

Hugh Latimer

OF Hugh Latimer it has been said that, "No one among the Reformers sowed the seeds of sound Protestant doctrine so widely and effectively among the lower and middle classes as Latimer. He, more than any other man, promoted the Reformation by preaching." The span of Latimer's life falls in one of the expanding periods of history. Changes were taking place more momentous than any since the victory of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire. The death throes of Mediaevalism were the birth pangs of a new age.

The date of Latimer's birth is uncertain; it may have been the year that saw the end of the War of the Roses, 1485. Foxe records that the boy Latimer had such a "ready, prompt, and sharp wit, that his parents proposed to train him up in erudition and the knowledge of good literature." To the end of his life Latimer retained his wit and cheerfulness; they stood him and his friends in good stead. In a sermon before Edward VI he spoke of his yeoman father who had a farm of three or four pounds a year at Thurcastone, Leicestershire: "I remember that I buckled his harness when he went unto Blackheath Field. He kept me at school, or else I had not been able to preach before the King's Majesty now . . . he kept hospitality for his poor neighbours, and some alms he gave to the poor."

Latimer's Cambridge years, 1505-1524, were a time of excitement and unrest. The New Learning clashed with the old Scholasticism; the newly discovered Greek tongue unlocked the New Testament; families were divided and friends estranged; political and social life were no less disturbed than the religious.

Latimer vigorously defended the old order. Elected to a Fellowship of Clare Hall in 1510, he received his Divinity degree in 1524 and in his oration attacked the German Reformer, Melancthon. "At the age of thirty I was a most violent and bigoted Papist." When the change came he did not hastily abandon old ideas or easily accept new conclusions. He faltered; sometimes to the distress of his friends. Carefully he studied the Scriptures, humbly sought the Holy Spirit's guiding, endeavoured to be intellectually honest, and sat lightly to worldly wealth and awards.

When Thomas Bilney read in Erasmus' Greek New Testament: "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners," he declared that the words had brought a comfort to his soul that all his prayers, fastings, penances and tears had failed to do. He had been attracted to

Latimer and had prayed: "Give me the soul of that man, and what wonders he shall do in Thy most Holy Name." He appealed to Latimer to hear his confession. "I did so," said Latimer, "and to say truth I learned more than before in many years." Latimer now began his own quest. "From that time forward I began to smell the Word of God, and forsook the School doctors and such fooleries." Bilney and Latimer rejoiced in their new friendship, studied the Scriptures together, visited the sick, the lepers, and those in prison. Bilney died at the stake on August 19th, 1531.

Latimer's first move was a change of emphasis; he ascribed less importance to the traditions of men than the teaching of Scripture; later, however, he denounced in scathing terms the evils and abuses within the Church and attacked as violently injustice and corruption wherever found. With Tyndale, Erasmus, and others he pleaded for a Bible in English free for all to read. So had Wycliffe pleaded a century and a half earlier. Latimer used plain words. "He pitched into unpreaching prelates who 'are so troubled with lordly living, rustling in their tents, dancing in their dominions, pampering their paunches, munching in their mangers, and loitering in their lordship, that they cannot attend to preaching.'" The refusal of the prelates to preach the Gospel was to Latimer a grievous sin. He told of the annoyance of a bishop for whom the church bell had not been rung. The clapper was broken. "But why doth your lordship make so much of a bell that lacketh a clapper?" asked one of the crowd, and added, pointing to the pulpit, "Here is a bell that hath lacked a clapper these twenty years."

So with "Purgatory," and its exploitation. "I know the wasp that stings them," exclaimed Latimer, "if purgatory and pilgrimage were destroyed they would lose their profits. . . . Purgatory is a pleasant and notable fiction by means of which the Church had got more by dead men's tributes and gifts than any emperor had by taxes and tallages of them that are alive." And much more to the same effect. "The Lord's Supper; tush, what new term is this?" asked an unreforming bishop. "It is seldom read in the Doctors." Replied Latimer: "I would rather follow Paul in using his terms than them (the bishops) though they had all the Doctors on their side."

The cult of relics (often no more than the bones of pigs and goats), the decorating of images, invocation of the Virgin, the laborious system of penance, intercession of saints, the shameful commercial exploitation of every act of worship and belief, ignorance and vice, idleness and superstition; Latimer attacked them all without fear or favour. His preaching caused excitement and aroused enthusiasm. "When Master Stafford read and Master Latimer preached then was Cambridge blessed." Sir John Cheke exclaimed: "I have an ear for other preachers, but a heart for

Latimer." And another: "Oh! how vehement was he in rebuking all sins . . . how sweet and pleasant were his words in exhorting virtue."

In Lent, 1530 he preached for the first time before the court at Windsor and was presented to the King, Henry VIII. In the previous December he had preached his famous *Sermons on the Card*. Men played cards at the Christmas festivities; he would show them how to play Christ's cards; "to play as winners and not losers." His "cards" were texts: *Matthew* v, 21; 22-24. He used vivid illustrations to show how men lied and cheated, obeyed outward forms of religion but denied God, observed priestly rules but knew nothing of Christ and His salvation, made long pilgrimages but neglected the poor and needy about them, venerated shrines, relics and saints, for which there is no Scriptural warrant, but lived without mercy and charity. The sermons created an uproar. "The University was thrown into a frenzy."

Latimer stood with those who upheld the divorce appeal. He was among the divines appointed to consider the lawfulness of Henry's marriage against his will to Catherine, left a widow within a few months of her wedding to Henry's elder brother, Arthur. Henry's wedding had violated Canon Law, had outraged public opinion, had been denounced as "abominable and incestuous," yet, to please Henry VII, who, rather than lose the enormous dowry Arthur's wedding had brought, even offered at one time to marry Catherine himself, a papal dispensation was granted.

Nor did anyone labour more strenuously than Latimer to secure that the Bible should be translated into English and be free for all to read or hear read in their own tongue.

PREACHER, REFORMER, PRISONER

Latimer went to West Kingston in January, 1531. The diocese of Salisbury in which it lay was the preserve of the absentee Cardinal Campeggio who had drawn great wealth from it but had never visited it. His decision to leave the court for a remote country parish distressed Latimer's friends. Away from the court his chances of preferment would be slight. His preaching and pastoral care soon won for him not only the love of his parishioners, but the respect of a large number of influential people. He was not left in peace, however. The Bishop of Bristol objected to his teaching and asked Stokesley, Bishop of London, to call Latimer for examination. Latimer's plea that he was subject to his own bishop was overruled on Stokesley's suggestion by Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, "whose zeal was nearly of a temper with his own malice."

"I marvel not a little," wrote Latimer, "that my lord of London having so large a diocese, and so peopled as it is, can have either leisure to trouble me or to trouble himself with me, a stranger to

him. Methinks it were more comely for my lord, if it were comely for me to say so, to be himself a preacher than a disquieter of preachers." Latimer concluded that he knew the matter was weighty; as weighty as his life was worth, but as God had emboldened him to preach the truth so he would embolden him to suffer for it. "I trust that God will help me, which trust, if I had not, the ocean seas should have divided my lord of London and me by this time." Friends who had pleaded with him not to leave the court now urged him to flee the country.

During his frequent appearances before Stokesley he was not examined on his preaching but sounded on heresy. At one session, on being told to speak up he became suspicious. "I gave an ear to the chimney, and there I heard a pen walking behind a cloth." Presented with fifteen articles upholding purgatory and other practices, Latimer defended himself by distinguishing between "things voluntary and those demanded by God's commands." He was excommunicated, but later absolved after subscribing to two of the articles. It was later claimed that he accepted them all. Still held in custody he took the bold step of appealing directly to the King. A dilapidated State Paper, in part unreadable, suggests that Henry commended his learning and preaching, but if he should offend again "ye shall else only get from me a faggot to burn you."

Latimer's abject confession on his knees before Stokesley distressed his friends. Much has been said in extenuation. He may or may not at this time have fully decided what might be remedied from within the Church and what should be abolished. But it was probably his darkest hour. Others at the time stood firm. Bainham was cruelly whipped and racked in More's garden. On the night before his martyrdom he burned off one finger in a candle flame to accustom him to the pain. To Latimer he gave his reasons for refusing to recant and added: "I likewise do exhort you to stand for the defence of the truth; for you that shall be left behind had need of comfort (encouragement) the world being as dangerous as it is."

When, in 1535, Latimer was consecrated Bishop of Worcester, it had been the preserve of an Italian bishop who annually had received large sums from it, but had never set foot in England. "No diocese was in more dire need of spiritual oversight." Latimer's labours soon won for him the respect of all but those who opposed Reform. In his travels he helped to expose many "saints" and mechanically-contrived images.

"He was made to juggle; his eyes would goggle,
 He would bend his brows and frown;
 With his head he would nod, like a proper young god,
 His chafts (jaws) would go up and down."

“Our Lady of Worcester,” the great Sybil, venerated by multitudes of people, proved to be the trussed up statue of a long dead bishop. Sybil had many “sisters.” The “Blood of Hailes,” said to have been caught from the Cross, was saffron coloured honey. The people gasped when Latimer threw a small image out of St. Paul’s. It had long been claimed that eight oxen could not move it.

Less happy for Latimer was the part he had to play in John Forrest’s execution. Cranmer had appealed for leniency, but towards those who denied the Act of Supremacy Henry was merciless. They were guilty of treason. At the stake Forrest remained unmoved by Latimer’s pleas and said to the people : “Seven years past he dared not have made such a sermon for his life.”

“The Bloody Statute (the Whip with Six Cords),” 1539, was a severe setback for the Reformers. That too much had been gained for all to be irrevocably lost was not obvious at the time. Henry defied the Pope, sequestered the monasteries, brooked no interference, but also insisted that “all his loving subjects should observe and keep the ancient ceremonies.” Political expediency determined the extent of his Protestantism. With the passing of the Statute Latimer resigned, but Cranmer stayed in office. It transpired later that Cromwell had deceived Latimer into believing that the King had desired his resignation. Later generations have made much of Latimer’s “heroism” and Cranmer’s “cowardice,” but there is little to be said for or against either.

What further good Latimer might have done had he remained at Worcester is a matter for speculation. There is a silence of eight years. Held for a time in London, he was afterwards allowed to live in the country, but on a visit to the capital was arrested on a trumped-up charge, and “endured a cruel imprisonment during the remainder of the King’s reign.”

During Edward’s reign Latimer lived mostly at Lambeth with Cranmer, rising at 2 a.m. for prayer and study, helping Cranmer to compile the first *Book of Homilies*, and undertaking preaching tours. He preached frequently before the young King and openly appealed to him to hear personally the pleas of his subjects. “The saying now is that money is heard everywhere; if a man be rich he shall soon have an end of the matter; others are fain to go home weeping for any help they obtain from the judge’s hand. Hear men’s suits yourself; in God’s Name, I requite you.” When accused of stirring up the poor against the rich he told the wealthier classes that even their self interest should compel their compassion, “for the sore is brought to such an extremity that if it be not remedied all the realm shall rue.”

In the January of 1548 Latimer preached his striking *Sermon of the Plough*. It made a powerful impression. He spoke often against the perversion of the Mass, setting forth the Scriptures

plainly that men may see how the nation's religious life had departed from the purity of the Gospel. "The people had come to look on him as one raised up and specially endowed by God, and gifted almost with the powers of the old Prophets. . . . It was a common saying : ' If England ever had a prophet he was one. Moses and Elijah did never declare the true message of God to their rulers and people with a more sincere spirit, faithful mind, and Godly zeal than did Latimer '."

Ridley, consecrated Bishop of London in 1549, desired with Latimer and others that some of the vast wealth of the universities should be used for charity, teaching in the study of the Scriptures and in preaching; he appealed for protection for the Universities, and in his reference to Clare Hall with its pillaged library, paid a fine tribute to Latimer.

When the young King died in 1553, commending his people to God and praying that "he would defend the nation against papistry and would maintain the true religion," many who had favoured Reform fled to the continent. With the crushing of the Wyatt rebellion Mary's promised toleration came to an end. Wyatt and Lady Jane Grey were only two of many who went to the scaffold; only the intervention of the Council saved the young Princess Elizabeth. With the passing of the new "heresy" laws Mary's fanaticism knew no bounds. Ecclesiastically religious rather than Christian she aimed with Papal support to exterminate Protestantism. Long before her 279th victim had died at the stake the people had sickened of the brutal tortures and burnings.

Summoned to London by Gardiner, "Diotrephes," as he dubbed him (3 *John*, 9), Latimer passed through Smithfield, commenting grimly to a friend that "the place had long groaned for him." His examiners harped on the one string, *Unity*. "Yes, Sir, quoth I, but unity in verity (truth), not in Popery. Better is diversity, than unity in Popery."

Lodged in the Tower with Cranmer and Ridley, he and they saw many escape during the excitement of Mary's coronation when "neither gates, doors, nor prisoners were looked to." Much time was spent in prayer; the New Testament was read "with great deliberation and painful study." Their chief concern was to discover the teaching of Christ and the Apostles on the Lord's Supper. The issue was crucial. Either they must conform to Rome's view or defend with their lives what they believed to be New Testament teaching.

Bonner had boasted, "Cranmer will never burn," but when, six months after his friends had died, he literally ran to the stake carrying the six copies of his recantation to burn with him, he was fortified in no small measure by the loving friendship and brave example of Latimer. His death deprived Queen and Pope of their

dearest wish, that "public abjuration of the Protestant Faith that would have so discredited the Reformation in England."

HIS TRIAL

Saturday, April 14th, 1554, was a day of intense excitement in Oxford. Before the accused men were confronted with the thirty-three "Theological Gladiators," with whom they must dispute, there was a brilliant procession of proctors, regents, choristers, doctors of divinity, doctors of law, with a host of beagles in the van and a mob of boisterous undergraduates bringing up the rear. A Solemn Mass of the Holy Ghost followed after which Latimer and Ridley were presented with Articles to which they must assent or publicly refute. Neither would enter into lengthy argument. Latimer, "frail and ill," declared: "I am almost as ready to dispute as to be captain of Calais!" He later affirmed that he had read the New Testament through seven times deliberately and yet "could not find the Mass in it, neither the marrow bones or the sinews of it."

Weston who headed the disputation declared heatedly that he would make him grant that both were to be found. "That you never will, Master Doctor," replied Latimer.

Questioned about the Fathers, he believed them "when they spoke true and had the Scriptures with them." "Augustine was a reasonable man who requireth to be believed no farther than he bringeth Scripture for his proof. . . . I do not take in hand here to defend Luther's sayings or doings. . . . If he were here he would defend himself well enough, I trow." He repudiated again what he called the "Four marrow bones of the Mass": The Popish Consecration—which had been called God's body-making; Transubstantiation; Missall Oblation; Adoration. With other eminent scholars he had searched the Scriptures and had "found no other presence of Christ's body but a spiritual presence. Nor did the Scripture say that the Mass was a sacrifice for sins, but rather that the sacrifice which Christ did on the Cross was perfect, holy, and good; that God did require none other, nor than ever again to be done. . . ."

The "trial" was disgraced with incessant "cat-calls, jeers, hisses and ribald laughter." Because of his physical weakness he was permitted to write his replies to the Articles; his statement ended:

"Thus have I answered your conclusions, as I will stand unto, with God's help, to the fire. And after this I am able to declare to the majesty of God, by His invaluable Word, that I die for the truth, for I assure you that if I could grant to the Queen's proceedings, and endure by the Word of God, I would rather live than die, but seeing that be directly against God's Word, I will obey God more than man, and so embrace the stake."

From brow-beating Weston turned to pleading. "The Queen's grace will be merciful if ye will turn." It availed nothing. "So faint

and ill that he dared not venture to take a drink of water for fear of vomiting," Latimer replied: "You shall have no hope in me to turn. I pray for the Queen daily, even from the bottom of my heart, that she may turn from this religion." Sentence was pronounced, but its execution was long delayed. If a recantation could yet be procured it would be of immeasurably more value to Rome and do infinitely more harm to Protestantism than martyrdom; furthermore, death, if it had to be, must be by Papal and not by Henry VIII's legislation.

Latimer wrote his last address to the English people in March, 1555, shortly before his own books, with those of Luther, Tyndale and Cranmer, were ordered to be burned; six months later he appeared before another Commission appointed by Cardinal Pole, and headed by White, Bishop of Lincoln. Foxe describes his appearance:

"He held his hat in his hand, he had a kerchief on his head, and a nightcap or two and a great cap such as townsmen use, with two broad flaps to button under his chin; he wore an old threadbare frieze gown girded to his body with a penny girdle, at the which hanged by a long thong of leather his Testament; and his spectacles, without a case, depended about his neck, upon his breast."

White urged him "to return like a lost sheep into the unity of Christ's Church . . . you are a learned man, you are old, spare your body . . . if you die in this state you shall be a stinking sacrifice, let not vain glory have the upper hand, humiliate yourself, subdue your reason . . . outside the Church there is no salvation."

Latimer readily confessed to a "Catholic Church, that is in all the world, but hath not his foundation in Rome only, as you say . . . St. Peter did truly his office, in that he was bid *Regere*, but since then the bishops of Rome have taken a new kind of *Regere* (rule), not according to the Word of God, but ruling according to their own pleasures."

Wearied with the lengthy proceedings Latimer asked not to have to appear again on the morrow. "I beseech you to do with me now as your lordships shall please; I require no respite, I am at point" (decided).

The following morning he appeared with Ridley before a packed congregation in St. Mary's Church. Ridley was first sentenced before Latimer, "exposed to the rude pressing of the multitude," was led to a table from which the cloth had been removed to suggest that he had no valid claim to his doctorate. White began his appeal, but Latimer cut him short. "I confess there is a Catholic Church, to the denomination of which I stand, but not the Church you call Catholic, which sooner might be termed diabolic . . . it is one thing to say Romish Church, and another to say Catholic."

The "traditional mummery" of degradation from all ecclesi-

astical orders was probably performed on the evening of October 15th. The next morning strong precautions were taken to prevent any interference with the execution. Ridley in a black-furred gown was first at the stake; as Latimer approached wearing only a "poor Bristol frieze with a new long shroud hanging down to his feet," Ridley said, "Be of good heart, Brother, for God will either assuage the fury of the flame or else strengthen us to abide it." A renegade priest named Smith preached on the words: "Though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."

Ridley then distributed some small possessions to those standing near and on Latimer's advice gave away his truss. "It will put you to more pain, and the truss will do a poor man good." That done he prayed, "Oh, Heavenly Father, I give Thee most hearty thanks for that Thou hast called me to be a professor of Thee, even unto death. I beseech Thee, good Lord, take mercy upon this realm of England, and deliver the same from all her enemies." A chain was passed round their bodies and fastened with a staple to the stake. "Knock it hard," said Ridley, "for the flesh will have his course." As the faggots were applied Latimer spoke his imperishable 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."

The awed people watched as the aged Latimer stroked his face, bathed his hands as it were in the flames, and moved his lips as if in prayer. Apparently he died quickly and without much pain. Ridley suffered terribly before the choked flames finally exploded the bag of gunpowder and his charred lifeless body collapsed over the chain at Latimer's feet.

" . . . through the dusky air
The pyres thick-flaming shot a dismal glare."

Their reflection still brightly glows in English skies.

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