

Remembering the Christian Martyrs of the Church

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Introduction

Church History is as important as Theology and we do well to know and remember it. There are certain facts in history which the world tries hard to forget or ignore. These facts may not be favourite themes because they get in the way of things and are highly inconvenient. Yet as believers, we must never deny or forget our historic past and know the roots of our rich religious heritage. During this commemoration of the 493rd year of the 16th century Reformation, we would not speak of Luther and other magisterial Reformers as they are already well known. But, we will remember those who worthily contended for the faith with their lives, particularly the English Reformers and Puritans like William Tyndale to whom we owe our English Bible.

According to Wikipedia, "A Christian martyr is one who is killed for following Christianity, through stoning, crucifixion, burning at the stake or other forms of torture and capital punishment." The word "martyr" comes from the Greek word, mártys, which means "witness."

The first known Christian martyr was Stephen as recorded in the [Acts 6:8-8:3](#); who was stoned to death for his faith. Stephen was killed for his support, belief and faith in Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the Messiah. There were probably other early Christian martyrs besides Stephen, since Paul acknowledged persecuting Christians before his conversion ([Acts 9:1](#)).

English Martyrs

In his Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius tells of many martyrs in the Christian church prior to 324 AD. I think of Polycarp and Blandina and many others. These Christians were put to death by heathen emperors, governors and judges. Their crime was admitting to being Christian. They did not have proper trials. They were tortured before being put to death. The one way to avoid the ordeal was to denounce one's faith. By God's grace and strength they defied their tormentors by cheerfully submitting to God in both life and death and entered in glory in heaven.

The English Reformation was somewhat different from the German revival under Martin Luther who ignited the Protestant cause with his Ninety-Five Theses on Wittenberg

Castle door just before All Saints' Day, or 31 October 1517. It was a great day for Christendom and it transformed the spiritual landscape of Europe to a large extent.

As for England's Reformation, it began providentially with the marital woes of Henry VIII (1509-1547), which led to Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) being appointed as the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury. He began sweeping ecclesiastical reforms in the Church of England, with the Act of Supremacy in 1534. The mass was abolished and ties severed with Rome and the king appointed himself as the Head of the Church of England. The crown was no more under the Romish yoke, as it was for the past almost 1,000 years. Most of England's reforming work was done during the reign of young Edward VI (1547-1553; who died prematurely) with the help of Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, uncompromising bishops of the Church of England. But things took a turn for the worse when Edward VI died and he was succeeded by Mary (1553-1558), the daughter of Henry VIII and his first Queen, Catherine of Aragon, notorious in history as Bloody Mary. Mary was a bigoted Catholic who hated the Protestants, and her opportunity had come to rid the kingdom of these pestilent 'heretics.' She wasted no time to do that. Cardinal Pole was invited to England, and Gardiner and Bonner were made Bishops. This infamous trio later played a pivotal role in the excruciating deaths of some of the finest and most godly men England had ever seen.

It is an established historical fact that during the four years of Queen Mary's reign, about 300 persons were burnt at the stake for their Protestant conviction and practices. It included such godly men like Johns Rogers, John Philpot, Thomas Miles, Thomas Bilney and others. And it is an accepted fact that these sufferers were not put to death for any offence against property or persons. They were not rebels tried for sedition, insurrection or heinous criminal acts. On the contrary, they were some of the holiest and purest Englishmen of the day and several of them were the most learned men at that time. They were treated ignominiously to gross injustice before and during the trials, and were severely tried and burnt at the whims and fancies of the persecutors, without a just cause.

There were heinous things that we will not speak about. However, there is something that we must know and that is, the burning of the Marian martyrs was an act the perpetrators had never repudiated, apologised for or regretted up to this present day. From these gruesome murders of the 15th century Spanish Inquisition to the infamous Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day in 1572, to the grotesque Irish massacre of 1641; and the ruthless persecution against the Waldenses of the 12th century to the burning of the English reformers in the 16th century; these have never been renounced or retracted.

Reasons for Their Martyrdom

Why were the reformers burnt? Chiefly it can be summarised in one sentence, because of their biblical convictions which contradicted the established medieval church at that

time. Because they believed what the Bible taught to be true concerning the Lord's Supper that it was a commemoration of the death of Christ and not a sacrifice; because they stood alone on the authority, sufficiency and perspicuity of the Scriptures above that of man, church or synod; because they believed salvation is all of grace and faith through Jesus Christ alone and not of any works that men have done; and for these they were liquidated. These were the non-negotiable convictions of William Tyndale, John Rogers, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, John Hooper, Thomas Bilney, John Bradford, John Philpot, Rowland Taylor and others as well; and space and time would not permit me to name every one of these glorified saints, who served their God even at the point of death. (We must not forget John Hus, the Bohemian pre-Reformer who blazed the trail for the Reformers in the early 15th century. He was burned at the stake in Constance in 1415 for his Protestant convictions.) One of them, William Tyndale was burnt at the stake for his work in the translation of the English Bible. He died victoriously, having his prayer answered two years later, when the King commanded that every parish in England was to have an English Bible. Many died singing, praying, and submitting themselves to the will of God. Their spirit lives on today even though they be dead, and we must not forget this. It will do us good to read Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the latest book, *By Their Blood*, by James and Marti Hefley to refresh our frail memories of what happened to these faithful soldiers of Christ. Far too often, the spirit of worldly lethargy and indifference has done great harm to the cause of truth, for truth is lost not just by wickedness, but by weakness too. We need to be inspired and challenged again by the illustrious lives and deaths of these glorious saints of old.

Conclusion

We are living in momentous times. Many Christians today are very apathetic about their proclaimed faith. They take for granted the religious freedom which they have. There are many highly civilized parts of the world where the authorities cause those who believe in Jesus Christ to suffer. There is no freedom of religion, only the guise of such. There are modern day believers in Jesus Christ, their sufferings unheralded, who are today's Christian martyrs. They have forsaken all to follow Christ. These nameless individuals have counted the cost and found that Christ is worthy. They have decided that they would be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time ([Hebrews 11:24-25](#)).

The ecclesiastical horizon on every side is dark and bleak. The steady progress of the forces of darkness reminds us of the soon return of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The ecumenical movement, fanned by New Age and Charismatic influence, is on the ascendancy. The days are almost ripe for world dominion by the man of perdition. We have to set up our banners. If ever we are to meet the Lord in another world without shame, we must continue in the zeal for the truth which the Reformers stood for. There is a voice in the Blood of martyrs and it cried aloud from heaven even today. Let us continue steadfastly in the most holy faith, preaching, teaching, confirming, admonishing, watching, waiting, evangelising and defending it with godly zeal as the

Lord enables us. The 21st century Reformation continues today in the true spirit of the Reformation martyrs.

In mind let all Christians bear,
The saints of old whose faith had dare
To stand for truth with courage rare
Baring their lives with nothing to care.

The evil host will battle rage
Crusading foes with evil hate,
But Christ had crushed the adversary
All wrong will be righted in eternity.

And there they braved the bloody scene,
Right down to life's deep ravine.
For faith and truth how fierce the wood,
The Christian martyrs bravely stood.

When long the fire have fiercely burnt
The wind against the enemies turned,
The vanquished foes when martyrs they see,
Who breathed their last and was set free.

For those with valour did offend,
They did the truth of God defend
They gave their lives most valiantly
With Thee, O Lord, in heaven to be.

So let all ye faithful Christian men,
Each pilgrim, stranger and citizen,
Follow and hold your father's creed,
And show ye are their sons indeed.

(Poem Adapted)