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THE REFORMATION

by  
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You may have read the report that appeared in the daily press recently of the clash which arose on the last working day of the recent session of the Vatican Council between a Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney and the Abbott of Downside in England. The Abbott rebuked the bishop because he was not willing to acknowledge the faults of the Roman Catholics at the time of the Reformation, adding "I do not know if accurate knowledge of the 16th century has yet reached Australia". He went on "The facts, however, are admitted by both Catholic and Protestant historians. Members of the Church of England would be offended if Roman Catholics continued to say their church had arisen in the 16th century". By these words the Abbott is, of course, referring to the oft-repeated statement of Roman Catholics that the Church of England began in the days of Henry VIII. Although the Abbott of Downside condemns the idea as false, it is still, as he suspects, taught by Roman Catholics in Australia. Thus I received through the post not long ago a pamphlet by a well-known Roman Catholic clergyman, published in Sydney, entitled "Reply to the Anglican Bishops in Australia". On page 16 we read the statement "Henry founded a new Church of England". It is the repetition of statements like this by Roman Catholics in Australia that the Abbott of Downside condemned so severely, because the fact is, of course, that the Church of England began with the coming of Christianity to England in the seventh century.

It is well to remember that the Reformation was a spiritual movement aiming at restoring the church to the model of the New Testament. It had its beginnings well before the time of Henry VIII, and it would have achieved its work perhaps even more effectively had the monarchs not interfered at all. But in those days of absolute monarchy such restraint was, of course, more than could be expected. There were in fact three different streams which joined to bring about the Reformation, and these had nothing to do with the exigencies of Henry VIII and Elizabeth's government policies. The first of these streams sprang from John Wycliffe who was Professor of Theology at Oxford at the end of the 14th century. He saw the unscriptural character of some of the doctrines taught by the church; he opposed them and had to retire from Oxford to his parish of Lutterworth. After his death his enemies dug up his body and burnt it for heresy. Wycliffe sent out bands of preachers, nicknamed Lollards, to spread the knowledge of the Scriptures. Through them the first translation of the Bible into English was accomplished; but since printing was not yet invented copies of Wycliffe's Bible were expensive to obtain. Throughout the next century the ecclesiastical authorities harried the Lollards and many were burnt at the stake. Nevertheless the movement continued right up to the reign of Henry VIII.

The second stream which contributed to the Reformation in England resulted from the recovery of the Greek and Hebrew languages. When the Turks captured Constantinople in the middle of the 15th century the scholars from that leading Greek city found refuge in Western Europe and brought their knowledge with them. Thus while Columbus was

discovering the new world of America, scholars were rediscovering the interesting world of ancient Rome and Greece; a new enthusiasm for reading the Bible in its original languages was kindled and John Collet, later Dean of St. Paul's, lectured on St. Paul's epistles at Oxford. His method was novel for those days, for he went directly to what St. Paul had to say instead of what the scholastic authorities had said about St. Paul. Undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge began to have Bible studies amongst themselves. Thomas Bilney was converted by reading the Bible in this way and did much to revive biblical religion in the universities and in his home town at Norwich where he was later burnt. One of these young undergraduates was William Tyndale who resolved to translate the Bible into English. He completed the New Testament in 1525 and had translated most of the Old Testament before he was strangled and burnt eleven years later. It is interesting to read accounts of how Tyndale's New Testament, printed on secret presses, was circulated amongst the Lollards in England, bringing them new hope and vitality.

The third stream which contributed to the Reformation in England was, of course, the one from the continent through Martin Luther. This was decisive. Luther had entered a monastery as a youth in order to save his soul, but it was only after having been appointed a Professor of Sacred Scripture at the University of Wittenburg and studying the Bible, especially the epistle to the Romans, that he came to an understanding of God's way of salvation through Christ alone, and not for any of his own works or deservings. Luther was preaching salvation through faith in Christ in Germany about the same time as Bilney was in England, and both drew their doctrines from the same source, namely from the plain teaching of Scripture.

However, the Church authorities instead of welcoming the reading of the Bible forbade it, and the Bishop of London collected as many copies of Tyndale's New Testament as he could obtain and burnt them in a public bonfire outside St. Paul's Cathedral. The hostility of the authorities, as is well known, was not confined to the burning of books. Hundreds of thousands of Protestants on the Continent were killed because of their faith. In England Henry VIII for a while supported the Reformation Movement but then at the end of his life turned against it and executed some of its leading exponents such as Dr. Barnes. During his short reign the boy king Edward VI favoured the Reformation but his sister, Queen Mary Tudor, did all in her power to extirpate both the Protestant doctrines and those who held them. But on her death Queen Elizabeth I supported the Reformation, not perhaps so much by conviction as because she recognised that the doctrines of the Reformation had taken a firm grip on the hearts of her peoples. Thus it is not difficult for an impartial historian to conclude that the Reformation was a movement essentially independent of the attitudes of the reigning monarch. Historically it had more than one source, yet they may all be reduced to one principle, namely a rediscovery of the teaching of the Bible and an application of this teaching to private as well as church life.

The Bible is God's Word, and so it contains within itself a power to convict the mind and conscience of those who read it. God made our minds and consciences and speaks directly to us through the Bible. This has always been the case. As with Wycliffe, Bilney, Luther, Tyndale, it is the experience of all who read the Bible humbly and sincerely.

The biblical doctrine which the reformers recognised as neglected by the church of their time was the important question of how we are saved. There was, for example, no dispute between Roman Catholics

and Protestants on such doctrines as the nature of God or the person of Christ, but it was about the way of salvation on which the reformers differed from their opponents. The Bible teaches clearly that our salvation is God's gift to us from beginning to end. In ourselves we do not deserve salvation, but it comes to us as a gift from God by way of grace and mercy. Nor can we make our own contribution towards it. Both the grace which gives, and our faith which receives the gift are from God; and God's gift of salvation is based on the work of Christ who died for our sins. It is a free gift. In contrast the religion current in the 16th century stressed that we ourselves through our own works and merits made a vital contribution to our salvation; in fact our merit was regarded as the decisive contribution. But the reformers saw that this was not only derogatory to God's glory by focussing the attention on our own efforts instead of on Christ and God's gift to us in Him, but it also led the conscientious soul to despair of obtaining salvation, because of a vivid awareness of its own impotence.

In the four centuries that have succeeded the Reformation this has been the dividing line between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism; namely whether our salvation is all of God or whether partly of God and partly of ourselves. It is therefore remarkable that in a recent book by a Roman Catholic priest of France, to which a Jesuit Priest has contributed an introduction, we read that the Protestant doctrine of the free gift of salvation is undoubtedly true. Thus on page 29 of "The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism", the author, Louis Bouyer, writes "Luther's view of salvation is in perfect harmony with Catholic tradition". Bouyer also

approves the doctrine of John Calvin and the English Puritans and on p.113 writes "All the great themes of Calvinism ... must be recognised for what they undoubtedly are - scriptural themes", and on page 72 Bouyer writes "Our final conclusion is that the Catholic not only may but must, in virtue of his own faith, give a full and unreserved adherence to the doctrine of grace ... understood in the positive sense we have seen upheld by Protestants". The writer recognises that the protestant doctrine which he so ably expounds is out of keeping with modern Roman Catholic teaching. His words on p.65 are as follows: "The series of statements we have just formulated would undoubtedly scandalise a large number of Catholics to-day. It is equally certain that they are at variance with the general tenor of contemporary Catholic writing and preaching." But he goes on to say, "We do well to bear in mind that ... the Church's teaching is not necessarily the same as that which we chance to find in the written or spoken words uttered by Catholics at a given period". This Roman Catholic writer's conclusions are that the essential doctrines of protestantism are both scriptural and true, and from his point of view they must therefore also be Catholic. But the fact that they were not taught publicly by the Catholic Church for centuries does not in his judgment affect the truth of the fact that they are in accordance with Catholic tradition. This is, of course, true only if you go back far enough, before error arose in the church, for these doctrines are certainly taught in the Bible. But they were not held by the church at the time of the Reformation, which persecuted the Protestants for believing them; and they have not been held or taught since then, nor are they held or taught at the present day amongst the Roman Catholics, as the writer himself acknowledges. Nevertheless this book which has the Roman Catholic imprimatur and a Jesuit introduction, acknowledges the truth of these doctrines,

for which the Protestant martyrs died. We are not then surprised that a Roman Catholic Bishop of Sydney should not yet have caught up with this fact! but nevertheless we may be thankful that there is a recognition amongst continental Roman Catholics of the truth and Scriptural character of the essential doctrines of the Protestant Reformation. For in this we may see the hand of God, and it should encourage us to pray that as the Bible is now being read once more amongst Continental Roman Catholics it may continue to bear witness to the truth of its doctrines.

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