

A Dialogue of Sir Thomas More, Knight

by Sir Thomas More, written in 1529 at the Bishop of London's request;
revised in 1531 while Lord Chancellor

– Study Outline for *EWTM* edition –

The Messenger's major questions, objections, and comments are set in boldface.

Part 1

Preface: The issues of whom to trust, of purposeful distortion, of malicious conspiracy, and of the need for others' judgment lead Thomas More [TM] to write out this conversation and to publish it after consulting others. (527-9)

Chapter 1 "Letter of Credence": More's friend introduces the Messenger [M] as "my special secret [personal] friend"; he has "confidence and trust" that TM can help the M see "the very truth." (529-30)

"Author's Letter" to his friend: TM says he "shall never willingly deceive your trust." Note that the opening ten lines refer to the "credence," "confidence," and "special trust" of "your trusty friend." It affirms that the conclusions they came to "be so sure truths that they be not disputable," but TM will leave it to his friend to judge how well TM has argued these. (530)

(*Evening*) Initial meeting: To TM, **M recounts four major issues that are of concern**

TM's commentary to his friend on this initial meeting:

1. M stressed these were "mind of *others*" and that you had "so special trust and confidence" in "me and my learning" that "ye were fully determined to give full credence to me."
2. TM, having "demanded him what manner of acquaintance there was between him and you," and being told that the M is tutor to "your sons at school," TM then asks "to what faculties he had most given his study." Answer: Latin. "As for other faculties, he roughed nought of." TM reports that the M considers "philosophy, the most vanity of all" disciplines and that reading Scripture is "learning enough for a Christian man."
3. TM gives his initial judgment of the M: "he put me somewhat in doubt whether he were (as young scholars be sometimes prone to new fantasies) fallen into Luther's sect." TM thinks his friend may have thought the same – hence the reason for sending him.
4. In light of all this, TM devises and writes out a plan for the discussions that will follow. (530-4)
- 2 (*Next morning*) TM says he will respond to 4 issues raised the night before by M; begins with [Thomas Bilney]¹ affair, but postpones this until 3.2; defines "heresy" and (in 1531 edition) discusses *The Image of Love*'s criticisms of images & "outward observances." TM shows that words "be but images." (534-42)
- 3 M: don't assume that what I'm saying is my own opinion; **lists objections**; TM's lengthy reply. **M says God's temple should be the human heart**; TM: God also asked for temple of stone as his house of prayer. (542-6)
- 4 **M: Why?** TM: can't say WHY, but miracles confirmed THAT. (546-7)
- 5 **M: But the devil can produce miracles.** TM: Church's faith is crucial, as officially approved, and confirmed by general councils, but TM invites objections. (547)
- 6 M: Begins again by insisting that he articulates *others'* views. They discuss what TM says is the "much material" issue of whom and what to trust and why. Educated people "give credence to credible persons." There is "as much peril of error" in believing no one "as where men be too light of credence." (547-51)
- 7 **M objects**: "yet hit we not the point." Discussion on what can be known. TM says the existence of God can be *known*. 551-3)
- 8 **M: miracles are against nature**; TM argues that miracles are *above* nature. (553-4)
- 9 Against M's objections, TM argues that a Christian's presumption is to believe in miracles. (554)
- 10 TM: distinguishes 4 issues; changes "impossible" to "impossible to nature"; merrily speaks of the miracle of a birth. **M: "If it seem so ... to you, then have you a marvelous seeming"**; TM: import of keeping a sense of wonder. (554-6)
- 11 TM: size or occasion of a miracle is no concern to God. (556-7)
- 12 **How many witnesses are needed?** TM: "Some twain may be more credible than some ten." M still refuses to believe miracles, but easily believes malicious tales of a friar. (557-8)
- 13 **M still focuses on "kind of proof"**; TM strongly criticizes M's mistrust arising from sloth or incredulity. (558)

¹More explains why in this book he does not use the name of Fr. Thomas Bilney (1495-1531): to "preserve the man's estimation among the people" (723.25-26) since the case was still pending and a change of heart was possible.

14 In response to **M's point about gullible folk**, TM relates Duke Humphrey's shrewd way of exposing the "miracle" of the "blind" man of St. Albans. M responds by telling of "holy" Elizabeth of Leominster who lay nightly with the prior. When **M asks what trust or certainty can we have**, TM points to the examples of wise Duke Humphrey and the prudent King's mother who expose deceptions. TM ends by strongly correcting M's refusal to believe any miracle. (558-61)

15 TM: Because some folk are treacherous flatterers, all who seem friendly are not such flatterers. (561-2)

16 TM: Gives example of public miracle that recently occurred at Our Lady of Ipswich. (562-3)

17 TM asks M to explain the difference M makes between miracles of olden times and those today. M is concerned that TM thinks he really is a "favorer of that faction." M encouraged by TM's ability to listen so indifferently. After M explains, TM jokes that for one who rejects logic, M "play[s] the logician outright."

M invokes Scripture passages forbidding image veneration; many objections follow. (563-6)

18 TM diplomatically thanks M for "have not faintly defended your part as though it were a corrupted advocate."

Will begin with what they agree upon. So will answer objections after first establishing agreement on more basic issue – i.e., how to interpret Scripture. Issues of disagreement emerge such as: M thinks Scripture **promises a light and comfortable yoke**, not "fardel fulls of men's laws"; **M doubts value of good works**. TM says Christ himself made laws of Church; he insists that people "will not be so ready to live well as to believe well" and that the goodness of God does not allow us to fall from knowledge of the faith; otherwise if there is no norm to guide us, there is no Church. (566-71)

19 TM and **M agree**: the Church "cannot err in the right faith necessary to be believed." (571-2)

20 Since M has agreed, TM asks if anything is amiss in TM's argument. Yes, M has doubts: **he thinks faith is taught in Scripture rather than in the Church**. TM disagrees. (572-3)

21 TM says he "[check]mated" M on "two things ... as true points, and as plain, to a Christian man as any petition of Euclid's geometry is to a reasonable man." (573-6)

22 TM, opposing M's rejection of old holy Fathers' interpretation and of the liberal arts, explains the dangers of laziness and pride. **M defends the passionate and exclusive study of Scripture without wasting time on philosophy, "the mother of all heresies"** (578.33-34).

TM says the liberal arts are gifts of God (578.38).

TM shows the need for 3 rules to guide Scripture interpretation: old holy Fathers, Church's faith, reason. (576-9)

23 **M objects to bringing to Scripture these three external measures**; criticizes reason esp. as the great enemy of faith. TM gives a strong defense of reason, including the merry tale of the magical plum, and the defense of liberal education. (579-81)

24 **M says he is "somewhat content" with the role of reason, but opposes accepting faith as a rule** for interpreting Scripture. TM explains further. (581-3)

25 **M questions whether God wrote the Scriptures well**. TM's longest speech: on God's "high wisdom" and "wonderful temperance"; on import of reason, of laws & rituals, of good men who sometimes perform miracles, and of Christ's new law written in the heart. Ground of all Luther's great heresies: belief only in what is "proved evidently by Scripture." (583-590)

26 TM argues for God's "commandment that we shall believe his Church." (591-5)

27 **M objects**; TM defends the need to believe and obey the Church in faith and morals. (595-7)

28 **M objects** further. TM's strongest rebukes: "in very deed ye believe the Church in right nought"; "ye would now be judge over the Church." Church's teachings have "the consent and common agreement of the old holy fathers" – i.e., "concerning some necessary point of our faith or rule of our living." TM returns to issue of veneration of relics, images, shrines; **M resists agreeing with TM because "ye were content that we should ensearch again and again the matter otherwise besides, wherein mine agreement should not bind me."**

TM: what the Church is. **M: back again to Scripture first.** (597-601)

29 **M still will not "trust reason in matters of faith and of Holy Scripture."** TM retorts that his (and the Church's) reasoning has "Scripture for his foundation and ground"; invokes what Christ says in Scripture. (601-3)

30 TM reviews what has been proved; how Scripture depends on the "judgment and tradition of the Church." **M: No!** M ends lamenting the difficulties of remembering. (603-4)

31 M accepts the faith of the Church as a "right rule," but **M announces another difficulty that "turneth us yet in as much uncertainty as we were in before."** (605-6)

Part 2 (*After dinner/lunch; they resume in the garden*)

- 1 M summarizes major points from Part 1, but now questions: **What does the Church really believe? Who are the Church?** TM begins his response. (607-9)
- 2 TM on how the Church has existed before any heretical group came out of it. (609-11)
- 3 M: Perhaps only the **chosen and predestined are the true Church**. TM argues strongly against this. (611-2)
- 4 TM on why the Church must be publicly known & has stood firmly even if it meant death
 - Role of sacraments, priests & bishops; how Church is well known; madness of Luther's claims; what the Church is – beautifully described in marriage language (612-6)
- 5 TM: how the Church is not divided into factions. (616)
- 6 **M accepts argument about Church, but doubts if all in the Church have the right faith; for example, some “believe the worship of images and praying to saints to be idolatry.”**
 - TM refutes the idolatry charge. (616-7)
- 7 TM: Body of Christendom & general councils could not allow idolatrous practices to continue; urges M to bring up any questions he has; M agrees with TM. (617-8)
- 8 TM explains role of saints; **M: God can hear & help us himself**. (618-20)
- 9 **M questions relics and canonization**; TM responds. (621-5)
- 10 **M's main objections**: saints are venerated as God; what of superstitious action such as at St. Valery's?; what of illicit requests? (625-7)
- 11 TM analyzes three things in M's account: God alone receives *latría*, not saints; no one mistakes a statue for God; yes, there are abuses “yet not all things to be blamed that ye seem to blame”; distinguishes; as for St. Valery's: it's in France so let the U of Paris defend it! (627-31)
- 12 TM invokes the old holy theologians; **M questions if miracles are real** (again!); TM's response. **M swears he is fully answered and satisfied**. (631-5)

Part 3 (*Morning after Messenger's two-week stay at the University*)

- 1 **M reports 4 major objections of his university friends & how they stumped him**; TM shows M where he was mistaken in the way he answered them (compares this to Caius' trying to prove the boy an ass; shrewd boy's response as contrasted with M's response). Major question TM presses: Why believe the Church? TM's answer: “because ... God hath taught and told those same things to his Church” – even “if Scripture never had been written.” (636-40)
- 2 **M objects about how [Bilney] was unjustly treated**; TM cautions about being too quick to believe such things spoken against Church; explains that [Bilney] was so scrupulous that he couldn't live up to the law. **M's disrespectful attitude** towards the Divine Office vs. TM's “good mean manner.” (640-2)
- 3 **M criticizes the laws**; TM defends them. (642-4)
- 4 **M's objections about [Bilney's] trial**; TM's responses (645-8)
- 5 **M criticizes the “devil rigor” used against [Bilney's] first offense**; TM explains (648-53)
- 6 **M objects to discrediting someone's name**; TM responds (653)
- 7 M concedes the argument, but **asks about legitimacy of breaking an oath**
 - TM: it can never be legitimately done [TM expands this answer while in prison; see Addenda, p. 733.] (653-5)
- 8 **M questions burning Tyndale's translation of the New Testament** (655-8)
- 8-10 TM shows how T's translation is “Luther's Testament”; points out 3 deliberate mistranslations; shows M the actual texts (655-60)
- 11 **M's “pugnaunt and sharp” criticisms of the clergy**; M's belief that English clergy is “worst of all clergies” while English laymen are as good and upright as any.
 - TM distinguishes issues and gives his assessment. Aesop's fable of double wallet (661.49ff).
 - TM criticizes pride of those condemning the clergy and of those taking “filthy delight of evil communication” and the “wretched pleasure in the hearing of their sin”; story of Ham's disrespect for his father Noah vs. good sons who covered his nakedness. (660-3)
- 12 TM gives his reasons for clergy's corruption: too many; laws not followed. (663-5)
- 13 **M suggests that clergy should marry**; TM against Luther and Tyndale's position.
 - TM defends celibacy of clergy. (665-70)
- 14 **M returns to issue of translation & objects to the law forbidding an English translation** – “an evil-made law.” TM: There is no such law! Gives background since Wycliffe. Shows M the relevant synodal decree. M wonders how he and others were misled about this law. TM: partly malice, partly sloth and negligence. (670-2)

15 **M again criticizes the clergy** who burn books, & people too—referring to Richard Hunne.

TM: you are mistaken; explains that he was at the trial. Tells 3 funny things that occurred at the trial; explains what actually occurred. (672-9)

16 **M: Why keep English Bible out of layman’s hands?** (679-86) TM: I proved the opposite! M: But few have it. TM’s strong arguments for an English translation; explains difficulties confronted (the second longest speech of the work). **M says he is “fully content and satisfied” on this matter. They go to dinner.**

Part 4 (*After lunch, in the arbor of More’s garden*)

1 **M reports that many at the university had no bad opinion of Luther and thought the English clergy malicious in burning his books;** TM gives reasons for opposing Luther & Tyndale (687-8)

2 TM offers that M see himself Luther’s books to learn what L actually says; **M declines;** TM reviews what L has written against indulgences, pope, sacraments, good works, free will, Mass, purgatory... ; a section was added in 1531 edition to refute the charge that Pope Gregory passed a law against venerating images [responding to Tyndale’s *Answer*]; TM has M “read the formal words” & compare relevant documents; TM continues listing L’s positions against Our Lady, veneration of Holy Cross, vows of chastity and of marriage, celibacy – for the “utter destruction of the whole faith, religion, and virtue of Christendom.” (688-94)

3 TM on how L “began to fall in these mischievous matters,” falling “from reasoning to railing,” and from appealing to a general council to scoffing at and ranting about and denying authority of all general councils. Henry VIII’s explanation of L’s change: ire and envy. (695-6)

4 TM on how Luther lets out “all that he went about to hide.” (696-7)

5-6 TM on Luther’s inconsistencies & contradictions (697-8)

7 TM on horrors and cruelty caused by Luther’s promise of a “full freedom and liberty: discharged of all governance and any kind of law, spiritual or temporal, except the Gospel only.” (698-700)

8 **M objects that cruelty by men of war cannot be imputed to Luther.**

TM: Look at implications of denying free will and of saying God is responsible for evil. (701)

9 TM suggests the world may nearly be at an end. [Qualified at beginning of next chapter & denied in *Dialogue of Comfort* 3.Preface] (701-2)

10 TM on danger of denying free will and ascribing evil to God (703)

11 In response to **M’s belief that English Lutherans are better than German Lutherans,** TM relates a dialogue between a bishop and a learned English Lutheran.

M enters to defend the English Lutheran’s view.

Section added on St. James’ letter esp. in 1531 edition.

English Lutheran shown to be deliberately deceptive & malicious

Why Luther’s is the “very worst and most mischievous heresy...ever.” (703-15)

12 Henry VIII on why Luther’s heresy is the worst and a great danger to peace and order. (715-7)

13 TM finally takes up the issue raised in I. Preface and I.2: **Why use harsh penalties?** Heretics persisted in using violence and cruelty. TM distinguishes between action of heathens and heretics. Augustine’s experience with Donatists. Henry V’s experience with Lord Cobham. (717-9)

14 **M is critical of bishops’ role;** TM argues for obligation of self-defense in face of sedition; TM on just war. (719-22)

15 TM on rulers’ obligation to punish seditious heresy. He distinguishes gullible from proud and malicious heretics. (722-3)

16 **M urges that pity be shown in such inquiries,** esp. with the uneducated. TM: yes, but... (723-5)

17 TM on danger of false appearances and of pride; again: why this heresy is “the very worst and most beastly.” (725-8)

18 TM on need for severe punishment against sedition.

TM gives M books with specific passages marked to be read before they meet again.

Next day, just before lunch: **M says he is convinced.** TM offers to discuss Tyndale’s arguments “one by one”; **M declines.** TM’s long closing statement and then seven-line prayer.

They have lunch, then M goes home and TM, to work. (728-32)