

Trevor Low:

We are all, to a great extent, the product of the times in which we live, so in order to appreciate fully the man and his influence, his courage and his faith, we must look at the spiritual condition of England at the time of Hugh Latimer's life. What was the condition of the church in the first half of the sixteenth century?

It was in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg in Germany, exposing the darkness of the established church. At that time, of course, England lay under the rule of Henry the Eighth, while her religion was increasingly dominated by Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. For the majority of the population, spiritual darkness and superstition reigned. Most of the priests and churchmen were themselves ignorant of basic Bible knowledge. One writer records that many of them could scarcely say the Lord's Prayer or recite the Ten Commandments. Prayers were said in Latin which hardly anyone understood. There was little preaching, and what there was, was unbiblical and unhelpful.

Dotted over the country were many monasteries and abbeys, but these, in truth, were dens of iniquity and immorality. It is well known that weak and dying people were persuaded to give their money to these monasteries and abbeys under the guise of being accepted by God on account of their good works. The church, of course, claimed to hold the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven and so confession of sin had to be made to a priest. Without the priest, no one could be saved.

We can understand, therefore, why the poor, ignorant people were terrified of getting on the wrong side of the church. You were considered a heretic if you bought a Bible. A man's only idea, therefore, of how to get to heaven was to do as the priest told him. It was a case of the blind leading the blind.

Prayers were made to the saints and to the Virgin Mary. There was a famous shrine in the city of Canterbury in England, a shrine to a former archbishop called Thomas a Beckett. It is reckoned that one hundred thousand pilgrims per year made their way to Beckett's tomb in order to help their souls towards heaven. In one particular year there was offered: on Christ's altar £3, on the Virgin Mary's altar £63, and on Thomas Beckett's altar £832. This shows where their priorities lay.

Images and relics and saints' bones, most of them a complete hoax, were all worshipped. And all these things, the church knew about and taught and enforced on her members. This was the state of religion in the early sixteenth century. This was so-called 'Christianity' during the childhood and youth of Hugh Latimer.

Latimer was born in 1485 in the county of Leicestershire in the middle of England. His father was a farmer. Hugh was educated in the local schools and gained a place at the famous Cambridge University. He gained his master's degree there in 1514.

Having been raised in a staunchly church household, he was an ardent church man at university. Indeed his zeal won him the right to carry the university cross through Cambridge in the annual parade. He did this for seven consecutive years, a great honour indeed!

He would attend lectures given by one George Stafford. Stafford was one of the university lecturers but he differed from the others in that he taught directly from the Bible. Latimer often attended Stafford's lectures with the sole aim of putting him off and causing disruption. In one sermon, later in his life, Latimer said, "Until I was over 30 years of age, I used to think that I could be saved by the Law."

When he became a Bachelor of Divinity in 1524, he was expected to give a lecture to the university. He chose as his theme: 'Philip Melancthon and his teaching.' Melancthon was one of the great reformers in Germany and a friend of Martin Luther. Latimer used his lecture to attack the German reformer's teaching and to defend the church's teaching. He also warned his hearers against meetings which were being held in the White Horse Inn in Cambridge.

There, a group of students would meet to read and study the Bible. They were led by a little man named Thomas Bilney. Bilney was as enthusiastic about reading and teaching the Bible as Latimer was about ritual and the outward show of religion. While Latimer delivered his lecture, in the audience sat Bilney and he decided there and then to try to win this fanatical church man to the Reformation cause.