

Hugh Latimer Protestant Reformer & Martyr

Born 1485, in Thurcaston, Leicestershire, Hugh Latimer greatly advanced the cause of the Reformation in England through his vigorous preaching and through the inspiration of martyrdom.

Latimer was the son of a prosperous yeoman farmer. Educated at Cambridge University, he was ordained a priest around 1510. In the two decades before 1530 he gradually acquired a reputation as a preacher at Cambridge. At first he 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 Biblical, Reformed doctrines. He attributed his conversion by God's grace to the ministrations of Thomas Bilney.

After gaining royal favour by speaking out in support of the efforts of King Henry VIII to obtain an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Latimer received the benefice of West Kingston, Wiltshire, in 1531. He soon befriended two rising Reformers: Thomas Cromwell, who was to become the King's chief minister, and the future Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer.

Accusations of heretical preachings were made against him and he refused in January 1532 to subscribe to certain articles of faith such as the existence of purgatory and the need to venerate saints. Consequently, he was excommunicated and imprisoned until he made a complete submission (April 1532).

Nevertheless, thanks to Cromwell's influence, Latimer was elevated in 1535 to the bishopric of Worcester. By 1536 he was generally regarded as one of the Reform leaders, even though there is no sign that he played any part in the various attempts of those years to introduce changes in church doctrine. As a result of a temporary return in England to a favouring of Roman Catholicism, Latimer was forced to resign his See in 1539, and upon the sudden fall of Thomas Cromwell in July 1540, he lost his main support at Court.

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 reign, with its rapid advance of Biblical Protestantism, gave Latimer the opportunity to exercise his great talents. He refused to resume his bishopric, because he wanted to be free to preach without fear or favour. His sermons attracted large crowds and were often patronized by the Court.

With other Commonwealthmen, he attacked enclosure as a cause of depopulation and poverty. Because of his great contribution, under God's

blessing, in the spread and establishment of the Reformation, Latimer was a marked man when the catholic Mary Tudor ascended the throne. In September 1553 he was arrested on charges of treason; taken to Oxford for trial, he was burned there with the Reformer Nicholas Ridley on October 16, 1555. At the stake Latimer immortalized himself by exhorting Ridley with the words: "...we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as I trust shall never be put out."

During the reign of Edward VI Latimer preached the Gospel in many places. Frequently his voice was heard at St. Paul's Cross. In 1548 Latimer commenced a series of sermons from the pulpit at St. Paul's raising his voice in protest at the injustice of the wealthy toward the poor. Rich and poor, high and low came and heard him protest at oppression of every kind.

"You landlords, you rent-raisers, you have for your possession too much...and thus is caused such dearth, that poor men that live on their labour cannot with the sweat of their faces have their living. I tell you my lords and masters, this is not for the King's honour; it is to the King's honour that his subjects be led in true religion. It is to the King's honour that the commonwealth be advanced, that the dearth be provided for, and the commodities of this realm so employed as it may be to the setting of his subjects at work, and keeping them from idleness...The enhancing and bearing goes all to your private commodity and wealth. Ye had a single too much, and now ye have a double too much; but let the preacher preach till his tongue be worn to a stump, nothing is amended. This one thing I tell you, from whom it cometh, I know, even from the Devil...".

Preaching his famous sermon on "The Plough" he said to a number of bishops standing before him, "Who is the most diligent prelate in all England, that passeth all the rest in the doing of his office? I will tell you. It is the Devil!...Therefore, you unpreaching prelates, learn of the devil to be diligent in your office. If you will not learn of God, for shame learn of the Devil!" — *The Reformer March/April 1998*
