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Protestantism and Liberty

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Protestantism and Liberty.

THE time has gone by when we could say that any man, or even any body of men, possessed all the truth. The study of religion in a scientific fashion has shown us that men of all nations possess a religious conviction in some form or another, and that there is, to some extent, warrant for what they believe. We cannot say that truth has come to mankind through one channel alone. Truth may come in many ways, and we must study all those ways if we are to know all that there is to be known.

It is well to remember, also, that we ought not to mix up spirit and organisation. Christianity is a wide religion, with implications that affect every department of life. It is not to be confined to one aspect of life. It is not, in the first instance, what a man believes that makes him into a Christian, but rather what he experiences and what his relationship to God is. It is not creed that makes Christianity. A Plymouth Brother may be a Christian and so may the Pope. I say "may" in both cases, because the fact that a man belongs to a church does not, of necessity, carry the conclusion that he is a Christian. What makes a man into a Christian is his submission to the will of Christ and his acceptance of the grace of Christ. And so it is possible for men to be loyal servants of Christ, even though their intellectual interpretations of their faith be poles asunder from each other. It is what they experience rather than the way they interpret what they experience, that makes their religion. I am a Protestant, and, because I am, I refuse to listen to the priest who tells me that it is necessary for me to accept the authority of the Pope before I can be fully Christian. But I am a Christian, and so I refuse to listen to the Protestant who tells me that it is necessary to believe in an infallible Bible before I can be fully a Christian. I am a Christian, and so because of that I accept neither infallible Book, nor infallible Church, nor infallible Pope, but the fact that God has revealed Himself to me through Jesus Christ in the same way as He is doing to hundreds of others, and that He is using me as He is using them, to the limit of our powers, to establish His Kingdom and to do His work in the world.

With that introduction, I can proceed to speak of the subject of Protestantism and Liberty.

I.

The very foundation of the Christian religion is an individual experience of Christ. I do not deny or under-estimate the value of the religious institution. I do not suggest that if the institution of the Church were abolished it would be easy for men as

individuals to have an experience of God. Without the organisation of the Church, I am sure that the number of men and women with an experience of Christ would be few. In this world, and in any other world, so far as we can see, there needs to be the combination of organisation and individual liberty if there is to be fruitful work and service. The one without the other is doomed to failure. In some of our Protestant Churches we have individualism gone mad. They are so sure of the little bit of truth that they hold that they tear themselves out of the heritage of the whole body of truth that has come down with the Christian Church. They are so sure that what they think is true that they will listen to nobody else. That is rank heresy, and alien to the whole spirit of Christ. But in the same way, to elevate organism above experience, to say that the Church must be one in thought as well as in experience, to assert that inside the Church of Rome alone is there a full Christian discipleship, is just as false as it is foolish. Religion is always original. A man securely holds nothing that he has not experienced. The Church may give it to him, but he has to hold it for himself if it is to be his, and if it is to be of any benefit to him. And the mistake that the Church of Rome makes is that it tends to emphasise the value of holding a truth because the Church gives it to you, without at the same time demanding that the man himself shall have vital experience of the truth for himself. Even though the Roman Church possessed all the truth, which I should deny, for it to say that the possession of that truth, apart from the personal appropriation of it by men, is necessary, would be to run counter to every true idea of religion. It is a man's contact with God that makes him a religious man, and not his intellectual interpretation of that contact or his acceptance of a certain creed. For a church to say that men must believe that God acted in a certain way and that the Person of Christ is of a certain sort; for a church to say that it is to be accepted that Christ is of two natures in one person, man in the one and God in the other, fallible in the one and infallible in the other, that those two natures never mix or affect each other, that is to say, that the acceptance of the Christian faith depends upon our willingness to swear to the truth of a creed that nine men out of ten do not believe, and only one man out of a thousand understands, is to mix up substance and shadow, and to mistake a theory for a truth. It is personal experience of God that makes a man into a Christian. It may be that the Church mediates that experience. It may be that when a man tries to analyse that experience and to explain it, he does so in terms that the Church has given to him. That does not affect the fact that the experience must be his own. If it is not his own, it is of no use. Unless he knows God he is

not a Christian, be he as strict as you like in his observance of the ordinances of the Church, and be he as certain as you like that the creeds of the Church are correct. It is his knowledge of God, and not his way of expressing that knowledge, that makes him into a child of God.

Now that that interpretation of the facts would be true to the New Testament is clear, I think, to any one who knows Jesus and Paul. Paul was reared in a religion that made a tyranny of tradition. And all through his letters he was emphasising the truth of an experience as against the value of a tradition. He was set free from tradition, and by being set free from it he was given the power to enter into newness of life. The first thing that struck Paul was his liberty, liberty in the sense that he had been delivered from sin, and liberty also in the sense that he had been set free from the tyranny of a religious system which did not allow a man to think for himself or to mould the expression of his faith so as to meet new conditions and new problems. Paul was conscious that he had met Christ, and that meeting of Christ by Paul was the start of the Christian Church as a separate fact in the world. Apart from that experience, Christianity might have ended as a sect of the Jewish faith. In the providence of God, it did not end there. God saw fit to reveal Himself to Paul, and that meant for Paul the remarkable discovery that it is the actual meeting of Christ on the road of life that makes a man into a Christian man. It is not what he takes from his fathers. It is not his willingness to accept the creeds of the Church. It is his knowledge of God and his meeting of God. When he had that, Paul could go on to say that every other man must have it as well. That was religion in its universal sense. The experience which all men should have might be the same sort of experience, but all men must have it. They could not take the truth of it on the authority of somebody else. It was the common property of men and women of every sect and age and society, but each had to possess his own property. No submission to a rite should be demanded before a man was allowed to enter the Church. Only the fact that the man has met Christ should be made clear. That is the *sine qua non* of the Christian Church. Christian freedom does not mean that we must have something that nobody else has. It is the need to have for yourself what others also have for themselves. A Free Church is not a church in which men can say what they like; it is a church in which every man recognises the right of every other to go to God for himself. We may all have an experience of God which, in its essentials, is the same. That does not affect the fact that the experience must be our own, that we cannot impart it to anybody else, that we cannot receive

it from anybody else, that we cannot profess to believe it on the authority of anybody else. The faith of the Church of Christ starts with that personal attachment of men to Christ.

But when you have said that, you must immediately say that to Paul and to Jesus liberty means the deliverance of the man from evil. A significance far deeper than the fact that the knowledge of Christ frees a man from the power of tradition is the fact that it frees him from the power of sin. Before he became a man of Christ, Paul had been waging a battle against sin. And he had been waging it in a particular way. By a system of laws and prohibitions he had tried to cast sin out of his heart. He had not been able to do it. Even when he was trying to do it, he could not. And then he discovered that what he could not do by the law of sin and death he was able to do by the power of Christ. He did not win the battle so long as his faith was Jewish. As soon as he met Christ the battle was won. The entrance of Christ the Crucified into his heart meant the end of his bondage to sin. Christ is the liberator of the soul because He has saved men from the power of sin. But again it must be stressed that Christ saves a man who enters into the knowledge of Christ. It is no automatic business, as though Christ secured so much power when He died on the Cross, and that power can be imparted to any number of men according to the dictates of the Church. There is not a reserve of grace handed over to the Church which the Church has the right to give out as and when required. That is what the Church of Rome says, only it does not say it in quite such a crude way as that. It is necessary for every man who enters into the possession of the saving grace of Christ to enter also into the knowledge of Christ. To know the liberation it is needful to know the Liberator. That is, the salvation of Christ is a personal salvation.

There is a third element in this religious liberty, and that is that the Christian has the right of direct access to the throne of God. It is for every man to co-operate in the work of God. It is for every man also to present the message of grace to others. And it is for every man to know that the way to the throne of grace is open for him by himself. Nobody stands between God and the sinner, not priest, not Church, not angels, not saints, not Mary, not even Christ. For the truth given to us in the New Testament is not that Christ stands between God and man, but rather that He stands on the side of God facing man. It is open for every man to go to God for himself and to tell his own needs. It is not for a Church to say how God will act. God does not work according to the dictates of a Church. He is not like an earthly constitutional monarch, bound by the decrees of his servants or the constitution. God's action is free, in that He

can act according to His own purpose of love. His actions are not confined to the decrees of the Church or the Church's rationalisations. It is God who gives the Church its message. It is not the Church that tells God how He must act and on what terms He must forgive. The way to God is open for all the sons of God to tread, so long as they tread it in humility and trust. The discovery of the nearness and the love of God for all His children is, I should say, the greatest discovery of the Christian faith. God is no longer distant. He is no longer terrible. He is near and He is love. We must hold that against the world. We must hold it against the Church, if the Church dares to say by word or by implication that there is no chance for us to reach the ear of God unless we reach it through the power or merits of the Church or the saints of the Church.

II.

Religion covers the whole of life, and one of the chief departments of it is that department which we define by the term morals or conduct. Generally, by liberty the ordinary man means the right to act and move in the world without interference from other people. That is, he means social liberty in some way. And in that department of life, the Protestant faith has things to say that are of fundamental importance. They have always been of importance, but they are of especial importance to-day, when democracy is being attacked in so many parts of the world in so many subtle ways. Let me say one or two things in this section by way of introduction.

First, democracy does not mean the right of all the people in the State to stand on the same level in declaring public policy. You cannot settle matters of morals or matters of State merely by counting heads. Some heads are better than others. To say that the voice of the people is the voice of God is not true. It is not even sensible. There are certain men who have always been disregarded when the opinion of the nation has been asked for. The opinion of the lunatic and that of the criminal has been disregarded. It has always been said that only the opinion of the adult person should be asked for, even though there may be great differences as to what we mean by adult.

Further, democracy does not mean the right of men to do what they like without being interfered with by anybody else. It has always been seen that we must be ready to give up some of our liberties that might be pleasant for the sake of the whole. We have, for example, to be ready to give up motoring without a light at night because it is for the well-being of the nation at large that we should. There can be freedom for all to act as citizens only so long as all of us are ready to confine our actions

in such a way that we do not interfere more than is necessary with anybody else. Only with a limited liberty for all can there be real liberty for any. Democracy, if it means anything, means the education of all those citizens who are capable of benefiting from it in the art of political government, and the acceptance of their will in deciding upon the policy of the country at large.

Democracy is safe in the world to-day only as we further the principles of Protestantism. We have often been told that when we got rid of religion we should usher in a world of real freedom. But that is not the case. There have been two great examples of countries that have tried to abolish religion and to get rid of the idea of God. The Revolution in France did not succeed very well, and France went back. But during that Revolution there was not much freedom for anybody. There was not even freedom for the revolutionaries. And in Russia to-day, where there is an attempt to build up a nation on scientific lines without God, there is little liberty. Communism as it is practised in Russia is the deliberate governing of a great number by a few. The bitterness and the severity are little better than in the case of the Tsarist regime. The only difference is that the few are different from the few that were before. There is not liberty in Russia, either politically or intellectually.

But it might be said that you have in Germany an example of where liberty has given way to violence in a Protestant country. That may be true. But you will further notice that in Germany, so far as the ruling classes are concerned, everything that we mean by the Protestant witness has been lost. There has been a recrudescence of pre-Christian, let alone pre-Reformation, thinking and acting. The Nazi regime has come in defiance of Protestantism, and not as a result of it. Protestantism, with its emphasis upon the duty of every man to do his part in the work of the State, with its emphasis upon the duty of each man to have his own private contacts with God, with its criticism of the doctrine that only through the medium of the priest can a man find his way to the throne of grace, is the faith that teaches that we cannot do other than train sturdy fighters for liberty and individualism. Our whole history shows that that is so. The end of the Roman Church in nearly every country has meant the establishing of free democracies. Protestantism believes in the individual man, in his reason and in his political ability. Catholicism has an implicit faith in the power of the trained man and treats others as children who need to submit all the time to trained guidance. The power of resistance against the attacks that are being made to-day against political liberty is to be found in more and more of the Protestant witness. It is the fact that man is a child of God that makes him capable of holding

the political rights that he has won. Even the Rationalists of England, whose thinking is often of a very high order, and who stress the fact that in any State there ought to be the right for every man to practise his own religion without fear or hindrance, even they are moved in that direction by a Christian atmosphere they have absorbed without knowing it. The Rationalist who was brought up without the influence of religion would not have such a high conception of the worth of the individual man. But Romanism is trained in oligarchy. That faith has remained practically unchanged in its credal presentation for fifteen hundred years, even though the thought forms of men have altered so much that the creeds of the Church are no longer intelligible to the ordinary man. According to the Roman Church, our thinking in the field of religion has to be governed by experts. And if that is the case, then our thinking will of necessity be governed in other spheres also. To limit thought in one realm is of necessity to weaken it in every other realm. It is only in a Protestant State that you have the soil suitable for rearing the plant of democracy. For a democratic people believes two things. It believes first that the ordinary man can get to the root of every matter of importance if it is explained to him. Though he may not be able to understand the technicalities of it, he can understand the principles of it. Second, it believes that ways of living and thinking must be re-fashioned to suit new conditions of life. Man grows, and as he grows, so his political forms must change and his creed must change.

But now what is this liberty in a democratic State? I suppose that it means the right to fashion ways of living together that shall be for the well-being of all the citizens, and that all the citizens shall have the right to give expression to their desires in fashioning those ways of living. There must be a pooling of thought on the part of all if there is to be a State governed for the good of all. If the Christian religion stresses the importance of the individual man before God, it also stresses the importance of the individual man in the State. The State exists for the benefit of the individual. Its good is to be judged by his good. The form of the State can be altered to suit his requirements. Only so long as man grows and progresses can the State be said to be fulfilling its function. To the extent that any one man is prohibited through no fault of his own from adding his quota to the well-being of the State as a whole, to that extent the world is poorer and less Christian. The precise form of the State shall be that which will give the greatest scope to the individual man to live out his life at its highest and best.

Further, it follows as a necessary part of the Christian ethic that each man must think for the other man. It is a

violation of the Christian ethic for any one of us to think of our own well-being, or even of our own rights, to such an extent that we interfere with the well-being of another or even endanger his peace of mind. The classic example of that sort of thing appears in Paul's reply to the Corinthians with regard to the eating of food that had been offered to idols. Meat offered to them was no different from what it was before. But there were some weak brothers for whom Christ died, and for them he would act. He would think of the weak brother. That is the law of the Christian. It has important implications so far as Christian ethics are concerned. We must so act that we have in our minds at all times the well-being of the whole. We must be prepared to give up what we think is our right rather than that a weak brother should be harmed in his life. To do what you think is right without considering the effect of your action on the other man is a defiance of that love that lies at the heart of the gospel. Much Christianity is based upon the absolutes. Certain things are right and certain things are wrong. They are right or wrong in all circumstances. But there should also be included in any view of an action, when we are trying to assess its moral worth, its effects upon others, upon their faith, their happiness and their character. It may be difficult for the individual Christian to estimate the rightness of any particular action of his. He has always to take into account two facts. The first is that there is little in this world that is inherently wrong. What makes a thing wrong generally is why you do it and what you intend to get from it. That is not always the case, but it is generally the case. It is the whole circumstance and the whole life of ourselves and the other people whom our actions affect which decides whether an action is or is not right. The second thing we have to remember is the necessary limitation of our liberty, because there are certain courses of action that might put the spiritual life of another in danger. Our liberty in Christ does not give us the right to do what we want to do. It rather gives us the right to do what we think is good for the well-being of our brothers. The ultimate well-being of all is the ideal of the Christian faith, and many of our so-called rights will have to be held in check if we remember that.

That being so, it follows that we are allowed to experiment in forms of political life so long as the liberty of all to live to their best is preserved. No particular form of political thought is of necessity more Christian than any other. The term "Christian" cannot be applied to theories that are often more or less technical. We are allowed to experiment so long as two things are preserved. The first is that we must see to it that full scope for living is given to all, and that no man is prevented

from adding his quota to the common stock by any accidents of birth or bad environment or education. It is for the Christian conscience to alter the methods of society so that such accidents are reduced to a minimum. And second, we must see to it that we do not miss the reality for the dream. In our new experiments we must not forget the gains of the past. Man has not been through travail of soul for nothing, and without learning something of value. It is for him to remember that before he destroys a thing that many accept he must put something that is at least as valuable in its place. The iconoclast who does nothing but destroy will simply leave a ruin of a world.

There is one point where individual liberty is in a difficult position. How far is it the duty and the right of the individual Christian to oppose the expressed will of the State on the ground that the will of the State clashes with his own conscience? That is, how far has the individual Christian the right to set himself up as a critic of the actions of his State and to refuse to go along with them? How far has he the right to be a conscientious objector or a passive resister? That is an important matter in ethics. And I should say that the Protestant, with his emphasis upon the liberty of man to approach God for himself, must also give to the individual the right to live out what God tells him to do, even though that may clash with the declared will of the State. If God can tell a man what to do for himself it is the duty of the man to carry it out. That is so, even if it is against the will of the people. I should say all Christians would declare their conviction that there are occasions when the conscience of the individual must be respected. They may differ about the details. One man might say, for example, that it is his duty to stand out against a war that his country has declared, either because he objects to that war or because he objects to all war. Another might stand out against a particular tax. The point is not in the detail. The point is that the individual personality, where it is intelligent and honest, must not be violated. Even where it is wrong, it must be respected. It is for the man himself to do all he can to ensure that he does not mix up his inclinations with his convictions, and that he does not say that he has a conscientious objection to doing what he does not want to do or is afraid of doing. For it must be realised that few men have the right to have conscientious objections to anything. Before a man has the right to have ethical originality he must at least be up to the standard of the majority of his contemporaries.

III.

Now we come to what is perhaps the most difficult part of the matter, at least so far as our relations with Roman Catholics

are concerned—the liberty of the Christian to think through his faith and to interpret it in terms of the thought forms of his own day. In any case, if religion is to be understood, it must be interpreted in the thought forms of the day. That has always been the case. It always will be the case. The preaching of any Church is what must be really studied if we are to know in what way the religion is interpreted. Whatever the written creeds of the Roman Church or any other Church may be, they are of meaning only to theologians. They are the only people who really understand them, even if they do. The ordinary man takes no notice of them. He might say, if he were asked, that they are necessary to faith, but he would say that because he has been taught it. That that is the case with the Protestant bodies also can be proved by the fact that there are so many of them, all professing faith in the verbal inspiration of the Bible, and yet differing completely in their interpretation of the Book. If there were an infallible Book there should be an infallible interpreter and an infallible interpretation. If salvation is dependent upon our faith in the Bible, we should at least know, beyond all shadow of doubt, what the Bible means. The fact is, of course, that with all parties creed counts for little. It is the reality of the Christian life that counts.

But now it is necessary to go a little further. It is a wise thing for a Church to define its faith in terms of creed. In fact, it is a necessary thing to do. Religion means a certain attitude to the problems of the world and a certain intellectual approach to life. That attitude must be defined, and in being defined the Christian attitude is shown as against the non-Christian attitude. Christianity is separated off from other ways of thinking. But that also means that creeds must change with every new discovery of the nature of the world. It is alien to the genius of the Christian religion that dead forms of thought should be laid upon the Church, because those forms have been fashioned by certain honoured fathers of the Church. The Church has often had to face the criticism that it has set its face against science. The criticism has a certain amount of truth in it. But at the same time it must be remembered that the first task of the Church is not to train accurate thinkers, but good livers. And the danger has faced the Church all the time that new ways of thinking and new experiments in the art of living should go together. It was dangerous experiments in living rather than new ideas in the world of intellect that the Church set its face against. The faith had to be defended against pagan society, and if to do that sometimes new thought was opposed, it cannot really be wondered at. But at the same time, the Church has often mixed up faith as an experience with faith as an inter-

pretation of an experience. The experience must be demanded by the Church. Without it, there is no Christianity. But if we are to go by the authority of our Lord and the New Testament, we have the right, and the duty, to interpret that experience in the most living form that we know, to make it real and impressive to the men of our own day.

In this branch of the subject of Christian liberty, the following points call for mention.

First, there are certain facts that are implicit to any man who calls himself a Christian. He believes in God and His goodness. He believes that Christ is the revelation of the Father. He believes in the forgiveness of sins. He believes in immortality. He believes in the reality of the Holy Spirit of God. He believes in many more truths. But *they* are essentials. A man may feel that he has much to learn about all of them, and he may feel that he has the right to keep an open mind with regard to the philosophical interpretation of them, but unless he accepts them as truths it is hard to see how he can really call himself a Christian. They are prerequisites. The Christian Church, in all its branches, is a Church of religious people. It is based upon religious convictions and not upon ethical ideas. What makes us Christian is primarily what we believe and not what we do. We are Christians because our hope is in Christ.

Second, even in the exploring of the outworks of Christian thinking we should remember that others besides ourselves think, and that they must be given credit for honesty. Nothing has done more harm to the life of the Church than the arrogance with which certain thinkers have presented their conclusions as though they were to be taken as final. It takes all sorts of Christians to make a Church. And it will take all the Christians of all the world to unfold all the riches of God in Christ. It is for all of us to pursue our studies with sympathy for other students, and for us to present our conclusions with humility, because in any case we can possess only part of the truth. We must be ready to find our conclusions rejected by other men. And they may be rejected by others because we are wrong. The Church has often been condemned for persecuting the original thinker. I have often heard a man who said that the Church would not listen to him because it lacked courage and vision. But I have more than once found that the man was far inferior to those whom he was condemning. Other things being equal, a man without training in mathematics is hardly likely to make a real contribution to mathematical science. And other things being equal, a man who has not been through an intellectual discipline of a severe type is hardly likely to make any contribution to the intellectual understanding of the nature of God. We must know

at least as much as our fathers before we presume to know more.

Third, we believe in the reality of the living spirit of God who will lead all His children into the truth. We believe, that is, in the reality of a corporate inspiration. And we believe in the reality of a corporate witness. All the prophets of God were, of necessity, isolated individuals, but they had all fed in more or less degree upon the religion of their fathers. And if we tear ourselves out of the company of the believers in God, we shall hardly make a discovery about Him that will be worth making. It will either be old or it will not be true. Much as we may deplore the lack of inspiration in the Church, we shall not be inspired if we leave the Church. We believe in the community of saints, and that God speaks to and through that community. We believe also that what He has said to that community must be taken notice of before He is likely to say anything new. Because we reject some of the creeds of the past it does not follow that a creedless attitude to religion is safe. Because we do not believe in an infallible Bible or Pope, that does not mean that the men and the writings of the past are rejected by us. We should be ready to go as far as they take us. We must be ready to listen to the voice of the past and equally ready to follow the Spirit as He leads us into the future. We must be ready to listen to the voice of the united Church. And we must be ready to listen to the voice of the lonely prophet, as he tells what he has seen and heard. There needs to be much love over this sort of thing, and much wisdom. For here again, it is important that we shall follow the truth, but even more important that we shall keep the unity of the Church in the bond of peace. It is not an intellectual attitude to the world nor an intellectual approach to the facts of our faith that is the chief feature about us, but rather a common experience of the grace of God and love for all the saints. We may have intellectual unity and no power. For love might not be there, nor the experience of God. The Christian has the right to go wherever his thinking takes him, so long as his thinking does not take him away from God or from the love of his brethren. Within that realm he can wander at his will.

H. J. FLOWERS.