

Nicholas Ridley

Churchman 068/3 1954

Revd G. C. B. Davies

“Latimer leaneth to Cranmer, Cranmer to Ridley, and Ridley to the singularity of his own wit.” This taunting remark of Bishop Brookes of Gloucester to Ridley at Oxford, in October, 1555, referred not to the work of the Reformation in general, but to the fact that on the error of Transubstantiation, Ridley, who had been privately convinced in the course of his own reading, had brought over Cranmer to his point of view. Cranmer, in his turn, in 1547, had drawn Latimer into agreement with his brethren. The man who had such influence over Cranmer as to convince him of doctrinal error, deserves the attention and gratitude of all lovers of Protestant truth.

Second son of a father bearing the same name, Nicholas Ridley was born in Northumberland, probably in 1502 or 1503. His boyhood was full of the sound of border warfare, the battle of Flodden being fought when he was about ten years old. Educated at Newcastle School, he went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge, about 1518, taking his degree in 1522, and being made a Fellow of his college two years later. About 1527, he was sent to read at the Sorbonne and at Louvain, and years later he recalled the “Sorbonical Clamours”, judging them moderate in comparison with the storm that raged around his own head at the Oxford Schools. By 1534 he was Senior Proctor, and chaplain to the University, and in 1540 he was chosen as Master of Pembroke. He had already shown his sympathy with the cause of reform when, in 1534, with almost the entire Senate of the University, he had signed the decree against the Papal supremacy. By 1539 he had come to the notice of Cranmer, who made him one of his chaplains, and at almost the same time gave him the vicarage of Herne, in Kent. The days were not easy for a parish priest favouring reform; the reactionary Six Articles date from the year after Ridley’s institution. But he was undisturbed, though he was criticized, when he caused the Te Deum to be sung in English, and when he strove to fulfil his ministry, as he says in his farewell letter, “not after the popish trade, but after Christ’s Gospel”: so preaching that people flocked to Herne church from all the Kentish countryside. Meanwhile he was reading, and among the books which he studied was a short treatise on the Holy Communion entitled *On the Body and Blood of Christ*, written in the ninth century by a French monk, commonly known as Bertram. The result of his study of this work is important, for his belief, hitherto unbroken, that the tenet of Transubstantiation was primitive, and universally held in the early Church, was now dispelled. “This Bertram,” he said, speaking at Oxford in 1554, “was the first that pulled me by the ear, and that brought me from the common error of the Romish Church, and caused me to search more diligently and exactly both the Scriptures and the writings of the old ecclesiastical Fathers in this matter”. As a result, Ridley left his vicarage convinced not only that Transubstantiation was neither scriptural nor primitive, but armed for discussion by a special study of early Christian literature. He had not indeed found always one type of sacramental language, but always reason to think that the foundation-thought of the Fathers was not that of the subtle would-be literalists of the mediaeval schools.

This momentous change did not terminate in Ridley’s mind and personal teaching. He went with it to the Archbishop, who had hitherto not only held the current theory, but held it with a jealous dread of change. But the weight of Ridley’s mind and character induced him in 1545

to review the matter; and, to quote Foxe, Ridley “by sundry persuasions and authorities of doctors, . . . drew the Archbishop quite from his old opinion”; and to such purpose that within the next few years Cranmer had written his own masterly treatise on the Eucharist, so much in the sense of Ridley’s new convictions that Ridley (to his own loyal indignation) was often credited with the real authorship of the book.

In January 1547, Edward VI succeeded his father, Henry VIII, on the throne of England, and in September of that year, Ridley was consecrated Bishop of Rochester, with the mediaeval ritual. As bishop, he commanded the administration of the Eucharist in both kinds, and preached a sermon at St. Paul’s Cross on reverence, so emphasizing the divine greatness of the sacrament that he was afterwards falsely accused of having taught Transubstantiation to the people. The year 1548 saw the preparation of the first English Prayer Book, and Ridley was on the Commission from the first. We know nothing of his hand in the work, but he appears as principal speaker on the “new” side in the remarkable three day debate between the bishops of the “old” and “new” or reformed schools on the nature of the Eucharistic presence which was held in the House of Lords, in the presence of the Commons, in December, 1548. The following year he was one of the Commissioners to Cambridge University on questions of academic legislation, and was president in a scholastic discussion on the Eucharist. In this, it was his duty to close the debate by a “Determination”, or summing up, where he decided against Transubstantiation, and also against a propitiatory sacrifice by the priest. Pilkington, afterwards Professor and Bishop of Durham, who was present, said that Ridley “made all things so clear in his Determination that they were so convinced that some of them would have turned the Archbishop’s book of that subject into Latin”.

Meanwhile, Ridley did not look on in silence at those nominal adherents of the Reformation among the nobility who, for personal enrichment, though in the name of religion, plundered the revenues of education and of the Church. “Cranmer and another,” he wrote in his *Lamentation*, “were in high displeasure” for protesting against the activities of the Duke of Somerset. He also speaks of Lever, Bradford and Knox as unsparing denouncers of this evil, yet few supported their appeals except, as he said, “the King’s Highness . . . that innocent, that godly hearted and peerless young Christian prince.” Latimer, in one of the prison conferences with Ridley, says in his energetic style, that “our nobility will not have that religion that hath the Cross annexed unto it”. In 1550, Bonner was deprived of the see of London for refusal to use or recognize the new Prayer Book, and was placed in mild confinement. Ridley was nominated his successor, and was enthroned in St. Paul’s Cathedral on April 12, of that year. The Te Deum was sung in English, “with organs playing and the choir singing”, as Ridley’s biographer records. At St. Paul’s, Ridley gathered round him as chaplains and prebendaries some of the most notable of the reforming clergy, among them two friends of his college days, Rogers, afterwards the first Marian martyr, and Bradford, for whom his affection was ardent to the end of his life. In the visitation of his diocese, he took the strong measure of commanding the removal of stone altars from churches, and the substitution everywhere of the holy Table. He did this, so far as can be gathered, with the expressed but unwritten support and indeed at the instance of the king. Ridley’s written Injunctions on these points were explicit.

“That no minister do counterfeit the popish Mass, in kissing the Lord’s Board: washing his hands or fingers after the Gospel, or the receipt of the Holy Communion; shifting the book from one place to another . . . ; breathing on the bread or chalice; saying the Agnus before the Communion; shewing the sacrament openly before the distribution, or making any elevation

thereof; ringing of the . . . bell, or setting any light upon the Lord's Board. And finally, that the minister, in the time of the Holy Communion, do use only the ceremonies and gestures appointed by the Book of Common Prayer, and none other, so that there do not appear in them any counterfeiting of the popish mass. Whereas in divers places some use the Lord's Board after the form of a Table, and some of an altar, whereby dissension is perceived to arise among the unlearned . . . we exhort the curates . . . here present to erect and set up the Lord's Board after the form of an honest table, decently covered, in such place of the choir or chancel as shall be thought most meet by their discretion and agreement . . . and to take down and abolish all other by-altars or tables”.

On All Saints' Day, 1552, we find the Bishop using in St. Paul's the revised Prayer Book. He was robed in the simpler vestments which it prescribed, and preached in the afternoon at St. Paul's Cross till almost five o'clock, so that torches were lighted here and there among the congregation. Just before the king's death in July, 1553, Ridley was nominated Bishop of Durham, but political events prevented his taking this preferment. For under the pathetic appeals of Edward, he took the side of Lady Jane Grey, and preached by command a sermon at St. Paul's Cross against the claims of both Mary and Elizabeth as heirs to the throne, being heard with ominous signs of disapproval by the crowd. Before the month was out, the king was dead, and all was over with the ill-fated Lady Jane. Ridley hastened to Framlingham, in Suffolk, to make his submission to Mary, the new queen. He was at once arrested, and committed to the Tower of London, where he was soon joined by Cranmer and Latimer. The failure of Wyatt's rebellion crowded the prisons, so that Ridley wrote, “it chanced in Lent, by reason of the tumult stirred up in Kent, there was so many prisoners in the Tower that my Lord of Canterbury, Master Latimer, Master Bradford and I, were put altogether in one prison, where we remained almost till Easter”. Later they were separated, but were able to communicate with each other by writing, helped by friendly attendants. To this we owe the preservation of the so-called “conferences” between Latimer and Ridley, alike so full of religious and human interest.

The charge of treason against the Reformers was withdrawn, and it was arranged that they should be tried for heresy alone, death by fire being the sequel to an unfavourable verdict. Accordingly, their nine months' confinement closed about the middle of March, 1554, with Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer arriving at Oxford after two days' journey, to stand before their judges. Their treatment was harsh; they carried scarcely anything but the clothes they wore; their attendants at the Tower were dismissed and strangers placed about them. At Oxford they were sent to different prisons, Cranmer to Bocardo gaol, and Ridley to the house of the Mayor, Edmund Irish, who lived nearby. About a month later the theological judges met, including Young, Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge, and Ridley's successor as Master of Pembroke. The President was Hugh Weston, Rector of Lincoln, afterwards Dean of Westminster. The first session, on Saturday, April 14th, commenced with a Mass of the Holy Ghost, and a dinner at Lincoln College, after which the doctors took their places before the high altar in St. Mary's to answer preliminary questions. On the Sunday they were left in peace. On Monday the Archbishop went through his ordeal, and Ridley's turn came on Tuesday, the 17th. Of this he records,

“I never yet in all my life saw or heard anything done or handled more vainly or tumultuously than the disputation which was had with me of late in the schools at Oxford. And surely I could never have thought that it had been possible to have found any within this realm, being of any knowledge, learning or ancient degree of school, so brazen-faced and so shameless as to behave themselves so vainly, and so like stage-players as they did in that disputation”.

The argument was concerned with the nature of the Real Presence in the Sacrament, and Ridley set forth his position with clarity and conviction.

“Since the Body of Christ is really in heaven, because of the true manner of His Body, it may not be said to be here in the earth. But now, my brethren, think not, because I disallow that presence (. . . as a presence which I take to be forged, phantastical, and, beside the authority of God’s Word, perniciously brought into the Church by the Romanists) that I therefore go about to take away the true presence of Christ’s Body in His Supper rightly and duly administered, which is grounded upon the Word of God, and made more plain by the commentaries of the faithful Fathers. They that think so of me, the Lord knoweth how far they are deceived”.

After quotations from the gospels and epistles, from Cyprian, Augustine, Cyril and Chrysostom, among others, he concluded with Bertram,

“I confess that Christ’s Body is in the Sacrament in this respect; namely, as he writeth, because there is in it the Spirit of Christ, that is, the power of the Word of God, which not only feedeth the soul, but also cleanseth it. Out of these I suppose it may clearly appear unto all men, how far we are from that opinion whereof some go about falsely to slander us to the world, saying, we teach that the godly and faithful should receive nothing else at the Lord’s Table but a figure of the Body of Christ”.

Weston interrupted, “Ye say, Christ gave not His Body, but a figure of His Body”. Ridley rejoined,

“I say not so; I say He gave His own Body verily; but He gave it by a real effectual and spiritual communication”. On the grace of the sacrament he added later, “Every Sacrament hath graces annexed unto it instrumentally; but there is divers understanding of this word ‘habet’, hath; for the Sacrament hath not grace included in it; but to those that receive it well, it is turned to grace”. “We behold with the eye of faith Him present after grace, and spiritually set upon the Table; and we worship Him who sitteth above.”

Upon the Friday, April 20th, 1554, sentence of death at the stake was pronounced on all the doctors. On hearing this, Ridley replied, “Although I be not of your company, yet doubt not I but my name is written in another place whither this sentence will send us sooner than we should by the course of nature have come”. Weston’s triumph was great no doubt in his own eyes. At the close of the disputation with Ridley, he had cried in Latin, “Here you see the stubborn, the glorious, the crafty, the unconstant mind of this man; here you see this day that the strength of the truth is without foil”. And all followed him in the cry, “Vicit veritas”, Verity hath the victory. Next day the Commissioners departed, Weston without keeping his promise to give Ridley a sight of the notes of his defence taken by John Jewel, afterwards Bishop of Salisbury. The severity of the prisoners’ confinement increased; for a time all were thrust into the Bocardo gaol together; no one might visit them; they might not ‘take the air upon the wall’; even the English Prayer Book was confiscated. University and town “bore them heavily”, so they heard through their gaolers. Their hours were cheered by the frequent exchange of letters, through trusted servants, at great personal risk. Meanwhile Ridley was constantly at work with his pen, or a substitute for it; he was once reduced to using a strip of lead from the casement as a pencil. He wrote ‘prison epistles’ to others also in captivity for their faith, “dispersed abroad, but knit together in unity of spirit and of holy religion”, as he expressed it; and also letters of thanks for various gifts which the “condemned heretics at Oxford” received from time to time, such as meat, money and shirts, on one occasion. But

more important, he was writing two dissertations, one of which remains the most significant of his works; namely a tract on the papacy, not preserved, and *A Brief Declaration on the Lord's Supper*, setting forth in detail his Eucharistic doctrine.

Execution of the sentence against the prisoners was unduly delayed owing to the state of the law. Not till January, 1555, did Cardinal Pole absolve the English Parliament of the sin of schism, imposing as a penance the restoration of the old legislation. That done, the martyrdoms could begin. But the first public burnings aroused such a display of anger against Philip of Spain, now Mary's husband, that the fate of Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer still lingered. Ridley's *Brief Declaration* was in due course completed, and safely smuggled abroad. By September, 1555, however, Philip had returned to Spain, and his early policy of moderation (in face of public opinion) was quickly reversed by Queen Mary. The sentence of April, 1554, against the bishops, was now void by the existing state of the law, and new commissioners were appointed to make another pronouncement. Three bishops, White of Lincoln, Brookes of Gloucester (who was also Master of Balliol, Oxford), and Holiman of Bristol, carried with them Pole's authority as papal legate, and proceedings were soon completed. Ridley appeared with Latimer at the Divinity School at eight o'clock in the morning of September 30th, 1555. He respectfully took off his skull-cap whenever the queen was named, and when Cardinal Pole was spoken of as a member of the royal house; but declined to raise it at the mention of the pope, or of Pole in his capacity as legate. No threats moved him; at length one of the bishops' beadles snatched it from his head. In his examination, his removal of altars while Bishop of London was strongly condemned. He began to read a statement; it was taken from him, inspected, pronounced blasphemous, and not returned. Condemnation followed as a matter of course. The precise counts of the charges were that Nicholas Ridley

“stubbornly defended certain opinions contrary to the word of God and the received faith of the Church, as in denying the true and natural Body of Christ, and His natural Blood, to be in the Sacrament of the altar; secondly, in affirming the substance of bread and wine to remain after the words of consecration; and thirdly, in denying the Mass to be a lively Sacrifice of the Church for the quick and dead”.

A fortnight passed before the end, during which Ridley wrote two farewell letters, full of patriotic and prophetic appeals to the nation, which rank among the finest examples of contemporary English prose. On October 15th, Bishop Brookes and the Vice-chancellor came to the house in which he was imprisoned to degrade him from the priesthood. It is remarkable that no mention was made of degradation from the episcopate, though he was recognized as a true bishop so far as Rochester was concerned. He spent his last evening with his brother who offered to keep vigil all night with him. “No, no,” said the bishop, “for I mind (God willing) to go to bed, and to sleep as quietly tonight as ever I did in my life”. The actual martyrdom, on October 16th 1555, was mismanaged, for the faggots round Ridley were wet, and would not burn, and he suffered untold agonies. His faggots were lighted first, and it was then that Latimer uttered the memorable and prophetic words, **“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”**. Ridley, a vigorous man of only fifty-three, met the flames with a wonderful loud voice, crying, “Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit”. The explosion of the gunpowder which had been tied round their necks at length closed their sufferings.

The question has often been asked whether the confessors and martyrs did well to treat such abstruse problems as matters of life and death. The Reformers, be it remembered, were far from *making* a death-question of their own convictions; the questions were forced upon them by their opponents. They were commanded to accept the mediaeval theory *de fide*, and in general to bow without appeal to the ruling of the papal Church. They were to accept on pain of death, as divinely true and necessary, many doctrines and practices either unwarranted by the word of God or actually contrary to it. They were required to believe, and to profess their belief, on matters that were not in themselves reasonable or Scriptural, but so declared by the despotic and infallible authority of the Church; which authority they were further obliged to accept as a power capable of extension indefinitely to all matters. How was it possible to admit into the life such obedience, and into the mouth such a confession, and into the heart such a slavery as this, and who was he that would not, or could not, find in his heart “in this cause to be content to die”? Ridley arrived at that conclusion calmly, soberly, and with a noble modesty of spirit. His deep conviction, that of one who had been born and bred in mediaevalism, and had read as widely perhaps as any Englishman of his time, was that the two main points of mediaeval error were the claims of the papacy and the tenet of Transubstantiation. He never said that to bow to those claims and hold that tenet was a necessary bar to salvation; but he would rather die than say that to do so was helpful to it, much less requisite. To this he would abide, by the grace of God, even to the flames. He, with all the Reformation martyrs, could take comfort from the Scripture: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried . . . be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life . . . He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment . . . and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels” (Rev. ii. 10f ; iii. 5).

REVD G. C. B. DAVIES