

The Spiritual issues of the Reformation

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So closely interrelated were the political, economic, cultural, and religious developments of the early sixteenth century that some historians have denied, and others doubted, the importance of spiritual issues in the Reformation struggle. F. M. Powicke, for instance, says that “the Reformation in England was a parliamentary transaction”,¹ and S. C. Carpenter that the first stage of the Reformation was in almost no sense doctrinal.² While both these statements are true, if interpreted rightly, there is considerable evidence from contemporary sources to indicate that it was the search for personal spiritual satisfaction which initiated and sustained the impetus of the significant changes made during the period. It was not because of the influence of Renaissance learning nor because of a patriotic desire to dissolve Roman supremacy over the English Church that Thomas Bilney entered on the road that led to martyrdom. It was because he found for himself, and wished others to find, that God’s forgiveness was conditional only upon man’s faith. In his own words: “This one sentence (1 Tim. i. 15) did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that immediately I felt a marvellous comfort and quietness, insomuch that my bruised bones leaped for joy”.³ R. H. Bainton closes his book *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* by examining its effects on politics, economics, and domestic relations, but goes on to comment: “All these (effects) were only by-products. The Reformation was a religious revival. Its attempt was to give man a new assurance in the presence of God and a new motivation in the moral life.”⁴

It is worthwhile, however, to assess some of the varying explanations of the Reformation which have been offered. Some have suggested that the whole movement was simply one of the periodic rebellions against economic exploitation, in this case by the Protestants against the Papacy. There is no doubt that during the Middle Ages the papal organization had developed into a vast money-making machine, as procurations, tithes, annates, “provisions,” and Peter’s Pence flowed into its coffers, and that this was bitterly resented by the laity and clergy alike. But if nothing more had been at stake, it would have been quite possible for Henry VIII to adjust the grievance by a concordat like that yielded to France, especially as Clement VII was in no position to insist upon his so-called rights. The refusal to remain under the pope’s spiritual control can hardly be attributed therefore to economic considerations.

Another attempted explanation is that the Reformation was merely the manifestation and culmination of an inner conflict between two ethnic groups—a rebellion by the Teutonic peoples against the dominance of the Latins. This theory has a show of truth, because obviously in the end Protestantism entrenched itself in the north and Roman Catholicism in the south. Moreover, Protestant theology is sometimes supposed to be more congenial to the tenacious, intellectual rather dogmatic Teutonic approach. In the first place, though, this explanation ignores the persistence of Catholicism in Ireland and its sharing of German territory. Secondly, it does not seem that Roman doctrine is less dogmatic or more spontaneous and intuitive than that of Protestantism. In fact the most celebrated Protestant theological work, Calvin’s *Institutes*, is typically swift and supple in the French tradition. The division of the rival churches into rough geographical zones is best explained by the

application during the sixteenth century of *cuius regio, eius religio*, and the expulsion and emigration of religious minorities.

On the other hand, the Reformation has been regarded as a chiefly social phenomenon. According to this interpretation, Roman Catholicism remained as the religion of the upper classes, the middle classes turned to Lutheranism and Calvinism, the lower to Anabaptism. This explanation misconceives both the state of society in the sixteenth century and the composition of the religious groups. Firstly, these sharp dividing lines between class and class were a product mainly of the Industrial Revolution, certainly they were not evident in a society which was in many respects medieval and which had only just entered on the growth of capitalism. Secondly, it would be difficult to maintain the thesis that different religions were adopted by different classes, even if these existed. That the Calvinist Huguenots were largely tradesmen is true: but the French peasantry showed little tendency towards Anabaptism. Luther continued to hold the allegiance of peasants even after their abortive rebellion. The Anabaptists themselves owed their limited growth and adversities of their existence not to their low social status but rather to the severity with which they were harried from place to place. Their early leaders came indeed from the burgher intelligentsia. We must beware, too, of mistaking the effects of the Reformation for its causes. For example, the prosperous merchants of Holland in later years were Calvinists, but were they Calvinist because they were merchants, or merchants because they were Calvinists?

Perhaps the most plausible of the alternative explanations is that which attributes the Reformation to nationalistic and political causes. It is certain that for some centuries in England and France, and more recently in Spain, an increased desire for national unity and independence had been shown. The twin leadership of Europe by Church and Empire was being discarded in favour of smaller, more compact units, which were easier to control and possessed enough internal agreement to weld together their divergent elements. It is certain, too, that in England and Scandinavia, and to some extent in Germany, Reformation ideas were used to further political ends. But that the ideas themselves were not the product of nationalism seems equally clear. In Spain, for instance, a fierce patriotic fervour aligned itself with Rome *against* the Protestants. Again, Henry II of France, who was the last king before Henry IV who could decide and execute his own policy, showed scant mercy to the Reformers but equally little consideration for the pope. In Ireland, it was Catholicism which supported the struggle for national independence, while in Germany the Lutheran princes during the Thirty Years' War were leaning over backwards to preserve the Empire from dissolution. It seems that neither in Protestant nor in Catholic camps was there a fixed predilection for or against a particular form of government, but that their reaction was determined by the circumstances of the time.

Sir Isaac Newton phrased his Second Law of Motion thus: "The rate of change of the quantity of motion in a body is proportional to the impressed force and takes place in the direction of the impressed force." As in the sphere of mechanical science, so in religion is this law true. The impetus and direction of the Reformation can only be explained by a mighty spiritual energy. The greatest movements of world history, judged by both the intensity and the permanence of their effects, are those where the human spirit has been the mainspring. The rise of Communism cannot be adequately explained as an economic, a political, a social development. It is because of its claim to satisfy all human needs, only to exterminate the soul by subtle means, that its proliferation has been so devastating and rapid. Now the Reformation produced many changes in the different spheres of civilized life, but it is in religion that they have been permanent and stable. Different forms of government have

arisen and decayed, economic systems have fluctuated, cultural life has sometimes flourished, sometimes faded: new principles, new approaches, have had their influence in every field of human life. But that the spiritual need of Europe in the sixteenth century was adequately satisfied in accordance with the unchanging relationship between man and God is proved by the continued life and vigour of Protestantism. It is, of course, a dynamic, not a static religion; but while methods and terminology do and must change, the survival of the old principles is a guarantee of the religious validity of the Reformation. So much for the *direction* of the new movement.

To estimate next the amount of “impressed force”, it is necessary to find out the resulting “rate of change” or momentum. To begin with, there was a tremendous acceleration as the Reformation got under way. The ground had been prepared for some time before by the exponents of the New Learning. Apart from the Renaissance scholars like Lorenzo Valla, there were those like Colet of St. Paul’s, a pioneer in Biblical exposition, who were concerned with the decadence of the Church. Among these, and influenced himself by Colet, was Erasmus, whose crowning achievement was his edition of the Greek New Testament in 1515. The encouragement he gave to Biblical Study was reinforced by his “Paraphrases” or commentaries, which were eventually placed by royal command in every church in England. But even allowing for the extent to which the Roman Catholic position had been undermined by this fresh scholarship and by earlier dissidents like Wycliffe and Huss, the speed at which Reformed truths spread through Europe after 1517 was sensational. Within twenty years of Luther’s attack on indulgences, Protestant national churches had been established in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, England had seceded from her allegiance to the papacy, the powerful Schmalkaldic League of German Lutheran princes had arrayed itself against the Emperor, Calvin had begun his work in Geneva, and the Zwinglians had secured for themselves a measure of toleration at the Peace of Kappel. This is to speak only of the official recognition accorded to Protestants. Their doctrines had filtered into every land in Europe to some degree. Within fifty years, toleration had been yielded in Poland, and Calvinism established in Scotland. Already there were the beginnings of the storm in France and the Low Countries. In 1598 the Edict of Nantes gave freedom of worship to French Protestants and in 1609 Holland gained her freedom from Catholic Spain. So swift then was the dissemination of the new-found truths, that in less than a century half of Europe had transferred its loyalties to the Protestant faith. The rapid growth of the movement, together with the direction in which its course mainly flowed, are patent indications that its source must have been an overwhelming spiritual force.

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What was it that brought the Reformers into opposition to the Church of Rome? What were they seeking that seemed so important as to be worth persecution and martyrdom? The opening paragraph of Bishop Jewel’s *Apology* provides a clue. In it he conceives the struggle between Christ and Satan as one fought under the aegis of truth and falsehood. “The truth wandereth here and there as a stranger in the world, and doth readily find enemies and slanderers amongst those that know her not.”⁵ The lies which constantly oppose the progress of the truth are fathered by the devil. “Nay truly, this might seem much rather a marvel, and beyond all belief, if the devil, who is the father of lies and enemy to all truth, would now upon a sudden change his nature and hope that truth might otherwise be suppressed than by belying it.”⁶ Jewel, thinking of Christ, says that “the truth” is the name most fit to express all His divine power.

It would seem, then, that at least one typical Reformer understood the conflict with Rome in terms of truth (Christ) versus falsehood (Satan). His criterion in assessing a doctrine was not “Does it please?” nor even, “Does it satisfy?”, nor again, “Is it of long-standing?”, but “Is it correct?” Equally Archbishop Cranmer in *The Lord’s Supper* claims repeatedly that his aim is “that all should be performed according to its true use”.⁷ His favourite description of the Anglican faith is “the true Christian religion” based on “the truth of the Divine Word”. Truth it was which mattered above all else to these men. A testimony to the honesty of their search is that although in the early fifteen-twenties Cranmer and Latimer had met at the White Horse Inn in Cambridge to discuss Reformed ideas with, among others, William Tyndale and Robert Barnes, it was years and sometimes decades before they found themselves able to agree entirely with their former friends, already passed on in glory. It was 1546, for instance, before Cranmer came to the true and catholic doctrine and use of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. There was no facile acceptance of new doctrines simply because the pupil admired or respected his teacher, no believing for believing’s sake. Truth, unless examined and appropriated individually, is tasteless in itself and profitless. The Reformers were convinced, too, that truth is powerful and persuasive. So Cranmer writes: “By which book so many persons were drawn to a correct opinion that I perceived how great was the power of truth, and understood the benefits of the grace of our Saviour Christ, so that men who had been darkened to the light of truth received the splendour of the light.”⁸

The search for truth was initiated for two reasons: firstly, because men wanted a religion that was adequate for their spiritual need; secondly, because they believed it ought also to be intellectually satisfactory. Brought up among and surrounded by all the trappings and accessories of Roman Catholic religion, the Reformers found its system inadequate and largely irrelevant to the problems they felt in their relationship to God. On investigating further, it was found that the system itself was not internally consistent or respectable. Thus spiritual dissatisfaction led to intellectual doubt, and God in His mercy and wisdom supplied the needs of both mind and soul, for His truth provides for the whole man.

It is not every Christian’s wish or gift to make public his spiritual history, or at least the details of the encounter with God in Jesus Christ which made him a new creation. Only a little is known, for example, of how Robert Barnes and Hugh Latimer first came to know Christ—through the instrumentality of Thomas Bilney. Of Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cranmer, William Tyndale, we know even less. There is, however, more to be learned about Bilney’s, and indeed of Luther’s conversion, the pioneers of the English and German Reformations. In a letter to Bishop Tunstall, Bilney makes it clear that his conversion only came after he had made every endeavour to satisfy his soul by the means provided by the Roman Church, spending not only his money but most of his spiritual strength in so doing. Vigils, fasts, penances, every ordinance prescribed for the consolation of a conscience-stricken sinner, all these were tried by the young priest, and all were found wanting. This experience is an exact parallel to Luther’s a few years before. Dr. Wace describes it thus: “When one great and genuine soul had wrestled with these terrors of conscience for years in a monastery, when the truth had been brought home to the depths of his conscience, by a bitter personal experience, that there was no hope in himself and his own efforts, but that he must look altogether outside himself for forgiveness, the long struggle of the Middle Ages had reached its natural conclusion.”⁹

It is highly significant that the break from Rome, as well in Germany as in England—Foxe calls Bilney “the first framer of that university (Cambridge) in the knowledge of Christ”—¹⁰ was made by men who had tasted everything that papal religion had to offer, who had been to

every length to prove its claims in their experience, and still had to admit its emptiness. It was not the easily discouraged, but those of spiritual zeal and stamina who found salvation outside the “one fold”. This is surely an indication to modern Christians that while forgiveness costs nothing in the way of good works, it is only given to those who are deeply concerned spiritually and really hungry for fellowship with God. There were few, if any, facile conversions in Reformation times. Moreover, spiritual needs always take precedence over the intellectual, and what evidence there is of God’s dealings with the Reformers suggests that it was when they had begun to seek for some greater consolation than the Church could offer that they began to have intellectual doubts as to its authority. Rome was proved wrong first in practice, second in theory.

It was not long after they *felt* that indulgences, penances, Masses, etc., were of no use to the starving soul, that they began to see why. They were preceded, however, in the field of detecting error by a long succession of rebels and critics who had expressed doubts as to the efficacy of such observances. This succession had lately been crowned by the coming of Erasmus. In his *Enchiridion* of 1503 he attacked the Pharisaism of contemporary religious thought. Six years later he spoke of “the clowns who had perverted the ways of Christian love”.¹¹ Though he lived and died a bachelor, he “disliked and distrusted the whole edifice of medieval religion, the monks, the friars, the bishops, the ceremonies, and above all indulgences.”¹² He complained that a man would choose rather to venture his salvation upon a skin of parchment than on the amendment of his life”.¹³ And this scholar from Rotterdam, “the glory of his age,”¹⁴ was in Cambridge for a full three years shortly before the meetings at the White Horse Inn.

When such renowned teachers, while still devout churchmen, could openly criticize abuses and advocate reform, it is not to be wondered at if those who had also an experience of forgiveness into the bargain soon began to find that the Romish system was not worthy of their intellectual assent. The merciless exposure of Catholic error was carried on especially by Tyndale in the glosses to his translations, but also by word of mouth by Bilney, who preached against images and penances in Norfolk, Miles Coverdale in Essex, Barnes in Cambridge. The first flash of the light of truth had come through the experience of the heart; its radiance was to shine more brightly and widely as chastened but gladdened minds undertook the labour of explaining and propagating the new truths.

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Reality in religion was the first object of the Reformers’ search. It meant acknowledging their utter helplessness to fulfil the commands of God. The Church did not recognize this premise and was unable to offer a solution, and consequently they were driven to the Scriptures, “*flumina aurum volventia*,” as Erasmus described them.¹⁵ It is worthy of note, but not of surprise, that enlightenment for both Luther and Bilney came from this source, to the former from the Psalms and Romans, and to the latter from 1 Timothy. The truth they discovered there was the vehicle of salvation to them, and later to others. It became the rallying-cry for the reform movement and anathema in Catholic ears. Justification by faith is the cardinal point around which the Christian life revolves, and it is the truth of this doctrine which makes it possible for sinful man *actually* to come into contact with God, and not just to flatter himself that he does. Luther put it this way: “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith’. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone

through open doors into paradise.”¹⁶ The Augsburg Confession thus: “We teach that men are freely justified for Christ’s sake, by faith, when they believe that they are received into grace.”¹⁷ The Thirty-Nine Articles thus: “Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.”¹⁸ By faith only: this *sola fide* was the bone that stuck in Catholic throats, and they took care to add “and by repentance, hope, and love” in the recantation which Cranmer was persuaded to sign. When Martin Bucer came to England in 1549 to occupy the chair of divinity at Cambridge, one of the features of church life which pleased him most was that “the doctrine of justification is purely and soundly taught”,¹⁹ though its detractors like Gardiner, Master of Trinity Hall, were not yet completely silenced. The doctrine hinges upon the meaning of the two words “justification” and “faith”.

First, it must be clear that faith is the channel and not the ground of salvation. Dr. Wace elucidates: “The phrase ‘justification by faith’ is really an abbreviated expression of the truth, and is not the phrase originally used by the Reformers in the Confession. They say not that men are justified by faith, but that they are justified for Christ’s sake through faith.”²⁰ It is not because we believe, but because Christ died, that we can enjoy fellowship with God. Faith is not another but superior kind of good work which earns God’s friendliness, but merely a receptivity which has no merit in itself. This receptivity is indeed passive, yet at the same time it is the utmost activity. The paradox is necessarily involved in any contact between infinite God and finite man, and may be paralleled in the following way. Man is freest when he is bound to God, strongest when he feels at his weakest, most his own when to live is Christ. So the minister must urge his hearers to be active in faith, emphasizing meanwhile that faith is to be received as a gift from God. Thus conversion must be shown to be both an *act* of committal and an *attitude* of trust: the separation of the two will lead on the one hand to unstable decisions and quick defections, on the other to complacency and spiritual sclerosis.

Second, it was the Reformers’ conviction that “to be accounted righteous is not the same thing as to be inherently righteous” (H. C. Porter).²¹ As Cranmer says in the *Homily of Salvation* (1546): “And this justification or righteousness, which we do receive by God’s mercy and Christ’s merits, embraced by faith, is taken, accepted, and allowed of God for our perfect and full justification.”²² Bishop Jewel (*Defence*, p. 582) quotes Augustine’s words: “Our very righteousness itself is so great in this life, that it standeth rather in forgiveness of our sins than in perfection of righteousness”;²³ and those of Jerome: “It is most certain that he enjoyeth full perfection, not of his own deserving, but of grace.”²⁴ This again meant reality in the worship and service of God, when relations between Father and son are without a blemish or a cloud. Fellowship under restraint and with reservations is not fellowship at all—its prerequisite must be confidence and openness. Only the Protestant truth of justification by the Cross can assure us of such a relationship.

The sinner is usually conceived as being righteous by his status and not by his condition. The process has been criticized as being no more than a legal fiction, but a true appreciation of Christ’s identification of himself with sinful man will show this suggestion to be unwarranted. The modern Evangelical must certainly maintain his emphasis on this aspect of the truth, opposing any system which offers salvation by means of a substitute for Christ, to be received by a substitute for faith. Here, as elsewhere, the Christian doctrine is made up of two interlocking parts, representing the activity of God and the response of man. Any substitute for Christ, whether it is ritual, sacraments, churchmanship, or the popular and pernicious alternatives of a harmless life, initiation into esoteric cults, or social progress, must be exposed.

Equally we must stress that faith is not a commodity existing *in vacuo*. Faith should never be separated from its antecedent—the promises of God, nor from its object—the life and death and person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Jewel’s words: “It is our faith that applieth the death and cross of Christ to our benefit. And Origen saith: ‘Christ is the priest, the propitiation, and sacrifice; which propitiation cometh to everyone by means of faith’.”²⁵ The operation of faith is thus integrally linked to Jesus and His sacrifice. Such a trust in God’s entire satisfaction and His full forgiveness of our sins will produce a bold, joyful, confident Christianity which should be typically Protestant. There is a point at which introspectivity becomes one of the most serious hindrances to Christian life and witness.

This leads on to the second great object of the Reformers’ search. Beside reality, the knowledge that religion was not just a vain mumbo-jumbo, they wanted security. Calvin, it is said, had such a sense of security that it never occurred to him to wonder if he was one of the elect. He was quite content to go on doing the will of God, and rather despised those who were worried by the question. Luther was not so serene, for God saw fit to test him with many periods of doubt and depression. He wrote: “If I live longer, I would like to write a book about ‘*Anfechtungen*’, for without them no man can understand Scripture, faith, the fear, or the love of God. He does not know the meaning of hope who was never subject to temptations.”²⁶ All in all, though, the characteristic note of Reformed religion was assurance. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* witnesses abundantly to this. Anthony Pearson, burnt in 1544, pulled the burning straw on to his head and cried: “This is God’s hat; now am I dressed like a true soldier of Christ, by whose merits only I trust this day to enter into His joy.” John Bradford encouraged his young fellow-sufferer, John Leaf, with the words: “Be of good comfort, brother: for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night.”²⁷ Such assurance sprang principally from three doctrines: the sovereignty of God, the trustworthiness of the Scriptures, the efficacy of the Atonement.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God was not new in the sense that it was unknown before or that it had been forgotten. It had merely been by-passed and whittled down. From the distinct assertion of Augustine that God controls every part of the universe, theologians through the centuries had managed to find more and more room for human effort, accommodating the truth to man’s innate desire to make himself “like God”. Thomas Aquinas, to be sure, did not deny that all power and merit belonged to God, but vaguely hinted that it was now on permanent loan to the Church. In fact, the emergence of a new emphasis in the Roman Church was typical of the medieval period. The honour due to the body of Christ, those whom He energizes and directs, is only the reflected glow of the honour due to Him. Unfortunately there are few errors more common than that of regarding the Church, which should be the principal vehicle of God’s glory, as an end in itself, an institution which must be preserved for its own sake. It was one of the chief benefits of the Reformation to restore the glorification of God as the motive for all human effort and the end of all creation. The test of ceremony and religious devotion was, “Does it enhance the glory of God?” The watchword of the Reformers became “*solī Deo Gloria*” . It was the starting-point of Calvin’s theology in the *Institutes*—God’s power is absolute, and He only is worthy to be praised.

In accordance with this view, whatever was allowed to man’s power, or goodness, or intellect, detracted in equal ratio from God’s. “The great thing to be attended to,” wrote Calvin, “is that God’s glory be maintained entire and unimpaired.”²⁸ Calvin was the greatest exponent of the revived significance of the doctrine. In his scheme of thought it became not

merely a philosophical maxim but a living and motivating principle, the presupposition underlying all Scriptural truth. Notably, however, it was productive and fruitful of Christian character and values wherever it was adequately integrated into a theological synthesis. Where it was not duly prepared for and compensated by other Christian truths, it sometimes led to severe doubt and an unwholesome fear. The new principle was referred to, especially, during the early days, as a guide in what was permissible in Christian worship. Thomas Becon praised Latimer for his attacks on “temple-works, good intents, blind zeal, superstitious devotion, etc.; as the painting of tabernacles, gilding of images, setting up of candles, running on pilgrimage, and such like other idle inventions of men, whereby the glory of God was obscured.”²⁹ The pomp and extravagance which earned the Church the contempt of the common man and the denunciation of preachers like Barnes and Bradford were further examples of the extent to which she was usurping the honour due to God alone. There was a violent reaction in Calvinist circles against any ceremony or ornament which was deemed to be superfluous. Many directives in the 1549 Prayer Book offended in this respect. Bucer censured the alb and cope, the sign of the cross at the consecration, anointing in baptism, the blessing of water in the font, etc.³⁰ It was some time, too, before John Hooper could be persuaded to wear surplice and cope at his consecration as Bishop of Gloucester. Such was the zeal of many Reformers to reject anything that might detract from or infringe upon the glory of God.

What may the twentieth century profitably learn from this emphasis? First, we must rediscover the importance of *solī Deo Gloria* as the incentive of the Christian life. It is the believer’s duty to live his life to the glory of God, irrespective of whether he finds it hard or easy, rewarding or barren. Second, we must challenge every attempt to set up the Church, the State, society, or the individual as the be-all and end-all of our efforts. Third, we (and especially those who are concerned with the ordering of worship in the Church of England) must take every precaution lest anything in our services and presentation of the Gospel cast a shadow over the splendour of God’s Name. The sooner it is realized that the dingy, the old-fashioned, the crude, the ugly, the immature, the tedious can no longer be tolerated in our churches, the better it will be. If there is to be music in church, let it be good music. If we claim the Bible is the Word of God, let it be read thoughtfully and well. Above all, if the Church gathers to meet the high and lofty One, then let there be manifest a true atmosphere of reverence. The sovereignty of God brings to the believer the security that all the chances and trials of this life are under His control, and, what is more, that he is himself more than their conqueror. The almighty God is involved in the human situation: He can be counted upon as the one stable factor. “The chief end of man,” then, “is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever”.

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What Dr. Wace called “the cardinal principle of the Reformed teaching”³¹ was contained in the third article of the Augsburg Confession, which laid down that our salvation has been achieved for us by Christ alone, in His death, and is applied individually to us by the operation of His Spirit. The cardinal principle is in fact that of the Atonement. It was the second ground of security for the Reformers: God was in supreme control: full provision had been made whereby the sinner could trust that the Almighty power would be exerted on his behalf. It was the meaning of the events on Calvary which suddenly broke out upon Luther from the twenty-second psalm and changed his understanding of the Scriptures. It was the realization why Jesus came which transformed Bilney’s reading of the New Testament. If the sovereignty of God was a philosophical assurance of security, then the Atonement was a

historical one. The prayer of consecration in the Holy Communion service is largely a record of the historical events by which Almighty God gave His “only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by His one oblation of Himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world”.³² In no more emphatic terms could the uniqueness and eternal sufficiency of the Cross be affirmed. Faith does not operate on anything but the saving acts of God. Calvary is Biblical history, that is, fact plus significance—and this dual aspect of the truth, when appropriated by faith, is God’s meeting-place with men. Belief in the sacrifice of Christ was then, as it should be now, the key-note of the preacher’s message. John Bradford urged his hearers: “The matter hangeth not on thy worthiness, but it hangeth on God’s truth. Clap hold on it; and I warrant thee Christ is ‘the propitiation for our sins, yea, for the sins of the whole world’.”³³

The two chief aspects of the Atonement which created controversy in the sixteenth century, were the sufficiency and the uniqueness of the death of Christ. The first was spot-lighted in the Augsburg Confession: “a Sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men”.³⁴ They complained that there was a widely-held opinion that the Cross dealt only with original guilt and that daily sins were taken away by the Mass. The Reformers were always careful for the honour of Christ, that nothing—Mass, penance, absolution, or purgatory—should be allowed to be added to the Atonement in the work of remission of sins. Such a certainty gave Tyndale the assurance to write: “We have a promise that Christ, and His body, and His blood, and all that He did, and suffered, is a sacrifice, a ransom, and a *full* satisfaction for our sins; that God for His sake will think no more on them, if we have power to repent and believe.”³⁵ Here is a salutary reminder that the Reformers took no narrow view of the Atonement. Tyndale conceives the whole person and work of Christ as the basis of God’s forgiveness—and yet the Cross was so far the essence and climax of Christ’s appearing that it may fitly be used to sum up the whole work. So Cranmer: “Only the death of Christ” is “the oblation, satisfaction, and price, wherefor our sins be pardoned.”³⁶ The present-day Christian must continue in this faith, that the only ground of God’s forgiveness is through the death of Christ, for original sin, for sins committed before and after conversion, for the sins of those who have never heard of Christ. Never does repentance, sacrament, or “living according to the light”, erase the barrier between us and God.³⁷

Whether Christ died once for all was a fruitful source of controversy then as now. Ridley speaks of “Christ’s blessed body and blood, which was once only offered and shed upon the cross”.³⁸ This was the truth which Cranmer expounded and defended so well in *The Lord’s Supper*, that “if Christ had made any oblation for sin more than once, He should have died more than once”.³⁹ Without contradicting the clear words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Romanists could not deny that “the sacrifice of our Saviour Christ was never reiterate” (so Gardiner⁴⁰). Yet they maintained that the Mass was a sacrifice. “The papists to excuse themselves do say, that they make no new sacrifice: but that they make the self-same sacrifice for sin that Christ made” (Cranmer⁴¹). This means, if taken literally, “that they every day slay Christ and shed His blood”.⁴² Cranmer quoted with approval Peter Lombard’s words: “That which is offered and consecrated of the priest, is called a sacrifice, because it is a memory and representation of the true sacrifice made in the altar of the Cross.”⁴² The important word “representation” is defined as a “memory”, and not “re-presentation”. Clear thinking will show that if the Lord’s Supper is a re-presentation, it is to crucify Christ again. Coverdale wrote: “It is not said that Christ was once offered up to the Father, that other should afterward use the same oblation, that they might apply unto us the force of His intercession. As concerning the application of the merit of His death, that we may feel the

fruit thereof, that is done, not after such sort as they of the popish church think it to be done; but when we receive the tidings of the gospel.”⁴⁴ What is needed in sacramental controversy today is a clear head. The Reformers dealt with every debated point that has since arisen. Their example of exhaustive argument and definition of terms must be adhered to if we are to expose false doctrine as successfully as they did. Their motive, too, must be recaptured or preserved—that the truth of the Atonement must be vindicated not to prove we are in the right, or to maintain for ourselves a foothold in the Church of England, but to keep unblemished the glory due to Christ our Saviour and to help in His search for those who are lost. Only if we realize how wonderfully sufficient our Saviour is, can we be secure in the knowledge that, on sin, God has spoken His final word.

The third bastion which lent the Reformers security against doubt and fear was the trustworthiness of the Bible. By it they were assured of the accuracy of their knowledge of God and particularly of Jesus. Again it was a doctrine which, while held in theory, had long since ceased to have a vital effect on man’s religion. And not surprisingly it was when its revival made it once more a significant force that it was doubted, challenged, and distorted. For the Reformers, the Bible was first of all the Word of God. Its inspiration is thus declared by Jewel: “these (the canonical Scriptures) be the heavenly voices, whereby God hath opened unto us his will; that in them be abundantly and fully comprehended all things, whatsoever be needful for our salvation”⁴⁵; and elsewhere: “the judgment of the Holy Scriptures, that is to say, the judgment of God Himself.”⁴⁶ As is the author, so is the authority. The Word of God replaced the Church as the arbiter of truth; it is “the very sure and infallible rule, whereby may be tried, whether the Church doth stagger or err.”⁴⁷ Tyndale calls it “the touchstone that trieth all doctrines”,⁴⁸ and it was to this court of appeal that Cranmer brought the question of the Lord’s Supper: “so the contention on both parties may be quieted and ended, the most sure and plain way is to cleave unto holy Scripture, wherein whatsoever is found, must be taken for a most sure ground and an infallible truth.”⁴⁹

We must notice the stress that is laid by the Reformers on the continuity of Protestantism with true Catholicism, especially noticeable in the Confession of Augsburg but also in Cranmer’s *The Lord’s Supper* and Ridley’s *Disputation at Oxford*. Cranmer deals extensively with evidence drawn from the Fathers, asseverating frequently that the papists are condemned in that their doctrine contradicts both the Scriptures and the “old doctors” or “ancient authors” of the undivided Church.⁵⁰ Ridley’s determination to retain as many of the old authors as possible was shown when he was challenged with a text from St. Bernard. “I know that Bernard was in such a time, that in this matter he may worthily be suspected. Notwithstanding yet I will so expound him, rather than reject him, that he shall make nothing for you at all.”⁵¹ The Reformers, then, fled all appearance of novelty, and paid great respect to the opinions of previous theologians. Yet, in the last resort they would maintain the right of private judgment.

The third quality of religious life which the Reformers desired, and found to be Scriptural and necessary, was freedom. It depended on, or rather was interrelated with, the reality and the security which they derived from God’s presence and truth, and affected especially their new life as Christians. It may be said that false religion always brings bondage, and wherever there is bondage, there is superstition and lack of holiness.

The discovery of freedom meant two things: freedom from undue ceremonial; freedom to do good works. So Coverdale writes: “Thus do we perceive that this multitude of ceremonies which is seen in the mass is utterly contrary to the Christian religion. (Yet) I am not of that

mind, that I would disprove (reject) all ceremonies which do serve to honesty and public order”.⁵² The Christian life no longer meant being religious, but doing the will of God in the place of His choice. So Becon: “But unto what good works is the faithful created in Christ? Unto Rome-running? gadding on pilgrimage? setting-up of candles? gilding of images? painting of tabernacles? building of monasteries? purchasing of pardons? Many non-Christians, and Christians too, still think of “following Christ” or “full-time service” as entering the ministry. A work-mate in an engineering shop recently said, “It’s all very well to follow Christ, but some of us have to go to work!” Let Coverdale’s words be better heeded and taught: “Our duty is no more but to trust and believe in Him, and to serve in that vocation and condition of life, whereunto we are called and appointed of God, faithfully.”⁵⁴ Christian freedom, regained by the Reformers, must not become bound again by twentieth-century religiosity.

“What is truth?” Pilate’s question was answered in the minds of Luther and his successors. True religion produced reality, security freedom, held in equipoise between their basis in theoretical doctrine and their outcome in practical living. Everything that is Christ-like is founded on the truth; therefore the truth was their goal. For it their spirits longed, and from it they produced a quality of religious life rarely equalled since. If we are to enjoy a religion without hypocrisy (play-acting), without bondage to others or ourselves, which is confident in its certainty, let us beseech God to create in us spirits that thirst for the truth.

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[Readers are reminded that the views expressed by the author do not necessarily represent those of Church Society].

Endnotes:

- 1) F. M. Powicke: *The Reformation in England* (1941), p. 34.
- 2) S. C. Carpenter: *The Church in England, 597-1688* (1954), p. 216.
- 3) Letter to Tunstall, quoted in M. L. Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* (1954), p. 7.
- 4) R. H. Bainton: *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (1953), p. 261.
- 5) John Jewel: *Apology of the Church of England* (1562) (Parker Soc., Vol. 30), p. 52.
- 6) *Ibid.*
- 7) Thomas Cranmer: *The Lord’s Supper* (1550) (Protestant Truth Soc., 1907), p. xix.
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) H. Wace: *Principles of the Reformation* (1910), p. 45.
- 10) John Foxe: *Acts and Monuments*, IV, p. 651.

- 11) Erasmus: *Praise of Folly*, LIV, in H. C. Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (1958), p. 25.
- 12) Carpenter: *op. cit.*, p. 204.
- 13) *Ibid.*
- 14) Henry Bullock: in Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- 15) Erasmus: *Epistolae*, I, 352, in Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- 16) Bainton: *op. cit.* p. 49.
- 17) In Wace: *op. cit.*, p. 50.
- 18) Article XI.
- 19) Porter: *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- 20) Wace: *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 21) Porter: *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 22) *Ibid.*
- 23) Jewel: *Defence of the Apology*, p. 582.
- 24) Jewel: *Apology*, p. 64.
- 25) Bainton: *op. cit.*, p. 283.
- 26) In Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
- 27) Porter: *op. cit.*, p. 72.
- 28) Calvin: *Institutes*, III, xiii, 12.
- 29) Thomas Becon: *Catechism*, p. 425 in Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- 30) Cf. Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- 31) Wace, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- 32) Book of Common Prayer, the Lord's Supper.
- 33) John Bradford: Parker Soc., Vol. 32, p. 68.
- 34) In Wace, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- 35) William Tyndale: Parker Soc., Vol. 38, p. 278.
- 36) Cranmer: *op. cit.*, p. 239.
- 37) Cf. Article XVIII.

- 38) Nicholas Ridley: Parker Soc., Vol. I, p. 12.
- 39) Cranmer: *op. cit.*, p. 237.
- 40) Gardiner: in Ridley, *op. cit.*, p. 314.
- 41) Cranmer: *op. cit.*, p. 241.
- 42) *Ibid.*
- 43) Lombard: in Cranmer, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
- 44) Miles Coverdale: Parker Soc., Vol. 15, p. 452.
- 45) Jewel: *op. cit.*, p. 62.
- 46) *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 47) *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 48) Tyndale: *op. cit.*, p. 398.
- 49) Cranmer: *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 50) E.g. Cranmer: *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- 51) Ridley: *op. cit.*, p. 217.
- 52) Coverdale: *op. cit.*, p. 460.
- 53) Becon: *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- 54) Coverdale: *op. cit.*, p. 165.