

**Reformation in England:
From Priests to Laity
(1300-1550)**

A

Paper

By

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Introduction

A.G. Dickens wrote, “The Christian Church had started to go astray very soon after the apostolic times. Yet more notably, though the patronage of Emperor Constantine the Great (r.306-337), it had fallen under the baneful influence of autocratic Roman Imperial ideas.”¹ From the time of Constantine in 306 AD to King Henry VIII of England in 1509, a struggle for power and authority between priest and laity existed throughout. The pride of class, wealth and the political power of the ruling laity were daunting to clergy, as well as an impediment for laity to submit to the authority of clergy. Nevertheless, the impact of the church on the masses was phenomenal in the late medieval age. The Church united the community and seized much authority and respect. The church’s recognition of a king, as “the one sent from God,” through the crowning ceremony, would guarantee him the easy acceptance of the masses. On the other hand, the church also needed the economical and political protection of the laity to fulfill its religious cause. The better option, therefore, was for priests and laity to seek mutual benefit and coexistence. But gradually, co-existence ceased to be an issue and assent became the decisive factor in their association. This became more apparent with the coming of King Henry VIII to the throne in 1509.

The Dusk of Priestly Authority

Materialism:

The Roman Catholic Church besides being rich financially owned one third of all the land in England and was exempt from all taxes. Owen Chadwick wrote,

With a fifth to a third of the land in the hands of church-men, and with the churchmen possessing special and independent rights in

¹ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 15.

justice and in paying taxes, it was not possible for the king to rule effectively unless he used the theoretically supreme power of the Pope as a means of controlling his clergy.”²

Greed for material and wealth lead the priests to assent to the laity of the ruling class. They despised the illiterate and poor peasants but associated with the wealthy merchants. Dickens reports that one of the important groups of the late medieval church was the lay fraternity “religious guilds,” who played a unique and attractive role in late medieval and early Tudor piety. Their primary function was to provide a dignified funeral and a series of intercessory Masses to their members and continue their friendship beyond their grave.³ They organized themselves as a religious and social group and did many charitable works to ensure a release of their dead from Purgatory. They maintained schools, almshouses and guildhalls and employed priests to perform the masses and intercessory prayers for their members. The priests allowed the wealthy guilds to exercise greater influence and dominion over their fellow-priests in return for maintaining institutions that brought material benefit to the church and monastery. Thus, with the gain of material wealth the late medieval church began to see a decline in the moral authority of the priests over the laity.

Unscriptural Practices:

The priests from the monasteries propagated detailed description of the horrors of Purgatory and the means whereby sinners could mitigate. *Supplication of Souls* is a magnificently written passage, which describes the lamentation of the suffering dead pleading for more prayers and masses. This certainly encouraged the laity to revere and attend the prayers and masses.

Dickens wrote,

“Medieval men were faced by quite terrifying views of punishment in the life to come; it was small wonder that they felt more

² Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Penguin Books: 1972), 97.

³ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 33.

comfortable with the saints than with God, or that they came to regard the Blessed Virgin as a merciful mediatrix for ever seeking to placate the divine wrath of the Son as judge.’⁴

Laity believed seriously in Purgatory and the mitigation for the dead by the Virgin Mary and the Saints. The belief had no biblical basis yet had many serious adherents. Priests began the wrong teaching, and the wealthy laity became its benefactors and patronized the belief. Since supplication for souls, the sale of indulgence and the annulment of marriages of the wealthy would bring material benefit to the church and the monastery such practices were encouraged and promoted by the priests.

Mysticism and the Famine of the Word:

It is needless to say that the Scripture was not very popular among the Priests. They either lacked the training, or they intended to astound the mass with mysticisms. The stress was on the saints, relics and pilgrimage and the Scripture was entirely ignored. Dickens rightly identified that the common belief among the laity was ‘salvation through devout observance.’⁵ These priests underscored meditation, contemplation, visions and dreams. Their catechism was based on popular stories of the religious experiences of saints, stories about prayers offered to Virgin Mary being answered, and the defeat of the devil and the victory of the virgin’s devotees.

Even among the educated laity, literature such as *Lay Folk’s Mass Book*, *Hours of Our Lay*, *The Penitential Psalms*, *Sarum Primer* and collections of prayers were well liked. These literatures were mostly selective and devotional in nature. Dickens wrote about some of the popular *Exemplum*, anecdotes or story from the time of Pope Julius II. He named two of the priests who very widely impacted cultic belief of the time. The first person was Canon John Thwing, who died in 1379 and canonized in 1401. The second was Thomas Ashby, an

⁴ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28

Augustinian Canon of Bridlington who impacted cultic belief in the days of Henry VII and Henry VIII.⁶ Most of these anecdotes were centered upon the Virgin Mary, St Anne, Angelic Salutation, and a meditation on the Magnificat and St John of Bridlington. After quoting from this

Exemplum Dickens wrote:

In St John and his miracles Ashby's taste for anecdote finds a more extensive scope. We read of the marvelous rescue of the five mariners of Hartlepool, the revival of the dead carpenter, the resurrection of the murdered man who luckily happened to lie unburied because of the coroners' absence. To these miracles, which occur in an earlier Bridlington hagiograph, Ashby adds another, based on the written testimony of an early fifteenth-century Gascon merchant. This impetuous foreign tourist had failed to wait for the custodian of the shrine and with rash curiosity had presumed to open the capsule containing the head of St. John. In consequence the angry saint had afflicted him with terrible pains in his hand and arm. Journeying south he reached Huntingdon, but his condition worsened and he feared to die. His companions, better instructed in the irascible ways of saints, urged him to return forthwith on an expiatory pilgrimage to Bridlington. Complying, he experienced a miraculous cure.⁷

One of the most popular books, *Hours of the Blessed Virgin*, was printed in twenty-eight editions between 1490 and 1530. The *Golden Legends* in its revised edition had seventy new lives of the saints added.⁸ The books on the saints outnumbered any other book during this period. Writings and publications like these may not disclose the whole gamut of the church practices of late medieval time in England; nevertheless, they do enlighten us about the popular belief and practice prevalent among the laity and the priests on the eve of reformation. Some of the priests were confused in their theology and practice. Although they sang the same Creed together, yet in their practice and belief they differed from each other and thus failed to give any direction on systematic theology to the laity of their time. Thomas More, who founded the

⁶ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 25

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

Coventry, departed from his own teaching and promoted the belief that a sinner could attain salvation by the simple expedient of saying his rosary every day.⁹ Pilgrimage to shrines of St. Mary of Walshingham attracted many intellectuals and the wealthy and educated men including Henry VIII.¹⁰

Priests of the late medieval time were influenced by Neo-Platonic mysticism, especially through the writings of St. Augustine, Gregory, Dionysius the Areopagite, Bernard, Richard of St. Victor, Aquinas and Binaventura.¹¹ The popular pantheistic notion of eastern religion that God is the whole of being, that all things have existence in God and the ultimate destiny is to get absorbed into the divine being, attracted some mystics. This promoted more austere and exalted mysticism in Christian belief. Richard Methley (1452- 1528) and John Norton (1509-1521) were two personalities that brought spiritual adventure in the last half century of the monastic life in England.¹² Methley wrote five mystical treaties and translated the two French contemplative works of the thirteenth century, namely *Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, into Latin. Norton claimed to have visions of Our Lady who revealed to him the Carthusian monks who had attained salvation recently. This tradition of late medieval mysticism, the tendency to attract emotional and idiosyncratic characters, and to expect violent psychophysical phenomena as sign of divine favor, survived both in London and Mountgrace until Dissolution.¹³ One can imply from these trends that the priests in the Church in England initiated a famine of the Word of God.

The Dawn of Laity

John Wycliffe:

⁹ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 43

While the priests neglected the Scripture and sought experience through diversified means, John Wycliffe (1330-1384) and his associates the Lollards captured the forces and aspirations of the spiritually hungry laity. They gave a better alternative in personal, heartfelt, fundamentally non-scholastic religion among the laity. Wycliffe born in 1329 in the city of Yorkshire, England attended Oxford University and finished his doctorate in theology in 1372. He taught as one of the professors at Balliol College. Because of his recognition as one of the most distinguished theologians of his days, he was appointed as chaplain to the court of King Richard II. Dickens described Wycliffe as “an obstinate North Country mind, endowed with the subtleties of the Oxford school; a combination of disappointed careerist, temperamental rebel, and sincere reformer of immense moral courage.”¹⁴ According to him Wycliffe was not a mere academic radical or a mere revivalist but a manifest revolutionary and heresiarch. For Wycliffe’s belief was most radical for his time. In 1378, Wycliffe wrote *The Truth of the Sacred Scriptures*, asserting that the Bible and its practice is the only rule for faith, through which the traditions, the council, and even the Pope should be proven. He stated that the Bible contains all that is needed for salvation, without any additional tradition and all men and not just the clerics should read the Scripture. In another book, *The Pope’s Power*, written in 1379, he described the papacy as an occupation instituted by men and not by God. He explained that papal authority does not extend to the secular government, and that its power does not originate from the Pope’s position, but from his moral and Christian character. According to him any Pope who does not follow Jesus Christ is an Antichrist.

In 1379 he wrote another article named *Apostasy*. In this article he condemned the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation. And in *Eucharist* (1380), he condemned Thomas Aquinas and his teaching that the bread and the wine are transformed into the body and the blood of Christ. In his

¹⁴ Ibid., 46.

book, Wycliffe described that the bread and the wine maintain their original form, being a sacrament in memory of the body and the blood of Christ. He believed in predestinarian doctrine and restricted the true church to being made up of only those whom God predestined to salvation. He advocated clerical marriage and denounced monasticism. The followers of Wycliffe came to be known as "Lollards." Susan Wabuda wrote, "The Lollards were the first in England to blur the distinctions between laity and clergy, and in depreciating the role of the priesthood, even Lollard women could annex the teaching functions of the sacerdotal office."¹⁵

The word Lollard is probably derived from the Dutch term *lollaerd*, meaning mumblor. Commenting on the origin of this word Dickens wrote, "At the moment of Courtney's triumph in Oxford, the term 'Lollard' was applied to the sect in a sermon by the Irish Cistercian Henry Crump; a Middle Dutch word meaning 'mumbler' or mutterer of prayers, it had long been applied to Beghards and other Netherlandish pietists whose orthodoxy was suspect."¹⁶ Wycliffe with the help of his friend Nicholas Hereford, translated two versions of the English Bible from the Latin Bible. The first version was released in 1380, and the second about in 1388. The first version was condemned as heretical but the second was accepted as "catholic," and even recommended by an orthodox man like Thomas More.¹⁷ The Lollards were declared a sect and were driven out of Oxford in 1382, but some devout members continued to circulate Wycliffe's teachings as well as the 1394 "*Lollard Conclusions*." By now, not only was the Scripture exposed to the common peasants, but also it exposed the unbiblical practices of the Roman Catholic priests. Commenting on the Lollards' protest against the priests, Claire Cross wrote:

They objected to certain theological developments in the medieval Church and what they considered to be erroneous practices; they deplored the way in which the ministry, intended by Christ to serve

¹⁵ Susan Wabuda and Caroline Litzemberger, *Belief and Practice in Reformation England* (Sydney: Ashgate 1998), 45.

¹⁶ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 47

¹⁷ *Documents of the English Reformation* Gerald Bray ed, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 17

people, had been distorted into an overbearing priesthood; they denounced the misuse the endowments of the Church, and they called for a return to primitive simplicity and morality.¹⁸

Wycliffe's influence among the laity, to the "Lollards," and through the "Lollards," was so powerful that it aroused "the Farmer's Rebellion" of the peasants against the government and the established church in 1381. Lollards continued to preach the scripture among the common peasants until the enforcing of the declaration "*De Haeretico Comburendo*" (Burning the Heretics) by Parliament, and the introduction of punishment by death penalty to those unlicensed preachers. Nevertheless, they were never eliminated. The Lollards helped to prepare the way, even though unnoticed, for the great Reform in England.

Pope Gregory XI condemned Wycliffe, but because of the protection he received from the royal family, especially the Duke of Lancaster, John Gaunt, son of Eduardo III, he continued his ministry. Wycliffe condemned the dogma of Purgatory, the use of relics, peregrination, the selling of indulgences, and the fallacy that the papacy never fails. He was forced to leave Oxford in 1382, and took his pastorate in Lutterworth until his death in 1384.

The Roman Catholic Church, even after Wycliffe's death, gave orders to exhume his body, to burn his bones and throw his ashes in the Swift River in 1428. John Wycliffe was the principal exponent of the Reform's measures, and for this reason he is called "The Reform Morning Star." Lollardy continued to exist in the time of the Reformation. They did impact the first reformers, but it is not certain how much they participated in the camp of the Reformers. But it would not be wrong to say that Wycliffe liberated the laity from ignorance of the Canon and initiated them into a powerful movement before the Reformation was conceived in Europe.

The Alliance of Laity:

The political situation of Europe did not favor the priests during this period.

¹⁸ Claire Cross, *Church and People 1450-1660* (Fontana Press: 1976), 9.

In 1519, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V of Spain, who aspired to universal monarchy over the far-flung territories he had inherited from Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain to the New World, ascended to the throne. He successfully quelled an uprising of a group of Spanish cities *Comuneros* (1520-21) but the opposition of Francis I of France, of Süleyman I the Magnificent (ruled 1520-66) of the Ottoman Empire, and of the Lutheran princes in Germany proved more intractable. Early success in Italy, nevertheless, provided Charles with the most important base outside Spain for exercising his power. He forced the French to retreat from Milan and restored the Sforza in 1522. But in 1524 a French army of 30,000 men retook Milan in 1524, and the new Medici pope, Clement VII (reigned 1523-34), changed sides to become a French ally. Since England and France were not on good political terms ("One Hundred Years War", between England and France) so the English monarchy actively supported the return of the Pope to Rome. On February 24, 1525, the French were defeated at Pavia and Francis I was captured.

King Henry VIII, who came to power in 1509, was in personal crisis. He married his brother's widow Catherine of Aragon, sister of Charles and had no male heir but only Princess Mary. He then fell in love with a young and attractive Anne Boleyn, and started desperately seeking the annulment of his marriage with Catherine, so that he could marry Anne and have a male heir. But the powerful emperor of Spain Charles V, brother of Catherine, would not let this happen.

After the release, Francis I abrogated the Treaty of Madrid (January 1526), and headed a new anti-Spanish alliance, the Holy League of Cognac (May 1526), which united France with the papacy, the Sforza, Florence, and Venice. On May 6, 1527, they attacked the city of Rome and forced the Pope to take refuge in the Castle Sant'Angelo. This period of history was indeed not in favor of the Catholic Church and the Pope. The rise of the Protestant movement in Europe and

the personal agenda of Henry VIII against the interest of Charles V had put the Pope in a difficult position.

The Catholic Church in general had lost the favor of the common people because of its disarray and corruption. Respect for the priest and the church among the laity had declined to a great extent. Now the laity knew that the priests were not a distinct group from them, rather that the Scripture put them on the same plain. Claire Cross wrote, “The Laity in general, not merely the King and his ministers, or even the Crown together with the nobility and gentry, was beginning to demand a far more active role in the life of the Church.”¹⁹

Disregarding Charles V’s opposition and using the authority of the state and of Parliament, King Henry VIII divorced Catherine and married Ann Boleyn in 1533. He revived the half forgotten concept of *praemunire*, developed in the later part of the 14th century, which prevented the Pope from interfering with the Crown’s rights, and levied fines upon the clergy as the “pardon” for violating the *praemunire*.²⁰ He did all this to exhibit the royal supremacy over the church. This did not obtain the annulment for Henry but it pushed him further to the formulation of the abjuration of Papal Supremacy by the clergy and the Act of Supremacy (1534). The underlying message of the act was obvious, that the laity have supreme jurisdiction over the clergy. The Act of Supremacy did not violate *potestas ordinis*, the right to preach, ordain, or administer the sacraments and rites of the church. These were left with the clergy. But clergy were subjugated to the state for correction and reform.²¹ Henry had another act passed to strengthen his supremacy in the same year. This was known as the Act for the Submission of the Clergy and Restraint of Appeals (25 Henry VIII, c.19). The first section of the act read as follows:

¹⁹ Claire Cross, *Church and People 1450-1660* (Fontana Press: 1976), 9

²⁰ *Document of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 1994), 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

Where the king's humble and obedient subjects, the clergy of this realm of England, have not only acknowledged according to the truth, that the convocations of the same clergy is, always has been, and ought to be assembled only by the King's writ, but also submitting themselves to the King's Majesty *in verbosacerdotii* (by the word of their priesthood) that they will never henceforth presume to attempt, allege, claim or put in ure (use), or enact, promulge or execute any new canons, constitutions, ordinance provincial or other or by whatsoever other name they shall be called in the Convocation, unless the Kings most royal assent and license may to them be had, to make, promulgate and execute the same...²²

Thomas Wolsey, who joined Henry VIII in 1509, and soon rose to the highest ecclesiastical and social status, enjoyed authority over the entire administration as the Lord Chancellor of England. Wolsey, who was in favor neither of the laity nor of the priests but only of himself, exploited the situation and raised all his relatives and friends around him and gained a lot of wealth for himself. Finally, Wolsey also could not obtain the annulment for Henry VIII and thus lost his head on the charge of treason.

Another important person from the office of Henry VIII, who advocated the cause of the laity against priests' superiority, was Thomas Cromwell. Born in 1498, he was the son of a cloth worker of Putney in Surrey and grew up as a businessman. He had learned the New Testament by heart and, unlike Wolsey, he was genuinely interested in others' need. Elton wrote:

“Above all, Cromwell thoroughly shared the anticlerical feelings that in the reign of Henry VIII dominated so much English public life: he hated ‘the snuffing pride of prelates’ (as Hall put it), objected to the elevated claims of ritualistic priesthood, and had conceived a deep dislike of the regular orders. His anticlericalism stemmed, however, from positive feelings than lay resentment of envy; it stood rooted in his religion.”²³

²² Ibid., 84.

²³ G. R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 171.

Cromwell was instrumental in convincing the House of Commons and the Parliament. In September 1532, he began a propaganda campaign through an interesting tract called *The Glass of Truth* which primarily attempted to persuade the elite about how justified the annulment of King's marriage was, and about the Parliament of England, which was authorized to act independently upon it.²⁴ Affirming the contribution made by Cromwell to the triumph of the laity, Cross wrote:

In one sense Cromwell realized the ideal for which laymen had been striving for generations: liberty for every individual to determine his own religious identity without external coercion. In another sense, he stood far in advance of most members of the ruling classes for he not only worked for freedom of religious observance for himself and other gentlemen but wished this freedom to apply to all men however humble. The fear of social anarchy, which many Parliamentarians believed would have had little weight on him.²⁵

Henry then appointed Thomas Cranmer as the Archbishop of Canterbury who validated his marriage with Ann. Cranmer had the experience neither of the Church hierarchy nor of being a parish priest. He was a teacher in Cambridge and was in favor of transferring the authority from priests to the laity. In 1549 he introduced the Book of Common Prayer and began involving the laity in the Eucharist.²⁶ This was a revolutionary step towards the laity's triumph in the church.

With the passing of the Act of Restraint of Appeals in 1533, Henry VIII declared, "This realm of England is an Empire."²⁷ This severed all relationship with Rome subjugating the church to the administration of lay government. Priests were much like the employees of the state, and were expected to carry out the orders of the King.

²⁴ Ibid., 176.

²⁵ Claire Cross, *Church and People 1450-1660* (Fontana Press: 1976), 214.

²⁶ Caroline Litzenger, *The English Reformation And The Laity* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64.

²⁷ G. R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), 177

In 1535, Cromwell introduced a large-scale census, the third of its nature in history, known as *valor ecclesiasticus*.²⁸ This census was primarily to expose the corruption of the church and seize the property possessed by the clerics. The task of *valor* commissions was to collect enough evidence to justify the confiscation of Church and monastic property. And the commission knew well that Cromwell wanted a report that would aid such a process. Elton wrote:

When the last session of the Reformation Parliament assembled in January 1536, Cromwell had sufficient evidence to show that many things were amiss with English monasticism, and this was employed to secure the passage of an act which dissolved all houses worth under 200 a year and vested their properties in the crown. Heads of houses were imprisoned; other inmates had the choice of transferring to a surviving house or taking a faculty (a license) to live as secular priests. No choice, of course was open to nuns.²⁹

The laity, especially of the gentry class, favored this act of Cromwell because the seizing of the property of the Church and monastery by the Crown enabled them to own land and property.

Most historians believe that King Henry VIII was a devout Catholic and least interested in the reformation movement. He desired a reformation in the form of Catholicism rather than its dogma, and thus Cromwell and Cranmer had many conflicts with him. He was not primarily interested in the involvement of laity in the church but the superiority of the King over both laity and the priests.

²⁸ Ibid., 233.

²⁹ Ibid., 235.

William Tyndale:

William Tyndale, born in about 1495 in Gloucestershire,³⁰ and known, as the true hero of the English Reformation, cannot be ignored while discussing the transfer of authority from priests to laity. Dickens introduced him as “An Englishman, who is so skillful in seven tongues, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, French, that whichever he speaks, you would think it is his native tongue.”³¹ Because of his talents Thomas Wolsey appointed Tyndale in the newly founded college, but being suspected of Lutheranism, he was imprisoned.³² In 1515 he gained his M.A. from Oxford and then he moved to the University of Cambridge. In 1521 he left Cambridge to be a tutor to the children of Sir John Walsh, a knight of Little Sodbury, in Gloucestershire. It is a mystery why Tyndale, who was a scholar, superior to most of his contemporaries, moved to such a humble position. But here Tyndale met learned people such as deans, archdeacons, and doctors - a large spectrum of laity, whose life he began to influence. Most of their talk was of learning, Luther, Erasmus, and opinions in the Scripture. Tyndale, confronted with these learned men, showed their ignorance by opening the Scripture. Foxe wrote:

Beneficed clergymen and lordly abbots, whose learning had become rusty from disuse, and who hated the teaching of Erasmus and Luther as odious and heretical novelties, must have been sadly disconcerted by the shrewd and determined schoolmaster, fresh from the University, an expert theological controversialist, with his terrible, matter of fact habit of confronting their opinions with the plain and manifest words of Scripture printed in the book.³³

For the benefit of the laity, Tyndale translated Erasmus’s work *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (Manual of a Christian Soldier), to expose the popular misconception of placing the religion in scholastic dogmas and ritual observances. He presented a copy of his translation to his

³⁰ Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale – a Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 27.

³¹ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 93.

³² *Writings of Tindal, Frith, and Barnes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1842), 1.

³³ Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale – a Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 67-68.

master Sir Walsh and his Lady, who read the book and became in favor of Tyndale's opinion. As a result they stopped inviting the clergymen into their house to dine. Tyndale then began to preach in the adjacent villages and also to the crowd that collected around him on the College Green in Bristol. This further outraged his opponents. Foxe wrote, "These blind and rude priests, flocking together to the alehouse, for that was their preaching place, raged and railed against him; affirming that his sayings were heresy, adding moreover unto his sayings, of their own heads, more than ever he spake."³⁴

Tyndale was accused of heresy and was summoned before a sitting of the Chancellor and the priests of the neighborhood where he was threatened and badly treated. Sir Thomas More said "he sometimes savored so shrewdly of heresy that he was once or twice examined thereof."³⁵ Tyndale knew that their lack of knowledge in Latin meant that many failed to understand what the Scripture says. This made him more determined to translate the Bible into English at all costs so that all his countrymen could read the Bible in their own mother tongue and know the truth. Tyndale said, "Because I had perceived by experience how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order and meaning of the text."³⁶ He began seriously to contemplate the translation of the New Testament into English as the noblest service that he could render to his country. This became his life passion, which cost him dearly. Tyndale resolved to translate the New Testament from the original language-Greek and Hebrew, and not from the Latin Vulgate, as Wycliffe had done. When he disclosed his intention, it was published and the news spread widely all over the neighborhood. The priests became fiercer in their opposition, and charged him with heresy. For some time he engaged himself to preach in St.

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale – a Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 80.

³⁶ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 93.

Dunstan's in the West where Humphrey Monmouth, a wealthy cloth merchant happened to be among the audience. Monmouth offered to help. Through him Tyndale met many other learned men in London whose life he impacted with his knowledge in the Scripture. Since there was no possibility of translating the New Testament in England, those friends who gathered at Monmouth's table suggested that he should go abroad where there would be no difficulty in translating. Tyndale took heed of their advice and sailed for Hamburg, Germany in 1524.³⁷ He finally went to Wittenberg to see Luther. Learning from his knowledge and experience, Tyndale translated the New Testament into English. Sir Thomas in his *Confutation* asserts that Tyndale was with Luther at the time when he was translating the New Testament.³⁸ He translated directly from the Greek and Hebrew, with occasional reference to the Latin Vulgate and the German translation of Luther. Wittenberg at that time was known as the center for heresy, so books from this city imported to England were under strong scrutiny.

It is difficult to estimate the time when Tyndale's New Testament reached England. Based on the words of John Pykas of Colchester, who was examined before Tunstal, the date may be assigned to April or May 1526.³⁹ A. G. Dickens wrote: "Copies began streaming into England by March 1526: the efforts of Warham, Tunstal and More to check their spread proved almost uniformly fruitless."⁴⁰ When the book arrived it brought a new awareness among the people in England. Foxe wrote: "These books of William Tyndale, being compiled, published, and sent over into England, it cannot be spoken what a door of light they opened to the eyes of the whole English nation, which before were many years shut up in darkness."⁴¹ Packington highly favored Tyndale and knew his need of money for printing. He helped Tunstal to buy all

³⁷ Tony Lane, "A Man for all People: Introducing William Tyndale," *Christian History*, vol. VI (1987): 7.

³⁸ Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale-a Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 117.

³⁹ Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale – a Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 175.

⁴⁰ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 94.

⁴¹ *Writings of Tindal, Frith, and Barnes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian board of Publication, 1842), 6.

the copies of the Testament from Tyndale. All who imported and purchased these books were severely punished. John Raimund, a Dutchman, was punished “for causing fifteen hundred to be printed at Antwerp and bringing five hundred of them into England.” But in spite of all the restrictions three large editions were sold before 1530. The books were widely circulated among the lower classes laity and they willingly paid for a New Testament in English.

Tyndale published another book called *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*. It is a treatise on the doctrine of “Justification by Faith,” in which Tyndale examined all those texts that were usually cited as incompatible with that doctrine, and showed that when rightly interpreted, they were not inconsistent with it. It also states the real meaning of the doctrine. On the same day Tyndale also published another treatise called *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, which is the largest and most elaborate of all his works. Next to his translation of Holy Scripture, it was the book by which he was best known to his contemporaries, that which exerted the greatest influence upon those who were friendly to the Reformation, and which gave deepest offence to the authorities of the church: it is the book in which the mind of Tyndale is most fully portrayed by himself.⁴² *The Obedience of a Christian Man* was also severely condemned. Sir Thomas More said:

“...that frantic book of *Obedience* ...a book able to make a Christian man that would believe it, leave off all Christian virtues, and lose the merit of his Christendom...a book wherein the writer railleth at large against all popes, against all kings, against all prelates, against all priests, against all religions, against all the laws, against all saints, against the Sacraments of Christ’s Church, against all virtuous works, against all divine service, and, finally, against all thing that is good ... a malicious book ...”⁴³

Ever since the middle of 1534, Tyndale took up residence with the English merchants of Antwerp, as the guest of Thomas Polyntz, a relative of Lady Walsh of Little Sodbury. Antwerp

⁴² Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale-a Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 222.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 249.

was a city in which he was relatively free from both English agents and those of the Roman Empire. His residence with Poyntz not only provided Tyndale with the comforts and the companionship of a home, but also gave him considerable personal safety. It was a privilege granted to the citizens of Antwerp that none could be arrested merely on suspicion, or could be imprisoned for more than three days without trial; and the same privilege was extended to the English merchants resident among them. Tyndale enjoyed this protection of the wealthy laity for a while.

In his zeal to influence the laity, Tyndale developed a friendship with an Englishman, called Henry Philip, and was betrayed. The imperial attorney in Brussels had issued a warrant for the arrest of three leaders of English reforms: Tyndale, Joye, and Dr. Barnes. With Philip's conspiracy Tyndale was arrested most probably on May 23 or 24, 1535. The attorney came to Poyntz's house and took away Tyndale's books and other things. Tyndale was brought to the attorney's residence and finally to the Castle of Vilford, where he remained until his death. Poyntz failed in his attempt to rescue Tyndale. He was banished from the Low Countries, lost his business, was separated from his wife and family for many years and died in 1562. Commenting on Tyndale's influence John Foxe wrote, "Such was the power of his doctrine and the sincerity of his life that . . . he converted his keeper, the keeper's daughter, and others of his household."⁴⁴ Tyndale was condemned to death. He was to be strangled, and his dead body was to be burned. On Friday, October 6, 1536 Tyndale was executed. Before his death he prayed for the king of England. Foxe wrote, "He cried at the stake with a fervent zeal and a loud voice, 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes!'"⁴⁵ The eyes of the King of England did open but Tyndale's dream for the laity's dynamic role in the Church came to fruition. Describing the new mindset of the laity in England Cross wrote:

⁴⁴ Mark Galli, "What the English Bible Cost One Man," *Christian History*, Issue 43 (1994): 14.

⁴⁵ Robert Demaus, *William Tyndale-a Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 543.

In 1556 certain inhabitants of Norfolk objected to the papal supremacy and the Latin Service, and petitioned to be permitted to keep the English service and to retain communion in both kinds. “The priest complain that we laymen love them not, we have them in honour, but it is their own fault, for how should we love them, that only seek to keep us in blindness and ignorance, to damn our soul, to destroy our bodies, to rob and spoil our goods and substance under colour of pretended holiness?”⁴⁶

Conclusion

Underneath this prolonged history of conflict between the priests and the laity, the motif was to seek the submission to the right authority. Caroline Litzenger wrote, “The actual result of these efforts, however was not always what those in power had in mind, as parishes and parishioners interpreted and implemented official policies in ways which suited their circumstances, religious preferences and past experiences.”⁴⁷ The picture of priests and the laity should be painted neither as good-and-evil in its entirety nor as the black-and-white images of Protestant (laity-centered) and Catholics (priest-centered); rather we need a kaleidoscopic array of colors to depict accurately the countless shades of beliefs to be found.

The involvement of the laity was new to the Church, and thus with its many good aspects brought uncertainty in the new changes. Questions such as - “If the King is the head of the church then can he, being unordained, also ordain the bishops?” “Should the priest wear a special kind of robe or simply a surplice?” “What is the class of the priest and his family in the society?” “Who should answer these questions – priests or laity?” “Who has the final say on the interpretation of the Scripture?” The difference of opinion was inevitable and the splitting of groups and starting of different denominations was unavoidable. The lid from the box was removed for more disorder and pandemonium among the laity. The new issue was, “Who is

⁴⁶ Claire Cross, *Church and People 1450-1660* (Fontana Press: 1976), 119.

⁴⁷ Caroline Litzenger, *The English Reformation And The Laity* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 161.

responsible to keep the church united?” Even after 400 years of separation from the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Church is yet to come to terms with many of these issues. The predicament still lingers and will persist to the advantage of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the triumph of the laity in the Protestant Churches is phenomenal.