

# 5 The course of the Reformation in the church in England

John Wycliffe heralded the English Reformation in the 14th century, emphasising the importance of the Bible as the authority for all matters of faith and doctrine. He translated the Bible into English. Erasmus prepared a new Greek and Latin edition of the New Testament which was used by later translators into European languages. As Luther's ideas spread to England, many found these exciting but had to meet in secret after Luther's works were banned. After the break with Rome, those in the church sympathetic to the Reformation slowly transformed the liturgy from Catholic to Protestant.

## John Wycliffe and the Lollards



John Wycliffe, by an unknown artist. Picture hanging in Abbot's Hospital, Guildford. Courtesy of the Master.

Photo J. Skelton

Yorkshireman John Wycliffe predated Martin Luther by almost 200 years but had similar complaints about abuses in the church and emphasis on the primacy of the Bible in all matters relating to faith and practice. He held a number of senior posts at Oxford University, then became rector of Lutterworth in Leicestershire, though he continued to maintain academic links with Oxford.

Wycliffe regarded the Scriptures as the only reliable guide to the truth about God and maintained that Christians should rely on the Bible rather than the teachings of clerics and the Pope, indeed he said that there was no scriptural justification for the papacy. In keeping with his beliefs about the Bible, he oversaw its translation from the Latin of

the Vulgate into English. Further, he criticised the wealth of the church, the practice of pilgrimage, and the veneration of images. He believed in the priesthood of all believers and that no particular person, for example a priest, was necessary for access to God.

## Erasmus and the Renaissance

An important strand in the birth of the Reformation was the renewal of interest in the classical philosophy of the Greek and Roman civilizations. Scholars renewed their study of the ancient texts including those of the Bible. One scholar who had considerable influence was Erasmus of Rotterdam who came to Cambridge in 1510. He collated the Greek texts of the New Testament then edited the Latin version which had been originally translated by Jerome over 1,000 years previously and had long been the only version of the Bible available in the Catholic church. Erasmus' Greek edition of the New Testament made the original available for scholars, who quickly realised that the Latin version in the Bible they were using obscured many important doctrines. His Greek edition was the basis for William Tyndale's English translation of 1526.



Erasmus, by Hans Holbein. Wikimedia.nl

## The Reformation comes to England

At the same time as Erasmus was studying the original Greek of the Bible, the controversy started by Martin Luther in Germany in 1517 excited interest in England and a group of scholars including Hugh Latimer, Thomas Bilney, Robert Barnes and Martin Ridley met to discuss the new Greek text and the new ideas from Germany. They began to preach doctrines taken directly from the Scriptures as did Luther, but in 1521, Luther's works were banned by the authorities and publicly burnt, so scholars sympathetic to the reformers had to go underground. They met in secret in the White Hart Inn in Cambridge (later known as Little Germany from its links with the reformers in Germany), and although these four were prominent a few years later in the rise of Protestantism



Martyrs Memorial Oxford, commemorating those martyred for their faith under Mary.

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under Edward, they all were martyred under Mary when Catholicism was reinstated briefly.

## Changes in the church

There was much that needed to change in the church at this time. Before the Reformation, the service (Mass) was in Latin so little understood by the parishioners, the Bible was not read and sermons to explain the religion were only required quarterly.

John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester, did a survey of his diocese in 1551 and found that out of 311 clergy, 168 were unable to repeat the Ten Commandments, 31 of those 168

could not even say in which part of the Scripture the Ten Commandments were to be found, 40 could not tell where the Lord's Prayer was written, and 31 of the 40 did not even know who the author of the Lord's Prayer was! So there was plenty of room for improvement even among the clergy.

However, following the authorisation of the Bible in English 1539 and the first service in the English language five years later with the full prayer book produced in 1549 in the reign of Edward VI, an English liturgy was created, parts of which would be familiar to members of the Church of England today.



St Mary's Church, Guildford. Commons.wikimedia.org

## The character of the English Reformation

The English Reformation resulted in a church with a very different character from that which developed in Germany following Martin Luther's revolutionary teaching. The German Reformation was largely inspired by their doctrine which was informed by what they found in the Bible. The salvation of the individual believer depended on their relationship with God alone and worship and church organisation were made to conform to this view of the primacy of Scripture.



Angel corbel in St Mary's Church, Guildford, defaced during the Reformation. Photo T. Gray

The Church of England was a top-down revolution started by Henry but embraced and pushed forward by Protestant clergy. The churches themselves, of course were the same ones in which people had been worshipping for centuries, though during the Reformation some statues of saints were defaced by Protestant reformers keen to prevent idolatry. The liturgy was modified from that which the church had inherited from Catholicism and many of the reformers' doctrines were pasted on to this framework to keep the adherence of the faithful.