

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 21

---

Volume 21 • Number 2 • April 1997

---

## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from  
publications worldwide for an international  
readership for the purpose of discerning the  
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by  
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

ecumenical expectations. Precisely in such a moment of diminished expectations, the Catholic Church pledges, and asks others to pledge, a redoubled devotion to Christian unity. For Catholics, it is not a matter of choice, as is made unmistakably clear in the ecclesiology of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

---

**Richard John Neuhaus** is President of Religion and Public Life, a research and education institute in New York City. Among his books are *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (edited with Charles Colson, 1995) and *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* (1992). p. 161

# Changing Patterns in the Church's Ministry in the Age of the Reformation

Richard B. Norton

*Reprinted with permission from Hayama Missionary Seminar, 1974*

Preface: The purpose of an historical paper in the Hayama Seminar is to open up an area of church history which will have a direct bearing on the conference theme. Of several possibilities I have chosen the age of the Protestant Reformation, but with this choice I realize that I am tackling an area which in no wise can be adequately treated within the time limits set for this presentation.

Basically I shall develop this essay by, first, taking a look at the concept of ministry in the so-called 'classical Reformers' (by which I mean Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc.,) and then, secondly, looking at the concept of ministry in the so-called 'Radical Reformation' (by which I mean the scattered groups on the left which rejected the mainstream reformation attempts). To set the stage, by way of introduction, I shall try to draw a simple picture of the Medieval Church, and to draw the essay to a conclusion, I will try to raise some points relevant to our discussion today.

## INTRODUCTION

### Ministry in the Medieval Church

A traveller crossing Europe, say in 1517, would have found himself at almost any point in his journey within sight of the spire of a great cathedral, a monastery chapel, or a village church. In a word, as the church dominated architecturally all the buildings clustered about it, so the church dominated all medieval life. But what was this church of which we speak? Medieval theologians would most likely have defined it simply as 'the community of the faithful'. But in using the term 'faithful' the emphasis would have fallen on 'obedience' rather than on 'faith', though to be sure, it was not without reason that the Medieval Age has been called 'the Age of Faith'. To get immediately to the heart of the matter, the church on the eve of the Reformation was the clergy. Without the properly

ordained cleric there was no church; and with the cleric, in spite of his character and even though there **p. 162** were no laymen, there was the church.

Now, this distinction between clergy and laity, which had gradually come to be implicit in the third and fourth centuries, is now in the Medieval Age made explicit. Christopher Brooke, a Professor of Medieval Church History, says there was no more fundamental division in medieval life than that between upper and lower clergy. 'The official view of the Church was that the cleric and lay were utterly different in status and function, and must be kept apart'.<sup>1</sup> The 'community of the faithful' was led by an entrenched hierarchy in which there were numerous grades of clerics, each with rights and duties, all headed up in the bishop, and finally in the Pope at Rome. And this hierarchy held the keys which unlocked or barred heaven's door to the laity.

### **The Ministry of the Clergy**

So first let us look at the clergy. In this age ministry meant very simply the ministry of the 'set apart, ordained' clergy. In two ways the laity were constantly reminded that their spiritual leaders were different from the rest of the church. In the first place, the clergy were forbidden to marry and so were a distinct 'order'. And secondly, perhaps to save them from worldly temptations, the clergy were given special dress, which may have enhanced their prestige, but only set them further apart from the faithful.

But right here we confront an interesting paradox. If it is a fact that the clergy were a 'set apart' order, it is also a fact that, as Roland Bainton has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> functions which in the earlier centuries had been strictly denied to the clergy, gradually came to absorb much of their time. Let us note two or three examples. First, the growth of the church's land holdings—the church had indeed prospered in this world's goods—forced the clergy to become business administrators. This was probably the only time when clerics have been more adroit at business than laymen. Secondly, the clergy were increasingly drafted by the ruler or local prince to handle affairs of government. Indeed, in some places bishops actually became territorial rulers. In both cases clergy were thrust into such functions by virtue of the fact that in a society where there was little education, the clergy probably had the best of what was available. But a third function might be added here. From the Crusades onward the clergy became increasingly involved in the machinery of war, sometimes in serving the state, but more often in simply preserving the holdings of the church. To be sure, it was mostly the upper clergy—bishops, abbots, etc.—who became involved in business administration and the affairs of state, nevertheless responsibilities assumed by the upper clergy filtered down to the lowest levels. What this meant was, of course, that the **p. 163** clergy which had been 'set apart, ordained' for a unique function in the church actually had little time to do those things for which they had been called.

Many of the aspects of ministry which in the early church had belonged to the whole Christian community, by the fourth century had been appropriated by the clergy. To take but one example, consider the prophetic ministry—the right to preach and to teach the Word. Gradually what had been once the responsibility of the whole church through its elders came to be vested primarily in the bishop. And as the bishop became involved in all manner of other activities, preaching and teaching decreased in the Medieval Church, though, to be sure, there were other factors involved. The Medieval Church had a few great

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Brooke, 'The Church of the Middle Ages' in *The Layman in Christian History*, ed. by Neill & Weber (London, SCM Press, 1963), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Bainton, 'The Ministry in the Middle Ages' in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Neibuhr & Williams (N.Y. Harper & Bros., 1956), p. 86.

preachers, but the fact remains that the general ignorance of baptized Christians in matters of faith can be traced basically to the demise of the sermon in weekly worship, with no comparable place for instruction' ever found. The brutal truth is that the church on the eve of the Reformation was a church which did not hear, and thus did not know the Word.

But if the prophetic ministry had suffered an eclipse, the contrary was true of the priestly ministry. Above anything else the clergy were 'ordained' priests. In so far as the priest had a pastoral ministry among the laity, it came to clearest focus in the performance of the sacraments. The sacraments numbered seven and touched the life of the faithful at every crucial point of their existence from the cradle to the grave. The supreme sacrament was the Lord's Supper, known simply as the 'Eucharist'. Though laymen may have communed not more than once a year, still they were usually present at the mass in time to see the sacred host elevated. Close to the Eucharist was the sacrament of penance, which perhaps more than the Eucharist, impinged on the daily life of the faithful. We cannot forget that it was the sale of indulgences which angered Luther, and led to his posting of the Ninety-five Theses. In a word, through the ministry of the sacraments the church became a church in servitude to the established priesthood.

### **The Ministry of the Laity**

So much for the ministry of the clergy, but what of the laity in the Medieval Church, a church dominated by the clergy? Let us not forget that even as there were faithful Christians among the clergy, so also among the laity, were men and women deeply committed to the gospel. But there was the tradition for those who had been grasped by the gospel to make their way into a monastic 'order', and there to find an area of service, often quite apart from the real world. What this meant was that in the church out in the world there would be few left who had a genuine sense of commitment to serve Christ and their neighbour in any profound way. The nominal Christian in the world was called simply to be faithful in attendance at the mass, and to be obedient to the traditions of the church as they were interpreted to them by [p. 164](#) their clergy. Not an altogether happy picture.

But by the sixteenth century laymen were beginning to take a greater interest in what was going on in society in general, and in the church in particular. Even so, such laymen were a small minority. Several movements within the church of the 12th and 13th centuries tended to bring laymen into more conspicuous positions in the life of the church. The establishment of universities did much to encourage education, and led to the creation of several lay professions. And of course the Renaissance in the mid-15th century with its emphasis on humanism and the freedom of the individual, increased the laity's interest in church and world.

However, to understand the Protestant Reformation, we must recognize the fact that laymen from the late 12th century were beginning to demand a ministry of their own. Several movements reflected this new spirit. To take one, consider the movement centred in Peter Waldo. Waldo, a layman in Southern France, had discovered the gospel for himself, and was anxious to preach as a layman. The movement spread quickly among the laity. But the hierarchy, scared of an awakened laity, rejected such movements and ruthlessly persecuted the Waldensians. By the time of St. Francis Assisi, the church was beginning to recognize its error, and so baptized his movement and kept it within the church. But other lay movements were not so kindly treated, and many suffered martyrdom for their right to fulfil a lay ministry, though they were encouraged to fulfil it with a monastic order. By the late Medieval Age such lay ministries were not being limited to prayer within the cloister, but were reaching out to positive service in the world. Clearly

by the time of the great Reformers, the laity were awakening and were beginning to move, demanding greater roles within the life of the church. And as lay aspirations were articulated, it gradually became clear that there was also a certain tendency for anti-clericalism. Now let us turn directly to the Protestant Reformation.

## I. MINISTRY IN THE CLASSICAL REFORMATION

It goes without saying that we all recognize the many differences, some very important, which separate the mainline Reformers, one from the other. Nevertheless, because the overlap is so great, it is possible to distil what might be called the 'classical' position, though admittedly always with certain attendant dangers. I shall first attempt to set forth the 'classical' view of the church, and then proceed to examine the meaning of ministry, looking on the one hand at the ministry of the laity, and on the other hand at the ministry of the clergy with reference mostly to Luther.

For the major Reformers the central concept used to describe the Church was the 'communion of saints' (*communio sanctorum*) taken, of course, from the historic creeds. Now, the 'saints' were not those few superior Christians who, because they had in their lifetime supposedly worked miracles, had p. 165 been canonized by the church, but rather were all those Christians throughout the ages who had accepted the love of God in Christ, been forgiven and justified by faith, and had been baptized into Christ's one Body, the church. Luther purposely sought to get away from using the word 'church', (*ecclesia*) for its many connotations, he felt, only blurred its true meaning. Rather, he preferred to speak on the reality of the church as 'a holy, Christian People' (*Santa catholica Christiana*). In a word, all the Reformers sought to discourage emphasis on the church as an institution in order to direct attention to the people who composed the church. But equally important was the emphasis on the term 'communion'. For Luther, it was the gathering of 'the holy People of God' into one body, and not isolated individuals, however much they had been 'justified by faith'. But 'communion' carried the deeper meaning of a holy people who were in fellowship with one another, as well as with the Lord of the church. So Luther was exceedingly concerned about the reality of the 'community of Faith' here on earth, i.e., the 'visible' church; though of course he also believed in the 'invisible' church. But it was Calvin who did more to distinguish the two, and to emphasize the invisible character of the church as that body of believers known only to God. However, as time went on, especially after 1536, Calvin too took a more positive attitude toward the visible community of faith here on earth.

All of the Reformers, in one way or another, sought to set forth what each believed to be the 'marks' (*notae ecclesiae*) by which the true church could be distinguished from the false, although all were quick to add that these 'marks' did not mean that everyone in such a church was a true believer. The classical Reformation usually placed these 'marks' as either two in number, or at most, three. Here we turn to Luther's famous pamphlet, *On the Councils and the Churches*, 1527, where he lists not two or three but seven ways to distinguish the true community of the saints. Writes Luther: 'First, this Christian, holy People is to be known by this, that it has God's Word ... We speak, however, of the external Word orally preached by men like you and me.'<sup>3</sup> And, 'where God's Word is purely taught', writes Luther in another pamphlet, 'there is also the upright and true Church.'<sup>4</sup> And again,

---

<sup>3</sup> *On the Councils & the Churches*, Cf. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Phila., Westminster Press, 1943) p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> *Table Talk*, No. 369; op. cit., p. 135.

‘Wherever, therefore, you hear or see this Word preached, believed, confessed and acted upon, there do not doubt that there must be a true ecclesia sancta catholica, a Christian, holy People, even though small in numbers.’<sup>5</sup> So sure is Luther of the power of the Word to create the church that he goes on to add: ‘If there were no other mark than this alone, it would be enough to show that there must be a Christian Church there.’<sup>6</sup>

Again, all the Reformers were united in placing the sacraments— p. 166 understood by them to be baptism and the Lord’s Supper—second (Luther treats them as the second and third ‘marks’ of the church). ‘Where baptism and the Sacrament (the Lord’s Supper) are, there must be God’s People and vice versa’, says Luther.<sup>7</sup> But it is not enough that the sacraments ‘be rightly administered according to Christ’s institution’, it is imperative that they ‘be believed and received’.<sup>8</sup> As in the case of the Word, the active, positive reception on the part of the Christian community is emphasized. In receiving the sacraments ‘the Church exercises itself in faith, and openly confesses that it is a Christian People’.<sup>9</sup>

But beyond these two—the pure preaching of the Word, and the right administration of the two sacraments—there is often added a third—the correct use of discipline. Luther, in discussing the ways by which the true church is recognized, next takes up the question of discipline under the rubric of ‘the Keys’, which are to be used both publicly and privately in calling Christians to repentance and amendment of life. Luther says, ‘Christ decrees in [Matt. 18](#) that if a Christian sins, he shall be rebuked, and if he does not amend his ways, he shall be bound and cast out; but if he amends, he shall be set free. This is the power of the keys.’<sup>10</sup> But it is Calvin who without doubt placed the greater emphasis on discipline as that means whereby, on the one hand, the purity of the church is maintained, and on the other hand, those who have fallen victim to the world’s temptations and have strayed from the faith are redeemed. Even so, Calvin stopped short of making discipline one of the ‘marks’ of the church. For him discipline belonged to the organization of the church, but not to the definition of the church.

There can be no question that the Reformers placed genuine emphasis on the role of the church. Therefore, it should not be surprising when we hear both Luther and Calvin take the traditional stand of the Roman Catholic Church in teaching that outside of the church there is no salvation, no forgiveness of sins: ‘I believe’, says Luther, ‘that no one can be saved who is not found in this congregation, ... I believe that in this congregation and nowhere else there is forgiveness.’<sup>11</sup> Now, if one thoroughly understands what the Reformers meant by the church, one will know that it was poles apart from the traditional view of their day. And it is precisely against the Reformers’ understanding of the church that we must wrestle with their concept of ministry.

### **The Ministry of the Laity: The Priesthood of all Believers**

The Reformers were all deeply concerned about the laity. Luther’s most creative works—his translation of the Bible, catechisms, liturgy, hymns, etc.—all were directed toward the

---

<sup>5</sup> *On the Councils & Churches*, op. cit. p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed & the Lord’s Prayer*, Cf. Kerr op. cit., p. 124–125.



needs of the laity. And p. 167 we should not forget that Calvin's *Institutes* certainly in their first editions, were specifically for the layman. In a word, if the Medieval Church was a church of the clergy, the Reformers meant the church to be the church of the laity. This concern for the laity in the church comes to clearest focus in the doctrine of the 'Priesthood of All Believers', and is set forth perhaps more clearly in Luther's 'three great manifestos' of 1520.

All the Reformers in developing their concept of the priesthood of all believers resorted to those passages of Scripture familiar to us all, though each developed his thought in his own way. In general we may say that the classical view rested on two pillars; on the one hand, each Christian has been given ample gifts by the Holy Spirit for his own particular ministry, and on the other hand, this ministry is specifically a ministry in the world, i.e., in the Christian's daily walk. In a word, the Reformers were clearly attacking two medieval errors: one, that only a choice few had been given gifts for ministry, and two, that those so blessed could best fulfil their ministry apart from the world in a specialized vocation, i.e., in a monastic 'order'.

The heart of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was the simple teaching that all baptized Christians are priests. Here are several representative quotes: 'As many of us as have been baptised are all priests without distinction.'<sup>12</sup> And again, 'Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian be assured of this, and apply it to himself—that we are all priests, and there is no difference between us, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and all the sacraments.'<sup>13</sup> And again, 'There is neither priest, nor layman, canon or vicar, rich or poor ... for it is not a question of this or that status, degree or order.'<sup>14</sup> Simply put, justified by faith, through baptism all Christians are incorporated into the death and resurrection of Christ, and so into the one fundamental Christian estate.

To sum up this teaching on the priesthood of all believers, I can do no better than to quote the German Dogmatician, Brunotte's four points, recorded in Gordon Rupp's excellent essay,<sup>15</sup> as follows:

- (1) Before God all Christians have the same standing, a priesthood in which we enter by baptism through faith.
- (2) As a brother of Christ, each Christian is a priest and needs no mediator save Christ. He has access to the Word.
- (3) Each Christian is a priest and has an office of sacrifice, not a mass, but the dedication of himself to the praise and obedience of God, and to bear the cross.
- (4) Each Christian has the duty to hand on the Gospel which he has himself received.

Calvin's basic emphasis is not so p. 168 different as to merit time here. Since the Reformer's clearly visualized this ministry of the laity being fulfilled in the world, we thus come to their idea of 'vocation'. For all the Reformers each Christian had a vocation. For Luther, as Ralph Morton puts it, 'Men are called to his service in all activities of their lives—in their daily occupations as well as in their religious activities, in their homes as

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Luther's Gloss on Galatians, Cf. Gordon Rupp, 'The Age of the Reformation' in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective*, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

much as in the Church.’<sup>16</sup> The ministry is clearly a ministry of the Word, of bringing the Word to bear on daily life, but this ministry is interpreted differently by Luther and Calvin. Luther, who saw little hope of the whole of society being saved, saw the Christian’s vocation as that of being a ‘little Christ’ to his neighbour, bringing to bear the forgiveness man has in the gospel to his neighbour. Calvin, who took a more positive view about the salvation of society, saw the Christian serving the Word in such a way that the Kingdom could be at least partially realized here and now. It is important to note that all the major Reformers placed a significant emphasis on the Christian family as a primary place where Christians fulfil their vocation. It is also important to note, that whereas ministry is increasingly opened up to the male, in truth, though perhaps not intentionally, women are reduced primarily to a role in the home, whereas the Medieval Church had at least given them the possibility of a genuine vocation outside the home in monastic ‘orders’.

Now, all this would seem to indicate that the Reformers envisioned a laity set free from the old structures to serve God and man in a way the church had not known for more than a thousand years. Indeed, in a controversial passage in the Preface to the *German Mass*, Luther in 1526 hints at the possibility of more private assemblies where ‘those who mean to be real Christians’ might meet in houses for prayer, worship, the Sacraments, discipline, etc.<sup>17</sup> One might jump to the conclusion, as the radical left-wing reformers did, that the classical Reformers, at the early stage of the Reformation, looked forward to the time when there would be no need for a ‘set apart, ordained’ clergy, but this is not the case. Widely read in this same period in the Rhineland, France and England was a patristic handbook, called the *Unio Dissidentium* which had a section in it called ‘that all Christians are priests, kings and prophets, but not all are ministers of the Church’. Yes, the ‘Classical Reformation’ also placed an important emphasis on the ministry of the clergy. To this ministry we now turn.

### **The Ministry of the Clergy**

In the document already mentioned, *On the Councils and the Churches*, in which Luther discussed the basic ‘marks’ of the church, after discussing the pure preaching of the Word, and the right administration of the Sacraments, and the handling of the ‘Keys’, i.e., of discipline, he adds three other ways whereby p. 169 the true church can be recognized, the fifth of which runs as follows: ‘The Church is known outwardly by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers ... the whole group cannot do these things (i.e., the Word, the two sacraments, and discipline) but must commit them, or allow them to be committed, to someone.’<sup>18</sup> And again, ‘The priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us, who do all they do in our name.’<sup>19</sup> Or again, ‘Priests, bishops and popes are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with administration of the Word of God and the Sacraments, which is their work and office.’<sup>20</sup> Thus Luther, as did the other Reformers, provided for a ‘set apart, ordained’ clergy.

Now, this special ministry, like the ministry which the laity has, is rooted in the free gifts which the Holy Spirit has given to all Christians. The point, of course, is not that the

---

<sup>16</sup> T. Ralph Morton, *Community of Faith* (N.Y., Assoc. Press, 1954), p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church* (N.Y. Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> *On the Councils and the Churches*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>20</sup> *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 137.



whole laity do not have the right to preach, administer the sacraments, and take responsibility for discipline. But rather, so that the church may fulfil its mission in an orderly way, as a single body integrated about its head, Jesus Christ, certain Christians are given gifts which are for the building up of the whole body.

Luther, it should be pointed out, is not as concerned with any contradiction between the ministry of the laity and clergy, as he is with the fact that this special ministry is not to be construed as a priesthood of the Roman variety. Luther writes: 'The churchly priesthood which is now universally distinguished from the laity and alone called a priesthood, in the Scriptures is called ... a ministry, an office, an eldership, etc.'<sup>21</sup> The priesthood grew out of the church's organization, and is not in Scripture, says Luther. 'It was the custom years ago, and ought to be yet, that in every Christian community, since all were spiritual priests, one, the oldest or most learned and most pious, was elected to be their servant, officer, guardian, watchman, in the Gospel and the sacraments, even as the mayor of a city is elected from the whole body of its citizens.'<sup>22</sup> As for the polity of the church, whereas Luther in his younger years tended to take a freer view, letting it depend more on time and circumstances, Bucer and especially Calvin, deduced it more specifically from the Scriptures, rooting it not only in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but also in the lordship of Christ over the church. However, in the end Calvin's view was not too far distant from that of Luther's. Neither wished to establish the structure of the church in the sixteenth century too slavishly on an imitation of the primitive church.

A delineation of the specially set apart ministry is not necessary here. Suffice it to say that in both Luther and Calvin it took roughly the same [p. 170](#) form. Calvin, however, set forth finally four levels of ministry, which we might note here.<sup>23</sup> Pastors came first, and were supremely responsible for the Word and the Sacraments. Next came teachers who were to instruct the faithful in sound doctrine. Incidentally here Calvin includes the whole gamut of education whose chief end is to prepare the people to hear the gospel. Teachers have nothing to do with the sacraments nor with discipline. In reality these two offices—pastors and teachers—often blurred even in Calvin's own thinking. Elders were to care for the life of the faithful with special emphasis on the cure of souls and on proper discipline. Deacons stood last and were charged with serving the poor and the sick, both within and without the church, thus freeing the pastors to fulfil their rightful ministry of the Word.

As to how the special ministry, i.e., the clergy, were to be chosen, the principle was clear enough: the ministers are chosen by the whole church. Indeed, in 1523 Luther affirmed the right of a Christian congregation in defined circumstances to depose a preacher and to call another who would preach the gospel.<sup>24</sup> But the principle so clearly articulated was observed more by its breach than by its fulfilment. In truth, in the classical Reformation churches the ministry was chosen in the first instance by the leaders of the Reformation and then were presented to the congregation for its approval. But as the vague line separating church and state became even vaguer, increasingly clergy were chosen, if not outwardly, at least with the tacit consent of the magistrates of the state or city.

---

<sup>21</sup> Answer to the SuperChristian ...; Cf. Kerr, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> *Institutes* IV: 3:4–9; Cf. Kerr, *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin* (Phila., Presbyterian Board of C.Ed., 1939), p. 163ff.

<sup>24</sup> Rupp, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

To draw this part to a conclusion we must say something about the contradiction which stands at the heart of the conception of ministry in the 'Classical Reformation'. Gordon Rupp, a first-rate scholar of the Reformation, puts the question thus: 'Why didn't the classical reformation maintain this new emphasis on Christian solidarity and on the initiative of the laity?'<sup>25</sup> He then goes on to ask why one branch of the Reformation became a dominated pastor's church while the other branch bred a Christian radicalism? The Classical Reformation articulated all the scriptural principles upon which the Radical Reformation were to build the 'free church'. But somehow in Lutheranism and in the Reformed Church these basic principles came to be overshadowed and eclipsed. Rupp answers his own question thus: 'The answer must be sought in history itself rather than in theology, and with regard not to one doctrine but to the wholeness of the theological pattern and to that mysterious imponderable ... the "ethos" of a great communion.'<sup>26</sup> Though the Reformers did place genuine emphasis on the doctrine of the laity, the laity were not a great dominant theme of debate—'the real dogfight was about the ministry, p. 171 and it was carried on by clerics in the main',<sup>27</sup> says Rupp.

### III. MINISTRY IN THE RADICAL REFORMATION

A word must be said here by way of introduction about the use of this term, 'Radical Reformation'. We are not dealing here with a homogeneous 'left-wing', but with many small groups of great diversity and vitality. These groups arose in most cases quite independently of each other. Some placed a great emphasis on the Bible, others almost rejected it, giving primary place to the Holy Spirit. Many led the strictest moral lives, while a few went so far as to practise polygamy. Most took the path of non-resistance, but some were ready to use force to accomplish their aims. Some moved toward mysticism, but the most were down-to-earth realists. In other words, we have here what we would expect to find when all tradition is cast to the winds. But it is not fair to judge any movement by the extreme radicals on the fringes, as many scholars have done in the past.

Clearly we should not think of the Radical Reformers as a second generation movement rebelling against the classical reformers. In point of time, they existed from the very beginning of the Reformation, appearing very early in Wittenberg. Though the earliest groups are found in South Germany and Switzerland, it was the Hutterites of Moravia and the Mennonites of Holland who did the most to mould the 'Anabaptist' tradition. The term 'Anabaptist' was given to them by their adversaries, because they rebaptized their followers. They chose to call themselves simply 'Baptists'.

In wrestling with Anabaptist thought it is unfair to force it into the same framework we have used above in discussing the 'Classical Reformation', rather I shall start where their own Confessions of Faith began. Let me add here that I am drawing heavily from two books which I commend to you all: Franklin Littell's *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, and Donald Durnbaugh's *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism*.

First, I would like to point out several things about their concept of the church, and then move to a discussion of the 'marks' of the church, and then in that context touch on ministry. Without question all shades of Anabaptists were in agreement in starting with the church itself as crucial. But the Anabaptists came to a discussion of the church

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

empirically rather than theologically as did the Reformers. They started with the observable fact that the church had somewhere in history lost its true character and purity. Thus they spoke of 'the Fall of the Church', and usually placed this 'fall' in the Constantinian era. The obvious mark of the fallen church was the fact that it was a territorial church supported by the State.

Secondly, it was the task of Christians to rediscover the true church, i.e., the church before the Fall. Since the Reformers did not recognize the Fall and so valued the whole history of the church no matter [p. 172](#) how far it had fallen away from the ideal, their basic purpose was the reformation of the church. They admitted the branches of the tree were diseased and needed to be cut back to the trunk, but they believed the trunk to be solid. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, rejected any reformation of the church. They chose to use the word 'restitution'. Since the Roman Catholic Church could not be reformed, their task was to return to the original church and to its primitive, pristine character. For them the trunk of the tree was also diseased. The answer was to cut back to the very roots. Thus Anabaptists rejected not only the Catholics but also Luther and Calvin. To the Anabaptists the Reformers were 'half-way men', and their churches 'half-way churches'. The great reformers had failed to carry out their own principles. The Radical Reformation sought to carry out the job which had been left unfinished. But here scholars raise an interesting question: Should this radical movement be considered a variant form of traditional Protestantism, or a new and third type apart from either Protestant or Roman Catholic? Littell calls one 'the Church of the Reformation', and the other 'the Church of the Restitution'.<sup>28</sup>

Third, the pattern of the 'restituted church' is to be found in the N.T. In a word, the message and example of the N.T. Church is taken to be binding on the church of every age, therefore its recovery is of supreme importance.<sup>29</sup> As we have already noted, Luther and Calvin both sought to take the N.T. pattern seriously, but not to be bound by it. Both firmly believed in historical development and so took history seriously in a way the Anabaptists could not. Thus in Classical Reformation thought we find no clear-cut break with the Medieval Church so far as the concept of the church is concerned, whereas this break with the past is a hallmark of the Radical Reformation. Basically, the Reformers accepted what was not contrary to Scripture, whereas the Anabaptists accepted only what was clearly taught in Scripture, and commanded by Scripture.

Fourth, and last, the restituted church was for the Anabaptists the 'communion of saints'. It should not surprise us that the Anabaptists took the same term to describe the church which the Reformers used. Indeed, throughout our discussion we shall see that they use the same Scriptures to support their position. The 'communion of the saints' was a very 'visible' community for the Anabaptists. They never got hung up on Calvin's distinction between the 'invisible' and the 'visible' church. The 'saints' were saints in the N.T. sense—men and women who sought to follow their Lord as closely as possible, and were ready to suffer the cost of discipleship.

Now, let us look more carefully at the church itself, i.e., the 'communion of saints' in mainline Anabaptist thinking. Anabaptists accepted the so-called 'three marks' of the church taught by the great Reformers, but [p. 173](#) since they came to the whole question of the church from a quite different angle, their interpretation was different. How did they view the 'marks' of the church? The Schleithem Confession of 1527, in its seven articles, represents the main thinking of Anabaptists.

---

<sup>28</sup> Franklin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

The first 'mark' of the 'communion of saints' is believer's baptism, for by this alone the true church is constituted.<sup>30</sup> In a word, entrance into the church is through the conversion experience. Therefore baptism is viewed differently than in the classical Reformers. Regeneration is not the result of baptism, but viceversa—so taught Menno Simons. Baptism is not an instrument of grace, not the medium of forgiveness and the new life, rather it is the expression of the fact that grace has already been at work. Thus everyone who comes to baptism has already experienced the new birth. Since this prerequisite experience is lacking in the infant, Anabaptists demanded their followers be re-baptized. This emphasis on adult baptism—believer's baptism—tempered everything else that could be said about the church.

The church, i.e., the 'communion of saints' is thus a voluntary association of Christians, in which each Christian has made his own decision for Christ. This ruled out immediately the whole traditional parish system. By decision Christians entered into a covenant relationship with God, and what is equally important, with all others who have been baptized upon a confession of faith. It is precisely here that the ground-work is laid for the Anabaptist concept of the ministry of the laity. Entering into a covenant relationship with God and with other believers is the highest expression of discipleship short of martyrdom. Within this covenant relationship believers find their ministry, and it is the same ministry for all. Baptism is thus a levelling experience. One comes out of the water an equal to everyone else, and from that moment on ministry begins. On the one hand, the Christian is a priest to his fellow believer, and on the other hand, a missionary to all unbelievers.

The earliest Anabaptists may have placed great emphasis on the individual's personal experience, but as faith matured, group consciousness grew. Encouraged to think things through alone, the Christian was increasingly encouraged to test his personal faith with the group with which he was in covenant relationship. Let it be clearly understood that mainstream Anabaptists took the church seriously as the 'communion of saints'. Interestingly, the 'keys' about which Luther spoke often are also found in Anabaptist thinking, but they are of two sorts: the 'keys of David' which unlock the Scriptures. and the 'keys of Peter' which open up forgiveness to the repentant. It is part of the ministry of every Christian that he uses these keys in interpreting the Scriptures to each other and in extending forgiveness.

The second mark of the 'community of saints' is spiritual government, or what Hubmaier called, 'fraternal discipline'. Anabaptists recognized the need for discipline in [p. 174](#) order to maintain the integrity of the community. Indeed, discipline stood very close to believer's baptism. Discipline rested in the end upon the threat of expulsion from the community, on what was called the 'Ban'. The ban was rooted in the N.T. ordinance of [Matt. 18](#), which makes us responsible for our brother's sins. All discussion of spiritual government began with the ban. Discipline was taken seriously because the purity of the Christian community was taken seriously. By the power of the Spirit which ruled in the community everyone was expected to live a life above reproach. This involved separating oneself from the rest of the world. The community gathered by believer's baptism was thus a separated community. There was a distinction between the children of light and the children of darkness. But it should be noted that the attitude taken toward the world varied from one group to another, and was not as negative as it is often made to sound.

Now, it is in the above context that we come to the ministry of the clergy, if we dare use the word here. In the earliest groupings true democracy reigned. Government was government by consensus. Everything was done in accord with the voice of the whole

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 83ff.

group. Responsibilities were shared by all, not necessarily according to the person's talents, rather everyone took his turn. Every form of ministry was open to all. In such a community there would be no need for the professional 'clergy', certainly not for clergy supported by rents and tithes. But the movement grew under the Holy Spirit. Littell says: 'As the center of authority shifted from the protesting individual conscience to the newly gathered congregation governed by the Holy Spirit in the midst, a new principle of leadership came to the fore.'<sup>31</sup> In many groups this simply meant the group electing one of their own number to be pastor. In the community at Waldshut in 1525, when Hubmaier resigned as priest, he was immediately elected pastor. Here we have the very beginning of true congregationalism—the principle that each congregation was free to choose its own pastor. The leader so chosen became the servant of the whole group. Through him discipline was carried out, as well as the cure of souls. In all ways he was subject to his congregation, and never acted apart from them.

In most cases this pastor earned his own living, or at least part of it, after the example of Paul. But very early it became permissible for him to receive support from his congregation, never in the form of salary, but rather as free will gifts. Menno Simons boasted that he had lived from brother to brother for years and had never gone hungry. Among the Hutterites grew up a regular leadership. There we find three types of officers: first, the shepherd or pastor of the flock. Next came the 'missioner', the servant of the Word, and last, stewards who fulfilled the role of deacons.<sup>32</sup> These leaders were chosen by the congregation on authority of the exact p. 175 same passages which Luther or Calvin would quote

A third and fourth mark of the church can be quickly touched on. The third mark of the 'community of saints' was selfless sharing. It was here true community was most apt to break down. The sum of Anabaptist teaching was simply this: 'A Christian should not have anything apart from his brother; both were pilgrims and walked the martyr's way, and their citizenship was in another city other than the city of this world.'<sup>33</sup> This principle of community was not rooted in some eschatological ideal, rather for most Anabaptists it was simply an expression of discipleship. The community found in Acts became their model, but not all groups interpreted Acts in the same way. Selfless sharing characterized all groups, but the concept was pressed farthest among the Hutterites who practised a type of communism where everything was held in common. Among the Hutterites individualism was looked upon as a sin. For them community of goods was a mandate. And those who held back were barred from the Lord's Supper. Now, the Lord's Supper was the fourth 'mark' of Christian community, and though it was important it was treated quite differently than among Lutherans and Reformed Christians. It was supremely a symbol of fellowship, and hardly a means of grace. Here the Anabaptists were deeply influenced by Zwingli who treated the Supper as a simple memorial of the death of Christ. For most Christ was not present in the elements.

With this I shall bring this paper to a close. I feel that there is more than enough material here to stimulate discussion about ministry in our day. Of course, the three great questions which faced the church in the Reformation Age were the same three with which we are wrestling. What is the role of the laity—the ministry of the laity? Do we need in our day a 'set apart, ordained' clergy? And if that question is answered in the affirmative, then what is the ministry of the clergy? And tangled up with these three questions is the

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 96.



difficult one, what is the meaning of ordination? And aren't all Christians ordained for service?

---

Rev Richard B. Norton served as a missionary in Japan. [p. 176](#)

## Evangelical Theology Today

Mark Noll, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., and David Wells

*Reprinted with permission from Theology Today January 1995.*

The first difficulty faced by anyone who assesses the state of evangelical theology today is that the combination of 'evangelical' with 'theology' provokes tolerant smiles among those casual religious spectators who conflate evangelicalism and fundamentalism. To these folk, if fundamentalist theology is an oxymoron—like elementary Greek, or student teacher, or Dutch treat—so is evangelical theology. Any discussion of evangelical theology must therefore help these spectators to get serious.

The second difficulty, more famous and more wearying, is trying to clear a little of the smog around the term 'evangelical'. Evangelicalism, like pornography and the political thought of Presidents of the United States, is easier to recognize than to define.

Accordingly, it is nowadays usual to find 'evangelical' used as a mute substantive that gains its voice only when coupled to another, and more clarifying, adjective. Accordingly, these days we have fewer and fewer plain garden-variety evangelicals. What we have instead is a lot of fancy evangelical hybrids: radical evangelicals, liberal evangelicals, liberals who are evangelical, charismatic evangelicals, Catholic evangelicals, evangelicals who are Catholic, evangelical liberationists, evangelical ecumenicalists, ecumenicalists who are evangelical, evangelical feminists, young evangelicals, and orthodox evangelicals. The concept *evangelical* has become so promiscuous, has enjoyed so many bedpersons, has been equally and unequally yoked so often, that its self-concept has broadened into that of a commune.

### WHO IS AN EVANGELICAL?

To say that people are evangelicals, therefore, says little about what they [p. 177](#) are likely to believe, although the tag says more if they are older and less if they are younger. But for those who find this assessment unduly agnostic, let us attempt a description. Suppose we call *evangelical* those Christians who possess at least two of the following seven characteristics, but in any case one of the first three:

(1) Members of a denomination that derives from the Protestant Reformation, these Christians heartily affirm the saving gospel of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the priesthood of all believers.

(2) Members of a denomination that derives from eighteenth-century revival movements in England or America (the Wesleys, Whitefield, Edwards), they show zeal for conversion, piety of life, evangelism, and social reform.