

# The future of Protestantism.

## A response to Wilhelm Gräb

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Protestantism should not be too wary of modernism and postmodernism. These cultural developments are not the deathblow to the protestant church, but its renaissance. That is one of the challenging conclusions we can draw from Wilhelm Gräb's contribution. It is a reminder of how our former colleague practical theologian here in Kampen, Dick Tieleman, considered the modern crisis of faith to be an optical illusion. Religion isn't dead. Protestantism isn't dead. It's merely relocated to the realm of art, cinema, and culture. Gräb lends credibility to this thesis by a new interpretation of Protestant motto's, most notably of course the justification through grace and faith alone. In this new interpretation, the role of the church is not so much the verbal proclamation of timeless truths, but the facilitator of personal idiosyncratic aesthetic and/or religious experiences.

I must say that I am sympathetic to Gräb's fundamental position. I also appreciate the strategic directions in his paper. In the end, however, for the protestant church this may be a suicide strategy. It may also be too local a western-European perspective.

### THE PROTESTANT PROBLEM

Before I get to that, let me start with this fundamental position. Protestantism is a life form of individual dignity and finite freedom. This may be true, but it certainly isn't the whole truth. These are not the distinguishing characteristics of Protestantism as compared to for example Catholicism. More precise probably is the view that for Protestantism the church is not the central mediating structure of salvation. In that sense, Gräb is correct to point to individualization as a process fostered by Protestantism. Religion has become an individual experience.

If all this is true, there is a problem in Protestantism that merits more attention than Gräb has given it. In his opening lines, he has mentioned the weak institutional forces and internal plurality that could get Protestantism in danger of becoming invisible in society. I would say this is an understatement. Protestantism, especially in the form pictured by Gräb will certainly become

invisible. The Protestant church envisioned here will be available for people looking for an aesthetic religious experience, but the church as church itself will be close to invisible while rendering this service.

Perhaps this is not just a problem with Gräß's position. It may be inherent to Protestantism itself. Its radical democratic and demythologizing tendencies can be understood as kenotic, a dimension addressed yesterday by Gerrit Neven in his comments on McCormack. If we follow these kenotic principles consistently, we are in fact en route to the dissolution of Protestantism. That is not an historic accident, given with the rise and fall of modernity. It is directly connected to the heart – or theological essence, if one would use that term – of Protestantism.

But there is always the other side of Protestantism, one that counterbalances this kenotic or self-destructive character. It is the side of rational organization. Maybe this is more Calvin than Luther, but I am no historian of religion. Let it suffice to say that the Protestant influence on society that Max Weber described has more to do with rationality than with kenosis. This rational, functionalistic, and in the end also institutional dimension is needed to protect Protestantism from its own kenotic principles. It is the petrification that keeps it intact.

The dark side of this institutional dimension is the terror of Protestantism. Tinyiko Maluleke reminded us of the connotations of Protestantism in Africa: slave castles and apartheid. Obviously this does not regard only Protestantism, but it does regard us. The Protestant inspiration can find its way into liberating individualism, the way Gräß describes here, it can also express itself in oppressive actions and structures and fundamentalist violence, especially when this individualism is adopted by those in power. For rich, white, educated, male persons, individualism is appealing, but its implication may well be the marginalization or even oppression of the less powerful.

Precisely here, of course, we need the correction of the kenotic principle that opposes institutionalization and criticizes our self-righteous use of Protestant elements like justification. We might also say that we need the ethical communal correction, one that necessarily involves the global context and especially the otherness. Only with these corrections can we protect ourselves and others from the hazards of Protestantism.

## THE PROTESTANT FUTURE

But let me return to the prospects, the future of Protestantism, at least the Western version. Gräß gives a lot of weight to the individualized plural religious needs and expressions and claims that that is truly a Protestant approach. When he addresses the church, he advocates thorough reshaping. A change is needed, in which churches self-consciously are transformed into spaces and performances of symbols and rituals. They need to uphold their Christian, even Protestant profile,

but at the same time they should allow for plural, even syncretistic religious expressions.

Such a vision for church life certainly appeals to me. I am one of those post-modern men Gräb describes, when he says: it feels good to them to come to such a non-dogmatic, open church, depending on what appeals to them, what touches them and what concerns them in a fundamental way. Yes, that's the church I want to attend. Or, maybe not so much attend, but pass by, as a coincidence, every now and then.

Here we find one of the strategic problems. In the Netherlands, one of the most influential visions for congregational renewal rests on the metaphor of the inn. Travelers may stop there, have a drink, rest, meet other travelers, and move on. The problem is, however, that this inn will only function if there is a warden. A church for post-modern visitors, hoping for an aesthetic or religious experience will need modern innkeepers to keep the shop running. In that sense, this is not really a new practical ecclesiology, it is an inspiring local missiology. It does not change the church, but only its communication. For the Protestant church to work with this vision, we need people willing to engage themselves in a more stable enduring and encompassing manner. Travelers are not enough.

In Gräb's vision, probably these volunteers are still present. In many local churches they are. But if they have the same needs and tendencies as the travelers, chances are that they will join the travelers and move from church to church, from cinema to cinema, from museum to museum. Why not follow the seekers to places where new experiences are offered? If the volunteers and the travelers are of the same kind, there will be no volunteers left. And if they are truly different, how will the volunteers offer what the travelers seek?

This is not just a question of marketing, planning, or evangelization. The problem lies at a deeper level. Sociologists of religion, working with Rational Choice Theories have distinguished between inclusive and exclusive religious organizations. The inclusive are close to Gräb's vision. They do not claim to have the truth, they accept syncretism, they offer religious goods for anyone in need of them. Most of all, they do not oppose multiple membership. You are free to participate in more than one religious organization. Exclusive organizations keep strict boundaries. These are either/or groups and churches, proclaiming the one and only truth. The point here is that inclusive religious organizations wither away, whereas exclusive organizations tend to be much stronger and appealing. In our time we can see how evangelical, Pentecostal, fundamentalist, and orthodox Protestant churches are flourishing when compared to mainstream liberals of western Europe. People would rather choose exclusive religious organizations, because the rewards are much higher. Obviously, Gräb's church is beautiful, aesthetically inspiring, and above all, free to enter and to leave. But the exclusive organization will offer what this free church can not: eternal truth and a sweet hereafter. It can offer experiences of the real presence of God, whereas Gräb's

church can only offer space for desire. It is precisely because it is an exclusive organization that members are convinced of the truth. Every sacrifice they make for their religion is further proof of an even higher reward.

In other words, although I would gladly visit the Protestant church of Wilhelm Gräb's dreams, I cannot see that this is the Protestant church of the future. Many have claimed that in fifty years or so Protestantism world wide will be evangelical or Pentecostal, not liberal. It will indeed be experience-focused like Gräb promotes, but in a much different way. It will affirm doctrinal truth and oppose syncretism. It will use collective pressure to defend this religion. It will build churches rather than create space. That exclusivism is also a shape of global Protestantism.

And then one day, somewhere, maybe, there will be a new reformation, in which dreamers like Gräb will nail it on the door of the church and proclaim that the message of the gospel is individual, liberating, and kenotic. To me, that constant struggle of the kenotic and the petrified is extremely protestant. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*.