

Module 311: Thomas Cranmer

Acts and Monuments (Also known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*) by John Foxe. "The Death of Thomas Cranmer." Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited for the web by Dan Graves.

"This unworthy right hand."

Module Introduction

In this passage several elements in the Reformation come together. In his book, Foxe has just reminded readers that Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII was largely responsible for the creation of the Protestant Church in England. And then, under Edward VI, it was Cranmer who wrote the Protestant *Book of Common Prayer* which has been the backbone of the English Church. But now we come to Queen Mary's time and the re-establishment of Catholicism. Because of his part in procuring Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Cranmer was the number-one target for the bonfires of Catherine's daughter, "Bloody Mary."

Cranmer was not a natural martyr, unlike some of those who went to their death in the same years. His story is an interesting and very human one.

But the passage is important because of the author too. It is one of the famous stories from *Acts and Monuments*, Foxe's bestseller of the century which tells the story of Christian martyrs from the first century until Mary's time, showing that those who died under Mary were not heretics getting their comeuppance, but the latest in a long line of holy heroes who have always suffered at the hands of cruel antichristian oppressors. The book was phenomenally successful in turning ordinary English men and women away from Catholicism towards Protestantism.

As you read, ask yourself why it had such an impact. Also think about how much of what you read is simply reporting what happened and how much is Foxe's spin on the events.

Archbishop Cranmer

The death of Edward, in 1553, exposed Cranmer to all the rage of his enemies. Though the archbishop was among those who supported Mary's accession, he was attainted at the meeting of parliament, and in November adjudged guilty of high treason at Guildhall, and degraded from his dignities....

A calumny was now spread against Cranmer that he complied with some of the popish ceremonies to ingratiate himself with the queen, which he dared publicly to disavow, and justified his articles of faith. The active part which the prelate had taken in the divorce of Mary's mother had ever rankled deeply in the heart of the queen, and revenge formed a prominent feature in the death of Cranmer....

Cranmer was condemned at Rome, and on February 14, 1556, a new commission was appointed, by which, Thirlby, bishop of Ely, and Bonner, of London, were deputed to sit in judgment at Christchurch, Oxford. By virtue of this instrument, Cranmer was gradually degraded, by putting mere rags on him to represent the dress of an archbishop; then stripping him of his attire, they took off his own gown, and put an old worn one upon him instead.

This he bore unmoved, and his enemies, finding that severity only rendered him more determined, tried the opposite course, and placed him in the house of the dean of Christchurch, where he was treated with every indulgence. This presented such a contrast to the three years' hard imprisonment he had received, that it threw him off his guard. His open, generous nature was more easily to be seduced by a liberal conduct than by threats and fetters. When Satan finds the Christian proof against one mode of attack, he tries another; and what form is so seductive as smiles, rewards, and power, after a long, painful

imprisonment? Thus it was with Cranmer: his enemies promised him his former greatness if he would but recant, as well as the queen's favor, and this at the very time they knew that his death was determined in council. To soften the path to apostasy, the first paper brought for his signature was conceived in general terms; this once signed, five others were obtained as explanatory of the first, until finally he put his hand to the following detestable instrument:

I, Thomas Cranmer, late archbishop of Canterbury, do renounce, abhor, and detest all manner of heresies and errors of Luther and Zwingli, and all other teachings which are contrary to sound and true doctrine. And I believe most constantly in my heart, and with my mouth I confess one holy and Catholic Church visible, without which there is no salvation; and therefore I acknowledge the Bishop of Rome to be supreme head on earth, whom I acknowledge to be the highest bishop and pope, and Christ's vicar, unto whom all Christian people ought to be subject.

And as concerning the sacraments, I believe and worship in the sacrament of the altar the body and blood of Christ, being contained most truly under the forms of bread and wine; the bread, through the mighty power of God being turned into the body of our Savior Jesus Christ, and the wine into his blood.

And in the other six sacraments, also, (alike as in this) I believe and hold as the universal Church holds, and the Church of Rome judges and determines.

Furthermore, I believe that there is a place of purgatory, where souls departed be punished for a time, for whom the Church doth godly and wholesomely pray, like as it doth honor saints and make prayers to them.

Finally, in all things I profess, that I do not otherwise believe than the Catholic Church and the Church of Rome holds and teaches. I am sorry that I ever held or thought

otherwise. And I beseech Almighty God, that of His mercy He will vouchsafe to forgive me whatsoever I have offended against God or His Church, and also I desire and beseech all Christian people to pray for me.

And all such as have been deceived either by mine example or doctrine, I require them by the blood of Jesus Christ that they will return to the unity of the Church, that we may be all of one mind, without schism or division.”

...

“Let him that stands take heed lest he fall!” said the apostle, and here was a falling off indeed! The papists now triumphed in their turn: they had acquired all they wanted short of his life. His recantation was immediately printed and dispersed, that it might have its due effect upon the astonished Protestants. But God counter-worked all the designs of the Catholics by the extent to which they carried the implacable persecution of their prey....

The queen’s revenge was only to be satiated by Cranmer’s blood, and therefore she wrote an order to Dr. Pole, [the Catholic Archbishop after Cranmer] to prepare a sermon to be preached March 21, directly before his martyrdom, at St. Mary’s, Oxford. Dr. Pole visited him the day previous, and was induced to believe that he would publicly deliver his sentiments in confirmation of the articles to which he had subscribed. About nine in the morning of the day of sacrifice, the queen’s commissioners, attended by the magistrates, conducted the amiable unfortunate to St. Mary’s Church. His torn, dirty garb, the same in which they habited him upon his degradation, excited the commiseration of the people. In the church he found a low mean stage, erected opposite to the pulpit, on which being placed, he turned his face, and fervently prayed to God.

The church was crowded with persons of both persuasions,

expecting to hear the justification of the late apostasy: the Catholics rejoicing, and the Protestants deeply wounded in spirit at the deceit of the human heart....

During the sermon Cranmer wept bitter tears: lifting up his hands and eyes to heaven, and letting them fall, as if unworthy to live: his grief now found vent in words: before his confession he fell upon his knees, and, in [prayer to God] unveiled the deep contrition and agitation which harrowed up his soul....

Then rising, he said he was desirous before his death to give them some pious exhortations by which God might be glorified and themselves edified. He then descanted upon the danger of a love for the world, the duty of obedience to their majesties, of love to one another and the necessity of the rich administering to the wants of the poor. He quoted the three verses of the fifth chapter of James, and then proceeded,

Let them that be rich ponder well these three sentences: for if they ever had occasion to show their charity, they have it now at this present, the poor people being so many, and victual so dear.

And now forasmuch as I am come to the last end of my life, whereupon hangs all my life past, and all my life to come, either to live with my master Christ for ever in joy, or else to be in pain for ever with the wicked in hell, and I see before mine eyes presently, either heaven ready to receive me, or else hell ready to swallow me up; I shall therefore declare unto you my very faith how I believe, without any color of dissimulation: for now is no time to dissemble, whatsoever I have said or written in times past.

First, I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, etc. And I believe every article of the Catholic [i.e. worldwide] faith, every word and sentence taught by

our Savior Jesus Christ, His apostles and prophets, in the New and Old Testament.

And now I come to the great thing which so much troubles my conscience, more than any thing that ever I did or said in my whole life, and that is the setting abroad of a writing contrary to the truth, which now here I renounce and refuse, as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, and written for fear of death, and to save my life, if it might be; and that is, all such bills or papers which I have written or signed with my hand since my degradation, wherein I have written many things untrue. And forasmuch as my hand hath offended, writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished; for when I come to the fire it shall first be burned.

And as for the pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy, and Antichrist, with all his false doctrine.

Upon the conclusion of this unexpected declaration, amazement and indignation were conspicuous in every part of the church. The Catholics were completely foiled, their object being frustrated, Cranmer, like Samson, having completed a greater ruin upon his enemies in the hour of death, than he did in his life.

Cranmer would have proceeded in the exposure of the popish doctrines, but the murmurs of the idolaters drowned his voice, and the preacher gave an order to 'lead the heretic away!' The savage command was directly obeyed, and the lamb about to suffer was torn from his stand to the place of slaughter, insulted all the way by the revilings and taunts of the pestilent monks and friars.

With thoughts intent upon a far higher object than the empty threats of man, he reached the spot dyed with the blood of Ridley and Latimer [fellow Protestant bishops who had recently been killed]. There he knelt for a short time in

earnest devotion, and then arose, that he might undress and prepare for the fire. Two friars who had been parties in prevailing upon him to abjure, now endeavored to draw him off again from the truth, but he was steadfast and immovable in what he had just professed, and publicly taugt. A chain was provided to bind him to the stake, and after it had tightly encircled him, fire was put to the fuel, and the flames began soon to ascend.

Then were the glorious sentiments of the martyr made manifest; then it was, that stretching out his right hand, he held it without shrinking in the fire until it was burnt to a cinder, even before his body was injured, frequently exclaiming, "This unworthy right hand."

His body did abide the burning with such steadfastness that he seemed to have no more than the stake to which he was bound; his eyes were lifted up to heaven, and he repeated "This unworthy right hand," as long as his voice would suffer him; and using often the words of Stephen, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," in the greatness of the flame, he gave up the ghost.

Discussion Starters:

Why do you think it was Thomas Cranmer more than any other that Queen Mary wanted to have killed?

Which doctrines are denied in the renunciation that Cranmer signed? Why do you suppose these were chosen?

How did Cranmer come to sign the renunciation? If you were in his situation, how do you think you would have reacted?

Why did Pole allow Cranmer to preach at his execution? How did Cranmer use the opportunity?

Do you suppose the witness of Cranmer's death was less powerful for his temporary recantation, or in the end more so?

Why did he put his hand into the fire?

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

(Tertullian, second century) Do you agree with this?

Does Foxe’s report strike you as balanced and reliable?

Does it matter that he is so strongly in favor of one side?

What, if anything, do you think you would be willing to die for?

Bible Verses

Revelation 7:9-17

Matthew 5:30

Matthew 10:16-39

1 Peter 4:12-19