If English reform lacked a Luther or a Zwingli at least it had Thomas Bylney. In his capacity as an inflammatory preacher and a leader of men, he took the lead in starting the English Reformation. He often evoked the epithet of 'Little' — a reference to his slight stature — but a more fitting description would have been 'aggressive' or 'tough-minded' Bylney. Although he expressed doubts about the papacy he never openly repudiated the see of Rome: nor did he doubt the traditional doctrine of the real presence in the eucharist. Clearly, he cannot be called a Protestant although he is often portrayed as one. His conversion to evangelical reform came through reading the *Novum testamentum* of Erasmus, but his subsequent attack on the saints puts him beyond the pale of the milder, conservative Erasmianism. His personal influence at Cambridge was immense since he was responsible for converting key men in the coming Reformation of England: Thomas Arthur, Hugh Latimer, Robert Barnes and John Lambert. The portrait that Foxe paints of him is of saintly hue. Like the apostle Paul he was an insignificant-looking man, temperate in his habits, ascetic in his tastes, and unflagging in his concern for others. He visited 'lazar cots' where he comforted the sick, and went to the prisons to reclaim the hopeless. He was something of a Puritan since when his college neighbour, the future Bishop Thirlby, practised his recorder, Bylney would resort to prayer.

Bylney underwent four trials for heresy. On 23 July 1525 he was granted a licence to preach in the diocese of Ely, but a marginal note in Bishop West's register records that the licence was revoked because the holder had been accused and convicted of heresy.¹ It is likely that this episcopal prohibition on Bylney's preaching caused something of a stir. Resistance to episcopal control of the pulpit was a consistent feature of early reform. One of the articles that Thomas Arthur was to abjure in 1527, after his joint trial with Bylney before Wolsey's episcopal commissioners, was 'that there ys nether bishop nor ordynary nor yet the pope that may make a law to let any to preche the gospell'.² In a sermon in St Mary Woolchurch in the diocese of London, Arthur was reported to have claimed the right to preach by four authorities: Cardinal Wolsey, whose licence he had; the university of Cambridge; the pope; and the dominical command of Christ himself. A similar claim had been made in the same year by George Marshall while preaching in the London cure of Danbury. At a hearing before the vicar general on 2 April 1527 he admitted

¹ Cambridge University Library, Register West, fo. 33r.
² Guildhall Library, Register Tunstall, 9531/10, fo. 136r.
saying on the occasion, ‘I am a graduat a master of art and a master of Grammar and I wyll shew you the Gospell’. He also made reference to St Paul that no man be forbidden to preach, and to the dominical command of Christ.3

Bylney next appeared before the personal audience of Wolsey and was dismissed on his oath not to preach heresy. This episode is commented on by Thomas More in his Dialogue concerning Tyndale, published in 1528. Much of this work is devoted to justifying Bylney’s handling by the spirituality against certain charges that he had been falsely accused, and More relates that on his arraignment before Wolsey he had been treated ‘very benignly’, even to the extent of having the costs incurred by his summons borne by the cardinal himself. More explains this by the fact that Wolsey so favoured the university that he was lenient towards misdemeanours.4 Foxe tells us that after the conversion of Latimer Bylney set out on a preaching tour towards London, intent on preaching against the idolatrous rood in the church of St Magnus before it had been gilded. It was as a result of this preaching tour that Bylney was called to book for a third time before an episcopal tribunal sitting in the chapter house of Westminster on 27 November 1527. The tribunal included many illustrious names – the foremost orthodox scholars, Fisher of Rochester and Tunstall of London, and those pillars of orthodoxy, West of Ely and Longland of Lincoln. This fraternal front was marred by a wrangle between Wolsey and Tunstall, with Wolsey claiming that the bishops were his legatine commissioners. Tunstall retorted that his ordinary jurisdiction was sufficient to proceed against heretics in his own diocese. As a compromise, the trials of Bylney and Arthur proceeded jointly under both jurisdictions, Wolsey himself soon leaving the court on pressing state business and Tunstall remaining as president.

The broad features of Bylney’s trial of 1527–8 may first be established before going on to consider the thorny problem of the authenticity of the record. This has been seriously called into question by E. G. Rupp on several counts. First, More in his Dialogue credited Bylney and his followers with a deliberate policy of mendacity: ‘Let us preach and set forth our way. And if we be accused let us say we said not so, and yet some of them shall we win alway the while.’ Although it in fact seems likely that Bylney did not show all his mind in answering to interrogatories put to him during the trial, Rupp finds More’s contention unacceptable. On the other hand, Rupp accepts another of More’s judgements to the effect that Bylney’s abjuration was a compromise. The other problem relates to the Wycliffite articles of Bylney’s abjuration. Rupp sees these as a false accusation against the reformer since ‘Bylney was no Lollard but a considerable figure with a not undistinguished following in the universities’.5 We shall return to this issue. The records of the trial itself immediately present another problem. In handling his account of the trial, Foxe makes one of his

worst slips as a historian when he wrongly assigns to Thomas Arthur an interrogatory touching doubts expressed as to the real presence in conversation with Sir Thomas More. In fact, this question was not addressed to Arthur but to a third suspect who was present, Richard Foster. This brief appearance by Foster on 2 December 1527 was the prelude to an abjuration by him on 5 December. He had been dismissed on the first occasion pending a written statement on his views of the eucharist. It is crucial to understand that the eucharistic controversy did not arise in the trials of Bylney and Arthur. Another misapprehension about these trials at Westminster was made by A. F. Pollard. He thought that Wolsey's central legatine court at Westminster inhibited the local diocesan consistories and that these 'recovered their liberty' after 1529. In fact, the *magna abjurata* of 1528 — as these mass Lollard trials have come to be known — before London courts proves this to be wrong: Wolsey's commissions for heresy were only occasional.

The trial of Bylney opened with his being asked whether he had taken an oath to avoid the heresies of Luther and others. He admitted that he had but not lawfully: an answer that must have angered Wolsey and Bishop West, the latter being used to administering such an oath to all Cambridge graduates. There are two sets of interrogatories in Tunstall's register. Thirty-four are in Latin and cover a wide spectrum of reforming opinion. Solifidianism, the priesthood of all believers and the bondage of the will clearly relate to the reception of Lutheranism that had been opposed by Fisher's sermons and Wolsey's mandates to bishops. Erasmianism is covered by such questions as whether the scriptures should be in the vernacular, and whether men should concentrate on the bare essentials of the faith. The Wyclifite objection to the honouring of the saints and their images, and to the saying of prayers to them, was also represented. In the margin of the register there are another six interrogatories in the vernacular which are wholly Lollard in character. Sacramentarianism — that is the denial of sacramental grace and the real presence in the eucharist — is listed together with articles on the veneration of images, prayers to saints and the dead, and the condemnation of the ceremonies of the church. In the event, the thirty-four Latin ones were used and the vernacular, Lollard, articles were not. It appears that the judges had partially prejudged the issue. By 1527 German and Swiss reforming literature was in circulation, and it was likely that academic heretics had imbibed them rather than that they were following the precepts of Wyclif and the Lollards. Even so, the bishops recognized the possibility of a popular mixed heresy in which Wyclifite views played a part. A. G. Dickens has demonstrated this to be true for the diocese of York. In the event, it will be shown that Bylney was closer to the Lollards than he was to Luther.

The responses to the interrogatories were copied into a paper book which

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has not survived, so that Foxe has to be relied upon for Bylney’s answers to interrogation: he records only fifteen of the original thirty-four, missing out some of the key issues. Bylney affirmed the first two articles without reservation: he agreed that the condemnation of Luther was just and that the councils and constitutions of the church were to be universally observed. It is thus not possible to suggest that Bylney was a Lutheran, or that in 1527 he was forced to recant Lutheran views, as has recently been suggested. One of the articles of his abjuration does have a Lutheran flavour about it but, as will be argued later, this can be accounted for by the movement known as Evangelism which did contain a superficial reaction to Luther that led it to espouse vague doctrines of faith. The White Horse circle at Cambridge of which Bylney was a participant, though nick-named ‘Germany’, in all probability was simply a reforming sodality of which there were so many in early sixteenth-century Europe. More than anything, these were discussion groups in which humanists extended their liberty of expression into the field of religion by reading forbidden books. As will be shown, the bishops used the smear of Lutheranism on suspects who plainly held Wycliffite views. In Spain, similarly, the inquisition dubbed the leaders of Evangelism, Erasmians, and Illuminists as ‘Lutherans’.

To the next question recorded by Foxe, whether the catholic church could err and whether it was known only to God, Bylney answered more equivocally. He agreed that many papal laws were scriptural and profitable, but continued in Erasmian vein, following Augustine and Gerson in a plea for greater simplicity since it was impossible for men to keep so many observances, ‘when our forefathers, being pure before the fall, could observe only one precept’. He might have added that they failed to keep that one. He affirmed that the church could not err, and that councils ‘congregated in the Holy Ghost’ were a visible assembly of the catholic church. However, Bylney was not taking a stand on curialism or conciliarism in this reply. He believed that the church was the company of the elect, known only to God: ‘no man should be ascertained of another man’s salvation, or of his own, but only through faith and hope’. Clearly, Bylney stands in descent from the radical tradition of Wyclif and Hus. It was the very point of man’s inability to know who the elect were that made Wyclif’s propositions so disruptive.

To the article whether true Christians should venerate images in church, Bylney answered, ‘Cum sint libri laicorum, adorare oportet, at non imaginem sed prototypon’. In the light of what follows this is best seen as a circumspect reply to a leading question. Wyclif and his immediate academic followers hedged the cult of the saints around with increasing reservations about idolatry and superstition. Wyclif increasingly tended to condemn offerings and pilgrimages as idolatry, while William Taylor extended this attack on the saints to include the invocation of them. Erasmus ridiculed the relic of the Virgin’s milk

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at Walsingham in his *Colloquies* of 1526, but later apologized to Wolsey for any trouble his skits might have occasioned. Thomas More, the leading Erasmian in England, could be critical of superstitious practices, such as the mechanical saying of Our Lady's psalter, but like his master came down on the conservative side when controversy raged. In his *Dialogue* More was indulgent towards abuses and insistent upon the pestilential heresy of Thomas Bylney 'that we should do no worship to any images, nor pray to any saints, or go on pilgrimages'.

The formula, that images were the books of laymen, could cut both ways. For More in 1528 it was the initial justification for images which could be expanded to include the whole structure of late medieval piety. Saints were honoured in their images, and God in his saints. Such practices as offerings, pilgrimages, honouring of relics, efficacious cures, miracles, and the decking of images with candles, all these could be built on the formula by the Erasmian. More saw the wholesale attack by Bylney and other heretics as a malicious attempt to quench the devotion of the faithful. Conversely, the formula could be used to limit the practice of the cults. In the Henrician Injunctions of 1538 images are ordered to be used as 'bookes of unlearned men that can noe letters'. Beyond that use images tended to superstition and idolatry which had been introduced in the past by avaricious priests. In future such practices as pilgrimages, offerings, candles, waxen images and other devotions done to images, including 'kyssing or lyking', were to cease, and images that had been so abused in the past be removed. This limited iconoclasm was the high-water mark of the Henrician Reformation, a period that coincides with what G. R. Elton calls the 'age of reform'. The architect of these religious changes was probably Thomas Cromwell, aided by Erastian reformers like Cranmer, Latimer, and Barnes - a reform which went ahead by means of preachers and printing press alike. There can be little doubt that Bylney's use of the formula about laymen's books was intended to be limiting and mainly Wycliffite in provenance.

In answer to the interrogatory whether the souls of St Peter, St Paul and the Virgin were in heaven, Bylney betrayed a narrow biblicism: 'he did not believe that they were in heaven; being so taught by the Scriptures and holy fathers of the church'. He gave an unorthodox reply to the next question, whether it was possible to believe that Our Lady remained not always a virgin. He asserted that it was possible. He agreed with the next two questions recorded by Foxe, affirming that men should observe festivals and be obedient to monarchs as unto parents. The next three interrogatories to which replies are recorded concerned vernacular translations, and here Bylney occupied an Erasmian position. He wanted to see the Lord's prayer, the creed, and the New Testament in English, with the addition of marginal notes to avoid error. The reply that most clearly reveals Bylney's Evangelism came in answer to a

12 Guildhall Library, Register Bonner, i, 9531/12, fo. 30r.
question on papal pardons. He regarded them, as currently used, as derogatory to Christ’s full and perfect atonement, and therefore held that they should be restrained. This was the heart of his belief, that anything that detracted from the uniqueness of Christ’s passion should be swept away. The remaining replies were to the effect that legal redress was available to the weak but that true Christians should avoid restitution at law, while he went on to quote patristic authorities in support of his assertion that God was the author of punishment but not of evil.  

Bylney had been initially charged with preaching heresy in London cures: St Helen’s Bishopsgate, St Magnus, Willesden, Newington, Kensington, and Chelsea. It goes without saying that he must have gained access to these pulpits with the assent of incumbents who were not unsympathetic to his cause. His judges were not satisfied that he had fully revealed his mind in his replies to interrogation and went on to admit witnesses of his preaching. The first set of articles were deposed by two chaplains who had been present at his sermon in St Magnus. The depositions were almost exclusively concerned with the saints, and the first three covered the following assertions: that men should pray to no saints but only to God; that men ought to worship God only and no saints; and that no lights should be set before images. Bylney denied having preached these opinions. However, to the next two depositions, the plain ‘negat’ of Tunstall’s register becomes ‘negat ut ponitur’:

Item he sayd lykwise as ezechias distroyde the brasen serpent that moyses made by the commaundement of god even soo shuld kynges and prynces nowadayes dystroy and burne Images of the sayntes sett up in churches and other placys.

Item he said good people I exhorte yow in god that if prystes by of yyvyle conversation or will not applye ther lernynge that yow helpe them not but rather let them starve then gyve them any penny.

It is clear that Bylney here partially reveals his Wycliffite side with his qualified attack on idolatry expressed in the veneration of images, and his advocacy of the withholding of clerical endowments. The next set of depositions, taken from his sermon preached at Willesden, repeat the Wycliffite invective of the first set.

In primis he sayd that the Jewes wolde have becom crysten agoo but fore idolatry usyd by cristen men as offringes of candelles wax or money to Images of stockes and stones stonding in churches or chapellys.

It was at this point that the trial reached its dramatic climax, a climax which has produced so much controversy, then and now. Bylney asked that the trial should be stopped since he could not remember whether he had preached so or not. It was this outburst that later led to rumours that Bylney was forced to abjure heresies he had not been guilty of. As will be shown, the weight

of the evidence is against this interpretation of the trial. The likelihood is that Bylney was deliberately obstructing the *ex officio* process: it would not be the last time that a kind of moral violence was used against what was, after all, legal violence on the part of the church. The remaining depositions stand unanswered. The remainder of the Willesden depositions continued in the same Wycliffite tones but in a more extreme form:

Item he sayd the prestes take away the offrynges made to such Images give them to hooris and dyd hange them abowght there neckys and after that toke them fro them and dyd hange them agayn uppon the Images.

He was accused of rebuking parishioners for making offerings to Our Lady of Willesden, and of having affirmed that to confess one's sins in one pater noster was as good as a pilgrimage to Rome. The third list of depositions contains articles of the same sort that were supposed to have been preached at Newington. The final list refers to supposed errors preached in Christ Church, Ipswich, on 28 May 1527. These were more theological and extended than the other articles, perhaps reflecting the fact that they had been deposed by friars. They were of the same evangelical flavour as his answer on papal pardons, expressing his belief in the sufficiency of Christ, the supremacy of scripture, and the allegation (after Lollard fashion) that there had been only one pope who lived rightly, the rest having been tainted with simony and worthy of being opposed.

On 3 December Bishop Tunstall exhorted Bylney to return to the church and forsake his errors. Bylney did not reply like a man falsely accused. Instead he said that he would stand to his conscience, repeating the words 'fiat iusticia et iudicium' three times. On the previous day, Tunstall had produced further evidence in the shape of five letters that Bylney had written to him during the trial. Bylney had attempted to convert his judges by confessing his faith, a course which had brought such dramatic effects with men like Latimer: here it was coolly received and used as evidence against him. Foxe reproduces three of the original letters. The message of the first is simply Christ as man's everything. It contains the account of his conversion, in the manner of an English Luther:

But at last I heard speak of Jesus, even then when the New Testament was first set forth by Erasmus; which when I understood to be eloquently done by him, being allured rather by the Latin than by the word of God (for at that time I knew not what it meant), I bought it even by the providence of God.16

The letter went on to say that he had not preached heresy or sedition but simply that men should put their confidence in Christ crucified. He had been slandered by men who instead of preaching Christ preached elect works such as pilgrimages, buying of pardons, fasts, and offering of candles. He claimed to have preached against the abuse of saints rather than against the saints themselves. The second and third letter dealt with the question what the clergy

should preach. His answer was simple and evangelical: that preachers should show forth the fruits of Christ's atonement, which is remission of sins.

On 4 December, Bylney's obstinacy led Tunstall to begin the reading of the definitive sentence, but he halted at the crucial clause of condemnation, a common device to stay execution in order to gain a submission. On 5 December Bylney replied in the same vein as before: he did not wish to shame the gospel that he had preached and he did not consider himself separated from the church; moreover, he could call thirty witnesses to his honesty. Bylney still refused to abjure in the afternoon, alleging that his conviction had not been sufficiently proved. Finally, he was allowed three days in which to deliberate. On 7 December the patience of the judges was rewarded, and after reading the abjuration in private, Bylney abjured and submitted himself to penance. He was to make public penance at St Paul's and was to be imprisoned at the cardinal's pleasure. Sir Thomas More, who was present at the reading of the abjuration, was dissatisfied because Bylney did not specifically acknowledge himself convicted of the seven articles of the abjuration. There is no indication of any such irregularity in the register, the abjuration reading:

[I] doo detest and abjure all maner heresies and articules folowynge whereupon I am now deffamyd noted vehemently suspected and convicted That is to say That men shuld prey onlye to god and to no sayntes Item that christen men owght to wurshipe god and no sayntes.

The remaining articles were that men should not set up lights before images: 'that man in no wise can meryte by his own dedys': that miracles daily wrought were by the devil with the sufferance of God: and that no pope has the authority of Peter unless his life is as pure and perfect as Peter's was. The general tenor of the abjuration is borne out as authentic by another document preserved by Foxe: 'A dialogue between Friar John Brusierd and Master Thomas Bilney at Ipswich concerning the worshipping of images'. Here, Bylney's emphasis upon the atonement of Christ led him to assert that the role of saints was extraneous.17

More's detailed apology for the bishops' handling of Bylney sought to quell a swell of rumour and anticlerical comments. It touched on wider issues of the Reformation which were linked to Bylney's own case. According to More, some folk had believed that many things that could not be proved had been brought against Bylney as they had been brought against Luther himself. Certain honest priests in London held that Bylney had been falsely accused because he attacked the abuses of friars, and the pomp and pride of the clergy at large, while Bylney himself was a self-effacing man of virtuous life whose preaching edified the people. Similar doubts were entertained about the burning of Tyndale's New testament at St Paul's Cross and about Tyndale himself, who while he was in England was known as well learned and a good preacher. Had not his books been burnt so that no one could come to the truth? Similarly, was Luther as evil as had been made out? Was he not persecuted

17 Guildhall Library, Register Tunstall, 9531/10, fos. 133v–135v.
because of his attack upon the abuses and vice of the church of Rome, and his books burnt so that no man could come to the truth? It appears that there was something of the same sort of popular reaction to Luther in England as there had been in Germany itself, albeit without the fervent nationalism. This term ‘Lutheran’ was made ‘a common cloak of a false crime’ by the clergy, that poor simple and unlearned men, should instead of teaching, be beaten cruelly with abjurations and open shame with peril of burning also, if a few fake witnesses shall after such abjuration depose that they have heard him fall in relapse.

More partially dealt with these objections by saying that Bylney attacked images, saints and pilgrimages, whereas saints, by their intercessions with God, can and do help us. Similarly, the root of Luther’s heresy was the sole authority of scripture, while the church should be the interpreter of scripture and the Spirit leads the church into all truth, including ‘unwritten truths’. He also upheld the traditional distinctions of worship, latria being for God alone and dulia for his creatures. He doubted whether there was man or woman so mad that they mistook the saints themselves for dead stones, while the miracles done at the images and shrines of the saints showed that God wished them to be sought at particular places. Those that make so much of idolatry over saint worship seek only to attack the saints themselves, while since St Loy was a farmer what harm is there in seeking his help with our horses? If abuses did occur, they were not so important. Wives who brought oats to the image of St Wilgefort, hoping that the saint would rid them of their husbands, did nothing but provide fodder for the canons of St Paul’s horses. After all, ‘a few doting dames make not the people’.

More returned to his theme by quoting rumours coming from the university of Cambridge over the handling of Bylney, the burning of the New testament, and the forbidding of Luther’s books. Some had found the last not so bad as they were made out to be. They also thought the burning of heretics to be uncharitable. More countered all this by declaring that one of the witnesses in Bylney’s favour, who had written him a letter, turned out to be Robert Foreman, rector of All Saints Honey Lane in London. He, together with his curate, Thomas Garard, and his servant, Geoffrey Lome, had been heretical book agents in the universities and plain heretics. In fact, Bylney had been convicted on the evidence of some twenty men: ‘honest men and almost of all sorts, of religious folk, husbandmen, and gentlemen’. More dealt next with Bylney’s claim that he had forgotten his sermons. He felt that this was impossible unless Bylney was mad, ‘after so many sermons’. Bylney’s copy of the Vulgate survives, and in the marginalia there is a comment on Jeremiah’s ‘pious lie’, an indication, perhaps, that Bylney could contemplate a politic untruth. More upheld the validity of the ex officio oath, asserting that it was the suspect’s duty to tell the truth, ‘upon damnation’. He clearly felt that Bylney had obstructed the path of justice. He went on to the wider issues, saying that Tyndale’s New testament was a false translation and that the scriptures could

18 J. Y. Batley, On a reformer’s Latin Bible (1940), pp. 47–8.
be read in the vernacular if it were done under the direction of the ordinaries. Similarly, Luther’s books were full of heresy, and Luther himself, in the name of freedom, loosened the bonds between princes and their subjects, and encouraged the Turkish invasion of the empire. The burning of heretics was justified by the violence that heretics did to Catholic people. He upheld the necessity for good works to be joined with faith. He justified the term ‘Lutheran’ when used to cover all heretics since ‘Luther’s sect is in effect the whole heap of heresies gathered together’. In his defence of the church against the heresy of Bylney, Tyndale and Luther, More laid down controversial policy for a long time to come: he also put Bylney in his context. While he was clearly a hostile witness against Bylney, one cannot doubt his sincerity or his grasp of contemporary issues. It is likely that his interpretation of the trial of 1527 is broadly right.\(^{19}\)

More succeeded in halting the Reformation in England where Wolsey had largely condoned it, and his resignation from the chancellorship can be seen as a result of the king’s displeasure at too-successful prosecution at a time when anti-papal reformers were beginning to have their uses.\(^{20}\) There is no doubt that More worked closely with the bishops in opposing reform, and a small number of cases that came up before the vicar general of London seem to echo the sentiments of someone sympathetic to the Reformation that had been detailed in the *Dialogue*. As early as 30 September 1525, a preacher had unwisely repeated some hearsay in a sermon at St Paul’s, to the effect that some were withdrawing their devotions from the church, particularly candles set before images, and were ready to be burnt with Luther’s books. The rumours mentioned in the *Dialogue* are recalled by the offensive words of two parishioners of St Andrew’s, Eastcheap, who appeared on 2 May 1527. John Parkyns was accused of the following:

\[
yf I had xx bokes of the holye scriptor translatyd in to Englishe I wold bringe noon of them in for my lord of london, curse he or blesse he for he dothe it bycause we shuld have no knowledge but kepys it all secrete to hym self.\]

William Jonson of the same parish was charged with having praised the works of Luther, adding that if he had his way, they would be published throughout the realm. On the subject of Bylney’s trial of 1527, Robert West, a priest of St Andrew Undershaf, denied having spoken the following words on 7 June 1528:

\[
my lord of london will suffre no man to preche at powles crosse but flaterers and dissemblers for they that say trouth er ponyshed as bylney and Arthure was.\]

While the charge was denied, it is at least an indication of what was in the air.

If More was a hostile witness to Bylney’s case, there were sympathetic

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\(^{19}\) More, *Dialogue*, pp. 6–314.


\(^{21}\) Greater London Record Office, DL/C/330, fos. 100r, 137v, 138v, 1647.
witnesses who bore out the evidence of the trial as More portrayed it. More quoted the case of ‘an ancient heretic’ who appeared before Wolsey and confessed that he would not stop to go twenty miles to hear Bylney preach against images, relics, and pilgrimages. The next favourable witness to Bylney’s preaching was the Essex Lollard, John Pykas, who got caught up in the magna abjurata of 1528. Pykas, a baker of St Nicholas parish in Colchester, revealed at his interrogation before Bishop Tunstall on 7 March 1528 that he was a Lollard of some standing. Five years previously, his mother had taught him not to believe in the sacraments of the church but rather in the teaching of the gospels and epistles. She gave him the epistles in a Wycliffite version, to which he added Tyndale’s New testament which he bought in 1526 from a Lombard of London for the sum of four shillings. He learnt his doctrine from these books and subsequently taught in various houses that the sacrament of the altar was but bread and wine after the words of consecration. He also taught, from the same sources, that there was no baptism but that of the Holy Ghost, and that private confession to God was sufficient. He also maintained that the church had no right to declare fasts, and he fasted only on ember-days. Also, that God made no holy days except Sunday, and that the pope and other churchmen had no authority to grant pardons. His Lollardy was strengthened by hearing Bylney and others preach at Ipswich to the effect that it was but folly to go on pilgrimages, for saints are but stocks and stones and cannot speak to a man nor do him any good, and that it is no good to pray to saints for they are but servants and can hear no man’s prayer.

The last piece of information about Bylney’s preaching comes from a prosecution in 1533. On 2 July, Guido Glazen and Thomas Fen, shoemakers of Eye in Suffolk, were examined on certain articles. Glazen answered first and confessed that he had said that he would not worship the cross or the crucifix. He denied the second article, that if he had the rood of Eye monastery in his yard he would burn it and do other unmentionable things to it—an article he later confessed in his abjuration. At first, Fen refused to answer, but after imprisonment at Hoxne he confessed the same articles as Glazen. He revealed the source of his heresy by saying that on Corpus Christi day last he walked with a man whose name he did not know, who pretended to be learned and persuaded him not to worship images or the crucifix. On 5 July, Margaret Mason of Eye testified that she heard Adrian Herrysoune, servant of another shoemaker of the same place, speak against fasting: ‘And if he had been at home I wolde have better meale’. There then follow the abjuration of Glazen and the implication of another shoemaker, Francis Nolles of Harleston. Glazen also revealed the source of his heresy, a sermon that Bylney had preached at Hadleigh in 1527. It appears that Bylney’s invective against the saints had gained new adherents who were not necessarily Lollards. The craft connexion

22 More, Dialogue, p. 194.
23 Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII, ed. J. S. Brewer et al. (1862–1923), iv (ii), 4029(2).
24 Norfolk and Norwich Record Office, Act/4/4b, fos. 33v–37r.
here, that of shoemaking, probably also helped to spread heresy once it had been initially imbibed.

The sequel to Bylney's trial of 1527 was his imprisonment in the Tower for a year and his return to Cambridge full of remorse. In 1531 he set out on another preaching tour towards Norwich with the intention of going up 'to Jerusalem', an indication that he was going to preach in the same vein as before and expected to suffer for it. Like other Cambridge reformers, Bylney was a Norfolk man, and it seems natural that he should turn his steps to his native county. That he had contacts there is proved by a letter of his to the vicar of Dereham that pressed the incumbent to preach the gospel, if only by repeating one sentence of it each Sunday.25 Bylney's subsequent trial for relapse at Norwich has left no record apart from Foxe's account. His articles of 1531 were similar to those with which he had been charged previously: that he had dared to preach after his conviction; that he had spoken against the worshipping of saints and the invocation of them as mediators; and that he had preached in the fields and in households, and had taken Tyndale's New testament and Obedience of a Christian man to an anchoress in Norwich. A note among the Norwich municipal archives records that Bylney was burnt in Norwich for speaking against the papal supremacy.26 This is partly borne out by the address that Bylney gave to the onlookers at his execution. The opinion of Gow and Rupp that Bylney did not make a last-minute recantation seems correct.27 He attended mass and then made a speech full of reconciliation and irenics. In this he admitted to entertaining doubts as to the papacy, but did not consider himself cursed 'before God'. He had also doubted the church 'as it is now used', but believed in 'Ecclesiam Catholicam'. He left the vexed question of clerical marriage to be settled by divines, and exhorted the people present to uphold vows of chastity and fasting.28

Bylney's trials of 1527 and 1531 probably brought wider repercussions than have so far been suggested. On 18 March 1532, the 'Supplication against the Ordinaries' was presented to the king, with its accusations of uncharitable handling by the clergy of recent heresy trials. Elton considers the grievances about the ex officio procedure in heresy trials to be the 'true core of the commons' genuine complaint', in the six extant drafts of the 'Supplication'. The major grievance repeated in draft after draft is the malicious citing and accusation of innocent men, without the support of reliable witnesses. This specific charge is elaborated in draft D, the one Elton believes was resuscitated in 1532 by Cromwell, and presented as an official bill in the parliament of that year. Thus, while the commons had shown definite grievances of their own in 1529, they acquiesced in the forging of an anti-papal weapon in 1532.29 It is possible that

26 Ibid. i (1847), 143.
28 Letters and papers, v, 372(3).
the reappearance of the ‘Supplication’ in 1532 was not sponsored by the government but represented a continued agitation by the commons against the conduct of heresy trials. A draft heresy bill belonging to 1529 or to the next two years, proves to be a more anticlerical version of the ‘acte for the punysshement of heresye’ of 1533. The grievances displayed are that the ordinaries arrest on trumped up charges those who have reproved their living, forcing them to abjure, or to submit to perpetual imprisonment or burning. Bail is refused, while there is no redress against false witnesses. The remedy suggested is the enforceable use of indictment, as in felony, or the accusation of at least two reliable witnesses. It appears that many of the grievances recall the rumours about Bylney’s trial of 1527 after he had obstructed the ex officio procedure. He had called for true witnesses to his preaching, while others had complained that he had been falsely accused and silenced for his attack on clerical abuses. Equally as in 1527, the trial of 1531 at Norwich brought its effects: the mayor of Norwich anticipated parliamentary concern over the burning of Bylney. An enquiry was held before the chancellor on 5 December 1531 to establish the facts of the last trial. Reed, the mayor of Norwich, answered questions as to whether Bylney had appealed to the king, and whether he had recanted at the stake. It seems that Bylney had again refused to answer satisfactorily under the ex officio oath, while Reed was certain that he had appealed to be tried before the king. Reed denied having asked the chancellor of Norwich to hand Bylney over but he had reminded the ecclesiastical judges ‘that the king had new title given him by the clergy’, and that the trial be conducted accordingly. In 1534, Bishop Nykke of Norwich was imprisoned for offences under praemunire. While this was probably a general warning to conservative bishops that a new order had come to pass, a dispatch of Chapuys suggests that the suit did not stem only from the bishop’s breach of municipal privilege in citing the mayor of Thetford on heresy charges, but that a subsidiary charge concerned his having burnt Bylney without waiting for the king’s writ.

While Bylney is important to Reformation issues in popular and parliamentary circles, his purely religious significance is much greater. If he cannot be called a Protestant, or a Lutheran or a Lollard, how are we to view him? The need for definition is important since the confusion over Bylney’s belief is considerable. The best way of viewing Bylney against the background of reform in general is to see him as an English exponent of the movement known as Evangelism. Unlike Lutheranism, European Evangelism lacked a dominant leader; rather, as was true also of the Radical Reformation, certain topics such as justification and grace crop up in various places at the same time. Among the Radicals, re-baptism and anti-Trinitarian views became current in the Netherlands and Switzerland under the pressure of new scriptural questionings.

31 Ibid. p. 622.
32 Letters and papers, v, 569.
33 Ibid. vii, 158, 171.
The springs of Evangelism were the impact of new versions of the Bible and of the solifidianism of Luther upon otherwise orthodox circles. In Spain, the eclectic nature of Evangelism is demonstrated in its contacts with the native Spanish heresy of Illuminism which gave the movement there an esoteric and even mystical complexion. Similarly in England, Evangelism was sensitive to Lollard opinion: it is as a conditioning factor in the story of English Evangelism that the native English heresy has one of its most important roles to play in sixteenth-century history. The preaching tours of men like Bylney, Latimer, and Arthur may seem a far cry from Juan de Valdés and the imperial court in Spain, or from the aristocratic salons of Julia Gonzaga and Vittoria Colonna in Naples where Valdés took refuge after his expulsion from Spain. They have one important thing in common, namely the espousal of the doctrines of faith while remaining in communion with Rome. In time, the south developed the doctrine of double justification as advocated by Cardinal Seripando at the Council of Trent, while from the north came a rather different version of the doctrine of faith. In England, it was not so much the operation of faith that was stressed by Evangelism but rather its object: the all-sufficiency of Christ. Put another way, it was faith in Christ's passion and atonement alone that became the familiar formula of faith with the English Reformers. This formula was often expressed in Lollard or Wycliffite terms: faith in the mediation of Christ rather than that of the saints. Looking at Evangelism in Italy, Jung has defined the movement as reforming and ecumenical and within the Roman communion, but having divergent tendencies. Evangelism, as the term implies, put the 'pure word of God' before the teaching of the church. Because it was undogmatic, aristocratic and transitory, Evangelism in Italy did not break away from the church or challenge the traditional dogmas of the eucharist.

The reorganization of church life in the diocese of Meaux made French Evangelism a more positive force for reform than elsewhere in Europe. Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples laid a foundation of biblicism in the years 1507 to 1525 that led to the replacement of the mass by sermons and Bible reading. In Strassburg, from the preaching of Matthew Zell to the abolition of the mass in 1529, the familiar combination of biblicism, preaching and irenics can be seen as making a typical period of Evangelism. Similarly, in the years 1519 to 1523, Zwingli's preaching in Zurich followed the same pattern, a period of biblical preaching before his final rupture with Rome and the establishment of a Protestant church order.

Four broad features of Evangelism thus present themselves. First, it accepted the doctrines of faith as against the penitential system of the medieval church. Second, it held the authority of scripture to be above that of the church. Third, it actively engaged in the preaching of the gospel, sermons becoming more important than ceremonies in its public programme. Fourth, it is an irenical
and eclectic movement, sensitive to many forms of reform. These features can be seen in English church life in the years 1520 to 1531, and nowhere better than in the opinions of Thomas Bylney. One of the articles of Bylney’s abjuration of 1528 shows a plain reaction to Luther in a vague doctrine of faith – ‘that a man in no wise can meryte by his own dedys’. The supremacy of scripture is expressed in another of Bylney’s articles:

Loo, here ys the new testament and here ys the olde. These be the swordys of owre savyoure chryste which I will preche and show to yow and nothyng else.

The importance of preaching to the Cambridge reformers has already been noted. A reformer looked back to the days of English Evangelism when he quoted a preacher as saying,

And that men ought to put their trust in goddes worde and to have better regarde to good sermons and preaching then to the sacrament of the alter, masse, matens, and evensonge.38

He had heard Edward Crome and Hugh Latimer preach similarly. The eclectic nature of Evangelism in England, manifest in the absorption of Lollard teaching on the saints, is seen in another of Bylney’s articles where he couches the chief of his doctrines – faith in Christ alone without recourse to anything else – in Lollard terms:

Seying that oure savioure Christ ys oure mediator betwene us and the father what shold nede us to seke any seynt for Remedye.39

Sometimes this doctrine of faith takes on a different emphasis which is equally important – faith in Christ’s passion alone. This is expressed in one of Bylney’s articles taken from his preaching at Ipswich where he attacked a bull of Sixtus IV that had remitted penance in purgatory for all those buried in a Franciscan cowl. Bylney reckoned this to be ‘a great blasphemye Ayenst the blode of christe’. For irenics, we need turn only to Bylney’s reconciliatory address at the stake when he exhorted the onlookers in conservative terms.

Bylney’s Evangelism was not an isolated phenomena. Evidence for Evangelism as the first stage of the English Reformation (first apart from Tudor Lollardy) occurs in many other trials of the period 1525 to 1533. In 1524, Thomas Batman, prior of the hospital of St Bartholomew in Rochester, was smeared with the taint of Lutheranism for what were plainly Lollard beliefs in the main: ‘diversos errores et opiniones Lutheri viz de non veneracione sanctorum in ecclesiis eciam sanctorum in celo’. It was Stephen Gardiner who later realized that Luther had not specifically denigrated the saints but that this belonged to the older English heresy. Batman did generally approve of Luther in the familiar superficial reaction to Luther common to Evangelism. The movement is best illustrated in his belief in a doctrine of faith couched in Wycliffite terms: that he puts all his faith in God and not in the saints. Batman abjured again in 1525, evincing the same Evangelism. He was again

38 British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra E.v, fo. 398r.
39 Guildhall Library, Register Tunstall, 9531/10, fo. 134v.
accused of holding the errors of Luther, 'that is to witte, that no man should offer to sayntes nor worship them but only god. Also I have said that no man should offer to the Rood of Grace nor to our Lady off Walsyngham or other ymages for they be but stokes and postis'.

In April 1528, Robert Bayfield, the colporteur who had connexions with the Christian Brethren, that organised wing of Lollardy, and with Tyndale, abjured a typical Evangelism: 'that all laud and praise should be given to God alone, and not to saints or creatures'.

That other emphasis of English Evangelism, the sufficiency of Christ's passion, crops up in two further trials. The confessions of John Tewkesbury in 1529 and 1531 show him to have been a Lollard who moved with the new currents of reform. He held 'that if he should look to deserve heaven by works, he should do wickedly; for works follow faith, and Christ redeemed us all, with the merits of his passion'. He followed Bylney in his expression of this doctrine in Lollard terms: 'He saith that Christ is a sufficient mediator for us, and therefor no prayer is to be made unto saints'.

In 1531, the lawyer James Bainham confessed a shorter version of this opinion: 'there is no purgatory but the purgatory of Christ's blood'. The trials of the heretical book agents, Garard and Lome, follow the same pattern. Garard evinced a superficial doctrine of faith in response to Luther, coupled with the usual Lollard opinions: 'that cristen men owght to worship god only and no sayncts'. Lome's confession was similar.

These are key trials that show the same Evangelism that Bylney maintained. However, the days of Evangelism were short lived. By 1534, the breach with Rome was complete. Much too much emphasis remains on the Henrician Reformation as an act of state. Religious change had begun earlier than 1533, and the significant changes wrought by the state came somewhat later. Apart from giving relief to those who were anti-papal, the Reformation parliament was accompanied by a religious reaction against Evangelism, leading preachers like Hugh Latimer and Edward Crome being made to jettison their aversion to saints and other traditional practices in their trials before convocation.

These erstwhile preachers of Evangelism now largely espoused the royal cause, limiting themselves to royal doctrine and setting forth the royal supremacy. They became Erastian reformers. However, the Erastians retained in their programme the central tenet of Evangelism, the sufficiency of Christ, and by 1537 Cranmer could claim that 'our justification by Christ's passion only' was the lawful doctrine of the realm.

Recognition of the existence of Evangelism solves many of the historical problems of the early English Reformation: its superficial Lutheranism, and the espousal of Lollard or Wycliffite views by academics. Nowhere is this movement better illustrated than in the trials of Thomas Bylney; they show him to have been the outstanding reformer of his generation.

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44 Guildhall Library, Register Tunstall, 9531/10, fos. 137r–137v.

45 Ibid. fos. 138v, 142v.