

# Cranmer's Attitude to the Bible: 'Lucerna pedibus meis verbum tuum'<sup>1</sup>

Churchman 109/1 1995

**Maurice Elliott**

*This is the first of the four articles to which Maurice Elliott referred in the preceding introduction.*

Cranmer was England's Reformer *par excellence*, and the wider Reformation of which he was part was nothing if not a Bible-movement. All of the great Protestant leaders in Continental Europe, whether first or second generation, strove to base their ideas on the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. Their overriding concern was to re-establish the Bible at the very centre of Christian doctrine and lifestyle. In practice this emphasis came to be known as the 'scriptural principle',<sup>2</sup> and this aspect of reformed teaching cannot be overstressed. In the words of Euan Cameron, it must be seen 'as a second fundamental pillar of the Reformation, alongside the theology of salvation'.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bible should have such an important role to play in Cranmer's overall theological schema.<sup>4</sup>

At the outset of this entire discussion it is vitally important that Cranmer's attitude to the Bible be accurately rehearsed, for it is this which will undergird his outlook concerning all other authority-structures. In order to arrive at this we must endeavour to reconstruct Cranmer's outlook from the various remains of his writings. Since he has nowhere left a complete 'summa theologica',<sup>5</sup> the evidence itself is piecemeal and demands such an interpretation. To facilitate this process we shall consider first a number of the most formative influences upon Cranmer as a young man. A survey of these will act as a useful introduction to the whole question of his attitude to Scripture. Thereafter a more in depth discussion of two longer treatises, his *Preface* to the Bible of 1540 and his *Confutation of Unwritten Verities*, will form the core of the analysis, and finally we shall take an overview of other miscellaneous material.

## **Formative influences**

Cranmer's close relationship with the text of Holy Scripture can be traced back to the loss of his first wife, 'Black Joan of the Dolphin', during childbirth in 1515. Until this time, as a young scholar at Cambridge, his studies had been limited to logic, philosophy, Greek, Hebrew and certain classical authors. Now distraught at losing both his wife and new-born child he turned to the pages of the Bible for solace, and there discovered all the spiritual comfort which he so desperately wanted. Much later, in his *Preface* to the English Bible of 1540, Cranmer, adopting the words of St Chrysostom, alluded to this period, which had been a turning-point in his whole development:

The loss of thy dear and well-beloved causeth thee to mourn . . . Where canst thou have armour or fortress against thine assaults? Where canst thou have salves for thy sores, but of holy Scripture?<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note in passing that at the very end of his life Scripture performed a crucially similar function for Cranmer. While in prison awaiting the disputation of their

doctrine at Oxford in 1555, Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer and Bradford read the New Testament to each other, and it was this which restored their flagging morale.

The convictions that Cranmer was to gather during the months following the death of his first wife were to remain with him for the rest of life.<sup>7</sup> He became so utterly persuaded as to the necessity of biblical understanding that, upon his appointment as University Examiner in 1526, he insisted that no undergraduates should take their degrees until they had demonstrated themselves conversant with Scripture. Such an approach was unusual, given the received academic emphasis upon the study of Scholasticism,<sup>8</sup> but Cranmer stuck to his new-found principles, only too aware of 'the deplorable ignorance of Scripture which was so widespread among parish priests'.<sup>9</sup>

Henry sent Cranmer to act as his ambassador at the German Imperial Court in March 1532. At Nuremburg the inexperienced cleric found himself exposed for the first time to a town which was completely under Lutheran control.<sup>10</sup> Many features of life in the new environment were different, and among the most striking in terms of religious practice was the continual reading of Scripture, with an entire chapter prescribed for each day. Naturally this could only reinforce the ambassador's already considerable inclination towards the importance of biblical teaching. Later, in his work as a liturgist, Cranmer implemented precisely the same principle in the daily practice of the English Church. In his *Preface* to the 1549 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* he declared his intention of tackling the difficulties created by so many interruptions to continual reading:

And for a readiness in this matter, here is drawn out a calendar for that purpose, which is plain and easy to be understood; wherein the reading of holy scripture is so set forth, that all things shall be done in order, without breaking one piece thereof from another.<sup>11</sup>

Cranmer's increasing emphasis upon the Bible marked him very conspicuously as a son of the Erasmian school of thought. The Bible had become for him the supreme source of authority in every aspect of daily living, and especially in the spiritual realm. Naturally he could adhere to such a view only by abrogating the authority and jurisdiction of the Pope, and this conflict of interests was one which endured to the very end of his life.

In 1532 Henry appointed Cranmer to the see of Canterbury and he immediately brought with him the desire to promote Scripture. Perhaps the most obvious way in which he set about achieving this was to call for a new English translation of the Bible. It took some time to complete this mammoth task, but eventually in 1539 the new text of the third authorised translation in as many years was ready to be published. Cranmer himself wrote the *Preface*. However the whole work was not issued until the following year because the Archbishop insisted that his copy be first submitted to the King for his royal approval. A more detailed consideration of this *Preface* will extend our appreciation of his attitude to Scripture.

### **The Preface to the Bible of 1540<sup>12</sup>**

The publication of the Bible in English represented a milestone in Cranmer's programme for the reform of the Kingdom. One of the great objectives of Continental Protestantism had been the use of the vernacular so that the people might understand both the service and the Scripture as well as the priests. Now at last Cranmer was in a position, by the authority of the King, to insist that the same principles of intelligibility be adhered to in England.

The *Preface* itself is a typical piece of Cranmerian prose, marked throughout by close attention to detail and the presentation of a balanced view, and from it we can begin to detect the recurrent way in which Cranmer attempted to play off one source of authority against another. The final words are his customary acclamation of the monarch—‘God save the King’. In this instance, however, it was more than mere custom which was at work, for in practice it was only by means of the King’s final authority that he dared to introduce the new scriptural authority.

In the *Preface* Cranmer seeks to address ‘two sundry sorts of people’, who portray opposite ends of the contemporary theological spectrum, those that are ‘too slow, and need the spur’ and those that ‘seem too quick, and need more of the bridle’:

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, whereof they would seem to be the greatest furtherers.<sup>13</sup>

Cranmer intends to rebuke both extremes. Could this be the origin of the classical Anglican *via media*? In his reproach of the first grouping Cranmer makes his defence of using the vernacular:

And as touching the former, I would marvel much that any man should be so mad as to refuse in darkness light; in hunger, food; in cold, fire: for the word of God is light; . . . food; . . . fire.<sup>14</sup>

That much said, however, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the three biblical verses which he includes are precisely not in the vernacular, but rather in Latin. Of course this may not be of major import in the context of a much fuller argument such as is the *Preface*. Nevertheless it does already raise the question as to Cranmer’s complete consistency of thought and indeed of practice.

Cranmer wishes to reassure those who are reticent concerning the introduction of the common language. They may have been justifiably uncertain in the very initial stages of his new regime, but the fulness of time has now arrived and they are left without further excuse:

I can well think them worthy pardon, which at the coming abroad of scripture doubted and drew back. But such as will persist still in their wilfulness, I must needs judge, not only foolish, froward, and obstinate, but also peevish, perverse, and indurate.<sup>15</sup>

The words are written out of strong conviction and it is quite clear from them that Cranmer was someone who did not shrink from speaking his mind in matters of importance.

The basis of Cranmer’s argument for the vernacular is a two-fold appeal to antiquity. In the first instance it had been customary ‘not much above one hundred years ago’ for the Bible to be read in the vulgar tongue. Consequently it is the use of Latin itself, and not the re-introduction of the vernacular, which is the intrusion upon the historic norm. Secondly, the Archbishop seeks to take his stand upon the shoulders of St Chrysostom. The quotation which he includes is almost excessively lengthy, running to over one hundred lines, and its thrust is to assert the necessity of private reading of Scripture as a buttress to preaching. Before looking at its content, however, it is worth pausing to identify yet another vital aspect of Cranmer’s thinking in regard to the Bible which emerges from this.

It was Cranmer's belief, along with all his fellow Reformers, that to be a Bible Christian was to be an orthodox Christian. Again and again he returns to the safe pastures of the Early Church Fathers in order to draw support for his case. The 'Reformation' was precisely that: a re-forming of what had already been current in the earlier years of the Christian era and which had become obscured to some extent behind the various medieval abuses. In Cranmer's own mind reformed thinking, not least in the area of the Bible, was essentially 'catholic'. Much later in his Appeal at his Degradation Cranmer reiterated the same principle:

And touching my doctrine of the sacrament, and other my doctrine, of what kind soever it be, I protest that it was never my mind to write, speak, or understand any thing contrary to the most holy word of God, or else against the holy catholic church of Christ; but purely and simply to imitate and teach those things only, which I had learned of the sacred scripture, and of the holy catholic church from the beginning, and also according to the exposition of the most holy and learned fathers and martyrs of the church.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to the *Preface* we may observe that the Bible for both Chrysostom and Cranmer was to be seen as a source of spiritual strength and nourishment in the midst of life's trials and temptations. We have already noted how Cranmer himself had come to prove this truth in his own experience. The Scriptures were by their very nature, being inspired by the Holy Spirit, accessible to 'publicans, fishers and shepherds' for their edification as much as they were to the wise and learned. Again here we are brought face to face with an important reformed idea, namely that of the perspicuity and self-interpreting nature of Scripture. Of itself this theme might be sufficient to illustrate Cranmer's belief that the Bible was an intensely practical book. The point, however, is driven home as Cranmer proceeds to list the various categories of persons to whom the book's message is relevant—'priests, laymen, lords, ladies, officers, tenants, and mean men, virgins, wives, widows, lawyers, merchants, artificers, husbandmen . . .'<sup>17</sup>

Turning to his second grouping, those who would move too quickly, Cranmer begins by affirming that every good gift has the potential to be abused. In this connection Scripture is no exception. He therefore urges both caution and reverence on all who intend to read the book:

I would advise you all, that cometh to the reading or hearing of this book, which is the word of God, the most precious jewel, and the most holy relic that remaineth upon the earth, that ye bring with you the fear of God, and that ye do it . . . to the honour of God.<sup>18</sup>

For Cranmer, while Scripture was undoubtedly the living word of the living God, it was itself no more than a means to the end of worshipping God. It was neither to be revered in and of itself, nor debated over to no constructive end, but employed only in as much as it could enable the Church to progress in godliness.

Again placing himself firmly upon Patristic shoulders, this time those of St Gregory Nazianzene, Cranmer speaks against presumptuous interpretation of Scripture by the unlearned and he outlines the requisite fourfold approach: first, a man must cleanse himself, and secondly, it may not be appropriate to study the Bible on every given occasion. Both of these allude to the need for humility. Next Cranmer, through Gregory, suggests that discernment should be exercised in the choice of an audience for a scriptural disputation—'there and among those that be studious to learn, and not among such as have pleasure to trifle'<sup>19</sup>—and finally, he cautions against wading in too deeply in matters of difficulty. Above

all there is the need to come to Scripture with an open mind, willing to be persuaded by its clear teaching and to reform one's life accordingly.

As a *Preface* this piece must have been an admirable introduction to the biblical text which followed it. The Reformers, not least Cranmer, were in many ways taking a huge risk in making a book with the reputation of Holy Scripture more widely available. They could not have known all of the effects that its circulation might cause. As regards Cranmer in particular we are left with the impression of a man for whom the Bible was of first importance. By the time of publication for this edition he had already been attempting to demonstrate its authority in his own life for some twenty-five years. Such commitment, however, had not blinded him to the inevitable problems which the scriptural text itself might throw up in the life of the Church, and it was for this reason that he favoured restricted access for the common people. Cranmer's attitude to the Bible is refreshingly balanced between open submission and, if and when appropriate, humble questioning, while all the time maintaining that its teaching held the answer to every human situation.

### **A Confutation of Unwritten Verities<sup>20</sup>**

It is possible to deal more briefly with this text since much of it merely recapitulates points already adduced from the *Preface*. It is important, however, to begin by identifying its proper origin and context. The *Confutation* was first published in 1582 as 'translated and set forth by E.P.'. The title-page attributes the work to 'Thomas Cranmer, late archbishop of Canterbury' and Strype suggests that Cranmer's original composition be dated circa 1547.<sup>21</sup> The extant text stands replete with an extensive preface, and it is generally accepted that this, along with various other parts, must have been added by the translator. For that reason I intend to concentrate upon the eleven chapters which form the core of the argument.

The *Confutation* is a mammoth defence of the sufficiency of Scripture and this is effectively summarised by the title of the first section:

That the word of God, written and contained within the canon of the bible, is a true, sound, perfect, and whole doctrine, containing in itself fully all things needful for our salvation.<sup>22</sup>

The chapter itself proceeds to list twenty-four biblical quotations, all of which point very clearly to Scripture's view of its own centrality for the life of faith, and to the dangers of either adding or detracting from what is contained therein. To take but one example here, Cranmer cites the book of Deuteronomy:

Whatsoever I command you, that take heed you do only to the Lord; and put nothing thereto, nor take aught therefrom.<sup>23</sup>

For Cranmer, as for all the Reformers, the message of the Bible was complete. It was by this medium that God had chosen to provide for the spiritual needs of humanity, and it would be ignored or tampered with at man's own peril. Such is the thesis of his argument in the *Confutation*, and the remaining ten chapters merely act to buttress this.

As we might expect Cranmer turns very quickly to Patristic sources<sup>24</sup> and this in fact forms the longest single section. Again, as before, his intention is to show that the reformed emphasis on the Bible is nothing new since even these great saints and scholars were unable to prove any Christian doctrine except from Scripture. His concluding statement bears witness to his findings:

The school-authors call the stay of our faith, the truth shewed of God, and contained in the canon of the bible.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover this same 'scriptural principle' can be applied to the great General Councils of the Church. Throughout the *Confutation* Cranmer is once more making a case for the essential catholicity of his position, and naturally this must bring into focus the counter claims of the Papist position. In the next four chapters he seeks to address these directly. Those with which he deals are the oracles of angels, apparitions of the dead, supposed miracles and the weight of custom or tradition. At every stage in his argument he blends together biblical verses and citations of the Early Fathers as a means of negating the Romanist viewpoint.

Chapter 8 brings us back to the crux of the argument and it will profit our discussion to consider its contents at greater length. Cranmer begins by re-asserting the issue of scriptural sufficiency:

The old testament was sufficient for the Jews; and why shall not both the new and the old suffice us?

Christ and the apostles proved all their doctrines by the law and the prophets. What an arrogance is it then in us, to teach any thing which we can neither prove by the law, the prophets, the apostles, nor the evangelists.<sup>26</sup>

Returning to his favourite domain of Patristics, Cranmer goes on to infer that every battle that was ever fought by the Fathers with the heretics of their own day was precisely aimed at defending the scriptural message. In fact no-one could ever be accused of heresy 'but for things which are not contained in the scriptures'.<sup>27</sup> Any degree of moving away from the word of God in the Bible must entail, as Cranmer sees it, an infusion of uncertainty into the life of the Church, and indeed he boldly asserts that this is exactly what has happened in the Roman communion. Ultimately the Scriptures are vital for the continuance of the true faith since 'faith cometh by hearing of God's word',<sup>28</sup> and in addition God has threatened to punish those who refuse to accept his prescribed means of authoritative rule for doctrine and life.

What emerges repeatedly is that the Archbishop was utterly convinced that the Bible contained everything which was essential. Elsewhere this same idea is reiterated in the Sixth Article of Religion, which also owes its origin, if not its final form, to Cranmer:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.<sup>29</sup>

To finish his argument Cranmer reverts to dealing with Papist objections to his position and, again demonstrating himself to have a keen mind and a logical approach, he closes one potential loophole. Having already emphasised the importance of essentials, he now makes explicit the necessary corollary of this, namely that the 'scriptural principle' leaves men free to differ in non-essentials. This is a further feature of Cranmer's thinking which will prove vital to our complete understanding of his view of authority.<sup>30</sup>

### **Miscellaneous Writings**

Thus far we have observed that Cranmer believed solidly in the Bible as God's unique revelation of himself and his supreme means of authority for the life and witness of the

Church. As a final contribution to this chapter we turn to a selection of Cranmer's other writings, all of which testify to the same convictions.

From Cranmer's extant correspondence with other Reformers it is interesting to note how he regularly returns to the theme of the Bible as pointing to their common concerns and indeed to the whole purpose and nature of the Church. For example, in a letter to Melanchthon of early 1549, Cranmer uses Scripture to help describe the situation in which the English Church was finding itself:

We are experiencing, most learned Melanchthon, the truth of all that our Lord Jesus Christ has foretold respecting the trials of his church. 'But God is faithful, who will not suffer his people to be tempted above that they are able, but will also with the temptation make a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it.'<sup>31</sup>

The verse is from 1 Cor 10:13 and it aptly demonstrates how Cranmer considered the message of the Bible to be unceasingly relevant.

A second pertinent example of Cranmer's use of the Bible in his dealings with fellow-reformers is in his letter to Martin Bucer of 1549 inviting the German to come to England. The Archbishop's opening sentence immediately betrays his continuing, staunch adherence to the biblical, reformed faith:

I have read your letter . . . , in which you . . . inform us that you can scarcely preside in the ministry of the word in your city. With groanings therefore I call out with the prophet, 'Shew thy marvellous loving-kindness, O thou that savest them which trust in thee from those that rise up against thy right hand'.<sup>32</sup>

By implication we may infer that, for Cranmer, to rely upon God entailed relying upon his word as found in the Bible and endeavouring to proclaim its message.

Taking this last idea a step further we should note that Cranmer was also a man who sought to put theory into practice. His view of the ministry was that it should be a ministry of the word, and we need look no further than his *Homilies* to observe that his model sermons were nothing if not scriptural.<sup>33</sup> At no point in these does he ever stray far from the yardstick of the Bible in very general terms, and indeed the texts themselves are interwoven with precise quotations. As far as the Archbishop was concerned, the preacher might derive his authority to proclaim any message only from the pages of the Bible.

Moreover we may assert that Cranmer was determined that all those under his scriptural authority might live by the same rule. In 1548 he undertook a visitation of Canterbury diocese and in this he persistently comes back to the theme of Scripture. For example, Item 10 reads:

Whether they have preached, or caused to be preached, purely and sincerely, the word of God, in every of their cures, every quarter of the year . . . exhorting their parishioners to works commanded by the scripture, and not to works devised by men's phantasies besides scripture. .

<sup>34</sup>

In Item 17 Cranmer intends to bring his clergy back to the importance of using the vernacular and that the Scriptures ought to be made easily available to all who show an interest in their teaching:

Whether they have discouraged any person from reading of any part of the bible, either in Latin or English, but rather comforted and exhorted every person to read the same, as the very lively word of God, and the special food of man's soul.<sup>35</sup>

Much of the same principles emerge from the injunctions of his visitation in Hereford diocese as early as 1538.<sup>36</sup>

Lastly, even in his own personal life Cranmer displays himself determined to implement Scripture's teaching. In a letter to Bucer's widow in 1552 he relates the fact that he is compelled to act on behalf of her welfare precisely because the word of God commands 'that offices of kindness . . . be afforded' for the loss of her husband.<sup>37</sup>

From the evidence that has been presented it cannot be doubted that Thomas Cranmer believed in the supreme authority of the Bible. At a relatively early age he had discovered the secret of its riches and the persuasion that this insight afforded him became the governing factor for all his subsequent theology. As such he was a typical Reformer. The great goal of Cranmer's life was to share the Scriptures, as he had come to know them, and to ensure that their newly reconstituted place at the heart of both Church and State might continue long after his personal influence was gone. Naturally, however, the full picture is never as straightforward as this summary might suggest. In pursuing his objective within the context of sixteenth-century England Cranmer needed some other authority greater than his own to implement the changes. It was here, as we shall see, that his view of the monarchy was to become crucial. More immediately it behoves us to consider his attitude to the Papacy as that source of authority which he was attempting to leave behind.

**MAURICE ELLIOTT** is curate at St Patrick's Church, Coleraine

- 1) Psalm 119:105 'Your word is a lamp to my feet'. Cranmer quotes this verse in his *Preface* to the Bible of 1540, J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP 1846) p 118. Further references from this book will be abbreviated to CW (Cranmer's Works).
- 2) Martin Luther's famous slogan was 'sola scriptura', 'by Scripture alone'. The Reformers appeal to the sole authority of the Bible as the infallible word of God over against human opinion and ecclesiastical tradition.
- 3) E Cameron *The European Reformation* (Oxford 1992) p 136
- 4) The Huguenot historian J H Merle d'Aubigné makes an apposite point: 'The Reformation of England, perhaps to a greater extent than that on the continent, was effected by the Word of God', *The Reformation in England* Vol 1 (London: Banner of Truth Trust 1962) p 143.
- 5) Many of the great thinkers in the history of the Church have written exhaustive theological treatises covering all aspects of doctrine. One obvious example from the sixteenth century is *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin. The term *Summa Theologica* itself is the title of Thomas Aquinas' *magnum opus* in the thirteenth century.
- 6) CW p 120

- 7) J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 21
- 8) The term is best regarded as the medieval movement, flourishing in the period 1250-1500, which placed great emphasis upon the rational justification of religious belief. For a full discussion of Scholasticism see A E McGrath *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: OUP 1987) pp 86-93.
- 9) J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 22
- 10) Cranmer's appointment was as resident Ambassador to the Court of the German Emperor. Charles V resided in turn in different parts of his Empire, and was at this stage travelling from Brussels to Ratisbon via Nuremburg.
- 11) CW p 517
- 12) CW pp 118-125
- 13) CW p 118
- 14) CW p 118
- 15) CW p 119
- 16) CW p 227
- 17) CW p 121
- 18) CW p 122
- 19) CW p 123
- 20) CW pp 1-67
- 21) See Cox's Introduction to the *Confutation* CW pp 5-6
- 22) CW p 19
- 23) CW p 19. Deut 12:32
- 24) CW pp 22-36. Chapter 2 is entitled 'That the Writings of the old Fathers, without the written Word of God, are not able to prove any doctrine in religion'.
- 25) CW p 36
- 26) CW p 52
- 27) CW p 52
- 28) CW p 53
- 29) *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: CUP 1960) p 337
- 30) Cranmer's understanding of 'adiaphora' will be treated more fully in the fourth article of this series.

- 31) CW p 426
- 32) CW p 424
- 33) There are three extant *Homilies*, 'Of Salvation', 'Of Faith' and 'Of Good Works annexed unto Faith' CW pp 128-150.
- 34) CW p 155
- 35) CW p 155
- 36) CW pp 81-2
- 37) CW p 434