

# The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

## Reformation in England

He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;  
The Lord shall hold them in derision.

Psalm 2:4

The Reformation continued to develop and spread throughout Germany, France, Scandinavia, Holland and Eastern Europe. Various Protestant factions emerged — Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Mennonite — each of them played a part in shaping the course of later church history. We will return to learn about some of them later but for now we are going to turn our thoughts to England, to see how the light began to dawn in the realm of Henry VIII, the reigning monarch when Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517.

## A Welcome Awaits In England

Before Luther's teachings ever began to penetrate England there was already a thriving underground movement for reform. Lollards, the followers of John Wycliffe, were increasing in numbers.

The Lollards provided a ready-made welcome for Protestant literature, especially new English translations of the Bible. They, you will recall, had been actively distributing their own literature and making translations of parts of the Scriptures from Latin into English since before the death of Wycliffe in 1384. Lollardy and Protestantism came together in the mid 1520s.

## The Cambridge Group

It was also in the 1520s that a very significant group of Cambridge scholars met regularly at the White Horse Inn to discuss Luther's ideas. Among them were Robert Barnes, Thomas Bilney, Thomas Cranmer, John Frith and Hugh Latimer, all of whom were to be burnt as martyrs for the Protestant faith after 1526 when the authorities cracked down on them — not before they made a major contribution to the spread of Protestantism in the country.

## William Tyndale

William Tyndale, a priest and linguist trained at Oxford, had been impressed and influenced by the teaching of Erasmus. He made it his mission to translate the Bible into English from the original Greek and Hebrew and give it to the common people. He saw this as the surest way to overthrow the errors of Rome.

“Master Tyndale happened to be in the company of a learned man, and in communing and disputing with him drove him to that issue that the learned man said, we were better without God's law than the pope's: Master Tyndale, hearing that, answered him, 'I defy the pope and all his laws,' and said, 'If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost.'”

Tyndale began his work in London in 1523 but soon was forced to move to the Continent, spending the rest of his life exiled in Germany and the Netherlands. His English New Testament was published in 1525 and thousands of printed copies were smuggled into England. They soon superseded the old Lollard hand-written fragments.

Tyndale's translation was a masterpiece. It not only formed the basis of almost all English translations until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but also contributed much to the development of the English

language. The English bishops of his day, however, saw it as subversive. Tyndale translated “church” as “congregation”, “priest” as “elder”, “do penance” as “repent” and “confess” as “acknowledge”, thus ridding the Bible of terms with special Roman Catholic significance. In addition, Tyndale’s theological writings were the most important of his time in promoting Protestant teaching.

An English spy in the pay of Henry VIII’s government betrayed Tyndale in Antwerp in 1535 and he was burnt at the stake the following year. His last words were, “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.”

## **Henry’s Quarrel With Rome**

Henry VIII’s own quarrel with Rome began when he wanted to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon because she had failed to produce a male heir for the throne of England. Catherine had previously been the wife of Henry’s brother Arthur and Henry sought an annulment from the pope on the grounds that the marriage had been unlawful (see Leviticus 20:21). However, the pope of the time, Clement VII, was under the control of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Catherine’s nephew. Henry’s annulment was not forthcoming.

Henry began by exerting diplomatic pressure on the pope. Then he put pressure on the English clergy so that they appealed to the pope to grant his request. When none of this worked he moved to enact the separation of the English Church from papal jurisdiction through the Reformation Parliament which he had summoned in 1529.

First, Parliament stripped the Church of its legislative independence. Next its financial independence was removed, diverting all clerical taxes from Rome to the English crown. Then its judicial independence was removed. Finally, in the Act of Supremacy, Henry was declared head of the Church of England.

In spite of this Henry VIII did little to change the doctrine of the English Church. Such doctrinal reforms as came about were due largely to the influence of two men: Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell.

## **Thomas Cranmer**

Cranmer — a priest and member of the Cambridge group — was a cautious and gentle humanist scholar who moved slowly in the direction of Protestantism. He won Henry’s approval when he supported his case for divorce. In 1533 Henry made him archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer, in return, pronounced Henry’s marriage void and declared his marriage to Anne Boleyn lawful the same year.

## **Thomas Cromwell**

Cromwell was appointed as Henry’s prime minister in 1534. It was his reward for having successfully guided through Parliament the legislation which made the “English Empire” independent of the papacy. He had strong leanings towards Protestantism and encouraged Protestants so far as he could, despite Henry’s traditional Catholic beliefs.

It was Cromwell who oversaw the dissolution of the monasteries whereby monks were given a pension or parish appointment and their property sold by the monarchy. It amounted to a redistribution of land and wealth unsurpassed in English history.

Cromwell was also instrumental in promoting the English Bible. He and Cranmer urged the English clergy to petition Henry for an official English translation of the Scriptures. In 1537 Henry sanctioned a London printing of a translation by Miles Coverdale, who had stepped into Tyndale’s shoes. In 1538, Cromwell as vice-regent commanded every parish church in England to obtain an English Bible and display it for all to read. In 1539 Coverdale’s “Great Bible” appeared, the work having been part financed by Cromwell personally.

Political factors brought about Cromwell’s downfall and execution in 1540 but he did much to move England towards Protestantism.

## **God's Word Unleashed**

While these things were happening on the political landscape Protestant views were being spread by sympathetic clergy and laypeople, protected to a large extent by figures like Cromwell and Cranmer. The 1530's was the decade of evangelical bishops like Edward Fox, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Shaxton, John Hilsey, Thomas Goodrich and William Barlow.

But the greatest phenomenon of the 1530's and 40's was the huge popular interest in Bible reading. Ordinary people were discussing the Bible in ale-houses up and down the land. People learned to read so that they could study the Bible. By 1537, Edward Fox could say to his fellow bishops, "Make not yourselves the laughing-stock of the world; light is sprung up and is scattering all the clouds. The lay people know the Scriptures better than many of us." The effect of all this Bible reading was to open up and reveal the gap between New Testament Christianity and the church of the day.

But it was not all plain sailing in those early years. Henry VIII remained a traditional Catholic, apart from his rejection of the papacy, and continued to inflict persecution on outspoken Protestants as well as stubborn supporters of the pope. In 1539 He introduced the "Six Articles" as a test of orthodoxy. These articles reaffirmed transubstantiation, a celibate priesthood and other medieval teachings. Hugh Latimer and others were forced to resign as bishops. It was a particularly bleak time for Protestantism.

Never the less, by the time of Henry's death in 1547, Protestantism was firmly established in southern England, especially in London.

## **The Roots of the Church of England**

English Protestantism was neither fully Lutheran nor fully Reformed. It developed its own character marked by a love of the Bible, emphasis on personal godliness and a nationalism which saw England as God's chosen nation at the forefront of His quarrel with the Roman Antichrist.

## **Questions For Discussion**

- In what ways do Anglican practices today reflect these early historical roots of the Church of England?
- In what ways do you see the events of Henry VIII's reign as a fulfilment of Psalm 2?

## **For Further Study**

To learn more about this important period in English history read "God's Outlaw — The Story of William Tyndale and the English Bible."