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# THE CHURCH OF THE REFORMATION

## I

THE present situation in some Continental Churches faces us with the question: Will these Churches, will we ourselves, be able to maintain our position as a truly Protestant Church? This question is nowhere so sharply raised as in German Protestantism, and therefore it will be advisable to look at its present conflict under a world-wide aspect.

There is a struggle in the very Church in which, four hundred years ago, the Reformation began—the Church of Martin Luther. And the more one gets an intimate knowledge of the background, the more one sees that this conflict in the German Church is almost exactly of the same kind as that in which the Reformers themselves were involved.

Luther and Calvin had to deal with two great adversaries: Papalism and Humanism. The Pope declared himself lord of the ecclesiastical tradition, possessed with the treasure of the Church and therefore its monarch. And the humanists and religious enthusiasts declared themselves lords of their own lives, possessed with the light of the Spirit, the light of reason or the light of devotion. In both cases man was very religious, but he himself was the master: he encountered God as His partner. The mathematical expression of this Roman and this humanistic thinking is the ellipse with two focusses: God and man, namely the giving God and the enriched man now standing on his own feet. The Reformers frankly refused to follow either of these conceptions. They declared that man never can lay hold upon the objective gifts of God, for instance upon the Sacraments or the Scriptures, nor can he lay hold upon God's gifts as conceived in terms of subjectivity. For the Reformers, justification by faith is the central conception. It is not the assistance of God enabling a man to gain perfection, after this man has striven at least partly successfully towards this end. It is not working in a system where man is fellow-worker with God, but justification is simply the free gift of God to a man who is rebellious against Him, dead in his sins even in the most beautiful expressions of his humanity and religiousness. So justification is the miracle of God's mercy, as inconceivable as

the Resurrection, a miracle, made possible by the Incarnation and Calvary and Easter and Pentecost, not by any human datum. One can dare a mathematical expression here, too: the relation between God and man is like a circle with only one centre. The justified sinner has to confess: All my sources are in Thee, they are in Thee and they remain in Thee.

This conception, which proved itself to be the rediscovery of the Gospel, is the great heritage of Protestantism. But the generations after the Reformers up to our days did not remain faithful to this insight, and at once they fell back either to Romanism or to Humanism. That is true of almost all Protestant Churches. In Germany, Papalism showed itself in an autocratic rule of the Orthodox Church authorities, without sufficient counterbalance of the synodal element. Humanism expressed itself in a theology and a preaching which honestly tried to serve God, but also to serve the interests of man. The chief concern was not so much to preach the Word of God as to solve human problems and to meet the secular contemporaries on their own ground. This humanistic theology, expressing itself in hundreds of different forms, submitted the Word of God to the criticism of man. Strangely enough, this preaching and thinking of the Church which aimed at being up to date, did not succeed in appealing to the masses. It could not prevent the rise of atheism and materialism. So the Church lost more and more its central position in public life. In the Middle Ages and even in the first centuries after the Reformation, Christianity held rather a questionable but still a remarkable key position in the whole cultural sphere. But now this central place is no longer occupied by the Church. Partly it is empty, and the consequence is indifferentism and relativism. Partly it is occupied by some secular potency which has assumed a religious significance, by art or money or social revolution or political conviction.

## II

After the Great War, a new political conception grew out of the special problems and difficulties in Germany. It covered in its programme all these problems, giving solution for the social question, for unemployment, for a new construction of the inner organization of the country, for a confessional peace

between 40 millions of Protestants and 20 millions of Catholics, finally also for a new relationship to the other nations. What wonder that this movement filled the thinking and hoping of many! Once again the empty place in the centre of modern civilization was occupied for them. Therefore, after the great changes of 1933, the Church was faced with a serious problem. Would it be a prophet, serving the Eternal King, and therefore and so serving the nation; or would it be a sort of "priest", trying to sanctify the national aims and secondly also to serve God?

The Church in Germany acted according to its fatal heritage: once again "Romanism" was victorious, a Papal system, more radical than ever before, governed the Church. And also the old humanistic disobedience towards the Word of God continued its course: formerly it had acknowledged reason or religious feeling or socialism as authorities besides the Revelation of God; now it acknowledged the new political principles. The theologians of this school declared that there is a second source of revelation besides the Bible, namely God's Word as spoken in the national history of 1933, in the rise of the nation. They declared that this is the hour of God for the country and that therefore the Church must act according to this hour of grace. They did not see that they were moving, in spite of all their honest and deep religiousness, in a secular enthusiasm. Their interest lay in the political sphere, and suddenly they worshipped two gods: the one who has spoken through Jesus Christ, and the other who has spoken through something else. And the second god proved himself stronger in his influence. The picture of Jesus, formed in all phases of Humanism according to the respective secular interests, once again was shaped by the second god: Jesus was seen as the great unselfish Hero, the Bible was purged of all elements not to be reconciled with the new ideals, the message of forgiveness of sins was replaced by a new moralism. Once again, the Christian faith was not so much conceived in its relation to God as in its relation to the present problems. The nature and truth of the Christian faith was not doubted, but the only question was how to relate it to political problems, and suddenly one lost both Christianity and its relevance for the present needs. So Humanism is ruling the German Church—and not only the German one. The present rulers are the heirs of a deplorable history of Protestantism: they only continue on a larger scale their fathers' sins.

## III

So one must say that what at present is happening in the Church is the judgment of God, is His answer to our Protestant unfaithfulness. And that calls for repentance, not merely for criticism. But in the midst of this ecclesiastical catastrophe God's mercy has given a new revival, a new understanding of the Gospel, a re-discovery of what it means to be a Protestant Church. Against the new Romanism of the autocratic bishops this new movement confesses anew the priesthood of all believers and the Sovereignty of Christ in His Church. And against the new Humanism it confesses anew the Word of the Cross. Many congregations are influenced by this idea. They are convinced that only when the Church is nothing but the Church of Christ, it can meet the demands of our days. They believe that their best patriotism consists in proclaiming the Gospel. So this ecclesiastical movement standing for the reformation and fighting against the deformation of the Church, is not at all to be mistaken as an opposition against the State. For it was not merely the State that interfered and caused the present difficulties, but it was the old problems of the Church itself that led to this fatal situation. Therefore synods and congregations and ministers, while protesting against the secularization of the Church, proclaim very firmly their loyalty towards the political government. What they want is a free Church within the State : what they want is to be free to seek first the Kingdom of God. So this struggle goes on. How long, nobody can tell. But it is a struggle fought out not only for German Protestantism's sake, but for the sake of all Churches derived from the Reformation. Therefore it is our Christian duty to watch and to pray that we may not fall into temptations. For to-morrow, any other Church may be faced by quite similar religious problems. Protestantism does not consist in asserting man's liberty against the authoritative claims of Romanism, but in asserting the Authority of Christ against all those who try to erect their Catholic or Humanistic kingdom of heaven, which may be nothing but the Tower of Babel !

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