



MOUNTAIN TRACT NO. 6

The true unity of the Church

On 17 January, 2017, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued a Joint Statement to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. They acknowledge that ‘many Christians will want to give thanks for the great blessings they have received to which the Reformation directly contributed’, and name ‘clear proclamation of the gospel of grace, [and] the availability of the Bible to all in their own language’ among those blessings. They go on to speak of ‘the lasting damage done five centuries ago to the unity of the Church, in defiance of the clear command of Jesus Christ to unity in love’.

Let us consider the facts. *Before the Protestant Reformation the medieval Church taught a system of salvation that mixed faith with works.* The whole system was given over to this, from the heresy of baptismal regeneration (by which the infant is made a Christian through the actions of the priest), through confirmation as the occasion when the Holy Spirit came down on the person (thus by an act of the Church rather than by an act of grace), the mass with its heresy of transubstantiation (whereby grace is received in eating the transformed bread) to confession, absolution and penance (teaching that we can remove our own sins by some small additional actions). It is true that none will receive any of these benefits unless they have faith, but that faith is not considered to be sufficient to accomplish salvation. Works must be added to make up what is lacking in faith.

Against this, the great rediscovery at the Protestant Reformation was that a sinner is justified by faith. We call this a rediscovery because it is taught plainly in Holy Scripture, and was the accepted doctrine of the early Church. Only during the middle ages, when human philosophy began to govern theology, did the Church corrupt the pure teaching of the Bible, and produce a system which, though coherent within itself, was completely at odds with God’s Word. The Reformers saw this, and saw that faith in Jesus Christ justifies the sinner from all sins, and puts him in a right standing with God for ever.

This doctrine became the subject of gospel preaching. The preaching of the Reformers was nothing like the morality tales of the friars and parish clergy. It was plain biblical exposition, delivered with conviction and authority. By preaching the gospel was made known to whole nations who, until then, had been kept in ignorance by a system that owed nothing to Christ and his gospel.

Before the Protestant Reformation the medieval Church worked tirelessly to stamp out vernacular translations of the Bible. This had not always been the case. The Venerable Bede and Alfred the Great had both translated, or caused to be translated, portions of the Bible into the language of their day. When the Lollards began to translate from Latin into English they were condemned at the Synod of Oxford, and any found in possession of translated portions were in danger of death. When William Tyndale expressed a desire to translate the Bible into English, Bishop Tunstall made it clear that this would be a most dangerous thing to do. Tyndale had to leave England to undertake the work, and he had to move frequently to avoid detection. His New Testaments were burned on Tunstall's orders, and those suspected of bringing them into England were interrogated, tortured and fined. This situation changed when, having broken with Rome in 1534, Henry ordered the production of an English Bible in 1538.

In short, we owe our English Bible to the Protestant Reformation. Had there been no Reformation, who can say how long it would have been – if ever – before we had a Bible in our own language?

Where, then, is the 'lasting damage' done by the Reformation? How can the re-discovery of the true gospel, and the publication of the Bible in a language understood of the people, be called 'damage'? If the medieval Church had supported these changes there would have been no division. It was Rome's opposition to gospel truth, an opposition which continues to this day, that caused the damage. It was Rome who excommunicated kings and queens, that condemned the Reformers as heretics, and that burned men, women and children alive if they would not deny the faith once delivered to the saints.

Under God, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the Protestant Reformers. Through their courage our nation was delivered from superstition, clerical corruption and oppressive heresies. If we would give thanks for the Reformation, let us return to the old paths, to the faith once delivered to the saints. This is true, biblical Protestantism.