

Sixteenth Century Progressive and Twentieth Century Conservative

Reflections on Cranmer and the Eucharist

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Dr. D.A. Scales's stimulating and erudite article on Cranmer's eucharistic doctrine in a recent edition of *Churchman*¹ is based on a thorough study of the *Defence*, Cranmer's book of 1550, in which his mature eucharistic doctrine is clearly and unambiguously set forth. Dr. Scales is at his best in discussing 'pure' doctrine, but in his attempt to 'earth' this, to translate the theory into liturgical expression and also in his conclusion (the last two sections of his article) he moves from the impeccably scholarly to the polemical, and in his robust defence of Cranmerian doctrine overlooks two vital points: that the 1662 Prayer Book service is *not* pure Cranmer and that the *Alternative Service Book's* Rite A, for all its faults, is *not* devoid of Cranmerian insights. This article seeks to redress the balance.

Dr. Scales expresses concern that contemporary liturgies are both 'unreformed' and 'have forsaken Cranmer's clear teaching and the liturgical principles which expressed it' and goes on to suggest that the answer to this perceived problem is, *inter alia*, 'to study and use the Prayer Book service of Holy Communion'.² But all is not so simple. As is well known, Cranmer's 1552 Communion service was altered in 1559 and again, more substantially, in 1662 in order to give us the Prayer Book Communion service we have today.³

It is unfortunate therefore that in his article Dr. Scales fails to consider this fact and is content to leave the misleading impression that Cranmerian eucharistic purity is there for the asking if only we would use the 1662 service. But as he accepts 1662 uncritically and saves his criticism for twentieth-century revisions of the service, let us now turn our attention to them and see if this unfavourable comparison with Cranmer's work is valid.

How 'UnCranmerian' Are Modern Liturgies?

How has Cranmer's liturgy and theology fared at the hands of twentieth century revisers and how, on the basis of his own eucharistic theology, would he have reacted to modern Anglican liturgy?

On three separate occasions (excluding his comparative charts)

Dr. Scales lumps together for criticism the Communion services of 1928, Series 1, 2 & 3, and Rites A and B of the *Alternative Service Book*.⁴ Is this fair and accurate?

The proposed eucharistic liturgy of 1928 need not detain us. Cranmer would have objected to it on two grounds: first, that it was an attempt to turn the eucharistic clock back to 1549 and second, this champion of lawful authority would in no way have countenanced the (illegal) use of a liturgy which had not been authorized by lawful means.⁵

The experimental liturgies (Series 1, 2, 3) of the period 1965–73 need not detain us either. Cranmer, after all, introduced the principle of using imperfect interim liturgies (in 1548 and 1549) as a means of introducing change gradually.

So we turn directly to the *Alternative Service Book's* Rite A Communion service (no one, surely, would wish to defend Rite B!) as the definitive rite after the period of experimentation.⁶

a. Cranmer's Problem

In order to gain the right perspective it is vital to remember that the writers of modern liturgies experience the same problem as Cranmer—the problem of making a single liturgy acceptable to diverse groups within the church. Cranmer tackled the problem in 1552 by decreeing that, 'from henceforth all the whole realm shall have but one Use'.⁷ By way of contrast the compilers of the *Alternative Service Book* recognized that in 1980, 'the spiritual needs of [Christ's] people are too diverse for a single form of worship to suffice'.⁸

Of course, Rite A was devised in a period of considerable doctrinal pluralism within the Anglican church, occasioned by the existence of distinctive 'parties'. But this was nothing new and it should be remembered that the 1662 Prayer Book was essentially a compromise between the Puritans and the Laudians. In 1552 Cranmer's work was done against the background of tension between two antipathetic parties within the church, the Protestant and the Catholic.

It is easy to demonstrate a false antithesis between the doctrinal purity of Cranmer's work and the doctrinal comprehensiveness of Rite A. But this is to ignore the historical contexts of both. It is an undeniable fact that Cranmer was able to impose 1552 on the church by *diktat*, whereas the *Alternative Service Book* was subject to the negotiations, amendments and compromises of the synodical process.

The Tudor society in which Cranmer lived was authoritarian, and although divergent opinions were expected it was equally expected that the dominant party (in 1552, the Protestant, which enjoyed the royal authority—though the pendulum was soon to swing) would impose its own views on everyone else. Those who disagreed had three choices, compliance, voluntary exile or persecution. This was understood by both sides; neither expected a consensus to emerge or a compromise to be struck. Consequently Cranmer's service was imposed on the church by an

Act of Uniformity.

The problem of doctrinal pluralism within the Anglican church was both a cause and a result of the Reformation and as time progressed the parameters of belief widened. By 1662 a degree of compromise was necessary between Laudians and Puritans at the two extremes before a revised service could once again be imposed on the English church. By the twentieth century the parameters of belief had widened much further and Rite A was compiled in a religious milieu of much wider comprehensiveness than could have been foreseen by Cranmer or the Caroline divines. The sea-change to the church wrought by the Oxford Movement and liberal theology may be regretted or even deplored, but cannot be denied or ignored.

Consequently it is all too easy to be negative about a compromise and a composite liturgy and to criticize the parts that one dislikes. But this is really an inadequate response and, one suspects, is much less likely to be found among those in parochial ministry than amongst academics, since the church is called by Christ to live out the gospel not in a theoretical or imaginary world, nor in the world of the past, but in the real world of today. It is therefore not inappropriate that in an imperfect world the use of an imperfect liturgy should sacramentally prepare worshippers for the perfect liturgy (if, indeed, its worship *is* liturgical!) that will be used before the throne in heaven.

The most striking feature of the main Rite A service is its variety of alternatives. By contrast the lack of choice in *all* previous Anglican liturgies, permanent or experimental, is apparent. However it needs to be said that, because of the wider variety of Anglican belief in the twentieth century, Rite A allows a wider liberty of interpretation (sometimes by the use of studied ambiguities) than either Cranmer or the 1662 revisers had in mind or would have found acceptable in their age. Nevertheless, by judicious use of the available options, Rite A must, surely, be acceptable to all but a tiny minority within the contemporary church.

b. Cranmer's Pattern

Over the years, Anglican eucharistic liturgies (and within the worldwide Anglican Communion there have been many) have conformed to one of two basic patterns: the classic 'Western' shape with a long canon, and the classic 'Cranmerian' shape with a short canon. It needs to be said at the outset that Rite A contains *both* these eucharistic patterns as alternatives. It is most unfortunate that Dr. Scales, in his criticism of Rite A, fails even to mention the existence of the 'Order following the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer', which is basically the 1662 service (and to that extent not pure Cranmer) in contemporary English. As such it brings remarkable freshness and clarity to Cranmer's prose, if not to his doctrine, and needs to be more widely used in the church today. Indeed, those who rejoice in the Cranmerian legacy should seek to promote this Order rather than to ignore its existence.

It needs to be remembered that no-one is obliged to use the full Rite A

service and any parish can construct a service geared to its own needs and traditions from within the available options and (subject to the necessary copyright permission)⁹ have them printed in booklet form. This could clearly be in a form very near to Cranmer's own. The disadvantage of this kind of 'Parish Rite A booklet', however, is that it will inevitably narrow down the number of options and alternatives to a level of inevitable predictability, which goes against the spirit of Rite A.

However, the advent of the word processor and photocopier in many parishes (and no doubt, in many more in the future) makes the production of 'one-off' orders of service geared to seasonal themes or preaching topics far more likely in the future.

Of course, no man-made liturgy is perfect and it is easy to criticize the main part of Rite A by concentrating on those options one dislikes from an evangelical standpoint.

It is clear that Dr. Scales exalts 1662 and abases Rite A mainly on grounds of doctrine. While not wishing in any way to play down the importance of doctrinal soundness, many evangelicals would regard this approach as being well meant but misguided as we embark on a decade of evangelism. Doctrinal soundness that cannot be readily understood is of little value, either to edify believers or to win converts for Christ.

Over twenty years ago Gavin Reid chided the church for its failure to communicate,¹⁰ yet the liturgies which seek to do just that are criticized and compared unfavourably with the 1662 service.

Liturgical intelligibility, I would suggest, needs to be high on our list of priorities, if the church is to be more than a self-indulgent group of like-minded religious enthusiasts. If our worship fails to communicate, it fails.¹¹

These two factors, of intelligibility and generally sound unambiguous doctrine come together in Rite A's 'Order following the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer'. Would that more would make use of it!

c. Cranmer's Principles

Cranmer practised the principle that radically new forms of liturgy were not only in order but also positively desirable to take opportunity of changed circumstances, to expunge error and to teach the truth. In this respect the Rite A 'Order following the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer' follows sound Cranmerian principles.

Indeed, Cranmer would have rejoiced in the *Alternative Service Book* in its didactic and thematic approach to worship throughout the Christian year. He himself had seen the church as very much an educative institution, and teaching as a fundamental part of the eucharist. By making preaching an integral and compulsory part of the service (and by providing a Book of Homilies for non-preaching clergy), providing propers for the great festivals, and collects, epistles and gospels for the entire year, Cranmer made a start on this particular work. The wholesale extension of it in Rite A with a much wider range of propers and seasonal material, the provision of Sunday themes and an Old Testament lesson, together with

Sixteenth Century Progressive and Twentieth Century Conservative the whole Alternative Lectionary, provide a teaching aid of inestimable value to the contemporary church.¹²

Cranmer made worship visible, audible and in contemporary English, and insisted that the people were to receive the sacrament whenever they were present, three times a year being the absolute minimum. Indeed, he was so well ahead of his time that his attempts to get the laity to church for daily morning and evening prayer,¹³ and to make the Lord's Supper a regular weekly act of worship fell on deaf ears in the sixteenth century.

It is clear that Cranmer would have approved of the corporate nature of much twentieth century worship; the emphasis in Rite A of the whole people of God celebrating the eucharist, with the Minister presiding over, not dominating, the worship is one which he would have rejoiced to see.

Similarly, the westward facing position of the President, though not required in the rubrics of Rite A, has gained almost universal acceptance and has recovered after three hundred and fifty years the Cranmerian principle of Minister and people gathered together around a central Table.

In the average parish that has, over the last twenty years, experienced resistance to liturgical change, it is highly probable that any opposition majors more on linguistic grounds than on any other, or combination of others. It is more often than not the language, the 'magic' of Cranmerian prose, which is regarded by many as being in some way superior to modern English, in the same way that Shakespeare's prose and poetry are often perceived as being superior to that of contemporary writers. Now this may well be true, for we are in a highly subjective area, but how would Cranmer react to those who cling tenaciously to his words (though not necessarily to his doctrine) as a vehicle of worship?

Ironically despite being the commonest, the linguistic approach is the weakest line of attack on vernacular liturgy. The twenty-fourth Article of the Thirty-nine established the principle of worship in the vernacular. The corresponding article of the Forty-two, which came from Cranmer's own pen, stated,

It is most seemly and most agreeable to the Word of God, that in the congregation nothing be openly read or spoken in a tongue unknown to the people . . .¹⁴

This article was aimed specifically at the use of Latin in worship, but the principle remains¹⁵. Were he alive today, Cranmer would be critical of the *language* of the Book of Common Prayer for it violates this principle now that Tudor English has ceased to be 'understanded of the people'.

Bodies like the Prayer Book Society who seem to look to the 1662 book for literary rather than spiritual excellence are apt to forget what the church is really all about. Colin Buchanan rightly takes to task their argument for the preservation of Cranmer's English:

A root and branch discontinuity of life and liturgy advertises worship as play acting, an escape from reality into a dated ritual. It was to end this discontinuity that Cranmer abolished Latin and introduced the vernacular.

Thus the *principle* which underlies the Book of Common Prayer is the very reason why [it] is being superseded. Which should we honour—the spirit or the letter?¹⁶

The Cranmerian principle of vernacular worship should also be a challenge to modern Christian leaders to avoid that contemporary Christian jargon which can so often be as much of a barrier to the outsider or newcomer as can the use of archaic language.

Conclusion—Positive Continuity

Dr. Scales's thesis seems to be to contrast present day eucharistic liturgy unfavourably with earlier Cranmerian purity. But in doing so he fails to distinguish Cranmer's work of 1552 from the emended Prayer Book which emerged one hundred and ten years later. As a matter of factual accuracy it needs to be remembered that pure Cranmer (that is, 1552) was legally available to Anglican worshippers for less than fourteen months (from 1 November 1552 to 20 December 1553).

Regrettably, even those of us who believe that Cranmer's contribution to Anglican eucharistic liturgy and doctrine is of paramount importance must be realistic and accept the fact that pure unadulterated Cranmer is not legally on offer in the Church of England today. As we have seen, to take the line that 1662 *is* Cranmer is both simplistic and inaccurate. Nevertheless all is not lost. Much of his legacy remains in 1662 and, more importantly for a church called to serve contemporary society, much is available within the options of Rite A, which, as we have attempted to outline, is in many ways more in tune with the *spirit* of his work than is 1662. But whichever form of service is used it is, surely, the *teaching* which accompanies it which is paramount for the continuation of Cranmer's eucharistic views within the Church of England.¹⁷

If nothing else comes out of the Cranmer quincentenary it would be good to see him reinstated as the great eucharistic theologian and radical liturgiologist of the Anglican Communion. Sadly, to mention Cranmer in many circles both evangelical and the wider Anglican is to evoke one of two contrasting responses; either a yawn and a feeling of irrelevance to contemporary worship on the one hand or, on the other, a grim determination to cling doggedly to the 1662 book, which quite overlooks the fact that 1662 is not 1552. Neither of these viewpoints is fair; both amount to a tragedy that must be prevented by recovering the true Cranmerian legacy of conservative biblical theology, imaginative thought and radical liturgical forms.

Cranmer is too important to remain forever shackled to a Prayer Book edited by others (1662) which is but a pale shadow of his mature work. The Cranmerian legacy should be active not static, positive not negative. In essence it should be biblically sound eucharistic doctrine set within a culturally relevant liturgy which glorifies God and which is written in fine vernacular prose. As such, it needs to be in a state of continuous evolution as the Holy Spirit leads and as the church needs.

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Cranmer is the precious legacy of the whole Anglican church. It is sad to see him regarded either as an irrelevance or as the patron saint of liturgical conservatism. He would not have regarded himself, or his work, as either.

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NOTES

- 1 D.A. Scales, Thomas Cranmer's 'True and Catholick Doctrine of the Sacrament' *Churchman* Vol. 104 (1990), p. 102.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 126
- 3 For details and comment on these changes see R.T. Beckwith *The Anglican Eucharist: from the Reformation to the Restoration* in Cheslyn Jones et. al. *The Study of Liturgy* (S.P.C.K., London, 1978), pp. 267-71; A.G. Dickens *The English Reformation* (Collins, London, revised edition 1967), pp. 413-4; R.C.D. Jasper *The Development of the Anglican Liturgy 1662-1980* (S.P.C.K., London, 1989), pp. 1-5.
- 4 Scales, *op. cit.*, pp. 122 and 124.
- 5 Though presumably his reaction to 1928 would not have been as extreme as that of Gregory Dix! See *News of Liturgy* 77, May 1981, p. 6.
- 6 But not definitive for all time, as is shown in the publication by the Liturgical Commission of *Patterns for Worship* (GS 989, Church House Publishing, 1989), and the fact that the *Alternative Service Book 1980* is only licensed for use until 2000 (originally 1990) and therefore must be replaced, altered or (unthinkably) renewed in its present form.
- 7 Concerning the Service of the Church, *Book of Common Prayer* p. ix. (This and all subsequent BCP references are from the Cambridge edition).
- 8 Preface, *Alternative Service Book 1980* p. 9.
- 9 *Ibid.* p. 1291.
- 10 Gavin Reid, *The Gaggling of God—the failure of the church to communicate in the television age* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1969).
- 11 Indeed, many find even the *Alternative Service Book* difficult to understand, and *Patterns for Worship* continues Cranmer's principle of producing comprehensible liturgy so that all who wish to, however humble their background and meagre their education, may be able to worship their Lord through the medium of Anglican liturgy.
- 12 This has since been supplemented seasonally by *Lent, Holy Week, Easter* (Church House Publishing, 1986) and *The Promise of His Glory* (Mowbray, Church House Publishing 1991).
- 13 *Book of Common Prayer*, p. x.
- 14 Quoted in W.H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, (Vine Books, Sixth Edition, London 1978), p. 339, (currently available from Church Society).
- 15 Article XXIV.
- 16 'Back to the Stained Glass Window?' *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 21 December 1979.
- 17 There is an interesting paradox that it is sometimes those Anglicans who are most wedded to 1662 who are the least convinced by Cranmerian eucharistic doctrine. For example, in all three of the parishes in which I have served, it has been those who would most dislike the label 'evangelical' who have been the greatest supporters of the 1662 service! No doubt this is because they were brought up in an age when only 1662 was on offer yet the teaching which accompanied it was of a broad Anglican 'real presence' variety. The irony is compounded by those who regard this teaching about the Lord's Supper as being genuinely Cranmerian and who regard my (Cranmerian) eucharistic teaching and practice with some suspicion!

All of which goes to show that important as a biblically and theologically sound liturgy is, the accompanying teaching actually has more effect on people's understanding, and that we can actively develop the Cranmerian legacy irrespective of which order of service is used.