

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

Alistar McGrath's *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* is an ambitious book. In it he attempts to provide an interpretative history of Protestantism in a single volume. It is an examination of general trends and influences punctuated with individual cases and examples. McGrath moves from Luther's Wittenberg to Pentecostalism in the Global South while attempting to identify "the big idea that lies at the heart of Protestantism" (p. 10) and the people named Protestants. "The dangerous new idea, firmly embodied at the heart of the Protestant revolution, was that all Christians have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves" (p.2). Once this idea took root the result was unprecedented innovation and irresolvable conflict. Communities were formed, reformed and splintered over differing interpretations of Scripture with no appeal to any central authority apart from Scripture itself. And the Protestant process continues unabated. Thus Protestantism is by no means a fixed state of affairs or doctrines or practices. There are as many ways to understand the Bible as people who read it.

McGrath traces the privilege of personal interpretation back to Martin Luther's doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers." He highlights Luther's empowerment of the laity as interpreters of scripture. All Christians are endowed with the right to read and interpret and thus question the church's teaching. McGrath reads Luther as unintentionally feeding the beast of individualism unleashed by the growing humanist movement. "The most radical element of Luther's doctrine of justification is its conception of salvation as a matter affecting God and the individual. The individual's relationship with God is direct, determined by faith in God's promises and the salvation procured by Christ's death and resurrection. There is no longer any need for intermediaries—for the intercession of Mary or the saints. There is no necessary role for the church, its sacraments, or its priests in the dynamic of salvation" (p. 44). This emphasis on the personal and private carries over to McGrath's understanding of Luther's theory of universal priesthood. No mention is made of Luther's insistence on the responsibility held with the birthright of priesthood: that each believer is responsible for the spiritual welfare of her sister and brother in the faith. One is not a priest for oneself, but a priest for others. Similarly, one is not to read and interpret the Bible solely for oneself, but for the benefit of the community. Priesthood does not turn one in towards the self but outward toward neighbor. While this theme of mutual care and service may have soon been lost in the Protestant proliferation, it is present in Luther and deserves recognition.

McGrath does provide the needed service of correcting some common textbook misrepresentations. John Calvin is no longer the tyrant of Geneva or the author of predestination but a serious, reliable and trustworthy scholar of scripture. And the attention paid to the work of Martin Bucer is long overdue. By shining light on some of the lesser known Protestant innovators, McGrath expands his narrative beyond the household names to illustrate the original diversity of the movement. On the whole, McGrath provides a sympathetic interpretation free from the usual stereotyping. He even puts a positive spin on the current consumerist mentality that dominates contemporary Protestantism: Protestants have the ability to react quickly to new social and cultural realities; and they can protest, remove their leaders, switch denominations or start new congregations while remaining true to their Protestant identity.

While the volume is readable and covers an amazing amount of ground, it often sacrifices depth and focus for breadth and span. It is a ride on a high speed train with quick stops along the way. It favors travelers who prefer a wide range of experiences over those who like to settle in one spot and stay for awhile. Regardless, journeying with McGrath is worthwhile if only for the questions raised by his

interpretation of Protestantism. Since Protestantism is a reactive movement, must it have an identifiable enemy to survive? If Protestants are simply those who read and interpret the Bible for themselves, has the designation outworn its usefulness? And what would the outcome be if we returned to the full understanding of Luther's "priesthood of all believers" and focused on serving each other and the world rather than insisting on our right to read and interpret for ourselves. Maybe that's an idea too dangerous for Protestants to consider.

- Book Review by David Van Houten  
Program Director of the Transition into Ministry Residency Program  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church