

# A Theology of Protest: The Reformation and Paul Tillich's 'Protestant Principle'

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Martin Luther initiated the Reformation in protest of religious practices in the late-medieval Roman Catholic Church. Paul Tillich, who died in 1965, was among the most important Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, probably second in importance only to Karl Barth. Just as Barth took his Reformed-Calvinist heritage to heart, so Tillich took seriously his roots in Lutheranism. Although I have never been a Lutheran in the denominational sense, Tillich was the first serious academic theologian whose writings I encountered as a young man when I was struggling with whether I could still be Christian in the light of a modern understanding of reality. Tillich helped me to realize that asking critical questions about faith is not a sign of a lack of faith but rather of deep existential seriousness or, as he put it, ultimate concern. Had I not encountered Tillich at this early stage of my adult life—together with a few other German Lutheran theologians, including Bultmann and Bonhoeffer—I am sure that I never would have gone into the ministry and that I would not even be a Christian today. It was through these German Lutheran theologians that I learned what “theology” means and why it is so vitally important. It was years later, however, before I ever encountered Luther’s thought directly. It first was mediated to me by his modern interpreters, such as Tillich. In the form given to Luther by Tillich, however, I was already, albeit dimly, aware of the profound power of Luther’s theology that has since captivated my intellectual passion and defined my professional vocation for forty years.<sup>1</sup>

Not only have I learned deeply from Tillich’s writings, but I also had the privilege of studying with Langdon Gilkey, who was perhaps Tillich’s most famous and creative disciple. At United Theological Seminary I have taught three courses on Tillich’s theology, including one with my colleague Lois Malcolm at Luther Seminary. Tillich was certainly the most formative theological influence upon the early curriculum of United Theological Seminary

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1. This article is based on a lecture delivered to the alumni of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities on May 5, 2017. The reader should note that although I was invited to give this lecture, I chose neither the topic nor the specific wording of its title. I clarify this so that it may be understood that what follows is my exegesis of the topic as formulated in the title: “A Theology of Protest: The Reformation and Paul Tillich’s ‘Protestant Principle.’”

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(UTS), followed closely by H. Richard Niebuhr. Tillich’s method of correlation, according to which the gospel is interpreted anew in each age in response to contemporary formulations of the existential question, accounts for UTS’s openness to the urgent concerns of the present day. Moreover, Tillich’s theology of culture accounts for the UTS emphasis upon the arts, since a culture’s particular formulation of the existential question is often best reflected in its creative artistic expressions, secular though these may be.

It is interesting to observe that at this Reformation commemoration I have been asked to speak about Tillich, not Luther. Yet the reason for this is not hard to find. For many Protestants today, especially those left of center, Luther is too remote a figure to be able to relate to him easily. While conservative Protestants revere Luther much as Americans revere George Washington, this is not quite the same thing as making Luther’s historic significance relevant for people who are asking different questions than those which Luther himself sought to answer. Luther seems too distant to be directly relevant to our contemporary concerns, too medieval to be readily understood and appropriated. Tillich, of course, was acutely aware of this problem and tried to address it through his own theological work. He knew how foreign original Protestantism had become to modern people and how difficult it is to comprehend the reasons for its protest against medieval Catholicism.

Apart from assiduous historical reconstruction of the sixteenth-century context, it is virtually impossible for modern people to understand what Luther was fighting against and what he was fighting for. The doctrine of “justification by faith alone,” for which the Reformation struggle was waged, barely has any meaning anymore. Tillich wrote:

Protestantism was born out of the struggle for the doctrine of justification by faith. This idea is strange to the [person] of today and even to Protestant people in the churches; indeed...it is so strange to the [people] of today that there is scarcely any way of making it intelligible to [them]....This whole complex of ideas which for more than a century—not so very long ago—was discussed in every household and workshop, in every market and country inn of Germany, is now scarcely understandable even to our most intelligent scholars. *We have here a breaking-down of tradition that has few parallels.*<sup>2</sup>

One of the courses on Tillich that I taught was a comparative course on Luther and Tillich. It underscored precisely this point about the distance between Luther and us; it also employed Tillich's example to see how Luther's legacy could be reformulated, so that modern people might understand and appreciate its existential significance once again. This article will use Tillich as our starting-point for inquiring into the contemporary significance of the Protestant Reformation.

### **Paul Tillich and the Protestant principle**

Without being narrowly Lutheran or anti-Catholic, Tillich was a modern Christian theologian who believed that something of ultimate concern was and remains at stake in Luther's protest. In fact, Tillich's entire theological corpus can be read as a sustained attempt to distinguish what is of enduring significance in the Reformation from what is merely of historical interest and should thus be set aside today. While he was firmly convinced that the Reformation had been waged on behalf of a religious principle that is essential to a genuine apprehension of the meaning of the gospel and Christian faith, Tillich also realized that the Reformation was a historical phenomenon of the late medieval world and thus limited by the intellectual, cultural, social, political, and economic conditions of that age.

Tillich's ever-present concern was to ask about the theological essence of Protestantism in distinction to its medieval historical trappings.

In contrast to the Reformers, we are no longer involved in a life-and-death struggle with Rome. We are able to decide in terms of principles and not of controversy; and we are not bound in our decision to a classical period of Protestantism. It belongs to the nature of Protestantism that it has no classical period. Every period stands under the Protestant protest, even the age of the Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

It is in keeping with the essential nature of Protestantism to be critical of the actual history of Protestantism. Protestantism is thus not only critical but also self-critical!

How does a modern Protestant theologian, such as Tillich,

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critically assess the first Protestant theologian? Obviously there are many perspectives from which Luther can be criticized: from the modern perspective of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment Luther was "medieval" in the pejorative, non-descriptive sense of the term (after all, he knew nothing about the historical-critical study of the Bible, Enlightenment political philosophy such as fueled the American and French revolutions, or modern science); from the Jewish perspective Luther was an anti-Semite whose vicious remarks about Jews were used as propaganda in Nazi Germany in support of the Holocaust; from the Marxist perspective Luther was a defender of the political and economic status quo, since he took his stance against the Peasants' Revolt; from a feminist perspective Luther was patriarchal; and so forth. In each of these respects, however, Tillich embodied what an updated version of Luther might look like: Tillich fully embraced the Enlightenment in its scientific, historical, and political challenges to medievalism; not only was Tillich forced to leave his native Germany on account of his defense of Jewish students and colleagues during the Nazi era but Tillich was also one of the most remarkably pro-Jewish Christian theologians in the entire history of the church. I have never found a disparaging word about Jews or Judaism in any of Tillich's writings.

Tillich, moreover, was a socialist, whose book, *The Socialist Decision*, was placed on the list of books to be burned by the Nazis; and before the recent era of feminist theology, Tillich not only grasped the negative psychological consequences of calling God "father" and "lord" but even served as inspiration for many of the earliest feminist theologians, such as Mary Daly, Carol Christ, and Judith Plaskow. In his far-sightedness Tillich also had a deep appreciation of non-Christian religions and anticipated our current "inter-faith" context, for example, in the last lecture delivered before his death. In all these respects, the twentieth-century Tillich was worlds away from the sixteenth-century Luther. Yet, in spite of this huge chasm separating them intellectually, culturally, socially, and politically, Tillich knew himself bound to the cause for which Luther had fought. How, then, does one speak of this cause today when Tillich's contemporaries—and ours!—can barely make sense of what the first Protestant was up to? Since Luther is so remote from us, what exactly are we doing when we celebrate the Reformation? What, if anything, does it really mean to be a Protestant today?

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2. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 196 (italics added).

3. *Ibid.*, 210.

By way of answering this question, Tillich distinguished between Protestantism as a historical movement beginning with Luther that resulted in “a special denominational form of Christianity,” on the one hand, and Protestantism as a critical insight into the divine-human relationship for the sake of which the Reformation was waged, on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> Tillich’s characteristic terminology here is the distinction between “the Protestant era” and “the Protestant principle.”

Protestantism as a principle is eternal and a permanent criterion of everything temporal. Protestantism as the characteristic of a historical period is temporal and subjected to the eternal Protestant principle.<sup>5</sup>

Luther protested medieval Catholicism for its pretension to represent God infallibly on the authority of its tradition and to restrict salvation to those partaking of its institutional means of grace. He did this in the name of the Protestant principle; but this same principle is the criterion for judging Protestantism as a historical form of Christianity. I reiterate Tillich’s previous claim: there is something inherent in the nature of genuine Protestantism that makes it *not only critical* (for example, of medieval Catholicism) *but also self-critical* (of the historical manifestations and forms of Protestantism). “It is judged by its own principle, and this judgment might be a negative one.”<sup>6</sup>

Tillich had great doubts about the future of Protestantism as a denominational form of Christianity. If he were alive today, he would have even more reason for doubt about its future prognosis. In his essays devoted to the interpretation of Protestantism, *The Protestant Era*, Tillich concluded by asking whether we are indeed living at the end of the Protestant era. I, for one, certainly think this is the case. But the end of Protestantism as a historical movement does not mean that the Protestant principle will die. Protestantism as a religious and theological principle does not depend on Protestantism as a denominational form of Christianity.

The Protestant era might come to an end. But *if* it came to an end, the Protestant principle would not be refuted. On the contrary, the end of the Protestant era would be another manifestation of the truth and power of the Protestant principle.... [I] may be the way in which the Protestant principle must affirm itself in the present situation.<sup>7</sup>

Protestant denominations may well deserve to die if they no longer embody or express the Protestant principle that gave rise to them in the first place, insofar as that is the sole reason why they exist. This is the self-critical question we must ask: What is the Protestant principle upon which everything hangs?

In the late medieval context Luther formulated the Protestant principle as the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but Tillich

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understood that it can be formulated in other ways. And it should be reformulated, especially if we are no longer asking Luther’s particular question! For Tillich, the Protestant principle is the recognition of what he calls “the boundary situation” of the human being: that we are finite, not infinite; mortal, not immortal; fallible, not infallible; sinners, not saints; relative, not absolute; creatures, not gods. This means that we are limited in power, our knowledge and perspectives on reality are always partial, the claims on behalf of our own moral goodness and righteousness are dubious, and we are far from what it means to be authentically human, whether individually or collectively. “The Protestant principle implies a judgment about the human situation, namely, that it is basically distorted.”<sup>8</sup> This is what the concept “original sin” intended to express—to mention another venerable theological concept that most modern people, especially those on the left, can no longer understand. The importance of the Protestant Reformation is that it illustrates vividly how religion, whether Christian or non-Christian, can and does become the vehicle through which we seek to justify our sinful pretensions by appeals to an absolute divine authority.

The first word...to be spoken by religion to the people of our time must be a word spoken against religion. It is the word the old Jewish prophets spoke against the priestly and royal and pseudo-prophetic guardians of their national religion, who consecrated distorted institutions and distorted politics without judging them. The same word must be spoken today about our religious institutions and politics.<sup>9</sup>

Tillich’s reference to the Old Testament prophets illustrates his point that the Protestant principle transcends not only Protestantism but Christianity as well. It also bespeaks his deep appreciation for the Hebrew-Jewish heritage to which Christianity is permanently indebted.

Tillich was very critical of the ways that Protestant denominations had become aligned with the bourgeois interests of the

4. Ibid., vii.

5. Ibid., viii.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., viii, xviii.

8. Ibid., 165.

9. Ibid., 185–186.

middle classes in Europe and America.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the alliance of Protestant churches with the middle classes in Europe led to a complete secularizing of the socialist parties and a consequent rejection of the churches, the working classes in America have been bound to a pro-capitalist form of conservative Protestantism as is represented by the evangelical voters who supported Trump in the recent election. When driving from Texas back to Minnesota, I kept seeing billboards by the side of the highway that only had four words: "Reclaiming America for Christ." I asked others about this slogan and whether they thought this was a good idea or a bad idea. Although the sign contained only four words, I knew immediately the intent: it was the voice of white nationalistic Protestantism with its anti-feminist, anti-gay, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and anti-science agenda.

This is the captivity of American Protestantism to certain cultural, social, economic, and political interests to which Tillich was referring:

The question of whether Protestantism as a determining historical factor will survive is, above all, the question of whether it will be able to adapt itself to the new situation; it is the question whether Protestantism, in the power of its principle, will be able to dissolve its amalgamation with bourgeois ideology.<sup>11</sup>

Here, of course, he is referring to an ethical critique of itself and he points out some obvious failures in the history of Protestantism in this regard:

Protestantism has not developed a social ethics of its own as Roman Catholicism has done... The Protestant principle cannot admit an absolute form of social ethics. But, on the other hand, it need not surrender its development to the state, as it did on Lutheran soil, or to society, as it did on Calvinistic soil.<sup>12</sup>

In the Lutheran countries there was a "romanticism without justice" whereas in the Calvinistic countries there developed a "puritanism without love."<sup>13</sup> In other words, love must always be combined with justice, if it is not to be sentimentalized; just as law must always be combined with mercy, if the gospel is not to be perverted into works.

Tillich is instructive on the relation of theology to the political and economic arenas, since, like Barth, he was a socialist. Tillich believed that unbridled capitalism is anti-human and thus anti-Christian. Anticipating the basic insights of liberation theology, Tillich declared that "there are situations in which the perversion of [humanity's] essential nature is manifest primarily as a social perversion and as social guilt."<sup>14</sup> Like liberation theologians, Tillich

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believed that the fundamental insights of Marxism (not, however, all its doctrinaire assertions!) are complementary to those of Protestantism's critique of the distorted character of human existence. Tillich recognized that universal claims about the distorted character of human existence do not invalidate recognition of concrete historical manifestations of this distorted human existence: The category of 'the universally human' [does] not lead away from the particular human problem of a definite social situation. The 'universal' and 'the concretely historical' do not contradict each other."<sup>15</sup> Tillich gives these examples:

So primitive Christianity challenged the Roman state as a demonic power having the ambiguity of the demonic to be creative and destructive at the same time, establishing order and compelling [people] to the worship of itself. So Luther saw in the papacy in Rome the "Antichrist" dominating Christendom and attacked it with all his prophetic wrath, although he knew he risked the unity of Christendom.<sup>16</sup>

He goes on to say:

To reveal these concrete ideologies is one of the most important functions of the Protestant principle, just as it was one of the main points in the attack of the [Old Testament] prophets on the religious and social order of their time. Theology, of course, must provide general insight into human nature, into its distorted character and its proneness to create ideologies. But this is not enough. A religious analysis of the concrete situation must unveil concrete ideologies, as Luther and the Reformers did when they unveiled the all-powerful Roman [Catholic] ideology.<sup>17</sup>

Tillich was keenly aware that Protestantism needed to undergo transformation in the light of the Protestant principle so as to relate effectively to the challenges presented by unbridled capitalism with its attendant ills.

10. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1957).

11. *Ibid.*, xx.

12. *Ibid.*, xxi.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 166.

15. *Ibid.*, 168.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 170.

As a member of the “religious socialist” movement that tried to affirm the valid insights of Marxism apart from the dogmatic atheism of Marxists, Tillich called upon Protestantism to free itself from its ideological captivity to capitalism: “Protestantism must decide for the Protestant principle as against historical Protestantism.”<sup>18</sup> In our American context this would mean freeing Protestantism from its alliance with right-wing politics and its support of the wealthy at the expense of the poor and middle class with the concomitant racism, sexism, heterosexism, and xenophobia, as well as its intolerance of real science and free humanistic learning. Protestantism would have to lend support to a democratic socialism in which all would be equal and become identified with the cause of the liberation of the oppressed, no longer serving as the religious and ideological prop of the oppressor.

What could be more un-American in this present climate than a democratic socialism?

The end of the Protestant era is not the return to the Catholic era and not even... the return to early Christianity... It is something beyond all these forms, a new form of Christianity, to be expected and prepared for, but not yet to be named.... For Christianity is final only in so far as it has the power of criticizing and transforming each of its historical manifestations.<sup>19</sup>

Protestantism, as Tillich believed, has the potential to be so transformed by its own principle. If this is so, however, why has the public face of Protestantism become identified with the right-wing? Why is the progressive voice of Protestantism in our country virtually impotent? Why is historic mainline Protestantism dying? Why have we come to the end of the Protestant era? Why? Much ink has been spilled about the cultural, sociological, economic, and demographic factors at play here by interpreters of culture and social scientists.

## The ongoing significance of the Protestant principle

As a Presbyterian minister and a professor of theology, I want to weigh in on the intellectual factors at work. To do so, we need to return to the word “theology” in the title of this article, “A Theology of Protest.” “Protest” by definition is negative: it is always protest *against* something. For protest to be meaningful, however, it has to be based on something positive that is affirmed as true and good. So, for example, protest against injustice is based on the affirmation of justice; protest against falsehood is based on the affirmation of truth; protest against hate is based on the affirmation of love. So too, a theology of protest is a contradiction in terms if it is not based on affirmations about the nature of reality: the reality of God, humanity, and their mutual relations. Unless this positive basis of reality is affirmed and articulated, protest will exhaust itself in negativity and eventually evaporate. “A theology

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of protest” without further ado becomes a self-contradiction.

The term “Protestant” refers to the original protest against Roman Catholicism. But the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century did not call themselves “Protestants.” Their chosen self-designation was “evangelical,” which comes from the Latinized version of the Greek euangelion (“good news”) found in the New Testament (for example, Rom 1:16). In German, the self-designation of Lutherans is *evangelisch*. The crucial point is that the Reformers’ protest against Roman Catholicism was based on their affirmation of the gospel. Whatever claims to represent the good news of Christ but actually distorts it into bad news has to be opposed, precisely on account of the gospel! Tillich made the same point. The negative and critical thrust of the Protestant principle presupposes the positive affirmation of the truth of Christian faith: “Protestantism is not only Protestantism, it is also—and first of all—Christianity.”<sup>20</sup> Tillich called this “the catholic substance.” However, I prefer to call it “the evangelical substance” in keeping with the self-designation of Luther and the other Reformers. Protestants are only true Protestants to the extent they are true evangelicals!<sup>21</sup>

How did Luther and his original Reformation co-workers come to the judgment that Roman Catholicism’s claim to the gospel was fallacious and that the Protestant counter-claim to represent the gospel was genuine? The answer is *theology*, pure and simple. The Reformation was a highly intellectual movement based in the best linguistic and historical scholarship of the day. Luther and company availed themselves of the humanistic legacy of the Renaissance to read the Bible in the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. This daring move uncovered discrepancies between the original text of Scripture and the Latin translation that had the official sanction of the Roman Catholic Church, upon which it based its doctrinal claims. It allowed the Reformers to posit deep discontinuity between Scripture and the medieval tradition and to call for a return to “Scripture alone” as the sole source and norm of genuine doctrine.

20. Ibid., 195.

21. I realize that the term “evangelical” has a negative connotation, since it refers to a particular type of Protestantism in the English-speaking world. But I think the term needs and deserves to be retrieved by those of us who want to claim to stand in the authentic legacy of Luther and the other Protestant Reformers.

18. Ibid., 180–181.

19. Ibid., xviii.

The fact that the Reformation was a highly intellectual movement, rooted in the best and most demanding scholarship of the day, however, did not prevent the Reformation from becoming a popular movement that captivated the hearts and minds of non-academics. Since the Reformers also cultivated the arts of rhetoric (that is, persuasive and beautiful speech), preaching became the means whereby the theological ideas of Luther about the meaning of the gospel changed both the religion and the culture of late medieval society. There was no tension here between academic theology and relevant ministry, between being rigorous in the classroom and vigorous in the pulpit. There was no tension between the theoretical and the practical dimensions of theological education, since everyone knew that theology was the basis of everything in the Protestant or, better, evangelical church. There was no tension between head and heart since it was theology that unleashed the existential and pastoral implications of the good news that soothes consciences, provides assurance, and emboldens courageous living.

Unlike Luther, Tillich was not only a Protestant theologian but a *liberal* Protestant theologian (even though Tillich would not have called himself a “liberal” since that term had become a term of derision during the era of Barthian neo-orthodoxy, just as it has always been among conservative Protestants). In Tillich’s day the term referred to the tradition that stemmed from Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and culminated with Troeltsch (1865–1923). It referred to that movement within German Protestant theology called “mediating theology,” which sought to mediate between the traditions of the Reformation, on the one hand, and the Enlightenment, on the other hand. During the neo-orthodox era Tillich, who affirmed many of Barth’s criticisms of liberal theology, nonetheless stood closer to his liberal forebears than did Barth. Barth himself would have had no hesitation in calling Tillich a liberal and with complete justification! The word “liberal” in this context has nothing to do with political or economic sympathies but refers to the idea of a non-authoritarian, non-dogmatic approach to theology. This kind of theology made it possible for the modern heirs of the Reformation to embrace all the distinctive challenges of the Enlightenment, such as natural science, historical criticism, and modern approaches to ethics and politics. Whereas Luther asked only one question, namely, whether doctrine or the content of preaching is congruent with Scripture, Tillich also asked another question, namely, whether the Christian message can be affirmed as true in the light of a modern understanding of reality. Liberal theology, therefore, has two criteria: the criterion of appropriateness to Scripture and the criterion of credibility according to reason and common human experience. Tillich made the point by saying that theology has to be apologetic, that is, ready to answer the questions of contemporary people, whatever those questions might be. In today’s terms, all theology must be public theology.

When I first encountered Tillich, there were two groups in Protestant denominations: liberals and conservatives (with some conservatives being so extreme as to be called “fundamentalists”). The liberals were the political and moral progressives, since we were the heirs of the “social gospel” movement that predated

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liberation theology in its insistence that Christians necessarily are involved to work toward a just social order; the liberals were also the intellectuals in the church who fostered a critical theology that was apologetic in Tillich’s sense. Anti-intellectualism was never encountered left of center. The only group to the left of liberal Protestants was secular atheists, who renounced Christianity altogether. Since then, however, something new has arisen that could never have been anticipated either by Tillich or me. I refer to the politically correct left who not only have made the cause of liberation theology their own, but who, by their alliance with “postmodernism” in philosophy, have repudiated the tradition of the Enlightenment as much as conservatives always have. The left has made the term “liberal” a term of derision just as much as the right.

Remember that the word “liberal” is derived from the Latin word for “free” as in the words “liberty” and “liberation.” It refers to free, critical inquiry. Liberal Protestant theology is free because it affirms not only Luther’s insistence that our interpretation of the gospel be validated in terms of Scripture alone (thereby free from distorted theological traditions), but also that the gospel, having been validated as authentically Christian by the appeal to Scripture, then too is validated as true by appeal to reason and common human experience (thereby free from dogmatism and authoritarianism). Liberal Protestantism, as it was represented by mainline churches and their institutions of theological education, thrived because of its commitment to theology in this rigorous and vigorous sense. Once that commitment waned, however, liberal Protestantism withered as an important cultural and social force, because of its lack of meaningful intellectual substance. The right has always been the enemy of liberal theology. What is new, and truly frightening, is that the politically correct left is now equally opposed to liberal Protestant theology, just as it is opposed to the Enlightenment principle of free critical and self-critical discourse. In its place is ideology, to which the designation “politically correct” refers: there is *only one way* to think, speak, or act, if one is really committed to liberation of the oppressed. But this is a delusion and a deception. Remember that the Soviet Union destroyed as many human lives as did the Third Reich, even though the

Soviet Union was based on a left-wing ideology (whereas Nazism was based on a right-wing ideology). In neither case, however, were free speech and free thought allowed. Liberal theology, as critical and self-critical reflection, is opposed to ideologies of any stripe, whether of the right or the left. Liberal Protestantism has all but died out, because the mainline churches have given up on theology and the progressive wing of the church has ceased to be liberal and has become left-wing.

I do not need to urge those on the left to protest against the Trump administration. I do, however, need to urge critical and self-critical theological reflection upon the positive basis that underlies their protests. Why? Because apart from theology as critical and self-critical reflection, there can be no genuine ministry in service of the gospel. The Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox do not require theology in the same sense, since the Catholics have an infallible authority in the papacy to decide matters of faith and morals whereas the Orthodox have their unchanging tradition to rely upon. But Protestant ministry without Protestant theology is self-contradictory, since there is no critical and self-critical means whereby the church can discern the best way to articulate the gospel, so as to answer the urgent questions of the day. This involves Tillich's method of correlation and, as Tillich pointed out, it was also the very method implied in Luther's own formulation of the gospel as the message of justification by faith alone.

Let me illustrate what is at stake here by reference to my own personal struggle as a gay man in the church. When I finally did encounter Luther's theology during my Ph.D. studies, I was struck by the parallel between Luther's account of his struggle with celibacy as he tried to be a good monk and my own struggle with how to be a faithful Protestant Christian knowing that homosexuality was condemned as a sin by the church. Not only was I struck by the similarity between Luther's struggle and mine, but I was even more impressed by the theological reasons Luther gave for his eventual repudiation of the monastic lifestyle. Luther held that no Christian should ever take a vow of celibacy for any reason whatsoever since it is a form of works righteousness and, as such, antithetical to the true meaning of the gospel. When I read those passages from the sixteenth-century medieval Luther I realized that I had just found my argument against the Protestant churches for requiring celibacy of gay people as a condition of our good standing as Christians. Luther equipped me with the theological rationale needed to fight against the Presbyterian Church and other Protestant churches on behalf of gay people. Years later, after I had been forced to leave my first job at a Presbyterian seminary and after I had given up my ordination out of protest, I made this argument based on Luther's precedent in the public forum of Protestants, both in writing and in lectures. But I found that for the most part I was talking to myself, because very few people in the churches, whether on the right or the left side of the aisle, even knew what I was talking about. Whereas the right is guilty of an ideological misuse of tradition, the left is guilty of an ideological rejection of tradition.

Although the right claims to care about and to defend the

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Protestant heritage, it does not really know it. For example, when I stood before the Presbytery of the Twin Cities at a specially called meeting to determine whether I might be restored to the ordained ministry given my argument based on Luther, one conservative objected that he had never read anything like what I claimed to have found in Luther (he was implying that I had made it all up!). Since the presbytery had previously distributed my article "Luther's Significance for the Plight of a Gay Protestant" to all the gathered ministers and elders, I referred him to my article where I had cited Luther not only according to the standard English translations but also in the original German and Latin.<sup>22</sup> What about my pro-gay colleagues on the left? They did not know what I was talking about either, since they had refused as a matter of principle to study dead straight white male theologians. While the right has engaged in an ideological distortion of tradition in order to defend conservatism, the left has engaged in an ideological rejection of tradition on the grounds that it is oppressive. Where does that leave the Protestant ministry? Utterly without any ability to move forward on the basis of its own heritage, so as to formulate the gospel faithfully in a way that is genuinely responsive to contemporary concerns, that is, in a way that is both appropriate and credible.

When I was invited to lecture on this topic at Harvard, I was denounced by a student who identified himself as "queer." He accused me of heterosexism and of having internalized homophobia for allowing straight people (Luther) to dictate the terms of my argument. I explained that appeals to Foucault or queer theory were never going to carry the day in Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, or Baptist churches and that, if he harbored any hopes of changing the minds of Protestant Christians, he had better learn to speak their language and make theological-ethical arguments that would make sense to them. On another occasion a prominent feminist theologian declared that people like me

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22. Paul E. Capetz, "Binding the Conscience: Luther's Significance for the Plight of a Gay Protestant," *Theology and Sexuality* 16 (March 2002): 67–96; a slightly revised version appeared under the title "Reformation Views on Celibacy: An Analogy for Gay Protestants Today," in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 115–131.

will be shot when the revolution comes! Moreover, the last time I taught a seminar on Luther's theology one student could not bring herself to forgive Luther for his position on the Peasants' Revolt or for his statements against the Jews; even at the end of the semester she saw no value in Luther's theology whatsoever and questioned how a seminary that claims to be committed to social justice could justify teaching a course on him. I could adduce many other examples of this shrill, self-righteous, and deeply anti-intellectual stance on the part of the politically correct left. Let these suffice to illustrate what a liberal Protestant theologian is up against today and why the cause of theology as critical and self-critical inquiry is so imperiled in our time.

John Calvin, whose importance in the Reformation was second only to Luther, once described the Protestant self-understanding in these words: "Our constant endeavor...is not just to transmit the tradition faithfully, but also to put it in the form we think will prove best."<sup>23</sup> Notice this succinct definition of Protestantism not as protest but as affirmation. Paraphrased, Calvin's meaning is this: "Our major obligation is not only to hand on the authentic Christian heritage but also to revise (that is, re-form) it according to our best lights, so that our preaching and ministry might faithfully serve the cause of the gospel in our time and place." Only on this basis can effective and faithful protest take place within Protestantism. I was trying to do what Calvin described: critically to convey the Protestant tradition by putting it in the form I thought would prove most faithful in the matter of the church and gay people. How can there be any real Protestant ministry apart from the kind of theology Luther, Calvin, and Tillich stood for? How can there be genuine Protestant ministry when there is so much ignorance or such vehement disdain for the heritage of the Reformation on the part of those wanting to enter the Protestant ministry or already teaching in Protestant theological schools?

Couple this with the postmodernist rejection of truth. How many times have I been told by leftists that there is no such thing as truth, since all truth-claims are nothing more than the will to power, domination disguising itself under the pretense of universality? Nonetheless, these same leftists, who deny the category of truth, are certain that it is always wrong to oppress women and gay people or to be imperialistic. Consider the contradiction here: If there is no truth, then Jesus never died on a Roman cross, the Holocaust never happened, there were no slaves in the American south, and there are no ethical criteria for determining that it is wrong to oppress people. This politically correct posture that has become such a force in theological education and academic theology would be laughable if it were not so serious and threatening, not least of all to the very cause for which all liberation theology stands, namely, liberation of the oppressed of the earth. Liberation theology articulates issues and concerns that all morally serious people should take to heart, but the politically correct left has done

great damage to the cause of liberation theology by its embrace of the postmodernist denial of the truth, exchanging theology for ideology, and its *ad hominem* critiques of anyone who dares demand public reasons for their viewpoints.

The Protestant principle cuts both ways: not only against a smug right-wing Christianity that is impervious to critical and self-critical theological reflection but also against an equally smug left-wing Christianity that has insulated itself from critical and self-critical theological reflection. The left does not really speak for the oppressed any more than the right speaks on behalf of the authentic Christian tradition. Since these are the two dominant forces on our contemporary scene, both of which despise the liberal Protestant tradition of which Tillich was such an exemplary figure, it should come as no surprise that a progressive Protestant voice has lost its power to speak, persuade, convince, and thus remold the culture, given its lack of intellectual substance. Sadly, the end of the Protestant era appears to be nigh. As Tillich explained, this might well represent the judgment of the Protestant principle upon the Protestant churches, having forfeited their right to claim the Reformation legacy as their own.

Both the Reformation and liberal Protestant theology were born in Germany, a culture that is deeply historical and deeply intellectual in its orientation. North America, by contrast, has always been deeply ahistorical and deeply anti-intellectual in its orientation. Perhaps liberal Protestant theology as represented by Tillich never really had a chance, given these character traits that have indelibly shaped American religion. The liberal Protestant commitment to critical understanding of faith in dialogue with a critical understanding of reason is a noble but demanding ideal, yet of utter significance since religion without reason easily degenerates into fanaticism, just as reason without religion easily loses touch with the deepest existential concerns of the human heart. Even if we must concede that the end of the Protestant era is upon us, those who have been committed to the same cause for which Luther and Tillich risked their lives can be grateful for the precious inheritance of a critical and self-critical tradition that is unique among the religions of the world. I will always be grateful that I was raised in a liberal Protestant church and, against the ideological distortions of theology's enemies both on the right and the left, I will never turn my back on the cause of a liberal Protestant theology. As the first Protestant said in reply to those who would have him recant his critical views, so I say: "Here I stand. I can do no other."<sup>24</sup>

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23. Cited by B. A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (University of Chicago, 1978), 13.

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24. The citation from Martin Luther is taken, with slight modification, from Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon, 1950), 185.