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PROTESTANTISM

THE word "protestant" was first applied to a minority at the Second Diet of Spire (1529). The majority of the new Diet had repudiated the unanimous decision of the First Diet of Spire (1526) which had given some advantage to the evangelical cause. After three years the Emperor felt himself strong enough to embark on a policy which not only would forbid any Zwinglian teaching, but also would bring the progress of the Lutheran teaching to a standstill. A solemn *Protestation* was drawn up on April 19, 1529, by a small minority in the Diet, six Lutheran Princes and the deputies of fourteen cities (some Zwinglian), and it was reinforced, three days later, by a longer document, the *Instrumentum Appellationis*, also called *Die Bescherung und Protestation*.

The signatories declared that the minority would not carry out the new edict of the Emperor. They maintained that the unanimous decision of one Diet could not be reversed by a mere majority in another. They included a statement that the Zwinglians ought not to be condemned unheard. But above all, this *Protestation* penetrated to the heart of the problem which was being raised by the unscrupulous alliance of Emperor and Pope to crush the evangelical teaching by means of the secular power. The essential passage runs as follows:

The new edict declares that "the Ministers shall preach the Holy Gospel according to the interpretation of the writings accepted by the Holy Christian Church. This raises the question: What is the true and Holy Church? There is no small diversity of opinion at this point. There is, we affirm, no sure preaching or doctrine but that which

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abides by the Word of God. According to God's command no other doctrine should be preached. Each text of the holy and divine scriptures should be elucidated and explained by other texts. This Holy Book is in all things necessary for the Christian; it shines clearly in its own light, and is found to enlighten the darkness. We are determined by God's grace and aid to abide by God's Word alone, the Holy Gospel contained in the biblical books of the Old and New Testaments. This Word alone should be preached, and nothing that is contrary to it. It is the only Truth. It is the sure rule of all Christian doctrine and conduct. It can never fail us or deceive us. Whoso builds and abides on this foundation shall stand against all the gates of hell, while all merely human additions and vanities set up against it must fall before the presence of God."¹

Here, as early as 1529, we meet the two great fundamental convictions of protestantism, the awareness that there could be another kind of churchmanship than that which was possible under the Papacy, and the setting up of the primitive Rule of Faith as the standard of all Church life and Christian belief. The *Protestation* is a declaration of fidelity to the Gospel, the Word of God contained in Holy Scripture, as the final court of appeal for the Church. The Gospel is God's Word in Christ, spoken in deed and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the *Protestation* is a declaration of allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ. This is positive enough. No movement as fruitful and abiding as protestantism ever nourished itself on negations.

Archbishop Benson said that the word protestant

¹ The documents are in J. G. Walch, *Luther*, xvi (1745), col. 399. See also Julius Ney, *Geschichte des Reichstages zu Speier*, 1880, and Wace, *The Principles of the Reformation*, pp. 1-34.

Apparently there has been no English translation of the *Instrumentum Appellationis*. The only extracts given in Kidd's *Documents* are borrowed from Wace's article in *The Church and the Faith*, 1896, where Wace himself is only quoting a paraphrase by Gieseler.

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was not a word to be forgotten, but a word to be understood. We may add that, when it is understood, it is not a word of which any Christian need be ashamed. One of the authors of *Catholicity*¹ has committed himself to the view that “the life of protestantism depends on the survival of that against which it protests.”² The life of protestantism does not depend on any protest. It depends on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The view that protestantism essentially consists in “protesting against error, and particularly against the errors of the Church of Rome”, ignores alike the etymology, the history, and the positive content of the word.

Essential to the word protestant is the meaning “declaration”, and especially a declaration of devotion or allegiance. A century later, when Herrick wrote of an earthlier devotion,

Bid me to live, and I will live
Thy Protestant to be,

he was maintaining the primary meaning of the Latin word, *protestari*, and also of the French and English derivatives. The English word means “to declare formally in public, testify, to make a solemn declaration”.³ The meaning of “protest against error” is subordinate, though naturally in a widespread revolt against practical abuses and doctrinal error the subordinate meaning becomes intertwined with the primary. But essentially protestantism is an appeal to God in Christ, to Holy Scripture, and to the Primitive Church, against all degeneration and apostasy.

It has been said of the English Reformers (who included among their number great saints, doctors, and martyrs of the Church of England), that they “had a strong sense

¹ *Catholicity*, Dacre Press, 1947.

² T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, p. 75.

³ See *O.E.D.*, vii, 1504.

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of the unity of Christendom. They were concerned . . . with the faith once for all delivered to the saints. . . . With awful sight they were prepared to pay the cost of their claim to rebuild faith and order and discipline in accordance with Holy Scripture, the Primitive Church and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. . . . They stand and fall, not by the judgment of political expediency or human religiosity, but by the faith they most certainly believed. They knew this, and it was the strength which fed them, and they grasped the hands of fathers and brethren across many centuries because they also confessed: '*Credo in sanctam ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum communionem.*'"¹

As we are anxious to cause no needless offence by the misuse of words, we must forestall the criticism of those members of the Church of England who dislike the very word protestant. We shall, like William Laud and Jeremy Taylor,² follow the Roman Catholic usage at this point, and include Anglicanism among the protestant churches. Like Laud we defend the word. We are forced to this by our reading of the historical facts. The English Reformers are no small part of our Free Church heritage. We too claim, as they did, continuity in faith, doctrine and worship with the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of all past ages. Anglicanism owes its separate existence to the events of the sixteenth century which resulted in the break from Rome, and the Thirty-nine Articles bear the unmistakable imprint of the Reformation. Indeed, as Canon R. W. Dixon points out, the use of the word protestant in England, up to and including the time of the Caroline divines, was understood to include the

¹ E. G. Rupp, *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition*, pp. xiv-xvi.

² See Laud's *Controversy with Fisher*, and his answer on the first day of his trial, W. H. Hutton's *William Laud*, pp. 149 and 209. For the usage of Jeremy Taylor, see *Works*, IX, 424-5; X, 281-2.

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designation of catholic.¹ For a time the word protestant described the English Church as distinct from Papists and Puritans. On the Continent, after the calamities following on the Thirty Years' War, the name protestant, which had at first meant Lutheran, became the common term for both Lutherans and Calvinists.

In England, after the Restoration, protestant Dissenters became the "general name for every sect sprung from the Reformation which could be considered passably orthodox. . . . The word has undergone no serious change of meaning since the end of the 17th Century."²

In any generalizations about a movement which is so many-sided, enduring, and expansive, as protestantism has proved to be, especially in the last century and a half, it is well to be clear about the extent and mutual relationships of the chief traditions within protestantism. To-day, it is embodied mainly in six world-wide communions, each of which is increasingly conscious of the ties which bind its members to one another, and each of which has shewn its eagerness to co-operate in the recently formed World Council of Churches, with a view to the greater task which awaits us, the evangelization of the world. Any generalization about protestant teaching, especially when made by those who call themselves "catholics", ought to be based on a firm knowledge of the doctrines affirmed in every one of these six communions at least. Those affirmations are contained not only in the Reformation Confessions of belief, but in a living tradition of life, worship, and sanctity, extending over two, three, or even four hundred years.

(1) LUTHERANISM. The Lutheran World Federation claims a baptized community of 90,000,000. No reliable

¹ *History of the Church of England*, IV, p. 221. Cf. Wace, *Principles of the Reformation*, pp. 32-4.

² Gwatkin, in *E.R.E.*, X, 411.

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estimate can yet be obtained as to the communicant membership.¹

(2) PRESBYTERIANISM. "The World Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System" gives its communicant membership as 11,555,393.

It is interesting to note that the figure in 1917 was given as 6,418,014. The 1917 total was almost double the number recorded in 1888, less than thirty years before. In 1925 the total communicant membership was found to have grown by two million in twelve years. In that year, "the total number of adherents was carefully reckoned to be about 40,000,000".²

(3) ANGLICANISM. The communicant membership figure is given at 9,000,000. It is almost impossible to estimate the numbers of the baptized community. Father Congar's estimate is 30-32 millions.

(4) THE BAPTIST CHURCHES are associated in the Baptist World Alliance, and now have a communicant membership of 13,500,000, excluding the Baptist members in Soviet dominated lands. The Baptist numbers have been steadily rising in the present century.

(5) THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES are associated in the International Congregational Council. In 1911 the number of communicant members was given by Williston Walker as 1,376,424. The figure recorded by Slosser in 1928 was over 2,000,000 communicant church members.

(6) THE METHODISTS are associated in the Ecumenical Methodist Conference, which has met regularly every ten years from 1881 till 1931. The 1941 Conference was post-

¹ The supreme statistical difficulty meets us here at once. The figures given in the authoritative handbooks for the Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Lutherans, are 'community' figures, sometimes embracing the majority of whole nations. The other chief communions give estimates for both, but are aware that the figures of full or communicant membership are more reliable. See H. P. van Dusen, in *Christian World Mission*, ed. W. K. Anderson, Nashville, 1946, p. 248.

² James Moffatt, *The Presbyterian Churches*, 1928, p. 93.

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poned to 1947. The number of full adult members was estimated in that year as 12,486,000.¹

The figures in 1910 were estimated by Dr. John S. Simon as 8,768,616 full members, with a total number, including children and adherents, of over 32,000,000. In 1937, Father Congar's estimate for the community was from 33 to 35 millions. Since that date, while the number of full members has declined in Great Britain, there have been great advances on the various mission fields and in the U.S.A. An increase of members in Great Britain was reported in 1949.

These facts and figures are given deliberately, in order to redeem the concept protestantism from the vague insubstantial world of tendencies or trends or drifts, and to show it as firmly planted in the habitable world. Every one of these world-wide communities is a minority movement. Indeed, all the figures of communicant membership put together constitute a minority, which seems to shrink to insignificance in face of the total population of the world. No one who reads the reports of ecumenical organizations will easily detect the note of complacency, in view of the task of the Church in the world to-day.

But when protestants face the world-situation, they must be on their guard against two errors. The first is that of accepting uncritically the claim, unproved and unprovable, that "the Papacy is at the head of a full half of Christendom".² The second is the prejudice which causes any ignoring of the Roman Church. We cannot too often remind ourselves, when we meet in the World Council of Churches, that the largest communion of Christians always holds itself aloof.

¹ *Proceedings of Seventh Ecumenical Conference*, p. 79.

² *Catholicity*, p. 40. Father Congar's figures are, for the total Roman Catholic community, 330,000,000; for the ancient Eastern Churches, 170,000,000; for the Protestant Sects (including Anglicans), 209,000,000. The last figure includes two million Mormons, Russellites, Adventists and similar sects.

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What we who are protestants must say in the light of our own history and traditions, the continued blessing of God on protestant missionary labours, and the signs of growth in Christian character and sanctity which have been given to us throughout our history as separated bodies, is what Christians must always confess in humility of the whole Church of Christ, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. This work is not of ourselves; it is the gift of God. In spite of the disastrous breaches of fellowship in Christendom, and even in periods of degeneration and apostasy, the Word and Sacraments of His Church have never been without power, and men have been continually ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. We ask those in the older communions who would unchurch us, or deny our ministries and sacraments, to consider the patent spiritual facts. If God has poured out His Spirit on our communions, if in all of them the fruit of the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifestly given to us as to them, if our alleged "irregularities" or "invalidities" have not barred us from the grace of our Lord who undoubtedly meets us in our Eucharists, and crowns our proclamation of the Word by drawing men and women all over the world out of darkness into light, who is there, of all those who bow in reverence before Him, that can deny to us the mark of catholicity?