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## THE PROTESTANT REFORMED RELIGION— WHAT IS IT?

### I

WHEN Paul spoke on his own behalf before Felix he made a confession. It was to the effect that he worshipped the God of his fathers after a way which his opponents called heresy. He did this believing all things that are written in the Law and in the Prophets. What he believed was the common Faith of Christians and his worship was that which was to be found in the practice of his fellow-believers. Again when speaking before Agrippa he could tell of the witness which he had long borne to the message entrusted to him. He had borne that witness to small and to great, saying none other things than the Prophets and Moses did say should come. Moses and the Prophets were for him authoritative when they spoke of the things that the Gospel now opens up. His countrymen who were not believers when he met them in Rome could describe the Christian body of which he was one as a sect that was everywhere spoken against. The early New Testament Church had to run the gauntlet of opposition. This came from two sides. On the one side were the unbelieving Jews: on the other was the outside heathen world. The opposition of the latter could be taken for granted.

What could be said of Paul and the early Christians may now be said of the Protestant Reformed Religion and its adherents. Paul could claim that he adhered, and that strictly, to the Scriptures which the Jews themselves held in their hands and owned to be of authority as the Word of God. So the Reformed Faith holds to the authority of Scripture, not only the Scriptures of Moses and the Prophets but the Scriptures, too, of the New Testament in which we have the witness and teaching of the Apostles. The New Testament books open up as the full flower does the bud what was hid in the bosom of the Law and the Prophets. With Christ as the final Revealer of God we have in the Scriptures of the two Testaments the full revelation that the Living God has been pleased to give of

Himself. This full revelation is the message from heaven that historical Protestantism claims to believe and to honour. And recognizing the Scriptures of both Testaments to be the Word of God it claims to bear witness to and to teach none other things than these Scriptures set forth. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is in this sense the Religion of Protestants. That Religion holds to the divine authority of the Scriptures which it regards as the very Word of God; and it professes to worship God according to the way in which those Scriptures teach that He ought to be worshipped.

The Christians of Paul's days were a sect that was everywhere spoken against by the unbelieving Jews who had nothing good to say of them. They spoke of them as heretics and of their faith as a heresy. Such was the treatment meted out to the Christian Faith by the Jews in the times of the Apostles. Yet the Christians believed all that Moses and the Prophets taught and did not teach anything else. The Jews too, professed devotion to Moses and the Prophets. They claimed to regard their writings as the very Word of God. So far Paul and his Jewish adversaries had what was professedly common ground. The Jews, however, held alongside of the Law and the Prophets what they called the Tradition of the Fathers; and this, which they held over and above the written word, they took as the key to that word's meaning. Thus they set aside the direct authority of what they admitted to be the Word of God in order to give place to the teaching that had grown up among their fathers and that had come down to them by word of mouth. This teaching our Lord and His Apostles set aside. So here the early Christians and unbelieving Israel joined issue. And because the Apostles and their followers would not yield to the authority of the Fathers they were spoken of as a sect which was a heresy. The Church of Jesus Christ had thus to meet with opposition from those who adhered to this oral Tradition.

The oral Tradition which was thus accepted was looked upon by its adherents as the last word in authority. This last authoritative word is the interpretative authority. Thus it came about that when the Tradition of the Elders was taken as the key to Moses and the Prophets it set aside those Scriptures which Israel still in name professed to hold as the Word of God. Here we have a likeness to what was the case with regard to the unreformed Church of four hundred years ago.

## II

When we speak of the Protestant Reformed Religion we use words that have a definite place in history; and it is when we put them in their proper setting that we can see what precisely they mean. The Reformation movement was one that broke away from the Rabbinism of the Western organized Catholic Church. That Church chose to stand for the Faith as it had taken concrete shape under the moulding influence of the Fathers, the Hierarchy and the Doctors of the Mediaeval Schools. It stood thus for what had come to be a very different thing from the Christianity of the Apostolic Age. It rested on mere Church authority. The appeal that the Reformers took when they were met with a challenge on the ground that they did not hold with the Fathers was away from the Fathers altogether. As Martin Luther put it, he appealed from the fathers to the grandfathers. And this appeal which was common to the brotherhood of the Reformers went behind the accretion of ages of change to the teaching of our Lord and His Apostles as that was to be found in the pages of Holy Writ. It took the Scriptures that enshrined the Apostolic witness and message as of final and unquestioned authority. It was an appeal from the words of man to the Word of God.

In accepting, as they did, the New Testament the Reformers accepted also the Old; for it is easy to learn from the New Testament books how our Lord and His Apostles treated the earlier Scriptures. Thus the Reformers went back to Holy Writ as the very record of the Word of God; and in making this appeal they cited authority that their opponents acknowledged to be divine. For however far the teaching Church of Pre-reformation days had got away from the teaching of the Apostles it still professed to hold that the New Testament Scriptures have come to us with the authority of the Apostles of Jesus Christ. The current Faith of Western Europe had followed the line of Church traditional teaching. And when the Reformers dared to go behind the teaching Church and the authority of the Mediaeval Tradition they were treated by their adversaries in precisely the same way as the Christians were in the days of the Apostles. They were called a sect and wherever the authority of Rome carried weight this sect was everywhere spoken against. It was called a heresy. Its advocates were

labelled heretics, and it was only in the teeth of the most strenuous opposition that it made headway.

Thus the Reformers had to pass through the ordeal of just such criticism and censure as Paul and his fellows had to face in their own day. Yet as they did so they could say as the Apostles did, that they worshipped God believing all things that were written in the Law and in the Prophets. And they might go farther and claim that they believed all things that were written in the Gospels and the other writings of the Apostles. And not only could they say that they believed all that the Scriptures taught, they could add with Paul that they said none other things than the Prophets and Moses had said should come. Thus at once on the negative and on the positive side might they make their claim. They believed all that they found written in the Bible and they said nothing else than it did.

This illustrates the two sides of the teaching of the Reformers. Protestantism has often been described as a mere protest or a thing of negatives. This, of course, is a sheer caricature of the truth. Yet we admit at once that it had and has a negative side. So also has every truth. It presents a negative face to the lie that it confronts. Its witness, however, is in itself of a positive character. But the needs of the case called in Reformation days, and call still, for opposition to the lie which set the truth aside. In its own place and time a negation is a very good thing. If it is wanting when it is called for something essential is wanting.

The truth, however, has its positive side of direct witness and affirmation; and it was because of the value that our Reformers had learned to set upon the Gospel that they were so zealous in their polemic of protest. They had found the Gospel to be the power of God unto their own salvation and they protested with all their might against what they looked upon as a mere counterfeit which was altogether another thing than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They held the historic Christian Faith and were prepared to defend it even to death. This indeed in many cases was the end of their witness. They sealed their testimony with their blood. They loved not their lives to the death. For they loved more the truth that had set them free. And this being so their deep love for the truth had as its convinced companion a hearty hatred for the lie. It was said as one of our Scots Worthies was going to his death that he died

a true Protestant. Argyll heard this and added, "Yes, and with a heart hatred of Popery". The depth and the intensity of the conviction with which men hold the truth come out in the aversion that they show to its rival and enemy, the lie. With men of conviction such as the Reformers were it was little wonder that they protested so vigorously against the lie that burned their brethren's bones to dust.

When Protestantism is denounced as lacking in positive witness it is to be charitably hoped that those who use such words do so in ignorance of the facts. Though ignorance is not a sufficient excuse when it is easy for men to be free from it and to learn the truth, yet it helps to extenuate the guilt of those who make an ill grounded charge. They did not make it knowingly. In view of how accessible the facts are it is a disreputable device, a more controversial dodge, to accuse our Protestant Faith of being a thing of negatives. We acknowledge that it has a negative aspect. But a shield has two sides. So has the truth. And the truth of the matter remains that Protestantism as historically understood and as its teaching is embedded and set forth in the Confessions of the Reformed Churches is anything rather than a tissue of negatives. It makes its appeal to the original witnesses to the Christian facts and the authentic teachers of the Christian Faith. This is surely positive enough.

### III

If we are then to describe the Faith of our Reformers we may begin with this first fact. It was Christian. It was this for it took its place at the feet of the Apostles. And as it heard their Lord speaking through them it said in effect, "I will hear what the Lord will speak. Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth." Those who held this Faith believed with the heart what Holy Scripture has to say throughout its whole extent from first to last.

This first fundamental being as it is, we might add that such a Christian Faith is the truest Catholicity. For the true Catholicity embraces the whole truth of the word as the true Catholic Church includes all that in every place call on the name of Christ Jesus the Lord. It may be looked upon as a paradox to claim that Protestant teaching was and is the true Catholic Faith. Because it was so truly and as pervasively Christian this held good in regard to it. And it is the true universal Faith of the Church of God just because it was so

comprehensive. For the perfect Christian creed embraces all the truth and leaves out nothing. It was not the fashion that found favour with the Reformers that he who believed least should be held in the highest esteem. Nay, there was no element of Apostolic truth that entered into the attainments in doctrine of the Church of former days with which they had a quarrel. Their controversy was with a type of things that masqueraded as Catholic while it was not Christian. Some, indeed, of our Reformed writers used to speak of their own side as the Catholics or the true Catholics while they called their opponents the Romanists or the Papists. They prized the word Catholic, grudged it to their adversaries and were well assured they were themselves the Catholics.

There is another adjective which is applied to the Faith that the opponents of Protestantism lay claim to as though it were their own. They boast of holding Primitive doctrine or the Primitive Faith. This word, however, belongs not to them but to us. We who hold the Faith of our Reformers in doing so hold the Primitive Faith of the Christian Church. For we believe all that the Word teaches and we say in the matter of Christian profession none other things than those that stand on record in the pages of Holy Writ. We hold it to the full.

There is still another word that is abused in this connection by the question-begging terms that Rome and its train of Pseudo-Catholics employ. They boast of the Apostolic purity of their Faith. No Faith can be holy or purely Apostolical that diverges from the witness and the teaching of the word of the Apostles as that of Rome has done. The Reformers, on the other hand, as they took their place at the footstool of the fully qualified and the final teachers of the Church held the true Apostolical Faith. Thus we see that what is really the property of historical Protestantism has been wrongly filched from it and made use of to command the claims put forward by men who are not prepared to abide by the standard given us in Holy Writ. That is the standard by which we may learn what is the pure and primitive, the Catholic and Apostolical Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Religion of the Reformers was in an eminent degree the believing and loyal acceptance of the full Evangelical verity. For that verity is exhibited for all ages in the message and witness of the Holy Bible. This Religion is positive in its Faith and in its profession

and in its fruits. It is negative in its protest against the lie and error and in its polemic as it controverts them.

We have seen what the Reformation Rule of Faith is. It heartily accepts the Holy Scriptures as being what they profess to be and as being what historical Christianity accepts them as being. It treats the books of the New Testament as in witness and in teaching the abiding ministry of the Apostles of the Lord. With this Faith it has to contend against specific unbelief in every form. Its attitude to the Scriptures of the Old Testament it has learned to take because it accepts them as our Lord and His Apostles evidently did. To quarrel with it on this subject is to put oneself outside the pale of the Christian Confession. As to the Scriptures which it thus holds to be the Word of God it recognises that it is not only men's privilege but their duty to read, study, believe and obey them. Thus only can they treat them worthily as the Word of God.

The Reformed Protestant Religion thus stands for the right and the duty of exercising our individual judgement as to what the Scriptures teach. At this point there is a curious attitude adopted towards private judgement on the part of its Roman critics. They maintain that it is obligatory on man to receive as final the teaching of their Church as to what the Doctrine of Scripture is. This they can do as rational beings only when they have exercised their judgement by way of deciding to give it up and to be at the beck and call of the official Church. At the same time in regard to the teaching of the Church they assume that, unless ignorance be taken to be the mother of devotion, the judgement of her children is to be exercised in receiving what she teaches, however much they may shut their eyes to what the Scriptures say. "Shut your eyes and open your mouth and see what the King will give you" may do well enough when children play with one another. It can hardly be spoken of as wisdom for men.

If early Christianity had to meet the oppositions of the Synagogue and of the heathen world our Protestant Reformed Faith is in an analogous position. It has its conflict with the Pharisees of Rome and with the Sadducees of Unbelief. Thus it has to keep up a fight on at least two fronts. On the one it maintains its warfare with Rome in her doctrine as to the way of life. On the other it contends with Infidels for the very truth of the Gospel itself.



In regard to the way of life a battle has to be fought in opposing the teaching of Rome as to her sacramental principles. Our Reformers insisted that the Sacraments are of saving good only to believers. Rome looks on what she calls the Sacraments of the New Law as effective in themselves unless a man puts an obstacle in the way of their achieving the end for which they have been instituted. Our fathers were called on also to withstand not only the perversion of which the Roman Church is guilty in the use it makes of the word Justification but also the confusion of which it is guilty as to the ground and method of a sinner's acceptance with God. The Justification of the sinner by faith alone stands in opposition to Justification by sacraments and works of creature merit wrought by man himself.

The watchword of the first Reformers was Justification by faith alone. When Rome opposes this watchword and insists on the need of good works of personal merit, she forgets that important as we Protestants regard free Justification to be, we do not fall into the error of thinking or teaching that Justification is all the salvation that a man needs. It is, we hold, faith alone that justifies, but the faith that justifies is not alone. It is ever attended with the whole train of graces that are the fruit and the evidence of the new birth. Of these each has its own place. But none of the other graces receives the righteousness of God which is of faith and upon faith. It is the special function of saving faith to receive and rest upon Jesus Christ, the end of the Law for righteousness as He is set before us in the Gospel. It takes Him as the Lord our righteousness and by it we become the righteousness of God in Him. What He is to us we are in Him. Thus in opposing the tangle of Roman confusion in regard to the Justification of a sinful man the Reformed Faith sets forth Heaven's easy, artless, unencumbered plan. In so doing it bears witness to the exclusive Priestly work of Christ and to the terms on which man may enjoy the salvation and life everlasting that He has won. It strips the sinner of his rags that it may clothe him in the righteousness of God and he may thus stand accepted before God in his Lord as the righteousness of God to him.

#### IV

In maintaining this teaching, the Apostolic Faith as to how we can come to have our sins forgiven and reach peace

with God our Protestant Reformed Faith sets open before us the way of approach to God with acceptance. It finds room for no other Priestly Mediator between the sinner and God but the one that God has designated and provided and revealed. In so doing it lays stress on the common and universal priesthood of all believers in Christ. Thus it finds no room for an official priesthood to come between God and the rank and file of His people on earth. With the opening up of this Gospel teaching it is easy to see what an upheaval there was of the Mediaeval order of things. The organized visible Church had come to be ossified into a close hierarchy who were its officers and framework with a depressed constituency who were dependent for the mediation of every blessing on the official ordained priesthood. The Rabbinism which had come before the days of the Apostles to lord it over the Church in Israel arose again in the Christian Church. With its traditional doctrine it took the form of a hierarchy that claimed mediatorial special functions alike as authoritative teachers and as sacrificing priests. With its rise it blocked the way of life and the channel of gracious salvation.

History has a way of repeating itself. It virtually describes the old orbit over again. So we find in the professing Christian Church that just such a tendency showed itself at work as we find in Judaism of old. While the writings of the Apostles as we have them in the New Testament Scriptures are still acknowledged to be their work and to be entitled to be looked upon as documents of authority a tradition that has grown up in past ages has come to be regarded as an authoritative exhibition of the Faith of the Church. As such it is treated as though it held the key to the understanding of the Apostolic writings and as the last word it is the controlling word. The teaching Church which has this key is regarded as infallible. So the key may set aside the message which it proposes to guard and to expound. Thus in the organized Catholicism of the Western Church the development of doctrine which has been handed down from the Fathers has supplanted the verity of the plain Apostolic message. Thus what happened of old in Israel has happened again. Moses and the Prophets were outwardly honoured yet their teaching authority was undermined. So with Christ and His Apostles. The New Testament records are admitted to be the Word of God yet the traditions of man have got such a plea as to set aside the simplicity and the freeness of the message of the Gospel.

The process of change which at last issued in a revolution began at an early date. There was a warning given to the Church at Philippi to beware of the Concision. There were teachers abroad who were mangling the Gospel. They laid a stress on Israel and their position and the need and value of circumcision which came to this, that as the Christ was the Hope of Israel the outside world must become members of the commonwealth of Israel that they might share in the Saviour of Israel.

On the scheme of these Judaisers it was not enough for the heathen that they should repent and believe on the Son of God. For with them He is not the one Mediator between God and the World. Israel was a second mediator and the heathen must become Jews or they should not share in the Saviour or in the salvation of Israel. Their plan of things was that the Church in the world was to be a great Church extension scheme for Israel. This leaven which was not content with one Mediator did not cease to work. It made membership of an outward body essential to an interest in the Christian hope. And this leaven of the Concision came to the height of its achievement in the exclusive claims that the Church of Rome puts forward. With her the Church has become a second mediator and the admission of a second makes it possible and even easy to bring in any number more. Along this line another gospel or one of a different kind that is not a Gospel at all has come to take the place of the Gospel which was of God about Christ and was proclaimed by the Apostles.

It was the reception by the Galatians of a gospel of the concision which was no Gospel at all but brought them under the Law of works, for every one of them that was circumcised had become a debtor to do the whole Law and so had fallen away from a salvation that was of grace, it was this falling away that called forth Paul's Epistle whose message gave the battle cry of the Reformation. From that Epistle and the Epistle to the Romans a revived Church learned Law and Gospel. And as they learned their lesson the Reformers cast away the whole yoke and load of Mediaeval Church teaching and ordinances which had usurped the place of the Gospel and had brought bondage in their train. There was thus on their part a return to the serious godliness and the bright hopefulness of the Christianity of truly primitive times. Such was the outcome of the Reformers' protest against the Pharisaism of Rome.

The revolt at the Reformation against the leaven of the Pharisees which met with such success was not the result of giving place to the leaven of the Sadducees. It proceeded on the ground of a cordial acceptance of the divine authority of Holy Scripture. It had no quarrel with the supernatural. Nay, its faith embraced without question or reserve or ambiguity the truth of the Gospel which tells of the coming of God's own Son as Saviour, of His dying the accursed death of the Cross, of His triumphant resurrection from the dead and of the hope of His glorious appearing. It told of a truly supernatural salvation that is pervasively divine through and through. It is of God in its origin, in its nature, and in its working. So the protest of historical Protestantism had no place for the kind of teaching that exalts reason at the expense of revelation. It would not recognize human reason as either the source of authority or as its final norm. Nay, it looked upon the highest function of man's reason as being its humble recognition of the voice of the Supreme Reason as that voice is to be heard uttering the oracles of God. Thus our Reformers had no room for the Socinian denial of the mystery of godliness and the mystery of the atonement. Nor had they anything in common in their doctrine of reason with the full-blown Rationalism that took up the succession of the earlier Socinians and carried out their Sadducean teaching to the even greater extremes of modern and contemporary unbelief. They had no thought of playing fast and loose with the truth or the integrity or the direct divine authority of the Sacred Scriptures.

Historically our Reformers were more in the succession of that strain of witness which was true to the teaching of Augustine in regard to the doctrines of grace. This was the common teaching of the Reforming movement in its earlier phases. In the course of its contentings the truth of these doctrines was brought out more clearly and fully than in any previous age of the Church since the days of the Apostles. The Lutheran Churches when they gave way to a co-operative doctrine of Synergism broke away from the consensus of the first Reformers. In this respect the Reformed as distinct from the Lutheran Confessions preserved the witness to the thorough supernaturalism of a gracious salvation. Their teaching in this respect comes out as surely in the Anglican Articles as in the Canons of Dort or the Westminster Confession. The Synod of Dort indeed, as an

almost Ecumenical Council of the Reformed world when it condemned Arminianism, made unmistakable the Anti-Pelagian witness that was borne by the Reformed Churches. They preserved what had through the dark ages been the kernel of the teaching of those who walked in the steps of the Doctor of grace. In doing so they served themselves heirs to the Evangelical as distinct from the Hierarchical tradition of the Christian Ages. For they would not hold to the autonomy of the will of man to the prejudices of the holy sovereignty of God. In thus standing fast by the Doctrine of Grace the Reformed Confessions present the Apostolic and Evangelical Faith in its fullest exhibition and in its purest expression.

There has been no end to the travesties and perversions of the principle of Protestantism. It is easy, however, for those that care to find the truth in regard to it to learn what that truth is. Let them only look into the Confessions in which the Reformed Churches set forth their Faith. That Faith has borne fruit. And if men are willing to judge a tree by its fruits they may see in the orderly living and the national prosperity that have gone in the train of the Reformation so much of its outcome; and from this they may form an estimate of the high spiritual and ethical character of the Faith that has produced results of such a kind. And they are only a by-product. The direct fruit of the Reformed Faith is to be seen in renewed lives and in a literature that embodies the record of such spiritual, godly, fruitful living. It has let in the light. For Protestantism does not hold that ignorance is the mother of devotion. There are things that shun the light of day. It is looked upon as their enemy for it exposes them. They flourish most in a dim religious light and for them the dimmer it is the more it is welcome. These things may speak of the light of day as the garish day. They prefer to be seen in a less revealing light. The Reformed Faith reverences mysteries that are mysteries indeed. It believes in a God that it can trust in the dark. It believes in a God whom it can honour as King. For it holds that He is King, being all that He is in His uncreated perfection. And when they find His footsteps past finding out they can rest in the confidence that just and true are the ways of Him who is the King of Saints.