

Church Times
02.12.05

True Protestants allow diversity

By Keith Ward

'Genuine biblical Protestantism has to admit freedom of interpretation'

Whether Anglicans call themselves Catholic or Protestant, they are undoubtedly children of the Protestant Reformation. But parts of the Anglican Communion today wish to undermine the fundamental principles of that Reformation.

Strangely, they are doing so in the name of a claimed loyalty to "biblical faith" - by which they mean their own interpretation of the Bible. They seem unconcerned that most biblical scholarship in the past 150 years has put their interpretation in question.

The saddest thing, however, is that they are under the illusion that their interpretation is "the one and only correct and acceptable one". It is that illusion that betrays the Reformation. There is a wide misunderstanding that some Protestant groups are somehow returning to an imagined original purity of the Christian faith, which had been lost in the Middle Ages.

It is never possible simply to go back in time, and classical Protestants were wholly different from the first generation of Christians. The first Christians possessed no New Testament - they were still in process of compiling it. They had no standard doctrine of the Trinity, the atonement, or the incarnation, as the Reformers had. The very first Christians were much more Jewish in their practice and diverse in their theology than the Reformers.

So the Reformers were doing something new. They were rejecting a view of the Church as a hierarchical organisation, instituted by Jesus, having supreme authority in faith and morals, and being the sole means of salvation from hell. They believed in salvation by faith. But faith was not acceptance of the authority of the Church. It was personal trust in Christ, and the Church is primarily the fellowship of those who have such trust.

Such faith does not require or entail that all your beliefs are correct. The right of dissent and liberty of conscience are essential to the very existence of Protestantism. There is no human authority to tell you what is true. Councils of the Church can err, and have erred (as Article XXIX of the Thirty-Nine Articles states). Interpreters of the Bible can err, and have erred, though they may still have true faith.

It follows, of course, that Protestants can err, and we may state it as a fundamental Protestant rule that anyone can be mistaken. It follows that I may be mistaken. By a simple induction from human experience, it seems probable that I am mistaken about some matters. Simple humility requires me to admit that my interpretation of scripture is not infallible.

Faith is, as Kierkegaard put it, a passionate commitment made in objective uncertainty. In the Christian case, it is commitment to the person of Christ as disclosing the highest form of goodness we know, and as mediating the power to transform lives - to share to some degree in that goodness. It is saving faith, a personal commitment of trust that liberates from sin, and freely gives a share in divine love.

For many Protestants, this idea of faith was tied to the idea that the Bible alone provides all that is necessary for saving belief. This sometimes led to dogmatic systems as inflexible as that of the Roman Catholic Church from which Protestants sought release. The Bible was sometimes thought to provide just one set of doctrines that were clear and consistent. Since the Bible was seen as the means by which alone Christ was known, the Bible was given just the sort of inerrancy that Protestants should, if they were consistent, have denied to all human interpretations.

"Biblical Protestantism", in this sense, is a contradiction in terms. It is refuted by the existence of the vast number of divergent Protestant Churches, which all disagree on what the Bible says. This shows that the Bible is interpreted in many different ways, and that it is often interpreted with the aid of beliefs that are not strictly in the Bible - such as "orthodox" belief in the Trinity and the incarnation.

Any genuine biblical Protestantism has to admit freedom of personal interpretation of the Bible, and so has to tolerate diversity of interpretation and understanding. It has to deny to any human being the magisterial authority to issue the "correct" interpretation of the Bible.

In this sense, Protestantism is essentially liberal. It permits and encourages dissent, freedom of conscience, and toleration of diversity. It insists on a fraternity and fellowship that includes those who disagree. It affirms that the one thing that matters is personal commitment to the person of Christ. All else is open to discussion and debate. I am an Anglican partly because I can live together in faith with people whose interpretation of the Bible seems to me completely wrong.

This does not seem much like the Protestantism we are seeing in some parts of the Anglican Communion today. Yet it is what the Protestant Reformation essentially is and implies.

That is why many movements (such as Reform) that think of themselves as founded on Reformation principles are in fact committed to undermining the Reformation. They are putting in its place an authoritarian dogmatism of just the sort the Reformers were trying to escape. They are either misunderstanding or betraying the principle of justification by faith alone. Is it not time they began to repent?

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