



Gethin Abraham-Williams Memorial Lecture 2017

**The Catholicity of Protestantism:
the inheritance of the Reformation
in the twenty-first century**

D. Densil Morgan

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It’s a great privilege to be invited by Cytûn to take part in this commemoration, and especially to deliver the first Gethin Abraham-Williams Memorial Lecture. If any single Welsh Baptist of our generation personified the ecumenical spirit it was Gethin, whose convictions shaped during ministerial training at Regent’s Park College, Oxford, in the 1960s cohered with those of my own college principal, the Revd D. Eirwyn Morgan of Bangor, whose own ecumenical ideals were moulded at Regent’s a generation or more earlier, in his case under the tutelage of the great ecumenical statesman, Dr Ernest Alexander Payne. What Gethin, and Eirwyn, and Ernest Payne believed, was that not by diluting denominational specifics a theologian or minister or lay-person could best contribute to ecumenical dialogue, but by emphasizing the positive aspects of those convictions; it was only thus that the cause of Christian unity could be served. It took me a long time to arrive at ecumenical convictions of my own – not least after exposure during *my* time at Regent’s Park College during the early 1980s, to the works of Lesslie Newbigin and to the personal witness of that great evangelical preacher of the cross, Bishop Stephen Neill – when two realities became luminously clear to me. First that the NT knows nothing of denominations but only of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and second, that the lamentable divide between ecumenical convictions and evangelical truth which had characterized twentieth-century Protestant Christianity especially perhaps here in Wales, should be healed forthwith. That has been a guiding light of mine for the last thirty years at least. It is in that spirit that I venture to address you today on the subject of ‘The Catholicity of Protestantism: the inheritance of the Reformation in the twenty-first century’.

Luther’s theological formation

‘In 1517 an obscure German theologian from an undistinguished new university instituted a debate about popular religious practice which was destined to open up the greatest geological fault-line in European civilisation. Martin Luther’s angry critique of the sordid late medieval traffic in religious blessings known as “indulgences” would rapidly escalate into a more fundamental challenge to the theological structures which had underpinned the evolution of Western society since the fall of the Roman Empire. There ensued more than a century of

fratricidal ideological conflict in which many thousands would die, and the religious, social and political map of the European continent would be redrawn'.¹ These are not my words but those of the Catholic historian Eamon Duffy in one of a plethora of new studies published to commemorate, if not to celebrate, the beginning of the Protestant Reformation on 31 October 1517, five hundred years ago to today.

The obscure theologian was, of course, Martin Luther, born at Eisleben, Saxony, in November 1483, to Hans and Margaret Luther, Hans being a peasant who had climbed the economic ladder to become the owner of copper mines and smelters, while Margaret came from a more genteel family of lawyers and physicians. Well-educated at schools at Mansfeld, Magdeburg (where he was exposed to the Jesus-centred piety of the Brethren of Common Life which his older contemporary Desiderius Erasmus found so enticing) and Eisenach, he proceeded, aged seventeen, to the University of Erfurt, where he was both popular with his fellows and impressed his tutors with his intelligence and academic ability. He graduated with the BA degree in 1502 and came second in a class of seventeen following his Master's examinations in 1505. All was set for a career as a lawyer when, on returning from Eisleben to Erfurt in July 1505, he was nearly struck by a thunderbolt during a lightning storm and cried out in terror: 'Saint Anna, save me and I will become a monk!' There was probably more to it than that, but within a fortnight, without consulting his family, he had knocked on the door of the house of the Augustinian Friars at Erfurt and begun his monastic career, and, as it would happen, his priestly training as well. Hans, as you can imagine, was incandescent. He had not spent a fortune in school and college fees in order that his very gifted son should become a clergyman! He did, however, acquiesce, though at the dinner following Martin's ordination and first mass in April 1507 he could not forgo expressing his disappointment: 'Don't you remember that scripture commands you to honour your father and your mother'!

During the next few years Martin showed himself to be a model monk and the sort of clergyman that the medieval church existed in order to produce. But all was not well. To quote Rowan Williams:

It is given to mercifully few people in the Christian church to experience directly and intensely the meaning of words and phrases that are, for most believers, clichés.

Luther looked, with rare simplicity, into the face of the God he was told to serve and *hated* what he saw. God was a righteous God – that was taken for granted – and he

¹ Eamon Duffy, *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 1.

demanded conformity to his righteousness and condemned failure to conform. He demanded wholeheartedness, but how could the endlessly self-regarding, self-observing, self-dividing soul produce such simplicity? Nothing in human action and motivation could be clear; by what right can a person ever satisfy himself or herself that an action is ‘good’? By no right. Luther found this out through years of self-torture in the confessional. Scripture enjoined penitence; ‘do penance’ – *penitentiam agere* – was the Vulgate translation of the evangelical ‘repent’. And if sin was a nightmare of daily failure and doubt, so penance was a nightmare of struggling to find the possibility of unequivocally good acts by way of recompense – which would themselves be open to the same agonies of doubt about motivation ... The God who presides over this appalling world is the God who asks the impossible and punishes savagely if it is not realized. The righteousness of God, *Justitia Dei*, is a threat hanging over the whole of every human life. The expression itself for a time produced a pathological revulsion in Luther ... The most significant fact about Luther is that, in these years, he *hated* God.²

It would not have been difficult, even at the time, for any half-decent theologian to convince Luther that he had not only misunderstood God but that had misconstrued the official teaching of the Catholic Church about penitence and the divine forgiveness. Did not the great Johannes von Staupitz, vicar-general of the Augustinian Order tell him that God was not angry with him but that he was angry with God, and if he wanted to understand the real meaning of the righteousness of God and of true penitence, that he should begin not with his own striving but with ‘the sweet wounds of Jesus’. The covenant between God and his elect was not relative but absolute as St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas had taught, and that in Christ God’s mercy was freely available to all sinners, granting them faith, freeing the will and instilling in them that habit of charity which would slowly transform the soul, allowing them to fulfil those obligations to God and neighbour which the scriptures required. For Staupitz at least, and for St Augustine before him, the basis of righteousness was God’s free and undeserved grace in Christ.

If your antennae are so attuned, you will have picked up that despite Staupitz’s fine emphasis on the covenant of election in Christ, free grace, and God’s extravagant mercy toward undeserving sinners, subsequent Protestant theology would shy away from the concept of ‘the habit of charity transforming the soul’, so-called infused grace, and would posit a sharp divide between justification, or the Christian’s *status* before God, and sanctification where it is wholly

² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the NT to St John of the Cross*, 3rd edition (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), pp. 143-4.

appropriate to refer to striving for moral transformation in order to fulfil one's obligation to God and neighbour. But more of these differences anon; now to return to Luther.

With a wealth of pastoral wisdom, Staupitz realised that this young man had too much time on his hands to obsess over his sins and what he needed was something to take him out of himself. What he did was to appoint him lecturer in philosophy and ethics in the new university of Wittenberg, a little town of some 2000 souls; he told him to begin doctoral work on the scriptures, and generally to do other things apart from his priestly and monastic tasks. In October 1512 Luther not only received his doctorate in divinity but succeeded to the chair in Theology and Holy Scriptures that Staupitz himself had recently vacated. From then on until his death in 1546, Dr Martin, or Professor Luther if you prefer, would oversee the Protestant Reformation in breaks between lectures to his students.

It was on the basis of scripture that his understanding of the divine righteousness would be transformed and that, at long last, he would find relief for his soul. Much has been written and continues to be written on Luther's theological breakthrough, whether it occurred in 1512, 1514, 1517 or sometime else, but what is not in dispute is that it occurred in the context of wrestling with the biblical text, the Book of Psalms especially, and St Paul's epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. As he would reminisce in 1545, a year before he died:

At last, as I meditated day and night, God showed mercy and I turned my attention to the connection of the words [in Romans 1:17], namely – 'The righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written: the righteous shall live by faith' – and there I began to understand that the righteousness of God, revealed in the gospel, is *passive*, in other words that by which the merciful God justifies us through faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'. At this I felt myself straightway born anew and to have entered through open gates into paradise itself...³

The revelation for Luther was that rather than *demanding* righteousness from sinners, God in Christ *shared* his own righteousness with them, all they had to do was to accept it, to *believe*. Rather than requiring perfection, he communicated, imparted, allocated, distributed to sinners, freely, the perfection that Christ had achieved on the cross. This, for him, was gospel indeed. Whether the chronology was as clear-cut as Luther recalled makes no matter. By the second decade of the sixteenth century the breakthrough had occurred, and what would become Protestant *theology* was developing apace.

³ E. Gordon Rupp and Benjamin Drewery (eds), *Documents of Modern History: Martin Luther* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), p. 6.

The development of the schism

What about the Protestant *Reformation*? The geological fault-line in European civilization to which Eamon Duffy referred in the opening quotation, occurred surprisingly quickly. It commenced with the indulgences controversy and the publication of the 95 theses on 31 October 1517, inciting, among other things, the boorish and irresponsible retort by the Dominican Tetzl: ‘In three weeks I will have the heretic in the fire and he will go to hell in a bath cap’!; then the demand that the Elector of Saxony should hand this errant professor over to Rome to be questioned and disciplined; the altercation at Augsburg in October 1518 between Cardinal Cajetan and Luther, demanding that he should recant of his views; and the triumphant exposition before his fellow-Augustinians in Heidelberg six months earlier of his gospel-based concept of the *theologia crucis* challenging the scholastic notion of the *theologia gloriae*. The Leipzig Disputation of the summer of 1519 showed not a meeting of minds but growing intransigence between Luther and his by now emboldened supporters on the one hand, and the church hierarchy represented by Johannes Eck of Ingolstadt who raised the spectre of Jan Huss, burned a century earlier for holding views which sounded disconcertingly similar to those which were gaining ground daily. The notice of excommunication came in June 1520, and being disregarded by Luther, the bull itself arrived in January 1521 only to be consigned by him to the flames. By then the great manifestoes of 1520, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and what used to be called *The Freedom of the Christian Man* (‘A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to no-one; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone’) were being read avidly throughout Europe.

The final time that he would be called before the authorities, at the Diet – or convocation – of the Holy Roman Empire meeting at the city of Worms in April 1521, he well realized the gravity of his situation. The emperor, Charles V, was a loyal Catholic, but a loyal Catholic who needed the political support of the German princes including Luther’s own prince, the Elector Frederick. There was nothing that the emperor would like more than to hand this turbulent, excommunicated priest over to the ecclesiastical authorities to do with him as they pleased. This was especially true after he had refused to recant of his inflammatory opinions:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of scripture or plain reason (for I believe neither in the pope nor in councils alone, since it is agreed that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted, my

conscience being captive to the Word of God. I neither can nor will recant anything, for it is neither safe nor honest to act against one's conscience.⁴

The closing declaration: 'Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God, Amen', though revered mightily in Protestant lore, is probably apocryphal; the rest, however, is according to the record.

The Diet's edict, promulgated a month later, was that Luther should indeed be handed over on the count of heresy, by which time he was safely ensconced in the virtually impregnable castle of the Wartburg. While returning home under a decree of safe conduct which Elector Frederick had extracted from the emperor, he was ambushed by a posse of (as everyone thought) the emperor's soldiers and had disappeared. The distress of his by now myriad supporters is no better expressed than by the artist Albrecht Dürer who wrote in his diary:

On the Friday before Whitsun [17 May], news reached me at Antwerp that Martin Luther had treacherously been taken prisoner ... There appeared ten knights who carried him away, a betrayed man, pious and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, a successor of Christ and a follower of the true Christian faith. Whether he is still alive or whether they have put him to death, I know not. He has suffered for the sake of Christian truth and for having condemned the un-Christlike papacy, which obstructs Christ's salvation with its man-made laws ... O God of heaven take pity on us; O Lord Jesus, pray for your people ... O God, if Luther is dead, who will henceforth expound to us the holy gospel so clearly?⁵

Dürer need not have worried. His hero had been waylaid not by the emperor's knights but by the Elector's, for his own safety. His ten months spent at the Wartburg, translating the Bible into German and throwing his inkpot at the devil, contributed also to Protestant lore. By then the map of Europe was being redrawn. City after city was severing its links with Rome; university after university was reshaping its curriculum to teach the evangelical truths; the mass was being discontinued in the parish churches and the Lord's Supper was being celebrated in its place; monks were leaving the cloister in droves, and nuns were getting married – including the redoubtable Katherine von Bora who in 1525 would become Luther's bride; and other reformers – Zwingli in Zurich, Bucer in Basel, Osiander in Nuremburg and more – were coming to the fore. However idealized the famous description in Luther's Wittenberg sermon of 1522, and however understated the social and political realities that were involved, it did, however, express a truth:

⁴ Rupp and Drewery (eds), *Documents of Modern History: Martin Luther*, p. 60.

⁵ Quoted in H. R. Rookmaaker, *The Creative Gift: Essays in Art and the Christian Life* (Winchester, Illinois: Cornerstone Books, 1981), pp. 167-8

I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached and wrote God's word, otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends [Philip] Melanchthon and [Nicholas von] Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did it all.⁶

An awesome dynamic had been unleashed which would take on a life of its own.

The term 'Protestantism' came into use in 1529 following the second Diet of Spire when the princes and representatives of fourteen imperial cities and states declared their loyalty to the new teaching, emphasising justification by faith alone, salvation by grace on the basis of Christ's unique sacrifice, and the sole authority of God's Word in scripture:

We are determined by God's grace ... to abide by his Word alone, the holy gospel contained in the books of the Old Testament and the New. This Word alone should be preached ... as the sure rule of all Christian doctrine and conduct ... Whosoever builds upon this foundation, he shall prevail against the gates of hell.⁷

This protestation was hardly negative. It was, on the contrary, a positive declaration – *protestare* (a witness *for*) – of fidelity to the gospel within the church, on the foundation of the Word of God in scripture. For the Reformers, witness to the catholicity or wholeness of the one, holy and apostolic church could be achieved on this basis alone.

The Catholicity of Protestantism today

It's a bold step to move from 1529 to 2017, to trace continuities between what happened five centuries ago in a different world, indeed a different universe from the globalized, technological, post-modern, post-religious, post-truth order in which we find ourselves today, or to claim any unanimity among the dizzy cornucopia of customs and convictions held by those churches and communions who still, in some way or other, regard the momentous events of Wittenberg in 1517 as their founding charter, and draw sustenance from what happened then.

What was it that the Reformers set out to do? It was *not* to create a new church. There could only be one church, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic community, constituted by the life, death and resurrection of Christ, our Lord, born on the day of Pentecost and perpetuated ever after through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The aim was not to begin again but to reform and renew. 'Where Jesus Christ is', claimed Ignatius of Antioch well over a millennium earlier,

⁶ Rupp and Drewery (eds), *Documents of Modern History: Martin Luther*, p. 102.

⁷ Quoted in R. Newton Flew and Rupert E. Davies (eds), *The Catholicity of Protestantism* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1950), pp. 13-14.

‘there you find the Catholic church’.⁸ Christ had always made himself known within the fellowship of his people, through the scriptures and in the sacraments; he had always shed his love abroad in the hearts of the faithful, planting faith in their souls, causing them to be born again in the Spirit, and by so doing had perpetuated the community of the redeemed. ‘He (or she) who has God as his (or her) Father’, wrote John Calvin, memorably, in Book IV of *The Institutio*, plagiarising Cyprian of Carthage outrageously, ‘has the Church as his mother’; not the invisible church, but this tangible, distinct, routine, humdrum reality in the vicissitudes of history, to which we all belong.

How can people come to belong to this one church, this catholic community? Through faith. Faith as a quality of the soul, inherent in the human heart? No. faith as a gift, a free gift from the risen Christ:

When the Word of God goes forth [wrote Luther] and the heart cleaves to it through faith, then the heart is imbued with the same truth of the Word ... And soon all the powers and members are likewise changed. For all the members act in accordance with the inclinations of the heart, whether good or bad.⁹

The essential thing about faith is not faith itself but its object, namely Jesus Christ. That is why he and his fellow Reformers were so insistent that justification was on the basis of faith *alone*, because it meant that we are justified not by ourselves, our good works or morality or personal qualities or striving, but by Christ alone – *sola fides* and *solus Christus*. And this is not a theory, or a doctrine or a concept or an idea, but an existential fact:

Faith is a living and mighty thing, not an idle thought. It does not float on the heart like a goose on the water; but just as water warmed by fire remains water, though it is no longer cold ... so faith, the work of the Holy Spirit, creates a different spirit and different mind and makes a person new.¹⁰

It’s well known, indeed notorious, that Luther regarded the Epistle of James as an epistle of straw. What is less well known is that there is scarcely a single NT verse that he quoted more often than ‘faith without works is dead’ (Jas 2:26)! Faith works through love, the love that we show to others knowing that we, too, have been loved: ‘We love him because he first loved us’ (1 John 4:19). And not only him, but our neighbour as well. It may well be that justification is by faith alone, but the fact is that true faith is *never* alone if its object is Christ.

⁸ *Epistle to the Smyrneans*, VIII.

⁹ *Luther’s Works*, Weimar Edition, Vol. 6, p. 97, quoted in Flew and Davies (eds), *The Catholicity of Protestantism*, pp. 67-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Vol. 42, p. 452, *The Catholicity of Protestantism*, p. 69.

Justification and sanctification may be two separate doctrinal realities, but they can never exist apart. What God has joined together, let no-one put asunder! Luther and Calvin, Zwingli and Bucer, and the rest, not least our own sixteenth-century Welsh Reformers, Bishop Richard Davies, Bishop William Morgan and those who came after them, knew this very, very well!

Fortunately, in Wales, we were spared the bloodshed that marred the history of religion on the continent of Europe, ‘the fratricidal ideological conflict’ mentioned by Eamon Duffy, ‘in which many thousands would die’, though both Protestants and Catholics did have their martyrs: the simple fisherman Rawlins White, burned in March 1555 a stone’s throw away from where we are now during the reign of Mary Tudor, and the saintly pastor David Lewis, ‘*tad y tlodion*’ (‘the father of the poor’), hanged, drawn and quartered in August 1679 on a trumped-up charge, his grisly execution witnessed by his own flock of poor people at Usk. Mercifully, examples like this were very few. When religion in the twenty-first century has become toxic and tinged with atrocities and violence, we can at least say that this aberration, among Christians, came to an end in our land over three centuries ago.

What about our differences? I wouldn’t want to underestimate them. On such matters as the Petrine ministry or the primacy of the pope; the nature of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist; priesthood and the nature of Christian ministry; (for the most part) the ordination of women; to say nothing of the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, significant differences remain. This is also true of the relation between holy tradition and an authoritative divine revelation in scripture. And whereas we all hold to the concept of catholicity, we define it in different ways. It is fascinating that the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism, promulgated in 1964, refers to ‘impaired communion’ between the Protestant bodies and the Catholic Church in much the same way as Calvin in Book IV of the *Institutio* speaks of ‘vestiges of the church’ within medieval Catholicism. For both sides these include scripture, baptism, the gospel itself, the existence of true holiness among the faithful, the ancient creeds, the Chalcedonian conviction concerning the deity and the humanity of Christ in the unity of his Person, the Nicene conviction concerning God’s Trinitarian nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and reverence for the theologians of the early Christian church. But whereas, for Calvin, this is all you need, for the Second Vatican Council, this is a pretty minimal list: In the words of the Church Historian David C. Steinmetz:

The sharp disagreement ... between Catholics and Protestants over catholicity has been not so much a disagreement between a church that affirms the importance of

catholicity and one that denies it, as an argument between two Christian communities that understand catholicity in radically different ways.¹¹

So where does that leave us? The great Methodist historian and Luther scholar Gordon Rupp, after comparing and contrasting Protestant convictions and Catholic faith once wrote:

Behind these charges and counter-claims there is the outline of a norm, of fundamental agreements, as, for instance, that the Christian religion must be God-centred, that Christ is really present with his people, that grace must be personal, that salvation involves both forgiveness and holiness. It suggests, moreover, that this norm is not to be sought for in a *via media* ... or a synthesis [but] ... in the profound statement of the evangelical Charles Symeon that ‘truth is not in the middle and not on one extreme, but at both extremes [together].’¹²

Rupp would always tell his Catholic students: ‘We shall get on very well together if you remember that what I refer to as Protestantism means roughly what you mean by Catholicism!’ From the inside, and for the faithful, the feel of the faith in both traditions is very much the same.

‘The Catholicity of Protestantism: the inheritance of the Reformation in the twenty-first century’. Five hundred years after the publication of Martin Luther’s 95 theses, that’s the way that one rather obscure Welsh theologian sees things at least. I only hope that Gethin Abraham-Williams would approve.

¹¹ David C. Steinmetz, *Taking the Long View: Christian Theology in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 65-6.

¹² E. Gordon Rupp, *Protestant Catholicity* (London: Epworth Press, 1960), pp. 39-40.