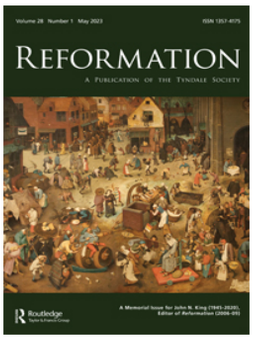

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"Wherfore Amend Your Lyves Yff Yowe Wyll be Savyd": The Soteriology of Thomas Bilney

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ABSTRACT

Among the few things scholars can agree about Thomas Bilney (1495–1531), the enigmatic figure at the heart of early English evangelicalism, is that he embraced Luther's teaching of justification by faith. This consensus is based chiefly on two of Bilney's statements on justification in a 1527 letter to Cuthbert Tunstall, then Bishop of London. By putting these statements in the broader context of Bilney's extant writings, this essay aims to show that while Bilney used some of the same language and concepts as Luther, the way he developed and understood those concepts was fundamentally distinct. In his views of the law, the reception of grace, and of the nature of justification, Bilney's soteriology differed markedly from that of the German reformer. In his distinctive development of evangelical soteriology, Bilney illustrates the experimental nature of early evangelicalism and the dangers of seeking prematurely to pigeonhole its proponents with anachronistic confessional labels.

KEYWORDS

Thomas Bilney; reformation; justification; psychopannychism; Cuthbert Tunstall; John Foxe

Introduction

Among the earliest English evangelicals was the Cambridge canon lawyer Thomas Bilney, described by John Foxe as "the first framer of [Cambridge] Vniuersitie in the knowledge of Christ," whose reformist vision of Christianity inspired Hugh Latimer, Robert Barnes, and many others to re-assess long held doctrines.[1] Yet the nature of that vision was contested in Bilney's own lifetime and has remained so ever since. His was more an exploration of reformist possibilities than a concrete program of reform, much less the promotion of a straightforward party line. This has made Bilney exceptionally difficult to place, and yet is precisely what makes him interesting and important. Scholars of biological evolution speak of "transitional fossils" – the remains of animals which have evolved certain traits that differentiate them from their ancestors but have not yet diverged enough to constitute an entirely separate species. By studying the remains of creatures which are neither quite one species nor

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[1]John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online or TAMO*. 1583 ed. (Sheffield: The Digital Humanities Institute, 2011), 1035. http://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe.

yet another, biologists hope to better understand the process by which speciation has taken place. Thomas Bilney, or at least his extant paper trail, can be regarded as the religious historian's equivalent of a transitional fossil. In certain areas (such as sacramental theology, particularly concerning the Eucharist and Confession) he retained medieval orthodoxy, while in others (such as the question of prayer to the saints or the existence of Purgatory) he broke radically from that tradition in favor of the emerging evangelical movement.

Nothing is known of Bilney's parents, but he was born around 1495 in Norfolk, and at age fourteen, he was sent up to Cambridge to read law at Trinity Hall. In 1519 he was ordained a priest, in 1521 earned a BCnL (Bachelor of Canon Law) degree, and in 1524 was elected to a fellowship at Trinity Hall. At Cambridge, Bilney became an important figure among the budding circle of proto-evangelicals, and was personally responsible for converting Thomas Arthur, Hugh Latimer, Robert Barnes, John Lambert, and Thomas Dusgate, among others, away from orthodox Catholicism.

In 1525 Bilney obtained a preaching license from the Bishop of Ely, Nicholas West, but a note in Bishop West's register records that this license was quickly revoked. The precise reason is unclear, but Thomas More records that Cardinal Wolsey summoned Bilney to account for his controversial preaching but dismissed him on an oath not to preach Lutheran heresy.[2] In 1527, Bilney began an even more controversial preaching tour with his disciple Thomas Arthur, triggering a far more significant trial, which convened on November 27, 1527. Bilney was charged with preaching heresy in six London churches; specifically, that Christians should not pray to saints and that the worship of images was idolatry, charges attested by several witnesses. Following a complex series of legal maneuvers, during which Bilney fiercely protested that he had never deviated from the teachings of the church, he finally agreed on December 7th to abjure and do penance. He was sentenced to carry a faggot at St. Paul's Cathedral followed by a year's imprisonment in the Tower. After his release, Bilney returned to Cambridge, committing himself to scholarship and service to the poor. However, the urge to proclaim his message proved irresistible, and in 1531 Bilney set out on a last preaching tour to his native Norfolk, provoking a final heresy trial in Norwich. Bilney was condemned to die, and on August 19th, 1531, was burned as a relapsed heretic at the Lollards' Pit just outside Norwich city walls.

Because of the complex and plural nature of Bilney's ideas, scholars have frequently disagreed about how to describe him. Louis Schuster called Bilney the "acknowledged leader of the Lutheran enthusiasts," almost as if they had formed a society and elected Bilney its president, and William Clebsch similarly described him as the "moving spirit of the Cambridge circle of Lutherans."[3] Greg Walker, on the other hand, has argued, "Bilney was, in short, no Lutheran."[4] Gordon Rupp wrote "Bilney was no Lollard," while Anne Hudson thought it was "certain that Bilney's views were genuinely only Lollard" and Diarmaid MacCulloch that Bilney's "views seem to have been a fusion

[2]Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies. The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 6, ed. Thomas M. C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 268.

[3]Louis A. Schuster, "Thomas More's Polemical Career, 1523-1533," in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 8, Part III, ed. Louis A. Schuster et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 1140; William A. Clebsch, *England's Earliest Protestants, 1520-1535* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 278.

[4]Greg Walker, "Saint or Schemer? The 1527 Heresy Trial of Thomas Bilney Reconsidered," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 40, no. 2 (1989): 219–38 (at 230).

of a reforming brand of Cambridge Erasmianism with Lollard ideas."[5] Susan Brigden characterized Bilney as one of "England's first Protestant evangelists," while John Davis wrote that, "[Bilney] cannot be called a Protestant."[6] Perhaps the only thing about Thomas Bilney's theology that modern scholars *have* been able to agree upon is that his soteriology (even if not his theology more broadly) was Lutheran. Thus, though they disagree about nearly every other aspect of Bilney's thought, A. G. Dickens writes that Bilney embraced "the Pauline doctrine of Justification by Faith," John Davis that he held "the [evangelical] doctrines of faith as against the penitential system of the medieval church," Carl Trueman that Bilney "embraced justification by faith," Richard Rex that he held to "justification by grace," and Korey Maas that Bilney believed "grace alone, by faith alone, is sufficient for salvation" and that "Bilney's doctrine of faith is Lutheran."[7]

Yet even this lone consensus is built almost entirely on two sentences from a single letter which are, as Professor Rex puts it, "drenched in evangelical catchphrases."[8] The trouble with catchphrases is that, as in modern politics, the same slogan could mean radically different things to different people. As has been increasingly recognized by scholarship on the Reformation more broadly, "early evangelicals were late medieval Christians," and were profoundly influenced by "the orthodox religious culture of the late Middle Ages and its capacity for generating self-critiques and new devotional emphases"; the line between orthodox and evangelical identity was far messier than we might sometimes like to think, and the language of early evangelicals was not cut from whole cloth but a restitching of medieval reformist fabric.[9] Early evangelical identity is now widely acknowledged to have been plural and complex, the figures who fit (to varying degrees) within that identity to have been "theological omnivore[s]," who "positively resist rigid categorization and definition."[10] As Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie observed now more than twenty years ago, "[b]oundaries," in this period, "were unclear, where they existed at all, and identities were nascent and contested."[11] It is for this reason that many scholars now choose to speak of people who sought "the renewal of the

[5]E. G. Rupp, "The 'Recantation' of Thomas Bilney," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 167 (1942): 180–222 (at 185); Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 500; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors: Politics and Religion in an English County 1500-1600* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 150.

[6]Susan Brigden, "Youth and the English Reformation," *Past and Present* 95, no. 1 (1982): 37–67 (at 41); John Davis, "The Trials of Thomas Bylney and the English Reformation," *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 4 (1981): 775–90 (at 787).

[7]A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, rev. ed. (London: Fontana/Collins, 1967), 118; Davis "The Trials of Thomas Bylney," 788; Carl Trueman, *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers, 1525-1556* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 50; Richard Rex, "The Early Impact of Reformation Theology at Cambridge University, 1521-1547," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 2, no. 1 (1999): 38–71 (at 51); Korey Maas "Thomas Bilney: 'Simple Good Soul'?," *Tyndale Society Journal* no. 27 (2004): 8–20 (at 13).

[8]Rex, "The Early Impact of Reformation Theology at Cambridge University," 51.

[9]Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 141; Peter Marshall, "(Re)defining the English Reformation," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 564–86 (at 581). See also Susan Wabuda, *Preaching During the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially 9–16 and chapters 1 and 4, and Peter Marshall, "Evangelical Conversion in the Reign of Henry VIII," in *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, ed. Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14–37.

[10]Ethan H. Shagan, "Clement Armstrong and the Godly Commonwealth: Radical Religion in Early Tudor England," in *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, ed. Marshall and Ryrie, 73; and Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie, "Introduction," in *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, ed. Marshall and Ryrie, 6.

[11]Marshall and Ryrie, "Introduction," 6.

church outside its traditional framework of authority," rather than assigning a fixed theological label to Henrician religious dissenters.[12]

Despite this welcome trend in Reformation scholarship more broadly, writing on Thomas Bilney has largely remained stuck in unhelpfully Linnean attempts to label rather than understand. By putting the one famous letter which is always cited in discussion of Bilney into the full context of the reformer's extant writings, including the woefully neglected marginalia in his Vulgate, I aim to show that while he did embrace justification by faith in a certain sense, Bilney's understanding of that concept was materially different from that of Luther and his English disciples.[13] Unlike Luther's opposition of law and gospel, Bilney's critique of the existing penitential system was based on the opposition of the true divine law and invented human ones. When he critiqued man's righteousness achieved through voluntary works, this righteousness was not suspect because it was connected to human actions, but because it was achieved by following human traditions rather than the authentic divine law, contained in scripture. Sinners benefit from Christ's righteousness not by having his merits imputed to them, freeing them from the burden of the law, but rather through the total forgiveness of sins won for them on the cross, a forgiveness accessed through the resolutely orthodox means of sacramental confession. Bilney's radicalism consisted in his assertion that following this total forgiveness, promised by Christ to all those who truly repent, no further penalties remain, either in this life or the next, obviating the need for purgatory, prayer to saints, and the performance of penances. Though not the same as the Lutheran conception of justification by faith, this program was both radical and evangelical. Indeed, in certain respects Bilney's evangelicalism extended beyond the traditional picture of his thought, to encompass at least one Lutheran doctrine which scholars have not previously ascribed to him: psychopannychism, the belief that following death the soul sleeps until the last day.[14] Thomas Bilney's theology of salvation and judgement was therefore both more and less Lutheran than has generally been thought, more complex and even conflicted. Bilney was among the very earliest English evangelicals, and as such was groping his way toward new ways of understanding Christianity, not selecting from a list of premade confessions. Discerning his theology therefore requires more than picking up a critical phrase which identifies him with one party or another. Scholars have been unable to agree a label for Bilney because such an endeavor is by its nature futile. Early evangelicals ought not be regarded chiefly as the avatars of confessions which did not yet even properly exist, but rather as independent thinkers who, though naturally influenced by the views of others, were not limited to them.

Human righteousness and the law

The ascription to Bilney of a Lutheran soteriology rests chiefly on two lines from a letter written to Cuthbert Tunstall, his judge, during a 1527 trial for heresy. In the first, Bilney

[12]Susan Wabuda, "Hugh Latimer," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2009).

[13]For a fuller discussion of the marginal notes in Bilney's Vulgate, see Colin Donnelly, "On the Vulgate of Thomas Bilney," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 73, no. 4 (2022): 837–44.

[14]This was in contrast to the orthodox Catholic teaching that the soul was judged immediately upon death, and entered either directly into heaven, to purgatory for a period of cleansing before ultimately proceeding to heaven, or directly to hell for eternity.

describes his conversion in, as John Davis put it, "the manner of an English Luther."[15] Bilney likened his prior condition to that of the bleeding woman who spent all she had on useless physicians until she touched the hem of Jesus' garment and was made whole.[16] Like her, he had "spent all that I had vpon those ignorant physitions, that is to say: Vnlerned hearers of confession … for they appoynted me fastinges, watching, bienge of pardones and masses, in al which things as I now vnderstand they sought rather ther own gaine then the saluation of the sicke diseased soule."[17] However, Bilney was healed when "at the last I harde speake of Iesus, verily when the new testament was set fourth by Erasmus … I chanced vpon this swet sentence of saint Paule … Christ Iesus cam into the world to saue sinners of which I am the chiefe and principall."[18] It is easy to see how Davis reached his comparison with Luther, and it only becomes easier as Bilney continued to the most frequently quoted line of the letter: "The rightuousnes of God by fayth in Iesu Christ, is upon all them which beleue in him, for there is no difference, all haue synned, and lacke the glorie of God, and ar iustified frely through his grace by the redemption which is in Iesus Christ."[19] This description has a strikingly Lutheran ring to it, but to fully understand Bilney's meaning, we must set it within its full context, both in the correspondence from which it comes and Bilney's thought as a whole.

In these passages, Bilney sets up an opposition between human and divine righteousness. The former is represented by the "fastinges, watching, bienge of pardones and masses" appointed by unlearned confessors and the latter by the mercy which comes through faith in Christ and his sacrifice.[20] Richard Rex has argued that this opposition "is redolent not of the contrast between flesh and spirit in Erasmus's *philosophia Christi,* but of the contrast between law and gospel in Luther's *theologia crucis*."[21] Thus for Professor Rex, Bilney's concept of human righteousness corresponds to Luther's notion of the righteousness of the law, and Bilney's concept of divine righteousness corresponds to Luther's notion of the gospel.

However, Bilney's own definition of human righteousness, given later in the same letter, does not quite fit with this conception. For Bilney, human righteousness is that "which is wrought through … our owne elect and chosen workes, as pylgrimages, bying of pardons, offring of candels, elect and chosen fastes, & oftentimes supersticions, and finally all kynde … of volu[n]tary deuotions."[22] As in all his extant writings, Bilney is extremely careful to distinguish between works commanded by the law and works invented by human beings. Within one sentence, he twice repeats that he is speaking of "elect and chosen" works and concludes by describing such works as "voluntary." These are the works of human righteousness – seeking to achieve righteousness by the means devised by human beings rather than those commanded by God.

This can also be seen in the passages of scripture Bilney enlisted to support his case:

> volu[n]tary devotions, against the which gods word speaketh plainly in the fourth of Deute. And in the xii. saying: Thou shalt not do that whiche semeth good vnto thy selfe, but that

[15]Davis, "The Trials of Thomas Bylney," 781.
[16]Cf. Mark 5:25–34, Matthew 9:20–22, & especially Luke 8:43–48.
[17]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 519–20.
[18]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 520.
[19]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 520; cf. Romans 3:21–23.
[20]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 519–20.
[21]Rex, "The Early Impact of Reformation Theology at Cambridge University," 51.
[22]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 520.

> whiche I commaund thee for to do, that do thou, neither adding to, neither diminishing any thing from it. And therefore I oftentimes haue spoken of those workes, not condempning them (as God I take to my witnes) but reprouing their abuse, making the lawful vse of them manifest, euen vnto children, exhorting all men, not so to cleue vnto them that being satisfied therewith they should lothe, or waxe wery of Christe as many doo.[23]

In the same breath that he condemned elect and superficial works, Bilney affirmed the crucial importance of works genuinely required by the law. His concern was that human traditions distracted from *both* the mercy of Christ *and* the authentic law of God.

Bilney's words are not a direct quotation from either Deuteronomy 4 or 12, but appear to be a paraphrase of what is now the second verse of Deuteronomy 4: "You shall not add to the word that I speak to you, neither shall you take away from it: keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you," the whole point of which is precisely the necessity of keeping the law.[24] Moses repeatedly urges the Israelites to "keep therefore [their] souls carefully" and to "[k]eep [God's] precepts and commandments, which I command thee: that it may be well with thee."[25] Bilney himself clearly saw this as the key theme of the passage when he read it – the sole annotation in this portion of his Vulgate reads: "proponit benedictione[m] observantibus lege[m] d[omi]ni et maledictione[m] non observantibus"; "[He] declares a blessing to those that observe the law of the lord, and a curse to those that do not observe it."[26] This would be a very strange passage indeed for Bilney to pick out in support of a Lutheran conception of justification by faith.

The same can be said of the other passage Bilney references, Deuteronomy 12, which similarly concludes: "What I command thee, that only do thou to the Lord: neither add any thing, nor diminish." Bilney's condemnation of elect works such as special fasts, pilgrimages, et cetera, was that they added to the divine law, in express contravention of this commandment. Emphasis on the law is again seen in Bilney's annotations; at the start of Deuteronomy 12 he wrote: "the precepts and Judgements of the lord," interestingly and ungrammatically capitalizing "Judicia."[27] Further along, the sentence "Non facietis ibi que nos hic faciem hodie singuli q[u]o[d] rectum videtur" was underlined, marked by a finger, and paraphrased in the margin. This may well be the source of Bilney's phrase "Thou shalt not do that whiche semeth good vnto thy selfe."[28]

Indeed, this approving view of the law paired with a disdain for false human traditions can be seen throughout Bilney's annotations of his Vulgate. Near the end of Isaiah 10, a passage warning of a coming judgement day, Bilney wrote: "Magis legi quam miraculis fidendum" – "One ought to trust the law more than wonders." The suggestion is plainly that one ought to put one's trust for salvation in the law, precisely the opposite of Luther's view. For Bilney, such voluntary devotions and practices as going on special pilgrimages or praying to the saints distracted from the authentic divine law. In condemning these practices, he did not condemn the necessity of adherence to the

[23]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 520.
[24]All English scriptural quotations are taken from the Douay-Rheims translation unless otherwise noted.
[25]Deuteronomy 4:15 and 4:40.
[26]Thomas Bilney's vulgate can be found in the Parker Library at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, shelf mark EP.W.11.
[27]"precepta et Judicia d[omi]n[i]."
[28]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 520.

law – on the contrary, he was seeking to affirm it, by removing human traditions masquerading as law and distracting from God's true commandments.

This message is repeated in another of Bilney's letters to Tunstall, wherein he responded to the bishop's request for him to specify "wherein men haue not preched as they ought, and how they shulde haue preached better."[29] Bilney answered that "they haue not preached as they oughte, which leauing the word of God, haue taughte their own traditions … preaching fables and lies, and not thy law of God."[30] This is precisely the contrast between the true commandments of God as found in the scripture and later human accretions decried by Erasmus.

This can also be seen in Bilney's dialogue with the conservative friar John Brusierd. Bilney began by attacking prayer to saints, but then expanded his attack to all "the constitutions of men, which are devised onely by the dreames of men."[31] Such constitutions are a problem not because they trick man into thinking he can fulfill the law himself, but because human laws distract from God's law: "For who so contemneth the decaloge or the table of the comau[n]dements of God, ther is but a smal punishme[n]t for him, which punishment is not to death, but contrary wise he that shall contemne or violat the constitutions which you call the sancions of men, he is counted by all mens iudgement giltie of death."[32] Bilney's critique is not based on the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel, but the Erasmian one between the authentic commandments of God contained in scripture and false human accretions.

This critique was memorably illustrated by Bilney's disciple, Thomas Arthur, who, when asked about the authority of the church and its laws,

> brought a similitude of crosses set up against the walles in London, that men shoulde not pysse there. Whe[n] there was but one crosse or a few more, men did reuerence them, and pissed not there, but when there was in euerye corner a crosse set, then men of necessitye were compelled to pisse upon the crosses. So in like manner whe[n] there was but a fewe, holye and deuout lawes in the church, then men were afraid to offend them. Afterward they made manye lawes … [and] regard them not, and so now a daies, there are so many lawes, that whether a man doo ill or wel, he shalbe taken in the law.[33]

This criticism reflects the clear influence of Arthur's teacher Bilney, and only makes sense if Arthur believed it was possible for men to keep the law if the church would only cease from needlessly complicating things. For Luther, lapsarian man is so utterly depraved even had there been only one cross against the walls of London, men still could not have restrained themselves from pissing on it. There was, after all, one commandment in Eden, yet our ancestors in whom all have sinned failed even to keep that.[34] In sharp contrast, Arthur's argument that the problem with excessive laws of mere human invention is fundamentally that they distract and prevent the faithful from keeping the authentic law only makes sense if he believed they would otherwise be able to do so.

[29]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 523.
[30]Davis, "The Trials of Thomas Bylney," 523–4.
[31]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 530.
[32]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 530.
[33]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 514. This is a reference to the holy images painted upon the walls of homes, shops, and other buildings in an effort to protect property using the natural reluctance to relieve oneself on a picture of the cross or one of Our Lady.
[34]Cf. Romans 5:12.

This conception of the law diverges markedly from that proposed by Luther, but seems, at least initially, far more similar to the view of the law offered by the covenantal theology which was beginning to emerge among Swiss reformers, and which scholars such as William Clebsch and L. J. Trinterud have argued played a crucial role in the soteriology of other early English reformers, especially William Tyndale.[35] Like Bilney, figures such as Martin Bucer and Johannes Oecolampadius placed enormous emphasis on the role of moral regeneration and the observance of the law in salvation.[36] Could this be the source of Bilney's fundamentally positive conception of the law? Tempting as this conclusion is, it is unfortunately unsustainable. The first obstacle is one of chronology; Bilney's views were developed and expressed in Cambridge during the early to mid-1520s, during which time this conception was only just beginning to emerge in Switzerland, and long before it first appeared in England. More fundamentally, the developing Reformed view pairs its emphasis on performing the works of the law with a stress on divine providence, and in particular the notion that the works necessary to keep the law, when they are performed, are not to the credit of the individual performing them. Rather, "the works of a believer are accepted by God as worthy of merit not because they are so in themselves but because, first God has decreed them to be such and, second, they are his very works in the believer."[37] As Martin Bucer put it:

> eternal life is assigned to us as a result of works. But this is the case only when through our election and the purpose of God formed before the ages, there is already assigned to us before the foundation of the world this life of God as a result of the grace of God and the merit of Christ. This life moreover is assigned to us through faith, that is, after we believe in Christ and have in some way become already possessed of him. … For good works are the fruit of this faith and of the Spirit.[38]

For Bucer, works remained necessary for salvation, but because of humanity's fundamentally wicked postlapsarian nature, these works were the result of the operation of the spirit in the believer, decreed from before all time. Likewise for Oecolampadius, though "justification ultimately depends on regeneration," which is "manifested in good works," those works are both predestined and the works of God in the believer.[39] In contrast, as we have seen, Bilney had no doctrine of total depravity, and while he firmly maintained that God's grace was necessary for the believer, the works done with the assistance of that grace nevertheless remained the believer's. Moreover, as we will see, for Bilney a Christian needed to be forgiven anew each time she sinned if she was to be saved. Salvation was worked out, with the help of God's grace, through the course of the sinner's whole life, not determined by God's providence from before all time.

Bilney's critiques of false law have also been compared to those of Wycliffe and his later Lollard followers.[40] While their views do overlap at certain points, the suggestion

[35]Clebsch, *England's Earliest Protestants*, 66–8 and 181–205; L. J. Trinterud, "A Reappraisal of William Tyndale's Debt to Martin Luther," *Church History* 31 (1962): 24–45.
[36]Alister McGrath, "Humanist Elements in the Early Reformed Doctrine of Justification," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 73 (1982): 5–20 (at 9).
[37]Brian Lugioyo, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification: Reformation Theology and Early Modern Irenicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 95.
[38]Martin Bucer, *Metaphrasis et Enarratio in Epistolam … ad Romanos* (Basel: Petrum Pernam, 1562), 119, translation taken from Lugioyo, *Martin Bucer's Doctrine of Justification*, 97.
[39]McGrath, "Humanist Elements in the Early Reformed Doctrine of Justification," 9; for Oecolampadius on predestination, see, e.g. Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam Prophetam Hypomnematon* (Basel: Andreas Cratander, 1525), 6.
[40]See for instance Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 500; or MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors*, 150.

that Bilney's views can materially be described as Lollard is difficult to sustain. As we will see in greater detail below, Bilney was a fervent defender of auricular confession, urging his parents to confess their sins as often as they feasibly could and writing in his Vulgate that the practice had scriptural support in Leviticus 13. Further, the central hallmark of later Lollardy was a skepticism towards the Eucharist, and it is on this point that Bilney was most surely utterly orthodox.[41] Even John Foxe, keen as he was to make of Bilney a Protestant hero, agreed that "[a]s touching the Masse, & Sacrament of the aultar, … he neuer differed therin from the most grossest Catholiques," and as we will see below, Foxe's assessment is strongly supported by Bilney's letters.[42] This is not to deny that there are notable overlaps between Bilney's critiques of existing ecclesiastical practices and those of the Lollards, only that (in lieu of specific evidence that he encountered Lollardy in a formative way) we cannot safely conclude that these were Bilney's key influence. Similar overlap, after all, can and could be found in the preaching of even so staunchly orthodox a reformer as John Colet (1467-1519), another figure who gained an unwanted following among at least certain Lollard communities just a few years before Bilney.[43]

Divine righteousness and justification

Thus far we have seen that Bilney's condemnation of works in relation to soteriology was specifically circumscribed to voluntary works which are the product of human traditions and did not include those works he regarded as authentically commanded by the divine law; so much for Bilney's concept of human righteousness. But what of the mercy and divine righteousness by which he claimed to have been saved? Was this conceived in a Lutheran sense?

To answer this question, we must turn to two more of Bilney's letters. The first was written to his parents just before his 1531 execution. Documents from immediately before death must always be treated with great care but given the lack of surviving statements in Bilney's own voice, this revealing letter cannot be ignored. Moreover, the links between this letter and those he wrote to Tunstall four years earlier suggest that it was no deathbed recantation, but rather a repetition and explication of beliefs long held.

Bilney's message in this letter is urgent; he exhorted his parents: "we be bound under the peyn of everlastyng damnation to love god above all thyngs and ower neyborghs as owr self."[44] This phrase comes from Jesus' reply to the question of a Pharisee: "Master, what is the greatest commandment in the law?"[45] Bilney was explicitly stating that we will be sent to hell if we do not keep the law. He made this even clearer a little further on: "the holy prophyt moyses and saynt paule also … do saye th[a]t every man and woma[n] be accursyd of godys own mouwth th[a]t do not observe and kepe co[n]tynualy … [the] utte[r] most poynt of the law of god."[46] The emphasis on keeping the law "continually" is important here, as it suggests a constant striving through one's whole life to become more

[41]Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 283–9.
[42]Foxe, *TAMO* (1583 edition), 1035.
[43]Jonathan Arnold, *Dean John Colet of St Paul's: Humanism and Reform in Early Tudor England* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 149–51.
[44]Cambridge, Corpus Christi College [hereafter CCCC] MS 340, 583.
[45]Matthew 22:36.
[46]CCCC MS 340, 584.

and more perfect (or at least less and less wretched) in keeping the law, echoing medieval ideas of a continual process of sanctification, rather than Luther's single moment of justification.

Bilney continued with a terrifying description of hell, and asked: "what shal cum of hus, most wrechyd wrechyd synners" who with "sweryng and ydll wordes [have tarnished] the whyte garment of Innocencie and clennesse whche was dyed in the most presius water and blud sprykelyd out of the syde of chryst … and put on … in ower baptyme." At that moment of baptism, we were freed from the "thraldom of the dyvel," a freedom purchased not with silver or gold but with "th[a]t preciose blod of th[a]t most clen and Inocent lambe hys only dere son Jesus Chryst."[47] Bilney was emphatic that nothing would come to one who had, through wicked living, spat upon that sacrifice "but everlastyng da[m]natyo[n] … in paynes intollerable … thes peyns doutles father and mother shal we suffer as god thretenythe in the scryptures except we … repent … & axe mercy owre manyfold synes."[48] The crucial question is what Bilney meant by repentance. He defined the word explicitly in another letter, as we will shortly see, but even here he made his view clear by assuring his parents that "yff we aske forgyvenesse of ower synnes be they never so grevose owre most marcyful father in heven wyl not deny th[a]t us," for he is always "a thowsand tymes" more ready to forgive us than we are to ask forgiveness.[49] However, forgiveness is limited to those who repent and sincerely strive not to sin again: "so exeedyng ys hys mercy toward them th[a]t wyll aknowledge and co[n]fesse ther synnes and aske forgyness of them for chrysts sake & *lyve a new lyff*" [my italics].[50] Moreover, this forgiveness can be obtained not through simply throwing oneself on the mercy of God in the abstract, but by going to confession. Bilney urged his parents when they sinned "to be playnly co[n]fessyd of them as son as we maye … or at the lest as tymes orderyd by holy chyrche."[51] This echoes the comment he wrote beside Leviticus 13, in which is enumerated the laws concerning Leprosy: "perhaps one should gather that men ought to show their sins to priests."[52]

Thus, according to this letter, following the sin of Adam we were in thrall to the devil, and destined for eternal damnation. In baptism, however, we are freed from this slavery, and given a new white garment, washed clean in the blood of the lamb. We then stain this garment with our sins and therefore need to ask forgiveness again. However, we need not fear, for if we ask for forgiveness fully intending not to sin again and receive the sacrament of confession, then God of his mercy will utterly forgive our sins, no matter how many or how terrible they may be. This is remarkably similar to the orthodox doctrine well summarized in Stephen Gardiner's declaration that "we all are iustified in baptisme yonglinges, and fallinge after Baptisme, we must arise by the Sacrament of penuance."[53] It is strikingly dissimilar to Luther's notion of a single moment of imputed justification.

At the end of his letter, Bilney referred to the same text which he told Bishop Tunstall had caused him such joy: "why should not the synful sowle lyvng up on the ded bed hope

[47]CCCC: MS 340, 585–6.
[48]CCCC MS 340, 585–6.
[49]CCCC MS 340, 586.
[50]CCCC MS 340, 587.
[51]CCCC MS 340, 587.
[52]"fortisan colligendum debere homines peccata sua sacerdotibus ostendere."
[53]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 801.

and trust to be savyd by the passion of chryst seyng he dyed for Synners, as the Scrypture of god wytnessythe."[54] In the context of this letter, however, we can more fully understand what Bilney meant when he spoke of taking joy in the knowledge that Christ came to save sinners. It is not that Bilney believed God would impute Christ's righteousness to a sinner, in the Lutheran sense, nor that Christ had fulfilled the law for us, so that we don't have to. Rather, it is that through this verse Bilney came fully to believe and trust that our original sin is washed away in baptism, and that individual sins are truly and completely forgiven when we confess them and sincerely repent of them.

Bilney's radicalism was not based on a Lutheran rejection of the terms of existing theology, but rather on its radical simplification. The church taught, and Christ promised, that if a sinner repented and asked forgiveness for her sins, they would be forgiven her. For Bilney, that was the end of the story – the sinner was forgiven. Therefore, there was no need for appeals to the merits or intercession of the saints, nor for going on pilgrimages, obtaining of indulgences, or anything else. All these were distractions from the two things necessary to salvation: the authentic law of God, which we must continually strive to keep, and the mercy of Christ, in whose name God will always forgive us when we fail.

This view is further confirmed in Bilney's letter to the vicar of Dereham, in which he urged the vicar to do his duty by faithfully preaching Christ's word to his people.[55] Bilney emphasized that, in his view, the great majority of priests in England were failing in this duty, for they "pascunt semetipsos [feed themselves] with the profyts of their benefyces, sed non pascunt gregem verbo dei [but do not feed their flocks the word of god]."[56] Such priests should be afraid, for "[i]deo minatur illis deus Ezehaelis xxxiiij eternam damnationem, dicens, Vae pastoribus" – i.e. "Because of this, in Ezekiel 34 God threatens them with eternal damnation, saying, woe to shepherds."[57] Bilney underlined the same passage in his Vulgate, writing "co[n]tra neglige[n]tes pastores" – "against negligent shepherds." Instead, Bilney thought priests should be proclaiming the very first words of Christ in the gospel according to Mark: "repent and believe in the gospel."[58] What did Bilney think Jesus meant by "repent"? This is crucial, since in the letter to his parents he made true repentance a precondition for the forgiveness of sins. He explained in his next comment, taken from Luke 13:3: "Nisi penitenciam egeritis, omnes peribitis"; "Unless you [plural] do penance, you will all perish," an injunction which Bilney interpreted straightforwardly: "Wherfore amend your lyves yff yowe wyll be savyd."[59] Bilney affirmed a very strong version of the teaching that if one repents, her sins will be forgiven utterly, but emphasized that repentance must involve an actual change in behavior if it is to gain forgiveness.

This can also be seen in Bilney's use of the phrase "penitenciam egeritis," another version of Jerome's "poenitentiam agite." This is a translation of the Greek "μετανοεῖτε" which became a source of controversy when in 1516 Erasmus, in his *Novum Instrumentum* which so influenced Bilney, suggested that the best translation might not be Jerome's

[54]CCCC MS 340, 587.
[55]The vicar in question *might* be Roger Balkwell (see Norfolk Record Office, PRCC 1/2, Godsalve 197); however, as the letter is undated and the records of clergy in this small parish are scarce, I have been unable to identify him with any certainty.
[56]CCCC MS 340, 281.
[57]CCCC MS 340, 281.
[58]Mark 1:15.
[59]CCCC MS 340, 282.

"poenitentiam agite" but rather "resipiscite."[60] In the 1519 edition of his Latin New Testament, titled *Novum Testamentum*, this is indeed the translation Erasmus adopted. This change was significant because while "poenitentiam agite" is probably best translated into English as "do penance" and has the clear connotation of performing an external action, "resipiscite" signifies something more like "come to your senses," indicating a more internal change. This shift enormously influenced Luther, who blamed Jerome's inaccurate translation for the economic ecosystem of penance he so despised, and, as John N. King rightly observed in his noted essay on the religious propaganda of this period, the translation of this word into English as "repentance" formed a central part of Thomas More's argument that William Tyndale's translation of the bible should be burned "on the ground that it contains Lutheran propaganda."[61]

Bilney did not, however, adopt Erasmus' suggested revision, so favored by Luther and his disciples, despite attributing his religious transformation to Erasmus's work. Instead, he kept the traditional "poenitentiam agite." When seen in light of the facts that Bilney defined repentance with specific reference to changing one's external life and that throughout all his letters he consistently and explicitly urged that external notion of repentance, and not simply an internal change of mind, we can see the significance of Bilney's use of this term.

Certainly, Luther also taught that true repentance must be accompanied by a change of life, and indeed that a Christian's whole life must be one of repentance. However, the crucial difference is in the relationship between that reformed life and salvation. For Luther, a Christian is justified, and then having been justified he lives a life of repentance in gratitude for his salvation. Bilney, however, makes clear in his injunction "amend your lyves *yff* yowe *wyll* be savyd" [my italics], that the change of life is not the result of salvation, but its precondition.

Bilney's trial

How does this revised conception of Bilney's soteriology, based on his letters, scriptural annotations, and the record of his dispute with John Brusierd, fit with our overall picture of the man and his thought? Work on Thomas Bilney has focused disproportionately on his 1527 trial (by far the best documented of the four he underwent) and the various historical puzzles which arise from its records. This is therefore an ideal testing ground in which to see whether the revised picture I am proposing clarifies or only muddles further our understanding of Bilney.

The first controversial issue within the records of his trial concerns how to read Bilney's statements that Luther was "iustly and godly" condemned, that Luther and all his followers were wicked and detestable heretics, and that the teachings of general ecclesiastical councils should be observed by all, not only out of fear but for conscience's sake.[62] This, Bilney's only extant statement about Luther, is about the clearest evidence

[60] C. A. L. Jarrott, "Erasmus' Biblical Humanism," *Studies in the Renaissance* 17 (1970): 119–52 (at 125). For the enormous impact of this phrase on one of Bilney's Cambridge contemporaries, Thomas Cranmer, see Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87–8.

[61] Jarrott, "Erasmus' Biblical Humanism," 128; John N. King, "Thomas More, William Tyndale, and the Printing of Religious Propaganda," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature: 1485-1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 115.

[62] Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 516.

against his supposed Lutheranism that one could ask for, but only if we think he was telling the truth. Bilney was, after all, on trial for his life, and it is on this ground that his frank disavowal of Luther has often been dismissed.

However, when we turn to the rest of the interrogatory, we notice that, while Bilney did practice a kind of self-preservatory deceit, it was of a strikingly different variety. When asked if it was right that images of saints were set up in churches, and whether they should be worshiped by all Christians, Bilney replied: "cum sint libri Laicorum adorare oportet at non imaginem sed prototypon" – "because they are the books of the laity, it is proper to worship them, but not the images, rather what they represent", in an answer John Davis characterized as "a circumspect reply to a leading question."[63] Indeed, this seems something of an understatement. According to the witnesses called against him, Bilney had preached that "as Ezechias destroyed the brasen Serpent that Moyses made by the Commaundement of God, eue[n] so should kynges and Princes now a dayes, destroy and burne the Images of Saintes set up in the Churches."[64] This fits with several of Bilney's annotations in his Vulgate, such as the note by Deuteronomy 7: "hic colligunt non esse nefas subvertere imagines et destruere"; "Hence [they] conclude that it is not wrong to overturn and destroy images." Strictly speaking, Bilney's response could fit with the testimony against him, since the serpent Moses made at God's explicit command was surely not wrong in itself, but only because it had come to be abused. Nonetheless, his lawyerly answer carefully evaded an outright lie, while also misrepresenting his preaching.

Later in the trial, Bilney rather unbelievably claimed that he could not remember whether he had preached the revolutionary message that images should be destroyed.[65] Greg Walker has argued that Bilney's claim of poor memory was an act of "deliberate dishonesty," designed "to prevent any potentially incriminating arguments over detail with the witnesses, avoiding any traps which his inquisitors might set."[66] More charitably, we might say that Bilney was caught between the Scylla of an outright lie and the Charybdis of the stake; claiming a faulty memory allowed him to simply not comment on his preaching against images, rather than either lying about it or admitting heresy.

This evasive pattern is reproduced throughout Bilney's responses. If he were unscrupulously willing to lie to save his skin, then his carefully worded, lawyerly answers to questions on papal authority, the infallibility of the church, and the validity of prayer to saints would have been unnecessary. He could have flatly denied that he ever deviated from orthodox teaching, particularly as he does not seem to have preached on at least the first two of these issues. Rather, Bilney meticulously avoided outright heresy, while also keeping his answers sufficiently vague that they did not technically contradict his beliefs. When we compare these judiciously circumspect answers to Bilney's frank and unambiguous condemnation of Luther, the contrast suggests that, even if we cannot trust it entirely, there may be more to the condemnation than is often thought, and if we follow the revision of Bilney's understanding of salvation suggested above, this makes sense.

[63]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 516; Davis, "The Trials of Thomas Bylney," 778.
[64]Foxe, *TAMO* (1570 edition), 1177. Cf. 2 Kings 18:4.
[65]Walker, "Saint or Schemer?," 201.
[66]Walker, "Saint or Schemer?," 221.

Another notable moment in Bilney's interrogatory came when he was asked if he believed it better for the people to pray in their own language than a strange one (i.e. Latin). Bilney replied that

> the xiiii. chapter of saint Paule in his first Epistle to the Corinthians moueth me to beleue that it is best, that the people shuld haue the Lords Prayer and the Apostles Crede in Englyshe, so that their deuotion myght the more be furthered by the vnderstandyng of it … suerly I haue harde many saye that they neuer hard speake of [th]e resurrection of the body, and beyng certified thereof, became much more apte and ready vnto goodnes, and more fearefull to doo euill.[67]

In this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul condemns overzealousness for speaking in tongues, for "if in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said?"[68] Interestingly, the conclusion Bilney drew from this text was relatively modest – the Lord's Prayer and Apostles Creed should be in English, a more conservative position than that advocated by Erasmus, notably in the *Paraclesis,* or even by Cambridge's chancellor, Bishop John Fisher, though it is likely this was simply more careful circumspection.[69]

Bilney justified his claim with the argument that if the laity were assured they would be raised on the last day, they would be more eager to do good and afraid of doing evil. Necessary to this view is the prerequisite belief that wicked actions could cause even a believing Christian to be condemned to hell. Otherwise, it would hardly make sense to suggest that if they understood the faith better the laity would be scared by the threat of damnation, and encouraged by the promise of heaven, into doing good. This was not the evangelical view that true Christians would react to their gracious justification by lovingly obeying God's commandments in gratitude. It was the Erasmian one that the laity could obey the essentials of God's law and should be incentivized to do so by the carrot and stick of Jerusalem and Hades.

One particularly revealing question asked in the course of Bilney's examination, which has thus far eluded scholarly attention, was whether he believed that the souls of the faithful departed, including the apostles, have yet to be judged. Bilney effectively dodged the question, but stated that he "doth not beleue [tha]t they are in heaue[n] being so taught by the scripturs & holy fathers of the churche."[70] His judges were trying to sniff out psychopannychism – the heretical doctrine that between bodily death and the last judgement, the soul of the departed is effectively asleep, and will wake on the last day to be judged by God. At least one of those involved with the trial, Sir Thomas More, was actively concerned with this heresy, which he repeatedly refuted just two years later in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.[71]

Though evasive, Bilney's answer was revealing. Surely, having accepted and followed Christ, Jesus' own apostles are not in hell. Therefore, if they are not in heaven, at worst they are awaiting judgment, presumably to come on the last day. Certainly Bilney did not believe that such souls are experiencing the pains of purgatory; as we have seen, he taught that once a sinner has been forgiven by Christ, no further specific works of atonement are

[67]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 516–17.
[68]1 Corinthians 14:9.
[69]Richard Rex, *The Theology of John Fisher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 158–61.
[70]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 516.
[71]Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Lawler, Marc'hadour, and Marius, 365–6, 376–7.

necessary to expiate her sins, and no further penalties attend them. If this is so, then purgatory has no purpose, and indeed appears sadistic. Moreover, in Bilney's lengthy discussion of the possibilities which await him in the letter to his parents, he did not mention purgatory once, a glaring omission in an age obsessed with shaving time off sentences in that celestial debtors' prison. This leaves an obvious question. If there is no purgatory, and the souls of the dead are not in heaven or hell, where are they? For Bilney, the likely answer was that they are asleep.

This is one respect in which Bilney's thought was in fact more Lutheran than has previously been suggested, since "it is hard to find anywhere a more concerned or enthusiastic spokesman for psychopannychism" than Luther.[72] In 1526, Luther argued in his lectures on Ecclesiastes that "the dead are asleep and do not know anything about our affairs," indeed they are "completely asleep and do not feel anything at all."[73] Similarly, in his lectures on Genesis, Luther held that "the saints do not taste death but most pleasantly fall asleep," and later on that those who have died in faith, "after they had been called away from the troubles and hardships of this life, they entered their chamber, slept there, and rested."[74]

In England, Luther's teaching found fertile soil and bloomed in the thought of William Tyndale and John Frith, both of whom taught a form of psychopannychism.[75] For Tyndale, belief that the righteous may be in heaven already, before the general resurrection, made a mockery of Christ's promise that all would be raised on the last day. The doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul "taketh awaye the resurreccion quite / and maketh Christes argument of none effecte."[76] A similar view was advanced that year by John Frith in his *Disputation of Purgatory*, which argued, like Bilney, that it is impossible to prove by scripture that the souls of the dead are in either heaven or hell. Rather, "the righteous … [man] when he departeth resteth in peace as in a bed."[77] Later on, Frith reiterates, "He that departeth in this fayth resteth in peace, and wayteth for the last day."[78] Frith's view is particularly notable since he likely knew Bilney personally from their overlapping time at Cambridge. These statements also make even more suggestive Bilney's answer on the translation of scripture, in which he said that the faithful could be moved to good works by knowledge of the resurrection of the body on the last day, after which there would be a final judgement, *not* an immediate judgement at the time of death, a sentiment Bilney repeated in the letter to his parents, in which, though he was just hours from death, he wrote that he would answer for his preaching "at the daye of dome," but makes no mention of a reckoning before then.[79]

[72]Bryan Ball, *The Soul Sleepers: Christian Mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestley* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2008), 30.
[73]Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton Oswald, ed., *Luther's Works: Volume 15* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 163–6.
[74]Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter Hansen, ed., *Luther's Works: Volume 4* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 309, 312.
[75]Ball, *The Soul Sleepers*, 44–9.
[76]William Tyndale, *An Answer Vnto Sir Thomas Mores Dialoge, The Independent Works of William Tyndale*, vol. 3, ed. Anne M. O'Donnell and Jared Wicks (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 117. See also Gergely M. Juhász, *Translating Resurrection: the Debate Between William Tyndale and George Joye in Its Historical and Theological Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).
[77]John Frith, *Disputation of Purgatorye*, in *The Whole Workes of W. Tyndall, Iohn Frith, and Doct. Barnes*, ed. John Foxe (London: John Daye, 1573), KK4v. *STC* 24436.
[78]Frith, *Disputation of Purgatorye*, MM4r.
[79]CCCC MS 340, 582.

Another, much closer associate of Bilney's, Hugh Latimer, was also repeatedly accused of psychopannychism, and at least one modern scholar, Bryan Ball, has argued that he was guilty. In 1532, Latimer was asked almost the same question Bilney was in 1527 – whether the souls of the saints and apostles were already in heaven.[80] Though he assented that they were, that he even had to do so is revealing. Ball has found hints toward soul sleep dotted throughout Latimer's sermons – in his 1536 sermon to Convocation he urged prayer, "not forgetting those that being departed out of this transitory life, and now sleep in the sleep of peace, and rest from their labours in quiet and peaceable sleep."[81] Later, when preaching on the daughter of Jairus, Latimer asked: "Where was the soul after it went out of this young maid?" His answer to his own question was revealing: "It was not in heaven, nor in hell," and purgatory he dismissed as "a vain, foolish argument." No, instead, the answer was simple, and lay in Christ's own words: "She sleepeth."[82] Latimer was among Bilney's closest friends in Cambridge; according to Foxe the two "used much to conferre and companye together," so much so that "the place where they most used to walke in the fieldes, was long called after, the Heretikes hill."[83] Later in life Latimer was to credit Bilney with his conversion and recall his friend with affection, ironically calling him "Saint Bilney."[84] Thus, if we follow Ball in accepting Latimer's psychopannychism, it may well be that Thomas Bilney was its source.

Unfortunately, Bilney's responses to many of the most interesting questions, including whether Christians should pray for the dead, whether there is a purgatory, whether Christians should pray to saints, whether faith may exist without works, and whether salvation and damnation are predestined, are omitted from Foxe's record, and the paper book in which they were originally recorded has long since been lost. Nonetheless, since Bilney never openly admitted to heresy, and given that, while generally reliable, Foxe did occasionally omit material he did not like, we can infer that Bilney's answers to these questions were orthodox.

Foxe himself hinted at this. At the start of his record of Bilney's responses he wrote: "Concerning the aunsweres vnto these articles … in [th]e most part of them, he semed to consent and agree, (although not fully and directly, but by waye and manner of qualifiyng) yet because he dyd not expresly denie them, it shall not be nedeful here to recite them all, saue only suche wherin he semed to dissent from them."[85] The crucial question is whether by "consent and agree" Foxe meant that Bilney agreed with the position of his interlocutors, or agreed with the position put in their questions. This is particularly challenging because the structure of the questions changes. Agreeing with the first ten interrogatories would mean orthodoxy, while agreeing with the twenty-four that followed would mean heresy.

Three additional considerations help to clarify this question. First, Foxe specified that Bilney agreed in the omitted answers "not fully and directly, but by waye and manner of qualifiyng," which as we have seen was typical of his semi-affirmations of orthodox teachings. This, together with Foxe's use of the term "consent" when stating that Bilney

[80]Ball, *The Soul Sleepers*, 55.
[81]George Corrie, ed., *Sermons by Hugh Latimer* (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1844), 40.
[82]Corrie, *Sermons*, 546, 550.
[83]Foxe, *TAMO* (1583 edition), 1759.
[84]Corrie, *Sermons*, 334.
[85]Foxe, *TAMO* (1563 edition), 516.

"seemed to consent and agree" to the articles, indicating a grudging acceptance, strongly suggests that the omitted answers were orthodox. Second, Foxe sought to portray Bilney as a Protestant hero – he is therefore far more likely to have omitted conservative answers than reformist ones. Finally, from the proceeding of the trial it is clear that Bilney at no point openly admitted to heresy. Therefore, the answers Bilney gave to these questions, including that of whether faith may exist without works, were probably affirmation of orthodox teaching, even if hedged and partial ones. Once again, this is a potential challenge if we take the conventional picture of Bilney's soteriology as resolutely Lutheran but makes far more sense in light of the revised conception of his views proposed above.

Conclusion

The core of Bilney's theology was the all-sufficiency of Christ. He believed that when Christ promised his disciples "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it," he meant most of all the forgiveness of their sins.[86] Once one's sins were forgiven, that was the end of the matter – requiring additional works of penance implied that Christ's word of forgiveness alone was insufficient. To Bilney, mechanical prayers, pilgrimages, and penny offerings had become the gods of popular idolatry and had to be destroyed.

This did not mean that good works or obedience to the law were unnecessary for salvation; on the contrary they were crucial. True penitence involved a sincere commitment to reform one's life and was a prerequisite for the absolution of sins. Bilney's view of the law was itself similarly based on the total sufficiency of God. God provided the law, and "the law of the Lord is perfect."[87] Therefore, no additional human rules were needed. Just as the belief that sinners needed the aid of saints to be forgiven implied an inadequacy in Christ's sacrifice, so arguing that human regulations were necessary in addition to the biblical law implied that God was a somehow less than perfect lawgiver. All of this amounted to an enormous and radical challenge to the economy and ecosystem of late medieval soteriology, but it did not involve the total rejection of its terms. Bilney's soteriology was fundamentally unlike that of Luther in its continued emphasis on the importance and possibility of keeping the law, and in its vision of forgiveness occurring repeatedly and through the means of sacramental confession. Bilney demonstrates the ways in which early evangelicals not only adopted new ideas piecemeal and gradually, but also adapted the ideas they received in creative ways. Bilney's distinctive interpretation of evangelical priorities further underscores the now common observation that the Reformation, in England and across Europe, was never following an inevitable track from Erasmianism to Lutheranism to Reformed Protestantism, but rather explored countless avenues (including *both* Bilney's conservative adaptation of evangelical soteriology *and* his strikingly Lutheran psychopannychism) abandoned by later generations. He reminds us, above all, not to see early evangelicals primarily in terms of tidy fixed camps, but rather as independent thinkers, working out their theology with fear and trembling.

[86]John 14:14, NRSV.
[87]Psalm 19:7, NRSV.