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NICHOLAS RIDLEY: ENGLISH REFORMER, THEOLOGIAN AND MARTYR

by CHARLES H. HUTCHINS

MR. HUTCHINS, Rector of Arthingworth with Keimmarsh 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 leaneth to Cranmer, Cranmer to Ridley, and Ridley to the singularity of

¹ For details see Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.

² Jasper Ridley, *Nicholas Ridley* (Longmans, 1957), p. 418.

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 zealotry 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.

³ Ridley, *Works* (PS), p. 283.

⁴ Jasper Ridley, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁵ See chapter 8, part 3, and Appendix 7, in C. H. Hutchins, *The Theology of Nicholas Ridley in connection with the Book of Common Prayer* (unpublished B.D. thesis, Leeds University).

⁶ Cranmer, *Letters* (PS), II, p. 218.

⁷ Ridley, *Works* (PS), p. 406.

⁸ Ridley, *Works* (PS), p. 206.

⁹ *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.¹⁰

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.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.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.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 Ghost¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ But there is grace attached to the sacrament—the Holy Ghost is not contained in the water,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.”¹⁷ As to the content of baptism, so long as the substantial parts of baptism were observed¹⁸ 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

¹⁰ Ridley, *Works* (PS), p. 271.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 273.

¹² *Op. cit.*, pp. 274–275.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 275–276.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 35, 275.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 273.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 240.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

tongue.¹⁹ He clearly assents to the baptism of infants²⁰ and does not believe it lawful for a man once christened to be christened again.²¹

(2) *His teaching on the Holy Communion*

As to his teaching on the Holy Communion, he has much more to say—and for good reasons. The sixteenth-century controversies raged around this sacrament rather than baptism, and so, as is to be expected, he deals with Holy Communion, and particularly with the errors of the Catholics, at length.

In the first place he evolves five reasons for removing the error of transubstantiation. There is the authority, majesty and verity of the Holy Scriptures, and after quoting a succession of scriptures and commenting upon them, he points out how Paul called it bread after the sanctification and clearly did not believe any change had taken place. Consequently “transubstantiation is clean against the words of scripture”.²² But the error is to be refuted also by the testimony of the ancient Fathers who uphold what he believes the scriptures to teach.²³ He calls on Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian and Rattramus among others to support him. The very nature of a sacrament is a third argument he uses. Unity, Nutrition and Conversion are the three aspects, and in each case if the bread ceases to be bread then the analogy breaks down.²⁴ As a fourth argument he cites Eutyches, who denied the human nature of Christ and who was condemned as a heretic. Ridley’s point here is that those who teach transubstantiation are ascribing to the human nature of Christ what only rightly belongs to the divine, and so fall into the same heresy as Eutyches.²⁵ Then finally he points how even the Catholics believe the creed and confess that Christ ascended into heaven. It was the human body that ascended, so how can he be carnally present in two places?²⁶ The doctrine of transubstantiation he abhorred as a position which is based on a foundation “monstrous, against reason” and a “detestable heresy”.²⁷

Positively he calls the sacrament a Holy Communion and asks what the sacrifice is. In answer he is clear that it is spiritual sacrifice, and one of “prayers, praise and giving of thanks”.²⁸ There was no offering of Christ by the priest, in his estimation. But what did the

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 534.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 141, 367.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

²³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 171, 173.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 175.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 176.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 196.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 210–211.

service mean to those who participated? It was life or death²⁹ and the feeding was that on the body and blood of Christ spiritually and by grace.³⁰

As for the mass, it was the occasion of blasphemy³¹ 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".³² 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".³³

As to the presence of Christ in the sacrament he denied a Real Presence such as the Catholics taught,³⁴ 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.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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".³⁷ 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."³⁸ Whilst he quotes freely from them and makes appeal to over thirty

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 8-9; cf. p. 161.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 235.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 206.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 198.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 223, 238.

³⁶ For discussion as to alleged misunderstandings on the part of the Reformers of Catholic teaching see F. Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformers* (Darton, 1960).

³⁷ Ridley, *Works* (PS), p. 193.

³⁸ Introduction to Ridley's *Works* (PS), p. xii.

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.³⁹ 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"⁴⁰ 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 promoting. 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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³⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 206.