

# The English Reformers' Teaching on Salvation<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In this paper there is much from the English reformers' own mouths and pens. This is important, because we are dealing here with no dry doctrine, but with changed lives, real human testimonies, powerful witnesses to the grace of God. And they are more eloquent than we.

We begin with Thomas Bilney, Bachelor of Law, priest, Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge: a gentle and humble man and eventually a great soul-winner. Bilney began to come under conviction of sin sometime between 1510 and 1520, while studying at Cambridge. Prayer, reading and study did nothing to help. He resorted to the catholic priests, but found their advice of no value. Penances, fastings, payment for masses, purchase of indulgences: none of these did anything except to convince him that the church and its priests were more interested in money than in the things of God. He remained in torment, unable to find forgiveness or to know God's love. Here is a fairly lengthy quotation from Bilney, consisting of extracts from letters he wrote in about 1522 to Cuthbert Tunstall, then newly Bishop of London. He began by describing the priests of his day:

These men do not find pasture, for they never teach and draw others after them, that they should enter by Christ who alone is the door whereby we must come to the Father; but set before the people another way, persuading them to come unto God through good works, oftentimes speaking nothing at all of Christ; thereby seeking rather their own gain and lucre than the salvation of souls. . . .

I also, miserable sinner, . . . before I could come unto Christ, had even likewise spent all that I had upon those ignorant physicians. . . .

I have not heard all the preachers of England; and if I had heard them, yet till . . . this [last] year or two, I could not sufficiently judge of them. But this I dare be bold to affirm, that as many as I have heard of late preach (I speak even of the most famous), they have preached such repentance that if I had heard such preachers in times past. I should utterly have been in despair. . . .

At last I heard speak of Jesus, even then, when the New Testament was first set forth by Erasmus.<sup>2</sup>

Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum* (his own Latin translation in parallel columns with the Greek New Testament) was first published in March 1516, then three years later in a revised edition renamed *Novum Testamentum*. It is this 1519 book which Bilney went on to describe:

Being allured rather by the Latin than by the word of God (for at that time I knew not what it meant), I bought it even by the providence of God. And at the first reading, as I well remember, I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!), 'It is a true saying and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief' (1 Tim. 1:15). This one sentence, through God's

instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, 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. . . .

At last, I desired nothing more than that I, being so comforted by him, might be strengthened by his Holy Spirit and grace from above, that I might teach the wicked his ways which are mercy and truth; and that the wicked might be converted unto him by me who sometime also was wicked.<sup>3</sup>

Bilney offers a marvellous picture of what the reformation doctrine of salvation is all about. In his experience we can see five themes which recur in other writers as they did in other lives. These five themes form our introduction, the background to this study.

## 1. Conviction of sin

Bilney's problems with the Roman church began, as did Luther's, not with a doctrinal breakthrough, but with a sense of his own sin, his unacceptability to God. The reformers all knew this, and they preached it as the first step in coming to Christ. The greatest preacher of the English reformation, perhaps of all time in the English language, was Hugh Latimer (he who spoke so nobly and eloquently to Nicholas Ridley as they were both burnt at the stake). Latimer, in typically vivid style, put conviction of sin like this:

Many speak of faith, but few there be that hath it. Christ mourneth the lack of it: he complaineth that when he came, he found no faith. This faith is a great state, a lady, a duchess, a great woman; and she hath ever a great company and train about her, as a noble estate ought to have. First, she hath a gentleman-usher that goeth before her, and where he is not there is not lady faith. This gentleman-usher is called *agnitio peccatorum*, knowledge of sin.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes this deep sense of human sinfulness can sound like an arrogant, even hypocritical, condemnation of other people. It can appear to be largely a piece of dogma. But it was not that to the reformers. Even when stated as doctrine the writers were conscious that they were describing themselves. There is no pretence that Christians are any better; in fact in many places the reformers insisted that original sin remains in the believer after conversion. Here is how the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion put it:

Original sin . . . is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man . . . whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and condemnation. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that we are still sinners even after conversion is central to the reformation experience. Luther's great catchphrase *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time righteous and a sinner), is not just his doctrine, but first of all his testimony. It is seen clearly in much liturgy and hymnody of the day, perhaps supremely in the Prayer Book service for The Lord's Supper, in which reminders of sin keep recurring, despite several prayers for (and assurances of) cleansing and forgiveness.

Alongside the insistence that the believer remains by nature sinful is the equally important teaching that human sinfulness renders us totally unable to save ourselves. However good

someone may be, there is no possibility of earning or winning God's favour. This again was argued initially from the experience of being under conviction of sin; but it had to be argued against various Roman doctrines according to which our good deeds actually prepare us to receive grace and forgiveness. The Thirty-nine Articles, as usual, were clear on this:

Works done before the grace of Christ, and the inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the school authors say) deserve grace of congruity: yea rather, [because] they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not [that] they have the nature of sin.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Realization of the Roman Church's inability to help**

This second theme is vital, and explains the whole necessity of the Reformation. Men under a deep conviction of sin were not receiving any help from the church. Although the priests talked of sacrifices and forgiveness, although they claimed to offer absolution and pardon, those who through the working of the Holy Spirit knew their own sinfulness found no peace from them. They realized that the Roman claims were a sham, an offer of peace without the reality, and thus likely to be seriously misleading. The Church of England's Article 31 said it all:

The sacrifices of masses, in the which it was commonly said, that the priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits.<sup>7</sup>

Article 20 spells out the principle at stake here. The Roman church was actually teaching another gospel, another way of salvation which in fact led nowhere. It had no right to do this:

Although the church be a witness and a keeper of holy writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Where did the church point people for forgiveness and salvation? We have just heard Article 31 condemning the idea of the mass as a sacrifice for sin. It was not only the mass, but the whole sevenfold sacramental system, built up by Rome, which that church offered as the only way to peace with God. The reformers knew, first from their own experience, that this was a lie. Sacraments do not create peace with God; they do not deal with sin. But they are of value, not purely empty tokens or badges as some extreme reformers wanted to say. The Anglican reformers were clear, following the Swiss doctrines, that sacraments are useful: but only if received aright. It is the attitude in which the sacrament is received, not the thing itself, that matters. So a high sacramental doctrine is combined with an insistence on right reception. Article 27 spelled this out:

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not Christened, but it is also a sign of regeneration or new birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive baptism rightly are grafted into the church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; faith is confirmed, and grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. Discovery of the truth in Scripture**

The Reformation began with conviction of sin and the realization that the church was unable to help. The next step was the discovery that in scripture God was actually speaking words of life, peace and hope. Bilney was converted as he read Erasmus's Latin translation of the New Testament. He urged the same Latin exercise on others of his scholarly circle, and he preached the same message in English to many ordinary people, proving that it was not just for the privileged. It was not long before the reformers were stating their settled conviction that salvation comes, not from the church through the sacraments, but from God through his word. The negative was as important as the positive. False teaching had to be cleared away to make room for the truth. Article 6:

Holy scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.<sup>10</sup>

This understanding was more than a breakthrough. It was actually the beginning of a true submission to the Lordship of Christ. No longer was the church an agent or mediator of salvation. God's people were to have immediate access to Christ himself, the true and only mediator. For this way of salvation was not just another option, presented by the reformers as an alternative to Rome's way. This was God's revealed way. Again let the Articles speak, this time Article 17:

We must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy scripture: and in our doings, that will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the word of God.<sup>11</sup>

### **4. The liberating experience of salvation**

This can sound like dry doctrine, arguing for the sake of it, but the reformers stressed the point because of what this truth had done for them. They knew it from their own experience. Christ had given them something, by his word, that Rome could never give. Bilney felt his bruised bones (bruised by the punitive spiritual exercises of the church) leaping for joy. William Tyndale, converted in Cambridge soon after Bilney (possibly under his influence), described the experience of many:

At once and together, even as we believe the glad tidings presented to us, the Holy Ghost entereth into our hearts, and looseth the bond of the devil, which before possessed our hearts in captivity, and held them.<sup>12</sup>

Tyndale is famous now for his labours and his great skills in Bible translation. He gave his all that the word of God might be freely available in English. But the reason for this was not a love of scholarship, or of the beautiful flow of language of which he was such a master. The reason was the experience of God's peace, and more—the experience of God himself, which came upon him as he read and believed that word.

When we believe, and are come under the covenant of God, then are we sure of the Spirit by the promise of God, and then the Spirit accompanieth faith inseparably, and we begin to feel his working.<sup>13</sup>

## **5. The longing to see others won for Christ**

Tyndale translated the scriptures because he wanted to see others saved as he had been. Bilney witnessed personally to so many because he longed to see souls won for his master. Latimer, the great preacher, was equally fervent for people to come to Christ:

I had rather ye should come of a naughty mind to hear the word of God for novelty, or for curiosity to hear some pastime, than to be away. I had rather ye should come as the tale is [of] the gentlewoman of London: one of her neighbours met her in the street, and said, 'Mistress, whither go ye?' 'Mary,' said she, 'I am going to St. Thomas of Acres to the sermon; I could not sleep all this last night, and I am going now thither; I never failed of a good nap there.' And so I had rather ye should go a napping to sermons, than not to go at all. For with what mind soever ye come, though ye come for an ill purpose, yet peradventure ye may chance to be caught [ere] ye go; the preacher may catch you on his hook.<sup>14</sup>

Latimer knew, as did the other reformers, that what they had learned from scripture had to be explained to others. Not everyone would be able to read, or reading, to understand. They had to be told. The harvest was plentiful, but the labourers few:

If we will come to faith, we must hear God's word. . . . we pray unto God that he will send men amongst us, which may teach us the way of everlasting life.<sup>15</sup>

With these five themes the scene is set: conviction of sin, the realization that the church could not help, the discovery that scripture held the key, the liberating experience of God's salvation, and the longing to see others won for Christ. We can now look in a little more detail at the doctrines, the teaching on salvation, which the English reformers found in scripture (and for which they were so ready to give their lives).

## **Doctrine**

We will examine the English reformers' doctrine of salvation under four heads: the human problem, the Spirit's work, the cross of Christ, and the Father's plan. The order may seem peculiar; it may appear better to set the Father's plan before the roles of Christ and the Spirit, but it was in this order that these great areas of truth were discovered and set forth.

### **1. The human problem**

Bilney knew the problem, and described it eloquently. We have analysed it as conviction of sin, combined with the church's inability to deal with sin. Greater theologians, learning this from Scripture as well as experiencing it for themselves, articulated this truth with great power. Tyndale, as early as 1526, wrote of the righteousness we need before God:

Such righteousness can nature, free-will, and our own strength, never bring to pass. For as no man can give himself faith, so can he not take away unbelief; how then can he take away any sin at all?<sup>16</sup>

Tyndale knew that it was not the Roman church as such which was to blame (except in that it

claimed to offer a way of salvation). The fact is that no one, and no human method or institution, can deal with sin. We need righteousness, but we cannot achieve it. We need sin removed, but we cannot take it away. In short, wrote Tyndale:

We are so weak and so uncertain, that if it stood in us, there would of a truth be no man saved.<sup>17</sup>

The Thirty-nine Articles, written a generation after Tyndale, and basically the work of Cranmer and Ridley, emphasized this point:

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God: wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ [leading] us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.<sup>18</sup>

What is needed, according to the Articles, is for God in his grace to transform us, to give us faith, to make us acceptable to him. Thomas Cranmer, the great liturgist and Archbishop of the Reformation, had realized this by 1538. He described the inner transformation that is needed, something quite impossible to achieve by human means:

Therefore, let no man deceive his own mind; for no man surely can have the right faith and sure trust of God's favour towards him, and persuade with himself that God is his benign and loving Father, and taketh him for his well-beloved son and heir, except he love God in his heart, and have a willing and glad mind, and a delight to do all things that may please God, and a very great repentance and sorrow that ever he did any thing that should offend and displease so loving a Father, whose goodness he can never account.<sup>19</sup>

Latimer the preacher dwelt much on this. Like the other reformers he did not teach salvation by works; the idea was abhorrent to them all. But like the rest he insisted on works as a necessary proof of faith. Just as faith was preceded by the acknowledgement of sin, so it must be accompanied by a change of mind, of heart, of life:

Look where remission of sin is, there is acknowledging of sin also. Faith is a noble duchess, she hath ever her gentleman-usher going before her,—the confessing of sins: she hath a train after her,—the fruits of good works, the walking in the commandments of God. He that believeth will not be idle, he will walk; he will do his business.<sup>20</sup>

But still confusion might remain. Some can read and hear these truths and continue to say that we may be saved by inner goodness, or by framing our lives according to a high standard other than Christ. This was taught in the sixteenth century, just as it is today. The Thirty-nine Articles dealt with such teaching, and its exponents, in no uncertain terms:

They . . . are to be had accursed that presume to say, that every man shall be saved by the law or sect which he professeth, [if] he be diligent to frame his life according to that law, and the light of nature. For holy scripture doth set out unto us only the name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.<sup>20</sup>

The human problem is clear. We are under God's wrath. Because of our sin his judgment must fall. We are unable to change our sinful nature, or to take away the actual sins we have committed. The problem is not (in modern terms) our alienation, but the objective fact of God's rejection of us, which we may feel as an inability to relate to him or as a sense of condemnation. To please God we need to live in perfection and holiness. There is no hope, no

way of salvation, without faith in Jesus Christ. And even faith is something we cannot find or create for ourselves. Our hearts, minds and wills are in bondage. Although we may want to change and come to faith we are unable to do so. How, then, can we be saved?

## **2. The Spirit's work**

The simple answer is that we are saved only by the sovereign work of God. We will look later at the ultimate truth of this in the doctrine of predestination. But the first stage of learning it comes as we think of the work of the Holy Spirit. What is the relationship between the Spirit and faith? Does he come to us because we believe? That would make our believing a work by which we are saved. It would put him under our control. There is a link between faith and the coming of the Spirit. The reformers are clear on this, while insisting that both faith and the Spirit are God's gifts to us. Tyndale:

All our justifying then cometh of faith, and faith and the Spirit come of God, and not of us. When we say, faith bringeth the Spirit, it is not to be understood, that faith deserveth the Spirit, or that the Spirit is not present in us before faith: for the Spirit is ever in us, and faith is the gift and working of the Spirit: but through preaching the Spirit beginneth to work in us.<sup>22</sup>

This sovereignty of the Spirit, the fact that he is in control and actually creates our faith, is the basis of assurance. It is this of which Bilney and the others were so much in need, and which the Roman church said so emphatically that they could not have (unless they felt assured by their own submission to the sacramental system). But Bilney, then Tyndale, experienced the true assurance of word and Spirit: assurance which is based not on a profession of conversion nor on a sacramental life, but on the present witness of the Spirit active in a believer. Tyndale went on to teach it:

When we believe, and are come under the covenant of God, then are we sure of the Spirit by the promise of God, and then the Spirit accompanieth faith inseparably, and we begin to feel his working. And so faith certifieth us of the Spirit, and also bringeth the Spirit with her, unto the working of all other gifts of grace, and to the working out of the rest of our salvation, until we have altogether overcome sin, death, hell, and Satan, and are come unto the everlasting life of glory. And for this cause we say, faith bringeth the Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

Faith, understood as the work and the witness of the Spirit within us, is God's way of dealing with the problem of our sin and his wrath. Faith, God's gift of faith, something we could not create for ourselves, is what makes us righteous in God's eyes. Tyndale again:

Hereof cometh it that faith only justifieth, maketh righteous, and fulfilleth the law: for it bringeth the Spirit through Christ's deservings.<sup>24</sup>

But still there is room for misunderstanding. People took this to mean, and still take it to mean, that in some way our good deeds or merits have a part to play in salvation. At the very least our repentance must be a contributory factor. Surely this is the work we have to do: turning from sin and turning to Christ. The reformers were not so muddle-headed. They knew that salvation was of God. Of course repentance is important—it is commanded in Scripture—but it is not what earns our justification or enables God to forgive us. Cranmer made this plain:

Though sinners do not obtain this justification without repentance, and a good and well-

inclined outgoing of heart, wrought by the Holy Spirit, towards God and their neighbour, yet they are not justified in virtue of the work or merit of their repentance, or of any of their works or merits; but they are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into grace and their sins are remitted for the sake of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight.<sup>25</sup>

Imputed righteousness, free justification, all for the sake of Christ whose death makes satisfaction for sin: this is the gospel of the reformers, as it is the gospel of Christ himself and of Paul. We contribute nothing. This, once understood, is the most joyful and liberating truth of all. Our own contribution to salvation, which would always be defective and suspect, is not necessary. Herein is true freedom and full assurance. The teaching of Article 11, so hated by the Church of Rome, may have split the church, but its truth brought godly comfort to many souls:

We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings: wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.<sup>26</sup>

Surely good works must have some place in the story of salvation? We have already heard Cranmer and Latimer saying so. All the reformers insisted on the importance of good works. Anyone whose lifestyle was not exemplary was in danger of God's judgment. The glorious truth of justification by grace through faith did not in any way excuse an evil life. Cranmer is abundantly clear:

Good works are necessary to salvation, not because they make an ungodly man righteous, nor because they are a price for sins or a cause of justification; but because it is necessary that he who is already justified by faith and reconciled to God through Christ should have a care to do the will of God.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this and similar statements by Cranmer and others, the reformers were harshly criticized as opening the door to lawlessness. But in fact they were so strong on the necessity and importance of good works, and so opposed to the anti-law teaching of the extreme anabaptists, that one of the Thirty-nine Articles was written specifically to make this point. Article 12:

[Although] good works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgement; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith: insomuch that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.<sup>28</sup>

So we are saved by faith, and faith is proved by good works. We contribute nothing to our salvation. But is not the very act of faith, the process of believing, the trusting that we do, the ultimate good work? Does it not really boil down to this? We have already heard Tyndale insisting that faith is the gift of the Spirit: but is our exercising that gift not a good work? This question arises because of a misunderstanding of the nature of faith itself. Tyndale explained that faith is not just a point of view or a hope we may have. Faith is something within us yet not of us. Faith is God's agent of change:

Faith is not man's opinion and dream. . . . But right faith is a thing wrought by the Holy Ghost in us, which changeth us, turneth us into a new nature, and begetteth us anew in God, and maketh us the sons of God. . . . Righteousness is even such faith; and is called God's righteousness, or righteousness that is of value before God. For it is God's gift, and it altereth a

man, and changeth him into a new spiritual nature. . . . Such righteousness can nature, free-will, and our own strength, never bring to pass. For . . . no man can give himself faith.<sup>29</sup>

But perhaps faith, rather than being a work we do, is a simple matter of assent to divinely revealed truth. Many medieval Catholics, like many contemporary Anglicans, saw it thus. Believing and saying the creeds was faith. The Catholic teachers, then as now, were rightly suspicious of any suggestion that salvation comes simply by believing a doctrine. Sadly many modern Protestants, not least within Anglicanism, do see faith in that way. If we accept the creeds, or even just believe in God, we must be Christians. Cranmer would not allow such simplistic belief:

There is a general faith . . . to believe that God is, that he is the maker and creator of all things, and that Christ is the saviour and redeemer of the world, and for his sake all penitent sinners have remission of their sins; and that there shall be a general resurrection at the end of this mortal world, at the which Christ shall judge all the good to joy without end, and the evil to pain without end; with such like other things. And all these things even the devils also believe, and tremble, for fear and grievousness of God's indignation and torments. But they have not the right Christian faith. . . . And though Christ hath paid a sufficient ransom for all the sins in the world, and is a sufficient redeemer and saviour of all the world, yet shall they have no part thereof, for they belong not unto Christ; and Christ utterly refuseth them for his, which have faith and love only in their mouth, and have not the same engraven in their hearts, and expressed in their acts and deeds. . . . And as the body is but dead that lacketh a soul, even so is that faith but dead that is but in the mouth, and doth not enter effectuously into the heart, and work accordingly.<sup>30</sup>

Faith must enter the heart. It is not an opinion, a mental assent, even a thought-out conviction. It is better described as a submission to the word and will of God. John Bradford, renowned as a gentle and mild natured man yet a fearless preacher, wrote thus:

We believe and confess concerning justification, that, as it cometh only from God's mercy through Christ, so it is perceived and had of none which be of years of discretion otherwise than by faith only. Which faith is not an opinion, but a certain persuasion wrought by the Holy Ghost in the mind and heart of man; [through which], as the mind is illumined, so the heart is [enabled] to submit itself to the will of God unfeignedly, and so sheweth forth an inherent righteousness.<sup>31</sup>

The nature of this inherent righteousness is also important. Faith must prove itself by genuine good works. Simply claiming the righteousness of Christ, imputed righteousness, will not do. We may be accounted righteous by faith for Christ's sake, but that faith must show itself in good works. This genuine inner righteousness is, according to Bradford,

to be [distinguished] . . . from the righteousness which God endueth us with in justifying us, although inseparably they go together.<sup>32</sup>

Faith, then, is nothing we can achieve or create, though it is necessary and it must produce a mighty change in us: but how does it come, and how can we lead others to faith? This was a burning question, given the reformers' zeal to see others won for Christ. They believed in the sovereignty of the Spirit, but what is now called hypercalvinism would have offended them deeply: they believed in evangelism. So how does the Spirit effect faith within us? How does faith come? Tyndale:

Through preaching the Spirit beginneth to work in us. And as by preaching the law he worketh

the fear of God; so by preaching the glad tidings he worketh faith.<sup>33</sup>

Latimer was the great preacher, and this truth burned in his heart. He lost no opportunity to spell it out, whoever his hearers. Preaching to the King and his court, doubtless hoping that royal influence could increase the number and condition of preachers, he was his usual blunt self:

We cannot be saved without faith, and faith cometh by hearing of the word. ‘And how shall they hear without a preacher?’ I tell you it is the footstep of the ladder of heaven, of our salvation. There must be preachers, if we look to be saved.<sup>34</sup>

To a more ordinary audience his message was the same:

The preaching office is the office of salvation, and the only means that God hath appointed to salvation. Those that believe, be saved by the holy office of preaching.<sup>35</sup>

There is nothing academic or dry about reformation preaching. There is always a longing for souls and an urgency for salvation. Latimer once more, on a different occasion but with a similar message:

‘There is full and plenteous redemption by him.’ But how shall I get that? how shall I come unto it? By faith. Faith is the hand wherewith we receive his benefits; therefore we must needs have faith. But how shall we obtain faith? Faith indeed bringeth Christ, and Christ bringeth remission of sins; but how shall we obtain faith? Answer: St. Paul teacheth us this, saying, ‘Faith cometh by hearing God’s word.’<sup>36</sup>

The reformers’ doctrine of salvation is in large part their doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The tragedy of today’s church is that the doctrine of the Spirit has been lost: watered down, turned into a matter of superficial experience, emptied of almost all meaning. Learn from the reformers that the Spirit works faith, brings justification, enables sanctification, opens the heart to the word of God as the truth is preached. The Spirit applies to us the benefits won by Christ.

### **3. The cross of Christ**

Christ’s death as a sin-bearing substitutionary sacrifice is God’s way, and the only way, of dealing with sin. Sin not punished in the person of Christ must be punished in the offender. And Christ’s death is complete: a full sacrifice, sufficient for all people, all sins, all times; never to be repeated. This teaching recurs often in the reformers. Here it is in Article 31:

The offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other sacrifice for sin, but that alone.<sup>37</sup>

We need not dwell on this, except to underline one point hinted at earlier on. The death of Christ is said to reconcile us to God (2 Corinthians 5:18), but this can easily be misunderstood. It could mean that something wrong in us is put right, thus making us acceptable. But that is precisely what it does not mean. The cross does not change us or our attitudes. The awesome power of the cross is such that *it changes God’s attitude to us*. His perception of us as sinners changes; he sees us as righteous. It is God, not the sinner, who is

immediately affected by Christ's death. The reformers saw this clearly, and taught instead of God being reconciled to us. Article 2:

[Christ] truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men.<sup>38</sup>

#### **4. The Father's plan**

Salvation goes back to God the Father. It is not just about Jesus or the Holy Spirit. We have already seen the sovereignty of the Spirit and the sufficiency of Christ. Now we must turn to what is for many the real stumbling block: the sovereignty of God the Father in predestination and election. Not only did the reformers believe this doctrine: they rejoiced in it, because they knew that it was the ultimate ground of their security. Without God's electing grace there can be no assurance, no true salvation. This is something to shout about. Tyndale was clear on it:

By . . . predestination our justifying and salvation are clean taken out of our hands, and put in the hands of God only; which thing is most necessary of all. For we are so weak and so uncertain, that if it stood in us, there would of a truth be no man saved.<sup>39</sup>

But there were objections, as there are today. Basically they came from those too proud to submit to God's will. Tyndale argued that they themselves needed to be humbled; if they knew conviction of sin they would not complain about predestination, but would give joyful thanks for it:

Except thou hast borne the cross of adversity and temptation, and hast felt thyself brought unto the very brim of desperation, yea, and unto hell-gates, thou canst never meddle with the sentence of predestination without thine own harm, and without secret wrath and grudging inwardly against God; for otherwise it shall not be possible for thee to think that God is righteous and just. . . . Take heed therefore unto thyself, that thou drink not wine, while thou art yet but a suckling.<sup>40</sup>

To meddle with God's sentence of predestination, that is to argue against it, is a dangerous business. Only those mature in the faith, convicted of sin, knowing imputed righteousness, living inherent righteousness, can even talk sense on this glorious theme. Others had best leave it alone. Article 17 took up this argument too, as part of a long but marvellous exposition of the doctrine:

Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting [happiness].

. . . The godly consideration of predestination, and our election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and

drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, [not only] because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, [but also] because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God. [But], for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation.

Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in holy scripture: and in our doings, that will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the word of God.<sup>40</sup>

What this means quite simply, is submission to God's will as set forth in his word. To argue against him shows lack of submission. But submission, as we saw earlier, is what faith is all about. Meddle with this truth at your peril! But why meddle? Why not accept with joy the Father's loving sentence? If the Spirit is at work within you, convicting and changing, give thanks for his sovereign grace, which alone can save.

## **Implications**

Now some lessons for today: we have noticed a few at various points, but here we draw them together and add more.

### **1. Salvation and the church**

The saddest thing about the A.R.C.I.C. II Agreed Statement, *Salvation and the Church*<sup>42</sup> is the whole idea that the doctrine of salvation belongs somehow within the doctrine of the church. The doctrine of the church is part of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit<sup>43</sup>. Calvin certainly described the visible church as the mother of believers,<sup>44</sup> arguing our utter dependence on her. This is a powerful and helpful passage, but it is meant as an analogy. He knew well that only by the Spirit are we born into the kingdom.<sup>45</sup> The A.R.C.I.C. II statement confuses justification (imputed righteousness) and sanctification (inherent righteousness),<sup>46</sup> and it confuses the visible and the invisible church.<sup>47</sup> The reformers knew and rejoiced in the corporate dimension of the Christian life, but they did not confuse fellowship with salvation. We need a high doctrine of the church, but also to remember that historically the church has often been a stumbling block to those seeking salvation.

### **2. Salvation and public worship**

When we understand the Reformers' view of the sacraments we will be grateful. The sacramental trap tied them to Rome and its rituals without allowing true salvation. They broke out of this, but did not go on to reject sacraments altogether or to empty them of meaning or efficacy. They rightly rejected as sacraments the five rites that Rome had added to the Lord's two, but equally they refused the temptation to think of sacraments as empty signs. Rome still needs to learn the lesson that sacraments are not the way of salvation, but many free-churchmen and not a few Anglicans need reminding of the reformed understanding. Article 25:

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but

rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in him. There are two sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, baptism, and the supper of the Lord. . . . In such only as worthily receive the same have they a wholesome effect or operation.<sup>48</sup>

While holding a high doctrine of the sacraments we must see that we devalue them if we make them the heart of public worship. What is needed is a return to non-sacramental but lively preaching services. So many Protestants replace these in various ways. If they are trying to be evangelistic, but have little depth of understanding, they may opt for weekly family services. If they are tempted to stress fellowship instead of the gospel they may go for family communions or 'celebration' meetings. If they have lost the true reformed zeal for souls they will turn Morning and Evening Prayer into dry occasions, every bit as ritualistic as medieval Rome. Public worship must meet the needs of the parish, not just the gathered church, and the chief need in most parishes is evangelism.

### **3. Salvation and repentance**

When will we take in the glorious truth that repentance is not our doing, but the work of God within us and through us? When will we clergy stop being tempted to use the Romanizing forms of absolution in the *Alternative Service Book* Morning and Evening Prayer services, and return to the language (or better still the theology) of the *Book of Common Prayer* at this point? There we are not encouraged to see forgiveness as automatic when we say sorry, but urged 'to beseech him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit.' Forgiveness is not easy, even for God. Anyone who has been hurt or offended knows that full well. We cannot glibly come before God with a superficial 'sorry' tripping off our tongue. Neither should we pretend that his forgiveness comes easily. It is freely and graciously given, but it cost him the blood of his Son. Our repentance must be true and deep.

### **4. Salvation and sinfulness**

We are sinners saved by grace, and sinners we remain. The reformers had a far better understanding of the kingdom of God, and of eschatology, than most modern evangelicals. They knew that within the church here on earth there would remain sin, sickness and sorrow. They would not have stood for the perfectionism, the healing heresies, or the Jesus-solves-all-your-problems mentality of today. Both Romanism and restorationism teach their own brands of perfection, some perfections claimed for leaders, others for an inner core, and others for all. What is really needed is conviction of sin.

### **5. Salvation and reconciliation**

To close: our doctrine of salvation must be God-centred instead of man-centred. The reminder from Article 2 that Christ reconciled his Father to us has to sink in. Salvation is not, at its deepest, a matter of what Jesus has done for me. It is about God's revulsion at my sinfulness, the eternal decree of the Father to save me, the obedient action of Christ in appeasing his Father's wrath, and the gracious work of the Spirit in applying this medicine to a helpless sinner.

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Endnotes:

- 1 A paper read to the Church Society Spring Conference, Swanwick, 1991.
- 2 Thomas Bilney, Letters to Bishop Tunstall (c.1522) in John Foxe. *Actes and Monumentes* (Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*) vol. 4. pp. 633-636; cited in Marcus Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1954, pp. 5-6. *Original spellings in quotations have been retained, but many initial capital letters have been set in lower case. Occasionally a word has been altered to make the sense clearer: these are marked in the text in square brackets.*
- 3 Bilney, as above, cited in Marcus Loane. *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.
- 4 Hugh Latimer, *Fourth sermon preached before King Edward the Sixth* (1549) in *Sermons by Hugh Latimer* Vol. 1 London: Parker Society, 1884 p. 168.
- 5 *Articles of Religion* (1552-1572) *Book of Common Prayer* Article 9. Of original or birth-sin.
- 6 *Ibid.*, Article 13. *Of Works before justification.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, Article 31. *Of the one oblation of Christ finished upon the cross.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, Article 20. *Of the authority of the church.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, Article 27. *Of baptism.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, Article 6. *Of the sufficiency of the holy scriptures for salvation.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, Article 17. *Of predestination and election.*
- 12 William Tyndale. *Preface upon the epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (1526) in *Tyndale's Doctrinal Treatises* London: Parker Society, 1848. p. 488.
- 13 *Loc. cit.*, p. 489.
- 14 Hugh Latimer, *Sixth sermon preached before King Edward the Sixth* (1549) in *Sermons by Hugh Latimer* Vol. 1 London: Parker Society, 1844 p. 201.
- 15 Hugh Latimer, *Sixth sermon on the Lord's Prayer* (1552). *ibid.*, p. 418.
- 16 Tyndale, *op. cit.*, p. 494.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 505.
- 18 Article 10. *Of free-will.*
- 19 Thomas Cranmer, *Annotations on the King's Book* (1538?) in *Thomas Cranmer* ed. G.E. Duffield, Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1964, p. 8.

- 20 Hugh Lather, *Seventh sermon preached before King Edward the Sixth* (1549) in *op. cit.*, p. 237.
- 21 Article 18. *Of obtaining eternal salvation only by the name of Christ.*
- 22 Tyndale, *op. cit.*, p. 488.
- 23 Tyndale, *ibid.*, p. 489.
- 24 *Ibid.*, loc. cit.
- 25 Thomas Cranmer, 1538 Articles, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.
- 26 Article 11. *Of the justification of man.*
- 27 Thomas Cranmer, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 28 Article 12. *Of good works.*
- 29 Tyndale, *op. cit.*, pp. 492-4.
- 30 Thomas Cranmer. *Annotations on the King's Book* (1538?), *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.
- 31 John Bradford, *Declaration concerning religion* (1554) in *The Writings of John Bradford*, Vol. 1 London: Parker Society 1848. pp. 371-372.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 372.
- 33 Tyndale, *op. cit.*, pp. 488-9.
- 34 Hugh Latimer, *Sixth sermon preached before King Edward the Sixth* (1549) *op. cit.*, p. 200.
- 35 Hugh Latimer, *Sermon preached at Stamford* (9th November 1550) *op. cit.*, p. 291.
- 36 Hugh Latimer, *Sixth sermon on the Lord's Prayer* (1552) *op. cit.*, p. 418.
- 37 Article 31. *Of the one oblation of Christ finished upon the cross.*
- 38 Article 2. *Of the word or Son of God, which was made very man.*
- 39 Tyndale, *op. cit.*, p. 505.
- 40 Tyndale, *op. cit.*, p. 505.
- 41 Article 17. *Of predestination and election.*
- 42 *Salvation and the Church: an Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, A. R. C. I. C. II* London: Church House Publishing, 1987.
- 43 Donald Allister, 'Ecclesiology: a reformed understanding of the church' in *Churchman* Vol. 103 (1989) pp. 249-261.
- 44 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.4.

- 45 Calvin, *ibid.*, 2.7.11.
- 46 *Salvation and the church*, e.g. section 15.
- 47 *Salvation and the church*, e.g. section 29.
- 48 Article 25. *Of the sacraments*.