THE GREAT PROTEST – The Diet of Spires 1529

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At no former Diet had the attendance, especially on the Catholic side, been so numerous.[1] The Popish princes came first. The little town was all astir as each magnate announced his arrival at its gates, and rode through its streets, followed by an imposing display of armed followers.[2] First in rank was King Ferdinand, who was to preside in the absence of his brother Charles V., and came attended by 300 armed knights. After him came the Dukes of Bavaria with an equally large retinue; then followed the ecclesiastical electors of Mainz and Treves, and the Bishops of Trent and Hildesheim, each with a troop of horsemen.[3] Their haughty looks, and the boastful greetings they exchanged with one another, proclaimed the confident hopes they cherished of being able to carry matters in the Diet their own way. They had come to bury the Reformation.[4]

The last to arrive were the Reformed princes. On the 13th of March came Elector John of Saxony, the most powerful prince of the Empire. His entrance was the most modest of all. There rode by his side none but Melanchthon.[5] Philip of Hesse followed on the 18th of March. With characteristic pomp he passed in with sound of trumpet, followed by a troop of 200 horsemen. It was on the eve of Palm Sunday that the elector, with Melanchthon by his side, entered Spires. On the following day he had public worship in his hotel, and as an evidence that the popular favor for the Word of God had not abated, not fewer than 8,000 attended sermon both forenoon and afternoon.[6] When the deputies of the cities had arrived, the constituent members of the Diet were complete, and the business was opened.

The Diet was not long left in suspense as to the precise object of the emperor in convoking it, and the legislation which was expected from it. Scarcely had it met when it received the intimation from commissioners that it was the emperor's will and command that the Diet should repeal the Edict of Spires (1526).[7] This was all. The members might dispatch their business in an hour, and return in peace to their homes.

But let us see how much was included in this short message, and how much the Diet was asked to do–what a revolution it was bidden inaugurate, when it was asked to repeal the edict of 1526. That edict guaranteed the free exercise of their religion to the several States of the Empire till a General Council should meet. It was, as we have already said, the first legal establishment of the Reformation. Religious freedom, then, so far as enjoyed in Germany, the Diet was now asked to abolish. But this was not all. The edict of 1526

suspended legally the execution of the Edict of Worms of 1521, which proscribed Luther and condemned the Reformation. Abolish the edict of 1526, and the edict of 1521 would come into operation; Luther must be put to death; the Reformed opinions must be rooted out of all the countries where they had taken root; in short, the floodgates of a measureless persecution would be opened in Germany. This was the import of the curt and haughty message with which Charles startled the Diet at its opening. The sending of such a message even was a violation of the constitutional rights of the several States, and an assumption of power which no former emperor had dared to make. The message, if passed into law, would have laid the rights of conscience, the independence of the Diet, and the liberties of Germany, all three in the dust.

The struggle now began. Shall the Edict of Spires (1526) be repealed? The Popish members of the Diet strenuously insisted that it should at once be repealed. It protected, they affirmed, all kinds of abominable opinions; it fostered the growth of heretical and disloyal communities, meaning the Churches which the three years of peace enjoyed under the edict had permitted to be organised. In short, it was the will of the emperor, and whoever opposed its repeal was not the friend of Charles.

The Reformed princes, on the other side, maintained that this edict was now the constitution of the Empire, that it had been unanimously sworn to by all the members of the Diet; that to repeal it would be a public breach of national faith, and that to the Lutheran princes would remain the right of resisting such a step by force of arms.

The majority of the Diet, though exceedingly anxious to oblige the emperor, felt the force of these strong arguments. They saw that the ground of the oppositionists was a constitutional and legal one. Each principality had the right of regulating its own internal affairs. The faith and worship of their subjects was one of these. But a majority of the Diet now claimed the right to decide that question for each separate State. If they should succeed, it was clear that a new order of things would be introduced into Germany. A central authority would usurp the rights of the local administrations, and the independence of the individual States would be destroyed. To repeal the edict was to inaugurate revolution and war.

They hit on a middle path. They would neither abolish nor enforce the edict of 1526. The Popish members tabled a proposition in the Diet to the effect that whatever was the law and the practice in the several States at this hour, should continue to be the law and the practice till a General Council should meet. In some of the States the edict of 1521 was the law and the practice; that is, the preaching of the Gospel was forbidden, and its professors were burned. In other States the edict of 1526 was the law and the practice; that is, they

acted in the matter of religion as their judgment dictated. The proposition now tabled in the Diet practically meant the maintenance of the status quo in each of the States, with certain very important modifications in those of them that at present enjoyed religious liberty. These modifications were that the Popish hierarchy should be re-established, that the celebration of the mass should be permitted, and that no one should be allowed to abjure Popery and embrace Lutheranism till such time as a Council had met and framed a general arrangement.[8]

How crafty! This proposition did not exact from a single Protestant a renunciation of his faith. It had no pains and penalties for existing converts. But what of those whom the light might reach afterwards? They must stifle their convictions, or abide the penalty, the dungeon and the stake. And what of States that might wish to throw off the yoke of Rome, and pass over to the side of the Reformation? The proposal, if passed into law, made this impossible. The State no more than the individual dare change its religious profession. The proposal drew a line around the Reformation, and declared that beyond this boundary there must be no advance, and that Lutheranism had reached its utmost limits of development. But not to advance was to recede, and to recede was to die.

This proposition, therefore, professedly providing for the maintenance of the Reformation, was cunningly contrived to strangle it. Nevertheless, Ferdinand and the Popish princes and prelates hurried on the measure, which passed the Diet by a majority of votes.[9]

Shall the chiefs of the Reformation submit and accept the edict? How easily might the Reformers at this crisis, which was truly a tremendous one, have argued themselves into a wrong course! How many plausible, pretexts and fair reasons might they have found for submission! The Lutheran princes were guaranteed the free exercise of their religion. The same boon was extended to all those of their subjects who, prior to the passing of the measure, had embraced the Reformed views. Ought not this to content them? How many Perils would submission avoid! On what unknown hazards and conflicts would opposition launch them! Who knows what opportunities the future may bring? Let us embrace peace; let us seize the olive-branch Rome holds out, and close the wounds of Germany.

With arguments like these might the Reformers have justified their adoption of a course which would have assuredly issued in no long time in the overthrow of their cause.

Happily they looked at the principle on which this arrangement was based, and they acted in faith. What was that principle? It was the right of Rome to coerce conscience and forbid free inquiry. But were not themselves and their Protestant subjects to enjoy religious freedom?

Yes, as a favor, specially stipulated for in the arrangement, but not as a right. As to all outside that arrangement, the great principle of authority was to rule; conscience was out of court, Rome was infallible judge, and must be obeyed. The acceptance of the proposed arrangement would have been a virtual admission that religious liberty ought to be confined to Reformed Saxony; and as to all the rest of Christendom, free inquiry and the profession of the Reformed faith were crimes, and must be visited with the dungeon and the stake. Could they consent to localise religious liberty? to have it proclaimed that the Reformation had made its last convert? had subjugated its last acre? and that wherever Rome bore sway at this hour, there her dominion was to be perpetuated? Could the Reformers have pleaded that they were innocent of the blood of those hundreds and thousands who, in pursuance of this arrangement, would have to yield up their lives in Popish lands? This would have been to betray, at that supreme hour, the cause of the Gospel, and the liberties of Christendom.

The Reformed members of the Diet–the Lutheran princes and many of the deputies of the cities–assembled for deliberation. The crisis was a momentous one. From the consultations of an hour would come the rising or the falling of the Reformation–liberty or slavery to Christendom. The princes comprehended the gravity of their position. They themselves were to be let alone, but the price they were to pay for this ignominious ease was the denial of the Gospel, and the surrender of the rights of conscience throughout Christendom. They resolved not to adopt so dastardly a course.

The Diet met again on the 18th April. King Ferdinand, its president, eager apparently to see the matter finished, thanked the Diet for voting the proposition, adding that its substance was about to be embodied in an imperial edict, and published throughout the Empire. Turning to the Elector of Saxony and his friends, Ferdinand told them that the Diet had decided; that the resolution was passed, and that now there remained to them nothing but submission to the majority.

The Protestant members, not anticipating so abrupt a termination, retired to an adjoining chamber to frame their answer to this haughty summons. Ferdinand would not wait; despite the entreaty of the elector he left the Diet,[10] nor did he return on the morrow to hear the answer of the Lutheran princes. He had but one word, and he had spoken it–Submit. So, too, said Rome, speaking through his mouth–Submit.

On the morrow, the 19th April, the Diet held its last and fateful meeting. The Elector of Saxony and his friends entered the hall. The chair was empty, Ferdinand being gone; but that took neither from the validity nor from the moral grandeur of the transaction. The

princes knew that they had for audience, not the States now present only, but the emperor, Christendom, and the ages to come.

The elector, for himself, the princes, and the whole body of the Reformed party, now proceeded to read a Declaration, of which the following are the more important passages: –

"We cannot consent to its [the edict of 1526] repeal… Because this would be to deny our Lord Jesus Christ, to reject His Holy Word, and thus give Him just reason to deny us before His Father, as He has threatened… Moreover, the new edict declaring the ministers shall preach the Gospel, explaining it according to the writings accepted by the holy Christian Church; we think that, for this regulation to have any value, we should first agree on what is meant by the true and holy Church. Now seeing that there is great diversity of opinion in this respect; that there is no sure doctrine but such as is conformable to the Word of God: that the Lord forbids the teaching of any other doctrine; that each text of the Holy Scriptures ought to be explained by other and clearer texts; that this holy book is in all things necessary for the Christian, easy of understanding, and calculated to scatter the darkness: we are resolved, with the grace of God, to maintain the pure and exclusive preaching of His Holy Word, such as it is contained in the Biblical books of the Old and New Testament, without adding anything thereto that may be contrary to it. This Word is the only truth; it is the sure rule of all doctrine and of all life, and can never fail or deceive us. He who builds on this foundation shall stand against all the powers of hell, whilst all the human vanities that are set up against it shall fall before the face of God.

"For these reasons, most dear lords, uncles, cousins, and friends, we earnestly entreat you to weigh carefully our grievances and our motives. If you do not yield to our request, we protest by these presents, before God, our only Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, and Savior, and who will one day be our Judge, as well as before all men and all creatures, that we, for us and for our people, neither consent nor adhere in any manner whatsoever to the proposed decree, in anything that is contrary to God, to His Holy Word, to our right conscience, to the salvation of our souls, and to the last decree of Spires."

This protest, when we consider the long dominancy and formidable character of the tyranny to which it was opposed, and the lofty nature and vast range of the rights and liberties which it claimed, is one of the grandest documents in all history, and marks an epoch in the progress of the human race second only to that of Christianity itself.

At Worms, Luther stood alone; at Spires, the one man has grown into a host. The "No" so courageously uttered by the monk in 1521 is now in 1529 taken up and repeated by princes,

cities, and nations. Its echoes travel onwards, till at last their murmurs are heard in the palaces of Barcelona and the basilicas of Rome. Eight years ago the Reformation was simply a doctrine, now it is an organization, a Church. This little seed, which on its first germination appeared the smallest of all seeds, and which Popes, doctors, and princes beheld with contempt, is a tree, whose boughs, stretched wide in air, cover nations with their shadow.

The princes renewed their Protest at the last sitting of the Diet, Saturday, 24th April. It was subscribed by John, Elector of Saxony; Philip, Landgrave of Hesse; George, Margrave of Brandenburg; Ernest and Francis, Dukes of Luneburg, and the Count of Anhalt. Some of the chief cities joined the princes in their protestation, as Strasburg, Nuremberg, Ulm, Constance, Reutlingen, Windsheim, Lindau, Kempten, Memmingen, Nordlingen, Heilbronn, Isny, St. Gall, and Weissenburg.[11] From that day the Reformers were called Protestants.[12]

One the following Sabbath, 25th April, the chancellors of the princes and of the Protestant cities, with two notaries and several witnesses, met in a small house in St. John's Lane, belonging to Peter Muterstatt, Deacon of St. John's,[13] to draw up an appeal. In that document they recite all that had passed at the Diet, and they protest against its decree, for themselves, their subjects, and all who receive or shall hereafter receive the Gospel, and appeal to the emperor, and to a free and general Council of Christendom.[14]

On the morning after their appeal, the 26th, the princes left Spires. This sudden departure was significant. It proclaimed to all men the firmness of their resolve. Ferdinand had spoken his last word and was gone. They, too, had spoken theirs, and were gone also. Rome hoists her flag; over against hers the Protestants display theirs; henceforward there are two camps in Christendom.

Even Luther did not perceive the importance of what had been done. The Diet he thought had ended in nothing. It often happens that the greatest events wear the guise of insignificance, and that grand eras are ushered in with silence. Than the principle put forth in the protest of the 19th April, 1529, it is impossible to imagine one that could more completely shield all rights, and afford a wider scope for development. Its legitimate fruit must necessarily be liberty, civil and religious. What was that principle? This Protest overthrew the lordship of man in religious affairs, and substituted the authority of God. But it did this in so simple and natural a way, and with such an avoidance of all high-sounding phraseology, that men could not see the grandeur of what was done, nor the potency of the principle.

The protesters assumed the Bible to be the Word of God, and that every man ought to be left at liberty to obey it. This modest affirmation falls on our ear as an almost insipidity. Compared with some modern charters of rights, and recent declarations of independence, how poor does it look! Yet let us see how much is in it. “The Word,” say the protesters, “is the only truth; it is the sure rule of all doctrine and of all life;” and “each text of the Holy Scriptures ought to be explained by other and clearer texts.” Then what becomes of the pretended infallibility of Rome, in virtue of which she claims the exclusive right of interpreting the Scriptures, and binding down the understanding of man to believe whatever she teaches? It is utterly exploded and overthrown. And what becomes of the emperor’s right to compel men with his sword to practise whatever faith the Church enjoins, assuming it to be the true faith, simply because the Church has enjoined it? It too is exploded and overthrown. The principle, then, so quietly lodged in the Protest, lays this two-fold tyranny in the dust. The chair of the Pontiff and the sword of the emperor pass away, and conscience comes in their room. But the Protest does not leave conscience her own mistress; conscience is not a law to herself. That were anarchy–rebellion against Him who is her Lord. The Protest proclaims that the Bible is the law of conscience, and that its Author is her alone Lord. Thus steering its course between the two opposite dangers, avoiding on this hand anarchy, and on that tyranny, Protestantism comes forth unfurling to the eyes of the nations the flag of true liberty. Around that flag must all gather who would be free.

Of the three centuries that have since elapsed, there is not a year which has not borne its testimony to the essential grandeur and supreme importance of the act, so simple outwardly, done by the princes at Spires. We protest, said they, that God speaking in his Word, and not Rome speaking through her priests, is the One Supreme Law of the human race. The upper springs of Divine influence thus brought to act upon the soul and conscience of man, the nether springs of philosophy, art, and liberty began to flow. The nations that rallied round this Protest are now marching in the van of civilization; those that continued under the flag of Romanism lie benumbed in slavery and are rotting in decay.

End Notes

[1] Sleidan, bk. 6, p. 117.

[2] Seckendorf, lib. 2, sec. 14, p. 129.

[3] Sleidan, bk. 6, p. 115.

[4] Corp. Ref., 1.1040–D'Aubigne, bk 8, chap. 5.

[5] Sleiden, bk. 6, p. 118

[6] Seckendorf, lib. 2, sec. 14; Additio.

[7] Ibid., p. 129.

[8] Pallavicino, lib. 2, cap. 18. Sleidan, bk. 6, p. 118. Seckendorf, lib. 2, sec. 14, p. 127. The edict contained other articles, such as that Sacramentarians or Zwinglians should be banished from all the lands of the Empire, and that Anabaptists should be punished with death. (Pallavicino, lib. 2, cap. 18.)

[9] The date of this edict is variously given. Seckendorf says it passed on the 4th April; D'Aubigne says the 7th, on the authority of Sleidan, but this is a mistake, for Sleidan gives no date. The continuator of M. Fleury makes the date of the edict the 13th April. Sleidan says that the Protest of the princes against it was read on the 19th April, while Pallavicino makes the date of the edict the 23rd April. The most probable reconcilement of these differences is, that the edict was passed on the 13th April, published on the 23rd, and that the Protest was given in on the 19th.

[10] Sleidan, bk. 6, p. 120.

[11] Sleidan, bk. 6, p. 120.

[12] Pallavicino thinks that they would have been more truly named had they been called "Rebels against the Pope and Caesar"–Ribella al Papa ed al Cesare (lib. 2, cap. 18).

[13] D'Aubigne, bk 8, chap. 6.

[14] Sleidan, bk. 6, p. 120. D'Aubigne, bk 8, chap. 6.