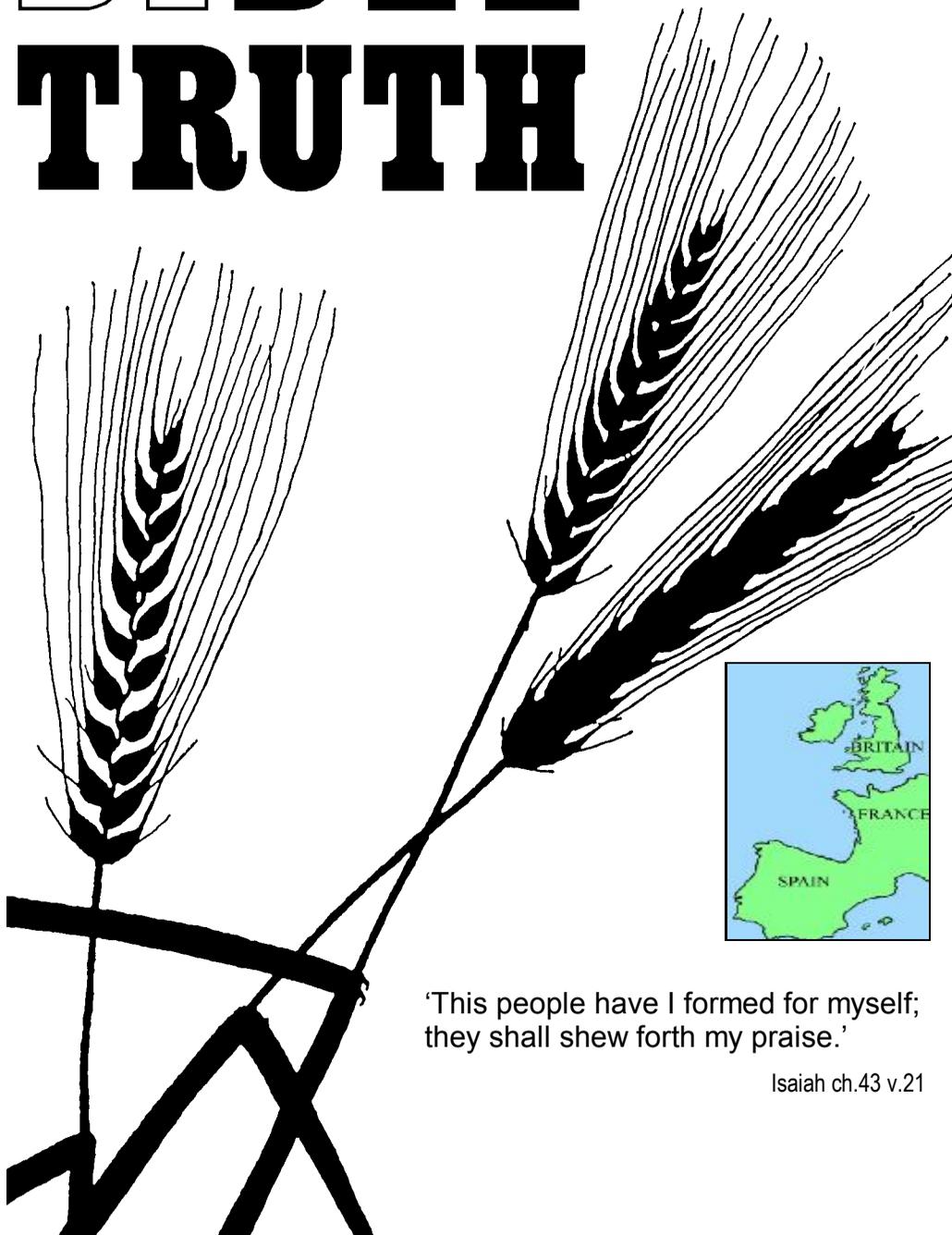


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'This people have I formed for myself;  
they shall shew forth my praise.'

Isaiah ch.43 v.21

# **The Celtic Church, Rome & The Morning Star of the Reformation**

by the late Jon Ellis

During the Dark Ages, Britain had been in great danger spiritually and physically, when God had intervened in a miraculous way, and the course of our national history was altered. The issue was no longer if Britain should be Christian or pagan, but whether the Roman or Celtic view of Christianity should submit to the Roman Church, which by now was controlled by the Bishop of Rome.

To settle this thorny matter, King Oswy of Northumbria summoned the Synod of Whitby in 663 when the decision had hung in the balance for a long time. King Oswy who had championed the Celtic Churches of Iona was tragically influenced by his wife and gave his judgement that the churches of Northumbria should be a part of the Roman Catholic system. Some of the leading Celtic Christians from Iona like Cuthbert, accepted the judgement but returned to Iona in disgust after having seen their Northumbrian friends so tragically turned against them. They realised they could no longer maintain the struggle for Celtic Christianity in England.

The Synod decision started a landslide, and the church of Mercia in the south conformed soon after. This resulted in there being a far greater and more powerful part of England being associated with the papacy. A major step had now been taken towards England becoming Roman Catholic and in the course of time the churches of Scotland, Wales and finally Ireland came into line. The historian G.M. Trevelyan in *A Shortened History of England* observed,

'It cannot be denied that the decision of Whitby contained the seeds of all the trouble with Rome down the ages to come'.

Seeds have a habit of spreading to cover the whole land, suppressing the work of the Holy Spirit, finally extinguishing the light. The Celtic, New Testament and Biblical form of Christianity had now become distorted by erroneous doctrines and added practices introduced by the Roman Catholic Church. Then came a period of great spiritual darkness, not only in Britain but the whole of Europe wherever the Church of Rome held sway. However God did not allow the light of truth to be extinguished indefinitely, and this was clearly demonstrated by the Reformation over 800 years later.

Although the nature of the church in England had changed, God continued to protect Britain. Over 120 years after the Synod of Whitby, in 789, the extremely cruel pagan Vikings made raids from the sea in the north; the monasteries of Lindisfarne and Iona were ravaged and pillaged, as well as places in Scotland and the South.

In 865 a great invasion of Northumbria and eastern England began by the Vikings using fleets of long boats. God again began to intervene, when all seemed to be lost. There appeared on the scene one of the great figures of our national history, no doubt a man raised up by God, and it soon became apparent that here was a man through whom the tide of fortunes was to be turned. Accounts of some of the great battles with the Vikings are like reading the stories of great battles in the Bible.

Alfred the Great had not yet become king, he was second in command to his elder brother Æthelred, who became king of Wessex in 866, and commanded the West Saxon armies. Like his brother, he was a devout and godly man; one of vision, great faith and prayer.

Here was a man that God had raised up for the hour, in a similar way that God had provided for Israel when in difficulties as during the time recorded in the Book of Judges. It is an indisputable fact of history that had King Æthelred, Alfred, and their West Saxon forces been beaten, the whole of England would have been overrun by the heathen Vikings, thus dragging the country into greater darkness.

God continued to work with him, overruling events to further his own purposes. For at the very time when Alfred was undergoing this gruelling experience, a profound change began to come over the Viking army. Nearly half of these barbarous and heathen sea pirates began to settle down on the land and till the soil. It was literally a case that thousands of them were to '... beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: ...' (see Isaiah ch.2 v.4). They forgot the sea, they forgot the army, and they became cultivators of the land. A new wind was therefore blowing amongst them, and who can deny that it was the wind of the Spirit of God?

However, further Viking invaders from the sea attacked again, and something happened which, at the time, was believed to be a direct intervention of God. A frightful storm hit the Viking sea army and their ships were dashed against the cliffs and sunk, but not by force of arms.

In the summer of 877, Alfred found his enemies ready for a new period of peace, yet that year was scarcely out when another period of crisis struck. Alfred met reversal of his fortunes, the enemy suddenly swept down upon his camp, taking it completely off guard. Alfred's entire army was thrown into confusion and disarray. He was allegedly seen disguised as a minstrel playing his harp in the Danish camps. It was at this time that the well known story arose of Alfred burning the cakes. With their king now a fugitive and in hiding, it seemed to the people of Wessex that all was over.

Then came a turning point as news reached King Alfred in hiding of a victory which had been achieved by some of his forces, who had laid low most of the enemy. Alfred was greatly encouraged with this news, decided to rally his forces and take to the field again. It is said that when his assembled army saw the king, they welcomed him as though he had come back from the dead. Alfred advanced with his army and eventually the Danes turned and fled, so God had once again given the victory to Alfred. Guthrum, king of the Viking army now found himself entirely at King Alfred's mercy.

By this time the Danes were suffering so much from hunger, cold, fear, and full of despair, they begged for peace, Alfred could have starved them into surrender and slaughtered them to a man, instead, he invited Guthrum and his prominent chieftains into his camp, where he entertained them for twelve days of grace. It is not known precisely what happened during those twelve days. Alfred showed them Christian love; he presented them with costly gifts; and they dined with him at his table. In fact, his whole attitude towards Guthrum was an outstanding example of a well-known Scripture being put into practice.

'... if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.'

Romans ch.12 vv.20-21

It would be reasonable to suppose that Alfred talked to Guthrum about trust in God and faith in Jesus Christ. Either as a result of his generous treatment, or of his sharing his faith, or both, a miracle occurred. According to historians, Alfred now looked upon him as his son, which is full of significance if 'son in the Lord' is what is meant. There is no doubt that the Spirit of God had been working with Alfred whilst he entertained his guest and a series of Viking conversions followed.

Winston Churchill, was so impressed by this outcome that he wrote,  
‘We must still wonder how the hearts of these hard-bitten swordsmen and pirates could be changed in a single day’.

Then he reflected,

‘The workings of the Spirit are mysterious’,

and said of this period,

‘We are watching the birth of a nation. The result of Alfred’s work was the future mingling of Saxon and Dane in a common Christian England’.

G.M. Trevelyan describes King Alfred as,

‘... the champion of Christ against the heathen. ... The course of history would have been very different had not the royal family of Wessex provided a long succession of able warriors and statesmen, including Alfred the Great’.

God was bringing about these miracles of conversion in order to fulfil his long-term purposes in our history. King Alfred was now able to encourage the restoration of Christianity and set about further shaping our nation’s Christian laws, in spite of the influence of Rome on the Church in these islands.

### **The Morning Star of the Reformation**

So the Celtic Church submitted to Rome, but the truth of God’s Word was not to be hidden indefinitely. It was about 600 years before there was a return to the New Testament teaching of the Celtic Church. However, the deliverance from the grip of Rome and the papacy on the British Church was to come around another 200 years later.

In 1324, in Yorkshire, John Wycliffe was born, at a period when great spiritual darkness lay across most of Europe. However, this brilliant man was used by God to influence greatly the spiritual life of England, and indeed much of Europe. Wycliffe has been called ‘The Morning Star of the Reformation’. He was born at an important time in the history of England when this country was becoming recognised as a distinctive nation.

For Wycliffe the Word of God, was to him a beacon and a shining light in a world of gross spiritual darkness. When the truth dawned upon him he declared it and acted upon it. This led to conflict and the remainder of his life was of toil and trouble, but his ministry was greatly used by God for the furtherance of the true Gospel. It is considered by some that he was more responsible

than Luther for the growth of the Reformation in England. Wycliffe's great strength was his adherence to the Scriptures. It was the faithful preaching and teaching from the Word of God that accomplished so much.

In England at that time there was no alternative to the Church of Rome but Wycliffe attacked the institution which controlled the lives of every Englishman. By his attack on the Roman Church, he exposed the wicked practices of the 'begging friars' that were causing much harm to the people.

This struggle gave Wycliffe a wonderful opportunity to express widely his views on the papacy, enabling him to greatly undermine its influence on the English people. The battle for authority between England and Rome continued, and at one time he was sent as one of the commissioners to a meeting with the papal delegates.

Wycliffe's influence upon the nation grew. He was widely respected at Oxford, and he was influential with numerous members of Parliament. The Pope and his supporters were, of course, furious, and sought to have Wycliffe imprisoned and punished for his 'heresy'.

In 1377 the Bishop of London, summoned Wycliffe to appear before him in St Paul's. The bishop was angry when he saw the support Wycliffe was being given and there was a very heated exchange of words. Indeed it became such an uproar that the trial was abandoned and Wycliffe returned home.

Parliament continued to seek the advice of Wycliffe in their dealings with the Pope, however, it seems that a year later his popularity began to lessen in political affairs. Nonetheless, his spiritual influence continued to grow and in God's providence he was able to accomplish much in the remaining years of his life.

Papal bulls were sent to England that allowed the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy the opportunity to call Wycliffe before them. A large crowd came with Wycliffe at this appearance, and the bishops were very aware of the support he was being given. With fear among the bishops and their supporters they did not dare harm Wycliffe, who made his position clear in a lengthy written paper showing many of the errors of the Papacy. Also he pointed out the reforms which should be carried out if the Church was to be true to Christ and His commandments. God was his protection from his enemy's hatred.

In his book, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, David Fountain records that,

‘... the pope wished to establish the Papal Inquisition in England. Wycliffe gave such wise advice to the government of his day that the pope was unable to do so. Even though English ‘heretics’ were persecuted over the next 200 years, things would have been much worse if the pope had succeeded in his desire’.

At the time Wycliffe came to see clearly that the whole papal system was anti-Christian. He stated that the Pope was the man of sin who, ‘... exalteth himself above all that is called God ...,’ (see 2 Thessalonians ch.2 v.4).

Whilst bravely dealing with his enemies, he worked on the translation of the Bible into English and he sent out men to preach the Gospel. Probably due to his increased workload and the numerous difficulties he had suffered, Wycliffe fell ill. When the friars heard of his illness they hurried to his bedside hoping that he would recant before his death. However Wycliffe was not going to change his mind. His response to them was, ‘I shall not die but live, and again declare the evil deeds of the friars’. This prophecy was fulfilled and Wycliffe went on translating the Bible and sending forth his preachers, the Lollards.

When he declared his views on the errors of transubstantiation, he was expelled. His political influence waned but his usefulness in spiritual matters increased. In 1382 the Primate called a synod to try to punish Wycliffe, however the building where they were meeting began to rock and the whole city of London was shaken by a powerful earthquake.

In appealing to Parliament, Wycliffe called for many changes in the way the Catholic Church was administered. He presented his reasons clearly. In the trial the Commons supported Wycliffe and when the trial was over, he went back to his parish of Lutterworth and faithfully continued in the work to which God had called him.

Wycliffe only lived another two years and with the assistance of others, he was able to complete the translation of the Bible into English. It is generally accepted that Wycliffe did the translation work on the New Testament, but his two helpers translated The Old Testament under Wycliffe’s supervision. Besides the work of translation he was enabled to develop, expound and publish his theological views as well as training and sending out his preachers. Despite these great tasks he acted as a true pastor to the congregation at

Lutterworth. Copies of some of the sermons he preached there, are still in print today.

Until Wycliffe produced his translation, the Latin Vulgate was the only version of Scripture available for people to read. In addition there was a prohibition on anyone other than the clergy reading the Scriptures. Wycliffe's work in making the Scriptures available to ordinary people was much opposed by the clergy and some years later the Roman Church passed a decree which virtually prohibited the translation of God's Word.

Wycliffe believed that the translation of the Bible was absolutely essential. People had to be able to read God's Word in a language they could understand. He believed that the Scriptures were inspired by God and every part was to be accepted without reserve. Every word had to be hand-written because the printing press had not yet been invented.

Even today, after more than 600 years, there are about one hundred and seventy hand written copies still available. This gives us some idea of the great number of people who worked at this task for the even greater number who wished to have their own copy of the Scriptures. It has been estimated that it would have cost a man six month's wages to pay for a copy of the New Testament!

As well as the work of translation, Wycliffe was diligent in sending out his 'Bible-Men'. These men were not laymen, but students who had come to embrace the theology propounded by Wycliffe as well as his practical principles. They were ordained men but without a bishop's licence. They would preach in any place where there were people to listen.

Wycliffe was considered to be the greatest preacher of his day. He based his preaching on the Word of God, his sermons were full of Bible truth and he had great confidence in the effectiveness of the Word by the Spirit to bring people to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. His teaching on the inspiration and reliability of the Bible has come down through the centuries, and remains with us today when many Bible students still receive inspiration and encouragement from him, but sadly the opposition to it also exists, although its main source may have changed.

Note: A modern international team of Bible translators have adopted the name, 'Wycliffe Bible Translators'.

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