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THE PRINCIPLES OF THE REFORMATION

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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We are all thankful for the improved spirit in church relations and for the disappearance of bitterness between Christian denominations but it would be a great mistake to let go a firm apprehension of the principles of the Reformation, for they are as true to-day as ever and they are in danger of being lost through neglect.

The first principle rediscovered in the Reformation and passed on to us is the uniqueness of the Bible as the Word of God, and so the only rule of faith and practice. The mediaeval church did not deny that the Bible was the Word of God and the Council of Trent spoke of the Holy Ghost dictating Scripture. For the uniqueness of God's Word was lost by church tradition being put on an absolute equality with it so that the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in Session 4 stated that it received and venerated with equal affection of piety and reverence not only the books of the Bible but also the traditions of the church, and it added that no-one was to interpret the Bible except in accordance with the interpretation that the church gave it. In this way the uniqueness of the Bible as God's Word was obscured and all sorts of doctrines and practices not found in the Bible were put on an equality with Scripture because they were the practice and teaching of the church. Thus it became impossible that the church practice should be reformed by the Bible, because church

practice was regarded as of equal divine authority as the Bible.

Nowadays the protestant churches are in danger of losing this great truth of the Reformation that the Bible is God's Word and so the only rule of faith and conduct by which all our religious life is to be judged. The reason is not that tradition is being given a divine authority so much as Holy Scripture is losing its divine authority.

Holy Scripture and church tradition are once more approaching each other in equality in value but this is not because tradition is being lifted to the level of divine authority so much as the Bible is being lowered to the level of a human book, but the effect will be the same. We will cease to have a word from God by which our beliefs and practices are to be tested and so our own opinions and customs will become once more the criterion.

The second great principle of the Reformation is the centrality of Christ in salvation. Justification, or our acceptance by God as His children, was seen to rest solely on the merits of Christ and not in any way on our own life or merits. As Article 11 of the 39 Articles put it we are accounted righteous before God only for the merits of our Lord and Saviour

Jesus Christ through faith and not for our own works or deservings. This clear biblical doctrine cut away with one stroke the mediaeval religious activities such as pilgrimages, indulgences, penance, fastings and all the other long lists of meritorious works by which Christians tried to win their way to heaven. At the same time faith took on a new meaning. No longer was it merely assent to what the church teaches (even perhaps an implicit assent not knowing what that teaching might be) but faith was seen to be an attitude of trust towards a divine person who had promised to save and help. This then was the second great principle of the Reformation, justification of the believer by faith alone - without good works, sacraments or anything else.

The third principle was the universal priesthood of all believers; that is to say, the right of every Christian to come into God's presence through Christ, the one mediator between God and man. Thus no hierarchy, priest, saint or intermediary of any kind stands between the believer and his Heavenly Father. This principle swept away prayers and invocations to the saints, relics, the priesthood, auricular confession, and the seven sacraments as indispensable means of salvation. It made possible a true spiritual fellowship with God and Christ through the Holy Spirit's indwelling the believer's heart.

The fourth principle was the principle of religious liberty, that is to say that only the Word of God has authority over the conscience and that the human conscience is not to be coerced by external pressures such as threats of burning at the stake, inquisitions, or episcopal imprisonment. The massacre of the Huguenots when perhaps 70,000 French protestants were killed in a few days, the prolonged burnings and executions of the Spanish Inquisition in the Netherlands when some hundreds of thousands of people perished simply because of their religious convictions are examples of the denial of religious liberty. The massacre of the Covenanters by the Catholic Stuarts are in sharp contrast to the Presbyterian refusal to take revenge when in turn they came to power. Even in the early days of John Knox, in spite of the martyrdoms at the beginning of the Reformation, the Presbyterians in power in Scotland did not execute a single person for religious beliefs. The Roman Catholics who were executed in Elizabeth I's reign in England were executed on political grounds because they were not willing to acquiesce in the political situation, for the pope had issued a Bull deposing the queen and calling on her subjects to rebel against her and to overthrow Elizabeth's Government. It was for this that they were executed, not for their religion, though modern Roman Catholics like to regard them as martyrs. It is true that the recent Vatican Council has modified the doct-

rine of the Roman Catholic church on religious liberty. The Council's new view is the result of the influence of the Reformation, which insisted that a man's conscience is not to be coerced by an external power, but is directly responsible to God and His Word.

The fifth principle of the Reformation is the denial of the temporal sovereignty of the church. Mediaeval popes deposed kings but the Reformation insisted on the Bible truth that the civil government receives its authority direct from God; it is the minister of God and is bound to govern in accordance with divine will but not necessarily at the direction of ecclesiastics. This principle has found full expression in Australia where religious authority and political control are quite separate.

The sixth principle is the ethical value placed on ordinary life, together with the sanctity of daily labour, marriage, children and the home. The mediaeval ideal of holiness was physical withdrawal from the world into a monastery. But the Reformers taught that ordinary life was the best sphere for living a holy life and, for example, that the marriage state provided much more opportunity for self-denial than did the cloistered life of the monastery where everything needed was provided. Similarly, the monastic ideal of mortification of the flesh and asceticism was denied by the Reformers. The wearing of a hair

shirt, or the whipping of oneself with a rope is not the biblical way towards Christ-likeness of life, for the self-denial which trains us in Christ-likeness is the denial of ourselves for other people's needs, and the living by faith that God would supply our own needs.

The seventh principle of the Reformation is the sanctity of our ordinary vocations whether clerical or lay. The Reformers taught clearly that a man whose work was to mend shoes might please God just as well in that occupation if he did it with all his might as the bishop or priest in the sanctuary, or the nun in the nunnery. This doctrine was very hotly denied by people such as Sir Thomas Moore who regarded it as outrageous, but the effect has been to sanctify the whole of life for those who believe in God.

These are some of the basic principles of the Reformation. They still need to be affirmed and taught, for they are vital to a true Christian attitude to life. They all spring directly from the clear teaching of the Bible and if the Bible is read and valued among us and preached from in an honest straightforward way, these doctrines will still continue to be among us. But if the Bible is downgraded in its place in Christian life and worship then the mediaeval doctrines which have their root in the natural heart will spring up amongst us once again, and the truths which

the Reformation rediscovered will be lost for a second time. The Bible can be downgraded in two ways: it can either be made subservient to church tradition, as in mediaeval religion, or it can be made subservient to autonomous human reason, which regards itself as omniscient. This is the great danger to-day.

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