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Thomas Bilney: A Prelude to the Restoration

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Much has been said about the Restoration and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and rightfully so. Joseph Smith had the faith and courage necessary to part the heavens, see the Father and the Son, and once again reconstitute the Church of Jesus Christ upon the earth. Persecution and opposition ensued. From the First Vision to the death of the Prophet Joseph, the very “elements” combined to “hedge up the way” (D&C 122:7). Even those within the newly restored Church struggled to retain their newfound way of life.

Just one year before his martyrdom, the Prophet Joseph Smith stated, “Many men will say, ‘I will never forsake you, but will stand by you at all times.’ But the moment you teach them some of the mysteries of the kingdom of God that are retained in the heavens and are to be revealed to the children of men when they are prepared for them, they will be the first to stone you and put you to death. It was this same principle that crucified the Lord Jesus Christ, and will cause the people to kill the prophets in this generation.”[1] In another sermon delivered to the Saints at Nauvoo, the Prophet told the congregants: “But there has been a great difficulty in getting anything into the heads of this generation. It has been like splitting hemlock knots with a corn-dodger [hard-baked corn bread] for a wedge, and a pumpkin for a beetle [hammer]. Even the Saints are slow to understand.”[2]

We rejoice at the dedication and strength of the early Saints who remained faithful and feel sorrow for those who failed to stay the course. Why did some fall short? Why so much persecution? One answer may simply be that people resist change. The Lord stated in a revelation to Joseph Smith, “And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience, from the children of men, and *because of the tradition of their fathers”* (D&C 93:39; emphasis added). Opposition foments when people resist change and allow seeds of discontent to be sown by the adversary.

Many individuals throughout earth’s history felt the sting of persecution. Others encountered trials and tribulations similar to those experienced by Joseph Smith long before the First Vision. Whether we speak of Noah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or the Savior Himself, persecution abounded throughout history. Jan Hus, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, William Tyndale, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and a host of others also endured tremendous suffering and hardships. The pattern seems all too familiar—standing firm in one’s beliefs leads to persecution, betrayal, expulsion, and for some, martyrdom. The scriptures affirm the potential of discipleship: “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29; see also Matthew 5:10; 24:9,13; Acts 5:41).

Latter-day prophets have commented on the significant role of those reformers who helped prepare the way for the Restoration of the gospel.[3] President Joseph F. Smith stated: “Calvin, Luther, Melanchthon, and all the reformers, were inspired in thoughts, words, and actions, to accomplish what they did for the amelioration, liberty and advancement of the human race. They paved the way for the more perfect gospel of truth to come. Their inspiration, as with that of the ancients, came from the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the one true and living God.”[4] We rightfully express gratitude for the strength and courage that these reformers displayed, but at the same time we often forget that as they broke from orthodoxy they did not do so with the intent to further any religious freedom other than their own. As early as 1531 Luther and Melanchthon “favor[ed] capital punishment for Anabaptist preachers and their unrepentant followers.”[5] Henry VIII and Elizabeth I executed hundreds of Roman Catholics during their reigns. “From 1585, to be a Catholic priest in England was ipso facto treason.”[6] Historical evidence from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries demonstrates clearly that the reformers and counterreformers did all in their power to minimize and eliminate heterodoxy. Although church leaders, regardless of their religious affiliation, sought to reform religious deviancy, for those who refused, “executions were not only legitimate, but obligatory.”[7]

Such being the case, consider the political and cultural climate required before Joseph Smith could publicly

pronounce that "all their creeds were an abomination in [the Lord's] sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: 'they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof" (Joseph Smith-History 1:19). It took centuries and another continent before conditions allowed the gospel of Jesus Christ to take root in its fulness. From the Reformation to the Restoration, literally thousands of Protestants, Anabaptists, and Catholics died as religious martyrs.[8] Dedicated believers sought change. They desired something that society was not yet willing to give them: the ability to believe and worship as their own conscience and understanding dictated.

The story of one such martyr, Thomas Bilney, is little known, infrequently discussed, and rarely recognized for the effect he had on future generations. Bilney would likely have preferred it that way. From available sources, it appears he did not seek personal glory or notoriety. His life's mission, as he saw it, was to bring the word of God to the people. In so doing, he not only helped transform England but, in some small way, the world. His story is a representative reminder to us all of the many who lost their lives holding fast to what they believed and, in so doing, moved us closer to a time when a young boy could earnestly implore God in a sacred grove, receive a witness of the truth that exceeded all expectations, and restore the gospel in its fulness.

Before Thomas Bilney

To understand the sacrifice of Thomas Bilney it will help to know something about the social and political climate of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Let us begin with John Wycliffe. Born in Yorkshire, England, in about 1328, this Oxford-educated priest recognized and began teaching the need for reform within the Roman Catholic Church. During the Great Papal Schism,[9] Wycliffe rejected the biblical basis of papal authority, insisting on the primacy of scripture. He and his followers (later known as Lollards) eventually traveled throughout the countryside teaching his message of change. Wycliffe's determination to bring about reform included the idea of translating scripture into the vernacular or common tongue. Wycliffe, or more likely those who assisted him, produced the earliest complete English Bible sometime around 1382.[10]

Opposition to Reformation thought continued long after Wycliffe's death. To help stem the tide, Henry IV of England approved a petition against heretical teaching in 1401. A clause within the petition known as *De Haertico Comhurendo* (Concerning the Burning of Heretics)[11] empowered bishops to arrest any unlicensed preacher who taught, held meetings, or disseminated books contrary to the rules of the Roman Catholic Church. John Foxe, the sixteenth-century Protestant historian,[12] writes: "[Whoever] should read the Scriptures in the mother-tongue (which was then called Wickliff's learning), they should forfeit land, cattle, body, life, and goods, from their heirs for ever, and so be condemned for heretics to God, enemies to the crown, and most arrant traitors to the land. Besides this, it was enacted, that never a sanctuary, nor privileged ground within the realm, should hold them, though they were still permitted both to thieves and murderers. And if, in any case they would not give over, or were, after their pardon, relapsed, they should suffer death in two manner of kinds: that is; they should first be hanged for treason against the King, and then be burned for heresy against God."[13]

Thus, the punishment of death was introduced into English law for matters of opinion. Such aggressive efforts and partnership between the church and the monarchy helped quell—but not stop—expansion of religious diversity. Wycliffe's ideas and scriptures lived on. Even though he died in 1384—just two years after completing an English translation of the Bible—in the spring of 1428, forty-four years after his death, the Roman Catholic Church ordered his body disinterred, the remains burned, and the ashes scattered. Such efforts may have temporarily slowed the movement, but another wave of discontentment soon arose.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536), a Dutch scholar, theologian, humanist, and friend of Thomas More, Hugh Latimer, and other high-profile leaders of England, unknowingly instigated what was to become a lasting challenge to Roman orthodoxy. Erasmus's scholastic ability and popularity made him an eagerly sought-after guest of kings, emperors, popes, and cardinals. In 1509 he moved to Cambridge, England, where he would remain for the next five years. While there, Erasmus systematically prepared a parallel-column manuscript for a Greek-Latin New Testament *(Novum instrumentum).* Published in 1516, this Bible contained nearly four hundred marginal notes that identified and supported changes from Jerome's Latin Vulgate. Also included among the annotations were numerous comments on the ecclesiastical conditions of the day. Politically adept, Erasmus dedicated the book to Pope Leo X—who fully endorsed it [14]

—in spite of a number of statements in it that supported Reformation thought. J. A. Wylie, a nineteenth-century Protestant historian, says of Erasmus: "Next to the heretics, the priests dreaded the scholars. Their instincts taught them that the new learning boded no good to their system.[15] Of all the learned men now in England the one whom they hated most was Erasmus, and with just reason. He stood confessedly at the head of the scholars, whether in England or on the Continent. He had great influence at court; he wielded a pungent wit, as they had occasion daily to experience—in short, he must be expelled [from] the kingdom. But Erasmus resolved to take ample compensation from those who had driven him out. He went straight to Basle, and . . . issued his Greek and Latin New Testament."[16]

From additional sources it seems that Erasmus intended to change the church rather than encourage people to break from it.[17] Nonetheless, the Roman Church at Cambridge and Oxford took a decidedly strong stance against Erasmus's Bible following its publication.[18] Yet, with the printing press and its ability to mass produce books, the Bible quickly made its way into the universities of England and Europe. In England, as elsewhere, it was received with great enthusiasm—"everywhere it was sought after and read" by Greek scholars and those learned in Latin.[19]

Thomas Bilney and the Scriptures

Thomas Bilney has been recognized as the first at Cambridge to come to "the knowledge of Christ."[20] Little is known about his childhood other than that he was born around 1495 in the area of Norwich, Norfolk County, East Anglia, and that his parents sent him to Cambridge to study canon law while he was still very young. Sometime while at Cambridge, Bilney turned from canon law to theology and was ordained a priest in the summer of 1519.[21]

John Foxe describes Bilney as little in "stature and very slender of body, and of a strait and temperate diet, given to good letters and very fervent and studious in the Scriptures."[22] Furthermore, Bilney seems to have demonstrated tremendous discipline and compassion for those in need. Foxe states that "concerning his diet, . . . it was so strait, that for the space of a year and a half, he took commonly but one meal a day" so that he could give the remainder of his food to those in prison.[23] According to those who knew him, Bilney slept about four hours a night and "could abide no swearing nor singing."[24] As Bilney struggled to know his standing and personal relationship before God, he turned to fasting, prolonged prayer, and acts of penance through confession of his sins before a priest.[25] The sources do not indicate how long he endured this inner struggle for peace, but relief did not come until he discovered the scriptures. A change of heart began when one day he overheard some friends talking about Erasmus's New Testament.[26] Torn between personal curiosity and duty, he finally purchased a copy. "At last he took courage. Urged, said he, by the hand of God, he walked out of the college, slipped into the house where the volume was sold in secret, bought it with fear and trembling, and then hastened back and shut himself up in his room."[27] In a letter to Cuthbert Tunstal, bishop of London, Bilney writes of his experience:

"But at last I heard speak of Jesus, even then when the New Testament was first set forth by Erasmus. . . . I bought it even by the providence of God, as I do now well understand and perceive: and at the first reading (as I well remember), I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Tim. i., 'It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief and principal.' This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that immediately I felt a marvellous comfort and quietness, insomuch 'that my bruised bones leaped for joy.'"[28]

From this point on, Bilney immersed himself in the scriptures.[29] They were, he says, "more pleasant unto me than the honey or the honey-comb."[30] As his pursuit of truth continued, Bilney states, "At last I desired nothing more, than that I, being so comforted by him, might be strengthened by his Holy Spirit and grace from above, that I might teach the wicked his ways, which are mercy and truth; and that the wicked might be converted unto him by me."[31]

Others soon joined Thomas Bilney in Cambridge, where they formed a private group to discuss the scriptures. As a note of interest, one of those who joined Bilney was William Tyndale.[32] Precisely what their relationship was remains unknown. Nonetheless, each of these early reformers, in his own way, would affect all of England.

While still at Oxford, Tyndale "increased as well in the knowledge of tongues, and other liberal arts, as especially in the knowledge of the Scriptures."[33] In time Tyndale would achieve mastery in eight languages.[34] No doubt such linguistic talent aided him as he translated the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament into English. His determination to make the scriptures available to the public is evident from a verbal exchange he had while working as a schoolmaster for an English knight. During a heated discussion with a visiting "divine" (theologian), Tyndale remarked that "if God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough, to know more of the Scripture than he did."[35] Such a prophetic statement can be seen in the fact that over 80 percent of the language Tyndale used in his translations of the Bible (1526, 1530, and 1534) is retained in the King James Bible we use today.[36]

Bilney's impact on the Reformation can also be seen in the conversion of Hugh Latimer. Latimer, recognized for his keen mind, powerful oratory skills, and early devotion to the Roman Catholic Church, describes his conversion to reformist ideas in a speech he gave to Katherine Grey, Duchess of Suffolk, during the reign of Edward VI:

"Here I have occasion to tell you a story which happened at Cambridge [in 1524]. Master Bilney . . . that suffered death for God's word sake; the same Bilney was the instrument whereby God called me to knowledge. . . . For I was as obstinate a papist as any was in England, insomuch that when I should be made bachelor of divinity, my whole oration went against Philip Melancthon and against his opinions. Bilney heard me at that time, and perceived that I was zealous without knowledge: and he came to me afterward in my study, and desired me, for God's sake, to hear his confession. I did so; and, to say the truth, by his confession I learned more than before in many years. So from that time forward I began to smell the word of God, and forsook the school-doctors and such fooleries."[37]

Bilney and Latimer fast became friends, parting ways when Bilney left Cambridge to preach throughout the countryside. Latimer went on to gain favor with Henry VIII and his son Edward VI. His influence on these kings and among the general populace was a significant factor in England's eventual break from the Roman Catholic Church.

On July 23, 1525, Bilney received a license to preach in public at parishes outside Cambridge.[38] At about this same time, Thomas Wolsey (cardinal in the Catholic Church and lord chancellor to Henry VIII) determined he must forcefully confront those who promoted heretical ideas, for the spreading of heresy was "worse than multiple murderers, because their victims lived on to harm others in turn."[39] Bilney's preaching did not escape Wolsey s attention. He summoned Bilney, who appeared before him sometime during the year 1526, the same year William Tyndale published his English New Testament. Published in Worms, Germany, copies were quickly smuggled into England and "for the first time the whole New Testament . . . could be read by anyone."[40] English authorities banned Tyndale's Bible but to no avail. Reformist ideas were now spreading on the Continent and in England. Martin Luther had translated and published his German New Testament just four years previously (1522) and, in his own right, had taken on the established church. As Bilney appeared before Wolsey, the latter demanded and received from Bilney an oath that he did not believe and would not teach Martin Luther's doctrines.

The following year (1527) Bilney and a Cambridge associate, Thomas Arthur, preached a series of sermons at a number of parishes, including some in and near London. Their lectures raised the ire of several priests. After gathering evidence against them, the bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstal, arranged for their arrest and imprisonment.[41] On November 27, 1527, Arthur and Bilney appeared in London before Cardinal Wolsey and a sizable group of bishops, lawyers, and divines.[42]

Cardinal Wolsey began his inquiry by asking Bilney about the oath he had taken to "not preach, rehearse, or defend any of Luther's opinions."[43] Bilney replied that he had made such an oath and, during further questioning, repudiated Luther, admitting that Luther and his teachings were heretical.[44] Such a statement benefited Bilney in two ways. First, it let his accusers know that his sympathies did not lie with Martin Luther and his teachers per se; and second, by rejecting Luther and his ideas it removed the subject from the judiciary docket. Wolsey, unable to remain for

the entire trial due to other responsibilities within his realm, turned the proceedings over to Tunstal. Before leaving, he gave explicit instructions that the defendants were either to abjure or to be delivered to the civil authorities for execution.[45] Wolsey's instructions emanated from a view that duplicitous interpretation of the scriptures contradicted Christ and His divine church. Calvin and others held similar beliefs and "ridiculed those who would permit people to read and understand the Bible as they pleased."[46]

Written questions (called interrogatories) were then issued to Arthur and Bilney. "Far from yearning to kill heretics, members of the clergy frequently strained to save them."[47] Such careful proceedings intended, if possible, to reclaim the wayward by securing formal recantation. In addition, bringing errant persons back to the fold helped to reinforce the existing order within the church. Some of the primary issues centered on such matters as the pope's authority, praying and reading scriptures in English, and the selling of indulgences—all of which challenged the orthodoxy of Bilney's day.

According to Foxe, throughout the trial Bilney never countered the authority of the church or openly rejected the authority of the pope.[48] In his view, "he would not be a slander to the gospel, trusting that he was not separate from the church."[49] It seems that Bilney desired to effectively change the church from within. Like many religious leaders of his day, he recognized a need to limit access to the scriptures. He held that the scriptures could be translated into the vernacular, but for the most part they should be read and explained by clergy, who would minimize misunderstandings and wrongful interpretations of doctrine. For unstated reasons, Bilney felt inclined that the people should have the Lord's Prayer in their own tongue and "wished that the gospels and epistles . . . might be read in English." Regarding indulgences, he said "it were better that they should be restrained, than that they should be any longer used as they have been, to the injury of Christ's passion."[50] Such views must have brought enormous concerns as they eroded and undermined the solidarity of the church.

The trial lasted eleven days, and Tunstal made deliberate efforts throughout the time to get Bilney to recant. It seems that Tunstal's strategy in part was to give Bilney unprecedented opportunities to abjure in order to "secure a public demonstration of the fairness of the trial and a public renunciation of heresy from Bilney."[51] There is some suggestion that the church was also concerned about the spread of ideas from the universities to the general populace. Such an outward movement of reformist thoughts would wreak havoc for Cardinal Wolsey and the church. Bilney had already proved his persuasiveness among scholars, parish clergy, and laity in the conversions of Hugh Latimer and other high-profile scholars.[52] If Tunstal could get Bilney to recant it might be a major step in slowing down, or even stopping, the spread of heretical ideas. Besides, he firmly believed that "eternal damnation was no mere symbol: it was *literally* what happened to heretics who died at odds with Christ and his mystical body, the one Church."[53]

Throughout the trial Tunstal gave Bilney considerable opportunity to carefully consider his position. Bilney, however, remained steadfast to his beliefs. Finally, Tunstal declared: "Thomas Bilney, I pronounce thee convicted of heresy."[54] Just before announcing Bilney's punishment, he decided to give him one last chance to abjure by granting him "two nights' respite to deliberate" on the matter and to consult with his friends. Foxe tells us the result: "On the 7th of December . . . the bishop of London with the other bishops being assembled, Bilney also personally appeared; whom the bishop of London asked, whether he would now return to the unity of the church, and revoke the errors and heresies whereof he stood accused, detected, and convicted. He answered, that now he was persuaded by Master Dancaster and others his friends, he would submit himself, trusting that they would deal gently with him, both in his abjuration and penance."[55] Tunstal and the other clergy must have felt a sense of relief. Bilney finally agreed to abjure, having been convinced by his friends that if his life was spared he would be of greater service to the Lord. Bilney would later lament his decision to recant.

Latimer writes of Bilney's abjuration: "I will advise you first, and above all things, to abjure all your friends, all your friendships; leave not one unabjured. It is they that shall undo you, and not your enemies. It was his very friends that brought Bilney to it."[56] After Bilney read his abjuration before the plaintiffs, Bishop Tunstal absolved him and then announced his penance. The next day (Sunday) he was to walk before the procession at St. Paul's Church bareheaded, carrying faggots (a bundle of sticks used as fuel) on his shoulder, and stand before the preacher at Paul's

cross where he was exhorted to repent. He was then sent to the Tower of London where he spent the next year in prison before returning to Cambridge.[57] The purpose for such public display and humiliation sent a clear message of warning to others who might have held similar views to Bilney's.

Returning to Cambridge brought Bilney no relief. John Foxe writes that "he was in such an anguish and agony, that nothing did him good, neither eating nor drinking, nor even any other communication of God's word."[58] Latimer also recounted the torment he felt: "[He] had such conflicts within himself, beholding this image of death, that his friends were afraid to let him be alone: they were fain to be with him day and night, and comforted him as they could, but no comforts would serve. As for the comfortable places of scripture, to bring them unto him it was as though a man would run him through the heart with a sword."[59] More than two years passed before Bilney determined that he must be faithful to his convictions and once again preach what he knew to be true. Foxe writes of his departure from Cambridge: "And thus, being fully determined in his mind, and setting his time, he took his leave in Trinity Hall, at ten o'clock at night, of certain of his friends, and said, that he would go to Jerusalem; alluding belike to the words and examples of Christ in the gospel."[60] Bilney returned to Norfolk, where he had taught years earlier. Without a license to preach, however, he no longer had access to local parishes. He therefore entered households, reaffirming the truthfulness of his message to those he had taught previously. Later he preached more openly. While in Norwich one day he visited an elderly anchoress (nun) "whom he had converted to Christ" and gave her one of Tyndale's English New Testaments.[61] She in turn lent the scriptures to others who visited her. Information soon reached Thomas More, the new chancellor of England who had replaced Thomas Wolsey in October 1529. More immediately had Bilney arrested and imprisoned at the Tower of London. As a relapsed heretic, Bilney had no chance of defense.

The bishop of Norwich requested that the trial be moved to his diocese so as to set an example for those who espoused heretical ideas.[62] A public execution would also serve to deter "would-be criminals [and] to reinforce the existing authority."[63] Many priests visited Bilney in Norwich while he was in prison at Guildhall. Once again they sought for him to recant so as "not to die in his opinions, saying, he should be damned body and soul if he so continued."[64] This time Bilney remained unmoved. In the early part of August 1531, his fate being decided, he was degraded by his priestly order and handed over to civil authorities for execution.[65]

The night before his execution, several of his friends from Cambridge visited him in prison. The records indicate that Bilney greeted them with a "cheerful heart and quiet mind."[66] The following episode is best told by John Foxe:

"Sitting with his said friends in godly talk to their edification, some put him in mind, that though the fire, which he should suffer the next day, should be of great heat unto his body, yet the comfort of God's Spirit should cool it to his everlasting refreshing. At this word the said Thomas Bilney, putting his hand toward the flame of the candle burning before them . . . and feeling the heat thereof, . . . 'I feel by experience, and have known it long by philosophy, that fire, by God's ordinance, is naturally hot: but yet I am persuaded by God's holy word, and by the experience of some, spoken of in the same, that in the flame they felt no heat, and in the fire they felt no consumption: and I constantly believe, that howsoever the stubble of this my body shall be wasted by it, yet my soul and spirit shall be purged thereby; a pain for the time, whereon notwithstanding followeth joy unspeakable.' And here he much treated of this place of scripture. 'Fear not, for I have redeemed thee, and called thee by thy name; thou art mine own. When thou goest through the water I will be with thee, and the strong floods shall not overflow thee. When thou walkest in the fire, it shall not burn thee, and the flame shall not kindle upon thee, for I am the Lord thy God, the holy One of Israel.'"[67]

The horrors of martyrdom seem almost unfathomable in our day and age; yet for Bilney and others, martydom demonstrated "conformity to an ancient course of action, grounded in scripture and epitomized in the crucifixion of Christ himself."[68] The manner of death verified the martyrs' inner conviction of what they believed. To die well displayed faith in Christ and fidelity to Him and His word.

The next day Bilney was taken by the guards to the place of execution (called Lollards' Pit) located just outside the city gate about a mile from Guildhall. As he left the prison and walked to the place of martyrdom, his friends came to him and prayed that he take his death patiently. Bilney responded: "Ye see when the mariner is entered his ship to sail on the troublous sea, how he for a while is tossed in the billows of the same, but yet, in hope that he shall once come to

the quiet haven, he beareth in better comfort the perils which he feeleth: so am I now toward this sailing; and whatsoever storms I shall feel, yet shortly after shall my ship be in the haven, as I doubt not thereof, by the grace of God, desiring you to help me with your prayers to the same effect."[69] After arriving at Lollards' Pit, he offered a prayer quoting a portion from Psalm 143:1–2: "Hear my prayer, O Lord give ear to my supplications. . . . And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." When he had finished his prayer, the officers chained him to a stake, placed reeds and faggots about him, and lit the fire that ended the life of Thomas Bilney.

Conclusion

Thomas Bilney was not the first and would certainly not be the last to die for his convictions. Many suffered a similar fate for their beliefs, including Hugh Latimer, William Tyndale, and in centuries to come, Joseph Smith. Yet, the lives and deaths of these early martyrs combined to ignite a fire not to be extinguished. Within just a few short years following Bilney's death, English Parliament would stop all contributions to the Roman Catholic Church and give Henry VIII supreme control over the Church of England. Although England's move toward independence is seen as more of a political maneuver, it nonetheless opened the door a bit wider for the possibility of greater religious diversity. It also brought the availability and accessibility of the scriptures to the common person one step closer to reality. By 1539 efforts were under way to place the first *authorized* English Bible in every church throughout England. In time, Bible reading would not only be legal but mandatory.[70]

Within the ensuing years, others seeking their own religious freedoms would flee England, eventually making their way to America. The centuries that followed brought new generations of people—people with Bibles in hand—seeking a new place to worship. Christian pluralism eventually "emerged de facto, much to the chagrin of all the parties involved"; so much so, that "God's truth remained the subject of heated disagreement."[71] Such would be the case in upstate New York in 1820 when a young Joseph Smith sought not to break away from a particular faith but to know which one held the truth. With scriptures in hand—written in English—he would read from James, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5), and thus began the latter-day restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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[1] Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 5:424.

[2] Smith, *History of the Church,* 6:184.

[3] For additional statements from Latter-day Saint leaders about the reformers, see the following: Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball,* ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 426; Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 2002,85; Bruce R. McConkie, *Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1984), 45.

[4] Joseph F. Smith, "Fountain of Truth," *Improvement Era,* June 1907, 629.

[5] Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 95.

[6] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 92.

[7] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 79.

[8] It has been estimated that roughly five thousand Protestants, Anabaptists, and Catholics were killed as religious martyrs from 1523 to 1680; see Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 6.

[9] Between 1378 and 1418 two popes each claimed leadership of the Roman Church—one from Rome and the other from Avignon. At one point the feud went so far that each pope excommunicated the other. See David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 71–72.

[10] See Daniell, *Bible in English,* 66, 73.

[11]

See Bobrick Benson, *Wide As the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 67.

[12] Much has been said about John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (also known as *Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church).* Recognized as a partisan historian, Foxe provides a passionate and comprehensive history of those who died to defend and establish Christ's church through the ages. Attacks and defenses were made on Foxe and his book from the time it was first published in 1563. In the early 1830s, S. R. Maitland successfully began a campaign to discredit *Acts and Monuments* through a scholarly examination of sixteenth-century English documents. In 1940, J. F. Mozley defended Foxe s book by reexamining documentation available in the British Museum. The charges of Foxe s willful misrepresentation were largely cleared by Mozley, so much so that modern historians no longer feel constrained to apologize when citing from *Acts and Monuments.* For more details regarding the historical accuracy of John Foxes *Acts and Monuments,* see Warren W. Wooden, *John Foxe* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne, 1983). In addition, a more recent Reformation historian writes, "The wider point is clear and very significant: even where specific corroboration is impossible, we can use the sympathetic description of martyrs' public words and actions with a high degree of confidence" (Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 21).

[13] John Foxe, *Foxes Book of Martyrs,* ed. W. Grinton Berry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2000), 86–87.

[14] See Daniell, *Bible in English,* 116–17.

[15] The historian David Daniell stated that "Protestantism was an intellectual movement in English, powered by university men, dependent on free discussion at all levels" *(Bible in English,* 130).

[16] J. A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism,* 3 vols. (New York: Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1874–77), 3:358.

[17] Even today, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes Erasmus as one who "laboured for a reform of the Church that would not be antagonistic to the pope and the bishops, nor productive of a violent rupture, but which, through the dissemination of a larger enlightenment, would eventually but gradually result in the wished-for reorganization" *(The Catholic Encyclopedia,* 15 vols. [New York: Robert Appleton, 1909], 5:512).

[18] See J. H. Merle d'Aubigne, *The Reformation in England,* ed. S. M. Houghton, 2 vols. (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 1:154.

[19] Wylie, *History of Protestantism,* 3:358.

[20] John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe,* ed. Stephen Reed Cattley, 8 vols. (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1837), 4:651.

[21] See Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959-60), 2:502.

[22] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:620.

[23] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:621.

[24] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:621.

[25] See d'Aubigne, *Reformation in England,* 1:154.

[26] See Wylie, *History of Protestantism,* 3:359.

[27] D'Aubigne, *Reformation in England,* 1:154–55.

[28] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:635.

[29] A Bible with numerous marginal notes that once belonged to Bilney now resides in the Corpus College library at Cambridge. See Stephen and Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography,* 2:502.

[30] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:635.

[31] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:635–36.

[32] See Wylie, *History of Protestantism,* 3:359.

[33] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 5:115.

[34] See Daniell, *Bible in English,* 142.

[35] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 5:117.

[36] See Daniell, *Bible in English,* 136.

[37] George Elwes Corrie, ed., *Sermons by Hugh Latimer, Sometime Bishop of Worcester* (Cambridge: University Press, 1844), 334-35. Latimer gave the speech in 1552. Philipp Melanchthon was a friend of Martin Luther and professor of Greek at a university in Wittenberg, Germany. While Martin Luther was in hiding at Wartburg Castle (after being convicted at the Diet of Worms), Melanchthon took over his lectures, proving himself a powerful proponent of reformation thought.

[38] Stephen and Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography,* 2:503.

[39] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 86.

[40] Daniell, *Bible in English,* 144.

[41] See Stephen and Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography,* 2:503–4.

[42] See Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:621–22.

[43] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:622.

[44] See Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:622, 625.

[45] See Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:622, 624–26.

[46] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 89.

[47] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 80.

[48] See Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:625–26.

[49] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:631.

[50] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:626.

[51] Greg Walker, "Saint or Schemer? The 1527 Heresy Trial of Thomas Bilney Reconsidered," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 40, no. 1 (January 1989): 224.

[52] See Walker, "Saint or Schemer?" 227.

[53] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 85; emphasis in original.

[54] D'Aubigne, *Reformation in England,* 1:294.

[55] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:632.

[56] Corrie, *Sermons by Hugh Latimer,* 222.

[57] See Stephen and Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography,* 2:504.

[58] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:641.

[59] Corrie, *Sermons by Hugh Latimer,* 222.

[60] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:642; see also Matthew 16:21; Mark 10:33; Luke 9:51.

[61] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:642.

[62] See d'Aubigne, *Reformation in England,* 2:72–73.

[63] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 77.

[64] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:642.

[65] Bilney was placed in Guildhall in Norwich. The prison where he was held still exists today.

[66] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:653.

[67] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:653. See Isaiah 43:1–3 for scripture reference.

[68] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 119.

[69] Foxe, *Acts and Monuments,* 4:654. Bilney's words while going to Lollards' Pit are somewhat reminiscent of those of Joseph Smith, who said as he traveled to Carthage in the summer of 1844, "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men" (D&C 135:4).

[70] See John Stevens Kerr, *Ancient Texts Alive Today: The Story of the English Bible,* ed. Charles Houser (New York: American Bible Society, 1999), 72.

[71] Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 348.