

an essay:

## THE LEGACY OF THE THOMAS CRANMER

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## I. THOMAS CRANMER THE MAN

The Englishman Thomas Cranmer lived from 1489 - 1556 AD. He became Arch Bishop of Canterbury in 1533 AD under King Henry VIII, being instrumental in the English Reformation. He opposed “Papal Authority over English concerns” and promoted the “use of the Bible in English.” He however facilitated King Henry VIII’s adulterous lechery by granting him 3 marriage annulments, officially dissolving his King’s marriages to Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn and Anne of Cleves. When Edward VI became King of England, he served him in the same office, introducing “the First Prayer Book of 1549 [AD] and also that of 1552 [AD].”<sup>1</sup> The Book of Common Prayer was in fact largely the personal work of Cranmer himself.

When however the militant Catholic Queen Mary came to the English throne, Cranmer was accused of treason, tried for heresy, and “burnt at the stake at Oxford on 21 March, 1556 [AD].” After his arrest, he was placed under intense pressure to recant his Protestant views and embrace Catholicism, eventually signing “documents acknowledging he supremacy of The Pope and the truth of Roman Catholic doctrine.” But then having recanted his forced recantation of his Protestant faith, he was sent to the martyrdom in flames. As the flames came to engulf him, he thrust his hand that had signed his name to his recantation of his Protestant faith, crying out, “this hand hath offended!”<sup>2</sup>

## II. WHY CRANMER WROTE THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

So Cranmer used his Church office to promote and defend The Protestant cause in England. The contribution to Christianity that most marks Cranmer’s personal contribution to Protestant Christianity is Anglican Book of Common Prayer. There were at least 6 specific reasons that motivated Cranmer to labor so intensely to produce this work, each of which has given the Christian man and The Church a lasting legacy of a deeper, more personal and intense faith. It is upon these 6 points that we will focus.

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<sup>1</sup> 1, Rowell et al, “Love’s Redeeming Work – The Anglican Quest For Holiness,” p 28.

<sup>2</sup> 2, Rowell et al, “Love’s Redeeming Work – The Anglican Quest For Holiness,” p 29.

First, “Cranmer wanted to give the [English] people a liturgy in their own tongue rather than in Latin.” The Bible had not long previously been translated into English, but Church worship in English Churches was still in Latin, a language which the people did not understand and which thus “failed to reach ‘the hearts, spirit and mind’ of the laity.” Prior to this, Church services were conducted in Latin, a language that most of the laity could neither speak nor understand.<sup>3</sup>

Second, Cranmer desired to promote “edification through good preaching and systematic Bible reading.” Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer encouraged Bible-based sermons from all of Scripture, offering a lectionary that “complete[d] the New Testament three times in the course of a year and most of The Old Testament once.” This in turn required of the preacher diligent reading, study and prayer on the majority of Scripture, and not allowing him to be content with repeating the same limited number of sermons based on the same Bible passages over and over again.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer “simplified worship.” There were a confusing multitude of various books in use by The Church for conducting worship services, including “a breviary, missal, manual, pontifical, processional, consuetudinary, ordinal and Bible.” He observed that “many times there was more business to find out what should be read, than to read it when it was found out!” Cranmer took all these worship resources and combined all but The Bible into one unified and logically structured prayer book.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, prior to the advent of Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer, the English laity were more spectators than worshippers. Along with unifying and simplifying Church worship the new prayer book presented a worship format that was easy to follow, clearly understood and called for the active participation of the congregation. Worship in the English Church ceased to be confusing, “semi-secret, mysterious rites performed by a priest at a distant altar in a strange language.” The Book of Common Prayer allowed the

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<sup>3</sup> 2, Schmidt, “Glorious Companions – Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality,” p 4, paragraph 1.

<sup>4</sup> 2, Schmidt, “Glorious Companions – Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality,” p 4, paragraph 2.

Christian people of England to take part in the worship of their faith and make it their own.<sup>6</sup>

Fifth, Cranmer sought to provide his nation with a standardized form of worship that was the same in basic content and form from one locale to another. During the Middle Ages, a “great diversity of liturgical forms... had sprung up” throughout the nation. The Book of Common Prayer made it possible for an Englishman to be familiar and comfortable with the same mode of Christian worship in any Church of England.<sup>7</sup>

Sixth, Cranmer was concerned with purifying the English Church of doctrinal error and theological corruptions associated with the Latin Mass, which held that CHRIST Himself was re-sacrificed each time the service was performed. The Book of Common Prayer corrected this in the communion service by emphasizing that CHRIST’s work on The Cross is a “full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.” Cranmer’s prayer book teaches that CHRIST’s work of redemption received by the Christian man was made fully and completely once. The Christian man herein is taught that his sacrifice is “not of transubstantiated bread and wine,“ but rather to be “of praise and thanksgiving” to our Lord JESUS CHRIST.<sup>8</sup>

### III. CRANMER’S LASTING CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CHURCH

Although Cranmer was a strong supporter of The Bible in the English language for Englishmen to read directly, his most direct lasting contribution to The Church is no doubt to us via The Book of Common Prayer. It’s Bible-saturated liturgical form of worship offers many blessings to the worshipper in The Anglican tradition who employs it fully.

First, Church worship can not fully penetrate the heart of the worshipper unless it is in a language he understands. The Book of Common Prayer assures this for the

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<sup>5</sup> 2, Schmidt, “Glorious Companions – Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality,” p 4, paragraph 3.

<sup>6</sup> 2, Schmidt, “Glorious Companions – Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality,” p 4, paragraph 4 - p 5.

<sup>7</sup> 2, Schmidt, “Glorious Companions – Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality,” p 5, paragraph 1.

English-speaking Christian. Second, The Book of Common Prayer offers in depth Bible reading, preaching and prayer to both the clergy and the laity that employ it according to its schedule. Third, The Book of Common Prayer makes worship logical, easy to follow and promotes the full understanding of the worshipper.

Fourth, The Book of Common Prayer makes the worshipper an active participant in the Church service, reinforcing and deepening his sense of faith in CHRIST. Fifth, the standardization of The Book of Common Prayer allows an English-speaking Anglican to never be a stranger to the form of worship in any part of the world where it is used in Church service. Sixth, The Book of Common Prayer offers Biblically correct Christian doctrine on such things as The Eucharist, the finished work of CHRIST at The Cross and the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving owed by the Christian man to GOD.

Within The Book of Common Prayer is Thomas Cranmer's Protestant faith, for which he was willing to be martyred in the horrific flames under Bloody Queen Mary. It is ironic that, in America today one may find all of these 6 principles of Christian worship in any of the full range of denominations to various degrees - from Catholic to Anglican, from Anabaptist to Evangelical, from Baptist to Methodist, from Presbyterian to Fundamentalist.

#### IV. IN CONCLUSION

One may understandably be hard pressed to say that he, given the situation Cranmer found himself in before his martyrdom, would give his life in the flames to be true to these many Christian blessings. But one can most surely say "Amen!" and "Thanks be to GOD!" that Thomas Cranmer was a brave enough Christian man to sacrifice himself even unto death to help preserve these same Christian blessings that we take so much for granted in Christendom today!

Cranmer's greatest Christian legacy to us, The Book of Common Prayer, is the Anglican embodiment of COLOSSIANS 3:16, "Let The Word of CHRIST dwell in you

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<sup>8</sup> 2, Schmidt, "Glorious Companions – Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality," p 5, paragraph 2.

richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to The Lord!”<sup>9</sup> Cranmer’s faith might well be summed up in these 2 Bible verses: PSALM 56:10-11, “In GOD will I praise His Word: in The LORD will I praise His Word. In GOD have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me!”<sup>10</sup> COLOSSIANS 3:17, “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in The Name of The Lord JESUS, giving thanks to GOD and the Father by Him!”<sup>11</sup> In The Name of GOD The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost. AMEN!

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<sup>9</sup> 3, KJV, COLOSSIANS 3:16.

<sup>10</sup> 3, KJV, PSALM 56:10-11.

<sup>11</sup> 3, KJV, COLOSSIANS 3:17.

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