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**“IN THE SCRIPTURES BE THE FAT PASTURES OF THE SOUL”:
THOMAS CRANMER AND THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER**

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The English Reformation had a profound effect on how people engaged in worship, and the influence is still evident today in the Anglican church. Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer is to thank for many of the facets of Anglicanism, particularly the *Book of Common Prayer*. Throughout his life Cranmer was deeply interested in the health of the religious community in England, and held the conviction that Scripture was the basis of all education. He incorporated the importance of Scripture into all of his writing. During his time as Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer was a firm advocate of the Royal Supremacy, making him popular among the monarchy until his religious beliefs fatally clashed with Mary I, and his work to reform the church perished with him. Even though his efforts were destroyed temporarily, the state of the Anglican church lives as a testament to the longevity of his liturgy. Thomas Cranmer's development of the *Book of Common Prayer* for worship in the Church of England provides not only a beautiful method of community worship but also a model for catechesis and extended discipleship.

In order to understand the development of the *Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*, it is important to examine Cranmer's life and the causes and effects of the reformation in England. Thomas Cranmer was born on July 2, 1489 in Aslockton in Nottinghamshire, England to Thomas Cranmer, Sr. and Agnes (Hatfield) Cranmer.¹ He was educated at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he spent the bulk of his time reading and teaching, eventually earning himself a fellowship at the College in 1515.² Shortly after receiving the fellowship, Cranmer married a woman named Joan. He was forced to relinquish his fellowship even though he was not yet an ordained priest.³ During this time he accepted a readership at Buckingham College to continue his studies apart from Jesus College, and to support himself and his wife.⁴ Joan died during childbirth and Cranmer's fellowship was reinstated following his return to the celibate life. Cranmer would later secretly marry Margaret in 1532, the niece of German reformer Andreas Osiander who was instrumental in developing Cranmer's view of church reformation.⁵ He studied theology seriously and was ordained a priest in 1526.⁶ During this time, Cranmer was an advocate for Biblical learning and scholarship with an emphasis in humanism, for he was strongly influenced

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 9.

² Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, "Thomas Cranmer," *The Expository Times* 126, no. 8 (2015): 366.

³ MacCulloch, 21-22. Joan's last name is disputed, but it is said to have been Black or Brown.

⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Thomas Cranmer, Theologian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), vii.

⁵ O'Donovan, 367.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 366.

by Erasmus of Rotterdam. He continued his academic study of the Bible and other theological matters.⁷

In the late 1520s, the King of England, Henry VIII, was caught in a predicament: he desperately desired a male heir to the throne. The King was unable to produce a son with his wife, Catherine of Aragon, who was the widow of his late brother. With the help of Thomas Cranmer, Henry annulled his marriage to Catherine of Aragon in order to marry another woman in an attempt to produce a male heir. Cranmer was a key figure in seeking the resolution to this “Great Matter.”⁸ Cranmer held a firm belief that “supreme, undivided territorial jurisdiction belonged to the civil ruler by God’s appointment and institution.”⁹ This belief is evident throughout his work all his life. King Henry VIII was so pleased with Cranmer’s dedication to the matter that, upon the death of the Archbishop in 1532, Henry appointed Cranmer to the position of Archbishop of Canterbury even though he was merely a chaplain and a deacon and had very little experience.¹⁰

As Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer declared King Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon invalid in 1533, and he approved of the King’s marriage to Anne Boleyn just five days later.¹¹ The King would go on to marry Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr. Three of his children, Mary, Elizabeth, and Edward would eventually inherit the English throne. Cranmer had a strong conviction of Royal Supremacy. He believed that the English throne was the authority over the English church, not the Roman Catholic Pope; both church and state were under the authority of the King or Queen.¹² This belief was of central importance to the Archbishop, and would be the focus of the reformation. Cranmer worked with the King’s lay counsellor, Thomas Cromwell, in reforming



Portrait of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, c. 1547–1556. public domain

⁷ Bromiley, viii.

⁸ Mark Lindsay, "Thomas Cranmer and the Book of Common Prayer: Theological Education, Liturgy, and the Embodiment of Prosper's Dictum." *Colloquium* 47, no. 2 (November 2015), 197.

⁹ O'Donovan, 367.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lindsay, 198. Henry needed his marriage with Anne Boleyn to be recognized officially by the court, but he continued to have difficulties as he desired more marriages and thus, annulments.

¹² *Ibid.*

the Church of England, one of the most notable accomplishments being the development of the first official English Bible in 1539, also known as the Great Bible.¹³ During this time, Cranmer was working on the beginnings of the *BCP*, developing the Litany, as well as a preface to the Great Bible. One of Cranmer's greatest goals for reforming the church was to place English language Bibles into each English church and to construct a form of worship that would engrave Scripture into parishes across England.¹⁴ However, Henry VIII was not convinced of the importance of providing materials to his people in the vernacular. The King was more inclined to approve of the traditional Latin service, something which he had been exposed to his whole life. This gave Cranmer plenty of opportunity to showcase his ability to produce "graceful English liturgical prose," beginning with the Litany: prayers of intercession used during a worship service, which would become a major part of Anglican worship.¹⁵

King Henry VIII died in 1547 and his young son with Jane Seymour, Edward VI, inherited the throne. Under the regency of Edward VI the English reformation gained significant ground, especially in Cranmer's formal English liturgy. During that same year, Cranmer was able to secure the Gospel and Epistle being read in English, as well the Order of the Communion. Even though the service was still largely in Latin, various prayers and exhortations during Communion would become English devotionals, making the Mass more accessible to the laity.¹⁶ For example, the Prayer of Humble Access written by Cranmer was a special English prayer for the priest to recite during the administration of Communion:¹⁷

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

¹³ O'Donovan, 368.

¹⁴ Lindsay, 199.

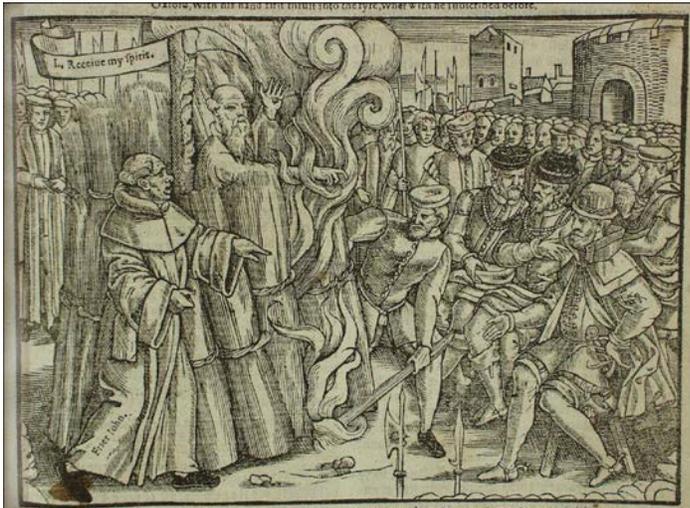
¹⁵ O'Donovan, 369.

¹⁶ Gordon Jeanes, "Cranmer and Common Prayer," in *The Oxford Guide to The Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey*, ed. Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

This prayer was included in the first edition of the *BCP*, published in 1549.¹⁸ In addition to the advancement of the English liturgy under the regency of Edward VI, Cranmer also wrote the *Ordinal*s, the *Book of Homilies*, and the *Forty-Two Articles of Religion* (preceding the more well-known *Thirty-Nine Articles* under Queen Elizabeth, which was after Cranmer's time).¹⁹ The development of a liturgy in the vernacular was increasingly important in a time of religious confusion, having recently broken ties with the Roman Catholic church, to unify the English people in their own language.

In 1553 King Edward VI died and was succeeded by his half-sister Mary I, daughter of Henry VIII and his first wife Catherine of Aragon. Under the reign of "Bloody Mary," Thomas Cranmer was forced to endure the destruction of his life's work, for Mary had reinstated Catholicism as the official religion of England.²⁰ In 1553, when rumors started spreading about Cranmer authorizing a Catholic service, he denied it and was arrested on the charge of heresy, and was to be executed by burning at the stake.²¹ During his imprisonment, he issued several recantations, professing that he was an advocate of the Catholic church and that he fully accepted



The burning of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Doctor Thomas Cranmer. Woodcut from John Foxe, The Unabridged Acts and Monuments (1576 edition)

all Catholic theology.²² It is ultimately unknown the reason for his recantations; it could have been coercion, a last chance to save his life, or other reasons.²³ Some have speculated that it was a complicated, overwhelming "crisis of conscience."²⁴ The recantations are wildly out of his character, at least in relation to how he is understood today. On the day of his execution, Cranmer asked the enormous crowd of both Catholics and Protestants

¹⁸ O'Donovan, 371.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 365.

²⁰ Bromiley, xxvii.

²¹ Jasper Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 391.

²² *Ibid.*, 390.

²³ *Ibid.*, 389.

²⁴ O'Donovan, 375.

to pray for him as he also prayed to God aloud. He retracted his recantations and cursed his right hand for writing them by forcing his arm into the fire while shouting, “This unworthy right hand!”²⁵ Cranmer was killed on March 21, 1556. Mary I was in power for five years, and became sick and died in 1558. She was succeeded by her half-sister Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth I was a strong advocate for the reformation of the Church of England, sharing Cranmer’s conviction of the Royal Supremacy, and she reinstated much of Cranmer’s work under her reign.²⁶

In order to develop a strong Prayer Book, Archbishop Cranmer had to have a mature theology, and it shows in his writing. The principles of Cranmerian theology are manifold: it is theocentric, anthropological, soteriological, Scriptural, evangelical, and communal.²⁷ First, theocentric: there is a clear emphasis on the priority of divinity over humanity, as well as the total dependence of humanity on divinity. Everything is issued from God’s graciousness, and human intentions and actions are only good if they begin and conform to God’s will.²⁸ It is anthropological because it focuses on the corruption of humanity by sin. Humans are so possessed by their own sin that they have a powerful disregard of God’s grace and mercy, so that they are deprived of the knowledge and love of God.²⁹ It is by God’s will alone that a person might be brought into this powerful love and knowledge of their Creator.

Thirdly, Cranmerian theology is soteriological because it emphasizes the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, in God’s reconciling judgement and humanity’s reception of that judgement. Cranmer provides a high, positive view of human community: “the act of faith by which the Spirit unites sinners with Christ’s righteousness is ‘lively,’ informed by love and hope, being their whole-hearted turning to God’s merciful and gracious countenance in penitence, gratitude, trust, and adoration.”³⁰ Again, it is totally the work of God, not by any means of human action. The fourth principle of Cranmerian theology is Scriptural: the sole authority and sufficiency of salvation through Jesus Christ is Scripture. It is the “comprehensive and unifying communication of the history of God’s relations,” in which

²⁵ Ridley, 408.

²⁶ George R. Balleine, “How the Reformation was at last Victorious,” in *A Popular History of the Church of England* (London: Vine Books Ltd., 1976), 114.

²⁷ O’Donovan, 375-377.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 375.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 376.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

humanity recognizes as a fundamental authority in knowing the truth of God, oneself, others, and creation as a whole.³¹

The fifth principle of Cranmerian theology is evangelical. This means that the church is an evangelical community where God's Word is proclaimed and received by the power of the Holy Spirit.³² This is part of Jesus' Great Commission, where he sends out his apostles to preach the gospel to all the nations, in addition to providing counsel and encouragement to the church.³³ More specifically, the core practice of the church is common worship.³⁴ This principle of theology is entirely present in Thomas Cranmer's liturgy. The liturgy makes meaningful, reverent, devoted worship possible among a group of people. It is practical to the faith and generates a rhythm of life that is integral to living as a Christian in a secular world. The final principle of his theology is communal, in the sense that both secular and church authorities practice communal jurisdiction over human action and morality. This can be understood in relation to the old humanity which exists in sin, and the new humanity existing in the resurrected Christ.³⁵ The new humanity belongs to the old, while simultaneously the two are interdependent of each other. Therefore, political judgement is for correcting human wrongs for the goodness of the community.³⁶ These six principles of Cranmerian theology are a window into his methods for creating his Book of Common Prayer, which serves as a sort of systematic theology for the Anglican Church.

As is clear from Cranmer's biography and his personal theology, the establishment of an English liturgy through the *BCP* was an integral part of developing the Church of England in the 16th century. The initial writing of the Prayer Book was the culmination of work that Cranmer had been doing for a decade or so before publishing.³⁷ For example, in 1538 Cranmer had published an edition of the Daily Office: a calendar of reading Scripture by the hour, for the purpose of instruction, comprehension, and Christian living.³⁸ This model of reading Scripture was Cranmer's vision of worship for the Church of England. Under the regency of Edward VI, Cranmer had the freedom to push forward in reforming the English church, which included

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 377.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

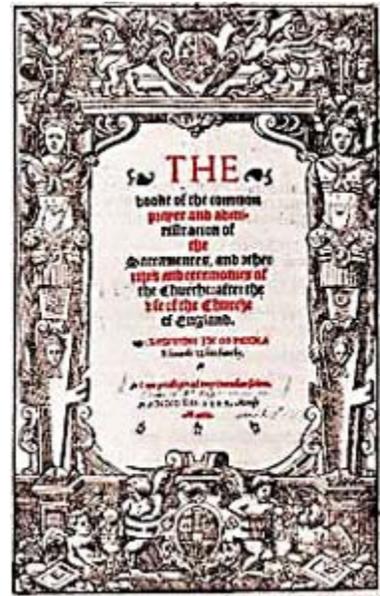
³⁷ Lindsay, 202.

³⁸ Ibid., 202-203.

publishing the first and second editions of the *BCP*, the first in 1549 and the second in 1552.³⁹ The *BCP*, the extended title being *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, after the Use of the Church of England*, included the Daily Office, Daily Morning and Evening Prayer, the Order of Communion, and other rites such as Baptism, Marriage, Ordination, among others.⁴⁰

The term *liturgy* means the work of the people: having an official liturgy means that the congregation is involved in the worship service along with the bishop, priest, and deacons. To Thomas Cranmer, this was his purpose in developing the *BCP* for use in the Church of England. It is clear that he felt that lay people should be educated and be enriched by Scripture; in his preface to the Great Bible, Cranmer wrote that, “In the Scriptures be the fat pastures of the soul... He that is ignorant, shall find there what he should learn.”⁴¹ Cranmer’s reformation was liturgical, theological, formative, and educative.⁴² Liturgically, Cranmer was able to develop a comprehensive guide to worship that would engrave on the hearts of the English people what it means to live in reverence to God and also how to live in a devoted community. Theologically, a goal of Cranmer’s was to change the faith of the English people from largely Catholic to Protestant. His reformation was formative in that it formed a standard of worship that would play a role in the Anglican church for centuries to come. Similarly, his reformation was educative because, since it was in the vernacular English, it was able to teach the English people what it meant to be a Christian.

As noted before, developing a devoted Christian community was a primary goal for Cranmer’s *BCP*. He would implement deliberately educational prayers in the vernacular into the *BCP* so as to guide readers in devotion. In addition to this, Cranmer also instituted that lay people could receive both bread and wine during the Eucharist.⁴³ Archbishop Cranmer was



Cover page from *The Book of Common Prayer*. 1549.

³⁹ Alan Jacobs, *The Book of Common Prayer, A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 12.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey G. Cuming, *A History of the Anglican Liturgy* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1982), 45-69.

⁴¹ Thomas Cranmer, “Preface to the Bible,” in *The Protestant Reformation*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 167.

⁴² Lindsay, 199.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 203.

remarkably concerned with the religious health of the community. It was important to the health of the people that four principles should be practiced: the Bible should be read through in its entirety over a year; worship should be in the vernacular to facilitate intelligent participation; rules of worship should be simplified for easier understanding; and nearly all liturgical material should come from Scripture, or should be harmonious to it.⁴⁴ All of these principles were to aid in Scriptural literacy, another important goal of Cranmer.

The liturgy was practiced in community worship, but Cranmer hoped that it would become part of the English people's daily lives. Again, translating prayers and services into the vernacular English was a major catalyst for personal and community reform. Having the opportunity to participate in worship was encouragement to the populace that Christianity was something accessible and able to be practiced. This differed significantly from Roman Catholic services where there was a heavy emphasis on preaching to educate, while Cranmer made sure to highlight education through the structure and content of the liturgy.⁴⁵ This was a remarkable innovation for catechesis. If there is participation and recitation of Scripture and prayer throughout a worship service, people are more likely to remember those words and ponder them as they leave the service and go on about their lives. The *BCP* itself was in essence a catechetical book. It was also incredibly special that it begged to be read aloud in community in worship. A tremendous part of the *BCP* was the lectionary readings: a schedule of Old and New Testament readings, together with psalms and lessons. This only strengthened its ability to teach and encourage daily practice, learning, and meditation on Scripture.⁴⁶ Perhaps one of the first Bible reading plans, the lectionary provided an opportunity for discipleship in the Anglican church that still exists in modern congregations.

The legacy of Thomas Cranmer is still living today. The *BCP* is still widely used in both Anglican and Episcopal churches throughout the world, and many subsequent editions have been published since its genesis in 1549. Cranmer's other works, such as his Homilies and the Litany, are also a large part of the Anglican canon and faith. His initial Forty-Two Articles of Religion were the basis of the later published Thirty-Nine Articles established under the reign of Elizabeth I. The *BCP* was his greatest achievement in that the English language became standardized among intellectual communities, making literature like the *BCP* more accessible to laypeople.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The education that English congregations were exposed to through the Great Bible and the *BCP* allowed for community comprehension while developing an understanding of Scripture and other prayers. It is without a doubt that Cranmer's work has had a heavy impact on the English language, education, and worship.

Because of Archbishop Cranmer, Prayer Book worship is the main expression of worship in the Anglican church. The skillful and elegant writing of the Archbishop makes the English liturgy worthy of continued use and study. Cranmer's emphasis on community worship and the educative nature of Scripture lends to the timeless beauty of the liturgy. The grace of his writing in the vernacular opened the door for the English people to participate in this special worship, engaging both their mind and heart.

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