

"The Food of the Soul": Thomas Cranmer and Holy Scripture by Charles Sherlock,

Background: *This paper is a short contribution read at the Cranmer Conference, held at Cranmer College, University of Durham, July 1989, to mark the 500th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Cranmer.*

Cranmer is chiefly remembered in liturgical circles for bringing about the first Books of Common Prayer. Two main features are usually noted about this work. The first is his desire to adhere to scriptural principles in the fashioning of the books. The second is his drastic reshaping of the Holy Communion, both doctrinally and pastorally. This latter development was to a large degree a specific outworking of the first. Yet because of subsequent Anglican history, especially since the Tractarian movement, it receives most of the attention (and opprobrium). It is the first area which is the concern of this paper, however.

The Reformers all affirmed strongly the importance of the scriptures. Cranmer was no innovator in this respect. He shared, with humanist scholars like Erasmus, the new enthusiasm for the rediscovered Greek and Hebrew texts, and the importance of their translation into the "vulgar tongue". Yet he went beyond humanism in adopting the Reformation outlook on theological method, beginning with scriptural rather than philosophical perspectives. He leaned more to the Lutheran notion of allowing what the scriptures do not forbid, than to the Calvinist principle of forbidding what they do not allow. Yet all such concepts were common stock in the sixteenth century.

Did Cranmer have a distinctive understanding of Holy Scripture, however? Does this show through in his liturgical work? The thesis of this paper is that both questions should be answered in the affirmative - and that his perspectives can and should inform our tasks in ministry today.

(NB: Cranmer rarely used the term "Bible". This term in the singular can suggest that a greater uniformity exists within the body of the scriptures than is actually the case. The plural term "scriptures" is more typical of Cranmer, in both English and Latin. It carries overtones of both variety, particularity, and being a real document whose substance was human writing. Cranmer held no merely "formal" doctrine of scripture.)

a) **Scripture and Liturgy: the "matter" of Divine Worship**

Let me begin with a comparison of the Cranmerian and Carolingian prefaces to the successive Books of Common Prayer. The first is called "Concerning the Service of the Church"; the second forms the Preface to the 1662 book. It assumes a known body of "particular Forms of Divine worship, and the Rites and Ceremonies appointed to be used therein". The Restorers assumed they already possessed a stable, excellent "Liturgy". They saw their work as but making slight adjustments due to changed circumstances, "notwithstanding all the vain attempts and impetuous assaults made against it".

Cranmer, on the other hand, inherited a rather heterogeneous collection of materials, themselves under heavy criticism in Reformation circles. His work is notable for the care he took to avoid change for change's sake. Yet the very fact of binding up the "common prayer" into one book changed the sensibilities of what the structures of divine worship entailed. It gave a sense of uniformity and "properness" to public worship hitherto unknown in Christendom. A century later the very quality of Cranmer's work underscored the sense of having the "proper" liturgy which the Restorers displayed. These sorts of differences could be seen as purely historical. It seems to me, however, that a divergence of theological perspective can also be discerned.

Cranmer's opening argument in his preface concerns the "Common Prayers in the Church, commonly called Divine Service". *He believed that the Fathers*

so ordered the matter, that all the whole Bible (or the greatest part of it) should be read over once every year; intending thereby, that the Clergy ... should (by often reading, and meditating in God's word) be stirred up to godliness; ... and further, that the people (by daily hearing of holy Scripture read in the Church) might continually profit ...

The scriptures - or better, reading and hearing them - are here thought of as the matter of divine worship. Everyone agreed that the Bible was important, and authoritative in some way. All the Reformers, and the Restorers a century or more later, thought of it as the formal authority in the Church. Cranmer, however, here shows a stronger attitude. He was not given to extreme theological precision unless that really mattered (when he was so given - as in his writings on the Lord's Supper). He did come to believe strongly, however, that the pastoral use of the scriptures, their material authority, was of critical importance. Therefore its public reading was to form the substance of "common prayer". This can readily be felt by the simple process of reading Morning or Evening Prayer for a few days as Cranmer intended it. Approximately 50% of the time is taken with the scripture lections, 15% with psalms, 15% with canticles. A mere 20% is left for the exhortation, confession, absolution and lesser litany - and these consist substantially of scripture verses.

The 1662 Preface breathes a different tone. It may be due simply to changed circumstances, as I have noted. Nevertheless, I find it hard to imagine Cranmer using naturally such "double negative" language about scripture as the following.

We are fully persuaded ... that the Book ... doth not contain in it any thing contrary to the Word of God, or to sound doctrine ...

Cranmer would not have disagreed with this sentence. But the emphasis does not fall where he placed it, on holy Scripture itself, so much as on given liturgies which do not contradict it. This emphasis is more directly seen in the next paragraph. Three reasons are there given for the changes made in 1662. The third was "for a more perfect rendering of such portions of holy Scripture, as are inserted into the Liturgy" (emphasis mine). The "Liturgy" (a word I have been

unable to find in Cranmer's BCPs) is here the given, the Scriptures inserted therein.

For Cranmer, on the other hand, the scriptures were the matter of divine worship, not a component within it. As his own preface continues, "nothing is to be read, but the very pure Word of God, the holy Scriptures, or that which is agreeable to the same". Cranmer was no fundamentalist, afraid of anything other than the scriptures. He often cited the Fathers in his work, and used existing liturgical resources freely. But he saw the contents of the scriptures as the basic stuff from which public liturgy was to be made. Thus he "cut off Anthems, Responds, Invitatories and such like things as did break the continual course of the reading of the Scripture".

The scriptures were not to be read in little chunks. A proper diet needs a mix of foods for wholesome development. Thus Cranmer insisted that not merely parts, but the whole of the scriptures was to be used. (Anyone who follows his lectionary will soon find that to be the case; only genealogies are omitted.) This reveals a profound, catholic consciousness of the importance of the whole story of God's dealings. Only then could the parts of scripture be appreciated properly, even if many were "too high" for the simple. Cranmer sees that as no excuse for not using them, however. "He that is so weak that he is not able to brook strong meat, yet he may suck the sweet and tender milk, and defer the rest until he wax stronger."

b) Scripture and the Common People: hearing and reading

Cranmer thus gave much importance to individual as well as corporate use of the scriptures. Hearing is good: the church attends to it as a body. Reading, however, is also important. It brings home the truth at the personal level. This is the main point of the Second Part of the Homily on scripture. Not only the clergy, but all Christians should know them. The scriptures would bring people out of ignorance and reveal to them the truth. Such study was not to be merely academic. It was required to be conjoined with prayer for the Spirit, and an attitude of humility - which is why his offices are constructed as they are. Cranmer did not seek to sell the common person short by a thin diet. Nor did he underestimate the need for all Christians to approach the scriptures with these requirements in mind.

It is easy to forget that until early last century most Church of England parishioners could not read. The repeated "Readers and Hearers" in Cranmer's Preface and Homily draws this to our attention. He did more than merely note this, however. Cranmer encouraged all to be not only hearers, but readers also, so that they could apply them the more readily for themselves. Such can be seen clearly in several of his prayers. For example, in that for the Church Militant we pray for

this congregation here present; that with meek heart and due reverence they may hear and receive thy holy Word; truly serving thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life.

This reveals a strong commitment to enabling the common person. He assumed they could receive the scriptures, and were able to apply them to their lives without clerical intervention. This trust also explains why Cranmer did not place nearly as much weight on preaching as other Reformers. Preaching certainly mattered. Yet the scriptures could do their own work if taken seriously and regularly.

The way Cranmer employed language had hearers more than readers in mind. Liturgical Latin was terse, to the point, and (in Cranmer's time) reflected primarily doctrinal concerns. It was a reader's medium. Cranmer's English was for hearers. Everything is said twice, lest the hearer have a thought pass by them without the opportunity for taking it in. Thus we "acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickednesses". God is "the author of peace and lover of concord" - many more examples could be given. This language is written so that the ordinary person could truly take part. (This structure is close to the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, which produces a similar effect.)

Cranmer is often accused of imposing reform from above. In terms of method this is true: there was no consultation of the people (or even many clergy). The 1928 debacle was in part due to following Cranmer's methods. In terms of long-term socializing effect it may also be true. His catechism, for example, could easily be used to support the status quo rather mindlessly, through classist use of the "duty towards my neighbour". His reverence for the "godly Prince", expressed in the many prayers for the monarchy in BCP, could lend support to unthinking adherence to the political establishment in later ages. Yet this is the danger of all liturgy. Unchanging texts can be socially functional for an unchanging society. And in terms of motive, such an analysis fails to see that Cranmer wrote from "above", yet for those "below".

I have made this point in order to indicate what Cranmer saw as the purpose of hearing or reading the Scriptures. It was not merely for setting forward correct teaching, though that mattered. It was that people "might be stirred up to godliness", "profit more and more in the knowledge of God". The aim was to convey not simply correct opinion, but "wholesome doctrine", teaching that built up healthy lives as well as informed minds. The Homily on Scripture denotes three aspects of this knowledge.

And as drink is pleasant to them that be dry, and meat to them that be hungry; so is the reading, hearing, searching and studying of holy scripture, to them that desirous to know God, themselves, and to do his will.

The scriptures, Cranmer goes on to argue, show us God (Father, Son and Spirit, not some dry deity), our own true nature (vile sinners, yet created to share God's goodness) and how we should "frame our manners" to do God's will. The scriptures thus have interacting theological and pastoral uses. They are the basic tool of those called to ordained ministry, as even a cursory glance at the Ordinal shows. It speaks of "priests" in the Old Testament sense of those who "give torah", pastoral instruction in the statutes of God. (They are not High Priests in

miniature, offering sacrifices on behalf of others. Yet nor were they seen as ruling presbyters: Cranmer took the diaconal nature of all ministry seriously. But that is another topic.) Such ministers must study the scriptures diligently, with the help of the Spirit, and shape their lives thereby accordingly. They are to model the life they proclaim to others.

c) Scripture and Sacrament: feeding on Christ

Cranmer employed several metaphors to explicate this emphasis. The scriptures are the "fountain and well of truth" from which we may draw. It is "medicine" which restores those wounded by the Devil unto death". These are but occasional uses, however. The metaphor used over and over is that of eating and drinking. This is seen in the citation above, but occurs throughout Cranmer's work. He concludes the Homily with exhortations, including this:

Let us ruminare, and, as it were, chew the cud, that we may have the sweet juice, spiritual effect, marrow, honey, kernel, taste, comfort and consolation of them.

Rather a mixture of agricultural metaphors! Yet they point to what I suggest is the most distinctive feature of Cranmer's attitude to the scriptures, their "sacramental" nature. Echoes of John 6 abound in Cranmer, of both scripture and Supper. "Feed upon him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving" could be for Cranmer as much an exhortation before a scripture reading as prior to the Holy Communion. For most of us the metaphors "eat and drink" evoke images of the Lord's Supper. Christ is our food and drink for eternal life, offered to us in the offer of the creaturely elements, efficaciously received through lively faith. This is the type of language of Cranmer himself used. He employed it to refer to the use of the scriptures, and thus unite the ministries of table and book, of mouth and ear.

There is but one means of salvation, Christ, brought to us by and in the Spirit. The Spirit employs means in this creation by which the divine work of grace is accomplished. The prime such "means", according to Cranmer, is the "word of God". He does not equate this with the scriptures, however. It is "contained in" these, and mediated through them, as also through the scripturally sanctioned sacraments. In brief, the hearing or reading of the word of God is THE "sacrament of the Gospel". The scriptures are the means available to us whereby this word may be known and proclaimed. It is the vehicle of the Word of God, Christ.

The "matter" of scripture so used, as in Baptism and Communion, is thus Christ crucified and risen. The "element" is the words of scripture themselves, the creaturely reality corresponding to the water, bread and wine. As with these other earthly realities, these words were to be received through faith. The "instrument" is the hearing or reading, corresponding to the administration of the water, bread or wine. The "form" in all sacraments is the word of Christ which makes the elements to be for us what they signify. The words of scripture are what authorizes their reading to be for us the Word of God. The "virtue" is

salvation, the life-giving illumination and transformation of human life. In short, the reason Cranmer places such emphasis upon the use of the scriptures is that them he saw as the fundamental sacramental means of divine grace.

Cranmer was careful neither to equate nor separate the scriptures from the Word of God, Christ. To equate them ran the danger of bibliolatry, confusing the sign with the thing signified (as he saw transubstantiation doing). Such a view made preachers to be indispensable interpreters of a divine reality, as much mediators as a pre-Reformation priest. To sharply separate the scriptures from Christ, however, would mean that the words of the scriptures could not be for us the Word of God. Cranmer is not as careful in his use of language at this point as he is with Holy Communion, where he is scrupulously careful. There was less danger for him in confusing the words and Word of God than in running together the element and matter of the Lord's Supper. The following citation from the Homily reflects this sacramental sense.

The words of holy scripture be called words of everlasting life; for they be God's instruments, ordained for the same purpose. They have power to turn (convert) through God's promise, and they be effectual through God's assistance, and (being received in a faithful heart) they have ever an heavenly spiritual working in them.

Two aspects of Cranmer's work show this more fully. The first is the importance he gave to the public reading and private study of scripture. This I have already commented upon. It is worth noting that his overwhelming liturgical success at the popular level was Morning and Evening Prayer. If the scriptures are the sacrament of the Gospel, then it is not surprising that many generations of Anglicans used these services profitably. I am not arguing that this should lead to the neglect of the Communion - far from it. On the other hand, I am not contending that we should neglect the public, corporate ministry of the Scriptures for that of Holy Communion (let alone for a diet of "prayer and praise" services having no scripture reading at all!). Cranmer, for his part, never envisaged the Holy Communion being held separately to Morning or Evening Prayer (except for the sick). The modern habit of setting a maximum of about 25 verses as a weekly diet is one he would not approve!

The second is the view of ministry reflected in the Ordinal. It is striking that all the task-oriented questions have to do with the candidate's belief about, attitude to, and intended use of, the scriptures. The service proclaims that one is ordained to the ministry of one Christ, one Gospel. No division is made between the use of the scriptures, the sacraments of the Gospel, and a gospel life-style, in proclamation of the Word of God. This unity is powerfully expressed in the episcopal prayer of ordination: "Be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments." Sometimes this is read as if these were two distinct tasks. A reading which accords more with Cranmer is to take them as different aspects of the one ministry of Christ. Preaching and presiding are then seen as different aspects of the proclamation of the Gospel of God. As the bishop goes on to say, "Take thou authority to preach the Word of God, and to minister the holy

Sacraments in the Congregation, where thou shalt be lawfully appointed thereunto".

These words accompanied the giving of a Bible, instead of a chalice and paten, as formerly. Such an action powerfully symbolized Cranmer's approach to the matter of scripture as the basis for ministry, both public and private. It is repeated in the prayer made for the clergy in the Communion service. Here the note of life-style becomes explicit (it is rather hard to "authorize" this!). We pray "that they may both by their life and doctrine set forth thy true and lively Word, and rightly and duly administer thy holy Sacraments". In the Litany we pray

That it may please thee to illuminate all Bishops and Curates with true knowledge and understanding of thy Word; and that both by their preaching and living they may set it forth and shew it accordingly.

Scripture, life and sacrament form one whole for Cranmer. They are the inseparable means by which Christ is presented and proclaimed. This approach is typical of Reformed attitudes to means of grace. The idea that all means of the Gospel work the same way - through some created reality, by grace, received in faith - is not distinctive to Cranmer. Calvin (and later Hooker) understood the ministries of preaching, Christian Baptism and Holy Communion as different forms of the one Gospel. However, few on the Reformed side of the sixteenth century were able in practice to hold these ministries together. Cranmer was able to do so in part because of the structurally conservative nature of the English Reformation.

Yet it seems to me that it was Cranmer's approach to the scriptures as the matter of divine worship which held table and book together pastorally. Feeding upon Christ was what mattered. Whether one did so through scripture or Lord's Supper did not. Ideally these were perceived as mutually enriching ways of doing so, speaking to different aspects of our humanity. Those who reject Cranmer's "receptionism" need to consider his approach to the scriptures. It was certainly not "Zwinglian". Given Cranmer's belief in the unity of the means of grace, his eucharistic doctrine should be considered in the light of his attitude to the scriptures.

A further reason for Cranmer's success on this front, I suggest, was his trust in the scriptures as effective means of grace. One cannot imagine Cranmer supporting the popular Protestant notion of liturgy as merely the hors d'oeuvres before the main course, the sermon. It was the liturgy, whose substance was the scriptures, which mattered most in the formation of people's living. It was in within its setting that preaching took place. Cranmer left the scriptures to do their own work. Compared to Calvin, for example, there is far less explanatory, didactic material in BCP: the exhortations before confession are the most well known. What didacticism there is consists largely of scripture quotations (for example those in the Baptism of Infants, and in Holy Matrimony).

d) **Scripture and us: contemporary perspectives**

What does this say to us? It has become obvious that I agree with Cranmer on this matter. If the perspective delineated here is true, it brings a severe indictment on much English-speaking Christianity of the last century. Some use the scriptures in a merely intellectual manner, emphasizing teaching but neglecting the importance of their function to feed us, to transform as well as inform. Such an approach can turn a means of grace into lectures, and its ministers into pulpit autocrats. Others use the scriptures, yet as one resource amongst many. These employ them alongside traditional prayers, modern texts, ceremonial acts or spiritual exercises. This can turn a means of grace into rituals, and its ministers into altar mediators. Others refer to the scriptures, but in order to legitimate or express religious insights derived from personal experiences. This attitude can turn a means of grace into methods of self-expression, and its ministers into multi-media manipulators.

The faults of all three of these seem to me to be embodied in much modern liturgical practice. The words of liturgy are composed with allusions to the scriptures, but we do not trust the latter to do their own grace-giving work. Sentences are changed so as to give a meaning different to that in their original settings. Choruses repeat fragments in such a way as to distort the texts' meanings, or convey "religious" overtones not present in the scriptures. The public reading of the scriptures is commonly done with little care - or as if it were merely an exercise for the intellectuals in the congregation. Sunday lectionaries repeat the same passages, cut down to bite-size chunks, in the same year - and leave out whole books. (Ruth and Esther have disappeared entirely, despite contemporary concerns over the visibility of women in public liturgy.) It does not seem to occur to many intercessors to use the set lections as a basis for common prayer or meditation. And liturgical leaders issue instructions without end (whether publicly, or via the servers' classes), failing to trust the people to fashion their own liturgical practice.

I realise that these are strongly put criticisms, and that there are many places where they are proved false. Teaching, liturgical resources and personal experience are all significant factors in Christian life. Lectures, ritual and self-expression (even through banal ditties) may all be used helpfully. Leadership involves the imparting of a sense of direction and vision. Yet if any of these shift us from the straight-forward use of the scriptures in pastoral ministry - all the scriptures, not just the nice bits - they sell people short.

Our times are very different to those of Cranmer, especially as regards the role and use of words in society. He never knew such things as cheap printing, universal education, television or computers! The manner in which words function today, including the scriptures, differ markedly from his day. Yet the priority of the scriptures in knowing "God, ourselves and to do his will" remains.

Do we dare take the risk of genuinely enabling the people of God to frame their own response to God's revelation in scripture? Do we trust the scriptures, as a

thoroughly human, yet divinely-provided means of grace, to set forward Christ?
Does our understanding and practice of ministry reflect such a trust?

I have argued that these were major concerns of Thomas Cranmer. He did not fulfill them perfectly. Yet his perspectives upon the nature and use of the scriptures can, I believe, teach us a great deal. There is a streak of solid plainness about him which carries liberationist overtones. He endeavoured to set the scriptures free to do their Gospel work - and free their hearers into their own service for God. That he did so from a position of privilege cannot be denied. But that he did so at all mattered more. His effectiveness can be measured in the heritage he shaped for English-speaking Christians.

Let me end by citing his own words - strong ones - once more.

Let us reverently hear and read holy scriptures, which is the food of the soul. Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the Old and New Testaments, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by men's imaginations.

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