

THE
REFORMATION
IN
ENGLAND

*and the influence of
Thomas Cranmer*

An Address given by

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THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND AND THE INFLUENCE OF THOMAS CRANMER

Commentaries on Thomas Cranmer have varied. The priest of Scarborough said that "he is a hosteler and hath as much learning as the gooslynges upon the grene that goo yonder".

- Or the brutal forthrightness of Dr. Martin at his trial: "There was a compact between you and the King: give me the Archbishop of Canterbury and I will give you licence to live in adultery."

Obviously the English Reformation did not begin with Cranmer, or end with him. In a recent book by A.G. Dickens entitled, "The English Reformation", the author has included under the Chapter heading "The Abortive Reformation", the influence of Wycliffe and the Lollards in the 14th and 15th Centuries. Eventually this movement had to continue underground.

Dickens remarks, "That Lollardy thus survived and contributed in some significant degree towards the Protestant Reformation, is a fact based upon massive and incontrovertible evidence". (P. 37)

The visitor to Canterbury Cathedral may read down the list of the occupants of that ancient See and see the simple words, "Cranmer - Burned for heresy".

The Martyrs' Memorial at Oxford will remind those who see it that Cranmer and others like Bishops Ridley and Latimer refused to compromise the truth as they had experienced and as they understood it in the Scriptures.

The niches, still obvious today, in the wall of the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin at Oxford will indicate the place where the platform was erected for the mock trial of Cranmer - degraded, accused, condemned, yet victorious.

Thomas Cranmer was born near Nottingham in 1489. His schooling was severe and damaged his memory and his spirit. He was much more of a tough than the phrase "gentle scholar" suggests. In his youth he loved hunting, hawking, and to shoot deer with the crossbow. He commenced the usual Arts courses at Cambridge at the not

unusual age of 14. There is real evidence of his early concentration on Bible Study. He was from the first an anti-papalist. He became a Fellow of Jesus College, and later was ordained in 1520. He received his B.D. in 1523, and became Divinity Lecturer and Examiner of Theological Graduates.

He was instrumental in obtaining a favourable decision for the annulment of Henry the Eighth's marriage with Katherine of Aragon. This he obtained from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, as well as a number of other Universities on the Continent. Therefore, when Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, died in August 1532, Henry resolved without hesitation to appoint Cranmer to the position.

Far from being a fawning courtier, Cranmer proved himself to be without worldly ambition. He said, "there was never a man came more unwillingly to the bishopric than I."

He delayed his return from the Continent in the hope that Henry VIII would change his mind and allow him to decline the appointment. But there was no escape, for Henry's mind was made up, and Cranmer was consecrated on the 30th March, 1533. Four days previously he framed a protest, declaring that he regarded his oath of obedience to the Pope as a form rather than a reality, and that he "did not admit the Pope's authority any further than it agreed with the express Word of God, and that it might be lawful for him at all times to speak against the Pope and impugn his errors, when there should be occasion." Cranmer was merely claiming the same liberty to criticise the authority and action of the Pope which every prelate had exercised in the Councils of Pisa, Constance and Basle, despite their oaths to the Pope.

For Cranmer, his marriage was an entirely honourable estate, of which he never repented and had no need to be ashamed. While on the Continent, before he became Archbishop of Canterbury, he married Anne at Nuremberg in 1532, the niece of Andrew Osiander, a great Protestant reformer. She followed him to England in 1534, but returned to Germany in 1539 when clerical celibacy was enforced by the Six Articles of Henry VIII.

To this period belongs the most famous Cranmer story, how -

"He kept his woman very close, and sometime carried her about with him in a great chest full of holes, that his pretty nobsey might take breath at."

The evidence for this turns out to be a rather tall tale of a fire at Canterbury, when Cranmer showed great anxiety as they took a large crate from the burning building, crying out that "his evidences and other writings which he esteemed above any worldly treasure were in the chest." Which seems to prove no more than that there are, after all, two kinds of scholars: those who treat their wives like a box of books, and those who treat books as though they were their wives - "above any worldly treasure"; Cranmer belonged to the second class.

When Cranmer came to Canterbury in 1533 he became virtually the leader of the English reform movement. During a visitation of the Diocese of Gloucester, he examined 311 clergy. Of these, he found that 171 could not repeat the Ten Commandments in English, 10 could not say The Lord's Prayer, 27 did not know its author, 30 were ignorant of where it was to be found, 62 never resided in their parishes at all. If religion in England was to be saved in the middle of the 16th Century, a man of undoubted piety and ability must be found to save it. In Cranmer, England found that man.

He was a man of Learning

He was a man of Leadership

He was also a man of Literature.

1. CRANMER and THE BIBLE

He was instrumental in having the "Great Bible" published in 1539. Some of Cranmer's own work of translation was undoubtedly incorporated into this renowned version of Scripture into English, but it was prepared by John Rogers, a friend of William Tyndale, the original translator into the English tongue. The work for which Tyndale had been burnt as a heretic two years previously now received royal approval at the instance of a zealous Archbishop, and was ordered to be read in all churches.

"Sunday after Sunday, day after day, the crowds who gathered round the Bibles in the Nave of St. Paul's (or in parish churches of the country) were leavened with new literature. All the

noblest teachings of Scripture were flung broadcast over minds unoccupied for the most part with any rival learning."
(John Richard Green)

2. CRANMER and the HOMILIES

In 1547, after the death of Henry VIII, Cranmer issued his 1st Book of Homilies. They consisted of 12 simple doctrinal discourses on salient points of Christian belief and practice. The errors of the unreformed Church are exposed in no uncertain manner. Together with the 2nd Book of Homilies issued in 1563, it forms a standard for Church of England teaching today, and all the clergy are still called upon to accept its doctrine as sound and agreeable to the Word of God.

3. CRANMER and THE PRAYER BOOKS

Cranmer's most monumental works were the two Books of Common Prayer, published in 1549 and 1552, during the reign of the young Protestant King, Edward VI. The great and confusing number of Service books and manuals were abolished, the accretions of ages were swept away, and one simple, Scriptural Service book in English was set up for use throughout the whole kingdom. The earlier Book of 1549 had some objectionable features in it, and these were remedied in the 1552 revision: prayers for the dead were removed, and the name Holy Communion was substituted for the word "Mass", and Holy Table or Lord's Table substituted for the word "altar". The second Prayer Book of Cranmer is substantially that which we have in the revision of 1662, and which we use in our Services according to the law of the Church of England here in this Church.

4. CRANMER and THE ARTICLES OF RELIGION

The Articles of Religion appeared in 1552, and in these Cranmer's influence is paramount. Our present 39 Articles vary little from them.

In the 6 short years (1547-1553) of Edward VI's reign, Thomas Cranmer was able to achieve much more good for the Church in England than any other man has done in a lifetime. The 6 fat years of reform were followed by 6 lean years of spiritual degradation, but the revival of true religion was never crushed. The seed of God's Word, well sown, was yet to bring forth its

bounteous harvest!

On Edward's death, Mary Tudor, a bitter supporter of the Papacy, assumed the throne. In the year following her accession, Mary submitted England again to the sovereignty of the Pope and had Cranmer placed under arrest.

So far, we have seen the test of his learning,
the test of his leadership,
the test of his literature;
now we shall see the test of his LOYALTY.

Rather than escape to the Continent when Mary became Queen, he remained to defend the changes of which he had been the chief agent.

Queen Mary and Cardinal Pole were determined he should die; but more than that, they were determined to humiliate him so as to deal a staggering blow to the cause for which he stood. Beset on every hand by unrelenting pressure, the sensitive will began to bend. He signed six recantations, in the fifth of which he acknowledged the authority of the Pope, declared his belief in Transubstantiation, and anathematized the teaching of Luther and Zwingli. In the sixth recantation, he denounced himself and his past actions, and declared himself to have been a "blasphemer, insulter, and persecutor" of Christ and His Church.

The method by which pressure was brought to bear upon him was modern enough. The Spanish Friars and Oxford dons did not put Cranmer in a black hole, or in the glare of an electric light. They neither beat him up, nor starved him. They were more clever and more cruel. He was suddenly taken from Bocardo prison, from which he had previously watched the fires which had consumed Bishops Ridley and Latimer in horrible torture, and lodged him in the guest room of the Dean of Christ Church. They dined him, and he walked on the lawns and played bowls with the Fellows, back, unbelievably, in that world he had left at Jesus College.

But death for Cranmer was certain. After his condemnation, excommunication and degrading from his orders, he was handed over to the secular Arm for punishment in February 1556 to be burnt as a heretic.

On the morning of the 21st March, 1556, Cranmer was taken to St. Mary's Church where he was permitted to address the crowd.

He urged the people to care less for this world and more for God and the world to come. To obey the King and Queen. To love one another and to do good to all men. He reminded the rich how hard it was for them to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and exhorted them to charity.

Then he declared: "And now I come to the great thing that troubled my conscience more than any other thing that ever I said or did in my life, and that is the setting abroad of writings contrary to the truth, which I now renounce and refuse, as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart and written for fear of death to save my life, if it might be; and that is all such bills and papers as I have written and signed with my hand since my degradation, wherein I have written many things untrue; and forasmuch as my hand offended in writing contrary to my heart, my hand therefore shall first be punished; for if I may come to the fire, it shall be the first burnt. As for if I may come to the fire, it shall be the first burnt. As for the Pope, I utterly refuse him, as Christ's enemy and Anti-Christ, with all his false doctrines; and as for the sacrament, I believe as I have taught in my book against the Bishop of Winchester (Gardiner)".

He got no further: the stunned silence broke into uproars and confusion above which the secular Arm, Lord William, cried out, "Have you gone mad?" They pulled him down, but he strode before them. He had done with the quicksands of logic, legal formularies, and constitutional maxims, and had gained a foothold in conscience. The fight had been long and bitter, but he had reached a conclusion at length; he had professed a good profession before many witnesses.

On that cold, wet morning of March 21st, 1556, in the 67th year of his life, Thomas Cranmer was caught away in a chariot of fire to soar aloft at the call of God in glory; while to those who stood by, the doom of the Primate of all England, his sorrow and triumph, struck home with a moral grandeur such as no mere words could ever inspire. (M.L. Loane)

A.G. Dickens writes, "In our reaction against Protestant bigotry we have tended overmuch to neglect the martyrs and to forget that aspect of their message which is still relevant to our

need. It's the reverse of our craving for security. It's the simple and perennial message of unconquerable spirit, bereft of material weapons, yet prepared to take its stand in passive opposition to the might of principalities, powers and mob-instinct."

Why do we speak of the Reformers today? We speak because the Reformation is

Not a CURIOSITY of the PAST

but a CONCENTRATION on eternal TRUTH, which is our present heritage;

Not a COMBINATION of IDEAS

but a CONVICTION through EXPERIENCE
that the Word is quick and powerful and sharper
than any two-edged sword;

Not a CONDEMNATION of OTHERS and their unscriptural theories
but a CONCERN for all who need God's salvation.

The Christ who convicted Cranmer of his sins, convicts us today;

The Christ who died for Cranmer on the Cross, also died for us
and all men;

The Christ who called Cranmer to suffer, calls us to suffer for
Him, too;

The Christ who gave Cranmer the victory, will give us the
victory, too;

if we come in absolute obedience to His will.

And in that great day, at the end of all things, we shall
be numbered amongst those of whom it was said in Revelation 12:11
"And they overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of
their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death".

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Just what went on in those earth-shaking upheavals in the English Church back in the Reformation?

What do we owe to Thomas Cranmer, the one on whom God specially laid His Hand in those critical years?

Here in a nutshell Lance Shilton tells the story, and summons us to both be thankful to God for these men, and follow their good example.

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