

# The Results of Protestantism<sup>1</sup>

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In the mind of the average layman, so far as I can judge, there lurks the notion that prior to the arrival of Martin Luther on the scene of action, there had been in fact, as well as in theory, one Holy Catholic Church. I sometimes think that most clergymen look back upon the pre-reformation era through the same colored spectacles. In truth, the background out of which the forces of the Reformation emerged seethed with divisions, parties, and variations in doctrine and practice, quite as divergent in character as those which divide Christendom today. While the revolt against Rome seems for a moment to have had the character of spontaneous unanimity, like the first outbreak of the Russian revolution, yet this was but short lived. Soon forces and tendencies, which were to be found all through the germinating period of the middle ages, were focusing themselves into quite definite parties.

In the autumn of 1523 a public disputation was held Zurich between the Catholics and Zwingli's party, one of the points at issue being the source of final authority in differences of opinion in matters of religion and morals. Dr. Faber, who represented the Catholic Party maintained the position that the consensus of opinion of the learned men of the Universities should decide upon all such questions, and that their decision should be final. It

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<sup>1</sup> I have found no direct evidence of the purpose or audience that this essay was written for. This sentence in the text—"I am sure that you never conduct a service or preach a sermon without realizing that in the background of even the most devout there is a seething restlessness and uncertainty."—suggests this was intended for a group of ministers, perhaps at a meeting or convention of ministers.

<sup>2</sup> This manuscript can be dated by its reference to a New York Times article from February 22, 1931 about the starting of the Vatican's radio broadcasting station, call sign HVJ, in February, 1931.

would be interesting to follow the historical steps through which this point of view evolved into the doctrine of infallibility of the papacy. Yet given the situation and the premise, the outcome seems inevitable and sensible, the familiar parliamentary dictum that in a tied vote, the vote of the presiding officer is final.

Zwingli maintained the familiar Protestant Thesis that the revealed will of God, as disclosed in the Bible, must be the final source of authority. To this, obedience must be given. Just what four-hundred years of Protestant history has done to this thesis of Zwingli's, and the same thesis held by other leaders of the Reformation, is in part the theme of this paper. To what point has the logical acceptance of this dogma led the forces of Protestantism, and whither are they going?

Into the discussion of this public disputation of 1523 there entered one Simon Stumph, pastor at Hongg, a town nearby, who represented what we today would call the left wing of the Reformation. He maintained that the Spirit of God must decide all matters of difference of opinion and that each one must interpret the Bible for himself. This point of view has found its way into history, and shows up in our town in a declaration of the minister of the East Concord Parish, as the *Manchester Union* reports, as he asserts that he is a Bible Christian, and interprets the Bible as he understands it.

Well, so much for the three distinct points of view that appeared in this disputation. One more incident to which I wish to refer because it discloses that nature of the questions which were under discussion during the early decades of the reformation. I take the liberty of quoting from Prof. Nathaniel Schmidt of Cornell, a paragraph which presents some of the interesting aspects of the times.

The fullest development of these tendencies was reached in the Baptist Churches. Here a conscious spiritual experience, not a creed or a sacrament, was made the basis of fellowship. The supreme authority of the inner light was recognized. Absolute liberty of conscience and non-interference by civil society in matters of religion were demanded, and the principle of

voluntary association was maintained. How subversive of dogma this general attitude was, is well seen in the case of Johannes Denck, one of the profoundest thinkers of the sixteenth century. He argued the greater authority of the inner light, the immediate vision of truth, from the fact that only a small part of the human race had any knowledge of Scriptures; he believed in the final salvation of all men and freely proclaimed this conviction; he rejected the piacular conception of Jesus' death and declared him to be a prophet. His views were widely adopted and he was held in highest esteem in all the Churches. In 1550, sixty delegates from about forty Baptist Churches in Italy, Switzerland and Austria met in Vienna to settle the question whether Christ were God or man. Thrice during the meeting the Lord's supper was celebrated. After forty days of discussion an almost unanimous decision was reached against the deity of Christ, against the reality of good and evil angels, against the immortality of the godless and a place of future punishment, in favor of soul-sleeping, and against the propitiatory nature of Christ's suffering. (*The Prophet of Nazareth*, page 19.)<sup>3</sup>

I have cited these two incidents, the disputation at Zurich in 1523 and the Baptist convention at Vienna in 1550, together with the questions with which they are concerned, because they seem to me to have a profound bearing upon the practical and somewhat searching problems with which we are confronted today, and to which we have not been able thus far to give a very clear answer. They are not merely academic questions, they are practical and pressing. Not a day passes, I am sure, that you do not meet some person to whom these questions, as to the source of authority and the nature and validity of experience in religious and moral values, are vital and often tragically

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<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Schmidt, *The Prophet of Nazareth*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1907, p. 19. Nathaniel Schmidt (1862-1939) was a Swedish-American Baptist minister and professor of Semitic Languages Literature at Cornell University from 1896 until 1932.

vital. I am sure that you never conduct a service or preach a sermon without realizing that in the background of even the most devout there is a seething restlessness and uncertainty.

I have spoken of the three points of view presented in the disputation at Zurich. The Catholic point of view is quite the natural and naïve attitude which in the main we habitually follow. We are profoundly influenced today by the attitude of the fraternity of learned men. In 1523, Dr. Faber was quite safe in saying that the consensus of opinion of the learned men of the Universities should settle matters of differences of opinion in religion and morals. But since that date two interesting things have happened. Within the fold of the Catholic Church the doctrine of infallibility has become an official dogma. Given the premise of religion as supernatural revelation in faith and morals, that outcome of an infallible interpreter is inevitable.

But the universities can no longer be appealed to to support the doctrines held by the Church of Rome, or for that matter the doctrines held by any church. The *New York Times* carried in its Photogravure Section of Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup> a picture of Pope Pius with his hands on the wheel just as he was about to start the dynamo that would set in motion the Broadcasting station HVJ in Vatican City.<sup>4</sup> His voice was heard around the world in his Radio Broadcast; he has uttered his medieval pronouncement of Domestic Relations. Neither the broadcast, nor the Encyclical would find any great support intellectually or morally in the learned men of the Universities of the world. As one contemplates the picture he inquires of it whether finally after three hundred years of opposition, the papacy has dragged within the walls of the Vatican a Grecian horse in which are hidden the spirits of Copernicus, Galileo, Giordano Bruno, and other adventurous knights of the world of science; who will capture the ancient citadel of tradition; open its gates of exclusiveness, raise its walls of medieval dogma and let the streams of modern life move through its ancient streets and temples; or, on the other hand, are we settling

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<sup>4</sup> Vatican Radio began broadcasting on February 12, 1931 under the callsign HVJ, with a message from Pope Pius XI.

back into an age of pleasure-seeking, unthinking conformity in which the constant reiteration of a dogma will pass for demonstration of its truth and validity. In other words, does the picture of the Pope Pius with his hand on the broadcasting machinery mean that the dogmas and practices of the Catholic Church can be sold to our age as Lucky Strike Cigarettes are by constant reiteration in the midst of a program of pleasing music?

That question is not answered: The learned men of the Universities have not been heard from; but many are setting their faces towards Rome.

There was not much difference, so far as Dogma was concerned, between the Roman Church and the Right wing of Protestantism. Both held to the Supernatural Character of the Christian Religion as a means of Salvation. The chief point at issue so far as their differences attained to the distinction of intellectual status, was over the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. In defending their position against the authority of the Church, the reformers turned to the Bible. Here was revelation of Divine will. We are not far from the truth in stating that Protestants started out on their historic career impressed by the profound conviction that they had been entrusted by Almighty God with [the] task of carrying to a lost world the only means of salvation, The Christian Religion, God's Will revealed in the Bible.

Where have they landed him as he has followed them in faithful simplicity, and heroic fidelity?

First the Bible: Being the channel through which God's will is revealed to man, the Protestant, in all good faith, must know all that there is to be known about the Bible. In fact, the exigencies of his situation compelled it. I shall not trace the steps in the process. It had already had its beginnings, but Luther may be cited as an example of the problem as it faced them immediately. Erasmus, in his efforts to edit a pure Greek Text found that the famous verse in the fifth chapter of the first epistle general of St. John was not to be found in the older texts, and was manifestly a late interpolation. He omitted it from his first two editions of his New Testament. That raised

protest and set students at the task of investigation. Luther denied that St. Paul had written the Epistle to the Hebrews. Concerning the Epistle of St. James, he announced to the Church, "I do not esteem this an apostolic epistle; I will not have it in my Bible among the canonical books." But all these questions were not only theoretically, but practically pressing, and inaugurated that long, laborious and heroic search for the will of God in the Bible. Textual criticism; historical criticism; and the mis-named higher Criticism; it is the record of a sublime faith and a disinterested loyalty. Whatever may be said of the failures of Protestantism, this story of the uncovering of the secrets is marvelously rich, both in integrity of character, and in heroic fidelity.

But the interesting outcome is to be noted: Beginning in the faith that the Bible is a supernatural revelation, following in the fidelity to the belief, their search for all historic information about that revelation; the conclusion of it all has been to disprove the validity of their original assumption, and to place the Bible back into the realm of natural books, naturally produced and naturally transmitted. Even the most ardent defenders of its supernatural character, are forced to say that it contains "God's will as I understand it."

It remains for the churchman today to restore the Bible with its richness of material to a legitimate place in religious life and free from the taint of magic and superstition with which it was colored during the medieval period.

The second line of development in the 400 years of Protestant history is equally impressive and equally interesting in its outcome. Protestantism started on its mission with the conviction that the Bible was a revelation of the only plan of salvation offered to mankind and the only channel through which mankind, either in part or as a whole, might be saved. This attitude, of necessity, expressed itself in a missionary zeal. The record of disinterested consecrations to this high purpose, of carrying the religion of Christianity to the world, is one of the great epochs of human history. One cannot read of the consecration, the sacrifice, and the fidelity unto

death of the missionaries without feeling that he is in touch with one of the most moving and profound forces in human life. The astonishing fact remains, however, that one of the products of this extraordinarily interesting missionary movement has been the inevitable effect of the religion and religious life of other people upon the missionaries and upon Christian thought and attitude. I suppose that it is fair to say that out of this tremendous experience of the Christian world in its foreign missionary enterprises there has come a vast increase on our part of our knowledge of other religions, their origin, their character and their influence; out of it has evolved within the last century or less the comparative study of religions; the likenesses and differences that obtain between religions. The net income of this reaction has been the conclusion, which is very widely held, and which increasingly commends itself to disinterested minds, the conclusion that religion itself is subject to the revolutionary process; that Christianity is not a supernatural revelation but an interpretation of religion in terms of its age, and time. In other words, Protestantism, starting out with the conviction that Christianity is a supernatural revelation, arrives at the conclusion that while Christianity may be the best of religions, it is not different from other religions in its nature and its authority. To whatever extent it commends itself to us in our day, it commends itself by its intrinsic worth and truthfulness.

So, while the Roman Catholic world has arrived at its Doctrine of Infallibility and its dogma of authority, the Protestant Churches, following with implicit faith and fidelity, the conviction of an infallible Bible and a supernatural religion, have arrived at the point where it can no longer maintain that the Bible is an infallible or supernatural book, or that Christianity itself is the sole and exclusively true religion, supernatural in character. And, just as the Pope, with his hand on the dynamo in the Vatican, symbolizes the touch of the medieval world with the world discovered and described by modern science, so Protestantism, with its historic experiences behind it, is in touch with the same world. At the present time, and I am stating these things rather bluntly, there seem to be two tendencies of doubtful value from the point of view of

religious leadership. The first tendency is the attempt to drag into the household of faith the Grecian horse of a so-called "scientific religion." This, it seems to me, is quite as dangerous and as futile as the attempt to paint medieval dogmas with modernistic paint and try to dispose of them in the ecclesiastical markets of the day.

If there is any validity at all to religion, it must rest upon a foundation which is valid, not only in our modern world of machines and science, but which was valid in the day of the Puritans and the Lollards; in the day of Gregory the Great, and the first missionaries among our barbaric forefathers in Europe. It must rest upon a foundation that was valid in the Roman Empire and in Egypt and will be valid a thousand years hence as well. Back of all the forms which, in the name of religion, mankind has ever created, there is the unconquerable faith and courage that has created them; faith that there are permanent values in human life and that courageous fidelity to those values has its root in the nature of things.

END OF TYPED MANUSCRIPT

Here a transcription of a hand-written note that follows the typed text:

2-Qualities.

- (1) Integrity = {???
- (2) Courage.