

**Dialogue Concerning Heresies** – Study Outline (Scepter 2006 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 (39-40), and of the need for others’ judgment (42) lead Thomas More [TM] to write out this conversation and to publish it after consulting others.

Chapter 1 “Letter of Credence [Introduction]”: More’s friend introduces the Messenger [M] as “my close personal friend”; he has “confidence and trust” that TM can help the M see “the real truth” (43-45)

“Author’s Letter” to his friend: TM says he “will never deliberately betray your trust” (46), in the opening ten lines refers to the “credence,” “confidence,” and “special trust” of “your trusty friend” (45). Affirms that the conclusions they came to were “such certain truths that they are not debatable” (46), but TM will leave it to his friend to judge how well TM has argued these (46).

(Evening) Initial meeting: To TM, **M recounts four major issues that are of concern** (47-52)

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

1. M stressed these were “thoughts of *others*” and that you had “such special trust and confidence” in “me and my learning” that “you were fully determined to give full credence to me” (53).

2. TM, having “asked him what manner of acquaintance there was between him and you” (54) and being told that the M is “tutor to your sons,” TM then asks “to what branch of knowledge he had most given his study.” Answer: Latin. “As for other disciplines, he cared nothing for them.” TM reports that the M considers “philosophy, the most useless of all” disciplines and that reading Scripture is “enough education for any Christian” (54).

3. TM gives his initial judgment of the M: “he made me wonder somewhat whether he had (since young students are sometimes susceptible to new delusional ideas) fallen into Luther’s sect.” TM thinks his friend may have thought the same – hence the reason for sending him (55).

4. In light of all this, TM devises and writes out a plan for the discussions that will follow (55).

2 (Next morning) TM says he will respond to 4 issues raised the night before by M; begins with Thomas Bilney affair, but postpones this until 3.2; defines “heresy” and (in 1531 edition: pp. 60-69) discusses *The Image of Love*’s criticisms of images & “outward observances” (55-73). TM shows that words “are but images” (68).

3 M: don’t assume that what I’m saying is my own opinion (74, repeating 53); **lists objections**; TM’s lengthy reply (75-80). **M says God’s temple should be the human heart** (80); TM: God also asked for temple of stone as his house of prayer (80-82).

4 **M: Why?** (82) TM: can’t say WHY, but miracles confirmed THAT (83-84).

5 **M: But the devil can produce miracles** (84). TM: Church’s faith is key, as officially approved, and confirmed by general councils, but TM invites objections (85).

6 M: Begins again by insisting that he articulates *others*’ views (85). They discuss what TM says is the “very important” issue of whom and what to trust and why (86-94). Educated people “give credence to credible persons” (89). There is “as much danger of error” in believing no one “as where people give their credence too readily” (93).

7 **M objects**: “we are still not hitting the point” (94). Discussion on what can be known (95-97). TM says the existence of God can be *known* (96).

8 **M: miracles are against nature** (98); TM argues that miracles are *above* nature (98-9).

9 Against M’s objections, TM argues that a Christian’s presumption is to believe in miracles (99-101).

10 TM: distinguishes 4 issues; changes “impossible” to “impossible for nature” (102); merrily speaks of the miracle of a birth. **M: that is a “surprising way of seeing things”**; TM: import of keeping a sense of wonder (101-102).

11 TM: size or occasion of a miracle is no concern to God (105-106).

12 **How many witnesses are needed?** TM: “Some two may be more credible than some ten” (107). M still refuses to believe miracles, but easily believes malicious tales of a friar (107)

13 **M still focuses on “kind of proof”**; TM strongly criticizes M’s mistrust arising from sloth or incredulity (109).

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 (110-111). M responds by telling of “holy” Elizabeth of Leominster who lay nightly with the prior (111-12). When **M asks what trust or certainty can we have** (112), TM points to the examples of wise Duke Humphrey and the prudent King’s mother who expose deceptions (113). TM ends by strongly correcting M’s refusal to believe any miracle (114).

15 TM: Because some folk are treacherous flatterers, all who seem friendly are not such flatterers (116).

16 TM: Gives example of public miracle that recently occurred at Our Lady of Ipswich.

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” (120). M encouraged by TM’s ability to listen so indifferently (120). After M explains, TM jokes that for one who rejects logic, M “play[s] the logician, straight-out” (121). **M invokes Scripture passages forbidding image veneration** (121); **five pages of objections follow** (122-26).

18 TM diplomatically thanks M for “not having defended your side halfheartedly, like a corrupt attorney” (127). 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 (128). Issues of disagreement emerge such as: M thinks Scripture **promises a light and comfortable yoke**, not “big bundles of men’s laws” (131); **M doubts value of good works**. TM says Christ himself made laws of Church; he insists that it “is easier to believe right than to live right” (136) 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 (137).

19 TM and **M agree**: the Church “cannot err in the right faith that it is necessary to believe” (138)

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.

21 TM says he “checkmates” M on “two points as true and intelligible to a Christian as any axiom of Euclid’s geometry” (148).

22 TM, opposing M’s rejection of old holy Father’s interpretation and of the liberal arts, explains the dangers of laziness and pride (149-153). **M defends the passionate and exclusive study of Scripture without wasting time on philosophy, “the mother of all heresies”** (153).

TM says the liberal arts are gifts of God (153).

TM shows the need for 3 rules to guide Scripture interpretation: old holy Fathers, reason, Church’s faith (153-54).

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 (156-60), including the merry tale of the magical plum (157), and the defense of liberal education (159-60).

24 **M says he is “somewhat satisfied” with role of reason, but opposes accepting faith as a rule** for interpreting Scripture (160). TM explains further (161-65).

25 **M questions whether God wrote the Scriptures well** (165). TM’s longest speech (166-181): on God’s “high wisdom” and “wonderful restraint” (166); on import of reason (166-69), of laws & rituals (169), of good men who sometimes perform miracles (170), and of Christ’s new law written in the heart (170). Ground of all Luther’s great heresies: belief only in what is “proved conclusively by Scripture” (177).

26 TM argues for God’s “commandment that we shall believe his Church” (191)

27 **M objects**; TM defends need to believe and obey the Church in faith and morals (195)

28 **M objects** further. TM’s strongest rebukes: “In actual fact you believe the Church in absolutely nothing” (197); “You would now be judge over the Church” (199). Church’s teachings have “the consensus and unanimous agreement of the old holy Fathers” – i.e., on “what has to do with some essential point of our faith or rule of our conduct” (199).

TM returns to issue of veneration of relics, images, shrines (201); **M resists agreeing with TM until he considers “other perspectives”** (203). TM: what the Church is (204). M: **back again to Scripture first** (205).

29 **M still will not “trust reason** in matters of faith and holy Scripture” (207). TM retorts that his (and the Church’s) reasoning has “Scripture for its foundation and ground” (207); invokes what Christ says in Scripture (207-209).

30 TM reviews what has been proved (210); how Scripture depends on the “judgment and tradition of the Church” (212). **M: No!** (212); M ends lamenting the difficulties of remembering (213).

31 M accepts the faith of the Church as a “right rule” (215), but **M announces another difficulty that “will yet put us into as much uncertainty as we were in before”** (216)

## 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

2 TM on how the Church has existed before any heretical group came out of it.

3 M: Perhaps only the **chosen and predestined are the true Church**

TM argues strongly against this position

4 TM on why the Church must be publicly known & has stood firmly even if it meant death (233)

-Role of sacraments (232), priests & bishops (233); how Church is well known (234); madness of Luther’s claims (235); what the Church is (237) – beautifully described in marriage language (238)

5 TM: how the Church is not divided into factions

6 **M accepts argument about Church, but doubts if all in the Church have the right faith;** for example, some “believe it to be **idolatry to venerate images or pray to saints**” (240)

TM refutes the idolatry charge

7 TM: Body of Christendom & general councils could not allow idolatrous practices to continue (242); urges M to bring up any questions he has; M agrees with TM (242)

8 TM explains role of saints (243-6); **M: God can hear & help us himself** (246);

9 **M questions relics and canonization;** TM responds

10 **M’s main objections:** saints are venerated as God; what of superstitious action such as at St. Valery’s (262-3)?; what of illicit requests?

11 TM analyzes three things in M’s account: God alone receives *latría*, not saints (264-65); no one mistakes a statue for God (265-66); yes there are abuses “yet not everything is reprehensible” (267); distinguishes; as for St. Valery’s: it’s in France so let the U of Paris defend it! (269)

12 TM invokes the old holy theologians; **M questions that miracles are real** (again!); TM’s response

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

1 **M reports how his university friends “stumped” him** (284-87); 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? (288). TM's answer: “because ... God has taught & told those selfsame things to Church” (289) – “even if Scripture had never been written” (291).

2 **M objects about how Bilney was unjustly treated** (293); TM cautions about being too quick to believe such things spoken against Church (293). **M's disrespectful attitude** towards the Divine Office (296-7) vs. TM's “happy medium” (296-7).

3 **M criticizes the laws**; TM defends them (300-1)

4 **M's objections about Bilney's trial**; TM's responses (303-310)

5 **M criticizes the “fiendish severity” used against B's first offense** (311); TM explains

6 **M objects to discrediting someone's name**; TM responds

7 M concedes the argument, but **asks about legitimacy of breaking an oath** (322)

TM: it can never be legitimately done [TM expands this answer while in prison; see CW6 764-67]

8 **M questions burning Tyndale's translation of the New Testament** (326)

8-10 TM shows how T's translation is “Luther's Testament” (327); points out 3 deliberate mistranslations (328-29); shows M the actual texts (335)

11 **M's “pugnaunt and sharp” criticisms of the clergy** (336-7); M's belief that English clergy is “worst of all clergies” (336) while English laymen are as good and upright as any.

TM distinguishes issues (337) and gives his assessment (338); Aesop's fable of double wallet.

TM criticizes pride of those condemning the clergy and of those taking “filthy delight in bad conversation” (339) & in the “wretched pleasure in the hearing of their sins” (340); story of Ham's disrespect for his father Noah vs. good sons who covered his nakedness (341).

12 TM gives his reasons for clergy's corruption: too many; laws not followed (344-46)

13 **M suggests that clergy should marry** (346); TM against Luther and Tyndale's position  
TM defends celibacy of clergy (255-57)

14 **M returns to issue of translation & objects to the law forbidding an English translation** – “a law wrong to make” (359). TM: There is no such law! (359). Gives background since Wycliffe (360-61). Shows M the relevant synodal decree (361). M wonders how he and others were misled about this law (361). TM: partly malice, partly sloth and negligence (361).

15 **M again criticizes the clergy** who burn books, & people too—referring to Richard Hunne (362)

TM: you are mistaken; explains that he was at the trial. Tells 3 funny things that occurred at the trial (365-70); explains what actually occurred.

16 **M: Why keep English Bible out of layman's hands?** (377, repeating his question of chapter 7).

TM: I proved the opposite! M: But few have it.

TM's strong arguments for an English translation (378, 384-5, 392 esp); explains difficulties confronted (a 9-page speech, the second longest of the work: pp. 380-89)

TM draws attention to the willfulness of M's attitude (389)

**M says he is “fully content and satisfied” on this matter.**

Part 4 (*After dinner/lunch; they resume again in the 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** (393); TM gives reasons for opposing Luther & Tyndale

2 TM offers that M see himself Luther's books to learn what L actually says; **M declines** (397); TM reviews what L has written against indulgences, pope, sacraments, good works, free will, Mass, purgatory... (497-404); 405-409 were 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, word for word" & compare relevant documents (407); 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" (410).

3 TM on how L "began to put together these mischievous matters" (410), falling "from reasoning to railing" (411), and from appealing to a general council to scoffing at and ranting about and denying authority of all general councils (411). Henry VIII's explanation of L's change: ire and envy (412)

4 TM on how Luther "lets out all he was attempting to hide" (413)

5-6 TM on Luther's inconsistencies & contradictions

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" (418-23)

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 (424)

9 TM on why the world may nearly be at an end

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

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 (428-459)

**M enters to defend the English Lutheran's view** (435)

Pages 438-441 on St. James' letter esp. added to 1531 edition.

English Lutheran shown to be deliberately deceptive & malicious (452-3)

Why Lutheranism is the "very worst and most harmful heresy...ever" (453)

12 Henry VIII on why Luther's heresy is the worst and a great danger to peace and order (456-59)

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 (461-2) and heretics (462). Augustine's experience with Donatists (463). Henry V's experience with Lord Cobham (463-464).

14 **M is critical of bishops' role**; TM argues for obligation of self-defense in face of sedition (467); TM on just war (469).

15 TM on rulers' obligation to punish seditious heresy (470). He distinguishes gullible from proud and malicious heretics (471)

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

17 TM on danger of false appearances and of pride (477); again: why this heresy is "the very worst and most beastly" (482)

18 TM on need for severe punishment against sedition (485)

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** (487). TM's long closing statement (488-91) and then seven-line prayer (491). They have lunch, then M goes home and TM, to work.

gbw  
11-26-07

Brief outline – to insert inside the book cover:

***Dialogue Concerning Heresies*** (Scepter 2006 edition)  
by Sir Thomas More, written in 1529 at bishop of London's request;  
revised in 1531 while Lord Chancellor

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(*Evening*) Initial meeting of Messenger and More (47-55)
- 2 (*Next morning*) More says he will respond to 4 issues raised the night before by Messenger;  
begins with Thomas Bilney affair, but postpones this until 3.2; defines "heresy"  
and (in 1531 edition – pp. 61-70) discusses *The Image of Love's* criticisms of images &  
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**Book 4** (*After dinner/lunch; they resume again in the garden*)

- 1-10 Discussion of Luther, his teachings, their effects, & harsh treatment received  
[2b new defense of images added to 1531 edition: 405-409] (393-428)
- 11-12 [dialogue-within-a-dialogue] Discussion of English vs. German Lutherans as well  
as justification and predestination (428-459)
- 13-18 Discussion on why force is used (459-486)
- 18 More gives Messenger books to read; *supper* (486)  
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They end with dinner/lunch. (491)