

The Oxford Martyrs

Intro: As many of you know, October 31 on the Christian calendar is remembered as “Reformation Day,” an extremely important date in Church history. It was on this last day of October 1517 that a Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, nailed a document known as the “**95 Theses**” to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburgh, Germany. Luther was protesting the Roman Catholic Churches’ practice of selling Papal indulgences, along with many other things, he felt were contrary to God’s Word. It was through his personal study and teaching of the Book of Romans, that Luther had come to understand that salvation was by God’s grace through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. Luther’s protest against Papal abuses catalyzed what has become known as ***The Protestant Reformation***.



This morning I would like to focus our attention on ***The Oxford Martyrs***, three men that God used to promote reformation in England. Their names were Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley. Before looking at these three men, I would like to review two earlier English Reformers, John Wycliffe and William Tyndale. In addition, we will take a brief look at King Henry VIII, who God also used to bring Reformation to England.

I. Earlier English Reformers: John Wycliffe and William Tyndale

In the 14th century God used John Wycliffe to promote early reform in England. He has been called the Morning Star of the Reformation. He was one of the earliest opponents of papal authority over secular power. Wycliffe believed that the Bible was to be individually read and interpreted, as opposed to the Catholic Churches’ emphasis on receiving its sacraments as the only way to salvation. This required a translation of the Bible from Latin into the common language of the people. He completed his own translation of the Bible directly from the Latin Vulgate into English in 1382. Wycliffe sent out Lollards with hand written copies of the Scriptures to be preached to the people. He advocated the supremacy of the king over the papal authority of Rome. He rejected the concepts of purgatory, clerical celibacy, pilgrimages, the selling of indulgences, and praying to dead saints. Wycliffe championed the ***sole authority of the Bible*** as the basis for Christian belief and practice. ***Sola Scriptura*** became a formal principle of the Reformation!

Wycliffe was followed by William Tyndale, referred to as the “Father of the English Bible.” He was the first person to translate and publish the Bible in English from copies of the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. He had fled from Catholic church authorities in England in 1524, and taken up residence with Martin Luther in Wittenburg, Germany. He worked closely with Luther, and a year later, in 1525, the first English copies of Matthew and Mark were completed. Matthew and Mark’s gospels were printed and copies were smuggled into England and distributed all over the English country-side, much to the joy of the people. Tyndale was eventually betrayed by a friend, arrested, and returned to England. He was jailed and tortured for nearly two years, but refused to recant his beliefs in salvation by faith in Christ alone. He was put to death on the 6th of October 1536. **His last words were a prayer “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes....”**

King Henry VIII (1491-1547)

God honored Tyndale’s dying prayer by working through **King Henry VIII** to introduce reformation in Great Britain. The providential ways of God are indeed strange and wonderful.

King Henry VIII ruled England for 36 years, presiding over sweeping changes that brought his nation into the Protestant Reformation. He is perhaps best remembered for his marriages to a series of six wives. Henry VIII was a cruel and selfish man who had grown weary of his marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. His primary reason for wanting an annulment was because Catherine had failed to give Henry a male heir to his throne. He petitioned the Pope to grant him an annulment, but the Pope refused. Henry enlisted the help of Thomas Cranmer, who advocated the principle of Royal Supremacy. In Cranmer’s view, the King of England was ordained to rule by Divine right, and as such, he possessed Royal Supremacy to rule not only as the King of England, but as “the supreme head of the Church of England” as well. King Henry appointed Cranmer Archbishop of Canterbury.

Cranmer worked closely with King Henry on establishing legal procedures to annul the monarch’s marriage. On May 23 of 1533 Cranmer pronounced the judgment that Henry’s marriage with Catherine of Aragon was against the law of God, and as such, not binding. Henry was now free to marry Anne Boleyn, and on May 28, Cranmer validated Henry and Anne’s marriage, which had already taken place earlier that year on January 25.

Cranmer advised King Henry to end Roman Catholicism in England, and establish in its place the Anglican Church of England. King Henry removed the Roman

Catholic chains of Papal domination in England. He put an end to the monastic system, and he confiscated all church properties and assets. He threw the catholic priests out into the streets.

As you can see, Henry VIII's desire to annul his first marriage without papal approval led to the creation of a separate Church of England. Of his 6 marriages, two ended in annulment, two in natural deaths and two with his wives' beheadings for adultery and treason. His children Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I would each take their turn as England's monarch.

Of even greater importance, God used Henry VIII to fulfill Tyndale's dream of making the Bible freely available for the English people to read. In 1538 Henry issued a royal decree that a Bible be placed in every parish church, and stationed on a desk so that all people might come and read. King Henry was desirous that his subjects obtain to the knowledge of God's holy Word. Following Henry's death, his young 8 year old son Edward VI came to the throne. Thomas Cranmer was able to guide young Edward in continuing the religious reforms begun by Henry VIII.

The Oxford Martyrs

Thomas Cranmer (July 2, 1489 – March 21, 1556). The first of the Oxford Three was Thomas Cranmer a leader of the English Reformation and Archbishop of Canterbury during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and, for a very short time, Queen Mary I.

Cranmer, as already noted, was instrumental in guiding King Henry VIII to adopt the views of the Protestant Reformers. Cranmer had come to favor with King Henry by supporting the King's right to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry appointed Cranmer Archbishop of Canterbury. He took charge of building a biblical case for the annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine. Cranmer traveled to Rome and presented Henry's case to the Pope. The Pope refused to grant King Henry a Papal annulment. Cranmer returned home to England and advised Henry to abolish Roman Catholicism in England. Cranmer guided Henry in establishing in its place the Anglican Church of England.

Cranmer went on to refute the Catholic churches erroneous teachings on the Lord's Supper, clerical celibacy, and purgatory. He also abolished the use of sacred images in places of worship, and the veneration of dead saints. Cranmer was also responsible for establishing the first doctrinal and liturgical structures used in the

services of the reformed Church of England. He compiled two editions of *The Book on Common Prayer*, which is still widely used to this day.

Following Henry VIII's death, his 8 year old son Edward VI came to the throne. Cranmer was able to promote even greater religious reforms under young Edward. Unfortunately, Cranmer's advances of reformation in England came to an abrupt halt when the 16 year old King Edward VI contracted tuberculosis and died on July 6, 1553. King Edward had nominated his cousin, Lady Jane Grey, a devout Protestant, as his successor to the Crown. Lady Grey's appointment as Queen was quickly overthrown by Edward's ruthless half-sister Mary, who was proclaimed Queen on July 19 1553. Blood Mary, as she came to be known, was a devout Roman Catholic who was determined to return England to Papal allegiance. Mary's first act as Queen was to repeal the Protestant reforms of her father, Henry VIII, and of her late half-brother, King Edward VI. Her second order of business was to arrest and imprison Jane Grey in the Tower of London. Jane was tried and convicted of high treason in November 1553. Both Jane and her husband, Guildford were executed on the morning of February 12, 1554.

Mary next had Cranmer arrested and tried for high treason and heresy. Cranmer was brought to trial on November 13, 1553. He was found guilty of treason and heresy, and imprisoned for over two years. As a result of prolonged torture, he made several recantations of his faith in Christ. He repudiated all Lutheran theology, fully embraced Catholic theology, including papal supremacy, and stated that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church. Cranmer's recantation was a sign of a broken man. Despite the stipulation in Canon Law that recanting heretics be granted amnesty, Mary was determined to make an example of Cranmer, arguing that "his iniquity and obstinacy was so great against God and his Grace [the Pope], that clemency and mercy could have no place with him," and so she pressed ahead with his execution.

On the day of his execution he was allowed to make a public confession of his sins against Roman Catholicism. He shocked those in attendance by withdrawing his previous recantations. He concluded by saying, "And as for the Pope, I renounce him, as Christ's enemy, and Anti-christ with all his false doctrines." He was pulled from the pulpit, and taken away to be burned at the stake.

The other two members of The Oxford Three, who helped advance the Protestant Reformation in England, were Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley.

Hugh Latimer was born in 1485 in Leicestershire and educated at Cambridge, and ordained as a priest in 1510. He initially subscribed to orthodox Roman Catholicism, but in 1525 he came into contact with a group of young Cambridge divines who were influenced by Martin Luther's new Protestant doctrines. He attributed his conversion to Protestantism to the group's spiritual leader, Thomas Bilney. Bilney is purported to have simply shared his own conversion to Christianity through faith in Jesus Christ. Latimer responded in faith and was saved.

Latimer is best remembered for his Spirit-filled preaching and teaching. He placed great emphasis on the reading of Scripture, along with personal application. In fact, his powerful and insightful preaching resulted in his being appointed chaplain to King Henry VIII and, in 1535, was made Bishop of Worcester. Latimer's sermons emphasized that men should serve the Lord with a true heart and inward affection, not just with outward show. Latimer's personal life also re-enforced his preaching. He was renowned for his good works, especially his visitations to the prisons. For the remainder of Henry's reign Latimer existed in the shadows. Apparently he incurred suspicion of heresy at intervals and spent some time in the Tower of London, where he was incarcerated during the last few months before the accession of the boy king Edward VI in January 1547. The new regime, with its rapid advance toward Protestantism, gave Latimer a chance to exercise his talents. His sermons attracted large crowds and he was often patronized by the royal court. But because of his success in popularizing the idea of the Reformation, Latimer was immediately marked for prosecution when Bloody Mary ascended the throne. In September 1553 he was arrested on charges of treason; taken to Oxford for trial, he was burned there with fellow Reformer Nicholas Ridley on Oct. 16, 1555. At the stake Latimer immortalized himself by exhorting his fellow victim Ridley with the words "Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out."

The third Oxford Martyr was Nicholas Ridley.

Ridley was born in 1503, in South Tynedale, Northumberland. He attended Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, and was ordained a priest in 1524. After a period of study in France, he returned to Cambridge, where he settled down to a scholarly career. **Ridley was one of the finest academic minds in the early English Reformation.** Around 1534 Ridley began to show sympathies with Protestant doctrines, and in 1537 he became one of the chaplains to the prominent Reformer Thomas Cranmer. Ridley was elected to serve as master of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge in 1540. From this time forward he took a leading part in transforming the university into

a seminary supporting Reformist Theology, that would soon contribute greatly to the intellectual life of English Protestantism.

Ridley served as a chaplain to King Henry VIII, and was Bishop of London under his son Edward VI. He was a preacher beloved of his congregation whose very life portrayed the truths of the Christian doctrines he taught. In his own household he had daily Bible readings and encouraged Scripture memorization among his people. Ridley eventually joined Cranmer and Latimer in their attempts to move the English church in the direction of a more Bible-based Christianity.

Ridley created an uproar with his implementation of a plain table for communion instead of the priestly altar. His denial of the Roman Catholic doctrine of **transubstantiation**—*the teaching that Christ's natural body is present in the bread of the Eucharist and His blood is present in the wine after priestly consecration*, resulted in his being a marked man among Catholic supporters. Ridley backed the Protestant Lady Jane Grey's appointment to be Edward VI's successor. This led to his arrest in July 1553, following Queen Mary Tudor's accession to the throne.

Mary was a devout Roman Catholic, and in her attempt to return England to Papal control, ordered the arrest, trial, and execution of Bishop Nicholas Ridley, Bishop Hugh Latimer, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. After serving roughly two years in the Tower of London, the three were taken to Oxford in September of 1555 to be examined by Roman Catholic authorities in Oxford's Divinity School.

When Ridley was asked if he believed the Pope was heir to the authority of Peter as the foundation of the Church, he replied that "The church was not built on any man but on the truth Peter confessed—that Jesus was Christ, the Son of God." Ridley said he could not honor the Pope in Rome since the papacy was seeking its own glory, not the glory of God. Neither Ridley nor Latimer would accept the Roman Catholic mass as a sacrifice of Christ. Latimer told the commissioners, "Christ made one sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and that a perfect sacrifice; neither needeth there to be, nor can there be, any other propitiatory sacrifice." These opinions were deeply offensive to Roman Catholic theologians.

Cranmer was not put to death with Latimer and Ridley, but was made to watch as they were burned at the stake on October 16, 1555. As he was being tied to the stake, Ridley prayed, "Oh, heavenly Father, I give unto thee most hearty thanks that thou hast called me to be a professor of thee, even unto death. I beseech thee, Lord God, have mercy on this realm of England, and deliver it from all her enemies"

The martyrdoms of Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley, are today commemorated by a Martyrs' monument in Oxford, called *The Oxford Martyrs*. The faith these godly men died for, can now be freely practiced throughout the land.

Closing Prayer:

Keep us, O Lord, constant in faith and zealous in witness, that, like your servants, Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley, we may live in your fear, die in your favor, and rest in your forever peace; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.