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Hugh Latimer (1485 (?)-1555)

Active: 1524-1555 in England, Britain, Europe

By [David Coleman \(Nottingham Trent University\)](#)

Indexing Data:

Active In: England, Britain, Europe

Born In: England, Britain, Europe

Activity: Preacher, Bishop

Life, Works and Times

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One of the most charismatic of the sixteenth-century English reformers, Hugh Latimer is remembered not just for the zeal with which he adopted the cause of reform in the church, even going to his death at the stake, but for his oral performances as a preacher, establishing the pulpit as a site of rhetoric and literary inspiration.

Latimer was born in the 1480s at Thurcaston, a village north of Leicester. He was the only surviving son of his parents, although he did have six sisters. He attended his local grammar school, and went to Cambridge aged 14. There he graduated BA in 1511, MA in 1514, and BTh in 1524. He was ordained subdeacon of Peterborough in March 1515, deacon of Lincoln Cathedral in April 1515, and priest of Lidington in July 1515. Initially, Latimer was hostile to calls for reform of the church, denouncing the continental reformer Melancthon in his examination sermon (for the degree of BTh) in 1524. However, he soon fell under the reformist influence of Thomas Bilney and George Stafford, and was allegedly a member of the group of reformers who frequented the White Horse tavern in Cambridge.

By 1529, Latimer's sermons were already beginning to cause some controversy. In that year he called for the translation of the Bible into English, a move which led to a split among theologians in Cambridge (the first translation of the entire Bible into English, that of Miles Coverdale (see separate entry), did not appear until 1535). By the beginning of the 1530s he had begun to preach against the papacy and against the doctrine of purgatory. Such anti-Roman views were not necessarily a barrier to political advancement, and in Lent 1530 Latimer preached his first court sermon, at Windsor Castle. In January 1531, he was promoted to the living of West Kington, Wiltshire. However, his controversial views could land him in trouble, and in March 1532 he was called before convocation to answer charges relating to his preaching: he was excommunicated and briefly imprisoned. Unperturbed, he preached controversial Lenten and Eastertide sermons in Bristol in 1533 and, as a sign of the progress which the reform movement was making in England at this point, in 1535 he was appointed Bishop of Worcester.

As a supporter of reform, Latimer almost immediately began dismantling images in his diocese. The first of his sermons to be printed dates from his time as Bishop of Worcester: his Convocation Sermon of 1537 was a characteristically strident call to remove abuses in the church. Around this time, Latimer was also deeply involved in the project of developing an official English translation of the Bible. The 1535 Coverdale Bible was seen as insufficiently scholarly (it had been translated primarily from European vernacular editions), and it was felt that a new edition should be commissioned, printed, and placed in every parish church in England. The resulting text became known as the Great Bible of 1539, and Latimer's influence at the time is visible in the famous title-page illustration, where Latimer is one of the figures whose image is represented. However, also in 1539, Henry VIII instigated something of a return to conservative churchcraft with the Act of the Six Articles. Latimer had a major disagreement with the king over the doctrine of purgatory, and spoke against the Six Articles in the House of Lords. As a result, Latimer was forced to resign his bishopric in July of that year. In December, he was granted a pardon, which represented a rehabilitation of sorts; however, in 1546 Latimer was arrested under suspicion of heresy and imprisoned in the Tower.

In 1547 Henry died, the Act of Six Articles was repealed, and Latimer was released from prison. Immediately he resumed his career as a preacher. It is in the sermons which survive that Latimer's influence as a "writer" is most keenly felt. Yet he was not a "writer" in any conventional sense. It was in fact very rare for Latimer to prepare his sermons in advance, or record them afterwards; he considered himself inspired by the Holy Spirit during the act of preaching, and he was certainly one of the most gifted preachers among the sixteenth-century English reformers. The survival of his sermons for later generations is attributable to two figures: Augustine Bernher (Latimer's amanuensis), and Katherine Brandon (later Bertie), Duchess of Suffolk, who, from 1548 onwards, funded the printing of Latimer's sermons. Latimer continued to become involved in controversy as a result of his preaching: particular targets included Bishop Nicholas Heath of Worcester (who was removed from office) and Thomas Seymour, brother of Protector Somerset (who was eventually executed). In March 1550, Latimer retired from court.

In 1553, Queen Mary, a staunch Catholic, ascended the throne, and Latimer's days were numbered. His last official function was to serve as chaplain at the funeral of the young King Edward. In September 1553, he was arrested for sedition, and in April 1554 forced to perform in open disputation with Catholic theologians in Oxford. Refusing to recant his position, Latimer declined to speak in Latin, and condemned the Catholic mass in outright terms. He stood trial in September 1555, still attacking the Roman church, and the verdict was never in doubt. On 16 October

1555, Latimer was executed by burning at the stake. His death was famously "recorded" by John Foxe in *Acts and Monuments*; Foxe gives Latimer a defiant speech at the moment of execution, but it is not known how reliable this attribution is. It has, however, continued to be associated with Latimer, and is certainly in keeping with his characteristic radicalism.

Latimer's literary reputation rests almost exclusively on his remarkable skills as a preacher. His sermons were published in his own lifetime, and continued to be published after the accession of Elizabeth brought Protestantism to England. Like many reformers, his work was extensively edited and republished in the nineteenth century. Latimer's conception of his sermons, however, was as a form of oral, rather than textual, performance. Controversial and captivating in his prime, the texts which survive are only a record of his charismatic performances.

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