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Read Aloud for Power, Read Together for Doctrine: The English Reformed Theology of the Bible

Matthew Williams

Abstract

The English reformed theology of the Bible and preaching is primarily focussed on the instrumental function of God's words read in Scripture and expounded in preaching: his words are the instrument of salvation and transformation given and used by God among his people. But the dissemination of Scripture is not an invitation to doctrinal independence. Indeed the core structure of the English Reformed theology of the Bible and preaching can fairly be described as a balanced affirmation of the four biblical texts quoted below, positive and negative. They were sure that God would work faithfully through his word to save and sanctify people, and also sure that people would be sinful readers, destabilising themselves and others unless firmly bridled with sound doctrine. Thus the English reformers affirmed the sovereignty of God through Scripture, but did not uphold individualism in understanding Scripture.

Four Biblical Texts

You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God ... That word is the good news that was announced to you ... like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual-word milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation. (1 Pet. 1:23-2:2)

Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:14-16)

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by

human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions... many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. (2 Pet. 1:20-2:2)

There are some things in (Paul's letters which are) hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. (2 Pet. 3:16b-17)

Introduction

The words of holy Scripture be called *words of everlasting life*, for they be God's instrument, ordained for the same purpose. They have power to turn through God's promise, and they be effectual through God's assistance; and, being received in a faithful heart, they have ever an heavenly spiritual working in them.¹

The English reformed theology of the Bible and preaching focussed primarily on the *instrumental* function of God's words as instruments of salvation and transformation given and used by God among his people. But the distribution of Scripture was not an invitation to doctrinal independence. Indeed the core structure of the English Reformed theology of the Bible and preaching can fairly be described as a balanced affirmation of the four biblical texts quoted above, as they teach positively about what is accomplished by Scripture and negatively about what sinful people might do with it.

This paper contends that the English reformed theology of the Bible was thus soundly balanced with apostolic teaching. After briefly synthesising the biblical teaching, we will outline the period leading up to the official release of the vernacular Bible into church life in 1538, the vernacular homilies of 1547 and vernacular liturgy of 1549/1552, tracing how the biblical priorities emerged in the life of the Church of England.

A Biblical View

Documents from the leaders of the English Reformation echo the absolute confidence in Scripture expressed in 1 Peter and 2 Timothy. They ring with the same assurance that if the Bible is released to be read and proclaimed and expounded it will lead people to salvation and equip them for Christian living. Peter declares that the word is the instrument of God, through the announcement of men, through which his readers were led to salvation. He also exhorts them to crave that pure, spiritual-word (*logikos*)² milk, to foster their continued growth into salvation. If the word is thus the means of both regeneration and Christian growth, it makes good sense that Paul in 2 Timothy portrays Scripture as the all-purpose instrument of Christian ministry, and this view, we will see, is taken up in earnest by Cranmer.

But Cranmer also displays a cautiousness mirroring the issues raised by 2 Peter. He assumes that false teachers will arise in the church—people who will twist the newly available vernacular Scriptures to destroy themselves and destabilise others. Like Peter, he insists that the Bible is not simply ‘a matter of one’s own interpretation’, but rather there are true interpretations and false ones. So even as the vernacular Bible is freshly released into English church life, he sees a need for clarity about the correct interpretation of it.

The Archbishop thus sought a difficult agenda: he wished to maintain the stability and doctrinal cohesion of the church of England *while* radically reforming what it believes and how it worships. The initial goal of that reform was to make the vernacular Bible central to church life, because he believed the primary instrument of true reform—reform of people’s lives—was the read and preached Bible itself.

In seeking this agenda, Cranmer juggled his way to a well-balanced understanding of *sola scriptura*, which may be described as follows: ‘Scripture alone, *as understood* (not by each reader but) *by the Church being reformed by it*, has authority in the church. But misreadings by the church cannot ultimately alter the terms of salvation with God.’

History and Sources

The seeds of this distinctively English reformation can be found 150 years earlier in the work of John Wycliffe. Wycliffe had outlined a plan to give the

King of England supremacy over the English church, denied the scholastic doctrine of transubstantiation, and most crucially, pressed for an English Bible and vernacular preaching. The Lollards kept this tradition alive, circulating Wycliffe's translation and preaching where and when they could.³ Thus a costly commitment to the vernacular Scriptures had been bubbling under the surface of English church life for some time.

Tracing the factors at work in the English reformation is undoubtedly complex. It is in the early tussling with Henry VIII that the English reformed doctrine of the Bible and preaching took its shape as a *sola scriptura* that sought to maintain unity against doctrinal proliferation. It achieved this balance by emphasising the instrumental function of Scripture in salvation and sanctification alongside enforced guidelines for its accurate understanding.

G.W. Bernard has recently mounted a sustained scholarly narrative demonstrating that Henry VIII, far from opposing all aspects of the English reformation, was always masterminding a partial reformation he desired himself for his own reasons. Henry's reformation included the priority of vernacular Scripture reading and preaching, but sought concord of opinion in the realm as a higher priority.⁴

Henry was no Lutheran, in fact he was firmly convinced of the Roman view of most points of doctrine contended in the reformation, and had published his own refutation of Luther in 1521. But he was well educated in renaissance humanist disciplines, and certainly wished to reform the morals of his subjects (if not his own), and as such had other reason to value vernacular Bible texts.⁵

But Henry had a higher priority than the availability of the Bible: he was also determined to maintain the peace and stability of his realm while the continent had neither. The most obvious path to achieve this was to consolidate ecclesiastical power under his throne without a Roman counterweight, and then to exercise that power actively to intimidate doctrinal dissent.

These two threads, and the priority of political stability, are already evident in the preface to the Ten Articles of 1536 in which Henry affirms: '...that it most chiefly belongeth unto our said charge diligently to forsee and cause, that not only the most holy word and commandments of God should most sincerely be

believed, and most reverently be observed and kept of our subjects, but also that unity and concord in opinion, namely in such things as doth concern our religion, may increase and go forthward, and all occasion of dissent and discord touching the same be repressed and utterly extinguished.⁶

The second pressure, unity, clearly has the upper hand in Henry's priorities. The observance of Scripture is the 'not only', the maintenance of unity the emphatic 'but also' carrying dark threats. Henry is aware that 'diversity in opinions...have grown and sprung up in this our realm, as well concerning certain articles necessary to our salvation'⁷ and though he admits some priority to the Bible in English church life he firmly reins in what people are allowed to understand it to say. Even in those matters where the Bible is silent, he issues constraint rather than liberty, 'being very desirous to eschew not only the dangers of souls but also the outward unquietness which by occasion of the said diversity in opinions... might perchance have ensued.'⁸

The ten articles, reflecting Henry's own theological conservatism, retain as much Roman doctrine as possible in the face of the politically astute but undoubtedly reformed bishops who had lately assisted with his divorce. Yet the first of the ten articles does adjure all clergy to instruct and teach their church the Bible, although strictly in terms of the three creeds.⁹

The practical structure of Henry's twin priorities had powerful synergies with the priorities of the reformers to release the Bible into the life of the English church while holding together the unity of that church. They thus gave absolute priority to the authority of the Scriptures over all traditions, yet alongside doctrine said to be firmly grounded in those Scriptures. Thus the Bible was only unleashed on English life with firm theological guideposts and severe consequences for dissenting readings.

Why, one might ask, were they so keen to release the vernacular Scriptures into the church rather than simply teach the doctrine? The answer lies in their belief that the Scriptures are God's *instrument* for salvation and sanctification. Considering Coverdale's 'acceptable' translation only appeared in 1535, five years after Tyndale's efforts were burned, things then moved astonishingly quickly. It must have been a confusing time to be a priest. By 1538 Cromwell had issued further injunctions on Henry's behalf that every parish church must have

purchased a complete Bible in English by Easter; and keep it in a place in church available to all parishioners; and 'exhort every person to read the same, as that which is the very lively word of God'.¹⁰

Soon afterwards in 1540, a revised Bible was made available with a preface by Cranmer. Here, in a document wholly ecclesial rather than part royal edict, we can see that Cranmer's own concerns follow the outline of Henry's: he wants to promote Bible reading and restrain dissenting opinions. There was a correspondence between Cranmer's concerns for church unity and Henry's concern for political stability. That theological strata—church unity—may have been brought to the fore in Cranmer's thinking by political expediency, but it is no less wise for that.

Cranmer identifies two groups of people, some who need the spur and others the bridle with regard to the reading of Scripture.

In the former sort be all they that refuse to read, or to hear read the Scripture in the vulgar tongues; much worse they that also let or discourage the other from the reading or hearing thereof. In the latter sort be they, which by their inordinate reading, indiscreet speaking, contentious disputing, or otherwise by their licentious living, slander and hinder the word of God most of all other.¹¹

Cranmer wanted the Scriptures freely distributed to all and yet did not want all to freely distribute their opinions on the Scriptures. The vernacular Bible was intended to unleash the power of God's word in bringing people to a sound mind and genuine faith, not to introduce a sort of doctrinal individualism. To that end Cranmer introduced two more instruments of reform: vernacular common prayer and prescribed vernacular homilies. These would cause people to recite and hear sound doctrine at every service of worship, thus guiding them into a correctly balanced understanding of Scripture.

Indeed the whole principle of common prayer is an natural extension of this concern. Cranmer believed that people required guidance not just in their intake but in their output. It was not enough to pump the people full of Scripture, one had to guide what they affirmed in response to Scripture with prayers, creeds and other affirmations of the whole counsel of Scripture. Common prayer was Cranmer's strategy to rein in 'contentious disputing'.

It is also in the common prayer books that we see that Cranmer's commitment to Scriptures in the vernacular had a biblical-theological basis. His first holding of the mass in the vernacular in 1549 was on Whitsunday.¹² This service hints at Cranmer's biblical reasoning for valuing the vernacular, against any notion that the uniformity of Latin was integral to the unity of the church. Setting Genesis 11 (Babel) against Acts 2 (Pentecost) in the lectionary, we can see, as Rosendale points out, that 'the divinely inspired linguistic profusion is not a punishment but a work of recuperation, the beginning of international evangelism, through which the whole world would eventually be brought back into God's kingdom'.¹³ Cranmer thus regarded vernacular Scriptures, far from a testament to disunity, as essential to a (literally) *Pentecostal* church.

Cranmer's theology of the Bible can further be seen in his revision of the ordination rites. There was a longstanding custom of handing newly ordained clergy 'something which symbolized their role'.¹⁴ So medieval priests were given a chalice and paten, while bishops were given the gospels, pastoral staff, mitre, ring and gloves. In the first Anglican ordinal, published in 1550, Cranmer added the Bible to the chalice and bread given to priests, and gave the whole Bible and pastoral staff alone to bishops. But in the 1552 revision, all other accoutrements were removed, and both priests and bishops were given the Bible alone.¹⁵

This is powerful symbolism. It tells all clergy that the Bible is to be the all-purpose instrument of their ministry. Their job is to read the Bible, know the Bible, preach the Bible, apply the Bible, defend sound doctrine from the Bible, pastor with the Bible. It is sufficient for every task of ministry they might need to undertake, as Paul counselled Timothy (2 Tim. 3:14-16).

Yet because Cranmer knew many of the clergy had insufficient education to give expositions of the Scriptures themselves, and felt the urgent need for clear sermons across English pulpits, homilies were issued and decreed to be read to the people. The Homilies themselves are high quality sermons, both as rhetoric and as models of biblical theology, and also provide valuable insights into Cranmer's own thinking.

That the very first homily is 'a fruitful exhortation to the reading and knowledge of Holy Scripture' says a great deal about the priority of the Bible in the

English reformation. The beliefs articulated within it confirm that impression, from the opening words: ‘Unto a Christian man there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable than the knowledge of holy Scripture...and there is no truth or doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation, but that is or may be drawn out of that fountain and well of truth.’¹⁶

But they also directly affirm credal formulations as biblical, without always showing how: ‘In those books we find the Father, from whom, the Son, by whom, and the Holy Ghost, in whom, all things have their being and keeping up; and these three persons to be but one God and one substance.’¹⁷

Most crucially, the Scriptures are declared to be ‘God’s instrument...they have power to turn through God’s promise, and they be effectual through God’s assistance; and, being received in a faithful heart, they have ever an heavenly spiritual working in them’.¹⁸ We should note that this is sacramental language, like that used in Articles XXV & XXVII. We can see the pattern of the homilies themselves—preaching soaked in Scripture, quoting Scripture and appealing to Scripture may likewise hope to be God’s instrument to the same ends.

Practical-Theological Lessons

It is the two core aspects of English reformed theology of the Bible and preaching highlighted in this paper that most urgently need recovery today. We need to recover Cranmer’s trust in the instrumental effectiveness of the Bible read, preached and shared with people as the central tool of our ministries through which we expect God to work.

More contentiously for evangelicals, perhaps we have also too readily abandoned the English reformers’ assumption that we should hold ourselves to understand Scripture *together*. This may be why they were such patient reformers, urging steps in the right direction but not leaving to form their own church when they didn’t get their way.

A person who had fully embraced Cranmer’s view would say ‘the Church of England’s agreed understanding of Scripture has authority for me, and I may speak my understanding into the church’s understanding according to my authority and position in the church’. But a twenty-first century Anglican would more likely say ‘my personal understanding of Scripture alone has

authority for me and the Anglican church should make space for me to indulge that'. One could argue that Anglicans of many stripes today have swallowed an Anabaptist understanding of *sola scriptura* via the enlightenment.

The reformed documents made ample place for the arguing of improved interpretations of the Bible coming into the church (Articles VI, XX & XXI), provided they are agreed by the duly appointed authorities of the church to be faithful to the Bible. Indeed they acknowledge that where church councils have erred, those errors do not alter the actual terms of salvation with God (Article XXI); but conversely where a particular or national church ordains a particular tradition—provided it is not opposed to Scripture, but regardless of whether it is required by it—it may not be broken (Article XXXIV).¹⁹

There is some wisdom here. For what sort of fools—knowing themselves to be finite sinners who inevitably reduce and distort everything they read—would stake their souls on their *individual* present grasp of the Scriptures alone for guidance? And worse, who would teach those novelties to the vulnerable saints in the pew? It is hard to think of a riskier strategy, particularly where matters of salvation are concerned. It is surely prudent to shelter under the agreed doctrine of the communion of saints, while wrestling with tensions in one's own understanding of Scripture and, in appropriate contexts, offering our alternative readings to fellow readers for consideration and correction.

Of course, there may come a point where the church has stopped wrestling with Scripture, stopped submitting to any plausible interpretation, and is withholding Scripture from the congregation. Such was the situation of the sixteenth Century Roman Church: obviously the reformers believed the whole church could fall into error on Scripture, and there was a point to leave—but as much as possible to leave, and reform, together.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has sought to show that the English reformed theology of the Bible and preaching was well balanced and soundly biblical. In part the theological clarity Cranmer achieved was motivated by political expediency, but is it no less apt for that. He emphasised the Bible and the preaching of it as the instrument of God for salvation and sanctification, and so sought the dissemination of the vernacular Bible out of that confidence. But he did not

want that release mistaken for an endorsement of doctrinal individualism: he was as sure that men would be sinful as he was sure that God would be faithful, and so was at pains to instruct the people how to understand the Scriptures aright. Thus Cranmer neatly affirmed the sovereignty of God through Scripture, but not individuality in understanding Scripture and applying it to church life. This is a confidence, a humility, and a unity, in sore need of recovery throughout the Anglican communion today.

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ENDNOTES

1. J. Griffiths (ed.), *Certain Sermons or Homilies* (London: SPCK, 1864), p. 3.
2. *logikos* ('spiritual' milk) is difficult to translate. It does mean 'spiritual', but here its distinction from *pneumatikos* (2:5) and inherent resonance with the recurrent root *logos* are hard to ignore, implying a more 'articulated' sense of the spiritual, which I have perhaps clumsily rendered 'spiritual-word'. In the present context, Peter is showing that the word of God which came by the Holy Spirit (1:12, 23, 25), and through which they 'tasted' the goodness of the Lord when they were rebegotten (1:23, 25), is also the source of ongoing spiritual nourishment by which they will 'grow into salvation'. This fits well with Peter's understanding of the Holy Spirit's integral role in prophetic and apostolic preaching (1:11-12). See P. J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp.146-7.
3. H. O. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Vol 4* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 136.
4. G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven: Yale, 2005).
5. It is true that Tyndale's Bibles and several translators themselves were burned by Henry, but this was because of a suspicion of Protestant subterfuge through translation practices (Sir Thomas More encouraged this view in the court). But as a humanist, Henry was not opposed in principle to vernacular Scriptures—indeed when recalling Tyndale's Bible for burning in 1530 he promised to bring another more suitable translation in. Furthermore he actively promoted the reading of Scriptures in the monasteries (before later dissolving them instead due to their gross moral corruption): his first attempt to tackle immorality in the monasteries discovered in 1535 exhorted abbots to: (1) preach demonstrations to their members that the rule of their monasteries was firmly grounded in Scripture; (2) ensure that

their monastery kept members at university so that they might return with the skills to preach the Scriptures; and (3) ensure that for one hour per day all their members were to listen to an extended reading of English Scripture. The challenge for the reformers, then, was not to persuade the King of the value of a vernacular Bible, but rather to produce a translation which the King did not perceive as tainted with Lutheran 'deceit'. W. P. Haugaard, "The Bible in the Anglican Reformation," in *Anglicanism and the Bible* ed. F. H. Borsch. (Wilton: Morehouse Barlow, 1984), p. 34-36; Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 247-276.

6. C. H. Williams (ed.), *English Historical Documents, Vol V: 1485-1558* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), p. 795.
7. Williams, *English Historical Documents*, 795. The Ten Articles are also found in G. Bray (ed.), *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1994), 161-74.
8. Williams, *English Historical Documents*, 795.
9. Williams, *English Historical Documents*, 796.
10. Williams, *English Historical Documents*, 811.
11. Williams, *English Historical Documents*, 826; Haugaard, 'The Bible in the Anglican Reformation', 48-9.
12. B. T. Hartley, 'The Liturgical Reordering of the Ecclesia Anglicana: Faithful Understanding in the Elizabethan Homilies of 1563' *Anglican and Episcopal History* 76 (2007), 511.
13. T. Rosendale, "Fiery tongues: Language, Liturgy, and the Paradox of the English Reformation", *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001): 1146.
14. P. F. Bradshaw: 'Ordinals' in *The Study of Anglicanism* (rev. edn.) S. Sykes, J. Booty & J. Knight (eds.), (London: SPCK, 1998), p. 155.
15. Bradshaw, 'Ordinals', 155.
16. Griffiths (ed.), *Homilies*, 1.
17. Griffiths (ed.), *Homilies*, 2.
18. Griffiths (ed.), *Homilies*, 3.
19. For the Thirty-Nine Articles see the back of any *Book of Common Prayer* or *Australian Prayer Book*.