

Hugh Latimer (1487-1555)

Apostle of England

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When Robert Demaus (1829-1874) wrote his definitive biography of Hugh Latimer, he was determined to outline all the Reformer's faults and failures as well as his successes. He soon discovered that there was scarcely a shadow to be found in the life of the ardent scholar who became the voice of the Reformation in England. Any biography of Latimer must therefore be a panegyric to the over-flowing grace of God made evident in the courageous life and martyr's death of this great man.

A YEOMAN OF ENGLAND

Few facts concerning Latimer's family and childhood have survived. Attempts to date his birth back from the known date of his martyr's death in 1555 have proved unsuccessful. Ages given at his death vary from almost seventy to well over eighty. Going back, say, eighty years would make 1475 Latimer's year of birth. In comparison, Luther was born in 1483. Our subject's father was a yeoman farmer who rented land on which he kept upwards of a hundred sheep. Latimer tells us in a sermon preached before King Edward VI that his mother milked thirty cows a day. Such scanty facts show that Latimer came from a relatively humble home. Nevertheless, Latimer informs us further that his father earned enough to give alms to the poor, to send him to school, and to give his six sisters a dowry of five pounds apiece.

Latimer was a most precocious child and matriculated at Cambridge at fourteen years of age. He quickly became a scholar of note and gained a fellowship in Clare Hall which both covered his expenses and put to stop the neighbours' criticism that Latimer's father was spending hard earned money on his son's education. Latimer gained his Bachelor of Arts at the age of eighteen. During the next three years, he became Master of Arts, University Preacher and University Regent. Then Latimer took his Bachelor of Divinity and was given further offices reserved for scholars who possessed 'a sanctity of life which excelled all others'.

BACK TO THE BIBLE

Erasmus was expounding the New Testament at this time in Cambridge. Many students heard the gospel from Erasmus' Bible readings for the first time. These lectures were instrumental in Tyndale's spiritual turn and Reformer Thomas Bilney was led to believe the gospel on reading Erasmus' Latin version of 1 Timothy 1:15. Latimer, 'an obstinate papist' at



this time, regarded Erasmus with great suspicion, especially his emphasis on learning Greek. Latimer believed that the Latin language could alone express the will of the Church which was above the Word of God. When he found out that students Thomas Bilney and George Stafford were reading their New Testaments under the influence of Erasmus, he scolded them for putting the Bible before the Church. Latimer then made a speech in the university against Philip Melanchthon because he taught that scholars should test their church-traditions by Scripture. Bilney thus decided to visit Latimer in his study and give him his testimony, relating why he loved to read the Scriptures in which he had found peace for his sin-troubled soul. Latimer was so moved by what he heard that a deep change came over him. The honest man was mortified by the thought that he, who had been so zealous against the Scriptures, had been denying himself and others the true way to God. Soon, he was reading the Bible as ardently as Bilney, confessing his sins to the Saviour and becoming acquainted with the true righteousness that saves instead of a trust in sacramental justification. Before long, he was denouncing the works-righteousness of Rome and preaching the one way to heaven through the atoning work of Christ to his amazed hearers. Referring to the work of the law and gospel in salvation, Latimer now told his alert congregation, 'Adieu to all popish fantasies'. 'If we, if an angel from heaven shall teach any thing, beside that ye have received (in Scripture), accursed be he.' Exhorting his hearers to turn from the precepts and traditions of the school-doctors and follow the clear path to salvation prescribed by Christ in His Word, Latimer preached the total depravity of man and the eternal efficiency of Christ's redeeming blood. Preaching that all men have declined from God, including the pope and all his priests, and all are slaves to sin by nature, Latimer exhorted and commanded all men to look upon Jesus whom their sins had sent to the Cross and find in Him their only hope for cleansing.

CARRYING OUT THE DIVINE COMMISSION

Now Latimer, Bilney and Stafford visited the students homes, the hospitals and prison houses, preaching Christ wherever they went and assisting the poor as means allowed. Although some fellow-priests protested at this, Cardinal Wolsey protected the three men because of their saintly lives and deep learning. At first, the bishops were impressed at the new enthusiasm shown to the preached word and allowed the three to preach where they wished, but gradually, they realised that the gospel was taking hold of the people rather than the authority of the church. West, the Bishop of Ely, began to suspect that the 'new teaching' in Germany under Luther was behind the supposed 'new' teaching in England. On hearing Latimer preach, West thought he would stop him by flattery and told him that he was a great preacher but ought to speak against Luther as a special service to his Bishop. Latimer answered that he neither knew Luther nor his works¹ but as the bishop had confessed his approval of the sermon he had just heard from the Word of God, he would continue to preach thus. If, however, he heard that Luther preached against the Word of God, he would denounce him from the pulpit.

West would not believe that Latimer was not a Lutheran spy. The bishop now spoke against both Luther and Latimer and banned the latter from preaching. Meanwhile, Robert Barnes, an Augustinian prior, had found salvation in Christ and, as his priory was not under the jurisdiction of the bishops, he allowed Latimer, Bilney and Stafford to join with his fellow friar, Miles Coverdale, in preaching the gospel freely there. Sadly, Barnes became too aggressive and insulting in a Christmas sermon denouncing popery and, when this came to Wolsey's ear, he decided to stop protecting the reforming movement. Barnes was arrested and efforts were made to cleanse the university of Reformed literature.

LICENSED TO PREACH 'INTO THE BEARD' OF THE BISHOP

Wolsey now commanded Latimer to appear before him and defend himself against the charge of Lutheranism. He had arranged that two leading scholars should test Latimer on Duns Scotus and other men revered by himself. Latimer was soon in his element, leading the learned men in discussion and even correcting them when they misquoted the Scots philosopher. Meanwhile, Wolsey, highly amused by the scene, would occasionally utter a 'Marry, that is well said!', referring to Latimer's answers. At the end of the debate, Wolsey asked Latimer to repeat the sermon that had caused West to forbid him to preach. When he was finished, the Cardinal asked Latimer if he were sure that he had not left anything out which might have offended the bishop. On Latimer's assurance that he had told Wolsey everything, the Cardinal replied that if West could not abide such sound doctrines, he would give Latimer a licence to preach his doctrines 'into the beard' of the bishop. Indeed, before dismissing Latimer, Wolsey gave him a special license to preach throughout all England.

Soon a common saying arose at Cambridge, 'When Master Stafford read,

and Master Latimer preached, then was Cambridge blessed.’ The people confessed, that though there were many preachers who gripped their ears, only Latimer gripped their heart. This does not mean that Latimer was without enemies. A Dominican prior named Buckingham railed against Latimer’s endeavour to give the common man the Bible in his own tongue. Buckingham argued that as the Bible was full of dark sayings they would lead the common people astray. If a man should take the Bible at its word, Buckingham argued, and read that he ought to pluck his eye out if it offends him, he would do so without hesitation. Bakers, the Dominican maintained, will start using less yeast when they hear that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump! Latimer was quick to point out that when artists depicted Buckingham as a fox in monk’s clothing, no baker would think that he was truly a four-footed beast with a bushy tail. To bring this debate to an end Vice-Chancellor Dr Buckmaster, announced that a day would be set apart on which those who disagreed with Latimer’s reforms should speak or for ever hold their peace. Latimer turned up for the debate, but no one else did!

KING HENRY’S INTEREST IN LATIMER

Latimer, now a public figure, was invited to London by the king to advise him on the question of divorce. Latimer believed that Henry’s first marriage to Catherine of Aragon was doubly illegal as the marriage of a deceased brother’s wife, according to canon law was ‘against divine and natural justice’ and Henry’s father had forced him to marry whilst a minor. This view certainly kept Latimer in Henry’s good books and, by God’s grace, kept him from an early martyr’s death. Cranmer had appealed to all the universities in Europe for their learned men’s opinions on the divorce and most, if not all, looked upon Henry’s enforced marriage as illegal. The whole matter had become a European problem as the pope was not able to pronounce the marriage illegal because Catherine’s nephew, now Emperor, had him in his power. There was, however, much opposition from the English universities. Whilst at court, Latimer preached regularly before the king, not mincing his words in any way. To everybody’s surprise, the king thoroughly approved of Latimer’s preaching, as did Anne Boleyn.

Latimer was invited by Henry to be his guest and help to work out new Articles of Faith. Henry was striving to return to the old Celtic and Saxon traditions whereby ministers and royalty worked together to govern the Church.² This was in no way a religious Reformation as More, Gardiner and Tunstal succeeded in persuading the king to keep to extreme popish dogmas with Latimer protesting in vain. Not relishing court life in any way, Latimer was thankful to be called to West Kington on the Wiltshire-Gloucestershire border to carry out the work of a simple pastor. Soon, he was drawing crowds who loved to hear his homely preaching, full of practical illustrations. The neighbouring papist priests were enraged to hear that their ‘rival’ was claiming that baptism meant nothing to a sinner if not accompanied by faith and that all Christians were priests. What angered the un-Reformed clergy the most, however, was that Latimer preached on such texts as Romans 6:14 ‘For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are

not under the law, but under grace.'

TRUTH ON TRIAL

Latimer's bishop was Cardinal Campeggio who received a large salary for his office, though he lived abroad, so Latimer had nothing to fear from that quarter. However, Thomas More had now taken over from Wolsey as Henry's chief advisor, and he and his close popish companion Stokesly, Bishop of London, plotted Latimer's downfall. Latimer had preached by invitation of the minister in a London church but Stokesly argued that as he personally had not given Latimer permission, he had acted in contempt of his authority. Stokesly thus commanded Latimer to return to London and appear before a church tribunal. Latimer refused, saying that if he were to be disciplined it must be within his own local diocese. At first, Hiley, the Chancellor of Latimer's diocese, supported Latimer but then gave way and the Reformer received a summons via Sir Walter Hungerford of Farley, to appear in London at the Consistory Court on January 29, 1532 and answer for 'crimes and grave excesses' he had supposedly committed. Latimer told his friends, 'What a world is this, that I shall be put to so great labour and pains, beside great costs above my power, for preaching of a poor simple sermon! But, I trow, our Saviour Christ said true, "I must needs suffer and so enter"; so perilous a thing it is to live virtuously with Christ.' Latimer was now feeling his age, he was in poor health and the long, cold journey to London frightened him more than the thought that he was perhaps going to his martyrdom.

Latimer's trial went on for months. The strategy of his accusers was to persuade him to sign points that he could accept with a clear conscience but then, after promising that all was over, they would suddenly call him back and place further demands upon him, hoping that he would compromise himself. By 19 April, Latimer realised that his strength was failing and decided to make an unprecedented move. He reminded the Court that they were placed under the jurisdiction of the Throne, and demanded the right to present his case before King Henry.

The monarch made short work of the affair. He told Latimer to appear before Convocation, beg forgiveness for offending his superiors, tell them that they had just cause to be suspicious of him, and, thinking of Latimer's poverty, he told him to declare before Convocation that as he could not recompense them in any way for their troubles he would pray for them! After a trying ordeal of four months, Latimer was free to return to his beloved flock and carry on the duties of a pastor. It appears that the pope himself had received news of how Latimer, with the help of the king, had got the better of Convocation and swore vengeance on Latimer.

THE REFORMATION MAKES HEADWAY

Meanwhile, Henry married Anne Boleyn, Archbishop Warham, the pope's man, died and Cranmer took his place. Oddly enough, the pope sent bulls to England telling Henry to dismiss Anne from the court, yet accepting

Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury though he had been the primary instrument in working out a divorce for Henry. Now the king's Lord Chancellor, Thomas Cromwell, his archbishop and his queen were all friends of the Reformation. Latimer preached the Word with renewed vigour and crowds flocked to hear him. Soon he was occupying the leading Bristol pulpits to the dismay of the papists who complained to Convocation. Latimer's critics were told to silence him in oral disputation. However, all the ignorant papist priests could do was criticise Latimer for being Henry's favourite, which did not help their cause. Indeed, Cranmer decided to visit Bristol himself and support Latimer. He then gave Latimer the task of equipping the West of England with sound gospel preachers and pastors. Between them, the two men showed that they had matured from semi-papists to true defenders of the doctrines of grace, void of Roman superstition which had clung to them until that date.

LATIMER'S BRIEF BISHOPRIC

Parliament ordered Campeggio to return to his diocese or otherwise forfeit his bishopric, but the Italian preferred to live abroad. Who was to take his place? The humble people, archbishop, lord chancellor and the king and queen all thought of Latimer. He was horror-struck by the very idea. His protests were in vain, he was consecrated Bishop of Worcester, Gloucester and Bristol on 26 September, 1535. This was one of the largest and most popish of Britain's dioceses and Latimer had a hard task persuading people and clergy to leave their popish ways. When Henry started to close down the monasteries, Latimer insisted that the money gained by their sales should go to the poor and not into the royal pocket. He was enabled to rescue a number of deserted buildings for the care of the elderly and for use as schools. When he was rebuked by the courtiers, his sole reply was, 'It could not be for the honour of the King to take away the right of the poor.'

On 9 June, 1536 the first Convocation since the overthrow of Papal Supremacy sat and invited Latimer to preach the opening sermon. He preached on the parable of the unjust steward and the duties of the clergy. Latimer spoke with firmness and eloquence and caused quite a sensation. The sermon was quickly translated into English and distributed throughout the Kingdom. Latimer and his friends wanted Convocation to come out on the side of the Reformation but the sides were about equal and few reforming decisions were made. One glorious outcome of these early clashes between the Reformers and the old papists was that Tyndale's and Coverdale's Bible was at last, in 1537, given a Royal licence and soon Bibles were placed in most of the churches in the country. It is from this year that the national Reformation began, a feat never accomplished in Luther's Germany nor in Calvin's France.

Another divine gift to England was the birth of Prince Edward, under whom the Reformation spread with great swiftness. In the year 1539, the Reformation received a severe setback via the rightly-called Bloody Statute of six popish articles passed by Parliament affirming transubstantiation, the

validity of a bread-only communion, the celibacy of priests, the observance of vows of chastity, private masses and auricular confessions. Latimer conferred with Cromwell as to what should be done. Cromwell said that the king wished for Latimer to resign so as to keep him for the Reformation and not to compromise his faith by appearing to agree to the Six Articles. Latimer promptly resigned but the wrath of the king was at once upon him. Cromwell had deceived Latimer, possibly to save either Latimer's or his own skin. The king had wanted Latimer to keep his office and now thought that the Reformer had turned against him. He immediately had Latimer imprisoned. A year later, Latimer's jailer was himself put in the Tower and though the Reformer was never officially released, there were no guards to his prison and Latimer walked out to freedom.

For the next five years or so, Latimer kept under cover, travelling the country and preaching clandestinely. Little is known of this period except that, from then on, fellow Reformers such as Coverdale, Ridley and Foxe called Latimer The Apostle of England. Ridley, using very strong language, says that Latimer led the team of Reformers against the corrupt clergy and 'their tongues were so sharp, they ripped in so deep in their galled backs, to have purged them, no doubt, of that filthy matter, that was festered in their hearts, of insatiable covetousness, of filthy carnality and voluptuousness, of intolerable ambition and pride, of ungodly loathsomeness to hear poor men's causes, and to hear God's word.'³ In 1546, the courts caught up with Latimer. He was asked to recant his Reformed ways and, on his refusal, was again imprisoned, awaiting every day to be sent to the executioner.

EDWARD'S SHORT BUT GLORIOUS REIGN

A year later, Henry died, Edward VI, England's glory, ascended the throne and Latimer was released. The 'Old Soldier of Christ' as Latimer was now lovingly called, refused church preferences and said he wished to remain a simple preacher. Edward agreed but made sure that Latimer preached as often as possible to him and his court. A number of these sermons are extant and are as blunt, forthright and Scriptural as can possibly be imagined.

After telling his majesty that he had to sit tight for at least three to four hours, Latimer preached to him the sinfulness of sin, the vicarious righteousness of Christ, the fallacy of putting trust in purgatory and priestly prayers as a means of future redemption and the need for a monarch to be a Christian example to his people.⁴ Edward followed this sound advice more thoroughly than perhaps any other British monarch.

MARY THE BLOODY

Edward's reign was very short and Mary the Bloody replaced him in 1553. What a change! Latimer was quickly arrested. The messenger that brought the news was told that it was most welcome. Latimer explained that he had preached to two princes and now a third would hear his gospel message

'either to her comfort, or discomfort, eternally'. However, the pope, using the seemingly soulless Mary as his puppet, was now forcing the greater part of England to her knees before him. The holy innocents who refused to bow the knee to this Baal were slaughtered and that slaughter was immense. The papists argued that if they could obtain a recantation from Latimer, their task of making the nation recant would be easy. Latimer, they said had Cranmer as his supporter and Cranmer had Ridley and Ridley, they supposed, had only 'his own wit' and was the weaker link. They thus planned Ridley's spiritual downfall which they thought would then domino back to Latimer.

As their plans were devilish, they proved wrong. Cranmer, after a period of weakness, became stronger in the Lord and neither Ridley nor Latimer flinched once before their accusers, though Latimer was now in extreme old age and very ill. His only worry was that his memory might fail him in finding Scripture to refute his popish enemies. Happily, we have preserved through the care of Latimer's servant-friend Bernher, Foxe and Coverdale, the full testimony of these men in the days of what the papists thought would be their doom. Their unflinching courage is a miracle of grace in itself.

LIGHTING A CANDLE THAT WILL NEVER GO OUT

Latimer was condemned to be burnt with his friend Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London. Anticipating this, Latimer had written a letter to 'all the unfeigned lovers of God's truth' which was quickly circulated throughout the country. In it the Reformer said:

Pray for me your poor brother and fellow-sufferer for God's sake; His name therefore be praised. And let us pray to God that He of His mercy will vouchsafe to make both you and me meet to suffer with good consciences for His name's sake. Die once we must; how and where we know not. Happy are they whom God giveth to pay nature's debt (I mean to die) for His sake. Here is not our home; let us therefore accordingly consider things having always before our eyes that heavenly Jerusalem, and the way thereunto in persecution. And let us consider all the dear friends of God, how have they gone after the example of our Saviour Jesus Christ; whose footsteps let us also follow, even to the gallows (if God's will be so), not doubting but as He rose again the third day, even so shall we do at the time appointed of God, that is, when the trump shall blow, and the angel shall shout, and the Son of man shall appear in the clouds, with innumerable saints and angels, in His majesty and great glory, and the dead shall arise, and we shall be caught up into the clouds, to meet the Lord, and to be always with Him. Comfort yourselves with these words, and pray for me for the Lord's sake; and God be merciful unto us all. Amen.

Hugh L.5

The execution site was the ditch facing Balliol College, Oxford; the date,

16 October, 1555. Two stakes were hammered into the ground and the two martyrs were chained to them by the waist. Relations and friends then tied bags of gunpowder around their necks so that their suffering should be shortened. Faggots were placed around them and ignited at Ridley's feet. In a strong, fearless voice, Latimer shouted those noble words, 'Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.' With an equally calm, loud voice, Ridley prayed, 'Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my Spirit.' The flames rose and the merciful gunpowder exploded and blew the brave old man and equally brave youth to heaven. They had not showed the slightest evidence of having any pain.

Dear Christian friends, the candle that Latimer and Ridley lit has continued to light the gospel-way since those far off days. Yet Rome's many-faced power is again growing and allying itself with all the adverse and evil powers of this world. All over Britain, all over Europe, the gospel light is being extinguished. May we pray that those of us who are left holding these precious candles will be faithful to the end in preserving them from being blown out. May not only Latimer's faith but Latimer's steadfast courage be ours.

- i. Wolsey had banned Luther's works in 1521 from England and Latimer was not yet acquainted with them.
- ii. See Boulton's History of the Church of England.
- iii. Taken from Nicholas Ridley's 'Piteous Lamentation', Works, Parker Society, p. 59.
- iv. See Parker Society's and Legh Richmond's collection of Latimer's Works.
- v. Demaus, Hugh Latimer, RTS edition, pp. 175-6.

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