

WHAT IS PROTESTANTISM ?

I

THE *name* "Protestant" was born on April 19th, 1529 ; we have recently celebrated its fourth centenary.

1. I say, and I repeat, the "name," the birth of the name. For from the outset it is necessary to dissipate the great and so dangerous suspicion which certain persons strive even to-day to propagate ; our religion, Protestantism, would date from the sixteenth century ; it would have an existence of just four hundred years. No indeed ! That which was produced in the sixteenth century was what one would call to-day an awakening, a revival, the greatest of Revivals. Now a man is not born on the day on which he awakens from a more or less lengthy sleep.

The Christian religion, that which Jesus Christ had founded, which the apostles had preached, had been (little by little) corrupted. By the end of the Middle Ages it was sleeping profoundly in its corruption. Then the awakening took place, that is to say the return to the original source, to the first century. This was the Reformation. Therefore in the sixteenth century the reformed religion, Protestantism, had had an existence of fifteen centuries.

We celebrate the anniversary of this Reformation every year, on October 31st, in remembrance of the day when Luther, in the midst of the indignation aroused by the scandalous preaching of Indulgences, nailed his famous theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg, October 31st, 1517. Twelve years later, on April 19th, 1529, the "Reformed" received the name of Protestants.

2. Why and How ? Here is the answer from a little book of Catholic propaganda that is being distributed in Belgium at this present time. "Well, really, they are not proud those people, to glory in a title that only recalls violence and ruin. . . . For three years they had not ceased to attack the Catholics, to despoil them of their goods, and by cunning and force to introduce Lutheranism into the Catholic States. . . ."

"The latter, in the Diet of Spires of 1529 (the Diet was the German Parliament) wished to put an end to such a crying

abuse. . . . Nothing could be more reasonable, . . . but this union, and this provisional peace was not at all to the taste of these gentlemen. They had only joined forces in order to launch a protest against the measures taken by the Assembly. From that day these innovators were called Protestants. Thus these jolly fellows (gaillards) protested their right to rage as they liked against the Catholics, to rob them, and to do them merciless violence. They only conceded to the latter one right, that of allowing themselves to be slaughtered in silence. There is no gainsaying that they have fine fathers, the Protestants!" ("What is Protestantism?" Catholic Tract, No. 3.)

In France, at this very moment, the "Croix de la Haute Savoie" (June 30th, 1929) repeats the same slanders: "Ah, if only the trustful souls knew history! They would learn with stupefaction that Protestantism, in place of tracing its origin to the same Divine source, Jesus Christ (as Catholicism) was born fifteen centuries later, created by the foolish passions of a Luther in Germany, a Calvin in Geneva, a Henry VIII in England. Driven by lustful pride their only object was to cover their shame, and to satisfy their greed." (Quoted by "La Vie Nouvelle," July 12th, 1929.)

I may remark, before any other reflection, that if Catholics find the name "Protestant" shameful, many Protestants feel it to be unfortunate. This name, they say, makes us appear perpetual protesters, eternally dissatisfied. Many Protestants, even amongst the most distinguished, do not seem very clear as to the particular meaning of the protest itself.

Now to these gross slanders, and to these inexactitudes, let us oppose the simple truth.

Since the famous Theses of 1517, the Reformation had made rapid progress. The Pope had excommunicated Luther, Luther had burnt the Pope's Bull. The Diet of Worms, 1521, had put Luther outside the law. The progress of the Reformation continued.

Then in 1526, the First Diet of Spires attempted an arrangement. It permitted all "to live and to behave as each one believes and as it hoped to answer for its conduct to God and to the Emperor." But three years later, political circumstances having changed, the clergy and the Emperor believed themselves able to arrest the progress of the Reformation at one stroke. In 1529 a new Diet, meeting again at Spires, as the former had

done (that of 1526), decided that from henceforth all must be left unchanged, save for the re-establishment of the Mass in certain places. This abolition of the Edict of 1526 was a mortal blow for the Reformation, which, no longer able to progress or even to organise, was condemned to rapid decline whilst awaiting complete suppression.

It was at this moment that the Reformed protested. Only this word "protest" did not mean, as is generally believed, to deny something, to stand up against something. On the contrary, it meant to assert something, to assert it before all men, to assert it solemnly. If you doubt this consult your dictionary. Therefore the Protestants protested their right to liberty of conscience, that is to say they asserted their right positively, publicly and solemnly. "In these things," they say, "which concern the honour of God, and the salvation of the soul, each is responsible for himself before God, and must give account." And further on, "In the case of our grievances not being taken into consideration we protest and publicly certify before God, our only Creator, Redeemer and Saviour . . . that we do not approve the Edict, and do not accept it, but hold it null and void."

Let us also cite the explanatory letter which one month before (at the end of March) the Town Council of Nuremberg had addressed to their representatives at Spires: "He who violently compels Christians to do that which they hold to be wrong, although in itself it may not be wrong, compels them to sin, which is not Christian, and which it is shocking to hear of. In these matters we must not constrain anyone, but teach the word of God, and at the same time see to it that no one acts against his conscience, otherwise he would commit sin, and would be damned."¹

And though, shortly before this, Luther had violently opposed Zwingli's teaching regarding the Holy Communion, the Lutherans repelled the article in the Edict which condemned this doctrine.

This does not signify that from this moment liberty of conscience has been respected by all Protestants without exception; but the true principles were then magnificently proclaimed. This suffices for the glory of the first protestors of 1529, and for the name of Protestant.

¹ Die Protestation der Evangelischen Stände auf dem Reichstag zu Speier, 1529. Verein für Reformation's Geschichte, 1890, pp. 31, 35.

3. After the word, the thing itself. What is Protestantism ? The question is peculiarly one for this hour. I have already mentioned a booklet that has been published lately in Belgium. It forms part of a series of which two (this one and another) bear precisely this title : "What is Protestantism ?" A Paris house has just published a volume intended to teach the general public what it should think of Protestantism. *The Friends of Protestant Thought* have also put the question "What is Protestantism ?" and they insist on "the urgent need" of a work replying to the preoccupation and questions of a Frenchman of "to-day."

Above all, the great conferences of Stockholm and Lausanne, in pleading for the unity of all Protestants, invite, compel, all Protestants to ask themselves "What is Protestantism ?" It is certainly a question of the day.

Unfortunately this question, while increasingly present with us, and even more urgent, appears at first more and more insoluble. For the Catholics, the question "What is Catholicism ?" is simple. "Go and ask Rome." That is Catholic which Rome declares to be Catholic. But, in saying what Protestantism is, the Protestant is in quite another position, there is no authority charged to say this is Protestant, that is not. Everyone believes he has the right to call himself Protestant, and uses this right. That is the difficulty. Suppose you were asked to photograph someone of whom you were only told the name. Many people bear the same name. It would be necessary for you to know which of these persons bearing this name you were asked to photograph. And it would be found that there was no authority whose duty it was to tell you.

It is true that here we are arrested. "Do not seek," they tell us, "to distinguish between differing Protestantisms, that is not necessary. Take them all together, and find out what they have in common, it is quite easy!" Easy ? I am not so sure of it ; in any case it is illusory and dangerous.

Here are two Protestants, Calvin and Castellion. But it will be found that no one has contradicted Calvin with greater violence—a violence that went as far as atrocious slanders—than Castellion ! If we put aside all except what is common to these two Protestant doctors what will remain ?

Here are two Protestants, J. J. Rousseau and Calvin. J. J. Rousseau admits neither the Fall, nor original sin, nor the

corruption of human nature, all of which Calvin energetically proclaims. If we remove all except what is common to these two leaders of Protestantism, what will remain ? Continuing for a little this work of elimination we find ourselves faced with nothing.

In reality, in striking off all doctrines peculiar to each type of Protestantism, they have been led little by little to declare that the Protestant faith is independent of the ideas and of the facts expressed in the different doctrines, and that with the doctrines, even though contradictory, they can have the same faith, or as it is said, the same spirit—the Spirit! There is the great word of to-day! But let us not think that this word, though so modern, is a new word. It is an old word used and abused by the Anabaptists, and they did not invent it. It is said that at a great discussion between the Anabaptists and Zwingli the mystics replied to all the reformer's Scriptural arguments by crying "The Spirit! The Spirit!" Zwingli, growing impatient, said with all the rudeness and coarseness of a sixteenth century German-Swiss peasant, "I am up to the nostrils in your Spirit." ("Je donne sur le museau à votre Esprit.")

It is still a question what is meant by this spirit. One of the prophets of this spirit, one of the most distinguished and most valued, one of the most authoritative, replies: "The Spirit is at once an intellectual method, a moral principle, a religious experience," and again: "The Spirit is something more than intelligence, than reason. It is a personal energy, inseparable from moral consciousness, an energy which puts at the service of a mysterious task the instrument of a mysterious future." And finally: "To make a religion of Protestantism is a mistranslation (contre-sens), it is that as little as is Christianity itself." (See Monod, *Du Protestantisme*, Pp. 15, 22. The author adds: "The which (Christianity) is a very different thing to a mere cultus." On which a Catholic, an abbé, remarks: "By these different transformations, the Calvinist spirit, the Huguenot spirit, Protestantism, has become in the schools which it should enliven, the spirit of irreligion." And again: "Calvin was the first destroyer of authentic Protestantism." (Dedieu, *Instabilité du Protestantisme* (1927), Pp. 78, 80.)

I do not know where my reader is. Personally I lost my footing long ago in these regions of the incomprehensible, of the night, of the void, and I hasten to come down to solid earth, enlightened by the sunshine of common sense.

Here, happily, we find at once another and safer method of finding out which is the true Protestantism. It is the historical method which tells us which Protestantism is historically true. I repeat, *historically true*, for it is very necessary to distinguish. Once the historically true Protestantism is found, everyone will have the right to say either this Protestantism is not the best, or it is not good. Everyone will have the right to praise it, or to criticise it, to accept or reject it, to add to it, or to cut off from it, and of it to fashion for himself a Protestantism according to his own fancy. But historical Protestantism remains historical Protestantism. The judgment of history is more infallible than the judgment of an infallible Papacy. Then a child will be able to say which is the true, historical, Protestantism. It is the one established in the sixteenth century by the three great reformers, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.¹

II

It will be easy for us now to answer the question : What is Protestantism in itself, historical Protestantism ?

All confessions of faith of historical Protestantism declare that Protestantism rests upon two foundations, the authority of the Scriptures, and justification by faith. We will quote only two, the first and the last confessions of our French Reformed Churches ; the first, that of 1559 (celebrated as the Confession of Faith of La Rochelle), and the last, that of 1872.

The first says (Article 5) : " We believe that the Word contained in these books (of the Bible) proceeded from God, from Whom alone it derives its authority, and not from men. . . . And in as much as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, or even angels, to add to it, diminish from it, or change it."

¹Should anyone wish to discuss, to cavil, or to object ; Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin have not always been in perfect agreement, and consequently there is not only one historical Protestantism ; there are three and the difficulty reappears. I will confine myself to saying this : Calvin, the last comer, has given the best expression to the common doctrines. Despite their disagreements, Calvin, with the disciples of Zwingli, signed the famous " Agreement of Zurich," 1549. And if, forgetting Luther's qualities in order to exaggerate his faults, the first ultra-Lutherans had not almost ruined the Protestant cause by their fanaticism, Calvin would have concluded an agreement with them, similar to that of Zurich. At all events he (Calvin) declared himself ready to sign the " Augsburg Confession of Faith," of 1530. He called Luther " most venerable father " and wrote : " I have often reflected that even if he called me a demon, notwithstanding, I should continue to honour him, and to recognise him as an unique servant of God." (Jean Calvin, II, pp. 577, 579. E. Doumergue.)

And (Article 20): "We believe that we are made partakers in the righteousness of Christ by faith alone, as it is said that He suffered to purchase salvation for us, in order that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish."

The last of our Confessions, that of 1872, says: "With the Fathers, and with the Martyrs of the La Rochelle Confession of Faith, with all the Churches of the Reformation in their several Creeds, we proclaim the supreme authority of the Holy Scriptures in matters of faith, and salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, Who died for our sins and was raised again for our justification."

I. THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE.

2. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH.

I. We can establish at once that this was proclaimed with singular energy at Spire itself, at the same moment as the birth of the name Protestant. Liberty of conscience and the authority of the Bible were the two sole objects of the whole famous Protest.

On their arrival at Spire, in order to avoid all misunderstanding, the Evangelical princes had inscribed on the walls of the hotels where they lodged the five Latin words, "Verbum Dei manet in aeternum," "The Word of the Lord abideth for ever," and they had the first letters of these five words embroidered on all their servants' sleeves.

After this the Protest, in proclaiming the need for the Word of God, naturally proclaimed its sufficiency, and its sufficient clarity. These two are inseparable. What would a revelation be which was not abundantly clear? And how would God have spoken, and not have taken care to make Himself understood? Either there is no revelation, or the revelation is sufficiently clear. The Protest asserts: "The Word of God must abide alone, and no other word must be preached, *one text explained by another*, for the Holy Scriptures, *in all that a Christian needs to know, are in themselves clear and lucid enough* to enlighten all darkness."

These declarations are directed against Catholicism, and rightly so. Even to-day, in propagandist tracts against Protestants, Catholicism repeats assertions such as this: "One can be a Christian without knowing the Bible." "What is a book if no one is there to interpret it?" ("Who is right, Catholic or Protestant?" Catholic tract, No. 5, by Volekssom.)

What is more important for us, however, is that the Declarations of Spires are found of value against a number of Protestants, as well as against all Catholics. From the sixteenth century neo-Protestants have set themselves to assert the obscurity of the Bible.

Castellion,¹ the contemporary of Calvin, to whom in our days Protestants have raised a monument of filial piety, wrote: "Matters contained in the Bible are given to us obscurely, and often by riddles and dark questions. For more than a thousand years they have been under discussion, and have never been harmonised." (Doumergue: *Jean Calvin*, IV, p. 80.) And in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the most illustrious leaders of rationalistic neo-Protestantism unfolded these ideas.

Semler, the celebrated German theologian, asserted at different times that the Scripture is, in reality, made for the professors. The philosopher Lessing, still more famous, sees in the reading of the Bible something which is not necessary for the people.

Finally, at the end of the last century, in 1896, students, reflecting the teaching received in a Protestant theological faculty, maintained theses such as this: "For the humble, for the simple-minded, the Bible presents the greatest difficulties"; or this: "The light of the Scriptures is one of the most false assertions of the old, traditional theology." (*Jean Calvin*, IV, p. 80, n. 4.)

I do not know that we should find many similar declarations to-day; and yet, leaving aside intentions, one can prove that for other reasons, and by other means, many neo-Protestants reach the same result. Catholicism claims that the simple believer cannot understand the text of the Bible; neo-Protestants with their Higher Criticism, make this text inaccessible to the simple believer. For the Higher Critic the Bible has become a collection of books, of which some are authentic, and others not. What simple believer can choose and decide? Even in each book there are verses that are authentic, and verses that are not; in many verses there are some words authentic, and others that are not. What simple believer could decide and select? It is impossible for him, thrice impossible. There is nothing for him

¹ M. le pasteur Teissonnic has lately published at Brussels a volume called "The New Reformation Movement" ("La Mouvement de la Nouvelle Reformation") of which he is one of the leaders. The first study in this volume is entitled "Castellion against Calvin, an episode in the Liberal Reform of the sixteenth century." (*Evangile et Liberté*, Aug. 7, 1929.)

but to repeat : They have taken away my Bible, and I know not where they have laid it. Stunned, and overthrown, by such strange teaching I return to the Protestantism that is true and historical.

The Bible is the book inspired by God. How did God inspire it ? I do not know, and I cannot understand, for I cannot comprehend any miracle, that is to say any act of God. It would be necessary for me to understand God Himself, and His Nature. All I understand, and for that commonsense suffices, is that : either God has inspired nothing, revealed nothing, or else God has taken the necessary means for His revelation to be transmitted to men in a way that was sufficiently clear and authentic to attain the purpose for which He had designed it. The purpose was our salvation.

Calvin says, " The aim of the Word of God is to revive us, and it is a perverse error to seek within it anything but the benefit, the profit, of the soul " (Jean Calvin, IV, p. 70).

Only instead of spending time separating, isolating, texts until they contradict each other, let us never forget the condition laid down by the Diet of Spire : explain one text by another. This is what our fathers called " the analogy of the faith." And how beautiful it is, this Bible ! It is full of wealth for the simple, humble believer who seeks in its pages that which God has put there ; it is mighty, and across its mysterious depths it guides us from light to light on the road of faith and of Heaven.

2. To conclude : I offer a few remarks on the subject of Justification by Faith.

It is unnecessary to refute once again the error, if not the slander, which reproaches historical Protestantism with denying good works, and reducing the faith to a dry and dead intellectualism known by the name of orthodoxy.

To declare the body inseparable from the soul is not to deny the soul. To declare the heart inseparable from the brain is not to deny the heart. Historical Protestantism has no need of lessons from anyone in point of good works, of deeds, any more than in point of true, and good mysticism, and it can give some lessons to others. Salvation is not *by* works ; no, salvation is with a *view* to works. Salvation is not by sanctification, it is for sanctification. The effect does not produce the cause, it proves it. Sanctification, good works, deeds, are the consequence, the proof of salvation ; and as the true Protestant never has too many

proofs of his salvation he immediately rushes wholeheartedly, along the road of good deeds. The centuries of history prove it. It is the salvation that is by *faith alone* that has transformed the world, morally, socially, and economically.

Thus salvation by faith is a salvation by a faith which is as much of the head as of feeling, as much sentiment as thought, by a faith which is love. Love of whom, faith in whom ?

A group of Protestants have answered recently: Faith in man. Social salvation depends on faith in man. This is to make of J. J. Rousseau a fourth reformer, capable of replacing the other three, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. However, let the growing influence of Jean Jacques be as it may, such a clear declaration is still rare ; and they generally speak of faith in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately there are many Christs, they become more and more numerous. There are the Christs who are man, a man much wiser than others, of such wisdom that he distinguished himself above all other men, and we may call him "divine," just as we say "the divine Plato." There are Christs yet more divine ; Christ is a man, but so wise, so perfect that he has been deified, truly deified. Among the millions and millions of men who have lived on earth, and who will yet live there, there was found one, one only, whom God, as a reward, *deified by adopting* him. He was not His son, but His adopted son. Later on popular superstition, the subtlety of learned men, the influence of Greek cults "deified" this Christ. Divine, not God ! Son by adoption, not a true Son ! What a reason for numerous and formidable equivocations ! Indeed at this present time the neo-Protestants, who speak to us of salvation by faith in deified man, or even bluntly in man himself, speak to us of the Trinity. The Trinity, the Nicene Creed, becomes more and more popular. They tell us to-day that all ministers are Trinitarian because all baptise in the Name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

They say to us : " Ask a left-wing man about the nature of Christ and you will prove that we are all pretty nearly Trinitarians." It is true they also say, " Every one has the right to be a Trinitarian in his own way." What characterises all these neo-Protestants is that for them there is no longer a Fall, nor the corruptness of human nature, nor Atonement. The Christ of the Bible has vanished with the Bible, the Word made flesh with the Word made a book.

In this new terror, in the shock of thus seeing all slipping away from me, I apply myself to one text, and one only, and I cling to it with all the strength that my commonsense and my faith still have left. This text is the most authentic in the whole Bible ; this text is found not only in one of the Synoptic Gospels, but in all three ; this text is not only a precept, it is a parable. And the highest critic admits that the Parable is, amongst the texts which may be authentic, the most authentic. Because if instruction can be modified, voluntarily or involuntarily by the one who relates it, the Parable being a short, striking story can only be completely ignored, or else faithfully reproduced. It is materially impossible to modify it.

The parable in question is that of the Husbandmen (Mark xii. 6). In this parable Jesus Christ plainly declares to His adversaries that He is not only superior to the greatest of the prophets sent by God to Israel, but that He is of another origin than they. Another origin. They originate from man, He originates from God, and He alone. Finally He says : " The lord of the vineyard sent them his own son saying, they will reverence my son, my well-beloved, my *only* (unique) one. But when the husbandmen saw the son they said among themselves : This is the *beir*, come let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours." Let all be destroyed ; let all the other pages of the Bible be torn up, or effaced, if this sole page, three times reproduced, lives on, all continues to be in force. Christ Himself declared Himself the Son, the one alone of the nature, of the substance, of His Father.

Thus it is impossible to have the least hesitation, to have the shadow of a doubt. True, historical, Protestantism is the Protestantism of the authority of the Scriptures, and of Justification by faith in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, Who died for our sins, and was raised up again for our justification.

III

I now wish to leave with my readers one word, and one only, which sums up all my meaning, the word *necessary*.

At the present time *historical* Protestantism is necessary, and this for two reasons : it is necessary in order to save *Protestantism*, and in order to save *Christianity*.

1. *It is necessary in order to save Protestantism.* To-day the great endeavour is to amalgamate all Protestantisms, even the most diverse and contradictory, and to extract from this amalgamation one unique *spirit*. We have seen that this attempt is chimerical. But meanwhile these amalgamated Protestantisms become jointly responsible and accountable one for the other. From henceforth it is a game for adversaries of *the* Protestantism to find arguments showing the failure of Protestantism.

Protestantism ! they say ; see what it has made of the Bible, see what it has made of Jesus Christ ! Protestantism ! it leads to Rousseau, to the natural goodness of man, lost by society, saved by socialism, it leads to free-thought, sometimes even further. This is what we read in books appearing every day. It is for us to energetically protest, that is to say, we must solemnly assert : there is an historical Protestantism which is not responsible for the negations of all the neo-Protestantisms. There is an historical Protestantism which is not responsible for the negations of Strauss, Baur, and all the rationalists and mystics from the sixteenth century to the present day. If there were not an historical Protestantism, then truly there would only remain a little dust of Protestantisms more and more numerous and contradictory—Dust condemned finally to be swept away by the blast of Catholicism, or the wind of free-thought. But there is an historical Protestantism, and as long as this exists there will be a Protestantism. The existence of Protestantism is at this price.

2. *Historical Protestantism is also necessary to save Christianity itself.* Placed between Catholicism and the neo-Protestantisms, historical Protestantism allows of uniting that which they have separated, that which separated is deadly, that which united is essential.

Between Catholic Christianity which condemns free inquiry, and the neo-Protestantisms which make free examination their principle and their foundation, historical Protestantism asserts that free inquiry is not a foundation, but a method, the method which leads to the free acceptance of the truth revealed in the Bible.

Between Catholic Christianity which petrifies itself in a dogmatic intellectualism, and the neo-Protestantisms which vanish away in more or less mystical rationalism, historical Protestantism claims an equal and entire satisfaction for the intellect and for the

heart, for intelligence and for feeling, indissolubly uniting one to the other in a faith which is a life—the life !

Between a Catholic Christianity which borders on salvation by works, and the neo-Protestantisms which borders on salvation by deeds (a synonym for works), historical Protestantism proclaims salvation by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, but salvation for sanctification, for works, for good deeds.

Finally, between a Catholic Christianity whose Bible is an obscure text that the priest alone can explain, and the neo-Protestantisms whose Bible is a text sometimes obscure, sometimes uncertain, of which the professor alone can determine the authenticity and the meaning, historical Protestantism assures to believers a Bible in the text of which they can have confidence, and understand all that is needful for their faith. And if one wishes to speak the modern jargon at any price : there is the spirit of true, historical Protestantism.

In dividing Christianity, in taking some one side, some another, the two opposing camps make a war on each other of which it is impossible to see the end, each by his threats adding to the number of his adversary's upholders.

Historical Protestantism alone—that is to say the Gospel of the apostles and of Christ, that of the Bible, God's sole Book and of Christ, God's only Son—is capable of saving Christianity.

Often voices, menacing, or more and more flattering, make themselves heard saying to me : Will you not, you also, abandon this old-fashioned Protestantism ?

I reply : To what other Protestantism shall I go ? This Protestantism alone has the Protestant and Christian promises of life.

E. DOUMERGUE.

Montauban.