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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Passions of the Marian Martyrs: Lessons for the Anglican Communion¹

Andrew Atherstone

Evangelical Christians within the Western branches of the Anglican Communion face continual hostility because of their commitment to Jesus Christ and the biblical gospel, as is increasingly apparent with every year that passes. To become a gospel minister within the Anglican churches of Britain and North America now requires a willingness to face a lifetime of bullying and scorn, not least from neighbouring clergy and the episcopal bench. We cease to be surprised at scandalous tales of harassment of the godly by power-thirsty bishops. Ministers have their licences revoked, their church buildings confiscated, their stipends stopped, their families expelled from their rectories, simply because they insist on obeying God before men. The persecution of the saints by those in positions of ecclesiastical power has become an established part of life within the Anglican Communion in the West. Yet we have been here before. Four hundred and fifty years ago, gospel Anglicans in England endured the same fate, and worse, at the hands of the church. Those painful years in the middle of the sixteenth century were a foundational period for Anglicanism and our brothers and sisters who suffered before us have some important lessons to teach the church today. Their passions are ones that Anglicans in the twenty-first century need to rediscover in our own lives and ministries.

First let us recall the basic facts.² During the reign of Queen Mary Tudor the fires of martyrdom blazed across England and Wales. In less than four years, between February 1555 and November 1558, nearly three hundred evangelical Christians were burned to death for their faith. Many others died in prison, while still more were forced to go into hiding or flee into exile on the European mainland. Such was the ferocity of the persecution, never seen in England before or since, that Queen Mary's brief occupation of the throne has gone down in history as a 'reign of terror'—a time when the Church of God was under severe pressure. No one was safe. The martyrs came from every social class and every walk of life. Some were eminent, including four bishops and an archbishop. Sixteen were clergymen—first they were thrown out of their

homes and banned from their churches, then they were burned. But most of the martyrs were Christians in the pews—weavers, fishermen, tailors, barbers, upholsterers, brewers, carpenters, agricultural labourers—often illiterate and unlearned, apart from their knowledge of Christ and their love for the Bible. One in five of the martyrs were women. There were elderly widows and teenage girls; even a baby, born at the stake on the island of Guernsey, was thrown into the flames. The blind, frail or disabled found no leniency. To admit to evangelical convictions was a matter of life and death.

Yet those terrible forty-five months had a profound impact upon the future direction of Christianity around the world. Those martyred men and women re-laid the foundations of the Church of England, and therefore ultimately of the Anglican Communion. When the church was suffering, it seemed as if biblical Christianity was about to be stamped out. When the martyrs had their churches taken from them, and then their lives, it seemed like disastrous defeat. But from the ashes God raised up a revived, purified and empowered Bible-rooted, Jesus-glorifying church.

Hugh Latimer's famous encouragement to Nicholas Ridley has reverberated down the centuries and remains an inspiration to suffering Christians. As these two brother Bishops were chained back to back at the stake in a ditch outside Oxford, with bags of gunpowder around their necks, Latimer declared: '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.' By God's grace that gospel candle has blazed ever since, not just in England, but around the world—sometimes brightly, sometimes dimly, never yet extinguished. But in parts of the Anglican Communion in the West it burns distressingly low. In some dioceses there are deliberate attempts to douse the candle in a bucket of water. How can we ensure that it will not be snuffed out in our generation, but instead re-fire and burn fiercely? We need to recapture the passions and priorities of the early Anglican martyrs. Let us learn six simple lessons from their example.

Lesson 1: A Passion for God's Word

In the centre of Oxford stands Gilbert Scott's neo-gothic Martyrs' Memorial, with its impressive statue of Archbishop Cranmer holding a giant Bible. It acts as a visual reminder of the Archbishop's willingness to stake his life on the truths of Scripture. Cranmer tells us that if we want to know the true God and

his sovereign plan for the church and the world, then we must not be satisfied with the teaching of theologians and bishops—either the old-fashioned ones or the new-fangled ones. Instead we must go back to the Bible for the right answers. Of everything that is taught in our congregations and around the Anglican Communion, we must always ask the question, ‘But is this what the Scriptures teach? What does God say in the Bible?’

Cranmer’s great legacy in those foundational days for the Anglican Church, was to bring the Scriptures back to the centre of the church’s life. He persuaded King Henry VIII to allow the English Bible to be set up in every church in the land for the first time. He wrote Anglicanism’s first reformed liturgy, the *Book of Common Prayer*, with its persistent emphasis upon hearing the Word of God. Cranmer also provided a *Book of Homilies* to raise the standard of preaching in the parishes of England; and his Forty-Two Articles, later revised into our Thirty-Nine Articles, established the Bible, and the Bible only, as the foundation of the Church of England.

It wasn’t just the Archbishop who had a passion for the Bible. We see the same desire amongst his fellow martyrs, such as John Philpot, the Archdeacon of Winchester. The weeks immediately after Mary came to the throne were a troubling time for Bible-believers. Many even of the faithful clergy were afraid to nail their colours to the mast. But Philpot courageously stood up in the hostile environment of Convocation (the General Synod of the day) and spoke up for a biblical understanding of the sacraments. It was difficult to do—the majority were against him, and they shouted him down with the phrase, ‘You have the Word, but we have the sword’. He paid with his life in the fires of Smithfield.

At the other end of the social and educational scale was Rawlins White, an elderly and illiterate fisherman from Cardiff. He sent his young son to school to learn to read, and every evening after supper the boy read aloud from the English Bible, until his father was able to recite long passages by heart. The old man feasted upon the Scriptures and began to preach them in the local area, exhorting others to turn to the Christ of the Bible. The Bishop of Llandaff did not like it and condemned him to death.

Many such examples could be multiplied. One of the most striking is that of William Hunter, the first martyr in Essex. He was only nineteen years old when

he gave his life for his Christian faith, and he suffered primarily because of his deep passion for the Word of God. One day in 1554 Hunter entered a wayside chapel in Brentwood, found an old English Bible there and began to read to himself (out loud). A local official, Father Atwell, walked in, heard the Bible being read and immediately interrupted: ‘Why are you meddling with the Bible? Do you know what you are reading? Can you expound the Scriptures?’ The young man replied that he had no intention of expounding the Scriptures but was reading them for his own benefit. ‘It has not been a happy world since the Bible was circulated in English,’ retorted the official. But Hunter pleaded, ‘For God’s sake, don’t say that, Father Atwell—for it is God’s book from which everyone who has grace may learn what pleases God and also what displeases him.’ ‘I understand your mind well enough,’ said the accuser, ‘You must turn over a new leaf, or else you and a great many more heretics will burn for it, I promise you.’ ‘God give me grace,’ came the confident reply, ‘that I may believe his Word and confess his name, whatever the consequences.’ Atwell found Thomas Wood, Vicar of South Weald and Chaplain of Brentwood, sitting in a nearby inn and recruited him to argue with the young evangelical. ‘Who gave you permission to read the Bible?’ asked the vicar, ‘It does not suit you, nor those like you, to meddle with the Scriptures.’ But Hunter insisted, ‘I will read the Scriptures (God willing) as long as I live, and you ought not to discourage anyone from doing so.’ ‘How dare you tell me what I should do?’ blurted Wood, ‘I see you are a heretic!’

After Hunter’s arrest, he was thrown in the stocks and then taken down to London to be interrogated at St. Paul’s Cathedral by Bishop Edmund Bonner—nicknamed ‘Bloody Bonner’ because he burned more evangelicals than any other bishop. At first the persecutor resorted to bribery, promising money and employment if the teenager would only admit his ‘errors’. It takes courage to face down a powerful bishop, but once again the prisoner responded: ‘I thank you for your great offers, my Lord, but if you cannot persuade me from the Scriptures, I cannot turn from God for love of the world. I count all worldly things as loss and dung compared to the love of Christ.’ So they burned him in Brentwood in March 1555 in front of his family and friends. Today, near the spot, stands a memorial—much less architecturally dramatic than the Oxford monument. It is merely an obelisk in a car-park and most walk passed without noticing. Yet engraved there for all to see is the vital challenge: ‘Christian reader, learn from his example to value the privilege of an open Bible and be careful to maintain it.’

The early Anglican martyrs had a deep passion for the Word of God. It gave them spiritual life and spiritual liveliness. It was their rock and their guide. Anglicans today need desperately to recapture that passion, as is patently obvious. With more Bibles in circulation than ever before, but many lying dusty and neglected on bed-side tables, where is our desire to bring our lives back under the rule of the Scriptures? Where are those with a burning hunger for the Word of God? When will Anglicanism's reputation be restored as a faithful Bible-believing, Bible-preaching denomination? It was so once, and the martyrs died to make it possible. As they discovered to their cost, those who challenge unbiblical ideas and who preach the glorious gospel in all its fullness usually receive vilification instead of praise. But they considered it a price worth paying.

Lesson 2: A Passion for God's Saving Grace

'How can I be saved? How can I come into a right relationship with God?' There is no more important question that anyone can ask. The church of the Middle Ages gave the wrong answer—their theologians pointed to good works, sacraments and religious duty as the means to salvation. The church of today continues to give the wrong answer—many of our own theologians point to self-improvement or self-knowledge or self-sacrifice as the means to 'salvation', or perhaps they deny that we need to be saved in the first place. Whatever the latest vogue amongst modern scholars and their clerical disciples, the result is the same. They denigrate the glory of Jesus Christ. They lead people away from the true and only Saviour. They give the wrong answer to that most crucial question, 'How can I be saved?' In contrast, when the English Reformers began to read the Bible, like their friends on the continent they discovered God's way of salvation—faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone. It revolutionized their understanding of the gospel and transformed the priorities of their ministry. Having received the grace of Christ themselves and come to trust in him as their only Saviour, they became passionate about sharing that discovery with others.

It was on this question, above every other, that the Reformers staked their lives. As the accounts of their trials reveal, the martyrs were often asked about grace and faith and salvation. That is why they were so often interrogated about the Lord's Supper.³ The medieval mass gives one answer to the question 'How can I be saved?'—it says, through human merit and human mediators. But the Lord's Supper, rightly understood, gives another answer—that salvation is only

possible through the merits of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. Archbishop Cranmer stamped this emphasis throughout the *Book of Common Prayer*, with the intention that every congregation when it meets together will focus exclusively upon the Saviour Jesus and his grace. Even Gregory Dix, hardly a sympathetic witness, describes Cranmer's Prayer Book as 'the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of "justification by faith alone".'⁴ For this reason, at Rowland Taylor's tearful parting from his wife before he was taken away to be burned, he gave her his precious copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Taylor loved the book, which he had used every day in prison, because it constantly pointed to the saving grace of Jesus. The other martyrs were likewise willing to stake their lives, and their eternal destinies, on that good news.

The Anglican Communion today needs desperately to rediscover a passion for the saving grace of Christ. From our pulpits and with our liturgy, we must give a clear and true answer to that all-important question, 'How can I be saved? How can I come into right relationship with God?' As the martyrs painfully discovered, those who bring the grace of Christ back to the church's attention will not be thanked for it. Ecclesiastical leaders do not want to hear that they are pointing people away from Christ instead of towards Christ, and it kindles their wrath. For example, Richard Woodman, a humble churchwarden from the village of Warbleton in Sussex, stood up and bravely challenged his vicar for leading the congregation away from Jesus. Woodman was burned for it, with nine other evangelicals, in the centre of Lewes in June 1557—yet he was not willing to remain silent while his friends and neighbours were being denied the opportunity to receive the saving grace of Christ. Where are the Anglicans of today with the same passion? Have we the courage of our convictions?

Lesson 3: A Passion for Prayer

When the Anglican Reformers had their backs against the wall and were battling for the sake of the biblical gospel, they did more than merely strategize and campaign and sign petitions and meet for conferences and establish networks. They did more than preach bold sermons and write rousing pamphlets. Above all, they prayed. They demonstrated their reliance on their sovereign Lord by the amount of time they spent on their knees. Modern Anglicans, especially those of us in the West, urgently need to learn from the early Anglican martyrs in this area.

Shortly before Anne Askew was burned to death at Smithfield in 1546 under King Henry VIII, she ended her *Examinations* with the earnest exhortation: 'Farewell, my dear friend, and pray, pray, pray.' We see a similar emphasis amongst the martyrs of the next generation, under Queen Mary. For example, in one of the most stirring scenes, Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer and John Bradford ended up sharing a prison cell in the Tower of London. They had been held separately, but after Sir Thomas Wyatt's rebellion in January 1554 the Tower was flooded with new prisoners so these leading Reformers were put in one cell. They found it a great joy to be able not only to encourage each other and study together, but most importantly to pray together. Although only a small remnant—four men—they dedicated themselves to interceding with God with all their might for the gospel to take root in England. Realistically they knew they might not see it—the church and nation were so corrupt that it seemed to human eyes impossible for the situation to be turned around in their generation. But they knew that Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of all, so instead of despairing, they prayed.

The accounts of the other martyrs are breathed through with a similar spirit of prayer. One prominent example is that of George Marsh, the ploughman turned preacher from the village of Deane, near Bolton in Lancashire. Having once worked as a farmer, he was converted to Christ and gave the rest of his life to preaching ministry. When the persecution began, his family urged him to run for his life, but Marsh's first response was to pray. He spent a night with a friend in the open air on Deane Moor seeking the will of the Lord and came to the conclusion that he should face the persecutors and 'bear such a cross as it should please God to lay upon my shoulders'. At every point of difficulty he was found constantly praying. When summoned to stand before magistrates, he prayed. When locked in solitary confinement he spent the lonely hours praying. When writing or speaking to friends he encouraged *them* to pray. In one provocative act of defiance while incarcerated at Lancaster Castle, Marsh and his cell-mate prayed and read the English Bible together twice a day, and did so at the top of their voices. As a result people from the town gathered each night under the castle walls to eavesdrop on this evangelical prayer meeting, much to the annoyance of the authorities! It was the same when they took Marsh to Chester, where he was condemned in the cathedral to be burned as a 'heretic'. After the sentence was read out, the bishop declared, 'Now I will no more pray for you than I will for a dog.' But Marsh, still gracious, responded,

‘Nevertheless, my Lord, I will still pray for you.’ At Gallows Hill, overlooking the River Dee, they chained this evangelical preacher to the stake with wood and reeds piled around him. In a cruel twist, a barrel of pitch and tar was placed above his head, so that he was both burned and scalded to death. Yet as in life, so in death—his last words on earth were ones of earnest prayer, speaking with his Saviour whom he was about to meet face to face.

George Marsh and his fellow martyrs call out to their Anglican successors today. Their words to us are, Pray without ceasing. Pray in private. Pray in the family. Pray in the congregation. Pray for comfort when you are in distress; for light when you are in darkness; for boldness when you are weak. Pray for those who persecute you. Pray, as Marsh did, for ‘grace not to faint but patiently to bear the cross’. Pray for the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion to be revived and restored. Pray, pray, pray. Anglicans will once again be used mightily in the purposes of God when we are down on our knees.

Lesson 4: A Passion for Godliness

There are some sad parallels between the ‘benighted’ Middle Ages and the Anglican Communion in this supposedly ‘enlightened’ twenty-first century. Before the Reformation in England, the church modelled itself on the world. Instead of the church changing society, society was changing the church into its own likeness. Christians went with the flow. It was a time of grave moral and spiritual decline. Ignorance, greed, corruption, the abuse of power, and sexual immorality were rife, even amongst the clergy. Local congregations were without godly leaders who were able both to teach the gospel clearly and to model holy living.

For example, in the early 1500s many clergy were known to keep mistresses, with the acquiescence of their bishops.) The Reformers, like Bishop Ridley in London, Bishop Hooper in Gloucester and Bishop Ferrar in Wales, led the way in attempts to establish a godly ministry. They pointed to the high standards of morality demanded by the Scriptures saying, ‘Those are the sort of people we want to be ordaining and consecrating—godly disciples of Jesus.’ It seems a simple request, that our leaders be godly. Yet it won them few friends. Instead of praise they received derision and hostility.

Godliness, of course, is not only a demand on others. True godliness begins at home, and here too the Reformers led the way. They preached first to themselves and then to the church, and their spiritual stature was clearly evident when tested by the extreme stress of persecution. When the early Anglican martyrs were abused and accused they demonstrated godliness and the fruit of the Holy Spirit in remarkable ways. ‘Joy’, even in the midst of suffering, even when they lost their jobs and were separated from their children and thrown out of their homes; ‘peace’ and ‘patience’, even as they were tortured in gruesome ways; ‘kindness’, even towards their wicked persecutors; ‘self-control’—when we might expect them to curse, they bless.

The martyrs of Colchester are a typical example, amongst many. The town saw more evangelicals executed in the 1550s than any other place in England except Smithfield and Canterbury. One of those who suffered was Rose Allen, a godly young woman, aged only twenty. She and her parents were part of a secret evangelical congregation, but one night armed men sent by the bishop surrounded the house and dragged them from their beds. The ring-leader, Edmund Tyrrell, insulted Rose as a whore, a gossip and a heretic. Then he grabbed her by the wrist and held a burning candle under her hand until the flesh burned away to the bone. Yet Rose’s godliness shone through. Remarkably, she remained composed and kept a bridle on her tongue, until Tyrrell was so annoyed that he thrust her away with profane abuse. On the same day that Rose was executed, they also burned another young woman, Elizabeth Folkes. As she was being chained to the stake, one of the guards missed his aim with the hammer and struck her on the shoulder. Again her personal godliness was apparent. She raised her eyes to heaven and prayed with a smile, before admonishing the crowd. As the flames rose, she and her companions clapped their hands for joy on their way to heaven.

When Bible Christians are persecuted across the Anglican Communion today, how do we react? When ministers lose their jobs and their homes because of their commitment to Jesus, what is the response from the evangelical community? Does that note of godliness shine through our actions and our attitudes? Are we quick to bless those who curse us? Are the fruit of the Holy Spirit evident in consecrated lives? There is no better way to humble the persecutors. The martyrs of the Reformation challenge us today: ‘Where is your passion for godliness, both amongst your leaders and in your own life?’

Lesson 5: A Passion for People

It is easy to forget in the midst of tumultuous theological controversy around the Anglican Communion, what is ultimately at stake. We can become so embroiled in conflict that we take our eye off the ball. What is at stake is not some rarefied truth or ideological principle which can be bottled and kept in a scientific laboratory. It is more down to earth than that, more gritty—at least it should be. What is at stake, ultimately, is the eternal destiny of men and women, of the people within our families and our communities. The gospel is not about God's relationship with a structure or a denomination. It is about God's relationship, through Jesus Christ, with men and women. Gospel Anglicans today need to recapture not just a passion for truth, but a passion for people.

This emphasis is clearly seen in the ministry of Rowland Taylor, the pastor of Hadleigh in Suffolk. Taylor was not a great theologian or scholar. He has left behind no academic treatises to fill our libraries. He was not involved in the ivory tower debates. Taylor's work was at the coal-face, getting his hands dirty amongst the people of his parish. He was an energetic preacher and a compassionate pastor who taught the gospel message with clarity and warmth. Physically a big man, with a massive physique and a long white beard, he was famous for his big heart, especially his care for the poor. Although not a controversialist by nature, Taylor was prepared when necessary to become involved in controversy for the sake of the people. He knew that being a good pastor means a willingness not just to feed the flock of God but also to defend the flock of God when it is under attack. When it came to the crunch Taylor was willing even to lay down his life for the sheep.

The trouble began in March 1554, when two local men hired a priest to come to Hadleigh parish church and perform the Latin mass. Taylor was at home in his rectory studying his Bible, but when he heard the church bells ringing he went to investigate. In his church he discovered the tonsured priest, robed in vestments, about to begin the mass sacrifice. Around the altar were men with drawn swords, in case anyone should resist them. Immediately Pastor Taylor challenged the intruder: 'You devil! Who made you so bold to enter this church of Christ, to profane and defile it with this abominable idolatry?' One of the men responded, 'You traitor! What are you doing here, to obstruct the queen's proceedings?' 'I am no traitor', replied Taylor, 'but I am the shepherd that my Lord Christ has appointed to feed his flock, so I have good authority to be here.'

And I command you, you popish wolf, in the name of God, to go away and not dare to poison Christ's flock with such popish idolatry.' The armed thugs grabbed Taylor, locked him out of his church, and arranged for his arrest.

What took the authorities by surprise was the deep love between Taylor and the people of Hadleigh. He was no mere hired-hand or religious professional, but a compassionate pastor. When urged to flee, he answered: 'Remember the Good Shepherd Christ, who not only fed his flock but also died for his flock. Him I must follow, and with God's grace, will do.'⁵ After almost a year in prison in London, Taylor was taken back to be burned at Hadleigh, as a warning to his parishioners. When the convoy arrived, there was a popular out-pouring of grief on the streets of the town. Crowds wept and prayed for their pastor: 'Oh good Lord! there goes our good shepherd, who has so faithfully taught us, so fatherly cared for us and so godly governed us.' 'O merciful God! What shall we poor scattered lambs do? What shall come of this most wicked world?' 'Good Lord strengthen and comfort him.' The sheriff and his men were incensed and tried to keep the people quiet, but with no success. At the stake Taylor gave away his clothing to his parishioners, beginning with his boots and his coat, until he stood there just in his shirt. 'Good people!' he cried, 'I have taught you nothing but God's holy word, and those lessons that I have taken out of God's blessed book the holy Bible, and I have come here today to seal it with my blood.'

Pastor Taylor knew what it meant to have a passion for people. Orthodox Anglicans must hold firmly to that top priority as we continue to battle for the gospel. Is it our great aim to see men and women won for Christ? Do we have a deep love for those amongst whom we live and work, longing for them to grow in relationship with Christ? Why are we involved in controversy?—for the sake of party-spirit, or for the sake of the flock of God? The early Anglican martyrs included many ministers who raised pastoring to a new level by their total dedication, even unto death.

Lesson 6: A Passion for Eternity

Amongst the many symbols on the Martyrs' Memorial in Oxford are two crowns—a crown of thorns next to a crown of glory. They remind us that the martyrs were able to withstand persecution because they had an eternal perspective. They knew that for a while, like Christ, they might have to wear a

crown of thorns. But in heaven they would be given crowns of glory, an eternal reward that far outweighed their ‘light and momentary troubles’. Their eyes, like those of Paul, were fixed ‘not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal’. Do we have that eternal heavenly perspective? If so, it should transform our priorities in ministry and our attitude to the present struggles within the Anglican Communion.

The Reformers knew that there is something more important than comfort and security. Some of them were promised promotion—a wealthy parish with a lovely rectory, a teaching post at the right university, even a bishopric—if only they would change their opinions. Of course they would have enjoyed being in ‘the right circle’, respected by ‘the right people’, with a stable income and decent ‘career prospects’. But they turned their backs on those temptations because they were looking instead for eternal reward. Thomas Iveson, a martyr from Sussex, spoke for many when he said, ‘I would not recant and forsake my opinion and belief for all the goods in London.’

An eternal perspective helped the martyrs when they were separated from their families. Perhaps that is the earthly bond which tugs on our heart strings above all. When Bible-believing Anglicans put their heads above the parapet their families suffer too. Those who are forced to put their jobs on the line for the sake of the gospel know that their spouse and children may also have to pay a high price for that conscientious stand. But faced with similar struggles, the early Anglican martyrs were buoyed up by their passion for eternity. They recognised that there is something even more important than the happiness of their wives and husbands and children. One of the most moving scenes in the martyrs’ histories is the final parting with their families—that last meal with their beloved, that last embrace with their children, tears pouring down their cheeks. Think, for example, of John Rogers, burned at Smithfield within sight of his own church in February 1555. He was forced to walk to the stake passed his wife and his brood of children, one of whom was a babe in arms he had never even met. Yet the French Ambassador who witnessed the event said Rogers walked courageously to his death, ‘as if he had been led to a wedding’. Likewise Deryk Carver, the first martyr in Lewes, prayed out loud as the flames engulfed him: ‘O Lord my God, you have written that he who will not forsake wife, children, house, and everything he has and take up his cross and follow you, is not worthy of you. But you Lord know that I have forsaken all to come

to you. Lord have mercy on me, for to you I commend my spirit and my soul rejoices in you.’ He left behind five orphaned children. The martyrs were enabled to put the gospel before even the security of their families because they had an eternal heavenly perspective.

It was the same for Bishop Hooper, burned to death outside his cathedral in Gloucester. The night before he died, an old friend, Sir Anthony Kingston, came to visit. Kingston burst into tears and pleaded with Hooper to recant. ‘Remember,’ he said, ‘that life is sweet and death is bitter.’ ‘That is true,’ replied the bishop, ‘but the life to come is more sweet and the death to come is more bitter.’ The eternal perspective gave Hooper strength, even as he endured forty-five minutes of extreme agony in the fire. He was not prepared to let go of the crown of glory and eternal life with Jesus Christ. Similar examples could be multiplied. Like Laurence Saunders, who embraced the stake at Coventry with the words: ‘Welcome the cross of Christ, welcome everlasting life.’ Nicholas Ridley assured his gaoler the night before he died that although his breakfast might be ‘sharp and painful’ yet his supper would be ‘pleasant and sweet’. John Bradford encouraged the teenage lad being burned next to him, ‘Be of good comfort, brother, for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord tonight.’ Rowland Taylor jumped off his horse as they approach Hadleigh and began dancing about. The sheriff was puzzled and asked if his prisoner was feeling alright. ‘God be praised, never better,’ replied Taylor, ‘for now I know I am almost home. Two more stiles to go over and I am at my Father’s house.’

The early Anglican martyrs had a passion for eternity, for seeing God face to face, for worshipping before the throne of the Lamb forever. We need to recapture that eternal perspective. Who knows what God has in store for the Anglican Communion in the years to come? Will it even survive, and through how much pain? But the perspective of heaven reminds us to look up from our temporary struggles and focus upon the big picture. As the martyrs knew full well, the Lord God is in charge. He is working his purpose out, even through the Anglican Church. He will bring glory to himself, through feeble men and women. And on the last day, the Lord will vindicate his saints, those who have remained steadfast, and say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant—welcome to the wedding supper of the Lamb.’

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ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at a symposium on ‘The Global Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century’ held in April 2006 at Trinity School for Ministry, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to honour the ministry of Dr. Les Fairfield. I am grateful to Dr. Paul Zahl, Dean and President of Trinity, for the invitation to speak on that occasion and to participants for their stimulating interaction.
2. For recent introductions to the Marian martyrs, see Jasper Ridley, *Bloody Mary’s Martyrs* (London: Robinson, 2001); Andrew Atherstone, *The Martyrs of Mary Tudor* (Leominster: Day One, 2005); Marcus Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* (1954; republished Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005).
3. See especially J. C. Ryle’s classic essay, “Why Were Our Reformers Burned?” in *Light from Old Times: or, Protestant Facts and Men* (1890, republished Moscow, Idaho: Charles Nolan, 2000).
4. Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre, 1945), p. 672.
5. Bishop Hooper made a similar affirmation when friends urged him to flee; ‘because I am called to this place and vocation I will stay, to live and die with my sheep’.