

The Reluctant Sectarians

"The Intellectual Appeal of the Reformation" by David C. Steinmetz, in
Theology Today (Jan. 2001), P.O. Box 29, Princeton, N.J. 08542.

In looking back at the early Protestant Reformation, observes Steinmetz, a professor of the history of Christianity at Duke University Divinity School, it's easy to overlook an essential truth: its *Catholic* character. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other early reformers "were not Protestants" in the way that later ones would be. "In the nature of the case, they could not be."

The Reformation began in the 16th century as "an intra-Catholic debate," writes Steinmetz. "All of the first generation of Protestant reformers and most of the second had been baptized and educated as Catholics."

Their goal was not to replace a dead or dying church with a new Christianity, says Steinmetz, but rather to achieve "a reformed Catholic Church, built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles, purged of the medieval innovations that had distorted the gospel, subordinate to the authority of Scripture and the ancient Christian writers, and continuous with what was best in the old Church."

Most of the questions that the reformers asked and answered—e.g., Does baptism wash away original sin? Is Christ present in the Eucharist?—"were traditional questions that had been asked and answered before," Steinmetz notes. And even Catholics who rejected the movement, fearing that it would go too far, "felt the force of many Protestant criticisms . . . and attempted to accommodate some of those criticisms within the framework of medieval Catholic orthodoxy."

Eventually, however, the lines hardened, observes Steinmetz. "Faced with a stark choice

between competing visions of Christianity, a large number (though never a majority) of European Catholics born between 1480 and 1510 voluntarily abandoned the Church in which they had been raised in order to ally themselves with one or another of the new reform movements." Having begun as "an argument among Catholic insiders," the Reformation continued as one between Catholics and ex-Catholics "until well past the middle of the [16th] century."

The elements in the Protestant "angle of vision" that the new converts found intellectually attractive, writes Steinmetz, included: the appeal to Christian antiquity; the intention to restate theology in the fresh language of the Bible rather than the stale one of the medieval Scholastics; the doctrine of justification by faith alone; the dedication not only to studying the Bible but to preaching the word of God; and the theoretical support for institutional reforms (such as lifting the ban on clerical marriage) to correct acknowledged abuses.

By the mid-16th century, Steinmetz says, "a permanent, self-perpetuating Protestant culture had developed. The older ex-Catholic leadership of former priests, nuns, friars, and monks was slowly replaced by a new leadership that had never attended Mass, much less said one, and by a laity that had never confessed its sins to a priest, gone on pilgrimage, invoked patron saints, made a binding vow, or purchased an indulgence." By century's end, Protestants were confirmed outsiders who had "settled into a mode of permanent opposition."

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