

THE PROTESTANT RULE OF FAITH

AN IMPOSSIBLE ONE

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“In order to know the religion of Protestants,” says Chillingworth, “neither the doctrine of Luther, nor that of Calvin or Melancthon is to be taken, nor the Confession of Augsburg or Geneva, nor the Catechism of Heidelberg, nor the Articles of the Anglican Church, nor even the harmony of all the Protestant confessions, but that which they all subscribe to, as the perfect rule of their faith and actions, that is to say, the Bible. Yes, the Bible, THE BIBLE ALONE IS THE RELIGION OF PROTESTANTS.”—*Vide the Religion of Protestants, a sure Road to Salvation*, by Dr. CHILLINGWORTH (ch. vi. 56).

IF we turn to *Whitaker's Almanack* for 1900 we shall find that he enumerates two hundred and seventy-four “Religious Denominations” in England alone. Our leading Protestant journal goes so far as to say that “England alone is reputed to contain some *seven hundred sects*, each of whom proves a whole system of theology and morals from the Bible.”² In the United States of America there is said to be almost an equal number, so that we can hardly be accused of exaggeration if we say that, throughout the English-speaking world, there are many hundred distinct bodies of Christians.

Here we seem, at first sight, to be confronted with a veritable sea of confusion, and to be listening to a perfect babel of conflicting tongues. There seems no way of classifying these hundreds of different churches. They refuse to group themselves in any regular order. Each is a law to itself. The outlines of each are so indistinct, and so vague and ill-defined, that they seem

¹ Reprinted by permission from *Thoughts for all Times*, and revised by the author.

² *Vide The Times*, 13th Jan. 1884—leading article.

to blend almost imperceptibly into one another like the floating clouds in a storm-swept sky. Looking, however, somewhat closer, we find that there is just one among these Christian Churches which is fundamentally different from all the rest. Different, in the first place, in the number of its adherents. Not merely in the sense of being larger and more extended and more universally diffused than any other, which would not be very remarkable, but in the sense of being so *immeasurably* greater as to exceed numerically, not only any single Christian Church taken alone, but all other Christian Churches put together. So that, if we divide all Christian Churches into two parts, placing the Roman Catholic Church upon one side, and all other forms of Christianity on the other, we shall find a larger number gathered together under the banner of the Catholic Church than under the host of distinct banners held aloft by all the varieties of conflicting sects.¹ That is perhaps the most obvious distinction, lying, as it were, on the surface, and the first to attract the notice of the casual observer.

But there is another and far more important distinction, which takes us at once to the root of the matter, and that consists in the difference of the rule of faith.

¹ *Note.*—In the *Ecclesiastical Dictionary*, published this year, 1900 (Benziger Bros.), there are said to be 270,000,000 Catholics, and but a total of 89,000,000 Protestants of all kinds. On the other hand, the well-known statistician, Mr Mulhall, prepared for the Australian Catholic Congress a notable paper on the Christian population of the world, which, according to his figures, numbers at the present moment 501,600,000, and consists of 240,000,000 Catholics, 163,300,000 Protestants, and 98,300,000 Greek Christians. Under the head of Protestants are included *more than one hundred different* sects, who differ so widely from one another that some—those, for instance, who deny the Divinity of Christ and the mystery of the Holy Trinity—can hardly be called Christians. Assuming all classes of Protestants to form one religion, their total number in relation to that of Catholics would be as two to three.

The hundreds of different Christian denominations may, and do, differ to an extraordinary extent among themselves. They vary in innumerable unimportant, and in a considerable number of important points, both of doctrine and of discipline. Yet, however widely they may differ upon other points, they all, or almost all, are agreed as to their rule of faith. They all accept Reason and the Scriptures; or, if you will, the Scriptures, interpreted by reason, as the source and very foundation of their respective creeds. They one and all point to the Holy Scriptures as to the infallible and unerring word of God. They accept no other infallible or unerring authority upon earth. The Bible is the Divine Book, and contains all that is necessary to salvation; and there is no other Divine authority, no other infallible guide or teacher to whom men can have access. Though each denomination is distinct, and unlike every other, yet one and all found their creed on this only infallible teacher, viz., the Bible. "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation"; and "Whatever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man," etc. So runs Article VI. of the Church of England.¹ "Protestants assert that the Old and New Testaments are the only safe source of religious knowledge and form the *sole rule of faith*."² Rev. W. Lee writes:—"As Evangelical Protestants, we claim that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the rule of our faith and practice."³

It is only when we turn to the gigantic Catholic Church, which stretches out her arms over the entire earth, that we discover a totally different rule of

¹ *Vide* Thirty-nine Articles.

² *Vide History of Civilization in Scotland*, by Jn. Mackintosh, vol. ii. p. 35.

³ *Vide What is a Protestant?* p. 9.

faith. The Catholic Church accepts reason, just as the Protestant Church does. It is in her eyes a gift of God, to be exercised and employed to the utmost; she also accepts the Holy Scriptures as the inspired word of God, and as containing a Divine revelation. She even pays them more honour and more respect, and treats them with even greater reverence than any of those Churches that profess to found their creed on them alone. To this extent, therefore, she and all other Christian bodies are at one. But here she parts company with them. She does *not* believe that God has abandoned this inspired Book to the mercy of fallible men to be turned and twisted into a thousand conflicting meanings, to be made to support doctrines and practices not only different, but opposite; and to be a basis upon which hundreds of distinct and irreconcilable sects may take their stand. She believes that God confided this inspired volume to the guardianship of a living and infallible Church. That this Church is the only authorized interpreter and explainer of its pages. That no passage can really bear two or more *contradictory* senses; and that where such contradictory interpretations are set forth, it rests with her, and with her alone, to decide absolutely, definitely, and with unwavering certainty which is, and which is not, the true interpretation; and so to secure unity, or truth, which is the same thing; for where there is truth, there unity also must always be found.

There are, in fact, but two systems of Christianity possible—the one based on private judgement, and the other on authority. The system of private judgement is by far the more flattering to human pride, and that is why it has commended itself to so many haughty and rebellious spirits. It makes each man, not a

disciple, but a master ; not a learner, but a teacher ; not a pupil, but a critic. But, as a consequence, it renders all real unity, not only difficult, but practically impossible. Now, unless we are out and out rationalists, and deny that infallibility exists anywhere, which would be to destroy supernatural religion altogether, I take it as evident that but two courses are open to us : either we must accept the Bible as the only infallible teacher, or we must accept the *magisterium* of the living and articulate Church as equally infallible. If the infallible Bible alone will not suffice—if it is found incapable of securing the unity *for which Christ prayed*—we are forced and driven to acknowledge an infallible Church. Now, our reasons for not accepting the “Bible and the Bible only” theory are manifold. In the space at my disposal I can suggest only a few of the more important :—

I: Christ, when founding His kingdom on earth, never wrote as much as a single line of any kind, which seems strange, on the hypothesis that He intended each man’s religion to depend upon his personal interpretation of certain documents.

II. Though He commanded His disciples to “Go and *teach* all nations,” to “*preach* to every living creature,” etc., He never once commanded any one of them to commit a word to paper or parchment.

III. Even the very expressions He made use of seem to emphasize this fact ; for He does not say : “If any man will not *read the Scriptures*,” but, “If any man will not *hear the Church*, let him be to thee as a heathen and a publican” ; not “He that follows the *Scriptures* as his guide, follows Me,” but rather, “He that *heareth you*, heareth Me.” And, again, “Faith cometh (*not by reading*, but) *by hearing*” ; and so on, in many other passages.

IV. Because (*a*) very few of the Apostles wrote at all. Out of the "twelve," only five wrote any portion of the Bible, viz., St. Matthew, St. John, St. Peter, St. Jude, and St. James;¹ and (*b*) because those who did put pen to paper were urged to do so from special circumstances, as when absent, or in prison, and from accidental motives; but (*c*) even then, they did not address their writings to the whole Church, but to some one or another section specially needing them, or to some local church, and occasionally even to single individuals, as is the case in the Epistles to Titus, to Timothy, and to Philemon, etc.

V. Because the very form and construction of the Scriptures seem to show that the Bible was never intended to be a text-book of doctrine, or a summary of belief. There is no clear or methodical statement of the teaching of Christ, proceeding in regular sequence, but exhortations, narratives, and incidents, etc., are all intermingled.

VI. Because the entire Bible was not even composed until whole generations of Christians had passed away. The Gospel and Apocalypse of St. John, for example, had no existence for more than sixty years after our Lord's ascension.

VII. Because even after the various books of Scripture had been composed, they were not at once gathered together into one volume. Some were to be found in one place, some in another, and it was not until hundreds of years had rolled slowly by that the various inspired writings were collected and placed under the same cover; so that during many generations scarcely any one could have even seen the complete collection, unless indeed he were a great traveller.

VIII. Because even when at last the whole of the

¹ St. Paul was, of course, not one of "the twelve" Apostles.

inspired writings had been collected into one volume, not one person in a thousand could have obtained possession of them. There was no printing; and even paper had not yet been invented, so that the only possible means of securing a copy of this volume (in which each man is supposed to find his religion) was to get it written out by hand, letter by letter, and word by word: a process which would, according to some authorities, take a scribe five years to accomplish. Nor was this all: the copy had to be written, not on paper, which had not then come into use, but on vellum or parchment. As a consequence, the price was enormous and prohibitive. No one but a rich man could afford to purchase such a thing. So that for fourteen hundred years the system of "the Bible and the Bible only," interpreted by each individual, was clearly an impossible one, and, if impossible, then to be rejected by every reasonable and reflecting man. The well-known historian, Mr. W. E. H. Lecky, is no Catholic, yet he observes: "Protestantism *could not possibly have existed* without a general diffusion of the Bible, and that diffusion was impossible until after the two inventions of paper and printing."¹ Clearly a religion dependent for its very existence upon such human inventions, unknown during fourteen centuries of Christianity, cannot be the religion of Christ.

IX. There was not only the initial difficulty of procuring a copy of the Scriptures, there was the yet further difficulty of reading them. The Protestant historian, Macaulay, tells us that: "There was then throughout the greater part of Europe very little knowledge, and that little was confined to the clergy. Not one man in five hundred," he says, "could have spelled his way through a single psalm; books were

¹ *Rationalism in Europe*, vol. ii. p. 209.

few and costly: the art of printing was unknown." "Probably," writes Abbé Bégin, a professor of the University of Laval, "there is no exaggeration in saying that nine-tenths of the population were not in a position to read the manuscript of the Bible. According to the Protestant system we should have to conclude, therefore, that these poor unfortunate beings had no rule of faith, and were out of the path of salvation."

X. Because, whereas we *know*, on the one hand, that Christ desired and prayed for unity of faith and doctrine among His disciples, we know, on the other hand, that the "Bible only" system has been, and is, the direct cause of interminable divisions and innumerable dissensions. In the words of the historian Lecky:¹

"It has been most abundantly proved that from Scripture *honest* and *able* men have derived and do derive arguments in support of the most opposite opinions."² And if this be true in the case of "honest and able men," what will be the result in the case of the less honest and the less able? In our eyes such a system stands self-condemned.

The above facts present themselves as insuperable difficulties against the Protestant rule of faith. But there remain others far greater still. There are three fundamental tenets which are absolutely essential to the Protestant theory, but which on strict Protestant principles we hold to be absolutely unproved and unprovable. Let me exemplify them in this way: A Protestant comes up to me, holding the Bible in his hand. He says: "This is the word of God; this the foundation of my faith. I don't want any infallible

¹ On 2nd November 1895, Mr. Lecky wrote: "I was brought up in the Church of England, and have never severed myself from it."—*Vide St. James's Gazette*, 14th November 1895.

² *Rationalism in Europe*, vol. ii. p. 174.

Church to teach me. All I need lies here, within the cover of this book." Thus Dean Farrar is reported to have said: "We take our stand on the open Bible, and declare it to be the very charter of our existence." What would we naturally reply? We would say: "Not so fast, my friend. Are you *quite sure* that you hold in your hand the true Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible?"

I. Take the most important part of it, viz., the New Testament. Consider its history. It was written by different men, at different times, in different places, and under different circumstances. The different Gospels and Epistles composing it were floating about in different parts of the Church, together with dozens and scores of other Epistles and Gospels,¹ and it was not till the fourth century that the Catholic Church, after carefully examining them one by one, said: "This is Scripture"; "that is not Scripture": "this we enrol in the canon"; "that we reject." For example, there is said to be a Gospel which has been attributed to one of the twelve Apostles, viz., to St. Bartholomew.² The Catholic Church said: We reject that, even though the writer *was an Apostle*; on the other hand, there was a Gospel written by St. Luke, who was *not an Apostle*, and the Church said: We accept that even though the writer was not an Apostle.

In this way the present Bible came into existence. Now, either the Church which made the selection is

¹ Note, for instance, the Protevangelion, the Gospel according to St. Thomas, the Gospel of Nicodemus, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the Epistles of St. Clement, of St. Barnabas, the Books of Hermas, the Acts of St. Andrew, and a great many others, which the Church has refused to insert in the Canon of Scripture

² The Gospel according to St. Bartholomew is mentioned by St. Jerome.

infallible, or she is not infallible. If you admit her to be infallible, then you are bound to listen to her, and to obey her, and you must become a member of the Catholic Church, which is the only Church which has ever even so much as put forward the claim; but if you say she is fallible, then you acknowledge that she may err; and if she may err, then she may have erred in her selection of the books of Scripture, and you have no certainty that you possess the Holy Bible at all! Some of the books you include may be mere human documents—as, on the other hand, some of the really inspired books may have been omitted. Different Protestant denominations have different Bibles.

Luther rejected from the Canon of the Scriptures Job, Ecclesiastes, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Second Epistle of St. Peter, and the Second and Third of St. John, that of St. Jude, and the Apocalypse (or Revelations). Calvin rejected Esther, Tobias, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus and Maccabees. Spinoza doubts the authenticity of the Pentateuch, Judges, Kings, etc.; Strauss, the Gospel of St. Matthew; Griesbach, the Gospel of St. Mark. Who will decide between these, and countless others, if there be no infallible court of appeal, no unerring voice to pronounce sentence? No! If there be no infallible Church to settle such questions, no one can declare with any certainty that he possesses the Scriptures at all. Even were one satisfied with human testimony, it would not help one, since human testimony itself is not agreed on the point.

II. A second difficulty arises concerning the question of inspiration. What proof can any one bring forward that the Bible (granted that we have the Bible) contains the whole inspired word of God, and

nothing but the inspired word of God? Inspiration is not a thing that can be proved by mere history or intrinsic evidence. Whether the Holy Ghost Himself has guided and guarded a writer and protected him from all error, etc., can be known only by an appeal to authority. It does not admit of ordinary direct proof, or of ocular demonstration. So that, unless the authority appealed to be an infallible one, a man cannot be absolutely sure that the Scriptures are inspired. No such authority can be found outside the Catholic Church. There is not even agreement among the various Protestant denominations upon this most important, and in their case, positively essential, point.

III. But the third difficulty is the most insuperable of all, and that is the difficulty of correct interpretation. The Bible, however holy a book, and however certainly inspired, is not merely useless, but worse than useless to one who draws from it doctrines and principles which are contrary to its real teaching. Yet this is inevitable, unless there be a Divinely assisted, and consequently an infallible interpreter. Some would persuade us that the Bible is an easy and simple book to understand; so easy, in fact, that "he who runs may read." Nothing could be further from the truth. This may be proved from the Scriptures themselves. Thus the Eunuch of the Queen of Ethiopia, who was studying the writings of the prophet Isaias as he journeyed home, admitted to the Deacon Philip that he could not understand the sense of what he read, unless some one explained it to him. After reading out some prophetic utterances, he turned to Philip and said: "I beseech thee, of whom doth the prophet speak this? of himself, or of some other man?" (see Acts viii. 27-35). The Eunuch

himself was unable to decide, so he appealed to a higher authority.

In the twenty-fourth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel (verse 25 *et seq.*) we have another illustration of the difficulty of correctly interpreting the inspired text. Our Lord is obliged to interpret, to His own disciples on their way to Emmaus, "the things concerning himself, beginning from Moses and from all the prophets." He told them that they had not understood, and therefore He "opened to them the Scriptures"—*διηρμήνευεν αὐτοῖς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς τὰ περὶ ἑαυτοῦ* (verse 27). St. Peter, inspired by the Holy Ghost, reveals to us still more clearly that there are "certain things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures (*ὡς καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς γραφὰς*), to their own destruction" (2 Peter iii. 16).

The truth of this contention is fully borne out by the experience of past and present ages. One person reads the Divine oracles in one way, and another in another, so that from one and the same infallible source are derived totally distinct and opposite doctrines. The followers of Novatian take one view and the followers of Sabellius another; while Donatists, Arians, Pelagians, and Nestorians all differ among themselves. Truly does Erasmus remark that "the interpretation of the Scriptures by individual minds has never ended in anything but laming texts, which walked perfectly straight before"; while St. Augustine, as early as the fifth century, declared: "non aliunde natæ sunt hæreses, nisi dum Scripturæ bonæ intelliguntur non bene." Butler reminds us how

Religion spawn'd a various rout
Of petulant capricious sects,
The maggots of corrupted texts.

Some Protestants to whom the objection has been put have attempted to meet it by saying: "The difficulties pointed out may have some existence in the case of careless and worldly-minded men, but if a devout Christian takes up the Bible with reverence, places himself in the presence of God, and earnestly prays for the assistance and light of the Holy Spirit, he will be sure to arrive at its correct and true meaning, so that he has nothing to fear." Well! We English are considered a practical people. We like to test the theory for ourselves; for to use a homely phrase, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." Then let us, for the moment, accept the theory, just to see how it works. Take three honourable, good, and learned men; *i.e.*, (1) the Anglican Bishop of Lincoln, Dr. King; (2) the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, the late Dr. Ryle; and (3) the late Rev. Dr. Martineau, a representative of Unitarianism. Each believes in the Bible. Each, no doubt, approaches the study of it in becoming dispositions. Each craves God's grace, and light, and assistance. Yet each rises from his knees holding a totally different and wholly irreconcilable doctrine. The Protestant Bishop of Lincoln finds authority in Scripture for a sacrificing priesthood, for priestly absolution, and for the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. The late Protestant Bishop of Liverpool, on the other hand, can discover nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he finds that any clergyman who attempts or pretends to forgive sins is usurping the authority of Christ; further, he fails to discover any reason for believing that Christ is truly present under the sacramental species. "This is My Body" means one thing to the Protestant Bishop of Lincoln, and quite another to the late Protestant Bishop of Liverpool.

Still both are able to find in the Bible the Divinity of Christ. But a Unitarian, as clever and as sincere as any Anglican prelate, takes up the inspired writings, and he can find no proof within its pages even that Christ is God! He prays, and studies, and reads the Bible, and then comes to the conclusion that Christ is not God at all. You urge that the Scripture speaks of Christ as "God," and as the "Son of God." He will reply: "Yes, but may not such words be applied to a mere man? Does not the psalmist say, 'Ye are *all* gods, and sons of the Most High'?" If you return to the charge and point out that Christ's Divinity is clearly contained in His own declaration, "I and the Father are one," he will again retort: "Not at all; that is merely a union of heart and will such as exists, or may exist, among men. Nay, this is [he will urge] evidently from Christ's prayer—'Father, that *they* may be one, *even as I and Thou art one.*'" This is a fair specimen of the absurd and senseless position to which the private interpretation of the Bible inevitably leads. Here are three well-known, highly-respected, learned and scholarly men each discovering a totally different doctrine in the self-same words.

Is the Holy Ghost directing them all? Is the Changeless, Eternal, and Uncreated Truth whispering "yes" in the ears of one, and "no" into the ears of another; and declaring that a thing is false and true, black and white, at one and the same time? To say so would be blasphemous. If, instead of three highly-educated and distinguished men of recognized ability, we take the millions of educated and uneducated, learned and unlearned, young and old, rich and poor, the effect of such a system becomes still more apparent, and its consequences still more hopelessly absurd and appalling.

To sum up: 1. We believe that the Incarnate Son of God came upon earth to teach the truth. This, indeed, is stated in the most emphatic way by Christ Himself in the Hall of Pilate, viz.: "For this was I born, and for this came I into the world; that I should give testimony to the *truth*" (John xviii. 37). We believe with St. Paul that "the Church is the pillar and ground of truth"; that the Holy Spirit is to "remain with her for ever to teach her all truth"; and that "the gates of hell (*i.e.*, of error) shall not prevail."

2. We believe truth to be one, and that it cannot be anything but one, and in harmony with itself. We hold that two Churches, teaching contradictory doctrines, may both possibly be false, but by no possibility can both be true. That they may both be true we regard as a metaphysical impossibility, a self-evident absurdity. But if instead of two, there be five or six hundred claiming to be true Churches of Christ, the absurdity of the situation becomes more glaring and monstrous.

3. That there can be but one true Church follows, not merely from the intrinsic nature of truth itself, but also from the repeated and express declaration of the Divine Founder of Christianity, *e.g.*, "There shall be *one* fold or flock, and one Shepherd" (John x. 16). "Be ye all *one Body* and one spirit, as you are called in one hope of your calling. One Lord, *one faith*, one baptism" (Eph. iv. 4, 5). A body is but *one* organized whole; but:—"You are the body of Christ, and members one of another," and so forth. Further, the very comparisons our Lord makes use of express the same truth. He likens His Church to (*a*) a Kingdom, (*b*) a City, (*c*) a House, (*d*) a Family, (*e*) a Fold or Flock, (*f*) a Tree, (*g*) a Body, etc. All these figures

imply a most essential unity, together with diversity. What is more various than the different parts of a living body? Yet what is more essentially one, and in harmony with itself?

4. If unity be essential and vitally important, what constitutes the bond of unity? "The Bible," cry out the Protestant Churches. "The living and imperishable voice of the Divinely assisted, and (*because* Divinely assisted) infallible Church," exclaim Catholics. The one system maintains true unity in a community of between two hundred and fifty and three hundred millions, consisting of men of every race and nation, and character and disposition, and language under heaven. The other system cannot secure unity, even within a national Church, among men of the same race and country, and of the same general character and antecedents—nay, cannot secure unity upon the most vital points of Christian doctrine either among the people, or the clergy, or even among the bishops themselves.

Private judgement in religious matters is not merely contrary to the whole idea of a *teaching* Church; but it is by its very nature a strong solvent of all true unity. Even such a pronounced Protestant historian as Lord Macaulay could not fail to see that, and to confess it. "Our way of ascertaining the tendency of free enquiry is simply to open our eyes and look at the world in which we live: and there we see that free enquiry on mathematical subjects produces unity, and that *free enquiry on moral subjects produces discrepancy.*"—Macaulay's *Gladstone on Church and State.*

There is no logical resting-place between Catholicism and Rationalism.