

The English Reformers' Teaching on Scripture¹

Churchman 107/1 1993

Ernest Strickland

Doctrinal confusion is the characteristic of the present age: doctrinal precision was the hallmark of the legacy left by the Reformers. For example, Article 6 of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. . . .

What could be more explicit than that? But the present times are times of change for the church as for society. This paper seeks to explore the teaching of the Reformers on Scripture, and to show that their teaching is as valid today and as relevant to our present times as it was in its heyday.

We shall explore their teaching under four heads.

1. The Reformers' Discovery of Scripture

J.H. Merle d'Aubigné in his first volume on the Reformation in England says that the Reformation in England was essentially the work of Scripture:

The only true reformation is that which emanates from the Word of God. The Holy Scriptures, by bearing witness to the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God create in man by the Holy Ghost a faith which justifies him. That faith which produces in him a new life unites him to Christ without his requiring a chain of bishops or a Romish mediator who would separate him from the Saviour instead of drawing him nearer. This reformation by the Word restores that spiritual Christianity, which the outward and hierarchical religion destroys: and from the regeneration of individuals naturally results the regeneration of the Church. The Reformation in England, perhaps to a greater extent than that in the Continent, was effected by the Word of God.²

And as the late Dr. Philip Hughes puts it:

The Reformation in the Sixteenth Century in England was in its essence a spiritual movement which in its internal as well as its external development flowed from the rediscovery of the Gospel of divine grace to which the pages of Holy Scripture bear testimony.³

It is difficult for us in the twentieth century, notwithstanding the confusion and uncertainty within the Church today, to appreciate the darkness and the ignorance which permeated the mediaeval church in the time preceding the Reformation. The Church had departed farthest from the simplicity of doctrine and worship which had characterized the Apostolic and primitive age. The English Church shared in this general degeneracy.

The Preface to the *Book of Common Prayer* in the section entitled 'Of Ceremonies' asserts

that

the multitude of ceremonies was so great and many of them so dark that they did more confound and darken, than declare and set forth Christ's benefits unto us.⁴

The spiritual aspect of religion had become largely obscured and mediaeval Christianity had tended to become almost exclusively sacerdotal, sacramental and spectacular. The clergy had virtually ceased to exercise a true 'ministry'. The doctrine of transubstantiation, the corrupt penitential system, indulgences, pilgrimages, invocations of saints and the worldliness of monastic life which marked the Church, and the gross superstition found amongst the common people, were due in large measure to the fact that there was almost entire ignorance or neglect of the teachings of the Bible.

The first ray of light to shine in that Egyptian darkness of the Middle Ages was in the life, work and witness of John Wycliffe. Born in 1325 at Wycliffe near Richmond in Yorkshire he became Master of Balliol College, Oxford and was successively Rector of Fillingham (Lincolnshire), Ludgershall (Buckinghamshire), and Lutterworth (Leicestershire); Scholar, Theologian and Translator of the Bible. He lived some two hundred years before those whom we regard as the English Reformers, but the movement for reform can be said to have begun with him and more particularly in his own experience of the power of the Word of God. He has been rightly called 'The Morning Star of the Reformation'.

There were two factors which combined to bring about his conversion. First, the Black Death. This fearful pestilence broke out in 1346. It appeared first in Asia and then came West, crossing Europe with 'terror marching before it and death following in its rear', and on the first day of August the plague reached England. A hundred thousand died in London. Half of the Nation was struck down and two-thirds of Wycliffe's native county perished. 'This visitation of the Almighty', says the historian, 'sounded like the trumpet of judgment day in the heart of Wycliffe' and drove him to the Scriptures. The second factor in his spiritual pilgrimage was the influence of one Bradwardine, Chaplain to King Edward III. One day while listening to the reading of Scripture these words struck his ear (Romans 9:16):

So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.

The Word of God laid its powerful hand upon him and Bradwardine was converted to the truths that he had once despised and rejected. It was this Bradwardine who in turn brought John Wycliffe to the Scriptures; and the plague brought him to them again with a terrible sense of need. Now he studied more earnestly than ever, not as a theologian but as a seeking soul. The Black Death made him seek a refuge from judgment to come: the Word of God pointed him to Christ.

It is to John Wycliffe that we owe the first translation of the Bible into English in 1384. In his preaching he exposed the errors in the mediaeval religion and in his teaching he showed that Scripture is the rule of truth and should be the rule of reformation; and that we must reject every doctrine and every precept which does not rest on that foundation. The Word of God had set him free and became his guiding light. He was not to hide it under a bushel. For Wycliffe the Word had to be proclaimed and applied. All his usefulness derived from his respect for the Word of God, which was to him the Voice of God and the Power of God. It transformed him and through him transformed others. They adopted his view of the Scriptures and carried it right through to the Reformation itself. Wycliffe had found the

Word: more—as Professor James Atkinson says of Martin Luther—the Word had found him and what he found he passed on to his fellow countrymen.

Wycliffe's translation was epoch-making. But he had only the Latin Vulgate. What Wycliffe began was carried forward nearly two hundred years later by William Tyndale who was the first to translate from the divine originals, Hebrew and Greek. In 1453 Constantinople had been captured by the Turks. This led to the revival of a study of the Greek classics. The sudden dispersion of a multitude of scholars bringing with them priceless manuscripts of Greek literature produced a passion for Greek learning. The Renaissance not only revived a thirst for knowledge: it also fostered a spirit of criticism which revolted against unquestioning submission to the authority of the mediaeval Church. This new era which transformed thought on the Continent in the fifteenth century did not affect England until the sixteenth, but already in Oxford, scholars like Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn were lecturing to such pupils as John Colet, Thomas More and Erasmus. In their turn the aim of these men was to acquire a thorough knowledge of Greek in order that by returning to the purest sources of knowledge they might secure the best key to the correct meaning of the New Testament. Opposition was aroused amongst the mediaeval scholastics, who preferred the study of Thomas Aquinas to the study of the New Testament in the original Greek. 'The New Testament is a book full of briars and serpents', they said, 'and the Greek is a new language recently invented: of it we ought specially to beware. As to Hebrew it is certain that all who learn it, that instant become Jews'.⁵

But the advocates of the new learning insisted that men should discard the teachings of the mediaeval schoolmen and imbibe their theology direct from the pure Christianity in the New Testament. Their aim was to bring to people a direct and intelligent knowledge of the Person of Christ. Erasmus wished that

even the weakest woman might read the Gospels and Epistles of Paul, and that the husbandman should sing portions of them to himself as he follows the plough.

These words were echoed later by William Tyndale whose longing it was that the ploughboy might know more of Scripture than the Pope himself.⁶ John Colet began to lecture in Oxford at the turn of the century, on the epistles of St. Paul. 'He is a man of genuine piety. He talks all the time of Christ'.

Colet gained a considerable hearing as Dean of St. Paul's, preaching, teaching and exposing the errors of the Church and arguing that men were to be admitted to Holy Orders not simply because they could construe a collect, propound a proposition or reply to a sophism, but because they were men of purity of life, a knowledge of the Scriptures and, above all, a fear of God and a love of heavenly Life. 'Colet', says E.G. Dickens, though a Catholic, has a special place in Protestantism. His chief distinction lies in the fact that he stressed the relevance of the Scriptures to contemporary religious problems.'⁷ Most important at this stage was Erasmus, Professor of Greek at Cambridge, 1509-1514. He did most to overthrow scholasticism. A satirist, he exposed in his *Praise of Folly*, error, abuse and superstition in the Church. But his greatest contribution to reform was the publication in 1516 of the New Testament in the original Greek with a Latin translation. This was the most important factor in the development of the Reformation. The highest aim should be to give a knowledge of the pure and simple Christianity of the Bible'.

If the ship of the Church is to be saved from being swallowed up by the tempest there is only

one action that can save it. It is the heavenly Word which, issuing forth from the bosom of the Father lives and speaks and works still in the Gospel.⁸

There were two men in particular upon whom the New Testament of Erasmus exerted a profound influence. First, Thomas Bilney, Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. In 1519 he heard his friends telling of a new book—the Greek New Testament, also praised for its Latin translation. Attracted by the beauty of its style rather than the divinity of its subject, Bilney went to the house where the volume was sold—in secret—bought it and returned to his room. In fear and trembling he opened it and began to read. His eye fell on 1 Timothy 1:15:

‘This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief.’ What? St. Paul chief of sinners and yet saved? How sweet to my soul. Christ saves sinners. At last I have heard of Jesus.⁹

Bilney’s doubts were ended. He was saved. An unknown joy pervaded him: his conscience until then sore with the wounds of sin was healed; instead of despair he felt an inward peace which passed all understanding. ‘Jesus Christ saves!’, he exclaimed.

Such is the character of the Reformation. It is Jesus Christ who saves and not the Church.

I see it all: my vigils, my fasts, my pilgrimages, my purchase of masses and indulgences were destroying instead of saving me.¹⁰

He never tired of reading his New Testament. He no longer listened to the ideas of the Schoolmen. He heard Jesus at Capernaum, Peter in the Temple, Paul on Mars Hill and felt within himself that Christ Jesus possesses the words of eternal life. Little Bilney was united to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, not by a remote succession but by an immediate generation. God’s Word in the first century gave birth to the work of the Reformation in the sixteenth.

Second, William Tyndale, born in 1490. His childhood was spent in Gloucestershire and from there he went up to the University of Oxford. He made rapid progress in languages and took his degrees. It was at Oxford, as with Bilney at Cambridge, that he encountered the Greek Testament of Erasmus. At first he looked upon it as a work of learning or maybe a manual of piety, but he soon discovered it to be much more. This volume, strange to him at first, spoke to him of God, of Christ and of New Birth, both simply and authoritatively. Tyndale found that which he had not expected to find, and he uttered the cry of Archimedes ‘*Eureka*’ (I have found it). In 1531 he left Oxford for Cambridge and there he encountered Bilney. Together they met one John Fryth, a distinguished scholar of King’s College. They introduced him to the New Testament, and, records Foxe, ‘through Tyndale’s instruction he received the seed of the Gospel and sincere godliness’. These three gathered others around them. They met at the White Horse Inn, not to imbibe, but to study the Scriptures. It became known as Little Germany, but they said ‘We are not Germans, neither are we Romans but Christians’. The Holy Spirit united them around the Word of God. ‘So oft as I was in their company’, declared one, ‘methought I was quietly placed in the New Jerusalem.’¹¹

One other brought from darkness into light at this period was Hugh Latimer, born at Thurcaston near Leicester in 1491. Fellow of Clare College, University Cross Bearer and Preacher. He denounced the ‘new opinion’ in forthright terms. He was in his own words ‘as obstinate a Papist as any in England.’ Thomas Bilney listened to him and recognized him as a lost soul. But how to bring the message of the Gospel to him?

Bilney conceived a plan. He requested Latimer—as a priest—to hear his confession. He acquiesced in the request and Bilney went to him, and kneeling before him in the privacy of his study confessed Christ as his Saviour. By this testimony Latimer’s heart was changed and he said:

from that time I began to smell the Word of God and forsook the school doctors and such fooleries . . . I thank God for Master Bilney and for that knowledge I have of the Word of God.¹²

John Wycliffe, Bilney, Tyndale, Fryth, Latimer: these men and others with them had all come out of darkness into God’s marvellous light, through the Scriptures. The Grace of God in Christ had met them and found them. To quote Canon Barnes Lawrence, ‘this conception of faith as a personal trust in a personal Saviour had given them the master key to Scripture’.¹³ Except for John Wycliffe they were all martyred for the Word and for their testimony. But not before Tyndale had given the Church and Nation the Bible in English translated from the original Hebrew and Greek—the translation which underlay subsequent translations and the Authorized Version. Latimer had become the greater preacher of the Reformation, storming the strongholds of error and superstition by his forthright and fearless proclamation of the Gospel

speaking nothing but it left certain pricks or stings in the hearts of the hearers, and none went away from his sermons which were not led to a faithful repentance of their former life, detestation of sin and moved with all godliness and virtue.¹⁴

It was not only that these men had in their several ways made a discovery of God’s Word. The Word of God—the Scriptures—had found them.

2. The Teaching of the English Reformers on the Authority of Scripture

What then did the English Reformers teach on this subject? The question of Authority lies at the root of most of our problems and not least in the realm of religion.

There are three possible sources of religious authority: the Church, Human Reason and Holy Scripture. Supreme authority lies in God alone—the Triune God. But upon Earth, where is final authority to be found?

Is it with Human Reason? Is authority to be found in man—in human reason—albeit enlightened reason? The trouble here is that there is no final authority to which to appeal. One man’s guess is as good as another. There is no objective standard, no final court of appeal.

This is not to underestimate reason. God has given to man a mind to use. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy mind’ (Matt. 22:37). But because sin has tainted every part of man’s being he does not have of himself the pure light of truth. Thus there is need for divine revelation and divine illumination. The function of reason is to receive and then to apply God’s revelation to every part of life.

Is authority to be found in the Church? This was the great argument and bone of contention at the time of the Reformation. It still remains the fundamental difference between the Roman

Church and those who hold the reformed faith. This is apparent in the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission's debate (A.R.C.I.C.) to which we shall return later.

The question is dealt with at some length by William Whitaker, Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge in the reign of Elizabeth I. In his work entitled 'A Disputation on Holy Scripture',¹⁵ Whitaker writes in defence of the Reformed faith against the Jesuit scholar Cardinal Bellarmine. Bellarmine maintained that the authority of Scripture cannot be defended without the tradition of the Church (page 276) and affirms that the whole authority of Scripture with regard to us depends upon ecclesiastical tradition and that we cannot believe the Scriptures on any other grounds but because the Church confirms it by its testimony. The words of Bellarmine are 'all the authority which the Scripture now has with us depends upon the authority of the Church'.

Amplifying this further, Whitaker quotes another papist, Cochlaeus who, while acknowledging that 'the Scriptures are indeed in themselves firm, clear, perfect and most worthy of all credit as the work of God', nevertheless declares 'that with regard to us they need the approval and commendation of the Church on account of the disparity of our minds and the weakness of our understanding. Our understanding is to divine things as the eyes of owls to the light of the sun.'

Scripture, they acknowledge, has authority in itself, but it cannot be certain to us except through the Church.

'But', asks William Whitaker, 'what is meant by the Church?' Not only the Church in the time of the Apostles, but the succeeding and therefore the present Church. Yet not the whole people, but the pastors only; which is sometimes the pastors, sometimes councils, sometimes the Roman Pontiff; and so 'commends, delivers down and consigns the Scriptures with reference to the people subject to them.' And, 'when the Church consigns the Scriptures it does not make it authentic from being doubtful absolutely, but only in respect of us, nor does it make it authentic absolutely but only in respect of us'. Hence, concludes Whitaker in this section, 'we see what they understood by the term "the Church" and how they determine that the Scripture is consigned and approved by the Church'. What is this but the interposition of the Church between the Scripture and the people, and thereby making the Church the authority?

Whitaker's reply to this is first to acknowledge the place of the Church.

We do not deny that it appertains to the Church to approve, acknowledge, receive, commend the Scriptures to all its members; this testimony is true and should be received by us all. We do not refuse the testimony of the Church but embrace it. But we deny that we believe the Scriptures solely on account of this commendation of them by the Church. For we say that there is a more certain and illustrious testimony whereof we are persuaded of the sacred character of these books, that is the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit without which the commendation of the Church would have with us no weight or moment. We affirm that there is a far different, more certain true and august testimony than that of the Church.¹⁶

Scripture is *autopistos*, that is, it has all its authority and credit from itself and is to be acknowledged and received not only because the Church has so determined and commended but because it comes from God and that we certainly know it comes from God, not by the Church but by the Holy Ghost, having learned from that same Holy Spirit that the Scripture is divine and this persuasion is sealed by the Holy Spirit in the minds of all the faithful. Thus

the Scripture is true in itself, and our belief of their truth is produced by the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

So what is the function of the Holy Spirit in this matter?

First, as a witness and guardian of the sacred heritage discharging in this respect as it were the function of a notary. But the records are believed not on the notary's authority but on their own trustworthiness. Also the Church discharges the office of a champion, distinguishing and discerning the true, sincere and genuine Scriptures from the spurious, false or suppositious. It is worth noting here that there is today the view that, for example, the New Testament is the Church's book: 'the Church to teach: the Bible to prove' on the argument that the Church came first and that it was the Church which canonized Scripture and therefore Scripture is 'derivative'. (This was the thesis of Professor H.F.D. Sparks of Birmingham University and others since.) But in the formulation of the Canon of the New Testament the Church was giving her assent to a corpus of writings which had then and possesses still an inherent authority. 'Scripture', declares Whitaker (p. 289),

has for its author God Himself from whom it first proceeded and came forth. Therefore the authority of Scripture may be proved from the Author Himself since the authority of God Himself shines forth in it.¹⁷

It was not that the Reformers undervalued the Church, nor because they took no note of the Fathers of the Church. The Reformers were students of the patristic writings and recognized the Fathers—Augustine, Jerome, Cyprian as learned men and interpreters of Scripture, but, said Jewel, 'neither weigh we the heritage of all men be they never so worthy and catholic as we weigh the Canonical Scriptures'.¹⁸

The first belief of the English Reformers was that Scripture is the supreme authority in all matters affecting doctrine and practice, and that is so because God and none other is its primary author.

Archbishop Sandys wrote:

The foundation of our religion is the written word, the Scriptures of God, the undoubted records of the Holy Ghost.¹⁹

Hugh Latimer:

The excellency of this word is so great and of so high dignity that there is no earthly thing to be compared to it. The author thereof is so great, that is, God Himself, eternal, almighty, everlasting.²⁰

Nicholas Ridley:

that Holy Scripture which hath not been devised by the wit of man but taught from heaven by the Holy Ghost.²¹

Bishop Jewel:

The Scriptures are the Word of God. What title can there be of greater value? What may be said of them to make them of greater authority than to say the Lord hath spoken them . . . that they

came not by the will of men but Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. 2 Pet. 1:20-21.²²

The passage quoted refers to the Inspiration of the men as God's chosen instrument in bringing His message to His people. They are said to be moved or borne along; carried by the Holy Spirit.

The mover or bearer is the Holy Spirit and the word signifies 'taking up and bearing to the place of His choosing'. So the men who spoke from God are declared to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. Thus the things which they spoke under the operation were not their things but His. And this is the reason why the prophetic word is so sure. It is an immediately divine Word. And the stress in this context is upon the trustworthiness of the Word. With this the whole of the Old Testament agrees. The Old Testament writers all affirm that they were speaking the Word of the Living God. The phrase 'Thus saith the Lord' occurs over two thousand times in either this form or a variation. They were conscious that they were declaring a message which came directly from God, and that the words they spoke were God's words. Note that this is not to imply that they were mere robots or even secretaries. Their personality was not obliterated. The Spirit of God so moved as to use 'their mouths, their tongues, their hands', says Whitaker. The words themselves are human words but through them the voice of God is speaking. Thus what Scripture says, God says. If 2 Peter 1 refers to the inspiration of the men, 2 Timothy 3:16 refers to the writings. Here, says Whitaker, the whole Scripture is called *theopneustos*, literally, 'God-breathed'.

Thus while the words of Scripture are human words the primary author is God the Holy Spirit, prompting, enlightening, superintending the whole process of writing both the Old and New Testament, giving the words He intended to be given. Men are the human writers but Scripture hath for its author 'God Himself, from whom it first proceeded and came forth', so Whitaker.

The Reformers' teaching on the authority of Scripture is clearly set forth in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion: in Article 6, the sheet anchor of the Church of England; in Article 8, the three Creeds may be proved by 'most certain warrants of Holy Scripture'. Article 17 says we must 'receive God's promises as they be set forth to us in Holy Scripture'. Article 19 defines the Church of Christ as a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached. And, according to Article 20 the Church has power to decree rites and ceremonies and authority in controversies of faith but with the qualification that

it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ yet as it ought not to decree anything against the same so besides the same it ought not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of Salvation.

With regard to Councils, Article 21 affirms

forasmuch as they be an assembly of men whereof all be not governed with the Spirit of God and the Word of God they may err and sometimes have erred even in things pertaining to God.

The sufficiency and supremacy of Scripture is clear throughout and in other Articles, 22, 24, 28 and 34.

Not only in the Articles, but also in the Book of Homilies the final authority of Scripture is upheld, for example, in the Homily on the Nativity, the truth concerning the Passion of our Lord 'as by nature and substance perfect God and perfect man' is declared by the Scriptures. Also at length in the Homily on the Reading and Knowledge of Scripture (Books I and II). What of the Church of England today on the matter of authority? The publication, *Public Worship in the Church of England, a Guide to the Law governing Worship and Doctrine in the Church of England* (Fifth Edition, January, 1986) says, concerning Doctrine (paragraph 34):

The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.

The Declaration of Assent reads as follows (paragraph 36):

The Church of England is part of the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church worshipping the One true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. In the Declaration you are about to make, will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making them known to those in your care?

(This declaration is made by every clergyman on being ordained and on taking up office.)

Thus the doctrine is grounded in the Holy Scriptures.

She professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and if it is uniquely revealed the Scripture is set forth as Primary in matters of faith and practice, since that which is described as 'unique' must be on a plane by itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as meaning 'unmatched, unequalled, having no like, equal or parallel'.

For this we must be thankful and hold to it. And it can also be noted that this same affirmation appears at the beginning of the statement by the Bishops in the Church of England (House of Bishops, General Synod, April 1986) entitled 'The Nature of Christian Belief'. It has to be admitted however that what follows in later sections of that compendium would seem to put a question mark against the wholehearted acceptance of Scriptural authority on the part of some members of the House of Bishops. This comes out also in 'An Agreed Statement' in connexion with the proposal concerning the ordination of women to the priesthood, published in 1990 in which it is said that

conclusive Scriptural arguments on any doctrinal matter would appear to be part of the Anglican past. . . .

Then in the A.R.C.I.C. Agreed Statements, while the place of Scripture is acknowledged in matters of doctrine it does not have the place of Final Authority. And for a close explanation of this we need to take very careful note of a small and possibly not well known but highly

important document entitled 'An ARCIC Catechism' and see especially the section on Authority.

45. Q. How did ARCIC understand authority in the Church? It is the power to speak in Christ's name and exists for the sake of the *koinonia* of human beings with **God** and with one another.
46. Q. Did ARCIC understand scripture to be the basis of all teaching authority in the Church? Yes. According to the Final Report Scripture conveys the authority of the Word of God, and is the 'uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation'. The Church has recourse to Scripture for the inspiration of its life and mission and refers to Scripture its teaching and practice (Final Report, pp. 52, 70).
47. Q. Does this mean that the individual finds all the truth of revelation in his own interpretation of Scripture? No. The Final Report stated that there needs to be a 'common mind' in the understanding and application of Scripture. It is the task of those who exercise authority in the Church to help to produce this common mind.
48. Q. Some possess authority through the holiness of life: others through the talent or charisma given them by the Holy Spirit. The Commission saw ordained ministers as one of these gifts of the Holy Spirit which confers authority.

It would appear from this that a twentieth century William Whitaker is needed to dispute with a modern day Cardinal Bellarmine and to reestablish the primacy of Holy Scripture. If the Church of England is to be changed and changed in the right direction then the supremacy and sufficiency of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and doctrine must be affirmed.

'The Scripture is the touchstone', wrote Tyndale, 'that trieth all doctrines and by which we know the false from the true.' 'We are to believe the learned and the godly', said Cranmer, 'only in so far as they can show their doctrine and exhortation to be agreeable with the true Word of God written. This is the very touchstone by which we must try all learning and doctrine whatsoever it be'.²³

3. The Sense and Interpretation of Scripture

On the subject of the sense of Scripture the English Reformers thought that the only proper sense is the literal sense as the Holy Spirit intended. John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's, had been one of the first to challenge the methods of the mediaeval scholastics. They held the allegorical, tropological and analogical senses of the Bible. But the Reformers brushed all this aside. They said 'we call this the natural sense, that which the writer intended to be understood'.

Tyndale wrote 'the literal sense is the root and ground of all—the anchor that never faileth'.²⁴ He rightly saw that there are in Scripture proverbs, similitudes, riddles and allegories but 'that which is signified is the literal sense which thou must seek out diligently'. So also Whitaker (p. 406)

the sense of Scripture is one only, viz., the literal or grammatical whether it arise from the words taken strictly or from the words figuratively understood or from both together'.

The Reformers taught that Scripture is perspicuous, it is clear in what it teaches. Whitaker asks

whether those sacred Scriptures which we are commanded to search are so full of obscurities and difficulties as to be unintelligible to us or whether they be not rather a light and clearness and perspicuity in Scripture so as to make it no useless task for the people to be engaged and occupied in their perusal.²⁵

The Reformers did not deny that Scripture has its difficult passages. They recognized from their deep and extensive study of the Bible that there are some obscurities in the text. But, says Jewel,

notwithstanding a few certain places in the Holy Scripture be obscure, yet generally the Scriptures are a candle to guide one's feet—generally God's commandment is light and lightens the eyes—and therefore generally the Word of God is full of comfort.²⁶

Again Whitaker quotes the assertion of Martin Luther that Scripture is its most plain easy and certain interpreter, proving, judging and illustrating all things. And that while some words and sentences are shrouded in difficulty nevertheless no dogma is obscure, as for example that God is one and three—that Christ hath suffered and will reign for ever—and so forth. Thus all the articles of faith are plain and all things necessary to Salvation are propounded in plain words.

Whitaker suggests eight means to discovering the True Sense of Scripture.

1. Prayer—Let reading follow prayer, and prayer reading.
2. Know the original languages—ministers especially.
3. Consider which is figurative and which is strict.
4. Consider the scope, end, matter, circumstances of the passage and so arrive at a clear understanding.
5. Compare Scripture with Scripture.
6. In comparison of places not only similar but dissimilar.
7. All must accord with the analogy of faith in Romans 12:6.
8. Use the labours of others skilled in the Word.

Also, continues Whitaker, on this account, referring to the need for Scripture to be explained. God's ministers are to be listened to when they expound the Scriptures and the men most skilled are to be consulted. Herein is the responsibility which lies upon the ordained minister, as set forth in the Ordinal, *viz.*,

to bring all men such as are or shall be committed to your charge that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God and to that ripeness and perfection of life in Christ that there be no place left among you either for error in religion or for viciousness in Life—and the means to that end? to know that 'the will and ability is given of God alone and so pray earnestly for His Holy Spirit . . . and with doctrine and exhortation taken out of the Holy Scripture . . . and that with the heavenly assistance of the Holy Spirit and by daily reading and weighing of the Holy Scriptures ye may wax riper and stronger in your ministry. . .²⁷

4. Implications of the Reformers' Teaching

It is true that four hundred years and more separate the English Reformers from the Church of England in this last decade of the twentieth century. In respect of the study of the Bible and attitudes to the Bible a great deal of water has flowed under the bridges. There has been the critical movement which began in the last century in Germany and then in this country,

which in turn led to the modernist and liberal approach to Scripture. Many sections of the Old Testament were written off as having little or no relevance for an 'enlightened' age. And many Evangelicals preparing for the ministry have perforce had to sit under 'liberal' tutelage as part of the course at University or Theological College. It has of necessity had to be so in order to prepare for examinations. And it is not necessarily a bad thing. It is important to be aware of the other side.

In view of all this some may well ask—what can we learn from the English Reformers who lived in an age of long ago? Some, as Philip Hughes says, would dismiss them as uncritical or precritical in their approach to Scripture. But the leaders of the Reformation must not be written off on this score. They were men of exceptional intelligence, candour and scholarship. Their study of the Bible was marked by both depth and integrity. They were men of profound spirituality, whose lives, mind as well as heart, had been transformed radically, by the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ which they had found set before them in no other place than the Bible.

Their experience of Christ's salvation had given them the master key to Scripture. They were men taught by the Spirit and those today who do not have that inward testimony should question themselves as to whether they are in any position to pass judgment upon the Reformers' teachings on Scripture.

The Reformers were enthusiasts for the Word. They could say with the Psalmist (119:162) 'I rejoice at Thy Word as one that findeth great spoil'. Think of the joy of little Bilney who discovered that most comfortable word of Paul to Timothy and cried out 'Jesus saves!' 'How sweet to my soul', he declared, in similar vein to the prophet Ezekiel to whom the Word of the Lord was in his mouth 'as honey for sweetness'.

In the Scriptures, by the light of the Holy Spirit, they found their doctrine and all the light they needed for a daily walk with God. And so they encouraged the study of the Scriptures by the people. They worked and gave their lives—as for example, Tyndale, for the translation and the spread of Scriptures, so that 'even the boy that driveth the plough' might have a Bible. The Reformers would have given their whole weight behind every modern agency which seeks (as the Gideons do) to place the Word of God in the traffic lanes of humanity.

It is not that our efforts are needed to defend the Bible. As Spurgeon said 'What, defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion—just let it loose'.

We could do well to take one example from Hugh Latimer. Following his conversion he turned all his energy and eloquence to proclaiming the Word. Says d'Aubigné 'He was one of the first to set himself to preach the Gospel in the truth and simplicity of it'. He preached in Latin to the clergy (!), and in English to the people. He boldly placed before his hearers the law, with its curses, and then conjured them to flee to the Saviour of the World. The same zeal he had employed in saying mass he now employed in preaching the true sacrifice of Christ. His sermons were Scriptural, doctrinal, practical and vividly illustrated. The Parker Society volume of those sermons, now very attractively republished by Focus Christian Ministries Trust, contains, for example, his famous Sermon on the Card

whereas you are wont to celebrate Christmas in playing at cards I intend by God's grace to deal unto you Christ's cards wherein you shall perceive Christ's rule—the game we should play at shall be called 'the triumph'—and there is no man that is willing to play at this triumph with

these cards (Christ's) but they shall be all winners and no losers.

Latimer's racy style is heard in a sermon delivered before Convocation in 1534:

Who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England? That passeth all the rest in doing his office? I will tell you—it is the Devil—the most diligent preacher of all other; never out of his diocese, never from his cure, never unoccupied, ever in his parish, in residence at all times, never out of the way, call for him when you will, he is ever at home, ever at his plough, ever applying his business, you will never find him idle. When he hath his plough going, there away with books and up with candles; away with Bibles and up with beads; away with the light of the Gospel and up with the light of candles; yea at noon days, up with man's traditions and his laws, down with God's traditions and His most Holy Word. Oh that our prelates would be as diligent to sow the corn of Good doctrine as Satan is to sow cockle and darnel.

Latimer was as forthright in his preaching before Edward the King, as seen in his sermon on Covetousness (1550); and for those who are given to courses of sermons there is Latimer's course on the Lord's Prayer preached in 1552. 'Latimer's words about preaching', says Dr. David Samuel in the cover to the new edition, 'should ring in our ears today: "Beware, beware ye diminish not this office: for if ye do ye delay God's power to all that do believe".'

Hugh Latimer and all the English Reformers were men of the Word. They had come to a personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour. This conception of faith as a personal trust in a personal Saviour had given them the master key to Scripture. The written word pointed them to Christ, the Living Word. Here was God's full and final revelation. Holy Scripture was for the English Reformers supreme and sufficient, the final authority in all matters of doctrine and practice. They were enthusiasts for the Word—they loved the Scriptures—they learned passages of the New Testament by heart. God's Word was a lamp to their feet and a light to their path. It was, as Dr. Griffith Thomas says

milk to nourish them, strong meat to invigorate them, honey to delight, fire to warm, hammer to break and fasten, sword to fight, statute book to legislate, gold to treasure in time and for eternity.²⁸

It was this Reformation by the Word which restored true spiritual Christianity and it was from the regeneration of individuals that there resulted the regeneration of the Church.

Here lies the importance of the English Reformers for today, for this last decade of the twentieth century. If the Church is to be changed and equipped to meet the challenge it will only be as she sets her course according to the theology and principles of the Reformation.

ERNEST STRICKLAND is an Honorary Canon of Lincoln Cathedral and formerly Rector of Broughton.

Endnotes:

- 1 Based on a paper delivered at Church Society's Conference at Swanwick, 1991, the theme of which was "'Changing the Church": the Biblical Theology of the English Reformers and its relevance today'.

- 2 J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, *The Reformation in England*, Vol. 1, Book 2, ch. 1.
- 3 P.E. Hughes, *Theology of the English Reformers*, New Edition, ch. 1.
- 4 *Book of Common Prayer*: Preface, 'Of Ceremonies'.
- 5 S.C. Carter, 'England and the new learning' in *English Church and the Reformation*.
- 6 Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, p.19.
- 7 E.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, ch. 4.
- 8 D'Aubigné, *op. cit.*, Erasmus Leoni, p. 1843.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Carter, *op. cit.*
- 12 D'Aubigné, *op. cit.*, Bk. 2, ch. 8.
- 13 A.E. Barnes-Lawrence, 'The Church and the Bible' in *Churchman and his Church*.
- 14 Thomas Becon, *Works*, 'Catechism', p.425.
- 15 William Whitaker, D.D., 'Disputation on Holy Scripture against the papists, especially Ballarmino and Stapleton', Parker Society.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Hughes, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Whitaker, *op. cit.*
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Jewel, *Treatise on Holy Scripture*.
- 27 *Book of Common Prayer*: Ordinal, Ordering of Priests, Exhortation by the Bishop.
- 28 W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *The Catholic Faith*, ch. 26.