

# *A Few Words from the Director*

March 2010

A few years ago Alister McGrath, the distinguished Oxford church historian, published a book called *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* (HarperOne 2007). The book is designed as a history of Protestant Christianity from the 16th century to the present, and the idea in question is one of the most familiar and basic of all the themes of the Protestant Reformation--namely, the proposition that all believers, laity and clergy alike, have a right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. McGrath characterizes the advocacy of this idea by the Reformers as a dangerous development for the obvious reason that the dynamic it unleashed was one that could easily give rise to beliefs and practices that were problematic. Even at the time of the Reformation there was evidence of this happening, and it did not take much imagination to envision the eventual outcome of the changes it brought being a situation of spiritual chaos.

Things didn't turn out quite that way, however. Not in the short run, at least, and it is important for us today to understand why. The main reason is this: the churches that were formed at the time of the Reformation were committed not just to giving all their members access to the Bible but also to providing them with the tools necessary to make appropriate sense of the text. Each person was indeed expected and encouraged to read the Bible for him or herself, but the assumption was that people would do so in the context of the life of the church. Especially was this true in Reformed churches, where access to the Bible was accompanied by the provision of a whole series of different resources designed to encourage and facilitate sound interpretation. These churches insisted that their clergy be properly educated, for example, so that they could be relied on to provide sound interpretations of Scripture in their preaching and teaching, and one of their primary responsibilities was to equip lay people--especially lay leaders--with the tools necessary to distinguish interpretations of the Bible that were theologically defensible from those that were not. In addition, every member of the church was expected to undergo catechetical instruction and to be familiar with the more important creedal statements of the church, and the translations they were expected to use in their study of the Bible were filled with commentary written by people who were recognized to be distinguished authorities.

In the beginning, therefore, the Reformation was not a recipe for anything like the chaos critics thought it would bring. If anything, the access to the Bible Protestants gave to lay people tended to produce communities of faith that were characterized by a high degree of agreement (and knowledge) about the essentials of Christian belief. Nor was it just in the beginning that this was true, either. As McGrath's account shows, for much of its history Protestant Christianity has been dominated by well defined traditions that have given a definite shape to the belief and practice of those who chose to identify with them. And as long as the people responsible for maintaining these traditions have done their job at all well, that has remained the case.

But now, centuries later, the situation I have just described appears to be breaking down. The radical individualism that critics (Roman Catholic and otherwise) have said the Protestant Reformation would produce may finally be at hand, and the obvious question for anyone who wants to engage in serious reflection about the future of the church is what to do about this development. My own view is that we have no more serious challenge before us today than to consider carefully what our response should be.

**R. Bruce Douglass, Director**

Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington