

# The Giant and the Dwarfs

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*This forms the conclusion to Maurice Elliott's series of four articles concerning Cranmer's attitude to authority which have been published in Churchman vol 109/1-4.*

In 1563 Queen Elizabeth wrote to a Mr Herd requesting that:

the collections or common-places gathered and written by the late archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer... be set abroad... to the greater fruit and better furtherance of Christ's church.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of Mary's reign the winds of change were blowing in yet another direction and the thinking of Cranmer was once more acceptable on the ecclesiastical agenda. At the end he had bravely faced death for his 'heretical' beliefs, but now, less than seven years later, those same beliefs were back at the centre of the English establishment's programme for reform. Nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to realise that the crown, to which he had been so utterly devoted, was now actively using its own authority to pursue the very objectives which he had introduced. In that sense the Elizabethan Settlement was little more than a restoration of Cranmer's own beliefs.

That said, however, what of Cranmer's enduring contribution, not only in the years following his death, but even today? As the founding father of modern 'Anglicanism', the old doctor should have something to say to those in the contemporary theological quagmire. It was the mediaeval writer, Peter of Blois, who once observed concerning the status of the ancients:

We are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants; thanks to them, we see farther than they. Busying ourselves with the treatises written by the ancients, we take their choice thoughts, buried by age and human neglect, and we raise them, as it were, from death to renewed life.<sup>2</sup>

As the man upon whom fell the weight of the English Reformation Thomas Cranmer is without doubt such a 'giant'. The preceding articles, while not ignoring his weaknesses, have demonstrated both the depth and the breadth of his thinking. The responsibility, therefore, falls upon us, his late twentieth-century 'dwarfs', to address how we might 'raise [his] thoughts...to renewed life'.

Of primary importance here has to be the whole question of circulation and access. Even the publication of this series of articles<sup>3</sup> represents some progress on the long road to better recognition, but for many, even among those ordained as church leaders, Cranmer's insights sadly remain like the proverbial 'light under a bushel'. The next step has to be a major effort to raise Cranmer's profile within the wider Anglican communion, an effort which will depend on an unshakeable conviction that the great Reformer still has much to offer that is relevant to current issues.

Within Anglicanism Cranmer's undying legacy is undoubtedly his emphasis upon the authority of the Bible. As one of the major magisterial Reformers he would have had no difficulty in subscribing to any of Luther's great maxims, 'by Scripture alone', 'by grace

alone' and 'by faith alone'.<sup>4</sup> To update the idiom we might infer that Cranmer was a prototype Anglican 'evangelical', one for whom Scripture was both supreme and straightforward. His was an essentially simple faith based on reading, understanding and obeying what the Bible taught, and it is precisely here that we, his successors, must begin to hear and heed his voice.

To be an evangelical Christian has *in principle* always entailed being a Bible Christian and biblical truth lies at the heart of the Anglican formularies to which only a minority now wholeheartedly subscribe. We, like Cranmer, need to rediscover those essential doctrines of the faith, for nowadays it is all too common to hear reference to a whole variety of differing shades within the evangelical spectrum, whether conservative or charismatic or liberal or 'post-' (whatever that might mean!). If we are prepared to follow Cranmer's lead, we will quickly reject this sort of labelling, emphasise the centrality of Scripture and pursue its agenda rather than our own.

Cranmer's primary concern was the reading and the hearing of Scripture and his overriding aim was to make the Church of England 'the greatest Bible-reading Church in the world'.<sup>5</sup> It was his conviction that the Bible, being the living word of the living God, could speak for itself and that the Church's task was primarily to make it available. This same principle remains the key to living and healthy churches today. Those who have been set apart for leadership in the Church must renew both their confidence in biblical preaching and their commitment to personal Bible study. Thomas Cranmer was nothing if not a man who led by example. It is time for his 'dwarfs' to grow up a little.

Furthermore it cannot be overlooked that all of Cranmer's liturgical compositions, which remain unsurpassed, are woven deliberately and extensively around the text of Holy Scripture. It was never his intention that they should become cast in stone, lest that should make worship a linguistic and cultural anachronism. His driving concern was that the worship of the Church be biblical, devout, sincere and to that end 'understood of the people'.<sup>6</sup> Liturgical renewal, therefore, was to be an ongoing process – in his own lifetime Cranmer alone was responsible for two Prayer Book editions<sup>7</sup> – and its touchstone had to be the Bible. In the light of this it is more easily defensible that liturgical revision and even the creation of entirely new services have become a virtual industry for our present generation. Every effort should have been made, however, to ensure that biblical truth and biblical language were not neglected within these new compositions. A biblical liturgy which is at points obscure is much preferable to an unbiblical one, whether fully intelligible or not.

Cranmer of course was not perfect and it is possible to trace one of his weaknesses precisely at the level of his understanding of the Bible. Much of his thinking, not least about the divine right of the king, was rooted in Old Testament theology and the charge which he must face is that he gave too much credence to certain ideas of the Old Covenant, whilst not sufficiently relating these to the teachings of Christ and of the apostles.

Cranmer's biblical theology also has significance for the areas of both ecumenism – which for him could have taken place only under the agreed authority of Scripture<sup>8</sup> – and inter-faith dialogue, wherein, we may assume, he would have witnessed without compromise to the uniqueness of Christ with the objective that others might come to share his convictions. Is it too much to suggest here that some of his 'dwarfs' are in danger of forgetting their true commitment?

To return to the question of the monarchy and the whole matter of Church-State relations: it is clear from our knowledge of the sixteenth century that all sides in the political and ecclesiastical arenas were committed to the concept of royal supremacy, albeit for very different reasons. Whereas conservatives, such as Gardiner, viewed the monarch as the defender of Catholic orthodoxy, the reforming party saw the king as the necessary agent for any significant change. As for Cranmer, his understanding of royal headship within the Church demonstrates him at his most ambivalent. Although he had in theory committed himself to the Bible's ultimate authority, there were numerous occasions when his devotion to the king superseded this. At the end of his life, after much agony and heart-searching, proper submission towards the truth of Scripture did overcome this meekness towards the monarch's authority. Such a development, however, was simply a qualification, and not ever an abandonment, of the concept of the royal supremacy.

In view of this ambivalence there is surely much which needs to be reconsidered within the Church of England about the nature and purpose of an established church. It is to be welcomed that the Church retains an influence in society and a voice in important legal and ethical decisions through its constitutional position and its appointed representatives in Parliament, but the question still remains: has not the time now come for a serious rethink of the Church's relationship with the state? It is Christ alone who is the head of the Church, both temporally and spiritually.<sup>9</sup> The Church of England would do well to re-appraise its faithfulness to its calling and its necessarily new role within a nation and a world which are changing rapidly. Its leaders must ensure that continuing tradition and a position of privilege do not become a stumbling-block to either faith or membership, through forgetfulness of the weighty responsibilities which privilege involves.

In every area of authority Cranmer was at the same time both strong and weak. While there is much about his own understanding which is commendable, there are also many loopholes and discrepancies, and this same character-pattern holds good for his attitude to the episcopate. Cranmer's reforms at this level were well-intended and went a long way towards removing the abuse of episcopal privilege, which was prevalent. The problem from our point of view is that many of his later ideas were informed more by contemporary actualities, such as nascent presbyterianism and social conventions, than by the biblical text itself, and could be described as to some degree reactionary. He made many reforms in the ministry, revived preaching, and restored clerical marriage. Yet of all the areas considered it is with regard to the episcopal ministry that Cranmer still had perhaps furthest to travel in his reforming policies. Although he recognized the original identity between bishop and presbyter, he did not assimilate them so much in practice. It almost goes without saying that those charged with episcopal oversight today, just like Cranmer himself, continue both to delight and to disappoint, to lead and to lapse. We could do worse than to draw the attention of our present bishops to his recurrent emphasis upon inner calling and virtue, coupled with a Scripture-based ministry of teaching and pastoral care.

The focus of these articles has been that Thomas Cranmer was in every sense a man of authority. He himself could be highly authoritarian and his whole character was moulded by interaction with various forms of authority. It has been said that Cranmer 'could be a formidable opponent'<sup>10</sup> and he certainly did have many strengths; but against this we must not forget his inherent lack of courage and inconsistency:

While we render all justice to the sincerity of the Cambridge doctor, we must not be blind to his weaknesses, his subserviency, and even a certain degree of negligence.<sup>11</sup>

Here then are the two sides of Cranmer's personality. On the one hand he was forceful and even domineering; on the other he could be inconsistent, insipid and excessively submissive; and it is this ambivalence which must undergird any lasting appraisal of his relevance today. As Merle d'Aubigné suggests:

He was a reed and not an oak – a reed that bent too easily, but through this very weakness he was able to do what an oak with all its strength would never have accomplished.<sup>12</sup>

The assertion here is quite clear. Had it not been for Cranmer, with all his brilliance as well as his foibles, the Reformation in England might never have happened in the first place. In order to be reformed, the English realm, especially under a tyrannical man like Henry, needed someone just like Cranmer. The early and mid-sixteenth century were years of utter transformation at virtually every level of English society, and it is Cranmer who must be credited for much of the impetus underlying some of these changes. He may have lacked a consistent portrayal of integrity, he was ambivalent and at times hypocritical, we might not agree with absolutely everything for which he stood; but in spite of all this he was a courageous, highly intelligent and above all godly man. The English Church continues to owe him a great debt, particularly for his attitude to authority. It was this attitude more than anything else which made him the Reformer that he was, and which permits us to see his thinking as still relevant to the Church in our day. From the point of view of the English-speaking Reformation Thomas Cranmer was a 'giant' of a man.

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Endnotes:

- 1) J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP 1846)
- 2) Quoted in T George *Theology of the Reformers* (Leicester 1988) p 21
- 3) *Churchman* vol 109/1-4
- 4) *Sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*. The 'Magisterial Reformation' may be understood as the mainline reform movements. The term itself is used as opposed to the 'Radical Reformation' of the Anabaptists and the ensuing 'Counter Reformation' of the Roman Catholic Church. For a fuller discussion of this see A E McGrath *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford 1988) pp 6-11.
- 5) S Neill *Anglicanism* (London 1989) p 54
- 6) cf Article 24 *The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion*
- 7) Cranmer's first Prayer Book was published in 1549 and followed by his more explicitly reformed version of 1552.
- 8) See 'Cranmer's Attitude to the Papacy' *Churchman* vol 109/2.
- 9) Col 1:18

- 10) P N Brooks *Cranmer in Context* (Lutterworth 1989) p 72
- 11) J H Merle d'Aubigné *The Reformation in England* vol 1 (London: Banner of Truth Trust 1962)  
p 475
- 12) Merle d'Aubigné p 210