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# Current Signification of the Reformation<sup>1</sup>

*Jacques Ellul*

*translated by Jacob Rollison*

## SUMMARY

Understanding the current signification of the Protestant Reformation requires that we understand its significance in its historical and ecclesiastical context. While primarily aiming at the reform of the Church, the Reformation had far-ranging consequences for western society. These included inverting the situation of the previous centuries by abandoning the medieval doctrine of the *corpus christianum*. Thus the Reformation allowed the world to be the world. If it is God’s relation to the world which gives the latter an orientation, then the signification of the Reformation for today is to ask this question again to the Church

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and the world: what is the relational orientation and direction of the world? To the Church, the question is one of her reliance on the Holy Spirit for stability and continuity, which precludes her reliance on her authoritarian, institutional or traditional character; to the world, the question is essentially the question of God and his work as raised by the presence of the Church, which teaches the world that it has a Lord, an orientation and an end. Only by submission to the illumination of Scripture by the Holy Spirit can the Church be both faithful to the Reformation today and truly be the Church.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Pour comprendre la signification de la Réforme aujourd’hui, il est nécessaire de comprendre sa signification dans son contexte historique et ecclésiastique. Même si sa vocation première était la réforme de l’Église, la Réforme a eu des répercussions bien plus vastes sur la société occidentale. Parmi celles-ci, la Réforme a renversé la situation des siècles précédents en abandonnant la doctrine médiévale du *corpus christianum*. Ainsi, la Réforme a permis au monde d’être vraiment le monde. Si c’est la relation de Dieu au monde qui donne à ce dernier un sens, la signification de

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la Réforme aujourd’hui est de poser encore cette question à l’Église et au monde : quel est son sens et sa direction ? Pour l’Église, la question posée est celle de faire dépendre sa stabilité et sa continuité du Saint Esprit plutôt que de ses attributs autoritaire, institutionnel ou traditionnel. Pour le monde, c’est surtout la question de Dieu et de son œuvre qui est soulevée par la présence de l’Église, qui enseigne au monde que ce dernier a un Seigneur, une orientation et une fin. C’est seulement à la lumière de l’Écriture, et avec l’aide du Saint Esprit, que l’Église peut être fidèle à la Réforme et être vraiment l’Église.

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Um die heutige Bedeutung der protestantischen Reformation verstehen zu können, müssen wir deren Bedeutung in ihrem geschichtlichen und kirchlichen Zusammenhang verstehen. Während die Reformation zuallererst auf eine Reform der Kirche abzielte, hatte sie dennoch weit reichende Folgen für die westliche Gesellschaft. Dazu gehörte, dass man die Situation der früheren Jahrhunderte umkehrte und die Doktrin des Mittelalters vom *Corpus Christianum* aufgab. Dadurch erlaubte die Reformation der Welt, wirklich Welt zu sein. Wenn es die Beziehung Gottes zur Welt ist, die der Welt Sinn und Richtung gibt, dann ist die Bedeutung der Reformation heute, diese Frage erneut an die Kirche und an die Welt zu richten: In welche Rich-

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tung orientiert sich die Welt beziehungs­mässig und wohin geht sie? Was die Kirche anbelangt, so geht es bei ihr um die Abhängigkeit vom Heiligen Geist hinsichtlich ihrer Stabilität und Beständigkeit und nicht um die Abhängigkeit von ihren autoritären, institutionellen oder traditionellen Eigenschaften. Was die Welt anbelangt, so geht es bei ihr im Wesentlichen um die Frage nach Gott und seinem Werk, wie sie sich durch das Dasein der Kirche stellt, welche die Welt darüber belehrt, dass letztere einen Herrn, ein Ziel und ein Ende hat. Nur wenn sich die Kirche dem Licht der Schrift und der Erleuchtung durch den Heiligen Geist aussetzt, kann sie sowohl der Reformation gegenüber treu, als auch wahrhaft Kirche sein.

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## Introduction (Jacob Rollison)

The following is my translation of an article by the twentieth century French Reformed theological ethicist and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912–1994). The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation marks the occasion for this translation. I found this article while spending a year of my doctoral studies researching Ellul's work in Strasbourg, France, where it seems that Protestantism is as much a cultural and historical heritage as a religious one, and numerous events celebrating the Reformation are taking place. I hope that reviving this article at this moment could be useful in probing the Protestant Church's relation to and understanding of its historical inheritance, but equally (in what, in my view, is the chief theological value of Ellul's work) for questioning this Church's relation to the present time.

The original article was published in 1945 in a special volume of the journal *Protestantisme Français*, entitled *Présences*. The volume's stated goal was to honestly present contemporary French Protestantism. Part one, 'A Description of Protestantism', situates Protestantism in France; part two, 'The Reformation Today', and part three, 'Positions and Tendencies', show the diversity within unity under the Protestant umbrella; part four situates French Protestantism in a global perspective, and part five, 'What Separates Us, What Unites Us' initiates dialogue between Protestants and Catholics. Ellul's essay marks the beginning of part two.

The volume was published at a dramatic time both in the life of Ellul and of the French nation, coming on the heels of the end of World War II. The introduction gives special tribute to Yann Roulet, a collaborator in creating this volume, who was executed before its publication. As for Ellul, in the summer of 1940 his teaching post in Law at the University of Strasbourg (which he took up in 1938 – exactly 400 years after Calvin began his three years in Strasbourg [1538–1541]) was revoked. The University had withdrawn to Clermont-Ferrand because of the Nazi occupation of Alsace; Ellul was fired from his position because he had advised Alsatian students not to go back to occupied Alsace and not to trust the Vichy regime forming around Philippe Pétain. Subsequent investigations revealed that Ellul was the son of a foreigner; his father was thus put in prison, where he later died. When Ellul's wife of Dutch origin was summoned by the Vichy police,

Ellul and his family fled Bordeaux and took refuge in Martres, a village on the border between the jurisdiction of the Vichy regime and the free zone to the west. For the remainder of the war, they farmed potatoes and chickens while Ellul forged documents to help fleeing Jews escape into the free zone and otherwise non-violently supported the French resistance. From August 1944 till April 1945, Ellul briefly held the position of municipal counsellor in Bordeaux. Hopeful that post-war reconstruction might offer possibilities of a new political life, Ellul's experience of the sterility of political decisions in face of technical specialisation and overwhelming bureaucracy led him to essentially abandon hopes for meaningful political action for the rest of his life.

Within Ellul's larger corpus, this article is one of two significant articles on the Reformation. The latter article, 'Actualité de la Réforme'<sup>2</sup> ('Currency of the Reformation'), appeared fourteen years later in 1959. Though both contain similar themes, I consider translating the present article worthwhile for two reasons: first, because comparing their differences showcases development in Ellul's foci: the latter includes more sociological analysis of the contemporary situation and frequently employs the sociological category of the sacred; second, the contours of the respective historical discussions of the Reformation are not the same, which keeps this translation from being mere repetition.

The emphasis on currency, contemporaneity and presence is a significant theme in Ellul's work. In my doctoral research regarding his use of *presence*, I see Ellul's anti-philosophical approach to theology, visible below in his comments against static thought, metaphysics or fixity of method, as stemming from his most significant biblical influence, the book of Ecclesiastes, and his most significant theological influence, Søren Kierkegaard (as elucidated in his 1984 *La raison d'être* [Reason for Being])<sup>3</sup>. I believe he reads these two influences through the lens of the other, with the result that Kierkegaard's focus on the Christian necessity of being *contemporary with Christ* is filtered through Qohelet's vanity, which Ellul sees as a critique of all fixed thought. Ellul's *presence* thus retains the concern for God's action *today* while stripping Kierkegaard's descriptions of time of their problematic Platonic influence or philosophical abstraction. The pay-off is a context for Christian ethical thought which is extremely adaptable to a rapidly changing world without sacrificing biblical fidelity. In broad terms, Ellul aims to recover

Christian theology from what he sees as the problematic influence of Greek, Enlightenment and modern philosophy.

This article also comes one year before the publication of Ellul's first book, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, in which his training as a historian of western institutions unites with his theology. Consistent with his reading of Ecclesiastes, this book is an early expression of his constant rejection of natural-law style approaches to understanding God's action in society. Instead, seeing Jesus Christ as the only foundation of human unity, Ellul describes *all* human law as part of God's present act of sustaining grace towards the world. This book also describes a juridical evolution which Ellul sees as common to western societies, progressing from a living relation to law towards an elaborated, systematic and technical approach to law, which implies the decline and eventual death of a civilization. When in the present article, Ellul rejects the possibility of the Church becoming an institution or a tradition, we can thus see his theological and sociological concerns intertwining.

As hinted above, I suggest that the most valuable approach to Ellul for the Church is as a faithful critic who takes the questioning role of a biblical prophet. I think we can view Ellul as he views the Reformers below: as a fallible human, whose work springs from an attempt towards biblical fidelity, however imperfect, (and at times) abrasive or harsh this attempt might appear. As he often insisted, Ellul's work was above all self-criticism; to the extent that the Church is called to examine herself (in the spirit of 2 Cor 13:5), I suggest that she would be hard-pressed to find an ally as faithful and as capable of the necessary historical and theological criticism as Ellul.

All footnotes apart from part of note 1 are my own. I have made efforts to conserve Ellul's style, inconsistent capitalisation and punctuation (though I have changed the latter more significantly than other elements to follow the rhythm of reading in English, while still attempting to conserve Ellul's own rhythm). I have also tried to leave my translation phrases ambiguous or unclear when I found the original to be so. Rather than aiming to clarify these areas, I prefer to leave them as such in the text, making any clarifying comments in my footnotes.

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To try to understand what the Reformation currently represents, we must place ourselves not on a terrain of statistics and sociology, but on the terrain itself which the Reformation chose: specifically religious terrain, or more exactly, the terrain of theology as an expression of the faith. In effect, the Reformation did not pretend to be a political or social movement, despite the interpretations that historians of all nuance have wanted to make of it. That it would have *also* been a political party, an intellectual current, a social force – this is evident, because it was a matter of men engaged in life, and this life has its political, intellectual or social aspects. But to want to make of these aspects the essential is to go expressly against the will and thought of the Reformers. To say that without these presuppositions the religious Reformation would not have existed is to demonstrate a bias of historical materialism. To say that the Reformers were deceived, and that they clumsily expressed what was in reality a social and intellectual desire, is to advance a gratuitous hypothesis and to have a lot of faith in the subconscious of societies! The Reformation wanted only to be a Re-formation, according to the model given by holy Scripture, of the Church. It was thus primarily an ecclesiastical act, in that it had the Church for its object – and it remained as such. And we will see that in its current signification,<sup>4</sup> the Reformation retains this character of an ecclesiastical act. In the first place, then, we must try to consider the meaning of the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

## 1. Historical signification of the Reformation

We have often reproached the Reformation for being at the origin of the modern world (a world with neither faith nor law), of the rupture of Christianity and of the loss of all power by the Church, of capitalism and of the anti-religious intellectual movement. There is certainly some truth in this, but we will have to see how these facts are explained.

We have, inversely, declared that the Reformation was only one movement among those that we have observed in the beginning of the sixteenth century: The Renaissance, Statism, Humanism, Capitalism. It would have been but a consequence of these. We make here the same remark as before.

If the Reformation was a providential act of God (and this no Protestant can doubt), the question

remains posed: why did this act have such serious and apparently disastrous consequences? Why this intervention at this moment, while we know that the Church had had other difficult moments, and yet such a decisive act never took place? In reality, we have to take into account that the situation of the Church was never as threatening as during the fifteenth century. How did this come about? There is a movement of history which is important to grasp in order to understand the Reformation. Throughout the Middle Ages, we lived off the idea of the *corpus christianum*, the identity of church and society. States were powerless against the Church. There was no major division, because there was no nation. And the Church extended far beyond feudal frontiers, these minor divisions which, on the contrary, furthered its power. By the theory of direct power of the Church over the State, the Church was making her will predominant everywhere; and understandably so, because this entire medieval society (which is not a golden age or an age of Christianity, which does not touch a spiritual idyll) is ordered following a Christianly-thought structure, and Christian morality forms the common foundation of the social basis of all society. But this embrace of society by the Church, this fact that society is universal like the Church, that the further we go the more their destinies seem linked, eventually shows itself to be profoundly dangerous in the Church.<sup>5</sup> At the very beginning of the fourteenth century, French nationalism effectively awakens, which will soon bring all the others in its wake. When the rupture of this immense European unity of the feudal world is produced in this way, the Church, which is largely identified with it, will run the risk of this same division. Having forged this unity and affirmed this notion of the *corpus christianum*, when this latter breaks politically, it includes the Church herself in this rupture. The first product of this split will be the Gallican Church. In short, because the Church was universal *as* society, it becomes national when society becomes national; this was a consequence of the particular structure of the *corpus christianum*, much more than of the ambitions of a king or the pretensions of a state. The problem, as roughly everywhere in the fifteenth century, is one of knowing definitively if the Church will be a temporal power fighting on this terrain with the other powers (for Gallicanism,<sup>6</sup> the fact that the Pope is the head of State plays a considerable role), if it will be a national and nationalised Church, and if it will surmount the crisis of rupture set off in

the fourteenth century. Now, in the face of this grave peril, all moral, political, juridical remedies are manifestly powerless. This is manifest more than anything in that until 1791, nothing will resolve the problem of Gallicanism; it will finally be resolved by the laicity of the State.

It is necessary to start again from the beginning, to rethink the whole situation theologically. Now, if this was not the principal and apparent object of the Reformers' preoccupations, it is nevertheless here that the effort of the Reformation focuses in reality – and it is here that it will have certain consequences, by which we can say that the Reformation has succeeded. In biblical fidelity, the Reformers will draw the consequences of this separation of the spiritual and the temporal, certainly admitted in the Roman Church, but without a doubt obscured by the social importance of the Church in the Middle Ages, by the doctrine of the continuity of nature and grace, and by the theory of the *corpus christianum*. Now according to biblical texts, an opposition exists, not between spirit and matter, but for example, in that which concerns us, between the Church and the world. These are two incommensurable grandeurs. The Church cannot, in any degree, be of the world – and the world cannot in any degree enter into the Church: the fusion of the two is to anticipate the Kingdom of God. This does not at all imply that God has abandoned the world, or that the bridges between the Church and the world are cut off. But this means that the Church cannot exercise any power, any mastery over the world – and further, that the church cannot pretend to englobe the world. The relations between the two are different, and it can be a question neither of a national or an international Church, nor of a temporal power of the Church. Consequently, the crisis of the fifteenth century must be resolved not by political refinement, but by the recovery of the theological bases of the Church, of the relations of the Church and of the State and of the situation of the world; this is why we were able to consider the reformation as a political movement: but here it is solely a matter of theology, because it is God who assigns a certain place and a certain role to the State and to the world. For we note that it is less a question of the State than of the world. If after this, a state wants to take possession of the church: it can do so, the Church cannot respond except by her martyrs and her faithfulness (just like the priests who refused to take the oath to the Constitution during the Revolution). But the



world cannot assume another place than the one assigned to it: and the State acting in this way only manifests itself as united with this sinful world.

A rupture of the continuity of nature and grace, negation of implicit faith, rupture of the Church-society link in the *corpus christianum*, a refusal of all temporal power of the Church, a refusal of temporal combat with the state, and at the same time radical intransigence regarding the spiritual – these positions of the reformers will certainly have consequences for which we reproach the Reformation; but we must see the signification of these consequences.

The rejected world fully rebecomes the world: not a world without law, but a world which does not have the same laws as the Church. Now, the grand medieval hope was to make the world adopt the laws of Christian morality. But this was a radical impossibility: how could that which does not live by the Christian faith adopt Christian morality?<sup>7</sup> All biblical teaching shows that morality is a direct consequence of, and inseparable from, faith in the person of Jesus Christ. Without this faith, morality can be an ensemble of perfectly reasonable, perfectly honourable rules, but with nothing Christian about it. Only what lives by faith in the Saviour is Christian; Christian morality thus absolutely cannot be separated from faith. Consequently it would appear that it is impossible to apply this morality to the world, because *a priori* the world does not receive the Christian faith. The world is precisely that which has not received the light coming from God (John 1). And so the attempt of the Church in the Middle Ages, this immense effort to make the whole world enter into Christian laws and into the framework of the Church, could not have succeeded except if the world, ceasing to be what it is by definition, adopted the faith. The Reformation bursts this major impossibility. It renounces applying the principles of Christian morality to the world, delivers it to itself, leaves it to its initiatives, to its attempts, to the one who is said to be the Prince of this world.

We do not have to ask ourselves if this had humanly happy or unhappy consequences. It is true that it permits the birth of humanism, capitalism, etc. But the sole criterion that the Reformation accepts for good and evil is the Word of God. Now Scripture expressly teaches that there can be no confusion between the Church and the world (Jn 15:19), that the world, the domain of the flesh, is the place of Satan (Rev 12:9), that the world is nec-

essarily in revolt against God (Jn 15:20, Lk 16:13) and that it can in no way accept what Jesus Christ teaches (Jn 15:20–25). Consequently, this separation conforms to Scripture; the fact of restoring to the world its simple and demonic quality as the world is perhaps disastrous from the human perspective, but it is the truth wanted by God.

This does not mean that this world is totally abandoned: it is submitted to laws for its conservation, because in his patience God conserves the world; there are gifts which God has given to this world: the Magistrate, Law, etc., which permit it to subsist – there is also the action of the Church – because this separation does not at all entail the church folding back on herself: but all that the Church has to say is the good news of salvation. Nothing else. She does not have to inform society, she does not have to be a monitor of morality or of civic or social life, she does not have to be a cultural form: she must be exclusively the one who preaches in the desert, announcing the Lord. In other words, the function of the Church is not to organise the world but to convert it. And to do this, the Church must address herself to a world which would really be the world, with its sin, with its violence, amidst wars, famines, diseases – a world which would be the world where Satan reigns: without this, the Church has nothing to say or do, because Jesus Christ came not for the healthy but for the sick (Mt 18:11). It thus concerns a sort of laicisation of the world. This was the work of the Reformation and it succeeded. And at this price the church could be re-formed, she could be effectively liberated from political or social influence, because she no longer placed herself on the same plane.

But at the same time, another remarkable consequence of the Reformation was what we could call ‘the laicisation of Religion’. We will specify right away to avoid any misunderstanding: the Reformation poses as a principle the fact that one does not belong to the Church except by faith. This demands a real and living faith. But in living this way, there is no difference between the members of the Church. There is no caste of clergy. All are made priests ‘of a royal priesthood’ (1 Pet 2:9) equally and without distinction – this is the idea of the priesthood of all believers.<sup>8</sup> But these men belonging to the Church are called to live their faith, not in monasteries, but in the world. They must have a social and political situation like all other men; consequently, the morality that they must follow is not only individual, but a social

morality. The action of the Church is completed by the action of her members, and it is this which gave birth, by deformation, incidentally, to puritanism. The consequences of this are thus to make Christian faith and morality penetrate society, not by a collective action of the Church acting as one power on another, but by the individual actions of her members: this religion thus ceases to be an ecclesiastical religion and finds itself laicised, because it is lived in the milieu of the world itself and not in a more or less christianised milieu.

And so, by this double action, the Reformation of the sixteenth century totally inverts the situation of the fifteenth century.

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We said that there were reasons of an ecclesiastical order for this. Other historians have wanted to see here purely human reasons: the Reformation is part of this ensemble of movements (Renaissance, Humanism, Statism) from the beginning of the sixteenth century; it is only one among others, with the same causes. But what is the deep cause of these movements, if not precisely the dissatisfaction of the world before a failure of the church? The world, although in revolt, knows what it needs, awaits the word which delivers it (Rom 8:19–20), and it revolts when we do not bring it this word. It searches joyfully or hopelessly for the power which will permit man to live – for the meaning (*sense*)<sup>9</sup> of his life, for good action. Separated from the Church, in revolt against her, the world creates for itself its gods and its reasons to live. Man in himself, the State, Art, why search elsewhere? What we have been taught for centuries has not been the key of life! As the world by its revolt recalls the Church to order (because the world is in the hands of God, and Satan himself serves his designs) and demands her to be truly the Church, so the Reformation is certainly a part of these movements, and in a certain measure is conditioned by them. It is the response that God sends them. Men want to make gods for themselves. The Reformation responds to them: ‘The only God is the one who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and who has spoken in Scripture. In the Bible and nowhere else is there reason to live, meaning (*sens*) for life, superhuman power. You cannot change the fact that God has spoken, and you cannot transform what He has said. All that you find elsewhere or by other means is a lie.’ The Reformation is thus the effort for the Church to really be the

Church with her irreplaceable role to play in the world, the Church faithful to the Revelation of the Christ. Of course, this will not suffice to turn the world from its false gods: we have seen its nature. But here there is a particular grandeur to the task of the Church (Ez 33). If the world follows false gods, while the church remains silent, sleeps, is unfaithful, does not preach the Word – in short, is not the Church of Christ – then it is she who is responsible for this situation of men, and it is on her that the sin of all creation falls, and she is the true cause of wars, degradation and famine, which are reminders of her mission. But when she awakes, when the world has heard the truth, it has heard the will of God, and if it closes its ears and refuses, then it will bear the weight of its own sin. It is thus that the Re-formation wanted to be the response of the Church, before all the sin of the world with which she was overwhelmed.

One point remains yet to be examined summarily. This separation of the Church and the world – did not the Reformation itself create it? The Church of Germany in the hands of the princes, the Church of England too, and Geneva finally... For the first two events, it must be remembered that when the relations between the Church and the world are re-established as Scripture wants them, the possibility of the State invading and attempting to subjugate the Church remains. And the latter is without temporal force to resist. The overthrow of order by the State is, as we have seen, nothing but the mark of sin on it. This does not at all prevent the Church from being the body of Christ, in faithfulness and suffering. This happened in England and in Germany, without the church being at all shaken, because she expects and receives her life from another source than from the prince.

But Geneva? We have rightly considered it as a ‘City-Church’. And this is the reality. Calvin did not try to remake a world encircled by a church, but on the contrary a Church which would realise herself as a city. The situation is thus radically different. We do not have to discuss here whether or not Calvin’s view was well-founded. What he attempted, even if he was mistaken, does not weaken at all our thesis that the providential character of the Reformation is marked by the necessity of re-establishing relations willed by God between the world and the Church, that this reestablishment had for its foundation a profound theological renewal, and that it was conditioned by a re-formation of the Church. What Calvin did

does not imply a confusion of the world and the Church. He only wanted to furnish the church with material fortifications, and it is not Geneva-become-Church but the Church-become-Geneva that he attempted. Whence the exclusions from the city for all those who did not lead a Christian life, and inversely the welcome, often with the attribution of the title of bourgeois,<sup>10</sup> to all those who came searching for refuge, chased from everywhere because of their faith. But above all, what marked this will was the attempt to make all inhabitants of Geneva sign the confession of faith. This means that to apply the Christian morality to Geneva, it was necessary that all the inhabitants of Geneva would have had a living faith, real and personal. And that all these inhabitants would have had a common faith in a unique truth. To be part of Geneva, you had to be part of the Church. Geneva would have been like an immense monastery, where there would have been only brothers in the faith. It did not avoid the fact that outside, there was a world and a Church, and that it was there that the Reformation was acting most profoundly.

If this is the historical work of the Reformation and its signification, we should conclude that, because this work is currently prolonged, because the current situation of the world results from this affirmation of the sixteenth century, because State laicism is the normal position, because the Church is less and less a temporal power, the Reformation is still current. It still has a mission today because the situation that it provoked is perpetuated. It still has something to recall to the two sides where it turns, opposite the two powers where it finds itself. The Reformation, because it is founded on the 'God said', and because the Word of God is eternal and current, has something to say to the universal Church.

The Reformation, because it is like the sentinel of whom Ezekiel spoke, who announces, reprimands and also awaits the dawn, has something to say to the world, something that nobody can say in its place, given its theology and its vocation.

And if the Reformation ceases to provide this, it is nothing more than a historical memory, a monument to the dead, a church abandoned by God.

## 2. The Reformation: A question posed to the universal Church

This effort attempted in the sixteenth century thus puts both the Church and world in a critical situ-

ation. There is no more possible synthesis, neither to the benefit of the Church nor to the profit of the world, though it is always the temptation of the one and the other to rebuild this synthesis. The temptation of the world to construct a religion for itself, and become a Church; the temptation of the Church to become a temporal power, fighting to subjugate the world and direct it by temporal means. The situation is in fact critical for both, for the world cannot live without spiritual food and the Church cannot live without a body. And what the Reformation should be for the one and the other is the response that there is no other food for the world than the good news of the Gospel, and that there is no other body for the church than to be the body of Christ.

The Church thus finds herself in a situation which is inextricable from a human viewpoint. It cannot and must not search its force, its stability, in any human means. It depends only on the Holy Spirit who makes it live from day to day. God makes his people live in the desert by manna, which he gives each day, and He forbids that anyone would store it up. Now this is expressly the situation of the Church, that of being in the desert of the world, of being the people of God and of living only by the gift of God. In reality she finds herself taken in this tension so often described, and from which we cannot escape without unfaithfulness: on the earth, and yet strangers and travellers (Heb 11:13), in the world and not of the world (Jn 15:19), in the milieu of the world like sheep among wolves (Mt 10:16). There is no solution. And we do not have the right to escape, neither towards heaven, by means of mysticism, nor towards the earth, by means of power. For this tension, this impossible situation (impossible to live and impossible to resolve) is precisely the one created by Jesus Christ at the moment of his incarnation. To go against it, to want to escape it, is in reality to want to destroy what God did at the moment of the birth of Jesus Christ and at Pentecost.

This situation has no other key, this impossibility has no other truth than the Holy Spirit. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit which makes this life of the church possible; it is the Holy Spirit who is the first foundation of the Church: we see in the New Testament that the Spirit is always at the origin of an act of the Church. But it is never incorporated into the Church, never linked to her by essence. It acts on the Church in coming from God, as a new force which God gives to his Church, as tongues of



fire coming on the apostles. It never becomes the property of the Church, no more than of a man, and Peter after having spoken by the revelation of the Spirit, becomes a moment later an instrument of Satan (Mt 16:13–23). When God gives his Spirit to the Church, she is thus the veritable Church, she is thus veritably founded, but this is never a guarantee for the future. The Church cannot count on this action of God as a law of Nature, just as she cannot put the Spirit in reserve. The Church is thus not truly the Church except when she receives this gift of God, which never ceases to be a gift of God, because the spirit never ceases to be the Spirit-who-comes-from-God. This is not a static element; it is action itself, it is the one who comes, who blows, etc. This is not an element which acts as part of the world: it is the action of God in the world, the one who descends from heaven to act on the earth, and more precisely to act in the Church. Thus, the Church in her existence cannot seek another foundation, but neither does she have this one at her disposal, because she does not found herself. And her foundation was not made one day to then perpetuate itself by natural or logical ways. There was not, one day, Pentecost, which then becomes a historical memory, and from this a progression, a normal development of the Church. Precisely because the Spirit is action, and because it ceaselessly comes as a gift of God, it is given anew by God to his Church, so much that each instant where the Church is truly a Church is a miracle of God, a new Pentecost. And that is why the Church cannot search for another sustenance, another source of force and life, another security than this Spirit. As soon as she turns elsewhere, she is unfaithful, she is no longer the Church.

That is also why the Church cannot count on herself to live. As soon as she turns herself towards this once-given gift to live by it, she forgets that the Holy Spirit is in the present and not in the past; and she is no longer the Church.

Without a doubt, the Spirit essentially acts in the Church in the measure where the latter is already a beginning of the Kingdom of God. God has really made the promise to give his spirit to his Church; but this does not imply at all that the Church thereby receives an object, an inert element, of which it can make what it wants, that it can use: we have seen that this is the exact opposite of the Spirit. If the Church has a sort of monopoly on the Spirit, it is because God shows her this grace, without which the Church has and is nothing at all.

At no moment can the Church substitute herself for the Spirit, in claiming this monopoly, because this would be an attack on the freedom and the sovereignty of the Spirit in the Church. Thus, the Church can never bestow on herself the authority of the Spirit; on the contrary, it is God who makes what He wants of his Church by the Spirit.

But this produces the most hopeless situation imaginable, from a human perspective. The Church finds herself absolutely stripped of all securities, richness and grandeur, both human and spiritual. The Church is really reduced to nothing by the fact that she must not seek any temporal support, and by the fact that she has no spiritual property. Totally stripped, she does not live except on the charity which God gives it, and if God ceases this daily gift, the Church has absolutely nothing more. And this vacuity of the Church (vacuity which the Spirit of God fills like the force which comes in its time, from the outside, to accomplish the works of God in and by the Church), this vacuity has to be nothing except available for the action of God.

And this is the question ceaselessly posed by the Reformation to the universal Church: Are you available for the action of God? Do you have nothing except this availability?

The Reformation is not in effect an historic act of the past. In the measure in which Protestants turn to this past, to the principles of the reformers, to the history or tradition of their churches, they are no longer Reformed, they are no longer faithful to what the Reformation wanted to be. The Reformation is not a point of departure. It should not have been a point of departure for new churches. It did not want to be anything but the re-formation of the Church. And re-formation in a very precise sense: if God spoke to the Church in holy Scripture, *currently* God gives his Spirit to the Church to understand what God said in holy Scripture – does the Church live from this, and from this alone? And all the currency (*actualité*) of the Reformation holds to this ‘currently’ (*actuellement*). The Reformation is nothing other than this affirmation of the currency of the Gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. So much so that it is not an act which took place once, but a permanent act: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. This means, first of all, that the Church is made of men and that these men are sinners. They are not yet in the Kingdom of God, and consequently, by fact of their human lives they ceaselessly carry the Church in false directions. The Church constantly needs to be brought back to the service of God, and the

whole history of the Church is nothing other than the history of the people of Israel, a history of disobedience, of transgressions, of efforts towards other gods – and the history of the reformation of the Church by the Spirit. And this latter is a work which cannot be stopped, because Satan attacking the Church, even inside, does not stop, and the Spirit of God which gives life to the Church in reforming her does not stop either.

We have seen that it is God who has the Church at his disposal by the Spirit. The permanent reformation of the Church is thus the obedience of the Church to the Spirit; it is to accept that God makes things advance, to change his Church, that she would not be established in a revelation that she appropriates for herself, but rather that she would always be alert to receive this new order brought by the Spirit.

New order? God changes his Church? Does this mean that the Church is a body which changes? That it has an evolution? In other words, during the temporal history of the church, is there a history of the relations of God and the Church? No, in the measure in which the Church is the body of Christ. This ends all ideas of evolution. She is not more or less – she is or she is not at all. Everything that God gives to the Church, he gives all at once. Everything that God reveals to the Church, he reveals all at once: all that is necessary for salvation is contained in Scripture, and it is to Scripture that the Spirit returns. The Church, subsequently, is (or is not) ready to listen to the Spirit. The Church is (or is not) faithful to the revealed Word, illuminated by the Spirit. The Church is (or is not) obedient to the judgement of God. And, in this measure, she is (or is not) the body of Christ. But, inevitably, this return of the Church to Scripture by the Spirit entails a reformation.

Such is thus the sense of the question posed by the Reformation: because the Spirit is sovereign, and because the Church is composed of sinful men, the Church is always under judgement, and it is thus necessary that she accept being ceaselessly reformed.

If this is really the case, the Church can never be an authority, an institution, a tradition.

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The Church cannot be an authority in herself. She is but the reflection of the authority of the Holy Spirit. In this, it is not at all a matter of a ‘Protestant individualism’ (which existed, but

which is only a deformation of Protestantism) nor of a freedom of thought. There is an authority in the Church, which is that (and only that) of the Holy Spirit, which is expressed by the voice of the pastors, by the sentiment of the community of the faithful, by a prophet: because the Holy Spirit cannot be bound, it cannot have a special organ which receives and communicates it. But because the Holy Spirit explicates revelation, all that is said in the Church is submitted to the touchstone of Scripture. No authority can decide for the Holy Spirit on what the Church *must* believe, because the Church does not believe on the foundation of a human word, she does not believe except by the action of the Holy Spirit; no authority can decide on a plan of action for the Church, because the entire action of the Church is dictated by the action of the Holy Spirit.

To conclude from this that the Church will always be heretical or divided concerning doctrine, anarchic or disordered in her action, is to believe that human action in the church is wiser, more efficacious than the action of God. God can bring the Church back to the truth by himself when she strays from it. He can make her do the works that He demands, when she is indolent. Evidently this solution still seems hypothetical to us because we lack faith. We prefer to trust the decision of an authority to fix the doctrine or the action of the Church. But it is not about our preferences here: it is about the will of the Lord for his Church. Evidently it can appear much more practical to eliminate heresy by a decree, and to assert the authority of the Church as sufficient for teaching. But, in reality, heresy cannot be conquered except by conversion, and conversion is an act of the Spirit. When the Church chases it by decree, she performs only a human act; this gives the appearance of doctrinal solidity, the appearance of unity, the appearance of liquidation of the heresy. She does not prevent this heresy from existing, the fissure from subsisting under a unified exterior; because nothing can compensate for the solution of this problem which is the unity of the action of the Holy Spirit. Doctrinal unity rests on the fact that there is no contradiction in God; and the Church who, in full austerity, in full availability, in full humility lets herself be judged and taught by God, receives precisely this doctrinal unity from God, not as an exterior fact and as an appearance, but as a unity of faith.

This is also why no Church can pretend to have a totally orthodox teaching: orthodoxy is

the conformity of thought to the will of God. But when man is conscious that his thought (as his life) is conformed to this will, at this moment he is like the Pharisee in the Temple (Lk 18:11) and he ceases precisely to be orthodox. Orthodoxy exists at the moment when God speaks to man, and where man listens. But when man constructs a doctrine on this past moment, it is no longer orthodox except in the measure in which it returns to what God said. In other words, the teaching of the Church is not true except when it bears on the current presence of the Lord who is, who was and who is coming. Consequently, the Church is no more the mistress of her theology than of the Lord himself. And it is the Lord who, when the Church forgets herself, freezes in rigid formulae and gives way to science or metaphysics, can give her anew the Spirit of life, convert her anew, bring her back to the unique revelation of God.

In her teaching or her action, the Church has no more to use the argument of authority (we mean ecclesiastical authority, because the Church has only one argument of authority at her disposition: the authority of God *is all* that guarantees its truth) than God himself used this argument. He did not impose the people of Israel as having an authority in themselves by which they could dominate all others. He did not impose Jesus Christ as having an authority in himself: Jesus Christ is precisely the one who, being in the form of God, did not seek to usurp this authority of God (Phil 2:6), and the authority of Jesus Christ is not perceptible except to faith (Mk 1:22). Consequently the Church does not have to teach in founding herself on her own authority: in this she usurps that of God. The Church inverts the question when she uses this authority to force faith, because faith alone can discern the authority of God behind the words of the Church.

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Neither can the church be an institution. She is the Church that God alone builds (*I will build my Church*, Mt 16:18). It is not a question here of Protestant anarchism. For this does not mean that the Church should not *have* institutions, that invisible authority would not entail visible organization. Precisely because she must be faithful to Scripture, the Church should know that she must be a body, with an organization. Scripture does not distinguish the spiritual and the material. (It distinguishes the flesh and the Spirit, which is

another thing.) All that exists has a spiritual and material being, indissoluble.<sup>11</sup> That is why it is not a question of the visible and invisible Church: there is the Church, who has a leader, Christ; who has a terrestrial body, promised to glory, with some sort of ‘particular status’ on the earth, which God has given to her because she is in this impossible situation that we described at the beginning of this paragraph. And this leader, invisible, seated at the right hand of God, is the real head of this body composed of visible ecclesiastical communities, institutions, organizations. There is (despite the difficulty of thought that this represents for us, humanists and Cartesians) no hiatus between the one and the other. The whole ecclesiastical organism is put in order by God, sustained by his Spirit. Now God is a God of order, and not of disorder (1 Cor 14:33), and that is why the Church will be organized; there is a hierarchy, specialised functions, etc. But this is the only reason on which this organization rests. That is why it must never exceed this order of God, it must never take a value in itself; it should not appear as the means to reform the Church. For this is the greatest danger and it is the grand refusal of the Reformation: in the presence of the vices, the weaknesses, the tearing apart of the Church, man always thinks to overcome them by means of a better organization, juridical and administrative proceedings, moral and pedagogical proceedings: proceedings of man, which, definitively, express nothing other than the grip of man on the Church – while the sole recourse is prayer: this is the availability to the action of God in his Church.

And this is the grand problem of ecclesiastical organization: it must exist, it must be useful, it must never hinder the action of the Holy Spirit, it must never be a stiff, absolute, unalterable framework on which the Church counts for its subsistence. It must be the best possible: but, in this, we must not judge with the criteria of administrative technique: the best possible is that which disturbs as little as possible the freedom of the Holy Spirit.

The Church, finally, cannot be in any degree a temporal power, acting in the manner of the other powers of the world, as if she was of the world. She cannot be rich and act through wealth. She cannot be a state and act through politics. She cannot become a ‘spiritual force of the world,’ and act through propaganda: she has only one power, that of the Spirit. For action, she has only prayer and evangelism. When the Church succumbs to this temptation of power, she puts herself on equal

footing with the powers of the world, and she becomes herself of the world, ceasing by this to be the Church of Jesus Christ. 'No servant is greater than his master.' (Jn 13:16) The Church should not expect nor search more temporal force than Jesus Christ. The Church should not act in the world otherwise than Jesus Christ, without which she is not the servant of this master.

In all this, the Church thus tries to become a power in herself. But in doing so, she becomes an historical, sociological, purely human phenomenon. She is no longer the Church of Jesus Christ because she separates herself from her leader and from her Lord in the very measure in which she succeeds in having an authority of her own, an organization of her own, a power of her own, or more exactly (because in reality, whatever her pretensions, she never exceeds the limits that her Lord has assigned to her), when she presents herself to her faithful as having authority and power, as being an eternal organization.

Finally, neither can the Church rest on tradition. She is the Church of the Word of God and there is no other tradition than this Word which God speaks to his Church, *hic et nunc*. This is not a matter of the will of experimentation, of a theology of experimentation<sup>12</sup> (which is also a deformation of Protestantism). Tradition which adds to Scripture, or apostolic succession – the two are incompatible with the foundation of Scripture and the sovereignty of the Spirit in the Church. Because she is a Church which lives by a Word that God speaks to her, she would not know how to be a traditional Church. This word that God speaks adds nothing: in the same way that, by faith, the entire revelation is in every book of the Bible. This Word limits itself to continually sending the Church back to her foundation that she always forgets; it ceaselessly places her before the cross of her Lord. Consequently, there cannot be a doctrinal framework formed in some sort by the addition of these Words to the Word, no more can there be an authority which would be delimited and transmitted according to absolute, perpetual rules. This return to Jesus Christ manifests on the other hand that there is no theology of experimentation here. If, in fact, the Church lives only by the Word of God, it is not a matter of the experimentation that Christians can make of the veracity of this word. It concerns an objective reality, which imposes itself on the Christian from the outside. And this word itself, spoken outside of the Church, has but one object, Jesus Christ who is equally an objective

reality and an historic fact. In this the Church finds herself much more directly linked to her Lord than by way of apostolic succession. Because the Spirit directly guides the Church, there cannot be an organism which transmits the Spirit. Starting from the living present, we can base our hope on the promises of God, but we cannot found a tradition.

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Church authority, Church institution, Church tradition: temptations of the Church of Jesus Christ, in which she always falls, and for which she must always accept to be reformed anew. The Reformation is no other thing: at each instant it is this reminder brought before the face of the universal Church: Is the Spirit still the one who speaks and to whom we listen? Or is there (not explicitly, formally, but at the bottom of our hearts) another actor, is there another power in the Church?

### 3. The Reformation: a question posed to the world

Via the Reformation, historically, the world became autonomous in relation to the Church. And, in effect, the world which has understood this has interpreted this act in different ways: for the world the Reformation was an effort at liberation – otherwise lacking, incomplete, clumsy – with regard to ecclesiastical power, an effort for free thinking, an effort towards democracy, etc. The true Reformers were Servet, Castellion, Grotius, much more than Luther and Calvin. This is the interpretation that the world tries to give to the Reformation to annex it. For the problem posed is: this Church, which is not the grand roman Church, which is not a social power – what is it? The Reformation in a certain measure bothers the world, because it is neither catalogued (insofar as it remains itself) among the 'spiritual powers' nor among the temporal powers. And the world relieves itself of this question by the annexation attempted – and succeeded, in the measure in which the Reformation denies its foundations and ceases to be exclusively attached to Scripture, to be exclusively the Church of Jesus Christ, and sets about walking in the way which the world opens for it. When Protestants admit the *libre examen*,<sup>13</sup> Anabaptism, scientific liberalism, they are no more a church of Jesus Christ; they are easily annexed by the world, because they have made the wisdom of the world prevail over the foolishness of God. It



is to misunderstand the Reformation, in effect, to see it as an act destined to bear fruits according to the process of the world, logically, sociologically; and in its final consequences, all that was human in the Reformation should in effect bear these fruits, and we have exploited these fruits as the *true* products, while in truth they were but the mark of sin at the very interior of the Reformation.

In reality, the only consequence of the Reformation, to the exclusion of all others, is to endlessly send the Church back to the Word of God made explicit by the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Reformation interpreted as an effort towards liberation is, in effect, a liberation from all the forces of the world, but not at all from God, and the God of Jesus Christ. It is thus exactly the inverse of that which the world wants. But if the Reformation is this, it plays its role in the world in announcing to it that it has a Lord, that it has an orientation (*sens*) and that it has an end. We have often reproached the Reformation for its hardness of heart and its rigidity. But precisely in what the Word of God says to the world, there is the gospel of Grace but there is also (and the two things are directly linked) the affirmation of the complete power and the sovereignty of God. Now this complete power implies precisely that it would be spoken to men, and that men would know that this world has a Lord, an orientation (*sens*) and an end. In the Reformation, the two affirmations are corollaries, but we only wanted to retain the severe and hard aspect, perhaps because it was more typical, in the eyes of the pagans, than everything else – because it was less known by the preaching of the catholic Church – for still other reasons... The Reformation did not in effect present to the world the picture of hell to make it repent and accept grace. It only preached grace, the free pardon of God. But it taught the world what its true situation was. And we always return to this same point. It taught the world its true nature. It teaches this still, and by more than words. We will see this below.

The world has a Lord: this is a truth which is hard to accept. It is easy to say that Satan is the prince of the earth (which is true) (which we accept in general, among non-Christians with no little satisfaction!). It is less easy to accept (for Christians and for all others) that the world has, beyond Satan, a Lord who is really its master. By his death and by his resurrection, the Christ has obtained the victory over the powers which are henceforth submitted to him (Col 2:15). This is the point of departure of his lordship. Thus, from

this moment on we are under the reign of Christ. Nothing escapes his power, neither in the heavens nor on the earth. It is not, therefore, only the Providence of God (the Creator and the sustainer of creation) which acts; it is, in a much more positive and personal fashion the Christ himself, who is not monopolised by the Church but who lives in the entire world, and who prevails over all powers, and thus the entire world is under this reign of Christ. And, from now on, it cannot recognise another Lord than him, whether it wants to or not. Each time that it tries this revolt, it moves towards disorder and towards death. Christ thus reigns over the State, over the economic world, etc., and it is because he so reigns that the Christian must be submitted to the Magistrate, and for no other reason.

And in the middle of this world so incorporated into the reign of Christ, there is the Church. She even finds herself at the centre of this world, as the point of the world where the total reign of Christ appears visibly. It is for this fact that she is called the body of the Christ (the terrestrial body of the resurrected Christ) and that, on the other hand, Christ is designated as the leader of the Church: is there a contradiction in these two qualifications? No, for this means firstly that the Church is a part of this whole which is the world where Christ reigns, and of which he is the head, and second that it is Christ himself who is particularly present in this point of his reign which is the Church. And if the Reformation poses a question to the world, it is precisely because it has accepted – in another fashion than the Roman Church – this dreadfully heavy task of being, on the earth, the representative of this Lord of creation. In affirming this Lordship, it has taken it upon itself to truly be the messenger of this Lord, and it wanted to be this precisely as the Christ himself, that is, not by an affirmation of power, of grandeur, but in the humility of obedience to the will of God, in deprivation (for the Reformation was not rich except when it denied itself!), in weakness. And this is the great decision of the world regarding Christ himself, a decision which began on the cross, and which is pursued regarding the Church: who then is this Lord, who is so poorly served? So poorly represented? (Mt 27:42). And so the Reformation accepted this overwhelming situation of affirming without respite the Lordship of Christ, and of not supporting this affirmation of any human means which would make it reasonable to accept. In effect, nothing can lead man to reasonably accept



this truth – only the light of the Holy Spirit... And by its human mediocrity, the Reformation poses this question to the world.

It teaches, furthermore, that the world has an orientation (*sens*). It is not delivered to luck, to Fortune, to chance which does not exist. It is not the mix of more or less legitimate or violent forces which would produce logical results. It is not even an arbitrary creation of God which could have been better, and the history of this world is not the history of a madness. This order which exists, and which quite often man transforms into disorder, this history of which we do not comprehend the orientation (*sens*), has a precise function and a true reality, truer than the appearance of such which is given to us. This orientation (*sens*), this function, this reality, it is still the Church. We have just seen that the Church is at the centre of this current reign of Christ over creation. And it is here, one step further, that all of creation is oriented, organised so that the Church could take her place and play her role. All that is created, said, unchained in this world, all this is a function of this Church. And it is still more unsupported to admit than the Lordship of the Christ. For at least we do not see this Christ! And we can always imagine that his current glory merits the Lordship of the world. Whereas this Church, we see her, she is neither better nor more sane, nor more intelligent, nor more advanced than many other human institutions. She counts so little in the current preoccupations of men! She counts for so little in social, economic and political life! She is veritably nothing in the play of gigantesque forces! But here, all that matters is to ask ourselves if she counts for God. Now the Church has the formal promises of God. And we must admit what God says to us, that everything is ordered to his action and his life. All this enormous industrial progress, these means of communication, these banking systems, these colonisers and colonised, all these creations of the State, and these scientific discoveries, as implausible as all this may appear, have but one function, to permit the Church to successfully complete her task which is to announce the Gospel to the extremities of the earth (1 Tim 2:4). Much has been made of the fact that the *pax romana* permitted the expansion of Christianity in the Mediterranean world. The situation has not changed, only it would be the best to say that it is because of the needs of the Church that God founded the *pax romana*, and everything that we see in the disproportionate world in the middle

of which we live. This world has no other reason to exist than this one (and this is why it will cease to exist when the mission of the Church will be achieved, Mk 13:10, Mt 24:14). The Church is truly the support of the world, the cause for its continued life. And the Reformation accepted this unbelievable weight. It immediately understood this missionary duty (contrary to what we might believe, from the end of the sixteenth century, and in the middle of the worst crises, the Reformation sent pastors to America). And by its martyrs and its will to ceaselessly evangelise (this proselytism of which we are accused) it poses in effect this question to the world: what is the orientation (*sens*) of this world in which you live? This world is convicted of madness and you are in this world – you cannot accept being like animals led to the slaughterhouse? And there is one response to this, and one alone. There is one thing which is worth the cost of living and dying for. There is Jesus Christ.

Finally, the Reformation announces to the world that it has an end. And this is yet another thing which is hard to hear. It is directly linked to the idea that this world has an orientation (*sens*). It is like an elastic band stretched between two fixed points, which vibrates. Its vibration gives us a form and a direction, which are imprecise, inexact, distorted. But there are two fixed points and at the height of these two points the vibration disappears, the vision becomes exact again. One of these two points of the tension of the world is this end. But we must go further than this simple announcement of the end of the world. Because this latter could be objective, scientific, indifferent by itself, with fatalism as the sole response. If the Reformation made eschatology one of the pivots of its theology, this is not due to a contemplation exterior to this end. The end is not a result of a simple waiting. It is a fact which already brings about repercussions. Just like our elastic which has an end – but this is the post which provokes the tension. There is no tension without this (eschatological) post. Wherever we place ourselves on this line, we feel the existence of this post since it holds the elastic taut. It is the same for the world. Its end is already present in each of its acts and its moments. And this, which takes place because the world was judged at the moment of the crucifixion and because this judgment will be renewed, and will break out at the moment of the return of Christ, this, the world knows all too well. It does not know the conclusion, but it knows that, from this moment forward, it is engaged in a battle

where it is defeated, and all its attempts to exclude God, all its efforts to overcome man, lead to despair and failure. In the history of the world, this tension of the creation between the Ascension and the Return is inscribed in the constantly renewed effort of Babel followed by the despair of a constantly renewed failure.

And in the middle of this world, once again, the Church is there; a sign of what she announces, a witness by her life as much as by her words, joined in this tension that she endures and in this end that she awaits. For the tension of the Church appears first in that she is the miserable, temporal, suffering body of the Christ – and persecuted – and at the same time, she is the glorious, resurrected, spiritual body of the Christ. She is both at the same time. Not one on the earth and the other in heaven: she is both on the earth and in the middle of the world. And this is seen in her history. But there is more: in the Church, the resurrected Christ is really, truly present. The Christ who ascended into heaven, seated at the right hand of God, says: ‘I am with you until the end of the world.’ He did not leave this world because he is there, in his Church. And yet, at the same time (and here is the tension), the members of the Church are not angels, they are men, unworthy of forgiveness like all men, and forgiven only by grace, so much that sin is still present in this Church, that this body of Christ is linked to sin, to sickness and to death, while nothing corruptible should exist here. Thus, by her existence itself, the Church signifies to the world what it is, and what awaits it. And the Reformation which underlined this, which still ceaselessly underlines this, is in this situation of the Church; it is really one of the forms of the presence of the Judgement and of the Return in the current world. It is this, for example, when it teaches the irreversible fall, the radical separation of the world from God (but not of God from the world!), the total subversion of nature. Nothing can fill the void created by the fall – except God himself. Nature is completely delivered to oblivion, and is now under the stroke of judgment. To say in effect that there is a hope of improvement in nature, that this latter still conserves a fragment of good, that grace is the fulfilment of nature, this is to completely move aside this permanent and current presence of the Judgement, it is to leave natural man a hope, a guarantee against God. God alone can, by a radical changing of nature, by a substitution of the Spirit for the flesh, for the σαρκῆ, re-establish the

bridges between man and Himself. But God is the Judgement which is present in this work, the judgement and the grace.

And it is not only by its teaching that the Reformation is such – it is by what she is – for example, by the radical incomprehension that there is between the Reformation and the world. It is indeed remarkable<sup>14</sup> that the thought of the Reformation has *never* been able to be correctly explicated by non-Protestants. It is no less remarkable that the acts of the Reformation have never been understood by the world. When we reproach Luther for his brusque change of attitude at the moment of the Revolt of the peasants – and some take from this an argument to demonstrate his heresy (disastrous social consequences, a lack of stability in his thought), others take from this an attack against his lack of social audacity, and his ‘renunciation’ – this proves only that we have understood neither the preaching nor the attitude of Luther. The peasant revolt is the act of the world which heard nothing that Luther said, which confounded social freedom with Christian freedom – and when Luther ordered its repression, he remains in his own, essential line: to know that Christian freedom remains under the current judgment of God. That everything is permitted – but not everything is useful and not everything edifies (1 Cor 10:23). That there were modalities, expressions on which Luther varied, even contradictory phrases, we do not deny. Luther was a man. That there would have been a fundamental change in his doctrine: this, no. The entire knot of the problem resides in the fact that the world has not understood the message of Luther. This is the case when the world believes that democracy is a faithful expression of Reformed thought, or the Charter of the Rights of man, or liberty, equality and fraternity.<sup>15</sup> All of this is an expression perverted by the world, which thereby manifests the presence of the Judgement, the expectation of the return of Christ. The moment when only human values and the efforts of the world find their true place. Until then only the Holy Spirit can make understood the content of the preaching of the Reformation, and this is conversion, by which one no longer belongs to the world.

\* \* \*

All that we have just said on the signification of the Reformation calls for a last word: The Reformation is what we have described – but we

pretend neither that it is always this nor that it is totally this. The Reformation is to the extent that it remains faithful to the principles and the attitude of the Reformers: now this attitude was always one of absolute submission to Holy Scripture, which cannot be understood except by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. It goes without saying that when the Churches which issued from the Reformation seek something else, they reduce themselves to nothing. And as there is no external protection, no authority, which would either maintain them or bring them back to more fidelity, they really are nothing. Until the Holy Spirit makes them leave this nothingness, to report their testimony, to retake their signification. This signification thus depends, definitively, on the action of the Holy Spirit in these churches and on the fashion in which these churches accept this action.

Jacob Rollison is a PhD Candidate in Divinity at the University of Aberdeen. His address is jake.rollison@abdn.ac.uk.

### Endnotes

- 1 Original publication Jacques Ellul, 'Signification Actuelle de la Réforme', in *Protestantisme Français*, collection *Présences*, directed by Marc Boegner and André Sigfried (Paris: Plon, 1945) 137–165. I thank Michael Morelli for editorial suggestions, Frédéric Rognon for historical details and Melanie Marques for helping with the translation of the abstract.  
**Note from Professor Pierre Berthoud:** In this article Jacques Ellul offers some significant theological insights on the Reformation, its impact on modernity and its current meaning. In each of its three sections Ellul's analysis is thought-provoking, challenging the Church to take into account the Word and the Spirit as it seeks to be the body of Christ and as it seeks to address the world prophetically.  
It might be a surprise to find an article by Ellul in the European Journal of Theology. But since we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this year we thought that it would be appropriate to publish its translation because it has not been available in English and it deals with the Reformation. Though written in 1945, its content remains relevant to the challenges we face both within the Church and the cultural environment. Some of us will question aspects of Ellul's existentialist theology such as his acceptance of a divided field of knowledge, the absence of any reference to general revelation with its ethical implications, the emphasis on the existential nature of the Word of
- 2 Jacques Ellul, 'Actualité de la Réforme', *Foi et Vie* 58.2 (1959) 39–64; translated by Marva Dawn as 'The Contemporaneity of the Reformation', in Marva Dawn (transl.), *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 137–161. Despite reservations regarding some of Dawn's translation choices, I recommend both this article and Dawn's commentary on its relation to Ellul's larger corpus.
- 3 English translation: Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).
- 4 The word in French is *signification*; I chose 'signification' in English because Ellul intends something more specific than 'significance' would indicate. The question relating to 'significance' would be 'What does it mean?' while the question of 'signification' is 'what does it signify? What is it pointing to?' The French word *sens*, which could be translated 'meaning', always includes both signification and orientation. In the 1940s (and especially in *Presence in the Modern World*, 1948) Ellul emphasised the ethical duty of the Christian to be a sign, which he specified as being of the same nature as that which it represents – which stems from and points back to the emphasis on the *presence* of Jesus Christ in the world today.
- 5 The original text ends this sentence with *par l'église*; I have thus translated 'in the Church', in the sense of the Church being the occasion or instrument of this revelation. It seems that it would have been more natural if the *par* were a *pour*, which would translate by recognising a danger 'for the Church'. As there are observable errors in the original, this is not out of the question (see note 14).
- 6 Gallicanism is the belief, which originated in France, that the State (king) has authority over the (Catholic) Church, playing down the authority of the Pope and arguing that national customs can trump Church regulations.
- 7 The interested reader will find this and many theological themes in this article fully developed in Jacques Ellul, *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969).
- 8 French *sacerdoce universel*.
- 9 French: *sens*. I will mark when Ellul uses the French word *sens*, which he uses consistently in his writing to imply the double meaning of orientation and signification. In French *sens* also carries the connotation of a direction or a path. I think it is appropriate to understand 'signification' as Ellul intends it as a relational orientation which allows us to discern a

direction or path. In some cases the English word ‘meaning’ is the most appropriate equivalent, but this is a specific type of meaning. I will signal Ellul’s use of it so the reader can take the double connotation implied.

- 10 A city dweller or citizen of the city.  
 11 This line in Ellul’s original text reads *Tout ce qui existe. A un être spirituel et matériel, indissoluble.* While these phrases could be acceptable as such in French, given the context, it seems to me that the phrase makes the most sense if the first period is regarded as an error, and I have done so in my text.  
 12 In this case, Ellul is likely referring to pietism, which in his view, by emphasising what the believer feels in the moment, spiritual experiences, etc., leaves too much room for subjective appropriation of what he describes in this paragraph as the ‘objective reality’

of the Word. I owe this remark and the historical remark in the next note to Frédéric Rognon.

- 13 *Libre examen*, or free examination, refers to the submission of Scripture and Revelation to the criteria of reasonability as in the liberal tradition; this is the opposite of Ellul’s emphasis on the necessity of submission to Scripture. The debate between Luther and Erasmus is in the background here.  
 14 The original text contains an error at this point which I have corrected: It reads *Il es tremarquable...* which ought to be *Il est remarquable.*  
 15 By including here this trio, *liberté, égalité et fraternité*, the slogan expressing the chief values of France, Ellul is countering an interpretation of elements of French history as a natural outgrowth of Reformed thinking, as the next line also makes clear.

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**Roland J. Lowther** is the pastor of Eternity Presbyterian Church, Queensland, Australia. He holds a PhD from the University of Queensland on the subject, ‘Living by the Spirit’.

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