of cultural dominance – to rest. For those who have been nurtured by it, the most important act in our time may

be the pastoral task of guiding it to a dignified end. Marking the 500-year arc of European Protestantism might be more productively thought about as a wake than a birthday party.

#### **Difficult Conversations**

One significant challenge for the future is that there has been virtually no estate planning. If white Protestantism’s survivors can move through the stages of grief, from denial to acceptance, they could begin to have important, reasoned conversations about responsibly redistributing or reallocating enormous resources. Even in healthier institutions, hard questions – such as whether maintaining massive institutions to benefit dwindling numbers of members and students is justifiable – will have to be asked. And in struggling institutions, they will be sharper: Is spending down endowments to primarily shore up historic buildings rather than serve living people consistent with a church’s mission? White Protestant institutions have billions of dollars in assets, and they have a current window of opportunity to think about their legacy – their witness – in this time.

Such conversations are always difficult. And as is all too often the case in emotionally charged end-of-life settings, the temptation is to be more desperate than deliberate. The key difference between Luther and his white Protestant descendants today is this: Luther was convinced the end times were near, yet his legacy has endured for five centuries; today’s white Protestants are taking extraordinary measures to ensure white Protestantism’s dominance will live forever, but the end has already come.

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*Robert P. Jones is the CEO of Public Religion Research Institute and the author of The End of White Christian America (Simon & Schuster, 2016).*

#### **Notes**

- 1 Here and throughout, “white” refers to survey respondents who identify as white and non-Hispanic.
- 2 I unpack these trends more fully in *The End of White Christian America* (Simon & Schuster, 2016).
- 3 Robert P. Jones and Dan Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity: Findings from the 2016 American Values Atlas* (Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2017).

# The Search for Reenchantment



By Randall Balmer

*For anyone who cared about the future of Christianity in the West, the stakes could not have been higher. The Protestant Reformation was now a quarter-century old; Western Christianity was divided, and the two parties, Catholic and Protestant, met in a last-ditch effort to heal the breach. Representatives of the Vatican, led by the irenic Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, and a Protestant delegation led by Philipp Melanchthon, Johann Gropper, and Martin Bucer gathered in April 1541 at the Imperial Diet of Regensburg in an attempt to restore unity to Christendom.*

In advance of the colloquy, Bucer and Gropper had drafted a comprehensive statement of Protestant doctrines as a basis for discussions. Remarkably, and somewhat to everyone's surprise, Protestants and Catholics, with only minimal negotiation, came to an agreement on the doctrine of justification by faith, which some thought would be the most intractable.

## Take and Eat

Then came sacramental theology. The Protestants quibbled with Catholic understandings of the sacrament of penance, but the real impediment to unity centered on the Eucharist, specifically the Catho-

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**The Protestant embrace of rationalism has been its undoing. In America, the approach to Holy Communion as a strictly symbolic commemoration has prevailed.**

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lic doctrine of transubstantiation, the notion that the bread and wine of Holy Communion actually became the body and blood of Christ. Rejecting it outright, the Protestants had here succumbed, by one degree or another, to rationalism: How, after all, does one explain the transformation of wafer and wine into flesh and blood? Martin Luther himself was rationalistic on the point. Twenty years earlier,

he declaimed at the Diet of Worms that unless he was convinced "by Scripture and plain reason," he would not recant, a statement not without irony because Luther had excoriated the rationalism of both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

At Regensburg, neither side was willing to give ground. Even Contarini, the seasoned diplomat, could not break the logjam. For their part the Protestants, including John Calvin, caucused on the matter. Though the Protestants were by no means united on this question of the nature of the Real Presence, Calvin summarized their sentiments about Catholic doctrine: "It was the opinion of all that transubstantiation was a fictitious thing."

The Colloquy at Regensburg ended in failure.

Now, 500 years into the Protestant Reformation, I'm prepared to argue that the Protestant embrace of rationalism has been its undoing. In America, at least, Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli's memorialist approach to Holy Communion – the Lord's Supper is strictly symbolic, a memorial commemoration – has prevailed.

Some Protestants do talk about the mystery of Holy Communion. Luther the foe of transubstantiation held out for a nuanced Protestant approach, insisting that Jesus is really present in the bread and wine. Memorialism, however, is no mystery at all; the partaker is asked merely to recall Jesus' death.

This devaluation of the sacraments – a devaluation rendered even more acute by the evangelical embrace of temperance movements since the 19th century – has produced an arid sacramentalism devoid of power.

### **Eucharistic Takeout**

Let me provide a couple of examples. For a time at least, worshipers at one pioneering megachurch were offered the option of taking communion as

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**Recovery of a sense of enchantment centered in the Eucharist would be a countercultural gesture of defiance, a refusal to allow Enlightenment rationalism serve as the final arbiter of truth.**

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they left the auditorium. “There were attendants who gave each person a piece of bread and a small cup,” my informant tells me, “and then the person would ingest both at that point and put the cup in a basket.” Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ, *en route* to the parking lot.

Several years ago, while under the misguided illusion that I wanted to write a book about Sarah Palin’s faith, I attended her church in Wasilla, Alaska. I happened upon communion Sunday. Following the sermon, the pastor instructed the congregation to queue up at tables scattered around the gymnasium. There, deacons distributed thimble-sized containers of grape juice, and the deacons’ wives broke off pieces of bread. They were wearing the clear plastic gloves used in fast-food restaurants.

The body and blood of Christ. These examples of Protestant indifference toward the sacraments could be multiplied. I’m well familiar with this memorialist approach from my own childhood. Later, my embrace of the doctrine of Real Presence placed the Eucharist at the center of both worship and spirituality.

### **Not Wanting to Offend**

Bereft of a robust sacramental theology, Protestants – both liberals and evangelicals – have succumbed to the cult of rationalism. Among liberals, the embrace of rationalism has led to attempts to explain away the miracles of the New Testament – the annunciation, healings, the Resurrection.

Among evangelicals, more often than not, the rage for rationalism can be traced back to its reading of John Calvin, who was trained as a lawyer. The appeal of Calvinism lies in the fact that once you accept Calvinist presuppositions – total human depravity,

the doctrine of election – you enter a vortex in which everything can be explained. Evangelical logic-choppers love Calvinism for precisely that reason, and I suspect it is no coincidence that Calvin felt obliged to defend himself against the charge that his sacramental theology was “bound to human reason.”

By the 18th century, a confluence with Enlightenment rationalism had robbed the Protestant world of enchantment. Protestantism often calcified into theological sterility. Holy Communion was reduced to little more than a mnemonic exercise. To invest it with deeper significance would offend rational sensibilities.

### **Alchemy of Grace**

The failure at Regensburg placed Protestants on the road to a largely unmitigated rationalism. The recovery of a solid sacramental theology would go a long way toward reinvesting Protestantism with a sense of enchantment and restore spiritual vitality. In small, discrete ways this is beginning to happen. Various Protestant congregations are observing Holy Communion every Sunday, rather than once a month or once a quarter. Many have yet to develop a theology befitting such a move, but that may come in time.

The recovery of a sense of enchantment centered in the Eucharist would also be a countercultural gesture of defiance, one that says people of faith refuse to allow the canons of Enlightenment rationalism

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**We live in an enchanted universe where there are forces at play that we can’t begin to understand.**

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serve as the final arbiter of truth. Positivism is not the holy grail. The embrace of sacramentalism – the Real Presence of Christ – would assert that we live in an enchanted universe where there are forces at play that we can’t begin to understand, much less reduce to rationalistic terminology.

The sacrament of Holy Communion, the alchemy of grace, may be the ultimate such force.

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Prayers at Taizé, the ecumenical community in Burgundy, France, 2017

Photo by Alex Majoli

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I was having lunch with a clergy colleague, and the subject was bound to come up.

"What are you preaching on this coming Sunday?" she asked.

"Predestination," I answered.

"Yeah! That's what my parishioners *really* want to hear in the summer," she joked.

"And what season of the year, pray tell, would be a good time?"

My friend had no wish to argue: "Oh, Kaz! My congregation wouldn't let me preach doctrine." And she quickly changed the subject.

As I've observed it, not preaching Christian doctrine is a badge of honor among many colleagues. Marilynne Robinson says as much: "When I say Calvinism has faded, I am speaking of the uncoerced abandonment by the so-called mainline churches of their own origins, theology, culture, and tradition. ... What has taken the place of Calvinism in the mainline churches? With all due respect, not much."<sup>1</sup>

Since the shocking 2016 presidential election result, I keep hearing from clergy the anguished question: "How could it happen?" We should rather ask: "Why are we surprised it did happen?"

Instead of identifying Christianity with this or that political party, and watching the faith disappear in a competition with constant news updates and partisan outrage, it is time to re-teach our congrega-

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### More than ever, are we not called to preach about the Providence of God?

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tions truths of the Reformation. Christ and Christ alone saves us, and only God should command our ultimate loyalty. More than ever, are we not called to preach about the Providence of God – that "we belong not to ourselves, but in life and in death, in body and soul to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ," as the Heidelberg Catechism put it in 1563?

Many of us in the US mainline church long, I think, for the days when Reinhold Niebuhr was on the cover of *Time*. When *The New York Times* recently published a sympathetic piece on the religious left, most of my colleagues shared it.<sup>2</sup> Yes! We finally made the front page of the *Times*! We are back, baby! I, too, was glad that Christianity was for once viewed through a lens other than Jerry Falwell Jr. or Joel Osteen. But maybe instead of trying to outdo Franklin Graham in partisan punditry, it would do us more good if we paid attention to the other Niebuhr brother – H. Richard Niebuhr. His stinging

caricature of institutional US Protestant belief that a "God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" is as piercing today as it was nearly a century ago.<sup>3</sup>

As I write, the US has just been rocked by the neo-Nazi marches in Charlottesville, and a terrorist attack has traumatized Barcelona. That same week I read with my congregation two 20th-century faith statements: the 1913 Kansas City Statement of Faith and the 1934 Barmen Declaration. The first one now looks naïve in its belief in "the progress of knowledge" and "realization of human brotherhood." The second one, written only 20 years later in the shadow of the Nazi rise, reveals a spiritual resilience deeply rooted in the signers' confessional Lutheran and Reformed identities. It echoes the thunder of the Word of God when it states: "We reject the false doctrine ..." Most powerfully, it re-states serious Reformation truths: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death." It ultimately declares: "the Word of God endures forever."

Days before the lunch with my friend, I returned from a visit to former East Germany, which had been ravaged by the mad ideologies of Nazism and Communism. Once 95 percent Lutheran, today it is the most secularized area of Germany. Pockets of stronger churchgoing correlate with areas where the Confessing Church and the Barmen Declaration held sway. At Bach's Thomaskirche in Leipzig, I noticed a large crucifix hanging opposite the pulpit. The local Lutheran pastor explained: Every minister should have before his eyes when preaching, the subject of his sermon and our ultimate hope. Christ crucified.

Let's preach doctrine. Always.

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### Notes

- 1 Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), pp. 100-101.
- 2 "Religious Liberals Sat Out of Politics for 40 Years. Now They Want in the Game," by Laurie Goodstein, *The New York Times*, June 10, 2017, p. 1.
- 3 *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper & Row, 1959), p. 193. The book was first published in 1937.

## LISTENING TO MONTEVERDI

By Robert Bly

I come from a long line of Protestant revolutionaries  
Who refused the old marriages with Rome,  
But I'm still hoping to sit at Moses' side.

Every night the old angels call to us,  
Promising good things. For centuries the oysters  
Have been opening and closing at Moses' side.

For centuries I have been no one at all, tossed  
Up and down, a wild bird in the storm, and yet all  
That time I have been sitting at Moses' side.

How can it be that we are sons and daughters  
Of Danish tribesmen, barely Christian at all,  
Yet all this time we have been sitting at Moses' side.

We know how easily we can veer off the road,  
And get stuck in the snow, though all that time  
We still imagine we are sitting at Moses' side.

Let's forget the idea that we are the old ones, chosen  
To carry the creation. We are all latecomers  
To the earth, still hoping to sit at Moses' side.

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Mennonites in Chihuahua, Mexico, 1996  
Photo by Larry Towell  
© Larry Towell/Magnum Photos



A 21st-century consideration of the Reformation must be different from the past. The contemporary milieu is uniquely shaped, for instance, by more than 100 years of the modern ecumenical movement. This fact is dramatically documented by the present practice of avoiding any notion of “celebrating” the Reformation. A division of the church is not “celebrated” in an ecumenical age; it is to be “commemorated.”<sup>1</sup>

Whatever descriptive word is allied with the Reformation, its creative force continues after 500 years. Its core teaching remains Martin Luther’s understanding of the doctrine of justification.<sup>2</sup> The lively relevance of this teaching was apparent in Lutheran-Roman Catholic theological discussions in the 1990s. It finally resulted in the 1999 approval of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, the fruit of some 50 years of national and international dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Thus could churches of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church officially reach a fundamental and differentiated consensus on this doctrine, which had been a chief cause of their division 500 years ago. The mutual anathemas expressed by each side were, they declared, no longer applicable. Since 1999, Methodists and most recently Reformed church bodies have identified with the consensus expressed in the *Joint Declaration*.

This document provides a graphic example of the partial healing of divisions between some Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church and has the potential to serve as a catalysis for fur-

ther Protestant-Catholic agreements. Only the coming years and the will of the churches involved will determine whether this potential can be realized.

**Church unity is both a gift from the Triune God and a task given to the churches.**

The successful efforts of the *Joint Declaration* raise once again the ancient twofold question: Is the visible unity of the church necessary, and is it possible?

Certainly from the perspective of the magisterial reformers of the 16th century, the preservation of the one church – the desire to maintain its unity – was a major concern. They held out the hope for a genuine council for the church. These 16th-century figures should not be contorted into modern ecumenists. Yet their commitment to Scripture, the early church, and the creeds motivated their commitment to the

unity of the church. For them church unity was a necessity. This view has indeed influenced many Protestant churches that later became involved in the ecumenical movement. It has been undergirded by an understanding derived from Scripture that unity is a matter of Christian faith and confession, and not something subject to human disposition or a matter of mere utility. It is both a gift from the Triune God and a task given to the churches. In the final analysis it is affirmed as a possibility and expectation, but a possibility not achieved in the ultimate sense by only human efforts.

In spite of signs of malaise in the movement, we cannot overlook the positive steps toward Christian unity that have occurred. Besides the *Joint Declaration*, these include agreements of full communion involving Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Moravians, and Reformed. The ecumenical movement calls Christians to be faithful and persist. In this remarkable anniversary year of commemoration – if not celebration – we cannot neglect the urgency of the unity of the church.

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*William Rusch, adjunct professor of Lutheran studies at YDS, is an internationally known specialist in ecumenism.*

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of “celebrate” or “commemorate,” see William G. Rusch, “‘Commemorating’ the Reformation: Churches Looking Together Toward 2017 – and Beyond,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Spring 2017), pp. 220-21.
- 2 See Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 2-15. Gritsch and Jenson laid important ecumenical groundwork by proposing justification by faith as a dogma that the whole church could embrace.
- 3 See *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church* (Eerdmans, 2000).
- 4 For a fuller account of these developments, see William G. Rusch, “The History and Methodology of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: A Case Study in Ecumenical Reception*,” and Harding Meyer, “La ‘Déclaration commune sur la doctrine de la justification’ du octobre 1999.” Both articles appeared in *Agapè, Études en l’honneur de Mgr Pierre Dupre, M. Afr.*, edited by Jean-Marie Roger Tillard (Centre Orthodoxe du Patriarcat Oecuménique, 2000), pp. 169-209.

# “And Keep On Rising from the Dead”



By Peter W. Marty '85 M.Div.

“The church of Christ, in every age beset by change, but Spirit-led, must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.” — From *The Church of Christ, in Every Age*

*On a recent Sunday morning our congregation sang the hymn, “The Church of Christ, in Every Age.” I kept glancing back at the first stanza while singing the remaining four, wondering if those lines were quite right. Yes, it’s true: The church must keep rising from the dead and be on the lookout for deadly habits that can cripple its witness.*

But what if we’re living in a time when large numbers of Christians have no clue about the church’s heritage, and many pastors have little interest in tradition? How do you claim or test a heritage if you don’t consider yourself linked to one?

Some historians have suggested there is an every-500-year trend in Christianity whereby a new and more vital form of religion emerges. This can give the impression that a new religious expression is just waiting in the wings for the calendar to change. More likely, the nice round number 500 offers a convenient coat hook on which to hang the

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## The 21st-century world in which the church lives, moves, and has its being is as hungry as ever for expressions of confident faith and moral clarity.

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dust jackets of some freshly published books and their latest proposals for theology.

Nevertheless, dramatic change is afoot in America these decades – in the church and in the larger culture. Can new reform come out of this? It’s helpful to remember that change and reform are not necessarily the same thing. Reform movements of significance, in the 16th century or the 21st, require more than drastic change. In this quincen-

ennial year of the Reformation, I’ve been pondering some similarities and dissimilarities between the church of 1517 and that of 2017, hoping to gain clarity on the Reformation’s heritage, legacy, and continued potential.

### Medieval Tapestry

The centrality of religion in late-medieval Europe would be hard to overestimate. Even given large pockets of impiety and non-religious activity in towns and cities, the church still functioned as the center of life in ways that can be hard for us to comprehend. Civil authorities publicly executed people because of their theology. Anabaptists by the thousands were burned at the stake or beheaded, often observed by crowds full of religious fervor. In Protestant England, heresy was defined as treason. Martin Luther supported death for blasphemy.

In such a milieu, enacting Christian reforms in the 1500s was a complex operation dependent on the cooperation of local magistrates, princes, wealthy merchants, and urban aristocrats. To picture such a process today is almost unimaginable. In Luther’s time, territorial rulers had the final say over what was religiously acceptable. *Cuius regio, eius religio* – “whose realm, his religion” – became the guiding principle for the way faiths acquired legitimacy in the Holy Roman Empire.

Christian symbols were hard to avoid – so present and potent, in fact, that reformers went after religious images, shrines, and relics that in their judgment distorted church practice. Religious symbolism across America's landscape today is a startling contrast. On many days, visual symbols of faith can be hard to spot. New churches are often absent of a cross and indistinguishable from big-box stores. Congregations with electronic yard signs blink clever sermon titles. Megachurches lay down huge swaths of asphalt. Inspirational videos multiply on Facebook. But signs, parking lots, and online videos are hardly religious symbols destined to renew the church.

If vivid imagery and confessional statements rallied the faith of many 16th-century Europeans, comparable fervor uniting believers today is much harder to locate. Americans are increasingly disinclined to speak of deep religious identity when describing their lives to others. Religious conversations are largely absent from the public square. Issues of healthcare, tax system overhaul, voters' rights, and nuclear war get debated with little attention given to their religious implications.

### Two Pulpits

Luther's posting of the 95 Theses established a trajectory for his life that persistently challenged authority. At the outset, he was rankled by smooth-talking indulgence peddlers, but soon the unbending authority of the church, its leaders, and the pope himself became his primary targets. Luther's con-

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**We should remember that media do not inspire a reformation. People and their faith lives do.**

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science, which he considered captive to the Word of God, and his writings, which blanketed Europe, became his means for battling authority.

It has been said that Luther spoke from two pulpits – one in the church and one in the print shop. His shrewd understanding of print culture coincided conveniently with the expansion of mass printing. Books, pamphlets, tracts, sermons, and Bibles allowed Luther and other reformers to resist the idea that authority belongs exclusively to hierarchies and institutions.

Is our digital revolution in any way comparable to the role that media played in Luther's era? That's difficult to assess amid the diffuse, multi-layered character of our media-saturated world. We should remember, however, that media do not inspire a reformation. People and their faith lives do. This was true for the church in 1517, and it remains true today.

It's hard to picture a single figure like Luther ever dominating the religious landscape so thoroughly again. With myriad cultural forces competing for our attention, and religion playing an increasingly peripheral role in the public square, the odds seem stacked against people connecting the meaning of their lives with the sweeping biblical narrative.

### Off and Running

So, what is the legacy of the Reformation? Scholars continue to debate whether it was primarily a theological and religious revolution or a complex web of social and political events that permanently altered Europe. However we sort this divide, our best chance for flourishing as a church today depends on how thoroughly we elect to embody the richest elements of Reformation theology. Once Luther

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**It's helpful to remember that change and reform are not necessarily the same thing.**

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understood the church as a dynamic community of people who have been granted the gift of faith, and not an institution tasked with boasting of its traditions, the Reformation was off and running.

It wasn't as if 16th-century Christians all united together to embrace a goal of birthing a new church. The Reformation was rather an experience of individuals in their own homes and congregations coming alive to Christianity as a way of life. Fresh understandings of God's grace suddenly gripped ordinary lives. The notion that every believer was a priest, even in his or her own sinfulness, rocked the medieval church. That God could be viewed not as a taskmaster but as a generous donor of our days, interested in gifting us with righteousness – this discovery upended the ecclesiastical status quo. As Scripture fell into the hands and hearts of common folk, they began to feel what Luther felt personally: "The Bible is alive – it has hands and grabs hold of me, it has feet and runs after me."

The 21st-century world in which the church lives, moves, and has its being remains just as hungry as ever for people able and willing to speak with confident faith and moral clarity. If the Reformation quinquennial can renew even a spark of this desire among Christian believers, reminding each of us that we are not Christian for cultural reasons but for theological and life-giving ones, our commemorations will be full of joy and meaning.

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*Peter W. Marty '85 M.Div. is publisher of the Christian Century magazine.*

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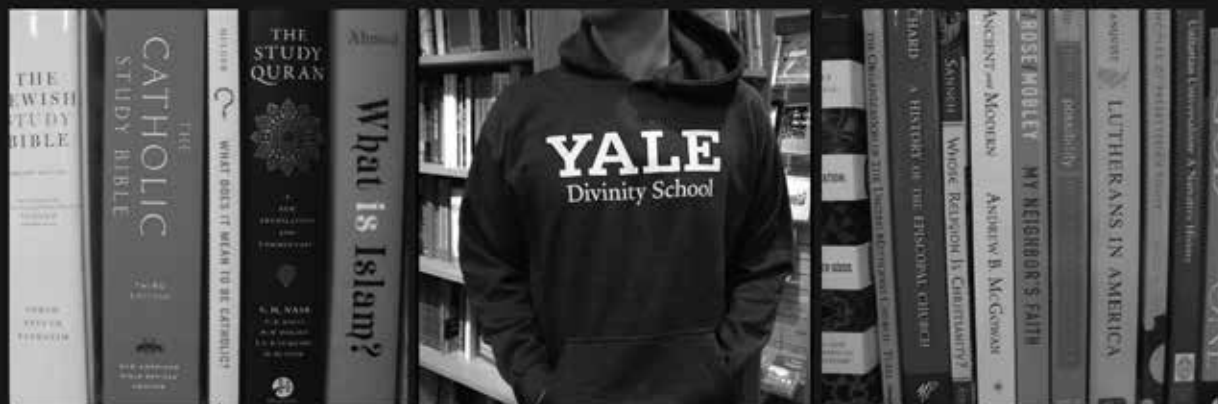


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#### COVER ARTWORK

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#### POETRY

**Robert Bly's** poetry includes *Morning Poems* (HarperCollins, 1997) and *My Sentence was a Thousand Years of Joy* (HarperCollins, 2005), as well as nonfiction books *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Addison-Wesley, 1990), *The Sibling Society* (Addison-Wesley, 1996), and *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* (Harper & Row, 1988).

"Call and Answer" and "Listening to Monteverdi" from *Stealing Sugar from the Castle* by Robert Bly. Copyright © 2013 by Robert Bly. With permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved.

**Jericho Brown**, who teaches at Emory, won an American Book Award for his first book, *Please* (New Issues 2008). His poems have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Buzzfeed*, and elsewhere.

"Hebrews 13" from *The New Testament*. Copyright © 2014 by Jericho Brown. Reprinted with permission of Copper Canyon Press. See [coppercanyonpress.org](http://coppercanyonpress.org).

**Kathryn Stripling Byer** (1944-2017) served as North Carolina's poet laureate from 2005-09. Her poetry includes *Descent* (LSU, 2012) and *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (Press 53, reissued 2013).

"Open Casket" from *Catching Light*. Copyright © by Kathryn Stripling Byer. Reprinted with permission of LSU Press. All rights reserved.

**Mark Jarman** teaches at Vanderbilt University. His work includes *Bone Fires: New and Selected Poems* (Sarabande, 2011), and *The Heronry* (Sarabande, 2017), as well as *Body and Soul: Essays on Poetry* (Michigan, 2002). His honors include the Lenore Marshall Prize from the Academy of American Poets and *The Nation* magazine.

"Rest on the Flight into Egypt" from *The Heronry*. Copyright © 2017 by Mark Jarman. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Sarabande Books, [www.sarabandebooks.org](http://www.sarabandebooks.org).

**William Stafford** (1914-1993) was the author of more than 50 books of poetry. He was also a Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress and served as poet laureate of Oregon. His 1947 memoir *Down in My Heart: Peace Witness in War Time* recounts his experiences as a World War II conscientious objector.

William Stafford, "Yes" from *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*. Copyright © 1994, 1998 by William Stafford and the Estate of William Stafford. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, MN., [graywolfpress.org](http://graywolfpress.org).

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# From the Editor: First Principles

By Ray Waddle



Musician David Olney does a growling honky-tonk song called “God Shaped Hole” about the miserable stuff that fills the void when the soul wanders away from belief. Yet a divine indentation re-

mains, despite every deadly sin and self-defeat. The spirit escaped, but people can still imagine it returning. Flickering thoughts of an empty tomb survive. “And it might come back/God only knows.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s tempting to transfer this image of deficit to the public world, where a hole seems to get wider and deeper. One hears analysis now of the guilt that many feel about the world’s cruelties and injustices but who have no metaphysic for grasping their sense of failure or dread or paths of repair, no frame for forgiveness.

A divine deficit leaves an imprint on common life. Other notions plausibly rush in. Individualism and self-invention install themselves as the basic social unit, cut off from relations with neighborhood, governance, and church. A real-estate tycoon becomes commander in chief, merrily upending presidential ethics, decorum, and prestige. Conspiracy theories are a national pastime.

One convenient contemporary milestone of religious loss and bewilderment became as clear as the night sky starting around 1947, when UFO sightings surged in the US. It’s as if the ordeal of world war and Holocaust, then the new anxiety about atom bombs and communist infiltration, all conspired to destroy a certain theological confidence. People scanned the Cold War heavens for help, harboring a terrible new secret thought: In the nuclear age, if God can’t save us from ourselves, maybe ET can.

Around this same time, a famous theologian was puzzling out vectors of divine movement and resilience, the perennial dynamics of redemption. Paul Tillich called it the Protestant Principle. By that he didn’t mean Reformation religion or the Protestant Era. Even in the late 1940s, he thought modern Protestantism wouldn’t last. Some other religious expression would someday take its place. It might not even be called Protestantism. But the Protestant Principle would always be in play. It was ready at hand – in every religion.

Tillich described this principle variously as the creative spirit of God, the ethic of love, the fire of the biblical prophets, the person of Jesus, the power of New Being. It is double-edged. It stands poised

to criticize the times and also transform them.<sup>2</sup> It undermines spiritual arrogance, political idolatry, denominational moralism, religion’s captivity to the complacencies of culture. It keeps alive a liberating vision about the future. It is an eternal flame of human endeavor and hope.

Catching it, riding its next wave, means paying attention to the gritty specifics of the everyday, staying alert to openings. I was handed a new book the other day regarding Christian politics. In it Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* said believers must step up and commit to a Matthew 25 ethic, the protection and defense of vulnerable people in the name of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> He spells out three things to do:

- support undocumented immigrants threatened with mass deportation.
- stand with African Americans and other people of color threatened by racial policing.
- defend the religious liberty of Muslims, threatened with travel restrictions, monitoring, even registration.

He doesn’t mention the Protestant Principle, but his words summon it.

A certain kind of Protestantism is fading. A familiar old-time religiosity declines. The trouble with writing about the decline of anything is it right away looks like sentimentality, a wistfulness about the way something was before decline set in.

But nostalgia’s a non-starter. Filling the God-shaped hole requires taking a measure of the depths of it. It has to do with calling out every brutalism of the new era and hearing out the next person you meet and facing down the cold wind and confiding in powers of renewal you didn’t expect to turn up.

## Notes

- 1 From his CD *The Wheel* (Loudhouse Records, 2003). See davidolney.com.
- 2 *The Essential Tillich*, edited by F. Forrester Church (Chicago, 1987), p. 79.
- 3 *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre (Orbis, 2017), pp. 161-162.



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