The Reformation's Legacy

1. What exactly is it to celebrate today the heritage of the sixteenth century Reformation? Many commentators in recent decades have expressed their sense that we have lost or are losing any clear idea of what it is to be a European Protestant in the 'classical' mode; in Britain, several observers have noted that if there is any residue of popular religion now, it is of what most would see as a distinctively 'Catholic' stripe, preoccupied with rituals and holy places and the numinous quality of the beloved dead (the reaction to Princess Diana's death being the most dramatic illustration). A popular British Christian identity grounded in the Bible, family-based devotion and anti-papalism (together with a certain sense of the providential role of the nation) has conclusively disappeared. And something comparable is reported elsewhere in Europe. While secular commentators will refer to 'Catholic Social Teaching' as a coherent and identifiable presence in general debates about social well-being and political justice, there is relatively little recognition, in the wider culture, of a distinctive Protestant voice in social ethics, despite the extensive and sophisticated contributions made by so many in church and academy. It is not surprising if there are signs of uncertainty about the Protestant – and specifically the Reformed – identity in Europe and more widely. 'Protestant' identity is often conflated with a distinctively American brand of biblical literalism and social conservatism, itself understood as opposed to an equally distinctive 'liberal Protestantism', which is unconcerned with doctrine and committed to broadly progressive causes. Such a framework is no help at all in making sense of most of the Reformation itself, let alone of what Reformed theology has meant in the last hundred years or so. Students are often bewildered as to where they should locate Karl Barth on a theological map defined by the simple oppositions of left and right, conservative and liberal.

2. In these brief observations, I want to attempt a very broad analysis of what the contributions of a recognizably 'Protestant' theology have been to Christian culture overall; to suggest what might be some of the lastingly constructive elements have been, as well as noting those things that have had more ambivalent effects. I write as an Anglican – that is, as someone whose ecclesiastical identity is shaped by a reluctance to see the Protestant/Catholic divide as a simple binary opposition, but who is bound to be conscious of the essential role of Reformed theology in the self-definition of the Church of England. My personal formation was in the 'catholic' wing of the Anglican family, but marked also by a childhood in the Welsh Presbyterian Church and a continuing interest in and enthusiasm for various strands in the Reformed tradition represented by writers like Richard Baxter, Thomas Torrance and, of course, Barth himself. It is against that personal background that I venture to identify three themes in Reformed theology and practice which I believe to be of lasting and crucial significance for the theological health of the Christian community; and also to reflect on another three themes that have been less obviously fruitful and which indeed bear some responsibility for aspects of our current cultural desolation and confusion. My tentative conclusion is that these latter themes can only be countered by a better theological understanding of the former ones

– so that we may after all be able to identify a positive, distinctive and creative role for the legacy of the Reformation today.

3. Very briefly, the three themes that seem to be positive are these. First, the Reformation affirmed the absolute difference of created and infinite action; its consistent emphasis on the sovereignty of God is a way of underlining the truth that God's action and ours can never be in *either* competition *or* collaboration. Second, the Reformation established the principle that scripture was not only a source for true teaching and for illustrative clarification of that teaching but also a *critical* presence in the Church, in some sense 'intervening' in the Church's life, never simply the Church's instrument. Third, the Reformation, in questioning any suggestion that the means of grace could be 'managed' by human intermediaries, affirmed that the Church was first and foremost the assembly of a people, not of rulers and subjects.

4. The ambivalent legacy of the Reformation might be summarised in these ways. First, the emphasis on the sovereign dignity of God's Word allied itself with a developing rationalism to produce a one-dimensional picture of human knowing, in which the non-verbal was regarded as inferior. Second, the suspicion of hierarchy encouraged a half-hearted theology of the Church and a privileging of individual piety and individual exploration at the expense of understanding corporate identity in Christ and the Spirit, and of intelligent appropriation of the Christian past. Third, the stress on divine sovereignty came to suggest (in a way directly contrary to its proper theological meaning) an opposition between human and divine to be resolved by simple submission on the part of the created will – so that human emancipation was thought to require the abandonment of theological discourse.

5. Taking the first three in order: the focus of the Reformation protest against the popular theology and practice of the late Middle Ages was a pattern of language and habit which seemed to presuppose that the reconciled or grace-filled life was something that could be 'negotiated' with God. This world of piety was seen (not always fairly) as a way in which human beings could use specific created means whose effects were guaranteed by God in order to obtain rewards promised by God; and, although the prior agency of God is acknowledged in such a framework, the *immediate* impression is of a sort of spiritual technology in which God is bound to honour the conditions he has himself laid down. The created agent knows what God is 'bound' to do. And this is where the difficulty arises. God's action is seen as removed from the present situation, it becomes an abstract frame within which human action plans and seeks to control human destiny (not least, of course, by the very particular kinds of control associated with the ordained ministry which controls the administration of the means of grace). The result is either a complacent reduction of the life of discipleship to compliance with a new 'law' – or, as Luther discovered, a corrosive despair of encountering the grace of God as a direct and living reality, a state in which there is a dissonance between what is authoritatively declared to be the case by the authorities of the Church and the personal sense of guilt or abandonment.

6. Luther reinstates divine sovereignty by appealing to a God who is systematically hidden; a God who cannot be negotiated with, whose presence is always to be found in the heart of his own apparent absence, not in the places where he can be *predicted* to be present according to some systematic map of his workings. And such a theology makes full sense only when there is a serious recovery of what had always been a fundamental principle of Catholic theology but had been regularly overlaid – the principle that God's action and finite action are not two instances of the same thing: they cannot compete, they cannot be thought of as fighting over a single contested territory. It is this principle that in fact pervades Aquinas's theological world (it can be seen at work in very interesting ways in his Christology especially). But the Reformation protest insists that this has to be worked through at every level of theology and practice. Any theological idiom or devotional habit that seems to imagine God as responding to human initiative is to be excluded from genuinely theological discourse, because God's action is not in any sense conditioned by human action. The contested, even shocking theology of predestination advanced by Calvin is essentially about this fundamental non-commensurabilty of created and uncreated act: temporal succession, logical consequence, moral appropriateness – all these are fatally mistaken frameworks for thinking about the relation of God to creation. And the rather paradoxical implication – not as alien to Calvinistic thought as some would think – is that the dignity of the human can never be threatened by the majesty of God any more than that majesty can be threatened by the affirmation of concrete human liberties, because there is no competition between the finite and the infinite. The Reformation principle of God's unconditional sovereignty *ought* to deliver us from both anxiety and resentment in regard to God, and to allow a robust theology of human calling and freedom in the social/political sphere.

7. This is not unconnected with the second positive point. If Scripture is 'the Word of God written', it is a vehicle for that same unconditional divine action. It is not a passive instrument for human discovery, expressing truths that can be distilled into a neat conceptual schema (which is why fundamentalism is in an important sense antithetical to a fully Reformed theology); it is alive and active, a field of records and songs and maxims in which human discourse may at any moment become tangibly the vehicle of an authoritative communication and summons to discipleship. And this means that Scripture is always a critical presence in the Church. Although there were and are some Reformed theologians who interpret this as meaning that Scripture provides a detailed constitution for the Church, so that anything not prescribed there is implicitly forbidden (a view expressed by some English Calvinists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), this is not quite how most mainstream Reformed thinkers have developed the point. The principle that everything in the life of the Church needs to be tested by how well it serves the proclamation of the gospel of God's free election and grace is not the same as saying that Scripture is a comprehensive law book for the Church. But it does mean that Scripture can never be regarded as simply as a tool for the Church's purposes or a source of material to illustrate the Church's teaching. It is something that has to be heard as a question from outside the Church's life, even though Scripture is

itself bound in with the Church's life and does not exist in a vacuum. It is always a book read by the Church; but it is read by the Church *so that* the Church is able to hear what it would not otherwise hear.

8. Thus the Church's life – including and especially the Church's worshipping life – is one in which we are brought into question. We are to be led into attentive silence as well as praise and affirmation; and the reading and hearing of Scripture is a primary embodiment of this dimension. It is not that as we listen we automatically hear the precise expression of God's will; as we have already seen, we cannot treat the agency of God as automatically predictable in any way. But we listen in the expectation of being changed into a more Christlike way of being. Sometimes, this is in ways we can see and grasp, most often it will be in ways we do not immediately perceive. But the discipline of listening expectantly means that we are bound always to ask what we should be discovering about our discipleship that we did not previously know. This is not a matter of working out new interpretations of familiar texts or producing radically new doctrines: there is a given framework of teaching and practice, the shared identity of those baptized into Christ, which gives meaning to all our actions in worship; without it we could make no sense of what we were doing. But within this we constantly ask to be instructed and enlarged in our reading, and so in our service and witness. The characteristic shape of worship can be seen as this attitude of expectant listening combined with the unceasing expression of gratitude for what has been heard and given.

9. The much-misunderstood Reformation principle of the open Bible, the accessibility of Scripture to all, was in its context a protest against authority that was not accountable to either the community as a whole or to the prior reality of God's communication in Scripture. It was not meant to be a charter for unlimited individual interpretation, but a way of opening up the life of the Church to a shared process of reading and discerning, in which all baptised people had a voice. The grace of Christ was not passed on to the body of the faithful by a priestly caste; ordained ministry in the Church was a solemn and lifelong charge, and the assurance of its continuity was a serious matter, but it was not an induction into a governing elite. The classical Calvinist distinction between ruling and teaching elders was an attempt to reflect the concerns at work here. Although it did not take long for the teaching ministry to become, in many contexts, as much of an authoritarian system as what it had replaced, the ideal of a 'conversational' process of studying the text to who all were equally accountable was a deeply theologically motivated effort to embody the principle of the dignity of all the baptized. An 'open' Bible is what gives to the community a common language in which all have the right to speak, and it is no longer acceptable to limit access to this shared world so as to reinforce the power of a governing class. There is a solid element of classical republicanism in this (a feature which ironically echoes some aspects of Aquinas's political thought). It is no surprise to see it worked out in various national histories. But this does not mean either an anarchy of love or a democracy as we understand the word. It could involve aspirations to real theocracy as much as ideals of participatory,

perhaps syndicalist, debate and decision. The significant point is that making universally available a shared authoritative cultural resource in the form of Scripture meant the creation in principle of a theological conversation in which all could be held to account, and there was no exclusion in advance of any voices. The challenge which the Reform did not always succeed in handling was to do with discovering the kinds of consensus that would have and hold authority.

10. In the light of this discussion, the positive legacy of the Reformation is very much bound up with the idea of a society (secular and ecclesiastical) capable of self-questioning, confident in the prior affirmation of God's action in a way that undercuts anxiety and rivalry, united by a common conversation around the narrative of Scripture and wakefully alert to the possibility of new insight or new challenge in this context. It is not simply identical with what we have come to think of as 'modern' society, let alone 'enlightened' society, though these latter would not exist without it. The main differences are to do with the particular way modernity privileges autonomy, so that God's sovereignty is seen (despite the all-important Reformation clarifications) as a menace to human dignity and the individual's liberty is likewise seen as threatened by the language of accountability. The Reformed picture of human flourishing involves obedience – and thus understands the deepest liberties to have something to do with submission to being questioned by a reality, a truth, beyond our individual agendas.

11. Modernity, in fact, appears in this light as a systematic misreading of the Reformed picture. What I earlier called the ambivalent features of the Reformed legacy are all in their ways inversions of the basic theological principles of the sixteenth century Reform, reinstating much of what the movement sought to overthrow. The way in which a certain model of rationality came to be seen as all-important and normative reflected a deep suspicion of claims to knowledge that could not be defended by the kind of argument proper to reasoning and adult persons. Against mystification and manipulation, Reformed thinkers insisted that God communicated in ways that were accessible to all. When symbols were used, they had to be understood as essentially illustrations of things that could be put more clearly – even if less vividly – in other ways. Despite Luther's sophisticated theology of the dialectic between hiddenness and manifestation in the actions of God with us, Protestant thought moved increasingly towards the assumption that truthful knowledge was necessarily a matter of clear verbal communication. It was hard to include in this an understanding of what more recent thinkers have called 'tacit' knowledge, or of the material dimensions of knowing (the capacity to recognize a face, to play an instrument, ride a horse, interpret the sky so as to foresee the weather) – let alone the codes in gesture, sign and indeed visual image which convey what cannot effectively or satisfactorily be codified in speech. Words *ought* to be enough for everything, which is why – as Torrance and others note – the Reformation so stressed hearing over seeing as the paradigm for knowledge.

12. The result was eventually to polarize different accounts of human knowing. Either we know because we hear/read in Scripture the simple propositions of divine truth or we

read off from the natural world around us all we need to know and ignore all claims to knowledge that do not conform to particular processes of gathering evidence. We are on the road to the futile and unintelligent stand-off between 'science' and 'religion' that still dominates the thoughts of so many in our culture. And to recover a more integral view of knowing, we need – as I have already suggested – to turn the best insights of the Reformation against its distortions.

13. Luther's revolution in theological thinking implied that no state of affairs in the world carried an obvious meaning that could be grasped and deployed as an instrument of human power. To understand the hiddenness of God in the crucified Christ required us to be silenced, brought to nothing, faced with a potential abyss of meaninglessness, so that we were at last free to receive God's gift without the presumptions of our own agenda, our individual needs and ambitions. The clarity of words alone will not alter this need for being dispossessed; and the more we let go of a view of language that assumes we can produce a comprehensive picture of the world that fits into a single system of consistent explanation, the more we see that our learning as human beings is bound up with our capacity to respond to a variety of signs and signals, consciously or not. Our reasoning must follow the appropriate method for its subject; it has to be moulded by that subject and to come to 'share' something of that subject's life. And in this, without trying to reinstate a late mediaeval obsession with symbolic readings of texts and world, we do recover a sensitivity to communications that are not simply verbal – or if verbal, then working with irony and indirection (a point very clear in the Protestant poetics of Fulke Greville or George Herbert in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries).

14. The weakness in thinking about the Church which I have suggested as another ambivalent legacy rises from a complex distortion of the notion of the 'invisible' Church. Once again, a point originally developed as a way of underlining the hiddenness of God's act and thus its absolute freedom and transcendence became a fixed position of scepticism in popular Protestantism towards any doctrine of the necessity of the Christian community as shaping Christian identity. The obscurity of the Church's limits, the truth expressed by the early Calvin as perceiving 'churches half-buried', the resistance to making institutional adherence a vehicle of almost automatic grace – all these things encouraged in many a vague sense that Christian identity need have nothing visibly corporate about it. Again, it is the Reformation's own principles that will help us escape such a distortion, above all the emphasis on the open Bible as the field of *common* language. The individual taking refuge in private piety (in ways that would have shocked Calvin as much as Luther) has not yet grasped that an inner realm beyond any shared discerning and testing of God's will is precisely the kind of inward-curving of the human spirit that consolidates the reign of sin. And while the stress on how the fullness of grace in the Eucharist depends on the communicant's faith is an understandable reaction to what was thought to be a mechanical and thus graceless approach in which God's presence was automatically assured, popular piety readily took this to mean that the outward form was a purely practical way of reinforcing a mental lesson – rather than a corporate and objective act of pleading with God to bear witness

to himself and his work in Christ through the effective operation of the Spirit. Believing in the absolute sovereignty of grace does not mean that we are bound to see grace at work in the private experience of individuals rather than anywhere else; quite the opposite. Such a belief relativizes private experience no less authoritatively than it relativizes shared experience. And our common worship directs us to the abiding realities of Scripture and sacrament as objective testimonies to God's act, independent of our subjective state or aspirations.

15. And just as a properly understood Reformed theology dissolves the polarity between corporate and individual by insisting that God's act is free in regard to both of them, so it dissolves the haunting and persistent sense of rivalry between God and creation, that rivalry which, as I noted earlier, makes so many assume that for humanity to be free, God must be dethroned. God's sovereignty is not a vastly inflated variety of human power. And once we have grasped this, we can begin to see the radical implications of God's creation of human beings in the divine image and God's purpose of endowing them through Jesus with a share in the divine life. As Calvin well understood, this is disturbing for a Reformed theology only if God is capable of being threatened by human dignity or flourishing – which is, *ex hypothesi*, unthinkable. An uncompromising stress on the absolute difference of God's power ought to result in an enhanced theological affirmation of human dignity: there is no reverence given to actual finite humanity that in itself takes anything away from what is due to God. Idolatry is ascribing to what is created what belongs only to God – that is, treating creatures as more than creatures. The true Christian challenge is to love and revere humanity for what it is – mortal and vulnerable, yet immeasurably glorious because made by God as the site of divine manifestation and agency. And – to connect this with themes touched on earlier – our capacity for radical self-questioning as individuals and as a society is made possible by this basic conviction that our mortal and fallible human state is affirmed in its fragility by God who undertakes to absolve and transform it, never to abolish it. Or in other terms, we can question everything about our humanity, its precise capacities, its habitual behaviour, we can live with an almost corrosive pessimism about what fallen nature is actually like, yet we cannot question the dignity unconditionally bestowed by the God who has no jealousy of our state, since the divine life does not share the same space as ours.

16. It is the ability of Reformed theology to affirm this that gives it a role in our current cultural struggles. To proclaim Christian hope is in no sense to advance an optimistic view of human capacity or character; a theological perspective allows us to assume the worst (in just the way associated with Augustinian and Calvinist thought in the popular mind), but it does not allow us to think less of our humanity than its maker does. And by proposing to us the language and world of Scripture as the house we inhabit together and the dialect we speak, it tells us that we may find direction and indeed transformation as we make our own the story of God's dealings with a people with whom he makes covenant. To speak of Christian hope is to speak of divine fidelity; our social vision is grounded in the belief in a God who freely promises to be the God of

those who have not 'earned' or been obliged to compel his love. The radical otherness of divine love and commitment, and the consequent irreducible mysterious extent of God's election entails a systematic reverence for human persons whatever their status or achievement or ethical performance. All are potentially part of a story of unpredictable divine faithfulness, part of the Scriptural story in which we may find common ground.

17. This is a legacy which challenges a number of negative forces. Its emphasis on growing into a maturity that can handle self-questioning is a challenge to a public/media culture preoccupied with the management of personal images. It suggests that genuine and honest exchange in personal and public debate is essential and that for this to work there must be a basic willingness to silence one's dreams of invulnerable rightness. In the face of a vague spirituality that can easily turn into consoling and sentimental 'inwardness', it stresses the need in spiritual practice, public and personal, for listening with care and attention, ready for what will not be welcome to the lazy ego – listening in 'the fear of God', to use the old-fashioned vocabulary. In contrast to a general unwillingness to think in terms of shared narratives that are more than local or communal, it proposes a universal narrative of divine grace and election, crystallized uniquely in Scripture, focused on the events in which the true image of humanity is restored in the crucified and risen Christ. It is worth underlining that Calvin himself repudiates the idea that our salvation is only a formal or external and mechanical relation with a Christ who has declared us righteous but makes no 'real' change in us: 'He imparts to us his life and all the blessings which he has received from the Father'(Comm. Jn 17.21).

18. Against anxious and fundamentalist religion, this Reformed tradition affirms a God who cannot and *need* not be persuaded by our efforts or our success: the language of our faith, especially our prayer, is characteristically shaped by gratitude for unearned and uncaused love and forgiveness, gratitude for God being God. Against a rebellious or resentful atheism, suspicious of alien and coercive power, it presents a God who can have no interest in diminishing his creatures and whose absolute sovereign freedom is such that he need not bully or coerce those creatures; God's free will is a will for forgiveness and healing and for the extension of the divine love and bliss to creation.

19. Out of all this emerges the outline of a theology that imposes a demanding spiritual discipline, a sober and thoughtful style of worship, a freedom constantly and without panic to have one's own integrity under scrutiny and to do the same for the community as a whole and its institutions, a Christ-centred understanding of human history and a radical political vision, challenging inequalities and arbitrary domination of all kinds. In brief, the governing themes of authentic Reformed theology do not only represent a recovery of many of the most radical ideas of patristic thought, but offer as robust and profound a resource for addressing contemporary social crises as the tradition of Catholic social teaching – not that these are rivals, but complementary understandings, with the Reformed tradition contributing above all its emphasis on the incomparable

sovereignty of God which liberates us from moralistic assessments of merit and invites us to reflect in our own actions and relations the same 'causeless' fidelity to the promise of love that belongs to God.

20. The greatest theologians of the Reform were not zealots seeking to expunge history and symbol from the Christian mind, or individualists committed to the autonomy of private conscience, or theocrats determined to impose on all human society an unreconstructed version of the Mosaic law, or rationalists obsessed with words at the expense of both silence and sign, or biblical literalists with a mechanical model of inspiration. The accidents of history have associated Reformed Christianity with all of these in various contexts, and there are of course elements in Luther, Calvin, Melanchthon or Zwingli that might foster and encourage such ideas. The popular picture of Protestant Christianity in the West is still largely dominated by one or all of these stereotypes. But if we are now seeking to articulate for our own day what is distinctive and valuable about the legacy of the Reformation, it becomes necessary to disentangle them from the fundamental insights and questions of the Reformers. In this very modest contribution to such a task, I have tried to indicate where I believe the emphasis should fall. I have been helped and encouraged by that strand in recent writing about Calvin which sees him as a humanist scholar retrieving insights from the early Christian centuries, offering a fresh way of focusing on the Eucharistic transformation of the believer and the community – not a logician determined to establish the omnipotent liberty of God at the expense of both reason and human dignity. There is in him, undoubtedly, a 'tragic' element which is most visible in his stress on the comprehensive corruption of fallen humanity and the (consequent) arbitrariness of predestination; Calvin – and much of the tradition that stems from him – is no more successful in handling this than Augustine. But this is an outgrowth from the main stem of his thought, and needs to be kept in perspective. What is most significant is the way in which Calvin explores so comprehensively the leading themes of a renewed theology which gives such space to human maturity – political and psychological – while at the same time keeping human capacity within a relentlessly realistic framework. A Christian faith that does not require any kind of infantilisation on the part of the faithful – that is, perhaps, the greatest aspiration of the Sixteenth century Reform, and an aspiration that today is more than ever an imperative if Christian belief is to persuade and attract and convert.

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