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Church History



Vol. V

JUNE, 1936

No. 2

Published by
THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CHURCH HISTORY

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COVERDALE

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History knows men who did not begin till they were in the middle of their days. It is only on approaching or entering the forties that some people seem to strike the line of their real achievement. Up to that period they may have been active and useful, but they have not awakened to their vocation; as yet they are unconscious of their true powers. While this does not apply to the spheres of art and music, it is far from being uncommon in politics and literature. There, as any student of biography soon becomes aware, a man may not find himself till he is about forty. Sometimes it is then or thereabouts—*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*—that something happens, and a man of action, a thinker, an author, first gets the chance or the idea of doing what turns out to be the most significant thing in his career.

Miles Coverdale is a case in point. He lived till he was eighty, and it was half-way through his long career that he came across the opportunity of doing the one piece of work for which he is remembered. He was born in 1488, about a year earlier than Cranmer and Cromwell, ten years after Sir Thomas More and five years later than Martin Luther. Like Wiclif and Cuthbert Tunstall before him, like Roger Ascham, Robert Ferrar, Adam Loftus, and Tillotson after him, Coverdale came from Yorkshire in the north of England, a county characterized by a spirit of sturdy independence, even of disaffection now and then, in religion as well as in politics. At Cambridge University Miles was no more than an average plodder. As a student he made no mark and showed no promise. Fortunately as a graduate he joined the Austin Friars, one of the religious houses which clustered round a mediaeval university, and during his twelve years of residence in this com-

munity, between 1514 and 1526, his mind gradually awoke, as he was brought into touch with the ferment of Luther's teaching through Robert Barnes, the prior, one of his distinguished contemporaries at the university. Barnes, after what we should describe as a post-graduate course at Louvain, had returned to rule the Austin Friars at Cambridge, where, like so many of the dons, he developed a keen sympathy with Luther's religious genius, which Louvain had tried to represent as irreligious anarchy. It is remarkable that Cambridge at this period of upheaval housed and trained most of the prominent men who were destined to reform the Church of England as well as some leaders of the reactionary opposition. If high-minded men like Stephen Gardiner, Thomas Thirlby, and John Fisher were Cantabs, so was a larger group of scholars who later became archbishops, bishops, learned priests, and martyrs; Coverdale's older and younger contemporaries included such figures as John Bale, Robert Barnes, Cranmer, George Day, Edward Fox, John Frith, the friend of Tyndale, George Joye, John Lambert or Nicholson, Latimer, Parker, Ridley, Thomas Sampson, Thomas Shaxton, and "honest little Bilney." Most of them cared more for studying theology than law, civil or canonical, and the impetus to this revival of vital Christianity was Luther's spirit.

Seven of the group were martyred under Henry the Eighth or Queen Mary. The first to get into trouble was Dr. Barnes, who was summoned before Cardinal Wolsey in 1526 for unsound preaching. After a couple of years in prison, he contrived to escape and made his way to Antwerp. Coverdale thought it prudent to follow his chief's example. Luther's works had been hilariously burned at Cambridge by the authorities in 1521; King Henry's book against Luther had moved a short-sighted pope to hail the English monarch as "Defender of the Faith"; by 1523 Parliament had ominously taken note of Lutheran opinions spreading at Cambridge; besides, copies of Tyndale's New Testament were being suppressed, as far as possible, when the translator smuggled them over from the Continent. That learned politician, Cuthbert Tunstall, now bishop of London, denounced the "many children of iniquity, maintainers of Luther's sect, blinded through extreme wickedness, wandering from the way of truth and catholic faith," who "craftily have translated the new Testament into our English tongue."

By this time Coverdale had left the priory to wander about the country preaching as a secular priest, interested in nothing except this "extreme wickedness" of confronting the church with the Word of God. The divine spark had at last fallen upon his mind. But the signs of the times pointed to the quenching of the spark at present, if he remained in England. So he betook himself to the Continent in 1528. There are very few clear data about where he went or what he did, during the next eleven years, the first and the longest of his retreats. In the Low Countries he may have met Tyndale, then engaged in finishing his version of the Bible. Luckily he did not fall into the clutches of the enemy, as was the misfortune of the Gloucestershire scholar. Miles somehow found sanctuary. Being now forty years of age he passed into obscurity, only to emerge after seven years with a literary masterpiece, a complete translation of the Bible into English.

How he came to undertake this task, we cannot ascertain. In these broken years Coverdale had to hide his tracks as he moved about Holland, Germany, Switzerland, and France, in order to avoid arrest; he also covered the tracks of his mind. But the tracks of his inward life led to a conscious end. It is the shining merit of his career that in this period of middle age he detected a need and a want of his religious world. No doubt, Tyndale had already felt the call to put the Bible into English; Coverdale may have caught an impulse from the pioneering work of his great contemporary. May not a quick-witted friend and patron like Cromwell have also urged him to begin? Perhaps. But what gave him courage to go on with the task on his own account was a fresh religious conviction that the Word of God was over-due in English. If he could no longer preach it to his fellow-countrymen, he reflected, might he not spend his exile in translating it, instead of wearing out his soul in bitter impatience? Coverdale was not called upon to sacrifice his life for the cause, as Tyndale and Rogers had to do. Yet there is something heroic in his consciousness of this duty no less than in the toil which he spent upon it single-handed, without any particular equipment, and unsustained by any thought of personal reward.

England was curiously backward in securing a Bible of its own. Germany had over a dozen versions in the vernacular,

before Luther published his New Testament in 1522; France had a French Bible by 1474, twelve years after the first German Bible; the Dutch got a printed Bible of their own in 1477, though it lacked both the Psalms and the New Testament; even the Italians had a popular translation, published at Venice in 1471. But the English had little of the Bible in their own literature except what they picked up eagerly from the *Golden Legend*, which Caxton had printed in 1483; it contained an almost literal rendering of the Pentateuch and the gospels indeed, but this was mixed up with the wood, hay, and stubble of mediaeval legends about apostles and the saints. Tyndale himself had managed to print only the Pentateuch and the New Testament as yet. Thus, when, by an odd shift in the politics and religion of the period, Cranmer and Cromwell came to need an English Bible for the open propaganda of re-formed Christianity within the nation, it was fortunate that Coverdale's diligence had enabled him overseas to finish the first complete version of God's Word in English. His work was ready, and England was ready, or almost ready, for it, in the year 1535.

Miles Coverdale was not technically a scholar like Tyndale. From Cambridge he had taken no taste for Greek, although the study of Greek was one of the powerful weapons which the new religious movement, inside as well as outside the Roman church, was by this time beginning to accept from the new learning. As a matter of fact, Coverdale was too soon for the revival of Greek at Cambridge. During his residence there, Erasmus was indeed attempting, between 1511 and 1513, to introduce Greek into the university, but the project failed. Erasmus found that he had as little gift for teaching as for preaching. Give him a pen, and he was at home; give him a class or a congregation, and he was out of his element. The Cambridge students either failed to attend the class or failed to pay their fees. Besides, some of the Roman authorities still frowned upon this dangerous line of study, which threatened to depreciate scholastic philosophy and the Vulgate version. When Roger Ascham entered the university in 1530, a renaissance of Greek had dawned upon Cambridge, but by that time Coverdale was far afield. Though he was fond of books, he knew little or nothing about the original languages of the Bible. His work was second-hand. "I have with a clear conscience,"

he explained, "purely and faithfully translated this out of five sundry interpreters," especially Luther, Tyndale, and the Vulgate. Still, he had one supreme asset as a translator. Some translators appear to know every language except their own. Coverdale may have known next to nothing of Hebrew roots and Greek particles, but in translating at any rate he had a rare sense of English. Not merely had he felt the need of an English Bible for the English but, as he laboured at his papers, he possessed or acquired a remarkable instinct for strong, musical, lucid prose. His achievement was timely and notable. Much work had still to be done upon the text of the English Bible, and Coverdale loyally took part in this labour of love, particularly when he prepared for Cranmer and Cromwell the "Great Bible" of 1539, in which his own version of the psalter proved so acceptable that it passed into the Book of Common Prayer, where it remains as one of the glories of what is a classic at once of devotion and of literature.

Outside this work of translation, he was not distinguished. His other translations of German and Latin works are second-rate, like any original prose that he produced. As a preacher, he always had a vogue, on the Continent as well as at home. Personally he seems to have been a favourite, even with some who, like his friend and host, Sir Thomas More, objected to many of his views. Miles was a cheerful, earnest, conscientious Englishman, with no insular provincialisms. He had a genuine appreciation of foreign culture. Indeed it was his very sympathy with continental Protestantism of the more radical type in Germany and Switzerland which made it difficult for him later on to adjust himself to the settlement of religion under Queen Elizabeth. He had been out of England for so long that he seems to have lost touch with the situation at home. Though never bitterly fond of scruples, as Hooper and some others of his party often were, Coverdale's sincere puritanism, by this time Calvinistic rather than Lutheran, disqualified him for appreciating the motives and the methods of his fellow churchmen as they reorganized the Church of England.

At one point his sincerity led him, as sincerity too often leads the sincere, into blundering and even cruelty. A just historical estimate of Coverdale cannot ignore one item in his record, even though the historian is relieved to find that it

stands alone. While Tyndale, like Jerome and Wiclif, was a translator who was also a choleric saint, Coverdale did not embroider his version with stinging notes and acid comments upon the Latin hierarchy. Yet he was far from being, as some of his modern biographers would like to suggest, a pious low-churchman of the sixteenth century. In 1553 a Spanish doctor of medicine was burned by the Calvinists at Geneva for the crime and sin of heresy. But three years before Servetus perished, a continental surgeon, George van Paris, was put to death in London by the English reformers for similar opinions, and Coverdale served on the judicial commission. The *damnosa haereditas* of persecution as a note of orthodoxy still clung to the Catholic tradition; it is disconcerting, though not unintelligible, to discover that the godly Coverdale like Calvin was implicated in some of its final blots upon the page of sixteenth century Christianity.

But this is to anticipate. No sooner had the "Great Bible" been issued than Coverdale was in rough water again. He returned home, only to be driven abroad once more. The fall of Cromwell in 1539, the burning of his old friend Barnes for heresy, and an attack by Convocation upon the "Great Bible" itself, drove him out of England for a second term of exile, which lasted about eight years. He was a marked man. Now that his patron and protector had collapsed, Coverdale at the age of over fifty had to seek shelter outside England, skulking about the Continent for safety. There were smooth places in this sea, it is true. The University of Tübingen gave him the degree of D.D., and he managed to hold a Lutheran pastorate for some years. What turned out to be a happy move, in more ways than one, was his marriage to a Scots girl, exiled from her own land for sympathy with the re-formed faith. Her sister had married a renowned Scots scholar, once the Dominican prior of Perth, who belonged to the numerous Dominicans in sympathy with the Reformation, and had fled south in 1534. He had been a canon of Salisbury cathedral for some years, before crossing to Denmark in 1542, where he became royal chaplain to the king as well as a professor of theology at Copenhagen. And thereby hangs a tale. For John Macalpine, or Maccabaeus (as he Latinized his name), was the indirect means of plucking Miles out of deadly peril, when the Englishman returned to London in 1548, among the exiles and foreign

divines who were flocking to England at the accession of Edward the Sixth. This was in 1548. Protestant hopes were high. With Cranmer in power, Coverdale at last seemed to have come to his own in his own land.

Responsible work fell to him at once, particularly as a preacher. He was despatched on missions to disaffected quarters like Cornwall; and in 1549 he served as chaplain to the troops of Lord Russell who had been commissioned to put down the western rising in Devon. For these and other services, Coverdale found himself a royal chaplain, and then in 1551 he was consecrated bishop of Exeter. Here Miles and his Elizabeth had more peace than pence, however. For a poor man, in these days, preferment to an episcopal benefice sometimes brought less income than expenses at first, and under his aged predecessor the funds of the diocese seem to have been sadly depleted. Indeed Miles was not out of his financial difficulties at Exeter, when the political sky was suddenly clouded. In 1553 the young king's death led to the accession of Queen Mary, and Coverdale, like Cranmer, Hooper, Robert Ferrar, Ridley, and Latimer, was arrested. It was an ugly situation, but most fortunately he had a friend at court, at the court of a strong Protestant state like Denmark. His brother-in-law, Dr. Maccabaeus, actually induced King Christian the Third to intervene on behalf of Coverdale. Twice the monarch sent diplomatic notes to Queen Mary, which, in view of Denmark's power in politics, she could not ignore. At first she made the excuse that the bishop was in prison for no more than a failure to pay some episcopal dues. In reality he was obnoxious not simply as a married clergyman but as one of those who had been directly responsible for introducing the English Bible. Yet, although the queen would have dearly liked to crush him, she probably felt that she could afford to let this particular victim slip from her fingers, especially as his fellow-prisoners had no foreign protectors to interfere with her policy of revenge. Denmark's diplomatic pressure was courteous but persistent. King Christian, determined to save one Protestant from the flames, finally obliged her majesty to let the ex-bishop go. In 1555 he was deported from the country.

This third period of exile lasted for four years. Miles and his Elizabeth sailed for Copenhagen, where he refused to accept a benefice from King Christian, on the ground that he

did not know the Danish tongue. Once more he took a charge in Germany, but found his congregation of dissenters to be so alive with dissension that he was soon glad to seek peace at Geneva, till at last in 1558 Queen Elizabeth's accession promised to relieve England from the Roman threat. Back came Coverdale in 1559. He had still nine years to live. But this minor hero of the struggle for religious freedom did not greatly enjoy the victory.

It is rather pathetic to watch the evening of his career. A man of seventy is too old to become a bishop, and anyhow Coverdale had by this time developed Genevan scruples about robes and ritual which would have been a serious handicap, had he accepted an English bishopric again. Responsible churchmen could not fit him into the organization, much as they respected him. Coverdale had become a pious impossible person, in their view. Even when he was made rector of a London church, it was only three years before he had to retire, declining to fall in with the not unreasonable policy which Elizabeth and her authorities felt obliged to enforce upon the clergy, in order to secure a richer, more reverent service, and discipline for recalcitrant precisians. The poor old man was not able to sympathize with the dominant forces stirring in this new age into which he had survived. It was not that the veteran stood alone. The puritanical party was strongly entrenched in his old university, where a scholar like Cartwright headed the rising opposition to anything in the shape of orders or vestments that differed from the Genevan pattern. Coverdale was consulted by the leaders, as a man in touch with foreign Protestantism at Frankfort, Zurich, and Geneva; also, there was some affectionate, popular support for him in London upon personal grounds. But the moving spirits on his side were all men of the younger generation. He was in their counsels, and yet isolated. As the situation developed, it bred discomfort for him. Unlike his fellow-exile, Bishop Grindal, he could not see his way to yield even a reluctant conformity. The pity of it! Inside the church, people chanted his version of the psalms; but when he died in 1568, at the ripe age of eighty, he was without a benefice, known only as "Father Coverdale" who was now ending his public life as sixty years earlier he had begun it, by preaching unofficially and almost surreptitiously the very Word of God which he had done so much in middle life to translate for Christian England.