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BEING FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH:
REFLECTING ON THE MEANING OF MARTYRDOM

One of the interesting things about any language is the way that words change. Take the English word “martyr.” It comes from a Greek word *martys* (the singular form) or *martyres* (the plural form). Originally, this word in Greek was a legal term that designated an “eyewitness, ” someone who knows the facts about something. This is the way it is used, for example, in Acts 1:7-8 where the Risen Lord Jesus told his disciples that they were to be “witnesses” to his death and resurrection in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the earth. By the end of the New Testament era, though, the meaning of the word had become a technical term and had been narrowed to mean a person who bears witness to Christ at the cost of his/her life. Look at Revelation 2:13: Antipas, martyred at Pergamum probably during the reign of Diocletian is described as Christ’s faithful *martys*.

In fact, Antipas was one of a number during the New Testament era who died for their faith in Christ. From its earliest days the Church was thus stamped as a Church of witnesses who gave their lives for Christ, a Church of martyrs. One thinks, for example, of

the Apostle James, the brother of John, killed by Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:2), or of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60), sometimes described as the first martyr.

Violent persecution is not our lot here in North America. And for this we should praise God. But it has been the lot of many of our brothers and sisters in the past, with whom we are joined in “mystic sweet communion.” To think about martyrdom then is to reflect on the nature of the church. Moreover, violent persecution and martyrdom are the lot of so many of our brothers and sisters around the globe. Thinking about what martyrdom means therefore is a way of helping us to understand their state and an aid in praying for them. Because martyrdom has not been the lot of the North American church, do not think it is something esoteric and minor. As we shall see, it goes to the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Bearing witness to the Faith

The Early Church understood martyrdom to be a gift of the Holy Spirit. It drew its thinking in this regard from passages like 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, where Paul includes martyrdom among the gifts that the Spirit gives to the Church, and Mark 13:9-11,¹ where

¹ See also the parallels in Matthew 10:16-20 and Luke 12:8-12.

Jesus expressly promises that the Spirit will speak through the martyrs. They do not need to worry about what they are going to say when they are brought before authorities. The Spirit, who indwells them and will never leave them, will give them the words to speak.²

Again and again down through the years the Holy Spirit has used the martyrdom of believers to bring glory to Christ, to bring unbelievers to Christian faith and to strengthen the people of God. For example, in the middle of the second century, a philosopher named Justin, who loved the teachings of Plato and who had heard slanderous reports about Christians, was converted when, in his words, he “watched them stand fearless in the face of death and of every other thing that was considered dreadful.” Then, Justin said, “I realized the impossibility of their living in sinful pleasure.”³ Similarly, a North African by the name of Tertullian, who may also have been converted through seeing Christians martyred, can state in a tract to Scapula, the Roman governor of North Africa,:

Our religion, which you know is growing stronger at the very moment when it seems to be cut down, will never perish. For, whoever beholds such noble endurance [of the martyrs] will first, as though struck by some kind of uneasiness, be driven to

² For other passages that also link the Spirit and martyrdom, see 1 Peter 4:12-14 and Acts 7:54-60.

³ 2 *Apology* 12.

inquire what is the matter in question, and, then, when he knows the truth, immediately follow the same way.⁴

As Tertullian powerfully put it on another occasion: “the blood of the martyrs is [the] seed [of the Church].”⁵

Revealing transcendent values

Again, martyrdom reminds that this world and its values are not all that there is to life. In fact, this world and its doings are not the most important entity in the universe—God is. And obedience to him and to his ways is far more important than anything else. Thus, Peter and the other Apostles, facing the possibility of physical persecution and martyrdom from the Jewish Sanhedrin, could tell them pointedly, “We must obey God rather than men,” even if that obedience meant death.⁶

Consider the witness of Helmuth James von Moltke (1907-1945).⁷ Von Moltke was the son of an English woman and a wealthy German landowner, who in turn was the grand nephew of a famous German Field Marshall from the First World War. Throughout the 1930s Moltke had opposed Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and the Nazi

⁴ *To Scapula* 5.

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⁶ Acts 5:29.A

⁷ For his life, see Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth von Moltke: A Leader Against Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

regime, and regarded their accession to power as a catastrophe of the first magnitude. During the war years he actively opposed Hitler, but unlike some others he came to reject the idea that assassinating Hitler was the way to correct matters within Germany. He was a Christian who refused to behave as the Nazis did. In January 1944, though, he was arrested for his active resistance to Hitler. He was put on trial in January 1945 and he rejoiced in the fact that eventually his trial boiled down to one fact, namely, that he, as a Christian, refused to accept Hitler's demand for total and absolute obedience.

At one point in his trial, his judge, Roland Freisler (1893-1945), shouted at him: "Only in one respect are we [i.e. the Nazis] and Christianity alike: we demand the whole man!" Freisler then asked Moltke: "From whom do you take your orders? From the Beyond or from Adolf Hitler?" "Who commands your loyalty and your faith?" Moltke rightly saw these questions as the decisive ones of his entire trial. As he told his wife in a farewell letter, he was on trial simply as Christian and nothing else. From the point of view of the Nazis, since, as a Christian, he refused to give total allegiance to Hitler, he had to die.

There were a couple of weeks between his being sentenced to death and his actual execution on January 23, 1945. As he reflected on his life during those two weeks, he saw above all else God's grace. In his words, written on the eve of his death in a farewell letter to his wife:

Yesterday, my dear, we read this beautiful passage: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body."⁸ Thanks be, my dear, before all else to God. Thanks also to yourself for your intercessions, thanks to all those others who have prayed for us and for me. That I, your husband, your weak, faint-hearted, ...very average husband, should have been allowed to experience all this! Were I now to be reprieved—which I swear is neither more nor less likely than it was a week ago—I must say that I should have to find my way all over again, so tremendous has been the demonstration of God's presence and omnipotence. He shows them to us and shows them quite unmistakably, precisely when He does what we don't like. Anything else is nonsense.

So then, my dear, I have only one thing to say: may God be as good to you as to me... My dear, my life is finished, and I can say of myself, "He died in fullness of years and of life's experience." This in no way alters the fact that I would gladly go on living, that I would gladly accompany you further on life's journey. But then I should need a new task from God,

⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:7-10.

since the one for which he created me stands completed. If He is willing to give me another task then it will be made clear to us. So keep going with your efforts to save my life, if I should survive today. Perhaps there may be another task.

I will stop, since there is no more to say. ...I end by saying to you by strength of the treasure which is in me, and which fills this humble earthen vessel: “The grace of Our [*sic*] Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”⁹

Demonstrating the nature of true Christianity

Then, martyrdom reminds us of the essential nature of Christianity. When we become Christians we cease to be our own masters. Another is now our Lord, even Jesus Christ. And the centre of our lives ceases to be us. Self-fulfillment and the search for meaning within ourselves should come to an end as we now live for Christ and if necessary, die for him.

Again, at the heart of the Christian life is grace. We can do nothing without God’s grace. And it is his grace that enables us to persevere. And so it was with the martyrs. A good example is found in Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Archbishop of Canterbury, who was instrumental in establishing the Reformation in England.¹⁰ He was arrested by Mary I, so-called “Bloody

⁹ 2 Corinthians 13:14. This extract is taken from *A German of the Resistance: The Last Letters of Count Helmuth James von Moltke* (2nd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 41–52, *passim*

¹⁰ On Cranmer, especially see the definitive life by Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (London/New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

Mary,” and sent to the Tower of London on September 13, 1553. Two months later he was tried for treason and convicted. Mary loathed him and there was no possibility of a reprieve. He spent six months in the Tower of London, and then in April 1554 he was taken to Oxford, where he was imprisoned in the Bocardo Prison.¹¹

But though Cranmer had been convicted, he languished in prison, because ultimately only the Pope could pass sentence on him, since he had been appointed Archbishop by the Pope. Finally, on December 4, 1555, Cranmer was formally excommunicated by the Pope, Paul IV (1476-1559). His trial and the breaking of his spirit could now begin in earnest. First, he was to be defrocked and then transferred to the secular authority for execution. On February 14, 1556, he was stripped of not only his arch-episcopal position, but also all of his other offices that he had possessed in the Church. It was a deeply humiliating counter-liturgy. In the judgment of A. F. Pollard: “the procedure on such occasions was a monument of exquisite cruelty; nothing that ingenuity could devise was omitted to abuse the victim and wound his spirit.”¹² Cranmer retained his bearing and dignity though, and wit! When a barber stepped

¹¹ For a detailed account of Cranmer’s trial, condemnation, imprisonment, and subsequent martyrdom, see MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 554-605. For a study of Cranmer’s martyrdom, see Rudolph W. Heinze, “‘I pray God to grant that I may endure to the end’: A New Look at the Martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer” in Paul Ayris and David Selwyn, eds., *Thomas Cranmer: Churchman and Scholar* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1993).

¹² Cited Peter Newman Brooks, *Cranmer in Context: Documents from the English Reformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1989), 96.

forward to shave his head, Cranmer, who had been quite bald since the days of Henry VIII, said: “I had done with all this gear long ago!”

Cranmer was tortured and forced to undergo what today we would call brain-washing sessions at the hands of a Spanish friar, Juan de Villa Garcina.¹³ By such means a recantation was obtained that completely repudiated the theology of the Reformation that had motivated Cranmer as a Reformer.

“I, Thomas Cranmer,” he wrote,

anathematize every heresy of Luther and Zwingli... I confess and believe most surely in one holy and catholic visible church, outside which there is no salvation; and I recognize as its supreme head upon earth the Bishop of Rome, whom I admit to be *summus pontifex*, Pope and Vicar of Christ, to whom all the faithful are bound subject. Now as regards the sacraments, I believe in and worship in the sacrament of the Eucharist the true body and blood of Christ, most truly without recourse to any trope or figure of speech contained under the species of bread and wine, the bread being changed and transubstantiated by divine power into the Redeemer’s body, and wine into his blood. And I believe in the other six sacraments... and hold that which the whole Roman church holds and declares.”¹⁴

¹³ Brooks, *Cranmer in Context*, 97-98.

This private recantation, though, was not enough for the authorities. Cranmer was informed that he would have to give a public recantation on the day of his being burnt by fire on Saturday, March 21, 1556.

That Saturday it was a cold, wet, blustery March morning. Cranmer was taken from the Bocardo prison to St. Mary the Virgin church where he was placed on a raised platform in the full view of all who were there (the indentations that the platform made in the pews upon which it rested can still be seen). He was once again berated for his heresies and then given the opportunity to speak where it was expected that he would repeat his earlier recantations. But by God's grace he was enabled to speak what truly he believed.

Cranmer began with prayer in which he confessed his sins and expressed his confidence in God's mercy.¹⁵ Then followed what was expected to be his public recantation. It began with exhortations to the audience which included one to obey "your King and Queen, willingly and gladly, without murmuring or grudging,"¹⁶ but it ended in a way that was utterly unexpected.

¹⁴ Cited Brooks, *Cranmer in Context*, 112.

¹⁵ *The Work of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford, Berkshire: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1964), 334-335.

¹⁶ *Work of Thomas Cranmer*, 335.

And now, for so much as I am come to the last end of my life, whereupon hangeth all my life passed, and my life to come, either to live with my master Christ for ever in joy, or else to be in pain for ever, with wicked devils in hell; and I see before mine eyes presently either heaven ready to receive me, or hell ready to swallow me up: I shall therefore declare unto you my very faith, how I believe, without any colour or dissimulation: for now is no time to dissemble, whatsoever I have said or written in times past.¹⁷

After stating his belief in “every word and sentence taught” in the Scriptures he continued:

And now I come to the great thing that so much troubleth my conscience, more than any thing that ever I did or said in my whole life: and that is, the setting abroad of writings 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, which I have written or signed with my hand since my degradation: wherein I have written many things untrue. And forasmuch as my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall first be punished therefore; for, may I come to the fire, it shall be first burned. And as for the Pope, I refuse him, as Christ’s enemy and Antichrist, with all his false doctrine. And as for the sacrament, I believe as I have taught in my book against the bishop of Winchester...¹⁸

¹⁷ *Work of Thomas Cranmer*, 337.

¹⁸ *Work of Thomas Cranmer*, 337-338.

He got no further. A stunned silence broke into uproar and confusion. The man in charge of the actual burning, a Lord Williams, cried out, “Have you gone mad?”¹⁹ Others of his opponents reminded him of his recantation. He responded, “always since I lived, ...I have been a hater of falsehood, and a lover of simplicity, and never, before this time, have I dissembled,” and he began to cry.²⁰

He then literally ran to the stake in what is now Broad Street with the Spanish friar Villa Garcia running after him trying to get him to recant once again. The Spanish friar continued trying to get him to recant all the way to the stake, but Cranmer was steadfast. In fact, when he was chained to the stake and the wood set on fire, he stretched out his arm, and, we are told,

put his right hand into the flame, which he held so steadfast and immovable...that all men might see his hand burned before his body was touched. ...oftentimes he repeated, his unworthy right hand, so 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.²¹

¹⁹ Rupp, “Thomas Cranmer”, 51.

²⁰ *Work of Thomas Cranmer*, 338.

²¹ *Works of Thomas Cranmer*, 339-340.

A few months before his martyrdom, Cranmer had written a letter to Peter Martyr—it may well have been the last letter he ever wrote.

God never shines forth more brightly, and pours out the beams of his mercy and consolation, or of strength and firmness of spirit more clearly or impressively upon the minds of his people, than when they are under the most extreme pain and distress, both of mind and body, that he may then more especially shew himself to be the God of his people, when he seems to have altogether forsaken them; then raising them up when they think he is bringing them down, and laying them low; then glorifying them, when he is thought to be confounding them; then quickening them, when he is thought to be destroying them. So that we may say with Paul, “When I am weak, then am I strong; and if I must needs glory, I will glory in my infirmities, in prisons, in revilings, in distresses, in persecutions, in sufferings for Christ.” I pray God to grant that I may endure to the end.²²

God gave him the grace he prayed for.

The account of his martyrdom is not one of unbroken triumph, but, in the words of Geoffrey Bromiley, “of victory out of the very jaws of defeat.” Cranmer appears a very ordinary man, one with no taste for violent death. But in his final hours God’s grace enabled him to endure to the end and we see that what Cranmer had taught as an

²² Heinze, “New Look at the Martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer”, 277.

evangelical—namely, that salvation is wholly the Lord’s work—is shown to be true in his final hours.²³

²³ Bromiley, “Thomas Cranmer”, 188.