

Liminal Protestantism.
The Protestant Heritage: Structures and Culture.

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“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent”, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

This single sentence marks the beginning of what we tend to think of as the European reformation. There had been earlier movements, in the Hussites, the Waldensians, and the Lollards, but when Luther posted this to the door of the church in Wittenberg, along with the other 94 theses that follow it, it was the beginning of something on a radically different scale. That single sentence captures something of various things which collided. The humanist movement marked a turning back to authoritative texts, meaning the translation of the Latin Vulgate was questioned, and its implications for the translation of the Greek text as ‘repentance’, rather than penance was noted. This in turn was an opinion that could be disseminated with extraordinary new speed thanks to the printing press. Territorial Princes, keen to stress what independence they could from the Holy Roman Empire found a useful ally in the new religious movement. In the midst of this, the authority of the church itself was brought into question; the whole medieval church settlement was rocked to its foundations. The very early years of the reformation from the year 1517 were most certainly liminal. How would new technology challenge communication within the church? Where would, and should power lie: at local level, or national level, or a pan-European trans-national level? How was the Christian gospel to be understood in the midst of a new intellectual climate?

And here we are, nearly 500 years later, asking how new technology should be put to missional use in the life of the church, wondering where real power should lie in the midst of a financial crisis which has shown that real power lies at a transnational and global level which has overtaken the governments of individual nation states. We live in an age when we wonder what the new intellectual climate of post-modernity (or should that be late modernity?) means for how we talk about the gospel. Some things never change.

And here we are today. Sitting together in this room to think about what it means to be Protestant in the 21st century. And I get the job of talking about structures and culture. The more information has come my way about this conference the harder some of this has come to seem. CWM, I thought – that’s easy. It contains big and little churches, all in some variety of reformed – lots of nice things to say about the tradition being open, not rooting itself in fixed structures, giving us a flexibility and speed of institutional change that perhaps the Catholic and Orthodox traditions don’t have. But then I look up and down the list of participants, and where we all come from, and suddenly it feels very complicated. We have member churches of the Council for World Mission who are all, through that body, in some kind of communion with one another. Then we have churches that are members of CWM and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe – which is another and slightly different kind of communion. Then there are churches that are in the CPCE but not in CWM. Then there are churches that participate in the CPCE but are not full members, but who are in full communion with the British Anglican churches. In short – we are quite a muddle of folk. Were ordained folk from some of the traditions we represent here to move to minister in a different church represented here, they may well have to be re-ordained. What on earth does all of this say about our identity?

We are not just somewhat muddled in terms of who relates to whom when, where, and how, but we represent the most extraordinary diverse range of forms of church life, particularly in our relationships to the countries we come from. Some people represent churches that are primarily regional, such as the German churches, who then work together at national level through differing organisations. We have churches here who understand themselves as the national church of the nation they find themselves in, such as Scotland. We have churches who are so institutionally bound up with political institutions that the final seat of church government is the parliament, such as Denmark. In contrast we have churches here who understand themselves to be non-conformist, as standing in opposition to forms of national or established church life, such as my own church does. We have small churches, such as the Union of Welsh Independents, and large majority churches where most of the people of the nation belong. We have churches funded by taxation, and others where free-will offering is the only source of income. Churches presided over by Bishops ordained into historic succession, and those who on principle would never have a bishop because bishops are just not properly Protestant. And yet here we all are, in this room together, wanting to think about what it is that our churches are called to be at this time, in this little corner of the globe we call Europe.

So – what on earth is Protestantism, and what on earth are its structures? I'm afraid I'm not going to answer that question. Just as an aside, however, I will, briefly let you know the conclusions of the CPCE study, *Semper Reformanda*, which looked into the reform and renewal processes going on throughout member churches in Europe. Roughly speaking, everyone is attempting structure change. They say this is missional, but more often than not it is about saving money and pragmatism. Layers of church government are being cut down, and many layers of church life are being combined into bigger units. Parishes are merged, congregations merged, councils and synods merged and so on. Oh – and the other thing we noted – none of this seems to be having the slightest effect on the size of church membership or numbers of people actively engaging with the worshipping life of the church.

So – as we look at the huge diversity of Protestantisms that we find in Europe, I wonder whether that itself tells us something about who and what we are? The reality is that many of the differences that we can note run along national, or at the very least regional lines. Protestantism is very clearly a deeply national phenomena. It has a dialectical relationship with the rise of the modern nation state. Protestantism emerged in the context of nation states, and Protestantism plays its part in the emergence of nation states. Where we now see regional churches, such as in Germany, or in a slightly different way in Switzerland, what we are looking at are historical boundaries around principalities, Kingdoms, free cities or cantons. At the end of the 30 years war in 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia marks the moment at which it became political and religious reality that the religion of a territory was determined by its ruler. We are heirs of that decision. It is expressed in different formal relationships, and in different ways – but the failure, as some might see it, to be able to agree that there might be binding decisions taken at a pan-European level of Protestantism in Europe demonstrates much. Just to take the CPCE for an example, the proposal to create a Europe wide Synod that would be in some ways binding on the member churches created a huge argument. National Churches were very quick to ensure that they were not going to lose their power and independence, even if theologically speaking a Synod with binding power makes utter sense when one is in full communion. It was rather like listening to the English talk about the European Union.

This is a long way round of saying that perhaps the most significant part of our Protestant heritage in terms of structure, is the fact that is so big we often don't see it, that we are overwhelmingly national ecclesial structures.

Taking that thought with us, as we begin to think slightly more about the 'culture' part of my brief we might just reflect for a moment on what we are doing here. We began on Wednesday afternoon hearing from different churches. Universally these were tales of decline. We have taken it as utterly for granted that this is a 'Bad Thing'. What we seek is church growth. Hence we need to be more missional. Hence we need to reform. The church should get bigger, and stop getting smaller. Why, I wonder? What is it about Protestantism that is so good that there should be much more of it?

In fact, the case can be made, and in fact is being rather well made, that Protestantism has been a deeply negative influence on the Western world, and now more globally. There are a range of commentators within the academic world making the case that Protestantism is in fact to blame for many of the things that we see going wrong. The hyper-individualism, the lack of a sense of community, the breakdown of social and political institutions and so on.

Let us turn back to Luther for a moment. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God...thus I cannot or will not recant, for going against conscience is neither safe nor salutary. I can do no other, here I stand, God help me. Amen"¹ Well...it turns out that just as he probably never actually nailed the 95 theses to the door of the church, he probably never quite said this in this way. But it certainly captures something of his thinking. Acting on his conscience, and in accordance with his reading of scripture, Luther challenged the hierarchy of the church of his day. Life has never been the same again. The sources and norms for faith were to be scripture. Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the faithful Christian reading scripture was also so inspired. People were to be educated so they could read the scriptures. But of course, it did not quite work out like that, did it? For everybody read the scriptures and in all good conscience, (just as Luther acted in all good conscience) found something different in scripture than that which Luther found. Soon there was a parting of the ways between the Swiss and German reformations when agreement could not be reached on the Eucharist. There were more parting of the ways over issues such as baptism, and the relationship of the church to the state. And all of these divisions happened as people acted in conscience, as they saw it, like Luther's – bound to the word. And so it went on. The doctrine of justification was landed upon as Paul's letter to the Romans was read, and as Augustine too was read (another character in another major liminal moment in the life of the church). We are justified by faith. Faith comes to us as gracious gift from God. And very soon it was realised that whether people were elect or not was only really for God to know. And if only God knew who was elect, then one could not really know

¹ Cited in: Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Wallise-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University, 1982), p.203.

who was in the church; at least in the church in terms of those who were saved. And so the true church becomes invisible and known only to God.

And of course once you have an invisible church known only to God, and you've got people who still insisting on reading the Bible and acting accordance with their conscience, then you are even more likely to divide the church. It is not as if one is leaving the church, after all – the true church is invisible.

But it does not stop there. It begins to become clear that people read the bible and see different things – and then some of these newly educated people, used to thinking for themselves, start thinking about other things. They start thinking about thinking – and before you know where you are you have Descartes being radically suspicious of everything. One can only know what is logically sure. And then you get Locke and Hume, and Kant (all good Protestants – well...Protestants, anyway....) saying that its not maybe the Bible after all that unites all things in truth but thinking properly and rationally. And then there is Hegel and all this talk of historical Spirit, and then you get the romantics, and suddenly everything is about feelings and the heart. And so we get the emergence of Pietist movements and evangelical revivalism – all about the individual experience of God. And then you get the shattering of it all in the destruction of two world wars – fought, after all, amongst good Protestants. And people begin to become very suspicious, not just of the church and faith, but of all claims to absolute truth, and you get radical individualism. No longer 'I think therefore I am', but 'I shop therefore I am'. And you get the McDonaldisation of everything. And it is all the fault of us Protestants.

Well...at least that is the story if you are a certain sort of Anglo-Saxon Catholic, or Anglo-Catholic commentator. Brad Gregory published his 'unintended reformation' last year arguing all of this. Charles Taylor has before him, John Milbank before that, Alistair MacIntyre before that. Western culture has gone so badly wrong because of us Protestants, who then exported it to other parts of the world. Why on earth would we think we want more of this? And this is before we get to the radical Atheists, the Richard Dawkins of this world...

And the problem is – that there is probably a lot of truth in much of this. What is the Protestant heritage: multiple competing structures, all of which now fail us, and a radical individualism in which people have chosen to purchase their Spirituality from the Apple Store, their authority from good looking scientists on television, and so on. And it is perhaps not just in the genealogy of all this

secularism that we go astray – there is something intrinsic to being Protestant about it. As Gerald Schlabach, a former Mennonite now turned Roman Catholic states:

The problem with the Protestant Principle is this: however right and proper are the corrective reflexes it names, once we elevate impulses to “protest” into identity markers for entire Christian communities, those impulses tend to undermine the very bonds of Christian community. If the Protestant Principle is not just one principle among many – though quite near to the core of Protestant identity itself – then Protestantism will tend to undo itself.²

So we are not only to blame for the state of the world – but are our own worst enemies too.

Although to a significant extent I am parodying these critiques – only to a certain extent. And I do think that the genealogy of contemporary western culture does significantly come into being through Protestantism. The thing I find fascinating with all of these commentators, is that the base line from which contemporary culture and society is judged, is against the medieval political and cultural context. Modernity is seen as somehow bad, and where it all went wrong. If only we could be back in Christendom, when all knew their place, society had its patterns, rhythms and institutions that kept things in their due place, in good order, and all the people happy.

The problem with much of this is that I quite like being modern. I’m very grateful I live in a world with antibiotics, and anaesthetic. I’m rather glad that my human rights are protected by law. I think I would have made a very bad peasant dancing round a maypole. I suspect I would have been a very unhappy peasant, mostly not dancing around a maypole. No...I’m afraid I’m rather a fan of modernity.

The trouble is, it is then too easy to construct an alternative Protestant polemic. This often arises around the notion of Freedom. We seem to think Freedom is deeply Protestant and that this encourage individual exploration, the challenging of the status quo, the individual inquisitiveness of scientists and explorers. And I’m far from sure that this gets us terribly far either – except maybe to give Catholic polemicists something to parody when they are asked to talk about the catholic heritage of structures and culture...

What I fear, is that is all our attempts to understand the society we are in, and to understand our faith, and to explore our practices, ends up being in service of whatever this Protestant thing is,

² Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism*, p. 33.

because we feel it has lost power, status and influence. If only we could regain it we might be able to make society better. We might even change individual lives for the good. But behind it what we are really doing is very similar to our Catholic detractors – we are looking back to an age when the church and society were co-terminus. To be European was to be Christian, and to be Christian was to be European. Now, it was never quite like that either, because the three Abrahamic faiths had to learn to talk to one another, which to some extent explains the return to an Aristotelian way of thinking in the 11th and 12th centuries, that in turn did lead to some extraordinary theological thinking by folk like Aquinas. But – overwhelmingly in western and central Europe, one was baptised, one practiced one's religion and the rhythms and patterns of life were shaped by it (although it is very easy to think that everyone did all of the time, there are many commentators that today argue that what is happening to Church attendance is it is returning to a normal low level, coming out of an unusually high level in the 18th and 19th centuries).

As Protestants – the situation we are now in is radically new to us. We were born into Christendom. We have taken it for granted for much of the 500 years of our existence that we have a right to be at the centre of things political (for religion and nationhood were so bound together), and cultural. And in what feels like a very, very, short period of time it feels like we have lost all of that. No longer is one simply culturally Christian. By and large to be European was to be Christian, to be a Christian was to be a member of the church, and outside the church there is no salvation, so to be a baptised member of the church was to be saved. No longer can we take any of that for granted. The world is a very different and strange place at the moment for us Protestants.

So... what resources might we have for engaging in this strange cultural context we find ourselves in? Perhaps we are not going to find all the resources we need in the Protestant traditions. In fact, it would be rather odd only to look to one quarter of the churches whole history to find the resources we might need. Well...in a moment of liminality at the end of the Roman Empire, Augustine turned to Paul's letter to the Romans. Luther, at the very dawn of the modern age did the same. Karl Barth, at the moment when *Kultur-Protestantismus* had been revealed to be morally bankrupt turned too to Romans. I wonder what we today might find there? "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have access to this grace in whom we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God".

There is no doubting that justification is a key Protestant notion. For Lutherans, the article of faith by which the church stands or falls. Perhaps not quite that for some of us, but nearly. There is no doubt

that one can chart a trajectory from Luther to the justification and election of the individual, through to modern individualism, and less than proper care of our church structures because they are only the visible ones anyway. But of course, this is a very long way from the original context of the letter itself. For the Christians who were being addressed lived in a remarkably pluralist kind of environment at the centre of a large and diverse empire. The so-called 'New Perspectives on Paul' have challenged received theological wisdom about the understanding of justification. Scholars such as James Dunn, E.P. Sanders and N.T. Wright have pointed out the way in which Paul's understanding of justification is inherently connected with being 'in Christ'. Dunn suggests that justification was Paul's way of making clear that within the church there could be no distinction between Jew or Gentile. He states: "Paul's theology of justification by faith was never simply about individuals as such. Paul's theology of justification had a social and corporate dimension which was integral to it."³ N.T. Wright points out some of the social and political consequences of this, which he suggests it helps understand why the church was persecuted. The way the church related to itself, in the care of the needy helps understand the church "not as a part-time voluntary organization of the like-minded which left normal social and familial attachments unaffected, but as a group with definite boundaries. If one belonged to it, one did not belong any more, certainly not in the same way, to one's previous unit, whether familial or racial".⁴ Embedded within this, is not simply the fact that the early church subverted existing social bonds, but is also the reality that individual identity is presumed as being fundamentally social. To be a Christian is to be of the people of God, the body of Christ, rather than an other people. Yes, pre-existing social bonds continue, but are relativized and subverted by being justified, by being incorporated into the Body of Christ, the church.

What I find enormously rich in St. Paul's imagery of the body, the parts of the body, and justified human beings is the way it both works with existing categories, and simultaneously subverts them. When St. Paul says that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, he is saying that Christian identity is more fundamental than any of those other identities. One is of course still those other things, but not primarily those other things. I am not first and foremost a Gentile free man, but in Christ. I don't stop being a Gentile free man, however. But suddenly I become the brother in Christ of Jewish slave women. The individual person is indeed addressed by God – just as Luther realised. But identity in this New Testament view can never be simply that one is a person and one is also a Christian. One is various other things too in the plural world of the Roman Empire. What resources do we find in this kind of reading of Paul and justification that might

³ James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmanns, 2005), p. 96.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (London, SPCK, 1997), p. 449.

help us navigate our way through a world where we do indeed construct our own identities to a significant extent? That is not a notion that will remain unchallenged by being 'in Christ' – for I will be formed by all of you as we find ourselves in Christ together – but I won't stop being all kinds of other things. Post-modern, or late modern, human beings are very good at juggling multiple identities. How can we find a way in which our faith might subvert our other identities – but not destroy them?

There would seem to be two kinds of movement within the life of the churches at the moment. One is brilliantly illustrated in *Fresh Expressions*. This has much to do with target groups. People like being with people like themselves, so we will target church at single professional people in their 20s who are highly educated and cultured and design a church for them. This approach stresses the individual constructed identity element of our society. We design church for those who live the designer lifestyle – we simply accept the already constructed identity as the fixed one we are then going to construct a church for. The other approach is frequently to do the opposite. Harden the identity of the church, make it more radically 'other' – and often by holding on to the practices of church life that were familiar in the period of Christendom. What this fails to realise is that we are never going to return to a world where our culture was Christian, and our Christian was culture – and certainly not by attempting to pretend that the last few centuries have never happened. Ours is a living God – an enlivening Spirit.

In the midst of all of this there are a whole load of theological questions we need to attend to. Personally, I think some of them are tied up with our view of salvation. Do we do mission to bring people to an individual moment of conversion after which they are saved and of the church? This strand of thinking is very modern, very much about the individual person – and very Protestant. Or are God's ways with the world rather more complicated than that? Was Christ's atoning work on the cross rather stronger than that? Is God's plan for the cosmos truly cosmic in scale – a new heaven and a new earth, all being in all in Christ? We seem to me to be in a twilight place when it comes to mission at the moment. We don't like to say that the unconverted are not saved – and that is largely because we tend not to think it is true. If that is not true – then what is Mission for? We talk about the terrible nature of church decline, however, as though that were true. Church decline is bad, because less people are saved. If we are not going to say that – and I'm certainly not, then why is Church decline bad? Are we sure that we're not hankering after political power and influence? Are we perhaps wanting our own return to a nicely Protestant Christendom? Is it possible that the Church is actually meant to be small? Maybe we need to turn to Kingdom images of yeast, or

mustard seeds. Is it the way we subvert human identities that might be the stuff that the Kingdom is made of – a Kingdom that God wills for the whole of God’s creation, not just the future of my own soul?

So – I leave us with far more questions than perhaps is helpful. What I am absolutely calling for is an honest assessment of our Protestant heritage. Some of it is simply not good, and extremely unhelpful in our present context. I want us to follow Luther and ask hard and challenging questions of things that we have taken as givens. I want us to read the thing in scripture that is new to us – the radical thing that we might not have noticed before. I want us to talk about God and God’s ways with the world. There is some good stuff about being a Protestant. But I think there might be some even better stuff about being ‘in Christ’.

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