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RIDLEY, LATIMER, AND CRANMER: THE OXFORD MARTYRS

R. Scott Clark

The church is the fruit of the gospel.

—HYWEL R. JONES

Our Lord has many weak children in his family, many dull pupils in his school, many raw soldiers in his army, many lame sheep in his flock. Yet he bears with them all, and casts none away. Happy is that Christian who has learned to do likewise with his brethren.

—J. C. RYLE

One of the most interesting bits of Oxford history is the story of the Oxford Martyrs and the statue by which they are remembered. The history of the monument itself is fascinating. In 1833, John Henry Newman (1801–90), an Anglican priest, began publishing a series of pamphlets called *Tracts for the Times*.¹ By them he intended to defend the Anglican church as a divine institution, the doctrine of apostolic succession and the *Book of Common Prayer*. He was followed by John Keble (1792–1866) and E. B. Pusey (1800–82) in the Oxford Movement. Some critics saw these emphases as a drift back to Roman Catholicism.² By 1838, the Oxford Movement was in full swing. Some more vigorous Protestant Anglicans, concerned about the powerful tug of the Oxford Movement's account of the tradition of the western church on the hearts and minds of Oxford, commissioned the Martyrs' Memorial in remembrance of the death of three of the English Reformation's most well-known and fascinating heroes, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, Bishop Hugh Latimer and Bishop Nicholas Ridley. The construction of the memorial was funded through subscriptions, which was also a vehicle by which various Anglican pastors could register their support of ideas for which the memorial would stand. It was not well supported locally. The memorial was completed just two years before Newman completed his conversion to Rome, in 1845. Newman was later rewarded for his labors with a Roman cardinal's

hat. Along with him several other prominent Anglicans converted to Rome, apparently justifying the fear of some of the movement's critics. It was ironic that the monument honoring England's most famous Reformers should be built in the midst of controversy involving Rome. For it was a very similar controversy that made three churchmen into martyrs.

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THE FIRST TO RECANT

The most fascinating of the three martyrs is the reluctant Archbishop, Thomas Cranmer (c.1489–1556). Thomas, like his fellow martyrs, was educated at Cambridge. Raised a loyal son of the church and a loyal servant of his king, Cranmer took priestly orders and became a fellow in Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1514. Soon after, he abandoned his order to marry. He became a reader at Buckingham College. After less than a year of marriage, Cranmer's wife, Joan, died and he was readmitted to Jesus College as a fel-

low (a tutor), and shortly before 1520 was ordained to the priesthood.

By 1529 it had become apparent to King Henry VIII that his wife, Catherine of Aragon, was not going to produce an heir to the throne. He sued the pope for divorce. Seeing Henry's unsuccessful attempt to free himself to produce an heir, Cranmer suggested to Henry that he might consult the universities who in turn might be able to find grounds in canon law for the divorce. Henry was delighted with this suggestion. This would not be the last time Cranmer would be of such assistance to Henry.

Three years later, Cranmer, the loyal servant of Henry Tudor, was serving as his ambassador to the pope. While on this trip, he met and secretly married Margaret Osian der, niece of the Lutheran reformer of the same surname.⁴ On the face of it, this was a strange thing for Cranmer to do. Why would a zealous priest, in the service of the king, on a trip to see his "holy father" take a second wife? This contradictory *modus vivendi* marked Thomas to his end. We know him as a Reformer, yet for most of his career he was not terribly Reformed in his actions, and perhaps the one unifying theme of his service was his dedication to an idea which most Reformed people found distasteful, to say the least. Cranmer was a committed Erastian.⁵ He believed that the king was rightly the temporal head of the church. The Genevan Reformers and their Palatinate, English and American heirs believed that Christ is the temporal and spiritual head of the church, and they struggled mightily to prevent secular authorities from manipulating the church. At the same time, Cranmer did much to advance the Reformation in England, in a way in which few others could. In 1532 he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, the ecclesiastical leader of the English church. He served Christ in that office until the accession of Mary Tudor in 1553.

From his appointment, until the accession of the child

Edward VI (1547–53), Cranmer served Henry very faithfully, granting ecclesiastical sanction to Henry's marital infidelities. The year following his appointment, Cranmer annulled Henry's marriage to Catherine. He performed the same "service" for Henry in 1536, leading to Anne Bolyn's execution and then officiated at Henry's marriage to, and divorce from, Anne of Cleves. Not surprisingly during this period, Cranmer advanced his Reformation ideas very cautiously, authoring and sanctioning a series of *Articles*, none of which can be described as militantly Reformed. His *Ten Articles* of 1536 endorsed three sacraments: baptism, communion and penance. Although the article on the Eucharist did not use the word transubstantiation, it is not clearly Protestant. It was replaced a year later by the *Bishops' Book*, named after the men who wrote it. This work endorsed seven sacraments and the *Ave Maria*. The *Bishops' Book* was revised by King Henry and aptly renamed *The King's Book* in 1543.⁶ The major change is that now the book clearly endorsed transubstantiation.⁷

Unfortunately for Margaret Osiander, her husband opposed ineffectively the *Six Articles* of 1539 which Henry imposed on the church. These articles were Henry's response to the growth of the reformation in the church. They endorsed transubstantiation, communion in one kind, clerical celibacy, monastic vows, private masses and auricular confession. Being a pastor's wife can be unpleasant. Being an archbishop's wife can be miserable, especially when it is illegal to be such! Margaret, whom Cranmer had kept in hiding seven years, was now sent to Germany. Ironically, after all Cranmer had done for Henry's married life, it is Henry who unwittingly enforced an unwanted separation on his archbishop.

Henry Tudor had good reason to trust his archbishop. Cranmer had done little to challenge or disappoint him. During Henry's life, the most radical move Cranmer made

was to encourage the distribution of the Bible in English, not an insignificant contribution, mind you, but not enough to get him in trouble with his "boss," as it were. Tied as he was to Henry's whim, Cranmer could only be as effective as Henry was tolerant. At the king's death and the accession of young Edward VI, Cranmer flew his Reformed colors more openly. His view of the Supper became more recognizably Protestant. He imported the Italian humanist and Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500–62) to be Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford and the Strasbourg Reformer, Martin Bucer (1491–1551) to hold the same post at Cambridge.⁸ In 1549 he published his greatest work, the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Book continues to be praised as a signal literary and theological achievement. It was revised and made more clearly Protestant in 1552. In the next year he also published the plainly Calvinistic *Forty-Two Articles*, the basis of the Elizabethan *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1571).

THE FIRST TO DIE

"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." These were among the last words of Hugh Latimer, as he and Nicholas Ridley stood back to back at the stake to be burned on October 16, 1555. Hugh Latimer was ordained to the priesthood in 1522. He was one of twelve preachers licensed by Cambridge University to preach anywhere in England. Three years later, however, the growing influence of Martin Luther on Christendom in England was beginning to show in Hugh Latimer. He declined an invitation to preach against Luther and soon found himself giving an explanation to Archbishop Wolsey (c.1474–1530). He satisfied Wolsey but was placed on a short leash. Upon Cranmer's appointment to Canterbury, Latimer was again allowed free reign. By 1539 he was openly opposing the doctrine of purgatory

and the mass. His outspoken criticism of the *Six Articles* of 1539 cost him his job as Bishop of Worcester. The year before his resignation, in a strange bit of foreshadowing, Latimer had preached at the execution of John Forest. Now, he, along with Nicholas Ridley, was odd man out. From 1540-46 he was confined to the Tower of London. At Edward's accession, he was released and renewed his preaching ministry.

As Bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley was an equally inviting target for Mary's wrath. Ridley had been, since 1537, Cranmer's chaplain and one of his closest advisors, helping to shape the 1549 Prayer Book. He also distinguished himself in Mary's mind, no doubt, by supporting her chief rival for the throne, Lady Jane Grey.



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to seek out and destroy the most visible proponents of the hated Protestantism. Latimer was an obvious target. He, along with Cranmer and Ridley, was arrested in 1553 and taken to Oxford to appear before a papal commission there. In March 1554, all three men were imprisoned in the Bocardo Prison near Oxford's north gate.⁹ On April 14, the men were taken from the Bocardo to the University Church, St. Mary the Virgin, to prepare to dispute transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass.¹⁰ On the twentieth, four days after the disputation, the outcome of which is easily guessed, all three men were brought before the commissioners and each was told he had been proved wrong and was given opportunity to recant. Each refused. They were condemned as heretics.

There was a problem regarding their punishment. The statutes for burning heretics had been repealed in 1547. In the fall, Parliament obliged by reenacting the statutes. In September 1555, Cranmer was tried in St. Mary the Virgin before the papal commissioners and convicted of heresy. Because of his exalted status in the church the proceedings had to be sent to Rome. Cranmer had eighty days in which to appeal. He had longer to wait and more time to think about his predicament.

On October 15, Ridley and Latimer were tried separately for heresy and convicted. The next morning, the two men were led to the stake. The mayor and gentry were present as were a number of soldiers to prevent anything untoward from happening. Archbishop Cranmer, still in the Bocardo Prison (near the site of the execution), was brought out only at the last moment to witness the death of his friends in front of the Master's Lodge of Balliol College.¹¹ Ridley came first, then the poorly dressed Latimer who joked about the slow progress they were making. When the two met, they greeted each other with joy (having been separated for some time) and prayed together.

They, along with everyone else present, settled down for the regulation sermon.

Predictably the Oxford theologian, Richard Smith, preached from the text, "If I yield my body to the fire to be burned, but have not charity, I shall gain nothing thereby" (1 Cor. 13:3). Both Ridley and Latimer "gestured their disapproval" and the sermon ended rather quickly after only fifteen minutes. They begged for permission to reply but were denied. They did not want to miss an opportunity, even at their own execution, to testify to the Good News.

There being no further occasion for delay, they were commanded to prepare themselves for the fire. Ridley distributed his garments, a small collection of momentos brought for the purpose, among the officers, and among his weeping friends and relatives. Latimer simply allowed the attendants to undress him, and being stripped into his shroud, he seemed as comely a person to them that were present, as one should lightly see; and whereas in his clothes he appeared a withered and crooked silly old man, he now stood bold upright, as comely a father as one might lightly behold.

When they were already chained to the stake, and exhorting each other with fervent prayers, George Shipside was allowed within the ring of guards to give to each a bag of gunpowder which would shorten their sufferings, and which each accepted thankfully as a token of the mercy of God.¹² The fire was then brought and it was at this juncture that Latimer uttered the words which have ever since been associated with the occasion: "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." It was a fitting and symbolic end to their relationship. In the event too, it was Ridley who had need to "play the man," for the older man died swiftly and comparatively painlessly,

probably from suffocation, while his younger colleague suffered excruciating agonies from a slow fire. Shipside, who had been allowed to remain to help him in whatever way he could, unwittingly made things worse through his own agony of mind by putting more faggots on the wrong moment, and it was one of the soldiers who eventually cleared a way for the air with his bill, and the flames reached the gun powder.¹³ Their prayers were answered. Many of the spectators were disgusted, but at least one of the audience, a fellow of Magdalen College, was converted.

*"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 LAST TO DIE

Mary Tudor (who believed in papal supremacy) would be a true test of Archbishop Cranmer's belief in royal sovereignty over the church. In November 1553 Cranmer stood trial, accused of entering the Tower of London on July 10 and proclaiming Lady Jane Dudley to be queen and conspiring with the Duke of Northumberland against Mary. He denied both charges. He was convicted and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered and imprisoned in the Tower of London to await execution. Not content with civil prose-

cution, Mary also wanted Cranmer convicted of heresy.

In November 1555, Cranmer's period of appeal on the heresy charges expired. The pope ordered his excommunication and degradation from holy orders. During part of this period he was housed in Christ Church.¹⁴ In January he was returned to the Bocardo. During Cranmer's imprisonment, he was deprived of friendship and isolated. Under these circumstances the governor of the Bocardo did what decades of ecclesiastical and civil pressure were unable to do: cause Cranmer to repent of his Protestant faith. In January 1556, "For fear of death" Cranmer submitted to the Roman Catholic Church, affirming transubstantiation and papal supremacy of the church.

Mary, however, had decided that, despite his recantation, Cranmer must die. On February 14 he was formally "degraded" from his office. Cranmer took the opportunity to appeal his conviction and gave no hint of his earlier recantation. Cranmer made two more ambiguous statements. On the twenty-sixth he signed a full renunciation of his Protestantism. Again, mentally and emotionally tormented, he signed another such document on March 18. That, however, was not the end of it. Perhaps, as his day drew near, the memory of the heroic deaths of Ridley and Latimer did "light such a candle" in Cranmer's heart and mind. The morning of March 21 was wet. The sermon was preached in St. Mary's. The preacher rejoiced in Cranmer's apparent conversion to Rome and proclaimed that his death, with that of Ridley, Latimer and Hooper, made up for the death of John Fisher! Dr. Cole also promised to Cranmer, immediately upon his death, all the rites of the church: dirges, masses and funerals in all the churches in Oxford.

Thomas Cranmer was called upon to testify to his faith. He did, categorically renouncing everything he had ever said or done "contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart." In case there might be any ambiguity about what he

meant by truth he refused the pope as "Christ's enemy and anti-Christ with all his false doctrines." He declared that since it was his hand which had "offended writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall first be punished therefore; for, may I come to the fire, it shall be first burned." John Foxe (1517–87) in his justly famous *Acts and Monuments of Matters Happening in the Church* (1563) recorded the rest of this sad story.

And when the wood was kindled and the fire began to burn near him, stretching out his arm, he put his right hand into the flame, which he held so steadfast and immovable (saving that once with the same hand he wiped his face) that all men might see his hand burned before his body was touched. His eyes were lifted up to heaven, and oftentimes he repeated "this unworthy right hand," as long as his voice would suffer him; and using often the words of St. Stephen, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit," in the greatness of the flame he gave up the ghost.¹⁵

Thus less than a year after Ridley and Latimer had died confessing Christ, Cranmer also met his Savior in the flames on Oxford's Broad Street.¹⁶

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edited by John H. Armstrong. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Hence the movement and the controversy it created are often described as the *Tractarian* movement.
2. In 1829 Parliament passed the fourth of five Catholic Emancipation Acts. These were a series of acts begun in 1778 under George III in which Catholics were progressively permitted to own landed property without taking an oath which denied their religion. They were freed to acknowledge the supremacy of the pope and they were given the franchise, access to the universities and the professions. These acts, particularly the act of 1829 in conjunction with the growth of Protestant liberalism, led to something of an exodus out of the Church of England into the Roman Catholic Church.
3. The starting academic position was lecturer. A reader was one step up. It is something like the move from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor in the United States.
4. Andreas Osiander (1498–1552) aligned himself with the Reformation in 1522. Later he broke with Luther over the nature of justification. In *De lustificatione* (1550) he argued for infused righteousness against imputed righteousness.
5. Erastian describes a view of the church named after the physician-theologian who played a significant role in the Reformation of Heidelberg, Thomas Erastus (1524–83). Erastus argued that the church should serve the state. This was a point of controversy among Reformed theologians. The Genevan (Calvin and Beza) and Heidelberg (Ursinus and Olevian) theologians disagreed. They argued successfully that the state should protect and respect the sphere of authority belonging to the church. Erastus was supported by the Zurich theologians, notably by Heinrich Bullinger. The Calvinist view is contained in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 23:3 (in the 1647 and in the 1729 American revision); and *Belgic Confession*, Art. 36. To this day, Anglican Erastianism requires that ecclesiastical appointments are not made officially by the church, but by the queen. In practice the prime minister consults with the archbishop and then passes on the appointments to the queen and parliament. These appointments are rarely questioned.
6. It was not for nothing that before his "reformation" of the church, Henry was named *Defensor Fidei* (Defender of the Faith) by the pope! It is unlikely that Henry ever adopted any distinctively Protestant views during his lifetime. His "break" with Rome was surely an act of convenience more than an act of conscience or principle. The initials F.D. (*Fidei Defensor*) are still stamped on British coins.
7. Transubstantiation is the traditional Roman Catholic view at consecration, the wafer used in the mass becomes the actual, physical body of Christ. The substance (essence) of the bread is said to have changed

even though the transformation is not apparent. This change in substance makes possible the priestly "sacrifice" of the mass. According to *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 80, ". . . the mass teaches, that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the sufferings of Christ, unless Christ is still daily offered for them by the priests, and that Christ is bodily under the form of bread and wine, and is therefore to be worshipped in them. And thus the mass at bottom is nothing else than a denial of the one sacrifice and passion of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry." *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29:2; ". . . so that the so-called sacrifice of the mass is most contradictory to Christ's one only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect."

8. Bucer was buried in Great St. Mary's Church in Cambridge. So intense was Mary's hatred of Protestants that, in 1557, Bucer's body was exhumed and publicly burned. Later, under Elizabeth I, his remains were reinterred in St. Mary's. His grave is marked with a plaque in the church. It is ironic that this should happen to Bucer who along with Philip Melanchthon, was among the most irenic and ecumenical of the Reformers.
9. The Bocardo was built in the late thirteenth century. The name possibly refers to its unsanitary state (boggard), or it may describe a place from which it is difficult to escape.
10. A *disputation* is something like a formal debate. Martin Luther was called to disputations to give an account of his new views at the Diet of Worms. It was a common and, when properly employed, useful way for the church to a theological understanding. However, it is also a procedure subject to considerable abuse, as in the case here where it is more an inquisition than honest debate between two competing views. This section follows closely the account given s.v. *Martyrs' Memorial in The Encyclopaedia of Oxford* (London, 1988).
11. It is said that one can still see evidence of the nearby flames of the martyrs' fire on the door. However, I suspect this claim is for the benefit of tourists. There is a permanent memorial to the martyrs, a cross, embedded flush with the pavement, in the Broad Street on the spot where they died.
12. The gunpowder was for throwing in the fire at the appropriate moment to finally kill the condemned.
13. D. M. Loades, *The Oxford Martyrs* (London, 1970), 219–20. This entire section and the next follows Loades.
14. Oxford's largest college.
15. Foxe, as quoted in Jan Morris' *The Oxford Book of Oxford* (Oxford, 1978), 49.
16. The account book of the (Oxford) city Bailiffs for March 21, 1556, recorded nonchalantly the bill for the cost "For an 100 of wood faggots; For an 100 and half of furs faggots; for the carriage of them; for two labourers." Morris, ibid.