

# WILLIAM TYNDALE AND LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF ERROR

It is easy to see why many people dislike the Reformation, if it was something to do with that nasty Luther or this immoral Zwingli. Not to mention those who say it all only happened because the lustful Henry VIII wanted a divorce! Was it all really necessary? Wasn't everything just fine already before 1517?

## **A RADICAL DISTORTION**

The traditional view of the late medieval church was one of ignorance, corruption, and growing anti-clericalism replaced at the Reformation by the re-discovered gospel, vernacular Bibles and liturgies, and increased lay devotion. This has been challenged in recent years by (amongst others) Professor Eamon Duffy at Cambridge. His book, *The Stripping of the Altars*, painted a picture of a vibrant and beloved church unjustly attacked and stripped bare by Henry VIII and his Protestant successors.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in*

More recently, however, Professor G. W. Bernard, vice-president of the Royal Historical Society, published a searching examination of the late medieval church on its own terms.<sup>2</sup> This, I think, gives us a much more nuanced picture of what was going on. Bernard claims that much of the recent writing on this period, particularly of the Duffy 'school', does not tell the full story, and indeed leaves the subsequent Reformation 'inexplicable.' Yes, there was some vitality in the church of the Middle Ages, but within that there were serious and substantial vulnerabilities which have been ignored or played down. That is not to make the break with Rome and the eventual triumph of Protestantism in various places an absolute inevitability. Yet Bernard places provocative question marks over the revisionist accounts of late, and allows us to ask again what the proper criteria for judging the late medieval background to the Reformation should really be.

The nineteenth-century bishop, J. C. Ryle, in his usual, breezy Victorian way, also speaks about the religion of England before the Reformation. In the book *Distinctive Principles for Anglican Evangelicals*, he has a chapter on what we owe to the Reformation. In there he writes of the radical distortion of Christianity which was medieval religion:

To sum up all in a few words, the religion of our English forefathers before the Reformation was

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*England 1400–1580* (London: Yale University Press, 2005) and his more recent *Saints, Sacrilege and Seditious: Religion and Conflict in the Tudor Reformations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

2. See G. W. Bernard, *The Late Medieval English Church: Vitality and Vulnerability before the Break with Rome* (London: Yale University Press, 2012) and my review in *Theology* 116.5 (September 2013), 379–80.

a religion without knowledge, without faith, and without lively hope – a religion without justification, regeneration, and sanctification – a religion without any clear views of Christ or the Holy Ghost. Except in rare instances, it was little better than an organized system of Mary-worship, saint-worship, image-worship, relic-worship, pilgrimages, almsgivings, formalism, ceremonialism, processions, prostrations, bowings, crossings, fastings, confessions, penances, absolutions, masses, and blind obedience to the priests. It was a huge higgledy-piggledy of ignorance and idolatry, and serving an unknown God by deputy.<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to demonstrate how ‘the Reformation delivered England from the most groveling, childish, and superstitious practices in religion.’ Alluding specifically to the worship of relics, he recounts some of the most ridiculous examples, before he concludes: ‘Wonderful as these things may seem, we must never forget that Englishmen at that time had no Bibles, and knew no better. A famishing man in sieges and blockades has been known to eat rats and mice and all manner of garbage, rather than die of hunger. A conscience-stricken soul, famishing for lack of God’s word, must not be judged too hardly, if it struggles to find comfort in the most debasing SUPERSTITION. Only let us never forget that this was the superstition which was shattered to pieces by the Reformation. Remember that. It was indeed a deliverance.’<sup>4</sup>

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3. J. C. Ryle, *Distinctive Principles for Anglican Evangelicals*, ed. Lee Gatiss (London: Lost Coin, 2012), 25.

4. Ryle, *Distinctive Principles*, 27.

Many were delivered from these things, only to have their bodies handed over to the flames. We must never forget how many suffered and died to establish the Reformation in this country. It is an axiom of Christian faith that ‘God’s power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor. 12:9). What people often mean for harm, God can turn to good (cf. Gen. 50:20). So it is, that in the tragedies of the Reformation era we can also observe its triumph. People died for the sake of the gospel they had regained.

This is powerfully illustrated for us in the accounts given in Foxe’s book of martyrs.<sup>5</sup> Read there the stories of Archbishop Cranmer, who recanted his Protestantism, and then repented of his recantation as he went to the stake. Read of the deaths of good Bishop Ridley and good Bishop Latimer, who died together for their faith. Their stories are well known, or should be. They died to light a candle in England that would never be put out. Foxe also writes of some brave Protestant ladies:

Now, when these previously mentioned good women were brought to the place in Colchester where they should suffer ... they fell down upon their knees, and made their humble prayers unto the Lord: which thing being done, they rose and went to the stake joyfully, and were immediately chained to it; and after the fire had compassed them about, they with great joy and *glorious triumph* gave up their souls, spirits, and lives, into the hands of the Lord ... Thus (gentle reader) God chooses the weak things of the world, to confound mighty things.<sup>6</sup>

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5. John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church* (1563) and later editions.

6. Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, from Book 12, page 2021 of the 1583