

John Rogers (martyred: 1555)

The special significance of John Rogers is that he was the first to be martyred by Mary, Queen of Scots (“Bloody Mary”). Rogers’ capital crime was his refusal to affirm the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. He argued that the doctrine was unbiblical, since the physical body of Christ is currently at the right hand of the Father in heaven. A body cannot be in more than one place at one time. To claim that Christ’s body can be both in heaven and on earth in the eucharist entails a contradiction. What leads to a contradiction is necessarily false. Yet the Word of God is not false. As a Reformer, the institutional church was not the arbiter of truth. Only God’s Word in Scripture provides sure and certain truth. For his unwavering faithfulness to the authority of Scripture, as opposed to the Roman Catholic hierarchy and traditions, John Rogers paid with his life. A lesson Rogers teaches us is that there are truths worth dying for. The essential truths of the gospel are worth the cost of sacrificial faithfulness, even unto death.

Questions

1. **Why was Rogers especially qualified to defend the gospel?** He had a brilliant intellect, trained at the best universities, including Cambridge. This provided him with the ability to read the biblical text in a profoundly penetrating way, in the original languages. He was ordained a Roman Catholic priest and had an intimate knowledge of Catholic doctrine and its distortion of the gospel of justification by faith alone. Given his superior education in theology and biblical languages, he was later able to see that the truth of this doctrine was well grounded in God’s Word. He was also exceptionally well prepared to be an accurate translator of the Bible into English.
2. **How is the contrast between John Rogers and Harry Phillips instructive?** On the one hand, Rogers effectually called by God’s grace to receive salvation by faith alone. His changed heart and its desires, recognizing Christ alone as master of his life. His talents were used in the service of his Lord. Harry Phillips had a different master, which was money. His talents were used in the service of this lord of his life. He’d been entrusted to safely bank his father’s estate in London. Instead, he pursued his false master and was prepared for gambled away the entire amount of the estate. This caused him to be vulnerable to the Catholic Church’s offer to repay all the estate money, if Phillips would track down the hiding place of William Tyndale. In this he was successful. Tyndale was arrested, imprisoned, and martyred. The master we choose to serve determines how our lives will be used, whether for the glory of God or in rebellion against Him.
3. **Why was Rogers burned at the stake?** He rejected the truth of transubstantiation, a crucial element in the doctrine of the mass as sacrifice. He repeatedly refused to recant but chose to lose his life to find it in Christ.
4. **What, exactly, is transubstantiation?** This can seem a somewhat complicated idea, because it involves elements of Aristotle’s philosophy. “Transubstantiation” refers to the “transforming” or change of one substance into another. This is taken from Aristotle’s philosophical description of “substantial change”, by which the church attempted to explain how the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. For Aristotle, a substance is any individual thing. If it’s a physical, material thing, then it’s made up of what Aristotle called “form” and “matter.” The “form” is what makes a thing be the *kind* of being it is. It

does not refer to the shape of a physical object, but rather to what causes the object to be the *kind* of object it is. In the case of a cat, the form would be “feline.” The matter is what makes “feline” to be one individual cat. Thus, matter is called “the principle of individuation.” In the mass, the bread is a substance. Its form is whatever the recipe for bread is. It makes the bread to be the kind of thing it is. The other aspect of the substance bread is its “accidents.” These are simply the features or characteristics of a thing. In the case of bread, the accidents would be the color of the bread, scent, its quantity, its shape, its taste, its texture, its location, etc. The same is true of the wine as a substance. Its form is whatever the inner structure or “recipe” of wine is. The accidents of wine would be the red color, its taste, its scent, its liquid qualities, its quantity, its location, etc. During transubstantiation, what Aristotle called a “substantial change” occurs. A thing changes from one kind of thing into another kind of thing. For example, when a cow eats grass, the substance of grass is ultimately transformed by the cow’s digestive tract into milk. In the mass, the substance of the bread is changed into the substance of the body of Christ. However, the accidents remain the same. It looks like bread, because it still retains the features of the color, quantity, taste, scent, location, etc., of the bread. But the basic underlying “form,” which causes the substance be the kind of thing it is, has changed into the body of Christ. In the same manner, the form of wine changes to the actual blood of Christ. However, the accidents of wine remain. The color, taste, scent, quantity, etc., remain. Thus, if one did a chemical analysis of the body of Christ as bread and wine, the results would not reveal the DNA of Christ’s body, or His blood type. It would reveal the features of the accidents of bread and wine.

The priest, by repeating the biblical words, “this is my body,” changes the substance of the bread into the body of Christ. When he repeats Christ’s words, “this is...my blood,” he changes the substance of the wine into the actual blood of Christ. This is considered the sacrifice of Christ for our sins, performed by the priest on the altar of the church. Thus, while Christ’s body remained in heaven at the right hand of the Father in power, his body was also on earth being sacrificed by the priest. This sacrifice was a sacrament, a means of grace, thought to have the power to take away sins. It generated merits that could be applied to believers in purgatory, to shorten the time of purification of the soul. Purgatory is not a “second chance” of salvation, since all who are in purgatory will go to heaven. But the merits generated by the mass, along with the excess good works of the Saints in heaven, could provide merits in the form of “indulgences.” One’s could shorten the time of his relative in purgatory by purchasing indulgences. It was the doctrine of indulgences to which Martin Luther objected when he nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church. When John Rogers objected to the doctrine of transubstantiation, he was rejecting the notion that each mass was a sacrifice of Christ’s body to take away sins and to generate merit.

5. **In what way does Rogers contribute to our understanding of the relationship between faith and reason?** He is an example of using one’s mind in the cause of Christ. Along with his main gifts having to do with biblical translation and commentary, and the defense of sound gospel doctrine, he utilized philosophy. For example, one reason he rejected the doctrine of the literal, real presence of Christ’s body in the bread and wine has

to do with philosophy. Rogers' stellar education would certainly have included logic, and the law of noncontradiction as a first principle of being, thought, and logic. What is contradictory cannot be true. To say that a body can be in two places at one time (e.g., Christ's body being both in heaven and on earth at the same time) is a contradiction. Rogers pointed this out as a reason to reject the doctrine, as did Zwingli and other Reformers. While the Bible refers to avoiding "vain philosophy," it does not say that all philosophy is vain. The early church used philosophical categories to help define the Trinity as three persons in one being or essence, and, to understand that Christ is two persons with one nature. Believers, like Rogers and the Reformers, applied the intellectual talents God gave them to defend the gospel. They provide a good example for us.

6. **How is God's sovereignty seen at work in Rogers life?** He was called to be a chaplain for businessmen in Antwerp, who wanted the Bible taught to their workers. The house in which some of the men lived was the very one in which William Tyndale was hidden, as he worked on his Bible translation. Tyndale presented the authentic gospel of Christ to him, and he was truly born again. Rogers became an assistant to Tyndale. After a few months, Tyndale was arrested and later martyred as we saw earlier. But this now put Rogers in a position to continue Tyndale's work of translation. The result of this was that Rogers helped another of Tyndale's co-workers, Miles Coverdale (known for the Coverdale Bible). Rogers edited and improved Coverdale's translation. He also completed Tyndale's translation work and added many improvements. These included a tremendous number of marginal notes, introductions, summaries, cross references, concordance, doctrinal articles, and so on. He produced a de facto commentary on the Bible in this way. It was these additions the Catholic establishment feared more than the Bible translation itself. This is because the meticulously done additions clearly presented the true, biblical gospel of Christ. How do these events affect us now? They show us that what appear to be catastrophic events, like the arrest of Tyndale can be sovereignly used by God. In the case of Rogers, the loss of Tyndale was turned to advantages in providing an excellent English Bible. The same is true of our own lives. What seems a profound loss is something God can use to help us in unexpected ways.
7. What was the significance of John Rogers rising to prominence as a Reformation voice in England? For his own safety, he spent time in Germany. He deepened his understanding of the gospel through contact with Reformation leaders like Luther and Melancthon. He married and returned to England when conditions became safer under King Edward VI. Rogers returned to England and held very prominent positions. He became a major and well known voice for the Reformation cause and against the abuses of the Catholic Church. This put a target on his back when Mary ascended the throne after the short life of Edward VI.
8. **What special impact did Rogers' martyrdom have?** After being condemned to death, he was taken to be burned at the stake. On the way, crowds cheered him. He saw his wife among them, for the first time in a year. Even this didn't tempt him to recant his position. The question was, as the first to die, whether or not the Reformers would have the backbone to die for the truth of the gospel. He did. He faced death courageously, exultantly. He provided an example of courage and strength for the later martyrs. This is an example of a general principle of Christian living. Remaining strong in the faith during the most difficult times is an encouragement to other believers. The most difficult times may include dying for the truth of the faith. In the face of death, the truth of the gospel is worth the sacrifice of

our lives. John Rogers was a supreme example to us of one who, by God's sufficient grace, desired to lose his life in order to find it in Christ.