

A Burning Passion

Reformation Sunday

2 Timothy 1:8-12

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Last year marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. We celebrated it for five weeks last October. We had so much fun we thought we should celebrate again this year. But we're going to limit our celebration to one sermon.

Why do we celebrate the Reformation? Simply put, the Reformation recovered the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel had been all but lost in the Roman Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century. The Reformers recovered the truths that are so foundational to who we are as evangelicals. That we are saved by grace alone, not works, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The Reformation also recovered the Bible as the ultimate authority over every realm of human knowledge.

When we think of the Reformation, we often think of Martin Luther in Germany. Or John Calvin in Geneva. Maybe even Zwingli in Switzerland. But did you know that there was also a Reformation in England?

The Reformation in England was like a tense tennis match or volleyball game. Control of the church went back and forth between the Catholics and the Protestants, then between the Church of England and the Puritans for over 100 years. It was a mess. And people on either side did horrible things in the name of God.

In 1547, Henry VIII died and his son Edward VI took the throne. Henry had already left the Roman Catholic Church, but England still believed in Catholic doctrine. Under Edward all of this changed. England became decisively Protestant. But this didn't last long. Edward died in 1553 and his sister Mary took the throne. Mary was staunchly Catholic. And she led England back to Rome. Those who refused to become Catholic were burned at the stake. Over 300 Protestants were martyred under Mary. That's how she earned the title Bloody Mary.

I want to focus our attention this morning on three men who were killed under Mary: Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, and Thomas Cranmer. All of them were burned at the stake in Oxford in 1555. Latimer was a gifted gospel preacher. Ridley was the bishop of London and a great organizer for the Reformation. And Cranmer was the archbishop of Canterbury.

All three of these men were instrumental in the Reformation, but when their time of testing came they didn't all respond the same. Latimer and Ridley stood tall and stood up for the gospel. But Cranmer folded. He publically renounced his faith in the gospel.

I want to do three things this morning with the rest of our time: I want to tell the story of these three men's martyrdom—why did they burn at the stake; what was their burning passion?¹ Then I want to turn our attention to 2 Timothy 1 and ask the question, "What enables us to stand for the gospel?" Finally, I want to consider some applications for us today.

¹ This play on words comes from Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame*.

OXFORD MARTYRS

Let's start with the story of the three men. Everybody in England knew Cranmer, Latimer, and Ridley. Before Mary became queen, they were leaders of the church. And so they were easy targets for her persecution. She brought all three of them to Oxford to stand trial.

According to John Foxe's famous *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, they were on trial for one reason. It had to do with the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.² For Catholics then, as well as now, the Lord's Supper is "the source and summit of the Christian life" because they believe Christ himself is present in it (CCC 1324).³ Catholics' view of the Lord's Supper is an essential doctrine for them. They believe that when the priest says the words of institution over the bread and wine ("this is my body and this is my blood") that the bread and wine are literally transformed into the body and blood of Christ. And the priest then offers *the* sacrifice of Christ. *The* sacrifice of Christ on the cross is re-presented. They also believe that the Lord's Supper is needed for salvation. The body and blood of Christ received in the Lord's Supper infuse grace into the recipients, like an injection. And that shot of grace enables the participant to co-operate with God in eternal life. And all of this happens irrespective of whether or not the person taking the Lord's Supper actually has faith that Christ was sacrificed for them or not.

When the Reformers were put on trial they were basically asked if they believed all of this? If they believed it, they may be spared. If they rejected it, they would burn.

When Ridley and Latimer were put on trial, they adamantly denied that the natural body and blood were present in the sacrament. So they were sentenced to death. They were bound back to back at the stake. When Ridley saw Latimer approach the stake, he said to him, "Be of good heart, brother; for God will either assuage the fury of the flames, or else strengthen us to aide it." Latimer's last words as the great nineteenth century preacher J.C. Ryle says, "were like a blast of a trumpet, which rings even to this day." Latimer said, "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 was an old man and died soon. Ridley's death took a long time because the wood beneath him wasn't set up properly. His legs were completely burned off before the fire reached his vital organs and took his life. Both men as they were burned alive said, "Into thy hand, O Lord, I commend my Spirit."

Was their death worth it? Why did they deny that the bread and wine turn into the real body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper? Why did they deny that Christ's sacrifice was re-presented in the Supper? Why did they say the Lord's Supper must be received by faith? Was it really worth giving their life? They thought it was.

It wasn't just because they didn't want to submit to the pope. It wasn't just because they wanted to maintain independence from the Church of England. It was because they believed that the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper did violence to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If Christ's sacrifice on the cross has to be re-presented, then how can it be a perfect, sufficient, and once-for-all sacrifice like the Bible says it is? If Christ's body is present at the altar, then how can the risen and ascended Christ be at the right hand of the Father interceding for us, like the Bible says he

² J.C. Ryle, "Why Were Our Reformers Burned?" in *Light From Old Times*, 54-55

³ Gregg R. Allison and Chris Castaldo, *The Unfinished Reformation: Why Catholics and Protestants Are Still Divided 500 Years Later*, 120

is? If you have to take the Lord's Supper to be saved, then salvation is by works and not by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, like the Bible says it is.

The reason Ridley and Latimer were willing to be burned was not just over some secondary issue of communion. They were willing to be burned, because the very gospel was at stake!

Cranmer was tried five months later. He'd witnessed Latimer and Ridley's death. And in the end, he lost his courage. He was persuaded to recant his Protestant convictions. But even though he recanted, Mary still wanted him dead because he was such an influential man. She wanted to make an example out of him. But her plan backfired. At the last minute, right before Cranmer went to the stake, he did take his stand for the gospel. He recanted of his recantation! This is what he said:

I come to the great thing that troubleth my conscience more than any other thing that I ever said or did in my life, and that is setting abroad of writings contrary to the truth, which here now 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. . . . And forasmuch as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished; for if I may come to the fire, it shall be first burned.⁴

And that's what happened. As the fire was kindled at his feet, Cranmer stretched out his right arm and hand into the flame and held it there as he said, "This hand hath offended." Eventually that hand was burned to a stump. And then his whole body.

The reason I share this story of Cranmer is because I think many of us may relate more to Cranmer than to Latimer and Ridley. We want to stand for the gospel. But at times we waffle back and forth. At times we're afraid. Or we're ashamed of the gospel. We're afraid of what people will say about us if we stand up for the gospel. Or maybe even afraid of what will happen *to* us if we stand up for the gospel.

2 TIMOTHY 1:8-12

Is suffering for the gospel worth it? And if so, how can we stand for the gospel? What will motivate us? How can we have a burning passion like the Reformers? In our passage this morning we learn why standing for the gospel is so important and what will motivate us to stand.

2 Timothy 1:8-12⁵

⁸Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹²which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.

This is the Word of the Lord.

⁴ Mark Galli, "[Courage When It Counted](#)" Christianity Today; cf. Ryle, 52-53.

⁵ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

This passage is divided into three parts. In the first part we're given two commands to stand for the gospel. In the second part we're given a theological motivation to stand. And in the third part we're given Paul's example as a motivation to stand.

Two Commands

The two commands are "do not be ashamed of the gospel" and "share in suffering for the gospel."

We know that Timothy was called to preach the gospel (1 Tim. 4:12-16). This was the gift that was given to him. But Timothy was timid. He was prone to fear. That's why Paul starts his letter to Timothy by telling him that God didn't give him a spirit of fear but of power (v. 7).

Timothy's ministry was opposed at Ephesus, like the English Reformers' ministry was opposed by Mary. There were people who were teaching a false gospel. There were some people who were threatening the gospel with a message of legalism. Saying that there were certain rules required to perform in order to be saved (2:18; cf. 1 Tim. 1:7). That went against the true gospel that says salvation comes through faith in what Christ has done for us. There were also people in Ephesus who didn't want to endure sound teaching, but had itching ears. They wanted preachers who would tell them what they wanted to hear (4:3-4).

Timid Timothy was afraid of this situation. He was afraid that confrontation with these false teachers may lead to suffering. But Paul is admonishing him to not be ashamed of the gospel and to suffer for the gospel.

The gospel alone brings life and salvation (2 Tim. 1:1). That's why Paul was calling Timothy to guard the gospel (2 Tim. 1:14). To protect it from false teaching and to proclaim it and to pass it on to the next generation. It was worth fighting for. It was worth standing for.

But how could timid Timothy be motivated to stand for the gospel? There are two motivations listed in this passage.

Theological Motivation

The first is theological. The reason to stand for the gospel is because of the truths that flow from the gospel. In verse 10 Paul says that through the gospel of our Savior Christ Jesus, death has been abolished, and life and immortality have been brought to life.

Basically he's saying that through the gospel we don't have to fear death. "The body they may kill, God's truth abideth still, his kingdom is forever." Even if we're persecuted unto death for the gospel, through the gospel we have the promise of eternal life.

Christ suffered unto death so that we can be forgiven of sin. Christ then was raised from the dead. Those who believe that good news, those who follow Jesus, will go the way Jesus went. We may suffer for the gospel now, but we won't suffer eternally. We will be raised. We have eternal life. That hope for the future is what enables us to stand in the face of opposition now.

Motivated By Example

The second motivation comes from Paul's own example (vv. 11-12). Paul too was a gospel preacher. And he suffered for the gospel. But he was not ashamed of the gospel. He knew it was the power of God for salvation. And he knew that even though he was entrusted with gospel and called to guard

the gospel, that it was God that would guard the gospel until he returned. Paul wanted Timothy to follow his example. He wanted Timothy to suffer for the gospel and not be ashamed of the gospel.

Discipleship is all about following Jesus. We follow his example of suffering with joy knowing that we will be exalted on the last day (Heb. 12:1-2). But we also follow the example of those who disciple us, of those who went before us. So Timothy can follow Paul as Paul follows Christ.

We're motivated by the examples of those who put their faith into practice. That's why it's important to remember people like the English Reformers. They believed that the gospel was worth protecting. Only the true gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone saves us and gives us eternal life. And that gospel is worth suffering for because we believe that even if we suffer unto death we will have eternal life if we trust in Christ.

APPLICATION

So how does all of this apply to us today? Like Timothy before us and like the English Reformers before us, we're called to guard the gospel. We're called to protect it from false teaching. We're called to proclaim it to the nations. And we're called to pass it on to the next generation.

And we too live in a day where the gospel is under fire. Obviously the Roman Catholic view of the Lord's Supper is still alive and well. But there are not many of you that face that doctrine on a daily basis. But all of you face other threats to the gospel in the culture we live in.

We live in a day where sin is called into question. We live in a day where God's judgment for sin is called into question. In other words, we live in a day where people don't like to hear the bad news. They have itching ears. They won't endure sound teaching. And they accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.

But friends, in order to guard the gospel of Jesus Christ we have to teach the truth about sin and judgment. The good news of forgiveness from sin and eternal life makes no sense if we don't understand that we are sinners who deserve God's judgment. We can't be ashamed of the gospel. We have to preach the bad news as well as the good news.

We also live in a day where the truths that we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone are called into question. We live in a day where people think there are many ways to God. The exclusivity of Jesus Christ is called into question. If you say that Jesus is the only way to be saved, you will not be the most popular kid on the block. You'll face opposition.

I think you know what I'm saying is true. You've felt it. You feel it when you hesitate to share the gospel with a friend or a neighbor. You feel it when you listen to your college professor question Christianity. Or when you're invited to go to a party where Christ won't be honored. In those moments when you were timid like Timothy. Or when your courage failed like Cranmer.

Friends, we must stand up for the gospel for it is only through faith in the gospel that our lost friends and family members can be saved.

And the reason why we can stand up for the gospel is because we know that even though we may receive rejection from those we share the gospel with, we will receive acceptance from our heavenly Father on the last day. It is worth it to suffer for the gospel. We don't have to be ashamed.

Paul wasn't ashamed. The English Reformers weren't ashamed. And God is calling us to not be ashamed either. It is worth it!

Do you have a burning passion for the gospel?