

## **The heritage of the First and Radical Reformations**

### **Prague I, 1986**

A consultation dealing with the heritage of the First and Radical Reformations took place at the Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology in Prague from 24 to 27 January 1986. Twenty-two people came together from the following groups: Church of the Brethren, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Hutterian Brethren, the Mennonites, the Moravians, the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Waldensians. After hearing introductory papers read by Prof. Amadeo Molnar (Prague) and Prof. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Oak Brook, USA), participants discussed the legacy of their ancestors and the ways these traditions play a role in their churches and communities. Those in attendance were aware of the historic significance of the meeting; it was probably the first time that members of all these groups met in order to ask what they had in common, in what ways they can deepen their cooperation and how they together can enrich the continuing ecumenical discussion.

### **The First Reformation**

What is meant by the First Reformation, the first of the radical reformations? According to Prof. Molnár, who both defined the First Reformation and described tendencies which appear in subsequent Radical Reformation movements, it is a complex phenomenon expressed primarily in the Waldensian (12th to 13th centuries) and the Hussite (15th century) movements. Not only did the phenomenon give birth to the Unity of Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*) in Bohemia and Moravia, it inspired other groups as well, such as the Anabaptists. The First Reformation was not just a forerunner of the German or Swiss Reformations in the 16th century, but was historically independent and unique. It emphasized the message of the Gospels (including the Sermon on the Mount) and the pervasive eschatological aspect of the biblical message. It was carried by the faith that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the world and that the social order should be shaped by his Lordship. The bearers of the First Reformation understood the gospel as the guiding principle for life - with consequences both for the individual and for social and political structures. They wanted to renew the eschatological dynamism and awareness in Christianity. The First Reformation had inclinations towards prophetic visions and referred to the Holy Spirit, sometimes without the safeguard and correction of Holy Scripture.

The Second Reformation - sometimes called the Magisterial or Classical Reformation - partially joined and continued the struggles of the First Reformation.

However, it concentrated on the Pauline epistles and spoke more about grace and freedom than about the law of the Gospel. The Second Reformation often reduced the eschatological component of Christian faith to the individual hope for eternal life. While the First Reformation had a strong relationship to the multitude of poor and simple people, the Second Reformation maintained a close connection with the middle stratum and was therefore more conservative.

In discussion of Prof. Molnár's presentation, consultation participants agreed that the First Reformation deserves additional attention and serious study. Also, they called for more dialogue on the relation between the perspectives of the First and Second Reformations in order to see to what extent the two movements' emphases are complementary and to what extent a balance between their emphases can be established.

### **The Radical Reformation**

What is meant by the Radical Reformation? According to Prof. Durnbaugh, Radical Reformation groups such as the 16th-century Anabaptists (Mennonites/Hutterian Brethren), the 17<sup>th</sup> century Friends, and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Church of the Brethren manifested emphases parallel to those of the First Reformation groups. They sought to reform Christian life and the church in a way which constituted an alternative to Constantinian Christendom. They linked faithfulness to the Lordship of Christ with discipleship, accepted Scripture as the basis for life as well as for doctrine, and adopted a restitutionist view of church renewal. The Radical Reformation movements emphasized both nonconformity and dedicated service to the world. They understood the church as a covenant community of believers, developed nonclerical patterns of ministry and reached out to other churches in "sectarian" or "alternative ecumenism".

### **Discussion at the Prague consultation**

After the initial presentations by Professors Molnár and Durnbaugh, most of the consultation consisted of discussion on issues related to the various movements in their historical and contemporary expressions. Participants explored selected characteristics of their groups, noted similarities and differences, acknowledged needed reforms, and addressed contemporary challenges in church or society. Most conversation focused on the significance and authority of Scripture, the Sermon on the Mount, eschatology, and matters related to wealth and economics.

The discussion linked the authority of Holy Scripture with its interpretation in the gathered congregation and with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, the congregation and Scripture, God's will and direction for Christian life can be discerned. In the context of the congregation, God's word provides guidance for and addresses all of life - social and political realities as well as the attitudinal and relational dimensions of Christian faith. The discussion highlighted similarities and differences of emphasis on the relation between Scripture, the Spirit and the gathered congregation in the process of giving shape to Christian discipleship, particularly in its present expressions.

Most groups represented at the Prague meeting emphasize the significance of the Sermon on the Mount for social *praxis* as well as for personal attitudes and relationships. They may understand it as a practical point of reference for daily living and as the truth which Jesus embodied and taught. However, they believe that the Sermon should not be understood

as a message inherently different from, or at variance with, the Epistles or with justification by faith. In this spirit, participants discussed the importance of the Sermon's call for inner transformation as well as for the exterior expressions, or fruits, of faith. They acknowledged the dangers of individualism and legalism in some of the groups and underlined the continuing need for repentance and renewal.

The topic of eschatology, both in terms of its historical significance for these movements and in relation to current understandings, sparked considerable discussion, particularly as a motivating factor in the reformation of the church and for change in social structures. Several traditions represented at the Prague consultation have understood its significance primarily in determining Christian ethics and moral conduct. Others have viewed eschatology more as an interpretation of historical events and the introduction of fundamentally new possibilities into history. Some groups have struggled with forms of millenarianism in their midst. It was agreed that these areas of convergence and divergence merit serious study and further conversation.

The discussion touched on several matters related to economics and social organization. Time did not permit thorough consideration of these issues in either their historical or contemporary expressions. It was agreed that this area of concern should be given serious consideration in future consultations. It was noted that the various groups, since their origin, have challenged economic patterns in different ways, ranging from community of goods to experimental managerial and industrial efforts.

Finally, consultation participants adopted the following declaration in which they expressed their sense of common calling and outlined plans for the future:

"We declare that we intend to stay together and to grow into deeper and more committed fellowship. We believe that we have been called together by our Lord Jesus Christ, who empowers witness to the gospel in the places where we live. In repentance and obedience, we accept Christ's call to give a more visible expression of the unity which is already given in him. We want to seek ways in which we can serve Jesus Christ in "the least of these our sisters and brothers" in the worlds of today and tomorrow. We share in the predicament of humankind regarding the threat of war and of social and economic injustice. We commit ourselves to work toward peace and justice, together with all those who have the same objectives.

"We plan to meet again in June 1987, in order to continue discussions on key questions and to examine possible common projects. A central theme at the 1987 meeting will be *Eschatology and Social Transformation* and will include conversation on related questions such as economics; peace; nonviolence and justice; liberation; and biblical interpretations. Possible common projects which may be considered at the meeting are publication of appropriate First and Radical Reformation materials, congregational exchanges and exploration of relationships to contemporary grassroots Christian movements around the world.

"To coordinate and facilitate our common work, we appoint a continuation committee consisting of Donald Durnbaugh (USA), Hans Meier (USA), Larry Miller (France), Milan Opochenky (Czechoslovakia), and Eva Pinthus (England)."