NICHOLAS RIDLEY: ENGLISH REFORMER, THEOLOGIAN AND MARTYR

by CHARLES H. HUTCHINS

Mr. Hutchins, Rector of Archingworth with Keimars and Harrington in Leicestershire, made a special study of the theology of Bishop Ridley in the Department of Theology of Leeds University, under the supervision of the late Dr. G. S. M. Walker. We are glad to present a by-product of his study in the following pages.

Amongst the English Reformers Nicholas Ridley is perhaps best remembered for the violent death he endured. Since he had been found guilty of heresy, the punishment was death by burning at the stake, but it was a death that did not come easy for Ridley. The faggots stifled the flames so that they could not reach up. The consequence was that the lower half of his body burned away before the flames finally leaped up and he was able to lean into them and allow the gunpowder slung around his neck to release him from his agony.1

He died at Oxford and with him on that day in October 1555 there died also Hugh Latimer. He it was who uttered those now famous words:

Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day by God's grace light such a candle in England, as I trust shall never be put out.2

In fact the candle which they lit was not extinguished, for, though Mary continued her cruel persecution of the Protestants, the queen who followed when she died was Elizabeth I and with her came the Reformation settlement.

Whilst we to-day look back at the days of the Reformation in this country and immediately think of Thomas Cranmer and his liturgical achievements, there is little doubt that the Catholics of those days feared Cranmer far less than they did Ridley. They realized he was the man they needed to subdue, and stated so publicly at the final trial in Oxford. Brooks, Bishop of Gloucester, and on the Catholic side, had no pretensions in his estimation of Ridley:

What a weak and feeble stay in religion is this, I pray you? Latimer leanteth to Cranmer, Cranmer to Ridley, and Ridley to the singularity of his own wit: so that if you overthrew the singularity of Ridley's wit, then must needs the religion of Cranmer and Latimer fall also.3

Ridley was undoubtedly the ablest disputant of the Protestants4 and was well versed in the Fathers.5 He it was who had converted Cranmer to the Reformed view of the sacrament6 and held firm in his beliefs to the painful end.

He had a distinguished career in academic and church life. He looked back on his Cambridge days with feeling and delight.7 There he had received his education, degrees and promotion in the various offices of the university before being called to Herne as Cranmer's chaplain. It was there that Ridley had read Ratramnus on "The Body and Blood of the Lord", and that work had "pulled him by the ear" and brought him "from the common error of the Romish Church."8 After Herne, the little village in Kent, near Canterbury, he became Bishop of Rochester at the accession of Edward VI and entered with zealfulness on his episcopate. The move from Rochester to London came about when Bishop Bonner was deposed for refusing to accept the new Prayer Book enforced by law. Such was the reputation of Ridley at that time that Hales in a letter to Gualter on the continent said: "The new bishop of London is now employed in his visitation, and threatens to eject those who shall not have come to their senses before his next visitation; and if I know the man, he will be as good as his word."9

He was elected to return to his native north country as Bishop of Durham, but before that could be effected Edward died, Mary came to the throne, and the fires began to burn.

Why was Ridley condemned? He was condemned because he refused to accept the Catholic teaching that, at the consecration of the elements in the Holy Communion, the bread and wine were transubstantiated to become the real body and blood of Christ. At his trial at Oxford there were five articles of accusation:

i. That he had publicly affirmed that the true and natural body of Christ was not present in the elements after the consecration of the priest.

ii. That he had taught that the bread and wine remain as such in the sacrament of the altar.

iii. That he had obstinately maintained that in the mass there is no propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the dead.

1 For details see Foxe's Book of Martyrs.


4 Cranmer, Letters (PS), II, p. 218.


7 Original Letters (PS), pp. 187-188.
iv. That because he held such teachings he was a heretic.
v. That such teachings as he held had been spoken ill of.\(^\text{19}\)

He had to accept the Catholic teaching or be condemned and punished as a heretic. It was the latter path that he chose to follow.

In answer to these accusations he makes it clear where he stands. He acknowledges a presence in the sacrament—and so did his adversaries, but it was the manner of the presence on which they did not agree. For Ridley it was a spiritual presence by grace.\(^\text{11}\) Again, in the answer that he was allowed to give to the second article, he made it clear that he believed there was a change, but it was not in the bread and the wine but in the use that was now made of them.\(^\text{12}\) In denying a propitiatory sacrifice at the altar he makes it clear that it would be derogation of Christ's death and passion should what they teach be so. The sacrament of the altar was instituted so that men taking it might partake of the merits of the passion of Christ.\(^\text{13}\)

At a time when there is a revival of interest in Reformation theology it is right that we see the Reformers in their proper perspective, not just denying a set of propositions posed by the Catholics, but seeing their positive teaching on the sacraments, and Ridley's clear mind is of great asset here.

(1) His teaching on Baptism

That water is the outward sign was agreed by all, and Ridley states how the water visible is the sign of the washing invisible by the Holy Ghost\(^\text{14}\) but asserts that there is a sacramental change. The change occurs through its setting apart and it becomes the fountain of regeneration, though in substance it remains water.\(^\text{15}\) But there is grace attached to the sacrament—the Holy Ghost is not contained in the water,\(^\text{16}\) but the sacrament does convey grace. Grace is not included in the sacrament as such "but to those who receive it well, it is turned to grace. After that manner the water in baptism hath grace promised, and by that grace the Holy Spirit is given: not that grace is included in water, but that grace cometh by water."\(^\text{17}\) As to the content of baptism, so long as the substantial parts of baptism were observed\(^\text{18}\) the language of the service mattered little, but for the sake of the people present, so that they could understand better their own profession, he would prefer the service to be in the common

\(^\text{19}\) Ridley, Works (PS), p. 271.
service mean to those who participated? It was life or death and
the feeding was that on the body and blood of Christ spiritually and by grace.

As for the mass, it was the occasion of blasphemy because the
teaching was that the priest "hath such power over Christ's body, as
to make God and man, once at the least every day, of a wafer cake". Also in connection with the mass he denied that there was any such
teaching in the scriptures as to allow a sacrifice of the altar to satisfy
"and pay the price of sins, both of the dead and of the quick".

As to the presence of Christ in the sacrament he denied a Real
Presence such as the Catholics taught, but he allowed a presence
which had nothing to do with a carnal presence of Christ's body in
the elements. For him there was a spiritual presence and by grace.

We can see then that the teaching he held was diametrically
opposed to that of the Catholics. He did not misunderstand their
teaching or react to a false understanding of the mass. He, like the
other Reformers, was clear as to the teaching the Catholics held, and
that teaching he opposed.

This is important at a time when ecumenical approaches are liable to gloss over differences in doctrine. Such differences in the understanding of the sacrament of the Lord's Table caused blood to be spilled in the sixteenth century, and we
would be irresponsible if we were to think that such bloodshed was
caused by anything other than doctrinal positions.

But what were the grounds on which Ridley stood and held his
position? There were three, and it was his roots in the Scriptures, the
Fathers and Ratramnus which made him the power that he was in the
Reformation debates. He was steeped in the Scriptures and his use of
them was profuse. He would not speak "wittingly or willingly in
any point against God's word". His knowledge of the scriptures was
matched by his knowledge of the Fathers. "His immense patristic
learning gave him a decided advantage over all his antagonists." Whilst he quotes freely from them and makes appeal to over thirty

writers, he uses them as witnesses and upholders of the teaching he
finds in the Scripture, for he believed they understood the true
meaning of Christ. One of the writers to whom he made appeal was
Ratramnus, a ninth-century monk and writer. It was this writer who,
as we have seen, had "pulled him by the ear" and thus brought him
to a true understanding of the sacrament. Whilst the Catholics made
an attempt to suggest that the book was a Protestant forgery, the
importance of Ratramnus was that such a book as his had been
written as late as the ninth century and accepted at the time as
orthodox teaching.

His teaching was clear and it had made Ridley search again the
scriptures. From that time forward Ridley held the Reformed teaching
on the sacrament and that teaching he was industrious in promot­
ing. His was a clear and incisive mind making him the man most to be
feared of the Protestant disputants. The Catholics had summed him
up well and knew that, if they could destroy his teaching, then the
religion of Latimer and Cranmer would fall also. In that Cranmer
recanted after the death of Ridley and Latimer that judgement was
right, but the great mistake made by the Catholics was at the trial of
Ridley and Latimer when, instead of examining the aged and less
scholarly Latimer first and making him falter, they examined Ridley
first and he did not waver one bit. With that example it is no wonder
that Latimer stood firm.

Ridley's death was a cruel and brave death, but it ought to be his
teaching and the grounds on which he held that teaching which take a
more prominent place.

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