

The English Reformation and the Power of the Gospel¹

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Revd C. Sydney Carter

(Principal of Clifton Theological College, Bristol)

The short story of the Pre-Reformation Catholic Church sketched in the previous issue of CHURCHMAN is sufficient to prove that the ground was not *altogether* unprepared for the sowing of the Reformation “seed.” God had not left Himself without numerous “witnesses” to the pure faith of New Testament Christianity even during those darkest ages of the Church’s history. The Spirit of Truth and Purity was always active in baptising multitudes of sincere believers into the “One mystical Body” of Christ’s Universal Church. But until the Reformation, for the most part, the true members of Christ were perforce practically compelled to remain in communion with an increasingly corrupt outward visible organised Catholic Church—the authorised doctrines of which, or at least many of them, were either contrary to Scripture or had no warrant of Scripture. At the Reformation the Reformers threw off the domination of the Church of Rome so that they could recover their freedom to profess a Scriptural Faith and to propagate it zealously. They then restored a Scriptural doctrinal basis for their separately organised visible National, or regional branches of the Catholic Church.

The Reformation Movement, in its doctrinal aspect, stands therefore not for mere destruction, but rather for restoration and construction. It has been tersely expressed that it was “the reaction of Christianity as Gospel against Christianity as law” (Ullmann). Certainly it demonstrated in a marvellous way both the power of the Gospel, to restore the purity of the true Catholic Faith, and also the creative and converting power of the Spirit of God which was so fully evidenced in the response to the Gospel messages proclaimed by the Reformers. There is little doubt that the main cause of the corrupt state of the Medieval Church was the ignorance of Holy Scripture. In spite of the good work achieved by such agencies and Societies as the “Brethren of the Common Lot” and the Mystics on the Continent, and the Lollards in England; the lay people generally in England were almost entirely ignorant of the Bible, except possibly for a few short extracts to be found mixed up with the “uncertain stories and legends” (which Cranmer refers to, in *Concerning the Service of the Church*) in some popular book of devotion. There was no authorised translation of the Bible in English, and the versions attributed to Wycliffe had been condemned as heretical. In fact, in spite of the statements of modern Roman apologists, like Cardinal Gasquet, there is little doubt that the Medieval Church had deprecated, if not actually forbidden, the study of the Scriptures by the laity. The possession of the Scriptures in English was usually regarded as a sign of heresy. Before what was known as “Wycliffe’s” translation, there were very few copies of the Bible in English, and undoubtedly the general ignorance of the Bible caused the decline of faith and morals and of spiritual religion. As early as 1229 a Roman Council of Toulouse had forbidden the laity “to have the books of the Old and New Testament, except perhaps if anyone wishes to have for devotion the Psalter or Breviary for the divine office or hours of Mary.” S. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century complained of inexperienced priests who could not speak Latin and “very few of whom have learnt Holy Scripture.” We have no evidence that things had improved in this way in the next two centuries. Yet Jean Gerson, the Chancellor of Paris University in the fifteenth century, left the laity to their sole instruction and directed the common people “to seek the law from the mouths of the priests,” because they had “neither the wit nor the learning to read the Scriptures” themselves.

Sir Thomas More had defended this withholding of the Scriptures declaring that “they were of necessity kept out of lay people’s hands” because of the “false translations” that were abroad. Latimer immediately retorted: “You say you condemn not Scripture, but Tyndale’s translation, but ye have condemned it in all other common tongues, so that it is plain it is the Scripture, and not the translation ye bark at, calling it new learning.” Probably Dr. Coulton’s careful statement brings us as near the truth on this much controverted question as we shall get. His conclusion is that while “the best medieval writers knew their Vulgate very well, the priests knew nothing outside the Service Books. A few of the richest and best educated of the laity possessed French or English Bibles or Psalters, but the ecclesiastical authorities opposed the desire for vernacular translations and such Bibles were either condemned or regarded as heretical.”

But in spite of this deplorable lack of Scripture knowledge, there were apparently, at least in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, earnest efforts made by means of the pulpit to overcome the increasingly prevalent corruption and vice. But by the beginning of the sixteenth century this powerful influence of preaching was terribly neglected, although previously it must have been a very real force. For Dr. Owst, in his recent valuable researches on the use of the medieval pulpit, shows that “fiery and eloquent preachers denounced with apt illustration, invective and satire the moral abuses and evils, the self-indulgence and luxury of their day.” And he declares that “the pulpit records of these days, reveal a Church striving by word of mouth, however fitfully, to curb wild passions and vicious habits, to educate the masses in a higher way of life, to reunite a discordant Society in brotherly love and common service, to establish, according to its lights, a city of God upon earth in every home and community.”

As we glance later at the transforming power of the pulpit as used by the Reformers, we are surely justified in asserting that the main reason of the practical failure of its vigorous use in these former centuries, was the general ignorance of the Scriptures as the one great regenerating influence. Erasmus felt that the better knowledge of Holy Scripture was the only remedy for the corrupt state of the Church and for the degenerate lives of so many of the clergy. Therefore he wished the Scriptures to be translated into every language. There was, he declared, only “one anchor” which could save the Church and that was “the heavenly Word which issuing from the bosom of the Father, lives, speaks and works still in the Gospel.”

But the study of the Scriptures, which Erasmus so strongly advocated, soon led the Reformers to see the necessity of proceeding on the pathway of reform further than he himself was prepared to travel. Reformers, both in England and on the Continent, at once recognised that the purification of the Church required more than the mere removal of moral abuses and of crude and ignorant superstitious practices. They saw that it needed also the rejection of doctrinal beliefs which had no warrant from Holy Scripture. It was in fact this very study of Holy Scripture which at length gave men courage to break away from the false and corrupting teaching and practices of the Medieval Church. And we must not underestimate the conspicuous courage involved in such a momentous step. For undoubtedly Medieval Catholicism was, as a system, very strongly entrenched. It possessed great strength from its unity, its perfected organisation, its practically unchallenged philosophy of life, and its great wealth and privileges, its far-reaching temporal powers and above all its exclusive supernatural claims. For the Medieval Church, we must remember, was a very real force in the life of the people, since they very generally believed in the exclusive claims to supernatural power advanced by the clergy. Moreover, they feared to disobey those who

could withhold Indulgences and Absolution, and thus virtually close the gates of heaven against the sinners and disobedient. We must not forget that God was in those days regarded rather in the light of an awful angry Potentate needing to be propitiated with an indefinite number of pilgrimages, fasts and penances and masses, than in that of a loving Father longing to pardon penitent sinners on the merits of Christ's one sufficient Sacrifice for sin. It is this mistaken view of God which must be the explanation of Luther's early "agony" of soul in his desperate efforts to discover a "gracious" God.

But although the Medieval Church was apparently so strong and entrenched, the elements of its strength proved to be the seeds of its weakness, because they were maintained mainly on the unstable foundations of ignorance and fear. Consequently when the Renaissance spirit of inquiry and investigation, combined with a serious study of the Scriptures, proved that the extravagant spiritual and temporal claims of the Pope had no Scriptural or historical basis, there was first a rude awakening, and then a widespread repudiation of papal ecclesiastical authority.

In considering the sources for the English Reformation it is important to estimate the influence of the earlier Lollard Movement. For instance, we must ask the question, Was Lollardy a practically extinct and spent force in the early years of the sixteenth century? Or was there a considerable body of secret Lollards which formed the fertile soil that produced the large party of later doctrinal Reformers? Henry Knighton's "Continuator" in the beginning of the fifteenth century, tells us that the Lollards were "then held in such great honour and had so multiplied, that you could hardly see two men passing in the road, but one of them shall be a disciple of Wyclif." Even if this be an exaggeration, it is sufficient to show the importance of the Movement at that time. Evidently, in spite of their severe persecution under Henry IV, the Lollards continued to be very numerous, and to hold their secret gatherings for worship. There must also have been a goodly number of them in 1449, or Bishop Pecock would not have troubled to confound their heretical teaching in his book the *Repressor of overmuch Blaming of the Clergy*. Persecutions for Lollardy also continued even to the early years of the next century. The Movement, it is true, had been largely driven underground, but evidently it had by no means been stamped out. Bishop Tunstal told Erasmus in 1525 that Luther's teaching was merely the revival of Lollard views—there was, he declared, "nothing new in it; it simply put new weapons in the hands of already existing bands of Wyclif heretics." Moreover, the fact that over 170 manuscript copies of Wycliffe's condemned hand-copied translations of the Scriptures have survived, is sufficient evidence of the numerous and widely scattered followers of Wycliffe's teaching. And we may reasonably conclude that this teaching persisted to the time when the later Reformation movement had begun. Dr. Gairdner has declared that the Lollards remained a latent power in the land and that "they mingled with and domineered over the Reformation, though they did not bring it on." Even if we may question the truth of the first statement, there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the last; (that Lollardy did not "bring on" the Reformation) since the early doctrinal Reformers seem to have had no direct association with Lollardy or its teaching. The scanty evidence we possess, points to a considerable number of secret disciples of Wycliffe's teaching who were still flourishing in England at the time of Luther's revolt, and of the revived study of the New Testament in England. This revival began with Dean Colet's lectures on St. Paul's Epistles and with the publication of Erasmus's Greek New Testament in 1516. Foxe tells us that in 1520 and 1521 heresy was spreading widely "in divers and sundry quarters of this realm," and he adds that "this was before the name of Luther was heard of, in these countries among the people." He says these people received the name previously applied to the Lollards, i.e. of "known" or "just-fast" men, and that their teaching was that of

the Apostles, and had been received of a great number long before Luther's day. He adds that the Church of England before his own days, "had not lacked great multitudes who tasted and followed the sweetness of God's Holy Word," and that "the fervent zeal of those days seems much superior to these our days and times," for "the Word of truth did multiply exceedingly among them." Evidently therefore in England, as well as among the Mystics and "Brethren of the Common Lot" on the Continent, there were numbers of earnest seeking souls who were preparing the soil for the revival of true spiritual religion. Undoubtedly these humble "known" men would welcome the new movement for doctrinal reform and help to swell the ranks of its adherents, even though they apparently did not contribute any of its outstanding pioneers.

There is ample proof that in its main essential doctrines, Wycliffite teaching definitely anticipated the special doctrines and principles of the later Anglican Reformers. For example: in its insistence on the reading of Scripture in English, the denunciation of pilgrimages, of the invocation of Saints and of the doctrine of the Real² or corporal Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

There is also little doubt that the movements for doctrinal reform in Germany and England were at first closely allied. But it would not be accurate to say that the English Reformation was entirely dependent on the Lutheran, since, apart from these secret Lollards, or "just-fast" men, there was a rising body of young scholars at the Universities, keenly anxious for a religious reformation, even before Luther's teaching had touched England. English Protestantism was not, as Cardinal Gasquet asserted, entirely of foreign or German origin, for Tyndale was at Cambridge deep in his study of the Scriptures being "further ripened in the knowledge of God's Word"—before any Lutheran writings had reached England. He undoubtedly owed his own "conversion" to his earnest, careful and fearless study of Holy Scripture, for which probably Colet's lectures on St. Paul's Epistles and certainly Erasmus's Greek Testament had inspired him. "In such a conflict of human opinions," Erasmus had said "to what refuge shall we flee sooner than to that truly sacred anchorage of Evangelical doctrine?"

But apart from this native origin, the writings and teaching of Luther undoubtedly exercised a profound influence on the English doctrinal reformation. A goodly company of young English "Lutheran" scholars, like Barnes, Bilney and Fryth, were diligently studying the Scriptures at Cambridge; and the secret dissemination of Tyndale's New Testament after 1525 gave a great stimulus to the movement. The evidence is somewhat conflicting, but it is fairly sufficient and conclusive enough to enable us to affirm that Tyndale must have visited Luther at Wittenberg while on the Continent engaged in translating his New Testament; and that in this task he had Luther's Bible before him. But while he made use of this, he certainly maintained a complete and scholarly independence in his translation, as "his style and interpretation throughout are his own." The same can be asserted regarding his doctrine of the Eucharist, which was not Lutheran, but that of a Spiritual Presence only, to the faith of the recipient—"We have Christ present in the inward eye and sight of faith (says Tyndale). We eat His body and drink His blood, that is, we surely believe that His body was crucified for our sins and His blood shed for our salvation." Barnes and Coverdale, and probably Rogers, were however wholeheartedly Lutheran in their views, although Cranmer, who had married the Lutheran Osiander's niece, always denied that he ever held the Lutheran teaching of the Presence of Christ in the Sacrament. An unprejudiced reading of his *Catechism* makes it rather difficult to accept this repudiation. But throughout the latter part of Henry VIIIth's reign Cranmer maintained the closest relationship of friendship with Melancthon and other

leading Lutheran theologians, while the “Ten Articles” of 1536 owe much to the teaching of the Augsburg Confession, and to Melancthon’s *Apology* for it. The “Bishops’ Book” of 1537 was also based largely on Luther’s *Catechism*.

The insincere “Conferences” which Henry VIII encouraged for political reasons in 1538 and 1539 with the Lutheran “Envoys” or “Orators,” produced no religious Concordat with Lutheranism, although they resulted in the publication of the “Thirteen Articles” of 1538. These Articles, which are based on the Augsburg Confession, were a useful quarry from which our Reformers drew, for their forty-two Articles of 1553. In these indirect ways the English doctrinal Reformation owed a certain debt to the parallel Lutheran movement in Germany; but the influence was greater and the contact closer, under Edward VI, with the Swiss Reformers. But we must not forget that during Henry VIIIth’s reign the attempts at a doctrinal Reformation were only fitful and tentative and largely unofficial. Certain moral reforms were effected and the more glaring abuses and superstitions removed, owing to the Renaissance movement; and the “political” Reformation was achieved by the legal or political separation of the Church of England from Rome, but that was all. Henry had no desire to move from the doctrinal teaching of medieval Catholicity—“Our King,” said Hooper, “has destroyed the Pope, but not Popery.” Or as Cranmer more carefully expressed it, “the darkness and blindness of error and ignorance that came from Rome still remained, and the Bishop of Rome was not clean gone out of England as soon as the laws were made against his authority, but still remained by his corrupt doctrine.” After the passing of the “Six Articles” Act in 1539, Luther summed up Henry’s position as that of “wanting to kill the Pope’s body but keep his soul.”

It is therefore not till the accession of Edward VI that the English doctrinal Reformation, as a National or State Movement, really begins. As we have seen, the beginnings of this truly spiritual movement were manifest many years earlier, when a number of ardent young scholars found peace and assurance of salvation through reading St. Paul’s Epistles. Circles of eager Bible students, including Tyndale, Fryth, Stafford and Bilney, were formed at the Universities, and even an “obstinate papist” like Latimer, was converted through hearing Bilney’s “Confession.” “He smelled the Word of God,” he tells us, and thus “forsook the School authors and such fooleries.”

But this spiritual revival was bitterly opposed by the Church authorities and Tyndale soon found that “there was not room in all England” for him to translate the Scriptures into English. When at length he had finished his great task, and sent his New Testament from the Continent in 1525, it was diligently sought for and destroyed as heretical. The progress of the spiritual awakening therefore under Henry VIII was only secret, fitful, and uncertain; but under Edward VI full liberty was at once granted to all to read the Scriptures in English; and the Council, led by the Duke of Somerset and Cranmer, vigorously pushed on the doctrinal Reformation. We should never forget that it was through this freedom to study, and this direct appeal to, the Scriptures, that the doctrinal Reformers discovered the pure message of the Gospel. It was the clear teaching of the Scriptures which showed them the medieval errors which had obscured the glorious light of gospel truth—“After it had pleased God,” said Cranmer, “to show unto me by His Holy Word a more perfect knowledge of His Son Jesus Christ, from time to time, as I grew in knowledge of Him, by little and little I put away my former ignorance.” It is well here, I think, to say clearly that it is solely because of this strong appeal to the teaching and supreme authority of Holy Scripture, that we value the work of the Reformers. We do not worship them, or think them immaculate or infallible. We revere and honour them because we regard the Scriptural Truths which they emphasised and reasserted

as of vital importance for the spread and safeguarding of real spiritual religion. And it certainly was this appeal to the Scriptures which constituted the great power of the Gospel at the Reformation. And we may also add that it was in England (as it had been in Germany by Luther), the reassertion by the Reformers of the great Pauline teaching of justification by faith alone, which constituted the power of the doctrinal Reformation. For the doctrine of the “Sacrifice of the Mass” had, in effect, denied the perfection of the completed sacrifice for sin which Christ offered on the Cross. It had made man’s salvation depend on priestly mediation and not on God’s free grace. The Anglican Reformers emphasised the truth “By grace ye are saved,” not through sacraments or Church or penances, but through faith. As Bishop Hooper expressed it in his *Brief Confession of Christian Faith*: “I do believe that Christ’s condemnation is mine absolution, His blood is my cleansing by which only I am washed, justified, purified and cleansed from all my sins, so that I neither receive, neither believe any other purgatory either in this world or in the other, but only the blood of Christ by which we are all purged and made clean for ever.”

It was the expounding of this Scriptural Gospel-message by the Reformers which accomplished such a great spiritual revival; and we may also say that this result was most conspicuously achieved by their preaching. For this was not only popular, but it was practical, persuasive and penetrating. Its novelty startled, convinced and captured the people, because Erasmus had declared, shortly before this time, that “there was not a sermon once in six months calling on people to repent.” In 1535 the Archbishop of York had declared that there were not twelve people in all his diocese who “could preach a sermon, and that many churches had not heard a sermon for years.” But people now flocked to listen to the Reformers. Wherever John Bradford preached, we are told, “the people crowded eagerly around him and drank in his message. He always knew how to adapt his eloquence to the understanding of his hearers”—a lesson which many modern preachers might well learn; “he had a humble and melting spirit and will be in a man’s bosom ere he be aware and willingly win him from himself to Christ.” Dr Rowland Taylor’s preaching so changed the little Suffolk township of Hadleigh that soon “it was rather a University of the learned than a town of clothmaking and labouring people.” Latimer also was a most practical preacher, who very rightly expected profession to be accompanied by practice, since “in his eyes sin was worse than error and a pure life of more importance than a mere orthodox Creed.” . . . We are told that his preaching “left certain pricks and stings in the hearts of the hearers which moved them to consent to the doctrine.” And we are not surprised to hear it when we listen to the startling way he dared to reprimand even bishops: “Who,” he asked when preaching to Bishops at Paul’s Cross, “is the most diligent prelate in all England that passest all the rest in doing his office? I will tell you, it is the Devil! Of all the pack of them that have cure—the Devil shall have my money! for he ordereth his business. Therefore you unpreaching prelates learn of the devil to be diligent in your office. If you will not learn of God, for shame learn of the devil.”

Preaching of this direct character is not likely to send people to sleep!

This is the effective type of preacher which we need today. “None,” it is recorded, “except the stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart, went away from Latimer’s sermons which were not led with a faithful repentance of their former life, detestation of sin, and moved into all godliness and virtue.”

But the Reformers did not expect that corrupt and unscriptural, but well-entrenched and popular, medieval doctrines, would be permanently corrected merely by a spiritual revival,

which, however genuine and widespread, might prove but transient. They therefore aimed at making the Reformation of doctrine and devotion secure and permanent, by the authorisation of a Scriptural Confession of Faith and a Scriptural standard of public Worship. In the issue of the Forty-Two Articles of 1553 a definite standard of doctrine for the Reformed Church of England was set forth. This not only reasserted the Catholic teaching of the Creeds, but also claimed to teach nothing which could not be proved by the most certain warrants of Holy Scripture. By this crucial test specific medieval and Roman doctrines such as the invocation of saints, purgatory, sacrifices of masses and transubstantiation were discarded as “blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits,” or as simply “repugnant to the Word of God.” A declaration was also made that the Church of Rome had erred not only in “its manner of living, but also in matters of faith.” It is important to bear this definite assertion of our authorised doctrinal text-book in mind, in view of an amazingly unhistorical attempt which is now being made to declare that the English Reformation was solely concerned with the mere repudiation of Papal Supremacy, and did not concern itself with the doctrines of the Church of Rome. Where such an opinion or statement is not due to mere ignorance, it is a deliberate and dishonest attempt to confuse the real doctrinal Reformation Movement with the mere legal and political breach with Rome effected by Henry VIII’s determination to be “master in his own house,” and not let the Pope occupy the “ground floor.” The words of one modern prominent scholar will serve as an illustration of this deliberate perversion of history: “Our quarrel with Rome is not concerned either with rules or ceremonies or doctrine but with jurisdiction” (Prof. Relton). Surely an elementary knowledge of history should be sufficient to disprove the theory that the Protestant Reformation was limited to the mere rejection of Papal power and authority, which was accomplished when Henry VIII was proclaimed “Supreme Head of the Church of England.” The real Reformation was carried out and defined by the “Forty-Two Articles of Religion,” and its doctrinal basis was again settled and confirmed by the issue of the “Thirty-Nine Articles” of 1562.

With reference to this latter specifically “Elizabethan Settlement” of Anglican doctrine, we must also notice an ingenious attempt which certain recent theologians have made, to assert that the change of language concerning the doctrine of the Eucharist in Article 28 of 1562 had the effect of restoring and safeguarding “Catholic doctrine” on this subject, which had been seriously jeopardised in the 1553 Confession. It is asserted that the wording of this Article underwent changes of “such magnitude,” that we are seriously told that the opinions of Cranmer and Ridley on the Eucharist have only an “historical interest for us,” and cannot be regarded as even a “contemporaneous exposition” of our present Article on the subject. It is perhaps sufficient to say that a careful examination of the doctrinal views and statements of Archbishop Parker and the leading Elizabethan bishops and theologians will show that there is not a shadow of foundation for such misleading and erroneous assertions. Cranmer and his brother bishops were insistent on their rejection of the “Sacrifice of the Mass” as “the oblation of Christ made by the priest for the salvation of the quick and dead.” And similarly Archbishop Parker in the ninth of his “Eleven Articles” of 1561 declared that “the doctrine which maintaineth the Mass to be a propitiatory Sacrifice for the quick and dead, and a means to deliver souls out of Purgatory is neither agreeable to Christ’s ordinance, nor grounded upon doctrine apostolic.” Again Cranmer did not deny a Presence in the Lord’s Supper, but asserted it was not localised in the elements but “spiritual” to the faith of the recipient. Article 28 of 1562, which is supposed to have made changes of “the first magnitude” in Reformed doctrine, also definitely states that “the body of Christ is given, taken and eaten in the Supper only after a heavenly and spiritual manner, and the mean whereby it is received and eaten in the Supper is faith.” And this is exactly Cranmer’s teaching! The injunction which Cranmer inserted in the 1552 Communion Service, “Take and eat this and feed on Him in thy heart by

faith,” was also retained by Archbishop Parker and the Elizabethan revisers in 1559; and its teaching was confirmed by the greatest Elizabethan theologian, Richard Hooker—who declared: “I see not which way it should be gathered by the words of Christ when and where the bread is His body or the cup His blood, but only in the very heart and soul of him which receiveth them.”

Of equally permanent worth for the English Reformation was the compilation and issue of an authorised form of liturgical worship for the English Church. The publication of the Book of Common Prayer revolutionised worship, for it meant that people, whose hearts and lives had been transformed by the Gospel message, declared to them from God’s Word, were no longer content to offer their prayers and praises to God by deputy in a dead language “not understood of the people.” The effect of these largely meaningless, mechanical and unprofitable services had been, that spiritual darkness was rapidly covering the land and the people. As Dr. Coulton expresses it: “The Church against which the Reformers protested was one in which the laity at large had never known why they believed, and seldom even what they were supposed to believe.” But now in this new Book of Devotion, which the Reformers drew up, all the “dark and dumb ceremonies” of medieval times, which, as Cranmer says, “had much blinded the people and obscured the glory of God,” were “clean swept away”; and nothing, as he also says, “was ordained to be read” but “the very pure Word of God or that which is agreeable to the same.” For, as he finely adds, “Christ’s gospel is not a ceremonial law, but a religion, to serve God, not in bondage of figure or shadow, but in the freedom of the spirit.”

As we have seen, it was the free and fearless appeal to the clear teaching of Scripture which gave us this definite doctrinal and liturgical basis for the Reformed Anglican Church; and it was this same appeal which taught the Reformers three vital and all-important truths—

(1) It taught them the right of immediate access of the seeking sin-burdened soul to God. It emphasised the truth that the believer can enter into the “holiest of all” through the blood of Christ. In experience, it proved that God can and does speak to any seeking soul through His Word without the intervention of priest, Church or sacrament. This was, we must remember, a novel and startling truth at that time. For men had long been taught that only through the Sacraments of the Church, dispensed by a duly ordained priest, could there be any hope of salvation. People were now freed from a very real and terrible dread—that the clergy by withholding from them the Church’s sacraments might consign them to eternal perdition! Spiritual life and health now no longer consisted in a blind obedience to the commands and laws of the Church, since Scripture showed that “every man had to give an account of himself to God” and that priestly mediation was not really necessary. And this great discovery meant also (2) that God’s grace and salvation were not tied to priestly channels or even to the ordinances of baptism, Absolution or the Eucharist. Men, as Luther, Bilney and Latimer discovered after much distress of soul, are justified by grace through faith, independently of priests or sacraments. This we may truly say, was the great Scriptural reassertion of the Reformers. For as Bishop Barnes well puts it: “The essence of Sacerdotalism is the belief that the priest has spiritual powers, which other believers do not possess. He is the Vicar of God and not merely the representative of the congregation.”

The natural corollary of the reaffirmation of this fundamental truth was the assertion of:

(3) The equal priesthood of all believers, and therefore the right of private judgment in matters of conscience. This meant in practice that the humble sincere Christian believer enlightened by the Holy Spirit is as much “infallible” as a Pope.

The Reformers emphasised the value of the individual soul in God’s sight, and this Scriptural doctrine had a direct result in the overthrow of despotism. For if Christ has made all believers free, they should be free to assert their rights in the government of their country. If every individual soul be of equal value in God’s sight and of infinite value, then it should also be of equal value in the eyes of an earthly ruler or Dictator.

It is not altogether out of place here to utter a warning against the fiction that the Middle Ages were the days of “purest faith,” devotion and piety and true righteousness. So that in those “glorious” days the Church always “protected the weak against the strong,” and was a great patron of learning and education and stood forth as the protector of the poor and oppressed. And it is now often added that this “ideal” social condition was destroyed by Protestant “vandals” and “capitalists” by their theories of individualism and competition. History will not support such a gross misrepresentation of facts. It would be far more true to say that the Middle Ages was a time of blind acquiescence, than of faith—an age of gross superstition and ignorance—an age when usually the poor were fleeced by the rich and powerful nobles, and ecclesiastics, and were exploited for the aggrandisement of popes, prelates and abbots.

But these great truths of Scripture reasserted by the Reformers, produced liberty of thought and this in its turn very soon led to freedom of conscience. And these Reformation blessings soon resulted in progress instead of the stagnation which had been so conspicuous of the last century and a half. For once men were freely allowed to think without incurring the ban of “heresy,” a sincere thirst for knowledge and truth was soon promoted. For although the Renaissance Movement had failed to satisfy the sin-burdened and distressed conscience, it had directly stimulated this sincere desire for Truth. And this aim had also led the Reformers to probe and “prove all things” and to “hold fast only to that which was good.” Such a pure disinterested motive is the secret of all advance and progress whether in religion, science or historical research. And as we, like the Reformers, seek to follow Him, who is the Truth, we too shall be led into fuller and clearer knowledge of His Word and Will for mankind. For we too are persuaded with John Robinson of Leyden—the pastor of the “Pilgrim Fathers”—that “God hath still more light and truth to break forth from His holy Word.”

C. SYDNEY CARTER

Endnotes:

- 1) The second of four lectures delivered at Dean Wace House, 1935.
- 2) At this date the terms “Real” and “Corporal” were practically synonymous.