

The Teaching of the English Reformers on Ministry and Worship¹

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The English Reformers faced a formidable task when they began the work of revising the ideas of ministry and worship in the Church. The first result of their labours was the Prayer Book of 1549. Here one book in English took the place of the various mediaeval Latin service books. It was drawn up on the principles of simplicity and faithfulness to Holy Scripture. The Ancient Hour offices, intended chiefly for recitation by monks and nuns, were condensed into the services of Morning and Evening Prayer, suitable for both clergy and laity. The regular use of the psalms and the continuous reading of the Old and New Testaments were the principal new features. But the most revolutionary development in the new book was its Communion Service and it was this which, in some quarters, produced furious opposition. Dr. C. Sydney Carter describes the demands of the 'Rebels in the West' in 1549: 'We will have the Sacrament to hang over the high altar', they said, 'there to be worshipped and only to be delivered to the lay people at Easter, and then only in one kind.' 'We will have the Mass in Latin, as was before, and celebrated by the priest without any man or woman communicating with him.' Dr. Carter comments that these demands

illustrate clearly the mediaeval practice and teaching concerning the Eucharist which our Reformers strongly condemned. They also prove that the doctrine of the Holy Communion centred round two closely related questions. Are the Body and Blood of Christ literally present in, under or with the consecrated elements, or only present to faith? The Reformers definitely declared that they were 'only present to faith'. Is the Lord's Supper the commemoration of a finished sacrifice or is it itself a propitiatory material sacrifice? The Reformers taught the former and denied the latter.²

The views of our Reformers regarding the presence of Christ at the Holy Communion are quite clear. Bishop Ridley said

Concerning the Romish mass which is used at this day, or the lively sacrifice thereof, propitiatory and available for the sins of the quick and dead, the Holy Scripture hath not so much as one syllable.³

Bishop Jewel said

We give unto the people the Lord's Supper according to the Institution of

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Christ, and have made it a Communion in very deed. They [the Romanists] give you a vain pageant to gaze upon.⁴

Archbishop Cranmer is very definite in his rejection of transubstantiation.

And so Christ calleth the bread His body (as the old authors report), because it representeth His body, and signifieth unto them which eat that bread according to Christ's ordinance, that they do spiritually eat His body, and be spiritually fed and nourished by Him, and yet the bread remaineth still there, as a sacrament to signify the same.

Similarly, he condemned the sacrifice of the mass in the clearest terms:

The greatest blasphemy and injury that can be against Christ, and yet universally used through the Popish kingdom, is this, that the priests make their mass a sacrifice propitiatory, to remit the sins as well of themselves as of other, both quick and dead, to whom they list to apply the same.⁵

We must not think that the Reformers came easily to what was, for them, a radical change of view. As Dr. Dyson Hague said,⁶

We stand almost amazed at the temerity of the men who dared to revolutionize a service that for thirty or forty years of their lives had been to them the most sacred and solemn act of their daily church worship. Nothing but the power of the Word of God and the force of the conviction that they had the leading and the light of the Holy Spirit could have impelled them to alter so sacred an inheritance as the ancient form of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

In view of the fact that the Reformation is so often regarded as a purely political or social upheaval it is necessary to emphasize that it was essentially a movement inspired by the Bible. R. S. Wallace, in a recent book, says

At the heart of all the experience and inspiration that lay behind the Reformation we always find this one book. It was through the Bible that Luther heard it said 'Christ is your own, with His life, teaching, works, death, resurrection, and all that He is, has, does and can do,' and was able to know himself justified. It was through the Bible that the Reformers found themselves brought continually to the cradle at Bethlehem, and to the cross at Calvary, and thus to the place where they knew at last they could see God as He truly is. Moreover in all their reading of it and in their listening at its door, they heard continually the living voice of Christ Himself, and thus experienced communion with the power of His resurrection. When they made Holy Scripture their sole authority they were not simply seeking to replace the old Pope by a new one; they were, rather, paying tribute to the most joyful and liberating element in their new Christian experience. Whenever they spoke about that experience they were inevitably forced to acknowledge the part played in it by the Word of God.

The Articles of Religion reveal the views of the Reformers regarding the Lord's Supper. Article 28 rejects transubstantiation on four grounds, that it cannot be proved by holy writ, that it is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, that it overthroweth the nature of a sacrament and that it hath given occasion to many superstitions. Article 31 says that the sacrifices of the Masses . . . were 'blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits'. By contrast, the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, as formulated by the Council of Trent, states

This sacrifice is propitiatory, and that by its means, if we approach God contrite and penitent, with a true heart, and a right faith, and with fear and reverence, we may obtain mercy, and grow in seasonable succour . . . Wherefore, it is properly offered according to the tradition of the Apostles, not only for the sins, punishments and satisfactions, and other wants of the living, but also for the dead in Christ, who are not fully purged.

It is frequently said that Article 31 does not mean what it says it means. Thus Dr. E. J. Bicknell, whose textbook on the Articles has been used by generations of theological students, says

There is no denial of the Eucharistic sacrifice, but of current popular perversions of it . . . So, too, the plural 'masses' makes plain that the idea condemned is that each mass possesses a supplementary value of its own . . . so it is not 'the sacrifice of the mass' but 'sacrifices of masses' that is condemned . . .⁷

This interpretation goes back to Newman in Tract XC. But it was Newman himself who admitted that

Nothing can come of the suggested distinction between mass and masses . . . What, then, the thirty-first article repudiates is undeniably the central and most sacred doctrine of the Catholic religion.⁸

The Holy Communion service of 1549 was revised in the second Prayer Book of 1552 and any remaining expressions which could be thought to give support to Transubstantiation or the Sacrifice of the Mass were carefully removed. In particular, the long consecration prayer, modelled on the Sarum canon of the mass, was divided into three, the Prayer for the Church Militant here on earth, the prayer of Consecration, and the Prayer of Oblation which, significantly, was placed after the communion to show that the only sacrifice which we can offer to God is that of 'ourselves, our souls and bodies'. It is now necessary to see how these changes were reflected in the views of the Reformers regarding the Ministry.

The 1549 Prayer Book had no ordination service. An ordinal was drawn up in the following year by a committee of six bishops and six other learned men under the direction of Cranmer. The principal feature in the old service, and one which survives in the Roman ordinal, was the delivery to the ordinand of a chalice with wine and water, and a paten with

a wafer. The accompanying words were 'Receive power to offer sacrifice to God and to celebrate mass, both for the living and the dead, in the Name of the Lord, amen.' (*Accipe potestatem offerre sacrificium Deo, missasque celebrare, tam pro vivis quam pro defunctis, in Nomine Domini.*) Now this formula is exactly what we should expect. If the principal act of worship is the sacrifice of the mass, the priest who officiates must be a sacrificing priest, a *sacerdos*, which in Greek is *hiereus*. The Reformers knew that the Christian minister is never called *hiereus* in the New Testament. The kindred word *hierateuma* is found in I Peter 2:5,9, but here it is used of the whole Church, not simply of the Ministry, and the sacrifices offered are 'the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light'.

The Reformers preserved the three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, whilst they abolished the minor orders of door-keeper, reader, exorcist, acolyte and sub-deacon. The question may be asked in what sense did they use the word 'priest', and the answer is, in the true, etymological sense of the word, for the English word 'priest' is a shortened form of the Greek *presbuteros* and this means an elder, an official of the Church, but in no sense a sacrificing official. Here again Dr. Dyson Hague says

When the Prayer Book compilers came to the work of constructing an ordination service, they came as men whose views with regard to the nature and purpose of the ministry were completely different from the ideas of their early days: and nothing but the profoundest change of views with regard to the nature of the Christian ministry could have effected such an absolute transformation of the ordination service.⁹

To understand the Prayer Book idea of priesthood we should read the bishop's address to the candidates in the ordination service. Bishop Dowden, in his book *The Workmanship of the Prayer Book*, says it probably owes its original form to Bucer. 'It may be stated', he says, 'that the long address of the bishop to those about to be ordained priests . . . seems throughout to be a rendering of Bucer's Latin.' He quotes Dr. Richard Travers Smith: 'The English editor, doubtless Cranmer, manipulated the cumbersome composition of Bucer and brought it to the noble form which we know so well.'¹⁰ In this address the work of a priest is described thus:

To be a messenger, watchman and steward of the Lord; to teach and to premonish; to feed and provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for His children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ for ever.

The whole emphasis here is on the priest as a pastor and evangelist. In the 1550 Ordinal the bishop gave the Bible in one hand and a chalice with the bread in the other hand, with the words 'Take thou authority to preach the Word of God and to minister the holy sacraments in this congregation,

where thou shalt be appointed.' But in 1552 the Bible only was given with the same words as before.

It is frequently said that the words 'Whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained', which form part of the ordaining sentence, open the way for the sacrament of penance, so the priest is a *sacerdos*, an intermediary between man and God, after all. The words are taken from the declaration of the risen Lord to His disciples on the evening of the first Easter Day, in John 20:19-23. If we compare this passage with Luke 24:33-48 we can see that the assembled company included the disciples and 'those with them' (*tous sun autois*) and it is at least possible, in view of Acts 1:14 that the women followers of Jesus were present. The commission to forgive or retain sins was therefore given to the Church as a whole, not to one section of it. This can only mean that the commission is for the preaching of the Gospel. Those who respond to it find free and complete forgiveness, while those who refuse it remain in their sins. But those who advocate the use of the sacrament of penance are not easily silenced. They point to the absolution in the service for the visitation of the sick, but they overlook the fact that the words in the rubric before absolution in the 1549 service 'and the same form of absolution shall be used in all private confessions', were removed in 1552. Furthermore, the Exhortation in the communion service of 1549 contained the words

Requiring such as shall be satisfied with a general confession, not to be offended with them that do use, to their further satisfying, the auricular and secret confession to the priest.

In 1552 the invitation was phrased differently:

Let him come to me, or some other discreet and learned minister of God's word, and open his grief, that he may receive such ghostly counsel, advice and comfort, as his conscience may be relieved; and that by the ministry of God's word he may receive comfort and the benefit of absolution, to the quieting of his conscience and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.

The omission of all reference to auricular and secret confession, and the provision at the same time of a General Confession and Absolution in Morning and Evening Prayer, show quite clearly that it was the intention of the Reformers to get rid of the theology of the sacrament of penance.

It is necessary to understand the theology of penance according to the Roman Church. Sin is described as original or actual. The guilt of original sin is said to be remitted by baptism, which also conveys the grace of justification. But justification may be increased by good works or lost altogether by mortal sin. Actual sins are divided into venial and mortal sins, and mortal sins can only be dealt with by confession and priestly absolution. I say dealt with, because the forgiveness of sins in absolution is never complete. The eternal punishment which is due to mortal sin is remitted, but the temporal punishment remains. This may be atoned for by

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good works, mortifications or indulgences, but a certain amount of temporal punishment remains, and this must be purged away through the sufferings of purgatory. Similarly, venial sin, which is not absolved after confession, can be reduced by good works, but what remains must be paid for in purgatory. We should notice carefully two things: First, the priest, in hearing a confession, is in the position of a judge—like a *praetor* sitting in his curule chair in pagan Rome; he can give or withhold absolution as he thinks fit. Secondly, the doctrine of purgatory is a necessary part of the scheme. The Council of Trent described purgatory as a place of punishment, and the Council's Catechism says 'There is a purgatorial fire, . . . in which the souls of the pious make expiation for a certain period.' Of course, those who die in mortal sin are thought to go straight to Hell.

Our Reformers cut at the root of the sacrament of Penance by describing Purgatory, in Article 22, as 'a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God'. They emphasized the completeness of the once-for-all sacrifice of the cross in Article 31: 'The offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual.' These words are directed not only against the sacrifice of the mass, but also against auricular confession, in which contrition, confession and satisfaction are required from the penitent, and the priest prescribes the kind of personal penance which is required by way of satisfaction.

In view of the fact that auricular confession is so often referred to as a highly desirable practice, leading to a healthy condition of the soul, we should try to see it as the Reformers saw it. Calvin, in his *Institutes* III.4.17 says 'By this ruinous procedure, the souls of those who were affected with some sense of God have been cruelly racked.' He describes the divisions assigned to sins by the Schoolmen 'Boughs, branches, twigs and leaves' and the 'qualities, quantities and circumstances of sins'. He shows the anxiety of the penitent

I have not spent enough time; I have not exerted myself sufficiently; many things I have omitted through negligence; forgetfulness proceeding from want of care is not excusable. . . . The dreadful voice was always heard pealing in their ears, 'Confess all your sins.'

There is a significant passage in Bishop Knox's book *The Tractarian Movement*:

As Coleridge insisted in his *Aids to Reflection*, 'This doctrine of the incompleteness of remission of post-baptismal sin lies beneath the tremendous power of the Romish hierarchy.' It was a doctrine which, if received, sent every adult Christian (or even every child above seven years of age) to the confessional, made him subject to penance, and left his future, however 'godly, righteous and sober' his life may have been, quite undetermined till the Day of Judgement. It made the whole essence of Reformation teaching a

hideous and soul-destroying delusion, abolished Justification by Faith only, and exalted the article of 'faith in the Catholic Church' at the expense of 'faith in the Remission of sins'.¹¹

In considering the attitude of the Reformers to the Ministry, it is necessary to say something about the theory of Apostolic Succession. Here a comment by Dr. W. H. Griffith Thomas is worth recalling:

If this means simply a historical succession of ministers as a fact, thereby emphasising the corporate and continuous idea as distinct from individualism and separation, there can be no quarrel with it. But this is not generally the case. The usual meaning is that the ministry has descended from the Apostles by a continuous transmission, and that this is the guarantee of grace in the sacraments. But the latter doctrine is so vital that nothing but a plain Divine command could justify it, since, as it is usually understood, it is foreign to the Spirit of Christ and the New Testament.

Now we can see from the New Testament that the Ministry is the gift of the Risen Christ. In Ephesians 4 St. Paul compares the ascension of Jesus to a triumph following the mighty victory of the Resurrection. He is thinking of Psalm 68 in which the God of Israel is described as a great conqueror who receives tribute after leading a train of captives. Paul is particularly impressed by verse 18, but he changed the three Hebrew words *laqachta mattanoth baadam* (you received gifts from men) to 'He gave gifts to men' and one of these gifts was the Ministry: 'It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service.' Now the Preface to the Ordinal which Neill and Willoughby say was probably written by Cranmer himself, says 'It is evident unto all men, diligently reading Holy Scripture and ancient authors, that from the Apostles' time there hath been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, priests and deacons.' It is thus claimed that the ministry of the Church of England connects itself with that of the Primitive Church. The emphasis is then put on the necessity for the minister to be called, tested and examined, and then to be lawfully ordained according to the form in the Ordinal. There is no reference here to the transmission of Orders from the Apostles. The emphasis is upon the inward call and the public recognition and authentication of that call. Our Reformers had to defend the sufficiency of our Ordinal against Rome and the necessity for an Ordinal against Anabaptists who regarded all Christians as actual or potential ministers. But they made no reference to a theory of Apostolic Succession to validate any man's ministry. In Article 23 they said

Those we ought to judge lawfully called and sent, which be chosen and called to this work by men who have public authority given unto them in the Congregation, to call and send ministers into the Lord's vineyard.

The principle is entirely scriptural. The minister, whether bishop, priest or

deacon, is called and chosen by Christ Himself and this is recognized and ratified by the ordaining bishop on behalf of the Church. Of course, the system is not immune from abuse. There have been many instances of unsuitable men being ordained and many candidates for the ministry who have been called but not accepted. In this, as in other matters, Satan never ceases to attempt to disrupt the church. Dr. Bicknell, who admits that the truth of apostolic succession can neither be proved nor disproved, thinks that the one possible centre of reunion is the historic ministry, but this is a questionable statement. What kind of fellowship could we have today with the present bishop of Durham or the present bishop of Newark, U.S.A.? The only possible basis for real fellowship among Christians is that of obedience to the living Christ in accordance with the whole revelation in Scripture.

Let us consider the value of some items of Prayer Book worship. We begin with the Psalms which as C. S. Lewis said, 'are poems, and poems intended to be sung, not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons'. The psalms have nourished the devotions of many generations of Jews and Christians. As Calvin said, they constitute the perfect anatomy of the human soul. But the theology of the psalms is all-important. The Illustrated Bible Dictionary sums it up:

The marrow of the religious life of the psalmists was undoubtedly their knowledge of God. They never tire of singing His majesty in creation. In all His works in the heavens, the earth and the sea He has made Himself known as the all-powerful, the all-knowing, the everywhere-present God. He is also the God of all history who guides everything towards the final goal which He has purposed to fulfil. . . . With such a high conception of God it is not surprising that the psalmists found their chief delight in prayer to God.

Consider the collects. A comparison of the Prayer Book collects with those of the *Alternative Service Book 1980* underlines Archbishop Ramsey's observation that it is as difficult to compose a collect as it is to write a sonnet. Some of our Prayer Book collects originated in the Gelasian or Gregorian or Leonine Sacramentaries, but others were composed in 1549. Of special note are those for Advent I and II, Christmas Day, Epiphany I, Quinquagesima, Ash Wednesday, Lent I, Easter Day, Easter I and II, Sunday after Ascension Day, Trinity II, St. Andrew's Day (1552), St. Thomas, St. Matthias, St. Mark, St. Philip and St. James, St. John Baptist, St. Peter, St. James, St. Matthew, St. Luke, St. Simon and St. Jude, All Saints. Most of the other collects were taken from the Sarum Missal with adaptations. Cranmer's genius in the use of prose shines in his collects. He was not so successful in his attempts at verse, so there was no serious attempt to translate the office hymns. It is possible that provision for congregational hymns would have been made if King Edward had lived, but the undoing of Cranmer's work by Queen Mary and the subsequent reinstatement of the Prayer Book by Queen Elizabeth brought about a

situation in which further enrichment of worship was, for the time being, impossible.

Bishop Dowden remarks

It may be, indeed, that here and there the prayers of the Church of England seem unduly lacking in warmth and emotional colour, such as are found in abundance, if not in excess, in the devotions of the Churches of the East. But on the whole we have reason for being thankful that the fault, if it be a fault, leans towards emotional reticence rather than towards emotional effusiveness. What is intended for ordinary daily use by the general body of Christian men and women should not indulge largely in high flights or impassioned utterances. But the good sense and sound literary taste of Cranmer himself may in part be credited with the generally happy result exhibited in the Prayer Book. Certainly some of his younger contemporaries were capable of a diffuseness and verbosity from which we have happily been saved.

The test of liturgy is its ability to lift our hearts and minds to God which, as St. John of Damascus said, is the essence of prayer. The achievement of our Reformers in planning and ordering the worship of the Church has stood the test of four hundred years and millions of Christians have drawn near to God and found rest in their souls through the achievement of the English Reformers and the work for which they laid down their lives.

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NOTES

- 1 A paper delivered to Church Society's Conference, Swanwick, 1991.
- 2 *The Churchman*, Volume 66 (1952) pages 92-93.
- 3 *Works*, page 209.
- 4 C. S. Carter, *op. cit.*
- 5 *On the Lord's Supper*, pages 36, 232.
- 6 *The English Prayer Book*, page 140.
- 7 *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles*, page 524.
- 8 W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, page 240 Note.
- 9 *Op. cit.* page 174.
- 10 *The Workmanship of the Prayer Book*, page 45.
- 11 *The Tractarian Movement*, page 165.