

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Historical Background of Protestantism

LORAIN BOETTNER

1

In our twentieth century America few among us seem to realize what a priceless heritage we possess in the freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly that is an integral part of our everyday life. Nor are many aware of the bitter and prolonged struggles our forefathers went through at the time of the Reformation and later to secure these freedoms. Instead it is quite the common thing to take these for granted and to assume that they are the natural rights of all men. But truly those of us who call ourselves Protestants are the inheritors of a great tradition. And in a country such as the United States our Roman Catholic friends also share these freedoms, little realizing what it means to live under a clerical dictatorship such as their church imposes wherever it has the power.

Roman Catholics often attempt to represent Protestantism as something comparatively new, as having originated with Martin Luther and John Calvin in the sixteenth century. We do indeed owe a great debt to those leaders and to the Reformation movement that swept over Europe at that time. But the basic principles and the common system of doctrine taught by those Reformers and by the evangelical churches ever since go back to the New Testament and to the first century Christian church. Protestantism as it emerged in the 16th century was not the beginning of something new, but a return to Bible Christianity and to the simplicity of the Apostolic church from which the Roman Church had long since departed.

The positive and formal principle of this system is that the Bible is the Word of God and therefore the authoritative rule of faith and practice. Its negative principle is that any element of doctrine or practice in the church which cannot be traced back to the New Testament is no essential part of Christianity.

The basic features of Protestant belief therefore are:

1. The supremacy of the Bible in all matters of faith and practice.
2. Justification by faith, not by works, although works have their necessary and logical place as the fruits and proof of true faith.

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

3. The right of the individual to go directly to God in prayer apart from the mediation of any priest or other human intermediary.
4. Individual freedom of conscience and worship, within the authority of the Bible.

For more than a thousand years before the Reformation the popes had controlled Europe and had said that there was only one way to worship God. That period is appropriately known as the "Dark Ages." In the church and, to a considerable extent, in the state, too, the priests held the power. They suppressed the laity until practically all their rights were taken away. They constantly pried into private affairs, interfering even between husband and wife and between parents and children by means of the confessional. All marriage was in their hands. They interfered in the administration of public affairs, in the proceedings of the courts, and in the disposition of estates. The revenues of the state built new churches and paid the salaries of the priests in much the same manner as in present day Spain. Anyone who dared resist ran the risk of losing his job, his property, and even his life. Life under such tyranny was intolerable. From that condition the Reformation brought deliverance.

One of the first and most important results of the Reformation was that the Bible was given to the people in their own languages. Previously the Bible had been kept from them, on the pretext that only the church speaking through the priest could interpret it correctly. Luther translated the Bible into his native German, and edition followed edition in rapid succession. Similar translations were made in England, France, Holland, and other countries.

Protestants of our day who have not been called upon to suffer or to make any sacrifices to secure this rich heritage are inclined to hold these blessings lightly. But the advances that Romanism is making today in this nation and in other parts of the world should cause even the most careless to stop and think. It seems that as Protestants we have forgotten how to *protest* against those same religious and political abuses that were common before the Reformation. We need to acquaint ourselves with and to teach the principles of our faith if we are not to be over-whelmed by a religious despotism that, if it gains the upper hand, will be as cruel and oppressive as ever it was in Germany, Italy, France, or Spain.

Our American freedoms are being threatened today by two totalitarian systems, Communism and Roman Catholicism. And of the two in our country Romanism is growing faster than is Communism and is the more dangerous since it covers its real nature with a cloak of religion. This nation has been well alerted to the dangers of Communism, and it is generally opposed by the radio, the press, and the churches. But Romanism has the support of these to a considerable extent; and even the Protestant

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

churches in many places take a conciliatory and cooperative attitude toward it. Most people have only a very hazy notion as to what is involved in the Roman system. And yet the one consuming purpose of the Vatican is to convert the entire world, not to Christianity, but to Roman Catholicism. Its influence is being applied vigorously at every level of our local, state, and federal government. It is particularly significant that in this country the hierarchy has taken as its slogan, not, "Make America Christian," but, "Make America Catholic." And in that slogan are the strong overtones of a full scale attack upon our Protestant heritage and those precious rights of freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and freedom of speech.

We cannot adequately understand this problem unless we realize that the kind of Roman Catholicism that we see in the United States is, for the most part, not real Roman Catholicism at all, that is, not Roman Catholicism as it exists where it is the dominant force in the life of a nation, but a modified and compromised form that has adjusted itself to life with a Protestant majority. Here it is comparatively reticent about asserting its claims to be the only true church, the only church that has a right to conduct public religious services, its right to suppress all other forms of religion, its superiority to all national and state governments, its control over all marriage, its right to direct all education, and the obligation of the state to support its churches and schools with tax money. That this is no visionary list of charges, but a cold and realistic appraisal, is shown by the fact that in Spain, which is governed under the terms of a concordat with the Vatican, and which is often praised by Roman Catholic spokesmen as the ideal Catholic state, the Roman Church is now exercising most of these so-called "rights" or privileges.

In order to see clearly what Roman Catholicism really is we must see it as it was during the Middle Ages, or as it has continued to be in certain countries such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Southern Ireland, and Latin America, where it has had political as well as ecclesiastical control. In those countries where it has been dominant for centuries with little or no opposition from Protestantism, we see the true fruits of the system in the lives of the people, with all of their poverty, ignorance, superstition, and low moral standards. In each of those countries a dominant pattern is discernible. Spain is a particularly good example, for it is the most Roman Catholic country in Europe, yet it has the lowest standard of living of any nation in Europe. The Latin American nations have been predominantly Roman Catholic for four centuries, and today the illiteracy rate ranges from 30 to 70 percent. The veteran radio political analyst, Howard K. Smith, recently reported that, "The average per capita income in the United States is eight times that of any country in South America" (March 3, 1960). The average per capita income in South America is \$280, one-ninth that in the United States.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

But even in those countries we do not see the ultimate fruits of the system. For over a period of years they have been influenced to some extent by Protestantism and they have been receiving assistance from the Protestant nations, particularly from the United States and England, so that their present condition, economic, social, political, and religious, is not nearly as bad as it would have been had they been left to themselves. Substantial aid has been given since the close of the First World War. American foreign aid, economic and military, granted to other nations since the Second World War through 1977 amounted to \$200 billion (*Statistical Abstract of the U.S.*, 1978). And probably \$50 billion more has been granted since that time, making a total of approximately \$250 billion. The Roman Catholic nations of Europe and Latin America have profited greatly through this assistance.

American Catholicism, so different on the surface from that found in Spain, Italy, and Latin America, is, nevertheless, all a part of the same church, all run from Rome and by the same man who is the absolute ruler over all of the branches and who has the authority to change policy in any of those branches as he deems it safe or expedient. If he chose to give his subjects in Spain or Colombia relatively more freedom and better schools, such as are enjoyed by those in the United States, he could readily do so by directing his priests and financial resources to that end. Undoubtedly Romanism in the United States would be much the same as that found in other countries were it not for the influence of evangelical Christianity as set forth by the Protestant churches.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Boettner, L. (1962). *Roman Catholicism*, 1–4. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.