

Savonarola

17

John Wycliffe was an Englishman, John Huss a Bohemian, and Jerome Savonarola, another of the forerunners of the Reformation, was an Italian. But whereas Wycliffe and Huss were involved in attacking the unbiblical teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, Savonarola was not a doctrinal reformer. He was a man who attacked the evil lives and immoral habits of many of his fellow-countrymen. God had used the writings of Augustine of Hippo to open his eyes to the moral apostasy in the Church. Being a man of influence through his position and intellectual qualities, he began to think about the necessity of reformation.

Born in the Italian city of Ferrara in 1452, Savonarola even as a boy was intensely serious-minded. For a time he lived in a Dominican monastery, and at the age of 38 he went to the city of Florence, a centre of science and art but shrouded in spiritual darkness and ignorance. Here he began to preach and lecture, but his voice was harsh and unmusical and few gave heed to him. Surprisingly, however, it was not long before he became a celebrated orator, and vast crowds gathered to hear his denunciations

of the corruption prevalent among clergy and laity alike. Large crowds filled the majestic cathedral of the city, never tiring of hearing about repentance from sin, which Savonarola urged with glowing earnestness. The effect was marvellous. Many a hardened sinner was aroused and led to conversion from an evil life. Florence became the centre of a great revival, even though the teachings of Romanism still held sway, and the reformer became for a time the idol of the people of the city. His influence seemed unbounded.

In those days Florence was under the rule of the House of Medici, and more particularly under the rule of Lorenzo de Medici who feared the increasing power of the bold preacher. It was under Lorenzo, called the Magnificent, that a new movement known to scholars as The Renaissance was flourishing. It was a new birth of art, literature and philosophy, and Florence was its great cultural centre. An interest in ancient Greek literature began to show itself, for in 1453 the Ottoman Turks had captured Constantinople, and scholars fled westwards taking valuable manuscripts with them. But the

[72]

Renaissance was pagan rather than Christian at this time, and the Medici family had no sympathy with the teachings and high morals of Savonarola. For a time Lorenzo showed the reformer favours and gave him valuable presents, possibly hoping to silence his preaching. But in vain. When Lorenzo was 44 years of age he fell ill. Realizing that his end was near, he sent for Savonarola, but when the latter found that he had no inclination to repent of his sins, he refused him the blessing which it was his custom to grant to the dying.

Lorenzo was succeeded by his son, but the people ousted him and Savonarola was unanimously chosen as ruler of Florence. He accepted the honour thinking it would render his work of reform easier, but in this he was mistaken. For three years Savonarola governed Florence and he certainly gave it good government. But many people began to resent the strictness of the new ruler. As Savonarola intended the city to become the model of a Christian commonwealth in which God was the Ruler and his gospel the sovereign law, the haunts of vice were abolished, gambling was outlawed, vanities of dress both male and female were to be restrained, and godly living was to be promoted. Cards, dice, costumes used in carnivals, and licentious books and pictures were to be destroyed in a 'bonfire of vanities'. The men who loved these things, however, soon began to create an opposition and to stir up the people against their ruler. Rather foolishly, Savonarola claimed to have the gift of prophecy and he actually predicted that certain things would happen. But his prophecies failed and even his supporters began to mistrust him. In consequence his influence waned.

At the same time the Pope, a man of notoriously evil life named Alexander Borgia—he was



Savonarola: forerunner of the Reformation. From a painting by Fra Bartolommeo.

the sixth of the papal Alexanders—took the lead in attacking the reformer of Florence. He was a Spaniard and one of the most wicked men who ever occupied 'the throne of Peter'. When he became Pope he had five children and it was his aim to use his power to promote their temporal welfare. It has been said that 'how the pope would proceed, in regard to marriages, endowments, and the advance of his children, became a question affecting the politics of all Europe'. He held no moral principles that would have obstructed his aims. He was completely unscrupulous, and was quite willing to engage in murder and the use of poison if his schemes could thereby be helped forward.

First of all Alexander VI tried bribery with

Savonarola. He offered to make him a cardinal. Cardinals rank next to the Pope as the highest dignitaries in the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope is chosen by them and from their number. Savonarola, however, rejected the glittering prize, saying, 'I do not desire any other crown than the crown of a martyr'.

The Pope therefore used other tactics to belittle the power of the reformer. The monks were persuaded to speak against him and to undermine his authority, and then the Pope excommunicated and imprisoned him. The citizens who had formerly acclaimed him now allowed him to be tortured in order to make him recant his teaching, and finally they joined in the cries of condemnation. But Savonarola remained unmoved. He could not be shaken in his convictions, and when the pains caused by the tortures of the Inquisition became unbearable, his lips uttered in anguish, 'It is enough, Lord, now take my soul'.

In May, 1498 the reformer was put to death by burning. Great crowds had gathered in the central square of the city of Florence. With two of his friends he was led to the stake. Like Huss,

he was stripped of his priestly robes in public while the crowd yelled, 'Now prophet, show thy power and work a miracle'. But Savonarola kept still. Had not his Saviour endured the same mockery and rejection? A bishop of the church now approached him, and said in faltering tones, 'I separate thee from the church militant and triumphant'. 'Militant, not triumphant', said the reformer, 'for you have no power to separate me from the church triumphant to which I go'. And so Savonarola died, at the age of 45. Some few, from the enormous crowd present, pressed forward to collect, if possible, some relic of the martyr, but the guards resisted them and carried out the instructions of those in authority, that the remains of the victims (three had been put to death) were to be borne away in carts and cast into the river Arno which flowed through the city.

Luther regarded Savonarola as a pioneer of the Reformation, but it is clear that his work was largely confined to the reform of public morals. It had no link with the reform of doctrine which began, though not in Italy, about twenty years after his death.