

Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution – A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-first*

“I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word.” — John Robinson, from a sermon preached to those aboard the *Mayflower* as they set out for the New World

Mainline Protestantism, at least here in the U.S., perceives itself in decline. Numbers are down (they are); too many seminarians are second-career (old! Where’s the new blood?); and traditions are often considered to be tired and less than useful for revivifying the old system. Yet, as Alister McGrath points out, Protestantism is alive, well, and living in the global south and in Pentecostalism everywhere.

The amazingly prolific (over a dozen books since 1999 alone) Alister McGrath offers here a synthesis of Protestant history drawn from the best of recent scholarship and his own deep learning. In recent years, historians in all areas have tended to focus on the monograph, tightly focused on a single aspect of a topic. What McGrath seeks to offer here is a grand narrative of Protestantism, a synthesis of many smaller, complex aspects of the story. He writes, he says, for the non-scholar and hopes in this work to lay down a historical foundation to help readers anticipate the future of this religious movement we know well.

What McGrath does particularly well in this book is to set the familiar events and people of the Reformation (and after) in their larger historical context. He does the same thing with the theological concepts that came into dispute at the time. Especially for the non-specialist reader, this is hugely significant. Here, we see the Reformation as not merely a revolt against corrupt church politics and leadership or a debate over dogma, but as part of a much larger cultural shift. The roots of that shift had begun well before 1517 and the shift itself would continue far beyond the years we associate with the Reformation itself.

The “dangerous idea” that we find at the heart of Protestantism is its approach to scripture. Luther’s struggle to come to terms with the concept of justification by faith resulted in a new emphasis on the Bible and Augustinian theology, moving away from the church’s emphasis on Scholastic theology and Aristotle. He, along with some other scholars, worked to change the theological curriculum at Wittenberg. Yet, Luther wanted to change the face of the church, not merely the course list at one of Europe’s lesser universities. He began to advance his cause by appealing in print directly to the laity. He would change the church and he would do it using the language of the people.

Reformers following Luther also put scripture at the center. Zwingli argued that the Bible could be clearly interpreted on all questions of consequence and held that the church had no authority other than the Bible. Yet, while Luther and Zwingli saw the Bible as authority, with theological leaders leading the effort of interpretation, the Anabaptists saw it much more strictly. If a practice was not specifically mentioned in scripture, then there no basis for it. Only adult baptism could be recognized as legitimate as infant baptism was nowhere mentioned in the Bible. But such radical disengagement with the current order put a strain on all the movements for reform and was effectively (and violently) suppressed.

In the city of Geneva, John Calvin brought to the discussion one of the most important, influential publications of the 16th century, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. What is striking about the

treatise, says McGrath, is that it is a work of pedagogy as much as theology. Through its many revisions, the work retains Calvin's unique emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the authority of the Bible. And it did this in simple language, foregoing Greek words and references to Aristotle, and, especially in the French editions, making good use of French proverbs and idioms.

The dangerous idea? That the Bible is central, that a coherent theological system can be derived from the Bible. Thus, it is the right and duty of every individual to read and interpret the Bible. From this basic tenet is derived an amazing array of explanations and practices that, as often as not, challenge existing interpretation. That variety in interpretation has made for a certain amount of cultural incoherence, says McGrath.

Little stability can result from controversy in which both sides appeal to the Bible for their arguments. McGrath describes the factors involved in the rise of denominations, of evangelicalism in general, and in charismatic movements in particular. Pentecostalism moves away from a strictly text-oriented approach to faith to see an experience of God in "primal spirituality." Some new truth and transformation can come through means other than sacred text. Some see the rise of Pentecostalism as "new Reformation," but McGrath again points out that, like other movements within Protestantism, it builds on what has gone before. It recovers, in a different form, the idea of the priesthood of all believers and its emphasis on transformation can be traced to the Pietism of the 17th century and forward.

That susceptibility to divergence can even accommodate, as it has in the late decades of the twentieth century, the kind of questioning that challenges institutional authority entirely. Taking their lead from post-modernism, some argue that Protestantism must revise its own foundations to accommodate the insight that nothing can be known for certain, that any authority is doubtful, and that no certain conclusions can ever be derived from any theological argument.

The threat to the survival of mainline denominations, as we have understood them, is thus made clear. And McGrath is not at all sanguine about their future. But then he reminds us that there was never a golden age of Protestant unity. Central to Protestant identity is that inherent vulnerability to change, to innovation that no central force can control. The original burst of energy that resulted in the genius of Protestantism was ultimately uncontrollable by any single institution and undefinable by any single paradigm. "That creative burst," he says, "gave birth to a solar system of planets of various sizes revolving around a biblical sun at different distances and in orbits of varying eccentricity."

Ultimately, he argues, Protestantism's identity is a *method*, not a single historical result of that method. The process of reform never ends. McGrath has given us an eminently readable and useful synthesis that could help all of us get past the fear that the church we know is slipping away. "The future of Protestantism," he wisely tells us, "lies precisely in Protestantism being what Protestantism actually is." It is a challenge to all of us attached to a particular tradition to grab what is valuable, and only that, and hang on to it as we are swept along in the reforming flood.

- Book Review by Melissa Kirkpatrick  
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