

Blaming the Reformation

Cardinal Walter Kasper recently [stated](#) that Anglicans needed to choose between the sixteenth century and the first millennium. To the contrary, historic Anglicanism—as represented by Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel, and Richard Hooker—argued that they were choosing the church of the first millennium, over against the departures from Catholicity of the late Medieval Roman Church.

Bringing up the tired old polemics of the Reformation is a constant temptation in the crisis of un-faith that is affecting all churches today—not only the churches of the Reformation, but certainly Rome. But blaming the Reformation (or conversely, blaming Trent) will not help the church today because it does not address the real crisis the church is in.

Yesterday my students and I finished an entire semester of studying Contemporary Theology. We began with Schleiermacher and Barth, then covered everyone from Brunner, Bonhoeffer, the Niebuhrs, the Catholic *Resourcement* movement (DeLubac, Congar, Danielou), Orthodoxy (Bulgakof, Schmemmann, Lossky), post-Vatican II theology (Rahner, Lonergan, von Balthasar), theology of hope/revelation history (Moltmann, Pannenberg) post-Liberalism (Lindbeck, Hauerwas), Evangelicals (Packer, Henry), (post-conservative) Evangelicals (N.T. Wright, Vanhoozer), “Scientific” theology (T. F. Torrance, Alister McGrath). We finished with Anglican theology—Ramsey and Sykes. All of these fairly clearly lined up with Barth. On the other side, we studied Bultmann, Tillich, process theology, feminist theology, liberation theology. All of these fairly clearly lined up on the other side—with Schleiermacher.

It really didn't matter whether the thinker was Protestant (Barth or Tillich) or Catholic (Balthasar or Schussler Fiorenza). The clear issue of division had nothing to do with which side of the Reformation divide one was on.

The answer to Cardinal Kasper's question is that every one of the thinkers we studied chose both the first millennium and the sixteenth century—whether Protestant, Orthodox or Catholic, whether Barthian or Schleiermachiian. But the clear divide was whether one sided with Barth or Schleiermacher, not whether with Luther or Trent. And whether one aligned with Barth or with Schleiermacher determined how one read the first millennium and the Reformation, and what one took from both.

I have come to conclude that in most theological crises the issue of division actually turns out to be how one answers some fairly straightforward question, although it often takes theologians decades to figure out what that crucial issue is.

During the Arian crisis, Athanasius identified the crucial issue with whether Christ was Creator or creature. During the Nestorian crisis, Cyril identified the crucial issue with whether Christ was truly God become human or a human being in whom God was especially present, i.e., God become man or a God-filled man.

During the current crisis I have become convinced that the issue has to do with Christology. Is the person and work of Jesus Christ constitutive of a salvation I can find nowhere else, or rather is the person and work of Jesus Christ illustrative of a salvation I can find elsewhere as well or even perhaps everywhere?

I think that Barth realized that this was the crucial issue with Liberal Protestantism. This was the issue addressed by the Barmen Confession. Throughout the twentieth and now the beginning of the twenty-first century, how one answers this question determines on which side of the divide we stand.

Schleiermacher and his followers clearly believe that Jesus' work is illustrative. He gives us an example of a salvation we can find somewhere else also. So, for Schleiermacher, Jesus was about God-consciousness. Jesus was the one who had most

clearly understood and lived out absolute dependence. When I was a graduate student, I once dated a woman who told me that she thought Jesus was the spiritual equivalent of being the first one to run the four minute mile. And, of course, Katherine Jefferts Schori, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, has repeatedly stated, since taking her now post, that Jesus is “a way” of salvation, and to suggest that there is no salvation outside Christ is to “put God in a small box.”

Such a Jesus is no more than an example. And such a Jesus cannot save. At best he demands that we try to do what he did, and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. After all if he “ran the four minute mile,” then, with enough discipline and self-sacrifice, we should be able to as well.

Except that we can't, and we don't.

The Jesus of the gospels is a Jesus who saves—and the churches of the Reformation realized this. The 39 Articles state the matter clearly:

They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.

The Jesus who is a good example is the Jesus of the second century gnostics, of Abelard (it seems), of some Renaissance humanists, and of post-Reformation Sabellians. He is the Jesus of Liberal Protestants like Schleiermacher and Catholic Modernists like Alfred Loisy. He certainly has followers among not only Protestant process theologians, but among Roman Catholic feminists like the late Catherine LaCugna or Elizabeth Johnson or Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. He is the Jesus of Hans Kung and Edward Schillebeeckx as much as of John

Spong or Katherine Jefferts Schori.

The Jesus who saves exclusively is the Jesus of Athanasius, and Cyril and Thomas Aquinas. But he is also the Jesus of Luther and Calvin, of Cranmer, Jewel, and Hooker, of Arminius and Wesley. He is the Jesus of Barth and von Balthasar, of Arthur Michael Ramsey and Stephen Sykes, of N.T. Wright and Bob Duncan, of John Rogers and Peter Akinola, of Fitzimmons Allison and Ephraim Radner.