

THE INFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE UPON THE REFORMATION,

AND UPON THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF THE ENGLISH NATION.

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The Medieval Church.

THE Medieval Church embraced within its scope the whole of human life, religious, intellectual, political and economic. Its theory was that all secular life should be under religious control : in practice it resulted in all religious life becoming secularized. The abuses to which the Medieval doctrine of the Church as an *imperium in imperio* led made the demand for a Reformation of the Church increasingly strong during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries. The causes which gave rise to this demand were varied. Englishmen objected to the economic impoverishment of the country through the constant drain of wealth which flowed into the Papal coffers from the proceeds of Peter's Pence, annates, fees and tribute of one kind and another. The abuse of justice in ecclesiastical courts became proverbial. The maladministration of the parishes and dioceses was continually increasing through the numbers of absentee ecclesiastics, and the practice of Papal "provision." The monasteries were becoming centres of idleness and corruption, and by the end of the fifteenth century were definitely past any further usefulness to the country. Men also resented the attempts of the Church to gain political control of the country. It is probable that, had it not been for the Lancastrian monarchs and their support of the Church for political reasons, the Reformation would have come at least a century earlier than it did.

The Bible and the Medieval Church.

Owing to the difficulties in the way of a common language consequent upon the Norman Conquest, no attempt was made between 1,000 and 1,200 A.D., to translate any portion of the Scriptures into the language of the common people. The monks and some clergy possessed copies of the Vulgate, but such MSS. were necessarily somewhat rare owing to the high cost (some £1,000 of our money). Where they were accessible to clergy or monks they seem to have been little read. Bishop Grosseteste, of Lincoln, Bishop Hugh of Lincoln, Friar Bacon and

others urged upon the clergy the duty of reading the Bible for themselves, but their advice does not seem to have evoked much response. It is probable that only a very small proportion of the clergy could read sufficient Latin to get them through the Daily Offices intelligently. As far as the common people were concerned their knowledge of Bible stories was such as could be gained from religious manuals, mystery plays, etc.

There appears to have been no desire on the part of the clergy to provide the Scriptures for the people in their own tongue, and as the gulf between the Christianity of the Gospels and that of the Church grew greater, so the danger of allowing the laity to read the Bible for themselves became more and more apparent to the clergy. Nothing more than the Psalter appeared in English before the time of Wycliffe.

Wycliffe and the Lollards.

The anti-clerical feeling during the fourteenth century, which was based rather on political and economic causes at first than upon religious ones, was greatly strengthened and put upon a higher basis by the work of John Wycliffe and his itinerant preachers. Wycliffe was himself a great student of the Scriptures and was the first to realize the benefit which would ultimately accrue to both Church and people if all men were able to read the Bible for themselves in their own tongue. The translation of the whole Bible into English was made for the first time in history by Wycliffe and Nicholas de Hereford, and was later revised by Wycliffe's disciple, John Purvey. For over a century the Lollards, though driven underground by persecution, kept alive the knowledge of the English Bible through their secret meetings, where the Scriptures were read to the illiterate, who learned long passages by heart. In this way a foundation of true spiritual religion, and of love for the Bible, was laid amongst the humbler classes in the great cities, and in the Eastern Counties, on which the structure of the Reformation was later to be built.

The Renaissance.

In the fifteenth century intellectual Europe began to awake out of her long sleep, and to cast off the fetters of medieval scholasticism. The study of Greek, Latin and Hebrew brought about a new knowledge of the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews. In Italy this resulted in a Neo-Paganism in which even the Papal Court was submerged, and statues of Plato were set up and accorded something like divine honours. Men like Savonarola, and Pico della Mirandola, however, began to turn their attention to the study of the Scriptures in a new way, studying them rather as a whole, than as a museum of isolated texts which might be used quite apart from their contexts. Their spirit was caught by John Colet, who in 1496, on his return to England began to lecture at Oxford on the Epistle of St. Paul, which he expounded on the historical principle.

The Bible and the Individual.

Colet's expositions of the Epistles of St. Paul caused a sensation at Oxford, and influenced many scholars to study the Scriptures. Through his influence Erasmus, the Dutch scholar who had recently come to England, was encouraged to turn his attention from the study of the classics of Rome and Greece to that of the Scriptures. In process of time he produced the first printed Greek New Testament, with a new Latin translation of his own, so that henceforth scholars might read the New Testament in its original language. When this New Testament came to Cambridge, a copy of it was purchased by Thomas Bilney, who was converted through studying it. It formed also the basis of the belief of Thomas Cranmer and William Tyndale, both of whom spent several years studying the Bible before proclaiming in public the great religious truths which formed the foundation of the Reformation theology and worship. Thomas Bilney, in his turn, was instrumental in converting the bigoted College cross-bearer, Latimer, who was later to die for the faith at Oxford.

Thus the first great effect which the Bible had upon the Reformation was the part it played in the spiritual preparation of those who became leaders of the movement in this country. These leaders were not ignorant, or ill-educated men, but were scholars of high standing in their day, and each was a man who had steeped himself in the study of the Bible before beginning his public ministry. Through this study they were led to go much further in their aims than the mere rectification of abuses. They struck at the source of all these abuses, the corrupt doctrine which gave rise to them, particularly the doctrine of Transubstantiation and the Mass. They sought to return to the doctrine taught and practised by the Apostles. The rubbish of ages was cleared away so that the life and worship of the Church might be built anew "on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone." To these men the new centre of authority in spiritual things was the voice of God speaking to them in the Scriptures, and not the tradition of the Church alone. All the teaching of the Church had to be brought to the touchstone of the Bible before it could be accepted.

The Bible and the Nation.

The vital part, however, which the Bible was to play in the English Reformation was the creation of a popular opinion which valued and loved all for which the Reformation stood, because of a deep conviction that the doctrines of the Reformation were those of the Christ and His Apostles.

While Henry VIII lived, he was at times drawn into a more hostile attitude towards the New Learning owing to the force of public opinion being against innovation in matters of doctrine and worship. The people generally were more incensed against the abuses in the Church than conscious of the corruption of its doctrine. Men like William Tyndale were wise enough to see that the general desire for a purer

worship and a more Apostolic doctrine could not come until the people themselves could read the Bible in their own tongue and judge the current doctrine of the Church by that standard. After the publication of Tyndale's New Testament, and the authorization of the Great Bible, this Book of books began to fill an important place in the daily life of the nation. This was greatly increased after the publication of the Geneva Bible in 1557. This, being handy in size and being somewhat helpfully annotated, became the accepted family Bible of the nation for about a century, and was only displaced by the superior merits of the Authorized Version after a considerable struggle. As the knowledge of the Bible spread amongst the humbler classes, and the doctrine of Justification by Faith and the high standards of morality gripped men and women, those around them were able to see the results in daily life of this New Learning. During the Marian persecution many of these men and women suffered for their faith in the districts where they had been brought up, and their sufferings and heroism in the face of death burnt into the nation a mistrust and horror of Rome which is still evident to-day, while it established the Bible and the principles of the Reformation in the heart of the people. From that time until the days of the Stuarts the practice of Bible reading grew more and more prevalent, and the Bible took the place of the religious dramas and mystery plays of the Middle Ages.

The Bible and Worship.

The services of the Medieval Church were largely dramatic in character, appealing rather to the eye than to the reason and intellect. What Scripture they did contain was largely in the form of scattered versicles, except in the case of the Psalms. Being conducted in Latin, it was understood neither by the bulk of the congregation nor even in many cases by the priests themselves. At the Reformation all this was altered. Thomas Cranmer, who was himself one of the greatest Bible students of his day, and a man of vast erudition and learning, revised the worship of the Church on Biblical lines. Acting on the Reformation principle that all worship must be intelligent, and that public worship should be corporate in the fullest sense of the word, he employed the English tongue. He himself was one of the greatest masters of dignified English, and the grand cadences and expressive phraseology of his liturgical work have never been surpassed. He was, at the same time, a man of truly Catholic sympathies, and sought material for his Books of Common Prayer from all possible sources of historic Christian worship. All that he used, he brought to the touchstone of Holy Scripture so that there should be nothing in the services of the Church which should conflict with Scripture, yet so that whatever was of value in the old Service Books might find a place in the new. Cranmer was likewise a man who was not afraid to alter what he had written when he found with increasing knowledge of the Scriptures that it was misleading or untrue. Thus the history of the Book of Common Prayer up to 1552 is largely the history of the growth of a human soul.

The Bible and The Clergy.

For the clergy the study of the Bible meant a new standard of living and a new standard of preaching. Hitherto the Bible had been used merely as a mine of isolated texts, the Latin of each of which might be interpreted in four different ways, the most obvious of which, the literal sense, was the most unimportant. This process rendered the Bible, if read at all, more or less unintelligible to anyone. The preachers of the Reformation used the Bible as a whole, and instituted a method of expository preaching which paid due attention to the context and to the natural and historical setting of the text. As a result, the Bible became a new Book to their congregations. This popularity of Bible study also necessitated a higher standard of education for the clergy, who could no longer rest content with knowing sufficient Latin to enable them to mumble the words of the daily Offices, and to carry out the pageant of the Mass. It is a matter of history that the continual study of the Bible has tended to sharpen the intellect, and to develop the talents of the student to a remarkable degree.

The Bible and English Literature.

The rise of English literature was subsequent to the translation of the Bible into English by Tyndale and Coverdale. Except for the Tales of Chaucer, and the half-forgotten tracts of Wycliffe, there existed no popular English literature at the commencement of the fifteenth century, and it was upon minds unoccupied by any serious rival that there fell from the lips of the public readers of the "Chained Bibles" in the churches of the land from 1538 onwards, the matchless phrases of Tyndale's English New Testament, or of the Old Testament books. The result was that the stately language of the English Bible became almost at once the standard of the English tongue, and exercised a profound influence upon the great writers of Elizabethan and Puritan England. The works of Shakespeare, Spencer, Bacon, and Milton, for example, show the widespread influence of the Scriptures, which broadened and deepened men's intellect, and led them on to a higher standard of education. English literature, therefore, may be said to have found its basis and its inspiration in Holy Scripture. In like manner the stateliness and rhythm of the language of the Book of Common Prayer owes much to the standard of English set up by William Tyndale, and the early translators of the Bible. Only the best was good enough for men whose minds were saturated with the humble reverence for holy things inspired by constant study of the Bible.

The Bible and the National Character.

Far more important than the influence of the English Bible on literature was the influence of the Bible upon the national character. Whereas the paganism of the Renaissance issued in a revival, to some extent, of the carelessness and loose living associated with the paganism

of Greece and Imperial Rome, and is exemplified in the deliberate cunning and deceit of the political code of Machiavelli, the insistence of the Reformers on the paramount authority of the Scriptures resulted in the prevalence of a manly purity and respect for law, order, and justice. Out of the Book of books, prophet and apostle spoke to simple men and women in their own homes of "righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come," and blended the holiness of an Almighty God with the story of His unconquerable love as expressed in the Death of Jesus Christ. The people were brought into constant touch with the ethical standards of the Gospel, coupled with the power of the Cross of Christ. The result was an uplifting of the standards of moral and spiritual life. This movement came to its head in the rise of the Puritans who were not by any means as a whole the canting, Psalm-singing hypocrites so frequently pictured by biased writers. They were men whose gravity, frugality, and industry, coupled with their religious attitude, was a standing rebuke to much of the extravagance and licentiousness of the early Stuart period. It is true that in face of the character of higher society around them, some went to excess in their sternness, and the rigidity of their outlook on life, but in the main their influence made for a wholesome strength and purity of character, which penetrated the lower ranks of society in a manner impossible before the publication of the English Bible. Since the time of Henry VIII, England had become the "people of a Book, and that Book was the Bible."

From that time onwards every movement towards the purifying and uplifting of the national character has always been associated with a return to the Scriptures, e.g. the Methodist Revival of the early eighteenth century, and the Evangelical Revivals of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, which changed the religious outlook of the whole of England.

Now that the widespread scepticism and mad rush for pleasure which characterized the years following the Great War show signs of breaking down, because men are discovering that their spiritual needs remain unsatisfied, it is for us as a nation to return to the only source of spiritual strength and satisfaction—the Scriptures of Truth. The Fourth Centenary of the Open Bible in England is a fitting opportunity for us to re-open and to re-read the Book which above all others has fashioned the national character.

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