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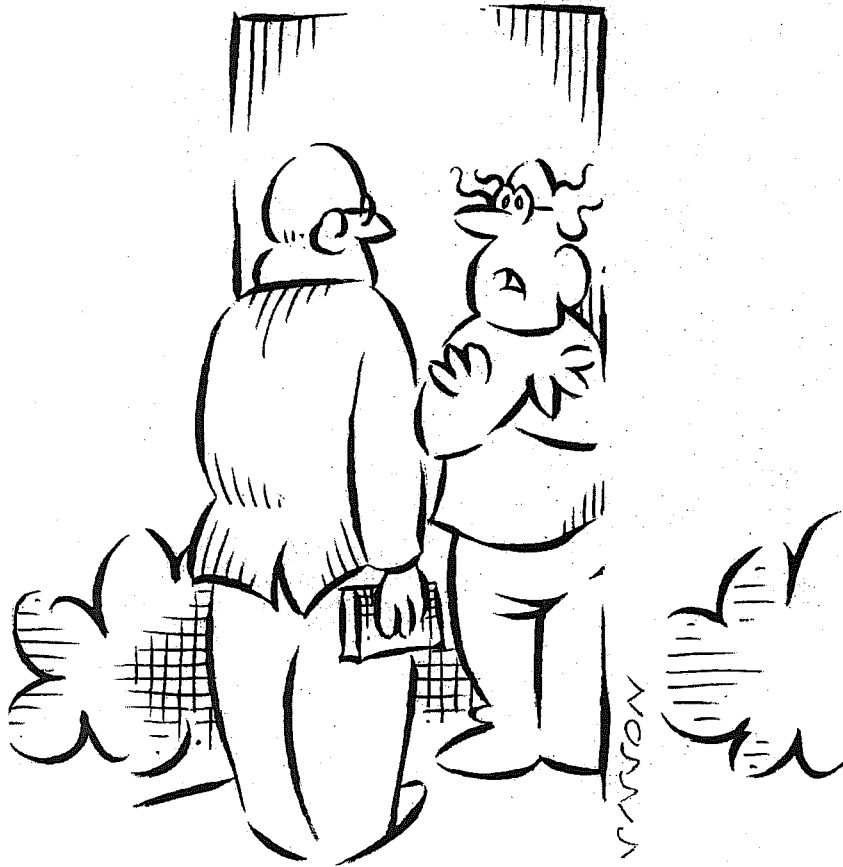
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Ecclesia Semper Reformanda:
*Gerhart Ladner and the Early Christian
Commitment to Renewal*



James D. Smith III



"Well, no, I haven't ever invited Jesus into my heart, but I did once enjoy a tasty little chocolate Buddha."

A generation ago, the Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley offered an historical essay titled, "The Passing of the Church."¹ In it he surveyed the early Christian warning against false doctrine, immorality, apostasy and faintheartedness and declared his conclusion: The Church ultimately ceased to exist. "The purpose of this article is to list briefly the principal arguments supporting the thesis that the church founded by Jesus and the apostles did not survive and was not expected to."² Immense ground was surrendered, he claimed, in the "radical and abrupt" change from first- to second-generation (and second-century) Christianity. Fourth century developments left a situation in which "no rhetorical cunning could bridge the gap between the views of the fourth century and those of the early church."³ The cause was lost.

Those familiar with Mormon apologetic (and other varieties) may ask which came first, the footnotes or the conclusion. But many readers will find some idea of the "Fall of the Church" familiar not only as a historical theme but also (more personally) at the roots of their denomination or movement, and as an attitude in the current church scene.⁴ In this writer's own evangelical, Free Church background there is a vestigial teaching that the true, pristine church was lost—through various scenarios—to Constantine and Catholics.

Yet the first five centuries of Christian voices reveal believers who considered themselves neither wondrously pristine nor hopelessly fallen. Instead, they experienced the initial stages of a perennial reality: "The disparity between the nobility of the faith which the Christian professes and the mediocrity of the life which he leads is reflected by history over and over again."⁵ Out of this honest realization grew repentance and an abiding motto, in Latin, *ecclesia semper reformanda*: "The church must always be reformed." Perhaps the most helpful current survey of this impulse throughout history is Christopher Bellitto's, *Renewing Christianity*.⁶ Beyond question, the classic treatment of this theme in early Christian thought (two years before Nibley and untouched by him) remains Gerhart Ladner's, *The Idea of Reform*.⁷ This brief essay invites its careful reading by those in Christian leadership today.

The impact of Ladner's work has been extraordinary. The January 1999 joint meeting of the American Society of Church History and the American Catholic Historical Association offered a special session: "Gerhart Ladner's *Idea of Reform* Forty Years After." In discussing his influence a former student, Phillip Stump, recognized how the UCLA scholar had defined a new sub-discipline of reform history, delineating its boundaries, establishing methodology and asking incisive questions. He then moved to focus on the early church:

Patristic scholars recognized that the principal achievement of *The Idea of Reform* was to demonstrate convincingly the existence of an idea of reform among the Church fathers which was above all an idea of personal renewal grounded in the theology of the Pauline epistles, and to trace the subtle but significant divergences of that idea in the East and West. . . . The main emphasis in the East lay on reform as restoration of the pristine image of God in the soul, a return to the paradisiac state of Adam before the fall, whereas the fathers of the West, beginning with Tertullian and culminating in Augustine, envisaged a *reformatio in melius*, a movement forward to a state better than that of Adam in paradise.⁸

Ladner, like other early church scholars, readily saw the overlap of Greek and Latin patristic ideas of reform. What struck him was the personal nature of reform, whether the Eastern goal of mystical reform (e.g. recapitulation in Gregory of Nyssa) or the Western aim of practical advancement (e.g. divine grace in Augustine). Though initially individual, these views had larger implications for right order and leadership in reforming Christian society East and West.⁹ In the East, as Stump observed, leadership fell in different ways to the emperor and the monks, with their different visions of the deification [=theosis] of man through "*Christomimesis*." In the West, reflecting Augustine, a city of pilgrims was in need of continual renewal under the priesthood—counseled to live as monks in community (cenobites).¹⁰ Across the empire, it is maintained, monasticism was emerging as a powerful corrective program.

The entire third section of *The Idea of Reform* (over 100 pages) is devoted to discussing monasticism as a vehicle of Christian reform in the early church. Some of Ladner's attention may reflect autobiographical, as well as historical, factors. He was an Austrian convert to Roman Catholicism who immigrated to the United States (like several other European scholars) with Adolph Hitler's rise to power.¹¹ The contrast between life-giving spiritual ideals in an increasingly healthy community and deadly rhetoric in an oppressive *reich* was compelling. In the fourth century, he noted, the church faced the issue of newly-found earthly power:

The origins of Christian monasticism in the strict sense coincide approximately with the moment in the history of the Church in which she was confronted with the new tasks and dangers resulting from her having become a power not only in the spiritual but also in the material order; and from that time onward, those who in one way or another followed the monastic, the "religious" way of life, were the principal agents of reform in the Christian world. . . . The early Christian reformation of man to the image of God far transcended the ethical sphere and was meant to lead him to deification through the

unitive contemplation of God in and through His Son, and to the building of the divine Kingdom and City among men. Monasticism was eminently and concretely directed toward these two goals which ideally were those of every Christian.¹²

Some readers will want to consider these claims, and the underlying model, more closely—whether stirred by an initial skepticism or by the uneasy awareness that our own renewal models may too often be uncritically imported from secular culture. One might ask, what distinguishes Christian reform from other cultural ideas of renewal? Ladner developed his idea of reform by identifying four theoretical overlapping renewal concepts. He claimed: (1) *cosmological* views focus on repetitive cycles (earth turning, seasons) which lack a biblical sense of freedom, (2) *vitalistic* views emphasize physical renewal (plant and animal life) and employ the language of personal “revival” and “renaissance,” but fall short spiritually apart from Christ’s redemptive action, (3) *messianic/millennarian* renewal uplifts an ideal plane of perfection, but admits of counterfeits if not exalting Christ’s Kingdom and (4) a *distinctly Christian* view is cognizant of the others, but is singularly identified with the realities of God’s grace in the conversion, baptism, repentance/penance and restoration of the believer. For the individual and Christian community, the reconstitution of divine life necessitates *reformatio ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei* (Genesis 1:26-27).¹³

No doubt several readers caught the word “revival” in the above paragraph, used in a broadly cultural, not-exclusively-Christian, sense. I believe today’s discussion of reform, renewal and related concepts in the church demands a “spirit and understanding” reexamination of our common terminology and the wise use of it. Frequently, there is the temptation to earnestly pursue directions invoking rich cultural and theological verb-concepts—*renovare, reformare, revivire, transformare, restaurare, corrigere, et al*—which remain inadequately defined or distinguished in our preaching and prayers. Toward what clear end are we exhorting our people and beseeching God’s grace? Historian Gerd Tellenbach has correctly observed that

reform vocabulary is diverse and often lacks accepted starting points.¹⁴ But Ladner’s discussion of the Greek and Latin terms is wonderfully provocative, while Bellitto offers a helpful guideline: “Reform in church history has tended to lean more in the direction of going back to or restoring an original form, while renewal has connoted making that original form “new and improved.”¹⁵

In summary, Christian leaders seeking historical resources for renewal ministries have often drawn upon two eras/movements with promising nametags: “Renaissance” and “Reformation.” Since the beginnings of Christ’s church, however, his followers—stirred by the perfections of his character and convicted by the realities of their personal shortfall—have sought avenues for repentance and restoration, renewal and reform.¹⁶ In his classic text, *The Idea of Reform*, Gerhart Ladner has offered a valuable portrait of early Christian life and thought, worthy of our careful study and prayerful reflection today. Contrasting Christian views with mass-culture impulses toward change, he offers two closing reminders:

The idea of reform implies the conscious pursuit of ends. Whether reform be predominately contemplative or active, its starting point is the element of intention rather than spontaneity, urge or response. The idea of the reform of man to the image and likeness of God became the inspiration of all reform movements in early and medieval Christianity.¹⁷

Author

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Notes

- This article is offered in memory of Dr. Marvin W. Anderson, my former professor at Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

1. "The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme," *Church History*, 30 (June, 1961), 131-54.
2. Nibley, "Passing," 131.
3. Nibley, "Passing," 146
4. For a helpful treatment summarizing early Protestant ideals and antecedents, see Gerald Strauss, "Ideas of *Reformatio* and *Renovatio* from the Middle Ages to the Reformation," in *Handbook of European History, 1400-1600*, edited by Thomas Brady et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 2:1-30. An influential statement of "the church is dead" thought is currently found in Family Radio preacher, Harold Camping's, "The End of the Church Age . . . and After."
5. Robert McNally, *The Unreformed Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1965), 187.
6. *Renewing Christianity: A History of Church Reform from Day One to Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).
7. *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1959; revised edition, New York, 1967).
8. "The Influence of Gerhart Ladner's, *The Idea of Reform*," in *Reform and Renewal in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Studies in Honor of Louis Pascoe, S.J.*, edited by Thomas M. Izbicki and Christopher M. Bellitto (Leiden; Brill, 2000), 3. See also Stump's footnotes for book reviews indicating the initial reception of Ladner's monograph. His encouragement in this present project is warmly acknowledged.
9. For the patristic period and "Carolingian Renaissance" see Bellitto, *Renewing*, 23-46. This section summarizes and interacts with Ladner, *Idea*, 63-283.
10. Stump, "Influence," 5.
11. See Bellitto, *Renewing*, 3-4. For the larger question of his intellectual development note former student John Van Engen's, "Images and Ideas: The Achievements of Gerhart Burian Ladner, with a Bibliography of His Published Works," *Viator*, 20 (1989), 85-115. His memoirs (*Erinnerungen*) were published in 1994, the year following his death.
12. Ladner, *Idea*, 319-20.
13. Ladner, *Idea*, 9-38.
14. *The Church in Western Europe from the Tenth to the Early Twelfth Century*, translated by Timothy Reuter (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1993), 158.
15. Ladner, *Idea*, 39-48. Fr. Louis Pascoe, in this unpublished critique offered at the above-mentioned ASCH/ACHA meeting, noted Ladner's offering of a somewhat laborious definition of reform—"the idea of free, intentional and ever perfectible, multiple and prolonged and ever repeated efforts by man to reassert and augment values pre-existent in the spiritual material compound of the world"—without his offering a similarly complex definition of renewal. Bellitto, *Renewing*, 10.

16. Biblical expressions include Genesis 1:26-27, Psalm 51, Psalm 104:30, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 4:16, and Ephesians 4:22-24.
17. Ladner, *Idea*, 26 and 62.