

The Great Controversy Series

17 Later English Reformers

You remember that in the 14th century, the morning star of the Reformation, John Wycliffe came on the stage. He read the Bible and found inner peace in Jesus Christ. The more Wycliffe read the Bible, the more he understood the difference between the doctrine given by God and those taught by the Catholic Church. He pointed out the errors of the papacy by exalting the truth in writing and preaching. Wycliffe was called before the religious court and he defended the truth before everyone. Wycliffe translated the Scriptures into English and the reform he began continued after his death.

There was no printing in the time of Wycliffe. To copy the Scriptures by hand and distribute them was hard and expensive work. Only the nobles and rich could own a copy. For this reason only a few people could read it. But in 1516 Erasmus published his Greek and Latin New Testament. For the first time the New Testament was printed in the original language. Wycliffe had used for his translation a Latin Bible. It had many errors. But in Erasmus' New Testament many errors were corrected and God's word was better understood. This supported the reform movement for the educated but for the average person the Bible was still far off. William Tyndale would change this situation.

Tyndale received the gospel from Erasmus' New Testament. He began to preach it boldly. Tyndale said that all doctrines were to be tested, not by tradition or by church fathers but by the Bible. To the papist claim that the church had given the Bible, and the church alone could explain it, Tyndale responded: "Do you know who taught the eagles to find their prey? Well, that same God teaches His hungry children to find their Father in His word. Far from having given us the Scriptures, it is you who have hidden them from us; it is you who burn those who teach them, and if you could, you would burn the Scriptures themselves."--D'Aubigne, History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, b. 18, ch. 4.

Tyndale's preaching was popular and many accepted the gospel. But when Tyndale left one field to go and preach in another, the papists with threats and misrepresentations were most of the time successful in undermining the work that Tyndale had done. Tyndale, who was greatly disappointed in this, thought that unless the people had the Bible in their own language there was no protection against the people's being deceived. They would not know what or who was right. How could they understand the truth? For Tyndale there was only one answer: The Bible. He began to translate it once again.

Because of persecution, in order to continue his work, he escaped to London. But after a short time the violent threats of the papists forced him to go from London to Germany. He began to print the English New Testament. Twice his work was stopped. But when persecution arose in one place he escaped to another. In a short time he completed 3000 New Testaments.

The English customs authorities made a great effort to prevent the New Testament from entering England but they were not successful. The New Testament was distributed. The papists tried to stop it but were unsuccessful. As the time of the Waldenses, in Tyndale's time we see the same procedure. When the Lord tries to bring the truth to people, Satan uses the people under his control to be an obstacle. The truth goes forward in a hidden, outlawed manner. How frequently we see the same thing in our time!

On one occasion the bishop of Durham bought a large quantity of New Testaments for the purpose of destroying them. He thought to hinder the reform movement this way. But with the money procured from the sale materials were purchased without which a new and better edition could not have been prepared. Later when Tyndale was made a prisoner, with the promise of being set free if he would reveal the name of those who were financially supporting him, he said, "Because the Bishop of Durham bought New Testaments, he was a helper like no other."

Tyndale was betrayed into the hands of his enemies and after a period of imprisonment he was executed. But the work that he did continued through the New Testament.

A preacher named Hugh Latimer, while forwarding the reformation maintained that the author of the Scriptures is God Himself. He preached thus in front of the king. "There is no king, emperor, magistrate, and ruler . . . but are bound to obey . . . His holy word." "Let us not take any bywalks, but let God's word direct us: let us not walk after . . . our forefathers, nor seek not what they did, but what they should have done."--Hugh Latimer, "First Sermon Preached Before King Edward VI." He was a bold preacher was he not? Would you have preached that way in front of the king?

Other reformers appeared. There was Barnes, Frith, the Riddleys and Cranmer. Most of these educated people were respected members of the Roman Catholic communion. We are definitely not saying that Catholics are bad people. There were people who loved God and the truth in the Roman Catholic Church. But why did they protest? Because they saw the church's errors and they wanted to correct them.

The principle that the reformers kept was this: The Scriptures are the sole, unerring standard of faith and practice. The reformers maintained that popes, councils, Church Fathers and kings have no right to control the conscience in matters of religion. If someone were to ask me, "What is the biggest difference between Catholic and Protestant?" I would point out this principle. This is the foundation. For this principle the reformers lived. For this principle they died. Latimer was executed and until the very end maintained his faith and courage and defended the Protestant principle.

In Scotland, the effects of the gospel work of Columba, who lived in the 6th century, continued for centuries. Centuries after England yielded to the papacy, the churches in Scotland were comparatively free. But in the 12th century the papacy began to rule. The spiritual darkness was deep as in no other place. But the Lord did not leave His people alone. The Lollards brought the

Bible and Wycliffe's writings to Scotland. Thus the gospel was not completely hidden. In every century there were witnesses and martyrs for the truth.

When the Great Reformation began, Luther's writings and Tyndale's New Testament came to Scotland. The gospel awakened interest and the papists saw the danger and executed many nobles and good people. But the dying martyrs witnessed for Jesus Christ and the gospel spread. Many people became believers.

One of the most important reformers in Scotland was John Knox. He was brought before the queen of Scotland and the queen accused him of teaching a forbidden religion. The queen, who said that the Bible requires subjects to obey their princes maintained that Knox had violated God's law. Knox said that if Israelites accepted the pharaoh's religion that it would not be right. In Jesus' time did God want the subjects of the Roman Empire to be idolaters? Logically, while the subjects should obey their kings we see that they are not bound to accept their king's religion.

In England, Protestantism was accepted as the national religion. But while religious persecution decreased, it did not cease. Although some of the papacy's doctrines were rejected, some ceremonialism remained. The papacy's authority was rejected only to be replaced by the king's authority. The king became the leader of the church. Religious freedom was still not understood. Everyone could not worship according to his conscience. Everyone had to accept the state religion. For centuries, dissenters were persecuted.

In the 17th century thousands of pastors were removed from their positions. Under the threat of fine, imprisonment or deportation, religious assembly outside of the state religion was forbidden. Some people met in hidden places, the forests and in the caves. Many people were persecuted and suffered for their faith. Yet the Lord was with His people and their testimonies could not be silenced. Many people went to America and laid the foundations of civil and religious liberty.

In time, under the state religion of the Church of England, the people fell to a spiritual level not much different than the heathen. The truth of righteousness by faith was lost sight of and people looked to their own good works for salvation. The lower classes were sunk in immorality and the upper classes despised piety.

At this time Charles and John Wesley appeared. These brothers were both pastors. They saw that God's law does not extend to the words and actions only but also to the thoughts and motivations. To suppress the natural evils of the heart and to live a holy life, these two brothers made great efforts. They sought holiness of heart because they wanted to earn God's favor. But they could not break the power of sin. They labored in vain. They encountered the same problem that Luther faced: how can a man be right before God?

Charles and John Wesley were sent to America on a mission. Terrible storms arose at sea and death seemed certain. Charles and John had no assurance of peace with God. But on the ship were Moravians who had fled persecution in their country. They had demonstrated a pious

lifestyle. But when the storm broke out the English panicked but the Moravians were not stricken with fear. When John Wesley spoke with them they said, “We are not afraid to die. Neither men nor women nor children.”

When John Wesley returned to England, he received instruction from a Moravian pastor and saw Christ as a Savior. Wesley, at last was not looking to his own works for salvation but trusted in Jesus and found peace with God. Salvation is a gift.

Ephesians 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

John Wesley continued his disciplined and sacrificing lifestyle, but this time not as the foundation of his faith but as a result of it, his piety not the root but the fruit of faith. God’s grace in Christ is the Christian’s foundation and that grace is displayed in obedience. The Holy Spirit convinced the Wesley’s to preach Jesus Christ as the sinner’s only hope. Thousands were converted.

The Wesley’s were tied to the Church of England and they did not think to start a new denomination. But they organized the new believers under the name the Methodist Connection. Wesley and his associates while still in the university applied a system of rules and procedures to live a holy life. Their classmates that despised them used the term Methodist as a mockery of them. Now the Wesleys lived a disciplined life, not to earn salvation but as the fruit of the new birth. The Methodist denomination became a very large denomination in both England and America.

Their way was not easy. They were persecuted by the Church of England. Many local churches closed their doors to them. Because many pastors opposed them, the crowds tried to lynch them. But the Lord saved them with many miracles. The houses of Methodists were robbed and ruined. Even though these actions were unlawful, they were ignored by the authorities.

In Wesley’s time the religious declension was in a large respect due to the doctrine of antinomianism which means “opposed to law.” Many people put forward the idea that Jesus Christ’s death on the cross canceled the Ten Commandments. According to them, to keep the Ten Commandments was bondage. Others however accepted that the Ten Commandments are binding upon mankind but held that a certain elect group of people that God had chosen for salvation, under the irresistible power of the Spirit would be led to live a religious and virtuous life and that those chosen for eternal destruction had no power to obey the divine law. The worst idea was this: The elect cannot be deprived of divine grace. Thus their evil behavior is not really sin, it doesn’t mean that they have transgressed the divine law. Therefore they have no need to confess and repent of their sins.

The Wesleys opposed these extremely wrong teachings that produced evil results and they were persecuted for it. Did God really determine people's character in a fixed and unchangeable way? No!

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,

1 Timothy 2:3-6 For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For *there is* one God and one Mediator between God and men, *the* Man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time,

If people are not saved, it is because of their own choice.

Wesley did not say that Jesus' death on the cross canceled the Ten Commandments. He wrote:

"The moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments and enforced by the prophets, He did not take away. It was not the design of His coming to revoke any part of this. This is a law which never can be broken, which 'stands fast as the faithful witness in heaven.' . . . This was from the beginning of the world, being 'written not on tables of stone,' but on the hearts of all the children of men, when they came out of the hands of the Creator. And however the letters once wrote by the finger of God are now in a great measure defaced by sin, yet can they not wholly be blotted out, while we have any consciousness of good and evil. Every part of this law must remain in force upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change, but on the nature of God, and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other. Wesley Sermon 25.

When John Wesley's life came to an end more than 500,00 people accepted had accepted his teaching. Because of what he taught, they forsook their sins and lived a purer life, a better experience.