The Relevance of XVIth Century Thought for the XXIst

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Washington, D.C.
October 2, 1996

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First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to this institution and to my friends in it, for the many ways in which through the years I have found support in them, both for myself as a person, and for some of the projects which are dear to my heart. Some of you who are here present have shown me in a number of ways what it means to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some have provided significant support to the Spanish edition of Wesley's works on which I am currently working. The institution as a whole, and quite clearly its administration, have made a commitment to the Hispanic Summer Program, one of the most exciting ventures in theological education in this country today about which I shall gladly speak later with any who are interested.

For all these reasons I am honored and happy to be here. Also in a sense it is due to those reasons that I am here, for when the invitation first came I had made the firm resolution to cut down drastically on any such engagements, and to decline as many such invitations as possible. But an invitation from Wesley Theological Seminary I was not able to decline. And so, I am here, hoping to offer at least a sign of my appreciation for all these people and for this institution.

As an historian, I have been asked to speak about the Reformation which took place in the XVIth century. And it is appropriate that we should do so today at the beginning of October, for October 31st, the day on which Martin Luther is said to have nailed his famous ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg door, is usually counted as the date on which the Reformation began. Today, almost five hundred years after the event, practically all are agreed that a reformation was needed in the church, even though some would have wished that it had taken another direction.

At any rate, when discussing the Reformation of the XVIth century it is customary to dwell on one of two subjects, or on both of them. In some accounts the Reformation is depicted as a movement to stamp out corruption in the church. In such accounts, what is important to understand is the Reformation is the background of simony, absenteeism, pluralism, nepotism, and other such ills that assailed the church towards the end of the Middle Ages. In other accounts the emphasis lies on the theological insights of the Reformation: the authority of Scripture, justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the like. Still other accounts—by far the majority and the best of them—combine these two elements and depict the Reformation as a movement grounded both on the need to cleanse the church of corruption and on a number of theological insights that became crucial for the Reformers.

What I would like to do today, however, is somewhat different. I would like to explore the possibility of looking at the Reformation not primarily as a movement to cleanse the church of corruption, which it was, nor as a movement born out of very significant theological insights which it also was, but rather as a radical change in the topography of Christianity.

There had been other similar changes in the earlier history of Christianity. One could say, for instance, that the history of the first four centuries of the Christian church is the story of how a faith centered in Jerusalem and in the surrounding areas of Judea and Syria, and whose followers were mostly Jewish, became essentially a Gentile faith with centers all around the Mediterranean, in Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Carthage. This change was marked by cataclysmic events both at the beginning and at the end, with the Fall of Jerusalem at the beginning, and the conversion of Constantine at the end.

Likewise, the eighth and early ninth centuries are characterized by a similar change in topography, so that now the center of Christianity, rather than forming a ring around the Mediterranean, was to be found along a North-South line that went from Rome to Aachen, Charlemagne's capital. Again, this change in topography was connected with two cataclysmic events: the invasions of the so-called barbarians in the fourth and fifth centuries, and the advance of Islam in the seventh and eighth. Just as the Fall of Jerusalem cut the early church from its original geographical centers, so did the advance of Islam cut the medieval church from

its traditional centers in Alexandria, Antioch, and Carthage. And just as the missionary expansion of the first four centuries brought into the church vast numbers of gentiles, so did the Germanic invasions bring an entirely different population.

The change from a Jewish to a Gentile church in the first centuries of Christian history was a wrenching experience with significant opposition on the part of those who represented the older center and partly attested in our present New Testament. Likewise, the change from a Mediterranean to a West-European church around the year 8OO was a similarly wrenching experience, with the authorities in Constantinople insisting on their ancient authority and clinging to the remnants of that authority for centuries.

One reason why I use the term “cataclysmic” for these changes is that they were not only enormous, but also unexpected.

In the New Testament, we have clear indications of the degree to which the early church was surprised by the beginnings of the topographic changes that it was to experience. Look at Acts 10 and 11 where we find what is usually called the conversion of Cornelius but should be more aptly called the conversion of Peter and of the church in Jerusalem. Look at the entire story in Acts, where the notion of a mission to the Gentiles, apparently so innocuous from our perspective, was so revolutionary that Saul and Barnabas have to be convinced again and again

that this is the direction to go. Look at Paul's struggles in Romans with the respective place of these two people made one, the Jews and the Gentiles.

At the time of the Germanic invasions, there were similar wrenching experiences, similar surprises, and similar stories of conversion to the outsider. To understand the pain of those who mourned the loss of the old order, it suffices to hear Jerome:

> The world goes to ruin. Yes! But in spite of it, and to our shame, our sins still live and prosper. The great city, the capital of the Roman Empire, has been devoured by a great fire, and all over the earth Romans wander in exile. Churches which were once revered are now but dust and ashes.

But side by side with Jerome there were others who saw the changing human topography as an opportunity, aid as an opening to the future. Listen for instance to these words from Paulus Orosius, who had personally suffered great loss as a result of the invasions:

> If only to this end have the barbarians been sent within Roman borders, that the church of Christ might be filled with Huns, and Suevi, with Vandals and Burgundians, with diverse and innumerable peoples of believers, then let God's mercy be praised . . . even though this has taken place through our own destruction.

At the time of the Reformation, it was clear that the center of Christianity was still along that North-South axis which had now moved West of the Rhine and ran from Rome to Paris. If Rome was, at least in theory, the seat of ecclesiastical authority, Paris—and to a lesser degree Oxford—was the seat of academic theological authority. In general, it was expected that the

lands that had been part of the old Roman Empire would continue being the center of theological and intellectual activity. Although this had generally been the case throughout the Middle Ages, such tendencies had become even stronger with the advent of the Italian Renaissance, which sought to revive the glories of ancient Rome, and for which anything that came from beyond the Rhine or the Danube was clearly uncouth and barbaric in origin.

When one looks at the situation from this perspective, it is possible to interpret the Reformation, at least in part, as another of those cataclysmic changes in the topography of the church, and more specifically in the topography of Christian theology. Before the Reformation, the theological centers of Western Christianity had all been within the borders of the ancient Roman Empire: Paris, Oxford, Salamanca. With the Reformation, new centers emerged - centers in places that until then had been quite peripheral: Wittenberg, Zürich, Edinburgh, the Netherlands, Geneva. It is difficult for us to see the degree to which these places were peripheral at the beginning of the Reformation, because we look at them, not from the perspective of the early sixteenth century, but from the hindsight of those who know the role that such places have played in the development of Christian theology. The University of Wittenberg, which played such an important role in the Reformation, was an upstart institution founded only fifteen years before Luther's famous protest. Geneva did not have a university until 1559, and Edinburgh until 1583. Yet very soon some of the most creative theological work in Western Europe was taking place in Wittenberg, Geneva and Edinburgh, while Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, and Salamanca were fighting a rear-guard and generally losing battle. Like

Constantinople in the ninth century, or Jerusalem in the first, the old centers had to cede their place of leadership to the new.

Part of what I would like to propose this morning is that this is not mere coincidence. Nor can it be explained, as was done some decades ago, one the basis of a supposed "ethos" of a particular people, so that Protestantism is somehow more adapted to Teutonic people and Germanic languages, and Roman Catholicism to those of Latin culture and romance language. Rather, it has to do with issues of power and powerlessness, center and periphery. In general, people at the periphery, far from the centers of power, see things differently than those at the center of things, near the centers of power. In general, those at the periphery are likely to see the need for reformation differently than those at the center. Those at the center may develop more comprehensive plans. They may seem to have more power to bring about the needed reformation. But they probably will confuse reformation with restructuring. In contrast, those at the periphery will have a more radical view of the need for reformation. Because they are not granted the privilege of a view from above, their vision is often partial and limited. For that reason, it is easy for those at the center to find fault with them and with their plans for reformation. And still, a genuine and far-reaching reformation is more likely to come from the periphery than from the center.

Examples abound in the history of the church. Before looking at the sixteenth century itself an example from the thirteenth may help to show what I mean. There were many in the thirteenth century who were convinced that the church stood in need of reformation and who believed that such reformation was the responsibility of the Papacy. One such person was Innocent Ill, the most powerful pope in the history of the church. Innocent was disgusted with the laxity of church practice and moral life and therefore he set out to cleanse and reorganize the church from top to bottom. He clashed with princes. He disciplined bishops. He issued edicts requiring confession at least once a year, and frequent attendance to mass.

Meanwhile, in a relatively small town in the mountains of northern Italy, there was the young son of a merchant—a lad so alienated from his own culture that his friends called him 'Frenchy —Francesco. He was deeply aware of the manner in which the nascent money economy was impinging on his life and the life of his community. As a result of the economic changes taking place, he saw more and more people reduced to poverty and begging. His father, a successful merchant, looked at these matters from above, from the center of things, and was proud to be making so much money. He, Francesco, looked at them from below, from the periphery, and saw the evil of the new economy in a way that his father could never fathom. One day, he suddenly realized that Jesus had been poor, and thus he resolved to become poor as Jesus was poor. When his father threatened to disinherit him—a typical reaction coming from one in power—Francesco simply took off the clothes he was wearing which his father had given him and walked off naked into the woods.

When Innocent the reforming pope met Francesco the beggar he was disgusted. "You look like a pig," he said. And yet, before too long it became clear that the movement of reformation that St. Francis started, and whose echoes can be heard to this day, was much more drastic and would have longer effects in the life and faith of the church than all of Innocent's edicts. The center, with all of its power and all of its interest in reforming the church, could only achieve so much, partly because its own perspective did not allow it to see how radical a reformation was needed.

In a way, the same is true of the reformation of the sixteenth century. History books tell us that there was corruption, that ecclesiastical positions were bought and sold, that the prestige of the leaders of the church had waned, and that therefore a reformation was very much in order.

Yet, if I had been living in Europe on October 30th, 1517, the day before the Reformation is said to have begun, and especially if I had been living in Rome, I probably would have felt no need for reformation. In fact, I would have said that things were going pretty well. Just about everybody in Europe was a Christian, except for the Jews. The papacy had gone through a turbulent period in which two or even three people at the same time had claimed to be the legitimate pope. It had also gone through a period of exile in Avignon, during which it had been a toy of French policy. But all that was left behind. The pope was again in Rome, and nobody disputed his legitimacy. Furthermore, the pope was a power to be reckoned with in Italy and

there was even the possibility that eventually all of Italy would be unified under papal leadership. Meanwhile, Rome was a center of culture and the arts. The best artists of the time flocked to Rome, to work for the church. There was also an extensive building program going on, a program that included plans to complete the beautiful and enormous Cathedral of St. Peter. Corruption there was but it was hidden under a vast mantle of success.

What this means is that we must look at the matter of corruption in the church in the late Middle Ages in a different way. Often, we think that it is corrupt individuals, hypocrites who do not believe what they teach that bring about the corruption of the church. That may be the case sometimes. But when we limit corruption to that which is willful, hypocritical, self-serving, we may also be hiding from ourselves the deepest form of corruption, which is not always visible to individuals participating in it, especially those who look at matters from the center, or from the perspective of the powerful. Thus, when we look at the corruption of the late Middle Ages, the corruption that required the Reformation of the sixteenth century, it is important to ask: Was it simply a matter of corrupt individuals, or could we look at the Western church in the late Middle Ages and say that corruption occurred at least in part because the structures of the church that had worked for several centuries were unable to carry out their proper functions,. and yet they were unable to see their own irrelevance?

Corruption does not just happen. Nor is it that people invent corrupt institutions. In the field of animal and plant life, corruption takes place when a living organism dies. Likewise, in the life of the church corruption takes place when institutions and practices that originally made sense become irrelevant. Institutions seek to preserve themselves even after their reason for existence is no longer there. They resist change even when changes in society at large make change mandatory - such is the nature of institutions. They particularly resist change when their irrelevance and even their failure can be hidden behind a smoke screen of apparent success. It is when that happens that corruption sets in, as it does in the case of a dead animal.

At the time of the Reformation, the church had a great deal invested in its own structures. They were successful. Money was coming in. People were requesting the services of the church. Why change what still worked?

Furthermore, many of these institutions had been founded or shaped by some of the great saints of the church. Today we look at late medieval monasticism and find corruption in it. But at the time, many looked at precisely the same institutions and saw in them the lingering inspiration of St. Benedict, St. Bernard, and St. Francis.

Yet the structures were not doing what they were created to do. Perhaps it was precisely the unchanged structures and their apparent success that created an illusion of security in the midst

of increasing irrelevance. The church seemed to stay the same while the situation and the culture shifted. But that is never the case. When there are dramatic shifts in the culture, any institution within it—including the church—may well find itself playing a new role, one that it does not wish to play, if it is not cognizant of what is happening. It may have to alter considerably in order really to play the same role in the new situation that it did in the old.

Furthermore, irrelevant institutional structures are probably far more open to corruption because they have no clear way to determine and little interest in discovering how well they are functioning. If they are successful in the sense of providing prestige or income, there is even less reason to be critical of them. Such irrelevance may also open the door for people who have little concern for the mission of the institution to hold power within it. That readily sets the stage for corruption, for using the structures for one's own gain and not for the mission they originally had.

There are many aspects of church life that one could examine with these questions in mind. Let us begin with the matter of how the church was organized and how leadership was appointed. In the early centuries of the church, leadership had been named by' election. Christians in a city would elect, for instance, the person whom they wished to have as their bishop. The election was then confirmed by other bishops in neighboring areas. Thus, a balance was kept so that the

church in each place could elect its own leadership, and yet the church was not fragmented as a result.

Then, in the fourth century, partly through the conversion of the emperors and the higher classes in society, a mass conversion began so that soon practically everybody in a city was a Christian, and being a bishop was a rather prestigious matter. Eventually, elections for bishops became an occasion for riots. In the early Middle Ages, in Rome and also in other major cities, two or three powerful families fought each other to make certain that one of their members was elected bishop. At times a mob, either paid or stirred up by a political faction, would break into the church when an election was taking place, and force their own candidate on the rest of the city.

In response to that, a centralized system was developed for making ecclesiastical appointments. Some devout and zealous popes who saw the manner in which the old system was corrupted developed a new system for the appointment of bishops, and even a system for electing popes through a college of cardinals. This was indeed a reformation in structure, and it worked fairly well for a time.

But then other forces came into play. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the monetary economy made its way first into the society at large and then into the church. Clearly, if

everything in society works on the basis of money, the church also needs money in order to function. Thus, a very efficient system was developed to raise funds and to pay for the expenses of the clergy. This system included having people pay for the services of the church, and then having parishes contribute to the expenses of the diocese.

For a long time, it had been customary for those who wished to expiate for their sins, thus avoiding a long stay in purgatory, to do so by making an offering to the church. Now, it made sense to ask those who wished to hold a position in the church to show their commitment by means of a similar donation. Eventually, a system was developed so that ecclesiastical positions were sold very much in the way that Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises are sold today. The value of a position depended on how much income it could produce. And part of that income was produced by selling sub-franchises and other services.

Those who saw how the system of ecclesiastical appointments had been corrupted called this "simony," after Simon Magus, the character who appears in Acts 8 and who tried to buy the power to confer the Holy Spirit.

But in truth most did not see the corruption until it was grossly abused. Most of the time, most Christians simply took for granted that this was the way the church had always functioned, and if they saw any problem with it, they figured others knew better. Even John Calvin, the great

reformer of Geneva, was able to finance his studies on the basis of what-was then called a "benefice," that is, an ecclesiastical position whose income he collected, and then paid somebody else to go do the work he was not doing. And Calvin was well on the way to reformation before he realized the corruption this implied and gave up his benefice.

Are there parallelisms today? One comes immediately to mind. In our own United Methodist Church, there is an institution called the "itinerant system." When the system began, it was a means of making certain that each minister was appointed to the church that most needed him - I say "him" because at that time all ministers were men. Also, the nation was expanding westward - it was doing so at the expense of the native inhabitants of these lands, but that is a subject for another day. In that westward expansion, new churches were being founded constantly, and the itinerant system made it possible for Methodist ministers to be always at the very frontier, responding to new needs as they arose. The system was harsh. Every year ministers had to pack all their belongings and their families and go to Annual Conference not knowing where they would be appointed next. But it worked, and that was one of the reasons why Methodism was so successful in its expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The system worked, among other things because all ministers made approximately the same salary - which in any case wasn't much. It also worked because there were few extremely large

and prestigious churches, so that a minister's prestige was not inordinately involved in whatever appointment he received.

To this day, the itinerant system is one of the foundational elements in United Methodist polity. In theory, the system has changed little. It has become more humane, so that ministers and their families know where they are to be appointed before they go to Annual Conference, and churches and ministers are consulted before appointments are made.

But in fact, the system has changed drastically, not so much because of these adjustments, but because the society has changed. For two centuries, the church has existed in a society in which a person's worth is increasingly measured by how much money they make, and by how much responsibility they have. A successful career in the society at large is one in which a person makes more money each year and moves upward along the organizational ladder. Partly due to the influence of the society, churches began paying their pastors different salaries, according to how much they could afford and how much seemed to be required by the law of supply and demand for the kind of pastor they wished, so that today there are very substantial differences in salary from church to church. And this in turn has brought about significant changes in how the itinerant system works. Normally, pastors are no longer appointed solely on the basis of what church needs them most. It is necessary to take into account whether an appointment will imply a cut or an increase in salary, and how much. A pastor's career often becomes very similar

to that of a business executive, moving to ever higher paying and bigger jobs, A move that is not in that direction is considered a failure. In consequence, the ablest pastors tend to end up in the larger and richer churches, which probably need them least, while the small, struggling churches, those which probably need the best pastors, are often left with those the larger churches don't want.

In theory, the system has not changed. It is still an itinerant system, with pastors being appointed by the bishop, and moving periodically from one church to another. But in fact, as the culture and the society have changed, the system has unwittingly and uncritically adapted itself to those changes, to the point that one could seriously doubt that it is really responsive to the mission of the church today.

At the same time, one should add that if I have chosen the United Methodist itinerant system it is because I am speaking at a United Methodist seminary, and I myself am a United Methodist minister who deeply loves the United Methodist Church. Similar remarks could be made about the polity of most other major denominations in the United States, where one could point to similar situations. In denominations with congregational polities, it is not uncommon for a rich congregation to lure a pastor from another congregation with promises of higher salary and professional advancement. And presbyterian as well as episcopal polities have also been similarly adapted to the free-market economy and the law of supply and demand,

This is not to say that any of the persons involved in these systems are personally corrupt, or that they do not love the church and the Lord dearly. But I suspect that three or four centuries from now an historian writing about the life of the church in the United States in the late twentieth century will find it difficult to understand why we become so scandalized by the buying and selling of ecclesiastical positions in the late middle ages, and are not equally scandalized by the manner in which our various polities have been corrupted. Such an historian might put the question bluntly: How could church historians in the twentieth century become so scandalized at pastors buying churches in the fifteenth century, and not have been equally scandalized at churches buying pastors in the twentieth?

Having said all that, I trust that the harshness of this criticism will not obscure the main point I am trying to make, and of which the matter of ministerial appointments is just an example. The main point is that in order to avoid corruption in the church it is not enough to make certain that we are sincere. It is not even enough to make certain that every church leader, or even every church member, is utterly sincere. It is not even enough to remain faithful to the same structures that were expressions of faithfulness in times past, for the structures themselves may have become corrupt.

In order to avoid corruption, it is important that the church listen, not only to its center, but also to its margins, to its periphery. In the sixteenth century, the sale of indulgences was fairly

common practice, as was also a fairly mild protest against its abuses. In the University of Paris there were those who criticized some of the most extreme abuses and misrepresentations but did nothing to challenge the basic structures and presuppositions on which such sale was based. They certainly did not challenge the theological presuppositions on which this and other forms of corruption were based. For that reason, because they could not see how deep the corruption was, what they called "reformation" was little more than an adjustment in non-essentials, very similar to what modern-day denominations call "restructuring."

In contrast, it was in Germany, both as a theologian and as a pastor disgusted at what the sale of indulgences did to his marginalized people, that Luther was ready to see that practice, not only as a matter of the moral corruption of some individuals in the church, but as a corruption of the Gospel itself. From his perspective, it soon became evident that what was needed was not a restructuring, nor even, as was said then, a reformation "of head and members," but rather a radically renewed reading of the Gospel.

I believe that there are some parallelisms between conditions in the sixteenth century and conditions at the end of the twentieth. To those parallelisms and to what they might mean for us today and in the coming century, we shall turn this afternoon.