

Nicholas Ridley (1500-1555)

The man who under God gave divine lustre to the Reformation

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Nicholas Ridley has rightly been regarded by Christian readers throughout the centuries as a pioneer of reformation and renewal in the Church of Christ and one who defied intense persecution and death rather than betray his Lord. Though Ridley came from a long line of noblemen and Reformers, Ridley's kinsman and biographer says of him, 'Descended from this ancient stock, he degenerated not from the virtues of his ancestors, but gave a much greater lustre to his family than he derived from it.'¹ John Foxe, the martyrologist, describes Ridley as 'a man beautified with excellent qualities, so ghostly (spiritually) inspired and godly learned.' Augustus Toplady says of our subject, 'He was esteemed the most learned of all English reformers: and was inferior to none of them in piety, sanctity, and clearness of evangelical light.'

As usual with men who have gained great prominence, Ridley is not without his critics, even amongst so-called 'Protestants' and those calling themselves 'Reformed'. J. H. Blunt in his two volumed work *The Reformation of the Church of England*, castigates Ridley severely for his 'innovations' which he sees as an Erastian binding of State and Church, the banning of popish vestments, pulling down altars, setting up communion tables and declaring both Mary and Elizabeth to be bastards in a sermon preached at St Paul's Cross. David Gay, in his recent book *Battle For the Church*, criticises Ridley severely for 'fighting back' against John Hooper, for putting the law of the land before Biblical church order, for thinking vestments 'a thing of indifference', and for his anti-Anabaptist position.

Historically, Blunt is quite correct in his allegations. He views Ridley's Erastianism as a too deep allegiance to that great Christian monarch Edward VI and the sound laws he passed. Any Christian, one would think, would prefer Edward's rule to that of Henry VIII and Bloody Mary. Ridley did reject transubstantiation, prayers for the dead, purgatory, 'holy' water, salt, the baptising of bells, images and a host of other popish trappings. It is also true that he banned Roman vestments, including the alb, chasuble and cope and worked closely with John Hooper in pulling down altars and altar walls. However, the English Reformers removed only those elements which were popish novelties, mostly, like altars, of very recent origin. Indeed, a letter is extant from the pen of Edward VI to Ridley, commending him for his initiative in taking down the altars and

commanding him not to stop until every single altar in his diocese is removed and tables set up.² Concerning the alleged illegitimacy of Mary and Elizabeth, Ridley was not the only Reformer to hold this opinion and we must remember that the two princesses were claimants and rivals to a throne that had the better man sitting on it.

Unlike Blunt's historically correct, albeit negatively interpreted, statements, Gay's strictures cannot be justified historically. Thus his interpretations are equally wrong, indeed libellous. The 'fight' over vestments that Gay postulates between Ridley and Hooper, is described by these friends as an amiable 'discussion' in which they reached a consensus of opinion which revealed the will of God. It was terminated in the greatest imaginable display of brotherly love. Gay, ignoring the historical facts, makes much of his vestment fetish as a sure means of dividing the Reformed wheat from the popish tares. Yet, since Pope Clement's days (428), Rome had complained that the British-Gallican churches did not wear the upper class toga but the low class celtic cape thrown over their sheep skins. The academic 'Genevan' gown, as the Imam's gown, is evolved directly from the toga. At the Reformation, British Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists, went back to wearing the toga as ordered by Rome and rejected the homely British overskin (L. super-pellicum, hence surplice). Ridley distinguished between popish and Anglo-Gallican robes and was against Presbyterian dogmatism making black vestments, which the English Reformers rightly called 'Turkish robes', mandatory. In his own person, Ridley demonstrated how little 'denominational' vestments meant to him by having his portrait painted as a bishop wearing a simple black gown and holding his New Testament, not a mitre, in his hands. Almost all the early Anglican Reformers and even those of Elizabeth's day professed that they did not mind donning a black gown if it would help the weaker brethren! Even when officiating as a bishop, Ridley wore a flat cap and dispensed with regal paraphernalia whether foreign or indigenous. When taken to be publicly murdered, Ridley refused to wear vestments. Gay sees this as a further display of Ridley's hypocrisy, using even this occasion, against his wont, as a display of falsity. Foxe says that Ridley dressed himself on this martyr's morning 'as he was wont to wear being bishop'. This is the Ridley of history! Gay's exaggerated, inquisitorial criticisms of Ridley and his fellow Reformers have carried him from historical interpretation, through blind denominationalism to pure belly-aching invention.

ANABAPTIST ANGLICANS

Regarding Ridley's alleged unqualified anti-Anabaptist stand, Gay might note that at this period, no church was criticised for being Anabaptist more than the Church of England. Hooper, the Riddleys, Jewel, Grindal etc. were all attacked as Anabaptists by papist writers such as Harding for teaching a different baptism to Rome's. When Gay sees the term 'Anabaptist', in this context, he invariably reads 'Baptist' but this is unwarranted, indeed, insulting to Baptists, as Baptist John Gill pointed out. However, Gay dismisses his Baptist father as an Antinomian, Hyper-Calvinist and a

spiritual 'dung-hill', so we can understand Gay's reluctance to learn from such a wise man. Only a fraction, if any, of Continental Anabaptists were Baptists in Gay's sense. Foxe and Jewel said there were none such in Britain. Many Anabaptists either baptised infants or refused to re-baptised those baptised as such. Anglicans did not denounce all Anabaptists (they were regarded as such themselves) but strove to distinguish carefully between the various types. This becomes apparent when reading the works of the Ridleys, John Hooper and especially John Jewel whose negative utterances against Anabaptists usually begin with a qualifying statement such as 'Those Anabaptists who ...' These men's writings on baptism and the Anabaptists are available in the Parker Society and Richmond collections. Cranmer's and Ridley's views are laid out in the Thirty-Nine Articles. Worth noting here is that Gay sides Hooper with the Anabaptists and Ridley against them but Hooper outdoes Ridley in his criticism of them. Indeed, Hooper is often soundly criticised for his 'bitterness', 'tyranny' and 'dreadful language' against those with whom he does not agree, including Anabaptists, whereas Ridley is seen as soft-spoken and clothed with a spirit of reconciliation.

After carefully studying Ridley's works and various criticisms of the Reformer, this writer can say with W. J. Heaton and J. A. Baxter:

How dare these wretches touch a man like Ridley! He was a star of the first magnitude, in any age. 'Honourable birth, a commanding form, superior learning, a generous spirit, sound judgement, united with unremitting industry, and all sanctified by an entire devotedness to the honour of God, gave to Ridley a degree of personal influence possessed by no other, probably not even by Cranmer.'³

It is interesting to note that Baxter tells us that even Ridley's contemporary enemies found him 'irreproachable in every relation of life.' How times have changed! The English Reformation's enemies now believe they know better! Let us then look closer at the life of this pivotal figure in the history of the Christian Faith.

RIDLEY'S ACADEMIC AND PASTORAL BACKGROUND

Nicholas Ridley, cousin to Reformer Lancelot Ridley, was born in Willowmontswick,⁴ Northumbria, and was educated in Newcastle upon Tyne. Thereafter, his uncle Dr Robert Ridley of Queen's College, financed Ridley's education at Pembroke. Ridley was made a fellow of Pembroke in 1524, so it is thought that he must have been born at the beginning of the 16th century and entered Cambridge around 1518. Ridley was well-known in the academic world by 1524 as records say that he was then invited to leave Cambridge for University College, Oxford where a fellowship awaited him. Ridley, however, preferred to remain as a fellow at Cambridge and took his M.A. there in 1525. These dates are rendered rather questionable by Ridley's own testimony in 1555 in his famous Farewell Address. Here Ridley affirms that he first became acquainted with

Pembroke 'not thirty years ago'. Furthermore, some contemporary witnesses claim that Ridley was a relatively young man at his death.

On receiving ordination, Ridley served as university agent to churches in Tylney, Saxthorpe and Soham, becoming Vicar of Soham after completing his studies at the Sorbonne from 1527-1530. On his return from Paris, Ridley took his B. D. and D. D., becoming Senior Proctor and Master of Pembroke though still a young man. Dr William Turner, Dean of Wells, and British exile during the reign of Mary, wrote to Foxe concerning Ridley's biography, informing him that he and Ridley were from the same area and had studied together at Pembroke. He relates how Ridley taught him advanced Greek and that Dr Robert Ridley had studied in France himself and also financed Nicholas' studies at Paris and Louvain.

Heading the university's protest against the pope's claim of supremacy over Cambridge, Ridley was asked to draw up and sign the anti-papal decree. From 1537 until his martyr's death in 1555, Ridley climbed quickly up the ecclesiological ladder becoming successively Chaplain to the Archbishop, then to the King, Prebendary of Canterbury, Prebendary of Westminster, Bishop of Rochester and Bishop of London. He was nominated to the Bishopric of Durham a short time before Mary had him arrested in 1553.

Receiving grace to believe and practise the doctrines of grace Ridley, according to Foxe, was converted through reading the works of Ratramnus (early 9th century). He was also nurtured in the faith by Peter Martyr, Cranmer and Latimer. Toplady affirms that it was Ratramnus alias Bertram) who taught Ridley the doctrines of grace, especially through such works as his *De corpore et sanguine Domini* which contended against the novel introduction of transubstantiation into church dogma and, we might add, *De praedestinatione Dei* which deals with predestination and reprobation. Ratramnus of Picardy was one of the great upholders of the true faith within the Western Church along with contemporaries Gottschalk, Remigius and Florus.

By Ridley's day, Rome had given up the ancient and Biblical doctrine of grace and when the Reformer was called before his papist persecutors, one of the first doctrines they condemned was his belief in election and predestination as witnessed in the work formerly called Ponet's Catechism, published in 1553. Ridley was charged with authoring the work but instead of merely denying this to save his life, Ridley said that he had read and used it and consented to its teaching. Alexander Nowel extended the catechism for the Elizabethan Church and since then it has been referred to as Nowel's Catechism.⁵ Toplady calls the catechism's teaching, (sponsored by the same committee who produced the Anglican Articles of Religion), 'the highest Calvinism'. He finds all his favourite doctrines in it, including Justification from Eternity which choice doctrine Toplady shared with his friends the Particular Baptists.

Ridley's industry for the Word of God and the spread of learning is illustrated by his brief pastorates at Herne and Soham where his preaching drew in many former absentees. Indeed, Foxe tells us that wherever Ridley went, the people 'swarmed around him like bees' to hear his preaching. In his diligence to see that the underprivileged were given the opportunity of education, he raised scholarships and founded no less than sixteen grammar schools. He also distributed thousands of free New Testaments. Furthermore, he pioneered social help for the poor whom he classified into three kinds. The first group were 'poor by impotency of nature' and included fatherless children, old, decrepit people, idiots, and cripples. Ridley transformed Grey Friars' Church into a hospital and school for their maintenance and education. The second group were those 'poor in faculty', such as the sick and invalid, wounded soldiers and those brought low by no fault of their own. For these poor persons, Ridley begged St Bartholomew's near Smithfield from the King. Though Ridley's third group were those who were poor through squandering their money or idleness, he still felt it a Christian duty to care for them and assist them to re-enter society as thrifty, industrious citizens. For this purpose, Edward gave Ridley his own ancient mansion Bridewell. Edward's words to Ridley on hearing a sermon of his on his royal need to care for the poor have been preserved. The kind King told his friend and mentor:

I took myself to be especially touched by your speech, as well in regard of the abilities God has given me, as in regard of the example which from me He will require; for as in the kingdom I am next under God, so must I most nearly approach Him in goodness and mercy; for as our miseries stand most in need of aid from him, so are we the greatest debtors – debtors to all who are miserable, and shall be the greatest accountants of our dispensations therein; and therefore, my lord, as you have given me, I thank you, this general exhortation, so direct me (I pray you) by what particular actions I may this way best discharge my duties.

Blessed England to have had such a King and blessed Edward to have had such a mentor!

DIVERSE NEGATIVE COMMENTS ON RIDLEY'S COMMENTS ANALYSED

Apart from quoting Ridley's numerous recommendations of Ponet's Catechism, Toplady lists many indications of Ridley's Calvinism culled from his works. These include his teaching on election, predestination, atonement, the immutability of God towards His adopted children, the perseverance of the saints, the Providence of God and the necessity and efficacy of Divine influence.

Most strange in David Gay's denunciation of Ridley is that he never considers his doctrines as being essential to the Reformation and which thus mark Ridley out as a Reformer. Rather, Gay attacks Ridley for not accepting church practices which Gay believes were introduced by Andrew Fuller in 1785. Equally odd is that on the page where Gay tells us that

Fuller rescued true religion from the dunghill of his predecessors, he complains that Latitudinarianism was still raising its rampant fiendish head in the Church of England. Now if we are looking for men totally void of Latitudinarianism, we must go to such as Ridley whom Gay denigrates. Yet nobody incorporated undiluted Latitudinarianism as much as Fuller whom Gay apparently views as the great Reformer of true religion.

The doctrinal axe Gay grinds against Ridley and the British Reformers is concerning their views of the Word of God and the Church. Ridley, Gay theorises, did not accept the Word of God as the absolute authority in matters of doctrine and practice and he did not accept the Church as the community of saints. Now, coming from a Fullerite background with its low view of the revealed Word of God in comparison with Natural Law and with a Church doctrine which denies the vicarious, penal suffering of Christ to redeem it and also denies the need for that Church to be clothed in the imputed righteousness of Christ, Gay is treading on very thin ice. Nor have we forgotten Gay's alarming statements made public a few years ago, that Scripture contradicts itself and the contradictions are irreconcilable and that the Son and the Father have different, contradictory, wills.⁶ We may thus doubt that Gay is the man to judge Ridley in this way. Sure enough, Ridley tells us in his work *A Piteous Lamentation of the Miserable Estate of the Church in England in the Time of the Late Revolt from the Gospel*, how it is the departure from God's Word that has brought England to her knees. In all his debates with those awaiting martyrdom and with his persecutors, Ridley stressed the gospel truth, 'Thy word is a candle unto my feet, and a light unto my steps.' Ridley was a co-author of the Thirty-Nine Articles which teach that Holy Scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation and in *Lamentations* he stresses that ministers must 'make a solemn profession before the congregation, that they should teach the people nothing, as doctrine necessary to attain eternal salvation, but that which is God's own holy word.' Gay has misunderstood Ridley and his fellow Anglican Reformers concerning allegedly accepting rules of life as 'gospel' which do not contradict Scripture but are not contained therein. In his *Conferences with Latimer* Ridley stresses that the rule of the Church is *sola scriptura* as opposed to the laws of the land which must be formed according to the principles of the Scriptures but not necessarily be directly taken from them. Case law, as propagated by some of the later Presbyterian wing, he strictly rejected. Concerning the nature of the Church, Ridley teaches, 'only by the Scriptures do we know which is a true church.' He distinguishes between those who merely profess to be Christians and those of the elect. Thus, for Ridley, the Church was 'the congregation of the true chosen children of God'. If professing Anglicans were not grafted into this congregation of chosen ones by God, they were not members. The Reformer emphasises throughout all his writings that the Church is the elect spouse of Christ whom He loved before the foundation of the world, 'who also gave himself for it, that he might sanctify it unto himself.' The death and passion of Christ, Ridley constantly affirms, 'was and is the only sufficient and everlasting available sacrifice, satisfactory for all the elects of God.' Ridley denounced the popish idea that the word of the Church was

the Word of God and declared that sinners do not turn to the Church for salvation but to the Word of God to which the Church should point them. Thus no church council can dictate what must or must not be done for salvation apart from giving the exhortation 'Search the Scriptures'. Ridley's clear teaching that Christ's sacrifice was specifically sufficient, vicarious and satisfactory for the elect alone ought to make Gay ask himself on what grounds he builds his own doctrines of the Word and Church.

NICHOLAS RIDLEY'S LAST TESTIMONY

Mary Tudor, alias The Bloody, never liked Ridley. When he called on her during Edward's days, Mary said, 'My lord, for your gentleness to come and see me I thank you, but for your offering to preach before me I thank you never a whit.' Foxe tells us that this sentence was accompanied with 'many bitter words against the forms of religion then established, and against the government of the realm, and the laws made in the young years of her brother.' When Mary came to power, she viewed Ridley as the main Reformer and had him arrested first of all and thrown into the Tower. From there, he was taken to the Bocardo prison in Oxford where he was joined by Cranmer and Latimer. The three men experienced sweet fellowship together and wrote several works in preparation for their trial and martyrdom which they knew would ensue. On being privy to this fellowship, the martyrs' jailers said 'Latimer leans on Cranmer, Cranmer leans on Ridley and Ridley leans on his own wit' and so Ridley was put into isolated confinement in a private building so that the work of the Reformation might be stopped in the popish prison. The pope viewed Ridley as the 'ringleader' of the Reformation and the pope's deputy's official accusations drawn up against Ridley and Latimer mention only Ridley by name in the body of the text.

In the evening before his burning, Ridley's brother-in-law said that he would sit up with him all night but the Reformer declined and said that, God willing, he would sleep as soundly as ever in his life. Next morning, with his night cap still on his head, Ridley was led away between the Lord Mayor and an Alderman. Passing the Bocardo, he looked up, hoping to catch a glimpse of Cranmer but the Archbishop was debating with his persecuting friars. Latimer and his executioners now followed the party from a distance. 'Oh, ye be there?' Ridley called cheerfully, 'Yea,' replied the old man, 'have after as fast as I can follow.' On approaching the heap of faggots, Ridley ran to Latimer, embraced and kissed him and said, 'Be of good heart, brother, for God will either assuage the fury of the flame, or else strengthen us to abide it.' Both men then kneeled before the stake and prayed. Then Dr Smith had the evil cheek to tell the two saints that if they yielded their bodies to the flames but had not charity, it would gain them nothing. This, a turn-coat, turn-tail priest said to the two most generous doers of good the country possessed, before declaring to the crowd that Ridley and Latimer would die as heretics outside the Church. Latimer and Ridley discussed briefly who should answer Dr Smith first but the papists stopped their mouths by force. Ridley managed to say, 'So long as the breath is in my body, I will never deny my Lord Jesus, and his known

truth: God's will be done in me.' Latimer cried, 'Well! There is nothing hid but it shall be opened', and declared that he would answer Smith well enough, if allowed. Before finally committing his spirit to God, Ridley addressed Lord Williams, asking him to mediate as he had kept a number of poor in food and clothing in his office of bishop but had heard that Bonner, his popish successor had stopped their grants and driven them out of their homes.

Latimer soon died, overpowered by the flames but Ridley's death was the most painful and brutal imaginable. Not until his legs and nether parts were burnt to cinders did his suffering cease. Francis Quarles (1592-1644), a victim of persecution himself, whose writings so influenced Toplady for the good, wrote:

Read, in the progress of this blessed story,
Rome's cursed cruelty and Ridley's glory:
Rome's siren's song; but Ridley's careless ear
Was deaf: they charmed, but Ridley would not hear.
Rome sung preferment, but brave Ridley's tongue
Condemned that false preferment which Rome sung.
Rome whispered death; but Ridley, (whose great gain
Was godliness) he waved it with disdain.
Rome threatened durance, but great Ridley's mind
Was too, too strong for threats or chains to bind.
Rome thundered death, but Ridley's dauntless eye
Stared in death's face, and scorned death standing by.
In spite of Rome for England's faith he stood,
And in the flames he sealed it with his blood.

- i. Biographical Notice of Ridley, Christmas, Henry, ed., The Works of Nicholas Ridley, p. ii.
- ii. Appendix VI, Works of Bishop Ridley, Parker Society.
- iii. The Puritan Bible, p. 54.
- iv. 'Willowmont' is northern English for the sea-bird 'guillemot'. Cf. Welsh 'Guillem'.
- v. Nowel teaches election and predestination throughout but see especially his section Of the Holy Catholic Church. Ridley was apparently on the committee that accepted the catechism for official church use.
- vi. Preaching the Gospel to Sinners: 2, BOT Mag., July, Aug-Sept., 1994; Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism, ET, August, 1996.

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