

Mary Dyer - A Light in the Darkness; A Voice for Intimacy With Christ

by Dan Trygg

Within the history of those who have been named as “followers of Jesus Christ” or “Christians”, there are many twists and turns between truth and error, authentic faith and empty formalism, ardent zeal for God and cold observance of ritual. Theology itself has wandered back and forth, straying into errors of various kinds, ...but God would eventually raise up people to give a clarion call for a return to Biblical truth. **Beginning as simple, organic, relational meetings in homes and non-religious places, the gathering together of God’s people moved from everyday settings to buildings made of stone, adorned with all sorts of decoration, art, liturgy and ceremony.** Instead of being an opportunity to speak words of edification to one another, and serve one another in love, church became a place where participation was mostly in response to ritual, and personal interaction was very limited. **The history of Christianity is full of revivals, ...people rediscovering the true message of the gospel, finding authentic relationship with God and meeting together to build one another up.**

The story of Mary Dyer is one of God raising up a light in the darkness. She was a voice that defied empty, lifeless formalism, and promoted a warm-hearted intimacy with Christ and other believers.

Born as Marie Barrett in 1611, she married William Dyer in 1633 in London, England. He was a milliner by trade (importer and seller of hats and clothing), and a member of the Fishmonger’s Company, which included a number of shops and guilds. **William and Mary had been raised in the Anglican Church, but by the time they were married had become “Puritans”.** Puritans were people who wanted to “purify” the Church of England of vestiges of its Roman Catholic heritage, and promoted a more simple style of worship. They believed in the Bible, but they especially emphasized that God would choose some to come to faith, and others would be lost. Even if you believed in Christ, professed your faith, and pursued sanctification through participating in church sacraments or self-discipline, you could not know if you were one of the “elect”. Only God knew. **Because of growing opposition and pressure from King Charles I, who was sympathetic to the liturgical and traditional trappings of the Anglican Church, Puritans began to leave England to go to “New England”,** where they hoped to establish a colony where they could freely implement their Puritan ideals. **William and Mary Dyer arrived in Boston in 1635, also in pursuit of their religious liberty.**

Soon after they arrived, however, there arose a controversy among the people in the settlement. A number of people began to promote a different message. **Instead of the emphasis on Divine election, some were introducing an emphasis on “free grace”.** This was declaring that God had provided grace sufficient for as many as would choose to embrace Christ. **They taught that God’s grace was offered as a gift to those who would believe, ...to any and all who would trust in Christ for their salvation.** Moreover, **they were also teaching that those to believed in Jesus would receive the Holy Spirit, who would live inside of them.** This may seem to be basic teaching to many of us, ...it is clearly taught in the Bible (Acts 2:38; Gal. 4:6)..., but **to the Puritans of that time, this was seen as outrageous!** The Puritan emphasis on God’s sovereign choice of the “elect”, and the emphasis on self-discipline to become holy, produced an “anxiety of unknowing” about what one’s status was before God. Here, **these “free grace” people were saying that you could know if you were saved or not, ...and that good works had nothing to do with obtaining your salvation. Instead, they were the fruit of a life transformed by grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.**

William and Mary Dyer were drawn to this “free grace” movement. A minister from Salem, Roger Williams, was one of the chief proponents, but was banished in the fall of 1635. **Meetings were held at the home of Anne and William Hutchinson.** Anne was an outspoken advocate of free grace, and led the Bible studies at their home. Her meetings became very popular, even among some of the prominent men. Soon, however, the Puritan religious leaders began to oppose her. **The Dyer’s regularly attended her meetings, and Mary and Anne became good friends.**

Not only was Anne a mentor to Mary, she also was a mid-wife. When Mary began experiencing contractions in the seventh month of her pregnancy, Anne had been called to help her. **In October 1637, Mary delivered a stillborn child, who was noticeably deformed.** Realizing that their critics would use this unfortunate incident as a means to attack Mary’s credibility, as “a sign of Divine disapproval”, **they secretly buried the child in the woods.**

Shortly after, Anne and her husband were ordered to appear before the court. In March of 1638, they were banished from Boston colony, along with many of their followers. When this judgment was decided, Mary arose from among those assembled, and walked with Anne out of the court, holding her hand. This public act of support brought Mary under scrutiny. The story of the “monster” which was Mary’s child surfaced, and, as expected, was used to publicly humiliate, discredit and attack her. **Subsequently, the Hutchinson’s and Dyer’s moved to Pocasset, Rhode Island, where Roger Williams had settled. Before leaving, Willam penned the Portsmouth Compact, which was an agreement of those willing to devote themselves, their lives and estates to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to the laws of the scripture to form a non-sectarian civil government together.** This is considered by many to be the first legal document for a self-governing community based upon religious liberty and democratic principles in the American colonies.

The Dyer's helped to found another settlement, Newport, where they became leaders in the community. Mary gave birth to four more children during this time. The Dyer's had a son, William, who was born in England, but had died in infancy. Then, their next son, Samuel was born in Boston in 1635. Mahershalalhashbaz was born in Newport in 1643, as was Henry (1647), daughter Mary (1649), and a final son, Charles (1650).

In 1652, Willam and Mary left their children in care of others, and ventured back to England. It would seem that William was dealing with legal matters, both in regard to redress for what happened in Boston, and to request a charter for the new settlement. He was given the title of Captain, and was made Commander in Chief upon the land, in preparation for possible hostilities with Dutch forces. **William returned to Newport in 1653, but Mary remained in England until 1657. During this time, she became converted to the Society of Friends (Quakers).**

The Quakers believed in a personal relationship with God. They held simple "friends' meetings" in homes. They rejected elaborate religious ceremonies and sacraments, and did not recognize the distinction between "clergy" and "laity". Instead, **they believed that everyone had the opportunity for equal access to God, through salvation in Jesus Christ. They believed that the Holy Spirit transformed people, and gave them the desire to do God's will. They expected to be directed and led by the Spirit, both into deeper intimacy with God and in carrying out His will.** They spent time in quiet and contemplation, seeking to more clearly receive revelation and leading from Him. **They also believed that all people were equal. Both men and women could speak, teach or preach. This was a step further in the simplicity and immediacy of her relationship with God, so Mary embraced what she saw and heard as being more authentic to the teachings of the Bible than the religious trappings she had known previously.** The Friends also advocated for the separation of church and state, so that each person could hold their own opinions without fear of punishment.

When Mary returned to Massachusetts, Quakerism was already outlawed, and a couple of women had been whipped for daring to come to share their testimony with people they knew there. **When she got off the boat, she was arrested and imprisoned until her husband could come and secure her release. She was immediately forced to leave.**

In the following year, three men who were Quakers were arrested, and sentenced to have their right ears cut off. Even after this was carried out, they remained imprisoned and received whippings over the next nine weeks. **When news of this reached Newport, Mary and three other women (one with her daughter, as well) were led to travel to Boston to visit these men in jail.** They were immediately arrested. Three other Quakers also came to see the prisoners, and were also imprisoned. **The growing number of imprisoned Quakers was becoming an embarrassment, so the magistrates passed more stringent laws. They were banished upon pain of death, should they return.**

The following June, 1659, two of these men who were originally arrested, returned to preach. They were again arrested and imprisoned. When Mary heard of this, she again travelled to support her Quaker brethren, and was also immediately incarcerated. In October of that year, the three of them were sentenced to death. On October 27th the three were brought out to Boston Neck, where the sentence was to be carried out. **The two men were hanged, but as Mary was bound and mounted the ladder, a reprieve from the authorities saved her. It was a prearranged plan, in hopes that seeing her friends die, she would change her mind. It was also thought that this act of clemency would soften the growing public outrage against these extreme measures.** To execute a woman would have been too much. Mary was sent home to Rhode Island. **Mary wrote a letter of protest to the court, refusing the reprieve, demanding that they change their laws to allow the truth to be freely taught without reprisal or persecution.**

The courage of the martyrs, and Mary's stand for the truth, turned public sentiment against the magistrates. They found it necessary to defend their actions, both to the public, and to the crown in England. A Quaker historian also wrote a short book that catalogued the brutal punishments levied against the preachers, and refuted the defenses of the Boston civil leaders.

Mary spent the winter in the company of her Quaker friends. **As she sought God in prayer, she became determined to return to Boston to force the authorities to either change their unjust laws, ...or hang a woman who only wanted to preach Christ.** On May 21, 1660, she arrived once again in Boston, and ten days later was brought before the governor. **The governor passed sentence against her.** To this she replied, "I came in obedience to the will of God the last [time], desiring that you repeal your unrighteous laws of banishment on pain of death, and that same is my work now, and earnest request, although I told you that if you refused to repeal them, the Lord would send others of His servants to witness against them." **She was hung the following day, at 9:00 a.m. at Boston Neck. She was 49.**

A few months later, King Charles II of England decreed that the imprisonment and executions of Quakers cease. The determination and bravery of Mary Dyer secured the legal protection of the British crown, and began to open the way for freedom of religious belief and discourse in society. **Mary's life and witness truly was a light in the darkness of religious legalism and ritual.** Many of us do not realize that so many have lived under layers of human tradition that obscure or restrict the provision of Christ for His people, and their ministry to others. **Intimacy with Christ enabled her to grow, be transformed, and to stand firm in the face of injustice.** May we be inspired to rise up into all that God has for us to become, and let *nothing* hold us back! ...and may we be strengthened to do His will, no matter what the cost!