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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

‘For the More Explanation’ and ‘For the More Perfection’: Cranmer’s Second Prayer Book

Roger Beckwith

Three years ago we were celebrating the 450th anniversary of the First Prayer Book of King Edward VI and of his Archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, which came into use on Whitsunday 1549; and this year, three years later, we are celebrating the 450th anniversary of their Second Prayer Book, which came into use on All Saints’ Day 1552. The 1549 Book was in many ways the greater change, for it was the first liturgy in the English language—in every respect an extraordinary achievement—but the 1552 Book was the climax of Cranmer’s work, for it brought to clear and mature expression the biblical theology which in the 1549 Book was often only implicit. The 1552 Act of Uniformity which introduced the Second Prayer Book expresses Cranmer’s intentions in the book: it commends the previous book as ‘a very godly order...agreeable to the word of God and the primitive Church’, but says that it has now been ‘explained and made fully perfect’, ‘as well for the more plain and manifest explanation...as for the more perfection’.

The remarkable speed of events during Edward’s short reign of little more than six years might seem to show indecent haste, were it not for the remarkable sluggishness of progress during the long reign of his father Henry VIII, when, because of the hesitations of the king, little more than preparations for reform were possible. These preparations included the very important steps of introducing the Great Bible of Tyndale and Coverdale into every parish church, and making the Church of England independent of the authority of Rome; but reformed services and homilies could only be privately prepared, not publicly introduced, with the single exception of Cranmer’s English Litany of 1544, the first edition of the one now in the Prayer Book.

Edward VI has often been described as a sickly youth and a puppet in the hands of others. He was certainly young, coming to the throne at the age of nine and dying at the age of fifteen, and his health was not robust, but recent study, summed up in Diarmaid MacCulloch’s book *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation*,¹ has shown that he

was far from being a mere spectator of events. Precociously well informed, and with clear convictions, he showed all the vigorous despotism of a Tudor monarch in driving forward the changes which Cranmer was planning, and which Somerset and Northumberland, the successive Lord Protectors, supported. Indeed, the King and Northumberland might have gone further, without Cranmer's restraining hand; but the 1552 Prayer Book is his work, not theirs; it shows the same liturgical mastery as that of 1549, and is in the same succession, completing the reforms that 1549 began. The theory of C.W. Dugmore that Cranmer was not responsible for the 1552 Book—an extremist opposed to him was—and the older theory that he *was* responsible for it, but only under heavy pressure from continental Reformers with whom he did not really sympathise,² are contrary to the evidence, and are now generally abandoned.

As we shall see, it is not the case that Cranmer intended to reform the liturgy at a single stroke, and that 1549 represents his true mind and his final goal. On the contrary, being a peaceable man, with a concern for those who found change difficult, he planned his reform by stages, and 1552 represents the final stage.

Critics of 1552

The forerunners of the Puritans did not think he had gone far enough. Among those who were in exile on the Continent during Mary's short and bloody reign were some who claimed that Cranmer was planning a third Prayer Book, 'a hundred times more perfect' than 1552.³ Probably this was just wishful thinking on their part. Such critics wanted a nearer approach to the practice of Geneva, and would have been glad to think that Cranmer agreed with them. The only real evidence that Cranmer contemplated any further change after 1552 is in his draft revision of canon law, where the evidence only relates to rubrics. It refers to a sermon at Evening Prayer, which 1552 did not explicitly provide for (any more than 1662 does), and, more surprisingly, it refers to 'those who sit as guests at the holy table of the Lord'. Perhaps the latter form of language is figurative rather than literal, or perhaps it is due to one of Cranmer's collaborators rather than himself, such as Peter Martyr, who was very active in the canon law task; for it is hard to think that someone who had defended kneeling reception of communion as strongly as Cranmer had in 1552 (see the so-called Black Rubric at the end of the Holy Communion service) would so soon afterwards have gone over to the

Presbyterian view advocated by his rival John Knox, and substituted sitting.⁴ If Edward had lived longer, and a second edition of 1552 had been produced, it is quite conceivable that Cranmer might have had a few afterthoughts on minor matters like rubrics, and might even have made for himself some of the minor changes that were made by others, between 1552 and 1662, in the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline Prayer Books; but what is not so easy to believe is that he would have made major changes, especially in the spoken texts.

The Puritan idea that Cranmer did not go far enough in his reform of worship has had fewer advocates among later Anglicans than the view that he went too far. Bishop Frere, for example, in his *New History of the Book of Common Prayer*⁵ wrote: ‘Thus against the Archbishop’s will and without the consent of the Church, English religion reached its low water mark and the ill-starred book of 1552 began its brief career.’ Every phrase in this statement is open to the gravest question, and is today disputed by scholars from Frere’s own school of thought. The changes made in 1552 were not made against Cranmer’s will but under his direction; they were not made without the consent of the laity in Parliament or (probably) of the clergy in Convocation—only the destruction of the earlier Convocation records in the Great Fire makes this uncertain; and, as to the book representing the low water mark of English religion, Couratin calls the Communion service which stands at its heart ‘a superb piece of liturgical composition, the finest flower of Reformation liturgy’, and Dix, in famous words, calls it ‘the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of justification by faith alone.’⁶ Being out of sympathy with the Reformation, these writers do not think that Cranmer’s work ought really to have been done, but they recognise that, if it was to be done, it was done supremely well.

Critics with the outlook of Frere began to appear as early as the seventeenth century, though their outlook did not become widespread until two hundred years later. The reason they preferred 1549 to 1552 was that it represented less change from the practice of the Middle Ages, and consequently less change from the practice of the early Fathers. Cranmer himself loved the writings of the early Fathers, and was in many matters content with the practice of the Middle Ages, but above all he was devoted to the teaching of the New Testament. He saw that the Fathers were close to the teaching of the New Testament (in substance as well as in time), and that the mediaevals

had not departed from it in everything, and, because he was a peaceable man, concerned for the conscience of the weaker brother, he was against unnecessary change.⁷ But where the teaching of the New Testament and the truth of the gospel were at stake, he let that take precedence over every other consideration.

The Reasons for the 1552 Changes

The old form of the Communion service, developed in the period of the Fathers, had unwittingly left room for the doctrines of transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass to develop during the Middle Ages. Ancient though this form was, it therefore needed to be changed, if those doctrines were to be got rid of. So in 1552 he rearranged the service, so that the sacrament would be administered as soon as it had been consecrated, and no-one would have a chance to worship the elements.⁸ He also moved all language about making an offering to God out of the central part of the service, and referred it to an offering of alms, an offering of thanksgiving, and an offering of ourselves, not an offering of the body and blood of Christ—which had already been offered once for all at Calvary. The use of the mass vestments was abolished, and the tradition of the instruments of sacrifice (the paten and chalice) in the Ordinal was abolished also.

The most serious changes that he made elsewhere in the book can be similarly explained. In 1552 he cancelled the celebration of communion at burials, so that it should not any longer be represented as a requiem mass—an offering of the body and blood of Christ for the dead. He also removed petitions for the faithful departed, both from the Burial service and from the Communion service. There was no doubt that these were ancient, as indeed the celebration of communion at burials was, but in the meantime the doctrine of purgatory had grown up, as a supposed third state in the world to come, additional to heaven and hell (said to be like hell, but temporary, not everlasting); and prayers for the dead were now understood as prayers to shorten their time in the torments of purgatory. So in 1552 prayers for the dead were removed. Then again, the distraction of the exorcism was taken out of the Baptism service. Also in 1552, a penitential introduction was added to Morning and Evening Prayer. Why was this? Partly, no doubt, to introduce a strong note of repentance and forgiveness into the daily services, but also to compensate for the loss of the sacrament of Penance. The mediaeval

teaching here was that sin committed after baptism could not be forgiven except by private confession and absolution before a priest. Like purgatory, this was a doctrine unknown to the New Testament, but confession of sin and assurance of forgiveness were in themselves biblical, and remained important, so 1552 incorporated them in a public practice rather than a private one, retaining private confession before a priest only for those with scruples of conscience which could not be otherwise overcome, not as a general requirement.

1552 would also, no doubt, have removed the invocation of saints from the Litany, if it had not already been removed in 1549. The Litany, as we saw, was the oldest part of the Prayer Book, first published in 1544, and in 1549 it was revised, removing the invocation of saints. To give thanks to God for the saints was proper, but to pray to them, as though they were minor deities, when the New Testament teaches that there is one Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, obscured the glory of Jesus, and was in fact idolatrous, so this practice too was removed, somewhat earlier than the others.

Perhaps the most surprising changes in 1552 were the removal of the anointing from the Visitation of the Sick and of the bishop’s pastoral staff from the Ordinal. In the former case this may have been due to the difficulty of distinguishing it, in a service often used with the dying, from the mediaeval sacrament of Extreme Unction, and in the latter case to the stress laid by the reformed Ordinal on the pastoral role of priests also.

In general, what had been done in 1549 was to purify the language of the liturgy, so that existing practice might become less misleading, but in 1552 the more radical step was taken of removing practices which were still almost bound to mislead. Whether all such practices are bound to mislead today is perhaps less certain, but those Anglicans who have since restored them, in this country or elsewhere, have usually restored them simply because they are more or less ancient, without carefully considering how they are likely to be understood by worshippers. And sometimes they have restored them in their unchanged mediaeval form.

It was not, of course, enough to remove false doctrine from the liturgy: it was also important to introduce true doctrine. Cranmer took great pains with this, as the extraordinary amount of biblical teaching and language

incorporated in the text of the Prayer Book shows.⁹ This could have been done clumsily, but was in fact done with great skill. It was one of Cranmer's chief ways of ensuring that public worship should 'edify', as Paul requires in 1 Corinthians 14. Precisely what doctrine of sacramental grace Cranmer's 1552 Communion service expresses was much debated in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The debate was effectively concluded by Peter Brooks's study *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist*,¹⁰ which demonstrated that his teaching was a symbolical one, but of a positive and not of a negative kind, akin to the teaching of Calvin.

Cranmer's Overall Scheme of Liturgical Reform

If it be asked how we know that 1552 is the true successor to 1549 and not (as Frere thought) in opposition to it, five historical facts make this clear. First, the royal proclamation accompanying the 1548 Order of the Communion (a set of English devotions for the laity, inserted into the Latin mass) expressed the intention 'from time to time, further to travail for the reformation and setting forth of Godly orders'—not one order, 1549, but more than one, and not all at one time, but from time to time. Secondly, even the 1549 Book is deeply marked by the influence of continental Protestantism: this is not a peculiarity of 1552. Thirdly, the report of the House of Lords debate in December 1548 on the forthcoming 1549 Prayer Book shows Cranmer and the other reforming bishops already voicing their mature opinions about eucharistic theology: so they already had these beliefs, and did not develop them between the publication of the two Prayer Books.¹¹ Fourthly, 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 features of the 1549 Book in favour of unreformed doctrine, claiming that they mean what he now believes; though in 1552 he is careful to change each of the disputed passages, so as to exclude Gardiner's interpretation in future.¹² And fifthly, there is a letter extant, written from Lambeth itself by guests of the Archbishop, Bucer and Fagius, just before the 1549 Book came into use, and stating that the book is only an interim measure, designed to make change less difficult to accept.¹³ These five facts indicate that the 1549 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. The shape of the final outcome was affected in detail by factors like Gardiner's misinterpretations and Bucer's

suggestions,¹⁴ but in general it was planned from the outset.

But not only is the 1552 Book the natural successor of the 1549 Book: it is also the natural forerunner of the 1662 Book. When people familiar with 1662 are shown the 1552 Book, their immediate reaction is to realise how similar the two are. There are undoubtedly certain differences of detail. There are many more rubrics in 1662, designed to remove doubt about what the minister is to do, and to safeguard decency and reverence. In 1662, the words of administration at Holy Communion are longer than in 1552: this is because Queen Elizabeth had prefixed to the 1552 words those of 1549. In 1662, the Catechism has a second part, dealing with the doctrine of the sacraments, which is not in 1552: it had been added in James I’s reign. In 1662, the rubrics about what the minister is to wear are less explicit than in 1552, and have been a fruitful source of controversy since. But these are details. The two books are substantially the same.

So we have good reason to celebrate the 450th anniversary of 1552. Anyone who loves 1662 would have no difficulty in learning to love 1552, and this is because they breathe the same spirit: they come essentially from the same author, who believes the gospel, is devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ, and has based his liturgy on the Bible. And when in ten years time we celebrate the 350th anniversary of 1662, we will be celebrating what is basically the same book, the book which some of us have grown up with, which some of us have learned to appreciate at a later stage in life, and which there is reason to hope that many more may in ten years time have returned to, out of weariness with the ASBs and Common Worship of the present day. These are the fashions of a moment, and do not last, but the Prayer Book never grows stale.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 London: Allen Lane-Penguin, 1999.
- 2 Dugmore propounds his theory in A.M. Ramsey *et al. The English Prayer Book 1549-1662* (London: SPCK, 1963), ch. 2. He argues that, owing to Cranmer’s disagreements with Northumberland, he had been supplanted as editor of the Prayer Book by 1552. But how was the evidence of this revolutionary change suppressed? Nor is there enough time for it, as the disagreements seem to have begun with Somerset’s execution in January 1552, and the 1552 Book was

approved by Parliament in April; see D. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven: Yale, 1996), chs.10-12. The older theory was first argued at length by E.B. Pusey, in *The Real Presence the Doctrine of the English Church* (1857), and was the prevailing view among Anglo-Catholic liturgiologists until it was abandoned in the mid-twentieth century by G. Dix and E.C. Ratcliff.

- 3 See MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant*, p 176f.
- 4 For the dispute with Knox and its outcome, see MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, pp 525-8.
- 5 Third impression reprinted, London: Macmillan, 1910, p 85.
- 6 See A.H. Couratin, "The Eucharist under Revision," in *Tell Wales* (Penarth: Church in Wales Publications, 1964), p 41f; G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1945), p 672.
- 7 See his preface 'Of Ceremonies' in the Prayer Book, and Article 34.
- 8 Contrary to what is often asserted, Cranmer always believed in the consecration of the elements, interpreting it as a setting of them apart to a holy use, and not as anything akin to transubstantiation (*On the Lord's Supper*, Parker Society, pp 11, 131, 177-83). However, he did not apparently believe that the consecration continued after the service was over, so in 1552 he adopted Bucer's suggestion that the consecrated remains should be returned to common use (a decision altered in 1662).
- 9 For evidence of this, see especially H.I. Bailey, *The Liturgy Compared with the Bible (1833-5)*, currently being reprinted in sections by the Harrison Trust.
- 10 London: Macmillan, 1965.
- 11 The report of the debate has several times been printed, most recently in C.O. Buchanan, ed., *Background Documents to Liturgical Revision 1547-1549* (Bramcote: Grove, 1983).
- 12 For the passages Gardiner appealed to and Cranmer's rejoinders, see *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. C. Jones et al. revised edn, (London: SPCK, 1992), p 312 and note 5.
- 13 The letter is printed in *Epistolae Tigurinae* (Parker Society), p 349f. It is dated 26 April, and the book came into use on 9 June.
- 14 Bucer's suggestions were made in his *Censura*, reprinted and translated in E.C. Whitaker, ed., *Martin Bucer and the Book of Common Prayer* (Great Wakering: Alcuin Club, 1974). About half of Bucer's suggestions were adopted by Cranmer. His suggestion about the consecrated remains, mentioned in note 8, is on p 40f.