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Thomas Cranmer after Five Hundred Years

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1. Cranmer's Life

Early Life

The five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Thomas Cranmer fell on Sunday 2nd July 1989. He was born in 1489 at Aslockton (or Aslacton), a village east of Nottingham and south-east of Sherwood Forest, the second son of his father, in a family of minor gentry. His schooldays were unhappy. His father died before he was twelve, but his mother saw to it that his education continued, and at the age of fourteen (not then an unusually early age) he went up to Jesus College Cambridge. The university course was long, but in 1511 he took his B.A. and in 1514 his M.A., becoming a fellow of his college. In 1521, having studied Divinity for six years, he was granted his B.D. In the meantime he had married, lost his wife by death, been ordained and become one of the twelve university preachers. In 1526 he was granted his D.D. and made university examiner in divinity. He was now thirty-seven years of age.

The Reformation on the Continent preceded that in England, and had been making headway in Germany since Luther's Ninety-Five Theses of 1517. Renaissance learning had been progressing in England since the turn of the century, and Colet and Erasmus had been promoting the study of the Greek New Testament, in the hope of remedying ecclesiastical abuses without division, though recognizing the great obstacles placed in the way of reform by the contemporary papacy. Luther, however, had as early as 1519–20 judged it necessary to renounce papal primacy and call upon the German princes to take responsibility for reform, including doctrine in his reform-programme as well as practice. Cranmer was not one of those at Cambridge who rapidly attached himself to Lutheran opinions. This was characteristic of his scholarly thoroughness. Rather, he set himself to study the Scriptures for three years, and, after that, ancient as well as modern authors whose writings threw light on the new teachings, all the time taking copious notes. The main conviction which he reached at this stage was that everything must be tested by Scripture, and as university examiner he refused to allow students to take their degree if they were ignorant of Scripture. It is said that about 1526 he also began praying for the overthrow of the papacy, and though his latest biographer thinks the evidence for this scanty,¹ it would in the circumstances be a very natural thing for an enthusiast

for the Scriptures to do, and would explain why in 1529 he was so ready to suggest that Henry VIII should disregard the papacy and turn for advice to theologians.

Public Life

Up to this point, a relatively uncontroversial account of Cranmer's life can be given, but from this point onwards virtually every act and every event is variously interpreted. Particularly those biographers and historians who belong to the Roman Catholic Church or sympathize with it have tended to assume that, since Cranmer led the way in a reform of which they disapprove, his motives in doing so must have been dishonourable. Nor have libertarian Whig historians found it easy to admire so loyal a servant of a despotic king. It is not without reason, therefore, that Jasper Ridley begins his modern biography of Cranmer with a chapter on 'Cranmer and his Biographers'. Ridley, though no indiscriminating admirer of Cranmer, often defends Cranmer against the more absurd and uncharitable of the charges that have been brought against him. Yet it is difficult to regard even Ridley's learned book as an altogether balanced account. He tries to be fair to Cranmer, but, in the effort not to appear prejudiced in the favour of one who has so many critics, he often concedes too much to them, sometimes condemning Cranmer where a more favourable interpretation of his actions seems equally possible, and sometimes using a strength of language in his criticisms which is excessive, even if the criticisms are valid. Ridley's is the fullest recent biography, and on many points of detail supersedes all earlier ones. Nevertheless, the more sympathetic biography by Bromiley, which preceded it,² may give a truer picture of Cranmer's life as a whole.

There is a second reason for thinking this. Ridley's biography is weak on the theological side. He cannot be blamed for not knowing what later study has revealed about Cranmer's eucharistic beliefs and writings,³ but he misunderstands Cranmer's teaching on justification,⁴ and he seems sometimes to think that on theological matters any opinion is as good as any other,⁵ and that even Cranmer, who came so slowly and deliberately to his theological convictions, could have shared this notion, and could have thought first one thing, then another, as outside influences swayed him. Hence, he denies Cranmer's own statements that he was led by fear to subscribe the reactionary Six Articles in 1539 and to sign his recantations in his final imprisonment,⁶ (as if a man who sometimes overcomes his fear will always be able to overcome it), and makes the grotesque suggestion that, if Cranmer had lived an hour longer after his profession of his characteristic reformed beliefs at his death, he might have changed his mind again.⁷ Bromiley, who matched his biography of Cranmer with a study of his theology,⁸ has far too good a grasp of Cranmer's clear and solid theological convictions to fall into this delusion.

Ridley is on much surer ground when he points to Cranmer's belief

in royal supremacy and his dread of revolution and disorder, even in the Reforming interest, as clues to the apparent inconsistencies of his conduct.⁹

When Cranmer suggested, at a dinner party in August 1529, that Henry VIII should disregard the papal courts in his quest for a dissolution of his first marriage, and turn for advice to theologians, the suggestion was the turning point in Cranmer's life. It was this that brought him the call to leave the seclusion of the university, and made him a public servant of the Crown. In less than four years it had also made him, quite unexpectedly, Archbishop of Canterbury. Ridley supposes that Cranmer's acceptance of the call to public life was due to ambition, despite the evidence which he himself quotes that Cranmer was not ambitious,¹⁰ but more probably it was due to his conviction that the royal supremacy was the biblical answer to the papacy, and was, as in Germany, the most hopeful way of bringing about reform according to the Scriptures. Cranmer had yet to learn that, when the royal supremacy was wielded by a monarch as wilful, ruthless and bigoted as Henry VIII, all his servants would be compromised by the course he pursued, and any religious reform he allowed would be limited and liable to reverses. Yet the unselfish and obedient loyalty which the archbishop manifested towards the king was reciprocated by a trust and affection which the king showed to few if any of his other counsellors, and enabled Cranmer to be frank with the king even in disagreement, and to achieve all that in the circumstances could have been achieved. When Edward VI succeeded his father in 1547, still a minor but much more favourable to reform, Cranmer was in a unique position to make the most of his short reign, though he had to pay the price of success when Edward also died in 1553, and Mary introduced a thoroughgoing reaction.

It is over Henry VIII's marriages and the trials of heretics that Cranmer has incurred most blame. Both these matters were in Cranmer's time the province of the ecclesiastical courts, and an archbishop of Canterbury was inevitably involved in both. On matters of marriage, Cranmer was prepared to disregard the existing canon law if it conflicted with Scripture, and he had himself married again in 1532, when he secretly espoused the Lutheran reformer Osiander's niece, despite the current prohibition of priests' marriages. Similarly, he was ready to dissolve Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon and to repudiate the papal dispensation allowing it, because he believed that marriage to a deceased brother's wife was contrary to Scripture (whatever he may have thought of Henry's conduct towards Catherine in other respects).¹¹ He was not to know that Henry would afterwards compel him to dissolve two further marriages, to Anne Boleyn and Anne of Cleves, on these occasions by the strict application of canon law, and by the admission of evidence which Cranmer could not call false or questionable, as

coming from his sovereign, and which he no doubt wanted to believe true, however hard that may in some respects have been.

The Tudor trials of heretics are obnoxious, partly because laymen were among those tried, as well as religious teachers; partly because rash reformers, who pressed forward further or faster than royal authority permitted, were as liable to be tried as were real heretics; but especially because the contemporary penalty for heresy was death by burning. It is sad to reflect that Cranmer was active in trials of this kind (although in the contemporary state of the law it was inevitable), and was not acquainted with the hard-won lessons about religious freedom which are so familiar to us today. Cranmer himself, of course, was to be condemned and burned as a heretic. He did not claim in his own defence that the burning of heretics was wrong, rather that he was no heretic, and that his own programme of reform had been pursued within the law. This defence was entirely true.

Victory in Defeat

When Cranmer confessed his faith at the stake on 21st March 1556, he not only looked forward to an excruciating death, but back on two and a half years in which his whole life's work had apparently been destroyed. Faith tested like this is faith indeed. Cranmer could not then know what now we know, that Mary's reign was to be as short as Edward's, and that she would be succeeded by a queen who would re-establish all for which Cranmer had laboured, and this time on a more lasting basis.

2. Cranmer's Character

The very different views about Cranmer's life which exist, and about the motives for his actions, imply equally different views about his character. If the interpretation which we have given of his life is even approximately correct, then our view of his character will rule out the claims that he was ambitious, cruel, unscrupulous or cowardly. Ridley points to his declaration against the mass after Mary's accession, as a proof of his courage, alongside his final act of holding the hand that had signed his recantations in the flames, to be burned first.¹² He also denies that Cranmer was cruel, and affirms on the contrary that he was free from malice, courteous and quick to forgive personal offences, only punishing offences against the monarch.¹³ His merciful character is proved by the fact that, almost alone in public life, he repeatedly interceded for disgraced contemporaries facing execution – Sir Thomas More, Bishop John Fisher, the princess Mary herself, the Carthusians, Anne Boleyn, Thomas Cromwell, and the Protector Somerset.¹⁴ The charges of being ambitious and lacking in scruple are charges which Ridley does, rightly or wrongly, urge against Cranmer at various points, but he ends by conceding that he was superior to most of his contemporaries in public life, and tried far harder than most of them to adhere to the

principles in which he believed.¹⁵ This is the least that can be said in his favour. Surrounded as he was by ambitious men, eager to disgrace their rivals, and to use the religious changes to enrich their own pockets, Cranmer stands out by contrast as a man of principle, because a man of godliness. His actions are not those of a different person from the compiler of the *Book of Common Prayer*, but of the same person, and in that book his deepest motives are revealed, as a conscientious seeker after God, and a humble believer in Jesus Christ.

3. Cranmer's Place in History

As Henry VIII's and Edward VI's Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer had unique opportunities to advance the cause of reform in the English church. The fact that, by God's grace, he took those opportunities, makes him the most important leader in the English Reformation.¹⁶

The Middle Ages and the Need for Reform

The periodic tensions between popes and kings after the Norman Conquest were not, of course, always the fault of the pope. The king was sometimes equally or more to blame, and if the pope had regularly been upholding spiritual values against worldly-minded kings, the history of Europe might have been different. But, regrettably, the later Middle Ages were a time of grave moral and spiritual decline, in which the clergy, the monastic orders and the papacy itself fully shared. In such circumstances, the claim of the pope to have supreme authority over princes, to be entitled to intrude foreigners into bishoprics, and to support bishops against their monarch, was naturally felt to be a crying evil, and fostered the wish to reassert national independence. Whatever the original motives of the papal claims, or the abuses which they sought to remedy, the fact was that they were relatively new, and were now being made by popes of worldly character, who freely sold ecclesiastical posts to the highest bidder.

The condition of the church had indeed become deplorable. The monasteries, which had long set the standard in godliness, were now largely infected by idleness and luxury, the outcome of their great wealth. The bishops were often preoccupied with affairs of state. The theologians had overlaid and perverted the gospel with unbiblical speculations. Ignorance, avarice and unchastity were rampant among the clergy, and, when they committed crimes, they were protected by 'privilege of clergy' from being called to account. The laity, who had neither the Bible in English nor services in English, were, for lack of sound instruction and good example, the victims of gross superstition. It would be foolish to suppose that, in a period which continued to produce the wonderful churches, cathedrals and abbeys of which we are the heirs, devotion to God was dead, but it was

undoubtedly very sick. New Testament Christianity was now confused with grievous error in the popular mind.

Henry VIII and the Breach with Rome

When the formal breach with Rome finally came, it was precipitated by Henry VIII's desire to be rid of his first wife. It is possible to make excuses for this shameful incident, on the grounds of the insecurity of the Tudor dynasty and its need for a male heir, or on the grounds of the doubt that had been felt about the legality of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon (as being within the prohibited degrees) when it was first contracted. However, Henry's subsequent conduct makes any such excuses unconvincing.

At the same time, the incident is disgraceful not only to Henry but also to the papacy. Not very long before, one of the popes had permitted the King of Castile to take a second wife because his first was childless; and the main reason why Henry was now refused a divorce was probably that his wife was related to the Emperor Charles V, whom the pope (Clement VII, a man of weak character) was afraid to offend.

Edward VI and the Doctrinal Reformation

Much more important, however, is the fact that the contemporary reform of doctrine and practice, since known as the Protestant Reformation, took place in many parts of Europe and not simply in the British Isles; and everywhere it took place there was a breach with Rome, because Rome resisted reform. Henry's desire for a divorce was therefore simply the occasion of the English Reformation and not its underlying cause. As supreme governor of the Church of England, Henry VIII was hardly more suitable than Pope Clement VII, and it had to wait for Elizabeth's reign for the royal supremacy to be stated and exercised in a more appropriate way.

Indeed, despite the breach with Rome, reform was not able to make much progress during the reign of Henry, who (though an enthusiast for the Renaissance) was a rebellious Roman Catholic rather than a Protestant, and it only made headway after the accession of his son Edward VI. Henry's other main 'reform' was the somewhat ambiguous one of dissolving and plundering the monasteries. He did allow some use to be made of Coverdale's English Bible, but two things had to wait until the next reign. One was the introduction of biblical services, in English not Latin, and the other was the revival of biblical preaching.

One of the best known sights in Oxford is the Martyr's Memorial, erected to commemorate the burning of Archbishop Cranmer and of Bishops Ridley and Latimer, which took place in Oxford in 1555 and 1556. It is unfashionable today to describe their deaths at the stake as martyrdoms. In a generation when few church people have strong convictions about anything, a man who went to the stake rather than

recant is considered as a victim of his own bigotry quite as much as of the bigotry of those who burned him.

But fashion, as so often, is a poor guide. Cranmer died for the truths of the Reformation. And, without idolizing the sixteenth-century Reformers, it has to be said that the two chief points for which they contended were two of the fundamental truths of Christianity.

Revelation

The first of these truths is the doctrine of revelation. It teaches that God has revealed himself uniquely through Jesus Christ, and through the prophets and apostles who bear witness to Christ, and that the permanent written form of his revelation is Scripture.

So, if you are concerned to know what God has revealed, you cannot be satisfied simply to know what has been handed down from generation to generation by tradition, or what contemporary bishops and theologians declare. You may and should go on to ask, but is this what the Bible teaches?

The Reformers did go on to ask this, and in many cases it cost them their lives. They discovered that the teaching of Christ and the apostles had become corrupted as it had been handed down. They discovered that much of what contemporary theologians and bishops were teaching – even, much of what the Bishop of Rome was teaching – was different from what the Bible teaches. But when they called for such teaching to be corrected by the Bible, they were not thanked for it but condemned.

Salvation

The second of the great truths of the Reformation is the doctrine of salvation. It teaches that man is not saved by his own efforts but by God. Nor is he saved simply by what God does *in* him, but by what God has already done *for* him, through Jesus Christ, in whom we must place our trust. Christ on the cross has paid the just penalty for our sins, so that, by repenting of them and putting our faith in Christ, we may be justified in God's sight and saved. Penances, indulgences and purgatorial pains, even the reception of sacraments and the doing of good works, are no substitute in themselves for faith in Christ, our only Saviour.

Here, as the Reformers saw, was the most important matter on which tradition had gone astray – on which the Bible taught one thing and the church leaders of the day taught another. But here again the Reformers were not thanked for pointing out the fact. On the contrary, their own teaching, on justification through faith, was caricatured and condemned.

Heresy and Schism

By sinning against the light on these two great matters, by condemning and burning those who called them back to the Bible and the

apostolic gospel, the leaders of the Church of Rome in the sixteenth century revealed themselves as heretics and persecutors, as what St. John would call 'antichrists' (1 Jn. 2:18). For the same reason, their victims can only be regarded as martyrs for the gospel, martyrs of Christ, who is the author and subject of the gospel.

In Rome's view, of course, the Protestant martyrs were the heretics. To be a heretic, so Rome considered, one had to diverge in one's teaching from the authorised leadership of the church, with its majority following. Even today, the advocates and admirers of the Church of Rome are always talking about its numbers, as 'the largest body in Christendom'. God, however, is not impressed with numbers. This is one of the earliest lessons he had to teach his people, and it is repeated throughout the Bible (Jdg. 7:4-7; 1 Sam. 14:6; 1 Chr. 21:1; Matt. 22:14; Lk. 12:32). Yet there are some who still need to learn that a heretic is not someone who opposes the majority but someone who opposes the truth.

Rome's other charge against the Reformers was that they were 'schismatics', people who had split the church. Since the Reformers' message was rejected, and they themselves were given the choice of silence or death, they had to organize themselves separately, both for their own protection and for the maintenance of their witness to the gospel. But the responsibility for the division lay unambiguously at the door of Rome. Schismatics are those who *cause* divisions, not those who have no choice but to separate.

It is often said today that there were as many Roman Catholic martyrs in Elizabeth's reign as there were Protestant martyrs in Mary's. Actually there were not so many, though one is sorry that there were any. Of course, how many Mary would have put to death had she reigned more than five years, nobody knows. And there was one essential difference between the executions in the two reigns, which today is usually ignored.

It was this: that most of the Roman Catholics who suffered in Elizabeth's reign suffered not as Roman Catholics but as traitors. There were many plots against Elizabeth, to assassinate or dethrone her and set up a Roman Catholic monarch in her place. Pope Pius V himself had given his blessing to these plots in his bull of excommunication against Elizabeth as a heretic and usurper, *Regnans in Excelsis* (1570), in which he had professed to release her subjects from their allegiance to her, hoping in this way to promote a successful rebellion. His hopes were disappointed, but even by the attempt he caused his adherents in Britain to come under a general suspicion of treason, whether or not they were guilty of it. It follows that the blame for unjust convictions that took place must at least partly rest upon the shoulders of that pope.

Holy Communion

Of course, the doctrine of revelation and the doctrine of justification by faith were not the only two truths which the Reformers were concerned to reaffirm. On the basis of Holy Scripture, they attempted a comprehensive reform of whatever was amiss in church life. This so far shamed their opponents as to cause moral reform to be introduced into the Church of Rome as well, though doctrinal reform continued to be resisted there, and the Bible and the services remained for four hundred more years (though happily no longer) in Latin.

In England, the debate concentrated in a remarkable way on the sacrament of Holy Communion. The immediate cause of the condemnation of many of the Reformers was their denial of transubstantiation and the mass-sacrifice, and their advocacy of a more spiritual view of Christ's presence in the sacrament, and of the New Testament doctrine that Christ's sacrifice for our sins took place once for all at Calvary, not every time a priest celebrates mass (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 10:10; 1 Pet. 3:18).

However, what the Reformers maintained in this connexion was far from being unrelated to the two great truths of the Reformation. The doctrine of *revelation* was the basis on which they attempted to get back to biblical teaching about the sacrament; and, as to the doctrine of *salvation*, Cranmer's Communion service (substantially that of the 1662 Prayer Book) has been well described by Gregory Dix as 'the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of justification by faith alone'.¹⁷

The Papacy

The other prominent subject in the English Reformation was the papacy. The see of Rome had first become influential through its link with the capital of the Roman Empire. Now that the Roman Empire was no more, and national sovereignty had everywhere taken its place, the emergence of royal supremacy in national churches was a predictable development.

Since the papacy had developed extravagant spiritual claims in place of its former imperial dignity, and was now acting as the main opponent of scriptural reform, there was a second and even more important reason for rejecting it. Both reasons were independent of Henry VIII's marriage difficulties. The standpoint of the English Reformers and of the reformed Church of England with regard to the papacy was briefly formulated in Article 37: 'the Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this Realm of England'.

4. Cranmer's Achievement

Though Cranmer was a cautious man, at one time firmly convinced of transubstantiation and other mediaeval doctrines, the progressive change in his views, culminating in his conversion to Ridley's

eucharistic beliefs (about 1546), which were essentially Calvin's beliefs, and afterwards Hooker's,¹⁸ made him the chief promoter of liturgical, doctrinal, and disciplinary reform both in Henry VIII's reign and in Edward VI's. The decision to set up the English Bible in every church (1538), to have it read at the Sunday offices and the Mass (1543, 1547) and the provision of the *First Book of Homilies* (1547) must be attributed partly or mainly to Cranmer's influence;¹⁹ and it is probable that five of the Homilies, the first English Litany (1544), the Order of the Communion (1548), and the two Edwardian editions of the Book of Common Prayer and Ordinal (1549–50, 1552) are substantially Cranmer's own compositions.²⁰ Outside the liturgical sphere, the Forty-two Articles (1553), on which the Thirty-nine Articles were later based, were probably drafted by Cranmer; his controversial treatises on the Lord's Supper provide an important commentary on his liturgies; and he practically completed with the help of Peter Martyr and others a revision of canon law, the *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*, though owing to Edward VI's death this was not enacted, and so left the Church of England without a systematic body of reformed canon law until 1603. If Edward had lived longer, the reform of virtually all aspects of church life would have been completed in his lifetime, and under Cranmer's guidance. Cranmer also deserves credit for the abolition of the compulsory celibacy of the clergy, and he led the way himself as our first married archbishop. Then, too, he invited distinguished and judicious continental Reformers to England, and if his plans for a synod of all the reformed churches had borne fruit, the subsequent history of Christendom might have been different.

Cranmer was not only a cautious man but a peaceable man. Faced with the necessity of making great changes, he followed Luther in not making greater ones than he could help; moreover, he made them by stages, not all at once. Thus, the 1552 Communion service was the fourth stage in a process which began with the first introduction of English into the Latin Mass in 1547. Similarly, the 1552 services of Morning and Evening Prayer were the fifth stage in a process which began with the first introduction of English into the Latin offices in 1543 and two draft revisions of the Breviary, before the publication of the two Prayer Books. His concern in proceeding by stages was not simply the concern of the Tudor monarchy for national political unity (though this was doubtless a factor, and even so the 1549 Book provoked a rebellion in the South West), but also a concern for the spiritual unity of the Church, to which he gives expression in the preface 'Of Ceremonies' and in Article 34, as had earlier been done in the royal proclamation accompanying the 1548 Order of the Communion. The same twin motives, together with the threat of private revisions,²¹ led to the quest for a national uniformity more complete than the growing influence of the Sarum use had hitherto

achieved. The possibility cannot be excluded that, had Edward VI lived longer, there would have been yet another stage of liturgical revision, though the evidence that Cranmer intended anything of the kind is confined to a rumour reported in *The Troubles at Frankfort* (1575) and to certain indications of future rubrical change (but perhaps nothing more) in the posthumous *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* (1571), a joint-work by Cranmer and others.

The Book of Common Prayer

The widespread view that the 1549 Prayer Book reflected Cranmer's true mind, and that the changes in 1552 were changes for the worse made under the malign influence of continental Protestantism, is today much less commonly held than it was. Five pieces of evidence had combined to discredit this view. In the first place, the royal proclamation accompanying the 1548 Order of the Communion expressed the intention 'from time to time, further to travail for the reformation and setting forth of . . . Godly orders'. In the second place, the 1549 book, as well as that of 1552, is deeply marked by the influence of continental Protestantism. In the third place, the report of the House of Lords debate in December 1548 on the forthcoming 1549 Prayer Book shows the reforming bishops already voicing their mature eucharistic opinions.²² In the fourth place, there is a letter extant, written from Lambeth itself by Bucer and Fagius on 26 April 1549, just before the 1549 Book came into use, stating that the book is only an interim measure, designed to make change less difficult to accept.²³ In the fifth place, between the publication of the two Prayer Books Cranmer's literary controversy with Bishop Gardiner on the Lord's Supper took place; and in this Cranmer refuses to admit the legitimacy of any of Gardiner's appeals to the 1549 Book in favour of unreformed doctrine, constantly maintaining that it was intended to express the views which he now holds. Each of the passages invoked by Gardiner was altered in the 1552 revision, so as to exclude his interpretation.²⁴ These five facts suggest that the 1549 Prayer Book was intended from the outset as a preliminary step in the direction of something more definite, by a man whose convictions were already formed. Consequently, the statements of the 1552 Act of Uniformity that the 1549 Book was 'a very godly order . . . agreeable to the word of God and the primitive church', but had now been further revised 'as well for the more plain and manifest explanation . . . as for the more perfection', should not be referred simply to problems that had arisen since the 1549 Book was introduced, such as Gardiner's misinterpretations and Bucer's criticisms.

One reason for Cranmer's cautious and conservative leanings was the respect for antiquity which comes to expression in his preface 'Of Ceremonies' and his controversial writings. He did not, however, cultivate antiquity for its own sake, as some of his successors in liturgical revision were to do. This would have conflicted with his

principle of avoiding unnecessary change. The only points at which Cranmer recognized a necessity for change were points where the liturgy had gone astray from scriptural teaching, or was understood in an unscriptural sense, and there indeed antiquity often provided the best model for change (hence the reference to the primitive Church in the preface now called 'Concerning the Service of the Church', the Communion service, and the 1552 Act of Uniformity). But the Fathers were no absolute norm for Cranmer: as chs. 2 and 7 of his *Confutation of Unwritten Verities* show, he recognized faults in their teaching which were not to be imitated. The idea taken up by the 1958 Lambeth Conference (resolution 74c) that the 'recovery of the worship of the Primitive Church' was 'the aim of the compilers of the first Prayer Books of the Church of England' is a mistaken one. And the argument by which this idea is often supported, that Cranmer was so ignorant of patristic liturgy that he imagined his Prayer Books to be much nearer to it than they were, is quite at variance with the facts. The combined evidence of his controversial writings, his library and the parliamentary debate on the 1549 Prayer Book show that he knew the liturgical evidence of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, the *De Sacramentis*, pseudo-Dionysius, Isidore and other of the Fathers, the Liturgy of St. Chrysostom, the Mozarabic Missal and the epicleses from the eastern liturgies. As I have written elsewhere, 'he certainly knew enough for us to be sure that if he had made the worship of the early church a model for close imitation he would have got much nearer to it than he did. His omission of sacrificial language in regard to the elements from the communion service, though he knew it to be universal in antiquity, is a case in point. And the epiclesis he actually discarded in 1552, after having himself introduced it in 1549'.²⁵

All in all, Cranmer was a child of the Renaissance no less than of the Reformation. He was a scholar, learned in the ancients as well as the moderns, but chiefly concerned to follow the Holy Scriptures, as now known in the original tongues. His greatest gifts became apparent when he took a share in the task of reviving English vernacular literature, by creating an English liturgy. The *Book of Common Prayer* has an originality and power which are often lacking both in Reformation liturgies and in attempts to restore the worship of the primitive Church. His English liturgical style is not the least part of what he accomplished. Though owing something to its Latin antecedents, and sharing the redundancies and antitheses characteristic of existing religious English, it achieves the difficult art of being contemporary without being colloquial, of having dignity without sacrificing vigour, and of expressing fervour without lapsing into sentimentality.²⁶

Cranmer's general liturgical aims are clear from his Prayer Book itself, and especially from the two prefatory statements 'Concerning

the Service of the Church' and 'Of Ceremonies'. He seeks to attain intelligibility, edification, and corporateness, by producing, for regular use, a single, simple liturgy in the vernacular, in which the Scriptures are read and expounded in an orderly way, biblical teaching is incorporated throughout, all that is misleading or meaningless is excluded, words are audible, actions are visible and congregational participation is speaking, singing, and reception of the sacrament (in both kinds) is encouraged. In pursuing these aims, there were limits to what he achieved. Like other students of the Bible, he had his blind spots. Being confronted with a largely illiterate Church, and long-standing habits of infrequent lay communion, he was not able to implement his principle of congregational worship as fully as he wished, and he had to carry simplicity to lengths which restricted variety and freedom, and sacrificed some of the riches of the pre-Reformation liturgy. He curbed music and ceremonial to an extent which may have been necessary at the time, but was not permanently desirable. He made rather too much use of exhortations. Yet, when all necessary deductions have been made, his achievement remains extraordinary. When compared with the state of the liturgy at the beginning of Henry's reign, Cranmer's Prayer Books show the following significant changes: the language has been altered from Latin to English; a multiplicity of service books has been reduced to one; a number of regional uses has been reduced to one national use; the rubrics have been pruned (even to excess), simplified, and fully integrated with the liturgical texts; the lectionary has been reformed; preaching has been reformed; the congregation has been given a considerable part in the service; the cup has been restored to the laity, and the rule of receiving the sacrament once a year has been increased threefold; an impressive new structure has been given to the Communion service; the eight daily offices have been combined into two; the biblical content of most services has been greatly increased; and traditional doctrines and practices which Cranmer judged to be in conflict with biblical theology (notably the sacrifice of the Mass, transubstantiation, reservation, the confessional, the invocation of saints and petition for the departed) have been reformed or entirely removed. The fact that his second Prayer Book received only minor revisions in 1559, 1604, and 1662, and in its 1662 form is still widely used in England and other parts of the world, is a tribute to his achievement which is not easy to gainsay.²⁷

NOTES

- 1 Jasper Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 21f.
- 2 G. W. Bromiley, *Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop and Martyr* (London, Church Book Room Press, 1956).
- 3 i.e. that Cranmer's view was essentially Calvinist, not Zwinglian (see Peter Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist*, London, Macmillan, 1965), and that Cranmer's translation of Justus Jonas's *Catechism* went through three editions, in

which the Lutheran eucharistic teaching was progressively modified (see D. G. Selwyn, 'A Neglected Edition of Cranmer's Catechism', *J.T.S.*, April 1964).

- 4 p. 266f.
- 5 pp. 28f., 411.
- 6 pp. 188, 407.
- 7 p. 409.
- 8 *Thomas Cranmer, Theologian* (London, C.B.R.P., 1956).
- 9 pp. 11f., 410.
- 10 pp. 23, 28f., 51.
- 11 See Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer*, p. 43.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 351–4, 409f.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 142, 410.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 76, 82, 102, 202, 335.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 410.
- 16 On the English Reformation, see C. S. Carter, *The English Church and the Reformation* (London, Longmans, 1912); A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, Batsford, 1964); and a very extensive literature besides.
- 17 *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, Dacre, 1945), p. 672.
- 18 Cranmer's mature eucharistic teaching is clearly expressed in the 1552 (and 1662) consecration prayer, where we pray that 'we receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine . . . may be partakers of his most blessed body and blood'; and in Article 28, where we are taught that this benefit is granted 'to such as rightly, worthily and with faith receive the same'. His teaching is underlined in the third part of Article 28, and in Article 29, both added in Elizabeth's reign.
- 19 From 1535 to 1540, Thomas Cromwell was the king's vicegerent in religious matters, with authority superior even to the Archbishop of Canterbury. This means that the main responsibility for setting up the Bible in churches was not Cranmer's, but also that the main responsibility for the suppression of the monasteries was not his either.
- 20 That others than Cranmer played some part in the preparation of the Order of the Communion and the two editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* is of course true, though very likely they did nothing more than comment on his drafts (see F. E. Brightman, in *Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Lowther Clarke and Harris, London, S.P.C.K., 1932, pp. 153–5, 169, 174).
- 21 See the royal proclamation just mentioned and the 1549 Act of Uniformity.
- 22 The report of the debate is printed in *Background Documents to Liturgical Revision 1547–1549*, ed. C. O. Buchanan (Nottingham, Grove Books, 1983).
- 23 *Original Letters* (Parker Society), vol. 2, pp. 534–7.
- 24 For details of Gardiner's appeals to the 1549 Prayer Book, see *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold (London, S.P.C.K., 1978), p. 265f.
- 25 *Services of Baptism and Confirmation* (Abingdon, Marcham Books, 1967), p. 29.
- 26 For a discussion and appreciation of Cranmer's liturgical language, see especially Stella Brook, *The Language of the Book of Common Prayer* (London, Deutsch, 1965), and C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954), pp. 215–21.
- 27 Much of the material in this section on 'Cranmer's Achievement' is reprinted, by permission, from material contributed by the author to *The Study of Liturgy* (see note 24). The text of the whole article is also appearing, by mutual agreement, as a booklet published by the Prayer Book Society.