

Andrew Cook:

As part of our look at the Reformation, here on *Serving Today*, we've been hearing about Hugh Latimer, an English reformer who lived at the time of King Henry the Eighth.

In his student days, Latimer showed himself to be enthusiastic about church tradition and ritual. At that time he also came under the influence of those who were reformed in their theology and Latimer was truly converted. He then became a preacher of the biblical gospel, rather than of works based religion. His particular gift was preaching the Bible, both to the intelligent and powerful, as well as to ordinary people.

His reformed views, however, came to the attention of church authorities. They set out to accuse him of heresy. Yet despite this, he was granted freedom to preach throughout England by Cardinal Wolsey, a very powerful man at the time. Later, Latimer was made chaplain to King Henry the Eighth, and this gave him further opportunity and protection to preach unhindered. But persecution surfaced again and Latimer was thrown out of the church. Although sadly he recanted, he was later made a bishop and continued his preaching, including to Anne Boleyn, the new queen.

In 1539, the King signed a new order which reversed many of the changes brought about by the Reformation. As Latimer would not sign the document, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. And this is where we left him last time.

Trevor Low joins us again to bring us the conclusion to this story.

Trevor Low:

King Henry the Eighth died in January 1547, and so a new era dawned for the reformers. Henry was succeeded by the boy king, Edward the Sixth, who in spite of his youth was a keen supporter of the Reformation. Hugh Latimer was immediately set free. He had used this period of imprisonment to firm up his biblical beliefs.

By now he was in his 60's but the next seven years were perhaps his most fruitful of all. He frequently preached to the young king, yet he also reached the lower classes. One writer has said, 'No other reformer sowed the seeds of sound biblical teaching so widely and effectively among the lower classes of England as did Hugh Latimer.'

The reason for this was his grasp of the New Testament emphasis on preaching. He was very aware that it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. In one sermon he asks the question, 'Who is the most diligent bishop in all of England? Who surpasses all the others in doing his duty? I will tell you. It is the devil. He is the most diligent preacher of all. He is never away from his parish. You will never find him unoccupied. When the devil is present and has his plough working, then away with books and up with candles. Away with Bibles and up with beads. Away with the light of the gospel, and up with the light of candles. There never was such a preacher in England as the devil is.'

One writer has written about Hugh Latimer, 'The place that baptism occupied in the church still confused the other reformers but this was not the case with Latimer. He would say, 'By the word of the living God, by the word of God preached and opened, that is how our new birth comes about.'

Sadly for the reformers, Edward the Sixth died in July 1553 at the age of just 16. What might have happened had he lived, we will never know. He was succeeded by Mary Tudor, daughter of Henry the Eighth and Catherine of Aragon. She has gone down in history with the title 'Bloody Mary' for the reason that before her reign of terror came to an end, some 285 men had died for the cause of the true gospel.

Hugh Latimer was summoned to appear before the Lord Chancellor. Friends encouraged him to make his escape to the continent of Europe but Latimer, knowing the effect that this would have, refused to go. Yet he sensed what his fate would be. Along with Cranmer, Bishop Nicholas Ridley, John Bradford and Elizabeth, Queen Mary's half-sister who would later become Queen Elizabeth the First, Latimer yet again found himself in the Tower of London.

In January 1554, there was a political rebellion led by a Sir Thomas Wyatt. This failed and Wyatt and a large number of his followers were also thrown into the Tower of London. The advantage of this to Latimer and his friends was that they were all herded together into the same cell, so that they were able to enjoy rich Christian fellowship together, reading the Bible, praying and discussing Bible teaching.

After some months this came to an end as news came that Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer were to be moved to Oxford. Bradford was in fact the first to be burnt to death in London on the 1st July 1555. Latimer, Cranmer and Ridley were sent to Oxford to face the greatest theologians. Inevitably the matter of the mass

arose in the discussion. If you did not accept the mass, the only outcome was excommunication. All three men flatly denied the doctrine of transubstantiation and as a result, they were condemned to burn as heretics.

In October 1555, Latimer and Ridley were taken from their cells to face the flames. They had been kept apart for weeks and so they greeted each other with joy. They were led past the prison where Cranmer was housed. He was brought out so that he might see them but he was not permitted to speak to them. A large crowd had gathered to witness their execution. The regulation sermon which was preached to all heretics was delivered. Latimer and Ridley begged permission to reply to this sermon but they were refused. They accepted the decision and stood firm.

Nicholas Ridley said, 'Be of good heart brother, for God will either lesson the fury of the flames or else strengthen us to abide them'. And so in Oxford, the two men were burnt to death. Many onlookers wept. It is known that at least one man was converted there and then. Latimer's words rang out, words which have gone down in history, words which were wonderfully prophetic under the hand of a sovereign God: '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.' Latimer died swiftly, probably from suffocation, but Ridley suffered a slow death. Five months later in March 1556, Cranmer was burnt at the stake.

Mary Tudor died in 1558 and so when Queen Elizabeth began her long reign, the Reformation, though by no means complete, was at least secure. The Scriptures with their teaching of the gospel of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone had come to England.

How grateful we should be to men like Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer. Men who were willing to stand against error, even to the point of giving their own lives in order that truth might prevail. We thank God for these men. What if they had not been willing to stand up for truth? What sort of country might England be?

Thank God that Hugh Latimer, by his preaching and by his example, in his life and in his death, did indeed help to light such a candle in England as has never since been put out.

Andrew Cook:

And the candle, Latimer referred to, is the truth of the Bible, God's Word as it is faithfully taught and proclaimed.

Thanks again to Trevor for bringing us the story of Hugh Latimer.