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REFORMATION CONSULTATION IN PRAGUE ON ESCHATOLOGY
AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

by N. Gerald Shenk

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A second consultation on the First and Radical Reformations brought representatives of eight historic groups to Prague, Czechoslovakia, June 23-28, 1987. The Comenius Faculty of Protestant Theology hosted more than thirty members of the Church of the Brethren, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Hutterian Brethren, Mennonite Church, Moravian Church, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and Waldensians.

Participants hoped to raise a joint witness to urgent issues of the contemporary world, based in the similarity of their spiritual roots in movements and communities of faith and obedience at the fringes of European Christendom. A previous gathering had explored the historical roots (January 1986); the task of Prague 1987 was to discern the implications which the separatist history of the great hope of God's intervention has had for actual transformation in the world.

Professor Josef Smolik, Dean of the Comenius Faculty, led directly to the central theme with a meditation on strength through weakness, from I Corinthians 2. The groups represented in the consultation have traditionally looked at history from below, he observed, and this offers a unique perspective on solidarity with those at the margins of society. Smolik pointed to the vulnerability of faith as the "cross of reality," in which the centrality of Christ is contrasted with the "miserable situation of the true Church and of believers in this world."

Professor Milan Opočensky, also of the Comenius Faculty and a key organizer of the consultation, stressed the importance of recovering original Reformation thinking on eschatology as a resource for the contemporary church in dealing with urgent issues in peacemaking, economic justice, and ecological concern for all of creation. He

argued that this agenda should have priority as a test of faith. "In spite of our sinfulness and fragility," Opocensky affirmed, "in spite of demonic powers at work in the world, we are called upon to change the world. We are considered worthy of becoming God's co-workers in the process of humanizing this world." He underlined in conclusion: "Humankind is looking for a revolutionary Christianity which will reject the world as evil, and will change it."

In another major presentation, Professor Marlin Miller of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (Elkhart, Indiana) portrayed "the church in the world as the community of the Kingdom." He identified differences among various Anabaptist groups in the sixteenth century in reference to their views of eschatology. "Evangelical" groups expected the "coming Kingdom of God on earth" to bring judgment and justice and peace, but they refused to resort to violent means to hasten the restoration of true Christianity. The more militant and revolutionary groups struggled for a new order through direct action, understanding themselves as agents of divine judgment.

Other participants recognized that even sectarian withdrawal into exemplary communities represents an implicit rejection of the surrounding social order. Both separation and direct involvement can be seen as stances "against the world and also for the world."

Input on economic justice by Prof. Hendrik de Lange of the Netherlands called upon the churches to take responsibility for restoring human relations broken by the sins of economic greed and exploitation. Poverty, hunger, and the wasteful depletion of natural resources are destroying human community on a global scale. Less developed nations and future generations alike face ecological and economic disasters unless present trends are checked by changes at the level of personal lifestyle and of structural realignment.

In conclusion, participants affirmed a desire to continue the process "to grow together into a deeper and more committed fellowship," having "jointly returned to our roots, drawing on the experience of our respective communities throughout the centuries." Hans Meier of the Hutterian Brethren had reminded the group that the witnessing community first acts to put its own fellowship under the discipline of Christian love, including economic equality, before it attempts to act as a conscience for the secular order. The final affirmation brought this into relation to the theme of suffering which appears so prominently among the inheritors of Peter of Waldo, Jan Hus, Menno Simons, and other dissenting reformers: "We must confess that we who come from diverse dissenting traditions are also heirs of a post-Constantinian world. We confess our temptation to seek power and influence. Yet we are learning again from our past that a Christian existence is fragile, uncertain, and risky. While we do not

glorify poverty and suffering, we know that we may be called upon to join the marginalized and suffering. Our faith in Jesus Christ lets us see that we in all our efforts are sustained by God's forgiveness and grace."